

Critical Analysis

Positions through Contextualising

Robbins, D. (2000) Chapter 2: Socio-genesis of Thinking Instruments, Bourdieu & Culture. London: Sage Publications, pp. 25-41.

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In my exploration of value and its translations, I centred Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus and cultural capital- components of what Derek Robbins describes as the 'Socio-genesis of Thinking Instruments' in Bourdieuan sociology. Habitus provides the inherited framework of society and predisposition which guides individuals (Robbins, 2000, p.26); cultural capital builds from this, understanding value as constructed through social systems rather than inherent to objects, and as something that can be strategically mobilised within those systems.

Central to my analysis is Bourdieu's distinction between situations and positions: situations are given, while positions are dynamic and relational. (Robbins, 2000, p.29) I wanted to examine how objectivated cultural capital is 'posited' through images- and how, given differences in situation, the reading of that capital varies. My project presents pairs of images carrying implicit cultural value in juxtaposition. The juxtaposition is not framed as a binary but a spectrum, and the reading of cultural capital depends entirely on the position-taking of the participant. The images are deliberately uncaptioned, so that situation remains open and imaginable in either image, or even in the space between them. To prescribe context would interrupt the natural operation of the participant's habitus. But not captioning was contextually blinding the participant and raised an interesting question: is it possible to read value truthfully when context is not provided?

The Kolhapuri slipper set in my publication '*same-same but different*', attempts to illustrate this contradiction: One pair of slippers appears unbranded; the other is labelled Prada. This signifier alone produces a certain reading of value. But add context: that the first was made by local Indian craftsmen, a popular festive staple locally purchased for under £20; that the second was formerly plagiarised by Prada, sold for around £800 without credit to the original artisans- and the reading shifts drastically. Position shifts as situation is reconfigured and cultural capital becomes unstable.

Adding context can be illuminating, but it carries a tendency to over-explain and the narrator inadvertently poses their view- as the previous example demonstrates (Yet how else does one legitimise a fading craft stolen by a global corporation, if not through loud documentation of its context?). The difficulty is that literal translation of context risks becoming overbearing. It imposes a universalising, arguably colonising gaze: it establishes an 'other' that must be converted into a dominant language of understanding. This forced naturalisation exposes a gap in Bourdieu's framework. While habitus is not static- his concept of hysteresis acknowledges the disorientation when habitus lags behind a changed social field (Hardy, 2008) - the framework still struggles to account for how systems of value are genuinely renegotiated rather than reproduced. This limitation is especially acute in postcolonial contexts, where the criteria by which things signify value (objectivated or otherwise) like knowledge, labour, land, aesthetic form, social relation, were systematically reordered under colonial rule and continue to be reordered under technocratic and capitalist imperialisation.

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity offers a more productive framework here. Rather than assuming culture originates in one stable context and is translated intact into another, hybridity insists that culture is not translated as an equivalent, but reforms in an ambivalent space - as a hybrid (Bhabha, 1984). This applies to the context of value itself. If context is what gives value its meaning, is its translation even possible? Does translating context require its appropriation into a new habitus altogether? And does every such attempt produce not fidelity, but an entirely new value in its place?

Schwartz, B. (2023). *UNLICENSED: Bootlegging as Creative Practice*. Amsterdam: Valiz.

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In *Unlicensed: Bootlegging as Creative Practice*, Ben Schwartz opens with a particular emphasis on ambiguity as the condition that allows bootlegging to survive (Schwartz, 2023, p.16). The bootleg is by definition unofficial yet seemingly official: not an illegal fake, but something occupying the space between. This in-between state is precisely its protection: visual difference or informal, untraceable circulation keeps it at a safe remove from legal consequence while preserving its cultural potency.

That potency comes from familiarity. The bootleg weaponizes affect over effect- it invokes meaning about its source without disrupting or damaging the original. This can operate through admiration, as in fanart or Elvis impersonators, but it can equally operate as resistance. Schwartz introduces the knock-up: bootlegs that use the faultlines of the original as a means of subverting its message, particularly when the original systematically excludes those who might otherwise co-opt it. Dapper Dan's customized jacket, with its sleeves cut from Gucci garment bags, catered to those who aspired to luxury but were excluded from it, positioning itself deliberately beyond the knockoff so as not to patronise its wearer (Schwartz, 2023, p.35). A more recent parallel is Indian fashion brand Ozo's Chhota Pandit x Funko Pop bootleg: where Funko Pop canonises Western-popular characters, Ozo's translation of a South Asian, low-brow comic relief figure into that same format not only crosses cultural registers but occupies space in a canon that had ignored it. The demand was immediate and the figurine sold out within a day (Ozo, 2026).

Copying, in this light, becomes a way of knowing and analysing the systems that govern you. Schwartz draws on method acting as a form of bootlegging experience, but the principle extends more broadly: to imitate is to learn the visual language and internal logic of a form well enough to then intentionally subvert it. Capitalism operates in the negative space of daily life in invisible, smooth and naturalised ways. The bootleg

introduces a glitch. A Shanzhai iPhone that boots with an Android screen when turned on disrupts that seamlessness, making visible what is usually absorbed without friction.

Schwartz also turns to circulation- the informal economy through which the bootleg travels and, in travelling, loses standard authorship and by extension authenticity. With authenticity revoked, the hierarchies of high culture are destabilised, and new structures of recognising value emerge. Appreciation of the bootleg belongs to an in-group not defined by traditional gatekeeping but by a felt *sense* of recognition- knowing it when you see it, a question of vibe rather than definition (Schwartz, 2023, p.38). Value flitters in and out of objects created either to hold it or resist it.

These ideas opened an important register in my own work. Where I had initially focused on a singular, positive reading of an object's value, bootlegging as creative practice introduced the possibility of intentional negotiation of value subverted not by circumstance but by design. It raised questions about how authority is dismantled through copying, how intentionality reshapes meaning, and how repositioning an object within a new circulation economy produces entirely new readings of what it is worth. By working through processes of copying, repositioning, and circulation, the project treats design not as fixed meaning but as something continuously reshaped through context and exchange, echoing Schwartz's approach.

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References

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