

systemic artifacts

created systems of meaning

DeChicchis デキキス

artifacts

(British spelling: artefacts)

- An **artifact** is anything created by humans.
- A **cultural artifact** is an artifact that provides cultural information about its creators or users.
- Common types of cultural artifacts include: **tools**, jewelry, weapons, clothing, furniture, **musical instruments**, maps, books, **buildings**, paintings, statues.
- Historically, technological advances have often been marked by noteworthy changes in **material culture**. For example, the collection of the Mercer Museum and Fonthill Castle includes a vast array of American hand tools which became obsolete as power tools and machines were developed.

two cats paws

American and Japanese

- Americans and Japanese have traditionally used similar-but-different tools to remove nails from wood.
- At the end of the 20th Century, many American carpenters working in Japan bought Japanese cats paws, and American stores soon thereafter began to sell more of the Japanese design.



traditional instruments

similar but different

- Cultural artifacts often show a “theme and variation” pattern, which suggests a history of cultural borrowing and independent development.
- Japanese shamisen 三味線
- Okinawan sanshin 三線
- Chinese sanxian 三弦



architecture

large artifacts

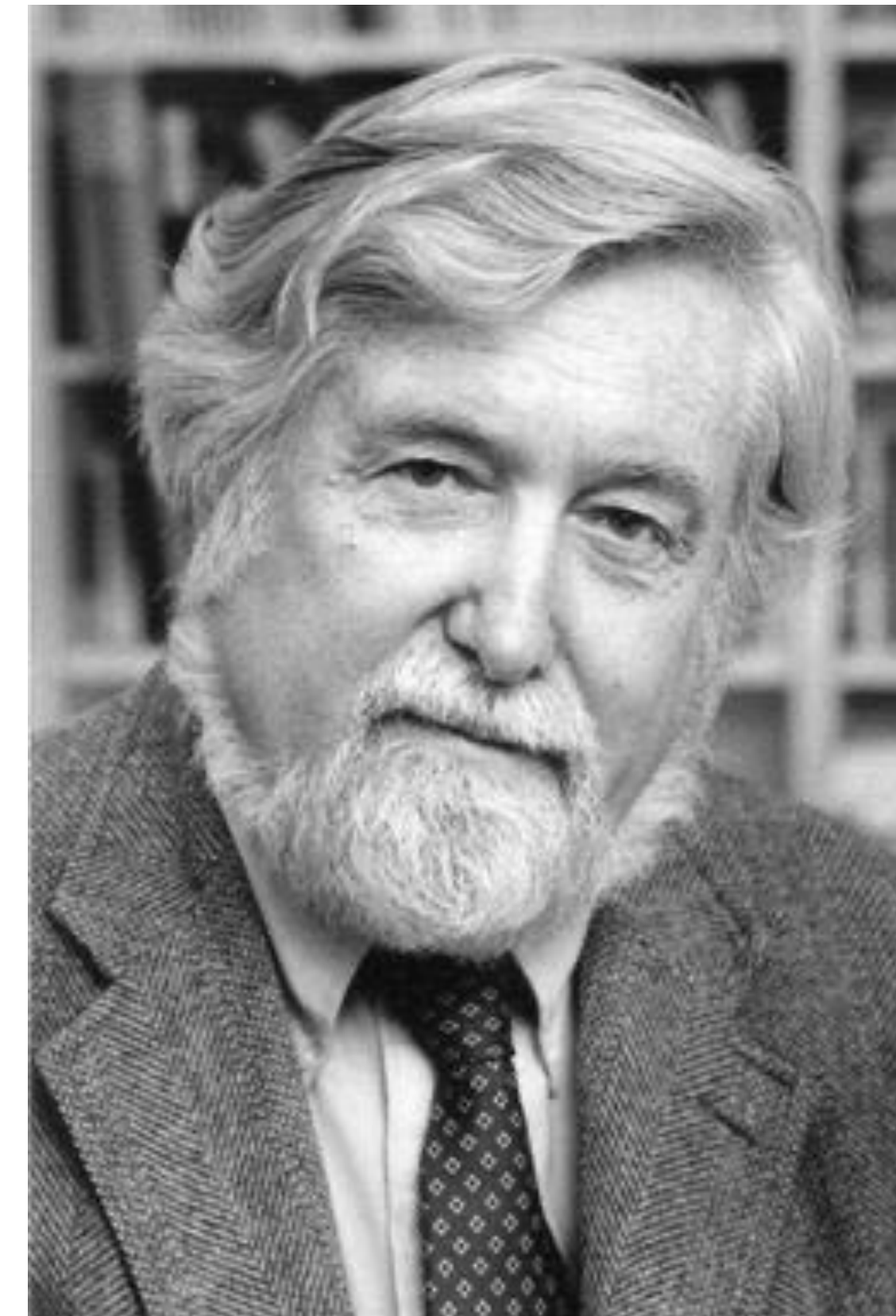
- Architects focus on the design of human spaces. Their buildings, bridges, and other structures must address environmental concerns. However, we can also find stylistic variation which is cultural.
- Even in the same environmental area, we can find different styles.



nonmaterial artifacts

figments of our imagination

- There is both **material** culture and **nonmaterial** culture. The way people think can vary from one culture to another.
- Nonmaterial culture includes ideas, beliefs, values, norms, and any fact or pattern of thought or propensity for behavior.
- Social anthropologists focus on nonmaterial culture. Culture has been described as a “historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.” [Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 89]



systemic artifacts

created systems of meaning

- Humans have a penchant for creating systems of meaning. Some of these systems, such as **calendars** and **mean clock time**, are important in regulating our daily life. Other systems, such as the naming of car models, may have only curiosity value. Some of these systems, such as the framework of modern empirical science, is nearly universal in its scope. Other systems may be used by only a few cultures, or perhaps only by one culture. These systems of meaning are artifacts of human creativity, and they are important for the people who create and use them. We may call them **systemic artifacts**.

the diversity of systemic artifacts

from artistic style to scientific fact

- Languages are the most complex systemic artifacts, and simple patterns routinely show the influence of language and culture; cf. the patterning of women's names:
Sofia, Giulia, Anna, Elena, Maria, Antonietta, Stefania
Sophie, Julie, Anne, Elaine, Marie, Antoinette, Stephanie
- Ethnomusicologists have enriched our lives by bringing us musical patterns from other cultures.
- Cultural studies of religion, kinship, and commerce have discovered significant differences in how people conduct their lives due to their different systems of social relations, beliefs, and obligations.
- More recently, studies of gender relations and internet communications are similarly revealing the ways and means for people to define themselves and think about their lives.
- Nonmaterial culture often contains important scientific knowledge that can benefit people from other cultures; e.g., the indigenous ethnobotanical knowledge that helps modern pharmaceutical companies develop new medicines. Today's universal science has its origin in the systemic artifacts of local cultures.

religion

- Religious differences were among the first things studied by social anthropologists, and religious belief systems are still among the systemic artifacts studied today.
- Ideas about “the soul”, “the Trinity”, “angels”, “karma”, and other religious concepts, although originally particular to a particular culture, have been borrowed and spread throughout the world.

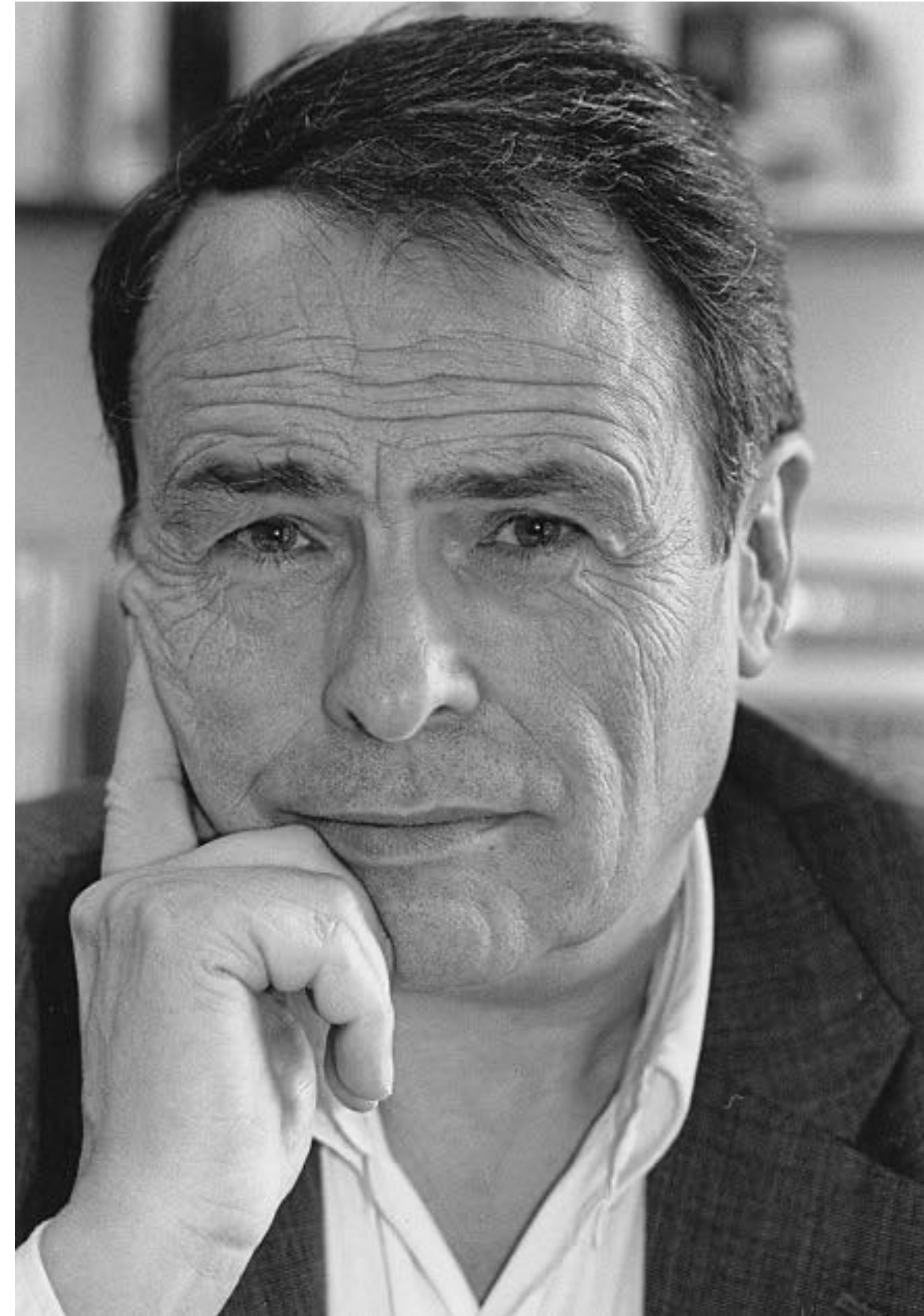
kinship

- Perhaps the most studied systemic artifacts have been the kinship systems of various cultures. The kind of people who comprise one’s kin are not the same in all cultures; nor are the kin term (e.g., “sister, uncle”) systems the same in all cultures; nor are the associated privileges and obligations between kin folk the same in all cultures.
- When we survey the world’s cultures, we find different rules which govern who can **marry**, who **inherits** a dead person’s property, who must **care** for children and disabled people. Of course, we can find many similarities too.

embodied cultural capital

our knowledge and intellectual dispositions

- Understanding nonmaterial culture helps shape each person's **habitus**.
- The habitus of a person includes both the hexis (i.e., kinesic habits) and the **mental habits** of perception, classification, appreciation, and feelings.
- The systemic artifacts which we learn through socialization and education are part of our **cultural capital**.
- According to Pierre Bourdieu, our attitudes, mannerisms, tastes, moral intuitions, and other habits influence an individual's life chances.



copying

we learn by imitating

- According to Bourdieu, our habitus lets us act in creative ways on the basis of our gut feelings and intuitions.
- One's habitus is acquired by **imitating** others in one's cultural group.
- Richard Stallman, who published the *GNU Manifesto*, has lectured widely on the wrongfulness of patenting or copyrighting computer software.
- Lawrence Lessig, the inventor of the Creative Commons (CC) believes that traditional copyright laws compromise creativity because such laws punish imitation.

