



Sociology of Literature and Publishing in the Early 21st Century: Away From the Centre

Cultural Sociology
2015, Vol. 9(3) 291–295
© The Author(s) 2015
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1749975515594467
cus.sagepub.com



Thomas Franssen

Leiden University, Netherlands; University of Amsterdam, Netherlands

Giselinde Kuipers

University of Amsterdam, Netherlands

Abstract

Literature is the art form of the nation-state. The written word was at the peak of its influence from the Enlightenment until late in the 20th century. National literatures became central to the development of national identities and the formation of national art worlds. Moreover, they were important vehicles for the exchange of ideas. However, the central position of the nation-state has dwindled due to the centrifugal effects of globalization and regionalization. Simultaneously, literature has given way to other, mainly visual and digital, cultural forms. In the process, it has lost much of its political clout. Literature seems to pose little or no threat to those groups it may previously have worried, and is of little consequence to elites in the 21st century. Instead, it has become an object of cultural consumption, for dwindling and aging publics.

Keywords

sociology of literature, cultural sociology, literature, literary, literary field, production of culture, legitimation, globalization, world-system, Bourdieu, publishers, publishing, neo-institutionalism

Literature is the art form of the nation-state. The written word was at the peak of its influence from the Enlightenment until late in the 20th century. National literatures became central to the development of national identities and the formation of national art worlds. Moreover, they were important vehicles for the exchange of ideas (Casanova, 2004; Moretti, 1999). However, the central position of the nation-state has dwindled

Corresponding author:

Thomas Franssen, Centre for Science and Technology Studies, Leiden University, Wassenaarseweg 62, 2333, AK Leiden, Netherlands.

Email: t.p.franssen@fsw.leidenuniv.nl

due to the centrifugal effects of globalization and regionalization. Simultaneously, literature has given way to other, mainly visual and digital, cultural forms. In the process, it has lost much of its political clout. Literature seems to pose little or no threat to those groups it may previously have worried, and is of little consequence to elites in the 21st century. Instead, it has become an object of cultural consumption, for dwindling and aging publics.

This special issue investigates the position of literature in this new constellation of power and place, in which literature has moved away from the centre, literally and metaphorically. We present eight research articles on today's 'republic of letters' (Casanova, 2004). Rather than looking at the transnational centres of the cultural world-system, all these articles delve into peripheries, regional literatures, emergent fields, counter-flows and new modes of recognition. Like literature itself, these articles also move away from the centre.

Away From the Centre of the Cultural World-System

Global translation flows are dominated by books that are translated from English (Franssen & Kuipers, 2013; Heilbron, 1999) and published by transnational media conglomerates. Sociological studies of the literary field have followed these flows. They have extensively mapped the literary centres of Paris and New York, and analysed the big publishers in these centres. This special issue turns its back on those centres. Roanna Gonsalves opens up for analysis the Indian literary field, and its position within the cultural world-system. She explores how Indian publishers negotiate their position on the Frankfurter Buchmesse (Frankfurt Book Fair) and, slowly but surely, are making their way into the global establishment. Nicky Van Es and Johan Heilbron, and Gisèle Sapiro take up the question of translation flows from the (semi-)periphery to the core. Van Es and Heilbron explore how Dutch authors are translated into English. They show that this often happens via the regional European centres of France and, in particular, Germany. Moreover, they highlight the crucial role of public and governmental institutions, such as the Dutch Foundation for Literature, that make these translation flows possible. Sapiro interrogates the purported 'death of French literature', investigating French translations into English. In ways similar to Van Es and Heilbron, she shows that France is an important transnational centre in the translation of peripheral authors from former French colonies into English. Thus, by deconstructing the notion of 'French literature' as a national literature Sapiro also deconstructs the very notion of 'national literatures' and the assumed one-on-one relationship between language and nation state. Ikuya Sato explores, again in relation to the Anglo-American centre of the cultural world-system, how the organizational form of the University of Tokyo Press was shaped in the post-Second World War period through a complex translation of the American organizational model for university presses. His 'view from the periphery' shows that what happens outside of the centre is never a straightforward diffusion process. All four studies highlighted here deepen our understanding of the cultural world-system from the perspective of the outsider, and show that peripheral and dominated forces engage with the field through active engagement with the centre. It is in and through this engagement with the centre that they understand themselves and define their own properties.

Away From the Centre of the Literary Field

While the authors above move away from the global centre of the cultural world-system, other contributions make such a shift within national literary fields themselves. Clayton Childress, through an analysis of a regional subfield (the Bay Area) within the American literary field, aims to combine and contrast three strands of field theory currently in vogue. He argues that regionality and regional subfields are an overlooked but crucial part of cultural fields. Through an analysis of genre subfields in the Dutch literary field, Thomas Franssen argues that the Dutch literary field is partly structured through genre subfields that do not follow the field-wide opposition between large-scale and restricted production. Both articles argue for a more thorough analysis of the ways in which cultural fields – national and otherwise – are structured internally, be this spatially or aesthetically. They venture towards a form of field theory that goes beyond Bourdieusian and neo-institutional accounts of field structures by combining together these strands of theory.

Away From Hierarchy: The Importance of Collaboration and Problems of Legitimation

The contributions discussed above underscore that for a full understanding of cultural production and the literary field, new levels of analysis must be explored and identified. As these levels of analysis exist both below and above the national level, the question of legitimacy comes in with full force. Fluid boundaries and shifting centres make for fluid distinctions and modes of legitimation. Luca Pareschi highlights the importance of the uncodified, informal ties that literary actors draw upon in his study of intermediaries in the Italian national literary field. He shows that mediation in this relatively small field is not shaped by formal roles and forms of recognition, but instead by informal social ties. In contrast with Bourdieu's famous analysis of the French literary field (1993), in this more peripheral field collaboration is valued above competition. Gonsalves, in a similar argument, highlights friendliness as a strategy employed by agents working for Indian publishing houses to enter the transnational literary space of the Frankfurter Buchmesse. The public institutions that help organize translations for the Dutch authors analysed by Van Es and Heilbron have a similar need for collaboration, in order to make translations possible in the first place. As we move our gaze away from the centre, we also find that theories developed to explain the workings of the literary centre lose part of their relevance. Bourdieu's emphasis on competing actors has to be replaced by a more modulated vision of actors who are partly in competition but also partly in relations of cooperation and mutual collaboration (Becker, 1982).

Marc Verboord, Giseline Kuipers and Susanne Janssen, in a historical and cross-national analysis, find that different forms of institutional recognition in the literary field reinforce each other, legitimating the same authors through prizes and coverage in newspapers. Surprisingly, the modes of recognition do not vary much across the four countries in their study – France, Germany, the Netherlands and the US. Moreover, they identify a class of authors operating on the transnational level, whose recognition transcends the nation-state. Their study shows that even in the 1950s, to a large extent

literary recognition was not organized on a purely national basis, again calling into question the utility of models of literary production which assume the primacy of national cultural spaces.

Where are the Readers of Literature?

This special issue focuses on the sociology of literary production, and so the reception and impact of literature by and on publics and political actors are absent. This reflects the relative absence of readers in the sociology of literature as a whole. In its move towards increasingly thorough exploration of increasingly diverse, fluid, transnational and de-centred literary fields, it has too often forgotten the readers, as well as the wider public role, of literature.

However, the papers in this special issue point some of the ways ahead, albeit obliquely. One implication of the changing dynamics of literary production identified by the various papers in this special issue is that the Bourdieusian notion of homology between producers and publics has become increasingly difficult to maintain. But no new paradigm has so far emerged to help us understand the relations that pertain between books and their readers, between publishers and their customers, and between authors and their publics. The relatively scarce amount of sociological reception research deals primarily with musical tastes, which has become a central indicator for changes in social identities and forms of boundary demarcation (e.g. Meuleman and Savage, 2013; Rimmer, 2012). In recent years, there have been some calls for a renewed sociology of the literary public. Childress and Friedkin (2012) have given a welcome reminder of what reception research can be and what it can achieve. Moreover, Sapiro (2003, 2007) has engaged with the question of the relations between literature and politics. However, a unified theoretical perspective on questions of reception, be it in relation to consumers or to public and political debates, has not yet emerged in the sociology of literature, although this is becoming ever more pressing in the field. We suggest that scholars should now turn their attention to reviving the sociology of literary reception, especially in light of the complex transnational dynamics pointed to in this special issue, which are transforming literary production in often profound ways.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

References

- Becker, H. S. (1982) *Art Worlds*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bourdieu P (1993) *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Casanova P (2004) *The World Republic of Letters*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Childress C and Friedkin N (2012) Cultural reception and production: The social construction of meaning in book clubs. *American Sociological Review* 77(1): 45–68.

- Franssen T and Kuipers G (2013) Coping with uncertainty, abundance and strife: Decision-making processes of Dutch acquisition editors in the global market for translations. *Poetics* 41(1): 48–74.
- Heilbron J (1999) Towards a sociology of translation: Book translations as a cultural world-system. *European Journal of Social Theory* 2(4): 429–444.
- Meuleman R and Savage M (2013) A field analysis of cosmopolitan taste: Lessons from the Netherlands. *Cultural Sociology* 7(2): 230–256.
- Moretti F (1999) *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800–1900*. London: Verso.
- Rimmer M (2012) Beyond omnivores and univores: The promise of a concept of musical habitus. *Cultural Sociology* 6(3): 299–318.
- Sapiro G (2003) Forms of politicization in the French literary field. *Theory and Society* 32(5–6): 633–652.
- Sapiro G (2007) The writer's responsibility in France: From Flaubert to Sartre. *French Politics, Culture & Society* 25(1): 1–29.

Author biographies

Thomas Franssen is a cultural sociologist who works as a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre for Science and Technology Studies (CWTS) at Leiden University. His work in the sociology of literature deals with translations, editorial practices and the book market. He recently defended his thesis entitled *How books travel: Translation flows and practices of Dutch acquiring editors and New York literary scouts, 1980–2009*.

Giselinde Kuipers is Professor of Cultural Sociology and Director of the Cultural Sociology Program group at the University of Amsterdam. She has published widely on the sociology of popular culture, media, humour, beauty, cultural globalization and comparative sociology, and is the author of *Good Humor, Bad Taste: A Sociology of the Joke* (Mouton de Gruyter, 2006, revised edition 2015). She is affiliated with the Cultural Classification Systems in Transition project at Erasmus University, Rotterdam. Currently, she is the principal investigator in an ERC-funded research project on the comparative sociology of beauty.