

KEES van REES

Modelling the Literary Field: From System-Theoretical Speculation to Empirical Testing

INTRODUCTION

The notions of "literary field," "literary system," and "model" count among the core concepts in much recent research on literature, especially in research of a sociological orientation. The first two notions are frequently used as if they were interchangeable. To some extent and with serious provisos they are indeed. But according to whether scholars prefer "system" or "field" as core concepts, they also tend to appeal to different theoretical and methodological frameworks. What is more important, they tend to pursue different purposes. These differences have serious implications for the way we evaluate the results of one or the other approach.

System theoreticians usually focus on theoretical and philosophical discussions involving the exegesis of what the founders, such as Bourdieu and Luhmann, have meant by their concepts and propositions on the one hand and the adaptation of certain propositions on the other. Despite system theoreticians' claim to understand the meaning of "model" as a set of hypotheses, they keep aloof from empirical research aimed at testing specific hypotheses. And that is precisely the major purpose of scholars engaged in empirical research.

For the latter, a model is a set of hypotheses by which they seek to explain social processes and interrelationships in the (social) world. Their research is articulated in such a manner as to enable the researcher to proceed from (i) theory-guided abstraction regarding social processes to (ii) data gathering using indicators for the theoretical constructs with a view to (iii) testing whether relationships posited in the model and relationships discovered in the data show a structural correspondence; in other words, whether the model fits the data (Gilbert). Thus, empirically oriented scholars formulate alternative hypotheses about the functioning of institutions in the literary field and, without capitalizing on chance, they compare various models in order to assess which one best fits the empirical data.

This paper contains a plea for the more empirical orientation in research about the literary field. To this end I will briefly discuss model formation aimed

at testing empirical hypotheses. I demonstrate this by using material from Van Rees and Vermunt on the processes of symbolic and material production in the Dutch literary field and on their interdependence. The comparison between model and empirical world requires that measurements be made on both levels. What is disappointing — when one reads studies by literary scholars, also by literary system theoreticians — is the lack of measurements. In this paper I shall focus on the rationale for model selection and construction. The boundary conditions under which the propositions specific to the theory of the literary field propounded here are expected to be valid are more general and more widely applicable than the empirical hypotheses which are assumed to be valid for the functioning of criticism in the Dutch literary field. I also propose that international comparative research is required to see how the theory passes the test in other countries.

The conclusion is that model formation and hypothesis testing are two sides indispensable to empirical research. Theory formation without hypothesis testing remains speculative. So much the worse for theories and conceptual models that are interesting enough to be put to the test.

THE LITERARY FIELD AS A MODEL IN A METAPHORICAL SENSE

From the sociological research by Bourdieu and others it appears that a work of art is the product of a vast operation of "social alchemy" jointly conducted by all the agents involved in the cultural field (see Bourdieu 1977; 1983). Here, the "cultural field" must be understood to mean the set of institutions or collections of agents performing specific tasks in the production, distribution, and promotion of symbolic goods. Areas of culture and art vary according to the degree of legitimacy each has obtained at a given moment. And the more legitimate a field, the more developed the division of labor will be and, consequently, the greater the number and kinds of institutions involved in the material and symbolic production. Among the characteristics these different areas have in common, two of the most important are (i) the interdependence of these processes of material and symbolic production (Bourdieu 1983; De Nooy 513-16) and (ii) the similarity of the institutions involved.

In raising questions, scholars focusing on the literary field should take a position outside of the field; they should make a special effort to analyze the activities of literary institutions from a meta-level viewpoint. The meta-position requires that scholars refrain from interpreting literary texts and expressing value judgments on them. For participants in the literary field, especially for critics and scholars in the humanities, this is entirely alien to their "habitus" and practice. In adopting a meta-position, scholars are not, however, prohibited to discuss the contents of statements of any form made by participants within the literary field. On the contrary, in order to adequately deal with a topic like reputation formation it may prove of great importance that reviewers'

statements, for instance, be *constructed* into empirical data that can be used to test hypotheses specified in the theoretical model and bearing, for instance, on how reviewers reach consensus on the quality of cultural products (Van Rees; De Nooy).

MODELLING THE LITERARY FIELD BY MEASURING REVIEWERS' ATTENTION

A starting point for the construction of a model in the formal, technical sense is the scholars' substantive focus, for instance, their (initially vague) interest in relationships among institutions and agents in the field. My colleagues at Tilburg University and I start from the idea that activities of all literary institutions jointly contribute — albeit to a varying degree and in very different ways — to the kind of (surplus) value an artwork is thought to possess. We subscribe to Bourdieu's idea that inquiry into the production, evaluation, and consumption of art objects is inevitably involved with inquiry into the production of various kinds of belief; for instance, belief in the consecrating activities of critics and connoisseurs and belief in the art producing talent of this or that artist (see Bourdieu 1977). An important line of research suggested by Bourdieu is that of assessing the effects achieved by the incessant quality assignments to works of art by cultural institutions and that of explaining this achievement.

The assessment of a work's quality is the privilege of a small number of cultural (literary) institutions, with criticism playing a dominant role. Critical communication takes place via specific channels of communication (education, journals, literary magazines, print, and audio-visual media); it is indissolubly connected with a process of evaluation and ranking. Art connoisseurs and critics are authorized to make pronouncements on the artistic qualities to be assigned to the works under discussion. A reliable indicator of the quality attributed to a work of art is permanent and intensive attention — in the form of (spoken or written) discourses.

At some stage in the simultaneous process of speculating, of doing research, and of processing extant theoretical literature, scholars have to transform initially vague ideas into a researchable problem, then, to attack that problem by specifying the steps permitting to arrive at a solution, and finally to show how the solution of the initial proposal works. To arrive at a researchable problem we wish to focus on the proposition that the more attention a writer receives from qualified reviewers, the better the writer's chances that criticism will reach agreement on the (high) quality to be ascribed to his/her work. This proposition consists of abstract concepts and relationships between them ("attention," "reaching agreement," "high quality") that should be translated into precise hypotheses containing variables that can be observed and measured.

Given the nature of the model, a particular technique of analysis will have to be applied to generate the expected data; whereas at the level of social

processes, for instance that of assigning quality to cultural goods, data should be gathered or constructed using indicators for theoretical constructs. An indispensable feature of the latter — a much neglected one in current literary systematians' research — is that at the empirical level their use be matched by composite measures (sets of single indicators) whose validity warrants their use. Again, operationalization, index, or scale construction and validation are steps in the research process that seem almost entirely neglected in "literary system" research.

For their quality assignment, critics lack an instrument to measure inter-subjectively a work's quality; in "assessing" a work's nature and value they use a *conception of literature*, a set of normative ideas on and definitions of the nature and function of literature. If critics do not have a theory or measuring instrument at their disposal, the question arises: how do critics proceed? They show a selective interest in the book supply. They gradually reach agreement on the authors/works deserving their selective attention. The process of consensus formation is orchestrated without there being a manifest director of the "score."

At Tilburg University we have at our disposal a database consisting of all the reviews that appeared in the Dutch press (dailies and weeklies) in the period 1975 to 1981. This "KUB-database" contains over 20,000 cases. The data definition for a review consists of, among other things, the following attributes: a number of string variables (title of the book reviewed, author, name of reviewer, name of publisher), date of publication (book and review), number of words in the review, value judgments, and title and kind of newspaper. In addition, Susanne Janssen recorded data on all works of fiction and on the critical reception of these titles for the years 1978 and 1991 (see Janssen 1994). This facilitated the construction of indicators to determine the weight of publishers and the importance of dailies and weeklies as a review medium.

Every new title is, in principle, a candidate for a reviewer's attention. Evidently, the latter is limited in range. Besides space limitations in periodicals, there are limits on the time a reviewer has to spend on reading and commenting on new works. As Janssen's research shows, the distribution of critical attention is extremely skewed. Nowadays, more than 50% of new Dutch literary fiction titles receive *no* reviewer's attention at all. In 1978, 50% of all reviews were devoted to only 10% of the fiction titles published that year. In 1991, the distribution was even more skewed as 60% of the reviews involved only 10% of the newly published books (Janssen 1994, 53; 1997).

Assuming that extrinsic features rather than intrinsic properties of a book make a reviewer decide to select it for review, the question arises: which are these extrinsic features? In selecting a work for review, critics draw "inspiration" from a number of attributes that appear related to its institutional setting. What actually happens is that the critic projects onto the text certain properties of the literary field, for instance, the name of the publisher or the

literary magazine which previously published work by the same author: "Chatto and Windus prose," "Transition poetry." Most of the texts reviewers discuss originate from a publishing firm whose output usually attracts their attention. Publishers differ in reputation according to their history (backlist), their size (the annual number of new titles and of reprints) and the extent to which they specialize in literary fiction.

Publishers were categorized according to their size and their predominant output (big/medium/small, literary vs. non-literary). Initially I followed Janssen (1994) in distinguishing five kinds of publishing houses: 1. big literary; 2. big non-literary; 3. medium literary; 4. medium non-literary; 5. small (literary or non-literary). In the case of a debutant, the type of publishing firm is more or less a deciding factor in whether or not a work will be reviewed. In the case of non-debutant authors, it is critical attention for previous work and the type of the publishing firm which jointly account for 71% of 230 titles' variation in critical attention (Janssen 1994, 59ff). For a debutant published by a small publishing house, attention in top periodicals increases the chance of his/her signing a contract with a publisher in a higher category.

To gain insight into the effects of critical attention, it is necessary to be more specific about how to measure critical attention. It is not the sheer number of reviews that counts. The reviews are published over a certain period of time. Presumably this is an important factor influencing the attention given to an author's subsequent publication. One must devise means to categorize reviews according to the influence they have on a writer's career. Another factor affecting the number of reviews an author receives is the status of the periodical in which the review is published. Papers with a nation-wide distribution are assumed to be more influential than local papers. A reviewer has an interest in seeing his reviews published by one of the major review media of a country. Attention from reviewers in major periodicals, together with the length of the review and mean value judgment, are assumed to be better predictors of the attention for subsequent titles. In using the number of reviews in top periodicals as the measure for the amount of attention, Van Rees and Vermunt expressly ignore the regional press, at least for their operational hypotheses.

Periodicals were categorized according to the number of reviews on fiction (literary and non-literary alike) published in the years 1978 and 1991. A distinction was made between top periodicals (dailies and weeklies having published >38 reviews with a mean number of >500 words per review) and the remaining dailies and weeklies (<38 reviews per year). The "top" periodicals not only cover more titles, with lengthier reviews, but they are also more prompt in their response to new titles. It is no coincidence that the "top" periodicals are known to have the readership with the highest level of education and the highest grade of participation in the more legitimate forms of "high" culture; they are distributed nation-wide.

From a list of debutant writers in all genres in the period 1970-80, a sample

of eighteen authors was selected according to the following criteria: year of debut (1975 to 1977) and genre of debut (narrative prose). Limitation of the population to narrative prose authors is based on the fact that poetry is deemed to be a more difficult genre, and is treated differently in the press from narrative prose. Thus, with the KUB-database as the starting-point, a *debutant review file* was created, consisting of some 1100 cases. Each case refers to review data on one of the ninety titles produced by the eighteen authors over a period of 12 to 15 years (1975-91). This debutant file contains a number of new variables. A value judgment was scored for each review on a five-point scale (ranging from "very negative" to "very positive"). Thanks to the work done by Suzanne Janssen, the data files for 1978 and 1991 provided a criterion to reliably assess the stature of both the publisher and the periodical on an ordinal scale over the period 1975 to 1991. Data on 1978 were used to assess the importance of the newspaper and the size of the publishing house for the period until 1985. Data on 1991 were used for the period after 1985. Reviews on a title were also differentiated according to whether the ones in top periodicals preceded those in the remaining periodicals or the other way round.

An aggregate file was made containing the following summary measures per title: its chronological place in the writer's body of work, the total number of reviews, the number of reviews in top periodicals, the total and the mean number of words devoted to the title (the mean number also being differentiated for top periodicals and the "rest"), and, finally, three kinds of mean value judgment (for the total number of reviews, those in top periodicals and those in the rest, respectively). Fourteen of the eighteen debutants were published by big literary publishers. Among these fourteen debutants, five scored rather modestly on top periodical reviews, mean number of words, and value judgment; four of them went over to a publisher of lower rank later on in their career, the remaining one discontinued his career as a writer of fiction immediately after his debut. That four of these authors attracted the attention of at least one reviewer in a top periodical may be due to the publisher's name. The other nine debutants published by the big firms were more successful in attracting reviewers' attention for the gradually increasing number of new titles they wrote.

FROM DATA SET TO TESTABLE HYPOTHESES: AN ANALYSIS OF THE DEBUTANTS' DATA

The previous section presented the debutants' data containing information on the titles of 18 Dutch authors. Relevant indicators of attention were specified and the problem of how to measure the amount of critical attention was discussed. In addition, I considered some of the possible factors determining the amount of attention that a particular title receives. Various interesting research questions could be raised, in other words, various models could be developed, with this debutant data set as ground for comparison, that is, for testing these models. For

instance, it is possible to test the above reproduction hypotheses that top periodicals are more prompt in their response to new titles and that the remaining periodicals follow the top periodicals' judgments. Van Rees and Vermunt (326 ff.), which will be used here by way of illustration, focused on the possible factors determining the amount of attention that a particular title receives. They formalized a number of hypotheses and tested them by means of a discrete-time event history model.

A strong point of the data set on the careers of 18 Dutch debutant authors is that it is of a longitudinal nature: for each author, there is information on the reviews of all their titles which appeared during a particular period (1975-91). This means that information is available on the change in attention between subsequent titles. That is the reason why Van Rees and Vermunt's analysis focused on explaining differences in changes in attention instead of differences in attention. The research question to be answered was formulated as follows: which factors determine whether an author experiences an increase, a decrease, or no change in attention between subsequent titles? To be able to answer this question, it is necessary to define the basic time dimension which is used in the analysis, to select the most appropriate measure for the dependent variable amount of critical attention, and to specify the explanatory variables to be used in the model.

Changes in the amount of critical attention between first and subsequent titles of the eighteen authors were analyzed by means of discrete-time event history models. The rank number of the title was used as the (discrete) time dimension. The main reason for using this discrete-time variable is that changes in critical attention can only take place when a new title comes out. Moreover, the rank order of the title is a good indicator for the stage of the career of an author, which may be one of the factors determining change in attention. When the rank order of a title is treated as the discrete-time dimension, the authors' data can also be seen as discrete-time event history data: for each point in time, that is, for each title, there is information on the dependent and independent variables of interest. Therefore, a discrete-time event history model was used to specify a regression model for changes in attention. In such a model, the probability of experiencing an event at discrete time points is regressed on a set of covariates.

Besides the choice of the time variable, it has to be decided how to define an event, that is, a change in the value of the dependent variable "amount of attention." In Van Rees and Vermunt (327) the number of reviews in top periodicals was used as the measure for the amount of attention. To make an event history analysis feasible, this dependent variable was collapsed into five categories: 0, 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, and >6 reviews. These five categories are the states that an author can occupy at each "point in time." An event is defined as a transition from one state to another state between subsequent titles, for instance, the transition from one or two reviews of the second title to five or six

reviews of the third title. The state that an author occupies at the t -th "point in time," that is, at the t -th title, is denoted by $RTOP(t)$.

The independent variables that were used in the analysis are the mean judgment of the previous title and the status of the publisher of the current title, which are both time-varying covariates. Both variables are dichotomized into the levels low (score 0) and high (score 1). For the variable mean judgment, "low" indicates that the mean judgment is lower than three and "high" means that it is equal to or higher than three. It should be noted that the mean judgment is obtained from judgments on a five-point scale ranging from one to five. For the publisher variable, the value "high" indicates that the publisher is a big literary publishing house, while "low" indicates that it is another type of publishing house.

It was hypothesized that a high score on the judgment variable (that is, mean judgment of the previous title) and a high status of the current publisher would lead to an increase in attention and a low judgment and a low status of the publisher would lead to a decrease in attention. With respect to the "time" variable, it was expected that with each successive title, it becomes more difficult to get more attention and easier to get less attention.

So far this section comprised the formulation of the hypotheses which jointly constitute the model to be tested. This is only the first step in the model's analysis. Before briefly discussing the three remaining steps that are indispensable, it may be recalled that it is the substantive interest in the functioning of the literary field as discussed in the preceding sections, that suggested this formulation. The choice is not arbitrary. Decisions regarding, e.g., the aggregation of scores on variables were taken on substantive grounds and with a view to performing an event history analysis. As indicated, other researchers have applied regression analysis to test hypotheses about reviewers' attention, on the one hand, and genre, publishers' size, and reviewers' attention for a previous title, on the other (Janssen 1994; Verdaasdonk). In our case, with the data available, an event history model has a number of important advantages compared to ordinary regression methods (Blossfeld et al.; Yamaguchi). First, within the event history analysis framework, the fact that we have a different number of titles for each author does not complicate the analysis. It should be noted that since we defined the time variable as the rank order of a title, the length of the observation period in terms of number of titles is not equal for each author. Besides the possibility of dealing with observations of unequal length, it is straightforward to model the time dependency of the process and to include time-varying covariates in an event history model. This is important in our case because we want to know the effect of the time variable and of the time-varying covariates on the size of the transition probabilities.

The fact that the dependent variable is collapsed into a limited number of categories to make an event history analysis feasible can be seen as a disadvantage of the approach chosen in Van Rees and Vermunt. Although this

may lead to some loss of information, modelling transitions among a small number of categories instead of, for instance, differences in the number of reviews between subsequent points in time also has advantages. First, it makes it possible to define relevant states and therefore relevant transitions, while when modelling differences, it is assumed that a particular difference has the same meaning irrespective of the value of the dependent variable at the t -th title and the one at the title preceding the t -th title ($t-1$). A second advantage is that weaker assumptions are made with respect to the measurement level of the indicator number of reviews. Only the information on the ordering of the categories of the dependent variable "number of reviews in top periodicals at title t " is used in the analysis. So, in fact, the number of reviews is treated as an ordinal level indicator for attention rather than an interval level indicator. This seems to be a plausible assumption, since it is unrealistic to assume that the difference in attention is equal between 0 and 2 reviews and between 10 and 12 reviews.

The regression model used was a discrete-time logit model in which "decrease in the number of reviews" and "increase in the number of reviews" were treated as competing risks. The (time-varying) covariates used, apart from the "time" variable, were the mean judgment of the previous title and the status of the publisher of the current title. Having specified the two equations constituting the model, we proceed to the second step in the analysis: that of estimating the cell frequencies we would find as expected values in the sample, if our hypotheses about the population were correct. In the opening section we referred to these estimates as the relationships posited in the model. In the third step, the model is tested by comparing expected data and observed data; then a decision is made "whether the model is acceptable, depending on whether the expected and the observed data sets are sufficiently similar" (Gilbert 6). In Van Rees and Vermunt (330 ff.) several models were estimated and compared with the null model (the model of no effect) and the full model (including both main effects and the six effects of the covariates) and two of them were selected for calculating parameters.

In the fourth and final step, the strength of the relationship between dependent and independent variables in the fitting models is assessed by calculating the parameters of the models in question. Although all parameter estimates had the expected signs, only the effect of judgment on "increase" and the effect of time on "decrease" were significant. This means that a high evaluation of one title increases the probability of the next title receiving more attention and that with each successive title, the probability of a decrease in attention rises. In general, there is a slightly lower probability of an increase in attention than of a decrease in attention. Which authors are most resistant to this gradual decrease? Those whose subsequent titles were judged positively.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper the importance of an empirical approach to the literary field was discussed. I used recent research, in which event history analysis served to answer concrete research questions on the effects of criticism, to illustrate an important aspect that is too often neglected by literary scholars, more specifically by literary system theoreticians: the transformation of speculative views into operational hypotheses that are empirically tested. In this case, the question related to the factors determining changes in the amount of critical attention that titles receive from reviewers. Despite the small number of observations and other limitations of the data set, it illustrated well the potentials of this technique.

Further research must be based on a greater number of authors and titles (person-period files). It appears that attributes of reviews in top periodicals, such as the number of reviews a first publication received in top periodicals, the size of these reviews, the mean value judgment, the time interval between the publication of the book and that of the review are better predictors of attention for a second title than analogous measures based on the sum of all reviews. The same holds for predicting attention for a certain title on the basis of the attention for a preceding title.

In further examining institutional resources and constraints affecting a writer's career, both qualitative and quantitative modes of research are needed to specify the factors involved. Therefore, in addition to the kind of quantitative research presented in this paper, qualitative modes of analysis should be developed which enable researchers to construct data bearing on the meaning of the writers' and critics' statements and its effect on both the way our society discusses the nature of cultural objects and the selection consumers make from among these objects. Admittedly, only by examining the reviews' contents and the critics' use of conceptions of literature (CL) one is in a position to reconstruct the process of orchestration by which consensus is reached on the nature of a writer's work. What also deserves close scrutiny is a critic's expertise in handling a CL and the extent to which the critical community tends to reproduce the views one or several of its members had about (and often in concert with) a particular writer. Qualitative research of this kind is currently underway. It is an indispensable complement to the more quantitative approach outlined above.

Tilburg University

Works Cited

- Allison, P. D. "Discrete-Time Methods for the Analysis of Event Histories." *Sociological Methodology*. Ed. S. Leinhardt. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1982. 61-98.
- Blossfeld, H., A. Hamerle, and K. U. Mayer. *Event History Analysis: Statistical Theory and Application in the Social Sciences*. Hillsdale: Erlbaum, 1989.
- Bourdieu, P. "Production de la croyance." *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 13 (1977): 3-43.
- Bourdieu, P. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. 1979. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984.
- Bourdieu, P. "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed." *Poetics* 12 (1983): 311-55.
- Gilbert, N. *Analyzing Tabular Data: Loglinear and Logistic Models for Social Researchers*. London: U College of London P, 1994.
- Janssen, S. *In Het Licht van de Kritek. Variaties en Patronen in de Aandacht van de Literatuurkritiek voor Auteurs en Hun Werken*. Hilversum: Verloren, 1994.
- Janssen, S. "Reviewing as Social Practice." *Poetics* 24.5 (1997): 275-97.
- Nooy, W. de. "Social Networks and Classification in Literature." *Poetics* 20 (1991): 507-37.
- Rees, C.J. van. "How a Literary Work Becomes a Masterpiece." *Poetics* 12 (1983): 397-417.
- Rees, C.J. van, H. Verdaasdonk, P. Bourdieu, and S.J. Schmidt. "Panel Discussion on the Structure of the Literary Field." *Empirical Studies in Literature*. Ed. E. Ibsch, D. Schram and G. Steen. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1991. 427-44.
- Rees, C.J. van, and J.K. Vermunt. "Event History Analysis of Authors' Reputation. Effects of Critics' Attention on Debutants' Careers." *Poetics* 23 (1996): 317-33.
- Verdaasdonk, H. "Effects of Acquired Readership and Reviewers' Attention on the Sales of New Literary Works." *Poetics* 16 (1987): 237-53.
- Vermunt, J.K. "LEM: Log-Linear and Event History Analysis with Missing Data Using the EM Algorithm." *WORC PAPER 93.09.015/7*. Tilburg: U of Tilburg, 1993.
- Yamaguchi, K. *Event History Analysis: Applied Social Research Methods*. Newbury Park: Sage, 1991. Vol. 28.