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In a world of transparency and unlimited access to information, it is irritating that the key to becoming a literary author still seems like an unfathomable riddle, a mythical process almost, refusing to adapt to modern-day rules. YouTube sports hundreds of videos on how to become a writer and how to publish a manuscript at a traditional publishing house. Semi-professionals and professionals try to provide knowledge to increase the “slim and uncertain” chance of a ‘big break’ in the literary market to the oversupply of creative laborers (Fürst 53-54).

Big breaks, namely breakthroughs in literary production, should not be underestimated in the academic context. An examination of the phenomenon can be vital for book studies research, as it might give insight into the dynamics of the 21st century literary market as well as bring to light the role of its essential agents and gatekeeping practices. There is still no superordinate theory for analyzing these dynamics (Norrick-Rühl and Vogel 20), but there may be fruitful approaches to lead to a closer examination of big breaks in literary production.

Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of field and position-taking through accumulation of capital holds the potential to provide a basis for the dynamics and interrelations in the market which lead to or facilitate the big break of an author. Of course, this determination is highly individual, which is why all further analysis should be tied to a specific example. This paper aims to build a foundation to these

analyses by investigating whether a big break in the literary market can be defined as a legitimization of an author’s position within the literary field through accumulation of social, economic, and cultural capital.

To do so, firstly, the theoretical foundation for analyzing a big break in the literary market will be provided, including relevant extensions and adaptations of Bourdieu’s field theory. Based on this, the term big break will be negotiated and determined for an academic context. The results will be discussed, focusing on how an analysis of big breaks in the literary market in an academic context can be used as a tool to uncover power relations and underlying discrimination within a highly limited field of cultural production.

On Pierre Bourdieu’s Concept of the Literary Field and Authorship in *The Rules of Art* (1999)

To construct the theoretical concept of this paper, Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory (1999) was chosen. Originally outlining the dynamics of cultural production in the French literary landscape in the late 19th century, Bourdieu provided a complex concept of art production as a system (Joch and Wolf 9), the so-called literary field. His approach focused on the mutual influencing of positions and positioning taking place within the relatively autonomous space of cultural production (Bourdieu).

In his *Les Règles d’Art* from 1999, Bourdieu developed

a concept for analyzing cultural production, focusing on “the social conditions of production of literary works” (Sapiro 31). In his approach, Bourdieu considers how production, the texts themselves, and reception are interrelated (Dörner and Vogt 125). Art in its varied forms can be seen as part of the process of gaining power and building hierarchy within a society (136). This process unfolds in two different spheres, namely the field of power and the literary field. The field of power is a space in which different agents and institutions join in relations of force, their main goal being to occupy dominant positions in the different fields within the field of power. They do so through accumulation of social, economic, and cultural capital (Bourdieu 342).

The literary field can be understood as a society within society (Joch and Wolf 2), where agents of cultural production (e.g., authors, publishers, literary agents) compete for power and legitimacy by accumulating different sorts of capital to secure a desired position in the field. The literary field continuously strives for autonomy and has already evolved into a “relatively autonomous space” (Sapiro 31). Nevertheless, it remains susceptible to the influences of external forces, especially those of politics and economy (Bourdieu 343).

The literary field is further divided into two subfields – restricted production and mass production. The tension between these two emerges through a differing understanding of what an author and what art is, even though there are areas of production that merge both subfields (Dörner and Vogt 162). The subfield of restricted production is based on symbolic capital, accumulated by producers who only produce for their peers and who are relatively independent from external demands (Bourdieu 345). In mass production on the contrary, success depends more on money and popularity. Therefore, this subfield often finds itself excluded and criticized by those following the principle *l’art pour l’art* (344).

In both subfields, authors are particularly interesting agents as they provide the cultural product. Bourdieu says that an author can only take effect in the open positions in the field through a specific amount of social, cultural, and economic capital as well as through taking on a specific habitus. As indicated above, the literary field and its subfield create sets of rules, a “modus operandi” (Sapiro 37) that authors need to follow to enter the field. The literary field is defined by a low amount of institutionalization

which makes personal relations and interactions more important for authors wanting to gain position. “Reactions, feedback, and sanctions [...], orient the choices of newcomers and lead them to readjust their strategies” (39). Although, it is possible that innovative works, which often result in scandal, redefine the space once and for all (40).

Authorship as a profession is clearly highly diverse and highly unpredictable (Bourdieu 358), which makes it even more important to use habitus and capital to secure one’s position as much as possible. Whether the decision of taking on a certain habitus is conscious or not remains to be discussed.

Accumulation of Capital

If we equate the term big break with the term “breakthrough” as a specific point in time when an author becomes known and successful in the literary field, looking at the accumulation of capital is an essential step in understanding the dynamics that lead to this point. Of course, no direct causality can be claimed between the big break and the accumulation of capital. Assessing capital is rather a tool to evaluate to what extent an author might have met the existing presuppositions to enter the field at a given point in time. In Bourdieu’s theory of capital, there are three types of capital which still apply to 21st century market circumstances: cultural, economic, and social capital.

Cultural capital in Bourdieu’s theory is divided into three subcategories. The first is objectified cultural capital, which means the possession of cultural objects that have not yet been acquired when it comes to their contents but project identity through their possession and presentation (Pressman 12). This type of cultural capital is related to economic capital as money is needed to buy many cultural objects. Incorporated cultural capital, or the process of acquisition, is the second sub-category. It can, for example, take place through private reading of books, formal education at school and university, apprenticeships, leading to the third sub-category – institutionalized cultural capital in the form of degrees, certificates, or titles.

Social capital is defined by membership in certain groups, relationships to other agents who potentially have access to capital that might be helpful for others, as well as institutionalized relations of knowing and acknowledging each other (Berleemann 26).

(Re-) Defining Literary Spaces

Bourdieu's theory of the literary field can be adapted for different spheres of cultural production. This has already been done by other scholars (Speller 74), yet an exclusive focus on the career of authors is still lacking. Bourdieu's theory holds the potential to make the definition of the big break phenomenon and its intertwining with the processes of production, distribution, and reception in the literary market accessible for academic research. Though to unearth this very potential, the theory must be supplemented and expanded to apply to modern conditions and dynamics of the sphere. Especially for future case studies, it is vital to address three issues arising from Bourdieu's approach and to give possible solutions.

First is the definition and connotation of subfields within the literary field. Bourdieu's subdivision is helpful to depict different foci in literary production, but it might be too one-sided and normative for academic discourse. Simply subdividing literary production into whether it depends on external forces would not meet the demands for research in the 21st century. Hence, it would be more fruitful to presume more subfields around the two poles existing in Bourdieu's theory and to further subdivide them. Following John B. Thompson, "publishing is not one world but many worlds" (Thompson, "Trade Publishing" 245) and therefore needs to be analyzed according to the specific rules of each world or subfield as well as in relation to the world around it. It might be sensible to choose more neutral language to talk about commercial literary production in academic research, because what is relevant here are its dynamics rather than the question if we consider it "true" art or not. Thompson's concept of the field of trade publishing can be a suitable replacement for Bourdieu's term of mass production. Trade publishing accurately depicts a space of literary production which "is the public face of publishing, the world of bestsellers and celebrity authors, of literary prizes and accolades, of books turned into movies ... the books that form an indispensable part of the public conversation and of our public culture" (Thompson, "Trade Publishing" 245). Thompson's term is more neutral and more successful in outlining 21st century book market structures.

Second is the criterion "nation" for defining the literary field. As already mentioned, Bourdieu's

concept of the literary field is not limited to French literary production and has been "used to analyse writers in different national fields and traditions" (Speller 74). However, it is questionable whether the category "nation" is even adequate to depict the transnational cultural production that takes place and always has to some extent (Norrick-Rühl 5). To understand how an author, such as children's book author Cornelia Funke, positions herself in the market while not only having her books translated into various languages but also writing in different languages, it is not adequate to stop at national borders. Following Pascale Casanova, French literary critic and professor of Romance Studies at Duke University, and her construction of a "world literary space" (Speller 71), there is not one literary field, but a transnational literary sphere that contains many interrelating fields.

Third and last is the process of position-taking between different subfields. There might be author agents who do not enter the literary field from the outside but have already been part of it in a different function. Some might start as illustrators or literary agents before they switch to writing. It would be important to not only examine the dynamics of entering the field for the first time but also those of switching subfields. Prior positions in the field may provide the agent in question with distinct knowledge of the subfields nearby or of how to initiate a change in habitus and the accumulation of capital. Considering the various possibilities of becoming an agent in the literary field allows a more nuanced perspective on an author's successful career as well as examples of those inhibited from being successful in the market.

Narrowing Down the Big Break

Defining a literary field with various subfields makes spaces of literary production visible. It also gives way to research on the mechanisms and dynamics driving these autonomous spaces of cultural work. A big break can be seen as one of those dynamics. As shown by Norrick-Rühl and Vogel, the literary field is always influenced by external forces like politics (24), though it has its very own "modus operandi" (Sapiro 37) that agents need to follow to change positions within subfields or to position themselves at all. Following Bourdieu, the term big break can therefore be defined as those moments of change in a subfield, when a position is taken by someone new. This allows for a closer look at economic and

cultural dynamics and interrelations from a more scientific perspective, which could also shift focus toward power relations, processes of gatekeeping and even discrimination within a relatively closed field.

In an environment of rising extremism and social injustice, it is crucial to uncover problematic choices in the stories that are told – or not told. Furthermore, an analysis of careers of young minority authors on a large scale may shed light on common difficulties they face in positioning themselves within the literary field and in accumulating capital to the point of a big break. The cultural sphere of literary production is relatively closed and still controlled by agents who, with implicit or explicit bias, “control the circulation of cultural goods and experiences” (Crips 88). Of course, it is impossible to assume direct causality, but a closer look at clusters might already provide helpful insight on general tendencies in career making in the literary market.

Despite the possible benefits, using the term big break in book studies research can be problematic. It is crucial to differentiate between the term as a tool for analyzing position-taking and a definition of success in the literary market. Big breaks can easily be misunderstood and thereby feed into the narrative of overnight success. It might be tempting to relate the introduction of an author to the literary field to automatic financial success and recognition by the public. This can be misleading as the financial and social outcome of a literary product depends on reception and current trends in the field. A big break in the sense of a breakthrough or turning point in position-taking does not guarantee income or an ongoing career. On the contrary, debut authors who receive bad reception or sell poorly are a risk for publishing houses if they try to publish another book (Thompson, *Merchants of Culture* 199). Moreover, success in certain subfields, such as academic literature or poetry, is not tied to money or publicity. In Bourdieu’s theory this would be the pole of restricted production (Dörner and Vogt 162).

A productive take on the link of the term big break and financial success and recognition could be its

use in the context of author marketing. In the sector of children’s and young adult literature, for example, research remains to be done on how an author and their brand is displayed and marketed. The big break might be an approach to examine how the emergence and success of an author is narrated to readers and the public by marketing professionals.

Another problem that comes with the term big break is its focus on just one point in time in an author’s career. Gaining legitimacy in the literary field is not one fixed event that guarantees future success but a constant process. Even when positioned in the target field, an author constantly accumulates more capital which allows a reinforcement of their position. The capital is, for instance, accumulated through literary prizes, reception and through adapting to the changing demands of the field. On this basis it could be hypothesized that there is not one big break but many smaller breakthroughs during the long career of an author which constantly ensure legitimacy in one subfield or even extend the legitimacy to further subfields.

Conclusion

This paper has shown how merging a redefined version of Bourdieu’s theory of the literary field and the process of accumulating capital results in a fruitful theoretical approach to analyze the dynamics of position-taking and position-changing on the literary field. The big break in literary production can be seen as one of those dynamics, namely the moments of change in a subfield, when a position is taken by someone new. The theoretical approach constructed in this paper is applicable to any case study of interest and allows an academic depiction of an author’s career in relation to the rules of their space of agency.

Redefining Bourdieu’s theory implies a shift from a less dichotomic, normative depiction of the literary field toward a transnational understanding of the sphere with the subfield of trade publishing as an established and valid sector included. Within this sphere, the process of accumulating capital, established by Bourdieu, is an essential process in achieving a big break as an author. The accumulation

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of money, cultural goods, and knowledge as well as social relations can be analyzed in the context of the redefined field and thereby map out structures, interrelations, and dynamics authors face in 21st century literary production. However, it is more suitable to presume several big breaks, instead of just one, during an author-career, which constantly confirm the author's legitimization and thereby their position within the literary field.

Though the theoretical approach proposed in this paper cannot be used as a key to success in the literary market, it is not meant to be a blueprint for becoming an author nor an indicator for financial success in cultural production. Rather it aims to approach the field of literary production from an academic perspective with a potential to focus on problematic power relations resulting in gatekeeping and discrimination. For further research it would therefore be of interest to apply the theoretical approach to relevant case studies. It could be interesting to investigate careers and big breaks of different author groups – especially minorities with the intention of uncovering difficulties in positioning – and authors from different subfields of the literary field, such as the area of children's and young adult writing.

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