

Politics of Readings / Politics of Dissemination

Jola Škulj

ZRC SAZU, Institute of Slovenian Literature and Literary Studies, Ljubljana, Slovenia
jsk@zrc-sazu.si

The politics of readings and politics of dissemination of literature can be discussed against a background of the system of objective relations as comprehended in Bourdieu's idea of the literary field, or in Lotman's concept of the agency of the semiosphere. The views on Bourdieu's idea of the literary field and its situation within cultural production are reread from a semiotic angle of literature and in view of semiotic consideration of literary historical facts, which are implicitly comparatist in the proper sense

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The theme of the colloquium “Who Chooses?” refers to the economy of symbolic goods. Publishing embodies the initiatives of mediation and represents the significant edge of decisions in the making of cultural worlds. Editorial selections implement their own reading of symbolic and economic values and thus participate in a complex self-regulating functioning of literary life. Is the role of editorial politics actually so essential? Are editorial choices in fact a vital aspect of the ongoing event of literature? However, no one can assert that the recent shift in the publishing industry with its own interests actually also participates in the construction of the literary field; that is, that it helps construct the space of position-takings¹ and regulate the interests or pursuits of literature. In 1983, in discussing the issue of cultural production, Bourdieu wrote:

To be fully understood, literary production has to be approached in relational terms, by constructing the literary field, i.e. the space of literary *prises de position* that are possible in a given period in a given society. *Prises de position* arise from the encounter between particular agents' dispositions (their *habitus*, shaped by their social trajectory) and their position in a field of positions which is defined by the distribution of a specific form of capital. This specific literary (or artistic, or philosophical, etc.) capital functions within an “economy” whose logic is an inversion

of the logic of the larger economy of society. (Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural" 311)

Cultural production is involved in an invisible network of objective relations, in a dynamic transmission of allocated and persistently rearranged symbolic capital. Cultural investments are confronted by resisting the literary or artistic field, which is *a field of forces*. The politics of reading and politics of dissemination do not cease to authorize this field and supply it with new conflicting and contradictory resources. By focusing on the politics of readings and politics of the dissemination of literature, this paper discusses some of the ideas introduced by Bourdieu and contrasts them with the semiotic ideas of culture and the agency of the semiosphere (Lotman, "The Semiosphere").

Only when manifested as a book or other publication – and thus involved in social space – is a literary product given life and allowed to enter the ongoing game that Bourdieu terms *the literary field*. For any literary work, publishing thus represents an initial move in the long process of establishing the work within a literary institution. Through readings (the plural form is here used intentionally), a literary text is permitted to exercise its function and can position itself within the literary institution, which means that it is given access to social space, its modeling system (the structure of its literariness) can be realized, and it can be made an object of response, receiving honor or veneration. Readers, critics, mediators, and the institutional roles of publishers, magazines, schools, universities, academies, and research institutes are all constituents in constructing the literary institution and they assist literature in being identified as part of an organized system and even integrated into a canon.

The politics of editing and publishing thus participate in the "economy" of cultural capital, although in the neoliberal (free market) vein their primary interests are basically absorbed in another type of economy: making a profit. As a result of editorial choices, literary transactions as symbolic goods are only set in motion, whereas literary phenomena start doing the job within their own literary field and involve themselves in an *economy* in the sense of *the orderly interplay between the parts of a system or structure*. In the case of literature, economy (< Lat. *oeconomia* < Gk. *oikonomia* 'household management' < *oïko(s)* 'house' + *-nomia* 'law') also refers to the management of the resources of a community or country, especially with a view to its output, production, or *poiesis* (< Gk. *poiein* 'to make') in the original Greek meaning of 'making, fabrication, formation'. Editions are thus a prerequisite to execute readings, a starting point for grasping a text's substance in reading negotiations, and a long process of reading responses and literary consecration.

Bourdieu claims that in the literary or artistic field there is

at all times the site of a struggle between the two principles of hierarchization: the *heteronomous* principle, favourable to those who dominate the field economically and politically (e.g. 'bourgeois art'), and the *autonomous* principle (e.g. 'art for art's sake'), which those of its advocates who are least endowed with specific capital tend to identify with degree of independence from the economy, seeing temporal failure as a sign of election and success as a sign of compromise (Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural" 321; my emphasis).

Bourdieu's delimitation of the heteronomous and autonomous principles in literature is rather relevant in analytical discussion of widespread editorial and publishing politics in recent decades. Free-market-oriented publishing is certainly in favor of the production of books as consumer goods. Consequently, preoccupied with consumerism and wary of the book-buying public, publishers mostly continue to support *bourgeois* art, to employ the notion used in Bourdieu's sociology of cultural production. In the abstract to his article on studying the literary publisher after Bourdieu, Frank de Glas, when arguing that "further application of Bourdieu's concepts to literary publishing should take the form of a much more precise study of the way literary publishers exploit the work of authors," points to the results of his empirical study of two Dutch publishers and concludes "that the publishing house exerts a powerful guiding influence in this exploitation" of authors (Glas, "Authors' Œuvres" 379). In fact, the outcome of his study confirms that "these houses have succeeded in steadily attracting new, productive authors to their lists" (Glas, "Authors' Œuvres" 379); moreover, they have almost certainly encouraged a number of writers to give up their proclivity for uncompromising artistic writing.² The publishing industry is attracted to best-sellers, and more often than not disfavors "the progressive invention of a particular social game" (Bourdieu, "The Field of Power" 163) labeled high literature with its autonomous principles and its own interests and largely promotes the consumerist taste for fiction. In addition, of course, there persist smaller, specialized (and now and then also subsidized) publishers that are overtly dedicated to bringing out books with more inventive writing and that cultivate the autonomous principle in literature. However, they usually cautiously print only a very limited number of copies. I have well in mind a conversation with the late John Gardner in the mid-1970s, who to my surprise told me that some early (and later well-known) postmodernist authors were published by smaller independent publishers in New York in no more than three hundred copies; in fact, the same number of books as an exclusive avant-garde serial edition of *Znamenja* reached in those years in Slovenia

with fewer than two million inhabitants. However, in the Slovenian press today one can hardly find titles such as that in *The New York Times* (of 15 February 2009), calling for “Saving Federal Arts Funds: Selling Culture as an Economic Force” (Pogrebin), not because the situation in Slovenia would be good enough, but because the magic rule of the free market is also still haunting this area of business and remains deeply embedded in the logic of publishing policy. The view on cultural production as an economic force in times of economic crisis stated above demonstrates the potential of a more accurate cultural understanding of literature as *poiesis* and points to the factual commerce of publishing as a double interest of investments, in the heteronomous and autonomous principle of literature. In times of emerging trends of highbrow omnivorousness³ in reading, editorial and publishing policy demands a decision-making role that is to remain a task of greater professional responsibility beyond being “colonized by the market” (Lizardo and Skiles 20).

What qualifies the one that chooses? How can one map an aggregate of the qualities on hand for the best editorial choices in publishing? What is the basis for good, penetrating judgments, for an accomplished managerial viewpoint on which literary text to issue for sale and distribution? The editor’s job needs a proficient professional profile, although it is certainly essentially operating through intuition and a great deal of experience. However, could one actually argue that the best literary agents unconsciously know that a manuscript can become a winning book, that they are able of having direct, quick insight to realize that a submitted text is of good quality, and that they are acting or comprehending immediately, without analysis, which work published will be a success? Cultural industry systems and patterns of cultural choice certainly change over the years (or decades), and a sensitive professional reader or editor with his thin-skinned feeling for a current publishing universe certainly knows how to act in response to given cultural transformations and interests. Through their refined, immediate cognition they instinctively recognize the distinction and merits of a text and know how to establish what comprises valuable and legitimate symbolic capital within the forthcoming world of literature. However, how can such knowledge be framed from the point of view of literary studies?

One can say that an experienced editor is well aware what constitutes legitimate cultural capital within a specific literary field because he is familiar with how to derive it from past symbolic capital. The theoretical framework I consider and the factors behind editorial and publishing strategies that I examine in greater detail certainly do not belong either to *publishing studies* and their interests in the book industry (as they are conceived at City

University of London⁴ or at The Oxford Publishing Centre for Publishing Studies, which is incorporated at the School of Arts and Humanities) or to the empirically focused sociological viewpoints of literary culture (as studied by Richard A. Peterson or Paul DiMaggio). My views on Bourdieu's idea of the literary field and its situation within cultural production can be reread from a semiotic angle of literature and in view of semiotic consideration of literary historical facts, which are implicitly comparatist in the proper sense. It means that Bourdieu's focus on how the field of cultural production has been established and how it connects to other fields, such as the *fields of power* and *class*, will be more or less neglected here, although such a point of view from the sociological perspective unequivocally shows how culture is a symbolic struggle for the primacy of specific works, as well as the naturalization of certain practices. Those interested in a discussion of how Bourdieu "developed ideas on the way authors in publishers' lists structure both the material and the 'symbolic' production of a publisher's output" should see another of de Glas's papers written for the SHARP⁵ Conference 2008 in Oxford (Glas, "The Usability").

Any thought of cultural capital is essentially related to the basic concepts of *field* and (in the case of literature) a writer's distinct *habitus*, much discussed throughout Bourdieu's work. For him, the field represents the structure of social relations, a site of struggle for positions within it, and is in fact constituted by the conflict. In Bourdieu's analysis, the event of a writer and his achievements is inseparable from the phenomenon of the literary field. Bourdieu frames his clear-cut description thus:

What do I mean by "field"? As I use the term, a field is *a separate social universe* having its *own laws of functioning* independent of those of politics and the economy. The existence of the writers, as fact and as value, is inseparable from the existence of the literary field as *an autonomous universe endowed with specific principles of evaluation of practices and works*. [...] In fact, the invention of the writer, in the modern sense of the term, is inseparable from the progressive invention of a particular social game, which I term the *literary field* and which is constituted as it establishes its autonomy, that is to say, *specific laws of functioning*, within the field of power. (Bourdieu, "The Field of Power" 162–163; my emphasis)

Any writer and reader of any text enters "the field of production, understood as the *system of objective relations* between the[...] agents or institutions and as the *site of the struggles* for the monopoly of the power *to consecrate*, in which the value of works of art and belief in that value are continuously generated" (Bourdieu, "The Production" 78; my emphasis).

Explaining his complex idea of the literary field as defined by *specific laws of functioning* and as *an autonomous universe endowed with specific principles of evaluation of practices and works*, Bourdieu's scrutiny implicitly calls to mind

another similarly intricate holistic concept of the semiosphere introduced by Lotman first in 1984 and later much more semiotically and historically elaborated in his book *Universe of the Mind* (1990). The complicated idea of the semiosphere also inscribes in itself a *space of possibles* and suggests to the writer or reader “all that one must have in the back of one’s mind in order to be in the game,” to use the words of Bourdieu (“Principles” 176–177).

Here is an integral paragraph from Bourdieu clarifying a *space of possibles*:

Fields of cultural production propose to those who are involved in them a *space of possibles* that tends to orient their research, even without their knowing it, by defining the universe of problems, references, intellectual benchmarks (often constituted by the names of its leading figures), concepts in *-ism*, in short, all that one must have in the back of one’s mind in order to be in the game. [...] This space of possibles is what causes producers of a particular period to be both situated and dated (the problematic is the historical outcome of the specific history of the field) and *relatively autonomous* in relation to the direct determinations of the economic and social environment. [...] This space of possibles, which transcends individual agents, functions as a *kind of system of common reference* which causes contemporary directors, even when they do not consciously refer to each other, to be objectively situated in relation to the others, to the extent that they are all interrelated as a function of *the same system of intellectual coordinates and points of reference*. (“Principles” 176–177)

The field of production, the literary field, and the semiosphere are entities continuously generated; any of these ideas represent a constantly redefined, ongoing *space of possibles* that is “a kind of system of common reference” or “the same system of intellectual coordinates and points of reference.” Bourdieu explicitly remarks that space of possibles is *the historical outcome of the specific history of the field*, relatively autonomous in relation to the economic and social environment. The field of production, the literary field, and the semiosphere all embody the *system of objective relations*. They are models (representations of structure or configurations) that display cultural communications and internal processing of artistic dynamism.

This space of possibles, which transcends individual agents, functions as an autonomous *live and active* network of concrete traces derived from past symbolic capital, inscribing in itself all the conflicting and contradictory choices for the nascent stage of any writing and any reading of texts. It also authorizes the very *locus of the struggles* the text is subjected to in the long process for its consecration.

Systems and patterns of cultural choices certainly change over time due to new factors and rearrangements in the literary field or in the semiosphere as *systems of objective relations* – pertaining to semiotic, cognitive, artistic, broadly anthropological, or social aspects. Bourdieu comments

on historical change as an advent of “the emergency of a group capable of ‘making an epoch’ by imposing a new, advanced position [...] accompanied by displacement of the structure temporally hierarchized positions opposed within a given field” (“The Field of Cultural” 340) and offers a fine observation to the point about the ever-increasing complexities involved in literary matrixes, thus touching on the question of why, over the course of time, artistic and literary idioms and strategies became increasingly institutionalized⁶ (i.e. established as a convention in an organization of culture) and professionalized:

Because the whole series of pertinent changes is present, practically, in the latest (just as the six figures already dialed on a telephone are present in the seventh), a work or an aesthetic movement is irreducible to any other situated elsewhere in the series; and *returns* to past styles [...] are never “the same thing”, since they are separated from what they return to by negative reference to something which was itself the negation of it (or the negation of the negation, etc.).⁷

That is why, in an artistic field which has reached an advanced stage of this history, there is no place for *naïfs*; more precisely, *the history is immanent to the functioning of the field*, and to meet the objective demands it implies, as a producer but also as a consumer, *one has to possess the whole history of the field*.⁸ (Bourdieu, “The Field of Cultural” 340–341; my emphasis)

The literary field and the semiosphere both imply, as *textual meaning-generated mechanisms*, *the whole history* of literature as *an open set* and represent exhaustive organizational patterns of transient schemes of objective relations. The literary field as well as the semiosphere entail “the whole semiotic space of the culture in question,” as Lotman (*Universe* 125) says, having in mind semiotic space not only of creative writing in a territory, but also of translated works, of stage presentations, and so on. His claims about the role and functioning of the semiosphere are also relevant for a proper understanding of the role of the literary field understood as social space. Lotman asserts: “The semiosphere is the result and the condition for the development of culture, [...] the totality and the organic whole for living matter [culture] and also the condition for the continuation of [cultural] life” (*Universe* 125). To sum up, *living culture is a function of the semiosphere and literary field in their particular space-time*. Lotman maintains that “the semiosphere is marked by its *heterogeneity*” (*Universe* 125) and the same is applicable to the literary field as well. (Bourdieu points to the existence of numerous subfields within it and of several *distinct subcultures*.) A semiotic space is “at one and the same moment and under the influence of the same impulses” still “*not [...] a single coding structure, but a set of connected, but different systems*,” Lotman says (*Universe* 125; my emphasis), and Bourdieu finds it “a

single field of the various socially specialized sub-fields” (Bourdieu, “The Production” 102).

The semiosphere, a semiotic entity, filled with structures of different types, and Bourdieu’s notion, which refers to sociological aspects in the structure of the literary field, are both useful comparatist holistic ideas that can provide a better underpinning to those involved in their editorial and publishing choices on a daily basis. Both ideas embody the literary historical context – the (semiotic or social) effects of previous, shifting cultural realities – pertinent to shape synchronic understanding. Lotman considers the semiosphere “as a single mechanism” and argues “that all elements of the semiosphere are in dynamic, not static correlations, whose terms are constantly changing” (Lotman, *Universe* 127).⁹ Is it correct to say that readings are latent in the ever-changing semiosphere? Lotman concurs with the view:

In the history of art [...] works which come down to us from remote cultural periods continue to play a part in cultural development as living factors. [...] What ‘works’ is not the most recent temporal section, but the *whole packed history of cultural texts*. [...] In fact, everything contained in the actual memory of culture, is directly or indirectly part of that culture’s synchrony. (*Universe* 127; my emphasis)

The semiosphere – implying an *entire packed history of cultural texts* – represents a holistic world model behind actual cultural processes, although one should see it as a constantly *re-read entity*, a *reworked actuality*, or an unceasingly *re-defined network of cultural traces* shaped through ongoing dialogism. The idea of the semiosphere is an exemplary observation on *transgressive realities* in culture.

I can briefly conclude here by saying that reading policies and publishing strategies face the difficult task of better and more refined understanding of literary production processes at work. Those that make choices should be cognizant that they are caught up in an entirely serious and sophisticated game of culture, semiotically and socially transmitted through an accumulation of various past writings, poetological traces, and matrixes. Inscriptions in texts are scanned through our own *being there*, and they participate in building up the imminent stories of *poiesis*. Thus the event of the omnivorous highbrow reader may not be there by chance.

NOTES

¹ In the words of Bourdieu, “*prises de positions*.”

² “The struggle in the field of cultural production over the imposition of the legitimate mode of cultural production is inseparable from the struggle within the dominant class (with the opposition between ‘artists’ and ‘bourgeois’) to impose the dominant principle of domination (that is to say – ultimately – the definition of human accomplishment). In this struggle, the artists and writers who are richest in specific capital and most concerned for their autonomy are considerably weakened by the fact that some of their competitors identify their interests with the dominant principles of hierarchization and seek to impose them even within the field, with the support of the temporal powers. The most heteronomous cultural producers (i.e. those with least symbolic capital) can offer the least resistance to external demands, of whatever sort. To defend their own position, they have to produce weapons, which the dominant agents (within the field of power) can immediately turn against the cultural producers most attached to their autonomy” (Bourdieu, “The Field of Cultural” 322).

³ Cf. Peterson, “Six Constraints,” “Changing,” “Problems”; Peterson and Kern; Lizardo and Skiles.

⁴ The following teaching modules can be found there: The World of the Book (10 credits), Publishing as a Business (15 credits), Publishing Law (15 credits), Digitisation and Publishing (15 credits), Selling Books (10 credits), Commissioning and Project Acquisition (15 credits), Book Marketing (15 credits), The Publishing Process (15 credits), Work Placement and Report (10 credits), and Dissertation (60 credits).

⁵ Society for the history of authorship, reading, and publishing.

⁶ That art became more and more institutionalized and professionalized is argued by Siegfried Schmidt in *Die Selbstorganisation des Sozialsystems. Literatur im 18. Jahrhundert* (1989).

⁷ Bourdieu wrote about the question of returns and Duchamp’s approach to it in “La production de la croyance.”

⁸ Cf. note 18 in Bourdieu (“The Field of Cultural” 341): “The perception called for by a work produced in accordance with the logic of the field is a differential, distinctive perception, attentive to the differences, the deviations from what is normal, usual, *modal* at the moment in question, i.e. from other works, contemporary and especially past ones – in short, a historical perception.”

⁹ A corresponding view is found also in Bourdieu (“The Production” 102) in his discussion on taste: “The field of cultural production is the area *par excellence* of clashes between the dominant fractions of the dominant class, who fight there sometimes in person but more often through producers oriented towards defending their ‘ideas’ and satisfying their ‘tastes’, and the dominated fractions who are totally involved in this struggle. This conflict brings about the integration in a single field of the various socially specialized sub-fields[.]”

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