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**How books travel: Translation flows and practices of Dutch acquiring editors and New York literary scouts, 1980-2009**

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# Chapter 3

**The relational mode of valuation:  
Value, taste and relations  
in the practices of  
New York literary scouts**

### Chapter 3

#### The relational mode of valuation: Value, taste and relations in the practices of New York literary scouts<sup>10</sup>

SCOUT:

IT WAS JUST BEFORE THE FRANKFURT BOOK FAIR, THE LITERARY AGENT THAT SOLD IT, THEY ARE KNOWN FOR THEIR MORE SOPHISTICATED CRIME FICTION. IT STARTED WHEN THE AGENT SENT A LETTER, JUST AN EMAIL, JUST BEFORE FRANKFURT SAYING 'LOOK HERE IS THE 35 PAGES', YOU NEED TO KNOW AN ITALIAN PUBLISHER JUST PREEMPTED – THAT WAS SOMEONE THEY SELL BOOKS TO ALL THE TIME SO THAT IN ITSELF WASN'T MUCH – AND KNOPF ALSO PREEMPTED. I WAS LIKE, 'HMM THAT IS INTERESTING, I AM GOING TO LOOK AT IT NOW'. I JUST LOOKED AT THE EXCERPT THEY HAD ON THE WEBSITE. IT WAS GOOD AND IT WAS ALSO SHORT ENOUGH FOR PEOPLE TO READ AND DIGEST IT BEFORE AND AFTER FRANKFURT AND PARTICIPATE IN AUCTIONS. IT SOLD FOR A LOT OF MONEY.

INTERVIEWER:

ALSO TO YOUR CLIENTS?

SCOUT:

NO MY CLIENTS LOST, TWO OF MY CLIENTS LOST IT IN AUCTION. MY GERMANS MADE A MISTAKE BECAUSE THEY READ THE ORIGINAL 35 PAGES AND IMMEDIATELY MADE AN OFFER, A SMALL OFFER. THINKING 'NOW I HAVE BOUGHT MY PLACE IN THE AUCTION, NOW I HAVE TIME TO SIT DOWN AND GIVE EVERYONE A CHANCE TO READ IT AND WE WILL DECIDE HOW MUCH TO OFFER'. BUT THE AGENT ACCEPTED A PREEMPT FOR ABOUT 25 TIMES THAT SIZE, SAYING THEY HAD FOUR PREEMPTS AND TOOK THE HIGHEST ONE RATHER THAN GO TO AUCTION. (...) AND IT HAPPENED WITHIN 24 HOURS.

(SCOUT 1)

Just 35 pages of this 'sophisticated crime fiction' were available; as the scout later told me, the 22 year-old author had written it while attending college. An Italian publisher and the American publisher Knopf had preempted the rights, meaning they had offered such a large advance that the literary agent was persuaded not to auction them. The scout was drawn to the manuscript by these preempts. She tipped off her clients but they struck out, and it all happened very fast. The press coverage of the deal stated that 'everyone was buzzing about' the book and that in Germany it was a 'high six-figure' two-book deal, meaning that the rights had been bought for this manuscript as well as for a yet unwritten second book.

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10. This chapter has been submitted to *Poetics* as: Franssen, Thomas. "The relational mode of valuation: value, taste and relations in the practices of New York literary scouts"

In Italy and the US the figures were about the same. There thus seemed to be widespread agreement in the global book market, among these actors at least, about the value of this incomplete manuscript written by a little known author. This process, in which the literary agent releases a manuscript until the rights are sold, I understand as a process of valuation. This article inquires: how do these valuation processes work?

I analyze the valuation process of book manuscripts through the practices of one of the crucial intermediaries in the global book market: that of literary scouts. Literary scouts work for publishing houses outside the US (mainly European ones) and occasionally for American movie or television companies. Some scouts have less than five clients; others more than 15. They collect information on new manuscripts that are, in our case, placed on the American market by literary agents. This is not the consumer market, but the market for American publishing houses that buy the publication rights of manuscripts, as Knopf did in the example above. But the clients of literary scouts are interested in another set of rights: translation rights. Literary scouts are, as one of them stated, 'the eyes and ears' of their clients in New York. They know exactly what is going on and what is interesting to their clients. And crucially, they can obtain manuscripts before European publishers can do so themselves.

Literary scouts are intermediaries who act as gatekeepers by filtering information and as cultural brokers by match-making manuscripts and people. They are co-producers in the valuation process of new manuscripts on the American and global book markets, brokering information between actors such as foreign and American editors and creating new relationships between them. Their role as co-producers is especially important because manuscripts are not yet books. During and following the valuation process I analyze here, manuscripts slowly but surely become books as they are completed by their authors, edited, in the case of a foreign sale translated and edited again, acquire material characteristics and a price tag (Franssen and Velthuis 2014).

The current analysis adds to existing research on intermediaries in cultural production which has, to date, largely focused on individual evaluation practices (e.g. Bielby and Bielby 1994; Franssen and Kuipers 2013; but see Mauws 2000). While meso-level valuation processes have been analyzed on consumer markets where sales figures, reviews, awards and other institutionalized consecration mechanisms are widely used (Bourdieu 1993; Verboord 2010; Janssen 1997), such information is unavailable in this producer market, complicating decision-making for all actors involved. Actors thus rely to a greater extent on the interest of others in a new manuscript, what they call 'buzz'. I argue that this process can be understood as a relational mode of valuation in which value emerges through the network that

develops around a new manuscript. I contrast this to the institutional mode of valuation, as described by institutional and field-theoretical accounts of cultural production. To do so, I build upon the pragmatic theory of valuation recently developed in cultural sociology (e.g. Helgesson and Muniesa 2013; Hennion 2007).

### **Evaluation practices of intermediaries and processes of valuation in cultural fields**

#### *Evaluation in (transnational) cultural fields*

The evaluation practices of intermediaries have been studied widely in cultural sociology. A first strand of research, approaching the evaluation of cultural objects from an ‘uncertainty perspective’, has shown that cultural objects are notoriously difficult to evaluate as their quality is difficult to assess, that there are no standardized tests to do so, and that future success is unpredictable (e.g. Aspers and Beckert 2011: 5). Intermediaries deal with this uncertainty in different ways, for instance by collecting and following information that can be regarded as quality clues (such as sales figures or reviews) (Bielby and Bielby 1994), by copying the strategies or decisions of other cultural intermediaries (Janssen 1997; Alhkvist and Faulkner 2002), by outsourcing part of their decision-making to a wider network of trusted sources (Foster et al. 2011), or by relying on their own experience and gut feeling (Mears 2014).

A second strand of research, often combined with the first, addresses evaluation in a slightly different way by asking how evaluation criteria relate to the positions of intermediaries in the structure and hierarchy of the cultural field in question (Bourdieu 1993). For instance, Friedman (2014) examines the criteria comedy scouts use to evaluate comedians and how through these practices they reproduce the structure of the comedy field. Similarly, Franssen and Kuipers (2013) find that Dutch editors, by focusing on whether a book ‘fits’ the list of the publishing house, reproduce the position of the publishing house in the literary field. These Bourdieusian analyses (see also Sapiro 2010) posit that there is a homology between the position of actors in the field and their evaluation practices. Recent case studies, however, have shown that evaluation practices are more complex and layered than previously assumed (e.g. Kuipers 2012; Craig and Dubois 2010). The understanding of evaluation practices in both strands of research rests, I argue, on a shared understanding of how the value of cultural objects emerges in (organizational) fields.

*Value and valuation in (transnational) cultural fields*

Within current research in cultural sociology, valuation is most commonly approached through an institutional understanding of value that builds on Bourdieu's work on field theory (Bourdieu 1993), Peterson's production of culture (Peterson and Anand 2004) or neo-institutional work on organizational fields (e.g. DiMaggio and Powell 1991). While these theories differ, they share a relational understanding of the meso-level structure of cultural fields, where the value of a cultural object is determined by the field's dominant (aesthetic) logics (valuation becoming possible once the information deficit is solved) (Dobbin 2008; Franssen and Kuipers 2013).

The value of a cultural object is seen as the outcome of a process of consecration where value mirrors the object's position in the field (e.g. Bourdieu 1993: 215-237). Given Bourdieu's more general theory of how the production of value (and belief in that value) becomes possible, the theory is deeply relational. Bourdieu argues that the value of a work or '[w]hat "makes reputations" is (...) the field of production [as a whole], understood as the system of objective relations between these 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 1993: 78).

In this view, the value of a work of art is generated through consecration via institutionalized mechanisms such as reviews in media outlets (Glynn and Lounsbury 2005; Janssen 1997), bestseller lists (Verboord 2011) and by the reputation of publishers (Bourdieu 1993), which can all be considered judgment devices (Karpik 2010) that produce and reproduce a certain market order. Besides these institutional mechanisms, the habitus itself is a powerful consecration mechanism as actors reproduce the structure of the field through their repertoires of taste (Mears 2014; Friedman 2014; Kuipers 2012). As value is generated first and foremost through institutionalized mechanisms, and mediated by the habitus, we can call this an institutional mode of valuation that will generally reproduce the structure of the field. For DiMaggio and Powell (1983), the mechanisms through which the dominance of a logic is established differs from Bourdieu's theory but the outcome is the same: the value of a cultural object emerges through the institutionalized actors or mechanisms that follow the dominant logic of the field.

In the worldview (in the case of neo-institutionalism) or the habitus (in the case of field theory), the structure of the field is embodied at the micro-level (Dobbin 2008); based on the positions of actors in the field, the act of evaluating a cultural object becomes almost automatic (see also Leschziner and Green 2013; Mears 2014). These individual acts of consecration reproduce the structure of the field and the

position of taste repertoires, actors and works of art within them (Bourdieu 1993: 108). Although this theory can capture how value comes into being in highly institutionalized markets where actors can access a plethora of judgment devices to make sense of the objects on offer, it cannot capture the complexity of evaluation practices in more unstable markets, not least because evaluation practices cannot be reduced to an application of meso-level mechanisms. As different logics operate within increasingly international cultural markets (Kuipers 2012) and hierarchies between cultural goods are less stable than ever before, it is incumbent that we come to understand how value in such markets comes into being.

### *Pragmatic intervention*

The pragmatic approach to value and evaluation (Muniesa 2011; Hunter and Stark 2015; Helgesson and Muniesa 2013), developed especially in response to Bourdieu's work, has grown more important in recent years (e.g. Prior 2011). This body of work critiques Bourdieu and other institutional theorists for reducing evaluating practices to field positions and argues instead for a situational and material approach to value and evaluation (Hennion and Grenier 2000). For research on intermediaries in global markets, this approach intervenes in three ways.

First, Hennion (1989) in his analysis of music producers as intermediaries argues that cultural production should be understood as a performative process. Intermediaries are not brokers between existing entities but co-producers of both objects and their publics. This fits with Friedman's discussion of comedy scouts as taste-makers who actively produce comedians and their publics. The performative aspect of engagement with cultural objects has been further elaborated by Hennion (2001, 2007) for music amateurs, by Acord (2010) and Griswold et al. (2013) for the visual arts, and by DeNora (2000) for music.

Second, evaluation regimes combine in different ways depending on the evaluative moment. In a study of the evaluation of cultural heritage sites, Heinich (2011) shows how government officials draw on a variety of valuation regimes through which cultural heritage comes into being. Hennion (2007) shows that music lovers engage and are determined in different ways by different valuation regimes at different times and places. These works show that intermediaries – depending on who they work for and what kinds of objects they engage with – can exercise considerable agency in the face of dominant logics and putatively automatic processes. Kuipers (2012) for instance shows how the buyers of television programs can use different evaluative regimes, including those that do not fit their personal tastes, depending on who they are buying the programs for.

Third, this approach analyzes how objects travel from one place to another (Law and Mol 2001), for instance from the studio to the public (Hennion 1989). These movements are conceptualized by tracing the networks that constitute research objects. According to Latour, objects cannot move from A to B by the force of A alone; B needs to be enrolled in the network and move it as well (Latour 1993: 16). Latour thus traces associations between all agents enrolled in the network that ‘make a difference’ (see also Law and Mol 2008). Adopting this approach to the field of culture, Hennion in his analysis of music producers shows how the network that constitutes a pop song slowly but surely widens as it moves from the studio to the consumer market. At the same time, different aspects of the network are black-boxed. For instance, while at first sound effects can be added or removed, once the network of the song moves out of the studio, the song itself is kept relatively stable. Strandvad (2012) likewise uses the extension of networks through attachment to analyze the life of a film project.

Following cues from pragmatic sociological research to add to our understanding of valuation in cultural fields, this article aims to understand how new manuscripts accrue value in the global book market. I argue that there is a relational mode of valuation through which manuscripts become valuable that differs from the institutional mode of valuation as described by field theory and neo-institutionalism. The practices of scouts are a good case to do so as scouts do not buy publication or translation rights or make decisions themselves, but play intermediary roles for other actors including their clients, American literary agents and editors. The practices of literary scouts reveal how evaluations, actors and manuscripts work together to make manuscripts economically valuable.

## Data

The current research is based on ten interviews at scouting agencies with a total of 13 scouts (some interviews involved more than one scout) and one interview at a publishing house with one ex-scout. While the sample size is small, so is the population (there were only 16 scouting agencies in New York in 2014)<sup>11</sup> and the data has rich depth. New York is the center of the American literary field and thus home to the greatest number of literary scouts. While additional data were gleaned from (online) industry periodicals, these data are also scarce as scouts rarely accept interviews.

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11. In 2014, the same source, Publishing Trends, reports that there are only 14 scouts left. Three had left the business (among them one of my contacts) while one scout had started recently. (<http://www.publishingtrends.com/2014/01/whos-scouting-literary-scouts-contact-sheet-2014/>)

The population is difficult to access. Six scouting agencies did not want to talk to me at all. One scout explained on the phone that he would have to call all of his contacts both in the US and abroad before he could say anything about them. While this could have been an excuse, it fits the secretive nature of the profession. Scouts did not feel comfortable discussing specific cases or the names of people they liked or disliked. Such secrecy is crucial as scouts want to maintain friendly relations with everyone in the literary field while advising their clients on specific manuscripts. If their advice becomes known, relations can turn sour very quickly.

In the end, scouts from ten agencies and one ex-scout all generously made time for me. In interviews ranging from 20 to 90 minutes, we typically discussed how scouts go about their day-to-day work and the challenges inherent to their profession. Four scouts also sent me old weekly reports or their reading reports of individual manuscripts, about which I could ask questions to understand how they report to clients. All interviews except one were taped and transcribed. All data were inductively coded in Atlas.ti. In this article I have refrained from providing identifying detail to protect the anonymity of my informants.

### **The daily practices of literary scouts**

In 2011 there were 16 scouting agencies in New York (Publishers Trade 2011), ranging from one-person operations to firms with around 10 to 15 employees. The larger agencies have their offices in rented suites on the main streets of Manhattan, evenly distributed across the West and East Sides. Two smaller, younger agencies are based in Brooklyn. Two one-man scouting agencies work out of their homes in Manhattan, while one scout lives and works outside of New York, traveling to the city only occasionally.

Scouts are hired by clients outside the US: mainly publishers but also literary agencies (in Japan) and production studios like Warner Bros in the US. Europe is the largest market for scouts. What a scout costs depends on the client's 'territory' – its size and prestige. Monthly costs range from \$500 to a few thousand dollars for a small territory like The Netherlands, to \$1500 to five-figures per month for a large territory like Germany. Fees are paid monthly but contracts usually run for longer periods.

Scouts operate within the New York literary scene and mainly work with American editors and publishers, rights persons at publishing houses and literary agencies, literary agents, and sometimes with writers and critics. They have two main tasks. The first is to act as 'information filters' and 'the eyes and ears of their clients on the ground in New York'. They need to know exactly what is going on and, more importantly, what will

be going on next month in terms of manuscripts entering onto the American market. They report on interesting manuscripts to their clients throughout the week via email. Scouts function as gatekeepers, narrowing flows of information to their clients, and as cultural brokers forging new relations between their clients and American actors. Media publications about scouts often highlight their roles as the most informed persons in the field. An author in *Publishers' Weekly* writes about a translation rights offer he received from a Russian publisher, unknown to both him and his agent, facilitated by:

[I]NTERNATIONAL LITERARY SCOUTS, THE JAMES BONDS OF THE PUBLISHING INDUSTRY, COVERT INTERMEDIARIES WHO MANAGE TO OBTAIN MANUSCRIPTS, BY MEANS FOUL OR FAIR, AND THEN SEND THEM OFF AROUND THE WORLD SECRETIVELY.

(PICKER 2014)

Scouts represent their clients socially to ensure that American editors and agents remember them as viable business partners. Scouts set their clients' agendas when they visit New York and the book fairs, acting as cultural brokers (Foster et al. 2011). Visiting New York allows foreign editors to see what is happening there, to get new ideas and meet American editors and literary agents, thereby strengthening their networks and increasing their symbolic capital (Kuipers 2011). For the book fairs, the scheduling is similar but also includes meetings with actors from outside the US.

*Competition in the global market for translations and problems of daily scouting practices*

The intensity of the competition for obtaining a manuscript's translation rights depends on the language and the genre as well as timing. In markets for peripheral languages and in genres such as poetry that are generally not very lucrative, an editor looking to buy translation rights can wait until a book is published and reviews and sales figures are known (Whitmore 2013). There will be little competition, and the longer one waits, the more information there will be to assess the book's commercial potential and literary quality. But typically, these books are not expected to sell well and are not the books scouts are looking for. In the dominant Anglo-American market and in the commercial genres (notably crime fiction and upmarket literary fiction), the competition is more fierce. As one scout explains:

WE ARE LOOKING FOR THE CREAM OF THE CROP, WE ARE NOT LOOKING FOR EVERYTHING. SO MANY PEOPLE HAVE SCOUTS WHO ARE LOOKING FOR THE CREAM OF THE CROP, THAT IS WHY THE COMPETITION HAS GOTTEN REALLY INTENSE.

(SCOUT 1)

The competition to sign the 'cream of the crop' means that scouts and foreign editors cannot wait for reviews or sales figures; ideally, editors want to buy the translation rights when the rights to a manuscript are sold to an American publisher. This makes scouting a nerve-racking job: my informants related stories of colleagues burning out after working as scouts for five to eight years. An ex-scout explains the high stakes:

IT COULD BE ONE BOOK THAT MAKES YOUR YEAR. AND IF YOU MISS THAT ONE BOOK, IF YOU DIDN'T EVEN SEE IT OR KNOW ABOUT IT AND YOUR BIGGEST COMPETITOR GOT THAT FROM THEIR SCOUT... AND GOT A PREEMPT IN EARLY AND IT MAKES THEIR YEAR. I MEAN THAT'S NOT A GOOD SITUATION TO BE IN. THAT'S ONE OF THE NERVOUS PARTS OF BEING A SCOUT. YOU DON'T KNOW WHEN THAT BOOK IS GOING TO COME. YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT IS HAPPENING TOMORROW. MAYBE TOMORROW WE COME BACK AND ANDREW WYLIE HAS A MANUSCRIPT OUT. WHO KNOWS, THAT COULD BE.

(EX-SCOUT)

The rush on promising manuscripts means that they are often not finished, not edited, and not yet sold to an American publisher. There are no sales figures, literary awards or reviews to go on; the manuscript is still in the process of becoming a book, of being classified, ordered and ranked (see Karpik 2010; Bourdieu 1993; Janssen 1997; English 2002). Manuscripts that literary agents have high expectations of are typically first circulated among a small group of American publishers; literary agents generally want to know what happens to a manuscript in the US before venturing abroad. Scouts cannot easily obtain such manuscripts, but when one does get out among foreign editors, it will likely sell quickly.

### **Evaluating manuscripts**

Manuscripts are evaluated through different evaluation regimes by literary scouts, literary agents and editors. My informants explained that, as paid agents, scouts must identify manuscripts that are potentially profitable, and that editors do not need scouts for books that are not commercially viable. In the case of poetry for instance, there is hardly any competition and editors can wait for reviews and literary prizes before buying the translation rights. But this does not mean that manuscripts are solely evaluated for their commercial potential. Direct commercial evaluations were in fact rare, with commercial viability understood as the (desired) outcome of an evaluation that usually combined different evaluation regimes.

*Aesthetic evaluation regimes*

Evaluating the aesthetic quality of a manuscript is done in two ways. The first is to compare a new manuscript to a larger body of texts, such as a genre, to assess whether it is interesting in light of its conventions and history. The second is to judge a manuscript based on the effect it has, or is perceived it could have, on the reader – what we can call the aesthetic experience. I first discuss the different bodies of texts that manuscripts are compared to.

Manuscripts are often evaluated in light of their particular genre. Scouts read or skim from 50 to 100 manuscripts a week and thus get a good sense of what is good and bad and, importantly, innovative or old, within a genre. Scouts are expected to have read the classics in each genre to which different actors in the literary field keep referring (e.g. Bielby and Bielby 1994; Franssen and Kuipers 2013). Within each genre, they are continuously looking for something ‘new’, ‘innovative’, ‘fresh’ and ‘original’. A scout explains how she evaluates a ‘noirish’ thriller:

YOU HAVE TO DECIDE IF IT IS A GOOD VERSION OF WHAT IT IS TRYING TO BE. IF IT IS A NOIRISH THRILLER: ‘IS IT A GOOD NOIRISH THRILLER?’ IS IT BRINGING ANYTHING NEW TO THE NOIRISH THRILLER TABLE OR IS IT JUST LIKE EVERY OTHER ONE OF THESE YOU HAVE EVER READ? (...) IS IT DOING A GOOD JOB OF BEING THE BOOK IT WANTS TO BE?

(SCOUT 2)

Manuscripts can also be evaluated in light of trends. Trends are smaller than genres and can be situated within them or bridge genres (for instance, vampire books often bridge crime and romance). As one scout explains about trends around book fairs:

**SCOUT:**

WE SEE WEIRD TRENDS YOU KNOW AROUND EACH OF THE BOOK FAIRS. LIKE ONE YEAR IT IS ANGELS, ONE YEAR IT IS ZOMBIES, THIS YEAR, RANDOMLY, IT WAS ‘ELECTRONICALLY CORRESPONDING WITH THE DEAD’.

**INTERVIEWER:**

I HEARD SOMETHING ABOUT MERMAIDS?

**SCOUT:**

MERMAIDS ON THE YOUNG ADULT SIDE ARE HUGE.

**INTERVIEWER:**

WHY MERMAIDS?

**Scout:**

THERE IS NOT A LOT OF LOGIC TO IT. CIRCUS BOOKS ARE VERY 2004. THAT WAS THE YEAR OF THE CIRCUS. SOMETIMES IT IS JUST A MATTER OF KNOWING HOW SOMETHING IS GOING TO BE MARKETED AND WHETHER SOMETHING CAN BE MARKETED IN THE RIGHT SORT OF WAY. *THE NIGHT CIRCUS* IS A FLAWED BOOK, IT WAS GOING TO HIT THE BESTSELLER LIST REGARDLESS OF WHO BOUGHT IT. BECAUSE IT WAS JUST SOMETHING THAT WAS REALLY EASY TO MARKET. SOMETIMES THERE IS JUST THAT SORT OF ZEITGEIST.

(SCOUT 3)

According to this scout, the emergence of trends is 'random' but relates to a certain 'Zeitgeist'. Like the emergence of a new 'look' in fashion, it is hard to point to its origins or to reasons for its appeal (Mears 2011). Interestingly, *The Night Circus* was evaluated very positively from a trend regime but, according to the scout, was flawed when evaluated in other ways – showing that what is considered important in an evaluation, and thus through which evaluation regime a manuscript is evaluated, differs from manuscript to manuscript.

Manuscripts can also be evaluated against the background of national culture. In this regime, scouts evaluate books in relation to the cultures of their clients' literary fields. When local cultures are discussed, scouts use stereotypes about readers from specific markets. For instance, Brazilians like romantic stories, Dutch and Italians like more cynical or dark stories, and South Koreans like positive business books. The evaluation regime is often negative, positing that a book is unable to travel abroad because it is too 'American', meaning that the themes or story only make sense in an American cultural context. A specific type of humor is often a clue, as are themes such as the Civil War or 'the South'. A scout explained why a book wouldn't travel due to its cultural specificity:

IT TAKES PLACE IN AN OFFICE, IT IS A WORKPLACE SORT OF NOVEL, NOTHING INHERENTLY BAD ABOUT THAT. BUT IT IS ABOUT A CHINESE AMERICAN WOMAN WHO IS IN HER EARLY THIRTIES. IT IS THE YEAR SHE IS UP FOR PARTNER AT THE FANCY CORPORATE LAW FIRM WHERE SHE WORKS AND IT IS ABOUT RACE RELATIONS IN AMERICAN CORPORATE LIFE. AND I WAS READING IT LIKE, 'IT IS WELL WRITTEN BUT WHY WOULD ANYONE CARE?' I CAN SEE WHY AMERICAN PEOPLE WOULD CARE, BUT WHY WOULD DUTCH PEOPLE AT ALL CARE ABOUT RACE RELATIONS IN AMERICAN CORPORATE LIFE?

(SCOUT 2)

Manuscripts can also be evaluated by the aesthetic experiences they produce. Here a manuscript's quality is determined not by comparing it to other texts but

through the effect it has on the reader. If scouts are affected by a manuscript, they talk about it in terms of having a ‘click’, a ‘feeling’ or ‘a little like falling in love’ (see also Mears 2014). As two scouts explain:

IF ALL OF A SUDDEN I READ 80 PAGES AND COMPLETELY FORGOT WHERE I WAS SITTING AND WHAT MY NAME IS THEN I KNOW. (...) IF YOU FEEL LIKE WOW, THIS REALLY HAS POWER.  
(SCOUT 4)

THAT INITIAL FEELING OF SOMETHING CLICKING IS A LITTLE BIT LIKE FALLING IN LOVE BECAUSE IT IS SORT OF HARD TO ARTICULATE. (...) IT JUST LIKE CLICKS. I CAN’T REALLY EXPLAIN WHY. (...) IT HAPPENS LIKE A COUPLE OF TIMES A YEAR AND THAT SEEMS LIKE A PRETTY AMAZING THING.  
(SCOUT 5)

Scouts read with their clients’ taste repertoires in mind. Evaluations of aesthetic experience are not necessarily personal but can also be effects that a manuscript is assumed or imagined to have on other readers (e.g. Kuipers 2011). As the ex-scout explains:

BECAUSE AS A SCOUT YOU ARE WORKING ON BEHALF OF YOUR CLIENTS. SO YOU MAY DISLIKE THIS COMPLETELY BUT IN REALITY YOU SEE SOMETHING THAT IS REALLY GOOD IN IT, AND YOU JUST DON’T CONNECT WITH THE WORK. THAT THERE IS SOMETHING GOOD IN IT AND THERE IS SOMETHING THAT WILL MAKE THIS BIG THROUGHOUT THE WORLD, THAN IT’S STILL GOOD EVEN THOUGH YOU PERSONALLY DON’T NECESSARILY CONNECT WITH THE MATERIAL.  
(EX-SCOUT)

### *Institutional evaluation regimes*

Manuscripts are not only evaluated aesthetically; literary scouts also rely on institutional evaluation regimes to assess their importance. If big literary agencies send out a manuscript to important American editors, scouts will want to see and report on that manuscript; editors will want to know about such manuscripts too (Franssen and Kuipers 2013). As two scouts reflect:

WHEN THERE IS A BIG BOOK COMING OUT OF ONE OF THE LARGER AGENCIES, EVERYONE IS GOING TO BE PAYING ATTENTION TO THAT SIMPLY BECAUSE OF WHO THE AGENT IS AND BECAUSE OF WHO THEY SUBMITTED TO HERE IN THE US.  
(SCOUT 3)

WE LOOK VERY MUCH FROM WHICH KIND OF AGENCY IT IS COMING IF OUR CLIENTS HAVE A LOT OF BOOKS FROM THESE AGENTS OR WE KNOW WE LIKE THE TASTE OF THAT PARTICULAR AGENT WE SAY, 'WE BETTER READ THAT FIRST'.

(SCOUT 4)

The institutional evaluation regime powerfully affects the practices of literary scouts and illustrates Bourdieu's field theoretical understanding of value. Unrelated to the textual qualities of a manuscript, it is important for scouts to report on it because of the position of the literary agent or publisher (Bourdieu 1993). Since few institutional clues are available, scouts rely on the position of the literary agent in the field and the position of the American publisher if the manuscript has already been sold. Scouts also assess the quality of the author through earlier publications in magazines, newspapers or on blogs. In these cases, they are not concerned with what the author has already published, but in the field position of the outlet.

#### *Relational evaluation regime*

A third evaluation regime is the relational regime, evident when scouts claim that if different people mention the same manuscript, they have to check it out. This is what they call 'buzz', one of the primary reasons scouts will look into a manuscript. As two scouts explain:

**INTERVIEWER:**

SO HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHAT TO READ?

**SCOUT:**

BUZZ REALLY. IF EVERYONE IS TALKING ABOUT SOMETHING YOU GOT TO READ IT. TO FIND OUT WHAT THE BIG DEAL IS.

(SCOUT 2)

WHEN BUZZ IS IN TOWN. CLEARLY IF THREE PEOPLE IN ONE DAY MENTION IT TO ME, TO MARIA, TO OUR COLLEAGUE ISABEL. WE FEEL THERE IS SOME VIBE IN THE AIR ABOUT A CERTAIN BOOK.

(SCOUT 4)

In this evaluation regime, buzz is seen as a signal of aesthetic quality, of a trend, or of more general 'interest'. Scouts report to their clients that a lot of people are talking about a given book, and do so even when they don't like the manuscript themselves as they feel they would be bad scouts if they did not report on books generating buzz. This regime relates to earlier findings in research on intermediaries which shows that

actors rely on their personal networks and most trusted sources (e.g. Powell 1978; Kawashima 1999; Foster et al. 2011). But buzz does not solely arise out of the personal networks of intermediaries; hearing from personal contacts that others, whom one might know personally or only by name, are talking about a manuscript is equally important. Buzz therefore becomes an evaluation regime in its own right, apparent in the example in the introduction where the news source wrote that ‘everyone was buzzing’ about a manuscript. In such a case, it no longer matters who these people are.

Buzz emerges because actors in this market are constantly in contact with one another and talking about new manuscripts. Below I argue that buzz constitutes a particular mode of valuation and can be understood as a judgment device that produces value and market order. I first discuss the ways in which evaluation regimes are intertwined in practice.

### *Intertwined evaluation regimes*

Different evaluation regimes are combined by scouts in different ways for each manuscript. In this section I discuss extracts from reports sent by scouts to their clients, which reveal the role of scouts in actively co-producing manuscripts. Consider the following:

I FOUND THIS BOOK AN IMMENSELY ENJOYABLE READ, ONE THAT MANAGES TO PERFECTLY STRADDLE THE LINE BETWEEN LITERARY (IN ITS THEMES) AND COMMERCIAL (IN ITS WARM, RELATABLE VOICE AND ITS AFFECTING PORTRAIT OF A LOVING WIFE WATCHING HER MARRIAGE SLIP AWAY FROM HER) (...) I LOVED THE ATMOSPHERES SHE EVOKES IN THE NOVEL, WHICH MADE ME WANT TO RUN OFF TO A PARIS CAFÉ AND SAVOUR A CAFÉ CRÈME, OR ESCAPE TO THE RIVIERA SUN, BUT WHAT AFFECTED ME MOST WAS THE POIGNANCY OF KARL’S WORLD TEETERING ON THE BRINK AS EVERYTHING STARTS LINING UP FOR FRED. (...) I FEEL THIS WILL ATTRACT THE SAME COMMERCIAL READERSHIP A NOVEL LIKE NANCY HORAN’S LOVING FRANK (WHICH DID QUITE WELL IN THE US) DID.

(SCOUT 6, CAPS IN ORIGINAL)

As the scout explains, she loved the book. It made a real impression on her, a feeling she wishes to convey to the editor. She places the manuscript within the genre by pointing to the perfect match between literary and commercial, which is a genre in itself (up-market literary fiction). She moreover relates it to an earlier work and its sales figures in the US, suggesting that this book will do well too. In the report (not quoted here), she mentions the US publisher and agent. Similar combinations can be found in other reports, each emphasizing a different element.

Consider these two excerpts from a single scout:

THERE ARE THREE BIDDERS IN THE RUNNING FOR [TITLE]. (...) THE APPEAL SEEMS TO LIE MOSTLY IN THE MIGRATION OF YA AND GENRE TROPES TO UPMARKET ADULT FICTION. THE AGENT COMPARES IT TO A CLOCKWORK ORANGE, BUT TO US IT'S MUCH MORE LIKE AN INVERSE CHILDREN OF MEN. (...) DESPITE GOOD WRITING, THE BOOK MISSES THE MARK. THE PLOT AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT SIMPLY TAKE TOO MUCH OF A BACK SEAT TO THE IDEAS THAT CONCERN THE AUTHOR.  
(SCOUT 2 READING REPORT)

THIS IS A REALLY ENJOYABLE HORROR NOVEL WITH SOME LEGITIMATE SCARES, A SORT OF ROSEMARY'S BABY (...) THERE'S ALSO A NICE BALANCE HERE BETWEEN THE LEGITIMATELY SCARY AND THE SLIGHTLY TONGUE IN CHEEK (...) [AUTHORS NAME] WHO PUBLISHERS WEEKLY HAS CALLED "THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN MASTER OF THE LOVE STORY." [AUTHORS NAME] IS THE AUTHOR OF TEN NOVELS, INCLUDING [TITLE], WHICH HAS SOLD OVER TWO MILLION COPIES TO DATE, AND THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST [TITLE]. HE HAS WRITTEN FOR ROLLING STONE, THE NEW YORK TIMES, THE NEW YORKER, GQ, AND HARPER'S.  
(SCOUT 2 READING REPORT, CAPS IN ORIGINAL)

In both excerpts, the book is evaluated within a genre and compared to its classics. The scout ventures her own aesthetic experiences of the manuscript: 'the book misses the mark' and 'really enjoyable horror novel with some legitimate scares'. In the first case the report only mentions the name of the author (not quoted here) without further elaboration; apparently there is nothing meaningful to mention about the author. In the second passage, the author's details are brought to the fore. Interestingly, the description of the author was not written by the scout but most probably copied from the literary agent his or her description of the book, as the same description can be found on the website of the book's American publisher.

In these reports we see that scouts are not only gatekeepers and brokers, but also co-producers actively engaged in how a manuscript should be read: '[t]he agent compares it to *A Clockwork Orange*, but to us it's much more like an inverse *Children of Men*.' Pointing to the 'nice balance here between the legitimately scary and the slightly tongue in cheek' and mention of the classic *Rosemary's Baby* gives the editor a frame of reference for evaluating the manuscript. In this way, editors are steered towards engaging with the manuscript in certain ways, perhaps by sending it to colleague A rather than B for a second opinion, or in their thinking about the editing, translation, title or front cover. Especially if the American rights

have not been sold and American editors are involved in the talks, stating that a book's plot and character development are slow may incline them to edit the book more drastically.

Consider the case of Chad Harbach's book *The Art of Fielding*. The ex-scout explains that baseball books don't travel well to Europe, but that this was far more than a book about baseball; it was a literary work. This, at least, was how the book ended up travelling around the world:

**INTERVIEWER:**

IF YOU WOULD STILL BE SCOUTING, WOULDNT YOU BE SORT OF THINKING  
'OEFH' BASEBALL?

**EX-SCOUT:**

EVERYONE THOUGHT THAT. IT WAS THEIR FIRST THOUGHT, 'IT IS A BASEBALL NOVEL'. PEOPLE WOULD READ IT AS A BASEBALL NOVEL BUT TRY TO CLAIM THAT THERE IS ACTUALLY A LOT MORE TO IT. BASEBALL IS JUST ON THE OUTSIDE. AND THAT IS TRUE TO AN EXTENT, THERE IS A LOT OF BASEBALL IN THERE AND HE WRITES ABOUT BASEBALL INCREDIBLY WELL. BUT I THINK, AND I KNOW FOR A FACT, THAT EVERY SCOUT MENTIONED THIS AND HAD CONCERNS. (...) IT IS A BASEBALL NOVEL. I THINK HOW PEOPLE WERE ABLE TO GET BEYOND WAS, ONE: LOOKING SOLEMNLY AT THE BOOK NETHERLAND AND THINKING 'OKAY CRICKET WASN'T POPULAR BUT THAT WAS A BOOK THAT CROSSED THE BOUNDARIES AND WORKED BECAUSE IT WAS ABOUT SO MUCH ELSE AS WELL.' AND THERE IS THIS GAY LOVE STORY IN THE ART OF FIELDING, THERE IS THIS STORY OF FRIENDSHIP THROUGHOUT. THERE ARE A LOT OF ELEMENTS IN THIS BOOK. WAS IT A GUARANTEE THAT THIS WAS GOING TO TRAVEL TO EUROPE? NO, NO. BUT IT WAS SUCH A BIG DEAL HERE AND IT WAS ABOUT THE MAKING OF A NEW LITERARY VOICE. PEOPLE WERE SAYING, 'IT IS JUST THE BEST LITERARY NOVEL THAT WE HAVE READ IN THE LAST SIX MONTHS TO A YEAR', THAT GOT PEOPLE TO READ IT.

(EX-SCOUT)

In this ex-scout's story we see the same elements as in the scouting reports. The book is compared to another book, *Netherland*, which despite being about cricket did well in Europe. There is talk of the different ways in which the *Art of Fielding* could be enacted – within the genre of the sports novel as a manuscript about baseball, or as a literary novel in which the style and voice are more important than the theme. Enacting it as a baseball novel might do well in the US, but would make it harder for the manuscript to form a network in Europe. As the work of a new literary voice, however, it would be much easier for the book to travel abroad.

Indeed, it ended up being published as a literary debut in the Netherlands by De Bezige Bij, an important literary house. The website of the Dutch publisher states: "The *Art of Fielding* is an intelligent, warm novel about ambition, family, friendship and love and is a dreamed entrance of a big writer."<sup>12</sup>

By combining and aligning different evaluation regimes – also bound by the affordances offered by the manuscript itself – editors and scouts develop the different ways in which a manuscript can be enacted and how it can be explained and legitimized to publishers, commercial directors and, in the end, sold to consumers (e.g. Childress 2012; Franssen and Kuipers 2013).

### **The relational mode of valuation: following buzz and extending networks**

Literary scouts and other actors do not evaluate manuscripts in isolation. Through the stories of my scout informants, I have traced how the valuation of new manuscripts works as a relational process. This relational mode of valuation differs from the institutional mode of valuation as analyzed by Bourdieu (1993) and others because institutionalized judgment devices such as reviews and rankings do not exist at this early stage in a manuscript's life. Because actors cannot use such judgment devices, talk itself, in the form of buzz, becomes a judgment device. How does this work in practice?

A new manuscript is usually submitted to a select number of editors (this can be field-wide or just a few) by a literary agent. Scouts are sometimes alerted of manuscripts directly from a literary agent or editor; at other times they learn of promising manuscripts from their contacts. At other times the flow of information travels the other way, with scouts informing editors over emails, lunches and telephone calls about the manuscripts they have read or heard about. Editors and scouts thus use each other as sources for knowing about buzz, while their conversations create buzz as well. As two scouts explain:

WE'LL BE CALLING AROUND AND I WOULD SAY TO ONE OF MY EDITOR CONTACTS THAT I HAVE 'OH ARE YOU READING SUCH AND SO? BECAUSE I THINK THAT WOULD BE SOMETHING THAT WOULD BE OF INTEREST TO YOU.' AND MAYBE THEY ARE NOT ON THE FIRST SUBMISSION LIST FOR THAT AGENT SO THEY CAN CALL THE AGENT AND SAY 'HEY COULD YOU PLEASE SEND IT OVER TO ME FOR CONSIDERATION'.

(SCOUT 3)

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12. My translation of the Dutch original: *De kunst van het veldspel* is een intelligente, warme roman over ambitie, familie, vriendschap en liefde en is de gedroomde entree van een grootschrijver. [http://www.debezigebij.nl/web/Zojuist-verschenen/Boek/9789023467564\\_De-kunst-van-het-veldspel.htm](http://www.debezigebij.nl/web/Zojuist-verschenen/Boek/9789023467564_De-kunst-van-het-veldspel.htm) (accessed 30-7-2014).

WE HAD A BOOK LAST WEEK THAT I LITERALLY GOT AT 9 O’CLOCK IN THE MORNING IN MY INBOX AND I HAD A GOOD FEELING ABOUT IT (...) I IMMEDIATELY GOT HOOKED AND THEN I MENTIONED IT TO AN EDITOR AT LUNCH AND SHE HADN’T HEARD ABOUT IT AND BY THURSDAY EVENING IT WAS SOLD HERE BY A VERY BIG PREEMPT.

(SCOUT 4)

Following buzz is a strategy of risk-avoidance and as such can be understood in terms of isomorphism. Editors will assume there is ‘something’ to the buzzy manuscript that makes it worth buzzing about. Buzzy books are important ‘status-wise’. If editors land buzzy books, they show that they have the economic capital to pay large advances as well as the symbolic capital to be deemed ‘worthy’ of publishing hot manuscripts. Similarly, scouts who introduce buzzy books to their clients, leading to sales, show that they have influence, that they can make manuscripts. Industry buzz can also lead to consumer market buzz, especially when the auction price is so high that it becomes a news event; *Publishers Weekly*, the most important industry magazine, often reports on record breaking or ‘hot’ deals. Thompson (2010) shows that for manuscripts with buzz that command high auction prices, publishers will invest significant resources to make them bestsellers in order to recoup their advances. Buzz thus creates a certain market order: the more buzz, the higher the auction price. A scout explains that buzz can raise auction prices beyond what he thinks is warranted:

WE TRY TO ACT AS THE THING OUTSIDE OF THE MACHINE (...) OUTSIDE OF THE HYPE, OUTSIDE OF THE BUZZ (...) WE SAY [ABOUT THESE HYPED MANUSCRIPTS], ‘THIS IS FINE, BUT THIS IS A BOOK THAT SHOULD SELL FOR A HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLARS HERE IN THE US NOT THE FIVE HUNDRED THOUSAND THAT IT ENDED UP GOING FOR.

(SCOUT 3)

This scout interestingly characterizes the mechanism of buzz or hype as a machine – a machine that drives up the price and produces economic value, one which makes a manuscript that is not (yet) valuable worth \$500,000. Another scout summarizes the same process of how ‘it’ builds:

PEOPLE READ AND LOVE AND THEY TALK ABOUT IT. YOU KNOW. LET'S SAY WE READ A BOOK AND WE BECOME STRONG ADVOCATES OF IT. ANOTHER SCOUT READS THE BOOK AND THEY BECOME STRONG ADVOCATES OF IT, ALL OF A SUDDEN YOU GOT FOREIGN PUBLISHERS, AT LEAST TWO. THEN YOU HAVE AN EDITOR IN FRANCE WHO WANTS TO BUY THE RIGHTS AND THEY KNOW THAT SOMEBODY ELSE, AN EDITOR FRIEND OF THEIRS FROM ITALY SAID, 'HEY ARE YOU BY ANY CHANCE READING THIS BOOK?', THAT IS HOW IT BUILDS. BECAUSE THESE PEOPLE DO TALK TO ONE ANOTHER BECAUSE THERE IS A BIG INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY.

(SCOUT 1)

Scouts are central intermediaries in extending the networks of manuscripts. If they believe in a manuscript's potential, they will translate its potential to their clients and try to enroll them in the network. A scout explains this process for two cases:

THERE WAS A TRILOGY ON SUBMISSION IN FRANKFURT CALLED [TITLE]. OUR ITALIANS PREEMPTED IT BEFORE THE FAIR. WE HAD OUR CLIENT DINNER ON TUESDAY EVENING AND I THINK, [PUBLISHER] HAD ALREADY TRIED TO PREEMPT BEFORE THEN, WE HAD BEEN IN CONTACT WITH THEM AND THEY SAID 'YES, WE ARE LOOKING AT THIS'. WE HAD ALREADY BEEN IN TOUCH WITH OUR GERMANS BEFORE THEN, BUT YOU ENDED UP SEEING OFFERS FROM OUR GERMANS, OUR DUTCH, OUR CROATIANS AND OUR SPANIARDS. THERE IS A SHARING OF MINDS HAPPENING IN CASES LIKE THAT.

(...)

THERE WAS A REALLY LITERARY BOOK BY AN AUTHOR WHO IS [NATIONALITY]. OUR [SAME NATIONALITY] CLIENT HAD, AND THIS IS SUPER CONFIDENTIAL, BUT OUR CLIENT HAD ACQUIRED THE BOOK BEFOREHAND. WE HAD SENT IT TO THEM FROM THE US AND SAID 'I CAN SEE THIS BEING SOMETHING OF INTEREST TO YOU'. NOT SO MUCH FOR ANYBODY ELSE BECAUSE AT THE TIME IT WAS A [CERTAIN TYPE OF BOOK] (...)

[THE SCOUT GOES ON TO EXPLAIN THAT THE BOOK WAS LATER REWORKED AS A MORE MAINSTREAM UP-MARKET BOOK WHICH WOULD BE INTERESTING FOR ALL HIS CLIENTS, AND GOES ON:]

AND OUR CLIENT WAS OF COURSE WELL TAPPED INTO WHAT EXACTLY WAS GOING ON WITH THE BOOK AND WAS INFORMING US THE ENTIRE TIME AND FOUR OF OUR CLIENTS ENDED UP ACQUIRING THE BOOK AT THE FAIR.

(SCOUT 3)

As these examples show, actors follow each other in enrolling into the network of a new manuscript. But they do not do so silently. In the process of extending the network, the manuscript itself is enacted in certain ways as well, with scouts and editors together defining its strengths and weaknesses, its genre, the older books it can legitimately be compared to, and its future public and market. All actors who enroll in this process can agree, add to or attack these enactments, thereby turning the manuscript into a book, or often, different books. All actors who enroll in a manuscript's network thus co-produce the book.

### **Conclusion: The relational mode of valuation and the institutional mode of valuation**

This article set out to understand how new manuscripts are evaluated in the global book market and how their value comes into being. I examined the practices of literary scouts, a crucial yet under-researched group of intermediaries in the New York literary scene. Scouts who work for European publishing houses act as gatekeepers, filtering information for their clients, as brokers, connecting their clients to manuscripts and people, and as co-producers engaged in the transformation of manuscripts into books.

I have argued that scouts use three evaluation regimes – the aesthetic, institutional and relational – to evaluate manuscripts. The influence of the relational regime, that of following buzz, is most noticeable in markets such as this one where objects are not yet finished, classified, ordered and ranked through a plethora of judgment devices and where actors are in a hurry to beat the competition to buy the best manuscripts.

From a field-theoretical and neo-institutional perspective, we recognize a number of elements in the relational mode of valuation. Powerful players have an advantage in generating buzz; manuscripts with buzz are status symbols; following books with buzz can be seen as an isomorphic strategy of risk avoidance. But the process through which manuscripts become valuable does not readily fit in an institutional or field-theoretical framework. I have thus drawn on pragmatic sociology (Hennion 1989; Heuts and Mol 2013) to develop an understanding of valuation and co-production in this particular market.

The analysis has shown that manuscripts are valued and classified through the extension of their networks. In this process of enrolment in which more and more actors are brought into relation with the manuscript, the manuscript is transformed into one or more books. Within these networks, actors discuss the different ways of evaluating the manuscript; in this way the manuscript itself and its value co-emerge. But what makes a manuscript valuable at an auction or in a preempt, I want to

stress, is the number and kind of people who are interested in it. I therefore argue that this particular relational mode of valuation is different from the institutional mode of valuation as described by Bourdieu, because it is impossible for actors to follow a dominant logic. First, because coming from different national literary fields, the logics in which they operate differ. Second, because the manuscript is often unfinished, there are different ways in which it could be finished and thus different ways in which it could be published. Third, there are no judgment devices or institutional mechanisms that are dominant enough to back a particular logic. Whether a manuscript is valuable, and in what particular way it could become a valuable book on the consumer market, is thus determined in a relational process of valuation. This mode of valuation does not follow institutionalized judgment devices such as rankings, awards or reviews, as these are unavailable. It is not the logic of the field, but the mass and kind of network that determines the value of a manuscript.