Artistic classifications as collective representations

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Abstract

Ever since Emile Durkheim introduced the concept of collective representations, the interplay between social and cognitive structure has fascinated sociologists. A society, a social group, or a social institution is thought to maintain shared convictions and classifications that legitimize the existing social structure because they present it as a natural fact. Collective classifications serve as unquestioned categories of perception that make people adjust their behavior to the current social order. In an art world, mechanical solidarity based on shared classifications is probably very important since classifications according to artistic quality receive much attention and raise fierce debates.

    This paper presents the results of an analysis of the dynamic interplay between classifications according to style, interpersonal judgments in reviews and interviews, and social origins in the Dutch literary field. Content and network analysis disclose the dynamic interplay between classifications and behavior in detail. Literary authors and critics adjust their evaluations to previous evaluations that concern them directly or indirectly. Sometimes, this behavior produces an overall structure of antagonistic social groups, which is reflected in classifications according to literary style published by literary critics and scholars. The published classifications function as collective representations: they disguise social categories as literary categories, thus legitimizing a social order under the pretext of an artistic order.

1   Introduction

This paper discusses the interplay between interaction among literary authors and critics, their social background, and the ways in which they classify themselves and each other according to literary style or movement. Broadly speaking, it explores the relations between social structure, action or interaction, and mental categories within the literary world.

    Literary classification and interaction among authors or critics are hypothesized to be dynamically linked; they trigger and reinforce one another. Interacting individuals usually produce particular structural patterns at the level of the group or network. The group's members and bystanders look out for these patterns, recognize them, and tend to interpret them in terms of style groups or literary movements. Sometimes, they make explicit their interpretations by

publishing a statement on current literary styles or movements. These publications, which I will simply refer to as 'literary classifications' henceforth, play an important part in the development of literary identity within the literary world. Whether they are contested or applauded, classifications create or enhance the literary identity of the classified authors, inducing them and their critics to adjust their interaction.

In the process, some authors and critics establish a lasting name for themselves whereas others are marginalized or even expelled from the literary domain. The process should, however, not be regarded as an affair that is purely internal to the literary world. There are reasons to believe that the structure of society is also at stake in this process. Social background characteristics of the authors and critics affect the interaction and, hence, the structure of the network, and they play a role in the perception of groups. The rejection of particular styles or movements leads to the exclusion of particular social groups from the ranks of literary authors and critics. Thus, literature as an activity and profession is reserved for a particular social stratum.

In this paper, I present a case study to illustrate the dynamic process outlined above, using a combination of social network analysis and content analysis Rather than on the results, I focus on the role that social network analysis can play in the conceptualization and analysis of the dynamic interplay between interaction and classification.

2   Classification and interaction

There are several theoretical perspectives in the sociology of literature. On the one hand, there is a long tradition of analyzing literature as a mirror of society (e.g., see Desan et al. 1989). Here, the literature, genres and styles produced in a historic period are thought to reflect the structure of society at that time. On the other hand, literary history and semiotics have studied literature as a purely textual phenomenon, relating classifications according to style or movement to textual properties.

I will follow none of these approaches. Instead, I view literature as a domain of social action. In my view, literary classifications are acts by authors and critics (and other professionals) that have social meaning to the people introducing them and to the people that are classified because they influence their positions and careers. Literary classifications, especially in the meaning used here, viz., published statements on styles or movements in contemporary literature, are efforts at labeling oneself or one's peers and this type of labeling is very important to one's reputation and success.

As a consequence, I derive my frame of reference from general sociological theory as well as social psychology. In the following subsections, I sketch my theoretical orientation.

2.1   Collective representations, mental categories

The links between social and cognitive structure, interaction and perception, have fascinated sociologists for a long time. In this section, I briefly introduce theoretical perspectives that are relevant to my research.

In a way, the interplay between literary classification and interaction among authors or critics is comparable to the approach adopted in 'symbolic interactionism'. In this line of thought, people are supposed to perceive the interaction in their environment or group, interpret it by attaching (symbolic) meaning to it, and adjust their reaction to their interpretation. In my example, a critic publishing a statement on styles or movements in current literature has perceived that some authors and critics have expressed their appreciation of each other's work and s/he has interpreted this as a sign of a common literary orientation or style. As a result, the critic will probably revise his or her position towards them because s/he sees them now in a 'different light'. In a similar vein, the literary labeling suggested in the critic's publication will influence the image of the classified authors within the peer group and the action or attitude towards them judged appropriate.

In an institutional approach, classification is assumed to be less personal or less idiosyncratic than in a symbolic interactionist perspective. When Durkheim writes about collective representations, the individual seems to be completely at the mercy of collective classifications and schemes of perception. The individual has little or no freedom of interpretation because it can only think in terms of categorizations that are taken for granted because they have been handed down from generation to generation and because they are used by everyone else. An individual is subjected to the logic of a particular institution (e.g., see Douglas 1986; Friedland and Alford 1991) or of a particular practice (Bourdieu 1990).

In the literary field, this type of logic may refer to the duty to strife for consensus with your peers or the obligation to deny economic motives. Note that a published, time-specific literary classification is probably not a good example of a collective representation in the Durkheimian sense because it is explicitly stated and it can be questioned. Probably, it is an instance or manifestation of a more general collective representation, which is taken for granted in debates on the literary classification.

A third source of inspiration is offered by Bourdieu's field theory (e.g., Bourdieu 1992), which may be regarded as a particular elaboration of institutional theory. Field theory stresses the competition or struggle within the (literary) field, hence the importance of classifications (making a name) for survival and success (Bourdieu 1983). In addition, it emphasizes the tacit influence of general social distinctions (class, power, possession of different types of capital) on the practice within a cultural field. Ultimately, the forces of the class struggle are assumed to govern the operations of a field, yielding advantage to some and disadvantage to others. As a result, the structure of the cultural field 'mirrors' (is homologous to) the structure of society, the social

field, or field of power. If this is also the case in the literary field, literary classifications may cloak and thus legitimize social distinctions.

The theoretical perspectives seem to differ with respect to the scope of the social domain and the time span involved in the interplay between interaction and classification, varying from the small social group in which individuals are relatively free to interpret the interaction that they perceive and act accordingly (symbolic interactionism), to the (class) structure of overall society, which is compelling and resistant against change (Durkheim, Bourdieu). In my analysis, I try to incorporate elements from all theoretical perspectives, paying attention to action at the individual level as well as to the structure of society at large and the position of the literary field within society. Do classifications according to style or movement arise from and influence interaction between authors and critics (at the micro level) and do general social distinctions matter here?

2.2   Balance and attribution

In the dynamic interplay between classification and interaction, particular structural patterns are supposed to trigger literary classifications and vice versa. What types of structural patterns would give rise to or arise from classifications? Social psychology offers two concepts – balance and attribution – that link interaction and classification.

As will be explained in more detail in Section 3, the interaction among literary authors and critics consists of the judgments that they pass on one another in interviews and reviews. Judgments are either positive or negative (neutral judgments are ignored). Balance theory (Heider 1958) deals with relations – affective relations – that can be either positive or negative: friendship, agreement, etcetera. Balance theory states that a person feels comfortable if s/he agrees on a topic with a friend but s/he feels uncomfortable if s/he disagrees. If the topic is a human being, this means that we feel more comfortable if our friend's friend is our friend than if we do not like him or her.
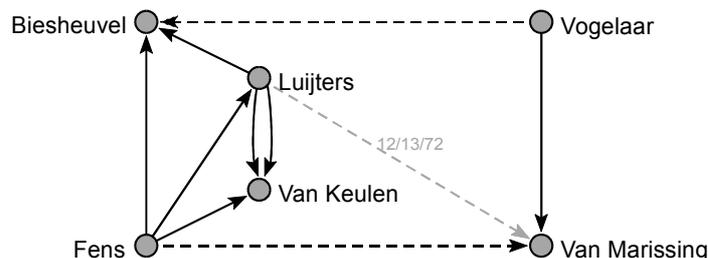

Figure 1 - Luijters' judgment on Van Marissing (12/13/72)in context.

Figure 1 illustrates some basic balance theoretic rules. It depicts the evaluations among six authors/critics. Note that people are the vertices (nodes) of the network, solid arcs represent positive judgments and dotted arcs designate negative judgments. If we take any three persons connected directly by arcs, we can see that their evaluations are balanced. Fens, Biesheuvel, and Luijters, for instance, are connected by positive evaluations: my friend's friend is my friend (if we do not take the word 'friend' literal). The triad Fens, Luijters, Van Marissing

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is also balanced: my friend's enemy is my enemy. It has been proved that any closed series of contiguous arcs (a semicycle) is balanced if and only if it contains an even number of negative arcs or no negative arcs at all (Cartwright and Harary 1956).

Heider's theory has important dynamic implications: if we know or believe to know another person's opinion about or affection towards a particular topic or person, we tend to adjust our opinion about the topic or our affection towards the other person to obtain a balanced, 'comfortable' situation. People tend to adjust their relations to previous relations and statements. When we consider the judgment passed by Luijters on Van Marissing in his review published on December 13, 1972, for instance, balance theory predicts a negative judgment because that judgment creates balanced semicycles around Luijters and Van Marissing.

In addition, it has been proved mathematically that a network containing only balanced semicycles can be divided into two clusters such that all positive relations are within the clusters and all negative relations between the clusters (Cartwright and Harary 1956). I will refer to these clusters as plus-clusters or factions. In ordinary speech, this is called polarization. In other words, if all people within the network pursue balance in their relations, a polarized group results. In Figure 1, this is the case: one faction consists of Van Marissing and Vogelaar, the other contains the remaining four authors and critics.

We should note, however, that people do not need to pursue balance always. There can be good reasons for people to prefer imbalance or at least to counteract polarization that results from balance strategies (e.g., see Granovetter 1979). In addition, particular types of imbalance are assumed to represent social ranking. I will not go into detail here and refer the reader to Chapter six in (Wasserman and Faust 1994) for more balance-theoretic models. In this paper, I will relate imbalance to efforts at changing the current structure and to being out of place ('uncomfortable') within the group.

As Heider acknowledged later (Heider 1979), balance is closely related to the social-psychological concept of attribution, which is linked to the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957). If we know or believe to know that people are friends, we assume that they are similar or have similar opinions, and vice versa. People attribute similarity from relations and the other way around. In a dynamic perspective on the classification process, attribution takes place at two stages. First, classifications give a name to polarizing factions and turn them into explicit literary categories: they are 'friends' (they agree, they like each other), so they must be similar. They like one another so they are alike. Second, published classifications produce literary identity among the authors that influences subsequent evaluations: s/he is like me, so s/he must like me and agree with me.

The concepts of attribution and balance, with their application in network analysis, offer grounded techniques and models for identifying network patterns that would surface when actors pursue balance. Now, we can analyze the evaluations passed among literary authors and critics and compare the factions

(plus-clusters) in the networks to the style groups and movements denominated in literary classifications. First, however, I will briefly introduce the case.

3   The case: literary criticism in The Netherlands, 1970s

The Dutch literary field of the 1970s is an interesting case because there were several attempts at defining the literary movements and styles in that period. Some attempts provoked reactions and one classification according to style and movement even stirred a debate within the field. It was a turbulent period with a large influx of new authors and critics, some of whom made a lasting name for themselves; others disappeared after a short but initially successful career. For a more extensive description, see (De Nooy 1999).

I selected all literary authors who appeared in at least one classification according to movement or style published in the 1970s. Almost all authors made their appearance in the 1970s, so the set consisted mainly of beginning authors. Next, I collected all evaluations in reviews and interviews passed on or by these authors. Then, I added the principal critics and authors who evaluated them to the case. The final number of authors and critics was forty (see the Appendix in De Nooy 1999). Finally, I collected and content analyzed all reviews and interviews featuring or written by these authors and critics. Each judgment among selected authors and critics that I encountered in the reviews and interviews was coded on the basis of three categories: positive (+1), neutral (0), or negative (-1). The judgment score was based on explicit evaluations of and connotations associated with the critical terms used. Note that many reviews contained not much more information than a brief description of a book's contents and a short judgment without extensive argumentation. In these cases, coding the judgment is almost all one can do.

All in all, 500 judgments have been coded spanning a period of 11 years (1970-1980). They represent the interaction among the authors and critics in my data set. This relation may seem less tangible (or less 'social') than face-to-face meeting, friendship, and other social contacts, which are usually studied in social network analysis. Nevertheless, public evaluation is a very important social relation within the literary field. The 'public sphere' (appearance in the media) is probably an arena of greater importance than literary cafes and editorial offices because published evaluations make or break the careers and reputations of authors and critics. We may safely assume that literary authors and critics closely scrutinize the reviews and interviews published in the national press or in literary magazines. To the literary author and critic, the contents of literary columns are what stock market news is to the financial analyst.

4   Classification and group structure

This section presents the results of the analysis of the overall network structure. Do classifications denominate and reinforce polarizing groups in the interaction network? Since literary movements are supposed to consist of authors that agree

on topics such as literary criteria, goals, or style, classifications according to literary style or movement should overlap with clusters of authors (and critics) that praise one another's work and that dislike or oppose the work by authors belonging to other movements or style groups.

In the decade studied, this happens a few times. I present the most telling example, which is the classification published by the literary critic Aad Nuis in October 1977. Aad Nuis is an interesting player in the field because one of his reviews triggered the classification, published by Jan Brokken in September 1977, introducing the concept of academism within Dutch literature that gave rise to an extended debate. The sociogram of Figure 2 shows the evaluations passed between October 1976 and September 1977: the twelve months before the publication of Nuis' classification. Note that this network does not contain all 40 authors. Authors and critics that were not involved in any evaluation in this period are omitted because they are isolates in this network. Gray shading indicates the literary styles distinguished by Nuis. Vertices are white if an author or critic was not mentioned in his classification.
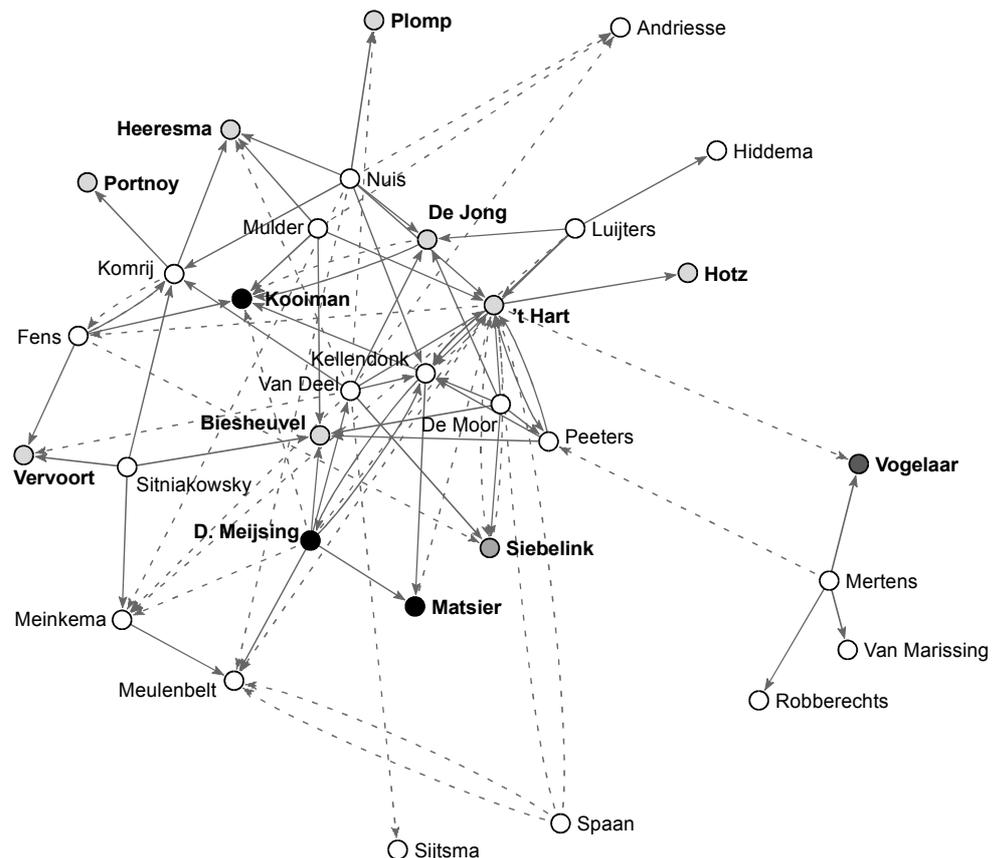

Figure 2 - Evaluations in the 12 months prior to Nuis' classification (October, 1977).

This sociogram was drawn in a particular way in order to identify polarizing factions easily: positive arcs, indicating positive evaluations, are drawn as short as possible whereas negative arcs are drawn as long as possible. Unconnected

vertices are also removed from each other as far as possible.[1] Optimizing the sociogram in this way, vertices connected by positive lines are clustered and separated from opposing factions. In Figure 2, Vogelaar, Mertens, Van Marissing, and Robberechts make up a plus-cluster or faction, which is separated from the rest of the network by negative arcs. Another faction consists of Meinkema and Meulenbelt, who are predominantly although not exclusively connected to the remainder of the network by negative arcs.

These two factions match literary movements or styles. Vogelaar c.s. were representatives of 'experimental' or 'marxist' literature. Meinkema and Meulenbelt had been labeled 'feminist' writers, although not by Nuis in 1977. In the remainder of the network, there is a distinction between 'ironic realists' (lightest gray vertices in Figure 2) and 'literary theoretical' authors (black vertices): the former are situated in the margin whereas the latter occupy the center. This distinction becomes even more telling if we take into account other literary classifications published in the 1970s. Then we see that Kellendonk was grouped with the 'theorists' Kooiman, Matsier, and Meijsing, e.g., in the controversial classification by Brokken in September 1977. After 1977, the critics Van Deel and Peeters were regarded as advocates of this literary group. With this in mind, the center of the network is clearly dominated by the 'theorists' or 'academists' as Brokken called them.

Many authors in the margin were classified and grouped in several publications that appeared in the first half of the 1970s. They received labels that either referred to 'realism' or to the '70ers', which referred to the manifesto for the 1970s that Andriesse, Plomp, and Heersema published in 1970. When we compare their social background to that of the 'theorists' in the network's center, we obtain a striking result. In the margin, we encounter the sons of working or lower middle class origins (Andriesse, Hiddema, Luijters, Plomp, Heeresma, Vervoort, Sijtsma), who did not attend elitist secondary schools ('gymnasium'). In the center, however, we encounter children of higher middle class families who attended the 'gymnasium' and most of whom took an academic degree in language, literature, or philosophy. In addition, several of them had a (short or long) academic career (Van Deel, De Moor, Meijsing, Kellendonk).

If we combine the two results, we notice that literary categories, social categories, and network position overlap. It is probably not a coincidence that the members of the lower social strata were situated in the margins. Soon after 1977, several of them disappeared from the literary scene. What we see here, I venture, is a snapshot of a process of social exclusion. The polarization and classification in the Dutch literary criticism of the 1970s has resulted in a reordering of the literary field. Once again, literature was reserved for a specific social stratum: people with a lot of cultural capital acquired at home and during their education. Their attitude towards and norms for literature prevailed over the norms, ideals,

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[1] The optimization technique by Fruchterman and Reingold was used as implemented in the software package Pajek (http://vlado.fmf.uni-lj.si/pub/networks/pajek/default.htm).

and practices introduced by members of lower strata. The arguments were literary but the effects were also social.

Instead of eyeballing an optimized sociogram, we can use the computer to delineate the most likely plus-clusters in a network of evaluations. This is a numeric alternative to visual optimization presented above. Elsewhere, I reported on this approach see (De Nooy 2002a, 2002b), so I will not go into details now. Suffice it to say that Nuis' classification was strongly associated to an optimized clustering of the network containing evaluations in the two-year period before (uncertainty coefficient = 0.69) and after Nuis' classifications (uncertainty coefficient = 0.68). These results lend credibility to the assumption that authors and critics do survey the network of evaluations and that they sometimes adjust their interaction to published classifications. A problem, however, is that the number of classified authors is quite low, so it is difficult to obtain reliable results. In order to trace systematic relations between the evaluations (interaction) and the classifications, we should take a look at the individual level. This is the topic of the next section.

5   Practice at the individual level

Instead of examining the overall structure of an interaction network, we can focus on a particular person in the network and his or her immediate neighborhood: the people that evaluate him or her, that s/he evaluates, and possibly other peers that evaluate them. At this level, we can detect individual strategies of cooptation, exclusion, and dominance, which may or may not be successful. Thus, we can keep a close track of the dynamic attribution process at the individual level, regardless of whether the individual strategies yield polarization at the level of the group.

As presented in Section 2.2, these subnetworks or (extended) ego-networks have specific properties when a person pursues balance. In that case, particular types of semicycles dominate, viz., semicycles with an even number of negative arcs or no negative arcs at all. In a dynamic approach, we can take a look at every single evaluation and determine which judgment – positive or negative – is most likely considering previous evaluations in the neighborhood of the two persons directly involved in the judgment: the judge and the person judged. Does the actual judgment create more balance than the opposite judgment?

In the example of Luijters' judgment on Van Marissing (see Figure 1), we can check all semicycles created by this judgment and evaluations published in the previous six months. We determine whether the semicycles are balanced by counting the number of negative arcs in each semicycle. Above we discussed the semicycle containing Fens, Luijters, Van Marissing and we showed that it is balanced if Luijters passes a negative judgment on Van Marissing. A positive judgment, however, would turn it into an unbalanced semicycle. With a negative judgment, all semicycles including Luijters and Van Marissing are balanced, whereas a positive judgment creates unbalanced semicycles.

In this case, a critic pursuing balance has strong reasons to prefer a negative judgment to a positive judgment. A simple index for capturing the amount of balance created by the actual judgment compared to the opposite judgment is the number of balanced semicycles created by the actual judgment minus the number of such semicycles created by the opposite judgment. If the actual judgment creates more balanced semicycles, the index is positive and we may say that the judgment conforms to the predictions of balance theory (which does not imply that the judge is necessarily pursuing balance or aware that s/he is doing that). If both judgments create an equal number of balanced semicycles, the index is zero and there is no balance-theoretic reason to prefer one to the other. Finally, a negative index shows that the judge is acting against balance-theoretic principles by creating unbalanced rather than balanced semicycles. We should note that several other indices are possible but we stick to this one because it is simple.

Figure 3 shows the preponderance of balanced semicycles created by the consecutive evaluations by the author/critic Luijters taking into account the evaluations published in the preceding six months (but not in the day directly preceding the publication of Luijters' judgment). Semicycles up to length four are counted because it is much more difficult for a person to survey longer semicycles.
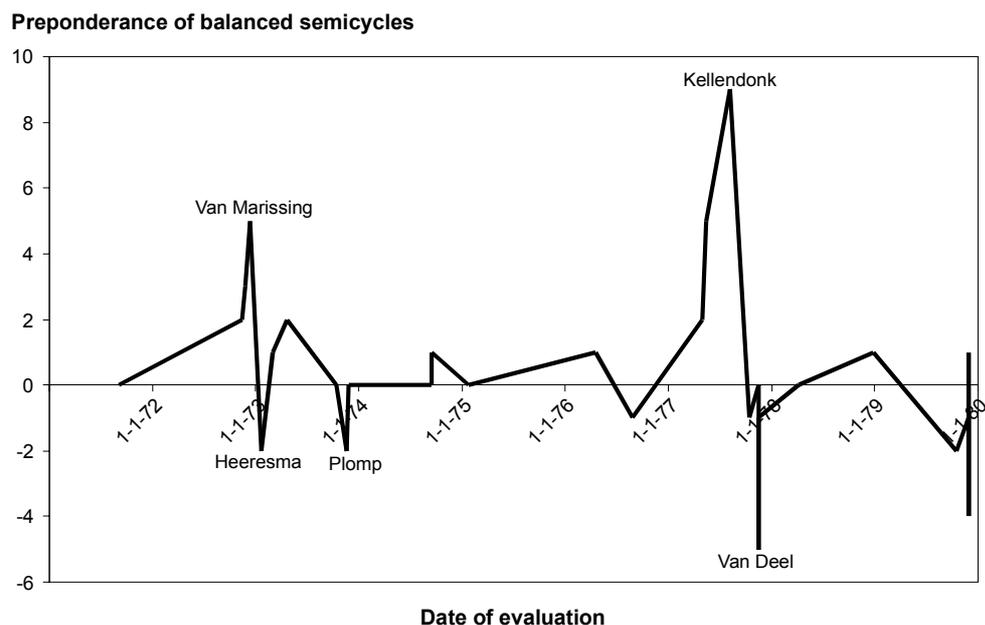
Preponderance of balanced semicycles

Date of evaluation

Figure 3 - Balance in Luijters' judgments, 1970-1980.

This time series has some interesting features. The first years are characterized by clear balance, with one example (Plomp), which I will discuss below. In the following years, there is no clear balance or imbalance in Luijters' judgments, until the middle of 1977, when Luijters creates a lot of balance. Then, right after the classifications by Brokken and Nuis, Luijters ignores the balance he could have created by a positive judgment on the critic Van Deel; instead, he passes a negative judgment. In 1979, after the end of his career as a critic for a national newspaper, Luijters' judgments continue to create imbalance. He does not seem

to accept the polarization in 1977 or the position accorded to him in the structure of factions. Perhaps he feels freer to show his dissatisfaction when he is no longer the official critic of a newspaper. The time series helps to select interesting cases.

Apart from balance, features of the judge and the person judged can influence the judgment. Just like the analysis of overall group structure, the analysis at the personal level can include perceived or real similarities and dissimilarities between the people involved in the classification. They can match or differ with respect to literary features, e.g., their classification according to style and movement, or with respect to social markers, such as age, sex, and social background. In the case of Luijters' judgment on Plomp (Figure 4), for instance, Luijters would have created balance if he would have passed a negative judgment on Plomp. Plomp, however, had just been assigned to the same literary style as Kooiman (published by Peeters in February 1973), which may have been a reason for Luijters to express the same (positive) evaluation on Plomp as he had done on Kooiman before. Another reason may be that Plomp's social background matches Luijters' (lower class) origin, assuming that 'like chooses like' or 'birds of a feather flock together'.
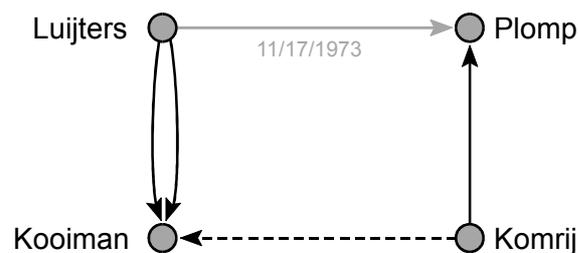

Figure 4 - Luijters' judgment on Plomp (11/17/1973) in context.

This is just one example out of many, so it is difficult to draw conclusions. Counterexamples are easily found: the 'like chooses like' argument would predict a negative judgment between Luijters (son of a laborer) and Kooiman (son of a professor). In contrast, class difference may still be operative here if members of lower classes tend to evaluate representatives of higher classes favorably out of a sense of respect or deference.

Ad hoc explanations are easily found but there are so many examples, even in a limited set of 40 authors followed during ten years, that it is difficult to acquire an overview in a purely qualitative manner. For those interested, however, the analysis of local structures can easily be quantified and systematized. In social network analysis, this approach is known as dyadic analysis (Lazega and Van Duijn 1997; Snijders 2001; Wasserman and Pattison 1996).

The simplest way to quantify the analysis of local structures is to conceptualize each evaluation as a unit of analysis (case) and use its sign as the dependent variable: can we predict the sign of the evaluation passed by author/critic X on author/critic Y? The structure of the local network, e.g., the preponderance of balanced semicycles created by a positive judgment instead of a negative judgment, would be an important independent variable. Personal characteristics of the judge or of the person judged can also be used as

independent variables, e.g., do young authors pass negative judgment relatively often or do young authors receive relatively many negative evaluations? Similarities between judge and judged can be added, e.g., do members of a particular literary movement or social class tend to appreciate the work of their fellow members? Thus we can check whether the tendencies we see in some example cases appear systematically in the entire data set.

6 Conclusion

The interplay between interaction and classification is a complex, dynamic process. Classifications change and multiple classifications can play a role in the interaction. The structure of the interaction is particularly complex. A relatively small group of people produces complicated interaction patterns, even if they do not interact frequently as in the case studied here. Conceptualizing interaction as social networks and applying social network analysis is indispensable for tackling this complexity. Network analysis offers visual and numeric tools for recognizing interaction patterns.

In the case of affective relations, such as evaluations, balance theory and associated network models offer helpful instruments for connecting interaction and classification. This can be done at the level of the entire group or at the level of each individual evaluation. Visualization of overall networks or local subnetworks and indices such as semicycle counts help the researcher to formulate ideas about the process and to find interesting cases without abstracting from the individuals involved. Quantification of the analysis at the evaluation level offers the possibility to test these ideas systematically.

This approach, I think, offers a penetrating view of the interplay between classification and interaction, following step-by-step the reordering of the literary field, the creation of winners and losers, and social exclusion. The analysis can even be extended to include the qualifications used in (part of the) reviews and interviews to motivate the judgments. In line with Heider's initial triad consisting of ego, alter, and a topic on which ego and alter can agree or disagree, qualifications such as 'readability' or 'journalistic' (applied to the '70ers' and not valued by most critics) versus '(self-)control' and 'intellectual' (applied to the 'theorists' and generally valued) can be included as vertices in the network. In this network, other vertices represent people, who can express like or dislike towards qualifications and who can consider qualities applicable or not applicable to the work of a particular author. Thus it would become possible to trace the development of norms and stigmata within the literary field.

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