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Publishers, authors, and texts: The process of cultural consecration in prize evaluation

Clayton Childress^{a,1,*}, Craig M. Rawlings^{b,1}, Brian Moeran^c

^a University of Toronto, Canada

^b Northwestern University, United States

^c Copenhagen Business School, Denmark

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ABSTRACT

As cultural objects are of subjective quality, the determinants of their consecration as being of lasting value is a common focus of research. Most typically, scholars look to three constituent features of cultural objects: 1) the characteristics of their creators, 2) the statuses of their sponsoring organizations, and 3) more limitedly, the textual features of the objects themselves. Rather than treating these features as independently assigned, Bourdieu argues they are different manifestations of the same latent positional and dispositional spaces in the field from which new cultural objects emerge. Using a new dataset on the full population of submissions to the Booker Prize for Fiction over nine years (N = 1094), we rely on a suite of characteristics across these three areas of foci to examine the latent positions in the field through which “art” is defined and consecrated. Findings show the consecration process begins with publishers’ nominations, which reflect a relational field of competing positions occupied by different groups under the canopy of the former British Empire. Afterward, juries’ decisions of shortlisters and then winners reveal how consecration emerges through a distancing from England-centered voices, followed by a growing preference for legitimation by the literary establishment, and male over female voices.

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1. Introduction

Consecration processes matter as they create “discontinuity out of continuity,” or rather, create “winners” and “losers” out of what can often be small differences (Bourdieu, 1984; Merton, 1968). Within this framework the sociological study of cultural consecration broadly focuses on two questions. The first asks *who* promotes some culture over others as being of value or import. Those who consecrate cultural objects as worthy of attention may orient toward producers (e.g. Hirsch, 1972; Rossman, 2012; Cattani, Ferriani, & Paul, 2014), consumers (e.g. Shrum, 1991; Verboord, 2013), or, be “orchestrated” toward each other and their own legitimacy (e.g. Janssen, 1997; Van Rees, 1987), as “every critic declares not only his judgement of the work, but also his claim to the right to talk about it and judge it” (Bourdieu, 1993: 36). The second major line of research, rather than asking “*who*” engages in processes of cultural consecration, asks “*what*” is consecrated as well as by “*which*” metrics and processes consecration occurs (e.g. Allen & Lincoln, 2004; Braden 2015; DiMaggio, 1982; Ekelund &

* Corresponding author at: Clayton Childress, Dept. of Sociology, University of Toronto, Canada.

E-mail address: CCChildress@gmail.com (C. Childress).

¹ Equal authorship.

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Börjesson, 2002; Janssen, 1997; White & White, 1965). In focusing on which metrics of cultural objects lead to their consecration, scholars working in different research streams typically orient toward three influential constituent features of them: 1) the statuses and reputations of their creators, 2) the characteristics associated with their sponsoring organizations, and 3) more limitedly, the textual features of the objects themselves.

Rather than treating these constituent features of cultural objects as independently assigned, Bourdieu treats them as conjoined in relational space. For Bourdieu, the combined characteristics of publishers, authors, and texts are manifestations within a given cultural object of an underlying position within the space of possible position-takings. The act of consecrating some of these works as “winners” and “losers” is a constitutive force within the field as it both reflects and (often) reaffirms an underlying logic of distinction.

Mapping consecration processes presents empirical challenges. Evidence of such a relational process of consecration requires a complete set of objects at least initially *deemed worthy* of consecration, as well as those selected as “winners” and “losers”, and such data are rare. Relying on a dataset drawn from previously unanalyzed submissions to the Booker Prize for Fiction (N = 1194), we take up Bourdieu’s treatment of consecration rituals by considering the multiple features of submitted novels – their publishers, authors, and texts – as markers of their positional spaces in the field which may predict the likelihood of their consecration as worthy of attention and praise. Moreover, if consecration processes unfold within relational spaces, analyses need to draw on models that capture both the interdependencies of who and which objects are put forward as contenders and subsequently the positions within the field that are consecrated.

Our analysis of these data therefore proceeds in two broad steps. First, we examine the space of position-takings in the literary field established through publishers’ submission decisions to the Booker Prize committee. Here, we examine features of publishers, authors, and texts as constituting a relational space defined by the characteristics of all submissions. Using Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA), we explore the logic of distinction employed by publishers through their strategic submissions for the prize. Collectively, publishers’ submissions, which are limited to two novels per publisher, reveal position-takings arrayed within a space defined by the opposition between “domestic” (English) and different types of “international” works, and a set of correspondences with the other key characteristics of authors, texts, and publishers. Second, we investigate the implications of the juries’ selections of prize shortlisters and winners in defining the field through valorizing some positions in this relational space over others. We do so by employing factor analysis to model the position-takings represented in each novel along latent dimensions such as those explored in the MCA. Based on 26 binary features of publishers, authors, and texts, we confirm and extend results from the MCA. In addition to the two pronounced geographic oppositions, we find several more nuanced dimensions constituting the field. These latent dimension of field space are then used as predictors of shortlisting and winning the Booker Prize, using multinomial and ordered logistic regression models. We find consecration occurs in a processual fashion: first there is a distancing from England-centered voices, followed by a growing preference for legitimization by the literary establishment, and male over female centered voices and stories.

In addition to the contribution of our findings, we close with a discussion of the treatment of publishers, authors, and texts as homologous in cultural fields, which we feel is an approach that is more faithful to Bourdieu’s understanding of cultural fields when studying consecratory processes within them. Rather than simply confirming the usefulness of this Bourdieusian approach, we also push it forward in a discussion of the *processual nature* of consecration as it unfolds within structural space. Lastly, albeit necessitating care, we also call for the more robust re-inclusion of definable textual factors in the analysis of cultural consecration processes. That the encoded contents of cultural texts may ultimately affect their evaluation and consecration within any given cultural field is no doubt an “ordinary view” view of the world, but it is also one with scientific merit.

2. Cultural consecration and establishing what counts

The consecration of some cultural objects such as art (White & White, 1965), movies (Baumann, 2007), television shows (Bielby & Bielby, 1994), and books (Griswold, 1987a) as valuable over others poses challenges for both evaluators and researchers given that most, if not all, of their value is socially constructed (Bourdieu, 1984; DiMaggio, 1982). Such cultural consecration processes are of interest to sociologists in part because to consecrate some objects as of lasting value is in some ways to rank the seemingly un-rankable (Karpik, 2010). Given this predicament, within any given field what are the metrics through which cultural objects are consecrated as being of lasting value and import? In any consecration process there are “winners” and “losers” with detectable differences in their character and presentation which may affect the likelihood of their cultural elevation. What is consecrated by those with the power to consecrate is, in effect, the dominate definition of art within the field at any given time. With the dramatic rise of cultural prizes and awards in the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Best, 2008; English, 2005), these overtly competitive cultural arenas have increasingly become the object of study in consecration processes, be it for film (Lincoln & Allen, 2004; Rossman, Esparza, & Bonacich, 2010), music (Anand & Watson, 2004; Schmutz & Faupel, 2010), books (Anand & Jones, 2008; Squires, 2004; Street, 2005; Verboord, Kuipers, & Janssen, 2015), or fine art (Pénet and Lee, 2014).

As argued by Bourdieu (1984), “cultural consecration . . . confer[s] on the objects, persons and situations it touches a sort of ontological promotion akin to transubstantiation” (6). For the most part, however, in the study of cultural consecration scholars have treated the characteristics of texts, their creators, and their sponsoring organizations as operating independently; in essence, pitting these different properties against each other in regression models. The benefit of this

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