Literary value in the era of big data. Operationalizing critical distance in professional and non-professional reviews

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New phenomena such as digital social reading, instapoets, and the "rating culture" expressed in online reviews challenge traditional literary criticism in newspapers and journals. Millions of reviews on platforms such as Amazon or Goodreads are part of this culture of participation and a counterweight to professional criticism. At the same time, successful instapoets such as Rupi Kaur reject the expertise of the gatekeepers of "prestigious literary circles" and try to establish a direct connection with readers. The aim of this paper is to build the proper methodological framework to capture these changes in the current literary system. To do this, the phenomenon of online reviewing has to be contextualized within the history and the praxis of assigning literary value to literary texts, the so-called canonization. In addition, literary theory needs to be able to analyze quantitative data and to integrate numbers into its models (engaging in a procedure that is called operationalization).

1. The quantitative mentality and rating culture

Johannes Franzen describes the phenomenon of massive online reviewing in which thousands of users publish product reviews over a short period of time. Such reviews can become a dangerous "review bomb" when a product or service receives a large number of negative reviews at once. One striking example involves the bomb "launched" by thousands of gamers against the videogame *The Last of Us Part II*. In this controversy, as reconstructed by Franzen, professional and non-professional critics clashed over two different assessment criteria (Franzen 2). The difference was also quantitative: 121 professional reviews versus feedback from 152,219 non-professionals. Critics of the game expressed their mistrust of professional reviews and demanded to participate in the evaluation procedure.

Clashes between contrasting forms of criticism concern not only many aspects of our lives but even more "refined" cultural artefacts such as literary texts. Lay criticism, for example, as it is carried out on platforms such as Amazon or Goodreads, is one manifestation of a culture of participation. With a record ninety million reviews, Goodreads may be seen as a counterweight to the professional criticism that appears in journals and newspapers. Other venues for amateur literary criticism include book review blogs, websites, online forums, booktuber channels and #instabook posts.

That the highly subjective and "aesthetic" experience of literary reading can also be forced into numbers is a recent phenomenon. In *The Metric Society* (2019), Stefan Mau discusses the incredible power of "quantitative mentality"

in every dimension of social life (Nassehi; Stalder; Reckwitz). According to Mau, this mentality aims to organize social life by principles of efficiency and predictability. For Mau, "quantification entails an act of translation" by reducing "a complex and confusing world to the standardized language of numbers" (13). We are in a new phase of this process because of the huge expansion of technologies for collecting, storing, and measuring data in a digitalized society. "Big Data" include not only shopping lists or professional performance, but also emotional states, our taste in restaurants and hotels, health parameters (diet, sleeping, lifestyle), and behavior quantified through self-tracking tools on smartphones. As Mau points out, humanity now produces more data in two days than in its entire history up to 2003.

Data have enormous power: In their particular forms of presentation, they "tell us how to look at things, thereby systematically excluding other perspectives," (15) and they always represent a particular form of value assignment. Quantification also touches diverse psychological mechanisms. As Mau asserts, "We are natural comparatists" (26) because we want to know whether we are superior or inferior to others. Data facilitate comparison because they create a common denominator across a range of dimensions. The result is "comparability," as Mau states it, "by applying a common standard to disparate entities" (31). This nearly infinite comparability, enhanced by our digital lives, produces a mechanism of "compare and despair" that can have a negative impact on the mental health of (not only) young people (Royal society for public health). In fact, quantification produces a correlation between estimated value and esteem—that is, the social recognition linked to that value. The notions of "prestige" and "value" occur several times in Mau's reflections (29, 50, and passim). These notions are important not only in relation to mental states but also to art and science. In the latter, the number of citations of a scholar's output—the so-called h-index or impact factor—is a crucial parameter in the performance evaluations of scientists or in recently introduced university rankings.

Rating culture is exploited by social media like Instagram and Facebook as well. Instagram gives its users three simple measures to show how they are performing: counts of "followers," likes on posts, and "engagement" (clicks on links, comments, and other user behaviors). These feedback scores make the Instagram experience competitive, emotional, and addictive. Facebook automatically catalogues its users' every small action in a similar way. Knowledge about what people want is crucial to understanding Facebook's success, its pervasiveness, and its appeal for advertisers—but it also exposes pitfalls.

2. The big data of online reviewers vs. the big names of literary criticism

Strongly connected to such a "quantitative mentality" is the new phenomenon of massive internet reviewing. In the literary system, then, we can well claim that "Today, everyone is a critic" (Mahdawi). In Franzen's view, the new tendency of non-professional reviewers in the digital age is to distrust professional reviews and demand to participate in evaluation procedures. Franzen, himself a professional literary critic, notes amateurish criticism of texts on Amazon or Goodreads. As an Amazon-owned, book-based social web site, Goodreads boasts some ninety million members as well as tens of millions of reviews and books catalogued; it employs review and rating systems similar to those on the Amazon website. Goodreads has become the most popular platform for readers to connect with one another through multiple opportunities to measure reading performance and text quality: they can list the books they have read, participate in reading challenges (that is, the number of books a user intends to read over the course of a year), offer ratings, and post reviews. On Goodreads, as well as on platforms such as Lovelybooks.de and Wattpad.com, books can be rated with stars, and the number of reviews and friend connections of a reviewer can be quantified. As Van Dijk has observed, in our digital society, evaluation of cultural products has become synonymous with crowd evaluation.

On websites or in newspapers and magazines, rating culture produces a diverse range of big data. Quantitative or numerical ratings, for example, may appear on the websites of book retailers. A "star system" is also used in newspapers. For example, in "La Lettura," the cultural page of *Corriere della Sera*, which is among the most important newspapers in Italy, professional reviewers rate three parameters of a text from 1 to 5 stars: the "story," the "style," and the "cover."

In this context, two different evaluation systems exist. Online comments don't express evaluations based on assessed criteria; they are mostly expressions of consumer satisfaction or dissatisfaction. In relation to these comments, Gerhard Lauer speaks about a "deconstruction of the hierarchies by pop-culture" (Lauer, *Lesen* 157). Consumers become "prosumers" in their digital lives and defend their right to express judgements. In literary debates, for example around Peter Handke's Nobel prize or the publication of the novel *Marianengraben* by Jasmine Schreiber, social media played a significant role and competed with traditional criticism in newspapers and journals. Social-media users today refuse to accept the authority of traditional "gatekeepers" who, in their eyes, follow outdated criteria, opening a debate between professional and lay readers regarding "Who has the power to establish what is tasteful and what is not?" (Franzen 14).

For Moritz Baßler, this controversy brings back the old distinctions between low- and high-brow culture and between symbolic and economic capital, the latter of which indirectly reference the works of Pierre Bourdieu, the first to illustrate the forces and institutions of the "literary field." Pierre Bourdieu is surely the twentieth-century thinker who most compellingly described the logic of the "literary field," by which he meant "an independent social universe with its own laws of functioning, its specific relations of force, its dominants and its dominated" (Bourdieu, *Field* 163). Far from being characterized by unselfishness and contemplation, the literary or artistic field is a "field of struggles" (30). The main value generated by "innumerable struggles between agents" (authors, actors, writers, critics, directors, publishers, dealers etc.) is the artistic value or prestige of a literary text (79).

In pre-internet times, the agents that determined symbolic capital in the literary field controlled not only the social value of a literary text or an author, but also the categorization of what could be considered "literature" and what could not. The idea of literature that dominated until the digital age, especially in the German context, was born in the second half of the nineteenth century, when differentiations among commercial literature, popular literature, and high-brow artistic literature were already being made (Bourdieu, *Field* 192 ff; Neuhaus). Modernist and avant-garde literature, dominated by the idea of renovation and of rupture with the past, adopted similar concepts. Modernist literature, in aiming at the status of art, held that literary writing should be difficult, complex—that is, different from everyday language. The literary writer, usually poor in economic terms, acquired a high symbolic power (Bourdieu, *Field* 15) and a privileged position with reference to the reader. The writer's might derived from indifference to the values of society, including current aesthetic values and public expectations (200). The idea of "literariness" that emerged in the nineteenth century has largely dominated the concept of literature in the twentieth and corroborated a notion of a complex and elitist literature (Salgaro, "Historical Introduction").

Pierre Bourdieu also recognized the shift in the nineteenth century from the pre-mass-media age to mass media and the consequent movement from a concept of literature produced against market imperatives to the imposition of the sales model when claiming: "Everyone is fixated on ratings. Wherever you look, people are thinking in terms of market success" (Bourdieu, "Television" 251). With the development of the market, mediators—who include editors, critics, reviewers, publishers, libraries, and writers in the literary system—have taken on an increasingly crucial role in the careers of writers. They affect the economic success of a book or an author but also the evaluation of the work and the establishment of an author's reputation. They are the "gatekeepers" because they decide whether to admit individuals or works into a cultural field. Gatekeepers in the arts can exercise their function at different stages: publishers can prevent texts from being published, and critics can foster or impede a text's success (Janssen).

Reviewing is a social practice attributing social recognition to literary works that meet certain standards. The selection and valuation of literary texts is generally presented as personal, in which the intrinsic and "aesthetic" properties of the texts under consideration are scrutinized. Van Rees has noted how literary texts, in order to be considered high-quality literature, must pass through the filters of three distinct types of critics: reviewers, essayists, and academic critics. Daily reviewers are the first gatekeepers to evaluate a literary text after publication, but essayists and academic critics have the power to legitimate the quality of a text and to introduce it into the "canon" (that is, texts considered representative of a specific nation, culture, or epoch) (403). In this process of canon formation (Rippl and Winko), many factors and institutions may join forces: reviewers, publishers, readers, sales figures, film adaptations, literary prizes, and publication in a particular series or edition. While more normative canons were the standard in the past (Bloom 10), more descriptive approaches are now predominant (Rippl and Winko 66–76). Revisionist debates about the function and nature of canons during recent decades have encouraged rethinking of traditional concepts of literary prestige from a political point of view. As a result, more non-Western and non-European writers, more women, and more writers of popular fiction have been institutionalized within literary history (P. Löffler 13; Rippl and Winko 82). A canon therefore arises from an interplay of individual acts that are not necessarily aimed at canonizing a text. In the thinking of Simone Winko, these acts involuntarily form an "invisible hand" (Rippl and Winko 73).

In the twenty-first century, the internet has revolutionized the "literary field"—that is, the reception and production of literary texts. The main institutions of the literary field have been dismantled and replaced over recent decades with new agents and institutions, to adopt Bourdieu's terms. The "order of the (paper) book" (van der Weel) shifted to an era of digital reading and writing. Today, books can be read on paper as well as in digital formats on computers, on eBook readers, and on smartphones. The circulation of the texts, which has been guaranteed for the last five centuries by publishing houses, is now also provided by self-publishing. The prestige acquired through reviews by literary critics in newspapers and journals can now also be obtained through discussions in blogs and online reading communities such as Goodreads. As we will see in the following paragraph, the image of the writer as a quixotic bohemian has been replaced by that of a networked, self-promoting author on social media. Simultaneously, literary reviews and canonization have achieved a different status in the digitized world.

Thierry Chervel has provided a longitudinal study of literary reviews on the most important German journals and newspapers: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Die Tageszeitung*, and *Die Zeit*. His main result is that, in recent decades, the number of reviews in these major newspapers has fallen sharply even as review sections have disappeared, including the feuilleton supplements of the *Neue*

Zürcher Zeitung and *Die Zeit*. Because *Die Zeit* is doing brilliantly in economic terms, the shrinkage of its review and criticism section is an editorial decision and not an expression of distress (Chervel 297–98).

Chervel also studied the phenomenon of the "Literaturpapst/'Pope of Literature'" who, in German public life, is an influential critic who determines the success or failure of a literary publication. During the twentieth century, these critics occupied the spotlight—Marcel Reich-Ranicki's television program, *Das Literarische Quartett*, for example, is a more intellectual version of Oprah Winfrey's show. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, three "Popes of Literature" were still alive: Reich-Ranicki, Fritz J. Raddatz, and Joachim Kaiser.

In his historical reconstruction, Chervel convincingly showed that today, such agents of the literary field no longer exist and have not been replaced because newspapers and magazines have lost their power to determine the success of literary texts (see above). In the past, at least for newspaper readers, the critic had the last word. For these agents, reviewing was an "incontestable judgement" (Murray 115). The book critic's opinion regarding the quality of a text was unequivocal, and a title was reviewed only once by any given critic. The internet has democratized reviewing practices by creating space for a multitude of voices. Both phenomena—the shrinkage of review sections and the death of the "Popes of Literature"—are consequences of social reading and online reviewing.

Literary studies adopt a variety of positions regarding these new phenomena. Most literary scholars still ignore or even demonize them. The big names of literary criticism try to defend their positions: Sigrid Löffler denounces the deprofessionalization of online literary criticism disguised as democratization. She considers professional literary criticism an educational discipline whose aim is not to give recommendations on book purchases but to judge the literary quality of the book and possibly also to integrate it into the literary canon. Professional reviewers such as journalists or literary scholars very often publish their evaluations online. Digital social reading (Rebora et al.) also shows that the concept of reader should be revised and substituted with that of "wreader," a reader who is also an online writer. For Simone Murray "The existence of book bloggers further problematizes book reviewers' liminal status between the amateur and professional domains" (11) For her:

> Social media has certainly rendered reviewing more democratically accessible and interactive than the traditional print reviewing paradigm. Yet, contrary to allegations, these coalescing digital cultural tastemakers are not reducible simply to the logic of quantification–whereby Internet traffic equates to cultural worth. We are witnessing the literary critical equivalent not of an absolute monarchy nor a proletarian revolt, but something poised ambiguously in between. (Murray 113, 119)

Statistics show that 64% of book purchases in Italy in 2020 were inspired by social media (Peresson). The users of Twitter and Instagram have expressed a preference for the kind of literature that can be produced on social media. That preference resulted in the success of Instapoets and, on Twitter, of the related phenomenon called "Twitterature." These genres were born within social media and did not exist before. Another consequence of the power of social media is that texts representing these new internet-conceived genres are now published by traditional publishing houses, sometimes with great success. Another effect of these communities is that these new literary genres are now studied by literary scholars (Kreuzmair and Schumacher). Even if we cannot show that these works will stand "the test of time," scholarly publications and interest by literary scholars are clear signs of canonization (Rippl and Winko).

The presence of writers on social media is an international phenomenon that encompasses such diverse writers as Rupi Kaur, Sarah Berger, Stefanie Sargnagel, Marco Missiroli, Roberto Saviano, Margaret Atwood, Florian Meimberg, and many others. And recently, social-media-based literature is also recognized by awards. In Germany, Stefanie Sargnagel, an author born in social media, is now published by the renowned Rowohlt-Verlag; in 2016, she received the Audience Award as part of the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize. Similarly, Florian Meimberg, a representative of German Twitterature (Salgaro, "How soon is now?"), published his tweets with S. Fischer Verlag, a major German publishing house, and received the 2010 Grimme Online Award.

Online reviewing has also changed the way literary texts are rewarded. For Philipp Ingold, "the only decisive factor is the number of spontaneous votes or the majority of thumbs up, which are extrapolated as 'likes,'" even for such an important award as the Ingeborg Bachmann prize (Ingold).

> In Klagenfurt, as elsewhere, the dominance of the lay public, which is predominant today in the cultural and entertainment industry, is satisfied (if not to say: shown respect) by awarding a so-called audience prize, which is exclusively determined by the criterion of majority approval. A discussion (or just an exchange of opinions) about the texts to be judged does not take place. The only decisive factor is the number of spontaneous votes or the majority of thumbs up, which are extrapolated as 'likes'. (Ingold)

By analyzing the justifications for awards, Ingold observes that they rarely go beyond declarations of subjective pleasure, which "makes desolately clear the extent to which professional criticism, which in Klagenfurt is always represented by well-known reviewers, has entered into a pact with the power of the non-professional public" (Ingold).

The evaluation of formal and experimental components of literary texts is neglected in favor of more emotional feedback (Martens et al.). For these new evaluators, in Ingold's view, the understanding of literature is dictated solely

by personal pleasure or displeasure. This, in principle, implies "realistic" texts, and the non-professional audience has succeded in imposing this kind of "realism"—a concept of literature that remains fundamentally oriented towards reality, has "everyday life" as its constant point of reference, and is familiar, easily understandable, and "relatable." For Ingold, this state of affairs can easily be deduced from the Klagenfurt jury votes and prize speeches. This peculiar, realistic writing style, and thus, the focus on non-literary interests, has been permanently consolidated over the years and has now achieved clear dominance. As a result, the quality parameters of juries have changed: good is what goes down well, is easily understood, and can be conveniently shared online. He calls the decline of the professional critic "Instantcriticism"—perhaps a counterpart to "Instapoets"—a phenomenon that induces, for him, a "McDonaldization" of the cultural scene.

Baßler thinks similarly when he observes the emergence of a so-called "Midcult"—a genre based on realistic literature. These texts are not challenging on a formal level and are not "trivial" popular literature. Readers also bring into them the good feeling of "having heard the heart of culture beating," as Umberto Eco put it. Writers like Daniel Kehlmann, Bernhard Schlink, Martin Suter, and Juli Zeh, as well as Elena Ferrante, Ian McEwan, Karl Ove Knausgård, and Haruki Murakami are representatives of Midcult (Baßler, "Konsens"). Takis Würger's novel *Stella,* which deals with Germany's Nazi past, also triggered a controversy regarding its literary quality. As Baßler reflected,

> I can say that there have never been such divergent ideas about what actually constitutes good literature as there are at the moment. Spectacle or not, heavy characters, legibility, pop? We simply no longer have a consensual standard of evaluation for it, and this also shakes the gatekeeper function that publishers, critics, and professors have had for so long. One can complain about this from a cultural point of view, but it is possibly just the logical effect of democratization, general education and access to the leading medium Web 2.0. (Baßler, "Konsens")

Baßler considers changes in taste a consequence of "access to the web," which is also the basis of social reading. Non-professional critics like Rupi Kaur's four million Instagram followers accuse professional critics of aloofness, elitism, incompetence, and arrogance (Baßler, "Midcult"). Professional literary critics have also changed their parameters because what is now expected from literature is no longer aesthetic ambiguity but rather ethical and didactic insights. Nevertheless Baßler doesn't perceive these phenomena as a decline of literature but as a challenge for the reading professionals in the book trade, critics, and universities, who must instead become better at justifying their aesthetic standards, adapting them to the current media and the social conditions of reading.

In fact, online reviewing is not solely the detriment to the literary system that critics like Ingold seem to suggest. As an example, a few years ago online reviews pushed the self-published *Fifty Shades of Grey* to planetary success. This erotic novel was analyzed by the reputed sociologist Eva Illouz who tried to understand its huge appeal. Despite the text's formal limitations, Illouz considered it representative of the aspirations and self-understanding of contemporary women, further evidence that such tendencies as self-publishing, lay criticism, new forms of literary evaluation and literary prestige cannot be neglected nor can their impact on the "literary field" be ignored.

Because the millions of online reviews cannot be captured with the typical tools of "close reading," this paper proposes a proper methodological framework to account for changes in current literary criticism. Given that quantitative analysis is very uncommon among literary scholars (Salgaro, "Digital Humanities"), the field could easily ignore the big data produced by contemporary, real-world readers, but that would mean that literary theory had neglected an obviously significant phenomenon.

On the methodological level, then, literary theory should be able to analyze quantitative data and to integrate numbers into theoretical models. Secondly, literary theory could contribute to our society of metrics by itself producing quantitative data. This transformation of abstract concepts of theory into numbers is called operationalization, and it has already been successfully applied in literary theory (Moretti). Operationalization means, in the vocabulary of the social sciences, the transformation of a concept into empirically observable properties. In operationalization, data production and analysis feed each other and form a circular process (Salgaro, "Digital Humanities" 55). As a consequence of this method, not only can the feedback of online reviewers be integrated into existing theories of literary evaluation, but the evaluations of professional and non-professional readers can also be compared by quantifying and contrasting their subjective comments. In so doing, innovative forms of online reviewing will be better recognized and anchored in the more traditional forms of literary criticism that appear in journals, magazines, and newspapers. To understand the "quantitative mentality" and the "rating culture" behind the big data of literature, literary theory itself has to adopt data-driven methods.

3. #Instapoets and #Bookstagram

Niels Penke notes that Rupi Kaur's *milk and honey* (2014), with three million copies sold, is the most popular book of poetry in literary history (Penke 465–69). The collected poems in the volume were initially written on Instagram where, beginning in 2013, Kaur developed a specific writing style, using, for example, lowercase type or alternating texts and pictures. Penke noted three themes in Kaur's lyrics: self-referential poems in which the lyrical "I" speaks about love, hope, and humiliation; a second, more referential type in which a "you" is called upon to imagination and identification; and a third type

of brief, aphorism-like poems (468). Brevity is a main feature of literature born on social media because it is mostly consumed on smartphones. Kaur's four million Instagram followers believe that her poetry is moving and emotionally touching but also that it is profound and thought-provoking. Gerhard Lauer acknowledged the huge success of Kaur's work, particularly considering that poetry is usually a niche editorial product (Lauer, "Gefühl"). The keys of Kaur's success are emotional authenticity about the experiences she shares with her audience and an emphasis on the healing process of social vulnerability—for example, the foregrounding in her texts of her experiences as the target of racism.

Moritz Baßler observes that the reviews of *milk and honey* clash: while online users adore it, professional critics have tended to ignore it or to consider it "not real art" (Baßler, "Midcult"). Professional reviews are rejected by non-professional readers, if they are even acknowledged. Non-professional readers accuse professional critics of detachment, elitism, and arrogance, charging them with membership in a profession of general insignificance. The problem of diverse evaluations of artistic value is also addressed by Anika Meyer, who showed that such well-known artists as Cindy Sherman or Nan Goldin found recognition of and a new audience for their artistic achievements on Instagram (Groß). The quantification of artistic recognition on social media is increasingly clear and implies a break: what experts think is good may not interest a wider audience and vice versa.

For Baßler, "Social media and Web 2.0 interactive sites invalidate professional gatekeepers not only on the side of the reception but also on the side of the production" (Baßler, "Midcult"). In fact, poets like Rupi Kaur started careers by bypassing the gatekeeping function of traditional publishing houses.

Means and methods of communication in publishing and bookselling have been revolutionized over recent decades. The communication among authors, writers, and readers was sporadic in the past. Publishing houses were the gatekeepers of the literary system, and writers could reach an audience only through them. Readers went to bookstores to buy books and were influenced in their choices by intermediary agents such as advertisements, literary reviews in journals, and bookstore staff. There was no direct communication among publishers, writers, and (non-professional) readers; the only feedback writers and publishers had were sales figures.

Nowadays important interactions among publishing houses, authors, and readers take place in social media. Many writers interact with their readers through their social-media accounts, and publishing houses all have accounts of their own on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook (Murray 105 ff.). Publishers can read and collect reader feedback in Amazon reviews and on social-reading platforms. They can assess readers' "sentiment" and base commercial decisions upon them. Such completely new phenomena as the BookTalk subcommunity and hashtag on TikTok (more than ten billion views as of 31 May 2021) and

the widely used #Instabook hashtag on Instagram (nearly fourteen million posts). These communication channels didn't exist until a few years ago. For the publishing industry "Direct-to-consumer" is the challenge of today (Wischenbart et al.). Simone Murray has also recognized "disintermediation" as the main characteristic of publishing in the digital sphere; it denotes the capacity of authors to publish and sell their texts "without the gatekeeper approval of mainstream media arbiters (agents, publishers, marketers, publicists, and retailers)" (29). As a consequence, publishing houses increasingly rely on the online reviews of non-professional readers for publicity more than on the great magazine or newspaper literary critics (Chervel). Smaller publishing houses use pitch parties on social media also to find new authors. Following McGrath, "Pitch Parties attempt to circumvent the systems of patronage on which the publishing industry relies" and provide an open alternative to a closed industry.

Literary texts are also read today in many different formats and not only on paper—as printed books, as ebooks, but also on smartphones or other readers. Most tablets and e-readers allow fonts to be changed and resized, notes to be recorded and retrieved, and passages to be highlighted. Other tools enable readers to know the number of others who have highlighted the same passage. According to Hayles, "In this sense, e-readers reinstitute communal reading" (78) and, by entering into a collaboration with human readers, can sense and respond to their demands.

Another crucial phenomenon of the last decade is self-publishing. According to publishers' statistics, the percentage of self-published titles rose to constitute 10% of the German book market (Wischenbart et al.). But the phenomenon of self-publishing is important not only because it is unprecedented but also because it shows that the gatekeeper function of publishing houses is changing. Moreover, it demonstrates the increasing importance of social reading in pushing a literary text to success. E. L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey* is only one of many possible examples.

The phenomenon of social reading and online reviewing challenges traditional notions of both reviewing and literary communication. Instapoets not only produce highly popular literature, because they deal with social issues in the public domain, but they employ a literary style that is easily understood; more importantly, their work can be quickly shared (Penke 461–62). Their nicknames, their graphic styles, and their themes are accurately selected to contribute to their success. They publish poems on Instagram at certain times of the day, using specific hashtags—#Instapoetry, #Poetrycommunity, and #Poetsofinstagram—to reach a specific target. These sharing practices, which are typical of social media, are common for digital poetry and feed a sense of collaboration (Kovalik and Curwood). The poetic style of #Instapoets encourages online sharing and dissemination. These authors could be considered innovators of multimodal writing because they employ ever-

evolving technologies to engage in authentic literacy practices in digital spaces. For example, the visibility of (paper) books and reading is enhanced: hashtags like #Instapoets often accompany pictures of hands holding books or leafing through a book. For #Bookstagram followers, the reading act is exposed, and the materiality of a paper book becomes crucial to its visualization. The book, with its symbolic capital, becomes an axis of attraction for empathy, compassion, and emotional engagement that can be shared with peers.

Followers, likes, shares, and comments, all of which can be expressed numerically, represent the degree of social prestige of each #Instapoet. For these writers, authority is conferred by likes. The value of "likes," however, concerns not solely the social standing of a writer but above all income. Paradoxically, by increasing the number of followers, #Instapoets can stimulate the interest of traditional "actors" in the literary field (i.e. literary agents) (Sovich). The logic of likes is a competitive one: "the more, the better" (Passmann 15). To reference Bourdieu, symbolic and economic capital go hand in hand in such cases. For Simone Murray, Bourdieu's conceptual models require sensitive reframing if they are to engage with the current digital literary sphere. In the pre-internet era, agents in the literary field held a monopoly on the award of the symbolic capital expressed by literary prizes, critical endorsement, and access to publication (Murray 18). Nowadays, the literary sphere is no longer characterized by cultural kingmakers but by mass democratic digital accessibility. The selection of cultural goods is no longer filtered by human gatekeepers but by algorithms. Amazon and Google use automated selection filters between authors and readers. These algorithms tend to be "black boxes" which, in Murray's view, "thus render ... the cultural encoded social and cultural priorities harder to identify and interrogate" (57). While, for Bourdieu, a small number of individuals in the literary field masked their individual investments behind institutional values, "once cultural gatekeeping shifts to computer programs, sociological critiques of individual or small-group agency become far harder to sustain" (57). Algorithms also permit readers to "review the reviewer," and reviews with the highest readers preferences are sorted higher in the listings (135). If, in the past, agents in the literary sphere were individuals with specific interests and powers, the discussion of and feedback on literary texts are now dominated by anonymous forces driven by multiple and highly complex quantitative elements. The fact is that the millions of reviewers on social media are, for these algorithms, more determinative than is the unique voice of the reviewer in the cultural page of a newspaper or magazine. The feedback Instapoets receive therefore appears online, in social networks, and not in specialized academic journals or in printed newspapers.

Another difference with reference to pre-internet writers is the communication between authors and their audiences. This type of reality, based on the sharing of photographs, texts, and intimate and personal thoughts capable of reaching thousands of people simultaneously was, for Rupi Kaur, "the only way to go"

(Sovich). In other words, it was the only environment in which she could share poems filled with personal themes as a sort of "public diary." Kaur alternates selfies and poems in her posts to amplify her proximity to her followers and amplify the authenticity effect of her texts.

#Instapoet fans comment on photos of their favorite artists, send direct messages, and, in turn, share the poems closest to their preferences. In the process, distinctions between the private and the public sphere are usually abolished, and people with the same interests can communicate directly. For users, the anonymity presumably granted to readers and followers by internet platforms is associated with a sense of liberation that encourages free expression of thoughts and feelings. In contrast, in pre-internet communication the link between writer and reader was a one-way communication, and readers were not considered the peers of authors.

A phenomenon like #Instapoets is highly interesting for our discussion because it produces millions of online literary reviews that contribute significantly to the big data of contemporary literature and because authors themselves are the theorists of a new binary (professional/non-professional) literary-evaluation system, which has become typical of the twenty-first-century "literary system." Thanks to #Instapoets, poetry can become a "consumer good" for all, produced outside of literary circles through self-publishing. As Rupi Kaur has stated:

> there was no market for poetry about trauma abuse loss love and
> healing through the lens of a punjabi-sikh immigrant woman.
> so i decided to self publish. even though everyone said not to
> cause doing so would lock me out of prestigious literary circles.
> (Qureshi)

With her lowercase texts, Kaur seems to fight against elites in the literary field and to make her opposition apparent through the use of strategies and channels different from those of pre-internet writers. Kaur deliberately rejects the expertise of the gatekeepers of "prestigious literary circles." This rejection of expertise is typical for current digitized societies (Nichols). She aims at a peer-to-peer relationship with readers and fans and does not need professional critical authority to assign "social prestige" to her writings. She also renounces the claim of elitism that the avant-garde concept of literariness implies. In a recent post on her Instagram account she narrates her struggles with canonical gatekeepers:

> 7 years ago today i self-published 'milk and honey' while starting
> my last year in university. prior to this i was trying to get my
> poems published in anthologies, literary magazines, and journals,
> but they weren't being accepted so i stopped trying, [...] i then

> self-published with the support of my friends At that point 'milk
> and honey' got picked up by a publisher. spent over 100 weeks
> on the new York times bestsellers list. (Dsouza)

These authors' literary practices are not far from the commercial. Other #Instapoets print their verses on T-shirts, hats, posters, charms, and notebooks, transforming the poet into a brand that can be monetized (Lederman). Empirical studies on book purchases have similarly shown that, in today's publishing climate, the author functions as a brand name and must establish "brand loyalty" with readers (Kamphuis). The rejection of the expertise of the traditional gatekeepers of "the literary system" denotes, in Bourdieu's vocabulary, a rejection of the symbolic capital of the literary field. The number of followers of the Instapoets correlates with popularity and presumably with "economic capital." These writers seem to give up the laurels of the poet's symbolic capital deliberately in favor of commercial success and popularity. Their followers' likes seem preferable to reviews in important newspapers. The power of the non-professional reviewer compared to professional reviewer seems a present-day phenomenon.

The traditional idea of the isolated poet, who stands in opposition to the social system, has been outclassed by the possibilities offered by social networks. Now the authors are engaged in one-to-many relationships with readers, intervening in cultural debates and selectively updating their fans on the progress of their writing projects. "Interactivity" is one of the main features of literary communication in the digital sphere where authors have the possibility to interact with their readers through websites, blogs, vlogs, Twitter and Facebook accounts and maintain intimate connection with them (Murray 29).

New generations see #Instapoets as points of reference and choose Instagram as the only possibility to express themselves freely. Their engagement on social media is crucial. Thanks to social media, they create fan-communities that undermine such traditional institutions of the literary field as editors, literary agents, publishers, and reviewers. #Instapoets don't aim to be received by professional readers: their readers are lay people, and they feel equal to them. This innovative and successful form of literary communication remains to be conceptualized by literary theory.

4. Methodological questions in the analysis of reviewing in the digital age

What can literary theory do in this neoteric context? Recent studies mainly evoke institutions under threat and assume the vantage point of such traditional gatekeepers as professional literary critics (S. Löffler). Some literary critics may prefer to retire to their ivory towers which, from the perspective of social media, is a stance that seems more and more obsolete. For Philip Ingold, literature that claims to be art—not on best or bestseller lists—can survive

"only in the ivory tower … finally becoming elitist and self-worthy again". Ingold believes that popular fiction certified by ratings may be and remain what it has become—a part of entertainment literature and infotainment.

Ingold's critical position implies both ignoring the production of literature on social media that has created such important phenomena as #Instapoets and #Twitterature and overlooking the millions of young readers who are a potential audience for high-brow (canonical) literature. Thomas Anz consequently recognized the positive evolution of online criticism and its ability to bring many new critics and new target groups to literary criticism.

First of all, it is important to understand that common ground exists between the lay reviewer and the professional: the reviewing activity itself, which implies the evaluation of the literary value of a text. Well before the institution of social reading and online book retailers, two German scholars, Renate von Heydebrand and Simone Winko, were studying the evaluation of literature. They developed a model that took into account both the social and the individual aspects of reviewing by abandoning the notion of literary quality as an intrinsic characteristic of the text. Following their thinking, a literary text is not intrinsically valuable; rather, it only acquires an attributive value in relation to specific standards. In appealing to the standards of cultivated readers, a "good" book should be "complex" or "rhetorically elaborated" to meet their expectations (values), while a "good" book can be a "suspenseful" love story or detective novel for less sophisticated readers. Interestingly, cultivated readers seem to share the criteria of literary value with modernist writers.

As Heydebrand and Winko have pointed out, "Literary evaluation is by no means limited by professional judgment on literary texts" (225). That is, different forms of professional reviewing—by journalists, literary critics, or literary scholars—also exist (Rippl and Winko). The actors in the "literary system" can express evaluations in a variety of ways, including through explicit verbal utterances and through non-linguistic acts of selection (e.g., buying one book instead of another). The indirect expression of preferences is multifaceted; it might occur in an author's choice of literary allusions, a reader's choice of one novel over another, an anthologist's inclusion or exclusion of a writer, a critic's comparison of several contemporary books, a professor's selection of works for a course syllabus, a student's choice of courses, or a journalist's survey of an author. Non-linguistic acts expressing intrinsic literary value can also be expressed through numbers (a book's sales figures, for example).

The evaluative process might be elicited by aesthetic, educational, or economic factors because the assessment of literary quality is regulated by norms that are influenced by both the economic and the cultural spheres. While the former aims at maximizing profits according to the law of supply and demand, the latter regulates "the possible gains in terms of knowledge, action orientation, gratification, prestige" (Heydebrand and Winko 230). Standards of value are

governed by four dimensions: formal values, content values, relational values, and reception values. While the first three take place on a social level and refer to the text, the fourth takes place on an individual level.

The sub-dimension of individual value encompasses the quality of literary texts with regard to personal needs, and it includes the following psychological assets:

- Cognitive value (reflection, memorability)

- Practical value (making sense, significance)

- Hedonistic value (pleasure, entertainment)

Importantly, these values are valid for both professional and non-professional readers. What changes are the standards of values they use, which are often a consequence of their differing expertise. Individual values are not the only crucial aspect of the evaluation of books. Social value considers literary texts in terms of:

- Economic value (literary works as objects of the economic system)

- Social prestige (symbolic capital within particular texts)

The Heydebrand/Winko models encompass professional and non-professional readers as well as linguistic and non-linguistic acts of evaluation and can also capture all the new tendencies of online reviewing (Rippl and Winko 147–48). This is precisely the praxis that has grown exponentially in recent years and created a challenge for current criticism. The Heydebrand/ Winko model has already been operationalized in the form of a questionnaire developed with Arthur Jacobs and Jana Lüdtke, two neuropsychologists at the Free University of Berlin. The questionnaire has been tested with flesh-and-blood readers and validated in other studies showing that it is a valid instrument to assess the literary value and social prestige of literary texts attributed by concrete readers (Salgaro et al.). It is potentially a tool that can shed light on the multifaceted reality, values and expectations of contemporary reviewers.

This is not the only operationalization in the field: online reviewing has also become a smaller branch within the bigger research field of digital social reading. Because many projects and research groups are focused on these phenomena, an accurate "snap-shot" of this young and vital field is difficult. Current research has taken different approaches to the big data of modern literary reviewing as it is practiced by professional and non-professional reviewers, and they can be summarized as follows:

1. Analysis of literary reviews based on quantitative evaluations, such as the stars on Amazon or Goodreads;

2. Investigation of qualitative (non-numerical) literary reviews on websites and social media; and

3. Analysis and comparison of professional and non-professional (online) criticism.

Valid applications already exist for each of these research paths. Quantitative evaluations of literary reviews can compare numerical data, expressed with stars, on Amazon or in print publications. These numbers can be correlated with other numbers—for example, sales figures—which are often published in newspapers or on websites. A good example of this research line is a study in which Goodreads book metrics were compared to a range of book-based impact indicators for 15,928 academic books across broad fields (Kousha et al.). Other research has shown how much user behavior on Goodreads is indicative of sales on retail book platforms such as Amazon (Maity et al.).

Investigation of qualitative literary reviews on websites and social media brings the concept of operationalization into play, which is already common in the Digital Humanities. Operationalization can be implemented, for example, by observing the occurrence of certain adjectives in online reviews. Using the LIWC (Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count) software, a 2019 study linguistically analyzed 474,803 unique reviews posted on Goodreads between 2014 and 2016 (Hajibayova). The high rate of function words coupled with positive emotion words suggests that reviewers tend to convey their opinions in order to influence other individuals' reading choices. These observations were supported by reviews of graphic novels (Hajibayova and McCorkhill). Other studies have confirmed the emotionality of reviews by highlighting the fact that 70% of emotion words appear in the first sentence of a book review and noting that reviewers mostly discuss the book's content rather than its formal characteristics (Wang et al.).

In another study, the book reviews of twenty-five 2009 bestsellers listed on Amazon were analyzed to understand which factors induced people to buy a book. Schreier coded Amazon reviews to understand reviewers' reasons for liking or recommending a book and showed that the main reason given was "involvement," which had the highest frequency in the sample. A closer inspection showed that readers' involvement concerned, in hierarchical order, plot and characters. Aesthetic involvement" which, for literary scholars is the main factor in appreciating a text, ranked only seventh on this list (312). For authors, these results raise concerns about the evaluation parameters, prestige, and value of reviews on such platforms as Amazon, Goodreads, and others.

Other studies have investigated various aspects of Goodreads reviews, such as their characteristics compared to Amazon reviews (Dimitrov et al.) and gender differences across reviewers and authors (Thelwall). Similar studies have been carried out for platforms such as Wattpad.com (Pianzola et al.) or LovelyBooks.de, the largest German-language book community (340,000

members and 1.2 million reviews). These studies show, among others, that a novel that becomes a show will receive about four times as many ratings on Goodreads.com as a novel that has never been adapted to TV or film (Manshel et al.).

Most of these studies have focused on social-reading reviews alone (Rebora et al.), sometimes giving the impression that book reviewing was born with the internet. But rating culture actually has a history. Only a few studies have tried to bridge the gap between professional and non-professional criticism, a comparison that could shed light on current evaluation practices in literary reading by showing continuities and ruptures between traditional and online criticism. Below I would like to list some examples.

Harada and Yamashita showed that reviews in print newspapers focus on "writing style," while online reviews emphasize "plot," and "setting." In addition, online reviews included more subjective and negative evaluations. Another succinct example of comparisons of online, non-professional reviewing with professional criticism was proposed by Stefan Neuhaus. After reconstructing the birth of literary reviews, Neuhaus analyzed lay reviews on Amazon. Because they appeared on a commercial website, these comments became part of advertising and public relations. He analyzed two online reviews, one of Franz Kafka's *Process* and one of John Grisham's *Sycamore Row,* to show their emphatic tone, the low quality of writing, and the lack of argumentation. The most amusing one included this line: "I would love to build a time machine, go back in time, and murder Franz Kafka before he ever had the opportunity to write a book."

Another approach was proposed by Peter Boot, who studied Dutch blogs to understand which persons or institutions were considered authoritative by online reviewers. Frequently mentioned authorities were authors, companies and institutions, online critics, and prizes, a noteworthy result because it suggests that the influence of critics is still powerful.

A different project, "Evaluation of Literature by Professional and Layperson Critics," led by Gunther Martens at the University of Gent, is studying the differences between professional critics and lay readers by contrasting their criteria for distinguishing "good" from "bad." To do this, the project is using corpus and sentiment analyses to explore the visibility and popularity of literary awards such as the Ingeborg Bachmann prize on social media.

In line with the above-mentioned approaches, a study by Salgaro and Rebora used the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) software to compare book reviews published on social networks with those that appear in paper magazines and literary journals. As a means to bridge the gap between professional and non-professional criticism, they focused explicitly on the precise vocabulary used in online and print reviews to express "critical distance" in literary reading. As expected, the analysis showed that "affect words"

dominated on social networks in comparison to print magazines (44% more) and literary journals (95% more). This emotional or "affective" approach did not impede "cognitive processes," showing that no interference exists between cognitive and emotive/biological/perceptual processes in book reviewing.

Together with the Heydebrand/Winko model mentioned earlier, these studies are potentially part of a renewed methodological framework of literary theory intended to shed light on the multifaceted reality of contemporary reviewing. Because the results of these studies are expressed in numbers, they can contribute to the big data of literary reviewing which, in turn, may allow comparability. By using data-driven approaches, we may help #Instapoetry find its way to a new, more productive form of #Instacriticism.

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