

Chapter Title: The One Unforgivable Transgression? Branding 'Kluun' as a Literary Strategy

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Book Title: Branding Books Across the Ages

Book Subtitle: Strategies and Key Concepts in Literary Branding

Book Editor(s): Helleke van den Braber, Jeroen Dera, Jos Joosten, Maarten Steenmeijer

Published by: Amsterdam University Press. (2021)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1m8d6qv.16>

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The One Unforgivable Transgression?

Branding 'Kluun' as a Literary Strategy

Jos Joosten

Abstract

In terms of economic capital, Kluun is one of the most successful Dutch authors of the last two decades. To date, at least a million copies of his debut novel *Komt een vrouw bij de dokter* have been sold; the book has been translated into 26 languages.¹ His later novels were less successful, but were still sold in considerable numbers. The reason why the 'Kluun-case' is remarkable is twofold. Firstly, Kluun is the former owner of an Amsterdam advertising firm, and considered his first novel not only an artistic product but an advertising venture as well; secondly, Kluun consciously played with the gap between his economic success and the amount of symbolic capital he accrued, and used the branding of his name and work as a literary strategy.

Keywords: Raymond van de Klundert, Kluun, *Komt een vrouw bij de dokter*, *DJ*

The Search for Economic *and* Symbolic Capital

Komt een vrouw bij de dokter, Kluun's 2003 debut novel, is the autobiographical story about a young couple, Stijn and Carmen, and their little daughter, living a happy and successful Yuppie life in Amsterdam. Things drastically change when Carmen is diagnosed with breast cancer. While Carmen undergoes chemotherapy, Stijn, who cannot cope with the situation, starts having affairs with other women. In the end, Stijn comes to his senses and

¹ See <http://www.uitgeverijpodium.nl/Auteurs/book/188/Komt-een-vrouw-bij-de-dokter> [accessed 18 February 2019].

returns to Carmen to help her end her life in a dignified way. The title *Komt een vrouw bij de dokter* refers to the rather lame Dutch cliché that opens many a joke: ‘A woman goes to see her doctor, and...’²

Kluun’s novel was issued by the renowned Amsterdam publisher *Podium* and was not instantly the commercial mega-success that it would ultimately become.³ In fact, it took a relatively long time before it became a success. The book appeared in October 2003, and at the end of February 2004 the number of copies sold was 27,861, which by Dutch standards is still considerable. However, this was not the real public mega-breakthrough. That only came one year later, when the novel at last ended up in the Book Top 60, after winning the *NS-Publieksprijs*, a literary prize awarded by popular vote.⁴

From the beginning, Kluun has taken a remarkable position as an author. He made no secret of the fact that he wanted to obtain economic capital – for example, by making a living as a writer – but on the other hand, he has also constantly hinted at symbolic recognition. This crossroads makes the Kluun-case remarkable from the perspective of branding. In the Introduction to this book, the following is stated about the phenomenon:

We aim to research all stages in this process, both in the present and in the past, paying special attention to the dynamic between the three most important participants: author, publisher, and readership. We ask to what extent this entire process is intentional. Often, the publisher is the initiator of the branding process, whereas the author is the one who is being made into a brand, and the readership is the target group considered to be sensitive towards that branding, yet these roles are unstable.⁵

Perhaps the most striking aspect about the case under discussion is that the process of product branding – starting with the catchy brand name, ‘Kluun’ – is from the beginning already largely intentional, and although it was of course carried out in cooperation with his publisher, it was initiated

2 In 2007 an English translation of the novel (by Shaun Whiteside) was published, entitled *Love Life* (St. Martin’s Griffin, New York). In this article I will refer to the book by its title in Dutch.

3 The first part of this article is a revised and updated version of ‘Waarin gelooft Kluun? Het geloof van Bourdieu en Kluuns *Komt een vrouw bij de dokter*’. In Joosten 2017, in particular 62–69.

4 See for more information: https://www.nspublieksprijs.nl/over_ons [accessed 22 February 2019]. The prize is awarded by a combination of votes from the general public (in 2006 24,976) and 600 members of a so called ‘kernjury’ (‘core jury’) – in a ratio of 2/3 to 1/3 (‘Kluun krijgt NS Publieksprijs voor debuut: *Komt een vrouw bij de dokter* is “Boek van het Jaar”’, in *Dagblad van het Noorden*, 16 October 2006).

5 Introduction p. 17.

and designed as such by the author Raymond van de Klundert, who himself was the former owner of an advertising company.

Kluun broke, for instance, a basic rule Pierre Bourdieu formulated regarding press publicity in the literary field: ‘The strategies which [an author] applies in his relations with the press are perfectly adapted (without necessarily having been so conceived) to the objective demands of the most advanced fraction of the field, i.e. to the “intellectual” ideal of negation, which demands refusal of temporal compromises and tends to establish a negative correlation between success and true artistic value’ (Bourdieu 1993: 100). Kluun, on the contrary, consciously and explicitly did *not* ignore the possibilities of publicity.

In his recent and interesting book *De literatuur draait door: de schrijver in het mediatijdperk*, Tilburg scholar Sander Bax dedicates a couple of pages to Kluun’s work and media strategy.⁶ Clearly Bax is not a great admirer of the author’s approach to the literary field. He interprets Kluun’s acts as being solely focused on economic capital and sees commercial profit as his only purpose: ‘The fact that Kluun in interviews constantly elaborates on his initiatives in favour of “the literature” or “young, unknown writers” is just a clever strategy of positioning himself: it makes unashamed commercialism look like altruism’ (Bax 2019: 89).⁷ Bax calls Kluun an author who ‘practices literary-institutional populism’ (90). In his book he approaches Kluun’s activities and work only from the angle of the classic-modernist *doxa* with its clear distinction between highbrow and lowbrow literature. Exactly the opposite appears to be the starting point for the reflections on the subject of branding by the Polish scholar Dominik Antonik. In his article ‘The author as a brand’, he analyses the case of author Michał Witkowski, which to a certain extent looks similar to Kluun’s, although the marketing strategy of this Polish author is far more radical: ‘The author functions as a brand, integrating a broad space of signs and bestowing external value on products. [...] His work affects us not through books, but through the brand’ (Antonik 2016: 185). One of Antonik’s conclusions is that ‘[i]t is becoming increasingly difficult to examine culture strictly in terms of a superstructure or sphere of values that is separate from us and operates somewhere above our heads; art, meanwhile, no longer fits into the traditional model. The division between culture and economy or the domain of art and material reality is becoming

6 See Bax 2019, in particular the pages 85-91 and 105-109.

7 ‘Dat Kluun het in interviews voortdurend heeft over zijn initiatieven voor “de literatuur” of voor “jonge, onbekende schrijvers” is een slimme positioneringsstrategie: daardoor doet onverbleemd commercialisme zich voor als altruïsme.’

inoperable' (182). According to Antonik, the Witkowski-case indicates a major turn in the literary field:

This is a literature that relies on novelty and newness, in the broad senses. Traditional literature is geared towards transmission and is linked to the dynamic of collective memory. The work of Witkowski and his ilk is based on communication, the flow of information at a given moment. It operates in a narrow time frame, focusing on topicality and synchronicity, rather than diachronicity, and does not seek to leave a permanent mark. It operates on quickly processable information, not values and knowledge that appeal to our long-term memory. (189)

Kluun evidently manoeuvres between the classical high-culture *doxa* (whose gatekeepers still have not fully accepted him), and the extreme opposite: the branded position of Witkowski.

What can be said about Kluun's literary strategy in the field and in what direction is his authorship moving? It appears that Kluun attempts to gather both economic and symbolic capital, what, following Bourdieu, is strictly spoken impossible since the one excludes the other. Kluun has always been explicit about his commercial intentions and even makes it part of his branding. His commercial strategy even became subject of the daily cartoon 'Fokke en Sukke' in quality newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*. The cartoon is entitled 'Fokke and Sukke call Kluun for advice'. Fokke: 'We're working on a really lousy cartoon...'; Sukke: '...but yet we want to sell a million of them'.⁸ In fact this way Kluun came quite close to what Bourdieu (1993: 80-81) called 'the one unforgivable transgression': calling into question 'the game itself and the belief which supports it.' We will discuss that further on.

From the moment Kluun started to gain his huge success in terms of economic capital, his somewhat problematic relationship with what one could call the 'literary establishment' was unveiled. The writer himself has, especially in this early stage of his career, never made a secret of his intentions (here he is writing about himself in the third person):

Former advertising and marketing man Kluun did have a commercial objective, and that was in fact very practical: in order to become a full-time writer, able to earn a living with writing, a couple of tens of thousands of

8 See [http://fokkesukkeearchief.nl/cartoon/bellen-kluun-voor-tips\(1302\)](http://fokkesukkeearchief.nl/cartoon/bellen-kluun-voor-tips(1302)) [accessed 7 November 2019].

copies would have to be sold. Because this only happens to a few debutants in a decade(!), he had this personal, more er ... ego-bound aim: to become one of the three best-selling debut novels of that year. (Van de Klundert 2005)⁹

Kluun thus had uninhibited commercial intentions, and his view on and relationship with the traditional literary field appeared, at first glance, to be purely negative. The traditional book reviewers paid very little attention to the debutant. The reception in that category remained limited to two very negative reviews in the student weekly *Propria Cures* and the Amsterdam daily newspaper *Het Parool*.¹⁰ The rest of the traditionally canonizing institutions completely ignored the book: none of the serious newspapers reviewed it. In terms of Bourdieu, the gained symbolic capital of the book was zero. On the other hand, *Komt een vrouw bij de dokter* accumulated a huge amount of economic capital.

Kluun's Moves Towards the Field of Literature

At first glance, Kluun's own attitude towards the literary establishment is ambivalent. He is probably not the first Dutch author to use varied marketing techniques to make a success of his book, but he is definitely the first one to be this frank on the subject. As an example, a few passages from an interview with the author follow, which are typical of many of the interviews he has given since his novel became successful (the journalist's remarks are in italics).

'I created a dream team of people I used to work with. The book cover was created by a designer who worked for Nike, Audi and Volkswagen.'

'The special book presentation at Hotel Arena, where visitors could walk, as it were, through the book, was designed by a friend who was founder of the *Sensation House Parties*, and the website kluun.nl was created by yet another person. I wanted to create a hype.'

9 'Ex-reclame- en marketingman Kluun had wél een commerciële doelstelling en die was zeer praktisch van aard. Om full-time schrijver te kunnen worden en er van te kunnen leven, zouden er enkele tienduizenden exemplaren moeten worden verkocht. Omdat dit hooguit enkele debuten in een decennium (!) overkomt, had hij voor zichzelf een persoonlijke, meer eh... ego-gebonden doelstelling: bij de drie bestverkochte debuten van dat jaar te komen.'

10 Arie Storm, 'Kluuniaanse aanstellerij', *Het Parool*, 17 October 2003, and JvdH, 'Kankerlijer. Vreemdgaan was nooit zo gemakkelijk', *Propria Cures*, 13 November 2003.

The literary establishment did not appreciate it, and accused him of posing. 'When it comes to beer, sanitary napkins, films or music it's all about marketing, but somehow that is not allowed for books in the Netherlands. Book covers are changed regularly, but my cover is still the same after the fifteenth edition and it will remain this way. Everyone knows the black cover of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* with the silver triangle and the rainbow on it, or the *Arrival* album by Abba, with the helicopter. That's the power of an image.'

'And besides that, the literary world is convinced that a debutant should be presented quietly to the public, and only if you already have a big name like Harry Mulisch or my next-door neighbour A.F.Th.van der Heijden, you will be launched like a rocket. In that respect, the Netherlands is very conservative. I wanted to give a wake-up call to the world of literature.'

*In spite of the criticism from the official literary world, Komt een vrouw bij de dokter became the best-selling Dutch debut novel of the past years.*¹¹ (Anon. 2005)

This interview presents a double view on the way literature works – or is supposed to work. On the one hand, Kluun elaborates on the new, innovative way he approached the launch of his book; on the other hand, it is clear that what might be called the traditional literary field still is (at least also) the author's point of reference – which he might as well have totally ignored.

11 'Ik had een dreamteam gecreëerd van mensen met wie ik vroeger werkte. De omslag is bedacht door een ontwerper die voor Nike, Audi en Volkswagen heeft gewerkt.'

'De opmerkelijke presentatie in hotel Arena waar bezoekers als het ware door het boek wandelden, was bedacht door een vriend die aan de wieg van de Sensation-housefeesten stond. De website kluun.nl werd weer door een ander verzonnen. Ik wilde een hype rond het boek en de site creëren.'

Het literaire establishment pikte het niet en beschuldigde hem van aanstellerij. 'Bier, maandverband, films en muziek worden met marketing-sausjes overgoten, maar voor boeken mag dat niet in Nederland. Hier worden covers regelmatig veranderd, maar mijn omslag is na de vijftiende druk nog steeds hetzelfde en blijft dat ook. Uiterlijke herkenning is zo belangrijk. Iedereen kent de zwarte platenhoes van Pink Floyd's *Dark Side Of The Moon* met die zilveren driehoek en een regenboog erop of de *Arrival*-elpee van Abba met een helikopter. Dat is de kracht van het beeld.'

'En daarnaast vindt de literaire wereld dat een debutant rustig moet worden gebracht. Alleen als je een grote naam als Harry Mulisch of mijn buurman A.F.Th. van der Heijden bent, word je spetterend gelanceerd. Wat dat betreft is Nederland heel conservatief. En ik wilde dat eens lekker wakker schudden en dit heilige huisje omver werpen.'

Ondanks kritiek uit de literaire hoek werd *Komt een vrouw bij de dokter* het best verkochte Nederlandse romandebuut van de afgelopen jaren.

The alleged new approach is clear from the opening of the article, entitled 'The writer as a brand: the unorthodox approach of best-selling writer Kluun'. But of course an *unorthodox* position is still related to a *doxa*, in this case that of the traditional literary field that Kluun puts in opposition to the world of 'beer, sanitary napkins, film, and music'. Thus, it becomes part of Kluun's strategy to combine economic success with symbolic recognition. It is only useful to suggest that you are neglected and even rejected by the official literary elite if you want to be recognized by them. As we already saw, the 'criticism from the official literary world' was not so bad, but Kluun's novel was in fact almost completely ignored by the 'official' reviewers. In the light of the strategy to find recognition within the literary field, any – even negative – review is nevertheless more than welcome as an essential part of the consecration – paradoxically, even if this criticism is utterly negative: being reviewed means being eligible for discussion in the book section, and thus that you are a possible candidate to take in a position in the literary field. That would be doubtful if your novel was completely ignored by the reviewers. By expanding the only two negative reviews (which were not even written by traditional dominant actors in the literary field such as *NRC Handelsblad* or *Vrij Nederland*) to 'criticism from the literary field', Kluun paradoxically stresses his position *in* the literary field.

There are more indications that Kluun, besides being commercially successful, wants to be eligible for a position in the literary field. In spite of his outspoken opinion on the so-called conservative literary world, Kluun has included two quotes from, respectively, *NRC Handelsblad* and *de Volkskrant* (both quality newspapers) in the reprints of *Komt een vrouw bij de dokter* right on top of the very first page that is filled with praise for the book from all angles. Interestingly enough, however, the quotes in question do not originate from literary reviews on the book but come from general articles from the entertainment pages of both papers, which were about the public presentation of Kluun's novel.¹² The suggestion that they are literary reviews is nevertheless further strengthened by explicitly mentioning the name of one of the 'reviewers': the late Adriaan Jaeggi from *de Volkskrant*, who was not only a journalist but also a literary writer.

There is another clue that Kluun at this time is strategically searching for recognition from actors in the literary field. After the negative review of critic Arie Storm was published in *Het Parool*, both Kluun and his publisher Joost Nijssen responded directly to the article with a letter to the editor. Both comments refer explicitly to the *literary* quality of the publishing house.

12 Kluun uses the same quote from *NRC Handelsblad* on the back cover of the English translation of *Komt een vrouw bij de dokter*, next to, amongst others, lines from *The Daily Mail* and *Der Spiegel*.

Nijsen points out: ‘The point is that *Podium*, besides the proud publisher of Ronald Giphart, is the publisher of a large variety of writers of fiction and non-fiction, from Dutch authors such as Manon Uphoff, Herman Franke, Joris Luyendijk, and Henk van Woerden to poets such as Ingrid Jonker, Tjitske Jansen, and Antjie Krog, as well as internationally renowned writers such as Michel Faber and Booker Prize winner DBC Pierre’ (Nijsen 2003).¹³ A week earlier, Kluun himself had also already mentioned in a letter to *Het Parool* ‘all authors connected to Podium publishers (among others DBC Pierre, winner of Booker Prize 2003, Henk van Woerden, Manon Uphoff, Herman Franke, Michael Faber, etc.)’ (Kluun 2003). It is, of course, quite unusual to respond to a bad review, especially when you are the criticized author in question. Kluun and his publisher broke this rule in a clear attempt to get as much attention as possible from this single review.

A last indication for Kluun’s link to high literature, lies in the fact that the novel appears to have become a subject of debate in intellectual circles, where the question whether or not it had literary value became a topic of conversation. Typical is a column by Frits Abrahams, one of the prominent columnists in The Netherlands, in quality newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, in autumn 2006, which begins thus: ‘More and more I got involved in confusing discussions about Kluun, writer of the bestsellers *Komt een vrouw bij de dokter* and *De weduwnaar* [*The Widower*, Kluun’s second novel]. On the one hand there are the defenders, often women of about thirty years old, and on the other hand the sceptics, often men over fifty years old. For the first group, *Komt een vrouw bij de dokter* is a “beautiful, moving book”, the other group considers it a load of crap’ (Abrahams 2006).¹⁴

Branding Kluun

It is evident that Kluun also seeks access to the literary field with his book. A curious document provides, from a quite unexpected angle, additional

13 ‘Feit is, dat Podium behalve de trotse uitgever van Ronald Giphart de uitgever is van de meest uiteenlopende schrijvers van fictie en nonfictie, van Nederlandse auteurs als Uphoff, Franke, Luyendijk en Van Woerden tot dichters als Ingrid Jonker, Tjitske Jansen en Antjie Krog en internationaal befaamde schrijvers als Michel Faber en Bookerprize-winnaar DBC Pierre.’

14 ‘Steeds vaker kwam ik in warrige discussies terecht over Kluun, schrijver van de bestsellers *Komt een vrouw bij de dokter* en *De weduwnaar*. Aan de ene kant had je de pleitbezorgers, vaak vrouwen van omstreeks de dertig, en aan de andere kant de sceptici, vaak mannen van boven de vijftig. Voor de eerste groep was *Komt een vrouw bij de dokter* een “mooi, ontroerend boek”, voor de andere groep “complete bagger”.’

material to illustrate the strategy that Kluun used to *brand* his book both as a potential public success as well as a literary novel. In 2005, Raymond van de Klundert filled out a twelve-page application form in order to compete for an Effie, the most important Dutch advertising prize, using the motto 'Advertising works, also in literature'.¹⁵ Kluun – or rather Van de Klundert – describes in the document, apparently following a given questionnaire, the strategy he designed to make his debut a public success.

The document in question is interesting because Van de Klundert's answers and remarks show a number of, not necessarily proven, assumptions about the situation of the current literary field, matters like literary value (an issue such as 'taste', for example) and the influence of 'traditional' literary criticism. Here, too, he turns against the high-culture oriented literary establishment: the form contains numerous references to the official literary world (often with a slightly ironic tone), where the actors seem to know all about the intrinsic qualities of books. Never before has a book been described and analysed this explicitly as a project of advertising by its own author. Once again, we witness the complex manoeuvres between economic and symbolic success, where for the sake of the matter it is time the commercial aspects prevail.

The interest in the literary field as a focal point becomes clear from the so-called SWOT-analysis Kluun presents of his own book. This is an American-based analysis that advertising professionals often use. These analyses examine both the main Strengths and Weaknesses of a company or a product, as well as the Opportunities and Threats of the product in question. Kluun's/Van de Klundert's analysis is quoted extensively (Van de Klundert 2006).

The Manuscript of *Komt een vrouw bij de dokter* was proofread by a few dozen people and provoked emotional reactions. People had to cry, laugh, they were angry, happy, sad. The story remained in people's head for a long time. That is – to get into Effie jargon – a *Strength* for a literary novel.

The biggest *Weakness*? Publisher Joost Nijsen estimated that there was only a very slight chance that book reviewers would go totally flat out for *Komt een vrouw bij de dokter*. The story is largely autobiographical, something most literary book reviewers consider a weakness for a debutant. In their opinion, it confirms the cliché image of the hundreds of thousands of would-be writers, wanting the world to take notice of their life story,

15 All quotations from Van de Klundert 2006 (author's translation).

while not being bothered by any talent for storytelling or rich literary imagination at all. In addition, Kluun's populist writing style was not exactly *salonfähig*:

Metaphors, for example football comparisons. Frequent use of brand names. Windows-like popups with descriptions of all the pubs, restaurants, and clubs that appeared in the novel. And the so-called 'wramples' – or **written samples**: pieces of text – of course with the source mentioned, but still – taken from literature, film, pop music, comic strips, cabaret, and – how vulgar! – even from advertising campaigns.

However, that was also the *Opportunity* right away. The advantage of a writer – just like a rock band, sportsman, or DJ – who deviates from the usual is that he can acquire real fans, who want to share their enthusiasm with as many people as possible. Fans provide word-of-mouth advertising of the kind product managers of 'ordinary' products can only dream of.

The second biggest *Threat* to a debut are bad reviews. There is only one bigger threat: no reviews. To be ignored by the literary press. For an established author with a large fan base that is not an insurmountable problem (writers like Coelho and Grisham are rarely reviewed), but, for a debut novel, to be neglected is equal to a postnatal abortion.¹⁶

16 'Het manuscript van *Komt Een Vrouw Bij De Dokter* was door enkele tientallen mensen gelezen en riep emotionele reacties op. Mensen moesten huilen, lachen, waren boos, gelukkig, verdrietig. Het boek bleef lang hangen bij iedereen. En dat is – om in Effie-jargon te komen – een *Strength* voor een literaire roman.

De grootste *Weakness*? Uitgever Joost Nijsen schatte de kans klein in dat literaire recensenten en masse plat zouden gaan voor *Komt Een Vrouw Bij De Dokter*. Het verhaal is grotendeels autobiografisch, iets wat door de meeste literaire recensenten wordt gezien als een zwaktebod voor een debuut. Het bevestigt in hun ogen het cliché-beeld van de honderdduizenden would-be schrijvers die vinden dat de wereld kennis moet nemen van hun levensverhaal, daarbij niet gehinderd door enig talent voor vertelkunst of rijke literaire verbeeldingskracht. Daarbij komt dat Kluuns populistische schrijfstijl bepaald niet *salonfähig* was. Metaforen o.b.v. voetbalvergelijkingen. Veelvuldig gebruik van merknamen. Windows-achtige pop ups met beschrijvingen van alle kroegen, restaurants en clubs die in de roman voorkwamen. En de zogenaamde 'wramples', ofwel **written samples**: gejatte stukken tekst – weliswaar met bronvermelding, maar toch – uit literatuur, film, popmuziek, strips, cabaret, en – hoe ordinair – zelfs reclamecampagnes). Maar dat was ook meteen de *Opportunity*. Het voordeel van een schrijver – net als een rockband, sportman of dj – die afwijkt van het gangbare is dat hij echte fans kan verwerven, die hun enthousiasme met zoveel mogelijk mensen willen delen. Fans zorgen voor mond-tot-mond reclame van het soort waar productmanagers van 'gewone' producten van dromen. De op één na grootste *Threat* van een romandebuut zijn slechte recensies. Er is maar één grotere

There are many similar clauses in the document, all of them indicating that the established literary order is Kluun's most important target group. The author mentions as the strength that his book is a *literary* novel. Joost Nijsen evidently manifests himself as a literary publisher, and both publisher and author consider the 'literary reviewers' the main target group.

Kluun did not win the Effie award. There is much irony in the reason why: the jury thought 'the product itself has had an influence on success, not communication'. In other words: the book itself had apparently intrinsic qualities – with which the jury from the very state-of-the-art industry that the advertising world is, paradoxically shows a very traditional view on what literary value is.

Branding as a Strategy of Complicity *and* Distinction

Of course it is questionable whether Kluun's outline of the way the literary world works is correct. It looks like this largely is an (in itself very interesting) matter of individual perception rather than empiricism. However, the matter whether his vision is correct or not is not relevant now. It is about a more basic topic: Kluun evidently focuses on recognition in the literary field. It is not a coincidence that he mentions 'being ignored' as a major threat.

In one of the articles in which Bourdieu most explicitly dwells on the properties of fields, he makes the following observation: 'Autre propriété, déjà moins visible, d'un champ: tous les gens qui sont engagés dans un champ ont en commun un certain nombre d'intérêts fondamentaux, à savoir tous ce qui est lié à l'existence même du champ: de là une complicité objective qui est sous-jacente à tous les antagonismes' (Bourdieu 1984: 115). The battle on the literary field can only be fought with the (unspoken) assumption of both parties that it is all worth the game: Bourdieu's 'complicité objective', or 'objective complicity', involves an (implicit) mutual agreement on the preconditions, a shared belief.

What can be said about Kluun's objective complicity? On the one hand, there are the obvious indications mentioned above that he aims at a position within the traditional literary field (the acquisition, therefore, of symbolic capital); on the other hand, it became clear that his strategy in terms of form and content almost entirely seeks to collect economic capital.

threat. Geen recensies. Genegeerd worden door de literaire pers. Voor een gevestigd auteur met een grote schare fans geen onoverkomelijk probleem (schrijvers als Coelho en Grisham worden zelden gerecenseerd), maar voor een debuutroman staat totale windstilte gelijk aan een postnatale abortus.'

In his text, we find many such assumptions about the characteristics of the literary field (and they sometimes seem almost borrowed straight from Bourdieu, for instance when Kluun (ironically) states: 'the noble world of literature has its own codes'). The alternative to recognition by the settled actors is always the commercial success that Kluun aims at with his branding strategy.

So here we come to a striking point of intersection: after all, economic success does not in itself make it necessary or even desirable to enter the symbolic capital market. In addition, here the Kluun-case seems more complex. Unlike what Bourdieu argues in 'The production of faith', Kluun tries to enter both the symbolic and the economic market. Following Bourdieu, success in one market generally excludes success in the other.

There are also two opposing images of the criteria of success. For 'bourgeois' writers and their readers, success is intrinsically a guarantee of value. That is why, in this market, the successful get more successful. Publishers help to make best-sellers by printing further impressions;¹⁷ the best thing a critic can do for a book or play is to predict "success" for it. [...] As for the opposing camp's vision, in which success is suspect and asceticism in this world is the precondition for salvation in the next, its basis lies in the economy of cultural production itself, according to which investments are recompensed only if they are in a sense thrown away. (Bourdieu 1993: 101)

As far as the recognition of his work is concerned, Kluun is not totally depending on those who determine success on a symbolic level. Success, following Bourdieu, does not indicate autonomous, objective quality but stems from the conscious and unconscious obeying of the written and unwritten rules of the game by judges that are judged to be competent, with knowledge of (faith in) literary value: 'Le producteur de la *valeur de l'oeuvre de l'art* n'est pas l'artiste mais le champ de production en tant qu'univers de croyance qui produit la valeur de l'oeuvre d'art *comme fétiche* en produisant la croyance dans le pouvoir créateur de l'artiste' (Bourdieu 1998: 375).

Kluun is evidently a 'complicit' player in the literary field. His 'antagonistic' attitude is clear, but it does not stand complicity in the way. On the contrary: antagonism is a traditional part of the game. In his classic study *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Renato Poggioli distinguishes between two

17 Actually, it says here in French: 'on contribue à faire les *best sellers* en publiant leurs tirages', which literally means: 'Publishers help to create bestsellers by publishing the circulation figures'.

types of antagonism as a trademark of the classic avant-gardist (Poggioli 1968: 30). Firstly, there is the antagonism against the general public. Of course, this does not apply to Kluun: reaching a big audience is one of Kluun's main goals. Secondly, there is literary antagonism. In fact, that does not apply to Kluun's novel either. His prose is not innovative, nor is his book experimental or hermetic. His battle is not one of the usual ones on formal matters orientated 'literary' nature. Kluun's campaigns to take up a position in the literary field are of a different nature and need to be sought in his strategy of being open about the branding of his novel. From that point of view, Kluun might even be considered more radical than any avant-gardist in the last few decades. Bourdieu calls it 'significant' that

all attempts to call into question the field of artistic production, the logic of its functioning and the functions it performs, through the highly sublimated and ambiguous means of discourse or artistic 'acts' [...] are no less necessarily bound to be condemned even by the most heterodox guardians of artistic orthodoxy, because in refusing to play the game, to challenge in accordance with the rules, i.e. artistically, their authors call into question not a way of playing the game, but the game itself and the belief which supports it. This is the one unforgivable transgression. (Bourdieu 1993: 80-81)

Indeed, Kluun does not attack with literary strategies (like more or less radical renewals of formal aspects, a revolutionary world view, or otherwise shocking linguistic experiments) but by radically denouncing a basic condition of the literary game, namely: high art with symbolic value keeps itself far away from economic laws. Nevertheless, at the same time, Kluun never loses sight of that established field and the recognition that it could provide. Kluun ultimately does not criticize the game itself.

After the Gold Rush

Kluun's career after *Komt een vrouw bij de dokter* shows an interesting development. His second novel, the afore mentioned *De weduwnaar* appeared in 2006.¹⁸ It was immediately reviewed in the book sections of most of the

¹⁸ *De weduwnaar* was translated into English by Shaun Whiteside, the translator of Kluun's debut novel. It was entitled *The Widower* and published by Pan Books, an imprint of Pan Macmillan Ltd, London in 2008.

nationwide quality newspapers such as *NRC Handelsblad*, *Vrij Nederland*, *de Volkskrant* and in various local papers after it was issued. All of these reviews were negative, but the amount of attention from the literary field was considerable – particularly compared to the two reviews of the debut. Kluun's next two novels, *Haantjes* (2011) and *DJ* (2017) were in terms of critical attention seen as 'regular' literary works. The judgement in the quality papers of those novels was in general rather positive. Kluun himself noticed the change too. He reflected on the apparently changing attitude of literary reviewers in an interview:

Is there some truth in it? There seems to be growing recognition for your work from the side of, let us say, the literary elite.

'Yes, I think I detect that tendency too. It is still reluctant and a bit hesitant, but something seems to be changing. I now hear more often: "It's well done." Apparently, I have to make more efforts to earn recognition. [...] I know what I am capable of, and I am very self-critical, but this is simply a good book. If that results in a very positive review from Jeroen Vullings in *Vrij Nederland*, then that is nice, of course. A friend of mine sent me a WhatsApp-message: "They're getting convinced." (Van Velzen 2017)¹⁹

Without doubt, the novel *DJ* that was published early 2017 is technically more complex than Kluun's earlier books. Viewed from the angle of the antagonism between symbolic and economic capital, the novel is very interesting. The outline of the story itself appears (again) to be to a certain extent autobiographical: it is about a writer, named 'Kluun' (also appearing in the novel under his real surname, Van de Klundert) who got divorced and has to deal with his ex-wife, with financial problems, and with writer's block. However, it is evident that the rest of the story is purely fictional.

Of particular interest is a motive that plays on the background. 'Kluun' is, without much success, working on his next book: a family saga, intended to be a serious, literary novel. His publisher, someone with high cultural standards ('he was convinced that no one could ever grow up to become a

19 'Zit daar iets in? Er lijkt nu ook uit de hoek van, laten we zeggen, de literaire elite, erkenning te komen voor uw werk.

"Ja, die teneur herken ik wel. Het is een schoorvoetend erkennen, het is hier en daar nog wat stekelig, maar er lijkt iets te veranderen. Ik hoor nu vaker: 'Het zit toch wel goed in elkaar'. Blijkbaar moet ik er meer voor doen om erkenning te verdienen. [...] Ik weet wat ik kan en ik ben heel zelfkritisch, maar dit is gewoon een goed boek. Als dan die goede recensie van Jeroen Vullings in *Vrij Nederland* komt, dan is dat natuurlijk wel lekker. Een vriend van me appte: 'Ze zijn om'."

full-fledged educated human being if he did not read Reve, Hermans and Mulisch') keeps enquiring, more and more urgently, when he will receive the manuscript of the new novel.

In the meantime, 'Kluun' has accepted a lucrative job: a production company called *EndofWorks* (an allusion to the big Dutch production company *Endemol*) asked him to make a television documentary about the world famous DJ Thor, who used to be his roommate when they both were students. Due to all sorts of circumstances a rivalling – very commercially orientated – publisher becomes interested and asks 'Kluun' to write Thor's biography, in which he sees large commercial potential.

In this way, Kluun has turned his own antagonism as a writer in the one and a half decades before into a thematic thread in the novel itself: the conflict between the economic and symbolic success. Kluun often uses self-irony as a technique, for instance when he describes a literary panel in which he takes part.

At my other side, a book reviewer was seated whom I only knew by name. He had called my last novel an Offence to Literature. That same night I discovered that he wrote books himself as well, and according to our interviewer, those were novels 'that mattered'.

In an attempt to create a happy atmosphere, I sincerely apologized for the fact that all my novels were bestsellers, and I said that of course I'd rather have had it the other way. And I added that I was hoping that tonight I would be able to learn from my colleagues how to write a really good novel.

Throughout the novel this sort of self-mockery turns up. For instance: when the producer of *EndofWorks* tries to persuade 'Kluun' to go on with the documentary, even though a friend of Thor, a young girl, has just died from drug abuse. This telephone conversation follows:

I answered that *EndofWorks* should be bloody ashamed of themselves for wanting to exploit the death of a loved one this way. 'What about *Komt een vrouw bij de dokter?*' Molenaar asked. 'Sorry! Gotta go.'

One conversation, somewhere in the beginning of *DJ*, between 'Kluun' and his own publisher is of particular interest.

'What would you say if I put the Family Novel on hold and write a book about a DJ?'

'About this friend of yours?'

‘Yes. There is a big chance he will be elected most popular DJ of the world next month.’

‘People that like *dance* don’t buy books, Kluun.’ My publisher crumbled the napkin beside his plate. ‘I urgently demand you to speed up the writing of the family novel. I cannot tolerate you pushing the deadline back any further. I have got a company to run.’

The old-school publisher of ‘Kluun’ thinks that there is no commercial profit to be gained from a novel about a DJ, and insists on the initially promised ‘literary’ product. His last line is of particular interest: he makes explicit that he, too, has to take economic capital into consideration. In this way Kluun has turned his own initial real-life marketing strategy into a *literary* theme in his most recent novel. It all indicates a final move towards the literary field.

Changing Positions

Parallel to Kluun’s march in the direction of the literary field there is a remarkable development to be detected in his economic success. *Komt een vrouw bij de dokter* sold 1.2 million copies; *De weduwenaar* 700,000 copies;²⁰ *Haantjes* 150,000 copies.²¹ All three novels reached the Number 1 position in the weekly Dutch Book Top 60. *Komt een vrouw bij de dokter* remained in the list for 216 weeks, *De weduwenaar* 114 weeks, and *Haantjes* 33 weeks. *DJ* never made it to the highest position.

Before *DJ* was issued, publisher Joost Nijsen already anticipated in *Boekblad* (the professional magazine for the Dutch book industry) that there would be less economic success for the new book compared to Kluun’s earlier novels:

A success like *Komt een vrouw bij de dokter* will never happen again. It was published in a time the book market reached heights that it will never reach again. I remember estimating that 140,000 copies of *Haantjes* would be modest at the time, but with *DJ* we aim at 100,000 copies to begin with. The market has totally changed. Moreover: we all know the

20 Information from Website Podium Publisher: <http://www.uitgeverijpodium.nl/Auteurs/author/63/Kluun> [accessed 14 February 2019].

21 Information in Rinskje Koelewijn, “‘Vrouwen willen beledigd worden’”, *NRC Handelsblad*, 19 March 2011.

female readers are decisive. They might be touched more by the emotional character of *Komt een vrouw bij de dokter* than the laugh and punch that *DJ* is. (Dessing 2017)²²

In the end, *DJ* ended up in the Top 100 of 2017 as number 59, indicating that between 30,000 and 40,000 copies were sold, which means less than half of the amount Nijsen estimated (CPNB 2017).

Of course Nijsen, as an experienced publishing expert, will be right with his explanation of the developments in the changing book market as one of the reasons for the smaller success of Kluun's latest novel. But it is also an undeniable fact that *DJ* is the most 'literary' novel Kluun has written so far. In the meantime, Kluun himself had started to downplay the role of the (attempts to launch the) brand 'Kluun' in the years following the publication of his first two novels. Only three years after he had applied for the Effie, he said in an interview, when asked if he had any idea about the reason for the 'tremendous success' of *Komt een vrouw bij de dokter*: 'It definitely wasn't the marketing, like some people suggest. Good marketing can give a book two reprints the most. After that the book itself should do the job' (Verbraak 2008).²³

Spring 2018 brought some remarkable book news concerning Kluun. On 22 February Lebowski Publishers in Amsterdam published a press statement:

Raymond van de Klundert, in an earlier life as a writer known as 'Kluun', switches to *Lebowski Publishers*. After fifteen successful years and over 2,5 million copies sold with Podium it is, in the words of the writer 'time for new élan. After fifteen years with Podium I felt I needed to make a new step. And use a new name: my own.'

The switch to Lebowski indicates a new direction in Van de Klunderts authorship. To begin with he literally goes back to his roots: the Brabant

22 'Zo'n succes als *Komt een vrouw bij de dokter* zal nooit meer voorkomen. Dat verscheen in een boekenmarkt die nooit meer zal pieken als toen. Ik weet nog dat we 140.000 exemplaren van *Haantjes* destijds bescheiden vonden, maar nu mikken we eerst maar eens op 100.000 exemplaren. De markt is gewoon totaal veranderd. En we weten allemaal dat vrouwen de markt bepalen: die vallen misschien eerder voor ontroering, zoals in *Komt een vrouw bij de dokter*, dan voor de lach en de stomp van *DJ*.'

23 'Het kwam in elk geval niet door de marketing, wat sommige mensen beweren. Met goede marketing overleeft een boek hooguit de eerste twee drukken. Daarna moet het boek het toch echt zelf doen.'

of his early youth. Thus, it is the right moment to publish in future under the name that his parents gave him: Raymond van de Klundert. (Anon 2018)²⁴

This appears to be the final step away from the commercial project that 'Kluun' was (too).

The strategy applied by Kluun – that is, explicitly collecting economic capital in order to gain a position in the literary field – was noticed by Bourdieu in his later work (as quoted in the Introduction) as a more general recent strategy in the publishing world: 'Certain publishers new to the game may try to reconcile strategies that would be irreconcilable if the literary field were more autonomous: those geared toward a long-term investment in writers promising long and productive careers, and those geared toward more immediately profitable literary production over the short term. They are supported in this ambition by a type of modernized marketing based on the methodical use of the *allodoxia*' (Bourdieu 2008: 140). Kluun appears to be a Dutch example of this strategy that Bourdieu criticizes strongly in the texts he published in the last couple of years before his death.

As we saw earlier, the scholars Bax and Antonik represented two diametrically opposing positions regarding the current trends in the field of literature. The Kluun-case cannot be interpreted as the radical change Antonik describes regarding Witkowski ('a radical shift in how literature operates' (Antonik 2016: 190)). Kluun's intentions are evidently still orientated on recognition of the traditional literary field, and probably closer to the *doxa* than Bax appears to think.

At this point it is important to note that that literary field in question is not, as Bax (at least implicitly) seems to suggest, an eternally fixed phenomenon. On the contrary, one of its basic (though often underexposed) characteristics is its dynamicism. Therefore, one cannot simply say, 'Kluun has entered *the* Dutch literary field,' but rather it has to be considered as a mutual development, with changing positions on both sides. Actors in

24 'Raymond van de Klundert, in een vorig schrijvend leven bekend als Kluun, stapt over naar Lebowski Publishers. Na vijftien succesvolle jaren en tweeënhalve miljoen verkochte exemplaren bij uitgeverij Podium is het nu, zoals de auteur zegt, "tijd voor nieuw elan. Na vijftien jaar samenwerken met Podium voelde ik dat ik toe was aan een nieuwe stap. En een nieuwe naam. Die van mezelf."

De overstap markeert een nieuwe richting in Van de Klunderts schrijverschap: om te beginnen een letterlijke terugkeer naar zijn roots, het Brabant van zijn jeugd, en een uitgelezen moment om in de toekomst te publiceren onder de naam die zijn ouders hem gaven: Raymond van de Klundert.'

the Dutch literary field, such as publishers, academics and book reviewers consider Kluun more and more apt to be part of their field, which inspires the field to partly reshape itself at the same time.

Of course, no one can tell what the future has in store. Until his next novel is published, it will remain unclear what effect the drastic change – new publisher, new name – will have for the literary career of the writer formerly known as Kluun. One thing appears to be certain: dropping the name ‘Kluun’ means the end of the brand.

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