

involvement of non-Malays in the history of Malay literature. Malay literature, in Dewan Bahasa's view, is written by Malays (Raja Ali Haji's Bugis ancestors being neatly assimilated, of course). In the literary fields marked out by nationalism and the global economy, there is no trace of the involvement of Europeans like Roorda van Eysinga, nor of the Eurasian and Chinese readers and redactors of *Syair Sultan Abdul Muluk* in its early printed versions, nor even of Raja Salihah and the palace women who copied and crafted the manuscripts and gathered in the light of oil lamps to recite them to one another.

CHAPTER NINE

ONLINE READING PRACTICES AND READING PLEASURE IN A TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXT: THE RECEPTION OF COETZEE'S *DISGRACE* ON AMAZON SITES

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Introduction

The characteristics of literary critical activity differ from country to country and the process of meaning creation follows rules which testify to national or linguistic characteristics of the literary field. E-libraries give social analysts the means to observe this process through the analysis of consumers' discourse on novels. Furthermore, this multi-situated ethnography¹ is capable of producing a better understanding of the way the evaluation of reading pleasure participates in the local "global medium" within which it is taking place.

Based on the digital critical discourse of consumers on four different amazon reviews sites (amazon.ca, amazon.com, amazon.co.uk, amazon.fr) concerning J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, we plan to a) describe the characteristics of online consumers' discourse on fiction, b) analyse the terms of creation and function of the digital reading space and c) discuss the issues related to the transnational reception of an international best-seller.

Our interest in the discourse produced by reviewers is closely related to an emphasis placed on users' practices and makes sense within a framework of reception studies analysis. In our case, the space in which critical discourse is being produced is a digital one and its actors (subjects of enunciation) are readers. Meaning production is embedded in e-commerce promotional

Malaysia, 2003), which seeks to restore the voices of women from the supposedly monolithically patriarchal Malay past.

¹ George Marcus, "Ethnography In/Of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-situated Ethnography," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24 (1995): 95-117.

strategies, while at the same time readers (amazon reviewers) are subject to national and linguistic constraints.

The English-speaking worlds of book-reviewing share common practices, which are forged within a (more or less) common network: access to literary information in English, familiarity with long-established modalities of (both official and unofficial) recognition, common distribution channels, acquaintance with different authorial works written in a common language. Anglophone literary worlds² produce and enhance common frameworks of perception.

The analysis of French-speaking reviewers on amazon.fr site will demonstrate the impact of translated texts on the shaping of specific settings of reading pleasure. In a comparative perspective, the study of amazon.fr reviews of *Disgrace* is crucial, since it reveals processes of meaning making closely related to the use of the French language. Anglophone and francophone literary reception on the digital arena present two different versions of the making of an "ordinary"-i.e. not certified as professional-discourse on a book.

The Reception Framework of Analysis

Reception theory³, reader response criticism⁴, sociological accounts of reading activity in a historical perspective⁵ and some audience studies research⁶ have provided us with the tools to understand the process of meaning creation in literary/fictional reading.

Most often though, when we talk about the reception of fiction, our statements are based on the critical activity of professional critics serving printed large-scale media or addressing the readership of in-depth pervasive and sophisticated reviews published by academics. Fiction consumption neither limits itself to nor addresses this limited audience. Effective consumers make up the target-groups of the markets. In a reception framework of analysis, the optimization of reading practice is at stake, with ordinary consumers acting within a book-market.

² Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1982).

³ See Hans-Robert Jauss, *Pour une esthétique de la réception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978) and Wolfgang Iser, *L'acte de lecture. Théorie de l'effet esthétique* (Paris: Mardaga, 1985).

⁴ See Jane P. Tompkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism. From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

⁵ See Jacques Leenhardt and Pierre Josza, *Lire la lecture. Essai de sociologie de la lecture* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999).

⁶ Will Brooker and Deborah Jermyn, eds., *The Audience Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003).

Amazon reviewers are interested in optimizing the quality of reading time they invest and the amount of money they spend on books. The discourse of effective, non-expert readers on their own uses of books and their meanings mediates the commercial choice of readers looking for information on the book's worth. In the case of amazon customers' reviews sites, opinions on a particular book can be posted if sent to amazon assistants. This means that any person willing to express his/her own views on a read can do so by posting a text message following the reviews guidelines. Amazon assistants "filter" reviews and they post them within five to seven business days. Visitors to the site share in common the fact that at a certain point they visited the site. Among them, there might be people familiar with e-commerce. The content of reviews is a kind of raw material bearing critical issues raised by readers (who are not necessarily experts or professionals), an online discourse on reading effects, which is itself of relevance to sociologists, provided that the whole commercial setting of its enunciation is taken into account.

Online reviewers share the same interest and thus are presented on the web as (effective or potential) publics for fiction. Amazon.com customers are posting on the web narratives of their own reading experience, in an asynchronous communication within a commercial space, which provides information on the experience resulting from the use of promoted products. The supply (fiction book) is likely to generate a pleasurable experience, if chosen. Pluralism and feigned respect for readers' diversity become obvious by the numbers of often conflicting reviews posted. Two main characteristics of the reviews posted on the customers' pages are indicative of the link between reading experience and incitement to purchase the necessary supply: the rating of the book and degree of help provided by the review to other readers. Books as commodities perform here as pleasure generators. The number of stars each book gains is an expansion of the 19th century tourist industry rating of hotels.

The help provided by the reviews is a service operated by the reading public of amazon users. Here lies the assumption that web users and potential buyers are in a relation of solidarity with each other, offering mutual help to facilitate safe choices. The idea of the safe choice based upon personalized criteria and user-centered priorities enhances trust in the web activity, and thus to its host or owner.

Customers' reviews sites are a public forum where people can at the same time operate their private expertise of a work of fiction and, by way of the digital communication, compare and enlarge their own vision of a book. Furthermore, they can increase their knowledge of the history of literature, of the work of famous authors, or of fictional masterpieces, while they justify their motivation to buy a new book. The web reveals the social nature of the market, not only on its ability to generate a social link between people-so-called "world

culture”-but also the fact that the book’s market relation is always “embedded”⁷ in a public discourse which transforms the consumer’s activity into an equipment of potential (both online and offline) sociability. Along with non- or semi- commercial sites on fiction reading, online discourse on fiction and on the subsequent categorizations of fiction-reading itself, customers (readers reviewing books and posting their opinions) enhance their visions and thus acquire some tools which help them to multiply their ways of reading.⁸ Reviewers take to contributing to the service provided by the online bookstore; they are playing an active part in the friendly atmosphere of a space in which future purchasers foster their own choices among peers. This assertion has nothing to do with an apology for the market. The observation of literary reception on the web brings simply a confirmation of the limits of the “top-down” understanding of literary consumption as a product of the industrial organization, which “produces in the same time the product and the way it will be consumed,”⁹ the product and the consumer. It shows that actual word-of-mouth and orality might be at play in the shaping of a critical discourse on literary production.

On the front pages, “spotlight reviews” of the book include ratings varying from 5 to 2 stars; in this way the reader gets the impression that the novel is highly-debated, definitely worth-reading since it prompts so vivid an exchange. These front reviews, which follow the editorial ones, begin in the first year of publication and extend to the moment the visit on the site takes place.

Controversies expressed about the promoted book function in (at least) three ways. Firstly, they underlie promises of witty discussion among future readers (purchasers), placing them in a situation of expertise in fiction. Secondly, by feigning objectivity (resulting from these different often opposed impressions) they enhance the trust in the service provided by the site. The market space is situated anew: books are being sold there, but future purchasers are able to forge their own criteria of choice. Thirdly, the long-lasting interest in the book functions as an indicator of its potential interest and reactivates an old widespread notion of a “classic” of enduring literary value. All three functions enhance acquaintance with the service provided on the site, target a possible gratification of the site-visitor and stress the possibility for reading activity to operate in a social setting: critical discourse on the book is shared on the screen and is to be shared further by future readers in different group situations.

⁷Mark Granovetter, “Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 93 (1985): 481-510.

⁸Mary Léontsini and Jean-Marc Leveratto, “Internet et la construction du goût littéraire: le cas des critiqueslibres.com,” *Sociologie de l’Art/OpuS* 7 (2005): 63-89.

⁹Karl Marx, *Contribution à la critique de l’économie politique* (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1957), 147.

Reading group participants or moderators are of particular interest since their preferences or views on a book might have an impact on collective orders. Keeping in mind that Amazon remains a multi-national space with commercial needs, it is interesting to note that customers’ review sites and the impression of independence they convey, absorb individual tastes and differentiation. It is important to stress that positive and negative opinions on a book coexist giving the impression of an open-yet personalized-arena of criticism. This coexistence is liable to function (and apparently it does) as an incentive for consumption and is not necessarily in conflict with Amazon’s commercial prerogatives. One should not forget that book reading is a practice, which reveals both subjectivity and personal involvement. We might like or dislike books: the stake here is to sustain a consumerist activity, which might be beneficial and gratifying to sellers and readers as well.

The Choice of J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* and of Amazon Sites

Coetzee was awarded the Booker Prize in 1999 and became a Nobel laureate in 2003. Therefore, its international audience and fame justify the choice of this book. The choice of Amazon.com obeys the same logic. The commercially significant activity of amazon.com along with its international appeal place it in an ideal position for the study of consumers’ experiences and reactions to the purchase of books. On the opening page we are informed that “Amazon provides the best possible experience for online shopping” and the list of products and services sold and promoted via Amazon is extremely varied, transcending the already extended leisure domain.

In this chapter, we use examples from four different sites of amazon customers reviews: amazon.com, amazon.ca, amazon.co.uk and amazon.fr in order to compare their reading impressions of Coetzee’s *Disgrace*.¹⁰

The main characteristics of posted reviews on different amazon sites are as follows:

¹⁰ January 15, 2005 was the date of our last visit of amazon.com and amazon.ca customer reviews of Coetzee’s *Disgrace*. Our data are as follows: 1) amazon.com: 236 reviews posted from 1999 to 2005. There were 20 reviews in 1999, 90 in 2000, 47 in 2001, 25 in 2002, 24 in 2003, 26 in 2004, 3 in 2005. 2) amazon.ca: 177 reviews posted from 1999 to 2004 (no reviews were posted in 2004 and 2005). There were 23 reviews in 1999, 109 reviews in 2000, 47 reviews in 2001, 10 reviews in 2002, 1 review in 2003. May 15 2005 was the date of our last visit to amazon.co.uk and amazon.fr 3) amazon.co.uk: total: 53 reviews posted from 1999 to 2004. 14 reviews in 1999, 20 reviews in 2000, 8 reviews in 2001, 3 reviews in 2002, 7 reviews in 2003, 1 review in 2004. There were only three reviews on amazon.fr by the date of our last visit.

In the case of amazon.com and amazon.ca there are many cross-postings: the same reviews are often posted on both sites. Reviews are extensive (ranging from 240 to 600 words each), sometimes including the re-writing of the plot by the reviewers, commenting both on form and content. Issues related to the reading effect / pleasure (or its lack) are raised. Brief (80-100 words) commentaries focusing especially on the reading effect, or in other words on the suitability of the book to provide a pleasurable reading experience, make up the bulk of amazon.co.uk reviews. In order to avoid excessively lengthy citations of customers' reviews, we have opted to refer to one typical example in each category of analysis. Examples will be drawn from English-speaking sites regardless of national origin, since our purpose is to stress common characteristics. There is an enormous interest in emerging subjectivities apparent in several examples, but this kind of investigation, which requires further analysis of reviewers' social attributes does not fall within the scope of this paper.

Only three reviews of *Disgrace* are posted on amazon.fr.

Many of Amazon's reviewers use nicknames and often there is no further information provided on the site. Real name reviewers are not numerous, but even in these cases, the use of a "real name" in itself is not a sufficient indication of identity. We made an extensive internet search on different sites in order to obtain reviewers' emails and whereabouts, and we sent out 87 very brief and very elementary questionnaires, asking their age, sex, profession, educational level, nationality and city of residence. This very elementary information makes no claim of statistical accuracy and is used here to give us hints on these specific readers' characteristics and verify if evidence from longitudinal works on reading practices is related to the ones we would obtain. Sometimes, we managed to identify reviewers thanks to weblogs they were posting or through professional information available on the Internet.

We received 21 responses and information on another 7. Very often emails were returned since the users were unknown, which makes us think that reviewers who posted reviews on amazon in 1999 or 2000 had changed addresses or stopped using them. Our search concerns only amazon.com reviewers, since there is not enough evidence in amazon.co.uk and amazon.ca for an Internet search.

Our elementary conclusions (basic and without any pretension to support any sort of generalization, are as follows: out of 28 reviewers, only four presented themselves as female, all (both male and female reviewers) were college-educated, ages ranged from 20-66 and apart from the US, they lived in Portugal, South Africa, the Netherlands, UK, Australia, Brazil, Brunei and Scotland.

The major issues for English-speaking reviewers

After an exhaustive reading of all the reviews we found that most of the posted reviews contain comments on two major issues: a) the author and b) the text itself.

A. Issues related to the author: Situation of the reviewer within Coetzee's literary production

On all English-speaking sites (com., ca, co.uk) reviewers mention the degree of their acquaintance with the author's literary production. They consider various literary works by the same author as a universe mediated / re-symbolized by the same individual and their acquaintance with this very universe plays an important role in the process of review writing. Fictional texts by the same author are not considered as autonomous entities; there is supposed to be a link between them and this link is the author.

"I have read others by JM Coetzee and loved them-*Life and Times of Michael K* and the *Master of Petersburg*. If you don't know this author start reading him now! I read this with my book club and we have had such a great discussion over the book: comment by Sheila_ash, from Oxford England, Oct. 25, 2000, amazon.co.uk

Rating of Coetzee's works

Reviewers rate individual works within Coetzee's literary oeuvre. When it comes to suggesting texts written by a famous author, the rating of pieces (as a result of acquaintance with the whole body of work) is conveyed:

Disgrace is the third, and best, of Coetzee's novels that I've read. Of the others: *Age of Iron*, about an old woman dying of cancer, opposed to apartheid all her life, but never, until the incidents described in the book, experiencing the brutality at its core, becomes sermonic by the end; *The Master of Petersburg* reimagines Fyodor Dostoyevsky's life between the publication of *Crime and Punishment* and before he began writing *The Brothers Karamazov*, but loses much of its resonance unless you know Dostoyevsky's biography (though it's meaningless inconsistencies and liberties may distance those that have read Fyodor's work more extensively): comment by Scott Lefaive, Charlotte, North Carolina, USA, May 27, 2003, amazon.com.

