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What is This?
Distinction, intentions, and the consumption of fiction: Negotiating cultural legitimacy in a gay reading group

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Abstract
The relationship between the ‘legitimate’ (or highbrow) and the ‘popular’ (or lowbrow) in cultural consumption has been extensively researched and debated in relation to Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of ‘distinction’ and ‘cultural capital’ and Richard Peterson’s concept of ‘omnivorousness’. This paper contributes to that sociological tradition by carrying out qualitative discourse analysis of a gay reading group’s verbal responses to Joe Keenan’s comic novel, My Lucky Star (2006) – a strategy that is acknowledged to be controversial, given the discourse analytic critique of sociology. It is found that members of the reading group studied here exhibit aspects of distinction and omnivorous openness in their arguments over the novel’s merits (or lack thereof), and that perceptions of authorial intention – in particular, Keenan’s non-intention to write a ‘serious’ book – are deeply implicated in this evaluative discourse. Evidence is found not only for a high degree of alignment between the group’s discourse on the novel and written discourse on the same novel in the mass media, but also for the importance of a specifically gay variety of ‘subcultural capital’, to which some group members appeal in order to contest other members’ dismissal of the book as insufficiently ‘serious’ to be worthy of discussion.

Keywords
book clubs, cultural capital, discourse analysis, distinction, gay readers, gay writing, Joe Keenan, omnivores, reading groups, reception

Introduction

Distinction and omnivorosity

In his most celebrated work of quantitative sociology, Pierre Bourdieu (1986) argued that members of the late 20th-century French bourgeoisie (or ‘dominant class’) were...
divided according to their possession of two very different forms of capital. Intellectuals were culturally rich but economically poor, industrialists were culturally poor but economically rich, and members of the professions were rich both culturally and economically. According to Bourdieu, this led bourgeois consumers to favour goods whose position in the cultural field was homologous with their own class-fractional position, with intellectuals having a taste for the avant garde, industrialists having a taste for luxury, and members of the professions having a taste for established high culture. The idea that ‘whereas economic capital is expressed through consuming goods and activities of material scarcity, cultural capital is expressed through consuming via scarce aesthetic and interactional styles that are consecrated by cultural elites’ (Holt, 1997: 98) is intuitive, and following convention, I shall refer to it as the ‘distinction thesis’.

A key element of the distinction thesis in its classic form is the idea that ‘tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance (“sick-making”) of the tastes of others’ (Bourdieu, 1986: 56). For this reason, it is challenged by Richard Peterson’s finding ‘that a considerable fraction of the elite are not highbrow snobs, as predicted by Pierre Bourdieu and American sociologists dating back to Thorstein Veblen. Rather, they are quite eclectic in their tastes’ (Peterson interviewed in Santoro, 2008: 51). Peterson’s analysis of American survey data suggests homologous hierarchies of occupational groups and musical genres, with ‘higher cultural’ professionals and classical music at the top, and farm labourers and country music at the bottom (Peterson and Simkus, 1992). However, it also suggests a correlation between position in the occupational hierarchy and breadth of taste in musical genres, suggesting that ‘elite taste is no longer defined as an expressed appreciation of the high art forms (and a moral disdain or bemused tolerance for all other aesthetic expressions)’, but ‘as an appreciation of the aesthetics of every distinctive form along with an appreciation of the high arts’ (Peterson and Simkus, 1992: 169; emphasis in original). This idea is conventionally called the ‘omnivore thesis’. Both theses have received qualified support from subsequent quantitative studies. Bryony Bryson finds that highly educated people tend to be ‘tolerant’ of a wide range of genres of music, but that ‘the genres most disliked by tolerant people are those appreciated by people with the lowest levels of education’ (Bryson, 1996: 895). Gindo Tampubolon finds that ‘[h]igh status people actually form different groups and they dislike different items’ (2008: 258; emphasis in original), with ‘strong dislikes ... to be found across all groups of omnivores and univores’ (2008: 256), and Peterson himself suggests that ‘there may be several distinct patterns of omnivorous inclusion and exclusion’ (2005: 264). On the basis of Danish survey data of, Annick Prieur and colleagues argue that the symbols of elite taste have shifted, but the underlying practice of distinction remains: ‘Scoring high on adherence to [relatively] highbrow tastes goes together with the refusal of [relatively] lowbrow tastes, and vice versa’ (Prieur et al., 2008: 66). Alan Warde and colleagues find that, in the UK, ‘alongside a relative openness to popular culture evidenced by their volume of likes, omnivores disproportionately favoured legitimate items’ of the type ‘that would earlier have conferred cultural distinction in the sense implied by Bourdieu’ (Warde et al., 2008: 158) and, concomitantly, ‘are more dismissive of popular culture than of other types’ (2008: 159). Analysing data gathered in the same project, Tony Bennett and colleagues find the most omnivorous consumers to be highly educated people who may like some popular forms, but disproportionately prefer items of legitimate culture: thus, ‘it seems likely that their pluralism contains the elements of distinction, rather than being an
expression of pure tolerance’ (Bennett et al., 2009: 189). Much as Bourdieu would have predicted, Bennett et al. also found ‘that cultural enthusiasm, especially for legitimate culture, concentrates among those in occupations specifically concerned with education and culture,’ (cf. Bourdieu’s ‘intellectuals’), ‘while those in more instrumental and business-oriented professions’ (cf. Bourdieu’s ‘industrialists’) ‘are less fussied.’ (2009: 181) Intriguingly, the general principles of Bourdieu’s theory have proved applicable to other groups within society and their associated subcultures. While John Fiske (1992) appeared to assume that non-official forms of cultural capital would be intrinsically democratic, compensating those who lack cultural capital of the kind described by Bourdieu, subcultural capital has been shown to produce inequalities and exclusions of its own (indeed, if it did not, then it would be counter-intuitive to describe it as a form of capital). Katherine Sender, for example, argues that gay lifestyle magazines such as The Advocate have promoted a gay form of subcultural capital as a means of distinguishing their (which is to say, their advertisers’) ideal readers – ‘gays of the professional-managerial class’ – from a rejected outgroup of less affluent consumers (Sender, 2001: 99).

What is left out of the above picture is any real sense of the mechanisms by which distinction or omnivorosity might operate in actual acts of cultural consumption. Literary reception might be a particularly good test case, due to print culture’s evident potential to discriminate between groups. Survey-based studies in a range of national contexts consistently have found reading to be a powerfully segregated activity, giving the lie to fanciful claims for the universality of ‘great’ literature (e.g. Rose, 1992). Bennett and his colleagues in Australia find a strong relationship between a high level of education and legitimate tastes in literature: only one in five respondents with primary education, but three in four of those who had completed a tertiary education, owned copies of literary classics (Bennett et al., 1999), while members of the latter group were just over four times more likely to prefer classical authors than less educated respondents (Bennett et al., 1999). These scholars find class to play a role, too, with ‘the high literary genres [being] most clearly associated with professionals’ (Bennett et al., 1999: 163). In Hungary, Erzsébet Bukodi finds that ‘serious readers’ – that is, ‘readers of classical and modern novels, drama, poetry, etc’ (2007: 117) – ‘are a kind of cultural elite comprising high-status people coming from high-status family backgrounds’ (2007: 125). Working with less detailed survey data, Florencia Torche finds that in Chile, ‘a country where books have traditionally been associated with the cultural elite’, the reading of books (as opposed to magazines) ‘still appears to be a powerful vehicle to express, and perhaps maintain, status distinctions’ (Torche, 2007: 89). In the UK, Bennett et al. find that while magazine and newspaper reading is very widespread, book reading is relatively exclusive, and ‘[t]hose few interviewees who choose modern literature titles are ... graduates and professionals in “cultural” occupations of various kinds’ (2009: 100): that is, ‘intellectuals’ in the Bourdieusian sense.

Discourse, reception and sociology

The research reported here falls within the discourse analytic school of reception studies (see Alasuutari, 1999). In its close attention to what consumers are doing with language on a turn-by-turn basis when they talk about books, it has much in common with work (e.g. Eriksson, 2002a, 2002b) that applies elements of discursive psychology (see Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter and Wetherell 1987) to reception data. However, it attempts to
carry out such analysis in a manner compatible with sociological studies of cultural consumption, and this may be problematic both from the viewpoint of cultural sociology and from that of discursive psychology. While the above-cited sociologists view distinction and omnivorousness as competing theoretical explanations of general phenomena, this article investigates how they are accomplished in specific social interactions, which could be taken to undermine the reifications of a sociological approach. However, this article also employs the sociological concept of cultural capital (itself a reification) as a theoretical explanation for much that occurs in these interactions. While this is not unprecedented in reception studies drawing on discursive psychology (see for example, Hermes, 1995), it certainly runs counter to the spirit of discursive psychology, which, as Martyn Hammersley observes, ‘refus[es] to attribute to particular categories of actor distinctive, substantive psychosocial features – ones that are relatively stable across time and/or social context – as a basis for explaining their behaviour’ (Hammersley, 2003: 752).

This study thus attempts to straddle a methodological divide, acknowledging both a discursive critique of sociology and a sociological critique of discourse analysis. On the one hand, the standard sociological method for acquiring qualitative information – that is, the interview – produces highly ‘artificial’ data, and as David Silverman observes:

if categories are utilised in particular contexts rather than simply pouring out of ... people’s heads, [no] method we use ... [can] transform what interviewees say into anything other than a category used at a particular point in some interview. (Silverman, 2007: 51)

On the other hand, there is obvious justice in Bourdieu’s (1988) complaint that, in its attempt to understand discourse solely by reference to discourse, discourse analysis must fail to take account of the conditions of the production of discourse (which are not reducible to discourse alone).

I would therefore align this paper with reception researcher Martin Barker’s argument that ‘discourse work needs always to be conducted within an explicit recognition that talk of all kinds arises within the circuit of culture.’ (Barker 2008, p.167) Observation of real-world cultural practices is necessary if theoretical models of cultural process are to be anything more than speculations. But theoretical models of cultural process (in Barker’s case, the circuit of culture; in mine, distinction, omnivorousness, etc) would seem no less necessary if we are to make any useful sense of the real-world cultural practices we observe (including those practices that involve talk about cultural practices). And so, unless such models can be inductively derived from observation of individual cases (which I find unlikely), I would argue that a purely discourse analytic approach to cultural phenomena (including reception, talk about reception, and indeed talk more generally) cannot reasonably be treated as self-sufficient. Reception study and the sociology of culture can gain much from close analysis of what people say – but little from a New Criticism of the spoken word.

‘My gay culture is not shallow’: reading groups and cultural capital

Since Elizabeth Long’s (1986) pioneering work, reading groups (or book clubs) have been an object of study for both sociologists and reception researchers. They are a widespread phenomenon: Jenny Hartley (2002) estimates that there may be as many as 50,000
in the UK and perhaps 10 times that number in the USA. They produce naturally occurring reception data in the course of their ordinary functioning: discourse that can be recorded and transcribed but which does not need to be elicited. Moreover, they tend towards social homogeneity. Groups are dominated frequently by single occupations, particular age ranges, etc. By working with reading groups, one can observe many different formations and orientations within the middle class, almost as though one were dealing with naturally-occurring focus groups. In view of all these points, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded Discourse of Reading Groups project at the Open University has accumulated a wealth of data pertinent to the questions raised in this article: a total of 16 British reading groups were observed and recorded on one or (usually) two occasions, with recordings being transcribed and subjected to quantitative and qualitative analysis (see O’Halloran, forthcoming, 2011; Swann and Allington, 2009). Extensive analysis of this dataset has suggested that a reading group’s relationship to cultural legitimacy is reflected (or constructed) in its reception of specific works, and has given some idea of the formal features that reading groups may associate with more and less legitimate texts (Allington, forthcoming, 2011). However, there is at least as much to be gained from more intensive analyses of single transcripts, since these frequently hint at complexities lost in extensive approaches.

In this article, I shall focus on a London-based reading group whose membership consists of self-identified homosexual males of a range of national origins, not all of whom speak English as a first language. Meeting in a gay pub, this group might appear to be a straightforward assertion of gay identity: in their study of gay service environments, Craig Haslop and colleagues argue ‘that bars and pubs may be seen as both an expression of an individual’s identity, and of the subculture in which she/he is acculturated’ (Haslop et al., 1998: 325). Nonetheless, the group’s discourse renders such an approach problematic. When I first met the group members and asked them what the purpose of the group was, they told me it was to discuss ‘books of gay interest’. When I asked why this was, the immediate response I received was from a speaker (henceforth, S1) who stated that it was a reaction to the ‘anti-intellectualism’ of gay culture and to the problem that ‘it’s very rare to have an opportunity to talk in depth with other gay men’. Another speaker (henceforth, S7) agreed that this opportunity was ‘very rare’. Thus, while the group was presented as centrally concerned with gay culture – discussing ‘books of gay interest’ – it was also presented as a rejection of one particular aspect of gay culture: ‘anti-intellectualism’. Moreover, while the group was presented as an opportunity for gay sociality – ‘with other gay men’ – it was in the same breath presented as one distinguished from other such opportunities by something lacking in the latter: ‘talk in depth’. The theme of depth was picked up again in the course of the ensuing book discussion, following complaints of the book’s main character being ‘shallow’:\(^1\)

S5 you say. we’re not gonna qua-. I mean gay culture is shallow
S7 [(laughs)]
S? [(laughs)]
S2 it is. I agree [with you
S5 [it is
S3 well
S2 I think to [say that is a bit disingenuous really
This short exchange illustrates not only the difficulty, but also the rewards, of working with qualitative data. S2, S3, and S7’s contributions to the above may be explained to some extent by the fact that the group was being observed by an outsider whose sexuality had not been made clear. However, they also show the way in which speakers’ positions are nuanced and complicated through discussion, and the way in which these position-takings index wider debates. The idea of the shallowness of gay culture emerges in the form of a humorous quip from S5, but (as we have seen) it builds on a theme raised in a different connection by S1. S2 first agrees with and then distances himself from this idea, and S3 disputes the monolithically ‘shallow’ character of gay culture (with humorous support from S7, who had agreed earlier that it is rare for gay men to ‘talk in depth’ together) by associating shallowness with the gay and straight ‘club scene[s]’. These themes are, I would suggest, of wider than local relevance. Ethnographers have found gay men elsewhere to be critical of the commercialized aspects of gay culture and the gay ‘scene’, and of the importance attached therein to fashion and physical attractiveness (Kates, 2002; Kates and Belk, 2001): all characteristics that could be described as ‘shallow’, and that could also be associated with the mainstream of popular culture (hence, perhaps, S3’s reference to ‘the heterosexual club scene’). As I shall try to show, this group’s deprecation of ‘shallowness’ is implicated in its valorization of intellectual culture, which also appears to be implied by its use of positive terms such as ‘serious’, ‘sophisticated’, and ‘depth’.

This draws attention to a paradox. The interest of reading groups from the viewpoint of literary studies has often been construed in terms of the ‘ordinariness’ of the readers who take part, in contrast with academic readers (see for example, Procter, 2009; Swann and Allington, 2009). However, reading group membership marks a person out as being unusually cultured. It is not merely the case that the typical group’s practice of discussing a different book every month represents a rate of book reading greater than that claimed by the overwhelming majority of respondents to a recent British survey (Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion; www.data-archive.ac.uk), but that the books read by reading groups (see Hartley, 2002) very often include what we have already seen to be exclusive cultural goods: that is, classics and ‘serious’ contemporary fiction.

Table 1 presents a chronological list of works read by this particular reading group in 2007.

The third and fourth columns of this table present quantitative measures that may give an indication of cultural legitimacy in a UK context: the number of quality national UK newspapers running reviews of each first edition, as provided by the Nexis UK database and the number of items on each author indexed by the Modern Language Association International Bibliography up until 2007. Nexis UK does not index UK quality
Table 1. Chronological list of works read by the reading group in 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author (date of first publication)</th>
<th>UK quality national newspapers reviewing the first edition</th>
<th>MLA-listed items on the author by end 2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Charioteer</td>
<td>Mary Renault (1953)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diary of a Provincial Lesbian</td>
<td>V.G. Lee (2006)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bitter Eden</td>
<td>Tatamkhulu Afrika (2002)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Night Watch</td>
<td>Sarah Waters (2006)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confusion</td>
<td>Stefan Zweig (1927)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>393</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father of Frankenstein</td>
<td>Christopher Bram (1995)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The World of Normal Boys</td>
<td>K.M. Soehnlein (2000)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Cold Blood</td>
<td>Truman Capote (1966)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Brooklyn Follies</td>
<td>Paul Auster (2005)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Behaviour</td>
<td>Molly Keane (1981)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Absolute Beginners</td>
<td>Colin Mclnnes (1959)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Lucky Star</td>
<td>Joe Keenan (2006)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

newspapers prior to mid-1984, so a zero can only be given for books published after that date; it indexes four daily and four Sunday papers in this category, so the maximum score is eight. Neither measure is a direct index of legitimacy. However, reviewing by quality newspapers indicates that a novel’s appearance is regarded as a significant event by the most legitimate providers of cultural news, and copious academic commentary is perhaps the surest sign that an author or work has been canonized. For example, when Sarah Waters’s first novel, *Tipping the Velvet*, was first published in 1998, it seems to have been perceived as a ‘lesbian’ novel – that is, of largely subcultural interest, for it received no reviews of its own in the UK quality press. Eight years later, however, her fourth novel, *The Night Watch* (2006), very nearly garnered a full house of reviews in the UK quality press and was duly nominated for both the UK’s most prestigious literary prizes. Similarly, Zweig, Auster and Capote’s vast scores on the MLA bibliography reflect the fact that they are authors whose works one is likely to encounter on university syllabi: almost a definition of canonicity. This gives us an idea of the partial extent to which the group resembles those of Long’s original study in following ‘socially sanctioned sources of cultural authority’ (Long, 1986: 599): cultural legitimacy appears to have been only one factor involved in its choices of reading matter. It is clear that the group selected some works by authors around whom considerable legitimacy had accumulated (Zweig, Auster, Capote and Waters), some by authors around whom none had accumulated (Lee, Soehnlein and Mclnnes), and also a range of intermediate and ambiguous cases, some of whom (Renault in particular) combine ‘gay’ and ‘intellectual’ cachet in particularly interesting ways.

The ambiguous cases may be the most interesting. *Bitter Eden* and *My Lucky Star* seem statistically similar, for example, but as I will suggest in a brief comparison of reviews of the two, there is an important difference to be observed in their reception by the quality press, with the former alone being treated as serious literature and associated with works (also treated as serious) by Renault and others. The reading group also appeared
unanimous in its view that My Lucky Star is not serious literature, but was more conflicted in its responses, with some but not all members rejecting the book in the sort of visceral terms that the classic distinction thesis might predict. As we shall see, group members did not use the words ‘literary’ or ‘popular’, but constructed oppositions between, on the one hand, the ‘serious’, the ‘intelligent’, etc., and on the other, the ‘light’, the ‘superficial’, etc: oppositions that appear to be underpinned by enduring cultural hierarchies, and that were presented as alternatives between which authors could choose intentionally. However, as discussed above, group members were able to construct value for the book by reference to a body of gay cultural knowledge also apparently reproduced in the book itself.

‘If he had made it serious, it would have been drivel’: evaluation and intention in discourse on Joe Keenan’s My Lucky Star

The question of My Lucky Star’s cultural status became an issue early in the group’s discussion, as can be seen from the following exchange:

S6 I must admit I sort of thought it was like y’know eating candyfloss. except someone’s force feeding you [candyfloss they just kept stuffng it un- t-=
S1 [yeah there’s
S6 =till the end you [just sort of felt like=
S1 [*
S6 =“uh: [I have a mouth full of *”
S2 [I have a big sweet tooth I wasn’t bothered
S1 there’s kind of too much of it=
S6 =it was just [it was just too sweet and frothy and
S7 [yeah
S1 yeah
S6 frivolous and. it was fine for the first two pages I sort of. chuckled and then after that I just thought. “na:h”
S? yeah
S6 (laughs)
S2 you have a very low tolerance for sugar don’t you
Grp (laughter)
S6 I do. and this was this was just so: so light as to be: (laughs)
S3 [it does-
S2 [I found it delightful it is very very light it’s. light entertainment and. I really enjoyed uh. the series “Frasier” who he he was a screenwriter for that. ah
S? mn
S2 and uhm so I just
S7 “Frasier” seemed almost more intelligent that programme
S? yeah
S7 the the humour in it seemed more intelligent than than
In this extract, both S2 (who evaluates the book positively) and S6 (who evaluates it negatively) appear to agree on the categorization of *My Lucky Star* as ‘light entertainment’ – ‘frothy’ conveys the idea of lightness and insubstantiality, while ‘frivolous’, like the more metaphorical ‘sweet’ and ‘sugar’, implies a work that aims to please but lacks substance or value (think of the phrases ‘empty calories’ and ‘nutritional value’), and ‘candyfloss’ arguably suggests all of these ideas – which is perhaps the ideal for the field of large-scale production, in which the image of the ideal producer is not a social critic or experimental artist, but what Bourdieu calls an ‘entertaining technician’ (1993: 130). The grotesque image of being force-fed candyfloss – metaphorically extended with the notion of ‘low tolerance for sugar’ – is redolent of the distinction thesis and Bourdieu’s invocations of ‘visceral intolerance’ and ‘sick-making’ – also called to mind by a later quip from S3: ‘there’s bitchy lines and gags all the way through. and I just gagged on it’.

Even before S2 steps up to the book’s defence by calling it ‘delightful’, a range of evaluative positions is already implicit in the distance between S6’s visceral rejection and S1’s much milder criticism ‘there’s kind of too much of it’. S2’s invocation of the middlebrow sitcom *Frasier* can be argued to offer a compromise position in which the ‘lightness’ of *My Lucky Star* is dissociated not only from highbrow literature (with which not even its supporters in the group associate it), but also from lowbrow popular fiction (with which its detractors in the group associate it). Arguably, such a manoeuvre would confer a degree of relative legitimacy both on the book (since it shares a creator with *Frasier*) and on S2’s taste for it (since his liking for the one is presented as continuous with his liking for the other), and indeed this interpretation would seem to be confirmed by the terms in which the compromise is rejected: the sitcom seems ‘almost more intelligent’ to S7, the ‘almost’ promptly dropped.

Before we look at more evidence from the transcript, it will be helpful to consider some data originating beyond it. The quantitative measures in Table 1 suggest that *My Lucky Star* is not entirely without cultural legitimacy, particularly when we know that both the broadsheet reviews it garnered were positive. However, it is worth paying attention to the precise terms in which it was praised by *The Times* and the *Independent on Sunday* (respectively):

[Keenan’s] comedy is of a high order – he has been described as ‘a gay P.G. Wodehouse’. This is sophisticated, deliciously camp entertainment. (Saunders, 2006: 15)

Keenan’s best trick is to create a comedy that really is laugh-out loud funny, stuffing in witty lines at an indecent rate ... It is ingenious, unpredictable and wholly enjoyable, not least because of its cast. (Phelan, 2006: 29)

These can be contrasted with the terms in which Afrika’s *Bitter Eden* was praised by the same two newspapers (in the same order):

*Bitter Eden* proves to be well worth the wait, above all for its chilling account of conditions in the [German and Italian prisoner-of-war] camps. This is a nightmare vision in which life is defined not by geography ... but by deprivations and humiliations. (Arditti, 2002: 14)
Bitter Eden is ... a worthy colonial companion to such post-war classics as Mary Renault’s The Charioteer, and Rodney Garland’s The Heart in Exile ... melancholic novels dealing honestly with the contradictions, deceptions and attractions of male love. (Simpson, 2002: 15)

Thus the two books appear to be evaluated on quite different criteria. My Lucky Star is valued for its ‘sophisticated’ and ‘ingenious’ construction as an ‘enjoyable’ piece of ‘entertainment’, but Bitter Eden is valued for something else entirely, and something rather harder to grasp. If it is ‘chilling’ and ‘melancholic’, then it may be less enjoyable or entertaining than My Lucky Star, and yet seems to be more highly esteemed: it is ‘worth [a] wait’ of 50 years, and it is a ‘worthy’ companion to what are explicitly described as ‘classics’. These twin references to worth are telling. My Lucky Star is valued for its pleasant effect on the reader and the skills of the entertaining technician who constructed it to this end (‘Keenan’s best trick ... ingenious’), but Bitter Eden is valued for something intrinsic to it, whether that is its ‘dealing honestly’ with ambiguities or its ‘nightmare vision’ of sufferings in Second World War prisoner of war camps. Bitter Eden is, in short, praised as a work of serious literature, both in the sense that it involves a serious treatment of serious themes and in the sense that although it is a contemporary work, it ranks with the classics. The criteria by which the two books are evaluated are different, so that despite their differences, each can be deemed a successful example of the kind of thing that it is. Yet there is also a sense that one kind has more importance than the other, that one is to be taken more seriously. High culture has been defined as ‘artistic genres that are treated by critics as “serious”’ (DiMaggio and Mukhtar, 2004: 175), and this seems to apply to Afrika’s work but not to Keenan’s. This may be apparent even in the column inches allocated. The Independent on Sunday’s review of My Lucky Star is fewer than two-thirds the length of its review of Bitter Eden, while The Times’ review of Bitter Eden is nearly three and a half times longer than its review of My Lucky Star.

However, the above-quoted reviews do have certain points in common. One thing notable about all four is the extent to which they relate the two books to their authors. Even the very shortest manages to associate the author of My Lucky Star with the television show Frasier and to connect his writing on the one with his writing of the other. From the viewpoint of an academic generation brought up on reports of the author’s demise, this may seem most unscholarly, but in fact even the most insistent academic spokesperson for the interpretative power of the reader insists that ‘one cannot read ... independently ... of the assumption that one is dealing with marks or sounds produced by an intentional being’ (Fish, 1989: 99–100). Although the notion of authorial intention has been unfashionable in academic circles since the announcement of the ‘intentional fallacy’ (Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1946), I would suggest that a consideration of perceived intentions may be illuminating here. The importance of this in the evaluation of a work is highlighted by E.D. Hirsch (1967), who suggests both that a poem can be evaluated for whether it achieves what its author intended it to achieve, and that the author’s intention itself may be evaluated as worthwhile or not.

While it may be objected that perceived intentions are theoretically unworkable as a basis for evaluation, it is clear that they are very frequently made to work as such in practice, and not only with regard to works of fiction. This is, I would argue, because intentions are not the inaccessible mental states that they are often supposed to be. In recognizing
a thing as a collapsed soufflé, I recognize it as a failure because I recognize in it someone’s intention to make a dish the criteria for which have not been met. Through ignorance, I may misrecognize the intention — perhaps it was not meant to be a soufflé at all, but an omelette — but my ignorance in that case would not be ignorance in the first place of the creator’s mind. To distinguish a successful omelette from a failed soufflé requires a small amount of culinary knowledge (and thus cultural capital), but no psychological knowledge at all. My suggestion is that the readers analysed here evaluate books as intentional attempts at instances of particular conventional kinds, attempts that succeed or fail by the criteria appropriate to those kinds (knowledge of which is a form of cultural capital). In her qualitative study of viewers of the situation comedy, The Office (BBC, 2001–2003), Inger-Lise Bore (2009) suggests that the perception of comedic intention is important in appreciating this pseudo-documentary, and that at least some viewers recognize this intention from features possessed by the programme that are more typical of situation comedies than of documentaries. Perhaps ‘genre’ is then the best term for the kind of thing with which we are dealing – provided that ‘serious literature’ can be called a genre.

The following journalistic piece on a different gay writer certainly implies this much, identifying the literary and the popular as categories of work that a writer can ‘set out’ (that is, intend) to produce, with the clear implication that the non-literary is not necessarily the failed literary. However, at the same time it acknowledges (through opposition) the view that only literary intentions are worthwhile:

The normally ebullient Paul Burston greets me at his south London flat looking slightly irritated. He’s just read a patronising piece about his new novel, The Gay Divorcee, in a gay paper snootily announcing, ‘He’s no Alan Hollinghurst’. There can be few more annoying things than being criticised for not being something you hadn’t set out to be in the first place.

‘I like Alan Hollinghurst’s work, and Michael Arditti’s, and Neil Bartlett’s. But I think there should be a place for stuff that isn’t literary as well!’ he protests. (Feay, 2009: 22)

As well as highlighting the importance of intention, this suggests that the cultural categories within which authors may intend to produce works are fairly stable: it does not seem to be the case that one person’s serious literature is another person’s light entertainment. At the same time, it provides evidence of the stability of authors as cultural reference points: Michael Arditti, here provided by Burston as an example of a literary gay novelist, was the writer who reviewed Bitter Eden for The Times. However, the reading group discussion we have been looking at shows that there is still room for ambiguity and surprise.

The section of transcript examined above shows the reading group to exhibit considerable agreement as to the genre or conventional type of My Lucky Star. Its perceptions echo the novel’s press coverage, in which My Lucky Star is discussed primarily as a work of entertainment: even the journalist who reads social commentary into the novel implies, with his argument that ‘[w]hile Keenan, like Wodehouse, seeks only to amuse, a significant plot line in My Lucky Star hinges on a less than funny cultural reality’ (Cannon, 2005: 22; emphasis added), that this was unintended by the author.

S2 was the group’s most unequivocal advocate for My Lucky Star. I interviewed him at a later date and, after talking knowledgeably and at length about historical romances
The novels of George Eliot (an expression of very omnivorous taste, since the latter are highly legitimate, while the former belong to what may be the most stigmatized of contemporary genres), he brought up the matter of this work unprompted. Apparently forgetting that the meeting at which it had been discussed was one of those that I had attended, he summarized the book and discussion as follows:

S2 and uhm. and as I say. very amusing very funny. ahm. but no: it’s not Jane Austen (laughs)=
R =(laughs)
S2 but very well done and very well done from beginning to end. uh: and to me it’s the perfect. like summer novel if you went to the beach or something and you were laying out on the beach and. nothing too: too challenging but at the same time. sophisticated enough to really. tickle your funny bones. but everyone in the reading group. were going “oh: gosh y’know there’s. joke a minute blah blah blah” they were reacting very much as I had with. Paul Burston with his:. and I was like. “well I think you’re really. not taking the book [*], for what it is:”. that’s what they were=
R [mn
S2 =saying with me with Paul Burston’s “Shameless” uh=
R =mn

It has been argued that among high status omnivores, ‘[c]ultural capital is expressed as valuing eclecticism, where reflective judgement can be applied to many genres in different contexts’ (Bennett et al., 2009: 71), which would appear to be a good paraphrase of what is meant by ‘tak[ing] the book for what it is’ – a principle that S2 suggests he holds in common with the rest of the group. However, what this interview extract emphasizes is that the principle that one should be able to appreciate anything adequate to the intentions that it embodies is not straightforward in its application. At least with regard to this reading group, it appears to function as a ‘commonplace’ to be appealed to in arguments over the correct evaluation of particular works: but as Michael Billig shows, commonplaces facilitate contradiction no less than assent (Billig, 1996). S2 praises *My Lucky Star* because it is ‘very well done from beginning to end’: that is, the skilled production of an ‘entertaining technician’. However, while praising the book as ‘very amusing’ and ‘very funny’, he makes clear that it is ‘not Jane Austen’ (cf. ‘no Alan Hollinghurst’). Thus the idea that one should evaluate works of popular fiction according to their native criteria is compatible with the idea that they belong in a different sphere from literary fiction: no matter how ‘amusing’ or ‘funny’ a piece of ‘holiday reading’ is, it remains only holiday reading. It is not, then, that the group is unequivocally for or against popular fiction, but that an opposition between the popular and the literary is treated as a given in its arguments over specific works. This seems more complicated than the situation Long describes:

[D]uring the meeting I attended, the League of Women Voters group teased one member for having chosen *Shōgun* some months before. This response not only reaffirmed the group’s commitment to a traditional definition of serious reading, but could serve to discourage other members from challenging the group’s reading boundaries, whether with a book like *Shōgun*, or in some other direction. (Long, 1986: 601)
Without assuming (as Long appears to) that reading groups should challenge their own ‘reading boundaries’, I would like to argue that they do provide their members with an opportunity to negotiate the limits to acceptable taste: what Bennett et al. describe as ‘subtle boundaries beyond which it is not respectable to trespass’ (2009: 194). The question of boundaries becomes all the more loaded when, later in its discussion of My Lucky Star, this group discusses the former member who had recommended it: he is criticized for having selected this unsophisticated book after having (it is implied) snobbishly criticized other members for their unsophisticated recommendations. One such recommendation was the autobiography of the gay Hollywood actor, Rupert Everett, about which S2 says: ‘I can tell you I read it and it’s far more sophisticated than this’ (i.e. My Lucky Star). The discussion continues:

S3 but also “Good Behaviour”. now. okay (smile voice) I’m very defensive about it be[cause
S8 [(laughs)
S6 (laughs quietly)
S3 but how (high pitch) could he?
S7 and 8 (laugh)
S3 [had he read it?
S2 I mean that is. [that is just incred-ible.
S8 and the storyline is about as
S1 about a [lesbian
S8 [about as convincing as (laughing) [this one
S1 [yeah well absolutely but it’s. but
S8 [this one’s funny

The highly animated speech, laughter and simultaneous talk in this short extract reflect the emotional charge associated with this issue: at least one group member (S3) appears to suggest that he lost face when the former member criticized his recommendation. The cultural references are telling: at least in this representation of the former member’s speech, the celebrity gossip magazine Hello! appears to stand in for the acme of unsophistication in reading matter (note the finding, discussed above, that the reading of magazines has none of the exclusivity of book reading).

Such boundary work continues when the topic of Stella Duffy’s novel Parallel Lies (2005) is raised. Duffy had visited the group the previous year, and while group members comment on how ‘interesting’, ‘charming’, and ‘fantastic’ she had been in person, they also describe the novel itself as ‘dreadful’. S8 goes so far as to call it ‘drivel’, although he adds that he has heard that ‘her other books are much better’ (which S1 seconds), and S2 leans across to the researcher and quietly says ‘I enjoyed the book’. The conversation develops as follows:

S8 and the storyline is about as
S1 about a [lesbian
S8 [about as convincing as (laughing) [this one
S1 [yeah well absolutely but it’s. but
the thing is [that book is meant to be convincing this mean-=
Appeals to the intended genre of the two works (what they are ‘meant to be’) imply conditions for success and failure. Being unconvincing is considered one of the failings of *Parallel Lies* because even though, as S2, defending the novel, says, it ‘had humour in it’, it was not, as S2 admits, ‘essentially a comedy’. A significant proportion of the group had expressed a strong dislike for *My Lucky Star* by this point, and yet a consensus seems to arise that being unconvincing cannot be one of that book’s failings, since it is of a kind that would not have to be convincing to succeed. S6, who has been particularly scathing, eventually concedes that ‘the only thing in you could say for the author [is that] he doesn’t sort of say “this is a serious book”’.

What S6 refers to in his mention of what the author ‘sort of say[s]’ is not the contents of Joe Keenan’s mind at the time of writing but the novel’s generic signposting, although he certainly regards this signposting as deliberate, as in his subsequent suggestion that Keenan might ‘find it a little bit absurd’ that the group are talking about the book in the way that they are. S8 then develops the point made above: *My Lucky Star* would have been ‘drivel’ (i.e. a failure) if Keenan ‘had ... made it serious’. This was, S8 implies, the case with *Parallel Lies*, as we see from his repetition of the word ‘drivel’. Here, it seems plausible that ‘serious book’ (and perhaps ‘convincing’ book) contrasts not only with ‘comedy’, but with the more general category into which ‘comedy’ falls: popular fiction (note the words ‘frivolous’ and ‘light entertainment’ in the first extract quoted above), so that a ‘serious book’ means not so much a non-comedy as a work of ‘serious literature’, at which *Parallel Lies* is positioned (with some resistance from S2) as a failed attempt.

Soon afterwards, an interesting reorientation takes place. S1 responds to S6’s assertion that *My Lucky Star* is a book ‘you can’t actually ana- analyse in depth’ with the counter-assertion that ‘I think you can analyse it in depth it but maybe from different perspectives from what we’ve been coming at it’ and, with support from S2 and S3, turns to a dissection of the novel’s allusions to classic Hollywood movies. This leads first to discussion of the novel’s cover images, and then to a debate between S3, S2 and S5 as to which female Hollywood star one of the main characters ‘was’, with candidates such as Rosalind Russell and Thelma Ritter being considered. S6’s apparent bafflement by this turn of the discussion leads to his becoming the object of the joking question, ‘are you sure you’re gay?’, to which he responds ‘I just don’t do gay things’.

Steven Kates suggests that gay subcultural capital can be displayed in the form of knowledge of camp Hollywood icons such as Barbra Streisand and Liza Minnelli (Kates, 2002), and a book such as *My Lucky Star* can be argued to provide readers with an enjoyable opportunity to exercise and display such knowledge. Given the group’s evident investment in intellectual culture, it seems telling that it was the book’s obscure Hollywood references, rather than its explicitly sexual elements, that appeared to rehabilitate it as a ‘discussable’ text: S6 was the only group member to draw attention to the
book’s homoerotic content, and yet he was also the group member to evaluate the book in the most uncompromisingly negative terms.

Conclusion

For the readers studied here, cultural capital would appear to be expressed in such practices as recognizing the intentional kind to which a book belongs, acknowledging the relative value of different kinds, and evaluating a book in terms argued to be appropriate to its kind. Moreover, such cultural capital would appear to exist alongside a variety of subcultural capital that privileges the ability to recognize and respond to historical popular culture references that the majority of contemporary consumers would probably find obscure. Further studies, both quantitative and qualitative, would be necessary in order to determine the extent to which these findings can be generalized to other groups (both within and beyond the gay community).

Discourse analytic studies such as this one can accomplish several things that quantitative sociological approaches may find difficult. First, they can show how cultural consumption is embedded in social interaction and how abstractions such as cultural and subcultural capital become relevant to such interaction. Second, they enable researchers to explore the ways in which real individuals manage the contradictions inherent in phenomena identified by quantitative research: for example, an openness to high and low culture that contains a preference for the former, or the combining of cultural and subcultural investments in a single portfolio. However, and perhaps more importantly, they provide information on cultural practices without requiring participants to act as disinterested informants on those practices, instead observing them as they live out those practices in the company of their peers. Such naturally occurring data begins to give a sense of why cultural hierarchies matter on a subjective level: the sentiment of S3’s ‘but how could he?’ is unmistakeable.

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Note

1. Transcription conventions: a full stop signifies a pause of up to three seconds. Underlining indicates stress, a colon indicates that a phoneme was sounded for a greater than usual length of time, parentheses enclose descriptive comments, square brackets are used to indicate the beginnings of overlap between different speakers’ utterances, hyphens are placed at the end of incomplete words, asterisks represent incomprehensible syllables. Where equals signs occur at the end of a line spoken by one speaker and at the beginning of one spoken by another, they indicate that there was no perceptible pause between the two turns, and where they occur at the end and beginning of two lines spoken by the same speaker, they indicate that he did not break off speaking. All speakers are identified with the letter S, except for the researcher, R. Question and quotation marks are used as usual in written English.
References


Biographical note

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