

Discussing Classicalness: Online Reviews of Plato's Allegory of the Cave and the Discourses around the "Classic"

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Abstract : In the context of the canon debate, assumptions regarding the place, value, and impact of classical texts have come under increased scrutiny. Factors like the distance of time, the depreciation of tradition, or the increased cultural omnivorousness and eclecticism have allegedly played a part in destabilizing classics' authority. However, despite all these developments, classics' position and influence is strong both in contemporary institutions and among readers' preferences. Within this background of conflicted narratives, the study maps the varied discourses, value grammars, and justifications that lay cultural consumers employ to discuss those texts which have come to be the most consecrated and valuable cultural objects. The study centers on reviews posted on Goodreads. These online reviews offer unique access to unsolicited reception data produced by lay readers themselves, thus providing a clearer picture of lay cultural consumption and lay theories about classics. Moreover, the approach taken relies on the micro-practices of evaluation: the study investigates the evaluation of a specific cultural object, namely Plato's allegory of the Cave, and treats it as an exemplary case to identify interpretive repertoires and valuation grammars about classical texts in general. The analysis uncovers a wide range of discourses used to construct the concept of the "classical text". At first sight, lay reviewers seem to adopt interpretive repertoires that highlight qualities such as universality, timelessness, canonicity, cultural impact, and difficulty. These repertoires seem in principle to follow generalized and institutionalized discourses about classical texts, as these are established and circulated by institutions and cultural brokers like schools, academics, critics, etc. However, the study also uncovers important variations of these discourses. Lay readers tend to (re)negotiate the meanings/connotations of the above qualities and also structure their discourses by "modalities" such as necessity or surprise. These variations in interpretive repertoires are important in cultural sociology's attempt to better grasp the principles informing the grammars of valuation that lay cultural consumers employ and to understand the kinds of impact that consecrated cultural objects have on people's lives.

Keywords : classics, interpretive repertoires around classicalness, institutionalized discourses, lay readers, online reviews/criticism

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