The Book Review as "Performance"

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Abstract: The growth of the Internet presents challenges to knowledge transfer; such knowledge is formed contextually and dialogically, a negotiated discursive construct that is created between people. The editorial makes a case for book reviews and review essays which are auto-ethnographic, "performative" and critical. The shift to a more dialogic exploration of emergent knowledge through the book review as social discourse is discussed. The essence of qualitative research itself is explored as the bedrock of book reviews. Reviews are considered as polyvocal attempts at interfacing with cultural/relational/linguistic accounts of the real. A narrative approach to reporting on reviewed books is encouraged, permitting authors to reveal themselves in the relationships presented through their writing. A case is made that a phenomenological approach to writing reviews would be more interested in the person who writes than in the act of writing itself.

It is through the creative representations of the reviewed book that reviewers can fashion their own individual Gestalt or worldview woven from the writing under review. The report itself mediates between researcher/writer and reviewer/reader. Such an approach opens up opportunities to write book reviews "performatively". Finally, reviewers are encouraged to create both a dialogue with the author under consideration as well as with their reader.

> "*Hi Günter, Here is the review back to you.*
>
> *It was a pleasure to do; like reading a nice long letter from a friend whom you haven't seen for a while. –Kip*".

1. Curtain Up

Like an audience sitting in a darkened theatre, disbelief suspended and charged with anticipation, I await the arrival of *FQS* book reviews for editing/reviewing. Because of my interest in the possibilities for qualitative research as "performance", my expectation is, ultimately, to be "entertained" (engaged as an audience member) by all aspects of qualitative endeavour, including book reviews. I remind myself that LAW and URRY (2004, p.400) champion "a fluid and decentred social science for knowing the world allegorically, indirectly, perhaps pictorially, sensuously, poetically …" and that DENZIN (2001, p.43) seeks "an interpretive social science that is simultaneously auto-ethnographic, vulnerable, performative and critical." I join this chorus of liberation. [1]

As new possibilities for information retrieval open up, the shift from a monologic to a more dialogic consideration of explorations of the knowledge base is taking place. Knowledge is no longer a collection of resources organised according to a classification scheme. We

occupy "a world that enacts itself to produce unpredictable and non-linear flows and more mobile subjectivities" (LAW & URRY 2004, p.399). A book review is, or at least should be, dialogic. A book's author speaks to her/his audience (in these cases, the reviewers); the book's reviewer speaks to us, her/his readers. This is a circle, a conversation whispered down a path, a sharing chain. Social constructionism, as described by Kenneth GERGEN (1985), maintains that knowledge, scientific or otherwise, is not obtained by objective means but is constructed through social discourse. No single point of view is more valid than another, because all points of view are embedded in a social context that gives them meaning. "Such a view does not obliterate empirical science; it simply removes its privilege of claiming truth beyond community" (GERGEN 1997, unpag.). [2]

2. What Is the Essence of Qualitative Research?

I am reminded of the essence of qualitative research each time I read a new book review. In qualitative research, the tyranny of numbers is abandoned for the enigma of words. It is often seen as rooted in a non-tangible domain, fundamentally experiential and intuitive. Qualitative work is in constant, dynamic flux, but *moving toward some end-point in an evolutionary way.* There are efforts by the mind to concretise meaning and the qualitative dimension has an integrative function for the researcher. Unity provides context and meaning and it is toward such unity that the researcher is striving. Qualitative efforts make use of that part of the person concerned with meaning, truth, purpose or reality—the ultimate significance of things. Not mere exercises in truth or falsehood, however, these investigations are polyvocal attempts at interfacing with cultural/relational/linguistic accounts of the real. They are, therefore, interpretations and not truths in the positivistic sense. The potential of intuition is ultimately a great advantage to this very process. [3]

One of the virtues of qualitative research is its inclusionary nature and ability to give research participants a voice, both through the research process itself (for example, through a wide range of qualitative social science practices that include participatory action research, in-depth interviewing, ethnographic studies, visual anthropology, biographic narrative studies and so forth) and in reports, documents and presentations (and these days, this is widening to include drama, dance, poetry, art, metaphor, evocative forms of writing, the Internet and other new media, film, photographs, etc.). The importance of participatory research and new methods of dissemination cannot be overemphasised, particularly when dealing with disadvantaged and/or unheard voices. Their stories (and, indeed, our own) are central to qualitative pursuits in a post-modern age. Adopting a narrative (listening and responding to told stories), rather than an empirical, mode of inquiry allows investigators to get closer to the phenomena studied in several ways: first, the narrative provides access to the specific rather than the abstract; secondly, narratives allow experience to unfold in a temporal way; thirdly,

everyday language and its nuances are encouraged; finally, narrative permits dynamics to reveal themselves in the actions and relationships presented. [4]

3. Emergent Knowledge

French educator Pierre LÉVY (1997) believes that profound changes are occurring in the way we acquire knowledge and supports the potential collective intelligence of human groups through emerging spaces of knowledge that are continuous, evolving and non-linear. LÉVY (2003) states that since the end of the 19th Century the cinema has given us a kinetic medium for representation. In fact, "we think by manipulating mental models which, most of the time, take the form of images. This does not mean the images resemble visible reality, they are more of a dynamic map-making" (LÉVY 2003, p.4). Within this kinetic world, "the social sciences need to re-imagine themselves, their methods and, indeed, their 'worlds' if they are to work productively in the 21st Century" (LAW & URRY 2004, p.390). [5]

The exponential growth of the Internet presents challenges to the methodological-philosophical foundations of knowledge. At the very heart of this matter is knowledge transfer. Science consists of many knowledge-generating activities, each with strengths and weaknesses (HOSHMAND & POLKINGHORNE 1992). Martin HEIDEGGER's philosophy of science recognised science as a cultural practice; he saw the human sciences as a double hermeneutic—as interpretations of interpretations. It is the naturally inquisitive nature of humans to seek knowledge that compels us to search for our own answers and, by doing so, ironically, enter into the dialogical. Thus, knowledge is formed contextually and dialogically. Knowledge is a negotiated discursive construct that is created between people. [6]

4. The Author/Reviewer/Reader as Companions

When considering reviewed books/book reviews, we find much revealed in the very style and storyline:

> "Alphonso Lingus, discussing 'exposure through presentation', says 'to enter into a conversation with another is … to throw open the gates of one's own positions; to expose oneself to the other, the outsider; and to lay oneself open to surprises, contestation, and inculpation….' If we follow Lingus' argument, it is through our surprise and questioning of the style taken by the authors that we find the missing person in the tale" (RAPPORT, 2004, p.40). [7]

The issue of "personhood" is central to the phenomenological school of philosophy, which is interested more in *the person* who writes than in the act of writing itself. In the words of MERLEAU-PONTY (cited in RAPPORT 2004, p.41): "Perception is not a science of the world … it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them". [8]

Thus, our considerations, through embodied perception, encourage us to walk around the edges of the review and the reviewed, to see beyond factuality to the humanism hidden on the other side. By extending our gaze beyond the usual, to new technologies and modes of presentation such as web publishing, we open new doors to understandings and resources. It is through the creative representations of the "*told story*" that book reviewers fashion their own individual Gestalt or worldview woven from the facts and accounts of what they have to say about the "who, what, when and where" of the writing under review. The interpretive presentations of this "*told story*," or thematic ordering of the narration, involves the construction of the reviewer's system of knowledge, *their interpretations* from their own lives and *their classifications* of experiences—MANNHEIM's (1936) "irreducible residue" of knowledge seeking. This personal system of knowledge is often more easily made accessible in review essays. Equally, it is also represented in more standardised reviews, if more subtly so. It is in the latter where what is left unsaid is often as powerful as what is said. [9]

SANDELOWSKI and BAROSSO (2002, p1), in fact, argue for a "reconceptualization of the research report [and thus, the research report review] as a dynamic vehicle that mediates between researcher/writer and reviewer/reader, rather than as a factual account of events after the fact". Such an approach resists the dominance of the author or reviewer, recognizing that work is incomplete without readers' responses. It is through such an expansive and inclusive attitude, in contrast to narrower approaches to book reviews, that possibilities open up to cross (or at least ignore) conservative and traditional boundaries and begin to write book reviews "performatively". [10]

5. What of "Criticism"—Dialogue or Debate?

"In dialogue, participants speak as unique individuals about their own beliefs and experiences, reveal their uncertainties as well as certainties, and try to understand one another" (BECKER, CHASIN, CHASIN, HERZIG & ROTH, 2003, p.184). BECKER et al. distinguish dialogue from debate. They explain that, in dialogue, participants are encouraged to question the dominant discourse, explore options for problem definition and resolution, and discover inadequacies in language and concepts used. In debate, however, the atmosphere is threatening, attacks are permitted, refuting the data of others and exposing faulty logic in argument pervades, statements are predictable and offer little new information, and success often only requires simple impassioned statements. [11]

I would encourage reviewers to take the approach of a dialogue with the author under consideration as well as with their readership and back away from the debating, argumentative, vitriolic and accusatory tone that often permeates reviews which champion "independent critical judgments". Much of this criticism too often takes a dismissive line of

attack which could be avoided without altering concepts or loosing its craft by taking a more communicative position—by the reviewer, with the work's author and, ultimately, with the reader. In fact, a dialogic attitude in building a case would more clearly highlight the integrity of the reviewer's creative writing style as well as her/his thinking. At the end of the day, the reviewer "acts" as an interpretive "performer" between the "script" (the work under review) and the "audience" (the reader). [12]

Writing a book review is, for many, a first step in joining a community of scholars (e.g., see my first crack at a review in *FQS*, JONES 2000). Often, in some of these early attempts at neophyte "criticism", the reader finds her/himself on a battle field, a war raging. A confrontational stance with a book's author, however, does little towards achieving the stated goal. An argumentative tone often makes it difficult for the reader to arrive at consensus with the reviewer when an unrelenting, dogmatic style of attack/presentation is used. Better would be a sense that the reviewer is inviting the reader to join her/him on a journey, attempting to draw the reader in by establishing common ground and exploring the book together. When the reviewer stops arguing and starts writing, the possibility is created for the reviewer to show the most integrity and imagination. In such efforts, reviewers become willing to reveal their own vulnerability and, therefore, engage in dialogue with the readership on a personal plane. By acknowledging more of her/his uncertainties as well as certainties, the reviewer stands a better chance of reaching others at the level of mutual understanding and shared experiences. [13]

6. Conclusions

What needs to be recognized and acknowledged is that beyond the mere text of the book review resides the promise of personal revelation, an intimacy that is shared by the reviewer with the reader. Recoiling from this shared understanding negates the potential for the cathartic, audience-like experience and the possibilities of a truly reflective knowing of other beings through writing. Within the reader/audience's interaction with the review, an opportunity arises for meaningful communication through images conjured up in a kind of theatrical, magical dialogue. Emphasis is on shared cultural and societal resources or the "habitus—our second nature, the mass of conventions, beliefs and attitudes which each member of a society shares with every other member" (SCHEFF 1997, p.219). It is in these moments of collective, extended reality that we connect to what it means to be human and, therefore, reach a higher plane of mutual understanding and a blurring of individual differences. Ultimately, book reviews contribute to the development of shared meanings and reciprocal appreciation—the beginnings of dialogue, not an ending point. [14]

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