

## READING MIXED RECEPTION: THE CASE OF *THE SATANIC VERSES*

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### ABSTRACT

Literary studies increasingly investigate texts by drawing on broader, cultural studies approaches. In this article, it is argued that such approaches may be enriched by combining analysis of mechanisms at work in individual acts of interpretation with ethnographic description of readerships and social dimensions of the circulation or reception of a text. The controversy surrounding Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* is re-examined in order to illustrate how social conflicts over meaning may be illuminated, where they arise as the result of divergent responses made by different cultural groups within a multicultural society, or by different readerships in an increasingly globalised media environment. While obviously less controversial in other cases than *The Satanic Verses*, it is suggested that corresponding issues arise in the case of other novels, films, exhibitions or cultural artefacts.

### KEY WORDS

Audience ethnography, interpretation, interpretive communities, meaning, multicultural societies, readerships, reception, Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*.

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## RESUMEN

Cada vez más los estudios literarios investigan textos usando abordajes más amplios de estudios culturales. En este artículo argumentamos que esos abordajes pueden ser enriquecidos combinando el análisis de mecanismos presentes en actos interpretativos individuales con las descripciones etnográficas de los lectores y las dimensiones sociales de la circulación y recepción del texto. La polémica alrededor de *Los Versos Satánicos* de Salman Rushdie es re-examinada para ilustrar como pueden ser elucidados los conflictos sociales sobre el significado que surgen como resultados de respuestas divergentes hechas por grupos culturales diferentes en una sociedad multicultural, o por diversas prácticas de lectura en un contexto de medios de comunicación cada vez más globalizados. Sugerimos que esos elementos aparecen también en casos menos controversos que *Los Versos Satánicos*, como otros romances, filmes, exposiciones y prácticas culturales.

## PALABRAS CLAVE

Etnografía de la audiencia, interpretación, comunidades interpretativas, significado, sociedades multiculturales, lectores, recepción, Salman Rushdie, *Los Versos Satánicos*.

## RÉSUMÉ

Les études littéraires se servent de plus en plus des approches plus larges établies par les études culturelles. Dans cet article, on propose que de telles approches peuvent être enrichies par l'association de l'analyse des mécanismes qui fonctionnent dans les actes individuels d'interprétation avec les descriptions ethnographiques des lecteurs et les dimensions sociales de la circulation ou de la réception d'un texte. On réexamine les controverses apparues avec *Les Versets Sataniques* de Salman Rushdie pour illustrer comment les conflits sociaux sur la signification peuvent être éclairés, pour illustrer aussi où ces conflits apparaissent comme le résultat de réponses diverses données par différents groupes culturels dans une société multiculturelle ou par différents groupes de lecteurs dans un contexte médiatique de plus en plus globalisé. Bien que d'autres romans, films, exhibitions et objets culturels soient moins controversés que le cas de *Les Versets Sataniques*, on suggère que des questions comparables y apparaissent.

## MOTS-CLÉ

Ethnographie de l'audience, interprétation, communautés interprétatives, sens, sociétés multiculturelles, lecteurs, réception, Salman Rushdie, *Les Versets Sataniques*.

## INTRODUCTION

In this article, we highlight issues about meaning in the public sphere raised in a perhaps uniquely energised and cautionary way by the cir-

ulation of *The Satanic Verses*<sup>1</sup>. Especially pronounced in the controversy surrounding that novel are questions about how we understand divergent responses to texts made by different cultural groups within a multicultural society, as well as by different readerships in an increasingly globalised media environment.

Our interest is as much in the general issues as in the so-called 'Rushdie controversy' itself. While obviously less controversial in many other cases than *The Satanic Verses*, corresponding questions may be asked about numerous other novels, films, exhibitions or cultural artefacts. There is also an educational dimension. If issues raised by such 'mixed reception' are considered in the context of a trend away from literary study, traditionally conceived, into broader 'cultural studies' treatments of literary works, then the reception history of *The Satanic Verses* offers an exemplary case study. Investigating issues of meaning, circulation, and value of the kind we discuss below, we suggest, is essential if literary works are to be usefully viewed through the prism of a cultural studies methodology.

#### LITERARY WORKS AS SOCIAL PRACTICE

One aspect of thinking about literary works from a 'cultural studies' perspective, rather than a traditionally literary one, involves seeing them as a kind of 'social practice' rather than as static, formal compositions. To view a work of literature as a social practice means taking into account at least two related processes. The first process is one by means of which the writer transforms the social discourses of her or his place and time into an aesthetic discourse (Greenblatt, 1989). The second process involves a corresponding (but not identical or reciprocal) process by means of which the reader produces her or his own representation of the text, and carries that representation over into various social practices of her or his own social context.

Both processes are highly interesting. But it is more directly the second we are concerned with in this article. Our interest follows from

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<sup>1</sup> A different, slightly longer version of this article, which also discusses pedagogic issues raised during a postgraduate course jointly taught by the authors at University of Sao Paulo, Brazil in June 1998, is to be published as a short monograph by USP/FILCH Publications (Sao Paulo, Brazil, 2001). Much of the relevant material regarding the reception of *The Satanic Verses* – especially concerning the fatwa imposed by Ayatollah Khomeini in February 1989 – can be found in Appignanesi & Maitland, 1990.

a stipulation that must be made regarding this second process: that, in reworking the text for a given reception context, the reader inevitably assumes her or his own (at least partial) agency in the production of the text's meaning. The strength or weakness of connections between the reader's inferred meanings and the text's form (which in some sense 'prompts' or 'precipitates' the reader's interpretation) in important ways affects the social effects or influence the text is likely to have.

Noting that a text's meaning involves a complex division of communicative labour is uncontroversial. That is a commonplace of a range of reception theories. But 'social practice' implications of the division of communicative labour, especially the linkage between what are usually thought of as two different classes of phenomena, textual meanings and textual effects, are less commonly discussed. *The Satanic Verses*, we suggest, offers an exemplary case study in the sense that the novel's varied and contradictory reception illustrates a need to tackle issues of chains of agency or causation in a text's circulation: the contributing roles of what might be called, in an established shorthand, intention, form, meaning, effect and use.

#### READING FOR MEANING

On the first page of *Interpretation as Pragmatics* (1999), Jean-Jacques Lecercle reminds readers that the word 'representation' (in this respect like 'interpretation', 'reading', and even 'analysis') has both a practice and also a result, or product, sense. Arguably in literary and cultural studies in the 1990s, however, less interest was typically shown in investigating the mechanisms of representation and interpretation than in what you can say, within a given cultural argument, by advancing a particular 'product' interpretation of a discourse.

As regards explaining the mechanisms by which meanings are produced, three major traditions in cultural analysis can be distinguished. Significant differences –as well as uneasy historical relations– exist between them, especially in terms of the notions of subjectivity and cognition they assume. To clarify the reception questions we feel are important, we need first to establish that certain key issues have been sidelined in the history.

What we are calling three traditions might be described as follows:

One tradition is associated with Anglo-American linguistics (especially pragmatics), and is underpinned by analytic and so-called 'ordi-

nary language' traditions in the philosophy of language. In the everyday practice of interpretation, work in this framework takes place in linguistic stylistics and in discourse analysis, as well as in psychological work on discourse comprehension.

A second tradition –what might be called a 'subject positioning' tradition– is associated with continental, especially post-structuralist, theory (significantly extended and inflected in the United States). Eminent among frameworks for interpretation in this tradition is Michel Pecheux's Althusserian account of discourse meaning and interpellation developed in the 1970s (Pecheux, 1982). Other, in some respects cognate, paradigms include Lacanian understandings of meaning, as well as other, more general derivations from Saussure, often via Barthes.

The third tradition involves an emphasis, widely associated with writing by the British cultural theorist Stuart Hall since the 1970s, on what is conceived as a 'circulation' of meaning and value (Hall, 1973). This tradition describes a circuit of transformative processes which occurs between four elements: the social content (or referents) of a discourse; the discursive representation (or encoding) of that cultural content; later processes of decoding; and the articulation of the decoding in social action. Each of these processes, Hall shows, is conditioned by specific forms of technology and institutions, as well as by other social pressures. Hall's own main interest has been in the non-linear and asymmetrical, but nevertheless determinate, nature of these processes. At the same time, his accounts have inspired other trends in more recent hermeneutic and ethnographic writing (often combining Hall's arguments with readings of Pierre Bourdieu and/or Clifford Geertz, as in Morley, 1992)<sup>2</sup>.

It is worth recalling these overlapping traditions, even as schematically as this, because each tends to create a specific agenda for interpretive studies. In *Interpretation as Pragmatics*, for example a Lecercle draws attention primarily to the first two traditions. He argues that, as a result of developments since the 1980s, the two broad approaches

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<sup>2</sup> The widely discussed, original paper is, Stuart Hall (1973). Reprints (sometimes edited and considerably shortened) are available in a number of collections, including Hall et al., 1981. Later variants on Hall's triad of 'dominant', 'negotiated', and 'oppositional' codes –with each new formulation offering a slightly different theoretical shading– include 'preferred' and 'resistant' as regards positioning, and 'readings' and 'readers' for 'codes'. For more recent discussion, see Hall, 1997. For work reflecting a combined influence of Hall, Bourdieu and Geertz, David Morley's collection of essays, *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies* (Morley, 1992).

have become more accessible to each other, and are partly reconciled in recent work such as Judith Butler's writing on the 'politics of the performative' (Butler, 1997)<sup>3</sup>. What is important here, however, is less the intellectual affiliation of contemporary positions than a more general observation: that less concern is now shown directly with interpretation as a theoretical issue.

Across a range of fields or sub-fields, textually-deterministic views, interested in the conventional meanings of linguistic (and other representational) forms, or in the characterisation (and also implicitly prediction) of subject positions –places constructed for an imaginary reader– have increasingly given way to kinds of audience ethnography. When theoretical issues about meaning-production are now raised, they are formulated as often in terms of audience as they are in terms of meaning or interpretation. This re-focusing is one consequence of a theoretical revisionism that nurtured the so-called New Audience Studies in media and cultural studies of the 1980s (for a comprehensive collection of papers, see, Hay, Grossberg and Wartella, 1996). By now the paradigm is so established that it is easy to miss implications of the changing terminology and conceptualization.

A corresponding shift has occurred as regards frameworks such as Pecheux's reworking of Althusserian interpellation, referred to above. Pecheux's work articulates a set of concepts, including 'transverse-discourse' (Pecheux, 1982, pp. 110-29) which offered cultural criticism of the 1970s and 1980s a powerful model of how social frameworks of belief surface in discourse. In more recent, reception-led debates, by contrast, discussion of social frames of reference in discourse is more likely to take the form of notions such as variable 'access to social codes'. 'Social codes' are abstract meaning-relations within a social semi-otic system; discussion of 'access' to such codes has nothing to offer as regards how such meaning-relations are selected from or expressed. Talking 'access' to such codes rather than, for instance, about how they

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<sup>3</sup> See Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (Butler, 1997). Butler's work develops insights about the 'force', as opposed to the content, of utterances first developed by philosophers such as John Austin and John Searle. The basic distinction is between two aspects of an utterance's meaning: its force as a social action and its characterisation of a state of affairs that is potentially either true or false (hence established theoretical interest in linguistics in what is called 'truth-conditional' semantics). Butler looks at socially contested utterances in terms of the acts they perform, rather than the 'content' they express. In doing so, she exposes a number of unresolved issues concerning free speech and censorship.

are activated or used, neglects issues of agency that are a precondition of any specific act of interpretation taking place.

These shifts share a common factor: they allow a retreat from the question of how interpretation takes place for any given reader. Instead, much contemporary literary and cultural analysis views social regularities in interpretation as agencies in themselves, rather than as an accumulation of many local, individual acts. Faced with the problem of how codes are worked in any given practice of interpretation, one common tendency has been to describe differences between the *bearers* of bodies of cultural assumptions –to describe determinants rather than mechanisms. The range of social and situational variables involved in audience demographics has been extended from race, class and gender into ever-thicker descriptions of social and situational variables that can be matched up with different reported readings. Reception studies has in effect turned away from trying to understand reception as social patterns in interpretation (i.e. in terms of textual meaning) towards trying to understand reception by way of demographic description and lifestyle (i.e. in terms of patterns of textual use).

Why should this matter? As we now illustrate in the case of *The Satanic Verses*, complexities in a text's collective audience can combine, in sometimes frighteningly combustible ways, with chains of causation in specific, individual acts of interpretation, to produce a full-blown cultural crisis.

#### AUDIENCES AND INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITIES

One key factor in the readership of *The Satanic Verses* is an increased tendency for contemporary literary fiction to be published and actively marketed internationally, as part of the global circulation of cultural goods. This extended circulation has as one of its consequences far greater engagement with contemporary fiction produced in one set of social circumstances by distinct sub-audiences with significantly different social backgrounds and values. Salman Rushdie's writing has sometimes been thought especially amenable to such global distribution, on account of the author's own cross-cultural, cosmopolitan background and consistent address to issues of migration between cultures and resulting forms of cultural hybridization. Indeed Rushdie has been widely recognized as being at the forefront of post-colonial writing that both cuts across and also expresses political relations between different cultures.

However, while these factors apply almost equally to most or all of Rushdie's books, the particular subject matter of *The Satanic Verses* adds a further dimension. Explicitly signalled by its title as being in some way about one of the world's major, transnational religions, Islam, *The Satanic Verses* inevitably attracted the attention of many readers who might otherwise not have read, or perhaps even noticed, the book, alongside all those other readers who would have read it whatever it was about.

As is well known, *The Satanic Verses* was banned in many countries soon after publication; and reflecting the principle that banning something confers instant public interest, the novel proceeded to sell more than a million copies in hardback during its first year - despite not only being banned in a number of countries but also being unavailable in many foreseen translations. Substantial sales have been maintained ever since, despite the novel remaining unavailable in paperback during the early 1990s for a far longer period than is usual for a work of literary fiction by an established author.

Beyond these sales figures, however, estimating how many people have actually read the novel is less straightforward. Not everyone who buys a novel reads it. Simply possessing *The Satanic Verses* became, for a period, a marker of a particular kind of distinction. Conversely, as with newspaper and magazine readerships, there has undoubtedly been for *The Satanic Verses* a substantial 'hand-on' effect, by means of which many people probably read the same copy, especially in circumstances where the book was (or continues to be) not freely available. As with the more problematic case of poster advertising, too, readership estimates are complicated by a tendency to extrapolate larger numbers of fractional or potential readers: people who glance at the novel on a shelf, flick through its pages, or show some degree of second-hand acquaintance with it.

These 'hypothetical' readers are especially vividly illustrated in the case of *The Satanic Verses*, as they often are in cases of alleged obscenity or blasphemy. Frequently, public complaints are made by people who openly acknowledge that they have not read the book they are complaining about. While publicly condemning *The Satanic Verses* for instance, the former Pakistani political leader Benazir Bhutto famously declared, 'Because I am a Muslim, I have not read it' (Pipes, 1990, p. 113).

Audience estimates expressed in numbers can presumably be refined and made more illuminating. Raw numbers, for instance, can



be linked to a finer mesh of demographic categories. But however sophisticated such techniques are made (for discussion, see Kent, 1994), knowing who readers are is not enough to understand a work's circulation. Reception is not just a matter of 'receiving'. It also crucially involves making some specific sense of a text.

Alongside more established empirical questions of audience research, therefore, *The Satanic Verses* requires us to ask how far a novel's audience forms a unity, or how far it may be preferable to think rather in terms of a network of interconnected but heterogeneous 'interpretive communities' (Fish, 1980). Stanley's Fish's notion of 'interpretive community' is a different kind of category from audience groupings based on fairly stable or consistent aspects of social identity, in that reading strategies on a given occasion do not always line up neatly with identifiable social groups. Exploring simply the social-situatedness of a text's reception can be illuminating (cf. Liebes and Katz, 1991; Bobo, 1988). But investigating the reception of *The Satanic Verses* demands something more: clearer linkage between *who* is interpreting and *how* they're interpreting.

Investigating such linkage is not straightforward. Nor is it made any easier by vagueness about interpretive processes at the level of the individual reader. It is therefore worth sketching what may happen at this level, given that an acknowledged gap between form and interpretation is routinely bridged.

As has been pointed out above, across a range of disciplines, understandings of meaning-production have moved away from being largely textual-determinist in character towards recognising a far greater reader contribution. In most contemporary interpretive frameworks, as a result, the words of a text themselves are rarely thought to deliver pre-packed meanings. Instead, to the extent that the form of the text is believed to contribute to its meaning, form is seen as providing a meaning potential or notation for reading. Reading is then a kind of performance from that notation. Putting this more procedurally, we might say that decoding of textual features prompts inferential activity, which takes the conventional meanings of linguistic forms as a sort of input. Inference fills in gaps in mental representations of the text, makes those representations more coherent, and derives implications from them by combining them with cultural knowledge and assumptions available to the reader from other sources (for detailed discussion, see Sperber and Wilson, 1995; Kintsch, 1998; Gibbs, 1999).

Other possible, fundamentally divergent reading strategies are conceivable, of course. One major alternative is that reader response operates more independently of the text's signifying features, consisting of less-constrained ascriptions of significance or 'meaningfulness'. What is meant by 'meaningfulness', in this context, is kinds of significance which bring maximum relevance to personal concerns of the interpreter while remaining largely autonomous from conventional or causal links back to specific textual features, or to an intention of (or effect anticipated by) the text-producer. Readings along such lines mould response out of the reader's own, already-existing intellectual or emotional agenda or circumstances; and in formalist traditions, such responses would usually be dismissed as misreadings. Readings of this kind may well clarify or illustrate a reader's own ideas or feelings, even if they depend far less on what the text directly 'says'. What is important here is that, because such readings can act as powerful catalysts to social debate or dispute, irrespective of their closeness to the text, they can have as much impact, and become equally a focus for policy decisions (for instance as regards alleged harm or offence) as readings which keep closer to what the text, more narrowly conceived, seems to say.

It is hardly surprising, given what we have said above about the paradigm shift from textual determinism towards audience studies, that academic reception-led work is often now less interested in the production of meanings by discourse (that is, in how audiences make texts mean) than in an audience's search for 'meaningfulness' (how audiences make texts meaningful, in the broad sense indicated above). But this shift of intellectual emphasis remains problematic in at least one respect. 'Meaningfulness' may be derived not only from texts but also from much else in our environment. It depends on a general capability of human cognition to interpret as a world of signs a world where most potential stimuli are nevertheless not there primarily to be interpreted by us. Failing to distinguish discourse interpretation adequately from this more general cognition leaves a theoretical vacuum at the core of audience ethnography. Reader response is reader response *to texts* (rather than, for instance, a matter of more general beliefs or cultural behaviour independently of exposure to particular texts) only when it shows commitment to meaning as in some way a property of, or something caused by, the specific form discourse takes. In most audience ethnography, however, little attention is given to what that 'in some way' might be.

## DIVERGENT READINGS

If you accept that not all responses to a text are equivalently compelling as meanings of that text, then certain further issues arise. How far readings diverge, and what relations exist between co-existing divergent readings, become crucial questions in understanding what constitutes a warranted or legitimate reading. This is perhaps especially the case with a disputed work such as *The Satanic Verses*.

Readings of a novel construct kinds of coherence and implication, based on textual features including narrative continuities and thematic patterning, as well as on the strength of more evident model-building such as mapping the text onto the social world and a variety of forms of reader identification. What radically reduces the likelihood of individual readings having no likeness whatever to one another is that they share common features at the level of interpretive process, even if not in terms of outcome or result. In the field of cinema studies, David Bordwell has shown, for example, how common characteristics in the practice of reading –what Bordwell calls an ‘art’ or ‘craft’, likening interpretation to ‘quilting or furniture-making’– may dominate even over explicitly different theoretical commitments brought to bear in reading a text (Bordwell, 1989). The craft element in literary and media studies, Bordwell suggests, is simply a higher-specification version of interpretive strategies in everyday use. Mostly such reading involves inductive procedures and heuristics (especially the ‘representative heuristic’: x stands for all x’s, or x stands for y) that map semantic fields onto selected textual cues.

As well as limiting the scope for texts to have a different meaning for each reader on each occasion, interpretive practices such as Bordwell describes contribute to social patterns in interpretation. Particular groups of readers may be predisposed towards making some specific interpretive moves rather than others. And while it may be difficult to chart the detail in full, the deployment of various interpretive heuristics, drawing on background assumptions that are socially available or accessible to differing degrees, builds cumulatively into overall effects perceived as interpretive variation between respective interpretive communities<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> One recent argument that, to trace a social circulation of meanings, we should examine the cumulative effect of local, individual cognitive events linked together in causal chains of repetition and modification across a given society, rather than jumping

As a first step in tracing such patterning, it is worth now recalling some of the over-arching or guiding strategies in well-known readings of *The Satanic Verses*.

### *Allegories of Islam*

During the period of most heated controversy surrounding *The Satanic Verses*, it was sometimes said that many (particularly Muslim) readers read the novel as a sort of historical revisionism, to be brought about by a mechanistic –and dishonest– allegory of aspects of Islam. The then prime minister of Iran, Mir Husayn Musavi, to take one exemplary instance, criticized the book for being ‘neither a critical appraisal nor a piece of historical research’, and claimed that it contained ‘no logical arguments or objective methods of research’ (Pipes, 1990, p. 111). Nor was this reading strategy confined to Muslim readers: Lord Jakobovits, the then British Chief Rabbi, suggested that the book involves a ‘falsification of established historical records’; and the English peer Lord Shawcross complained that the novel had been written ‘not with any intention of contribution to scholarship’ (Pipes, 1990, p. 111).

It is not uncommon for books dealing with religious subjects to be questioned in terms of their truth-claims in this way. Their subject matter, after all, represents beliefs (or truth statements) of believers that, especially in a multi-faith society, are likely to need constant re-validation. It may seem self-evident to readers of different religious or cultural backgrounds that *The Satanic Verses* is not, at least in any obvious sense, a piece of historical argument. But such a reading of the novel is made more plausible –perhaps even encouraged– by crafted parallelisms between the fiction and historical figures and events. As is well known, the title *The Satanic Verses* implies alignment with a mediaeval Christian perception of a longstanding Muslim theological issue; and use of the name ‘Mahound’ –again a mediaeval Christian term used in attacks on Islam (as well as sometimes more generally to mean false prophet, idol, monster, or devil)– may be thought to have much the same effect. Or again, use of the name ‘The Curtain’ for the Jahilia

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straight to a macro-scale interface between text and collective public mind, is Dan Sperber, *Explaining Culture* (Sperber, 1996). The theoretical account of interpretation implicit in Sperber’s ‘epidemiology of representations’, as in his earlier critiques of ethnography and anthropology, is Relevance Theory; see Sperber and Wilson, 1995.

brothel (the name 'Jahilia' itself means 'ignorance' in Arabic, but in narrative context implies Mecca) may be held to signify some sort of physical and moral transposition of the 'hijab', the veil Muslim women use to cover their heads or faces.

The obvious test to be applied to a novel that is viewed as a commentary on Islam –once allegory is translated back into pre-allegorical content– is how far it adequately represents the historical record. On the other hand, as has been commonly objected, such a truth-test appears simplistic and literal-minded when brought into contact with the novel's complex stylistic resources. More particularly, the critique of such an allegorical reading runs, 'decoded' reading along these lines is damaged by unduly restrictive canons of interpretation governing book-reading in Islam, by comparison with less reverential approaches permitted as regards oral storytelling (which is echoed in some aspects of the novel). The critique is of course only arguable, nevertheless, and can backfire. Rather than being simplistic, for example, allegorical readings may display a far more incisive reading strategy, developed over generations of dealing with anti-clerical satire in conditions of social censorship: a habit of deciphering public, authorial disavowals and reading between the lines to see what an author really wants to say.

In a powerful reading of the novel and reactions to it, written not from a Muslim perspective but sympathetic to Muslim interpretations of the novel as a religious slur, Bhikhu Parekh has argued that *The Satanic Verses* remains 'a work of fantasy, not a work of fiction' because Rushdie adopts only a low level of abstraction from accepted historical narratives and facts (Parekh, 1989, pp. 29-33). Parekh sees no reason to be convinced by devices such as the dreams, or the fantasy effect of falling 29,000 ft out of the sky. He considers these simply devices to disguise sneers at Islam, rather than a genuinely complex structure of dialogue between conflicting points of view.

Parekh's account of the novel draws attention to a dimension of interpretation which, although discussed in traditional hermeneutics, sits uncomfortably with contemporary views about discourse comprehension in linguistics and psychology: the close relationship, in practice, between sense-making and self-formation. Rather than focusing either on meanings derived from textual features, or alternatively meanings dreamt up out of personal memory or stock associations, Parekh highlights *community* needs and expectations rather than individual ones. He argues that Muslims who might have hoped for a considerate hearing from Rushdie, given the resources of cultural capital he could bring

to a metropolitan treatment of Islam, could only see in the book a declaration of hostility: abusive words of ridicule and contempt equivalent to the first pushes and shoves of a fight. Such readers, Parekh argues, felt belittled and demeaned in their own and other people's eyes, as well as provoked by both the novel's mocking language and by liberties taken with their sacred collective heritage.

What makes this reading more than simply one more report of readers' felt responses is that Parekh links the feeling of having their integrity slurred experienced by many British Muslims to a basis in present circumstances of racism and political marginalisation. In doing so, he anchors the circulation and effects of the novel not just in a particular reception setting, but in a dynamic force-field of political beliefs and action within which the novel is itself an agent.

### *Magic realist fantasy*

Meanwhile, as is also well known, *The Satanic Verses* has been publicly celebrated by literary reviewers and by accustomed readers of post-colonial literary fiction not as historical commentary but as a powerful *imaginative* representation. Such readings give particular attention to the novel's magic realist techniques, with the ground well prepared by a shift in literary expectations of post-colonial fiction away from allegories of national experience towards what have been seen as 'exotic' modes of story telling and postmodernist accounts of globalisation. Readers receptive to pleasures of this type find in *The Satanic Verses* repeated intersection and cross-referencing between the novel's three main narratives: that of Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha falling out of the jumbo jet and surviving, with the ensuing account of their lives in England, fantasy worlds, and eventual return to Bombay; episodes in the life of Mahound in Jahilia; and the story of the Muslim village in India whose population follow a holy woman into the Arabian sea, expecting the waters to part for them so that they can walk all the way to Mecca. Moreover, these narratives do not just intersect. Aspects of the three stories are embedded in Gibreel's dreams and paranoid delusions, and layered further in a sub-narrative about film producers and acting in which Gibreel finally gets to play himself.

Composed in such a complex and self-referring way, *The Satanic Verses* can seem an open-ended work about hybridisation and metamorphosis, with only very oblique interest in specific historical events or beliefs. Twists are given throughout the novel to historical refer-

ences, including the self-referring irony that the scribe who transcribes the holy word but at the same time adds in alterations (which for a period go unnoticed by the Prophet) is called Salman. If interpreted in this more conventionally literary paradigm, the novel is a series of interlocking, never fully resolved fragments. Its interpretation remains elusive, continually offset or contradicted in ways that, inverting earlier critical orthodoxy, make any obvious, fixed reading technically a misreading.

In the detail of how they are derived from the novel, the two divergent interpretive frameworks outlined here (which are of course by no means the only ones to be found in the reported reception of the book) each reflect the sorts of reading heuristic described by Bordwell. They map thematic contrasts onto textual cues provided by events and characters, and relate what is said in the work to complex bodies of background cultural assumptions, including expectations about the style and purpose of fiction. At the same time, they illustrate a further point in Bordwell's argument: that readings of texts can reflect different assumptions about meaning and value brought *to* a text as much as they reflect different techniques for constructing meaning *from* it. If meaning is in the eye of the beholder to this extent, then we need to ask: how far are controversial public 'effects' precipitated by texts properly attributable *to* them?

#### MEANINGS AND EFFECTS

Books become interesting to the extent that they have effects. Such effects can range from laughter, or pity and fear, through to offence or even long-term trauma. A book which lacks cognitive or emotional effects is unlikely to be either much read or even much objected to. *The Satanic Verses*, of course, has not been short of effects. Rather, urgency surrounding the novel has arisen because the ways people have contested its meanings have not been confined to reviews, interviews, or casual conversation. Response spilt over into angry public dispute, book burning, threats, bombs and murder.

Events in response to publication of *The Satanic Verses* are without doubt forms of social action in some way caused by the novel. But textual effect is not a straightforward form of behaviourist response. Where a text has been read, its effects depend on some specific, intermediate form of appropriation. It is that appropriation, or construction, which shapes how representations constructed from a particular book

interact with the more general social world. In cases where a text *has not* been read, its 'textual' effects depend on some kind of mediated social experience: usually involving hearsay or prejudice about what the text might contain, or involving use of the text as a symbolic accoutrement to struggles primarily about something other than the text itself.

Interpretation involves a combination of two related hermeneutic practices: what we might informally call appropriation (or construction) and what we might call cultural mediation<sup>5</sup>. Textual effects are only partly the result of what a text 'says' (what its words mean; how they are arranged; what the genre leads us to assume). Beyond this, effects or significance require further links between what the text says and varying sets of assumptions already held by readers, with which the textual representations enter into a sort of dialogue. The public actions, or dispositions towards action, which constitute visible textual effects follow from this complex process of combination of text with other cognitive material. Like many cognitive processes, the steps in this causal chain are not well understood, and are not necessarily available to introspection. They may therefore not operate in a single sequence, as described here. The point being made is simply that specific steps, stages or processes must be identified in any overall interpretive procedure, if we intend to view that procedure causally rather than as being random.

Mapping causal chains between discourse and social action is however rarely attempted in any detail, at least in cultural analysis (though see Lecerle, 1999, chapter 5). On the other hand, the general premise of causation between discourse, interpretation and effect *is* commonly assumed in regulatory frameworks governing media and freedom of expression. The social order or control which media regulation is designed to support is sought by efforts to limit classes of behaviour

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<sup>5</sup> The phrase 'hermeneutic process of appropriation' occurs in John Thompson's discussion of the globalization of communication in, *The Media and Modernity: a Social Theory of the Media* (Thompson, 1995:171). Our 'mediation' of texts signals blurred boundaries between textual meanings and different sorts of textual 'use'. Confusion between these two terms in literary and cultural theory is sometimes encouraged by appeals to Ludwig Wittgenstein's, 'the meaning of a word is its use in the language', or 'what do words signify, if not the kind of use they have' (Wittgenstein, 1953, para. 43 and para. 10). Such quotations lend doubtful authority to a view that meaning is readily re-defined by users, with no stable core. A brilliant attempt to disentangle issues of meaning and use is Umberto Eco's essay, '*Intentio Lectoris*: the State of the Art' (Eco, 1990, pp. 44-63).



that are believed to follow from particular discourses or kinds of discourse. [Usually, such effects are considered to be in some way encouraged by the discourse, hence legal formulations which speak of 'tendencies', 'causes', or 'incitements': e.g. tendency to 'deprave or corrupt', to 'cause grave or widespread offence', to 'incite racial hatred', to 'lead to a breach of the peace', etc. (see Robertson and Nichol, 1992)]. In any given dispute, the capability of a contested text to cause particular effects is decided on the basis of a reported or hypothetical reading which is considered a warranted or somehow justified interpretation, rather than merely an act of whimsy on the part of the complaining party.

What might broadly be called a contested text's meaning is, therefore, a representation simultaneously linked in two directions. In one direction, the text's 'meaning' is linked back to the text itself, both by linguistic convention (on account of its words and grammatical structures) and by derivation (by means of inference). In the other direction, the text's 'meaning' is linked to its effects by suppositions about how mental representations trigger social behaviour. It is not, therefore, the case (as is sometimes suggested) that media regulation is about social effects of a text, not textual meanings. In order for a discourse to be held accountable for effects that allegedly follow from it, an intermediate category of represented meaning is unavoidable. Meanings are in question to the extent that they form an essential link in a causal chain or network between discourse and effect.

#### LEGITIMACY OF INTERPRETATION

It is probably a good thing that most conflicts over textual interpretation and effects fade with time, overtaken by subsequent events and by more urgent social problems. Resolving such disputes equitably, through arbitration during the period when they are most aggravated, seems anything but easy.

It is difficult to see, for instance, how disputes over meaning or effect can be settled, or disputing protagonists reconciled to one another in a tribunal or complaints procedure, in the absence of some credible framework for attributing agency (and with it responsibility). Attributing responsibility appears a pre-condition either of deciding remedies for any injury which has already been inflicted, or for imposing injunctions against further, repeat effects being caused. But if the causal chain

between discourse and effect involves, as we have suggested, inputs besides the text itself (in the form of background assumptions activated in processes of inference), then we must question how far it is possible to attribute a specifically textual agency. It might be that the best that can be done is to tell a story, convincing or not, about overdetermined reception in an individual case: a critical history of a text's reception, rather than application of a general regulatory principle (or what Stanley Fish has amusingly dismissed as a kind of 'moral algebra', Fish, 1994).

The process of assigning degrees of responsibility to respective parties in a dispute for their contribution to whatever agency the text is judged to have is surrounded by problems. If you believe that ascribed effect is the proper test of meaning (as someone committed to audience ethnography might do), then in any litigation about textual effect –for instance, as regards a text's alleged offensiveness– the plaintiff should succeed. This follows from the fact that, whenever an effect is reported (such as feeling outraged or defamed), then leaving aside cases of deliberate misrepresentation that feeling has been genuinely experienced. Effects prove themselves simply by being experienced; it makes little sense to say, of a Muslim who claims to have been offended on reading *The Satanic Verses*, that she or he has not been offended. On the other hand, if you believe that authorial intention provides the appropriate warrant or authority for meaning, then the defendant in any litigation should succeed. Rebuttal is always possible on the grounds that the effect was not what was intended, was not in some sense what was 'meant'. If, to escape this dilemma, you reject both of these possibilities and insist instead that it is the form of the utterance which prescribes how an utterance should be interpreted (in some version of formalism or textual-determinism), then you are left with a different problem: that it is difficult to see why competent language users should *need* to contest interpretations, except in occasional instances –easily cleared up– where specific features of the text have been misunderstood.

Faced with these well-known (if slightly caricatured) difficulties, liberal legal frameworks have typically responded with a combination of pragmatism in dealing with the case in hand and interpretive tests that seek to separate meaning from the viewpoints of the immediate protagonists. The general questions typically asked are accordingly these: How far is a given interpretation of a text reasonable or warranted? Can the text properly be deemed the cause of the claimed, injurious effect?

Confusingly, the notion of a meaning separate from whatever the writer may have intended is sometimes called a text's 'intentional' meaning (as distinct from its 'intended' meaning). Reflecting more general legal principles, what you intend is whatever the 'natural and probable consequences' of your action are thought to be (Duff, 1990). Other, related formulations which seek to separate meaning from the immediate agents in a verbal exchange include 'natural and ordinary signification', the 'fair import' of the words, 'capability to bear a meaning', what the words 'are likely to mean', etc. (for full discussion, see Robertson and Nichol, 1992). The general purpose of words like 'reasonable', 'ordinary' or 'fair' is to establish how 'legitimate' any given interpretation is, where 'legitimacy' involves public recognition (especially public recognition conferred by a jury acting as a microcosm of the speech-community).

Whatever the limitations of these general frameworks, they do meet one evident need in attempts to arbitrate between contested interpretations: they rule out what might be called unilateral claims on meaning – claims that present themselves separately from a more complex division of communicative labour. But such approaches still face the problem of achieving a balance between the two major aspects of interpretation which we have already seen are difficult to disentangle: effect, and that more specific sub-class of textual effect, meaning.

If emphasis is placed on what we have called *meaning* dimensions in the causation of a text's effects, then our 'interpretive' approach ties reading to the work itself at the cost of circumscribing an author's responsibilities very narrowly. Too much credence will be given to deceptive ironies or disclaimers, in a manner roughly equivalent to accepting a speaker's repudiation of an openly defamatory statement on account of the single added word 'allegedly'. This approach isolates the text as a representation from its functioning as an action in a given social environment. On the other hand, if *effect* dimensions are emphasised, and reactions credited even where they seem triggered by needs or agendas largely autonomous from what the text narrowly 'says', then we risk re-writing texts too freely in our own words or in the words of other readers, and blaming the author for feelings of injury which may have little or nothing to do with what was written. An equivalent set of effects might have followed from many variants of the 'causing' text, which functions merely as a broad-spectrum prompt to different social forces to engage one another. In such an 'effects' emphasis, the rep-

representational content of the text is subordinated unduly to competing political interests at work in the rhetorics that contest it.

#### DIFFEREND, DISPLACEMENT AND BLASPHEMY

It is easy to imagine checks and balances that might be brought into play in order to refine the general frameworks for adjudication outlined above. Some writers, however, have maintained that adversarial litigation between contested interpretations fails to grasp a more profound issue in interpretation: irreconcilable incompatibility. In his *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (1989), for example, Jean-Francois Lyotard has argued that, where discourses allow radically different readings and are contested as a result, the different views represented will be incommensurable at a deeper level than pragmatic apportioning of responsibility or awarding of damages. The success (or validation) proper to the expression of one viewpoint, Lyotard suggests, may be just inappropriate or irrelevant to the viewpoint it is opposed to. One side's legitimacy does not imply the other's lack of legitimacy.

Lyotard's examples of instances of a 'differend' range from hypothetical, profoundly incoherent adjacency pairs in conversation (e.g. A: 'I can come by your place?', B: 'How is the dollar?'), through to details in labour contracts, moral rights and literary ownership, and holocaust denial. He argues that every utterance or discourse (each 'phrase', in Lyotard's terminology) exemplifies an order or 'regimen' of phrases (narrating, ordering, describing, questioning...) that cannot be translated between but which are each given rhetorical purpose by larger genres of discourse (teaching, evaluating, rousing emotion, persuading...). When it comes to tribunals, or arbitration between phrases in dispute, Lyotard suggests that there can be no universal authority or ultimate court of appeal. The social status of one particular genre at any given time simply trumps the validation criteria of other genres (with the trumping suit –forensic, economic, or whatever– varying between different places and historical periods).

Lyotard's philosophical arguments powerfully evoke an unresolvable centrality of contested discourse within modern societies – a centrality that is likely to increase as societies become more culturally diverse internally, and as the globalised circulation of cultural goods also increases. Given its historical and philosophical scope, however, *The Differend* understandably has less to say about how any one particular interpretive community can grapple with the sort of incommensu-

rability that may exist between its own readings and differing frameworks of understanding presented against it.

In the case of *The Satanic Verses*, efforts were certainly made to articulate a sense of offence felt within one interpretive community (made up of Muslim readers, though not of *all* Muslim readers) which found no resonance in other interpretive communities closer to the dominant cultural character of the society in which the book was first published. One of these strategies –beyond simply giving vent to outrage in public expressions of anger– consisted of Muslims illustrating feelings of grievance by creating analogies with attacks on Christian sensibility. The Birmingham Central Mosque, for example, displayed a notice comparing the novel's offensiveness to referring to 'Christ using four letter words; Matthew and Mark indulging in indecencies and molesting children; Moses as a racist and lecherous person'. Commenting on the novel in a similar vein, the critic Ali Mazrui developed parallel analogies, including the Virgin Mary being portrayed as a prostitute, Jesus as the son of one of her sexual clients, the twelve apostles as Jesus' homosexual lovers, and the Last Supper as an orgy (Pipes, 1990, p. 107). It is arguable that formulating analogies in this way with experiences and values recognisable to another interpretive community does more than simply clarify terms of outrage: it matches the stakes of struggle. But the strategy does also involve an appeal to empathy. One group of readers was appealing to a sense, among other readers, of the need for religious belief to be protected from abuse or ridicule, even if the content of respective faiths differs.

Beyond this appeal to empathy, however, many among Britain's more than one million Muslims wanted an appeal to law. With no recourse to other legislation in English law, and given the subject matter of *The Satanic Verses*, prosecution of the novel for blasphemy appeared a possible avenue of redress. It was widely recognised that the offence of blasphemy had fallen into relative disuse in English law [with no actions between 1922 and the Gay News trial in 1977, none for far longer in Wales or Scotland, and no English actions since what was even in 1977 a private, rather than police prosecution (Commission for Racial Equality, 1988)]. But the law of blasphemy remained in place and seemingly available, and had been contemplated during the 1980s as a possible legal route in other disputes by a number of religious groups. For a case of blasphemy to succeed, *The Satanic Verses* would need to be shown to be not merely a religious critique or work of irreverence or disbelief, but a scurrilous or obscene representation ex-

posing religion to ridicule and tending to vilify practitioners of that religion.

The opportunity to debate rhetorical techniques or perlocutionary effects of the novel never arrived, however. Blasphemy had certainly lost much of its credibility as an offence, even among judges and lawyers, in an increasingly secular and multi-faith society. But it also became quickly evident that the offence in English law operates selectively, offering protection (for complex historical reasons to do with Protestant Christianity as the nationally established religion) only to Christianity. Gradually, as a result of the impasse surrounding possible legal action over the book, debate diverted towards an also important but less tangible public agenda: debate over differences between blasphemous libel, obscene libel, and Islamic apostasy; debate over whether to abolish blasphemy as an offence altogether or to extend blasphemy law into a more coherent, enlarged offence; and discussion of how religions can be defined, if faiths other than Christianity are to be protected along similar lines to Christianity (Commission for Racial Equality, 1988; Lee, 1990).

This shift in the terms of debate moved *The Satanic Verses* from being a specific object of interpretation into being simply a key illustration in a broader discussion of policy and cultural values in a pluralist society. The development of debate also left unanswered how legal argument might have proceeded if a prosecution had in fact taken place. The English legal process may have found the alleged effects of *The Satanic Verses* difficult to assess. Like other offences intended to prevent disorder, blasphemy remains subject to uncertainty as between a subjective test of intention and strict liability associated with guilt on the basis of effect, irrespective of intention. Some discussion of these two conceptions of textual meaning and effect had taken place during the *Gay News* trial; but consideration of the issue was re-directed in that case towards a vaguer interpretive criterion: simply what an utterance 'having regard to all the circumstances is likely to mean' (for discussion, see Lee, 1990, pp. 4-21; Robertson and Nichol, 1992, pp. 160-5).

#### APPEAL TO A HIGHER COURT

As is clear from the way events unfolded in Britain, finding a legal channel through which the circulation of a novel can be held accountable is complicated, even within one country. Considered internationally, the situation is inevitably still more complicated. The global circu-

lation of contemporary novels makes them subject simultaneously to many different jurisdictions. In the case of *The Satanic Verses*, those jurisdictions include forms of law based on fundamentally different principles from those of the jurisdiction in which the book was first published (including the nationally implemented but internationally conceived Islamic 'sharia' law). Even if *The Satanic Verses* could not be prosecuted for blasphemy in English law, under 'sharia' law—at least as interpreted by Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran—Rushdie as the book's author could be held subject, as a born Muslim, to a legal decision (or fatwa) sentencing him to death for abrogation of the faith.

The fatwa altered international debate over *The Satanic Verses* decisively. The phrase 'Rushdie controversy' became a more popular, shorthand description than referring to the novel itself. Discussion focused more on what should or should not happen to Rushdie than on what the book does or does not mean. Such displacement, shifting emphasis from uncertainties of meaning to certainties in being a Muslim, may be unsurprising on the part of Ayatollah Khomeini, possibly for geopolitical reasons (Halliday, 1993). However, the transfer of attention and hostility from book to author was added to by dismissive personal attacks made on Rushdie's alleged hypocrisy and selfishness by some mainstream British politicians, and reinforced by fierce criticism directed at Rushdie by a small number of cultural critics for seeming to exploit, rather than illuminate, relations between the cultures he has lived between and sought to represent.

The fatwa exceeded powers in international law; and showed little interest in niceties such as establishing the 'intentional meaning' or 'ordinary signification' of *The Satanic Verses*. If the novel's 'intentional meaning' *did* have to be established internationally, it would have had to be recognised that, in a hugely magnified diversity of reception contexts by comparison with those imagined within any single legal jurisdiction, an author can hardly be expected to predict all the various readings her or his book gives rise to. At the same time, the circulation of texts as a kind of social action, in reception contexts where background cultural assumptions are to some extent predictable, does impose a responsibility on authors for recurrent, 'core' interpretive possibilities. The displacement of debate that followed the fatwa diffused and dispersed interest in the working of the novel as a social discourse at the precise moment when its power and risks were being most intensely demonstrated.

## CONCLUSION

We should stress that the main point we want to make in this article is not about *The Satanic Verses* itself. Rather, we want to suggest that the complex texture of this novel's mixed reception illustrates what may happen, if less convulsively, in the case of numerous other novels besides *The Satanic Verses* (as well as in the case of other kinds of text and cultural artefact). By emphasising the novel's troubled social circulation, we wish to lend support to critical approaches which view a work's meaning against the backdrop of specific circumstances of its production and circulation, rather than searching for that meaning in its words alone –in isolation from any particular context– or in an attributed single or simple authorial intention.

More complex modes of reading, we suggest, are especially important when novels are written and read in post-colonial or otherwise multicultural environments. In such circumstances, readers are engaged at what Mary Louise Pratt (Pratt, 1992) has called a 'contact zone', or domain of encounter between cultures. In such a zone of cross-cultural interaction, readers experience literary texts in increasingly complex ways. In doing so, we need to bring extra kinds of awareness and restraint to bear in judging a text's force or effects.

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