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From Product Reviews to Political Commentary: Performances in Amazon.com Reviews

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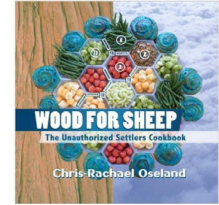
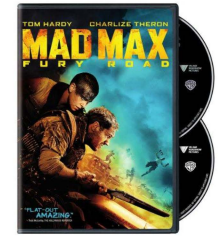
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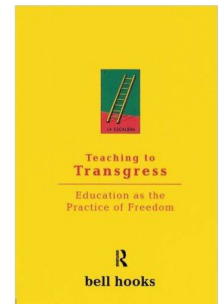
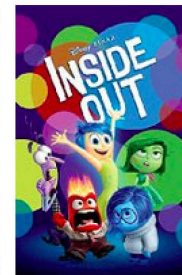
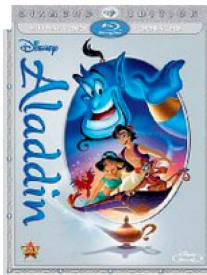
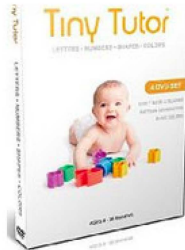
have noted that Amazon "hosts the largest review community on the Internet, featuring more than 28 million products" (Garcia and Schweitzer). Amazon's detailed consumer product reviews supplement online shopping by providing a missing physicality; the reviewer acts as the shopper's surrogate, providing tangible information (how well a product fits; durability; colors and textures) that may elude the online consumer.

Product reviews have developed fairly stable conventions, but they are—like other genres—still "dynamic because as their conditions of use change...genres must change along with them or risk becoming obsolete" (Bawarshi and Reiff 79). We have seen the genre transform as users have turned the Amazon review into a vehicle for political engagement, dialogue, and satire. In particular, we are interested in the rhetoric of reviews related to two moments: the 2012 Presidential debates and Wendy Davis's Texas filibuster in 2013.

During these political moments, Amazon reviewers shed the role of consumer to perform the role of "fringe activist." As Tristan Bridges notes in his blog, [Inequality by \(Interior\) Design](#), "Political protest and civic engagement have always taken on new forms to respond to inequalities and injustice in new ways." Like so many rhetoricians before them, the Amazon reviewers we discuss use a seemingly marginal space to offer political commentary that became highly visible and mainstream.

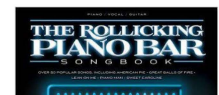
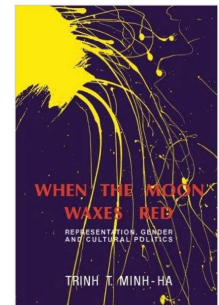


Most Recommended



Deviations from Convention

In his essay, "Identity and the Internet: The Telling Case of Amazon.com's Top Fifty Reviewers," Douglas Hesse focuses on the motivations of Amazon's most prolific reviewers. As Hesse recounts, Amazon's reviewers have deliberately deviated from the conventions associated with online consumer reviews almost since their inception. For instance, faux online reviews—or reviews that pretend to take a product seriously while actually mocking it—stand in for such deviations. The "[Three Wolf Moon](#)" t-shirt and the book, [How to Avoid Huge Ships](#), are just two of our favorite examples of such products. The mock reviews of these real products follow the conventions of the genre itself—titling the review, giving star ratings, explaining how/when reviewers used the product—without actually offering anything that would be useful for the reader (aside from some snarky, but enjoyable humor). These faux reviews call into question the utility and purpose of reviews altogether.²





★☆☆☆☆ **TOO Informative.**

By Dan on December 25, 2010

Read this book before going on vacation and I couldn't find my cruise liner in the port. Vacation ruined.



★★★★★ **Great compliment for my skin art**

By overlook1977 on May 19, 2009

Unfortunately I already had this exact picture tattooed on my chest, but this shirt is very useful in colder weather.

News outlets have also noted the entertainment value of these mock reviews. [The Daily Dot](#)--a blog that publishes "All the news that's fit to click"--acknowledges that the Amazon review space has "become a source of great hilarity...where Internet users can display their wit and comedic chops" (Martinez). However, journalists distinguish between reviews posted purely for humor's sake and those that contribute to a political dialogue. And so do we.

We intend to highlight those Amazon reviewers who transgress the generic boundaries of the online consumer reviews to incite political commentary. The reviewers we discuss--each of whom works through their political frustration by penning Amazon reviews of binders and running shoes--focus less on products, and are instead interested in the political moments that give tangible objects new meanings. In these reviews, then, products stand in for social issues.

Footnotes

¹ We have to acknowledge the growing skepticism surrounding the legitimacy of some Amazon product reviews. For instance, top reviewers on Amazon are invited to join "Amazon Vine," a program that sends members free products to review (<http://www.amazon.com/gp/vine/help>). In short, not every review is impartial.

² For example, Elizabeth Flock of The Washington Post recounts a case where The Onion posted an article titled "Planned Parenthood Opens \$8 Billion Abortionplex," and some readers responded with outrage, taking the satirical piece as truth. In response, reviewers on Yelp posted their own mock reviews to mock the reactionary responses.

