

Review

Julian Hanich, *The Audience Effect: On the Collective Cinema Experience*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018. 324pp.
ISBN: 978-1-4744-1495-1.

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I have to admit that I approached this book with a considerable degree of scepticism – because of its title. Books naming ‘the audience’ in the singular sound worryingly like those with ‘spectatorship’ in their titles, which happily derive accounts of the ‘position’ of the viewer (also singular) from theoretical premises, with never a whiff of a real person who might ever occupy those ‘positions’. But I was wrong. In fact the book begins from an insistent rejection of *any* idea that viewing a film – particularly, but not only, in the cinema – could ever be an isolated, atomic experience. The whole book is thus dedicated to exploring the huge variety of ways in which any individual will find him/herself connected with, sharing with, aware of, annoyed by etc. those around them. This can be physical but also wished or imagined co-presence. In the end, I was somewhere between intrigued, puzzled and frustrated by Hanich’s book.

Hanich has written *The Audience Effect* as an exercise in phenomenology, or, the philosophical analysis of forms of perception and engagement, their workings and implications. Watching films is seen not just as a visual, or even aural, process, but one engaging all aspects of a person, and (just about) all parts of our bodies. Phenomenology has of course a considerable history, having emerged particularly since the latter 1880s, and flowered in post-WWII Europe. And it has had a burst of new life within cinema studies through the work of people like Vivian Sobchack and Laura Marks. There’s little doubt that to those drawn to this approach, Hanich’s book will be a significant addition. So why am I still puzzled and frustrated?

It is not least because of the four most common words in the book: ‘can’, ‘could’, ‘may’, ‘might’. And alongside these overt markers of hypothetical claims, and imagined scenarios, come plenty more assertions which don’t wear their hypothetical status on their sleeves. It is, in short, a book which – while of course it certainly borrows quotes and anecdotes from many empirical audience studies – sets itself a ‘higher’ task: to theorise the

varieties of audience relationships within the cinema experience. How does this work? Across nine chapters, Hanich presents an account of inter-audience relationships which starts with some very large and wide distinctions (a 'Long Shot'), and moves steadily, via a 'Medium Shot' on the kinds of relationship in general that can hold in cinemas, to a 'Close Ups' on detailed consideration of Laughing, Weeping and Anger as specific case-studies. I confess to having found the last parts of the book – particular the chapter on Weeping – the most interesting.

Hanich opens with a quick and strong critique of those approaches in film theory that have viewed films as operating on, or achieving through their workings, isolated individuals. But he is generous in looking into the many cases where, at the margins of their main theories (as he points out, the dominant metaphors are 'dreams, hallucinations and hypnoses'), theorists such as Roland Barthes, André Bazin and Edgar Morin did acknowledge the social complexities of *actual* film watching. Looking often into their lesser-known writings, he unearths signs of recognition of the social processes involved. But these recognitions ran counter both to their main tenets, and indeed to the dominant tendencies in film theory, which (originating in the 1970s) were towards psychoanalytic approaches, and towards claims of 'medium-specificity'. Cinema was *in the dark* and that implied womb-like isolation. The main thrust of his book is to put centre-stage what only shows at the margins, if at all, of so many prominent film/cinema theorists.

His *big* theory comes with his identification of two modes of cinematic attention: what he calls 'quiet-attentive, and expressive-diverted' (p.65). Although he is very careful not to present them as binary opposites – people can, he thinks, switch between them and they can easily 'blend, fuse and morph into each other' (ibid) – a lot hangs on his distinction between these two. They are fundamentally different from each other – but not in the sense that the first (although it might sound as if it is) is *less* collective than the second. Rather, in the first, he argues that people are very aware of the collective presence of other viewers, but this does not intrude on their close attention to and involvement with the film. More 'distraction' occurs in the second mode, as either the *behaviour* of others in the cinema, or my *sense of their reactions*, intrudes on my ways of attending to the film (whatever that be). He outlines 15 major variables which might facilitate or disable either mode. These range from who I go with, via physical aspects of the cinema (from temperature, to arrangements of seating, etc), the 'affordances' of the film itself, and anything special about the particular screening, to personality factors. The next two chapters are devoted to describing the characteristics of each mode, and the kinds of way they involve awareness of others in the audience. He then draws strong contrasts between quiet-attentive watching *in a cinema* with watching alone on a TV screen or on a train via a laptop or a mobile phone. It is as if there is a kind of silent collective affirmation of the value of being so deeply engaged in a film. But, if people can 'mode-switch' so easily and quickly at any point, and if in principle the first is not being seen as *better* than the second, what are we gaining from the distinction? Hanich's key claim comes here:

There has been no intention here of intoning a nostalgic aria about the disappearance of the cinema experience. But at the same time I want to go beyond simply noticing that something is, for better or worse, changing. I wish to present a strong argument as to why silently watching alone is not the same as silently watching jointly minus the other viewers. In an important way, it is a different experience. Quiet collective attention is an enabling condition for another type of collectivity – one very much in tune with societies that insist on remaining highly individualized, and yet simultaneously yearn for a collective experience. (p. 164)

This is yet another heavy load for cinema to bear, even if it is quite different from all that talk of dreams and wombs. This is another version of culture-loss theories that currently abound around mobile technologies and social media.

Distinctions begin to multiply once we get to Hanich's mid-range considerations – leading to him hoping that he will not be 'eliciting typological fatigue' (p. 144 – he rather did with me, I am afraid). He lists and then explores seven different dimensions along which it may be possible to distinguish our awareness of other audience members. These range from how conscious I am of others, what are my relations to them, how much control I have over the situation, and how important it all is to me. A tiny sample of how this works in his analysis can be gleaned from his example of unexpected/unwanted laughter from elsewhere in the cinema during a screening while a person is deeply-engaged:

If we agree with Nietzsche that the sacred is whatever one cannot laugh at within a given culture, the laughter at these quasi-sacred, deeply moving moments must have a particularly disruptive effect. The person whose laughter *spoils* the film (in both senses of the word) cannot be part of one's community of feelings and values, because he or she does not share what is 'sacred' in that moment. The situation has changed into a paradigmatic state of I-you social antagonism. (p. 149)

My reactions on reading a bit like this were complicated. I looked into my own experience for examples, and *half* recognised what Hanich was saying. But I immediately felt other options were possible. Screening out the laughter, for instance. Smiling at one's own over-involvement. Now, none of these is ruled out by his account, but I get the sense that the bigger theorisation is *preferred*, because it is bigger (to do with the 'sacred'). Otherwise all we are getting is hundreds of complicated possibilities. I am not averse to complexification – that is what audience research does, *par excellence* – but I am not sure how much I gain just from listing of possibilities.

Hanich's final three chapters are the closest in, and most 'taxonomically demanding'. We get ten different kinds of cinematic laughter, and five different kinds of weeping. (His chapter on anger is, he admits, the least certain and tries to lay down the bones of some

questions, rather than so much delineating all the different kinds.) I confess I was particularly drawn by his opening discussion of why in the cinema we generally try very hard to *weep* (silently) rather than *cry* (openly/loudly). There is something there which goes way beyond simple ‘manners’ or ‘convention’.

So, my puzzlement and frustration comes down to this. While I accept wholly Hanich’s argument that there is a place for theory not immediately tied to empirical research, I do like my theories to have evident implications for empirical research. And I am simply unsure, beyond research simply that *confirms* how damned complicated it all is, what his detailed re-descriptions of actual but mainly hypothetical moments in cinemas might lead to. Other than, of course, that big not-quite normative claim about culture-loss that I cited above.

Biographical note:

Martin Barker is Emeritus Professor at Aberystwyth University. Across a long career he has researched in many areas, but has increasingly focused on audience research, for comicbooks, films and television. He has contributed to a number of large international projects, including the 2003-4 *Lord of the Rings* project, and the currently ongoing *Game of Thrones* project. He is Joint Editor of *Participations*.