

Editorial Introduction: A Small Diatribe, and a Serious Challenge to Other Journals

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We are proud to publish here the 17th issue of *Participations*. You will see that the Journal has something of a new look. We took the decision some months ago to simplify the way we publish, and from this issue onward will be publishing articles only in PDF format. For authors and indeed for users, the benefits are that everything now is automatically page-numbered, making referencing simpler. From a production perspective, the advantages are major, with a big reduction in the amount of time required to prepare each essay for publication.

From that flows the other real gain: we are simply now able to publish much *more* in each issue. As this bumper issue demonstrates, there is a good deal of work being done which is seeking and deserves publication. You will have seen that this issue has an extraordinary 27 articles in it – a good number of them longer than any print journal could consider carrying. The three Special Sections included here have their own introductions. The other five essays – on the state of debate about transnational cinema (using the reception of Indian films as a test-case), on television and moral imagination, on the reception of films between China and Finland, on pragmatism as a basis for understanding audiences, and on controversies over book-browsing in Singapore - are simply in our judgement valuable separate contributions.

An online Journal avoids most of the space constraints of a paper Journal – except inasmuch as work devolves on one or two people to actually prepare and mount work. But we want to adhere, as far as possible, to our principle of publishing submitted work as soon as it has completed our editorial procedures. And it is this that I discuss briefly here.

When *Participations* was launched in 2003, the founding members of its Editorial Board discussed in some detail how we proposed to organise the refereeing of submissions. Among the things which influenced us, was the considerable irritation that several people reported who had experienced dismissive and unconstructive refereeing of their work by people who hid behind anonymity – often resulting in out-of-hand rejection from which as

authors they felt they learnt nothing. Both for general ethical reasons, and because audience research seemed to us in some ways a rather ‘tender plant’ at that time – with many scholars trying it tentatively, scared of its challenges – we decided to work out a means of not replicating those problems. So, we went for a system of Open Refereeing.

How does this work? In some ways, the differences look tiny. Central is that the names of authors and referees are known to each other – with the caveat that we ask authors not to contact referees directly, unless they have indicated their willingness to talk. But the consequences and implications have been, to my eye, very considerable. In fact, I would say that the system has overall worked *brilliantly*. We do of course reject some submissions, either at the opening stage, or after a full editorial consideration. But what we have learnt is that the system we have adopted, has fostered a ‘culture’ in which referees, without exception, take care over their comments. Curiously, my sense is that Open Refereeing has had two, apparently paradoxical consequences. It has in many ways made referees *more* critical – not least because their ability to make reasoned judgements is open to scrutiny. But at the same time, it has sustained a culture in which referees *encourage* authors, and suggest ways in which they can strengthen and improve their work. And I have to report that again and again, upon completion of our editorial processes, authors have emailed me to say how much they have appreciated the care and attention their work has been given, and how much it has been improved through the process.

While this has been developing, I have (as of course have many of my colleagues at *Participations*) at regular intervals been asked to referee for other Journals – every one of them using ‘blind’ refereeing. I try not to say ‘no’, because I know how much *Participations* depends on colleagues’ willingness to give their time and expertise to these processes. Because I am usually asked to referee on topics where I have some knowledge and expertise, you can guarantee that I spend a ‘happy hour’ working out who most likely wrote the submission I am evaluating – and then, of course, pretending that I don’t know – while saying to myself that this is daft, since the whole point of refereeing is to look at a submission’s relation to its fields, and estimating where it stands, what it relates to and compares with, and so on. But no, I can’t say, because I ‘don’t know’, that *this* submission is a considerable advance on their previous work, or, adds little to what they have already published. Or whatever.

In the same decade, I have seen the launching of a number of other Journals. In one or two of them I have been asked to play an advisory role. Taking that idea seriously several times I have asked Editors to think about adopting some system of Open Refereeing, and have outlined the advantages as we have experienced them. Not one, not a single one, has to my knowledge ever even considered it. I think that is a crying shame.

So, that is my diatribe. And here's my challenge to readers who are involved in any fashion in the work of other Journals. Tell me, tell us in what way we are wrong about Open Refereeing. Engage in a debate about the ethical, intellectual and cultural implications of refereeing systems. It's interesting to think that in the natural sciences there has in the last few years been quite an intense reconsideration of this (although I don't know of any cases where it has led to a change) because of a discovery of serious 'intellectual decay' and misleading outcomes from blind refereeing. Aren't we capable of learning from such realisations?

If there are responses to this Editorial, we promise that we will publish them as a debate beginning in the next issue.