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'Seeing, Feeling, Knowing: A Case Study of Audience Perspectives on Screen Documentary'

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Seeing, Feeling, Knowing: A Case Study of Audience Perspectives on Screen Documentary

Abstract

Despite a blossoming of scholarly interest in screen documentary, audience perspectives remain significantly under-researched. This article is part of an attempt to redress such a neglect. It draws on a small study using questionnaires submitted by self-selected and largely middle-class cinemagoers who watched the French documentary *Etre et Avoir*. Key vectors of inquiry are: generic assumptions about documentary; issues of veracity and trust; distinctions between notions of the 'authentic' and the inauthentic, the 'sincere' and the contrived. In addition, the choice of film, cinema and, ultimately audience facilitates some insights into the cultural tastes and practices of the 'professional middle class', including Francophilia.

Key words:

Documentary; audiences; generic expectations; truth claims and trust

In the past decade or so, Anglophone screen scholarship has been energised by a renewed interest in documentary. Important work by Stella Bruzzi, John Corner, Bill Nichols and Brian Winston, to name but a few, has considered textual form, audience address, ethical concerns, and industrial contexts, in productive and stimulating ways. Despite this welcome blossoming of interest -- and despite the odd exception^[1] -- audience perspectives on screen documentary remain significantly under-researched. Perhaps this should not be such a surprise, given the halting pace at which empirical audience studies have been taken up within media and film scholarship in general. But it is nevertheless true that audiences for screen documentary have been given even less attention than audiences for fiction film, or, more recently, for factual programming and 'reality television'.^[2]

This article is part of an attempt to redress such a neglect. It is based on the first stage of a larger research project into audiences watching documentaries on film, video and television. The paper draws on a small study conducted in July 2003, using

questionnaires submitted by self-selected and largely middle-class cinemagoers who watched the French documentary *Etre et Avoir* (2003) at an arthouse cinema in Brighton, England.

My initial vectors of inquiry were cinemagoers' operative generic assumptions about documentary (which *Etre et Avoir* was seen to either fulfil or to refuse), and their perspectives on issues of veracity and the so-called crisis over trust and the essential truth claims of the mode. Other issues raised by audience response to the film included a series of distinctions made between notions of the 'authentic' and the inauthentic, the 'honest' and the contrived, and between ideas of documentary and reality television as good and bad objects respectively.

The choice of film, cinema and, ultimately audience also facilitated some small insights into the cultural tastes and practices of that nebulous category, the English middle classes, and in particular what Mike Savage et al have called the 'professional middle class'.^[3] As I have noted elsewhere,^[4] middle-class identity as it relates to cultural and media practices is all too often naturalised, rendered almost 'invisible' and excused from proper scrutiny in fields of study which have typically excavated other dimensions of identity (like race, gender and sexuality) much more energetically. This relative lack of attention is apparent not just in otherwise highly self-conscious modes of semi-autobiographical academic writing. As Ann Gray has recently argued, it is also evident in the area of audience research. Gray points out that this neglect has been linked to an understandable critical enthusiasm for listening to the voices of 'ordinary people', and, often, for validating popular culture in the face of inherited cultural canons. However, its consequences can be problematic:

'The emphasis of cultural studies thus far on popular forms [...] ignores crucially important groups -- cultural producers, consumers of middle or so-called "high" culture, policy-makers -- who in different ways shape and form the cultural landscape.'^[5]

Two further points are relevant here. First, I would argue that many studies of fans, viewers and audiences, *have* actually focused on members of the middle classes, but that this classed dimension has not been addressed explicitly. Class still seems to be a critical lens used most frequently, if at all, to think about the other -- usually the working classes -- rather than those closer to home -- the middle classes. Second, I want to avoid any simplistic notion that middle-class people only consume 'high culture' objects like opera, foreign films and certain documentaries. Equally, I am not suggesting that the audiences for these genres are always exclusively middle-class.^[6] Nevertheless, as will become clear, the particular audience sample upon which this study is based is very much a middle-class one.

To return to my case study: *Etre et Avoir* centres on a year in the life of a dozen pupils aged from 3 to 11 and their teacher in a one-class rural school in the tiny community of Saint-Etienne-sur-Usson in the Auvergne region of France. Given chronic problems in the

French education system, along with radical social changes taking place in rural France, the film was often taken as emblematic of wider issues beyond the particular school in question. According to the teacher, Georges Lopez, the film was intended to be about a boy learning to read. 'But he got camera-shy and it wasn't working. So it became a film about the death of a certain kind of life in France.'^[7] A magazine feature noted: 'As the nature of France's countryside changes, with 60,000 hectares of agricultural land disappearing annually, so the "petite ecole en milieu rural" is under threat. Saint-Etienne-sur-Usson is typical of this trend: it consists of 18 hamlets with clusters of houses and 234 inhabitants – no shops, no high street, no village. According to France's Association of Rural Councils, there were 19,000 of these schools in 1960. Now there are fewer than 5,000.'^[8]

The French scholar Guy Gauthier placed *Etre et Avoir* in a tradition of documentaries examining education in France, including *Alertez les Bebes* (Jean-Michel Carre, 1978), *Recreations* (Claire Simon, 1992), *Grands Comme Le Monde* (Denis Gheerbrant, 1998) and *Grandir au College* (Andre Van In, 2004). He noted: 'Some have seen in this film nostalgia for a paradise lost, the little rural school, surrounded by nature and sheltered from the currents of contemporary society.'^[9] A feature in the film magazine *Positif* drew connections between the school building and its teacher's methods and the secular republicanism of early 20th century French schooling: 'It could only belong to the third republic: this school is emblematic of the secular ABC [l'etre et l'avoir]. [...] In its near perfection, it appears as a unique case'. But, the article warned, 'It would be depressing if a conservative gambit used the argument of *Etre et Avoir* to put on trial for the umpteenth time the failings of the educational system, saying that the old ways were so good!'^[10]

The film was a big hit in France, where it attracted 1.8 million cinemagoers and earned the equivalent of \$10 million.^[11] *Etre et Avoir* occupied a much narrower cultural niche in Britain, however. As not only a documentary, but also a subtitled French film, and one predictably exhibited at a small number of specialist and arthouse cinemas, it was clearly not an example of popular cinema as the term is commonly understood. Six months after its release the film had earned just over £670,000 at the UK box office.^[12]

The audience sample

The research project is based on 36 questionnaires returned from a total of 123 given out at the Duke of York's cinema in Brighton.^[13] The sample was entirely white, and very much middle-class (insofar as the majority of respondents were professionals, usually working in teaching or related fields) with relatively high levels of cultural capital. All but three were educated to degree level, many to MA level. Some had been to private school. Many were middle-aged or older. The average age of respondents was 44. (As the film was screened in July, this may have led to less students watching it than would have

been the case during term time.) In gender terms, the sample was split evenly, comprising 18 women and 18 men.^[14]

Because of its self-selected nature, and the absence of comparable class or gender breakdowns for the film's British audience, the sample cannot be taken as statistically representative of a larger audience. However, the research material is suggestive of some viewing strategies and modes of response to documentary in general, and to this film in particular.

Generic labelling

When tracking audience perspectives on a topic such as screen documentary, which has already had its fair share of scholarly attention, it is important not to take for granted the concept's existence in cinemagoers' viewing repertoires. There is a danger that the researcher will effectively constitute the object (here the mode or genre of documentary) which s/he claims to find, by deploying an analytical and experiential category which may not be a valid term for audiences.^[15] How valid among respondents was the term 'documentary' as a label for screened material, and if so, what were the associations and expectations carried by such a category?^[16] Was *Etre et Avoir* approached and viewed as a documentary or not?

In the event, for many (but not necessarily all) respondents, 'documentary' appeared to be a legitimate category. For some, it was considered a mode or genre which crossed the formats of film and television. Of these respondents, some complained that few documentaries made it to cinema screens. But others characterised documentary as essentially televisual. For instance:

Q6: How important to your enjoyment was the fact that the film is a documentary?

'I rarely see docs at the cinema. Are they best suited to TV? Few seem to be worth a trip - *When We Were Kings* an exception.'

(Tim, British, white, male, teacher, age 46)

As it happened, the British poster and press ad images for *Etre et Avoir* (later reproduced in video and DVD cover art) gave no indication that this was actually a documentary, and six respondents reported that they did not know that it was one until they saw the film. Others went to see *Etre et Avoir* more or less despite the fact that it was a documentary. For example:

Q 13: Are you a regular consumer of documentary films?

'No - not usually interested - I expect the format / content to be dull.'

(Lynne, British, white, female teacher, age 51)

This viewer likened *Etre et Avoir* to other French films, which appear to include, by implication, screen fiction of a particular, 'scenic' kind as well as documentary. While the film's Frenchness was seen as an asset, its status as a documentary was potentially off-putting:

Q2: *Why did you go to see the film?*

'Well reviewed - like pace and scenic qualities of many French films'.

Q6: *How important to your enjoyment was the fact that the film is a documentary?*

'Not - I don't usually watch them.'

Another respondent commented similarly:

Q2: *Why did you go to see the film?*

'Read a good comment about it in *The Guardian*, and I was curious. In general, I like French films.'

Q6: *How important to your enjoyment was the fact that the film is a documentary?*

'Not much, I did not feel like watching a documentary.'

(Mar, Spanish, white, female research fellow in physics, age 36)

The (albeit unquantified) success of the film with cinemagoers such as these two who appear suspicious or agnostic about documentary, and are keener on some French fiction films, appears to vindicate the marketing decision not to label the film as a documentary in adverts and trailers. In the next section I will discuss in more detail exactly what expectations and assumptions the documentary category carried with it for members of the sample.

Seeing, feeling, knowing

Feeling and knowing are two axes of possible viewer engagement, two sets of pleasures, two currencies of value, potentially available to documentary audiences. These modes of experience are best approached analytically as co-present: they can and do overlap for

many viewers.^[17] Their exact balance will of course depend on the specificities of the particular documentary text, and on the perspective of individual viewers, who may value each quality differently. Nevertheless, some commonsensical assumptions about documentary suggest that the form is largely (or even wholly) concerned with delivering information and knowledge, to the exclusion of emotional engagement. In this section I will consider some viewer responses which suggest that feeling and knowing are mutually exclusive, and others which attest to their coexistence. In the process, such statements reveal respondents' assumptions and expectations about documentary and what -- if anything -- makes it distinctive from other screened material.

The three extracts below suggest that *Etre et Avoir's* informational content is relatively limited compared to other documentaries, but the respondents cite this as a strength of the film, a quality which distinguishes it from their preconceptions about screen documentary:

Q6: How important to your enjoyment was the fact that the film is a documentary?

'I do not usually go to the cinema to see documentary films but this film did not have a documentary "feel": this was important as I felt part of the film - the emotions were stronger than the "facts".'

(Anon., (9), British, white, female, teacher, age 45)

Q1: What were your responses to Etre et Avoir?

'Overall very impressed. It didn't try to explain itself with voiceovers, the pace of the film was quite slow at times, in line with the learning of some of the children. It made me think about a lot of things I hadn't for a long time.'

(Anon., (4), British, white, male, entertainment news editor, age 38)

Q1: What were your responses to Etre et Avoir?

'Good documentary, it was also a very touching, real and sincere film.'

Q16: How would you describe the differences between documentary film (in general) and fiction film (in general)?

'Excepting *Etre et Avoir*, documentary is rather objective and doesn't show feelings or emotions as being important, just facts.'

(Anon., (10), British, white, male, student, age 30)

Bill Nichols, among others, has described the will to knowledge as a desire central to the appeal of documentary. He writes: 'Documentary convention spawns an epistophilia. It posits an organizing agency that possesses information and knowledge, a text that conveys it, and a subject who will gain it.'^[18] Certainly in the three cases above, the generic promise of documentary, and its proposed viewing strategy, is assumed to be epistephiliac. However, in these instances, (and unlike other examples below) *Etre et Avoir* is seen to succeed in a large part by refusing some of the informational content expected of the mode, and by offering instead a degree of emotional engagement more likely to be associated with fiction film.

Similarly, for the following respondent, the film's deviance from an expected documentary template was a bonus -- here in terms of its deployment of humour:

Q6: How important to your enjoyment was the fact that the film is a documentary?

'Quite important, in that I forgave it some 'unfinishedness' and was pleasantly surprised at how funny it was - I wasn't expecting from a doc.'

Q13: Are you a regular consumer of documentary films?

'No - there aren't many available, and there is a sense that documentary will be terribly worthy, earnest and dry.'

(Paul, British, white, male, teacher, age 31)

Other respondents appear to have expected, and valued, some kind of balance between the informational dimension and mechanisms of engagement operating via emotion and character. For instance:

Q15: How would you define a good documentary film?

'A story that transcends a factual account. Thought provoking, moving and maybe progressive.'

(Chris, British, white, male, teacher, age 44)

'One that shows facts and emotions.'

(Sophie, British, white, female, Teacher, age 23) (her emphasis)

Emotional and informational qualities were valued differently by the following respondents, however. While popular among some viewers (see below) the film's formal simplicity and slow pace were problematic here, in so far as they were perceived as corrolaries of a disappointing lack of information:

Q5: What did you like least about the film?

'Not being able to seek more information - more understanding. We only saw a selection of images etc.'

(Anon., (11), British, white, female, learning and development facilitator, age 50)

'Its length, pretty but unnecessary countryside shots and I found the structure slightly odd - ie no informative voice-over, occasional talking straight to camera and no text to give extra info.'

(Caroline, British, white, female, student, age 34)

The second respondent quoted above also took the opportunity offered by the questionnaire to compare *Etre et Avoir* with fiction film, and again found it wanting, this time not so much because of limited informational content, but due to a relatively weak narrative drive. Thus, for this viewer, the film suffers from not only an informational lack as a less than successful documentary, but also from the absence of mechanisms of narrative momentum and viewer engagement expected in fiction film. These deficits appear to outweigh (for her) the film's surplus of 'authenticity'.

Q6: How important to your enjoyment was the fact that the film is a documentary?

'I would probably have enjoyed it more had it been fictional with more of a narrative.'

Q7: How would you describe the differences between this particular film and a typical fiction film?

'Less narrative, less forward motion, less to engage the viewer. More authenticity making it totally believable and real as opposed to fiction.'

Q12: Did you notice anything about the film's form (over and above its content?)

'I like more info from a documentary. This one washed over me in a pleasant way but I wanted to know more about the children, their backgrounds, the area, their expectations, etc etc. It was like a magnifying glass over an area that didn't move - very frustrating after a while.'

(Caroline, British, white, female, student, age 34)

In their book on documentary depictions of nuclear power, John Corner et al noted the existence among some viewers of a 'civic frame' of understanding, which was 'concerned with propriety in addressing a national audience on a controversial topic', and which often

prioritised the evaluation of 'balance' between contrasting standpoints.^[19] *Etre et Avoir* has a rather less controversial topic, and such a framework was not deployed by any respondents in the sample. But the issue of informational content, cast in more general terms, was still a source of concern for some. For the viewers quoted above, this (missing) content had been expected to be delivered via expositional techniques such as voice over and graphics. In these examples, informational values are seen as central to documentary, a part of a generic promise which *Etre et Avoir* fails to fulfil.

Slow pacing and 'authenticity'

The relatively slow pace of *Etre et Avoir* -- in terms of both form and content -- was a central aspect of its appeal for several respondents. For example:

Q4: What did you like best about the film?

'Well shot, stories gently told.'

(Mark, British, white, male, book editor, age 39)

Q1: What were your responses to Etre et Avoir?

'I thought that it was wonderful. I liked the 'slowness' of it, a pace of life that seems to elude us. Our own young orientated culture seems so fast, everything must be 'now' and extremely quick. Whereas this film showed that learning and caring is a slow process of growth.'

(John, English, white, male, instructor, age 60)

'I loved the beginning of the film - - the long slow shots of the countryside, the dancing trees ... and the tortoises creeping across the schoolroom floor. At once I knew this film was different. I was encouraged to slow down, observe and find meanings in the detail. In other words, to work with the director in making the film. I was encouraged in this way from the start and became part of the experience rather than a casual passenger.'

(Anon., (1) British, white, female, school counsellor, age 51)

'Slow, moving, peaceful'

(Anon., (8), British, white, female, nurse, age 52)

It is tempting to draw on Bill Nichols' concept of excess in documentary when approaching these responses. According to Nichols:

'If excess tends to be that which is beyond narrative in fiction films, excess in documentary is that which stands beyond the reach of both narrative and exposition. [...] It stands outside the web of significance spun to capture it.'^[20]

Can the slow, repeated landscape shots, the trees in the wind, the tortoises creeping across the floor, be addressed by this concept? Perhaps, but on closer inspection, it becomes clear that, for some viewers at least, the qualities of slow pacing, long takes, landscape, and a sense of time anchored to the seasons, are *not* beyond the film's argument. Instead, they are very much bound up with its key propositions (and pleasures). These are: a sense of the rarity, for a contemporary urban audience, of this rural setting and way of life, condensed in many ways into the representation of the school and its pupils. Thus, for some viewers, the appeal of *Etre et Avoir* was based on the relative uniqueness of both the subject matter -- the school -- and its form of representation.

In addition to its slow pacing and rural location, the sincerity and honesty of the film was valued by several respondents. For instance:

Q1: What were your responses to Etre et Avoir?

'A wonderfully human film which touched forgotten memories of childhood. Its sincerity was 100% and left me with an image of a kind dedicated man who would be the backbone of any educational system...'

(Kenneth, British, white, male, retired telecomms engineer, age 82)

'Good documentary, it was also a very touching, real and sincere film.'

(Anon., (10), British, white, male, student, age 30)

Despite the so-called crisis in the evidential status of documentary and its central truth claims, which has been much debated in Anglophone scholarship,^[21] a notion of gaining access to 'the real' was a major element of the film's popularity and authority among the sample. As well as the statements above, see for example:

Q1: What were your responses to Etre et Avoir?

'I really enjoyed, it was just something different from other films, and real.'

(Mar, Spanish, white, female research fellow in physics, age 36)

In addition, and often underpinning expressions of the appeal of 'the real', the use of a discourse of authenticity frequently revealed taste markers and a set of cultural distinctions deployed by these cinemagoers, notably between the veracity and 'honesty' of *Etre et Avoir*, and the contrasting 'fakery' and 'inauthenticity' of reality television. For instance:

Q4: What did you like best about the film?

'The way it showed *real* life with all its ups and downs, hard work and difficulties, moments of success and joy, its ordinariness without resorting to "reality TV" type tricks. Such close observation.'

(John, English, white, male, instructor, age 60)

What concerned several respondents in the sample was not so much the critically scrutinised indexical guarantee of documentary, but rather a less well defined and nebulous sense of qualities such as the 'human[ity]', 'honesty', 'sincerity', and specialness of the film. The notion of 'honesty' in these accounts can be approached in two ways. The first is in relation to the truth claims and epistephiliac pleasures of the documentary mode -- introduced above and discussed further below. The second is via a notion of a 'simpler' kind of film making, which contrasts with omnipresent media clamour.^[22]

Jim Collins' argument about developments in Hollywood fiction film during the 1980s and 1990s can be usefully imported here. Collins locates what he calls a 'new sincerity' in film making of this period -- a trend exemplified in *Dances With Wolves* (1990) -- which he sees as a particular response to the background noise of the media array which surrounds us. (The other response is a playful engagement with the media-saturated landscape of everyday life, found in highly intertextual films like *Back to The Future*.) Collins writes of the 'new sincerity':

'Rather than trying to master the array through ironic manipulation, these films attempt to reject it altogether, purposefully evading the media-saturated terrain of the present in pursuit of an almost forgotten authenticity, attainable only through a sincerity that avoids any sort of irony or eclecticism.'^[23]

Collins' proposal fits with elements present in the following responses:

Q4: what did you like best about the film?

'The simplicity of it, yet it was a very touching and intelligent film.'

(Anon., (10), assume British, white, male, student, age 30)

'Gentle build-up of a picture of rural education. Revelation of 'characters' unfolded as if naturally.'

(Anon. 13, British, white, male, teacher and psychotherapist, age 52)

"Sincerity"

(Kenneth, British, white, male, retired telecomms engineer, age 82)

The last respondent also commented:

Q12: Did you notice anything about the film's form (over and above its content)?

'Simplicity. Both in and out of the classroom, no clever tricks were employed.'

(Kenneth, British, white, male, retired telecomms engineer, age 82)

I'm certainly not proposing here that Collins' argument is applicable to documentary as a whole. Indeed, for some respondents, *Etre et Avoir* was significant and pleasurable in part because of its difference from other documentaries, -- including the proliferation of hybrids and 'formatted documentaries' currently found on television -- formats which might have more in common with Collins' notion of eclectic irony and playful intertextuality than with a new sincerity. For instance:

Q1: What were your responses to Etre et Avoir?

'It was a lovely film, I can't think of a film to compare it with. The long (time) shots and very relaxed editing gave it the feel of being barely edited.'

Q28: Is there anything else you would like to say...?

'I think that documentaries have less gravitas now. Why? I'm not sure - perhaps through the sheer number available, perhaps because of the frequent mixing of the modes of representation.'

(David, British, white, male, teacher, age 36)

This is not to suggest that viewers of *Etre et Avoir* have a facile notion of truth (just as Annette Hill's work on audiences for reality television suggests that they don't either).

[24] Notions of sincerity and authenticity do not simply equate to a naïve acceptance of transparency or self-evident truths in documentary. This became clear after the sample was asked explicitly whether they trusted documentary to tell the truth. The question produced a wide range of responses, and of interpretations of its wording-- linking 'truth' to notions of honesty or formal transparency. Some of those who had enjoyed the film's sincerity and honesty replied:

Q21: Do you trust documentary films to tell the truth?

'In principle, yes, but I always try to question the point of view of what is shown and said. Showing some facts but not all can lead to a different conclusion.'

(Mar, Spanish, white, female research fellow in physics, age 36)

'Yes. I think, generally speaking, that there is a long history of honesty in documentary film making.'

(John, English, white, male, instructor, age 60)

'No I don't trust them, but nevertheless I expect it. Was it Cousteau the French underwater film maker who later was accused of manipulating the truth? How we all enjoyed Cousteau originally.'

(Kenneth, British, white, male, retired telecomms engineer, age 82)

Others wrote:

Q21: Do you trust documentary films to tell the truth?

'No. Any film will involve a process of selection.'

(Chris, white, British, male, teacher, age 44)

'No. The truth is usually boring.'

(Bernard, British, white, male, chartered surveyor, age 52)

'Not 100% - everything is partial / open to interpretation.'

(Anon., (7), British, white, female, teacher / lecturer, age not given)

'No of course not - we don't even show everything of ourselves to our friends why would someone show the world every little bit of all their daily life or issues?'

(Sophie, British, white, female, Teacher, age 23)

'No, it depends on the bias of the director. The director can choose the source material which fits their visual interpretation and edit together accordingly.'

(Victoria, British, white, female teacher, age 29)

Other respondents were more willing to accept some of documentary's implicit truth claims:

Q21: Do you trust documentary films to tell the truth?

'Yes - you expect them to educate and inform, that they tell the truth is implicit.'

(Anon., (8), British, white, female, nurse, age 52)

'In as far as one trusts essays to "tell the truth". Clearly there will be bias but one expects the filmmakers to act in good faith.'

(Paul, British, white, male, teacher, age 31)

Finally, two examples of the coexistence of different knowledges and viewing strategies, mobilised by audience members at differing moments:

Q21: Do you trust documentary films to tell the truth?

'When thinking about the question I would be aware of the possibility of a film maker being able to present events in a certain light. However, when watching documentaries I probably accept a lot as the truth.'

(Haydn, British white, male, Access student, age 29)

'A version of the truth.'

(Cas, British, white, female, teacher, age 51)

The last respondent replied to *Q1: What were your responses to *Etre et Avoir*?*

'Loved it! Could have happily sat through another year in the life of the school. I recognised that an editing agenda had allowed the development of some characters at the expense of others - but accepted the version presented quite happily.'

This respondent draws on two viewing strategies -- one of scepticism and the other a willing abandonment to the film, and chooses to deploy them at different moments during the events of watching the film and responding to the research inquiry.

In this sample at least, viewers expected to find elements of authority (along with some dullness perhaps) in the documentary genre. But this does not mean that they assumed that documentary could offer unmediated access to 'the truth'. The general coexistence of a degree of trust with a degree of scepticism is significant because it refutes some problematic claims made by scholars about the gullibility of spectators, who are often assumed to approach documentary as a transparent rendering of 'real life'.^[25]

Reality TV as bad object

Considerations of viewing habits invited by the questionnaire often

put into play some binary oppositions between good / bad; 'authentic' / fake or fabricated; genuine emotional impact / cheap sensationalism; information and insight / trivia and exploitation. The operative distinction here is between documentary and reality television, two modes that tend to be arranged on opposing sides of these polarities.^[26]

For example:

Q13: Are you a regular consumer of documentary films?

'Yes - if the subject interests me - human interest stories biographies...'

Q18: Are you a regular consumer of 'reality television'?

'No. It holds little interest for me. There are enough interesting things happening without having to manufacture them.'

(Anon., (4), British, white, male, entertainment news editor, age 38)

Q18: Are you a regular consumer of 'reality television'?

"No. Manipulative, exploitative, cheap, nasty."

(Anon., (1) British, white, female, school counsellor, age 51)

'No if you mean *Big Brother*, etc. Exploitation of people for entertainment? Not relevant to me.'

(Anon., (11), British, white, female, learning and development facilitator, age 50)

'No - I think they are exploitative and often degrading. I dislike the pleasure we seem to enjoy watching others expose themselves.'

(Anon., (9), British, white, female, teacher, age 45)

'No because there is no content beyond - it's stage and performance with no story'

(Anon., (3), French, white, female, senior lecturer, age 44)

The last statement focusing on stage and performance provides an interesting point of contrast with Annette Hill's research into viewers of *Big Brother*, which suggests that one of the pleasures in watching the show was precisely in the often *inadvertent* revelation of emotional truths that could play havoc with attempted performance.^[27]

Thus, among *Etre et Avoir's* middle-class audience sample at the Duke of York's, distinctions were made between the film (embodying relatively rare qualities of honesty and sincerity) and 'reality television' (represented most commonly by *Big Brother*) as emblematic of mindless television and a debasement of the documentary project. At times this taste opposition *may* have had a classed dimension -- although this was actually not very clear. Inevitably, classed distinctions are not often openly or simply stated as such. And, in the case of my research, middle-class people tended to discuss and relate their own tastes without much attention to the classed nature of this activity.

^[28] Furthermore, class may not necessarily be a relevant factor, despite the suspicions of the analyst.^[29] For example, in the next instance, the key taste difference was generational:

Q19: Please list the last three 'reality television' programmes you watched.

'Not sure I've seen any, apart from walking in to see my middle child following a very tedious *Big Brother* - and a bit of something about a traffic warden some time ago.'

(Jon, British, white, teacher and psychotherapist, age 52)

Francophilia

Given its subject matter -- the lives of largely working-class children in a remote and relatively deprived area of France -- *Etre et Avoir* could have been organised around the voyeuristic paternalism of what Brian Winston has called the 'victim-documentary'.^[30] However, it was commonly reviewed as a positive, life affirming experience, in both Britain and France.^[31] In the sample, many respondents enjoyed it as a 'feelgood film' (Anon., 6, British, white, female, teacher, age 29).

Etre et Avoir's director, Nicolas Philibert, has stated that:

'The theme is universal – how teachers give children confidence – and how they learn is the same throughout the world, in the city or the countryside. So you're not in the Auvergne in this school, but in a timeless no-man's land, which lends the film the aspect of a fable.'^[32]

However, for the British audience under analysis here, as well as the French commentators discussed earlier, the particularity of *Etre et Avoir's* setting in rural France was highly significant. The location of the film in 'La France profonde' contributed to the 'feelgood' factor for many respondents. Francophilia was an important element in shaping the pleasures that they derived from the film, and a love of the French countryside, and of holidays in France, was often mentioned. Several of the sample had an additional professional investment in the country, working as teachers of French.

In the next accounts, *Etre et Avoir* is enjoyed for, among other things, its Frenchness and the pleasures of nostalgia which it offers, a chance to recall a slower, less hectic pace of life. Two points are worth making here. First, that this notion of slow pace, attractive to several respondents, is due to the film's form as much as its content. Second, that the Frenchness of the film is, for the second viewer quoted at least, significant in both contributing to and allowing for, the pleasures of a pastoral idyll:

Q4: *What did you like best about the film?*

'Characterisation

Naturalness

Photography

"Old fashioned" values and atmosphere

FRANCE!

(Anne, British, white, female, home tutor, age 55)

*Q1: What were your responses to *Etre et Avoir*?*

'I was completely absorbed, though at times I wondered why. I felt a nostalgia for a way of life that has disappeared in England. The film always felt realistic however.'

Q6: How important to your enjoyment was the fact that the film is a documentary?

'It gave permission to accept it as real, not pure nostalgia or another *Year in Provence*.'

Q7: How important to your enjoyment was the fact that the film is French?

'It also made it easy to accept a simple pastoral world, if it had been in England it would've needed more of a Ken Loach kind of social realism, poverty and economic problems, etc.'

(Graham, British, white, male, teacher, age 57)

Note that the film's representation of rural French life is, for the above respondent, crucially different to (and more 'real' than) another representation of rural France popular with a middle-class British audience. *Etre et Avoir* is praised in part via an explicit rejection of *A Year in Provence*, the best-selling book by Peter Mayle, which recounts the move he and his wife made to a farmhouse in the Luberon region of France, and which was later adapted as a television series. *A Year in Provence* stands here for a notion of an *unacceptably* nostalgic, touristic and perhaps middle-brow approach to finding a rural retreat in France. The documentary status of *Etre et Avoir* is important in distinguishing it from the 'bad pleasures' of *A Year in Provence*.^[33]

For Graham quoted above, the French identity of the film also operates to allay concerns and preclude objections that would attend watching, and complicate enjoyment of, a British version of the same topic. Contrast his account with the following statement, where the film is seen to fail precisely because it lacks an explicit engagement with social problems and political issues, which are again associated with the work of Ken Loach:

*Q1: What were your responses to *Etre et Avoir*?*

'Rather disappointing. A missed opportunity. Not enough about the background to the school or the kids. The piece to camera with M Lopez [the teacher] jarred slightly because it was the only interview. Ken Loach would have done a far better job.'

(Tim, British, white, male, teacher, age 46)

Here the notion of an informational deficit is again evident, notably focused around the larger social and political contexts in which the school and the community might be located.

Ethics, Law, Performance

Ethical issues around screen documentary tend to arise in two distinguishable but overlapping fields: (i) the processes and procedures of film-making and (ii) the form and address of the finished film, its propositions to viewers and implicit orientations towards its subjects. In terms of film form, the semiotic approach to issues of signification that has been so influential in studies of fiction film needs to be revised and widened in scope once the referent becomes a 'real world' person or event. As Bill Nichols has suggested, semiotics is an inadequate tool with which to confront the various impacts of documentary on 'those who have their image "taken"'. He notes that issues of privacy, libel, and slander are never simply semiotic phenomena.^[34]

In the case of *Etre et Avoir*, moral and legal notions of exploitation were most directly raised by the decision of its key adult protagonist, the teacher Lopez, to sue the film's director, producers, distributor and even the composer of its music, for at least 250,000 euros for 'counterfeiting' his class.^[35] Whatever the merits or otherwise of Lopez' claim – which was announced a few months after my audience research was carried out, and which was ultimately rejected by a Paris court^[36] -- it was not entirely surprising, given the film's reliance (albeit less than exclusive) on his teaching performance in front of the class.

A *Screen International* report on the case and its possible implications for documentary filmmaking carried this comment from the head of France's Association of Directors and Producers: 'What shocks me in Lopez' claim is his pretension to be recognised as the co-author of a work in which he was only a model. Mona Lisa didn't paint the Mona Lisa.'^[37] Philibert, the film's director, has said: 'To have paid someone for their presence on the screen – it would have meant the death of the documentary. From the moment you pay someone to appear in a documentary, the people you are filming become your subordinates. They no longer have the freedom to say "No, stop filming".'^[38] These lines of thinking are persuasive, but they do overlook documentary filmmakers' well established predilection for focusing on professional performers, from entertainers and politicians to less showy individuals like Lopez.^[39]

Furthermore, as Nichols suggests, screen documentary has become dependent upon a more general casting of individuals who can behave in an engaging yet unselfconscious fashion in front of the camera. He calls this way of appearing 'virtual performance', and notes:

'Like trained actors, social actors who convey a sense of psychological depth by means of their looks, gestures, tone, inflection, pacing, movement and so on become favored subjects. The impulse is toward social actors who can "be themselves" before a camera in an emotionally revealing manner.'^[40]

Nichols' concept of virtual performance is applicable to Lopez' appearance in *Etre et Avoir*, as well as to that of some of the pupils, especially JoJo, the boy featured on the film's poster image.^[41] (Indeed, since Lopez' case, the parents of seven of his 11 pupils are now going to court to seek payment of 20,000 euros each for their children's parts in the film.)^[42]

This is not to support the reductive logic of Lopez' legal claim, but rather to point to a common feature of a certain style of documentary film making, and a crucial element of its appeal -- the use of sympathetic characters. Thus, for several members of the audience sample, Lopez' quiet charisma was a key element in the success of *Etre et Avoir*. For instance:

Q1: what were your responses to Etre et Avoir?

"A wonderfully human film which touched forgotten memories of childhood. Its sincerity was 100% and left me with an image of a kind dedicated man who would be the backbone of any educational system..."

(Kenneth, British, white, male, retired telecomms engineer, age 82)

Q1: what were your responses to Etre et Avoir?

'LOVED IT! Inspiring teacher who never raises his voice - this is what teaching is all about. Wonderful rapport with pupils - brings out the best in even the reluctant ones.'

(Anne, British, white, female, home tutor, age 55, her emphasis)

In the second account above, Lopez' performance and the film's depiction of a notably pre-bureaucratic version of school teaching allow *Etre et Avoir* to be enjoyed as, among other things, a validation of the profession.

As the court case did not take place until after the British release of *Etre et Avoir*, the particular issues of exploitation and ownership which it raised were not directly

considered by members of the sample. However, concerns about voyeurism, intrusion, and possible exploitation of the school children were raised by some respondents. For instance:

Q1: what were your responses to Etre et Avoir?

'Wonderful bit of filmmaking - I felt there were so many layers to it. Two things concerned me though. One was that I was very aware of the editing and kept wondering about the hours of film left on the cutting room floor. The second was I was concerned about the ethics of using children's vulnerability as the basis of so much of it.'

Q5: What did you like least about the film?

'Some of the 'rawness' made me feel a bit voyeuristic.'

(Anon., (3), French, white, female, senior lecturer, age 44)

Q5: What did you like least about the film?

'The way in one conversation between the teacher and a pupil, I felt the conversation moved along because of the presence of the camera. He seemed somewhat uncomfortable, but the camera kept rolling.'

(David, British, white, male, teacher, age 36)

Q5: What did you like least about the film?

'I found some of the scenes slightly intrusive ... the teacher's 1-2-1 scene with the girl who cannot communicate.'

(Victoria, British, white, female teacher, age 29)

These responses are significant as viewer perspectives on what Nichols has called the ethical and ideological costs of documentary's epistephiliac drive.^[43]

Conclusion

In this article I have shown what can be learned from an investigation of audience perspectives on topics such as documentary's truth claims and conventional epistephilia, -- issues that have hitherto been addressed largely via text- and production-centred analyses. The study has considered audiences' generic expectations of the documentary

mode, and their deployment of notions of 'honesty' and 'sincerity' to characterise *Etre et Avoir*. The focus on this film in particular has also enabled an examination of less-debated subjects such as middle-class taste and Franchophilia, which proved crucial to its appeal for the sample under discussion.

Much more work is needed on audiences' experiences of watching documentary on television and video as well as at the cinema. Areas that are ripe for further exploration include viewer attitudes to questions of documentary form and ethics, and continuing investigation of issues of class and taste as they relate to documentary audiences. Such investigations are long overdue if viewers of documentary are to be treated with the seriousness with which audiences for screen fictions are now being addressed.

Notes

This is an extended and revised version of a paper given at the Media, Communications and Cultural Studies Association annual conference, University of Sussex, December 2003. Thanks to Charlotte Adcock, Guy Austin, Ernest Mathijs, and Brian Winston for help and suggestions.

[1] For example, John Corner, Kay Richardson and Nicholas Fenton, *Nuclear Reactions: Form and Response in Public Issue Television* (Academia Research Monograph 4) (Luton: John Libbey, 1990).

[2] See for instance the work of Annette Hill, or Ernest Mathijs and Janet Jones (eds) *Big Brother International: Format, Critics and Publics* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004).

[3] Savage et al divide the middle classes into three categories: entrepreneurial, managerial and professional. These are 'differentiated mainly by their respective command of property, organizational and cultural assets'. D Lockwood, 'Marking out the middle class(es)' in T. Butler and M. Savage (eds) *Social Change and the Middle Classes* (London: UCL Press, 1995), p.1 Within the professional middle class, those employed by the state in education, health and welfare are characterised as having, 'cultural assets but not much money', and are compared to Bourdieu's category of 'intellectuals'. Mike Savage, J. Barlow, P. Dickens, and T. Fielding, *Property, Bureaucracy and Culture: Middle-Class Formation in Contemporary Britain* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 109.

[4] See Thomas Austin, *Watching the World: Screen Documentary and its Audiences* (forthcoming, 2007).

[5] Ann Gray, *Research Practice for Cultural Studies* (London: Sage, 2003), p.51

[6] The American sociologists Peterson and Kern have argued persuasively that, for middle-aged and younger generations of the American upper and middle classes, barriers between 'high' and 'low' cultural tastes have been eroded, resulting in a shift they characterise as 'from snob to omnivore'. Richard A. Peterson and Roger M. Kern, 'Changing highbrow taste: from snob to omnivore', *American Sociological Review* vol. 61, no. 3 (1996), pp. 900-7. Whether there is such a mobility of cultural taste moving upwards from the so-called bottom end of the social spectrum is still debatable. On this topic, and the suggestion that television may work to increase the 'cultural mobility of viewers', see Maire Messenger Davies and Roberta Pearson 'Stardom and distinction: Patrick Stewart as an agent of cultural mobility: a study of theatre and film audiences in New York City', in Thomas Austin and Martin Barker (eds) *Contemporary Hollywood Stardom* (London: Arnold, 2003), especially pp. 168-9, and 181.

[7] Lopez quoted in Viv Griskop, 'Do the maths', *Telegraph Magazine*, May 28, 2005, p. 41. Thanks to James Montgomery for pointing me to this reference.

[8] Griskop, p. 41. *Positif* magazine gave the number of single class schools in France as 400. Françoise Aude, 'Etre et Avoir: un cas d'école', *Positif*, no. 499 (2002), pp. 40-41. Thanks to Guy Austin for pointing me to this reference and translating it for me.

[9] Guy Gauthier, *Un Siècle de Documentaire Français* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2004), p. 193. The presence of Pacific immigrant children in the class might be taken as one sign of 'contemporary society', however. Thanks to Guy Austin for pointing me to this reference and translating it for me.

[10] Aude. The article noted: 'Georges Lopez is the first to refuse [the school's] validity as a model. How could his method, his authority, and even the "foundations" he gives his pupils, work in an urban environment, within the turbulence of a multicultural society?' The feature also criticised a perceived gender bias in the film: 'If "school" is a feminine word, in *Etre at Avoir*, Nicolas Phlibert inscribes it mainly as masculine. That's old hat.'

[11] Amy Barrett, 'The truth hurts', *Screen International*, November 21, 2003, p. 18.

[12] Cinema Advertising Association figures to 4 November 2003. Telephone call to CAA research department, 24 November 2003.

[13] Additionally, I gave out 120 questionnaires to cinemagoers at the local Odeon cinema, hoping to discover some reasons why many people had not been to see *Etre et Avoir*. Only 11 questionnaires were returned - easily the worst rate of return I have experienced in audience research. Of these 11 respondents, nine did not know that the film was showing; one did not get round to seeing it; and one wrote 'the subject matter did not appeal to me'. The larger point here is how hard it is to track down (non)audiences who care little about any particular film, or, as in this case, know little or nothing about it. This difficulty may be one reason why so many audience studies have focused on fans: as especially committed and often vocal audiences they may be relatively easy to research.

[14] In addition to the 36, two female respondents (age 63 and 65) did not give permission to be quoted. Twelve of the 36 were teachers, with another 9 working in similar professions as tutors, lecturers, instructors, counsellors, etc. The full breakdown of the sample is as follows:

(Anon., (1) British, white, female, school counsellor, age 51)

(Anon., (2) no race or nationality given, male, student, age 30)

(Anon., (3), French, white, female, senior lecturer, age 44)

(Anon., (4), British, white, male, entertainment news editor, age 38)

(Anon., (5) British, white, female, secretary, age 59)

(Anon., (6), British, white, female, educational psychologist, age 35 given)

(Anon., (7), British, white, female, teacher / lecturer, age not given)

(Anon., (8), British, white, female, nurse, age 52)

(Anon., (9), British, white, female, teacher, age 45)

(Anon., (10), British, white, male, student, age 30)

(Anon., (11), British, white, female, learning and development facilitator, age 50)

(Anon., (12), British, white, female, occupational therapist, age 28)

(Anon. 13, British, white, male, teacher and psychotherapist, age 52)

(Anon. 14, Spanish, white, female, postgraduate student, age 26)

(Paul, British, white, male, teacher, age 31)

(Chris, British, white, male, teacher, age 44)

(Sophie, British, white, female, Teacher, age 23)

(Caroline, British, white, female, student, age 34)

(Mark, British, white, male, book editor, age 39)

(John, English, white, male, instructor, age 60)

(Tim, British, white, male, teacher, age 46)

(Lynne, British, white, female teacher, age 51)

(Kenneth, British, white, male, retired telecomms engineer, age 82)

(Mar, Spanish, white, female research fellow in physics, age 36)

(Jon, British, white, male, teacher and psychotherapist, age 52)

(David, British, white, male, teacher, age 36)

(Bernard, British, white, male, chartered surveyor, age 52)

(Victoria, British, white, female teacher, age 29)

(Haydn, British white, male, Access student, age 29)

(Cas, British, white, female, teacher, age 51)

(Anne, British, white, female, home tutor, age 55)

(Graham, British, white, male, teacher, age 57)

(Janet, British, white, female, university lecturer, age 52)

(Pascal, French, white, male, project engineer, age 30)

(Adrian, British, white, male, journalist, age 34)

(Roy, British, white, male, retired accountant, age 65)

[15] See more on this kind of analytical move in terms of class below. On the issue of a researcher writing into existence a generic category which may not exist on the same

terms for the audiences being researched, see my comments on writing about horror in Thomas Austin, *Hollywood, Hype and Audiences: Selling and Watching Popular Film in the 1990s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), chapter 4, especially pp. 116-118.

[16] Is documentary best approached as a mode or a genre? Clearly, individual viewers will have their own notions and expectations of material labelled 'documentary', and these may or may not accord with more established definitions. Personally, I largely agree with Paul Arthur's useful summary, although I would add commonly deployed audience assumptions and viewing strategies to his list. He writes: 'Some theorists assert that doc itself is a genre, although a more sensible approach would describe it as a mode of production, a network of funding, filming, postproduction and exhibition tendencies common to work normally indexed as "documentary".' As Arthur notes, it is also possible to locate generic types with 'family resemblances' within the category of documentary. Paul Arthur, 'Extreme makeover: the changing face of documentary', *Cineaste*, vol. 30, no. 3, (2005) p. 20.

[17] On this topic see various critiques of David Bordwell's overly rational model of spectatorship in fiction film.

[18] Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 31.

[19] Corner et al, p. 50.

[20] Nichols, p. 142.

[21] See for example, Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2000; John Corner, *The Art of Record: A Critical Introduction to Documentary* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996); Carl Plantinga, 'Moving pictures and the rhetoric of non-fiction: two approaches' in David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (eds) *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996); Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real: the Documentary Film Revisited* (London: British Film Institute, 1995).

[22] In each case, the 'simplicity' of *Etre et Avoir* -- in terms of both content matter and its relatively slow pace and 'gentle', unflashy formal treatment -- is crucial.

[23] Jim Collins, 'Genericity in the nineties: eclectic irony and the new sincerity', in Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins (eds) *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, (New York and London: AFI / Routledge, 1993), p. 257.

[24] Annette Hill, '*Big Brother*: the real audience', *Television and New Media*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2002).

[25] See Plantinga for a more detailed critique of such models.

[26] Not many members of the sample actually identified themselves as regular viewers of reality tv, so most rejections of the form may be based on limited viewing experience. Three respondents (all younger than the average age of 44) wrote enthusiastically about reality tv. These regular viewers of reality tv refused to characterise it as a debased travesty of documentary traditions.

[27] Hill, '*Big Brother*'.

[28] This is also evident in statements about attitudes to reality television and radio made in the similarly middle-class sample documented by the current Mass Observation archive at the University of Sussex.

[29] In considering class as a possible factor here, I am not suggesting that reality television as a genre only addresses a working-class audience. Its appeal is much wider than this in class terms.

[30] Winston, pp. 40-7, 230-1, 258.

[31] See for example Benny Crick, 'Documentary schooled in the art of feelgood', *Screen International*, October 4 2002, p. 24; Aude.

[32] Richard Falcon, 'Back to basics' *Sight and Sound*, vol. 13, no. 7 (2003), p. 29.

[33] Another respondent also noted the justification and authority which the film gained through its documentary status:

Q6: *How important to your enjoyment was the fact that the film is a documentary? 'Any feelings that it was a bit fey or twee would have been harder to dismiss if the film was not a documentary.'*

(Haydn, British white, male, Access student, age 29)

[34] Nichols, p. 271n.

[35] It is possible to argue that *Etre et Avoir* has precipitated some major changes in the way of life which it records. Its consequences and impacts include the elevation of Lopez from village schoolteacher to a kind of national hero, and more recently his recasting as a national villain, following news of his legal action; and the transformation of the village, its school and children into a tourist attraction. Reportedly, around the film's release, police had to be called to the school to restrain members of the media, and one of the pupils, JoJo could not go to his judo classes for a while, because of the crush of sightseers.

[36] See Amelia Gentleman, 'Defeat for teacher who sued over film profits,' *The Guardian*, 29 September 2004, p. 15.

[37] Barrett, p. 18.

[38] Quoted in Groskop, p. 43.

[39] For a more detailed discussion of performance and performativity in documentary, see Bruzzi, pp. 125-80.

[40] Nichols, p. 120.

[41] Philibert's earlier film, *Le Pays des Sourds* (1993) also features a charismatic teacher and an engaging and vulnerable male child, although each is less central to the film than their counterparts in *Etre et Avoir*.

[42] See Gentleman, Groskop.

[43] Nichols, p. 76. A scene that I found uncomfortable when I watched the film at the Duke of York's was of one of the pupils struggling with his maths homework. As the scene unfolded, he became gradually surrounded by more and more members of his working-class family, all trying to help and getting themselves and him more confused in the process. Whether intended as comic relief or not, this scene was greeted with widespread laughter in the cinema -- more than any other moment in the film. One of the reasons why I found it so uncomfortable was that I read this laughter as middle-class mockery of the stupidity of the working classes, -- a process of laughing at, rather than

with, those on screen. I mention this not so much to display the credentials of a guilty middle-class liberal, but to point to one of the difficulties in writing about class in this context.

Only two members of the sample mentioned this scene. One in a statement that was very brief and said that it was funny, but not *how* it was funny. The other one suggested finding humour in recognition -- a process very different from the other response that I suspected but was unable to support:

Q11: Who did you identify and why?

'The young boy whose family were attempting to help him with his maths homework, and getting confused about it. Why? My father wasn't too hot at Maths either!'

(Haydn, British white, male, Access student, age 29)

Thus I have no information from the sample to support my own suspicions, or my tendency to privilege class as an *a priori* analytical category in this research -- both of which I must admit would have shaped this passage further had I found such material. (Compare Liz Stanley, 'Women have servants and men never eat: issues in reading gender, using the case study of Mass-Observation's 1937 day diaries', *Women's History Review*, vol. 4, no. 1 (1995), on the assumption, made by herself and other feminist researchers, that gender is an *a priori* analytical category, and her suggestion that it is privileged in practices such as archiving, gathering and interpreting qualitative data.) The last response also served as a reminder that class needs to be understood as a dynamic process, as well as a set of structures and practices. Thus the last respondent, as an Access student, could be (although this is not necessarily the case) an example of someone on the social journey from working class to middle class.

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Appendix

Etre et Avoir Questionnaire

Contact (by email): Thomas Austin

