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Editorial Introduction

In 2003 a small group of academics, film enthusiasts and members of the film industry who were all members of the Edinburgh Film Guild started talking about the limitations of research into film audiences. The background to this discussion was the 70th anniversary of the Film Guild in 2004/5. The outturn of this was the first Edinburgh Film Audiences conference in March 2005. Following the success of this event, the decision to hold another conference in March 2007 was taken. The papers in this special edition represent some of the contributions to the later conference and I had the pleasure of being involved in organising both conferences. (Abstracts of all the papers at the 2007 conference can be found at <http://www.filmaudiencesconference.co.uk/>).

Allow me to introduce myself. I am a sociology lecturer at Napier University in Edinburgh. My background is somewhat mixed. My first degree was in Communication Studies, my Masters was in The Theology and Ethics of Communication and my PhD was in the Sociology of Mass Media. The one area that provides the bridge across those different disciplines is audiences. I have been thoroughly fascinated by the study of audiences but frustrated by work that is not borne out empirically; work that never actually speaks to audiences but which makes a good deal of assumptions about them. Without providing a long list of authors, it is probably fair to say that textual analysis that was never tested on actual audiences, particularly when it came from a theological perspective was and is an especial dislike.

Initially my academic work had focused on television audiences. It was therefore extremely interesting to meet with people at the Film Guild (which I joined 10 years ago) who either had more specific academic knowledge or had insider knowledge of the industry due to their involvement in production, exhibition and policy making. They were all just as frustrated with the lack of good, qualitative audience research that could help them in their work. The aim of that first conference was to try to bring academe and industry together to share ideas and to explore ways of working together that would be mutually beneficial. Whilst the conference was small it seemed to facilitate such exploration as well as providing a space for academics who were conducting empirical research into audiences – past and present.

The 2007 conference aimed to continue this theme. Though in reality the link with industry was not quite as strong as we had hoped, [nevertheless, there was a presence]. What was hugely satisfying was the more international flavour of the papers and their

definite, empirical nature. As part of its commitment to explore fresh perspectives on audiences, students were encouraged to submit papers, with the best student entry being granted a bursary to the conference. It was interesting to see recurring themes, not only across the two conferences but also across some of the papers – usually a good sign in qualitative research that some degree of generalisability is being reached - themes of resistance to received wisdom, the use of extremely varied films to be self-reflexive, the role of 'low quality' films to reinforce a sense of self and social identity to name but a few. Not all of the papers were based on interviews but where questionnaires were used open-ended questions were always incorporated in order to get a deeper understanding of those responses.

The papers in this special edition reflect a number of issues related to audiences. Cherry's article on female horror fans examines the notion of a feminine aesthetic. She notes the contradictions in their stated likes and dislikes compared to their actual likes and dislikes. In so doing she raises the question of the social construction of feminine taste and of course what this means in terms of defining films that are appealing to men or women. Haines Lyon's article on *Kill Bill 2*, which was conducted for the Methodist Church, touches on this apparent contradiction between its perception as a 'man's' film and the number of women who responded to it positively. Her article explores the ways in which mainstream cinema (despite a belief to the contrary in certain religious circles) can be used to reflect on meaning-making in life. It is a useful counter position to the advice offered on film viewing on some religious based websites. Following on from this idea of meaning-making, is Axelson's work carried out in Sweden. Using a socio-cognitive approach, he identifies a wide range of films that enable individual respondents to explore their understanding of the world at a personal level and often at an interpersonal level. Thus the paper further demonstrates the varied ways in which different members of different audiences will find resonances that might not seem obvious based on the title or content of the film.

Hardie's piece is particularly interesting because she is a documentary film maker and the article is based on research carried out in multiple locations across Europe. She explores possibilities for expanding potential audiences for documentary film in cinema. By talking to audiences she shows that there are challenges to existing, untested assumptions about audience behaviour; in this case, that arthouse audiences and documentary film audiences are not synonymous. Such findings pose challenges but present new opportunities for film exhibitors as well as those involved in policy making and funding.

Esan's article on Nollywood provides a fascinating insight into the development of Nigerian cinema and its role in the maintenance of identity for a diasporic audience. Her work demonstrates the ways in which the London-based diaspora use Nollywood to maintain a connection with Nigeria as well as providing a resource to assist daily living. She touches on the greater use of video (with the concomitant tensions about whether it counts as proper film), the sociological significance of the classed cinema and its

potential to be part of the hegemonic struggle even when the films appear to be unconnected to political issues.

Velez Serna won the best student paper at the 2007 conference and her work is based on research into the construction of audiences in Colombia during the 1940s. Some similarities can be seen between her work and Esan's in terms of political intrusions as well as the classed spaces of cinemas, which also reflect some of the points raised in Hardie's article. Velez Serna's discussion of the attempt to construct a Colombian national identity through film again demonstrates the problems that may be encountered by those who would attempt to control audiences' ways of seeing.

Finally, we have Selfe's article that discusses research carried out for the British Board of Film Classification in the area of sexually violent films. The study combined international and national respondents, using a variety of methods and provides further insights into the complex ways in which audiences respond to films that are often seen as socially problematic. The article demonstrates that even with the most 'difficult' films whilst there may well be similar responses nevertheless they are heterogeneous, drawing on different contextual positions to either embrace or refuse films.

Whilst each of these articles is interesting in its own right and adds to the debate about audiences and media effects, they all raise important points that are relevant to those in the industry be they film makers, distributors, exhibitors or funders/policy makers. Assumptions are dangerous and without good, empirical research audiences can be missed or targeted incorrectly. More seriously, those assumptions can be used to reinforce dominant positions to the detriment of 'other' positions. There is need for more work in this area and as shown at the 2nd Edinburgh International Film Audience conference, work is continuing. Some papers from the conference are still on going and could not be presented here. For some other contributors at the conference, their work has not been submitted here because of the pressures of academic life, but the empirical work on audience must continue regardless.

The Edinburgh International Film Audiences conference will be running again on March 26th and 27th 2009. The first [call for papers](#) is in this issue. Our aim, to provide a space where film audience researchers amongst others, can come together to present completed work, discuss on-going as well as future work, remains constant. I hope that this special edition of *Particip@tions* proves to be an interesting and enjoyable one. I am indebted to the editorial team for giving us this opportunity. Finally, I would like to thank everyone who was involved in running the conferences and the contributors for their willingness to participate and make amendments in fairly short periods of time.

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