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Past Issues

□ Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs (Eds.):

Watching The Lord of The Rings: Tolkein's World Audiences

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A Review by Sonia Livingstone

As certain media products become global in reach, audiences are also globalised. Does this mean that people are joined in a common 'we', sharing a love of *The Lord of the Rings*, *Big Brother* and *Sex and the City* from Oklahoma to Timbuktu? Or does it mean, as was shown by earlier research on responses to America's *Dallas* and *Disney*, that all they share is a delight in reappropriating ('glocalising') imported media, or perhaps rejecting them and, thereby, the culture that originated them? Such questions increasingly absorb not only media and communication scholars but also anthropologists, political economists and social theorists. But they set a challenge for empirical research. If it was hard to investigate the often privately experienced and unspoken responses of popular culture audiences in one's own country, how can researchers hope to encompass 'world audiences'?

'Watching The Lord of The Rings' stakes its claim for our attention both as an empirical exploration of world wide responses to a complex fantasy text and, reflexively, as a methodological prototype of how such exploration could and should be conducted. On both levels, this very dense, somewhat uneven, yet definitely stimulating report of a large collaborative project offers fascinating insights and future directions for audience research. Although these are simultaneously hampered by some weaknesses in methodology, researchers can learn from these as well as from the project's strengths, for the shelf on which comparative audience books are arrayed is still too short, given not only the ambitions of audience theory but also the political, economic and cultural significance of global audiences in the twenty-first century.

Creatively framed within the Germanic tradition of reception-aesthetics, together with perspectives from political economy, narrative and genre theory and, of course, the audience reception tradition, the project centres on December 2003, when the third film in Peter Jackson's trilogy based on Tolkien's novel, *The Return of the King*, premiered internationally. As with Hadley Cantril's *War of the Worlds* study which helped to kick start audience research seventy years before, this media event triggered multinational teams of researchers to seek quantitative and qualitative, textual and extra-textual data of many kinds before, during and after the film itself. Knowing how cross-national projects can struggle to reach completion, and having read the final, methodological chapter on how it was done, one must applaud the authors for having reached their goal.

Yet though the project delivers on many of its ambitions, it is not quite the model of cross-national research that the field needs. As I know from my own work, somehow when one comes to put countries side by side in a comparative framework, the quantitative speaks louder than the qualitative, as it does in this book, making for many data tables but fewer insights. Further, both qualitative and quantitative methods are demanding and, while the attempt to triangulate them is at times successful as the authors puzzle out the meaning of their data, getting the methods 'right' matters: there are some inept and confusing statements about sampling and survey design, and some tangled presentations of findings that would make me hesitate to present the book as a model to my students.

For example, despite nearly 25,000 responses to the online survey, it is unclear just what population has been sampled, rendering the study's validity uncertain. Since half have read all three books more than once, they are clearly fans; since they have responded to an online survey, they are relatively well-off in global terms; since one quarter are American and few come from Africa or Latin American, they are not quite the 'world audience' claimed. Of course, a book about fans is fine, but the authors waver in recognising this is what it is, obscuring what's left out. But note, no-one in these pages rejects, laughs at, is cynical about or simply baffled by *The Lord of The Rings*; unlike *Dallas* in Japan, it seems never to fail.

Also frustrating is the rather book's sweeping, even universalising gaze that encompasses many countries but says little about any. Though chapters are written by German, Australian, Dutch and Spanish scholars, we learn little of German, Australian, Dutch or Spanish audiences or of how they appropriate *The Lord of The Rings* within their lifeworlds or their cultural traditions of narrative or fantasy, nor of how it reshapes their horizons of expectations. Implicitly, the authors present – and perhaps fairly so – the experience of this complex text as something that people around the world have in common.

Exploring the character of people's involvement in *The Lord of The Rings* is where the book is strongest. The authors clearly share a commitment to extending the concept of the audience (and, in consequence, the text) far beyond the hermeneutic moment of someone staring at a screen. Being part of the *Lord of the Rings* audience includes 'pre-viewing' activities associated with initial film publicity – for many fans, this occasions lively anticipatory discussions in online forums. For many too, the experience of *The Lord of the Rings* began years before with reading the books, astonishingly widely translated, and so draws on the subtle ways in which the text has become embedded in diverse national cultures far beyond its British origins.

To be sure, actually going to the cinema remains a key moment in the reception process – but the deep collective sigh of pleasurable anticipation that welcomed the opening credits of the third film surely draws on that longer personal and cultural history. Watching *The Lord of the Rings*, it seems, stretches both across the globe and, for many viewers, across a lifetime. Indeed, the audience experience continues long after going to the cinema – people see the film again, then re-read the books after, discuss their reactions

with friends and family, enjoy the extra scenes in the extended DVD, play the computer game, check out news of favourite actors and more.

The audiences' absorption in comparing one textual form with another – especially comparing the translation from book to film – convinces, if one didn't already know it, that audiences reflexively enjoy exercising their critical expertise and, further, that the process of interpretation is a social one of deliberation, negotiation and shared understanding, not (just) a private act of cognition. The argument comes over clearly that, through what Liebes and Katz, in *The Export of Meaning*, called 'primordial themes' - here, friendship, belonging, journey and, of course, the struggle of good and evil - *The Lord of The Rings* speaks to profound concerns for us all.

However, audiences are also diverse – for reasons of gender and generation, life circumstances and cultural contexts. Among the various explorations of these differences within the edited collection, several are intriguing methodologically as well as empirically, playing with different dimensions of audiencehood in order to map distinct modes of reception. If these have any purchase beyond responses to this particular text, some valuable directions for future audience research could result, taking us beyond the easy segmentation of the audience demographically and fruitfully reconnecting audiences with both texts and contexts. As for the conduct of future cross-national projects, the often inventive approach exemplified here should encourage audience researchers to keep trying.

References

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