

Review:

Pomerance, Murray: *The Horse Who Drank The Sky: Film Theory Beyond Narrative and Theory*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press (2008). ISBN: 978-0-8135-4327-7, pp. 257, £61.50 hc. £24.50 pb.

Plantinga, Carl: *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience*, Berkeley: University of California Press (2009). ISBN: 978-0-520-25696-5, pp. 280, £41.95 hc. £16.95 pb.

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Abstract

Here are two books that are likely to irritate the pants off anyone with even a meagre interest in and understanding of audience research. In different ways they illustrate the continuing refusal in many parts of film studies to address the achievements of audience research and to allow the results into their thinking and theorising. Each book starts promisingly, appearing to open the door – but then quietly but effectively shutting it, lest life become more complex than their theoretical considerations can cope with.

Murray Pomerance opens his oddly-titled book (this is *sort of* explained in the final chapter) with a challenge to many traditional forms of film theory with which really made me hope, at least for a moment. Worrying about the very narrow account of ‘the filmic experience’, which appears to leave out so much of what brought him to his own continuing fascination (the experience of whole-minded and whole-bodied engagement with films), Pomerance turns to a well-turned quotation from Stephen Prince, who spoke of the “embarrassment that film scholars have written so much about film spectatorship at a level of almost total theoretical abstraction while other disciplines have done systematic work on real viewers” (quoted, p. 8). That hopeful introduction is the last time that any interest in any audiences other than Murray Pomerance so much as peeks in.

The rest of the book veers between incredibly dense textual accounting with bits of films which fascinate him, description of his own readings and responses, and sometimes implicit sometimes explicit prescriptions as to the *proper* way to read and respond. Chapter by chapter, he works through the detail of scenes of films milkable for their ‘brilliance’. So, *Rebel Without A Cause* lets him ‘deduce’ adult and adolescent responses to Jim’s alienation. *M* becomes emblematised through the smoke in a scene where the “police are like the criminals; the criminals are like the police” (p. 99) – and “we” *need* to notice this. We can get the tenor of his ways of arguing from two examples. Discussing how *Jaws* manages to be scary, when the shark is so evidently mechanical, Pomerance solicits ‘the audience’ as his witness:

Part of the problem of maintenance of the audience’s engagement against corruption involves prevention of status mixing. For example, audiences would be able to tolerate a mechanical device guised to look like a shark emerging from the water and coming near an actor named Roy Schneider, working a long day on a boat under contract to Universal Pictures. This would be plausible in a documentary about acting or film-making, the ‘making-of’ situation. The difficulty is produced exactly by Schneider’s immersion in the role of Brody being incompatible with the machine’s possible failure to be immersed in the role of the shark. (p. 176)

Did you find the shark unconvincing? Did knowing that it was not ‘real’ stop you enjoying the situation being scary? Nope, me neither. But Pomerance, having constructed a problem, can now set out to resolve it. It’s the dog, you see. Because the spaniel that barks at the shark is obviously real, that authenticates the shark ‘for the audience’. Ah. And I thought (and didn’t care) that the dog was a trained one, being instructed by a handler off-screen to bark.

This is audience as walk-on witnesses summoned for their ‘evidence’. The problem is, having called his witness to the bar, ‘the audience’ is not allowed to speak. And why should they? After all, most of the time they don’t know how they *ought* to watch. Writing of Hitchcock’s *Stage Fright*, Pomerance is much concerned with the ‘problem’ of Marlene Dietrich’s/Charlotte’s scream – heard but not witnessed by viewers. Who is screaming? Why? What does it mean? He takes in all 13 pages on this ‘acousmatic moment’, trying to convince that it just doesn’t make sense. His solution is to tell us that in effect we can’t have understood it right, because we didn’t get enough of the context: “Fully to appreciate Hitchcock’s use of sound to sever us from the world and then to join us to it, I must leap to the last moments of the film. Not to give too much away ...” (p. 136). This is a different kind of audience altogether – one which hasn’t yet even *seen* the film, but is being urged to go and do so, with this book as spoiler-free manual.

I think a fair judgement would be that this book is more than anything an attempt to prove the author's personal uniquely interesting insights. It is in the end instructional. That Prince quotation with which it began is now its own embarrassment.

Carl Plantinga is different. This book is very much part of the field of cognitive film theory, a field which has grown and established itself as the main viable alternative to the *Screen* theory/psychoanalytic tradition which sort of dominated film studies during the 1970-80s. Initially based on harsh criticisms of the uncheckable theoreticism of its main competitors, and built upon David Bordwell's demand for middle-range theories which could take account of histories, production factors, etc, Cognitive film theory has, it seems to me, hardened into its own new orthodoxy. Its followers hardly allow their work to intersect with, let alone be influenced by, other kinds of film research or scholarship. This is a new breed of textual scholarship, just as obsessively determined as its forebears, but just with different underpinning assumptions.

Still, as with Pomerance, at the outset it *looks* as if it might be different. Both begin with anecdotes of their own experiences of film-viewing, and each lays down a resulting challenge. Here is Plantinga's:

Film and media scholars sometimes use the tired literary metaphor of 'a reading' to describe the viewer's encounter with a film. [...] Perhaps for some audiences, and in relation to some films, the experience *is* cool and intellectual. A 'reading' is what some academics do in the classroom, days after the screening. Audiences at the movies, however, are often thrilled, excited, or exhilarated, moved to tears, laughter, scorn, or disgust; made fearful, expectant, curious, or suspenseful; absorbed and focused; outraged, angered, placated, or satisfied; given elevated heartbeats, sweaty brows, and galvanic skin responses; made to scream, yell, and excoriate the bad guys; and usually, relieved and calmed at the film's end. (pp. 2-3)

This panorama of possible emotional responses is his domain – and it didn't seem unreasonable to expect that a book with this ambition might see itself as able to learn *something* from the work that a good number of audience researchers have now done, which has had a lot to say about, for instance, the role of expectations, about the kinds of suspense felt, about anger and disgust, and so on. But no, 'audience' once again becomes a theoretical construct.

Plantinga develops almost an algorithm of emotional responses, building more and more complex distinctions between 'types of spectator emotions' (see his Table, p. 69). Mostly in dialogue with other cognitive film theorists (Ed Tan, Greg Smith, Torben Grodal), he takes us through the arguments for distinguishing different kinds of character allegiance – not pausing to check what evidence there is that real audiences principally relate via characters. Such

things are necessary to the theory, therefore the distinctions must go on, so pages 152-3 offer us five different ways in which spectators may 'align with characters' concerns and construals'. With distinctions in hand, 'conclusions' can be drawn. Who needs research when, Spinoza-like, deductions can be made?

Everything in Plantinga's schema revolves around what he terms "concern-based construals" – that is, making sense of things in light of caring what might happen. Well, fine, as one possibility – but anyone who has investigated audience responses to films (as with any other medium) will point to plenty of other kinds of engagement. But Plantinga will not look at the research. Like other cognitive film theorists, he only ever acknowledges small fragments, and these are always derived from the most backward forms of mass communications research. So, he will cite as supportive the finding that liking of horror films is associated with boys getting the opportunity to comfort and 'cuddle' girls, allowing a bit of illicit sexual conflict. Oh per-lease – come on in, Brigid Cherry, at least.

When I proposed to review this book for *Participations* (because of a continuing wider interest in cognitive film theory), I genuinely didn't know that the one piece of *actual* audience research the book would even mention would be a piece of my own – nor, certainly, that it would so badly bowdlerise and misunderstand it as to lose all its sense. Plantinga picks out one small finding from my study with Kate Brooks of *Judge Dredd's* audiences. Kate and I found that some viewers displayed very little interest in the narrative of the film. As we argued it, it was as if the narrative in action films operated like a carrier-wave, warranting the move between moments of spectacular conflict. These, we found, were what was sought, but they had their own criteria of evaluation – and that was what interested us, because it revealed the possibility of a double-edged engagement balanced between excitement (the thrill of the action) and pessimism (visions of 'futures' in which ordinary people usually lost out). Right or wrong – and we were clear that the argument was tentative because the evidence was fragmentary (and assessing the strength of evidence is surely one of the markers of real research) –, we saw something emerging through the tensions inside young men's talk. Plantinga can't have this, because narrative *has* to be important, or the theory stumbles. So with an airy scholastic wave of his hand, our research is set aside because we "are far too willing to take what spectators say at face value in displacing the value of narrative in action films" (p. 143). Oh dear, where does one begin?

I don't expect people like Pomerance and Plantinga to do audience research – my strong suspicion is that they would do it extremely badly, anyway – but I do expect them to recognise that it is being done by others, that it has its own logics and traditions and makes distinctive contributions, and that these intersect with textual analytic traditions in fashions that must be addressed. On that basis, we could at least try a bit of dialogue. Until then, 'the spectator',

'the viewer', and 'the audience' will continue to march on through film scholarship, take up their 'positions', semaphore their deduced responses, and exit on cue.

Biographical Note

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