

Review

Christophe Gelly & David Roche (eds.), *Approaches to Film and Reception Theories / Cinéma et Théories de la Réception*, Clermond Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2012. ISBN: 978-2-84516-523-6. 280pp.

I looked forward to getting a copy of this book in great hope, being really interested to glean a sense of how an audience research tradition is emerging in France, and the shapes that it might be taken. My interest was both general and particular (having taken part in a conference in this area at Versailles University in 2003). In the end, I am somewhere between none the wiser and quite disappointed.

In France, an audience research tradition has been emerging in fits and starts out of various approaches. The formative traditions are like and also unlike those in Anglophone countries. One is a sociological, post-Bourdieuian interest in taste cultures, their histories, class compositions, and hierarchical structuring. The problem is that Bourdieu had little to say about film (or indeed, curiously, about other media like television until his very last years). Nor is the notion of close examination of particular audiences for a particular form, or genre, or even product particularly easily derived from Bourdieu, whose interest was in the global structuring of cultural tastes and patterns. Another is a literary/semiotic tradition which is primarily driven by interest in textual form, and – drawing on continental reception theory – in the ways in which particular forms make demands and posit possibilities for audience participation. There are clear elements of cinophilia – which has long been strong in France – within this latter approach, not least in the choice of more arty or experimental films to consider. The ‘popular’ is notable by its almost total absence.

This book presents a series of papers gathered from a 2010 conference which, by its own account, aimed to ‘open new vistas on reception and on the way it evolves and determines our relationship with art’. This is a bold claim. It opens with a broad survey by Melvyn Stokes, one of the editors of the four fine BFI volumes on the reception of Hollywood films. Stokes combines a very sensible overview of the place of the audience in cinema history, with a matching consideration of the rise of audience research. Thereafter, there are twelve essays, seven in French, five in English, each also with opposite language abstracts. Not one of them, to be truthful, seems to me to offer any concrete evidence of what I would recognise as audience or reception research, from interviews, surveys or the like. There are no evident encounters with actual audiences. The uses of reception

materials (reviews, debates, commentaries) are minimal, and mainly amount to passing references to academic commentaries on films.

What is offered instead is a variety of ‘readings’ of particular films (*The Sun Also Rises*, *Last Year in Marienbad*, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, and *Twilight* (the one popular film to get attention), for the ways in which aspects of their form or marketing structure how ‘the spectator’ will respond. In the main, no multiplicities or variations are even conceived. So, writing of *Manhattan Murder Mystery* and the ways this has to negotiate with the troubled marital reputation of its author, Isabel Schmitt-Pitiot concludes – without a single encounter with an audience member or a published review or anything else equivalent – that:

The final restoration of order brings about little more than an illusion hardly solving more than the film’s manifold contradictions, as it strikes a precarious balance between reasonable doubt and escapist enjoyment. Allen’s film grants spectators with its own brand of double indemnity on becoming an ideal scene where to repair, albeit temporarily, the shattered mirrors and delicate dialectics of the film spectator’s experience as well as the director’s endangered pact with his public. (p. 171)

I cannot help thinking, after reading this, of Edward Schappia’s strange but fascinating book *Beyond Representational Correctness*, in which he takes apart the embedded claims in a series of such ‘readings’ of films, and proposes – and in some cases conducts – small empirical tests of them.

The point is that this doesn’t make the essays in here less inherently interesting, but it does require a clarification of their claims and status. As investigations of audiences, they are at best hypotheses, or perhaps better deductive possibilities – awaiting empirical research to find out who, and under what circumstances, responds in the postulated ways. This is the key aspect that is entirely missing from this book – and whose absence is not even noted.

So, in the book as a whole, we have Jean-Pierre Esquenazi exploring Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*, to consider how certain (mainly academic) reviewing positions are enabled by the film’s structure. Emmanuel Plasseraud compares two theoretical modes for thinking about the nature of filmic experiences: that implied by post-1960s ‘textual analysis’ (which privileges individual engagements), and that implied by 1920s ‘visual Esperanto’ (which emphasised shared experiences). Camille Gendrault engages in a close reading of the main trailer for *Last Year at Marienbad*, to derive a possible account of how the film was prefigured for spectators. And H  l  ne Laurichesse examines the possible implications of *Twilight* as a transmedia phenomenon for audience reception.

Micha  l Bourgatte uses Michael Gondry’s *Be Kind Rewind* to explore ‘sweding’ (that is, the making of bizarre or grotesque remakes of well-known films) as a form of audience attention in its own right. In another essay on Woody Allen, Gilles Menegaldo speculates on

the relations between real spectators and fictionalised spectators within Allen's films (with their often dense filmic references). Christophe Chambost deploys theories taken from French scholar Jean-Marie Schaeffer to explore different diegetic layers arising within John Carpenter's *In the Mouth of Madness*. Shannon Wells-Lassagne uses an adaptation of *Mansfield Park* to explore 'the very nature of adaptation'. Jean-Benoit Gabriel analyses the formal devices into two French films to consider how a 'new kind of reader/spectator' emerges from a play between fiction in reality in contemporary cinema. Fabien Gris considers a certain 'melancholy' which he believes inhabits recent French reception of films which emphasise 'experience' over formal construction. And, finally, Clara Muller uses concepts from Gerard Genette to explore the processes of narration in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (I ended very unclear in what sense this essay is about film at all).

So, no doubt interesting in their own right, but hardly about audiences or reception. I hope very much to see a strong audience and reception research tradition emerge in France, but the signs are not good here.

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