Review

Richard Butsch and Sonia Livingstone (eds.), *Meanings of Audiences: Comparative Discourses.* London: Routledge, 2014. ISBN: 978041583709, pp.205.

The significance of this international collection for readers of *Participations* cannot be overstated, since its remit is to offer a cohesive fusion of methodologies for thinking about audience as socio-culturally framed in / as discourse, written by discourses of power, representation and regulation in specific socio-historic contexts.

Drawing together empirically based contributions from twelve geographically situated contexts, spanning a diverse range of nations, cultures and languages, the editors make the compelling case that that scholarly attention to the discursive mediation of audiences is required. In their opening overview, Butsch and Livingstone observe an awkward disjuncture between Western concepts of 'the public' and many of the societal contexts researched, but at the same time declare more evidence of shared perspectives than expected, drawing an analogy with translation – "differing and unique inflections, yet recognizably related" (15).

All of the chapters here are of clear and present value for the field of audience studies, but I focus on two powerful examples.

Joe F. Khalil's analysis of discourses around 'the mass' in Arabic media, with Western delimiting, is far reaching but one immediately striking insight is the unpacking of 'Unmah' – the community of Muslims as inscribed in religious discourse, set here in the digital media era and observed 'transcending ethnic and national identities while negotiating internal disunions'. Khalil works this analysis against another powerful 'mass discourse', that of the 'Arab street' – at once mythical, potentially volatile and condemned as docile and obedient.

In Taiwan, Fang-chih Irene Yang and Ping Shaw negotiate the discursive construction of active citizenship in Taiwanese online participation, using a Foucaultian approach to explore contingencies in discourses of nation-state building and globalization around online responses to the 2009 flood and 2012 Mayiko event.

In both these cases (and the rest) the discursive framing of audience is understood as a means of control, often imposing Western conceptions of 'publics' in the idioms of enlightenment democracy rhetorics. The implications of this for audience research are clear. Equally, the editors concede the tension inherent in placing national boundaries around the research at the risk of homogenizing populations and, indeed, discourses. That aside, their

objective to "parse the culturally specific meanings of representations of audiences, regardless of their origins in Europe or America or elsewhere, and to place these in the contexts of discourses and the power they wield" is undoubtedly realized.

The chapters span time as well as space. Christian Oggolder researches seventeenth century German print 'readership' as a construct, using a Hegelian civil society model as opposed to the ubiquitous Habermasian sphere. Wendy Willems accounts for the unequal distribution of discourse in Rhodesia's transition to Zimbabwe. Stephanie Hemelryk Donald offers a historical narrative of consistent discursive separation, in China, between the regime elite and 'the masses'. Smets et al trace diasporic immigrant (cinema) audiences in Belgium without recourse to nation-state mapping, in keeping with a central objective of the collection – to address the problem of the nation state as a framing structure for academic thinking about audiences. Aliaa Dawoud's research into Ramadan-scheduled daytime serials assesses such content as explicitly aiming to distract viewers from politics, but the distinct construction of 'viewers' (as opposed to Khalil's 'gomhor) serves to situate audiences as 'more active than the masses but less political than citizens'. Only such a forensic mode of analysis, sustained across the collection, can bring to the surface the power residing below such seemingly nuanced and interchangeable terms.

In their comparative overview, Butsch and Livingstone draw the observation that more strongly governed societies demonstrate more ideologically driven and 'official' representations of audiences, dividing audiences into elites and 'masses'. Greater attention is paid to framing audiences as communities in non-Western contexts. The contrast between pre-modern and modern discourse is key, and a profoundly Foucaultian lens is adopted to trace such contingencies, not better, or neutrally progressive, but just different. The writing about internet communities here is always careful to avoid the polarization of either emancipation or governance, but rather to explore the tensions between these competing discourses, often articulated in response to the same practices.

At the risk of 'cutting corners' in a review, James Curran's endorsement is accurate in that readers of this book will think about audiences in new ways and as such the work must qualify as essential reading to this journal's circulation. Further to this, Curran points out the relatively young authorship, something which would only come to light through extensive biography perusal. There is a flavour of an emerging interdisciplinary approach here, one that can both speak to the contemporary practices of audiences and their construction as sites of situated conflict. As Hemelryk Donald puts it in her chapter on media use by senior citizens in China, "even speaking about audience in the singular while promoting diversity reproduced the notion of a mass-line. This is the continuum that bears watching" (147). Whether the project of understanding audiences from perspectives other than those handed down in Euro-American research is further enhanced by the 'new generation' at work is difficult to say but 'making new sense of a key topic', as Curran observes, does come across in the piece.

As is often the case, the publisher may overstate the reach of the publication when claiming, on the back cover, that undergraduates and postgraduates alike will benefit from

the material. That said, undergraduates' teachers are more likely to use these examples of research when working with them on audience as a more fluid and contested concept.

Referring 'head on' to the review criteria for the journal, there is no question that *Meanings of Audiences* challenges and develops our thinking about audiences and as such, nothing short of an unreserved recommendation will suffice.

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