

Review

Jo Whitehouse-Hart, *Psychosocial Explorations of Film and Television Viewing: Ordinary Audience*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 204pp. ISBN 978-0-230-36283-3. Price: ebook £45.99, hardcover £61, softcover £58.

Psychosocial Explorations of Film and Television Viewing opens with an intriguing account of a young mother's chance encounter with a Hollywood musical screened on television one afternoon – a formative viewing experience that turns out to be the author's own. She felt, perhaps still feels, compelled by this film, which exerts a strange attraction that induces her to watch it again and again. In what will emerge as key terms in Jo Whitehouse-Hart's groundbreaking study, this film is a 'favourite', an 'impact text'; and yet watching it has never been an unequivocally pleasurable experience. It is the paradoxical tone of this encounter that fuels Whitehouse-Hart's inquiry into how 'emotionally powerful viewing experiences which generate biographical memories, strange or odd identifications and affective responses' can be understood (p.2); and she wonders, too, if the fact that viewings of 'her' film have always taken place at home could be a salient factor.

And so she is led to delve into, to try to understand, how such intense, compelling – and yet often uncomfortable – feelings can arise in the 'everyday activity of watching television and films in the home' (p.3). In a crucial move – and one rarely acknowledged in reports of scholarly research – Whitehouse-Hart explains exactly how she has parlayed her own responses into a particular quest for understanding, and then into a set of concrete research questions that take on board the instrumentality of the viewer's inner world in a manner rarely, if ever, admitted in media audience and reception studies. A psychosocial approach addressing the interaction of inner and outer, psychical and social, worlds, she suggests, offers considerable explanatory power and nuanced understanding of our engagements with screen media. She looks in particular to Object-Relations psychoanalysis (OR) for guidance, arguing that media texts and technologies may figure psychosocially as objects in the OR sense of embodying, engaging and enacting qualities and relations of both inner and outer worlds. She cites OR practitioners such as Melanie Klein, D.W. Winnicott and Christopher Bollas and their explorations of ambivalence and negativity in object relations, their attention to 'home' as at once a physical place and a psychical space, and their focus on the instrumentality of 'evocative objects' in cultural experience. So, for

example, 'favourites' can bring forth unexpectedly strong emotions and generate enduring memory flashes, visual and aural, of key textual moments; elements in the viewer's biography are often salient, as is the object-status of real-world objects (television, say) and spaces (the home). Whitehouse-Hart's research was designed to road-test this model of media reception by means of a set of research methods and practices grounded in a flexible, psychoanalytically-informed approach to qualitative inquiry with media users.

The book is structured around material from in-depth interviews with six 'ordinary' viewers of different ages and backgrounds, and brings 'psychosocial interpretive paradigms and psychoanalytically informed methods to bear on these case studies' (p.24). In gathering and interpreting her material, Whitehouse-Hart draws on, and interrogates, the Free Association Narrative Interview, a psychoanalytic and sociographic method that takes on board the intersubjective dynamics of the researcher-informant encounter and is sensitive to the discursive features of informants' accounts and to their latent, as well as their manifest, content. Rather than setting out a separate case study for each informant, Whitehouse-Hart explores her interview material, and her own processes of working with interviewees and interpreting their accounts, through a set of themes that emerge from the accounts themselves: 'the concepts that I eventually used to help me explain the research process were generated in response to the data' (p.164), she notes. The heuristic significance of this open-ended, non *a priori* approach is apparent not only in the careful discussion of research methods throughout the book, and in particular in Chapters 2 and 6, but also in thematic discussions of, for example, 'favourites' (Chapters 1 and 4) and memory--on which latter this reviewer was left wanting more (Chapter 5). She is careful throughout to hold to the distinction between interpreting interview material – which is her objective – and psychoanalysing her informants: she is fully aware that the interview is not a psychotherapeutic encounter.

Understanding the paradox of 'favourites' – that viewing films and programmes can involve ambivalent and even negative feelings as well as pleasurable ones – is arguably the book's central theme. One informant (Sophie) shows the author her collections of media-related 'stuff', much of it Disney merchandise, and talks about film favourites such as *Wizard of Oz*, *Toy Story*, *Castaway* and *Back to the Future*. Whitehouse-Hart sets out an illuminating exposition of her work with Sophie, interpreting her informant's relationship with favourite objects and media texts in terms of Bollas's notion of evocative objects – objects, broadly defined, which seem to 'hail' the subject and open doors into psychically intense experiences. From the author's carefully argued analysis there emerges a nuanced, and a sociologically as well as psychologically illuminating, explanation of 'the ability of capitalism to present consumer goods as evocative objects with the power to transform, meet needs and to perform emotional work'. (p.119)

A thoroughgoing evaluation of 'the practical, ethical and conceptual use of psychoanalysis as a method' (p.149) and of what it can offer to qualitative audience research is set out through the case study of Bill, a recently retired teacher and keen cinephile whom Whitehouse-Hart experiences as a peculiarly 'difficult' interviewee (Chapter

6). This challenging research relationship prompts a self-reflexive consideration of the interpersonal dynamics of any research encounter – the operations of transference and counter-transference, for example, have to be acknowledged – and how these dynamics play out not just through the interview encounter itself but also, and equally importantly, in the process of analysing and interpreting data. ‘I was forced’, says the author, ‘in the throes of the interview session, to consider the importance of my own investment in being *in control* of the interview’ (p.153); and she freely admits that in reviewing the interview material she struggled at first to grasp Bill’s perspective. There is an eloquent description of the ‘Aha!’ moment when she finally finds a way through the impasse to reach an understanding of Bill’s feelings about what he describes as ‘risky viewing’ of his favourite films.

With its mix of creative inspiration, conceptual rigour and methodological pragmatism, *Psychosocial Explorations of Film and Television Viewing* is a substantial achievement, not only showing that ‘viewing is psychosocial’ (p.166), but also charting, through its case studies, precisely *how* viewing is psychosocial, and in the process developing, testing and evaluating an appropriate and innovative set of research procedures. The author is clear about, and defends, the necessarily idiographic nature of this kind of research – its intensive treatment of a small number of cases. For here this approach has produced immensely rich insights into the ways in which cultural experience can engage our inner and outer, psychical and social, worlds. It also demonstrates the potential value of Object-Relations psychoanalysis in helping to understand everyone’s most ‘ordinary’ cultural experiences.

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