

Review

CarrieLynn D. Reinhard & Christopher Olson (eds.), *Making Sense of Cinema: Empirical Studies into Film Spectators and Spectatorship*, Bloomsbury: New York, 2016. 297pp.

The desire to understand cinema's impact on spectators has long been traced through a large number of empirical and theoretical studies. From Sydney Bernstein's pioneering questionnaire study of 1930s British audiences to Laura Mulvey's Lacanian analysis of the male gaze, ever-changing modes of cinema exhibition and socio-cultural contexts have prompted those interested in spectatorship to remain on the very forefront of the discipline and move with the ever-shifting notion of the spectator. This is *Making Sense of Cinema's* greatest strength, with its collection of twelve empirical studies operating on the very edge of such developments.

Making Sense of Cinema, somewhat frustratingly, does not provide an overt structure of themed chapter clusters, as is commonly found within such collections. There is, however, a clear link between each chapter and the one that follows, appropriately acting like the flowing narrative one would expect from film itself. However, in the collection's concluding chapter, co-editor Christopher Olson does order the works into clustered groupings on the basis of methodological approach and subject matter. This chapter also ponders whether the collection should have instead been titled *Making Sense of the Audience*, which would perhaps be a more apt indication of the studies within the collection.

Following co-editor CarrieLynn D. Reinhard's introductory chapter, Annie Dell'Aria considers spectators who are vastly removed from the traditional cinema space by observing and actively engaging with audiences of public screens. In choosing naturally occurring spectators, rather than the researcher bringing the film to the participant, the author provides a ground-level analysis of the relationship between public screens and their accidental and intentional audiences. Olson groups this study, as a means of exploring the behaviours present within groups of spectators, with Jessica Hughes' following chapter on festival audience responses of Japanese extreme cinema and Amanda C Fleming's historical study, the seventh chapter of this collection, of the methods used to poll child spectators during the late silent era. Hughes' useful study utilises audience observation methods to indicate how phenomenological research can aid the understanding of collective audience

responses, particularly those that we may label *cult audiences*. This is achieved from the researcher's observation of audience reactions to four examples of Japanese extreme cinema across two film festivals. Away from fans of Japanese extreme cinema, Fleming's study aims to overturn the neglect of child audiences within early cinema spectatorship studies. Typical for the chapters within the collect, the author provides an excellent overview of existing scholarship within this domain as well as the context for the historical source, an empirical study of US child spectators from the 1920s.

Chapters four, five and six are grouped within the collection's conclusion as utilising post-viewing ethnography to explore the experience of spectatorship and sense making. Darren Waldron provides analysis of questionnaire responses to offer transnational reactions from LGBTQ film festival audiences to a French documentary concerning older queer people. In doing so the author poses questions about the role of foreign language LGBTQ cinema in the creation of LGBTQ social identity in terms of both the personal and the collective. Whilst Waldron's study provided anonymity for its respondents, from each other and the researcher, Alexander Gelmer's analysis of critique-of-ideology preferred readings, in relation to the 'mindfuck' (a sub-genre of psychological thrillers designed to unsettle the viewer), employs a focus group approach to elicit responses from young Berlin spectators. Gelmer's work uses its ethnographic results to provide credence in their chief argument for audience studies as a discipline to add further complexity to existing spectator encoding/decoding models. The final chapter of this grouping sees Martin Barker explore how audiences choose their favourite characters from a film. This study utilises qualitative data collected as part of the 2003-2004 *Lord of the Rings* international audience research project, as a useful means of considering favourite character choice across several personal and cultural dimensions, rather than a dominant focus on identification. In doing so, Barker's work provides a strong case for researchers to revisit their previous datasets as a means of extracting arguments that can complement current trends of audience studies. As such, one has to remember that the data refers to audiences of the trilogy – particularly *The Return of the King* (Peter Jackson, 2003) – during its initial cinematic run, rather than contemporary audiences whose choice of favourite character may be impacted by home video releases, extended editions or *The Hobbit* trilogy (Peter Jackson, 2012-14), as well as shifting personal and cultural factors. Overall, Barker has laid the foundations for further study of favourite character choice as a process not simply tied to identification, as well as showcasing the value of revisiting past audience datasets with a fresh analytical focus.

Chapters eight, nine and thirteen all concern the relatively recent trend of using eye tracking technology to use extreme precision to track a spectator's eye movement, length of stare fixation and what formal elements of construction can attract attention. These three chapters are the most problematic of the collection, not least as they largely reach the same conclusions with strikingly similar methodologies. To this point the collection has been a methodological toolbox for those interested in differing approaches of empirical audience research. Even in instances where the same method of data collection has been used, the data itself has been analysed and dissected in a number of differing ways, providing variety

in the understanding of how spectators create meaning and sense. The first of these studies, written by Andrea Russell et al, traces the eye movements of six participants whilst watching sequences from *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998) and *Monsters Inc* (Peter Docter, 2001). In screening sequences twice, once with sound and once without, the authors consider the impact of visual narrative and audio cues in drawing the spectator's line of sight and length of attention. Batty et al's following chapter employs a similar approach in using eye tracking technology to 'enhance' existing scholarship surrounding the degree to which spectator attention is tied to narrative cues. The authors describe their findings as 'hard facts', though one would suspect a greater number of subjects should be sought – twelve were involved in this study – before declaring such an absolute. Similarly, the authors state they chose *Up* (Pete Docter, 2001) for their experiment as it is an animated film. Animation, they claim, unlike live-action filmmaking, is a 'controlled and contrived' medium where 'everything on screen is created' (p. 167). The final eye-tracking chapter, authored by Kluss et al, again examines the link between eye movements and narrative, but does so in a far more overt relation to the notion of meaning making. Their study, with four films chosen from three genres, seeks to establish whether differential gaze behaviour can be seen as a measure for if the establishment of narrative explanations has an influence on a spectator's reception process. Three of the film sequences were preceded by audio stimulus, providing context for the sequence's genre, whilst the fourth had no such context. Ultimately, this study of seventy-seven subjects, goes a long way in proving the value of eye-tracking technology in exploring *how* spectators make sense of cinema, and demonstrates a true contribution to audience studies that is lacking in the other two chapters of this grouping.

The remaining chapters – ten, eleven and twelve – are grouped in Olson's conclusion by their use of minutia and think-aloud response elicitation methodologies. Despite control of the film, for example its pausing for a participant to note their response, being in the hands of the researcher, the benefits of this rapid response elicitation are valuable in understanding sense making as it occurs in the participants own words. Katalin Bálint and András Bálint Kovács' study uses a quali-quant approach – including a think-aloud mechanic – to explore how narrative procedures the viewer/character relationship. This work nicely complements the arguments and results found within both Barker and Kluss et al.'s studies in investigating the link between characters, spectator and narrative function. Similarly, CarrieLynn D. Reinhard's study uses minutia response methods to better understand the experience of spectatorship, specifically for non-Americans watching US made superhero films. She identifies this genre as being rich in US ideology and imagery and required her mostly Danish participants to immediately note their responses as they happened, allowing for the flow of spectatorship engagement and disengagement to be identified at a macro level. The notion of certain events in a film provoking response during spectatorship is further explored by Sermin Ildirar. The study traces four groups, male/female commercial film audiences and male/female art film audiences, during their spectatorship on the art film *Cache* (2005). Participants were asked to stop the film when they believed the situation

to have changed and to consider the events that informed this decision. In doing so, the author provides a convincing analysis of the role audience's usual genre or taste preferences can have on meaning making during spectatorship, as well as providing further credence for the use of minutia methods within empirical audience research.

This collection will prove to be a particularly valuable toolbox for students and scholars interested in widening their knowledge of the types of methodology and subject matter than can be encompassed by empirical audience studies. However, three similar chapters on eye-tracking technology somewhat distract from the collection's strength in variation of study. Where other studies use similar methodologies, they do so in relation to such differing audiences or forms of sense making that it provides fresh application for that form of data collection.

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Biographical Note:

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