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Editorial Introduction

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This issue of *Participations* once again offers a rich array of materials and approaches to audiences and reception. In our Open Section, Kate Ames and Jacqui Ewart explore the ways in which listeners and contributors to Talk Radio understand their role, including the urge to become part of the 'entertainment'. Lene Heiselberg, writing from the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, gives an account of the evolving methods of research they are using to capture the modes of participation of their audiences. Jacob Johanssen looks at responses to the TV series *Embarrassing Bodies*, arguing for the benefits of a psychoanalytic approach. Heidi Keinonen and three colleagues examine approaches to the concept of 'engagement', and apply a new model for this to research on viewers of music talent shows.

Richard Maltby, Dylan Walker and Mike Walsh present part one of an extended investigation of local cinema audiences in Adelaide, Australia, considering what can be learnt from an exhibitor's detailed records (part two will appear in our May 2019 issue). Jessica Seymour looks at the role of conceptions of the 'author' in relation to the reception of fanart, distinguishing three broad attitudes to authorship. Martin Ian Smith explores anti-fan responses to the notorious *A Serbian Film* (2010), drawing on findings from his original research into audience responses to the film. And Jono van Belle compares the reception of the films of Ingmar Bergman in Sweden and Belgium, within the context of the New Cinema History's insistence on the institutional aspects of cinema.

Alongside this varied array, two Themed Sections extend the range even further, with five essays exploring in different ways the experiences of cities which won the accolade 'City of Culture', and 6 essays originating from the first Australasian Fan Studies Network Conference held in November 2017. … (And of course our recently initiated **Issues and Debates** section has its second contribution: the authors' response to our review, in last issue, of their book using Q-Methodology.) These and three reviews make up another remarkably rich array.

All these contributions have been through our rigorous but, we confidently believe, generally friendly and encouraging, reviewing system. Managing this wide range of topics, approaches, areas of work, and traditions makes it quite a challenge to locate and recruit appropriate reviewers. And as Editors, we want to record our thanks to the people who agree to take on this role.

But I am prompted by two coincidentally close emails to reflect in this Editorial on our reviewing processes for submissions to the Journal. The first was an email from an author who had received two pretty critical – although not in the least hostile – responses to his submission. Writing to let us know how he was thinking of responding, he added this comment: 'As a regular reader of *Participations*, I should like to express my appreciation of the openness of the peer-review process and your effort as the editor'. This was a kind of comment we receive quite often, but it regularly warms my heart to get them. Our policy of open refereeing is a distinctive feature that we are very proud of – and its source in a suggestion by Dr Milly Williamson, at the very outset of the Journal's life, should be acknowledged.

But the second email has made me consider the broader context around this practice. The Editors of a forthcoming Themed Section, discussing with us their detailed use of the open reviewing policy, drew my attention to an intriguing essay in the journal *Convergence* (see Butchard et al., 2018). The essay presents a detailed empirical examination of all the formal and informal processes whereby a recent book in our field – Fuller & Rehberg Sedo's *Reading Beyond the Book* (2013) – travelled from first conception (and a promise made in a research grant application) to eventual publication. The essay tracks in fascinating detail the various kinds of critical influence on its shaping and destination: home institutions (where considerations like publisher prestige ran up against the pressures of the UK's REF system); mentors (who could help with mediation between institutional demands, and intellectual ambitions); 'critical friends', including at one point partners (whose complex criteria included help with internal tensions among the writers, and thinking about the field(s) into which the book could play, if written in the right way); and – often slow to respond – publishers (working in an increasingly difficult market where well-known series are 'safer', and good sales are numbered in hundreds). The broader framework is the powerful pressure on academics in the arts and humanities to produce monographs, for career development and promotion; and the challenge posed to traditional models by multiple authorships.

The authors conclude that formal accounts of reviewing miss out all the incredibly valuable academic work done by colleagues and friends, which play significant roles in forwarding fields of enquiry. One comment in particular stood out: 'the anonymity of traditional peer review occludes the contributions scholars make to the advancement of their disciplines' (p. 490). We agree – the role played by reviewers, formal and informal, is critical to the health of all fields, including ours.

There are clearly many differences between such a co-authored book, and the great range of essay submissions that we receive. It is not possible (and probably not appropriate) for us to know the range of people who contribute in advance to the shaping of submissions that come in to us. Some carry acknowledgements to those who gave vital help. Others are entirely silent on the history and makings of their research projects. In some cases we sense that submissions come to us (in the case of PhD students) because supervisors have told them to 'get published or else' (and we are seen as convenient). And

in a few cases we suspect people wonder if we are a 'soft touch', perhaps after being rejected from a 'noted' print journal. But what happens when things do reach us is pretty clear.

All essays are given an initial read by one of the four Editors, with a view to determining:

1. if a submission is actually within the broad field of audience and reception research – a small number aren't, by any stretch; another group are capable of *becoming* relevant if additional work is done (although our experience has broadly been that many authors are very unwilling to do this). There are inevitably some to which we simply say 'no' politely at this stage;
2. if there are issues with clarity, presentation, structure, or content which really should be addressed before we take the time of reviewers – who will, as we all know, be doing it for free, because of their interest in the area and general commitment to the idea of scholarly encouragement. We don't want, if we can help it, to waste the time of reviewers over matters that are not germane to the *intellectual strength* of a submission. But some demands are also specific to our sense of ourselves as a Journal – we very much encourage openness and explicitness over issues of methodology, clarity and accessibility of evidence, and we take advantage of our ability to accept longer-than-usual submissions to get authors to be more expansive and self-critical about these issues.

Between 80-90% of submissions go back to authors for some further work before we seek reviewers. Possibly 5-10% never come back to us with revised versions. Then the difficult stuff really begins. The challenge of finding reviewers for the very wide range of topics, areas, and approaches that constitute audience and reception studies is great, and growing. As Editors we simply cannot know the most appropriate people to seek out in parts of the field that we don't know well. And given that there are often conflicting – even contradictory – approaches, there is little point in approaching people who will respond with simple hostility to the very idea of a particular essay. Finding emails for potential reviewers is now becoming a greater problem – some institutions hide them, some academics assume that they will be 'known' through social media. Even once found, the problems can continue. It would be wrong, in our view, to use the same people over and again – wrong because of the call on their time, wrong because their perspectives may become the 'taken for granted' ones for a sub-field, and wrong because *all* colleagues can themselves benefit from the experience of trying to be 'friendly-critical', which is how we pitch the role of reviewers. My sense is that the rate of refusals or non-responses is rising. As a result it is becoming harder, in the increasingly pressured time-economies of contemporary academia, to recruit people willing to devote time to 'non-statutory' activities of this kind.

We seek two reviews per submission (and *mostly* get them). Once those reviews are in, it is not uncommon for us to find conflicting judgements – why might there not be? – and have to make decisions ourselves as to how to proceed. What to say to authors? These are judgements that we have to make, sometimes between acceptance and rejection. And we also largely take it on ourselves to review the changes that authors make in response to reviewers' comments – we don't want to take their time for a second occasion.

In Butchard et al.'s essay, they make much of the role of 'critical friends' in the making of an important book. That is how we would best try to describe the role we play. We are not 'gatekeepers' except *in extremis* – and we have no interest in competing with Journals which trumpet their Rejection Rates, as proof of their importance. While I have no doubt that not every decision we have made has been perfect, I believe that our approach has made a substantial contribution to the health and well-being of our field. And to our reviewers, again, who overwhelmingly respond to the spirit in which we try to do things: a huge thanks again.

References:

Butchard, Dorothy, Simon Peter Rowberry & Claire Squires, 'DIY peer review and monograph publishing in the arts and humanities', *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 2018, 24:5, pp. 477–493.

Fuller, Danielle & DeNel Rehberg Sedo, *Reading Beyond the Book: The Social Practices of Contemporary Literary Culture*, London: Routledge, 2013.