

## Editorial Introduction

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Preparation for an upcoming issue usually provides a much-needed moment to reflect upon where audience and reception studies has been, and where it might be headed as a discipline – and such is indeed the case here. Considering this issue of *Participations*, and audience studies more broadly, while media commentators continue to worry about the disruptive effects of the media we consume, what is even more striking, is the repetitive nature of the concerns that are raised. This endless return to common flash points is once again visible in recent think pieces centred on the ways in which new technology will impact on patterns of media consumption, and about the impact of certain kinds of media content on audiences at risk.

For example, in a recent essay for *The Conversation*, Deborah Shaw (2019) writes of the long-held fear about the death of cinema – this time at the hands of streaming services. While her argument is carefully nuanced, when the clickbait-worthy title ‘Can cinema survive in the golden age of serial TV?’ is combined with the claim that Netflix has ‘consumed cinema’, we immediately flash back to debates about the emergence of television in the 1950s. By concluding that streaming services enable a democratisation of access, where ‘cinema is more available to global audiences’, Shaw goes on to place audience choice at the heart of the discussion, while noting the criticism of streaming services for their use of algorithms and the narrowing of audience taste.

Audience choice, and the projected power of the media text, raised its ugly head once again in a spate of commentary circulated prior to the release of *Joker* (Phillips, 2019). Preview reviews of the film centred around the fear that audiences may be incited to violence by the portrayals within – a myth that has underpinned much of the audience studies discipline to date, even when audience research from the Payne Fund Studies onwards has repeatedly demonstrated that this is far from a given (Jowett et al, 1996). The power of the myth is far greater than the scientific evidence, a fact that will surprise no one in an era of climate change deniability and Trump. Elsewhere, others with a more ‘medical’ eye have charged the film character with ‘reinforcing dangerous stereotypes’ of mental illness (Driscoll & Hussain, 2019).

As it happens, the *Joker* controversy is also rooted in myth – connected to the 2012 Aurora cinema shooting during a screening of *The Dark Knight* – where the shooter was

falsely reported (see Meyer, 2015) to have been inspired by, and dressed as the Joker. And yet, for Brooks (2019) criticism of the recent film has centred around the moral ambiguity of Joaquin Phoenix's Joker, and his apparent 'power to corrupt ... audiences more suggestible than themselves'. This recalls other instances of violence wrongly blamed on fandom and pop culture figures from Slenderman, Marilyn Manson, to Chucky in the *Child's Play* series. The Joker, however, is also a comic book character with his own mythic status dating back to the 1940s. This latest screen version therefore needs to be read not only in relation to the history of the character thus far, but also the pressing issues of the day, including the spectre of 'toxic masculinity'.

In effect, these articles demonstrate a return to some of the central issues that have continued to shape the field of audience studies over the last one hundred years, including the impact of the technology on people's lives, questions of interpretation and appropriation, but most importantly, the social and cultural context in which these media experiences occur. As one of us has recently argued (Turnbull forthcoming 2020), in order to understand audiences, there has to be a deep understanding of the ways in which the media figures in their day to day lives.

While press commentary continues to infer that audiences are in some ways deficient, clearly our work here is never done. And so we need to continue to reflect on the past, as we see in the Themed Section edited by Richard Butsch, and to reflect on the need to 're-educate' ourselves (and others) as in Themed Section edited by Barbara Klinger. This issue of *Participations* therefore returns to some of the central concerns of audience research in order to review them through the lens of the present, demonstrating in the process the fact that audience research remains as engaging, vibrant, and urgent as ever.

## References:

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