

Participations Special Issue

The dynamics of film audiences: how they form and develop relationships with film

Editors

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Editors' Introduction

This special issue addresses film audiences and focuses on their relationship with film in the process of forming audiences and their audience experiences. This approach offers new insights because it considers the process of engaging with film in how audiences form. This encompasses how people develop relationships with film and their personal journeys with film. This includes understanding how they are introduced to film, develop their interest in film, foster interpretative skills of film texts, and the social and cultural practices of forming and being part of audiences. This focus on how audiences form is distinctive because it considers the dynamic process of the ways in which people come together as audiences as well as the direct audience experience itself. The special issue is based on the results of the AHRC funded project 'Beyond the Multiplex: audiences for specialised film in English Regions' (2017 – 2021) and papers given at the project's final conference in February 2021 (Tsitsou, Rana and Wessels. Eds. 2022).

This discussion is situated within wider debates and different approaches by addressing the process through which audiences form. The distinctiveness of this approach, and its relevance, is understood in relation to current debates about theorising, conceptualising, and studying contemporary audiences. Changes in audience experience and in audience trends are fostering new ways of thinking about audiences. Trends include digital access, and before Covid 19, the development of festivals and cultural events (Christie, 2012). This trend results in a tendency for niche audiences on the one hand, and on the other, extensive audiences via digital media. These types of changes have fostered ideas that audiences are fragmented and diffuse (Livingstone, 2003; 1998). Another argument is that it is no longer feasible to talk about audiences in that they cease to exist in a discrete and bounded way (Livingstone and Das, 2013). Other commentators suggest everyone is constantly positioned as part of an audience through the pervasive and ubiquitous reach of digital media. Previous research has often prioritised audiences as discrete entities, under-exploring the process and the ways in which audiences configure into distinct formations through the ways in which people develop relationships with film and the role of venues, screens, texts, memory, and interpretation of the relationships people form with film. The above-mentioned changes, trends and debates are drawing attention to different types of audiences, their practices and experiences.

The papers in this special issue explore the multidimensionality of audiences' relationship with film. The specific areas addressed are people's personal journeys with film, looking at how they are introduced to film, their engagement with film throughout the 'life course', their film viewing and cinema going practices in five types of contemporary audience formations, and the meaning of film and audience experience. To ascertain and understand what has changed for film audiences and whether there is also continuity in audiences and their experiences, the meaning and practices of film and film audiences are considered in historical terms. This is explored through cinema memories, specifically looking at the meaning of specific films in the memories of audiences and the importance of film to people in everyday life. Another dimension of the audience experience is the process and practice of interpreting film texts. This aspect identifies the wide range of resources members of audiences draw on in interpreting film. These include resources based on life experiences, formal and informal education broadly speaking as well as formal film education and self-taught informal film education. Interpretation and its resources are embedded in personal film journeys and in cinema and film memories. Recognising that interpretation is embedded in social and cultural life enables audience research to explore how audience members position themselves in relation to those being depicted, as being different from them. The focus here is on the wider process of othering and the various ways this happens in and through film. As is well-rehearsed, attention to date has largely

focused on representation, and in this edition, this is extended into considering the interplay of assumptions and the reflexivity that is operational within interpretative practices.

To address the changes and trends requires innovation in methodology. To understand and explain any changing characteristics of audiences requires research to undertake qualitative in-depth research to gain understanding of changes and what these changes mean for audiences. It also needs larger-scale quantitative studies to ascertain wider trends of any such changes. The focus on in-depth qualitative research and large-scale trends analysis has seen a rise in mixed methods research in audience studies (Barker and Mathijs, 2012, Merrington et al., 2019). The BtM project uses mixed methods drawing on a range of qualitative and quantitative methods: however, given its relational focus on audience formation, it requires innovation in analysis. To address the ways audiences form requires a holistic approach that covers not only the many aspects of contemporary audiences but also how those aspects relate to each other. This means that mixed methods analysis needs to go beyond triangulation, embedded, and explanatory approaches whether designed to be sequential or concurrently implemented in the research process (Cresswell, 2014) to one that identifies relationships amongst data.

Mixed methods involve working with a range of datasets with different ontological and epistemological underpinnings. Concerns about this have been addressed in philosophical and in methodological terms (Crossley and Edwards, 2016). This has led to a strong focus on integrative analysis (Cresswell, 2014). To address the relational dynamics of audience formation, requires developing mixed methods analysis. Analysis needs to be able to explore and query the relationships amongst the different aspects of audience formation, and in so doing makes these relationships data too. It is this analysis requirement that needs innovative approaches data-analysis. To that end, BtM's innovation is the use of data ontologies for film audience research. Data ontologies reflect a domain of knowledge. They are used to address how audiences form because it enables different data sets to be analysed in terms of the relational aspects of audiences. This supports analysis to understand the rich process of audience formation covering the experiential aspects of film audiences as well as venues, screens and the social and cultural factors that are part of film audiences and their formation (Pidd, this issue).

The challenges of understanding contemporary audiences and the methodological issues these raise also requires attending to theoretical and conceptual developments. The development of theory in the history of audience studies is vibrant with new theories and concepts emerging in relation to the characteristics of audiences. In broad terms, there has been a general move from passive audiences to active audiences and from mass audiences to niche audiences (Livingstone, 2013) Theoretical and conceptual developments are not necessarily linear, and in terms of audience studies, one sees the refinement of theory and concepts as well as new developments. Nonetheless, there is call for further theoretical development to address current debates about active and passive audiences and how the

characteristics of contemporary audiences can best be defined. To aid that development, Sonia Livingstone (2013) conceptualises audiences as ‘relational and interactive’ constructs. This focuses on the relations and interactions between audiences and texts within the socio-cultural practices of consumption and engagement. One of the potentially transformative developments in theory is the claim that film audiences are a process (Wessels, et al. 2023). The use of the term ‘audience as a process’ seeks to go beyond ideas about the practices of ‘audiencing’. The term includes a longer process of the ways in which people develop a relationship with film over their life course in the specific contexts of film provision, exhibition, and access. The term addresses both access and provision of film and people’s engagement with film in forming audiences. These relations involve specific sets of interactions that people have with film, film exhibition, programming, and venues as well as with the audience experience itself. Thinking about the audience as a process therefore requires considering the way the relations and interactions that make up the process of engaging in film underpin the development of specific audiences. Film audiences’ relations and interactions are interwoven and come together in varying ways, depending on audience members’ personal life experience; life stage and circumstances; access and engagement with culture; the media (broadly defined) and screens; and with place-based film culture being a significant element of this at the local level.

To address the contemporary trends in thinking about film audiences and their experience, the papers including in this special issue are:

1. The place of film in cinema memory. Silvia Dibeltulo and Daniela Treveri Gennari (Oxford Brookes University)
2. ‘I’m no expert, but...’: Everyday Textual Analysis with Film Audiences in the English Regions. David Forrest (University of Sheffield)
3. Audience Engagement with Foreign to English Language Film, Othering, and Interpretative frameworks. Lito Tsitsou (University of Glasgow).
4. Analysing film audiences: the merits of a data ontology. Michael Pidd (University of Sheffield).
5. How Audiences Form: theorising audiences through how they develop relationships with film. Bridgette Wessels (University of Glasgow).

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