

## Review:

**Austin, Thomas: *Watching the World: Screen Documentary and Audiences*. Manchester University Press (2007). ISBN: 0719076897, £50 hc.**

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### Abstract

As Austin clearly states in the introduction to this accessible book, his intention is 'to explore not only documentary texts, but also some of the commercial, discursive and social contexts in which they circulate and are watched, and the expectations of some of their audiences' (1). This is a welcome contribution as documentary studies have tended to focus on the genre's history (with an emphasis on "classic" documentary films rather than television programmes), studies of particular filmmakers (such as Grierson, Wiseman and Broomfield) and on debates about the possibilities and desirability of representing a pro-filmic 'reality' - notably in the work of Bill Nichols (1991) who is referenced extensively here. Meanwhile, there have been surprisingly few empirical studies of documentary audiences.

Whilst audience studies concerned with television genres have often explored viewers' engagements in relation to everyday practices, Austin's study of cinema and television audiences is unequivocally centred on the texts. As in his earlier study of Hollywood audiences (2002), Austin argues here that 'issues of form are crucial to this inquiry, and [...] should be so for any audience research that explores viewers' uses of and responses to a specific text' (63). As such, this approach is necessarily tied to particular case studies and is not concerned with the context of the viewing process. It does, however, usefully acknowledge that viewers' expectations of documentary as a genre are shaped by trade and journalistic discourses (advertising, reviews, etc) as well as by textual organisation.

The five case studies presented are each concerned with a specific documentary film or series of films/programmes. With the exception of one French feature documentary, all of the films and programmes originated in the USA or the UK and all of the audience research was

conducted with British viewers. Before turning his attention to these case studies, Austin provides some contextual information in Chapter 1 by exploring the 'boom' in documentary cinema claimed by commentators between 2002-2004. He cautions that *certain* films were *relatively* successful and also notes that 'the boom was in part a discursive phenomenon, constructed in the output of film magazines, websites and newspapers' (13). This is an important point and some of the evidence emanating from the industry and the press that is presented throughout this book would benefit from being further interrogated as rhetorical discourse. Chapter 1 also discusses aspects of distribution for documentary films and the opportunities provided by multi-channel television. Description of the latter relies largely on producers' and commissioners' commentaries (at industry events and in the press) and acknowledges television to be the main outlet for documentary in the UK.

In the subsequent chapters, case studies include the documentary films *Etre et avoir*, *Touching the Void*, *Capturing the Friedmans* and also British natural history television series. Austin provides sufficiently evocative descriptions of the form and content of the texts for readers who are not familiar with the films/programmes. The methods employed and the scope of the empirical audience research for each case study is clearly presented in each chapter and in the appendix. The use of questionnaires alone (without the aid of more in-depth qualitative research), combined with the relatively small samples represented for most of the case studies does weaken some of the arguments made. Nonetheless, the accumulative research across the case studies, combined with the concise discussion of existing literature does highlight a range of issues that are pertinent in the study of documentary audiences and, in so doing, points the way to further research that could be fruitfully taken up elsewhere.

The contradictory and sometimes ambivalent nature of audience responses is investigated, with some issues such as perceptions of truth, information, proximity and spectacle being addressed across the case studies and others such as feelings of guilt, perceptions of public/private divides, ethical concerns and self-identity being raised in relation to the form and content of particular films. The strength of this study, indeed its core purpose, is the illustration of each of these issues by relating research informant quotes to aspects of the specific texts.

Although Chapter 5 is, as the author himself concedes, limited in scope, the attempt by Austin to reflect on his own classed identity as a documentary viewer is an interesting proposition; such self-reflection is an opportunity for insights often disregarded by empirical researchers. He uses himself to turn attention to an aspect of audience experience that he argues has been under-examined but, in so doing, artificially separates 'being middle class' from other aspects of his self-identity. Austin is able to explore how his class position influenced his

experience of the films, but less accessible is an understanding of how watching the films may have influenced his sense of self.

In considering natural history television series in Chapter 6, Austin does refer briefly to the domestic context of TV viewing. But whilst the particularities of viewing contexts are acknowledged as significant, the approach adopted here is not primarily concerned with exploring these. Similarly, the concept of media literacy and its attendant literature are not referenced. However, there is some discussion in this chapter and elsewhere in the book of viewers' perceptions of the documentary genre in relation to other genres, such as reality television. This is an important area for investigation (explored further by Hill, 2007) and contributes to a central theme in this study: examination of public discourses surrounding the documentary genre as it is variously presented and perceived.

By examining the ways in which documentaries are marketed in conjunction with how they are framed by audiences, Austin's book highlights the genre's various forms and associated values. In this way, his study contributes to and up-dates documentary studies and will be of particular use to students in this field. In relation to audience studies, Austin does effectively explore the 'invitations to view' (80) offered to audiences by his chosen films and programmes and also viewers' responses to those invitations. The possible consequences of these encounters are referred to in the conclusion but purposefully remain outside the frame of this research.

### **References**

Austin, T. (2002) *Hollywood, Hype and Audiences: Selling and Watching Popular Film in the 1990s*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Hill, A. (2007) *Restyling Factual TV: Audiences and News, Documentary and Reality Genres*. Abingdon: Routledge.

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