

Special Issue Introduction

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“An audience is never wrong. An individual member of it may be an imbecile, but a thousand imbeciles together in the dark - that is critical genius.” These words by the film director, Billy Wilder, were the opening lines of the Call for Papers for the 3rd Edinburgh International Film Audiences Conference, which took place in March 2009 (<http://www.filmaudiencesconference.co.uk>). This issue includes a selection of papers from that conference. All of the papers that were presented, regardless of whether they are included in this issue, addressed audience responses to a range of film genres, directors and/or sites of film consumption from a genuinely international perspective. What each of them offered was an insight into the varied ways in which a diversity of audiences who, gathered together in the dark, brought their own experiences and interpretations to bear on their filmic experiences. The papers that are offered here can be divided into two fairly distinct categories – the historical and the contemporary audience, although it will be seen that for some of the papers there is a degree of overlap.

Louise Anderson (who won the best student paper award) took a novel approach to her discussion of working with older cinema audiences by reflecting on her experiences of the research process and the problems she encountered trying to develop a workable strategy when dealing with a topic (cinema newsreels) that was layered with numerous operational contradictions. She is also very clear about difficulties that could be encountered when working with a very elderly group of interviewees, which ought to be helpful to any reader about to embark on research in this area. On a personal level, it was the most amusing discussion of ‘doing research’ that I have ever heard.

In a similar vein, Glen McIver presented his work into audiences’ memories of the Rialto Cinema in Liverpool. Again, these were older audiences plus children of some of those who attended the Rialto. The films that were discussed were located within memories of the space of the Rialto and the ways in which those memories filtered into collective memories and specifically, family narratives. Focussing on two interviews in particular, he discusses the

perceived 'classiness' of the cinema and its place in the rituals of courtship and the establishment of long-term relationships alongside the remembrance of 'our film' or 'our song'.

Still in a historical mode but taking a slightly different approach to the audience, the next two papers undertook an analysis of archival documents that *partially* comprised letters from audiences to specific directors, and their responses. Kathryn Mackenzie, Karl Magee, John Izod and Isabelle Gourdin drew on a wealth of resources within the Lindsay Anderson archive at Stirling University to examine the tensions around his film, *Britannia Hospital*. They showed that the complexities around the marketing of, and critical reception to, the film exerted an influence on the varied ways in which audiences responded to it. The cultural variations across those complexities demonstrate that there is not a straightforward, linear way to understanding audiences' reactions.

Peter Kramer had access to archival material in the form of the Stanley Kubrick archive in London for his discussion of audience responses to Kubrick's famous film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*. He challenges the received wisdom that the popularity of the film was based on its appeal to a youth audience. Primarily through examining letters from viewers to Kubrick, he argues that not only were there very diverse audience segments to whom the film appealed but also that appeal appears to have been grounded in a belief in the possibility of personal and social transformation.

Karen Boyle's paper addresses a very contemporary audience phenomenon, that of mother and baby screenings. As a participant observer, her paper provides fascinating insights into the experiences of mothers as viewers (as she notes, there were barely any fathers attending the screenings) plus their viewing experiences as mothers with babies. Whilst some will argue that babies have no place in a cinema for a variety of reasons, some of which are apparently to do with the welfare of the child, it is clear from this paper that the mothers she interviewed were always sensitive to the well being of their baby and saw the event as offering experiences that were valuable to both of them. Similar to Glen McIver's article, the distinctiveness of the particular cinematic site is also relevant to the overall experience.

Kerstin Leder's paper addresses cross-cultural and intergenerational attitudes towards films that evoke a broadly fearful response. Regardless of whether interviewees had seen particular films, what emerges in her paper is the idea that perceptions of specific films act as a reference point to judge whether or not a film will involve too much emotional effort. Within this are issues of taste and in part she draws on the work of Bourdieu to explore this area.

Finally, Jane Arthurs presents a case study of MTV's EXIT campaign in Europe, which was aimed at highlighting issues related to the sexual trafficking of women and girls through the

use of short films. Detailed analysis of the films and audience responses enable her to clearly illustrate the problems of creating an ethical marketing campaign and she raises important questions about how the ethical and political can be integrated without over-individualising serious topics of concern.

The articles in this issue demonstrate the importance of talking to audiences directly as well as the value of exploring the audience via their archival traces. It is through these empirical studies that theories can be tested and found to be either useful or wanting. They also allow 'common-sense' understandings of films and audiences to be challenged and it is my belief that these articles contribute to that challenge in one way or another. Just before I sat down to write this piece I was watching a programme on BBC television where a family was taken back to the 1970s in terms of the technology they had and they gradually moved up to present day technology. Why do I mention this? Because in the 1990s episode they went over the Jamie Bulger case and subsequent concerns about video nasties and media effects from violent computer games. Was there a clip of Martin Barker discussing these issues? Unsurprisingly there wasn't but there were plenty of the usual suspects, so it seems to me that we still have some way to go in trying to explain the complexities of media consumption and media effects. I am proud to offer these articles for wider consumption because they offer further evidence of those complexities; and really finally, I would like to take this opportunity to say that the next conference will take place in 2011, with a call for papers going out in mid 2010. It will be well advertised but if you want to make sure that you are included in that call, then please e-mail me.

Biographical Note

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