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Film Audiences: Personal Journeys with Film, by Bridgette Wessels, Peter Merrington, Matthew Hanchard and David Forrest with the Beyond the Multiplex Team. Manchester University Press, 2022, 304 pp.

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The question of audience formation has, at times, been neglected in film studies, in favour of auteur-centric interests, sociopolitical commentary, and textual analysis. Though we each have personalised film journeys resulting from our engagement with different types of film throughout our lives, these journeys also indicate larger, collective trends. In response to a growing need to qualitatively assess regional audience studies, *Film Audiences: Personal Journeys with Film* sets out to sharpen the debate "about how to conceptualise film audiences and the ways in which they form" (1). In doing so, these researchers establish an important UK-based audience study that provides a useful framework for further audience studies in more diverse locales.

In partnership with the British Film Institute (BFI) and the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Beyond the Multiplex (BtM) project carried out an empirical research study on English film audiences, as a means of developing film audience theory based on collected data, film provision and policy, audience preferences, and the culture surrounding an engagement with more diverse types of film. An important element of this project was approaching these audience studies as "relational and interactive within the broader context of film as a cultural form" (193). BtM's contention is that, in contemporary society, audience formation is a process, and that process further instantiates and creates more specific audience formations and experiences.

The core research question of *Film Audiences* is how audiences engage with, and form in different ways, around specialised and mainstream films (192). From this central inquiry, the BtM team investigated how to better "enable a wider range of audiences to participate in a more diverse film culture that embraces the wealth of films beyond the mainstream, and how to optimise the cultural value of engaging with those less-familiar films" (193). This study labels those less-familiar works of cinema as specialised films, whether they are foreign-language films, independent domestic releases, or simply types of cinema outside the scope of mainstream (or commercial) fare. Looking beyond the film audience activities of Greater London, the BtM focuses on four major regions, as geographic locales of inquiry—the North East, North West, South West, and Yorkshire and the Humber.

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A large survey was held across these national regions at three different points over six months. This extended survey conducted interviews with residents in each region examining film policy and provision, analysing the sociocultural profiles of its film viewers, listening to their preferences, and, lastly, developing policy recommendations using Delphi methodology, by collecting opinions and reflections from those working directly in film policy and industry. This empirical research gathered that audience formation as a process is largely informed by access to both general and diverse types of films, and that that process is also informed by audience experience and engagement with film preferences throughout their lifecourses. Across eight chapters, the authors provide an informative and measured study on the nature of audience formations and culture, and how this informs different audience types as relational and interactive, in response to preconceptions about audiences being more fragmented and diffuse.

Each of the eight chapters details a major point of study in the BtM project, beginning with how to conceptualise and analyse film audiences and concluding with the conception of the audience as a process. Bridgette Wessels, the lead author and primary editor of the book, writes Chapters One, Two, Five, and Eight, in addition to the Introduction and Conclusion. Peter Merrington wrote Chapters Three and Four. Matthew Hanchard drafted Chapters One, Two, and Five, later completed by Wessels, and wrote Chapter Seven. Finally, David Forrest wrote Chapter Six, titled "Finding and sharing meaning in specialised film". In addition to these main contributors, the larger BtM team collectively contributed to this research project. Their work and sponsorship from the BFI are integral to the general findings of this study and its main theoretical conclusion of "audience as a process" (192).

The first chapter, "Understanding Audiences: Conceptualising and Analysing Film Audiences", introduces conceptions of how audiences understand films as multiple processes, instead of singular perspectives commonly conceived as either text or audience. Rather than singling creative and meaning-making processes as separate channels of comprehension in interpreting social and cultural life through the spectatorship of film, Wessels approaches comprehension and interpretation as interrelated processes. She acknowledges the innate complexity in balancing conceptual approaches to structure (the context of the film text) and agency (the context of the audience), and how giving too much prominence to one aspect limits a more holistic engagement with audience studies.

Chapter Two discusses the methodology of the BtM project. Using mixed methods and a computational ontology approach as a framework for gauging audience meaning-making processes, BtM sought to address "both the agency and structure in the ways audience form" as well as attempting to ascertain this formation in relation to broader trends of institutional film policy, exhibition, and distribution (38). While introducing the methodology behind the BtM project, this chapter also highlights Sonia Livingstone's work from the late 1990's. In her foundational research, she contended that audiences should be understood as interactive and relational, rather than fixed, and that viewers can be expected to engage and respond to media texts in increasingly complex, nuanced ways. Livingstone's conception was instrumental in the BtM project approaching the notion of audiences as a relational process.

The third chapter charts important decisions and trends in UK film policy and distribution. In general, UK provision practices favour the presumed profitability of producing and distributing mainstream fare, while specialised film exhibition receives more marginal government funding. However, in certain cases, independent or foreign cinema distribution may prove more commercially viable, at least based on percentage projections with lower terms

of financial return than major studio releases. Other significant changes in national film provision occurred in 2011 when the Department of Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) abolished the UK Film Council (UKFC). In the wake of this shift in national sponsorship of non-commercial cinema, the BFI assumed responsibility as a leading agency for UK film. Peter Merrington also signals the BFI's prevailing strategies of attending to a more "cultural cinema" outside of popular film media exhibition. He writes that "unlike the UKFC, the BFI had been established as a cultural charity, responsible for holding the national film archive and promoting, discussing and analysing film as an artform, and was therefore less market focused" (66). While assessing the cultural and economic value of a film can at times be complex, these exhibition practices are deeply connected to the BFI's film policy, which gives them latitude in shaping cultural activities, provision, and audience engagement with specialised film.

In Chapter Four, Merrington addresses the geographies of film provision by looking at access and inequalities to certain venues and screens, which directly affect audience formation through film provision. Within the scope of the four major regions studied by BtM, Merrington and the research team identify five different geographies of film provision. These are diverse film cities, which offer a broader range of venue types, providing a variety of film-related organisations and different exhibitors; mainstream multiplex cities, which have well-established culture and film economies but offer limited access to non-mainstream film; diverse film towns, which have more independent provision, but less multiplex provision; mainstream film towns, which often have multiplex venues but limited independent provision; and limited underserved areas, where there is generally minimal film provision and often people must travel far to reach any type of cinema venue (81). Overall, the chapter argues that there is an important, dynamic relationship between film exhibition provision across these major regions and the audience's sense of place and access to certain film content and that this can directly affect personal relationships with film throughout one's lifecourse (81).

Chapter Five, "Personal Film Journeys: Engaging with Film During the Lifecourse", observes patterns of viewership in individual's personal journeys. Moreover, it also acknowledges the potential for viewing habits to vary over the course of a lifetime. One's engagement with different types of films is open to growth and development due to a multitude of factors, such as gaining new experiences, social relationships, careers, and interests (200). As Wessels notes, "[p]ersonal film journeys are part of people's lifecourses—and lifecourses are part of personal lives" (200). These different aspects of personal film journeys are both subjective and intersubjective and help to define how audiences form. More specifically, the chapter outlines six major characteristics of personal film journeys as active introductions to film, relationships with venues and platforms, education, personal discovery, social environment and place, and changes in personal and social life. Even when tastes alter and major changes occur in one's lifecourse, most film audiences place intimate importance on their personal film journeys—ranging from an interest in passive entertainment through commercial fare or in a more challenging, interpretive, and creative engagement with specialised film.

David Forrest's chapter is the first to highlight a specific textual example, namely Luca Guadagnino's film *Call Me By Your Name* (2017). However, Forrest also details the notable connection that many of the focus group participants, especially those from Northern England, drew with Francis Lee's independent romantic drama *God's Own Country* (2017). Despite the focus group's more general familiarity with Hollywood-based commercial cinema, the participants resident in Northern England seem to have established a notable connection with this specialised film, based on their personal relationships with the moorlands of Yorkshire.

Despite being a queer film, the sense of place and nationality expressed in it appeared to attract the interest and appreciation of a largely heterosexual audience, which is further studied in assessing viewership of Guadagnino's coming-of-age romantic drama, based on André Aciman's 2007 novel of the same name.

Forrest describes how many of the participants made connections from their own personalised experiences to the thematic richness of the narrative, thus generating a special engagement with a film that they may have otherwise not experienced outside of a commercial cinematic viewing experience (143). Forrest also notes how many queer viewers responded positively to the film clips, expressing the "sense in which [queer] cinema offers a rich seam of quotidian representations to viewers which might enable identification, recognition and validation, representations which are potentially absent from other strands of mainstream, popular culture" (141).

In Chapter Seven, Matthew Hanchard details the five different audience experience types identified by the BtM project: individualised, groups, venue-specific, global, and digital. While each type of audience experience held its own social patterns and data sets, BtM found that socio-cultural demographic differences (such as age, gender, education, or ethnicity) had little impact on the overall assessment of participant feedback. Hanchard writes: "People watch films in all five types of audiences and configure their ongoing and dynamic relationships and interactions with films, screens, venues, platforms and other people" (165). How these experiences are calculated, quantified, and qualified leads into the final chapter's assessment of the audience as a process, which reflects on questions of institutional patterning and audience creativity.

The key theoretical conclusion that the study reaches is the framing of audience as a process. Wessel's final chapter addresses this conclusion. Put simply, this process signifies distinctive relationships and experiences that audiences have in their relationships to viewing film media, from both an individual and highly personalised perspective, and in relation to a larger film audience community. The varying relationships that audiences have with other viewers, venues, habitual practices, active versus passive viewership, and film culture as a concept are crucial factors in shaping this evolving and interactive process. Another important factor in understanding film audiences as a process is that it allows researchers latitude in their approach to audience studies as this area of study develops in response to the future of film policy and provision continuing to define the broader culture of film audienceship. Film audiences should be viewed as a flexible and dynamic entity, despite any presuppositions of passivity regarding commercial tastes, because various factors such as life stages, experiences, resources, and interests always have the potential to reorient individuals' lifecourses and experiences, thereby leading to engagement with more diverse or specialised film content.

In summary, this monograph proves to be pragmatic, pithy, and confident in its analysis and development of film audience studies. Its contributors intelligently detail patterns and logical assessments of the nature of film audiences through a synthesis of qualitative and quantitative data. As the first chapter title indicates, this book seeks to better understand exhibition and viewership through analysing and conceptualising film audiences. Understanding audiences as a process also allows for a productive shift away from viewing audiences "as passive [viewers], positioned by text which gives little room for interpretation" and advances audience studies by gauging the capacity for contemporary audiences to interpret film texts and other specialised films in various ways (194). As Wessels articulates, "there is a relationship between film provision and audiences in that each exists in relation to the other"

(196). As such, audiences are always evolving, and thus, can be read as a process of continual development and inquiry. The BtM project stages a contemporary encounter with this conceptual approach by theoretically and empirically studying certain audience formations in the UK, thereby providing a framework for continuing audience studies as an evolving global discourse.

Through their findings within this book, Beyond the Multiplex has endeavoured to reframe the theoretical discourse surrounding audience studies, recognising the latitude for audiences to evolve as a process, and at times gravitate towards more niche specialised films that challenge and enrich their audience experience through active, nuanced engagement. While commercial fare continues to dominate most film provision and directly shapes film policy both globally and regionally, understanding the audience as a process will be essential to further gauging audience patterns, as they continue growing and challenging assumptions about their viewing habits, thus slowly shaping future film policy and provision for current and new audiences to come.

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