MEDIA AUDIENCES

MA option

Autumn Term 2002

Convenor / tutor:
Thomas Austin: EH room 226; tel x. 2549; email: fcfal
office hour: Weds 2.30 - 3.30

seminar: Weds 11:30

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INTRODUCTION

This course aims to give you an opportunity to do several things -.

1) to explore and evaluate the broad tradition of critical research into media audiences which has developed over the past two decades, and which has been based largely in Anglo-American media studies and cultural studies, and has begun to take root in some areas of film studies.

2) to consider, through an exploration of this tradition, how we should understand the nature of media texts, and in particular how meanings, uses (dis)pleasures and responses are produced in the complex interactions between audiences and texts in specific social settings.

3) to have the chance -- and to develop the skills to be able -- to carry out a small piece of original audience research. The key methods encountered on the course are qualitative: interviews, semi-structured focus group discussions, open-ended questionnaires, respondents' letters, participant observation, etc. See more on assessment below.

Due to my own expertise and research interests, the course has a bias towards work on audiences for film, television and video. I have, however, listed approaches to a wider range of media audiences in the general reading section below, and you may of course choose to raise for discussion further audience studies which are not included in this document.

I am keen to take advantage of the fact that you come from a range of different geographical and intellectual backgrounds. My own knowledge is built on British and American traditions of audience research. It will be interesting and helpful if we can incorporate important contributions from other traditions wherever possible.
ASSESSMENT

This option follows the pattern of MA courses generally, in asking you to write a 5,000 word paper, with the title / question to be agreed in advance with your tutor. The deadline for submission is the beginning of the spring term (exact date to be confirmed.) For information on writing term papers, see the CulCom purple guide.

Anyone planning to use this course as a basis for their dissertation is welcome to undertake an essay or case study which is preparatory for that subsequent work (grounded in the key concerns of the course). Your dissertation may extend and develop ideas you began to consider in a term essay, but it must be substantially new written work. The responsibility for avoiding substantial overlap is your own.

Individual tutorials will be held to discuss your plans towards the end of the term. And in the week 10 seminar you will each be asked to present a short review of literature which you plan to draw on in your term paper.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

When undertaking reading and preparation for each week's seminar, the following questions are worth asking, in relation to the purpose, process and mechanics of critical audience research:

= What is the purpose of each piece of research? What questions does it ask? How do these inflect the way it is designed, carried out, and evaluated?

= What theoretical frameworks are mobilised or interrogated?

= What methods and methodologies are deployed in the research? What suppositions are embodied in the research as a result of this?

= What claims does the research make about the nature of the medium / media being consumed / used? How do these claims relate to other kinds of claim about the nature of these media (eg: production histories, industry rhetorics, textual analyses, audiences' self-reports, etc)?

= What conclusion does the work come to? What are its apparent consequences and implications, and for whom? What contribution to (whose) knowledge does the research make?
SEMINAR PRESENTATIONS

In most weeks one or two of you will make a presentation (to be allocated in week one). The purposes of this exercise are:

(i) to apply and / or evaluate the critical studies and theories raised in set reading;
(ii) to initiate a seminar debate on issues based on the week’s set topic.

To achieve these aims, you will be asked to combine a presentation based on your own research and reading, with a number of carefully selected points raised for your audience to discuss. Note that you can pause to ask questions during your presentation. Wherever your questions are placed, they should not be simply tagged on as an afterthought.

You will be expected to evaluate and critique the reading you have done; to illustrate and apply the critical arguments proposed; and to initiate further debate (you may use video clips, etc, if relevant). In other words, do not simply regurgitate your reading.

You should provide a handout to illustrate key points of your argument, and questions for further discussion. Make your presentation audience-friendly by making eye contact and speaking from brief notes or bullet points, rather than reading out a closely written text.

Your presentation will be judged according to the following criteria:

* content and understanding; * structure * presentational skills * steps taken to stimulate debate

All seminar members, (not just the presenter(s)) will be expected to critique, evaluate and test out reading, and to relate it to any ‘off-list’ reading and arguments, whenever appropriate.

You will be able to talk with your tutor in advance about preparations for your presentation. For more on seminar topics, see the week-by-week guide below.
INTRODUCTORY READING

Each of these books offers something different, but all are good points from which to start thinking about key debates about media audiences, their relations to media texts, and the contexts in which they encounter them.


GENERAL READING LIST

(1) OVERVIEWS, ANTHOLOGIES, CONSIDERATIONS OF METHOD, ETC:


Martin Barker (1998) "Film audience research: making a virtue out of a necessity" *Iris* 26

Martin Barker (forthcoming, October 2002) article on reception studies, title tbc, *Scope* (http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/film/journal/)


John Corner (1995) "Media Studies and the 'Knowledge Problem'", *Screen* 36.2 (Summer)


Ann Gray (1999) "Audience and reception research in retrospect: the trouble with audiences", in Pertti Alasuutari (ed) *Rethinking the Media Audience* London: Sage


Joke Hermes (1993) "Media, meaning and everyday life" *Cultural Studies* 7


Barbara Klinger (1988) "In Retrospect: Film Studies Today" *Yale Journal of Criticism* 2: 1

Barbara Klinger (1989) "Digressions at the cinema: reception and mass culture", *Cinema Journal* 28:4

Barbara Klinger (1997) "Film history terminable and interminable: discovering the past in reception studies" *Screen* 38:2


David Morley (1 992) *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies* London-. Routledge


Janet Staiger (1986) "The Handmaiden of Villainy: Methods and Problems in Studying the Historical Reception of Film", *Wide Angle*, 8:1


(2) SPECIFIC AUDIENCE AND RECEPTION STUDIES

Roger Aden et al (1995) "‘Dreams Are Born on Places Like This’: The Process of Interpretive Community Formation at the Field of Dreams Site", Communication Quarterly 43:4 (Fall)


Sarah Bragg (2001) “Perverse and Improper Pedagogies: The Case of Freddy’s Fingers and Russell’s Head”, The Velvet Light Trap 48:3 (Fall)


Una Dinsmore-Tuli (2000) "The pleasures of 'home cinema', or watching movies on telly: an audience study of cinephiliac VCR use" Screen 41:3 (Autumn)


John Fiske (1990) "Ethnomeiotics: some personal and theoretical reflections", Cultural Studies 4:1


Sue Harper and Vincent Porter (1996) "Moved to Tears: weeping in the cinema in postwar Britain", *Screen* 37:2 (Summer)


Peter Jackson, Kate Brooks and Nick Stevenson (1999) "Making sense of men's lifestyle magazines“ *Society and Space* 17

Mark Jancovich and Lucy Faire, with Sarah Stubbings (January 2003 forthcoming) *The Place of the Audience: Cultural Geographies of Film Consumption* London: BFI


Anne Massey and Mike Hammond (1999) "'It was true! How can you laugh?" History and memory in the reception of Titanic in Britain and Southampton", in Kevin S. Sandier and Gaylyn Studlar (eds) *Titanic: Anatomy of a Blockbuster* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press


Melanie Nash (1999) "'Beavis is just Confused': Ideologies, Intertexts, Audiences", *The Velvet Light Trap* 43:1 (Spring)


Eric Smoodin (1996) "'This business of America': fan mail, film reception and Meet John Doe", *Screen* 37:2

Lakshmi Srinivas (2002) 'The active audience: spectatorship, social relations and the experience of cinema in India', *Media Culture and Society* 24


- The Mass Observation archive, housed at the university library, contains a range of social history material dating back to 1937, including recent information on cinema and television, based on two directives issued in the last four years. It is available online at: http://www.sussex.ac.uk/library/massobs/

- See also a range of periodicals in the library, plus film and media related websites such as:

  Framework = http://www.frameworkonline.com/

  Intensities: The Journal of Cult Media = www.cult-media.com

  Scope = http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/film/journal/
THE COURSE WEEK BY WEEK

Week 1: Introduction:

In this introductory session we shall consider the question: why study media audiences?
I will also be asking you about your previous encounters with audience studies, whether sponsored by the academy, industry or policy-making bodies.

Week 2: Cultural Studies: The encoding / decoding model:

This week we focus on Stuart Hall's influential model of the encoding and decoding of media texts. We examine (1) the application of the model in David Morley's work on viewers of the British television programme *Nationwide*, and (2) how Hall's paradigm has been debated and critiqued by a range of commentators, including Hall himself. What are the purposes, implications and uses of the model? Do you agree with any of the criticisms made of it?

Reading:


* Stuart Hall (1994) "Reflections upon the Encoding/Decoding Model-. An Interview with Stuart Hall", in Jon Cruz and Justin Lewis (eds) *Viewing, Reading, Listening: Audiences and Cultural Reception*, Boulder: Westview Press


David Morley (1980) *The 'Nationwide' Audience: Structure and Decoding*, London: British Film Institute (esp. ch 4, afterword, chs 5,6)

David Morley (1981) "The 'Nationwide' Audience: A Critical Postscript", *Screen Education*, 39 (Summer) (rpt as ch 4 in the following)

Week 3: Film Studies - from ‘the spectator’ to audiences

This session considers the gradual and rather halting move towards audience research made within some areas of film studies during the 1980s and 1990s. Several overviews of this shift -- which was influenced by the tradition of audience research developed within British cultural studies since 1980 -- are listed below. To provide a common focus for our investigation, please also read the different approaches to the erotic thriller Basic Instinct developed by Julianne Pidduck and by myself.

What are the purposes and methods of each inquiry? What assumptions underpin, and what implications derive from, each argument? What key differences, and possible points of connection, emerge from the two accounts?

Set viewing: Basic Instinct (video available to borrow from EH 145)

Reading:

* Barbara Klinger (1988) "In Retrospect: Film Studies Today” Yale Journal of Criticism 2: 1
Jackie Stacey (1993) "Textual obsessions: methodology, history and researching female spectatorship" Screen 34.-3 (Autumn)
Week 4: Audiences and Identity 1: Videos, gender, class, and taste:

The statement that media users will differ in their responses to any given media form or text has become a banal truism of audience studies. As len Ang has suggested, a cultural studies approach to audiences needs to go one step further and to "be oriented toward a detailed understanding of how and why varieties in experience occur". This week (and in subsequent sessions) we consider some important ways of approaching the patterning of such "significant' differences -- via notions of social identity such as class, gender, sexuality, and taste.

Set viewing: Rocky II (video available to borrow from EH 145)

Reading:


Week 5: Audiences and Identity 2:
Gender and sexuality and / in media consumption:

Liesbet van Zoonen, among others, has argued that an epistemological dilemma confronts any assumption that gender (or other facets of social identity, such as sexuality) is an a priori characteristic that fully precedes the moment of media consumption. How might this insight productively inform / problematise investigations of the significance of gender in media use?

Reading:


**Week 6: "Audiencing":**
**Research methods and the discursive construction of audiences**

Just as media users and consumers may partially construct, perform or project elements of social identity through their choices of, and reactions to, media forms and texts, they may also construct identities via the research scenario itself. Furthermore, the research process may be seen to 'produce' aspects of the audience it claims to find. The readings below offer a number of perspectives on the call for self-reflexivity in audience research.

**Reading:**


John Corner (1995) "Media Studies and the 'Knowledge Problem’", Screen 36:2 (Summer)

Ellen Seiter (1990) "Making Distinctions in TV Audience Research: Case Study of a Troubling Interview", Cultural Studies, 4:1 (January)


Liz Stanley (1995) "Women have servants and men never never eat: issues in reading gender, using the case study of Mass-Observation's 1937 day diaries" Women’s History Review 4:1

Week 7: Reading week

Week 8: "Everyday life":

If people encounter and consume the media as an 'ensemble' of overlapping and often contingent experiences, how can this complexity be adequately conceptualised and addressed in audience research? Should researchers switch from investigating audience-text relations towards ethnographies of the rhythms and patterns of 'everyday life'? Is this question itself problematic?

Reading:

* Herman Bausinger (1984) "Media, technology and daily life", Media, Culture, Society, 6:4 (October)


Kirsten Drotner (1994) "Ethnographic enigmas: the 'everyday' in recent media studies" Cultural Studies 8

Joke Hermes (1993) "Media, meaning and everyday life" *Cultural Studies* 7


**Week 9: Fans: a special case?**

From being denigrated as dysfunctional and antisocial, fans have been recuperated in several recent studies as 'vanguard' audiences, characterised as active and creative. In part, the burgeoning interest in fandom has taken place within a larger critical shift towards popular culture as a 'legitimate' object of study. But it also raises important questions about how to define audience 'activity', and where this attention to fans leaves 'non-fan' audiences.

**Reading:**

* Martin Barker (1993) "The Bill Clinton fan syndrome [review of Jenkins and Lewis]" *Media, Culture and Society* 15

Una Dinsmore-Tuli (2000) "The pleasures of 'home cinema', or watching movies on telly: an audience study of cinephiliac VCR use" *Screen* 41:3 (Autumn)


Jostein Gripsrud (1989) "'High Culture' Revisited", *Cultural Studies*, 3:2


Week 10: Presentations:

You will each be asked to give a short presentation, based on a review of relevant critical literature undertaken as preliminary research for your term paper.