TRACES OF INTERPRETATIONS: JANET STAIGER AND MARTIN BARKER IN CONVERSATION

Martin Barker: I'm going to start the ball rolling by offering you some general thoughts I have on public debates about the 'influence of film'. First, I want to say that film academics have been virtually cowardly about these kinds of issues. With just a very few honourable exceptions, it is hard to think of anyone who has had the courage to speak out on such issues where particular films come under attack - for example, *Crash* (David Cronenberg, Canada, 1996) in Britain or *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, US, 1994) in America -, and say what they think research on film audiences actually shows - for instance, the guaranteed complexity of audience responses, and the ways audiences respond to films as patterns of meanings and symbols, not as 'stimuli' or 'messages'.

Time and again, claims about particular cases of supposed influence have not stood up to close examination. Yet they do not go away - they enter a general pantheon or reservoir of quotable fears. So, something other than rational debate is at work here.

Another problem is that sometimes the films which are attacked are not the kind which film theorists automatically rush to be interested in. Who wants to study *Child's Play III* (Don Mancini, US, 1991)? Who wants to study *The Basketball Diaries* (Scott Kalvert, US, 1995)? It seems to me there is a paradox in the soul of our field. On the one hand, film studies (the US tradition) and cultural/media studies (the British tradition) have made great steps in developing sophisticated ways of examining films as complex texts. And the logic of that is sharply at odds with the crude claims that underpin 'effects' theory, and the logic of 'copycatting'. But I have recently been looking closely at a wide range of work in film analysis, and it becomes very clear that despite the supposedly sophisticated accounts of textual organisation, a very great amount of work on film incorporates assumptions about 'how audiences must respond' - and those embedded assumptions are, to be truthful, often almost as crude as 'effects' theorising.

This is why I believe that audience studies must now take pride of place. Nowadays I am tempted to issue a challenge to those of my colleagues who invest great energy into yet more forms of textual analysis. I want to challenge them to show me one single case where a claim arrived at on the basis of analysis of film form has been substantiated by a serious piece of audience research. We have a responsibility to take on in public the bogus claims which circulate and are recycled about the supposed 'harmful effects' of films. To do this adequately, we have to be willing to deal in films which are outside the normal 'canon' of things that interest us. We have no hope of doing this with any conviction if we can't reference a body of substantive audience studies which support our understanding that films 'just don't work like that'. The question then is: what body of audience research would we each reference as being of greatest demonstrable value?

Janet Staiger: I believe fully that the violence debates are a 'nodal point' to understanding larger public struggles that I care about deeply. In particular, the violence debates reflect attempts by conservatives to order public thinking in ways that further undermine liberal and radical policy initiatives. Hence, scholars need to understand 1) the discourses being used, 2) the reasons why publics attach themselves to particular beliefs, 3) why liberals and radicals have been somewhat ineffective in responding to this, and 4) how liberals and radicals might intervene to shut down conservative discourses and alter public memory.

In the case of violence for the past 150 years, the targets have been 'the family' and 'the media'. Moreover, not only are these two targets the focal points, but the discursive strategy has been comparative: the family is disintegrating whereas it used to be whole (and nurturing); the media are worse now. This double strategy of blaming specific private institutions and suggesting decline speaks nostalgically as if the past were some idyllic utopian paradise. That's hogwash. Furthermore, this conservative discursive strategy deflects from what radicals would argue might be the cause of 'individual violence': larger structural inequities in class, race, and sex.

I believe that work currently being done on 'public memory' and fantasy will be very valuable. Whether we turn to sociological or psychological/psychoanalytical theories to explain why groups of people want to believe particular stories about the past and the present as more credible than others is a central line of research. Certainly, audience analysis and cultural study are the places pursuing such research.

I think the reason why liberals and radicals have been stymied about these matters is because we have an alternative 'effects' model that we haven't been able to give up or to refine adequately. Marxists argue that the superstructure has an uneven but still causal relation with the base. Hence, Marxists have been among the first-line theorists of how culture works to (re)produce the status quo. Where conservatives point to private individual/institutional groups which need regulation, liberals and radicals point to public individual/institutional groups which need regulation. The differences are to which groups we point. For Marxists, 'family' and 'media' are superstructural (results of) the base which is economic and State-supported. Thus, liberals and radicals can't argue that media doesn't produce the individual.

We need to make clear that 'family' and 'media' are productions of capitalism which employ 'Othering' as a strategy to fragment and deflect from inequities. We also need to construct, through audience studies, a much more complicated theory of 'effects'. You know that I do not support the types of symptomatic textual criticism that hypothesizes what an audience 'must' be doing. However, I cannot, likewise, argue that images on the screen have no effect. Too much evidence exists to be ignored of how stories play out fantasies for viewers, provide models for imitation and repudiation, and offer group cohesion through 'audience' and fan communities. While I am very sure that 'direct effects' models need to be debunked, I don't think audience studies can give up the idea of 'effects' altogether.

MB: Your claim that 'Marxists' use causal models effectively as much as conservatives, just differently, describes a tendency within *academic* marxism, whose theoretical perturbations have certainly ended up in determinisms. That to me has almost nothing to do with living traditions of marxist politics which don't talk of such things as 'ideology' and 'false consciousness'. Rather, they analyse and try to act upon lack of confidence and practical organisation. I'm afraid I view academic marxisms as a thing of little worth, and as having almost nothing to say to the issues we are trying to debate. My own suspicion is that the disinclination to speak out in these controversies is a sign of the retreat of academics into theory, to 'play safe'.

The main issue which emerges is your conclusion that, for all our scepticism about conservative notions of 'direct effects', audience studies can't give up the idea of 'effects' altogether. That goes to the heart of the matter. Let me take up the challenge in several ways:

At a commonsensical level, I agree. The media do have all kinds of effects. They make us think, laugh, cry, dream etc. But this is never what people mean when they talk about 'effects'. 'Effects' = presumed cumulative impact on presumed 'vulnerable viewers' of presumed meaningful units such as 'violence'. My first response to your position is to say that the language of effects has been too powerfully co-opted by anti-media campaigners for us to operate within in. I am also bemused by the insistence in so many media theorists and researchers on reducing a whole range of other processes to 'effects'. What do I do with the media I encounter? I smile over them. I talk about them with friends, I fantasise about filling my home with goods I can't afford, I get depressed at the poor and predictable quality of a lot of what seems to be around. What is gained by redescribing these kinds of things in terms of 'effects'?

Ah, but you might say I am not an ordinary case - and thus creeps in an acute case of that 'othering' you wrote about. Media theory about 'effects' is almost entirely about putative others, who might be affected. And here I want to move positively to the question of what audience research has achieved, before we discuss what it might. You say: 'Too much evidence exists to be ignored …' of how stories play out fantasies for viewers, provide models for imitation and repudiation. Can I ask: what evidence? I have read dozens of studies which purport to show such things. When looked at closely and with just a degree of critical appraisal, I have yet to find one that doesn't fall apart in the hands. Which studies are you saying you have found persuasive?

JS: I do not think that film (or a specific film) is the only causal factor in an event or the subsequent lives of people experiencing it. I argue for a contextual model for understanding audiences. One of my favourite passages in film theory is from Christian Metz's *The Imaginary Signifier* in which he writes about the three machines of cinema that make cinema into a good object. The three machines are the producers who support a political economy of good cinema, the consumers who seek a libidinal economy of pleasure, and cinematic writers - those critics, theorists, and historians - who find ways to analyze, rationalize, and save as many films as possible. In the spirit of Metz, my examples of audience research will generally fall into the category of making cinema into a good object. And that is the point I am making. Media scholars are quite ready to accept research that suggests 'good' effects, but many people are often hesitant to accept as well research that suggests 'bad' effects.

1) Political, Social, and Legal Effects. One good early example of research I find convincing and useful to understanding audiences and their encounters with film is *The Birth of a Nation* (D W Griffith, US, 1915). Historical research on the audiences' reception of *The Birth of a Nation* indicates that the film was significant in helping the fledgling National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) mobilize and increase membership. The film also produced major controversies in several cities, and violence at least one screening occurred. It also produced legislation and a Supreme Court decision. See Goodwin Berquist and James Greenwood, 'Protest against Racism: *The Birth of a Nation* in Ohio'; Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black* (1977: 112-18); Nickieann Fleener-Marzec, *D. W. Griffith's 'The Birth of a Nation': Controversy, Suppression, and the First Amendment as It Applies to Filmic Expression, 1915-1973* (1980). Subsequent examples are many, but notorious are the events surrounding *Rock Around the Clock* (Fred F Sears, US, 1956) (teen audiences), *Cruising* (William Friedkin, US, 1980) (gay men), and *The Warriors* (Walter Hill, US, 1979) (Hispanic audiences).

2) Effects of Stars. Many excellent articles and books describe the mediated 'effects' of stars on individuals. The case of the responses to Valentino's death has yet to be well analyzed although several people are contributing to understanding his meaning and impact culturally - see Miriam Hansen's *Babel and Babylon* (1992) and Gaylyn Studlar's *This Mad Masquerade* (1996). Jackie Stacey's work in *Star Gazing* (1994) is important in delineating among various types of relations fans may have with stars. Richard Dyer's discussions of the stars and their various audiences are also exemplary. See his *Stars* (1979) and *Heavenly Bodies* (1986). In *Stars*, Dyer's discussion of the meanings of Judy Garland to gay men is a landmark study. In

the latter book, Dyer makes some interesting distinctions between responses by white audiences and black audiences to Paul Robson's changing star status. In that regard, Karen Alexander's account of the impact of Hollywood on her as a African-American is valuable: see her 'Fatal Beauties: Black Women in Hollywood' in *Stardom* (Christine Gledhill 1991). A similar study of Latino audiences occurs in Alicia I. Rodriguez-Estrada, 'Dolores Del Rio and Lupe Velez: Images on and off the Screen, 1925-1944,' in *Writing the Range* (Elizabeth Jameson and Susan Armitage 1997: 475-92). Although having some problems because of methodology, the initial results of research on minorities' interpretations of Madonna are worth a follow up: see Jane Brown and Laurie Schulze, 'The Effects of Race, Gender, and Fandom on Audience Interpretations of Madonna's Music Videos', *Journal of Communication* 40, no 2 (Spring 1990: 88-102). One substantial example of queer readings of stars is Andrea Weiss, '"A Queer Feeling When I Look at You": Hollywood Stars and Lesbian Spectatorship in the 1930s' in *Stardom* (Gledhill 1991: 283-99). Also see Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (1993).

3) Effects of Fan Productions. Henry Jenkins' book, *Textual Poachers* (1992) provides massive evidence of fans provoked to rewatch favourite programs, tape and trade episodes of TV shows, and even write narratives and songs and produce videos. More such examples exist in Constance Penley, 'Brownian Motion' in *Technoculture*, ed Constance Penley and Andrew Ross (1991: 135-62); Camille Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women* (1992); and Lisa A. Lewis, ed, *The Adoring Audience* (1992).

4) Effects on Memories. The effects of films on people's memories are an area of research that I think deserves special attention. All of us 'mark' historical moments via associations, and media play a role in this. The research by Helen Taylor, *Scarlett's Women* (1989), is important for telling us how many women used *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, US,1939) through their lives. Memory studies require special delicacy since they do not inform us about the initial impact or significance of the movie or TV program on the individual at the time but rather how the memory of that event becomes woven into our personal narratives. I mark coming-of-age moments by specific films that informed me that what I knew of the world was quite confined compared with the world 'out there'. For me, particularly significant in this regard were *The Apartment* (Billy Wilder, US, 1960), *La Dolce Vita* (Frederico Fellini, Italy, 1960), *Giulietta degli Spiriti/Juliet of the Spirits* (Frederico Fellini, Itality/France, 1965), and *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper[co-director Peter Fonda], US, 1969).

5) Seemingly Inconsequential Effects. Effects of films and television include travelling to a specific place to be 'at' the site of movie's diegesis. A recent example is people traveling to Burkittsville, Maryland, as a result of the film*, Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez, US, 1999). People go to celebrities' homes to be 'near' the star. People name animals and children after media characters and celebrities. Some people communicate through code to others, using film references: 'Are you a friend of Dorothy?'

What these studies do establish is that media make a difference in how we live our lives - what we believe, what we desire, what we take up as actions. Because of this evidence (and my theories about culture and individuals), I am not willing to state that media effects do not exist. I'm not particularly interested in appropriating and trying to re-define 'effects'. That's a lost cause. But until media scholars find a way to talk about effects, acknowledging that media matters while disabusing the public that some kinds of images have direct and dire consequences, media scholars are going to lose the battle over public opinion about media causing violence.

In the spirit of our dialogue, let me ask you a question. Why are you studying audiences? I am assuming it isn't just to refute all of the effects literature or the weak social-scientific studies that pre-categorize audiences. I would love to know what you think makes this research so crucial at this moment.

MB: Media scholars and researchers can't have it both ways. If we want to have 'good' effects, we must be willing to countenance 'bad' ones. But in putting those words in quote marks, I am signalling where my unease begins. One of the harmful effects of the 'effects' lobby has been to push an ethical absolutist model in which, by dint of their re-description of everything in terms of anti-social behaviours (crime, violence) - and of course their 'nice' opposite, the pro-social - no space is allowed for the real complexities of society and history. That every one of their claims falls apart upon examination has not damaged that model - though some damage has been done by a little historical perspective, when people realise that not so long back homosexuality, and women moving beyond the domestic, were classed as 'anti-social'.

But once remove those pseudo-certainties, and the really-conceivable effects of films are not easily measured morally. Is it good or bad if a film makes someone cynical? What about if it makes them view the future with suspicion? These are now highly political arguments - and that I have no problem with. But it does mean that easy scales of 'good' effects vs 'bad' effects - or even 'progressive' texts' vs 'conservative' or 'reactionary' texts - are highly problematic to me.

I am prepared to countenance that for a few people a particular film might be a sufficiently strong resource so as to change their lives in a quite permanent way. What I would challenge is the stupidity of the moralists who think it will be by some decontextualised, dehistoricised 'insertion of a message'. To the contrary. Take the case of the elderly Jewish woman who committed suicide after watching *Schindler's List* (Stephen Spielberg, US, 1993) because it reawoke in her a terrible feeling of guilt that she had survived when so many had died. The awful thing is that I can't even quite make up my mind if this is a bad effect. It is sad, very sad, but wrong?

For much the same reason, truthfully, I would not share your enthusiasm for that quotation from Metz. A wonderful writer at times, nonetheless, I jib at the importation of terms from psychoanalysis, for many reasons. Rick Altman in his remarkable new book *Film/Genre* points out brilliantly how much supposedly radical theories of cinema still reproduce the linear models of communication which they set out to challenge. I have been working recently at some of the concrete claims of psychoanalytic theorists (and of course the first thing to say is that that is what they are, claims), and the model and the consequential notions of 'libinal economy of pleasure' are every bit as troublesome to me as are, for example, the wholly presumptuous accounts of people's 'affects' and 'attitudes' and 'person-perceptions' of Weaver and Tamborini in their (1996) book on the audiences for horror films (now if you want to see some bad research, take a look at that …). So, in thinking what my own list of good audience research is, I find I have been looking for studies which don't presume a given list of theoretically-conceived pleasures, uses, or whatever, but which explore the grain of people's responses, and try to develop more general accounts from there.

I admire your own work in *Interpreting Films*. Reviews are definitely a form of audience response - and they remind us, moreover, that only sometimes is an 'audience' some end-point, just being 'influenced' rather than mediating perceptions of a film to others. Annette Kuhn has recently finished a major study over here on audiences for 1930s cinema, which has yet to be published in full (see her 'Researching popular film fan culture in 1930s Britain', in Gripsrud & Skretting (1994), and also her essay in Gledhill & Swanson eds. (1996). Sue Harper and Vincent Porter (1996) have been brilliantly mining the Mass Observation Archive, to ask questions such as why men felt able to cry in the cinema after World War II. There are some smaller pieces which I think do well in this respect, for example Linda Williams' work (1984)on the management of the conditions for viewing Hitchcock's *Psycho* (US, 1960). And work on things like fan magazines could usefully be added to your list of studies of fans (see for instance David Sanjek, 'Fans' notes: the horror film fanzine', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Vol.18, no.3, (1990: 150-60), and Gaylyn Studlar's (1990) work on popular cinema magazines of the 1920s. The strength of each and all of these is that they deal with audience responses in and through the historical moments in which they occurred.

Audiences become particular, local, always grounded in their social circumstances.

By the same token, I am mightily interested in research which reminds us that 'audiences' includes those in power, as well as 'ordinary joes'. It matters a lot because it shows the way in which anyone watching a film is at the same time watching as from a social position, and 'on behalf of' others - even if what you are trying to do is to stop those others seeing it. Tom Poe's work on the responses of church and state to Stanley Kramer's *On The Beach* (US, 1959) is excellent for this (presented to the 1996 BFI conference on Hollywood Audiences - I hope he has found a publisher by now). So is Annette Kuhn's work in *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality* (1988) on censors' responses to films in the 1910s. Tom Dewe Mathews' (1996) work on the British Board of Film Censors has drawn out a lot about their viewing practices. There has also been useful work on people reacting against films, because of the way they feel (mis)represented by them. See for instance John Gabriel's work on minority audiences' responses to *Falling Down* (Joel Schumacher, US, 1993). But for work like this, we understand very little about how and why people feel disappointed, let down or even threatened by films.

In another direction, I greatly admire some of the recent work that has been done on children's media responses, none better than David Buckingham's. His *Moving Images* (1996) gets right inside the complexities of children's involvement with television, and sees the way children from a very young age know about the claims of 'effects', and adopt those rhetorics for the 'young ones' who are younger than themselves. He also shows the complexities of children's assessments of 'reality' (in for instance his *Children Talking Television* (1993). That same attention to modality is a blessing in Hodge and Tripp's fine book *Children and Television: A Semiotic Approach* (1986). Specifically on the issue of work on 'violent' media, I would put in the work of Philip Schlesinger et al on what 'violent' television and films mean to women, including women who have suffered violence (*Women Viewing Violence*, 1992) and Annette Hill's work on why - and how - people enjoy ultra-violent movies (*Shocking Entertainment*, 1997). And although limited in that it deals only with a single group of men, John Fiske's (in James Hay, ed., 1996) essay on men watching a *Die Hard/Die Hard II* (John McTiernan, US, 1988, Rene Harlan, US, 1990) movie does tell us something about how viewing is practised.

Finally, I would include some studies which ground the kinds of responses films and television get in the institutional histories of their distribution. And the best by far in my view is Jostein Gripsrud, *The Dynasty Years* (1995). Also Darnell Hunt's (1997) sociological study of responses by different communities of the coverage of the LA riots reminded me that some excellent work goes on outside media and film studies. The same can be said of Greg Philo's excellent (1990) study of the way in which TV coverage of the British miners' strike was transposed into memories - a pity that Philo went on to some much less nuanced assertions on the 'harmful effects' of Tarantino's films …

I could go on longer, but that's unfair. The important thing, really, is the principles behind my selection which are that studies do three things: they acknowledge that viewing of film, television or whatever takes place at specific historical and social locations - and that these play a part in how films 'mean' to people; that the films are complex symbolic forms, whose capacity to move people can only be got at through attention to those complexities; and that 'audiences' aren't empty termini having their responses switched on, or not - they have, as Rick Altman puts it, 'transactions' with the media they follow.

A last reference because, albeit in fictional form, it beautifully captures some of the complexities of people's real responses to a film. In Tony Hillerman's novel *Sacred Clowns* (1993) - one of his Navajo mysteries - there is a scene in which a group of Navajo go to see *Cheyenne Autumn* (John Ford, US, 1964) - and a visiting Cheyenne can't understand why they hoot with laughter all through it. Apparently Cheyenne Autumn cast Navajo in place of Cheyenne, and they speak their own language in the 'foreign' scenes. The Navajo carefully don't tell their guest that what is actually being said on the film is a discussion of the size of

the American Colonel's penis … I love this scene because it captures that real sense that when people go to the cinema, they always belong to groups, both real and imagined.

The central issue to me therefore is whether you and I could agree, not on a specific list of 'best works' - that clearly is a matter for detailed and continuous evaluation - but on the minimum conditions for a piece of research to be a serious contender. And my three principles in the preceding paragraph would be my bid.

JS: Your summary of what might constitute the grounds for good audience research is a fine list. In very simple form: acknowledgement of (1) specific historical and social locations; (2) the complexity of a film/TV text; and (3) individuals conceptualized not as 'empty' when they arrive at the event of viewing. The only point that I think I might take up with you is the possible use of psychoanalytical theory. While I disagree with using psychoanalysis to make broad assertions about massive numbers of individuals being positioned to interpret a text (and I would similarly challenge any psychological or sociological theory that attempts this, including critical Marxism), I do think using symptomatic textual interpretation of evidence of individuals' specific readings or encounters with a film or TV show has merit.

Investigating the traces of interpretations requires using some textual method. This could include not only symptomatic readings (psychoanalytical, marxist, post-colonial) but also content analysis, phenomenology, neo-formalism, neo-Aristotelian, and so forth. Choosing our method of analyzing these traces is an extremely significant move theoretically. As I say, I'm inclined to include symptomatic textual analysis within my tools, in part because I think the reasons audiences do respond as they do can be linked with personal dynamics for which psychoanalytical theory provides a good explanation. In fact, in understanding audiences I find I need to turn to both psychological and sociological theory. As you know, I tend to like critical theory (psychoanalysis and critical Marxist sociology), but I do find cognitive psychology and functional sociology have features that help explain some aspects of audiences-for example, in theorizing conceptual frameworks or explaining group behaviours.

MB: You say that some kind of textual investigation is necessary - and I agree, wholeheartedly. But that leaves a gaping chasm of permissions. And I don't believe that we can any longer work with an 'anything goes' attitude to the way we interrogate symbolic forms and systems (my preferred expression over 'texts', since the latter just does analogise too strongly with literary assumptions, and with a down-playing of sensuous, emotional, and indeed social relations with things such as films). My argument is that too often many kinds of film analysis presume on the audience. The fact that sometimes I might find some of those presumptions more personally acceptable is no ground for ignoring this problem. It seems to me we lose our right to protest the untested assertions of the moral campaigners if we repeat their sins, albeit we do so in much more sophisticated language.

I do agree with your comment that our choice of methods is extremely significant, theoretically. But that begs the question: on what grounds do we ever decide, other than just personal inclination? I have been working recently on the deceptively simple question: how do we decide on the (greater or lesser) acceptability of different accounts of, say, films? What grounds are there for declaring one analysis more convincing than another? Personally, I would like to go further and ask about grounds for determining the 'validity' of one analysis over another - but it is curious how the word 'validity' produces real signs of paranoia among many of my colleagues. I have been dubbed an empiricist or positivist for even speaking the word. But however strongly or weakly the question is put, its task remains tough: to come up with ways of determining, among the endlessly multiplying accounts of the 'meanings' of various films, why one or another is more rationally persuasive. To pick a few at random, there are many quite different and competing accounts of *It's A Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, US, 1946), of a host of 'noir' films, of the *Alien* trilogy. If film analysis is not just a game for academics, we can't just accumulate 'readings'. Besides, it is an abrogation of any social role for our field.

My personal view is that the most urgent research task is to develop our stock of knowledge about people for whom films do and have mattered beyond the cinema. Such a move would take us away from putative audiences ('the spectator', etc), into a real world of audiences - and I would end by saying that perhaps the most important addition to our armoury of forms of symptomatic analysis would be to develop ways of investigating their ways of finding meaning in films. Never mind what we think films 'mean', what do they 'mean' to those who care about them the most?

JS: Throughout *Interpreting Films* (1992) I argue against deciding on the acceptability of different accounts of films. I argue, instead, that as scholars we should be interested in assessing the implications of the events of different interpretations; hence the question of determining which reading should be preferred over the others is nonsensical to me. I agree with your final remarks-what we want to know is what films mean to those who enjoy (or detest) them!

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