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### *I have seen the Future and it is not here yet...*

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# I HAVE SEEN THE FUTURE AND IT IS NOT HERE YET . . .; OR, ON BEING AMBITIOUS FOR AUDIENCE RESEARCH

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*'Audience research, after a promising period during which some crucial advances were made, seems to be in decline in several ways, yet its tasks remain as important as ever. This article, originally a presentation at the 2003 Versailles Conference on the Future of Audience Research, makes the case for expanding our vision of the field's possibilities. To do this, it revisits some of the forgotten achievements of the Uses and Gratifications tradition, offers a critique of the dominant "Hall model" for conceiving media/audience relations, and outlines the key concept of an alternative approach: the concept of a "viewing strategy," which has been at the heart of the 2003–2004 international project on the reception of The Lord of the Rings.*

*This essay is an elaborated version of an opening presentation made to the Versailles International Conference on the Future of Audience Research, 23–25 November 2003. It is not identical with that presentation for several reasons. First, that was a presentation, rather than a read-out paper, and one cannot "footnote" a presentation. Second, the available technologies successively jinxed the presentation—meaning, among other things, that the quotes from interviews which I had intended to use became invisible, with consequences for some other parts. Third, and most important, conversations with colleagues afterwards led me to clarify or develop some points—thanks in particular to David Buckingham, David Morley, Milly Williamson, and Lyn Thomas for their comments.*

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I am particularly interested in the state of empirical research into media and cultural audiences.

Of course I am interested in very many more things than this (as I hope my research trajectory shows). But I am particularly interested in this because I have long been perturbed at a number of tendencies in our broad fields of enquiry, perhaps centrally: (1) the still-persistent tendency to singularize "the audience" and then to adduce qualities in this "audience" without ever looking at or talking to any actual people (a tendency that sadly couples too easily with a false opposite that "of course everyone's response is different"); (2) the tendency for some (especially textual-analytic) researchers to see audience research as a threat, an interference, or a waste of time—just another "interpretation"; (3) the disappointing tendency for young researchers to try out audience research

for their doctorates, and then to depart the field . . . or to turn to writing books *about* audience research.<sup>1</sup> These tendencies mean that we rarely get to ask: how do we ensure that we are not just doing *interesting* research, but *good*, even *the best possible* research?

Lest I be understood to be overly critical of the achievements of the renewed interest in audiences, I want to begin with a *celebration*. The last 25 years, according to my incomplete bibliography, have seen the publication of more than 400 studies into audiences for very many kinds of media and cultural output—some large, some small, some strong, some weaker. But between them they seem to me to have made almost unarguable certain truths about audiences, which it is well to remind ourselves of:

1. There is no such thing as “the audience,” rather, there are a great variety of “audiences” that nonetheless display patterns and processes which bind them into researchable communities of response.
2. Being an audience for anything is never a simple or singular process. It is a process that begins *in advance* of the actual encounter, as people gather knowledge and build expectations. These prior encounters are brought to bear in different—but researchable—ways within the encounter, guiding selections. . . . In other words, audiences bring their social and personal histories with them. And these histories continue after the “event” as the audiencing encounter is given a place—sometimes enclosed as “that was nice/nasty/over,” sometimes providing the (cognitive, affective, emotional, sensual, imaginative) resources for conceiving self and the world.

For a while, the rhetorical figure of the “active” audience was deployed as a way of capturing all the complicated processes—until people recognized explicitly what they had ready known, that “activity” must actually include a great deal that is definitely *not* active in literal senses. A great deal of media and cultural audiencing has facets of the routine, the inconsequential, the meaningless, and the deliberate letting go in the face of desired experiences, which require passivity, not to mention mental proneness! It became clearer that the notion of “activity” in fact functioned as a refusal of the still-recurrent notion of the “vulnerable audience” deriving from the mass communications/behaviorist tradition. This tradition—so welcome to politicians and moralists—has been so dominant for so long, despite the endlessly demonstrated failure of its research program, and despite the repeated exposure of the deeply ideological purpose that has inspired it, that for a time our own tradition has made obeisance to it by setting our own conceptual framework simply as its negation.

As our audience research tradition has found its feet, so the notion of the “active audience” has transmogrified into some more segmented and grounded claims:

3. Audiences are communal, in complicated senses: people not only perform a lot of their audiencing in groups, they also carry in with them a sense of belonging to different discursive communities— some real, some imaginary, even as they may watch, listen, and read alone.
4. Audiences make their own “wholes.” That is—and here a close proximity to European theories of “interpretive communities” has entered—people select and construct a sense of

the “whole” to which they are responding, by bringing to bear relevance criteria that encourage them to pay attention to some parts and treat others as “givens,” or irrelevant.

5. Being an audience is *ordinary*, something that people commonly do as a routine activity. But this sense of the “routineness” of it is the precise opposite of the way this is understood in conventional behaviorist accounts.

6. There is, however, a flip side to these routine engagements. These are the more committed, devotional engagements—the moments when being in an audience *matters deeply* to people. Fan studies have brought into view some of the striking sets of differences engendered by such commitments: from the production of “meta-texts” that run far beyond the imaginative world as immediately offered by production companies, to the addition of perverse extras, for instance, in the form of narratives of imagined sexual encounters shared with wide communities of similar fans.

7. Audiences often have to find pleasure *in the face of* disapproval, dismissal, and derogation by commentators. In other words, they are often aware of being categorized and judged.

8. Although they may not recognize it in themselves, audiences carry within their ways of responding to media and cultural forms a host of vernacular knowledge and skills. These are valuable cultural and social skills

9. Audience responses are always *emotionally charged understandings* and *educated emotions*. That is to say, there is no way of separating out the cognitive and the emotional responses, regarding them as separately shaped or driven.

10. What we choose to engage in as audiences, from the most routine to the most devoted, is a part of how we conceive of ourselves. Our identities are engaged in multifarious ways in our media/cultural engagements.

This is not a complete list. My guess is that every reader of this essay would add others, or shift emphases. However the list is exactly composed, what is most evident is the incompatibility of the entire set with what I have urged should be called the “effects tradition.” And, of course, to my list of conceptual rearrangements should be added the expanded knowledge of particular groups, or audience histories, or contexts of encounter that my bibliography of audience studies also embodies.

All the above combined constitute a brilliant set of achievements. But in my view they are not enough—and for several reasons. The key reason is that still too often our reasons for researching audiences are limited to two: either we want to rescue an audience—or its chosen media—from obscurity<sup>2</sup> or misunderstanding<sup>3</sup>; or an issue about audiences has become a “problem” with some other part of our belief systems.<sup>4</sup> The result is that audience studies have got stuck at the level of *accumulation*. There is nothing wrong with such studies merely by virtue of this. It is what they do not attempt which is the problem. To put it baldly, it is hard to think of a single case where either of the following has been attempted: (1) the testing of a proposition about audiences to the point where it is confirmed, refuted, or substantially reworked; (2) the formulation of a more general proposition about audiences in the light of the specific advances of empirical researches.

It is true that we have had a crop of “general theories of the audience.” At their worst, they are so bad as to be laughable. My own personal “favorite” of this kind is Abercrombie and Longhurst’s *Audiences* (1998), a book that offers an almost Hegelian teleology of audiences and audience theory. These authors seem to have forgotten that 30 years ago one of them contributed to a sadly-now-forgotten study which constituted a concrete warning against such easy theorizing.<sup>5</sup> Not all are as bad as this one, but even at their best, they read more like clever position-taking than as attempts to advance our overall understanding of audiences and audience research.

The question I want us to ask—and I regard our ability to ask and answer it as a sign of the potential maturity of audience research as a field of work—is this: what are our ambitions for our field? What are the kinds of questions we want to be able to ask and answer? Let me give a context to this question, which will also have the purpose of putting our tradition back into a longer history. Thirty five years ago, two researchers began on a 2-year audience research project. The project had several objects: the first was to answer a series of concrete questions about how ordinary British audiences related to a series of then-popular programs (*The Dales*—an about-to-end radio soap opera; *Coronation Street*—the first TV soap in Britain; the *News*; *The Saint* and *Callan*—both TV adventure series)— what pleasures they sought and gained from their encounters, and how patterned and interrelated these pleasures were; second, they wanted to find out how the distribution of these media choices and pleasures might be related to the concrete circumstances of the lives of the people they were studying—their occupation, their housing situation, their educational level, and their family membership and history (down to the detail of whether they had been first, second, third, or etc. child in their family of origin, and how far they had moved from their original home); and finally, they were developing and testing a *general instrument* for doing such research, which could then be offered to their research community.

Never published until now,<sup>6</sup> the results of this 2-year study are fascinating, not just for the detailed findings, but for the bravura of the attempt. Representing the high point of the Uses and Gratifications (U & G) Tradition, this series of research was attempting to develop advanced implements and methods of research, and a set of testable generalizations, of a kind that we have not yet dreamed of in our own tradition. My suspicion is that all of us have, almost too ready to hand, our list of critical objections to the U & G Tradition. Its picture of audiences is psychologistic, individualistic, and ahistorical.<sup>7</sup> It lacks a theory of ideology, or indeed, more generally, of power. It lacks an elaborate theory of the subject. It has nothing to say about failures, frustrations, or gratifications. And there is an overriding suspicion that this lack may be connected to a sense that U & G research was too easily absorbed into broadcasters’ administrative research. But I would ask my readers to set aside their objections for a moment and concentrate on that bravura: an attempt to develop an interconnected web of theories, concepts, methods, and implements— all of which had to be open to empirical testing.

James Curran (1996), among others, has charged that cultural studies has forgotten its history of audience research and lost sight of the many ways and cases in which cultural studies’ work on audiences was prefigured by earlier research. But in a way, the most important cost is not just that sense of history. It is that cultural studies effectively started all over again. Whatever the benefits or drawbacks the significant redefinition of which resulted from Stuart Hall’s “encoding-decoding” model, the simple fact is that its adoption made audience researchers begin again from scratch. Now there were no agreed questions about what needs researching, no settled—and therefore

checkable—methodologies, no elaborated conceptual framework of what is *meant* by “an audience.” And so on. The whole framework had to be built again, from the ground up, and in my estimation, the trouble is, that this has largely not happened. We have been content with loose and vague concepts: the concept of the “active audience,” much criticized but hardly superseded, is the most evident, but not the only, example (I would add others—the concept of “identification,” for instance). The methodology of the focus group interview—much puffed as approximating to ethnography—has only recently received critical scrutiny. No significant generalizations have been proposed or tested. Hence, my conclusion that audience research has largely worked by accumulation of numbers of studies.

This is where, in my opinion, we could learn much by looking back to the latter days of the Uses and Gratifications Tradition, but not so much for the adequacy of the particular concepts or methods, as for the ways in which these researchers saw and responded to the need for a fully elaborate research paradigm. And for this, that until-now-unpublished essay is a wonderful example. Whatever our view of the ultimate strengths or weaknesses of Uses and Gratifications Theory, the virtues of this essay and the research that lay behind it are the attempt to combine, in a mutually informative way, a theoretical framework, working concepts, methods of enquiry, research implements, and paradigmatic studies.

Our research tradition has different foci. At the core of so much of our own interests have been: text/audience relations, with their associated tensions between power and pleasure, fandom and disengagement, and between the creation of meanings and meaninglessness; reconceiving “messages” as meanings that are functions of complex media forms, but also belong within the wider, power-laden, discursive frameworks of our society; and locating audiences within systems of beliefs and practices which attach significance to the media as things-in-themselves, as much as to their particular content. For good or bad, audience research in the UK, and consequentially in the rest of Europe, was born under the star of Stuart Hall’s “encoding-decoding” model—a model that sought to offer a conceptualization of text-audience relations which could simultaneously treat texts properly as such (as culturally formed items) and also capture their ideological functions. In fact, so much is this true that a recent book declared a challenge—could anyone name a piece of recent audience research which did *not* reference this model and the essay in which it was enunciated?<sup>8</sup> It is, of course, the case that a good deal of the audience research which emerged from this new nexus paid only lip service to Hall’s model—or indeed reacted against it. But very often the manner of the departure from the model simply moved it into the background, rather than helping to unfold a new approach.<sup>9</sup>

Because our tradition begins at such different places, the foci of our ambitions would necessarily be different. For a start, it is hard to think of something that could be the equivalent for us of a General Theory of Gratification. The emphasis in cultural studies research into audiences is on the specificity of responses—what kind of generalization can that sustain? How could there be much working supervenient conceptualization combining any of the following: young women’s audiences to horror films; retired people’s responses to news; lesbians’ responses to *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*? Yet it is just this tendency that has led some critics to suggest that audience research never transcends clever description. We “tell interesting stories” of particular texts and audiences and contexts. Nothing wrong with these, but they just don’t amount to more than onion soup.

I have a suspicion that much of the interest in Pierre Bourdieu's theorization of cultural taste systems derives from the heart-felt need for a wider theory. Bourdieu offers a powerful system for thinking about the ways in which people learn, and internalize as "habitus" and "hexis" a set of socially appropriate lexicons for participating in the "right parts" of their culture. His ideas certainly intersected with the strand of thinking within cultural studies which wanted to challenge hierarchies of "high" vs. "low" culture. And, of course, one of the originating motives for audience research was to "defend" audiences from mockery for their choices and pleasures. From Janice Radway's famous study of romance readers onwards, this has been a powerful source for various studies—including some of my own. Bourdieu seems to offer a way of placing such studies within a wider framework—if there was for many the difficulty of his centering on class, as against other structuring categories like gender.

### **POSING AMBITIONS**

I do have a number of definite ambitions for the field of audience research. They have emerged for me from a series of researches that I have been involved in over the last 15 years. The ambitions all take the form of "Suppose we could . . ."

Suppose we could:

1. *Make the concept of an "interpretative community" empirically measurable and testable . . .* At a theoretical level, the concept of "interpretative community" has become important, if not vital, as a means of navigating between the thrall of textual determinism ("there is a meaning in this text, the only issue is: who does it reach with what force?"), and the call of individuation ("everyone makes his/her own meaning out of the text"). "Interpretative community" has become one of the natural journey points for talk about how audience responses are shaped and organized within supra-individual processes. Yet it is hard to find empirical work that investigates *how* people belong to such communities. We cannot draw boundaries around such communities. We do not know how to measure degrees of commitment to a community. I believe, however, that we now potentially have the methodological capacity to make this concept empirically measurable and testable.
2. *Explore and explain the relations between and among the "reading positions" of different interpretative communities . . .* At best, work on communities of interpretation tends to try to paint a portrait of how an individual community conceives, and works on its "text." But that treats such communities as operating in isolation from each other, unaware of each other—hardly a likely situation most of the time. "Reading positions" are, more likely, taken up *partly in response* to other people's assessments.<sup>10</sup> Suppose we had reliable ways of exploring the interconnections of these.
3. *Explore how such interpretative communities may be formed, what sources are drawn upon, assembled, and themselves made sense of in preparation/management of the cultural experience of the "text" at the focus of attention . . .* In recent years, particularly within film studies, a strong interest has emerged in the role played by ancillary discourses around films: publicity, merchandise, gossip, arguments, reviews, and so on. Instead of being seen (as they were first conceived) as "digressions," their *formative* role is increasingly being attended to. Suppose we could know how to do this systematically.

4. *State with sufficient precision to be checkable the conditions that have to be met for an audience member to be said to have attained an unconditionally positive experience from a cultural encounter . . .* This is my largest ambition. It is deliberately posed as the exact opposite of the central claim of the “effects tradition”— that those who are most involved with and most enthusiastic about a film, program, or whatever are the most vulnerable toward its “message.” Suppose we could not only elaborate on a theory of *rich involvement* but also had a method of discovering such engagements.

5. *Have checkable methods for achieving each of the above.* I say no more than this.

These are my current major ambitions. They are not all-encompassing— they are all derived in one way or another from my overreaching interest, definitely rooted in my own intellectual grounding in the cultural studies tradition, in the “text”—audience relationship.

It is easy to have ambitions. It is harder, much harder, to conceive of a way of realizing them. Right now, the most important thing to me in my life is my involvement, along with colleagues in 19 other countries, in a research project that I believe can realize at least some of those ambitions. That project is the international *Lord of the Rings* audience study.

What is the *Lord of the Rings* project, and in what ways is it ambitious? A summary description first. In a year-long study, 30 groups of researchers across five continents are carrying out a systematic investigation of the launch and reception of the final part of Peter Jackson’s film trilogy. At the heart of the project are a set of questions which, to my knowledge, have not been made the subject of empirical investigation before. What can we learn from the remarkable success in so many different countries and cultural contexts of the filmic adaptations of Tolkien’s story? How and why do stories of imaginary worlds, or “fantasies,” *matter* to different kinds of audiences? Where, and when, is Middle Earth in the imaginations of different audiences, and what connections do they make with their lived experiences?

To me, the role of audience research has often been like the Fool in Shakespeare: asking awkward questions of reigning assumptions. So, simply asking of the mass communications tradition’s obsessive search for the “impact of violence,” what do real, different audiences *perceive* as “violence,” and what different dimensions of “violence” do they distinguish, unstitches assumptions that have been taken for granted—for far too long. In the case of the *Rings* project, the background is those bodies of speculative and argumentative work, coming from a number of sources, which have between them raised questions about the operation of global fantasies. Epithets about “the colonization of the imagination,” claims about the role of Hollywood as an agent of cultural imperialism, or (more recently) of globalization . . . wider psychoanalytic claims about the nature of subjectivity, and the place of “fantasy” as an originary set of impulses through which people form senses of self and from which flow the kinds of “identifications” that they will make . . . these and others provided the critical impulse for the design of the project.

But this film version of Tolkien’s world provided its own layers of opportunity. Here is a story world originally conceived as an “English mythology,” now filmed in (and celebrated for its use of) the most untamed parts of New Zealand, but funded by a subsidiary of the largest Hollywood film studio— AOL-Time-Warner. This provokes questions about both the *origins* and the *location* of the film and its world. Then, this is a story world with a long history and complex accumulated fandom from



nearly 50 years of circulation. The filmmakers are known to have played complicated marketing games, learning from the recent experience of films like *The Blair Witch Project* to use the internet to prepare the world of Tolkien fans, and (if the signs are right) adjusting the second and third parts of the film in response to segments of audience.<sup>11</sup> Issues about the ways in which prior knowledge and commitments to this story world, but also about the ways these have been worked on over the past 3 years, were inevitably pushed onto our agenda. Also, the films have come out into a world replete with possible parallels in contemporary politics and life—and one spur to the research was the wonderful “Frodo Has Failed” e-mail which showed George Bush wearing the One Ring (and then seeing that same image carried on the several-million London March against the invasion of Iraq). For some people, at least, Tolkien’s world could “bleed” into their lived world.

All these put heavy demands on concepts and methods. In its outcome, the project has three stages. The first is a study in each participating country as wide a range as possible of *prefigurative materials*. By these we mean the full range of materials produced by the filmmakers and distributors (posters, teasers, trailers, publicity packs, interviews, photo opportunities, etc.), by associated traders (merchandise, tie-ins, and other licensed properties and images, background books, television documentaries, etc.); and the entire “second wave” of materials that develop and transmit these onto audiences (press, magazines, radio, television and (increasingly) the Internet). To call these “prefigurative” is to examine them for the ways in which they cumulatively assemble a set of expectations of the *kind of experience* it will be to watch the film. Who is it for? What should it be watched for? What can be known about it in advance? Against what measures is it to be judged? And so on.

The second stage, in many ways the most ambitious, is centered on a questionnaire. This has been “published” on the web, in 14 different languages, supplemented by a paper version that could pick up at least some who lack internet access. The questionnaire combines multiple-choice questions with opportunities for more discursive responses—thereby consciously combining possibilities of quantitative and qualitative analysis.

The third stage, about to begin at the time of my writing this, will be follow-up interviews with selected respondents. Individuals are being selected on the basis that they typify patterns and clusterings of responses that are identified through analysis of the questionnaire responses. In exploring in detail the meanings of the film to those individuals, the research can flesh out the role of this film fantasy in people’s lives.

In what ways, then, does this constitute an *ambitious* project? First, of course, in terms of scale. To my knowledge, this is the biggest cooperative research endeavor yet undertaken—with 30 research groups in 20 countries. In Britain alone, more than 3,000 items of prefigurative materials have been collected, coded, and are being analyzed. The central questionnaire gathered a total of 25,000 responses. This will offer a body of materials permitting investigation and analysis for many years. Therefore, the guarantee that we have offered that in due course the entire body of materials will be made available for other researchers to explore, is itself important. But in other respects, ambition is about much more than size. It is impossible to do justice to all the steps involved here, because of their number and complexity, but the following at least gesture to what these “ambitions” are:

1. *The combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches.* For some time now, a rapprochement between these two research traditions has been emerging. But in the main, this mutual rediscovery has still maintained certain assumptions about the nature of each. Qualitative research is still widely perceived to be limited to obtaining rich, contextualized “stories,” while quantitative research permits experimental validity and measures of representativeness. Quantitative research, in a reverse direction, has the difficulty of the importation of researchers’ categories, while qualitative research permits researchers to “hear” respondents’ working categories and discourses. I have no doubt that in some research contexts these are correct diagnoses. But I would make a case that in the field of contemporary audience research, where a central emergent concept is that of the *interpretive community*, the notion of “representativeness” needs changing to that of “typicality.” The implications of this change are simultaneously conceptual and methodological. Conceptually, it means that we need to look at the *social operations of interpretative communities*. Methodologically, it means that *not all individuals are equal*, and therefore it is more important to be able to investigate *what an elaborate version of a discursive position might look like, and what it might enable to a person or group to see and to do*, rather than to know what an *average* version of it might be.

In the *Rings* project, therefore, the questionnaire is designed with the intention of allowing us to identify *response patterns*, the *discursive resources* through which people exemplifying those patterns express themselves, how far these patterns *assemble into coherent strategies for making sense of the film*, and then to *identify people who best embody* this emergent strategy—which we can then, hopefully, explore further.

2. *The concept of a viewing strategy.* If cultural studies has put the question of the text–audience relation at the center of its attentions, then the issue of the compatibility of claims about the “text” with audience research becomes pretty paramount. And the struggle to develop an account of film form that does not simply *presume* “what the audience must be doing” has been quite a bitter one. The efforts of David Bordwell and his colleagues to assert a model of film form that takes into account the mental processes of audiences are commendable. It has put a focus on what is required of audiences if they are simply to achieve a coherent picture of what a film, its events, characters, and narrative are “about.” But Bordwell himself has never attempted to translate his account into a basis of actual audience research. To do so, I want to argue, requires a new concept: the “viewing strategy.”

The concept of a “viewing strategy” makes a move that may appear quite small, but is in fact exceptionally wide in its implications. The concept conceives viewing (or, by natural extension, reading, listening, participating in other ways) as a *motivated* activity. It therefore focuses on, first, *why* people go to see a film—with what hopes, fears, expectations, based on what prior knowledge, with what sense of (and what kind of) importance attached to the event, in what company and why (and “company” here includes real, possible, and imaginary companions). The reason for inquiring into all of these is because they are seen as providing the *conditions from which* a person goes about “making sense” of a film.

The notion of “making sense” derives a great deal from David Bordwell, whose work—deriving from cognitive psychology—has investigated the ways in which audiences may take up and form constructs from the “cues” which a film supplies. But Bordwell in the end is really interested in the formation of films, not the formation of audiences—therefore, he only explores the *conditions of comprehension*. He therefore curtails his account to just the cognitive, and excludes consideration of sensuous (the impact of films on our *bodies* through sound, light, etc.), aesthetic (all the forms in which we experience films as *beautiful* or *horrible*), emotional (the dimensions of caring, etc.), and imaginative (the ways in which audiences build larger worlds beyond the cues provided) aspects of film viewing. The approach outlined here *has* to embrace all these, and more. So the second step entailed by the concept is to ask: how as a result of these initiating, motivating conditions does a viewer notice some facets of the film and not others, and begin to form an account and an understanding of what is happening which may have to be checked and revised as the film proceeds? How does she/he judge people and behaviors, and care about actions and events in various ways? How does she/he encounter the various physical facets of the film (e.g., volume, brightness, length, editing pace) and endow those with meaning by virtue of placing them in categories (for example, hearing sound effects as, variously, spectacular, aesthetically satisfying, (un)original, intrusive, overblown, etc.)? How, through the whole encounter, do members of the audience arrive at a combination of *experiences* (surprise, delight, frustration, dislike, etc.) and *judgments* (“not as good as I’d hoped,” “a blast,” “appalling” etc.) which have both the characteristics of positivity or negativity, and of “naming.” Take one tiny example: to say of a film that it was “over-hyped” is to make a complex judgment on it. It *recognizes* the operation of a process of heavy publicity and associated media attention; it *acknowledges* the creation of a kind of expectation as a result of these; it then *measures* the film as not fully meeting those expectations; but it does these *within the language* of that established public presence.

A final step that “viewing strategy” introduces is to insist on the question: when for all practical purposes does the experience *end*? Of course, on a certain view, the only end-point of any experience is death itself. All experiences continue to resonate in one way or another through the lifetime of a person. But to say so would be to flatten all experiences. Not just because of processes of forgetting, all of us know in practice that some experiences continue to jostle us for longer than others. It is possible to leave a theater, and almost instantly consign the experience to a bin of completed outings. On the other hand, there are occasions when a film leaves behind talking points, needling incomplete understandings, recallable pleasures, dream materials, points-of-connection with other parts of our lives. Then there are the films we want, maybe need, to go back to— to see again, to check our memories, to relive the experiences, to explore afresh. The concept of a viewing strategy seeks to leave as an open, researchable question what the effective “moment of closure” is.

Note that this concept neither rules out nor requires a notion like “activity.” Viewing can be active in many ways (careful preparations, selection of cinema, company, seat, etc.) It can also be passive in the sense of setting oneself to be surprised, shaken, aroused, blown away. In watching *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*, there was a noticeable sigh of contentment the moment the film began, as people settled fully into the seats in readiness—was this “active” or “passive”? It is a meaningless question— the response inevitably combines elements of both.

The concept of a viewing strategy was developed as an alternative to, in many ways, in opposition to, the encoding/decoding approach. This approach perforce privileges readings that stand away

from a “text” (whether the preference is for “resistant” or “negotiated” readings<sup>12</sup>), because distanced readings are seen as more *active*. The never-quite-discovered dominant reader of a “text” would have to be passive at least in the sense of being, at that moment of encounter, vulnerable to the supposedly embedded dominant meanings. Quite aside from the objections I would raise to this way of conceiving how “meanings” are to be discovered in a cultural product, there is a problem in this model of the audience. The encoded audience, as it were, has to be conceived as an audience *without* a history, *without* the kind of real conditions of viewing that I am summarizing here.

But in addition to its challenge to that tradition, this concept bears a problematic relation also with Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus.” As I have argued elsewhere, Bourdieu’s concept emphasises the *routinized* nature of responses. There is no apparent space for two conditions that could challenge routine. First, there is *surprise*, in which an audience’s encounter with a film or whatever is not as expected. Surprise can be happy or unhappy, of course, can range between bitter disappointment and astonished delight. Surprise can occasionally be life-altering—an experience gained that breaches boundaries, opens new perspectives, wanted or not. Second, there is “*investment*.” “Investment” is a term developed in and through the previous project on audiences for *Judge Dredd*. It draws attention to all the ways in which audiences *care* about the experience they seek. It treats as crucial variables *how much* they care, and the *manner* of their caring. Our research on *Dredd*’s audiences showed that the more heavily invested an audience, the more they seek to control the conditions of viewing, the more they make demands on the film (we called these “ideal expectations”)—and are therefore prone to disappointment. The scale from casual to committed is not as simple as one from passive to active; a highly committed viewer may want to *bathe* in a film. It may be a deep desire to be engulfed by the experience, a committed passivity. This has to be discovered, empirically, through exploring the major available social positions from the basis of which *caring* takes place.

But also in important ways, we found that our findings contradicted two emphases in Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus,” and the concept of “investment” was designed to take account of these contradictions (see Barker & Brooks, 1998). First, we argue that high investors were able to use the outcomes of chosen experiences as *vehicles for change* (where change is hard to understand in Bourdieu’s framework). And they are able to do so, precisely because of a tendency for high investment to transcend the individual, to become a locus of a community of views. And through belonging to a community, people learn how to formulate their demands and see the possibilities of action. Second, we argued that high investors tend not to recognize boundaries around cultural fields. So, a film is not simply a “film” to a high investor—it is a source of ideas, images, imaginings that can be transported out of the world of the strictly cinematic into other areas of a person’s life.

Every sentence in this short account could well do with expansion, but cannot get it here. And just the issue about how one can research so complex a thing as one person’s viewing strategy—what is a viable and appropriate methodology for this task—is an essay in itself. Suffice to say here that the *Lord of the Rings* research is just such an attempt.

The concept of a “viewing strategy” has emerged, for me, over a series of researches. It is designed to bring together within one frame all the processes whereby members of an audience *prepare for* any act of reading, listening, or viewing; how these preparations lead to different kinds of attention, the ability to make sense of characters and events, a willingness to pursue possible connections and

meanings; and how the outcomes of these result in both degrees of acceptance or rejection, satisfaction or dissatisfaction, and longer-term integration of the experiences into people's thinking, feelings, and lives. The concept clearly has precursors, not least within the literary field (where I am happy to acknowledge the formative influence on me of Horst Ruthrof's (1981) work). But the remarkable thing about all the precursive influences is that they have hardly led to any actual audience research. Although each and all make claims about audiences, those who have deployed them have stayed out of the actual arena. This is frustrating not least because, as anyone who has ever conducted however small a piece of audience research will tell you, the wonder and fearfulness of it is that *it always surprises*. Easy predictions will fail. Too tidy concepts will falter. For those who do it, the joy of such research is precisely in taking those surprising, difficult materials and letting them teach us about complexities.

Just two tiny examples, but real ones that actually pushed me to formulate this concept. In 1995–1996 I conducted (with Kate Brooks) a research project in film audiences, the first ever to attempt to explore the meaning of action-adventure films to different kinds of audiences. The research was focused around the film *Judge Dredd*—which proved a strange blessing. The film was a box office failure, and was disliked by very many of its audience. This had, for me, a real advantage, because in the disappointed, frustrated, sometimes angry responses of many people whom we interviewed brought into view an aspect of audience responses I had never really identified before: the aspect of *ideal expectations*.

One set of interviews was conducted at a comic book convention, where many fans came and went to talk about their views of the film, to a schedule of questions that we had pinned to the wall. We had put in a final question as a small provocation, to see what kinds of responses it would get. The question was: suppose a second *Judge Dredd* film was made, what and who should be in it? A very common response was to wish for a story using Judge Anderson, a popular female judge in the story world's bleak futuristic scenario. The following exchange took place:

*MB* So who could play Judge Anderson? [ . . . ]

*S* Oh. She'd have to be blonde . . .

*D* . . . Why?

*S* Well, she is, I think, in the comic.

*D* Well, like, they can't change the color of an actress's hair?

*S* Well, no, but then you'd complain, oh heck, that woman hasn't got blonde hair . . .

*D* ..no, no, the actress's hair.

*MB* You'd prefer a blonde, OK.

*S* Well, I mean, if, if you're going to, you check all the uniforms and everything on Dredd, you know, so you want characters that people do come I think from the comic background will recognize. Erm. Erm. I don't know, erm, she might be a bit old but Sharon Stone, erm.

*MB* [laughs]

D For God's Sake!! Why can't you (a) choose some woman who can act, (b) someone who can enunciate, and (c) someone who actually captures something of Anderson, which is a street-smart person who has actually got some personality? Not a cardboard fucking cut-out!

What was so striking to me were the ways in which the last response revealed the relationship Don felt he had with the comic, and the ways in which it led him to reverse ordinary perspectives. Now Judge Anderson, in "reality" a drawing on paper, is more three-dimensional (has more personality) than the living human being Sharon Stone. Now a character in a comic has acquired *rights*; the right to be embodied adequately, to meet an ideal in the head of this, and indeed many other fans. In this ordinary, if spirited, exchange, an aspect of audiencing was revealed to me that provided the impetus to a whole rethinking of the processes and implications of being a "fan."

Take, next, a small quotation from an interview that was recorded as part of a research project into the British controversy over David Cronenberg's *Crash*. The interview was with four women who, somewhat to their own surprise, had absolutely loved the film. But they were terribly aware of its controversial reputation. One of the four:

K: Historically, it's quite often been very one-sided. A lot of directors seem to have lots of full frontals of women, in the shower and, you don't often get a man walking around with no clothes on. We need to think about redressing the balance that way. That's what I felt about *Crash*. I thought the sexual relationship was very, umm, equal, you know. He was giving and she was giving and it wasn't all coming from one side, it was not focusing on the woman.

The startling thing about this is two apparent inconsistencies. Kelly begins by referencing a long-standing debate with academic and public dimensions, about the way women are treated visually in films. But that debate collides with her own, deeply satisfying experience of the film—as equal, giving, "liberating" (her term). But Kelly does not (yet) have available to her another language for stating the difference. So, in a literal sense, she gets it wrong. If you do a content analysis, *Crash* without question displays more female than male flesh. But that isn't Kelly's working criterion, even if she doesn't have the words to express it fully. She has a very particular strategy for deriving meaning from the film, which leads her to celebrate its "equality," and much more.<sup>13</sup>

The *Lord of the Rings* project in very many ways sits on the back of the conceptual and methodological shifts that began with examples such as these. I don't want in any way to say that everyone involved in the project accepts the framework I am outlining here. Nor do I wish to imply that other researchers do not have equivalent ambitions for our field. But I do want to argue that the time is right for all of us involved in the field of audience research to come out and declare what our ambitions are, what wider linkages of theory, concepts, and methods we see for the field—and how these might be tested. No longer can it be enough to *illustrate* our claims. Like the researchers 25 years ago, we need to explore tougher forms of research. Ideas currently semi-sacred may have to be held up to hard, very hard scrutiny. It may hurt. But the pain is worth it.

## NOTES

1. I have discussed some of these in greater detail in two previous publications: *IRIS* essay (1998); and *From Antz to Titanic: Reinventing film analysis*. London: Pluto Press (2000).
2. As an example, take Lyn Thomas's (2002) fascinating research into audiences for the long-standing British radio soap opera *The Archers*, which have not been studied, one suspects, because their pleasures are so "obvious."
3. As an example, take Annette Hill's (1997) study of women as fans of violent media.
4. As an example, consider Ellen Seiter's excellent work on fundamentalist Christian women. The evident motive of her research is her concern that as a feminist she *ought* to find points in common with them, but it is so very hard. See her *Television and new media audiences* (1999).
5. I am referring to the important study *The Dominant Ideology Thesis* (Abercrombie et al., 1980).
6. As editor of the new on-line journal devoted to audience and reception studies, I grasped the opportunity to publish this research in our launch issue. See *Participations*, 1, November 2003. Available free-to-use at [www.participations.org](http://www.participations.org).
7. Our criticisms of this, mind you, could turn and bite. Can we readily point to any concrete cases where our own studies of audiences have been embedded in concrete histories— or, indeed to explore a different meaning of "historical," of any studies that have looked at how audiences *change in their media/cultural affiliations over time*?
8. See Kim Schrøder (2003). I have to declare that I took up that challenge. As will become evident later in this essay, I find myself very much at odds with Hall's theorization, and believe that adherence to it has hindered and indeed harmed our phase of audience research quite substantially.
9. An example of this would be the flourishing of fan studies for a time. The emphasis there on audiences' play with the media they loved seems to contradict Hall's model. In fact, it is more a claim of *political exceptionality*, a celebration of fans as virtual radicals.
10. The researcher whose work comes closest to passing beyond this semi-hermetic position is, in my judgment, Janet Staiger, whose work on discursive frameworks organizing responses to films does take note of the ways in which such discourses are in debate with each other. But Staiger has placed an unfortunate limit on her own ambitions, by insisting that "reception research," as she names it, should limit itself to *already published responses*. See Staiger (1992/2000). There is another, more pragmatic limit around her studies, in her unacknowledged preference for reviews in "serious newspapers" (as against popular reviews, gossip, interviews, and all the other paraphernalia that accompanies very many films to and after release).
11. The upgrading of Orlando Bloom's role was assuredly a response to their efforts to win their audience "fourth quartile," young women under 25.
12. See Tamar Liebes & Re Rivka Ribat (1994).

13. A full analysis of Kelly's and the other women's responses is given in chapter 4 of *The Crash Controversy* (2001).

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