From the Ideal Spectactor to the Social Practice of Reception: An Introduction

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Presumably, most film scholars secretly wish to know more about film reception, that is, about the “effect” of films on the spectator or spectators, or indeed on certain spectators, both now and in the past. Mostly, this wish remains unfulfilled – and perhaps it must ultimately remain a stumbling block.

The term “effect” is used here with caution. Not so much because we intend to refer to the meanwhile largely obsolete behaviourist model, but because film and cinema lead spectators to do things, integrate both into their everyday social and cultural practices, and use them for their psychic make-up. Instead, we prefer to speak of “appropriation” or “ways of reading,” in the belief that these terms more appropriately grasp the complex processes of film reception, even if they are perhaps already too text-heavy.

In any event, the category of the “ideal spectator,” derived exclusively from textuality and serving many aesthetic and semantic approaches to film analysis as an implicit construct of the intentional reader or spectator, this ideal spectator actually stifles discussion about real spectators as the social and historical instances of a communication process. The resulting gap might to a large extent be linked to the origins of film studies as a discipline. In many places, it emerged from literary studies and art history, or from structural linguistics, whose theories and methods, and their underlying traditions, inform film studies. While this had a productive effect on text analysis, it also foregrounded the need for greater methodological reflection on historical processes and audiences so as to understand film and the cinema as mass media and to account for their fundamentally different conditions of production and reception. Where, however, film studies evolved from history or other social science disciplines, attention focused for a long time on questions concerning the representation of historical events rather than the media-specific, social practices of spectators. The turn toward cultural studies has unquestionably broadened the horizon of film scholarship in general; already established for some time in film studies, cultural studies has increasingly urged scholars to align and link different positions, approaches, and methods.
The present volume seeks to shed more light on the interrelations between film, cinema, and spectators. We thus hope to assign to spectators their rightful place, namely, that filmic artefacts are perceived increasingly as social texts, and spectator activities as cultural practices, so that the construction of meaning can be explored not only on the side of production, but – together with the affective experience of cinema and film – especially on the side of reception. Even if the essays gathered here are not primarily concerned with amassing hard empirical data, they nevertheless focus on various contexts of reception, ranging from social and economic conditions over intermedia and discursive environments to lifestyles and attitudes, with a view to framing a broad range of possible contextualisations. Such an endeavour can succeed only through cross-disciplinary research, which thereby does justice to the complex constitution of cultural identities and practices – both now and then – and thus accounts for the manifold, idiosyncratic, and contradictory uses made of films by spectators. Doing so requires accepting the particularities of the medium, while also usefully considering its popular forms and genres. Particular emphasis is placed on the formation of genres, through which audience retention largely works.

Reception studies have played an important role in film studies in the English-speaking world for quite some time. By contrast, such questions have risen to the fore only recently in Continental European film studies, albeit with significant national differences. On an international level, essential contributions have been made to our understanding of the earliest period of film. Here, an often necessarily descriptive, locally or regionally delimited historiography furnishes important details on cinema management and attendance, including the social composition of the audience and its behaviour. Quite possibly, the endeavour of the state and bourgeoisie to censor and reform the cinema (both were suspicious of the lower social strata going to the cinema) favoured this defensive view of the audience (just as – customarily conservative – film education did subsequently in Germany).

Nevertheless, the fundamental questions about this early period and its principal audience contingent – for example, whether these were women or children – remain controversial (notably, later periods of film history hardly ever attended to the significance of the female or young audience). Other issues that have been far from exhaustively treated include the effects on reception of specific presentation modes and screening situations, such as the variety show, the role of the live narrator, discussions among spectators or comments directed toward the screen, and the interrelations between the cinema, theater, and other popular forms of entertainment. Nevertheless, research on primary accounts of the cinema
experience (diaries, autobiographical fiction, and so forth) dating from the silent era of film is most advanced, probably because of the novelty of the medium. Besides, the paratextual materials involved in researching the cinema as an institution (classified advertisements, programmes, audience magazines, reviews, and so on) in local histories of the cinema, which have now been appearing for over twenty years, tend to refer more directly to spectators than standard film historiography does. One general problem of reconstructing reception situations – which by no means concerns only early cinema – remains: the most readily accessible documents, namely, film reviews, only rarely provide information about the popular audience. Moreover, researching everyday practices, which evoke reactions that are hardly ever or only indirectly recorded in writing, often represents an obstacle for understanding actual auditorium behaviour or the reception of individual films. Questions concerning the concrete uses and functions of film and cinema thus often necessitate speculative assumptions and cultural-theoretical concepts. Among others, the notion of cinema’s public sphere promises to extend the scope of analysis to the cinema as an institution and the reappraisal of cinema history/ies. Following the recourse to theories of the public sphere associated with the Frankfurt School, this notion recently re-emerged in the cultural history of cinema during the 1990s, and has since been further developed in close association with the theme of reception.

“Classical” film historiography seems to most closely approach the spectator when it is informed by the history of culture and ideology, or by what used to be called the history of mentalities. This occurs, for example, when it collides with Siegfried Kracauer or when film and cinema are supposed to provide information on the social and psychic state of a society. New Film History has lent a tremendous impetus to exploring the cinema audience and film consumption in connection with broad historical and cultural contexts. By focusing on specific audiences, the more recent New Cinema History has further promoted audience research by rendering fruitful subjective testimony and memory through the methods of Oral History, and by aiming at an everyday history of media use. It draws on the approaches of media biography research of the 1970s and 80s. Other approaches originate in Cultural Studies, which, however, seldom refer to cinema and even less to individual films (least of all their aesthetics) confining their investigations mostly to the present. It would be desirable to increasingly combine these perspectives, thereby interlinking micro- and macrohistories of film and cinema. Further methodological reflections on our present theme are still needed, just as (theoretically grounded) concrete elaborations on historical and current film reception practices.
One particularity of established film historiography further complicates a focus on the audience, namely, the *canon formation* underlying the selection of films. Selection proceeds according to the categorisation of works of art, which almost always excludes their social and cultural circulation. Canonised works are frequently attributed an abstract life of their own, regardless of whether they reached or reach an audience or not. For a long time, the imbalance between the films investigated and those actually viewed, meant that entire historical periods, especially – but not only – of popular cinema (that is, the segment with the largest attendance figures) hardly existed in film history. In this field, various studies on historical or contemporary fan communities have been undertaken in recent years, especially by Anglo-American scholars. Such communities often form around individual or entire groups of films, which belong rather to so-called trash than canonical culture. Furthermore, research on film use, which is beginning to establish itself in the German- and English-speaking world, takes a firm approach toward ephemeral forms of film, which lie beyond the conventional artistic canon, such as industrial, school, science, or amateur films. Focusing on screening practices outside commercial cinema allows such research to broaden the scope to hitherto neglected aspects and alternative modes of film reception within the area of non-theatrical films.

In addition to the above-mentioned approaches, the present collection includes highly diverse perspectives on film reception. More or less explicitly, they take up many historically grown approaches to studying the audience and their methodological implications, often varying or modifying them. Entering into a reciprocal discussion, these approaches include those critiquing ideology and power through orientations toward semiotics and psychoanalysis, which are representative of film theory and film studies of the 1970s and 80s (and which feature a significant feminist correlative), as well as the broad field of cognitivist and (semio-) pragmatic positions. Other approaches include the psychology of affect and emotion, which is generally closely interrelated with cognitivist approaches within film studies, as well as those oriented toward ethnography, which consider the integration of film consumption into daily life or the lifeworlds of certain social and ethnic groups. All these approaches, and those mentioned above, have remained effective until today and complement each other in many of the essays gathered here. Thus, this collection fathoms the interfaces between historical contexts, empirical data, and over-arching theoretical models. On the one hand, it confronts them with films, their semantic potential, and what they offer the senses and emotions; on the other, it confronts them with the experience of film as a social and aesthetic practice.
The volume presents a broad, international palette of research questions, approaches, and topics concerning reception across the history of film and various cultures – for the first time in the German-speaking world. It might be added that until recently the fundamental debates waged mainly in English and French (with the exception of the one focused on feminism) exerted rather little influence on German-speaking research, although reception aesthetics, developed within literary studies and internationally widely acclaimed until today, would have provided an independent tradition capable of development.

The present collection omits the current discussions in neurophysiology and neuropsychology, and the debates on perception and the processing of emotions deriving from these fields. It also leaves out social statistics and its empiricism (as applied, for instance, in the audience research conducted within media and communication studies). These approaches have been omitted because the essays gathered here focus primarily on the role of film reception in the constitution of social, gender-specific, ethnic, and ultimately cultural identities and practices. However, this does not exclude gratefully making use of empirical data wherever available and if it sheds further light on our present theme. For pragmatic reasons, no consideration is given either to non-functionalist, cultural sociology orientations examining the interrelation between media-audiovisual and social worlds, such as symbolic interactionism. The fact, however, that many of the contributions to this volume explicitly present methodological considerations is related to the broad and as yet largely unconsolidated area of “film reception,” where one needs to be mindful of the approach adopted.

This volume collects the papers delivered at a conference bearing the same title, held in September 2008 at the Swiss Institute in Rome. It also includes various essays written in German and English especially for this collection, as well as a small selection of existing, illustrative essays on the theme, which are published here for the first time in German translation. Including contributions in either German or English reflects our concern to present not so much a comprehensive overview of film reception and how spectators deal with film and cinema, but instead to further encourage discussion within German-speaking film studies, which has intensified recently. This collection also aims to forge closer links with international research, thereby reaching beyond language boundaries, to foster self-understanding both within the discipline and also beyond disciplinary boundaries.

We have divided contributions into five large sections: the first, Topographies of Reception, presents various theoretical-methodological models,
which lead beyond the filmic text and the implicit spectator to open up new perspectives on the interaction between audience and film. Irrespective of their differences, the essays gathered in this section adopt a firmly critical stance toward established questions and research approaches. Some of these contributions focus explicitly on the new constellations of audience situations based on current media technologies (new forms of cinema and screening, involving relevant films and non-cinematic viewing: television, video, DVD, Internet, and digitisation in general). The authors explore their possible meanings for, and effects on, viewing films, as well as their impact on everyday life against the background of film history. The contributions thus reveal astonishing similarities between contemporary cinema performances and the early cinema of attractions.

The second section, Film/Cinema, Self-Reflective, on the one hand considers how cinema itself has addressed and represented spectatorship and film viewing over the course of its history. Within the often ironic self-reflection of film and cinema as regards its spectators, this aspect still remains largely uncharted territory in research – just as the emergence of audience types during film and cinema history. On the other, this section also includes two contributions that discuss the notions of spectatorship in the writings and works of film theorists and film practitioners (here, Alexander Kluge and Béla Balázs). Especially filmmakers advancing comprehensive theoretical statements often foreground the audience relationship.

The next two sections present historical reception studies on the interrelations between film, cinema, and audience through individual films and groups of films from different periods of film history. The first spotlights German (film) history, and explores the impact of films on everyday life and the audience’s psychosocial world. The second, Cinema-Going: Socialisations and Discourses, studies reception situations in other European countries. The essays collected here attempt to constitute and reconstruct cinema as a social experience, or to illustrate how culture conditions film consumption, or to reconstruct spectator experiences in narrative, discursive, and intermedia terms. Almost all contributions in these two sections represent, partially in a forthright manner, new research approaches by using historical case studies to present the procedures adopted and the results obtained thereby.

Particular attention is devoted to the final section, the transnational practices of reception. Contributions gathered here consider the mechanisms of film circulation and the presentation and use of films in a certain foreign market, whereby the political-ideological implications play a role as much as inter- and transcultural factors. Ultimately, these case studies reveal how differently the meanings of films and what they offer the senses
and emotions is perceived and understood in different cultural contexts. Film studies have not adequately explored this field to date, which provides excellent opportunities for international research cooperations. One issue worth mentioning here, and which further sharpens this point, is that allusions recurring throughout film historiography to the fact that highly propagandistic films are received in another society as largely unpolitical entertainment have remained uninvestigated. Thus, the same films, when becoming part of other cultural and ideological contexts, seem to fulfil an entirely different function for the constitution of national and individual identities. One transhistorical subgroup here concerns evolving cultural dispositions and preferences, which can cause a film to “flop” at the box office, only to become a surprising popular success quarter of a century later; or that certain films at first please only cinephile circles, but subsequently also a wider audience – or vice versa.

By way of a preliminary and cautious conclusion, the otherwise highly diverse contributions to the present volume concur that film studies and especially film historiography need to further determine the relationship between cinema, film, and audience, and between textual structures and contextual factors, to perceive filmic artefacts as social texts and reception activities as sense-making and affective experience so that the processes involved in the construction of meaning can be investigated among both producers and recipients. Audiences and spectators, in any event, should be seen neither as constructs addressed exclusively by film nor as purely theoretical models. Rather, they need to be explored as regards their historical anchoring and how their perception of films changes over time. Investigating the most diverse contexts of reception (in the broadest sense of the term) is crucial in this respect. The choice of contexts ultimately decides on the relevance of the results obtained as regards audience appropriation and identity formation. Analysis must consider the ambivalence and contradictoriness not only of the media texts but also of their paratexts, as well as of the social experience of cinema or more generally of lifeworlds. At the same time, however, polysemy and contextualisation must also be clearly delimited to prevent their study from losing itself in aporia from the outset.

Thus, the outcome would be a kind of negotiated reading of both the work setting and the film as an object of analysis. The latter should be approached “aesthetically,” through the structural interrelation between a film’s content and its form. Obviously, this appeal to negotiate between film, cinema, and audience retention should not obstruct a more radical positioning of the spectator’s absolute liberty to make choices, in the sense
of an oppositional-to-subversive, or at least self-willed practice. Given the current state of research, it seems promising to reflect methodologically on the connections between turning toward the text and the context of reception, in a narrower and broader sense, and between the ideal, deduced spectator and real, historical spectators situated in actual worlds of experience. Although not all the contributions to this volume quite satisfy these demands, the collection nevertheless clearly shows how the debate is opening up increasingly toward analysing films within a context focused on spectatorship. The editors hope that this development may continue and that this volume will contribute to accelerating such discourses in film and media studies.

*English translation by Mark Kyburz*