On Rigour in Theatre Audience Research

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2. Helen Freshwater, *Theatre & Audience* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 3–4.

3. Janelle Reinelt, 'What UK Spectators Know: Understanding How We Come to Value Theatre', *Theatre Journal* 66, no. 3 (2014): 337–61 (338).

There is no one 'right' way to study theatre audiences. Interviews, focus groups, post-show questionnaires and attitudinal surveys, historiographical and archival methods, social media research, 'big data', creative participatory workshops, and 'neuroaesthetic' cognitive science: as performance scholars, we have at our disposal a wide range of tools for evidencing audience reception, experience, and response.[1] And yet, as Helen Freshwater identified in *Theatre & Audience* (2009), prior to the 2010s, the academic field of performance studies had seen relatively few attempts to study spectatorship using 'empirical' methodologies. While moving steadily away from seeing audiences as either 'unified or stable' over the years, theatre scholars have historically been 'more comfortable making strong assertions about theatre's unique influence and impact upon audiences than gathering and assessing the evidence which might support these claims'. In the main, the preference has always been 'to draw on their own responses or the opinions of reviewers' in lieu of 'asking "ordinary" audience members – with no professional stake in the theatre – what they make of a performance'.[2]

Five years later, in a 2014 article called 'What UK Spectators Know', Janelle Reinelt speculated on the potential reasons for this lacuna. One explanation is a methodological knowledge-gap: a disciplinary vicious circle which has precluded supervising scholars from providing expert postdoctoral and early-career training in the crucial tenets of implement design and data analysis. Another is an overarching disciplinary suspicion about the political and epistemological implications of audience research, which as Reinelt says 'can seem too close to the "market research" or ratings games that are at the heart of commercial ventures within consumer-based capitalism'.[3] In other words, researching theatre audiences is never a neutral act. In the quotation above, Freshwater describes empirical research as a

4. Kirsty Sedgman, 'Audience Experience in an Anti-Expert Age', *Theatre Research International* 42, no. 3 (2017): 307–22 (312).

5. See e.g. Anja Mølle Lindelof, 'Audience Development and its Blind Spot', *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 21, no. 2 (2015): 200–18; and Ben Walmsley 'Deep Hanging out in the Arts', *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 24, no. 2 (2018): 272–91.

6. See e.g. Stephanie Pitts and Jonathan Gross, 'Audience Exchange: Cultivating Peer-to-Peer dialogue at Unfamiliar Arts Events', *Arts and the Market* 7, no. 1 (2017): 65–79; and Ben Walmsley '"A Big Part of my Life": A Qualitative Study of the Impact of Theatre', *Arts Marketing* 3, no. 1 (2013): 73–87.

7. See e.g. Joshua Edelman and Maja Šorli, 'Measuring the Value of Theatre for Tyneside Audiences', *Cultural Trends* 24, no. 3 (2015): 232–44; and Abigail Gilmore, Hilary Glow, and Katya Johanson, 'Accounting for Quality', *Cultural Trends* 26, no. 4 (2017): 282–94.

8. Alan Brown, 'Audience Research Gone Wild', *Participations* 14, no. 2 (2017): 53–62.

9. Reinelt, 'What UK Spectators Know', 339.

10. John Tulloch, *Shakespeare and Chekhov in Production and Reception: Theatrical Events and their Audiences* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009).

11. Matthew Reason, *The Young Audience: Exploring and Enhancing Children's Experiences of Theatre*

process of 'gathering and assessing […] evidence' about spectatorial reception: yet the very concept of 'evidencing' how audiences engage with, find value in, and respond to culture is inherently problematic. The field of theatre and performance scholarship is only beginning to wrestle seriously with the potentials and problems posed by this multifarious work. A decade on from Freshwater's seminal provocation, this article examines the state of play in theatre audience research today. It proposes the view as simultaneously very hopeful, and yet with potential cause for concern.

My primary reason for optimism is the increasing consolidation of live performance audience research. First, the newly formed international Network for Audience Research in the Performing Arts (iNARPA), which launched in January 2017, attests to a growing desire for audience scholarship to find 'a central base',[4] enabling researchers in varying fields to come together and learn from each other. It is telling though that so many of my iNARPA colleagues are publishing their work in journals outside the performance studies mainstream, with theatre audiences appearing regularly in forums such as the *International Journal of Cultural Policy*,[5] *Arts Marketing: An International Journal* (now called *Arts and the Market*),[6] and *Cultural Trends*.[7] This reflects the disciplinary variety of iNARPA's membership, within which can be identified representatives from a wide spread of fields, ranging from industry-based impact evaluators and quantitative data analysts, to arts marketing and cultural policy scholars, to cognitive scientists and empirical aestheticists, to those using ethnographic and quali-quantitative methodologies. It is hoped that these burgeoning relationships will now be solidified by the inauguration in Leeds of a brand new Centre for Cultural Value, supported by the AHRC, which intends to break the cycle described by Alan Brown, co-founder of American cultural industry marketing research firm Wolf Brown, as 'a near total lack of knowledge management in a highly decentralized field'.[8]

Second, at the same time, the discipline of Theatre and Performance Studies is beginning to move past its 'hasty dismissal' of audience research (to borrow Reinelt's phrase) by reconceiving the 'concrete political potential' of empirical methodologies.[9] This is bringing further into the light some important extant scholarship, with John Tulloch's *Shakespeare and Chekhov in Production and Reception*[10] and Matthew Reason's *The Young Audience*[11] two foundational monographs on spectator engagement, alongside numerous publications attributable to the 1980s emergence of a dedicated northern-European audience collective, spearheaded by scholars such as Willmar Sauter, Frank Coppieters, Henri Schoenmakers, and Peter Eversmann. Building on this tradition, a host of (frequently postgraduate and early-career) scholars are increasingly embracing discursive methodologies:[12] a trend which is providing a necessary counterpoint to performance studies' previous over-reliance on cognitive science as the only legitimate outlet for experiential evidence. See, for instance, Bruce McConachie and F. Elizabeth Hart's book *Performance and Cognition* (2006), which proposes that a neuroaesthetic approach offers a 'better' framework for understanding the

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(Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books Ltd., 2010).

12. Sedgman, 'Audience Experience in an Anti-Expert Age', 307–22.

13. Bruce McConachie and F. Elizabeth Hart, eds., *Performance and Cognition: Theatre Studies and the Cognitive Turn*, (London: Routledge, 2006), ix.

14. Kirsty Sedgman, *Locating the Audience: How People Found Value in National Theatre Wales* (Bristol: Intellect, 2016), 10.

'truth' of audience response:[13] a statement which led to my rueful comment in 2016 that

> [t]he field of theatre studies has sometimes seemed on the verge of moving from 'rhetorical' work, understanding audiences by dismantling texts for their capacity to produce responses, via 'high theory' about how hypothetical audiences do or should respond to things, to conducting cognitive experiments on them, without actually stopping to *talk to audiences* on the way.[14]

It is, therefore, heartening too to see a growing number of theatrical books and articles including some elements of discursive spectatorial response within their analyses. So what in this plethora of activity is missing? A sustained and overarching disciplinary examination of all the political, epistemological, ethical, and practical implications involved in investigating audience experience via empirical means, using different approaches and differing methodologies. Rather than hierarchising one approach over others, this instead means asking *which orders of question* our specific implements are able to answer, as well as how our particular research interventions – along with our own scholarly concerns, our biases and subject positions and sense-making processes – have necessarily inflected the things we find. If ten years ago the common complaint was that theatre scholars in the main avoid talking *to* audiences in favour of talking *about* them, my worry now is that within performance studies, the audience research element can occasionally risk being something of an afterthought: discon-nected from critical debates around implements and approaches, fail-ing to disclose key aspects of methodology, and presented simply as a way of evidencing outcomes for the author's own performance prac-tice. This is particularly troubling given recent governmental moves to metricise value, whereby audiences' responses are taken at face value as an objective measure of artistic success.

As a discipline, it is time now to ask ourselves what 'good' theatre audience research might look like. How will we know it when we see it? Happily, these are not new questions: scholars from cultural stu-dies and sociology have a long history of using experiential reflections as a way in to understanding lived reality, by interrogating the 'cor-respondence between a life as lived, a life as experienced, and a life as told'.[15] Thinking specifically about the viewer/reader experience, and notwithstanding the live performance scholarship mentioned above, a vast amount of this work has taken place within a distinct academic field called 'audience studies', an offshoot of media and mass com-munications research since the 1930s, which has systematically called for a self-reflexive interrogation of the research process.

By bringing decades of audience studies debates – heretofore given scant attention within theatre and performance fields – into conversation with theatre studies, I believe we will be better able to address the

15. Edward Bruner, quoted in Elizabeth Bird, *The Audience in Everyday Life: Living in a Media World* (London: Routledge, 2013), 20.

epistemological, ethical, and methodological implications of discursive audience research. In doing so, I hope to enter into dialogue with two distinct groups: (a) those who want to use spectatorial feedback as a way to understand audience experience but who have not been trained in the analytical frameworks necessary to make useful sense of the information they gather and (b) those who fundamentally disagree that it is possible to glean any useful knowledge about *actual* audience experience from spectatorial *descriptions* of experience at all.

Yes, it is clearly the case that audiences' articulations are not a transparent window into complex phenomena such as affect, experience, memory, or response. It is also fair to claim the impossibility for spectators of adequately describing all the ineffable, emotional, cognitive, kinaesthetic effects of performance engagement, or of comprehending the long-term impacts of theatre on our lives. But whether imagining audience statements to be direct reflections of the reality of reception, or dismissing spectatorial articulations as epistemologically worthless, both positions risk missing the real value of discursive audience research. As this article argues, audiences' answers in interviews, their focus group discussions, their scribbled reflections on post-show surveys: these things must be presented not as verifiable slices of experience, able to transmit the reality of audience response from spectator to researcher to reader, but as the result of a complex interplay between research context and analytical approach. Here I follow Ien Ang's suggestion that audience research tends to be undertaken

> because the relation between [culture] and viewers is an empirical *question*. But the empirical is not the privileged domain where the *answers* should be sought. Answers – partial ones, to be sure, that is, both provisional and committed – are to be constructed, in the form of interpretations.[16]

16. Ien Ang, *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences* (London: Routledge, 2006), 39.

Drawing on sophisticated audience studies frameworks, this article proposes that no matter which specific methods are used, it is critical attention to these constructive, interpretative processes that constitutes rigorous audience research. Thus, while the analysis here is focused on qualitative modes of enquiry, it is hoped that my repositioning of both audience *reception* and audience *research* as essentially processual, constructive, and interpretative will find broader methodological relevance. For where alternative approaches indeed have the capacity to produce important forms of knowledge, it is my contention that to fail to listen to how audiences themselves articulate their own experiences is to shirk the urgent responsibility of understanding the ways differing individuals imagine and make sense of our shared social world. After all, as Kim Schrøder et al. put it: 'the methods available may not be perfect, but there is no alternative – except ignorance'.[17]

17. Kim Schrøder et al., *Researching Audiences: A Practical Guide to Methods in Media Audience Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), 17.

18. Sedgman, *Locating the Audience*, xiii.

19. Shaun Moores, *Interpreting Audiences: the Ethnography of Media Consumption* (London: SAGE Publications, 2000), 4.

20. David Morley, 'Changing Paradigms in Audience Studies', in *Remote Control: Television, Audiences, and Cultural Power*, ed. Ellen Seiter, Hans Borchers, Gabriele Kreutzner, and Eva-Maria Warth (London: Routledge, 1989), 16–43.

21. Ien Ang, 'On the Politics of Empirical Audience Research', in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keyworks*, ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 177–97.

22. Joke Hermes, 'Audience Studies 2.0: On the Theory, Politics and Method of Qualitative Audience Research', *Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture* 1, no. 1 (2009): 111–27.

23. Barker, Martin, 'I Have Seen the Future and it is Not Here Yet … ; Or, on Being Ambitious for Audience Research', *The Communication Review* 9, no. 2 (2006): 123–41 (131).

24. Hermes, 'Audience Studies 2.0', 113.

25. Bird, *The Audience in Everyday Life*, 87.

26. Ann Gray, *Research Practice for Cultural Studies: Ethnographic Methods and Lived Cultures* (London: SAGE Publications, 2003), 2.

27. Moores, *Interpreting Audiences*, 4.

28. Graeme Turner, *British Cultural Studies: An Introduction*

Bringing Audience Studies into Theatre

Since the 1930s, the connected fields of media studies, communication studies, and sociology have been the locus for the development of a concerted 'audience studies' tradition. Largely focusing on the reception of popular culture, this research has predominantly taken place 'on sites of struggle, where audiences were considered in some way to be *at risk*'.[18] Having staked out, very early on, a corner of the emergent framework of cultural studies, audience researchers have spent the past almost-century investigating how the '"situational embeddedness" of cultural practices'[19] might practically be charted: capturing evidence of how people make sense of media texts through drawing on their own subjectivities and lived experiences, and asking how cultural engagements help people make sense of their lives.

While by no means homogeneous in outlook or approach, there has at least been a sense of audience studies as a relatively cohesive discipline, in that scholarly outputs – although they may often strenuously disagree – have tended at least to talk to one another. For examples of collaborative volumes, see Will Brooker and Deborah Jermyn's *The Audience Studies Reader* (Hove: *Psychology Press*, 2003), Kim Schrøder et al.'s *Researching Audiences* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2003), and the many articles collected in the international journal of audience research, *Participations.* Further influential reflections on the field include David Morley's 'Changing Paradigms in Audience Studies',[20] Ien Ang's 'On the Politics of Empirical Audience Research',[21] Joke Hermes' 'Audience Studies 2.0',[22] and Martin Barker's 'On Being Ambitious for Audience Research'.[23]

Although these methodological debates have by no means been harmonious (and forays into other methodologies notwithstanding), the audience studies strand of scholarship has by and large united around a need to take seriously how spectators/readers *themselves* reflect on their own cultural practices, with audiences' experiential descriptions studied as 'part of discursive webs of meaning reaching far outside the individual media text'.[24] Whether the subjects of study are 'extreme horror' viewers, or science fiction fans, or readers of women's magazines, such research projects have often been described as 'ethnographically inspired',[25] or using approaches 'often described as ethnographic'.[26] Whether or not such studies are themselves qualified to be 'properly called ethnographies',[27] though, has been contested. Tending to focus only on a small 'arbitrarily disconnected fragment' of culture,[28] audience research often fails to live up to the traditional definition of ethnography as 'a lengthy social interaction between a scholar and a distant culture […] rooted in an effort to observe and to comprehend the entire tapestry of social life'.[29] However, a common thread within audience studies has been the understanding that methods should broadly emulate an ethnographic *approach*, by investigating questions of meaning and context through

(London: Routledge, 2003), 130.

29. Janice Radway, 'Reception Study: Ethnography and the Problems of Dispersed Audiences and Nomadic Subjects', *Cultural Studies* 2, no. 3 (1988): 359–76 (367).

30. Virginia Nightingale, 'What's "Ethnographic" about Ethnographic Audience Research?' in *Australian Cultural and Media Studies*, ed. Graeme Turner (Routledge: London, 1993), 164–78.

31. Ang, *Living Room Wars*, 31.

32. Andrea Press and Sonia Livingstone, 'Taking Audience Research into the Age of New Media: Old Problems and New Challenges', in *Questions of Method in Cultural Studies*, ed. Mimi White and James Schwoch (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 175–200 (177).

33. Sedgman, *Locating the Audience*, 15–16.

description and observation.[30] In other words, the real point behind this argument seems to be less about the relevance of the term 'ethnographic' per se as it is about the need to study how the relationship between cultural engagement and lived experience is negotiated in practice by specific communities within particular societal contexts. Evidencing audience engagements via the gathering of qualitative (sometimes combined with quantitative) data, this has more commonly become known as an 'empirical' approach to audience response.

Rather than advancing claims of scientific validity, the word 'empiricism' was designed deliberately to distance audience studies from the parallel tradition of 'critical' spectatorship research. As Ien Ang explains, within the media studies field, critical spectatorship scholars have tended to lean towards making speculative claims about how the audience – usually conceived as a homogeneous whole – will necessarily respond to media texts such as films or television programmes. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, scholars have been left to conceive of 'the role of the viewer in purely formalist terms: as a position inscribed in the text'.[31] This spectatorial homogenisation was echoed by the earliest iteration of audience studies, the 'effects tradition', which sought to demonstrate that new mass media operated on audiences in preordained ways. From comic books to the 'video nasties', effects studies have traditionally been designed to prove that 'dangerous' media texts impact harmfully on vulnerable viewers.

In contrast, the move towards 'active audience research' saw the adoption of these same methodologies to pit 'ideas of heterogeneity against homogenization, of active against passive, of resistant against exploited audiences'.[32] From the UK's influential Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies onwards, the aim was now to show how gloriously rebellious audiences could be, with countercultural groups using popular culture as the basis for productive acts of meaning-making and community generation. Audience studies has since evolved over the years to facilitate a more nuanced unravelling of the relationship between production and reception:

> Such queries tend to boil down to a question of power. Where in such encounters is it located? […] Since the 1980s, the field of cultural studies has been embroiled in debates over whether media texts have power and influence over audiences, or whether audiences have power and agency in their use of media […]. There is a real need to consider audiences' encounters with theatre […] as not quite free, open, unfettered things, but shaped in hugely intricate ways by performance design. In other words, audiences do not come to [cultural texts] as they might to a box of assorted arts-'n'-crafts supplies (pipe cleaners, buttons, sugar-paper, bits of string), free to make whatever they choose from the pieces. Nor is the experience like a paint-by-numbers book, with clear instructions on how to produce the expected response. The reality is much more complicated than that.[33]

As a discipline, audience studies now tends to conceptualise spectators as neither entirely vulnerable to the effects of powerful texts, nor as entirely empowered by their use, but as navigating their responses in between the competing operations of cultural power and audience agency. As Clayton Childress explains, to understand the complexities of divergent audience response is to think through acts of creation, production, and reception together, rather than siloing enquiries into discrete subfields. These kinds of studies should, therefore, be designed to investigate both the ways that audiences are 'inscribed' within culture – how they are imagined or 'figured' by cultural producers – and how diverse people 'with different orientations, experiences, needs, constraints, expectations, and preferences' make sense of their encounters.[34]

For those who have made their home within theatre studies, this combined approach to the production/reception division is nothing new. All the way back in 1987, Marco de Marinis and Paul Dwyer identified two 'dramaturgies of the spectator': the first a 'passive' mode that conceived of the audience 'as a dramaturgical object, a mark or target for the actions/operations of the director, the performers, and, if there is one, the writer'; the second, an 'active' mode that referred 'to the various receptive operations/actions that an audience carries out: perception, interpretation, aesthetic appreciation, memorization, emotive and intellectual response, etc'.[35] De Marinis and Dwyer's work was part of an ongoing semiotic shift away from seeing authorial intention as the *ipso facto* determiner of meaning and towards a convergence of interest in acts of reader/spectator interpretation. Through their 'active dramaturgy of the spectator', the authors acknowledge that audiences' 'understanding of the performance [must not be conceived] as some mechanical operation which has been strictly predetermined – by the performance and its producers – but rather as a task which the spectator carries out in conditions of relative independence'.[36]

However, here is the point at which theatre studies, when approaching the audience, has tended to come to a halt. The remainder of this section intends to demonstrate how theatre scholars have historically approached issues of spectatorship: namely, by developing ever-more sophisticated models for theorising the audience experience. In the case of de Marinis and Dwyer, these authors use Umberto Eco's concept of the 'model reader' to side-step the work of investigating how these active 'operations/actions' – the spectatorial 'task' of emotive and intellectual engagement – are *actually managed* by audiences. Their 'model spectator' figure intended instead to draw attention to how performances first 'anticipate' audiences and then seek to 'address' or work on them: to attract their attention, to manipulate their spatial relations, to engage them in open or closed acts of interpretation, and to then activate potentials for compliance or resistance. Three years later, in 1990, Susan Bennett published the first edition of *Theatre Audiences*, which delivered a more detailed framework for understanding how the varying material conditions of production may influence theatrical reception, and which – with over 1,200 citations according to Google Scholar – is still widely regarded as the core text on theatre spectatorship. In her preface to the second edition (1997),

34. Clayton Childress, *Under the Cover: The Creation, Production, and Reception of a Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 4.

35. Marco de Marinis and Paul Dwyer, 'Dramaturgy of the Spectator', *The Drama Review* 31, no. 2 (1987): 100–14 (101).

36. Ibid.

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Bennett characterised her intention as being to work towards a 'theorization' of the audience; despite her initial suggestion of wanting to test 'theory's abstract claims' about the operations of audience experience, Bennett in her own words actually 'devotes little space to the particularities of an individual spectator's response to seeing a play and prefers to concentrate on the cultural conditions that make theatre and an audience member's experience of it possible'.[37]

The value of Bennett's book has, therefore, lain in how it opens theatre scholars up to considering the possibilities for divergence within the audience as a whole, without really offering the tools to investigate how this divergence actually manifests in practice. Using Bennett's framework may make our theories about spectatorial response more rich and complex, perhaps; but without evidence of contrary responses are we still just making assumptions, unqualified by information about actual audience reception? More recently still, Jacques Rancière's influential text 'The Emancipated Spectator'[38] has been widely adopted as a way to complexify further our apprehensions of audience activity, particularly within the newly popular phenomenon of 'participatory' or 'immersive' theatrical forms.[39] For example, scholars such as Carl Lavery have used Rancière to highlight how contemporary companies like Lone Twin ground their work in heterogeneous visions of spectatorial engagement. Rather than inveigling people into a predefined mode of participation and then celebrating the emancipatory benefits of this coerced activity, Lavery describes how Lone Twin see audiences as 'invited guests', always-already emancipated and actively participating in a multiplicity of ways.[40]

Historically, then, aside from a handful of exceptions, the discipline of performance studies has predominantly preferred to understand audience response via first-person critical engagements, phenomenology, and spectatorial speculation (occasionally based on conversations with similarly positioned colleagues). More specifically, while semiotics provided an early framework for envisaging a cornucopia of reader responses, Eco's concept of 'semiosic' interpretation has tended to be used to consider the ways an imagined reader *might* (or how the researcher themselves comes to) 'fill up' a text with meaning, rather than how this process is articulated by varying readers . Similarly, Rancière's framework has been most useful for the challenge it presents to assumptions of 'equality – meaning the homogeneity – of the cause and the effect'[41] between production and reception, without necessarily leading to an empirical investigation of the reception process according to multiple perspectives. By emancipating spectatorial activity from the unequal process of 'transmission' – 'the supposition that what will be felt or understood will be what [the producer has] put in their own dramaturgy or performance' – Rancière merely opens up space for a potential plurality of audience response: one that crucially includes the possibility that active participation may include a desire to 'engage in a relation of non-relation, to stand on the sidelines and make their "poem" from the "poem" that Lone Twin have offered them'.[42]

37. Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (Routledge: London, 1997), vii.

38. Jacques Rancière, 'The Emancipated Spectator', *Artforum International* 45, no. 7 (2007): 270–81.

39. While there is not the space in this article to produce a thorough survey of these debates (or of the ways Rancière has been mobilised within them), it is worth pointing to the new collection *Reframing Immersive Theatre*, ed. James Frieze (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), which collectively interrogates the utopian claims that are often made on behalf of these experiences.

40. Carl Lavery and David Williams, 'Practising Participation: A Conversation with Lone Twin', *Performance Research* 16, no. 4 (2011): 7–14.

41. Rancière, 'The Emancipated Spectator', 278.

42. Lavery and Williams, 'Practising Participation', 8.

In this last sentence, Lavery includes direct reference to Rancière's famous text. The full quotation goes like this:

> The spectator is active, as the student or the scientist: he observes, he selects, compares, interprets. He ties up what he observes with many other things that he has observed on other stages, in other kind of spaces. He makes his poem with the poem that is performed in front of him. She participates in the performance if she is able to tell her own story about the story which is in front of her.[43]

43. Rancière, 'The Emancipated Spectator', 277.

Viewed from the perspective of audience studies, this raises some important questions. When approaching the performance event, *how* does the spectator observe, compare, and interpret what they see? Which other experiences and observations do different audience members 'tie up' to the theatre experience in order to make sense of it? Through what discursive manoeuvres do we go about making our poems in response to the poems onstage? Qualitative audience research can offer the tools to understand how actual audiences work to fill up a text with meaning: how people go about telling stories about the stories they are told.

And yet this approach is far from unproblematic. When it comes to understanding the live performance experience, are empirical methodologies really any less speculative than alternative critical frameworks such as spectatorship theory, or first-hand phenomenological analysis, or Spectator-Participation-as-Research (SPaR) – modes of enquiry which all have the capacity to lay bare Rancière's poem-making process with exceptional depth, nuance, and care? In the following section, I address the epistemological hubris of my own introduction, which could easily be interpreted as claiming objective knowledge of spectatorial response.

Objective Knowledge and the 'Actual Audience'

In the present section, I want to complicate a term I have used throughout the initial pages of this article. This is the word 'actual'.

I have used terms like 'actual audiences' and 'actual response' to distinguish 'evidenced' reactions, captured via empirical research, from the 'imagined' or 'ideal' responses of critical spectatorship theory. But what is really being evidenced here? By focusing specifically on research designed to capture audience talk (as opposed, for instance, to studies of neurological or physical reactions), this article has proposed 'listening to audiences' as one way to draw out valuable information about the impacts and affects of performance on varying bodies and subjectivities. Sometimes 'listening to audiences' might mean designing studies specifically to prompt newly verbalised responses, by directly engaging participants in conversations via questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, or creative workshops. Sometimes, it might take the form of 'reception research', gathering and analysing discourse that is already in circulation: whether that means reading newspaper reviews, studying archived letters and diaries, or analysing online discourse such as below-the-line

commentary, YouTube video comments, social media posts, TripAdvisor reviews, blog posts, and so on. As Lois Weaver says in her introduction to Freshwater's *Theatre & Audience*:

> We each have our own rapture, whether we sit politely in the company of pearls and suits on a Sunday afternoon or offer vocal and daring alternatives; whether we swallow it whole or read between the lines; whether we rage against the critic who saw the performance as a series of in-jokes because everyone seemed to get it but him or stay home because the reviews are bad […]. Our individual raptures are likely to be kept secret.
>
> Unless, as Helen Freshwater aptly suggests, someone bothers to ask: What did you make of that?[44]

But what is discursive research actually claiming? By which I mean: how closely are audiences' descriptions really able to bring us to that moment of rapture? What can listening to 'actual audiences' tell us about the *actual encounter* – the aesthetic, ontological 'thing' itself – and where do the limitations of this methodology lie? I address these questions first by considering the (in)ability of audience research to produce 'objective knowledge', before finally investigating the relationship between experience and its articulation.

Adam Alston places the 'critical position of the "opinionated theorist" in opposition to empirical audience research, which valu[es] objectivity over and above alternative values'.[45] Meanwhile, Reinelt talks about empirical research as being 'bound by certain constraints: it is objective', which Reinelt takes to mean being 'disinterested in its results (or rather, perhaps, dedicated to them no matter what they turn out to be)'.[46] Certainly, there are some aspects of audience engagement that can be objectively measured: for example, number of tickets sold or percentage of the auditorium filled. But when it comes to understanding the audience *experience*, as Andy Ruddock describes, audience studies tends to avoid positivistic claims of producing 'objective knowledge about the world through the application of tried-and-tested scientific methods'.[47] Instead, the academic field of audience studies has long been committed to 'deliver[ing] at least a partial picture of the complex mediated reality' of how audiences engage with culture, by exploring how people's varying subjectivities – as well as the research process itself – inflect their subjective response.[48] Hence, Reinelt's parenthetical definition of objectivity – as a dedication to taking seriously audiences' diverse evaluations – is perhaps most apt[49]. Yet rather than being 'disinterested' in the results, good audience research often necessitates being *highly* interested: we are, after all, subject to the same political intentions and societal biases of any other scholar. The key, however, is to disclose those interests, by acknowledging how our own preoccupations and beliefs have shaped the impetus of research.

Needs an indent scholars are right to feel uneasy about words like 'objective', 'empirical', and 'actual', though. Ien Ang explains why it is so crucial for audience researchers to resist claims of objectivity:

44. Lois Weaver, 'Foreword' in Freshwater, xi.

45. Adam Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 26.

46. Reinelt, 'What UK Spectators Know', 339.

47. Andy Ruddock, *Investigating Audiences* (London: SAGE Publications, 2007), 1.

48. Kim Schrøder et al., *Researching Audiences*, 17.

49. It is important to note that scientific fields are not immune from the need to query the ability of research to produce 'objective knowledge' about the world. A growing body of literature is addressing how, throughout history, scientific 'truths' have shifted according to changing interpretations of data. Whenever we see 'humans studying humans', we get the possibility of bias; it is only through acknowledging the subjective processes by which findings are constructed and claims produced that scientific studies can assert legitimacy. (Angela Saini, *Inferior: How Science Got Women Wrong and the New Research That's Rewriting the Story* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017), 173.)

In empirical audience research, especially, it is important to reflect upon the status of the knowledge produced. After all, scrutinizing […] audiences is not an innocent practice. It does not take place in a social and political vacuum. Historically, the hidden agenda of audience research, even when it presents itself as pure and objective, has all too often been its commercial or political usefulness. In other words, what we should reflect upon is the *political* interventions we make when talking about audiences – political not only in the sense of some distant societal goal, but, more importantly, in that we cannot afford to ignore the political dimensions of the *process* and practice of knowledge production itself.[50]

50. Ang, *Living Room Wars*, 37.

Ang's concern that audience studies should 'develop insights that do not reproduce the kind of objectified knowledge served up by, say, market research or empiricist effects research'[51] has been echoed within theatre studies. In the introduction, I quoted Reinelt's agreement that research into theatre audiences 'can seem too close to the "market research" or ratings games that are at the heart of commercial ventures within consumer-based capitalism, which many theatre and performance scholars reject'.[52] The 'ratings games' about which Reinelt warns are right now coming to a head in the UK, where the Arts Council has been advancing their plans for a new Quality Metrics framework: now renamed the 'Impact and Insight Toolkit', previously called 'Culture Counts'. Adopted from the Australian model, and following similar trials in the USA and Asia, this 'dashboard approach to quality measurement' will force UK organisations who receive more than £250,000 as part of the Arts Council's National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) scheme to measure the value of their work against audience response data. Presented with a 'standardised set of statements […] that describe common high-level aims and characteristics organisations are looking to achieve through their work', audiences will be asked to measure aesthetic success/failure along nine different dimensions, from 'distinctiveness' to 'rigour'. In addition, the producing artists – along with a network of 'peer' assessors – will also be asked to rate the event along three extra dimensions: originality, risk, and excellence.

51. Ibid.

52. Reinelt, 'What UK Spectators Know', 338.

In their article 'Counting Culture to Death', Robert Phiddian, Julian Meyrick, and Tully Barnett provide an excellent critique of the drive to metricise cultural value. They echo Reinelt and Ang in arguing that the quantifying process of 'tak[ing] cultural activities and creative practices, which exhibit no obvious capacity for scalar measurement, and develop[ing] indicators and benchmarks that render them sensible to number is a political act'; one that pretends to 'encourage transparency and precision' while actually promoting

an illusion of comparability between things as disparate as supporting an experimental theatre in a de-industrialised city and maintaining a mediaeval artwork in a national gallery. This categorical logic need not be politically weaponised, but often it is; as [David] Beer observes, competition and measurement almost inevitably go hand-in-hand.[53]

53. Robert Phiddian et al., 'Counting Culture to Death', *Cultural Trends* 26, no. 2 (2017): 174–80 (176).

54. Chris Goode, 'The Audience is Listening', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 21, no. 4 (2011): 464–71 (468).

55. Nancy Weiss Hanrahan, 'If the People Like It, It Must be Good', *Cultural Sociology* 7, no. 1 (2013): 73–85 (83).

56. Paul Kosidowski, 'Thinking Through the Audience', *Theatre Topics* 13, no. 1 (2003) 83–6 (84).

57. Phiddian et al., 'Counting Culture to Death', 76.

58. Barker, 'I Have Seen the Future and it is Not Here Yet …', 131.

59. Ibid.

60. Ibid.

61. Jenny Kitzinger, *Framing Abuse: Media Influence and Public Understanding of Sexual Violence Against Children* (London: Pluto Press, 2004).

62. Ian Huffer, 'What Interest Does a Fat Stallone Have for an Action Fan?' in *Contemporary Hollywood Stardom*, ed. Thomas Austin and Martin Barker (London: Hodder. 2003), 155–66.

63. Ashton Toone, Amanda Nell Edgar, and Kelly Ford, 'She Made Angry Black Woman Something that People would Want to Be', *Participations* 14, no. 2 (2017): 203–25.

This assessment is, one of the major drivers of disciplinary concerns about theatre audience research: its vulnerability to instrumentalisation. There is always the worry that audience response data could be used to 'dumb down' the arts by forcing institutions to 'target […] operations at a kind of bogus Joe Public figure'.[54] Music scholar Nancy Weiss Hanrahan situates this phenomenon within a 'culture of consensus', arguing that while 'criticism helps to keep open the space for the experimental or edgy or as yet unproven, consensual culture tends toward the middle, toward the agreed upon and the known'.[55] As Paul Kosidowski suggests, '[p]erhaps the idea of listening to audiences is just too close to the idea of "giving them what they want" and all the crass populist pandering that the phrase implies'.[56] As well as being politically weighted, attempts to uncover the 'truth' of an experience – its quality, excellence, standard, success – are epistemologically meaningless, blurring together the complexities of multiplicitous audience feedback and thereby 'abstract[ing] the question of value without making it any clearer'.[57]

If the aim of this work is not to discover the objective truth of cultural value, what claims to knowledge *can* audience researchers hope to make? An answer can be found in the audience studies debates. Martin Barker argues that within contemporary cultural studies frameworks, audience engagement has fruitfully been reconceived '*as a motivated activity*' [emphasis added]. This is significant because of how it draws attention first to how people *come to* culture – '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 second, to how the way they come at an event inflects *what they take away from it*.[58] How do audiences make sense of all the 'cognitive', 'sensuous', 'aesthetic', 'emotional', and 'imaginative' dimensions[59] by drawing on senses of self- and community identity, their own personal histories, as well as wider frameworks of knowledge and language?

Barker explains that '[t]he 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' an event or text.[60] To give just a few of my favourite examples, Jenny Kitzinger's 2004 book *Framing Abuse*[61] investigates how people's memories of infamous sexual abuse cases (such as the Orkney child abuse scandal of 1991) have been forever modulated by the way these cases were framed by the news; reading this book is, therefore, to understand something of the process by which audiences' memories calcify around particular modes of media representation. Ian Huffer's chapter 'What Interest Does a Fat Stallone have for an Action Fan?'[62] shows how three male fans value action films for how they 'properly expose/celebrate' the übermasculine bodies of their stars, with these heightened representations of masculinity becoming most important at times of personal crisis. In an article exploring viewers' reactions to Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade*, Ashton Toone, Amanda Nell Edgar, and Kelly Ford[63] demonstrate how non-Black interviewees tended to value *Lemonade* for its insights into the complexities of Black experience, while Black women were much more unified in their response: in Beyoncé's oeuvre, Black

women identified a powerful legitimisation of anger, one that enabled them to reclaim and unravel problematic stereotypes. And in their special issue about the largest audience research project to date (capturing 36,109 completed questionnaire responses from 143 countries), the researchers involved in *The World Hobbit Project* explain how their large-scale data corpus is now allowing them to compare, for example, whether those who saw *The Hobbit* as a 'children's film' came away with a different experience to those who saw it primarily as 'part of Tolkien's legend-world'.[64]

Barker previously coined the term 'viewing strategy' as a way to articulate all the aspects of the audience experience this approach intends to capture, designed as it is

> 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.[65]

As I have elsewhere argued, for those studying spectatorship in the arts, the radical import of this approach is how it refigures spectatorial judgements: as part of a wider *process* of sense-making, rather than as a validatory marker of 'success' or 'quality' reached at the end-point of experience.[66] Crucially, unlike the Culture Counts framework, audience studies literature invites attention not just to the *evaluations* that people make about cultural texts, but to the evaluative *criteria* they use to make them. Which frameworks of knowledge, sensation, expectation, emotion, and so on do people bring to bear on their theatrical encounters, and how do these factors inflect their manner of reflecting upon it afterwards? The object of study is not simply audiences' judgements, it is how those judgements come to be made by people in varying ways: namely, the interrelated process of perception and description itself. Far from collapsing alternative viewpoints and evaluative measures into a singular blurred-together viewpoint, empirical methods tend to be used to unpick the necessary complexity of reception.

This mode of attention requires theatre audience researchers to do more than simply ask people what they thought and felt about a performance event and then faithfully to quote them: one voice in a cornucopia of other responses. Instead, the more interesting question is *why* certain people are prompted to think and feel in particular ways, while others take away such different kinds of experience. Addressing this question is fundamentally a process of interpretation.

Audience Research as Interpretation

The previous section proposed that good audience research must do more than just ask people (a) who they are and (b) what they thought. Instead,

64. Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs, 'Introduction: The World Hobbit Project', *Participations* 13, no. 2 (2016): 158–74.

65. Barker, 'I Have Seen the Future and it is Not Here Yet …', 131.

66. Sedgman, 'Audience Experience in an Anti-Expert Age'.

research methods must be carefully designed to explore the interplay between the *conditions* from which varying individuals go about making sense of a performance, and their *articulations* of the sense-making process. This section examines the analytical mechanisms that underpin the work of investigating how people take up particular subject positions in order to describe their experiences.

Whereas recent performance practice projects should be praised for incorporating an audience feedback element into their analysis, there is sometimes a tendency to include spectatorial quotations as tantalising 'lists of difference'. This is a phrase which I have elsewhere used to critique my own proclivity towards taking varying statements of affect at face value, without fully teasing out what might be behind such variations.[67] For example, Joanne Scott's pioneering intermedial performance work prompted one person to wish 'for more presence in terms of how you related to the audience', while another found her piece 'intimate and so personal'.[68] This is a fascinating divergence, and of course the audience research element was only one tiny part of her study. Yet the lack of information provided about methodology (how was the data gathered: e.g. via questionnaires or interviews? how were questions structured? how many people took part, and how were respondents chosen?) or the demographic orientations of participants precludes any analysis more sophisticated than that these responses 'represent diverse readings of the performer-activator in the work and the presence generated'.[69] Comparatively, Elliot Leffler's recent *CTR* article[70] footnotes the difficulties of extrapolating their in-show conversations and observations out to 'the audience' as a whole, while simultaneously failing to consider the possibility that Leffler's chosen methodology may have occluded signs of *dis*comfort: sensations that spectators often find difficult to articulate in the moment of performance.[71] In either case, there is no mechanism, in other words, for unpicking the possible reasons why different audiences may have reached such different views on the same event.

Here I want to argue a key point: which is that such reflections on methodology and analysis are *more than mere incidental detail*. It is my contention that rigorous audience projects must embed in their findings an examination of the political and interpersonal implications of the process of research itself. In fact, this brings us right to the root of audience studies' antipathy to objectivity. As Ang explains, it is imperative to recognise that 'it is not the search for (objective, scientific) Truth in which the researcher is engaged, but the construction of interpretations, of certain ways of understanding the world, always historically located, subjective and relative'.[72] What is at stake here, Ang says, is a politics of *interpretation*. This is why audiences' statements should not 'simply be treated as natural "data" or "self-evident facts"':

> Nor are they immediate, transparent reflections of those viewers' 'lived realities' that can speak for themselves. What is of critical importance, therefore, is the way in which those statements are made sense of, that is interpreted. Here lies the ultimate political responsibility of the researcher.[73]

67. Sedgman, *Locating the Audience*, 62.

68. Joanne Scott, *Intermedial Praxis and Practice as Research* (London: Springer, 2016), 53.

69. Ibid.

70. Elliot Leffler, 'How to End Poverty in 90 min: Maximizing Participation and Managing Risk in the Work of Sojourn Theatre', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 28, no. 4 (2018): 488–503.

71. See e.g. Sedgman, *Locating the Audience*, 117.

72. Ang, *Living Room Wars*, 38.

73. Ibid., 39.

74. Schrøder et al.,
*Researching
Audiences*.

As a theatre scholar engaged in audience research, I advocate for the necessity of interrogating our own claims to knowledge: not simply quoting responses verbatim but continually asking how much we are really able to know about audiences' experiences from the data we have been able to gather. This is why audience studies literature has tended to call for researchers to adopt a self-reflexive stance,[74] threading through findings a critical consideration of how the knowledge generated may have been inflected by (1) the conditions under which discourse is first captured and then analysed and (2) the communicative conditions of research itself.

To consider these two factors in order: first, it is necessary to examine how the limits of interpretation are set by the discursive *context*. For example, the lack of scholarly intervention makes reception research especially well-suited for uncovering the ways people assert, legitimise, hedge, and debate their opinions in self-directed ways, forming communities and allegiances (as well as disputes and enmities) naturally around their lived cultural practices. New forums for online debate have opened up fresh opportunities to watch discussions evolve over time, as people contribute to threads for months or even years. However, the methodological distance of reception research is also its weakness. With no opportunity to guide the conversation, researchers are limited to gleaning insights from those tantalisingly rare things people choose to include about themselves. Empirical research is, therefore, better able to draw out information on people's subject positions (such as gender, age, location, occupation, etc.) and to facilitate an examination of how relevant aspects might feed into the sense-making process. And yet *at the same time* empirical research demands critical consideration of how the artificial environment and embedded researcher/respondent power dynamics may have inflected results: as Joke Hermes states, so often respondents' answers can be understood as 'offer[ing] a guess at what an interviewer might want to hear or reiterat[ing] customary strategies' of response.[75] When building a narrative of reception, we, therefore, need to lay bare not just what we know (or suspect) about audience response but *why* we know or suspect these things: by showing the ways audiences came to their evaluative judgements, how we as researchers came to construct our interpretations, and where the resultant knowledge-claims end. Findings – and interpretations of findings – should always be presented through the lens of methodology.

75. Hermes, 'Audience
Studies 2.0', 119.

Second, and relatedly, considering empirical implements (e.g. questionnaires, interviews, etc.) to be mere data-collection tools obscures the way these implements are *experienced*: as social interactions in and of themselves. This is the point made by Ann Oakley in her influential 1981 chapter 'Interviewing Women'. Here Oakley took the entire social sciences to task for eliminating descriptions of the research process, excluding factors such as the

> social/personal characteristics of those doing the interviewing; interviewees' feelings about being interviewed and about the interview; interviewers' feelings about interviewees; and quality of interviewer-interviewee

interaction; hospitality offered to interviewees by interviewers; attempts by interviewees to use interviewers as sources of information; and the extension of interviewer-interviewee encounters into more broadly-based social relationships.[76]

In a later reflection, Oakley summarised her argument as follows:

> that [within the social sciences] admonitions about objectivity and the need to view the interview purely as a tool of data-collection suggested a masculinist mechanistic attitude which treated the interview's character as social interaction as an inconvenient obstacle to the generation of 'facts'. I suggested that this approach to interviewing was incommensurate with the practice of feminist social science, and was ineffective in terms of the purpose of interviews, namely to produce valid, trustworthy data.[77]

For Oakley, data can only be 'valid' and 'trustworthy' if it acknowledges the means by which it has been captured; for Ang, knowledge is useful only when it acknowledges the ways it has (through interpretation) been constructed.

It is this kind of epistemological attention, described more fully in *Locating the Audience*, that enabled me to investigate why one audience member of National Theatre Wales' inaugural year, 'Andrew', was able to criticise a deliberately 'open' experimental performance for having 'failed', while another spectator – 'Carol', a self-professed non-theatre-goer – left with the worry that *she* had failed instead:

> [Within the interview] [t]here were signs that Andrew only felt able to criticize the production directly once he had grown more comfortable talking with me. As with Carol, it is possible that this reticence was, at least partly, a response to my perceived status as researcher. There were many occasions, particularly during the observation work, when I sensed audiences trying to ascertain what it was safe to say to me as a possible 'expert' […]. Andrew's statement that perhaps he had 'missed something' can be seen in this light. Like Carol, he was allowing for the possibility that the performance was doing something particular that he himself had missed, but that I might understand. In fact, Andrew only began to feel sufficiently comfortable to criticize the performance once our statuses had been reversed, enabling him to take on the role of expert.[78]

In my research, listening to audiences means paying attention to the act of translating experience into a communicable structure. How do audiences 'come to their words, and how easily? Where does language stumble or fail? Where do respondents use gestures and grimaces? Where do they come up with unique turns of phrase, or fall back on tried- and-tested metaphors?'.[79] Rather than treating audience statements as 'direct slices of reality', I am interested in what all this discursive (and extra-discursive) activity might be able to tell us about spectatorial meaning-making in action.

Metricising cultural value is such an ineffectual window into audience engagement because this approach considers only the tip of the iceberg – the evaluation itself. On the contrary, audience studies can help us to

76. Ann Oakley, 'Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms', in *Doing Feminist Research*, ed. Helen Roberts (London: Routledge, 1981), 8–18 (9).

77. Ann Oakley, 'Interviewing Women Again: Power, Time and the Gift', *Sociology* 50, no. 1 (2016): 195–213 (196).

78. Sedgman, *Locating the Audience*, 117.

79. Sedgman, 'Audience Experience in an Anti-Expert Age', 315.

understand more about the evaluative *process*. Critical spectatorship work similarly presents a valuable insight into the evaluative process in action, but crucially as experienced from a singular perspective; furthermore, a perspective that often comes from an unusually informed, invested, and/or elevated subject position. Contrariwise, if the goal of empirical audience research is to understand how a broader sweep of spectators, coming at an event from different directions 'and bringing with them varying experiences, expectations, knowledges and language frameworks, take away very different kinds of meaning, then erasing the reactions of "ordinary" audiences is to miss an important part of the puzzle'.[80]

This is why when I ask audiences to fill out a questionnaire[81] telling me, for example, how they rate their experience overall, I do so knowing that the range of options (Excellent; Good; OK; Bad; Awful) are in and of themselves meaningless. Under investigation instead are the underlying *systems of criteria* which people use to make their selections: tiny boxes of feedback that nonetheless have the potential to demonstrate what gets lost in the metricisation of response. To offer one instance: in my British Academy-funded project 'A Theatre of Two Cities', exploring conflicting audience engagements with Bristol Old Vic, I found that rating a play Awful was not necessarily an indicator of a play's perceived (lack of) quality. Sometimes, an 'awful' judgement is an experiential reaction to a 'powerful' performance, such as in this reaction to a 2017 production of Pinter's *The Caretaker*:

> The actors did their absolute best orally, physically, kinetically. But I simply hated the play. I had a feeling of being locked into my seat, into the presence of 3 people I disliked involved in a manipulative power play. I stayed out on the 2nd half – down in the bar with a beer while my friends stayed in the play. [CT361][82]

Other respondents used negating conjunctions to posit the performance's affective power as something that took value *away* from their experience:

> It was a great performance by the person playing Davies and was at times very arresting, **but it was quite intense** and sometimes impenetrable and at times rather boring. [CT306, OK]

> I enjoyed the play, **although it was rather intense**. I love the BOV. [CT78, Good]

This is just one reason why we must continue to resist political and institutional efforts to aggregate audience reception. After all, the desire to have a 'powerful' or 'intense' experience is for many theatregoers a primary motivation for attending live performance – indeed, this is one of the major values of the art form itself. By paying attention to how different people engage in their own acts of interpretation, it is possible to identify that what makes an experience so valuable for one person may be that which, for another, diminishes its success. This is why we must avoid simply quoting audience feedback at face value, and instead incorporate into the research

80. Kirsty Sedgman, 'Challenges of Cultural Industry Knowledge Exchange in Live Performance Audience Research', *Cultural Trends* 28, no. 2-3, (2019): 103–17.

81. One of the major advancements within audience studies has been the development of a distinctive 'quali-quant' methodology: an approach that tries 'to build a bridge' between qualitative and quantitative modes of enquiry and 'get the two parties talking to each other'. Martin Barker's work has pioneered the use of questionnaires as a way to achieve this within the same implement: by 'asking people to allocate themselves within defined categories or subject positions, and then immediately to explain their answers in their own words' (Martin Barker, Ernest Mathijs, and Alberto Trobia, 'Our Methodological Challenges and Solutions', in *Watching The Lord of the Rings*, ed. Barker and Mathijs (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008), 220.

82. Numbers in square brackets refer to unique respondent reference IDs.

design interpretative mechanisms for exploring the hopes, worries, orientations, and subjectivities underpinning diverse spectatorial response.

Wistful, Speculative, Yet Necessary: A Conclusion

Earlier in this article, I defined the audience studies approach as an attempt to understand 'how people go about telling stories about the stories they are told'. To complete this analogy, from audience studies literature, we can see that the best research embeds into its analysis a consideration of how *we as researchers* tell stories about the stories people tell us. 'What matters', Ang says, 'is not the certainty of knowledge about audiences, but an ongoing critical and intellectual engagement with the multifarious ways in which we constitute ourselves through [cultural] consumption'.[83]

If audiences' evaluations are not 'direct slices of reality', nor 'natural data', nor 'self-evident facts',[84] but an interpretative activity in and of itself, this makes discursive research 'an act of interpreting an act of interpretation'.[85] For some people, the inexorable conclusion is to avoid talking to audiences altogether. It is tempting to use these epistemological caveats as a way to overlook discursive methodologies for the very 'wistful, speculative aspect' I have risked unfairly maligning in critical spectatorship theory: this time, by dismissing the responses they produce as mere 'isolated speech acts that are ultimately texts, needing to be weighed and interpreted', and thereby as invalid indicators of response.[86]

And yet to argue that audiences' articulations are epistemologically worthless is to miss the value of this information, which must be seen as 'pieces of a larger puzzle, suggestions that only deliver their significance when read against other' discursive information.[87] Whether the object of study is a questionnaire response or a more 'verbose' output like 'a blog post, an interview, a newspaper review, or an academic article',[88] this article has argued for the necessity of studying audiences' individual articulations as part of a much broader cultural conversation, proffered within the constraining formulae of their specific context and then pieced together by the researcher as part of an overarching interpretive process. 'It sounds rather messy – which is of course the beauty of it', says Elizabeth Bird. Following Victor Turner, Bird agrees that it is the 'groping towards an experience' on the part of the researcher that leaves open 'the possibility of the unexpected, and the excitement of sudden insight'.[89]

Rigorous audience research is that which does not obscure this process under the blunt finality of discovery, but rather lays bare the act of 'groping toward': an activity undertaken by audience members themselves, as they reach for words to describe the ineffable, as well as by the researchers who seek to understand audiences'experiences.

83. Ang, *Living Room Wars*, 43.

84. Ibid.

85. Sedgman, 'Audience Experience in an Anti-Expert Age', 315.

86. Cynthia Erb, *Tracking 'King Kong'* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 157.

87. Hermes, 'Audience Studies 2.0', 119.

88. Sedgman, 'Challenges of Cultural Industry Knowledge Exchange in Live Performance Audience Research'.

89. Elizabeth Bird, *The Audience in Everyday Life: Living in a Media World* (London: Routledge, 2013), 20.

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