

REINVENTING FILM STUDIES :

Christine Gledhill & Linda Williams (Eds.)

London: Arnold, 2000.

9

Reception theory and audience research: the mystery of the vampire's kiss

Henry Jenkins

Lips pressed together: two mouths tasted each other's sweetness. Louise gunned the gas pedal . . . The Thunderbird began picking up speed as Louise headed it toward the Grand Canyon's edge.

The Thunderbird arched through the cloud-wisped sky. It burst in flames, plunging to be bathed in the white flecks of the Colorado River.

Two bats fluttered, their jet-black forms floating along the Grand Canyon's sheer cliffs. The winged beasts paused, a matched pair suspended in air – then took a southward direction toward Mexico.

(Douglass, 1994: 63)

Susan Douglass's short story, 'Music of the night', published in the fanzine, *On the Edge*, represents one woman's response to *Thelma and Louise* (1991). Driving her green Thunderbird through the New Mexico desert, Louise glances at Thelma asleep beside her. After years of struggling for autonomy, Louise finds herself strangely drawn to Thelma, her 'streaming [red] hair', her 'dancing green eyes and rippling laughter'. Soon, the two women have sex in the moonlight, 'outlaws as lovers' as well as criminals. The two women join in other ways: Louise is a 300-year-old vampire; she 'initiates' Thelma, exchanging blood, allowing the two to 'transcend' their awaiting death.

We might contrast Douglass's story to the essay topics a writing instructor proposed to her students (Bogal, undated):

The ending of *Thelma and Louise* is all wrong – disappointing in its message to women about their options in the United States, stupidly fanciful in its lack of realism, and unexpected and unprepared for by the movie that leads up to it [Agree or Disagree].

Chart the ways the film shows Thelma becoming more like, or wanting to become more like, Louise through gesture, activity, speech, clothing or other props.

An event in Louise's past which is evidently of great importance to the decisions that Louise makes is never fully revealed to us. What is the effect of the omission?

The instructor's questions focus on many of the same issues as Douglass's short story. However, bright students may have already calculated how badly it would hurt their grades if they asserted that Thelma and Louise survived the crash, turning into bats and flying off to Mexico. The teacher's red pen is a powerful tool for disciplining how we interpret movies.

Teachers often claim that 'there are no right and wrong answers', but students are correct to suspect otherwise. They know, at the very least, that there are right and wrong ways to arrive at answers, right and wrong kinds of evidence, right and wrong styles of arguments, even right and wrong questions. All those rules probably do not correspond with the ways students talk about films with a friend, let alone how they think about film images in their erotic fantasies.

Such differences are the core of reception theory. Reception theory and audience research ask basic questions about how we make sense of the movies and what they mean in our lives. Within this paradigm, audiences are understood to be active rather than passive, to be engaged in a process of making, rather than simply absorbing, meanings. Meanings, interpretations, evaluations, and interpretive strategies are debated among everyday viewers as part of the 'vernacular theory' surrounding the cinema (McLaughlin, 1996). Such discussions generate shared (though usually implicit) ground-rules about what we can and cannot appropriately say about movies.

Assumptions about the audience underlie most film theories, ranging from the neoformalist conception of art as 'defamiliarizing' normal perception to the various psychic mechanisms (voyeurism, masochism, fantasy) in psychoanalytic theory. The difference between audience research and other film theory is not whether or not we discuss spectatorship, but how we access and talk about audience responses. In most other theoretical traditions, claims about spectators are derived from textual analysis, analogies, or personal introspection but not from dealing directly with the audience. Reception studies, on the other hand, seeks empirical evidence, through historical or ethnographic research, that documents the production and circulation of meaning. Other theorists speak of an 'ideal reader' or a 'subject position' created by the text, often assuming that textually ascribed meanings get reproduced fairly directly in spectator's heads. However, for audience researchers, as Tony Bennett (1983) argues, 'the process of reading is not one in which reader and text meet as abstractions, but rather one in which an intertextually organized reader meets an intertextually organized text' within a historically and culturally specific context. Text, context, and reader all play vital roles in shaping interpretation.

In television studies, most audience research has fit loosely within the framework of Anglo-American cultural studies (Fiske, 1992; Turner, 1990). In Film Studies, audience research has more eclectic roots, drawing upon reader-response criticism, cognitive science, social and cultural history, the sociology of art, and psychoanalysis (Allen, 1990; Allen and Gomery, 1985; Mayne, 1982; Staiger, 1992). Audience research bears a close relationship to issues of promotion, exhibition, and consumption. As a result, audience

researchers in those working about film re

In tracing v mystery of the Louise. Audie rather than tr is to grasp ' mainstream'. work, suggest. However, au shared strat. Consequentl on how it rel

First, a cav does not un labels her sto Louise to lin creative rev meanings. I must specul the film pro

Reading interpretive interpretati circulates. I theory and looking at discussion-behind by: nor fully re

Texts

In an essay characteris be 'alread archetypes irresolutic apart in o for our fa perspectiv properties

researchers in film studies are less likely to claim participation in a shared project than those working in television studies. However, there has been a significant body of work about film reception, appropriation, and interpretation.

In tracing various approaches to reception studies, I will return again and again to the mystery of the vampire's kiss – to 'Music of the night' and other responses to *Thelma and Louise*. Audience research has sometimes been accused of focusing on aberrant readings rather than trying to understand 'normal' acts of interpretation. The challenge, however, is to grasp the 'normality' and 'logic' of readings which 'fall outside the critical mainstream'. Less predictable readings reveal more clearly the interpretive process at work, suggesting that there is nothing inevitable about our own interpretations. However, audience research is more interested in shared patterns of meanings or in shared strategies of interpretation than idiosyncratic memories and associations. Consequently, my focus will be less on what 'Music of the night' means to Douglass than on how it relates to a succession of larger social and cultural contexts.

First, a caveat: 'Music of the night' is not, strictly speaking, an interpretation. Douglass does not understand herself to be recovering or reproducing the film's meanings. She labels her story 'a very alternate-universe version', recognizing the power of *Thelma and Louise* to limit its 'legitimate' interpretation. 'Music of the night' is an appropriation, a creative reworking of textual materials which consciously expands their potential meanings. In some senses, all interpretations are already appropriations. All readers must speculate to construct a coherent narrative from the bits and pieces of information the film provides.

Reading 'Music of the night' does not grant us unmediated access to this fan's interpretive process. We are confronting another text – an artifact not only of interpretation and appropriation but also of the discursive contexts in which it circulates. Despite its appeals to empirical research, audience study still depends upon theory and interpretation, not only upon observation and description. Whether we are looking at personal diaries and letters, trade press reports, newspaper reviews, net discussion-group debates, or focus-group interviews, we are reading the 'tea leaves' left behind by a more immediate process of reception, which we may never directly observe nor fully reconstruct (Crafton, 1996).

Texts

In an essay about *Casablanca* (1942), Umberto Eco identifies what he sees as the defining characteristics of cult movies. Rather than being 'whole' and cohesive, a cult movie must be 'already ramshackle, rickety, unhinged in itself', the coming together of various archetypes and quotations, an unstable mixture of contradictions, gaps, and irresolutions. Cult films such as *Casablanca* or *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) fall apart in our hands, 'a disconnected series of images' readily accessible as raw materials for our fantasies (Eco, 1983: 197–8). Timothy Corrigan (1986) adopts the opposite perspective, arguing that films become cult objects not so much because of their intrinsic properties as through the process of interpretation and appropriation. Cult films offer

'touristic' pleasures for people alienated from everyday life, an alternative world to visit where everything is up for grabs.

Within this debate, Eco stresses properties of texts (their fragmentation, their excesses), whereas Corrigan emphasizes the properties of audiences (their alienation, their appropriation). However, both describe an exchange of meanings which is partially determined by the film text and partially by the film-goer. Eco and Corrigan are struggling with what literary critic M.M. Bakhtin describes as 'heteroglossia', the possibility that texts may imperfectly contain or regulate meaning. For Bakhtin, there is no moment when the text stands outside cultural circulation and makes its meanings clear and unambiguous. The words and images writers use do not come from some neutral place such as a dictionary but rather from 'someone else's mouth' still dripping with meanings and associations from their previous use. All writers are already readers; their previous encounters with other texts shape what they are able to create. They can communicate only within the terms their culture gives them. Writers struggle to constrain the associations that accompany their borrowed terms, so they may fit comfortably within their new contexts. Yet, Bakhtin argues, this process never fully succeeds.

Not all words for just anyone submit equally easily to this appropriation, to this seizure and transformation into private property; many words stubbornly resist, others remain alien, sound foreign . . . It is as if they put themselves in quotation marks against the will of the speaker.

(Bakhtin, 1981: 294)

Bakhtin examines the process by which artists 'appropriate' and 'rework' borrowed materials to fit new contexts. If Bakhtin is right, no film achieves the 'wholeness' Eco describes. All films are potential cult objects because all films are 'already ramshackled', containing both gaps and excesses, traces of cultural appropriation.

Accounts of the production of *Thelma and Louise* foreground this process of appropriative rewriting. Scriptwriter Callie Khouri wanted to 'write about two women on the screen that we haven't seen before . . . women outlaws that were not involved in prostitution, who were not exploited' (Sawyers, 1991: 1). In doing so, she adopted a popular genre formula – the road picture – which historically had been associated with male fantasies of escaping from emotional commitments to women. Khouri reworked this formula into a female fantasy of escape from domestic confinement and masculine authority.

Readers, in turn, appropriate filmic images as analytic 'evidence', conversational reference points, fantasy icons, or storytelling resources. The retooling of genre conventions in *Thelma and Louise* encouraged many viewers to imagine alternative versions. Even Khouri imagined revising the film on other terms:

If you rewrote *Thelma and Louise* and decided to have a guy come and save Thelma, there wouldn't have been an uproar. If a guy caught another guy raping a woman and killed the rapist, you wouldn't even comment on that.

(Khouri, 1996: xvi)

Some rewrote the ending so that the two women enjoy more options; others reworked the story to fit more traditional patterns.

Reader-r
where read
the range o
that the p
implicit, n
Richard M
dissolve –
have slept
assumptio
forth. Talk

One ca
participati
Texas), irr
the Grand
invites er
dependen
decision t
circumsta
judgement
readings c
controver
gaps in ur
correct or
fragmente
more acce
can do so
take you s

Critica

One imp
newspape
Tony Be
historical
moved, f
towards
on texts
shells on
(Bennett
Drawi
historian
film-mal
(Kapsis,

Reader-response criticism often starts with textual analysis, trying to determine points where readers must go beyond the information provided, exploring how the film shapes the range of possible inferences (Bordwell, 1985). D.A. Miller (1991), for example, notes that the protagonists' homosexuality in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948) remains implicit, never explicitly stated, and thus open to viewer discovery and recognition. Richard Maltby (1996) points towards an ambiguous moment in *Casablanca* where a dissolve – and ellipses – leaves unresolved the question of whether or not Rick and Ilsa have slept together. How readers understand such moments depends upon their assumptions about human sexuality, the censorship process, Hollywood genres, and so forth. Talking through such differences is part of the fun of going to the movies!

One can identify many moments where *Thelma and Louise* demands viewers' participation, including gaps (Louise's 'secret' which prevents her from returning to Texas), irresolutions (the final freeze-frame of the Thunderbird hurling over the edge of the Grand Canyon), excesses (the kiss exchanged between Thelma and Louise which invites erotic interpretations of their relationship), contradictions (their repeated dependence on men despite claims of autonomy), unmotivated actions (Louise's decision to trust Thelma with her savings), and moral ambiguities (the complex circumstances surrounding the rape). At such points, readers are required to make judgements or speculations. Not surprisingly, such moments are central to most readings of the film. Khouri chose to leave some questions unanswered and to provoke controversy about characters' motives. Yet, nothing prevents readers from filling in the gaps in unanticipated ways. As Elizabeth Freund explains: 'The text does not talk back to correct one's misinterpretations; it cannot adapt, assert, defend itself or supplement its fragmented codes' (1987: 145). Textual features, however, do make some meanings more accessible than others. If you wish to read *Thelma and Louise* as lesbian lovers, you can do so, but some things must be explained and others added. Their one kiss can only take you so far!

Critical discourse

One important strand of reception studies has examined advertisements, film trailers, newspaper reviews, and other 'textual activators' which shape audience expectations. Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott, for example, studied various 'moments' in the historical reception of James Bond. Bond's meanings and associations 'shifted', as Bond moved, for example, from a figure primarily understood in relation to the Cold War towards one read in relation to the sexual revolution. Their analysis centers not simply on texts but on the meanings that get 'encrusted' around the Bond phenomenon 'like shells on a rock by the seashore' as the character moves through various contexts (Bennett and Woollacott, 1988).

Drawing inspiration from Robert Hans Jauss's work on literary reputation, film historians have examined the construction of authorial 'legends' around highly visible film-makers, such as Alfred Hitchcock, Charlie Chaplin or Rainer Werner Fassbinder (Kapsis, 1992; Maland, 1989; Shattuc, 1995). For example, Barbara Klinger's *Melodrama*

and meaning (1994) shows how the reputation of Douglas Sirk's films (*All That Heaven Allows* [1953], *Written on the Wind* [1956], *Imitation of Life* [1959]) have shifted dramatically as they move through different 'habitats of meaning'. In the 1950s, Universal-International Pictures sold them as 'slick, sexually explicit "adult" films', and journalistic critics denounced them for their crass commercialism. In the 1970s, academic critics rediscovered them, claiming they posed Brechtian criticisms of American middle-class culture. In the 1980s, Rock Hudson's AIDS-related death, and the revelation of his homosexuality, opened them retrospectively to camp interpretations. Such reception analysis has become a routine approach to doing film history, as writers seek more and more sophisticated accounts of what films meant in particular historical contexts (Budd, 1990; DeCordova, 1990a). Obviously, publicity-kit descriptions, journalistic reviews, movie magazine fan letters, or trade press reports are accessible to film historians whereas anonymous film-goers left little or no written traces. However, we need to be careful about ascribing to these 'textual activators' the same semiotic power once ascribed to films – that is, the power to predetermine audience response.

We also need to avoid reading critical response as if it were the same as audience response. To some degree, film critics do reflect the tastes and interests of their intended audience, as we see when the writer for an industry publication complained about negative stereotyping of truckers in *Thelma and Louise* (Siefkes, 1995), a writer for *Playboy* saw it as a feminist 'backlash' against men (Babar, 1991), and a critic for a feminist radio program compared it to Simone de Beauvoir (McAlister, undated). However, journalistic criticism operates within its own institutional contexts and interpretive rules, ensuring that critics often respond differently from casual viewers. Film critics often react to each other's reviews in the case of a high-profile and controversial film such as *Thelma and Louise*, which sparked a debate around what one male critic called its 'toxic feminism' (Schickel, 1991). Many argued whether gun-toting female outlaws constituted appropriate feminist role models and whether the film was anti-male. Film-goers were asked to choose sides between critics who had staked out radically divergent positions, often along gender lines, within ongoing debates about women and violence or 'political correctness'.

Such reviews can be seen as 'bids' for the film's potential meanings, reframing *Thelma and Louise* in various ways. Many critics read it in relation to other contemporary movies, including *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *The Terminator 2* (1991), or *La Femme Nikita* (1990), which showed women bearing arms (Corliss, 1991: 6). Emphasizing its progressive politics, feminist critics drew parallels with the treatment of sexual violence in *A Question of Silence* (1983) or contrasted the middle-class protagonists' relative freedom to a recent Supreme Court decision restricting poor women's access to medical information (Klawans, 1991; McAlister, undated). Male critics often adopted familiar auteurist models, placing it within the career of director Ridley Scott (*Alien* [1979], *Bladerunner* [1982]), while feminist critics stressed the creative contributions of its female scriptwriter (Klawans, 1991).

Such framings of the film matter. Our initial genre classifications determine our subsequent responses to new and unfamiliar works; they shape the priority we place on

partic
expec
resolu
(Rabin
mecha
that th
Smoke
– as a

Ho
many
femin
readin
upon
discov
'Are th
not ju
toward
previo
for ex
in oth
The H

Exhi

Audien
questi
People
Doug
restaur
often t
the mo
youth

Hist
film at
Singer,
1995),
or in
(Johns
econor
integra
require
Streibl
other

particular plot details, the meanings we ascribe to various textual features, the expectations we form about likely story developments, our predictions about its resolution, and our extrapolations about information not explicitly presented (Rabinowitz, 1985). Genre classification often occurs in response to publicity mechanisms or critical discussions before we enter the theatre. Some critics complained that the advertising for *Thelma and Louise* emphasized comic aspects (in the tradition of *Smokey and the Bandit* [1977]), while their reviews reframed the film in alternative terms – as a feminist melodrama.

However idiosyncratic it may initially seem, Douglass's 'Music of the night' follows many terms set by critical discourse, adopting the female outlaws as embodiments of feminist empowerment, struggling to resolve ambiguities about Louise's past life, reading it as a female-centered road picture. In other cases, Douglass's analysis depends upon less common interpretive moves – though none without precedence in the critical discourse. Even conservative John Simon recognized some homoerotic implications: 'Are these women, consciously or unconsciously, in love with each other? Is this perhaps not just a feminist but also a lesbian feminist movie?' (1991: 48). Douglass's turn towards vampirism depends upon reading intertextually across Susan Sarandon's previous screen appearances, another familiar critical move. Stanley Kaufman (1991), for example, drew strong parallels between waitress characters which the actress played in other films, while Douglass maps Sarandon's performance as a bisexual vampire in *The Hunger* (1983) onto *Thelma and Louise*.

Exhibition

Audience research has also centered around what it means to go to the movies, a question which moves beyond the meanings which get ascribed to individual films. People go to movies for many reasons; watching specific films is only one of them. As Douglas Gomery (1992) notes, the 'movie palaces' of the 1920s often included restaurants, dance clubs, bowling allies, and day-care facilities. Movie theatres were often the first air-conditioned buildings, offering refuge on hot summer days. Going to the movies was an important social ritual, frequently linked to dating, courtship, and youth culture.

Historians document the diverse venues where people watched movies, describing film attendance in Manhattan's immigrant neighborhoods (Allen, 1979; Merritt, 1976; Singer, 1996), in vaudeville houses (Allen, 1980), in small towns (Fuller, 1996; Waller, 1995), in rural areas reached only by traveling tent-show exhibitors (Musser, 1991a, b), or in the 'combat zone', a special part of Boston devoted to adult entertainment (Johnson and Schaeffer, forthcoming). Initially, much of this research focused on economic and demographic questions, recognizing exhibition's centrality to vertically-integrated film industries. From the beginning, however, accounting for exhibition required a social and cultural history of film audiences (Allen, 1990; Haralovich, 1986; Streible, 1990). Movies do not mean the same thing when they are positioned alongside other amusement-park attractions (Rabinovitz, 1990) or within 'an evening's

entertainment' which might include live stage acts, shorts, cartoons, newsreels, and coming attractions (Koszarski, 1990; Smoodin, 1993). Exhibition practices may subvert textual meanings, which occurred when black jazz bands performing for silent movies used their scores to spoof white movie stars (Carbine, 1990). Early immigrant film-goers experienced the cinema as a schoolhouse for learning American culture and values (Ewen, 1992; Hansen, 1995; Mayne, 1982).

Promotional stunts and window displays instructed patrons in gender-appropriate responses. Rhona Berenstein, for example, documents how 1930s' horror-film exhibitors would plant women in the audience to faint or scream or would position nurses in the lobby and ambulances out front to stress the dangers of watching such frightening films. She explains, 'women were classic horror's central stunt participants because they were thought to personify the genre's favored affect: fear' (Berenstein, 1996: 72). Eric Schaeffer (1994) describes how exploitation film promoters would segregate audiences into male-only or female-only showings in order to combine an aura of sensationalism with a rhetoric of public education and moral uplift.

Film theory's abstract generalizations about spectatorship often depend upon essentialized assumptions about 'archetypal' exhibition practices; theorists compare the experience of watching a movie in a darkened theatre to a dream state, or contrast the focused gaze of the film-goer with the distracted gaze of the television viewer. Such abstractions break down when we confront the eclectic history of film exhibition (Kepley, 1996). Some contexts encourage collective and vocalized responses, others foster quiet contemplation, and the conflict between these different modes of reception often marks significant class, racial, and ethnic boundaries.

The introduction of the video cassette recorder (VCR) has further expanded the contexts where films might be shown. By granting viewers access to a vast archive, the VCR breaks down traditional distinctions between different media, genres, time periods, and taste categories. For example, one university 'Womyn's Group' showed *Thelma and Louise* alongside other 'pro-women movies', including Hollywood films (*Fried Green Tomatoes* [1991], *Gorillas in the Mist* [1988]) and independent documentaries (*Not a Love Story* [1981], *Dreamworlds* [1990]). The VCR enables viewers to 'time-shift' movies so they more perfectly fit into the social dynamics of their lives. For example, Ann Gray (1992) describes a group of housewives who formed a 'movie club', getting together once a week during the day to watch videos (especially romantic comedies, historical melodramas, or musicals) which their husbands refused to see with them. The VCR enables viewers to take greater control over the flow of filmic images, using the fast-forward function to skip past dull bits or to edit together 'good-parts' tapes of special effects sequences or scenes featuring favorite actors.

The VCR enables films to move across national borders. Hamid Naficy (1993) describes how a group of recently displaced Iranian exiles cherished evenings spent eating home-cooked Persian meals with their friends and watching often faded and low-quality tapes of pre-revolutionary Iranian films. The most readily-available films were B movie comedies, melodramas, and action films, which many of these friends would not have watched in other circumstances, but which brought back the sights and sounds of their mother country. At the same time, the underground circulation of bootleg tapes of

Hong Kong
college s
anime, A
roots br
America:
foreign
'political

Howe
limitatio
example
laserdisc
own sub
doing se
circulate
descript
art cine
example
horror g
animal.

The
challeng
lines. N
for the
sometir
them a
alongsi
[1964-
[1977-
ready :
'Music
availab
betwee
descrip
consum
schola
techno

Fans

Altho
exami
lives,
Such

Hong Kong action films, Hindi musicals, or Japanese anime (animated films) allow US college students to appropriate Asian popular culture for their own use. Watching anime, Annilee Newitz (1994) tells us, allows some Asian-Americans to reclaim cultural roots broken down by their parents' generation, while many white anime fans challenge American nationalism, stressing the superiority of Japanese products. The anime's foreign origins also provide some male fans with an alibi for enjoying their often 'politically incorrect' representations of female sexuality.

However, the underground circulation of videotape confronts serious technical limitations. Grass-roots distributors of bootleg Japanese and Hong Kong movies, for example, must translate films across incompatible video formats, often working from laserdisc originals. Newitz describes, for example, how some anime clubs make their own subtitled editions of videos otherwise inaccessible to most American viewers. In doing so, however, these groups shape the films' reception, selecting which videos will circulate and framing how those films will be understood through their catalog descriptions or program notes, much as Janet Staiger (1992) describes the ways that the art cinema movement shaped our current understanding of film authorship. For example, anime fandom initially concentrated around male-targeted science fiction and horror genres rather than around the female-marketed romances and historicals or cute animal stories equally prominent in Japan.

The growing centrality of the VCR to the ways audiences encounter film texts challenges film studies' attempts to 'discipline' its own borders along media-specific lines. Newitz's anime fans make little or no meaningful distinction between films made for theatrical release and series produced for airing on Japanese television; they sometimes project the tapes for large audiences at campus screenings or they watch them at home on television. Douglass's *Thelma and Louise* story appears in a fanzine alongside stories about characters from US (*Star Trek* [1966–1969], *Man From UNCLE* [1964–1968]) and British television (*Blake's 7* [1978–1981], *The Professionals* [1977–1983]). Her linkage between *Thelma and Louise* and *The Hunger* suggests the ready availability on video of films produced decades apart, while the story's title, 'Music of the night' comes from the Broadway musical, *Phantom of the Opera* (1925), available to Douglass through a compact disc soundtrack. An institutional division between film and television studies preserves distinctions which no longer hold descriptive validity in terms of the production, distribution, exhibition, or consumption of media texts in the 1990s. To start from this recognition may allow scholars to ask new questions about the complicated interplay of diverse media technologies (Ang, 1996; Morley, 1992).

Fandoms and other interpretive communities

Although such work has been more common in television studies, film scholars have examined the 'uses' audiences make of filmic images and meanings in their everyday lives, adopting ethnographic techniques to describe the process of media consumption. Such research explores how social factors, such as ethnicity, class, gender, age, or

subcultural affiliations, influence film spectatorship and what happens when cultural materials circulate beyond the site of theatrical exhibition.

Such work has a long history. Focus-group interviews, fan writings, and personal autobiographical essays were employed by the Payne Fund researchers in the 1930s to study America's 'movie-made children' and their consumption habits (DeCordova, 1990b). The Payne studies built the case for self-regulation of film content (Jacobs, 1990; Jowett *et al.*, 1996). More recent media 'ethnographers' have had a different agenda, focusing on subcultural challenges to the media's ideological power. Earlier accounts stressed evidence that audience behavior (such as dressing like or imitating film stars) was influenced (often negatively) by film content, while more recent studies regard such behaviors as evidence of 'appropriation' or 'resistance'. This shifting perspective reflects larger changes in the nature of qualitative social science, from a period when researchers preserved a rigid distance from their research subjects towards a period when scholars have recognized the value of more proximate and engaged vantage points. Audience researchers increasingly acknowledge their own stakes in popular culture and their own membership within the fan communities they analyze (Jenkins *et al.*, forthcoming). As a result, they are less likely to portray negatively cultural processes that are part of their own lives.

Despite such shifts, audience research lags far behind dominant trends in the social sciences and still needs to become more self-conscious about the theoretical implications of its methodologies (Nightingale, 1997). At present, the term media 'ethnography' is applied loosely to all qualitative methodologies for studying the contemporary real-world contexts of media consumption. In some cases, the term gets applied inaccurately to focus-group interviews, even where the respondents did not know each other before the researcher brought them together. The term would be better applied to prolonged research into the ongoing interactions of pre-existing fan (or other subcultural) communities, especially work that extends from media consumption towards a broader range of social experiences (schooling, work, family relations).

Although film fans have existed since the beginning of cinema, their identities and activities have shifted dramatically. Many of the earliest film fans, Kathryn Fuller (1996) tells us, were men interested in cinematic technologies and the film-making process. Early film-fan magazines encouraged readers to write their own scenarios; their offices were often flooded with thousands of submissions. Only gradually did the thrust of film-fan interest shift from amateur film-making towards celebrity. In *Star gazing*, Jackie Stacey (1994) focuses on older British women's memories of their relationship to Hollywood films during World War 2 and the immediate post-war period. These women sometimes speak of the American stars as occupying a utopian space of glamour and beauty far removed from wartime shortages. The women also sought to frame the stars as like themselves, either through comparisons based on complexion, hair color, eye color, or personality traits, or through imitating the star's mannerisms and dress. The fact that these women can still remember the stars' specific costumes or gestures decades later suggests how much their relationship with these screen personalities were embedded in personal memories.

Stacey's research suggests the need for more sophisticated distinctions between

different
populate
to tell ou
to be rev
them, c
example
named
owners
lives, se
home a

Fans
as the b
Edge c
underg
social
practic
narrat
So did
exclus
to the
'poach
to bow

So
ideolo
fans i
them
becau
reflec
sexua
pote
audi
ideo
appr

W
term
poli
thei
trar
part
stor
ofte
Slas
ma
cha

different kinds of audience investments and identifications. We inhabit a world populated with other people's stories. Few of us have access to the means of production to tell our own stories through the mass media. The stories that enter our lives thus need to be reworked so that they more fully satisfy our needs and fantasies. We 'appropriate' them, or, to use another term, we 'poach' them (deCerteau, 1984). Consider, for example, one webpage which tells the story of two stray dogs their adoptive owners named Thelma and Louise. Reluctant to see these dogs as having been abandoned, the owners chose to construct a fantasy of their voluntary escape from unpleasant domestic lives, seeking freedom together on the open road. Providing these 'outlaw' pooches a home allowed the owners to claim access to the film characters' freedom and mobility.

Fans appropriate materials from film, television, and other forms of popular culture as the basis for their own cultural productions (Jenkins, 1992a). Fanzines such as *On The Edge* contain original fiction about favorite fictional characters, circulating in an underground economy. These stories emerge from – and help to perpetuate – their social interactions with other fans. In many ways, fandom extends traditional folk practices into a modern era of mass production. The difference is not that fans adopt narratives from other sources and retell them in their own terms. Shakespeare did that. So did Homer. The difference is that fans operate in an age where corporations claim exclusive ownership over core cultural narratives. Robin Hood and King Arthur belong to the British people. Kirk and Spock belong to Viacom. In that sense, fans are, indeed, 'poachers', who assert their own roles in the creation of contemporary culture, refusing to bow before pressures exerted upon them by copyright holders.

Some writers cite such fan appropriations as popular 'resistance' to dominant ideology. The situation, however, is far more complex than such formulations allow: fans relate to favorite texts with a mixture of fascination and frustration, attracted to them because they offer the best resources for exploring certain issues, frustrated because these fictions never fully conform to audience desires. Some appropriations may reflect growing disenchantment with conventional constructions of gender and sexuality; others may be highly reactionary, preserving the *status quo* in the face of potential change (Sholle, 1991). If the concept of 'resistance' carries use-value in audience research, we need continually to refine what it means to 'resist' dominant ideology; we should be more precise in examining the goals and the consequences of appropriation.

We impoverish our accounts of fan cultural production if we understand it purely in terms of ideological struggle. Fandoms do not typically understand themselves in political terms. Fans appropriate, rethink, and rework media materials as the basis for their own social interactions and cultural exchanges. As these materials enter into the transforming space of fandom, they are reshaped according to genres, which originate in part from fandoms' own cultural practices. For example, 'Music of the night' is a slash story. This fan genre posits homoerotic relations between fictional characters, most often the male partners commonly found in science fiction or action-adventure stories. Slash allows its mostly female producers to rewrite conventional representations of masculinity, to produce a more nurturing, emotionally sensitive version of the characters, and to imagine romance stories based on equality (Penley, 1992). Western

culture has a long tradition of 'romantic friendships' between men, intensifying homosocial relations to the point that they blur into the homoerotic (Sedgwick, 1985). For that reason, slash fans find it relatively easy to locate suitable images in mass culture. Slash fans assert that their fantasies build on 'relationships' that are 'visible' on screen in the performers' non-verbal gestures and physical intimacy (Bacon-Smith, 1992). In most commercial texts, however, the line between the homosocial and the homoerotic is carefully policed. Slash posits a greater fluidity of emotional and erotic expression.

Slash fandom allows women a communal space for talking about their sexual fantasies, offering models for imagining alternative character relationships. Once fans have produced stories about Kirk and Spock and many other male partners, it becomes easier for Douglass to imagine Thelma and Louise as lovers and to construct a story which, she would argue, fits comfortably within the genre. Other fans, however, disagree, insisting that slash emerges specifically from the characteristics of masculine culture; female-female erotica, by its very nature, does not fit within the genre's mainstream (Green *et al.*, forthcoming). Most academic writing on slash fans asks why heterosexual women would construct homoerotic fantasies. However, a growing number of lesbian and bisexual fans appropriate the slash genre for queer pleasures. Douglass created her own zine when she found it difficult to publish female-female stories elsewhere.

Describing interpretations as 'community property', literary critic Stanley Fish (1980) sees readers as members of interpretive communities, who share common strategies for making meaning. Fish is interested in what makes an interpretation acceptable or unacceptable, plausible or implausible, novel or predictable for particular groups. Jacqueline Bobo (1995), for example, has applied Fish's notion of an 'interpretive community' to look at black women's responses to *The Color Purple* (1995). Her respondents defend such films aggressively against outside criticism, stressing the value in having even 'flawed' representations of their lives on the screen. All participants in an interpretive community do not necessarily agree about what a film means; interpretive communities do not impose rigid conformity, only set ground rules for discussion. The black women Bobo interviewed might disagree among themselves about particular characters or plot developments, yet they agreed on the film's relevance to understanding their daily lives.

One way to understand what we mean by an interpretive community would be to think about a net discussion group as a place where people exchange their views on a common topic (Clerc, 1996; Jenkins, 1995; Jones, 1995; Wexelblatt, forthcoming). Initially, as a new discussion group appears, interpretive claims might diverge wildly, yet certain consensuses emerge through discussion; members coalesce around points of mutual interest and avoid areas of dispute. Over time, the group agrees upon what kinds of posts are appropriate. In practice, larger on-line groups may bring together multiple interpretive communities with fundamentally different interests. Sometimes, the group can survive these conflicting agendas by creating alternative lines of discussion. Often, so-called 'flame wars' erupt over places where opposing interpretive communities rub against each other. The various groups cannot explain or justify their different viewpoints because they are not reading by the same rules; the only way to resolve such

conflict
explain
between
lists or
respons

Doug
but dra
lesbian
repress
stars' p
interpre
which c
as *Alien*
sexuali
Many
Thelma
queer i
upon lo
Daugh
cult ol
between
Gomez
rewriti
differ
relatio

Acad

Acade
reader
the de
autho
recept
appro
those
vestec
straig
specu
Au
spect
are d
ethnc
McR

conflicts is to shift to another plane – a meta-level – where the interpretive communities explain the standards by which they form and evaluate interpretations. As the tension between competing interpretations mounts, the group will splinter, creating competing lists or some members may 'go underground' to protect themselves from harsh responses.

Douglass's 'Music of the night' is controversial because it is not simply a slash story but draws inspiration from alternative traditions of lesbian erotic writing. Slash fans and lesbian viewers may expand upon filmic subtexts, making visible what they see as repressed narratives of same-sex desire. Some lesbians viewers draw upon gossip about stars' personal lives, or subcultural signs (such as costuming or body language) to interpret on-screen characters as queer. Even some films, such as *Fried Green Tomatoes*, which depict lesbian relationships leave those erotic feelings implicit. Other films, such as *Alien* or *Silence of the Lambs*, develop strong cult followings because they leave the sexuality of their female protagonists unmarked, available for queer appropriation. Many lesbians 'read between the lines' as they watched *Thelma and Louise*, tracing Thelma's transformation from ultra-femme to ultra-butche as a subcultural marker of queer identity. Douglass's representation of Thelma and Louise as vampires also drew upon lesbian subcultural knowledge. Vampire films, such as *The Velvet Vampire* (1971), *Daughters of the Darkness* (1971), *The Hunger*, or *Blood and Roses* (1960) have become cult objects among some lesbians, because they explicitly represent erotic contact between women. A growing number of queer writers, including Pat Califia and Jewelle Gomez, have turned towards vampire stories as a genre of erotica (Keesey, 1993). So, in rewriting *Thelma and Louise* as a lesbian vampire story, Douglass links together two different traditions of women's amateur writing, finding a model for female-female relations otherwise unavailable to her as a slash fan.

Academic critics

Academic film studies is still struggling with the implications of this 'discovery of the reader'. In some initial accounts of reception, there was a euphoric tendency to declare the death of the text much as earlier critics had prematurely announced the death of the author. However, as we have seen, texts play central roles in shaping the terms of their reception, even if they do not totally control their meanings. Audience members may appropriate textual materials as the basis for their own cultural creations, including those which represent 'very alternate universes', but there is still a tremendous authority vested in the original that withstands most grass-roots challenges. While even the most straightforward film requires the audience to confront both gaps and excesses, allowing speculations around its margins, we are seldom confused about base-level plot details.

Audience research has increasingly rejected large-scale generalizations about spectatorship, demanding a more contingent 'case-study' approach. Slowly, academics are developing 'mixed genres' of writing which merge textual analysis with historical or ethnographic research. Some classic examples of this approach include Angela McRobbie's discussion (1991) of how *Fame* (1980) fit British youth culture or Valerie

Walkerdine's (1985) account of a working-class family watching *Rocky* (1976). Both writers took seriously what the films meant to their audiences, while offering alternative interpretations of the relationship between the films' content and their consumption contexts. Such works pose significant questions about the relative weight given popular and academic interpretations where they diverge.

If, like Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty, we could make things mean whatever we wanted, then there would be no reason to struggle over access to cultural production or to bemoan sexist, homophobic, nationalistic, or racist media representations. Instead, audience research may provide new motivations for our struggles over film content, as we acknowledge the consequences of excluding certain stories from broader circulation. John Hartley (1992), for example, has called for a mode of 'intervention analysis', which takes seriously the political agendas of popular readerships while using the power and the prestige of the academy to 'intervene in the media' and in the circulation of 'popular knowledge' about media content. Gay, lesbian and bisexual critics, for example, draw upon subcultural strategies to reveal the 'queer' potential of commercially distributed texts. Cathy Griggers (1993), for example, offers an interpretation of *Thelma and Louise* which self-consciously violates conventions of academic analysis and actively 'rewrites' the film. Refusing to accept the film's closure, the protagonist's 'death sentence', Griggers takes their kiss (and their freeze-frame fall) as 'the authorizing signs to read the film's narrative as a lesbian love story, a coming out story'.

In *Making things perfectly queer*, Alexander Doty (1993: 134) challenges the notion that queer interpretations of dominant media texts should be regarded as 'alternative' or 'subtextual' rather than enjoying the same status as interpretations based on heterosexual assumptions. Doty invites us to rethink the politics of reading: If all interpretations are appropriations, why do we still read some as 'outside the mainstream' (Doty, 1993)? What allows us to read heterosexuality into films such as *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) which have no explicit romantic subtexts (Doty, forthcoming), yet reject the idea that *Thelma and Louise* could be lovers, despite their kiss?

Audience research has forced the academy to re-examine the institutional factors that shape canon-formation or interpretation within academic circles (Bordwell, 1989; Staiger, 1985). Some writers have challenged commonsensical assumptions about the differences between fans and academics (Jenson, 1992; Sconce, 1995). Joli Jenson contrasts the stereotypical emotionalism of fans to the rationality of academics. However, as she notes, academic writing is shaped in significant ways by the affective attachments that draw scholars to particular film-makers or theorists. Writing in a purely 'rational' voice isolates us from our own experiences as media consumers and distorts our accounts of spectatorship.

This realization has facilitated more openly autobiographical criticism. Annette Kuhn (1995), for example, has written an introspective essay about *Mandy* (1952), a favorite film from her childhood; Kuhn explores how her academic training transformed her relationship to such melodramatic works, struggling to reclaim something of what *Mandy* once meant to her. While Kuhn's refusal of academic distance remains controversial, film studies actually lags behind literary criticism, where autobiographical modes of writing have gained much broader attention and acceptance (Freedman *et al.*, 1993). Film studies may still be too uncertain about its status as a discipline to erase fully

the line between academic and fan. Erecting such a boundary was the price of its admission into the academy. Yet, new modes of critical writing are more and more drawing upon traditions of fan discourse, making the way for more openly appropriative, playful, autobiographical, and inventive genres of critical analysis. Such changes will not come easily, since they go against many of the rules of conventional critical discourse. Yet, these new genres of criticism may bring us closer to understanding the affective power of popular cinema. Soon, it may be possible for us, as students and academic critics to imagine alternative endings of *Thelma and Louise* in our papers, even those that turn them into bats flying off to Mexico.

References

- Allen, R.C. 1979: Motion picture exhibition in Manhattan, 1906-1912: beyond the Nickelodeon. *Cinema Journal* 18(2): 2-15.
- Allen, R.C. 1980: *Vaudeville and film, 1895-1915: a study in media interaction*. New York: Arno Press.
- Allen, R. C., and Gomery, D. 1985: *Film history: theory and practice*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Allen, R. 1990: From exhibition to reception: reflections on the audience in film history. *Screen* 31(4): 347-356.
- Ang, I. 1996: *Living room wars: rethinking media audiences for a postmodern world*. London: Routledge.
- Bacon-Smith, C. 1992: *Enterprising women: television, fandom and the creation of popular myth*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Bakhtin, M. 1981: *The dialogic imagination*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Barer, A. 1991: October: a male perspective on the movie, *Thelma and Louise*. *Playboy*, 45.
- Bennett, T. 1983: The Bond phenomenon: theorizing a popular hero. *Southern Review* 16(2): 195-225.
- Bennett, T. and Woollacott, J. 1988: *Bond and beyond: the political career of a popular hero*. London: Macmillan.
- Berenstein, R.J. 1996: *Attack of the leading ladies: gender, sexuality and spectatorship in classic horror cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bobo, J. 1995: *Black women as cultural readers*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bogal, L. undated: essay questions on *Thelma and Louise*. Unpublished materials for writing instructors, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY.
- Bordwell, D. 1985: *Narration in the fiction film*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Bordwell, D. 1989: *Making meanings: inference and rhetoric in the interpretation of cinema*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Budd, M. (ed.) 1990: *The cabinet of Dr. Caligari: texts, contexts, histories*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Carbine, M. 1990: 'The finest outside the loop': motion picture exhibition in Chicago's black metropolis. *Camera Obscura* 23: 8-41.
- Clerc, S.J. 1996: DDEB, GATB, MPPB and Ratboy: the X-Files' media fandom, online and off. In Lavery, D., Hague, A. and Cartwright, M. (eds), 'Deny All Knowledge': reading the X-Files. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, pp. 36-51; C.
- Corliss, R. 1991: Why can't a woman be a man? *Time*, 5 August: 66.
- Corrigan, T. 1986: Film and the culture of cult. *Wide Angle* 8(3/4): 91-100.
- Crafton, D. 1996: The *Jazz Singer's* reception in the media and at the box office. In Bordwell, D. and Carroll, N. (eds), *Post-theory: reconstructing film studies*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 460-80.