



Media, Film and  
Communication

## *Working Paper Series*

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SPECIAL ISSUE: REVISITING AUDIENCES: RECEPTION, IDENTITY, TECHNOLOGY

**Issue Editors: Kevin Fletcher & Holly Randell-Moon**

**Editorial: Revisiting Audiences: Reception, Identity, Technology**

### **Editorial**

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### **Introduction**

We are surrounded by media texts – films, television shows, songs, comics, videogames to name but a few. With the growing range of technologies at our disposal, our relationships with media texts and practices are continually evolving, opening up new avenues for inquiry into audiences and reception research. What do these texts mean to us? How do they shape our lives and experiences? Rather than merely receive the texts they encounter, audiences *experience* texts, not as commodities, but as instances of intense emotional or affective engagement. Texts shape our understanding of the world and the ways we experience it – they make us laugh, cry, think and dream. They delight and infuriate. They have the power to help us create realities, to relive the past, or to stir us to action and activism. Our everyday interactions with media take many forms and range from identity performance on social media, to nostalgic attachments, and to fandoms.

The second special issue in the MFCO Working Paper Series draws from the *Revisiting Audiences: Reception, Identity, Technology* (9-10 June 2016) conference held at the University of Otago. This issue is particularly interested in the relationship between texts,

the producers of said texts, and their audiences. The authors in this collection engage with the work of several influential scholars, including Gerard Genette, Jonathan Gray, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, and Henry Jenkins. Through the four articles assembled here, and the literature that informs them, a fascinating and complex picture emerges of this relationship between text, producer, and audience, demonstrating both the productive and inhibiting impacts of such interactions, and their effects on the ways in which audiences receive, create, engage with and experience texts.

One of the key thinkers whose work informs this special issue is Roland Barthes. Barthes' book, *The Death of the Author* (1977), examines the relationship between a text and its creator. It argues that the role of the author is diminished upon the production of a text. Through a critique of Barthes' idea, Dion McLeod and Travis Holland's article, "The Ghost of J.K. Rowling: *Harry Potter* and the Ur-Fan" suggests that the author can play an active role in the production and reception of popular texts. Through their analysis of J.K. Rowling's efforts to intervene in post-textual interpretations of the franchise, it is suggested that this intervention results in 'a new interactional space emerging between authors, texts, and audience' (p. 6). The authors present a complex interpretation of the author-audience relationship, positing that Rowling's active engagement with social media, and the *Harry Potter* universe, fosters a new level of interaction between the author and her fan community.

Edmund Smith's article, "Superheroes and Shared Universes: How Fans and Auteurs Are Transforming the Hollywood Blockbuster" further complicates the relationship between audience and authors. Henry Jenkins discusses the notion of 'transmedia' in relation to stories that unfold 'across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole' (2006, pp. 95-96). In an analysis of Marvel Studios's transmedia franchise, Smith articulates a model of 'co-dependent authorship' through which studios and filmmakers collaborate within a 'cyclical relationship between the creative and commercial interests of the Hollywood blockbuster' (p. 19). Smith also explores the role of fan communities in generating publicity around Marvel media.

The notion of paratexts, discussed in several of the articles of this issue, draws upon the work of French literary theorist, Gerard Genette (1997) and Jonathan Gray (2010). The

term refers to the varied media sites that frame how audiences view a particular media text. Paratexts surrounding movies may include trailers – edited collections of footage designed to market an upcoming film – posters or reviews. However, they also extend beyond the purposes of hype and marketing. Gray considers the opening credit sequence of television shows as a paratext because of the role it plays in making meaning for its viewers, informing them about the type of show they are watching (2010, p. 74). Using the example of *Grey's Anatomy* and *Private Practice*, Alison Bell's article, "Welcome to your ABC Starter Kit", explores the significance of the DVD Starter Kit – additional content produced for the DVD release that precedes the first episodes on the discs and serves as an entry point into the current season. Bell argues that this act of summarising the show raises important questions concerning the author-function within these texts (p. 6). She suggests that the creative work undertaken by the shows' script writers is devalued and over-simplified through the inclusion of promotional starter kits that serve the commercial interests of the networks.

Informing the final article is the work of sociologist and cultural theorist, Jean Baudrillard (1983), who examines the relationship between signs and reality, and the simulation of reality via signs and symbols. Tracing the various stages of the sign order, from a faithful reproduction of the image, to "simulacra" – that which possesses few links to the original referent – Baudrillard's theories explore how simulacra obscures the original meaning of a sign. This obscuration leads to a reproduction of reality that impacts upon the ways audiences engage with the world through media texts. Similarly, Isabelle Delmotte's article, "Increasing Sonic Sensory Awareness in the Production and Consumption of Screened Nature Documentaries" notes the sonic impact of a text's production on the audience, arguing that commercially produced nature documentaries employ 'Technologically mediated experiences of soundscapes' (p. 2) that potentially "distort" the ways viewers experience the "natural" world through these films.

The articles collected in this special issue demonstrate that the ways audiences engage with media texts are many and varied. In an ever-developing media landscape, the study of audiences remains of paramount importance.

### **Author Biographies**

Dr Owain Gwynne is a recent graduate of the University of Otago where he received his doctorate through the department of Media, Film & Communication. His PhD introduced the original framework, 'fan-made time', to explore fan engagement with Peter Jackson's *The Hobbit* trilogy.

Dr Holly Randell-Moon is a senior lecturer in communication and media at the University of Otago, New Zealand. Her publications on popular culture, biopower, and gender and sexuality have appeared in the edited book collections *Common Sense: Intelligence as Presented on Popular Television* (2008) and *Television Aesthetics and Style* (2013) as well as the journals *Feminist Media Studies*, *Celebrity Studies*, and *Refractory*. Along with Ryan Tippet, she is the editor of *Security, Race, Biopower: Essays on Technology and Corporeality* (2016).

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