

Review:

Martin Barker, Clarissa Smith and Feona Attwood, *Watching Game of Thrones: How Audiences Engage with Dark Television*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Evans,
University of Nottingham, UK

Watching Game of Thrones is the latest major international research project that focuses on audience responses to high profile screen texts, following on from projects examining *The Lord of the Rings* (Barker and Mathijs, 2008) and *The Hobbit* (Barker and Mathijs, 2016). The project lying behind it involved forty-two scholars in fourteen countries with this book taking offering an oversight of the project, exploring its methodology and logistics as well as offering a number of insights into the importance of character, comparisons to real world politics and controversial narrative moments.

The book's most useful contribution emerges in its reflection on how and where audience research can and should be done. Whilst such explicit reflections on method were common in the 1990s (for just a few examples, see Lull, 1991; Moores, 1993; Hay et. al., 1996; Alasuutari, 1999), they have lessened recently, as audience research, and fan studies in particular, have become more established. When new avenues have emerged such as social media, there has been some exploration of the best ways to tap into them, but a broader critical evaluation of how audience researchers actually do their research and the assumptions that underpin their approaches has taken less of a centre stage. Returning to questions of how and why we gather information and insights from audiences – and how different approaches result in sometimes fundamentally different conclusions – is very welcome. Key here is the recognition that screen or media audience research is not the sole domain of the humanities. The authors clearly articulate how their approach, drawing on the British cultural studies tradition, differs from US media and communication studies or work done in the social sciences (such as Chapter 4's discussion of media psychology). By recognising different approaches to media audiences and working through precisely *how* they differ, the authors demonstrate how to position audience research within a collection of different disciplinary approaches. This is an excellent contribution to debates around how to understand screen audiences.

The project and book do, however, raise questions about the focus of arts and humanities-based screen audience research. The opening of the book establishes the project's motivation:

‘[GOT] is a cultural phenomenon of real import and impact – but what do we know about its viewers, followers and fans? What do we know of their varied interests in the series, of their likes and dislikes?’ (p1-2). These questions have been repeated several times recently in relation to screen content (for example Barker et. al., 2016 and the ongoing ‘World *Star Wars* Project’). Such projects repeatedly focus on audiences’ relationship to and experiences of specific texts and as a consequence lean towards a particular type of audience: fans. This echoes a larger trend that has seen screen audience research focus more and more on fan communities ever since scholars first made the case for fans as complex and important research subjects rather than socially inept ‘weirdos’ (e.g. Bacon Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; Lewis, 1992).

Fan studies undoubtedly remains a crucial way of understanding audiences’ screen experiences, with more recent work offering compelling and vital challenges to biases within fan scholarship (see Pande, 2018). However, when looking at screen audience research as a whole, it is necessary to ask what is left out as a result of this focus on texts and fans? *Watching Game of Thrones* does take steps to distinguish itself from being exclusively fan studies, presenting a range of viewing and experiential positions. However, it would have been interesting to see how fan and non-fan audiences were prefigured within the project’s method. Where was the questionnaire advertised? How were potential participants addressed? Were tactics put in place to try and capture audiences that in no way fall into the category of ‘fan’? There is also a more fundamental question – can any project that explicitly calls for responses to content escape falling into the broader category of fan studies? If someone is willing to answer a questionnaire, take part in a focus group or even post online, they are likely to only do so for content that they are at least familiar with and, more likely, that stands out for them (even if they’re an anti-fan). Who - and what kinds of screen experiences - gets left out?

I do not wish to detract from the valuable work done in *Watching Game of Thrones*, which offers a rigorous and reflexive approach to audience research, particularly in terms of data analysis. My point instead is to take the book’s awareness of its place within screen audience research and look forward to where the field may go next. Of course, there is space for more projects exploring audiences’ relationships with content. However, it is necessary to recognise that this trend of focusing on audiences for specific pieces of content and subsequently particular kinds of engagement, has left gaps. Even the turn towards interrogating ‘engagement’ itself as identified by Martin Barker (Barker 2021: online) carries assumptions of focusing on content that ‘matters’ in some form or another (Evans, 2019: 2). What questions are being left out of these debates? Several spring to mind as a first step. What about forgettable or mundane screen content? What role do non-content phenomena such as channels or institutions such as public service broadcasting play in audiences’ relationship to content? How do audiences reflect on cinema spaces and the rituals of cinema-going (bringing the approach of new cinema history to the present)? How are issues of diverse representation and strategies to improve it across television and film more broadly perceived by audiences? There are pockets of work exploring some of these questions, especially in relation to digital distribution (Bury, 2017, Kuscu-Osbuduk, 2021), including elsewhere within more social science-oriented audience research. However, turning our attention as screen studies audience scholars away from texts reveals so much that remains under-explored.

Biographical note:

Elizabeth Evans is Associate Professor of Film and Television Studies at the University of Nottingham. Her research examines the social, industrial and technological factors that shape (and are shaped by) audiences' experiences of media texts and is the author of *Understanding Engagement in Transmedia Culture* (Routledge, 2020) and *Transmedia Television: Audiences, New Media and Daily Life* (Routledge, 2011). Contact: Elizabeth.Evans@nottingham.ac.uk.

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