7

Audiences and moving-image media stories

ABOUT AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

There are many touching stories from the early days of cinema when **audiences** saw their first film narratives. Legend has it that patrons ran from the theatre or dived under their seats the first time they saw a train come towards them in the Lumière brothers' film *L'arrivée d'un train à La Ciotat* (1895). When a bandit fired a gun directly at the audience in *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), the audience literally tried to dodge the bullet. And in the memoirs of the silent film actress Lillian Gish, she tells of what happened when old soldiers from the American Civil War first saw the battle scenes in D. W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915): 'Their sobs shook the seats.'

It's probably true that audiences are more hardened and skilled at viewing films these days. But the howls of protest on those rare occasions when the projector breaks down, or when someone presses pause on the DVD player, prove that the power of narrative has not diminished in the past 100 years.

Figure 7.1 Early audience for a silent film. There are many stories in cinema history of the innocent reactions of these first-time viewers. Modern audiences are more hardened and skilled than the audiences for the first cinema narratives. However, the power of story remains just as strong. Some academics argue that story is an essential aspect of human thinking.

Taking pleasure in the text

Would you list 'watching movies or television shows' as one of your hobbies? Why do so many people in modern society spend so much time with the media and its stories? Most would just simply say they enjoy it so much. Enjoyment or pleasure is possibly the main motivator for media use. Movies, television shows and other narratives are fun and make people happy, with even sad stories allowing people to feel uplifted in some way.

Benefits of engaging with narratives

No one has had to be taught to enjoy narratives, so even very young children are immediately fascinated by stories. Some academics argue that stories are actually the natural way that humans think. According to this theory, stories were always essential to human existence and survival, so we should not be surprised that modern audiences need them as much as cave dwellers did. The following are some possible benefits of engaging with narratives.

- **Escape from the self.** Entering a fictional world allows you to take on the lives and experiences of other people. To do this, you must detach from your own reality and enter the world of the story. The intensity with which you focus on the story allows you to forget about yourself. You lose self-consciousness.
- **Safe peril.** Modern audiences enjoy horror movies in the same way that audiences thousands of years ago enjoyed stories of great peril and suffering. All good stories have an ending, and this allows the audience members to safely return to their real-life existences.

Figure 7.2 One of the pleasures of engaging in stories is to place yourself in 'safe peril'. Within the story world, we can experience great danger. If all turns out well for the character, then we can enjoy their triumph. If it doesn't, we are still safe, even if they aren't.

7.1.1 Australian trends in online and on demand viewing

7.1.2 Screen Australia: fact finder

'Stories enable us to mingle with risk takers – to live life even more fully. Just as story heroes survive risks, the audience is similarly invulnerable. Even if the story protagonists are doomed, the audience member is safe.'

Melanie Green, **Timothy Brock**, **Geoff Kaufman**

- **Extraordinary events.** Life for most people is safe and ordinary but, in a story, an individual can experience intense emotions and life-and-death situations. Film stories are condensed or exaggerated versions of reality with an unusually high concentration of emotional stimuli.
- **Guiding behaviours.** Audiences learn from stories. The fate of a character can show what can happen in real life, or the solutions that a character finds in a story can provide suggestions about how to solve your own problems.
- **Emotional or physical resilience.** A romance movie may help audiences deal with their own sense of loss, or an action movie may prompt an individual to start their own training program. Watching other people overcome difficulties and survive can supply us with the resources to do the same ourselves.
- **Identity play.** Entering a story world allows us to try on different identities. We can temporarily take on the lives of others.
- **Social values and beliefs.** Stories contain values and beliefs, but engaging in pleasurable narratives is thought to decrease the awareness of the presence of these values. Deep involvement with stories reduces counter-arguing – arguing against some of the values and beliefs in the story. If a reader continually consumes the same type of stories, this may increase the likelihood that they will take on the values of those stories.

The process of engaging with narrative texts

Audiences are thought to respond to media narratives on two levels:

- **Emotional responses.** Audience members can feel the emotional plight that the characters are in. They may have sympathy or empathy towards them. At the end of the story, they may be in a better mood themselves because they have enjoyed the experience.
- **Intellectual judgements.** Audiences also make judgements about the narrative and assess the actions of the characters.

Engagement happens via belief or confidence in the story world. After that, engagement happens through the processes of transportation, identification, immersion in realism and a sense of presence.

Belief in the story world

Belief is a voluntary contract the audience enters into with the maker of the story. A modern film, for example, provides all the assistance anyone could want, with believable actors, surround sound and realistic special effects. In return, the audience agrees to go along with the story and enter into the world of the film.

When the suspense becomes too much, or the fear becomes overwhelming, people remind themselves of the contract they entered into. 'It's only a film,' they say, or, 'Everything will be all right. The main character never dies – even in horror movies.'

Traditionally, the process of believing in the world of the story was thought to be through the active suspension of disbelief. Some modern analysts are now arguing that, instead, we actively create belief.

- **Suspension of disbelief.** Believing in the world of the story, no matter how fanciful, requires what is traditionally called suspension of disbelief. From our earliest years, we will happily settle down to listen when we hear: 'Once upon a time …' Few children will ever question that a frog could turn into a prince with just a kiss, but they also know not to try it in the real world.

  Everyone suspends disbelief when they view a film or television story. Adults know that the police rarely arrive 30 seconds after a fight breaks out. And even primary school children know that few life forms, let alone large amphibious monsters, could have survived in the black lagoon. But for the sake of the story, everyone puts aside these concerns from the real world.
- **Creation of belief.** Other analysts argue that we begin with default belief, not disbelief. Audiences enter a story wanting to believe. According to this view, audiences tend to believe whatever they are told. Information from within the story is accepted as true and can only be 'unaccepted' with a great deal of difficulty.

'A media viewer doesn't have to take the risk of changing jobs, spouses or locales to experience another kind of life, but rather can vicariously experience such alternative life choices through the lives of the characters who inhabit the [story] worlds.'

Melanie Green, **Timothy Brock**, **Geoff Kaufman**

Transportation

Transportation is the process by which a viewer becomes 'lost' in a story. The audience member loses focus on the actual world and turns their full attention to the world of the story. They become unaware of the passage of real time. By the time they return from the story, they are somehow changed by the experience. You might have experienced it most deeply when you go to the movies in the daytime. You get immersed in the story and then are disoriented when you come out of the cinema and it is night-time. You probably went through transportation into the narrative in three stages:

1   devoting almost full attention to the narrative stimulus
2   perceiving experience from a point within the story world
3   losing consciousness of the outside world.

A scale to measure the degree of transportation into a narrative has been developed by Green and Brock (see page 163).

Identification with characters

Once audience members enter the story world, they need to locate themselves within a character. This is usually the person from whose point of view the story is told (the protagonist – see chapter 6). Adopting the point of view of a character is called **identification**.

Identification happens when audience members lose awareness of the world around them, and instead enter into a close connection with a particular character. Identification is like being in someone else's shoes and seeing the world through their eyes.

The way the text is constructed encourages us to identify with characters. For instance, the camera can encourage us to see the world through a character's eyes. This can be done even if they are not the protagonist nor even a very likeable character. In *Psycho* (1960), the audience identifies with Norman Bates when he pushes the car containing the body into a swamp. We feel his panic when the car starts to sink but momentarily stops; like Norman, we want the car to sink.

Figure 7.3 Solomon Northup, aka Platt (Chiwetel Ejiofor), is released after being sold into slavery in *12 Years a Slave* (2013). When the audience enters the story world, they locate themselves by identifying with a character. Identification happens when audience members start to see the world from the point of view of the character.

Realism

'It seems plausible that stories we consider authentic and true to life are the most engaging. But it is also plausible [the reverse hypothesis] that engagement with a story then leaves us with a sense that the story was authentic.'

Rick Busselle and Helena Bilandzic

If the audience thinks that a story is realistic, they are more likely to be transported into it. The judgements that the audience makes about **realism** are related to their enjoyment of the story. These judgements fall into two basic categories:

- **Real-world or external reality.** Audiences make judgements about external reality based on comparisons they make between the story world and the laws and rules of the real world.
- **Narrative or internal reality.** Audiences also make judgements about the elements within a story and whether or not they are consistent and believable. The story has to have its own logic. It must take place within a coherent world. The motivations of the characters must be believable.

Audiences can accept stories that do not have complete real world or external reality, as long as the internal reality is very strong. For example, science-fiction movies involving time travel do not have external reality; however, this genre allows for a break from external reality.

Figure 7.4 Yoda in *Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith* (2005). In a *Star Wars* movie, no one would expect a character to use handguns instead of light sabers. Even though handguns have real-world or external reality, they do not have narrative or internal reality: handguns would not be consistent with the story world.

Presence

Presence is the sense of 'being there' in the story. The term is commonly used in virtual reality and in video games, where the user actively participates in events. Some human–computer interactions can create experiences that are almost like those in real life. Users tend to forget the medium itself and just focus on the experience – they are no longer aware they are in virtual reality or a video game.

In a story, the sense of presence is created by transportation and identification with the perspectives of the characters.

7.1 ACTIVITIES

1   **Construct** a list of the benefits that audiences receive by engaging with narratives, and then **construct** a parallel list of television shows, movies or games that provide this benefit.
    Explain the reasons why you have **identified** particular narratives to match the benefits, **giving additional information** that demonstrates you understand the connections.

2   In pairs, discuss occasions when you have found yourself actively refusing to suspend disbelief. These could be occasions when you told yourself, 'It's okay, it's only a movie', or they could be occasions when you were unable to get into the story right from the start.
    Explain the situations to your partner, providing them with some **examples** as well as **clarifying** some of the reasons why you think your disbelief could not be suspended.

3   How transported were you in the last film or television program you viewed? Answer the questions from Green and Brock's transportation scale, which can be accessed via the weblink. Place your response to each question on the scale from 1 (Not at all) to 7 (Very much).
    Explain the details of your survey findings, beginning with the survey concept and then giving some **additional information** about the text and yourself as a viewer.
    Analyse the results, **examining** each **constituent part** of the questionnaire and collating the results into a quantitative (numerical/percentage) finding.
    Appraise the role of transportation in a narrative, **drawing conclusions** about its significance as a factor for audiences in the enjoyment of a story.
    Discuss your responses with other class members who may have viewed the same text. **Report** your findings back to the class as a whole.

4   **Appraise** the degree to which you have found realism in the story or a character in a film, television show or game, **systematically examining** your reactions to the following text characteristics (which have been developed by Green and Brock):
    • plausibility or believability
    • realism or 'factuality'
    • connection to real-life experience of yourself or others.
    Make a judgement about the worth to you of each.
    Explain your findings, giving reasons that **clarify** your decisions.

5   Select a film, television show or game in which you have really liked the main character.
    Analyse your identification with that character by examining your responses to the following questions (which have been developed by Green and Brock).
    • Did you understand why character X did what they did?
    • Did you feel any of their emotions?
    • Did you feel you were inside their head?
    • Did you want them to succeed?
    Make a judgement about the **strengths and limitations** of that character in evoking identification in the audience.

7.1.3
Green and Brock's transportation scale

7.1.4
Green and Brock questionnaire

AUDIENCE EXPECTATION

'The sale of cinema tickets depends upon the public knowledge of the cinema experience — the expectation of a particular kind of entertainment. It runs as a kind of ground base, ensuring that cinema is a known constant in the anticipation that surrounds ticket sales.'

John Ellis, former TV producer and now Professor of Media Arts, University of London

How do you choose the movies you will see? You don't just pick titles randomly – you must have some idea of what you are wanting to see, even though you aren't really familiar with the stories. There must be signals and clues that come with the film to allow you to develop expectations about what you will see.

Audience expectations are the beliefs audiences have about a future media experience. Expectations of a story are based on feelings of looking forward to the narrative in advance. These expectations are based on a number of factors: codes and conventions of genre, narrative image, stars and word of mouth.

Factors influencing audience expectations

Figure 7.5 The Sun Pictures Cinema in Broome, Western Australia. This is the world's oldest open-air cinema still in operation. The audience still sits on the original 1916 canvas seats. In any cinema, the entertainment depends on the twists, turns and surprises of a good story. But it also depends on aspects of this story being known to the audience beforehand. Without these expectations, the audience would not have bought tickets in the first place.

Codes and conventions of genre

Can you tell the genre of a movie just by looking at its poster or DVD cover? Certainly you can from the trailer. Filmmakers have to make their movies accessible to the audience. One of the ways to do this is to build on audience expectations of genre. Audience knowledge about genre has been built up through hundreds of previous experiences. Tapping into these experiences allows filmmakers to build their audience.

Figure 7.6 A poster for the television series *The Walking Dead* (2010–). Audiences approach the show with genre expectations based on past experience with the zombie genre. Many critics have commented that *The Walking Dead* brings a fresh approach to the conventions of the genre.

If audience members have prior knowledge of a genre, they will enjoy a new text more deeply because they are familiar with its genre. Innovations and differences in the new text will then be gratifying for the audience because of the novelty.

The overall enjoyment of the story comes from the relationship between the audience's expectations and the new text's treatment of them.

Expectations about genres are related to the frequency with which they are seen. For instance, if you see a lot of horror movies, you will have quite well-defined expectations of that genre – however, you may have very poorly defined expectations of romantic comedy. A lack of expectations about a genre can also lead to a prejudiced view of it. When producers speak of a film 'finding its audience', they often mean that the film is appealing to a group of people who are familiar with its conventions. This audience will recognise its appeal and come to it with strong expectations.

Narrative image

According to television and film theorist John Ellis, the creation in their minds of a narrative image is a key aspect of audience expectations. 'Payment for a ticket is not an endorsement of a film. It is an endorsement of the narrative image of the film, together with the general sense of the cinematic experience,' he states.

- **Narrative image.** This is an expression of what people think the film or media narrative is like prior to seeing it. Narrative image is rather like brand image. It is a publicly circulating idea about the story. Audiences gain an idea of the narrative image of a story, and this helps them make a decision about whether to see it or not. The narrative image of the film is not a summary of the film or its storyline – it is a tantalising promise of what the film may deliver. The narrative image of a media text is a kind of bait for audiences. It creates in the minds of the audience a desire to know more. It builds audience expectations.
- **Narrative enigma.** This is the mystery of the story. It is the question of what happens. The narrative enigma is a key part of enticing the audience to see a film or television program. Solving the riddle of the narrative enigma is one aspect of audience expectations. Film trailers are carefully constructed to maintain the narrative enigma so that audiences feel they must see the film. The enigma is the reason you never see the ending of the film in the trailer.

Stars

'Stars have a similar function in the film industry to the creation of a narrative image: they provide a foreknowledge of the fiction, an invitation to cinema.'

John Ellis, former TV producer and now Professor of Media Arts, University of London

If one of your favourite stars is in a movie that is just opening, are you more likely to go and see it? **Stars** are important in most people's choice of movie. Therefore, stars are an important part of audience expectations.

John Ellis defines a star as 'a performer in a particular medium whose figure enters into subsidiary forms of circulation, and then feeds back into future performances'. The creation of a star relies on their appearance in other forms of media. If nothing is discussed about them in other media, they are not a star. The image they develop in other media, as their fame spreads, then feeds back into future movie roles.

Shutterstock.com/neftali

Figure 7.7 A stamp featuring John Wayne and the name of the Western movie that made him a star – *Stagecoach* (1939). John Wayne, the actor, stood for an idealised version of American manhood from the 1940s until the 1960s. In this sense, he also operated as a semiotic sign. Whenever he played a role, he filled that character with his own meanings as a star.

Stars as signs

Well-known stars operate like signs in a semiotic sense – they stand for something much larger than themselves. Often, stars have a desired characteristic or a manner of behaviour that society admires. Usually the star has this characteristic to some degree, but audiences also bestow it upon them. This characteristic is as much a representation of the audience's yearnings as it is an aspect of the stars themselves.

John Wayne, an actor in many classic Westerns, is an example of a star that stands for something much larger than himself. As well as being himself, with all his own very human failings, he came to represent an ideal of American manhood in the 1940s through to the 1960s. He appeared to be a tough, pioneering man with a keen eye for justice. He could shoot, ride horses and do all of those essentially 'manly things'. This was performed for an audience whose own reality was very different – they were often office-bound and suburban. When John Wayne appeared in a film, he brought his special meanings as a sign to his roles, thus adding more to these characters than was written in the script.

123rf/gors4730

Figure 7.8 Actor and film producer Harrison Ford portrayed on a postage stamp from Madagascar. The stamp depicts aspects of Ford's star image: previous screen roles, the person himself and his awards.

A star's image is made up of a combination of factors:
- previous screen roles
- publicity in mainstream media, fan magazines and social media
- personal appearances, speeches, gossip and so on
- the real person.

A star does much more than simply step into the place of a character in the script. The star fills out the character and brings along his or her own image to add meaning to the role. Casting actors thus becomes an important part of characterisation.

7.2 ACTIVITIES

1 Select some movies that are currently playing and, in pairs, discuss which ones you would like to see. **Explain** to each other why you made these choices and what expectations you have, recognising the **qualities** and **characteristics** of the films that have created interest in you as an audience member. **Construct** a list of what you already know about these movies, and where you found out about them. Present the findings from your discussion to the class.

2 Write down some movies you have seen recently that clearly belong to a specific genre. **Explain** whether you enjoyed the way it kept within the expected genre structure. **Explain** where it surprised you or deviated from the usual genre conventions. Were you able to predict the course of events or did it change your expectations?

3 Select some films you have not seen. **Explain** how you see their narrative images, and their narrative enigmas as you understand them to be. **Identify** what it is the movie seems to promise. **Identify** what information is withheld from the potential audience. Now form a pair with someone who has seen the movie. Discuss whether your description of the narrative image matches the film.

4 Look at the depiction of 'star image' in Figure 7.8. Select some of your favourite stars. **Symbolise** their star image in a similar way in a poster, identifying and depicting the important aspects of their image. Your design should represent some or all of the following:
   - the star as a character in one of their key movies
   - the star as a sign
   - the star just as a person
   - aspects of their public image or celebrity status
   - awards
   - contribution to the industry.

AUDIENCES AND DIFFERENT PLATFORMS AND CONTEXTS OF RECEPTION

When *Psycho* (1960) was first released, a cardboard cut-out of Alfred Hitchcock pointing at his watch was placed in the lobby of all the cinemas. No one would be allowed to enter the cinema once the film had started. Hitchcock was, of course, trying to control the conditions of reception. He wanted to build a strong sense of anticipation and fear in the audience, even before they saw the movie.

7.3.1
Subliminal
messages
in film

Alamy Stock Photo/Everett Collection

Figure 7.9 A theatre lobby standee (self-supporting cardboard display) placed in all cinemas showing *Psycho*. Hitchcock went to great lengths to control the conditions of reception for *Psycho*. Around the US, he purchased as many copies of the original book as he could so that no one would be able to read the ending. He closed the doors of the cinemas just before the film started so that no one could enter. This prevented disruption, and also led to a greater sense of anticipation.

The **contexts** of reception and consumption are the surrounding circumstances in which a media text is consumed. The context includes the following:

- **Surrounding environment.** The space chosen to consume the text can influence its reception. For instance, the formal space of a darkened cinema offers a different experience from that offered by the informal environment of a family lounge room or a teenager's bedroom.
- **The technology used.** The kind of experience a media text can offer depends on the technology used to present it. For example, the experience of watching a movie in an IMAX cinema is quite different from that of watching a movie on a small screen on the back of a seat on an aircraft.
- **The time of day.** Media texts are often designed to be consumed at certain times of the day. For instance, free-to-air prime time television takes place within the context of the period during and just after the evening meal.
- **Background knowledge of the audience.** Part of the context of reception is also carried within the minds of the audience. What they perceive of the narrative image and narrative enigma can determine their state of mind when they consume the text.
- **Audience experience and empathy.** The life histories and recent experiences of the audience can affect the way they interpret a film.
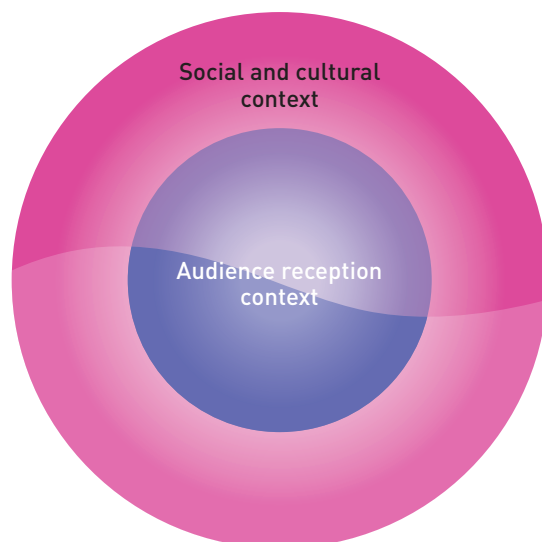

Figure 7.10 A media text does not exist in a vacuum. It is consumed in a reception context, which exists within a wider social and cultural context. Meaning arises out of a combination of the text and its surrounding contexts.

For example, an audience member who has recently gone through a relationship break-up will view a romantic comedy differently from the way someone in a happy relationship will view it. An audience member who has empathy (can put themselves in someone else's shoes) is likely to have a different response from one who cannot empathise.

Platform and context

Formal cinema contexts

Movie theatres were once so highly decorated they were called picture palaces. They were built in lavish style to resemble the grand luxury theatres of London or Vienna. Many even had first- and second-class sections, and special viewing balconies

Courtesy Empire Theatre

Courtesy Empire Theatre

Figure 7.11 The Empire Theatre, Toowoomba, was built as a movie theatre and showed films until 1971. The movie theatre was originally part-owned by E.J. Carroll, who later founded the cinema chain Birch, Carroll & Coyle. Before the arrival of television in Australia in the 1950s, and the arrival of the multiplex in the 1970s, movie theatres commonly presented themselves as 'picture palaces'. This sense of luxury promoted movie-going as a special event. Viewing a film in this context was a heightened audience experience.

with ornate decorative features. Heavy brocade curtains reinforced the feeling that watching a movie was a great event. Of course, like a Hollywood film set, much of this ornate decoration was one-dimensional and fake, made from plywood, plaster and chicken wire.

Even today, the multiplex cinema is well appointed. Seeing a movie is still a bit of an occasion. Ceremonial food (popcorn, soft drinks and choc-tops) accompanies the event. There are lots of little touches inside the cinema that also add to the sense of special occasion. The traditional curtains are just one of those.

The effects of a cinema context can be assumed to include the following, allowing for individual exceptions:

- increased transportation into the narrative (see page 162)
- increased identification (see page 162)
- increased presence (see page 163).

Some theorists have argued that the intensity of the cinema experience can reduce the distance between imaginary representations and actual perception. The reasons for the enhanced experience of the narrative include the following:

- **Total attention.** Being surrounded by almost complete darkness heightens the attention an audience can give to a film. The level of involvement that the cinema offers can be intense.
- **Voyeurism.** Some film analysts have described the cinema experience as being like a Peeping Tom or voyeur. The voyeuristic aspect of the cinema is the sensation of sitting in a darkened theatre looking at a lighted screen that 'secretly' allows entry into the world of other people. These people never acknowledge the audience and appear unaware that the audience is even there. The use of this term in cinema studies is not meant to suggest that audiences are 'perverts'. Instead, it is used to show that we are viewing aspects of people's lives that we would not ordinarily have permission to see.
- **Larger-than-life effect.** Cinema screens are huge: at least 9 metres by 21 metres. IMAX screens can be as large as 20 metres by 26 metres. A face in close-up is many times its normal size. Cinema sound quality can be equally overwhelming.
- **Social experience.** The cinema is unique among modern media experiences in that it is always social (except for those extremely rare occasions when you might be the only person in the cinema).

The drive-in

They are rare these days, but Queensland still has several drive-in cinemas. They were popular in Australia from the 1950s until the late 1970s, especially in country areas. Reasons for the decline in drive-in cinemas in Australia include:

- the drop in whole-family attendance at movies
- the rise in real-estate prices, making big land areas unaffordable
- increased availability of VCR and DVD rentals, and then video-streaming services
- daylight saving causing later start times (in southern states).

The drive-in offers an experience that is midway between the private context of television and the formal, social experience of the cinema. The privacy of the car allows for companionable family viewing (even if the baby is crying). It also allows dating couples to be alone together. Yet merely the fact of being out and the size of the screen create a sense of occasion.

Figure 7.12 Special viewings, where people come in classic cars and rockabilly costumes, are regularly held at the Yatala Drive-In, between Brisbane and the Gold Coast. Drive-in cinemas were popular in Australia from the 1950s until the late 1970s. As a reception context, the drive-in is halfway between the private-space viewing of television and the public space of the multiplex cinema.

Television

Television is most associated with domestic and family life. Television is a constant presence in everyone's living room and many people's bedrooms. Television is viewed within the context of domestic routines, such as meal preparation and household chores. It can also be a site for negotiating family relations, as arguments develop over which programs are watched, or even who holds the remote control.

The effects of a television context can be assumed to include the following, allowing for individual exceptions:

- incomplete transportation into the narrative
- moment-by-moment identification, depending on other activities
- distracted presence.

Features of the reception context of television include the following:

- **Distracted attention.** The domestic surroundings of television mean that the viewer often experiences distraction. This can simply be the visual distraction of the (usually partially lit) room, or it can be the distraction of conversation and other activity.

Figure 7.13 Television (and other small-screen devices) is characterised by a distracted reception context. People are often engaged in routine tasks while they watch and their attention is divided.

- **Smaller than life.** The activity around the television set can often appear larger than the screen itself. People themselves may take up more physical space as they walk past the screen going about their ordinary activities.
- **Channel context.** The same program can feel different if it is viewed on different channels. One obvious difference is the intrusion of ads on the commercial stations. There are also subtle brand differences and target audience differences between the stations. These can alter the viewing context.

The mobile phone

The smallest screen of all is the mobile phone. The mobile phone is often called the fourth screen, coming after cinema, television and computer screens.

The effects of a mobile phone context can be assumed to include the following, allowing for individual exceptions:

- 'snacking' style transportation into the narrative
- limited identification
- limited presence.

Figure 7.14 The viewing context of the tablet or mobile phone creates 'snacking' style viewing that lasts only a few minutes. Transportation is distracted, and identification and presence are limited. However, the so-called 'fourth screen' offers constant personal availability.

Digital games

Originally, video games suffered from limitations in technology. The gaming aesthetic, in its original design, was of a pixelated appearance. The gaming environments of *The Legend of Zelda, Mario Bros., Pac-Man, Prince of Persia* and *Gauntlet* all carried a simplicity akin to Saturday morning cartoons. Even the narratives were simple. Thus, early video games were perceived as a culturally immature medium. Cinematic literacy is the new currency of contemporary gaming, transforming the medium into art. Games can now offer viewers the same visual clarity as the cinema screen while delivering an equally engaging experience.

Actors perform character roles in motion-capture suits to provide more realism in gaming environments. Composers write symphony musical scores, complete with character motifs. However, the shift in dynamics from medium to art form can also be linked to other new emphases.

Viewer engagement is much more complex and active since the game controller places gamers in the heart of action. However, experiencing the environment of a video game can be so powerful that games can be said to have a psychological effect on viewers. Video games are cleverly designed now to manipulate experience in the viewer. Narratives produce situations that offer increasing but manageable levels of difficulty Players derive satisfaction from solving the problems offered in the narrative.

The video game experience for the audience includes the following:

- immersion
- identification in some narrative-based games and first-person shooters
- kinaesthetic involvement
- strong presence.

Audience background as context

Certain aspects of the audience can influence the reception that a media text gets. These can include the background knowledge of the audience members, and the personal experiences and empathy of the audience members.

Figure 7.15 Can-can dancers from the Paris Folies Bergère at the premiere of the Baz Luhrmann film *Moulin Rouge!* (2001). Popular songs from a number of different eras have been included in the soundtrack of this musical. When the audience hears them, their background knowledge, memories and associations are triggered.

Audience background knowledge

Now that you're older, have you watched *The Simpsons* (1989–) and understood its layers of meaning much better than you did as a child? This is a reception context change based on audience background knowledge. Audience background knowledge consists of several factors, including the following:

- **Knowledge of culture.** If you have a good knowledge of other movies, television programs and books, you will be able to take in more of the meaning in a text. This is especially true in a text with a lot of intertextuality, such as *The Simpsons*.
- **Intertextuality.** (see page 17) This is one way that *The Simpsons* uses audience background knowledge to enhance meaning. Intertextuality can be thought of as the textual equivalent of cross-referencing. It refers to the ways in which any one text is woven into the whole culture and operates as a link to many other texts. It is also a reading practice carried out by audiences. The ability of the audience to use their familiarity with other texts is a skill built up as cultural knowledge develops. By drawing on references to other texts, audiences are able to derive more complex and enjoyable meanings.
- **Knowledge of the codes and conventions of media texts within your own culture.** This is another important aspect of background knowledge and explains why it is sometimes difficult to understand many of the meanings in films from foreign cultures.
- **Knowledge of history, politics and so on.** The more general knowledge you have, the more you are able to make sense of a range of media texts.
- **Knowledge of an event or setting.** A film set somewhere you know well will 'click' or resonate with you in a special way. The same thing applies if you are familiar with or were involved in a particular event. For example, *Animal Kingdom* (2010) is based on real events in Melbourne in the late 1980s: the so-called Walsh Street murders. Older audience members who were in Melbourne at the time will remember those events. This will affect their expectations of the storyline, their identification with the characters, and their overall reception of the movie.

Figure 7.16 Different national cinemas have different codes and conventions. Unless you have the background knowledge, your reception of foreign films may be minimal. For instance, a musical segment appears in almost all Bollywood films irrespective of the genre. Even action or crime genres can have musical breaks.

Audience experience and empathy

Have you ever wondered why some people cry during sad movies, while others remain totally unmoved? There are a host of reasons why this could happen, including:

- gender differences in the expression of emotion (or in the freedom to express emotion)
- varying degrees of transportation
- different degrees of identification
- different experiences, capacities and types of empathy.

Audience experience

Everyone comes to a film or television program with their own set of life experiences and a unique life history. The reception of the narrative depends on recent as well as long-term experience.

Audience empathy

If you feel you can 'walk a mile in another's shoes' then you have empathy. Empathy is different from sympathy, which just means being able to feel sorry for someone. Sympathy does not mean putting yourself in another's shoes. Narrative transportation and identification require a degree of empathy. Empathy has four dimensions, according to Professor Mark Davis of Eckerd College, Florida.

- **Perspective taking.** This is the ability to take on the point of view of another in a film or television program. Perspective taking is an intellectual ability that allows you to see how things would look from another person's perspective.

- **Fantasy empathy.** Putting yourself into the shoes of a fantasy character is a form of identification. It differs slightly from perspective taking because it requires you to think you *are* that character in the narrative. Fantasy is also an intellectual ability. Some studies have found that people who are high in fantasy empathy ability can have trouble sleeping after seeing disturbing movies.

- **Empathic concern.** Feeling concern for another's distress is an emotional response. Some studies have shown that viewers high in this kind of empathy are more likely to experience negative emotions when the protagonist in a film undergoes some kind of suffering.

- **Personal distress.** This is a feeling of distress or discomfort in the presence of another's suffering. What is not yet clear in narrative research is why people high in empathy can watch sad or terrifying movies and yet rate the experience as enjoyable.

7.3 ACTIVITIES

1   The modern multiplex still tries to make the cinema experience a special one.
    Symbolise a plan of your local multiplex and represent on the plan all the features that create a sense of occasion. Explain each of them, clarifying their likely effect on the audience and demonstrating why you think the cinema went to the expense of including them.

2   Research images of famous cinemas from the early days of the movie theatre (before television).
    Construct a list of features that seem to have disappeared, and a separate list of those that appear to have survived. Explain why you think this is so, giving reasons that clarify your answer.

3   In pairs, discuss the difference in the experience of viewing the same movie at the cinema and again on your television or computer screen.
    Explain your experiences to each other and provide examples to illustrate them. Share the outcome of your discussion with the class.

4   Search for the closest drive-in cinema to you. Find out what they are offering to enhance the viewing context and to make the experience more attractive.
    Survey the class to find out what they would need to encourage them to go to the drive-in.
    Analyse the results of the class survey or discussion. Consider the information in responses to each individual discussion point. Combine the outcome of these responses and make a judgement about the viability of each based on cost effectiveness and audience appeal.
    Construct a list of enhancements to the viewing context that the existing owners may not have thought of, and which you believe would attract a larger audience.

5   Construct a list of ways a filmmaker could compensate for the distracted viewing context of television. Consider specific codes and conventions (such as shot size) and also aspects of the story structure.

WAYS AUDIENCES 'READ' TEXTS

Except for cinema audiences, media audiences are largely invisible and unidentifiable. This makes them different to the audience that might turn up to the theatre or a music concert. People who consume media also rarely identify themselves as part of an audience. They tend to consume alone and in the private spaces of their home or car, not thinking that they are connected to (often) millions of others.

Audiences create meaning

Over many years, we have come to change the way we think about how audiences (or readers) make meaning from texts. The location where meaning is created has gradually moved down from the producer to the text and now to the consumer.

- **Ancient and medieval times.** Meaning was considered divine and 'set in stone'. Texts such as the Bible were the word of God. As an all-powerful producer, God's writings were unquestioned – the audience just had to work out what the producer meant. The Church claimed it could help them get it right.
- **Modern times.** Meaning was thought of as being in the text itself. A close reading of the text would allow audiences to get the full meaning. It didn't matter too much what the author thought or what other critics might think – the meaning was available in the text if you looked hard enough.
- **Post-modern times.** Today we consider that the meaning is created by the audience or the reader. In post-modern times, it is accepted that the meaning a person draws from a text is a combination of their own interpretations and shared cultural meanings within the text.

How do audiences 'read' texts?

If meanings are produced by audiences (or readers) and all of them are different, how can anyone know what a text might mean? Theories about audiences or readers suggest that there is much common ground in communication as well. This is because we make our 'readings' from within our culture in which some meanings are shared – for example, in western culture that red means danger. The theories suggest it is possible to take a number of different and even contradictory viewpoints or readings of a text at the same time.

Encoding–3.5 theory

British Cultural Studies theorist Stuart Hall proposed that at least three main audience reading perspectives are possible:

- **Preferred or dominant readings.** These are the readings that are closest to those intended by the producers of the text. If your life experiences and ideas are similar to those expressed in the text, there will be nothing to clash with. For example, if you were a police officer watching a crime drama, you would probably find it easier to arrive at a preferred reading. In reality,

however, a complete and exact preferred reading is impossible.
- **Negotiated readings.** These are made when mental negotiations are needed to overcome some disagreement with the text. For example, a woman watching a movie with a male hero has to put herself in his place. This takes a degree of mental negotiation. Someone with a recent speeding ticket may enjoy a crime drama, but still experience minor resentment toward police officers. Everyone has to mentally negotiate a reading to some extent.

Figure 7.17 A woman watching a movie with a male hero may have to identify with him or put herself in his place, and therefore has to undertake a degree of mental negotiation.

- **Oppositional or resistant readings.** These are made when the audience member finds their own life experiences are at odds with the views in the text. For example, crime dramas are often read oppositionally in prisons. For the inmates, the 'bad guys' are the 'good guys'. Prisoners might cheer when the criminals get away and boo when the police catch them.

Figure 7.18 Prisoners watching television in a US prison. A crime drama may be read oppositionally in prison, where the police may be seen as the bad guys.

Figure 7.19 An American watching *Desperate Housewives* (2004–2012) in Los Angeles would understand the program rather differently compared with an Australian watching it in Oodnadatta. The Australian would probably make a more negotiated reading, entering into more of a fantasy land.

Cinematic stances

When a viewer engages with the screen, they are positioned into a particular kind of cinematic stance or viewing position, says Associate Professor Damian Cox of the University of Queensland. Cinematic stances come from the mental processes the viewer is undertaking. A viewer's engagement with the screen text is complex, and dependent on their cinematic stance at the time. Shifting across the different cinematic stances is quite normal when viewing – this is part of the uniqueness of the viewing experience.

Viewers might suspend disbelief to emotionally invest with story, but moments later will put that aside to think about the camera or an actor. As a result, each viewing event offers a rich set of experiences and understandings. There are four cinematic stances that a viewer might shift across, according to Cox.

1 **Belief–disbelief.** The viewer strikes a balance between an inattention to the fictionality of the screen text, and an inattention to disbelief (the movie is not the real world). Viewers are convinced of the reality of the screen text and quarantine the fact that it is nonsense. And yet they don't scream '*Look out!*' to characters on the screen – because they still register that it is fiction.

2 **Phenomenological.** In this stance, viewers see the screen text as a representation of real life experience or phenomena. Viewers may see the film as showing what happened in real life – for example, in a biographical or historical film. Or they may see the life problems it depicts as resembling those faced by themselves or people they know. This creates emotional investment and fascination. In the film *Touching the Void* (2003), for example, music, cinematography and editing combine in particular ways to represent what it is like to feel the hypothermia and dehydration that the main character is feeling. The scenes viewed on the screen are not actual experiences, but they are perceived as being *like* those experiences.

3 **Artefactual.** This is an acknowledgement of the degree to which a film is a construction: in other words, the conscious recognition, on behalf of the viewer, of the practices of editing, cinematography and *mise en scène* that combine in various ways to produce the moving image. In some cases this could involve appraisal, where the viewer spends time attributing value to something like performance, an actor, directing, the composer of the film etc. In addition, it could involve contemplating other filmic properties, such as colour temperature, saturation or fidelity.

4 **Intentional.** This is where the viewer perceives the film text as serving a cultural function. Generally this would involve a conscious acknowledgement of the connections between the film and everyday life, or the way in which ideology functions in the text. Thus Steven Spielberg's production *The Post* (2017) becomes a commentary on the relationship between US President Donald Trump and the American press. Nicholas Meyer's *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* (1991) becomes a commentary on the Cold War in the 1980s and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

How audiences read a narrative text

As you watch a film or television narrative, you pick up clues and build a mental picture (or mental model) of the whole story as you go along. This is the micro-world of the story, which includes the spatial setting and the chronological sequence of events in the plot. Each time a new event occurs, the viewer updates their mental picture of what is going on. At the same time, the viewer is going back over what they already know about the story.

'It is tempting to invoke the metaphor of a train moving along its tracks. But in this situation … the tracks are not assembled until the train passes. In front of the train would lie unrelated pieces of rail, wooden ties, and railroad spikes. Behind it would be an intact railway. Under the train, representing the present moment in the narrative, the pieces are being put together and the track is being constructed as the narrative unfolds.'

Rick Busselle and Helena Bilandzic

Figure 7.20 Union Pacific Railroad train crossing a wooden trestle bridge, circa 1868. The train represents your mental picture of the story. Ahead, the track is still being assembled. Events and narrative clues are represented by lengths of rail and wooden sleepers still to be put in place. Behind the train, the rail of the narrative is fully assembled and smoothly in place.

According to narrative specialists Rick Busselle and Helena Bilandzic, in order to view and understand a narrative text, audience members need to undertake the following steps:

1 Transport themselves into the story world.
2 Construct a mental model of the story as the events and clues are gradually built up.
3 Develop mental models of each of the characters and what they are like.
4 Position themselves at the centre of the situation.
5 Take on the perspective of the characters.
6 Follow through until the resolution.

7.4 ACTIVITIES

1   Gender can be one factor contributing to a person's negotiated understanding of a media text. Explore this with the cooperation of your classmates.

As a class, view a film with a strong message about gender, such as the classics *Thelma & Louise* (1991) or *The Piano* (1993). Survey questions might include:

- How did female members of the class feel about the characters? How did male members react to these characters?
- Which parts of the movie did males/females like the best and the least?
- With whom did the males/females identify? (To identify with someone is to put yourself 'in their shoes'.)

Respond to the areas of activity in the following table.

EXPLAIN	ANALYSE	APPRAISE
Explain survey **information** about the text you will use, the purpose and conditions, including sample questions. **Explain** survey **information** from class members on their readings of the film based on their gender identity. **Explain** the respondents, including information about age ranges, etc.	**Analyse** quantitative (numerical) results, **considering** them in percentages for each constituent part of the survey. **Analyse** qualitative (interview) results by **interpreting** responses and emotional reactions to events, **examining** any similarities or differences based on gender as a criterion.	**Appraise** results in order to interpret viewer responses to the text. **Appraise** results by **drawing conclusions** around the **significance** or **status** of gender-based responses.

2   Attempt to make a deliberately oppositional reading of a media text. An oppositional reading is one that is opposed to the view the producers intended. Follow the guidelines set out below.
    • Find a media text whose point of view you strongly disagree with. This could be a movie from an earlier era that is sexist or racist. It could be a television documentary promoting a negative view of young people and their subcultures.
    • View the media text. Note down your reactions at different places in the text.
    • Deliberately try to side with the group or point of view the producer is criticising.
    Explain how you arrived at the oppositional reading, referring to your reaction to specific parts of the media text, clarifying your responses and providing examples that illustrate your responses.

3   View a movie or television program filmed and set in Queensland.
    Explain your opinion on whether this helps you to 'go along with the story'. Identify times in the movie when the Queensland setting seemed to add something for you personally. Clarify how you think someone viewing the film in another country would react.

4   Consider a movie or television program where you have some obvious need to negotiate your reading. For example, it could be that the main character is a different gender to you, or it could be that you disagree with some aspect of the narrative.
    Analyse your reactions as you negotiated your way through this, interpreting them in relation to constituent scenes. Make a judgement about what was important to you: the story or your reservations. Evaluate the difficulty or ease of negotiating – did it require effort, or did you do it almost unthinkingly?

5   Construct an illustration of a selected film or television narrative as a railway line with a train. Label the progress of the plot along the track as each event happens. Place the train at a suitable point to represent the mental model someone is building up of the story as they progress through the narrative. Explain how your illustration works for that particular text, providing information and examples to help with understanding.