

Collective Experiences, Individual Interpretations

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Abstract:

In *The Audience Effect*, Julian Hanich examines the effects people have on each other's experiences inside the movie theater. Through a phenomenological approach, the author creates powerful descriptions of these experiences and the possible ways they might affect reception of the movie. Hanich's argumentation is sustained by several previous studies while he discusses in particular the laugh, the cry, and the anger, and presents a typology of collective viewing. The book shows that the spectators' behavior and cinema infrastructures contribute to our interpretation and evaluation of a movie, as well as an ongoing unique experience in the movie theater. An essential read for those interested in film reception.

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Hanich, Julian. *The Audience Effect. On the Collective Cinema Experience*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018. 256 pages, 80 GBP. ISBN: 978-1-4744-3177-4.

Abstract:

In *The Audience Effect*, Julian Hanich examines the effects people have on each other's experiences inside the movie theater. Through a phenomenological approach, the author creates powerful descriptions of these experiences and the possible ways they might affect reception of the movie. Hanich's argumentation is sustained by several previous studies while he discusses in particular the laugh, the cry, and the anger, and presents a typology of collective viewing. The book shows that the spectators' behavior and cinema infrastructures contribute to our interpretation and evaluation of a movie, as well as an ongoing unique experience in the movie theater. An essential read for those interested in film reception.

The very next time I watched a movie in the company of a friend after reading Julian Hanich's *The Audience Effect*, my experience was already changed. I was paying attention to the film, but also to what my friend was doing, and to what I was doing. If he laughed, was I also laughing? If I was sad, did I try to hide my sorrow from him? Was he distracted with his phone? Was I uncomfortable with this? As a movie researcher, I was always attentive to the moving images, their construction and meaning, as well as to what I was feeling because of them and why. But I have never paid so much attention to how this experience was also molded according to the presence of other people in the room and their behavior.

Hanich, currently Associate Professor of Film Studies at the University of Groningen, investigates in his book what he calls 'the audience effect': "[w]hat I propose is no more and no less than a theory and phenomenology of the influence other spectators have on our film experience and the influence we have on theirs" (p. 4). Thus, the author describes spectators' experiences in the movie theaters and the possible ways they might affect movie reception. Descriptions of numerous situations activate

the memory of the readers for similar situations in their own lives, or at least provoke empathetic understanding of the presented scenarios.

Hanich sometimes adopts a very intimate approach, telling about his own past experiences to illustrate his arguments. For example, he narrates the following: “[o]nce I asked two whispering women in front of me to be quiet during a film. When one of them told me that she tries to describe the images to her blind mother, my emotional experience immediately changed from anger to embarrassment, even shame” (p. 268). This personal story is situated in his discussion about the feeling of anger in the movie theater and one’s entitlement to ask for silence.

The book, though, is not only composed of a series of descriptions. Hanich relies on several previous studies and theories to support his statements. For example, the empirical study by Dolf Zillmann and his colleagues is presented (Zillmann, Dolf, James B. Weaver, Norbert Mundorf, and Charles F. Aust: “Effects of an Opposite-Gender Companion’s Affect to Horror on Distress, Delight, and Attraction.” In: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Vol. 51, No. 3, 1986, pp. 586–94), in which they analyze the behavior of spectators while watching *Friday the 13th, Part III* (Steve Miner, 1982). When the male participants acted fearless, they gained more sexual appeal for the female participants (p. 180). Therefore, Hanich uses this research to support his own argumentation that the spectators care about each other in relation to the movie.

After the introduction, Hanich begins by pointing out that in the history of film theory, there were not many authors concerned with audience behavior in the movie theater. So the second chapter is dedicated to exploring some precursors of ‘the audience effect:’ Roger Odin, Roland Barthes, Edgar Morin, André Bazin and Walter Benjamin. Despite this oversight by film scholars, Hanich defends the importance of studying behavior in the cinema, among other reasons, because it affects the movie’s evaluation and interpretation by the audience.

Moving forward, the author also presents two types of collective viewing, quiet-attentive and expressive-diverted, as well as the empirical variables that allow them to happen and determine their strength. To name a few: the degree of social and cultural connectedness, the density of seating, or the immersive affordance of the film (p. 68-9). Later, Hanich also carefully examines reactions of laughter, crying, and anger. He divides them into types and considers these reactions in the context of collective viewing. One of the main contributions of the book is to demonstrate how this collective viewing, together with the infrastructure of movie theaters, can create and smooth hierarchies between the members of the public.

To summarize, the premise of the *The Audience Effect* is that there is an ongoing unique experience in the cinema that also depends on the relations between the people who are watching the movie. Furthermore, he indicates that our own behavior and the collective viewing affect this experience. One of his important lessons in this sense is that “[...] the co-presence of other viewers can have an impact on how we judge and interpret a film; and it can affect how we become aware of or remain oblivious to a film’s racist, misogynist, or homophobic tendencies” (p. 276). Thus, the book is essential to those interested in film reception, also to film scholars who would like to apprehend more factors influencing their own movie viewing.

With his phenomenological perspective, Hanich makes an important addition to reception studies, a field that has already enjoyed great contributions especially by psychoanalytic, cognitivist, and historical materialist methodologies. Remarkable is the evident value of describing the experience, of paying attention to the expectations, underlying rules and conventions of watching a film in the movie theater. In addition, the writing style, very approachable and close to the reader, makes the book a valuable experience in its own right and is particularly refreshing in the scientific context. Just as a minor note, it could be said that the text is occasionally a bit repetitive, but at the same time it helps to solidify the author’s arguments. All in all, *The Audience Effect* might change your perspective and experience the next time you go to the cinema, as happened to me.

German Abstract:

Kollektive Erfahrungen, individuelle Interpretationen

Julian Hanich untersucht in *The Audience Effect*, welche Auswirkungen Menschen auf gegenseitige Erfahrungen im Kino haben. Durch einen phänomenologischen Ansatz erstellt der Autor aussagekräftige Beschreibungen dieser Erfahrungen und der Möglichkeiten, wie sie die Filmrezeption beeinflussen können. Hanichs Argumentation, durch mehrere vorhergehende Studien gestützt, diskutiert insbesondere das Lachen, den Schrei und die Wut und präsentiert eine Typologie der kollektiven Betrachtung. Das Buch beweist, dass das Verhalten der Zuschauer und die Infrastrukturen des Kinos zu unserer Interpretation sowie Bewertung eines Films beitragen und es ein anhaltend einzigartiges Erlebnis im Kino bestehen bleibt. Heraus kommt eine unverzichtbare Lektüre für alle, die sich für Filmrezeption interessieren.

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