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### *Crash, theatre audiences, and the idea of 'liveness'*

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## **CRASH, THEATRE AUDIENCES, AND THE IDEA OF 'LIVENESS'**

Martin Barker, University of Wales, Aberystwyth

“This is theatre. It may sound trite to say that when one of the actors pukes a mouthful of water over a member of the audience (his reaction for me was part of the performance!) you know you are not in a cinema but there is something so utterly physical and undetachable about the experience of having the arguments in your face, of having actors simulate buggery three feet from you that speaks to a deeper engagement. That deeper engagement is a moral one. In a cinema, the audience’s experience is essentially a passive one. What the audience sees on the screen and how they see it has already been decided by the director. There is nothing creative about the experience and hence nothing moral. David Rabey is a subtle director. By which I mean that he doesn’t use the event of his play to show off his talents but instead uses it to get the actors to reveal the arguments. If there is a space between the audience and the action in the play – and here there is not much! – it’s one that’s fraught with the arguments of the piece and we are engaged creatively and morally with those arguments. In cinema, the space between the audience and the screen, apart from the dust particles caught in the projector’s light, is empty. I’ve seen the film and while I was impressed with the cinematic virtues of it I found it unengaging and even patronising while Rabey’s play was the reverse of this.” (Dic Edwards, Review of “Crash”, *Theatre-Wales*, December 2001)

Academic study of theatre audiences has been, to put it kindly, spasmodic and discontinuous. Perhaps the greatest attention has been paid to historical questions such as: who were Shakespeare’s audiences, and how did they behave and interrelate within the theatre? A historian like Richard Butsch has extended this to a study of the general behaviour and reputation of theatre audiences across the 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. A little but much less attention has been given by sociologists to the contemporary social character of theatre audiences. There is a strong tradition, of course, of seeking to examine the ‘audience in the text’, and to explore the ways in which textual formations prefigure and predefine

possibilities of audience response. But except in, for example, Susan Bennett's (date) predominantly theoretical and speculative work, there has been little attempt to see how actual, differentiated audiences respond to these textual proposals. And a few studies apart, there has been almost no attention to date to certain rather crucial questions: what do audiences seek, and get out of, the experience of going to the theatre, and how do they go about the processes of making sense of the productions they see? It must be said that if theatre studies is underdeveloped in dealing with these questions, other fields of cultural enquiry are not that much further on. But within the broad field of cultural studies, there have at least been some attempts at tackling them, and at formulating appropriate research strategies for finding out (for a recent overview, see for instance Ruddock, 2000).

This is a first and partial report on a research project which I directed between October 2001-January 2002, into a stage production of J G Ballard's *Crash*, staged at Theatr Y Castell, Aberystwyth by director David Ian Rabey and a company of final year Drama students. The research had two parts: the first was a study of the ways in which the company (individually and then collectively) formed a conception of the meaning of the play, and the possibilities for staging it; the second – which provides the basis of this essay – concerned the ways audiences responded to the production. The research, which was funded by a grant from the AHRB (Award No. B/SG/AN7137/APN13423)<sup>1</sup>, was in very many ways a follow-on to a study which I undertook with two colleagues into the controversy that greeted the film version of *Crash* directed by David Cronenberg, when that approached release in the UK in 1996-7.

That earlier research had a broader remit, including studying the nature of the controversy, and analysing the discursive frames which came to dominate the debate; comparing these with two other countries, France and the USA, in order to divine the specificity of the UK controversy; exploring the impact of the controversy on viewers' expectations; and finally, via a special screening in Bristol, studying how people responded to the film itself. The whole research was organised through a framing device which enabled us to sort reactions (from both the published materials of the controversy, and the responses of our audience) into a nine-cell grid of the various combinations of Liking / Neutrality or Ambivalence / Disliking, and Approval / Neutrality or Ambivalence / Disapproval. The main findings of our research were published in our 2001 book *The Crash Controversy* (Barker, Arthurs & Harindranath, 2001).

I took up post in Aberystwyth in January 2001, to discover that the stage production of *Crash* was being planned. The opportunity to compare *Crash* on screen and stage was too

good to miss. There has been a century long debate about the relations between stage and screen, mostly focused on the supposed virtues of one or the other (see among other things Waller, 1983, for a very useful summary of these debates). But there has been little study, as far as I can see, of the different meanings to audiences of experiencing something on stage and screen. I am hoping that this research, and this first essay, will prompt others to see why this might be valuable, and to realise how many potential questions might usefully be explored.<sup>2</sup>

It is the audience part of the research which I draw on here. Front-of-house figures from the Aberystwyth production showed that in all around 260 people attended the six performances. Of these, 122 (roughly 40%) completed a four-page questionnaire which we gave out as people were about to leave theatre. 57 ticked that they were willing to be interviewed further and ultimately we interviewed 37 people, either individually or in small groups.

Clearly a great deal of the responses which the research gleaned must be understood in terms of the particularities of this production. A great deal deserves to be said about the character of the production itself, which was unusual and imaginative. J G Ballard's original novella *Crash* concerns a man who, after a car crash, encounters and becomes drawn into a group who find sexual inspiration in the encounters between their bodies and cars, and the scars that mark the collisions between the two. Using large sections of the original novella as a running narration, and without any dialogue at all, the cast of seven enacted the implied relationships through sometimes stylised, sometimes very direct physical movements and encounters. Using minimal props or costume, the most defining feature of the production was that the central roles in the play (especially Vaughan – its key protagonist and motivator) moved round among the cast, without respect for gender. Changes were marked only by handing on a leather jacket. Staged in a old converted building, which was 'lined' for this production with tin foil which rustled metallically in response to air movements, audiences found themselves seated on all four sides of the main, lit stage area, but with passageways behind them which from time to time the company used for the performance. The fact that this was a performance by students, indeed as part of their coursework, and that a high proportion (though by no means the whole) of the audience were either other students, relatives or acquaintances of the company, clearly matters. It is also relevant that the production was staged in Aberystwyth – a small, seaside town where in term-time more than a third of the total population connects in some way with the University. The Department of Theatre, Film & Television Studies is now the biggest in the University, but also plays

significant roles beyond it (for example in relation to local schools and via productions at the Arts Centre), which affect wider perceptions of it. And the drama staff are known for putting on plays and productions which are challenging and unusual.

All these factors must make very tricky any simple comparisons between audiences' derived 'meanings' from the film in our first round of research, and audiences derived 'meanings' from the play. But, I would argue, not impossible. In particular, *in and through* the very responses to 'locality' a number of issues starting revealing themselves – the most dominant and interesting of which concerned the ways in which the theatre audiences distinguished the *act of going to the theatre* from the *act of going to the cinema*. This operates, I want to suggest, as an overarching measure, guiding and superintending indeed the very ways in which people gave meaning to the experience of watching *Crash* 'locally'. One word in particular – a word which arose spontaneously from our audiences, and wasn't introduced by us – repeatedly summed up this superintending principle: 'immediacy'. To put it at its most simple, it emerges that many people's responses to the performance were as much a result of their wider commitments regarding the functions and possibilities of theatre and cinema generally as they were a result of the particular circumstances of this production. Indeed, audiences felt it appropriate to give attention to those 'local' circumstances *because* they are bound up in a broader set of ideas about theatre which *emphasises* locality, and 'liveness'.

It may help to gain a tentative overall picture before considering detailed responses. In our film research, the device of categorising respondents according to their self-assignments as liking/approving or etc produced striking results when we combined these with their chosen words or expressions for summarising their overall response to *Crash*. We organised these into a semantic diagram (see *Diagram 1*). This diagram not only groups expressions according to respondents' self-categorisation, it also takes account of modal aspects, for instance, the degrees of strength and conviction entailed by different expressions. This for instance, to us, drew attention to the fact that the most *positive* respondents appeared to be delighting in the film at many levels simultaneously: cognitively, affectively, sensuously and in relation to their overall senses of self. However, it also becomes possible then to see relationships *among* expressions which bring into view both common and discrepant characteristics. These then allow a preliminary *mapping* of the overall 'universe of responses'. So for instance it becomes possible to think that the sense in which *relatively* positive respondents found *Crash* 'disturbing' is as a tempered, hesitant version of finding it 'challenging' and 'arousing' – and were a little uneasy at their own reactions (hence placing

this at the bridge with *DIVIDED* responses; while negative respondents who found it 'disturbing' were stopping short of the outright rejection of the film that is signalled by 'dumbfounded' and 'appalled'. The diagram was not an end in itself, but a preparatory device inviting us to examine the more detailed responses we gained through interviews, to see how they filled out, confirmed or corrected the diagram.

Crucially, by interviewing people inhabiting different positions in the light of this preliminary patterning, we were able to explore in detail the *processes involved and the conditions that have to be met* for people to arrive at these wildly varied judgements. To put it another way, we could ask, what are the processes and preconditions required for a person to come to the conclusion that *Crash* is, variously, 'liberating', 'fascinating but nauseous', 'disgusting' – or indeed 'disturbing', in either of the two positions that this emerged? Again, what we found by this means is spelt out in full in our book.

In the research into the stage production, we planned to use the same procedures of classification and semantic patterning. This proved tricky. Our overall numbers were not quite as large (Questionnaires – 167 compared to 122; Interviewees – 63 compared to 37). Our questionnaire offered the same opportunity to sum up first reactions to the stage production, but our respondents were less willing or able to digest their responses into thumbnail expressions. And we simply had very few strongly negative responses.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the difficulties, and with the less malleable resources as were available to us, we attempted the classification and the diagram (see *Diagram 2*). If for nothing else than the suggestive contrasts with the film version's 'universe of responses', it is very interesting. Taking the *positives* alone, there are some clear similarities: the repetition of the word 'liberating' is striking (although closer examination of the fuller associations and connotations of the term showed the two cases to be not identical). It is possible to see a relationship between the filmic responses of 'challenging' and 'disturbing', and the stage response 'enjoyed feeling uncomfortable'. But even in the few words digested into the diagram, it is possible to see differences which, when explored more deeply in and through the interviews, become very interesting. The word 'exuberant' applied to the stage production hints at a relationship with the performers, which is simply not present in the case of the film. The decision as to what should appear in the centre of the diagram ('Hard work' for the stage, as against 'Neutral: interested, curious' for the film) came as a result of realising that there was an overall structuring difference between the two – which had only a little to do with the particular nature of this production, very much more to do with the *status of theatre in the eyes of these audiences*. At the risk of oversimplifying, we might put the

difference like this: with the film, the overriding tendency was for people to go ready to assess its 'content' and its impact on them. The centre of the diagram thus indicates 'no particular involvement', but rather a relatively detached general interest in the film. With the stage production, however, we found an overarching tendency to combine two things: audiences felt invited into a close, social relationship with the performers, they *cared* about them; and as a result they experienced an *obligation to do some hard work of interpretation*. And this in turn connected with one aspect of their experience to which many people, and in particular those who evinced the greatest will to be positive about the production, attached great salience: its 'liveness'. This concept, I aim to show, is complicated – but part of its complication is that it *seems* simple and transparent to those who use it.

### 'Liveness' as a category

Consider as a first example of an audience-member's use of 'immediacy', these responses by Jane:

I *Is its liveness significant? For example what difference would it make to you if you were to see Crash on the television or at the cinema as opposed to in the theatre?*

J I think it's removed .. slightly. I mean as you know, I-d-a different experience, and uhm .. yeah it's removed. You don't get the-er the humanity of it, in quite the same way. And the energy of it. Yi-du-just a different experience.

I *Right. So .. it's less removed if it's in the theatre than ..*

J Yes. Yes, yes, it-it-it's more direct because you're getting .. uhm, a physical energy from the performers directly. And .. er .. (small sigh) yeah I mean it-it-it's immediate. [10]<sup>4</sup>

There are several striking features to this. Jane struggles to articulate a notion that is clearly reasonably important to her, a struggle which resolves into the slight relief of falling back onto a word which seems to do the job – and seems to her transparent – 'immediate'. But what comes between, shows that the concept is anything by transparent. Jane deploys notions of 'difference', of theatre having a 'physicality' and an 'energy' and of cinema being 'removed'. That these are important is marked by the fact that they are the guarantors of the 'humanity of it'; they are therefore immediately *moral* in their meanings.

'Liveness' then for Jane is encapsulated in the term 'immediacy', which seems to operate as a term of closure; to say that the theatrical experience is 'immediate' in some way

ends the need for further elaboration. And it does so because its meaning *feels* obvious. As two other interviewees put it:

1. It also makes it a bit more immediate for the audience. I mean if you watch a film .. you don't, it's not there in front of you. [...] I'd possibly see the film again but I prefer the play to the film really, because it was .. more kind of immediate, so .. I think when we went to see the play it's far more immediate. You feel like you're actually part of the action. Whereas when you're watching the film, it's just there on screen. You take the image-images for granted a bit. (Vicky [1]).
2. They've ma-they've wrote the book and they've made the film, I think you wo-what's the different progression to sort of make .. (indistinguishable) like a stage version of it, so I think yeah theatre's, it's good to get the live element and.. to actually be able to watch things and kind of, feel more involved and interact more I think, with it. 'Cos it's all there, immediate .. to you. (Joanne [3])

Sheer physical presence is clearly a component in this. But much more than this is involved. What these quotations suggest is a *relationship to* this kind of presence. The meaning of 'liveness' is made apparent by its opposite: for those who take up this position, it feels natural and inevitable that *screened* images should leave you 'distanced', while *staged* ones make you feel part of the event. It may help to bring out the complexity in this if we see that if taking this route could have a rather unwelcome implication. For if theatre involves us this much more deeply than cinema, then we have an apparent contradiction of the common assumption that cinema has a *greater potential to influence behaviour*. If these terms are meant in their ordinary sense, then there ought to be a case for greater censorship of theatre than cinema. That this clearly isn't their intent, or their belief, comes from the unstated concomitant of this assertion, namely, that the *kind* of involvement people have with live performance is one which encourages thought, argument, moral consideration, 'humanity'. But why this should be, is not obvious.

Consider in this connection the quoted review which mastheads this essay, which offers a fragment of a more specialised kind of audience response, that of the professional reviewer.<sup>5</sup> Highly praising the production, Edwards goes well beyond simply pointing to excellent qualities. He make his case, once again, by contrasting the general characters of theatre, and cinema. Theatre is live, active, indeed interactive; cinema is empty and passive. As a result it is theatre that is intrinsically 'moral'. This is far beyond being an attempted



*description* of theatre vs cinema. Each of his terms connects with highly-charged, culturally-laden discursive categories. So, the notion of 'space' is a metaphorical one: acknowledging that while in the actual theatre there was almost no space at all, still, in a mental-cultural sense there was sufficient to *require* argumentation and moral enquiry. But in the cinema, where 'dust-motes' hang heavy, for some reason argumentation becomes difficult if not impossible (though it didn't of course stop Edwards arguing with the film – it is as so often a posited 'other viewer' who will have these difficulties (see Barker, 2000, Ch.1)). Edwards is not alone in this view – repeatedly among our respondents we found cinema described as 'passive', and the images on the screen as 'static'. The literal untruth of both terms is no problem, because while these terms are spoken *as if* they were descriptive, in meaning and force they are metaphorical.

I find myself fascinated by the rhetorical moves involved here. Take the aspect frequently claimed by audience respondents, that theatre is different because every performance changes – or as one person, Amanda, put it:

I think it seems to, have a more extended um.. boundary for the imagination.. than say film. We-we-we, the immediacy of theatre.. there's this.. er, almost like a sense of urgency and it-and almost a sense of .. you see one performance, you will never see that performance again. You can buy a video and play it over and over and over again and you see the same thing again and again and you're seeing the same thing again. But it doesn't matter if you've got the same actors with the same theatre and the same stage.. every night it's gonna be different. Because nobody can, have the-the exact same breath, that they had the day before. [1]

In one sense, of course, this is literally true: no two performances can be identical. Defenders of cinema might well of course query the consequential negative judgement, arguing that things are not so very different for them – the *circumstances of viewing* a film are never identical. Let that pass. What interests me is that, first, in most cases a committed company of players don't seek to make every performance different. On the contrary, their goal is to reach a plateau where everything works to plan, where movements are choreographed, timed and effective, where dialogue is delivered with all the appropriate patina of emotion, character and so on. In other words, performers work towards *minimising* any random changes between performances. In addition, although in principle they *could*, most audiences rarely go back for a second viewing. But even when they do, it is hardly to search for and pay attention to the small elements of difference. They go in most cases, I suspect, for as close as they can get to a repeat-experience.

In other words, this 'fact' that performances may vary, is actually irrelevant – or is it? Perhaps not. Suppose we were to posit that for certain kinds of audiences, plays are attended and experienced *as if* they had elements of uniqueness, that there may exist an unspoken 'contract' between theatres and their audiences: a contract which is almost ineffable *except* by distinguishing it from the *inferior* experience of cinema – the 'mediated' vs the 'immediate'. With this notion to hand, I want to explore further the complex ways in which 'liveness' was experienced and conceptualised, and how it was contrasted with a cinematic experience.

### ***Working at the play ...***

There is, first, a will to acknowledge the *work* of performance – and see this as different, special. This is how one respondent, Lyn, tried to express this – and even as she began to say it, had to acknowledge that cinema is not as opposite as her felt response told her:

*I And has it made you want to see the film at all or not?*

L No it hasn't actually. No it hasn't. I think, um, because it was actually people there, putting their heart and soul into it, doing it, you always appreciate that somebody's put that time and effort into it, and when it's up on the screen although it's still people who've put time and effort into it.. you can afford to be a bit more, uhm.. erm.. you're more anonymous. You haven't got that same personal contact as you have with somebody who you could reach out and touch, or see in the pub afterwards. And I think I would sit there seething, because the book made me angry, and I think that the, the film would really make me angry 'cos it would be so glitzy as well whe-this wasn't glitzy. [13]

What is also interesting in this quotation is something I have found frequently in research in this domain. Not having seen the film, she has ready to hand a vocabulary of terms which predefine what the cinematic experience would be like. Here, the term is 'glitzy'. It hints that *cinema per se* has a tendency to degrade meaning to mere show. In related fashion, other respondents repeatedly used the terms 'graphic', and 'gratuitous'.

Again, these terms function as shorthands for what may be expected of cinema. If a film shows sex, then there is always at least a question-mark over its way of doing so – is it any more than 'sex and violence'? The uncertainties of this are well caught in this exchange between two interviewees, Lela and Vicky:

L I think if it's relevant, it-you know-if it's relevant to a production to show sex, or um, ec-examples of sex, on stage .. uhm, and it's justified then it's fine. Whereas if it, even in a film like *Crash*, of course it's justified because that's the nature of-of, the play. I'm not saying that the text needs to be justified, I'm saying the actual .. acts, how far they go. I mean they do it .. on the West End now in that, er.. Mrs R-Robinson, y'know, they do it-they're doing it there and it's.. it's perfectly acceptable because that's the nature of, of the text. It's only when it's gratuitous ..

V Yeah, it's sex for the sake of sex.

L .. porn. Uh-that you really wouldn't, I really think that's.. taking it too far. [1]

The same tension can be seen at work in this comment from Laura:

L I think.. if you're writing something and sex is needed .. to get an issue or get a point across then yeah, use it as much as it needs to be used. As long as it doesn't become .. sex for sex sake .. d'y'know what I mean? As long as it, doesn't turn into that then, yeah, use it .. how and when it needs to be used. Again it's, d'y'know what I mean, it-it's to how, it's to what is being .. what is being said. What is being commented on, d'y'what I mean? It's like if you're .. commenting on .. em .. I dunno if you're trying to make a comment about rape then it's gonna be violent. [2]

How does one know whether a 'comment is being made' or if something is just being shown 'gratuitously'? That depends in large measure on the *interpretive work* a viewer is prepared to put in, to tracing a meaning and purpose. Such 'comments' are not there, sitting on the surface of the film. These are not in truth working criteria for distinguishing 'justified' presentations from 'sex for sex sake' – they point to an unease, an unease shared with 'violence'. 'Sex' has to have a sufficient reason, or it is (Lela's) 'porn' – and that is a

category veering between contempt and moral outrage. And 'porn' is not now so much a specific genre of film-making (explicit filming of real sexual penetration) as a term to summarise an *attitude* to sex on screen. It is what I would term a 'vernacular genre'. By this I mean that audiences work with categories / genres which summarise an *expectation of response*. One of these, very much related to this, we found at work in our research on responses to the film of *Crash*. There, we found evidence that the campaign against the film sedimented into a soft expectation that the film would be an 'ordinary sex and violence movie' of some kind – a category of expectations which may be almost without content, but which functions nonetheless because of the force of the long history of moral fears and complaints about films. The same can be sensed, albeit fragmentarily, in the following comment from Joanne:

J I was really interested to see how they'd do it. 'Co-'cos the film is so like in your face and there's so much sex and violence. It's kinda like, 'How are they gonna do this .. on stage?' [3]

*Crash* was not, of course, a violent film in any descriptive sense of the term, but the power of the vernacular genre label is not the power of description. But the point again is to mark a distinction: if there is always a question-mark over sex on screen (and it may turn out to be either 'graphic', or gratuitous', or just a 'sex and violence movie'), those problems don't inhabit the theatre by and large – because there is not the will or predisposition to find anything in the theatre 'gratuitous'. Theatre is presumed by the kinds of audience we encountered to be purposeful, and meaningful. And that, I am arguing, is related to the different cultural status attached to theatre as a whole.

So, a major strand within 'liveness as immediacy' was a conviction that theatre could and should be *hard*. People varied as to whether this was a defining requirement, or one among a number of options. But it was a virtual taken-for-granted assumption that if you go to the theatre, you may have to work at it. Here is one respondent, Miranda, explaining how she sees this:

I *Is theatre important to each of you?*

M Exceptionally because, I'm a drama student and .. I mean I love the immediacy of theatre. I like film but it doesn't, it doesn't do for me what, theatre does for me. I love, to come in here and I love the smell, I love the sound. I love the closeness of the actors. I love to see the sweat on their bodies. Y'know I love to sit next to someone in the audience and, though I feel in my own world. I can feel their body heat, y'know and I.. f-it's-it's.. that feeling of being isolated and,

when I watch a film I never feel like that. Y'know it is something, there is something about theatre.. that, gets right to your heart.

*I Is its liveness part of it?*

M Yeah definitely, it's-it's knowing that if you just leant forward you could touch, touch them. You could touch those actors and you can smell, that I mean I can smell it in here now. Y'know it's-it's.. that whole sort of.. atmosphere of the theatre and it.. there's something so... inaccessible about, some theatre and I love that, I love the inaccessibility if things. I love to be able to work hard .. y'know at something. And.. I don't just wanna sit in front of the television while they flash things up at me. Y'know, I want to go in.. to the theatre and work. I want to live what they live on the stage. I can't act, and I only wish I could. But when I'm sat in the audience I, my whole being just moves with those actors on the stage and I get lost, I get lost in their world. Y'know which doesn't happen when I watch a film. [6]

The idea of 'getting lost' in a performance is multi-layered (the smell, the proximity, the actors working, the struggle for meaning) – it is also entirely positive and life-enhancing: 'my whole being just moves with those actors on the stage and I get lost'. Again, it is worth reminding ourselves that in other contexts this degree of rapt absorption would be regarded as risky, even dangerous. Said of a 'violent, sexual film', for instance, one would be expecting to hear a pursuant chorus of complaints: 'taken over by the film and its message', 'losing their sense of reality', and so on. None of this is intended here, nor is it likely to be implied – because of theatre's higher valency within our culture, its 'superiority' to film and cinema.

### ***Looking out the performers ...***

A related phenomenon was the recurrent tendency to *care about* the performers. The first signal of this was the frequency with which respondents called the production 'brave'. Evidently a part of this was a result of them knowing that this was a student performance – and a good number of them having some kind of personal relationship with someone in the cast. But there was more than this. There was a predisposition to maintain a distinction between performer and performance – which interestingly is not there in the case of film. In our research on the reception of the film *Crash*, we found very strongly that 'figures' of the director in particular were invoked as part of critiques of it – how could he do this/ what did

he think he was doing? And the actors' motivation was questioned by those who hated the film – did they realise what they were getting involved in? But among enthusiasts for the film, discussion of the actors, and the director hardly arose at all among the film's enthusiasts. They were engrossed in exploring the relations between the surface appearance of the characters, and a deeper motivation which needed hunting out – and 'performance' was a means to this end.

But with the stage production, the fact that they have put the work in on our behalf puts us under an obligation, puts a legitimate demand on us. What kind of demand might this be? It goes far beyond acknowledging the actors' work on our behalf, and the risks they take. The responsibility owed is also felt to be that of *doing the hard work of finding meaning* in the play and performance. It is a signal of the complexity of this kind of rich involvement that rapt absorption is not just compatible with, but necessarily involved with, seeking to produce large, meaningful generalisations. But it is important to be careful about the nature of this commitment that people make. Here, another respondent, Lyn – a particularly apposite case, inasmuch as she disliked *Crash* intensely yet still found it 'brilliant' – formulates her own sense of these demands:

*I Is theatre's liveness significant to you?*

L Oh yes, I mean I can, you know when I have been to see a play or something I, when-when the actors come onto the stage at the end I can, be almost in tears. Because I can really, I can feel it now I-it does fill me up when people have put that much, effort and-and time, even if you are paying on the door. You know people have done that, because they want to communicate in some way with you. And, I, I don't think I've ever been to the theatre when it hasn't worked.

*I What did you think the play was about, centrally?*

L Ohh, what did I think the play was about centrally?.. Well about individuality I suppose.. Uhm, and about, searching... Uhm .. I don't know, it's not a question that I've put, given, it's a good question but I haven't really .. given much thought to it, so. Fall down a bit on that one. [13]

There is here a clear separation between a belief that there should be an effort after meaning, and the actual arrival at meaning. Lyn goes to the theatre to be on the receiving end of a communication, yet there need not be a content or an outcome.

A different complexity arises in relation to how audience-members feel about the relations between actors and the characters they are performing. Watching *Crash*, a number

of people who responded enthusiastically still remarked on their lack of emotional involvement with the characters. Here, three women -

From all the above, I would argue, it emerges that 'liveness as immediacy' has a number of aspects, which we need to recognise:

- it appears to its users to be simple, singular, transparent and descriptive;
- in reality it is very complex, and is a means whereby people are able to position themselves within culture and arrive at social, cultural and moral judgements;
- it attributes power to the objects or circumstances, suggesting that these have made them do things, that actually are the outcome of the person's participation in social taste cultures;
- it is *lived*, in the sense that the naming of experiences as 'immediate' is an important part of being able to manage, make sense of, and make use of the experiences that come under it.

### *Theorising 'liveness' as a concept*

Two bodies of wider work seem particularly relevant to this research. First, the work on Pierre Bourdieu on taste cultures.

Bourdieu's researches and arguments about taste cultures have retained enormous currency, despite being subject to a still-growing wave of criticisms.<sup>6</sup> And the reason surely is that his approach offers to frame and explicate the simply undeniable deep tendency for cultural systems and tastes to become hierarchised, where cultural critics are otherwise tempted either simply to make moral judgements, or choose sides. Bourdieu argues that the differential distribution of cultural capital tends to parallel and reinforce the differential distribution of economic capital and productive power. Putting it at its crudest, if you suspect you are superior, intellectually and culturally, that surely explains and justifies why you are worth more, and have more power to dispose of material things than other people. And vice versa. So, making judgements of quality, and in that moment putting a value on yourself as judge ('taste classifies the classifier'), is always and inevitably more than simply a declaration of preferences. This must apply to judgements concerning the 'superiority' of theatre over cinema.

As is well-known, Bourdieu's work has been as much criticised as it has been celebrated. Curiously, one aspect of his work has hardly received attention, except indirectly through the

work of M Mander. In Bourdieu's schema, there is one fundamental distinction which marks off popular from elite cultural tastes: the distinction, and dimension of distance. Where popular audiences are enthusiastic and immediate participants in their cultures, elite audiences are prone to stand back and weigh intellectually – their pleasure is in and through the measured talk, the restrained gaze, the *knowing* appreciation.<sup>7</sup> This rather caricatural opposition (the baying football crowd versus the silently appreciative gathering in an art gallery) will not only not stand up to close examination (the Last Night of the Proms springs to mind as a 'baying' crowd), but it also is dully mono-dimensional. Passions may come in many forms, from the collector, to the critical participant, and many forms of enthusiasm are not only compatible with, but positively require moments of distance, times for sharing critical commentary. In another direction, as I have argued elsewhere, another largely ignored problem in Bourdieu's work was his tendency to treat people's absorption within taste cultures as virtually 'automatic'. Bourdieu's argument turned on his concept of a 'habitus', which is the way in which people live *as a matter of habit* and *as if it were a free choice they were making* the cultural assumptions of their social location. In everything from taste preferences, manners of speech, expressions of emotion, and even uses of the body, a person's habitus was seen by Bourdieu to be a pattern of learned dispositions which *constitute* their cultural selfhood. This was his bridge between structure and agency – and it privileges structure in as much as we only really have a *feeling* of agency.

In a previous essay I argued that Bourdieu's work in fact contains two rather different tendencies which pull against each other. In his most famous work, *Distinction*, a will to present an overall account results in a diminished attention to history, and to the ways in which people actively engage with and work with and against their cultures – in this work, it is as if we are in Durkheimian fashion 'assigned' to our class cultures. But in some of his more empirical works, another tendency emerges. Here his notion of a 'cultural field' allows him to recognise the ways in which artists, for instance, may *try to intervene*. My further argument in that essay was that Bourdieu's biggest headache begins to show here, for from time to time artists and audiences within a particular cultural field can find themselves having to recognise, and do something about, the very *constitution of the field*. 'Culture' is only partially separated off from the rest of life. Politics and economics will keep rearing their heads. Being a football fan, an opera lover, a comics collector, or a hill walker are not all the time simply 'leisured' activities governed only by considerations of taste and the modes of pleasure they proffer. Indeed, the very possibilities of taste and pleasure and participation



can be at any time disrupted or threatened by structuring processes. Or, in more complicated fashion, the very substance of the pleasure and participation may require an encounter with the structuring forces. The football club is sold out from under the fans; the choice of operas for performance becomes a matter of contention; the comics you want, are banned; and the hills, closed by foot and mouth, never quite seem to reopen ... or, your club recruits its first black, or gay, player; a new opera, based on the events of 9/11, is presented; you decide to produce your own, risqué comic; and, the Countryside Alliance positions warning notices prominently across your walking trail. In the real historical circumstances of living within a 'taste-culture', there are no limits to the number of moments when even the most 'enthusiastic' participant is faced with moments of choice and decision, with requirements of appraisal; while the most distanced, aesthetic aficionado is faced with moments of emotional demand, and of group commitment. These do not do away with all the realities of cultural hierarchy, but they constantly destabilise them, indeed prevent them being *simply* issues of culture.

In the case which I have been researching, the recurrent insistence on the superior capacity of theatre over cinema comes on the back not just of people's 'habitual' participation in the one rather than the other, but rather of nearly a century of *external definition of cinema* as more narrow, as dangerous, and as culturally undemanding. This was of course 'topped up' particularly fiercely in 1996-7, during the yearlong campaign to try to prevent the release of the film version of *Crash*. That people *did* imbibe the assumptions of these, shows in their adoption of the vernacular category 'sex and violence', in their relative unwillingness to work at finding meaning in the film, when they wouldn't dream of doing that with the stage version, and in their paradoxical celebration of being 'involved in discomfort'.

This interdependence was particularly caught by one respondent, Miranda, who recognised that she could grasp and make use of the discomfort of the stage production *because of* the controversy over the film – it had set the scene, and made it worthwhile:

M Don't you think the shock factor was part of the point though? I mean of the whole performance that, y'know.. I don't know, y'know wha-what it was that David was trying to do but, y'know the whole point that this, this thing was being put on stage, I mean a theatre experience is something very, very immediate, whereas a film is not. And I think perhaps that shock factor.. is, is the thing that, that makes the performance what it, what it is. Y'know rather than.. rather than, sort of, not having that language, not having that shock factor

there, *Crash* wouldn't have worked on the stage, it was necessary to have that sort of controversy and that shock factor in order to make *Crash*, as the theatre performance, what *Crash* was. [6]

The second body of work is Philip Auslander's recent re-examination of the meaning of 'liveness'. This important work traces a history of the ways in which theatre has drawn a variety of mediating devices and processes into productions, to the extent that it is hard to determine a separable 'live' component in theatre. But that descriptive history would miss the point, argues Auslander, for 'liveness' is a semiotically-charged category, which can only be understood by its difference from that which is not 'live', the 'mediated': '[T]he live can only exist in a context where there is recording. It is a category of the not-recorded' (51). That creates a paradox, in his view, for now if there is a distinctive aesthetic to 'liveness', its source is the *televisual*. In a world where just about everything comes infected with recording, television's *apparent* capacity for immediacy becomes the measure of the 'live'.

Although I regard Auslander's history and argument as greatly valuable, it seems to me to have some striking problems. Three central ones emerge for me: his assumption that the opposite of the 'live' is the 'recorded'; his semiotic emphasis on 'meanings', as against modes of relating; and his assumptions about audiences. All three of these come together in one crucial passage, where Auslander writes:

I have argued here that, since the late 1940s, live theatre has become more and more like television and other mediatized cultural forms. To the extent that live performances now emulate mediatized representations, they have become second-hand recreations of themselves as refracted through mediatization. That historical dynamic does not occur in a vacuum, of course. It is bound up with the audience's perception and expectations, which shape and are shaped by technological change and the uses of technology influenced by capital investment. As Jacques Attali (1985) shows, an economy based in repetition and the mass production of cultural objects emerged when the production of unique cultural objects was no longer profitable. Analyzing audience desires when mediatized culture was in its infancy, Walter Benjamin (1986 [1936]) concluded that audiences were responding to the perceptual possibilities offered by the film medium. What this new mass audience wanted, in Benjamin's view, was a relationship to cultural objects defined by proximity and intimacy. He saw the

desire for reproducible cultural objects as symptomatic of those needs. Building on Benjamin's analysis, I have suggested that our current concepts of proximity and intimacy derive from television. The incursion of mediatization into live events can be understood as a means of making those events respond to the need for televisual intimacy, thus fulfilling desires and expectations shaped by mediatized representations (158-9).

This passage reveals the ways in which Auslander feels he can 'know' in advance what audiences (whose plural grammar seems to mask a claim of universally-shared characteristics). Theatre, it seems, attracts its audience as a release from the distancing of frankly mediatized representations (which would have to include cinema, as well as television) and from the false intimacy of televisual mediatization. There is a 'blaming' at work in this -

Although, as we've seen, 'immediacy' can function as a useful stop-term, closing audience accounts by dint of its apparent transparent obviousness, upon investigation it becomes clear that the concept has a number of complex, interrelated aspects – at least seven, in fact. Because of, and as part of, its 'immediacy':

- theatre is *expected* to be meaningful, to make us think and work at meanings
- stage productions are 'performed' in ways that films are not, and this puts an onus on us as audiences;
- with cinema it may be necessary and appropriate to separate *what* is shown from *how* it is shown; with theatre this distinction is impossible;
- one function of theatre is to *challenge*, to make us tackle and think through difficult, uncomfortable issues, to take chances, whereas cinema does this at best at risk;
- film is 'just images' – yet being 'just' images can mean being 'graphic', gratuitous, sex for sex's sake, whereas theatre is almost automatically meaningful, involving – yet being involved doesn't mean being potentially vulnerable ...

My central claim is this: to the extent that audiences use and are committed to this sense of the 'immediacy' of the theatre, and especially where they at the same time *deny* any equivalent kind of 'presence' to cinema, they will hold to this complex of implied relationships. They will *live* these implicit claims of 'liveness', and as a result when they walk into a theatre will feel it incumbent on themselves to behave and respond in accordance with its expectations. It is one that is relatively simple to acquire and commit to in general, because in all kinds of ways and for all kinds of historical reasons theatre and cinema are

differently valued within our culture. Theatre is 'culture' while cinema is 'entertainment'. 'Dangerous' theatre carries the suggestion of being edgy, perhaps politically challenging. 'Dangerous' cinema carries the threat of social harm. And so on.

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### **lations to performers ...**

A We actually came out talking about the different actors I-I went with a friend to see it and you-you were aw-aware of um the different actors, some of the because we'd seen them in *A Midsummer's Nights Dream* as well. Um... but I'd-I'd I really had, the feeling that by changing the different actors around for the different characters, that we were be-being.. um, put in the position where we could not become emotionally involved, with what they were doing or them as people.. I-almost like they, they were part of a machine that we weren't meant to, feel anything about.

J But was that not, the idea behind.. the creation of the (indistinguishable)? Mm, I think it was, wasn't it?

K I think that was a really good idea really because like the gender's changed as well sort of thing, so like, the girl, if you have two girls they felt more

comfortable doing something together, than a girl and a boy would. But they could still, like portray the same thing. It didn't really, you just didn't feel that there was an intimidation to do it.

A But as well with the, the sexual side of it where you've got the roles reversed where you've got the, one of the girls was playing out the role of, the male character. And, while the, while the guy was playing the submissive female character. And I found that really interesting because as first, as you saw it, it seemed really strange. But as you got used to what the idea of what they were doing. You almost, stopped being aware of what their sex was.

*Why is liveness important?* Because the audience is part of the performance. (*CT In, in all cases?*) In all cases I feel yes. The-they, the, uhm... the people who are performing, are changed by the reaction of the audience. And the audience .. because of that .. the audience, is moved by the people, you know it just goes around and around, there's no doubt in my mind that the audience are as important as the actors.. and to the, whole artistic.. thing. And that er, that doesn't happen.. in other media in the same way. I don't think it happens at all. (indistinguishable). You know in a book, that's a book, take it or leave it really. But.. the live performance does something very immediate and as I say, permanent, you know. People don't seem to forget it, it could be something re.. you know. So, I feel quite strongly about that (indistinguishable) (laughs) (Alison [9])

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks are owed to the AHRB for supporting this research, and to Caz Tricks, my Research Assistant on the project, who performed heroic tasks throughout.

<sup>2</sup> An example: not very long ago, I watched the stage production of *the Lion King* along with a rapturous audience predominantly made up (it seemed to me) of parents with young children, especially girls. Having myself written an extensive analysis of *The Lion King* as a film (see Barker with Austin, 2000), I was struck by a series of questions: what proportion of the audience had seen the film, and were seeing the theatrical presentation as a result of this? What role did their perception of the film play in their evaluation of the stage production? What expectations did they form of the relations between the two? What was the 'added value' of this second production which made it so pleasurable? This is of course one very particular kind of theatre – but also a particularly neglected kind.

<sup>3</sup> This led to some exasperation on our part. A number of people who clearly disliked the production left at the interval, and didn't complete our questionnaires. In some cases we knew who they were and asked if they would be willing to complete them, and perhaps speak to us. A number said they would do this, but then didn't. A few who agreed to be interviewed, and even agreed a date with us, simply failed to turn up. We have come tentatively to the conclusion that these reactions may indicate that it is felt somehow wrong to be against the play, that such a reaction is not to be shared – a reaction which was absolutely not present with the film.

<sup>4</sup> The numbers indicate the interview from which the interview is taken.

<sup>5</sup> On the concept of reviewers as audiences, and the possibilities of analysing processes of reception through analysis of these kinds of materials, see among others Janet Staiger (1997?).

<sup>6</sup> A recent example of a thoughtful researcher who wants to retain Bourdieu even as she rehearses the many criticisms of him, is Lyn Thomas (*Fans, Feminism and 'Quality' Media*).

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<sup>7</sup> It is surprising to me that noone has seen a strange analogy at work here. In 1950s British sociology a common claim was that the primary distinction between middle class and working class culture was the presence or absence of 'deferred gratification'.