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Engagement: The new paradigm for audience research

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Abstract:
Audience research remains a fractured discipline and this continues to hinder its development into a fully-fledged academic field. There are many reasons for this – historic, philosophical, structural, epistemological and methodological – that are discussed in the course of this essay. However, one of the benefits of the dispersed nature of the discipline is its flexibility and freedom: audience research is a broad church, attracting a largely itinerant congregation of diverse scholars and practitioners who benefit from the lack of constraints presented by more established disciplines and from the opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration and exchange. On the other hand, the lack of a scholarly home leaves the discipline vulnerable to charges of amorphism, which in turn hamper its structural evolution.

Drawing on an existing body of empirical and theoretical work, this essay argues that the concept of engagement offers a promising paradigm to underpin and inform the maturation of audience research. Following a critical review of competing definitions and application of notions of audience engagement, the essay deconstructs the concept of engagement before reconstructing it to propose a robust and workable new paradigm for audience research.

Keywords: audiences; engagement; audience studies; arts management; audience research

Introduction: The quest for a new paradigm

Engagement is not a new concept, but it is justifiably back in vogue. Various scholars, including notably John Corner (2017, 2011) and Annette Hill (Hill and Steemers 2017, Hill et al. 2017), have applied the concept of engagement productively to audience research in media studies, particularly in relation to the rapidly evolving economy of attention. However, in the context of the live arts and museology, audience research is only just

starting to take account of what Peter Dahlgren (2009) has labelled 'the affective turn' and what I am going to call the *engagement shift*.

Despite the fact that over the past two decades journal abstracts in arts marketing and cultural policy studies have witnessed an exponential rise in the deployment of the term 'engagement', from 111 occurrences in the period 1987–1996 to 3,689 between 2007–2016 (Walmsley 2019b), very few authors in these fields have actually attempted to explicate the concept, never mind differentiate it from similarly relational concepts such as 'participation' and 'involvement' (Brodie et al. 2011). There persists, therefore, a significant gap in understanding about what actually constitutes *audience engagement* in the context of arts and cultural experiences. This epistemological lacuna is not merely holding back the progression of audience research as an emerging academic field; it is compromising the realisation of the vast potential of engagement as an area of exponential growth in the arts and cultural sector, and indeed across the wider creative industries. During the Covid-19 crisis we have witnessed the solace and solidarity that arts and culture can offer to audiences and their wider communities alike, and as cultural organisations rebuild after the pandemic they will need to engage with their publics in deeper, more relational ways to unlock their full cultural and social potential. They will also need to rethink their strategies and modes regarding digital engagement – which will assuredly be significantly more important than before the pandemic but certainly no holy grail.

There is mounting evidence that the goal of being engaged represents the primary motivation behind audiences' decision to attend the performing arts (Walmsley 2019a, McConachie 2008). Although the nature of this engagement needs unpicking, this suggests *prima facie* that engagement is becoming an end in itself in the audience journey, an outcome as well as a process. Moreover, engagement is, of course, also a strategic function of arts management, sitting somewhere on the messy and uneven spectrum between marketing, audience development, participatory practice and education. The polysemous and multifaceted nature of engagement, and the corresponding breadth of its potential applications, warrant fresh investigation; and the core aim of this essay is to make the case for the centrality of engagement to the fundamental project of audience research, to offer it up as an appropriate paradigm for this fractured field in the turbulent context of the 2020s. This in turn will entail a critical exploration of the definitions, applications and relative merits of what Walker (2010) describes as a 'paradigm mentality'.

Audience research is certainly in need of something at least akin to a paradigm. The leading US arts consultant Alan Brown recently described the field of audience research as 'atomised' (cited in McDowell 2021). Similarly, in a recent interview with Matthew Reason, Martin Barker describes the current state of audience research as 'a good scatter' (Reason 2021). He goes on to urge audience researchers to 'move it to a level where something beyond scatter takes place and we can begin to talk about audiencing, for example, in the contemporary period'. Barker's description of audience research is apposite as it encapsulates the evolving and yet fragmented nature of the field alongside the scattergun development of its concepts and theories. Audience studies is a recognised branch of media

studies, which in turn has been heavily influenced by cultural studies. However, audience research into arts and cultural engagement remains curiously disconnected from media studies, drawing more heavily on fields such as arts marketing, musicology, museology and performance studies. Audience researchers are accordingly found in diverse and disparate academic departments and disciplines, ranging from business and management to theatre studies, via sociology, geography and fine art. This lack of a scholarly home leaves audience research vulnerable to charges of amorphism, which in turn hampers its independent structural evolution. In short, audience research has functioned via 'loose and vague concepts' for far too long (Barker 2006, p. 128) and is in urgent need of coherence and rigour (Sedgman 2019).

Elaborating on the thinking of Brown and Ratzkin, who describe audience engagement as 'a unifying philosophy' that combines marketing, education, artistic programming and development to maximise impact on audiences (2011, p. 8), I will argue in this essay that engagement is a *philosophy* underpinned by an audience-centric ethos that recognises audiences as equal partners in processes of artistic exchange and understanding. If we accept an audience-centred approach, then audiences must be placed at the heart of audience research. This assessment might appear to be tautological, or even a truism, but it is widely acknowledged that audience research in the arts and cultural sphere has traditionally neglected the audience voice (Bennett 1997, Freshwater 2009), shying away from the kind of rigorous empirical enquiries more common in media and cultural studies that might explicate the elusive concept of engagement. It is time, then, to reassess the state of the field of audience research and to draw together the currently disparate notions and conceptualisations of engagement in the hope that this endeavour might move the field forwards and even sketch out a future research agenda for this rapidly evolving discipline.

I begin the essay with a critical review of competing definitions and applications of notions of audience engagement. I then deconstruct the concept of engagement before reconstructing it in order to propose a robust and workable new paradigm for the field of audience research based on a porous conceptualisation of engagement. I will argue that the polysemous nature of the concept is indeed what makes it a suitable paradigm for this multidisciplinary field. I conclude the essay with some reflections on the wider social significance of audience research and highlight the urgent need for the field to finally come of age and make its own distinctive contribution towards the global challenges that confront it.

Definitions and processes of engagement

As Corner (2017) has noted, engagement is a 'broad, descriptive term' that lacks analytical application. Engagement is then arguably an exemplar of the 'loose and vague' concepts highlighted by Barker, and the underlying objective of this essay is to introduce some conceptual rigour to this polysemous term so that it can function as a suitable research paradigm. Like 'engagement', 'paradigm' is also a somewhat loose and contested term, and we must acknowledge that paradigms can easily be misappropriated to constrain critical

insight and justify opposition to theoretical alternatives (Walker 2010, p. 433).[1] In the context of a paradigm, polysemy can therefore be advantageous in that it doesn't close off too many avenues of research, nor alienate too many scholars working in a given field. However, it can also defeat the desired object of a paradigm to differentiate and demarcate a specific field. The term 'engagement', then, might at first sight appear to be a mixed blessing as a potential paradigm; but in the course of this essay I will argue that although it might be too loose or vague for certain fields, in the context of audience research its polysemy actually works to its advantage.

Many of the surprisingly few definitions that do exist portray engagement primarily as a psychological process or state (Brodie et al. 2011, p. 253). An etymological analysis of 'engagement' traces it back to the Old French word '*engagier*' meaning to bind or pledge (Online Etymology Dictionary 2020) and in everyday usage the term can refer to an arrangement to meet, a job, a pledge, the state of being interested or committed, emotional involvement or commitment, betrothal, the state of being in gear, or a hostile encounter between military forces (Merriam-Webster Dictionary 2020). In the particular context of audiences, Brodie et al. trace the theoretical roots of engagement to relationship marketing's focus on interactive experience and value co-creation, which, they maintain, offers 'a transcending view of relationships, which contrasts with a more traditional, transactional view of marketing relationships' (ibid.). This suggests that engagement has potential in the people-centred field of audience research, but it assumes a rejection of the reification and commercialisation inherent to the 'product-led' model championed by governmental creative industries agendas (designed, of course, to sell) and by traditional arts marketing scholars such as François Colbert (Colbert 2007).

Following the school of relationship marketing, Campanelli argues that engagement can generate 'emotional connection and empowerment' (cited in Brodie et al. 2011, p. 266). Sashi (2012) advances on this relational conception, claiming that effective engagement establishes intimate bonds, which culminate in enduring exchanges between producers and audiences that can effect both loyalty and delight. Campanelli and Sashi thus make a strategic as well as a philosophical case for engagement, implying that cultural practitioners and organisations would gain audiences' devotion as well as intimacy by investing their resources in engagement-based activities. This 'business' case is supported by Kemp and Poole (2016) who list the positive 'outcomes' of engagement as value creation, loyalty and advocacy (pp. 53–54). Kemp and Poole's empirical study of jazz audiences concluded that engagement is enabled via a tripartite combination of audience opportunity, motivation, and ability (ibid., p. 69). Vincs et al. (2009) follow Campenelli and Sashi's relational and emotional interpretation of engagement, describing the concept as being 'compelled, drawn in, connected to what is happening, interested in what will happen next' (Vincs 2013, p. 135). This definition successfully highlights two clear goals and manifestations of engagement: namely to captivate audiences concurrently, in the moment of appreciating a work of art; and to bind them into the future creative life of an artist or organisation. It also foregrounds the important sub-concepts of immersion and flow, which have been

demonstrated to be prerequisites of a positive experience of both the performing arts (Brown and Novak 2007) and exhibitions (Bitgood 2010).

These concepts encapsulate what commentators on the creative economy have recently begun to label the *attention economy*, a notion that regards consumers' or audiences' attention as a scarce resource and therefore as a 'cultural problem' (Crawford 2015). Within museum studies, Stephen Bitgood's (2010) research with museum audiences links attention closely with engagement and concludes that engagement encompasses a number of intellectual, perceptual, and affective processes, including learning, flow, inquiry, and immersion. However, Bitgood rightly argues that practitioners and scholars have traditionally misplaced their focus on the constituent parts of engagement rather than on the process itself:

> Emphasis is often placed upon an inferred outcome of attention such as 'learning', 'flow', 'restoration', or 'satisfaction' rather than on the processes that make these outcomes possible.

Based on extensive participant research, Bitgood has developed an 'attention-value model', which designates engagement as the third stage of audiences' attention process, following the prior states of focus and captivation. In other words, audience focus and captivation are prerequisites of engagement, which represents the most challenging level for audiences to attain as it requires 'deep sensory-perceptual, mental and/or affective involvement' alongside 'some type of exertion or concentration' (Bitgood 2010). Engagement emerges here as an integral component of effective audiencing; as a state of mind and body that demands not only the deep immersion of audiences but also the careful intervention and mediation of artists and producers. Suffice to say that engagement is a complex, multi-modal and multi-sensory process that does not just happen by itself, and this is where adjunct processes such as experience design and facilitation come into play (cf. Simon 2010).

As if in response to Bitgood's critique that researchers have underplayed the *process* of engagement, Brown and Ratzkin (2011) outline five chronological stages through which audience members ideally progress to construct what they refer to as 'unique experiences around a shared work of art': build-up, intense preparation, artistic exchange, post-processing, and impact echo (p. 2 and p. 7). The advantages of this model over Bitgood's more streamlined process are that it incorporates the facets of anticipation, hermeneutics and impact, thus elongating the process beyond the concurrency of being-with an artwork in-the-moment and articulating engagement's *raison d'être*. Based on a comprehensive review of audience engagement programmes in the USA, Brown and Ratzkin delineate four underlying spectra of engagement: social vs. solitary, active vs. passive, peer-based vs. expert-led, and community vs. audience (2011, p. 2). This framework offers a useful deconstruction of engagement, addressing common sites, as well as established modes and philosophies, of engagement. Within the context of this framework, the authors go on to

offer another helpful conceptualisation of engagement via a typology comprising six common modes of engagement: (i) reading; (ii) critical review; (iii) casual talking; (iv) technology-based processing; (v) insight seeking; (vi) active learning (ibid.). These modes are designed to reflect the preferred engagement methods of different audience groups. This more plural understanding of engagement is also adopted by McConachie (2008, p. 7), who rightly claims that an adequate understanding of audiencing must encompass many aspects of 'engagements' with performances. The consensus between Brown, Ratzkin and McConachie is that there is not a one-size-fits-all model of audience engagement: arts and cultural audiences are predisposed to engage in different ways and via different modes depending on their personality types, preferred learning styles and past experiences. A segmentational approach to audience engagement is therefore just as beneficial as it is in marketing, providing researchers and practitioners with more descriptive insights into audiences and their lifestyles and helping to predict future behaviour (Pitt et al. 2020).

Susan Ashley (2014) provides a broader, sociological definition of engagement, characterising it as 'a process for generating, improving or repairing relationships between institutions of culture and society at large' (p. 261). This definition reflects the ongoing influence of relational aesthetics on audience research alongside the cultural policy imperative for publicly funded arts and cultural organisations to attract and become more relevant to their diverse communities. As Ashley maintains, and as I have noted several times already in this essay, engagement is a necessarily broad term, which is deployed by organisations to describe their attempts to occupy audiences' attention, to involve them, to establish meaningful contact, and even to assure impact (Ashley 2014, p. 262). However, Ashley warns that engagement can also culminate in 'misrecognition, lack of parity and the subordination of some publics to management and regulation' and that it can be undermined by the 'political agenda-setting, conflicting subjectivities and power relations inherent in intercultural communication' (p. 263). Engagement activities can thus result in 'problematic and unequal encounters' unless audiences are encouraged to 'assert their own agency' and make their own choices in the way they use the arts as a 'resource' (ibid.). Like audience research, engagement, then, is a political act that is open to manipulation and abuse. This is where the politics of participation and co-creation become significant, because when these modes of engagement are deployed both strategically and ethically, artists and producers become the *enablers* rather than the gatekeepers of impact and culture moves beyond what Bourdieu famously derided as the 'interminable circuit of inter-legitimation' (Bourdieu 1984, p. 53).

Lynne Conner (2013) picks up on one of the rarer dictionary definitions of engagement outlined above, associating the term with the deployment of gears that enable a mechanism to function (p. 37). According to Conner, audiences 'engage' in the process of art-making when they feel a vital part of its engine. Drawing on the same metaphor no doubt, Steven Tepper defines engagement as 'to interlock' or 'involve' (2008, p. 363). There is an implicit democratisation at play in Tepper's former definition which works well alongside the contested notions of participation and co-creation, and addresses the

inherent dangers of imbalance outlined by Ashley above. Accordingly, and following Conner, Tepper's definition reflects a post-structural perspective of audiencing that perceives audiences as people who 'actively connect to art – discovering new meanings, appropriating it for their own purposes, creatively combining different styles and genres, offering their own critique' (ibid.).

Jennifer Radbourne (2013) approaches engagement from a strategic marketing perspective and defines engagement as the act of 'converging' with audiences. Radbourne depicts an evolving context wherein audiences increasingly seek appropriation, connectivity and transformation through their arts and cultural experiences. She argues, accordingly, that the role of modern arts and cultural organisations is to 'converge' creators with consumers of art (2013, p. 155). Although the language of consumption is anathema to many audience researchers, at least from what I'd call the relational school of thought, Radbourne's welcome focus on the role of 'converging' reflects other scholars' references to the need for third party facilitation and mediation in processes of audience engagement. Supporting a number of existing studies into audience motivation, Radbourne concludes that performing arts audiences' primary goal is emotional engagement, which can most effectively be secured via immersion in the arts experience (p. 153).

In synthesis, then, theoretical definitions coalesce around the notion of engagement as a psychological process which aims to develop intimate, meaningful, converged, committed and enduring relationships with audiences by involving them in interactive, immersive and hermeneutic experiences. If deployed authentically by artists and producers, this emancipates and empowers audiences and generates deep, emotional and enduring connections by enabling audiences to become an invaluable part of the art-making process. Engagement emerges therefore as both a strategic marketing or management process and a philosophy of democratic and meaningful participation. In both of these guises, its ultimate aim is to generate mutual value and impact – whether understood as the mutual exchange of value prized by arts marketers (Hill et al. 2003) or an ethical approach to participatory practice (Jancovich 2017).

Reconceptualising engagement

In order to scrutinise and apply this lofty aspiration of engagement in the context of audience research, it is important to consider what these meaningful and enduring relationships might look like from the perspectives of artists, cultural organisations and, of course, audiences themselves. In this section I'll therefore explore the wider cultural, sociological, philosophical, political, ethical and even physiological considerations that have informed and that continue to shape notions of engagement.

Despite the ongoing rhetoric surrounding the experience and attention economies (Pine and Gilmore 1999, Crawford 2015), since the turn of the millennium, scholars such as Bill Sharpe (2010) have argued that experiences *per se* are no longer sufficient for citizens who are actually seeking a particular kind of experience – namely one which is shared, meaningful, valuable and enduring. This focus on collective meaning reflects both Silvia's

(2005) finding that audiences' meaning-making is positively correlated to their aesthetic enjoyment and Radbourne's (2013) depiction of contemporary audiences seeking connectivity and transformation. Sharpe's thesis is essentially that we are entering into a new kind of economy where art is the new currency, 'the currency of experience, putting our unique individual experiences into motion amongst us as shared meaning' (p. 2). This new *economy of meaning* is characterised by participatory modes of engagement, both within the arts and beyond them, and the ultimate goal of this engagement is aesthetic and spiritual enrichment rather than consumer satisfaction.

This communitarian interpretation of the role of art and culture supports and indeed complements an engagement-based approach to understanding audiencing. It also reflects what we might refer to as *the relational turn*, which is manifesting day by day as cultural practitioners and organisations around the world strive to reflect on their fundamental purpose in light of Covid-19 and consider how best to 'reset'. As Mark Banks and Justin O'Connor (2020) have argued, 'the cultural sector was deeply confused about its value' as it entered the pandemic. Banks and O'Connor evaluate this confusion as part of a wider ambivalence shared even by national governments:

> On the one hand, 'bailouts' were justified on the grounds that art and culture were providers of social vitality and community, as well as (now) providing publics with succour and consolation during the pandemic; on the other they were simply a collapsing industrial sector like any other.

Elsewhere, O'Connor (2020) has argued that the arts sector has deliberately played the slippery political game between social and economic value and that it must now take responsibility for both the inequities that this disingenuous stance has effected and the unsure socio-political position in which it has left the sector. In a somewhat damning, but nonetheless compelling, judgement, O'Connor chastises the sector for being complicit in its own neo-liberalisation (ibid.). A similar appraisal is offered by Julian Meyrick and Tully Barnett (2020), who note that during Covid-19, 'the public role of arts and culture has become self-evident. The challenge is to match this realization with a new understanding of their public value.' This is essentially a political argument, which goes to the heart of what should be valued in the new economy evoked by Sharpe. It responds to Mariana Mazzucato's call for government policy to shift 'from public goods to public value' and to the policy (and even economic) trend to adopt a much broader conception of value (Meyrick and Barnett 2020).

The concept of engagement has of course a strong political heritage on its own merits – not least as a legacy of Jean-Paul Sartre, who popularised an existentialist conception of engagement in the mid Twentieth Century. In his seminal phenomenology of ontology *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre described the state of engagement as 'taking root' (1992 [1943], p. 388) and in later works he links it with his troublesome concept of authenticity. In Sartrean terms, engagement requires human beings to accept that they are

free to make their own choices and therefore condemned to take responsibility for the political consequences of their actions (Heter 2020). Engagement is presented as 'an ethical and political virtue' based on the premise that 'humans are necessarily situated in particular places and times' (ibid.). Considering the aforementioned calls for cultural organisations to be more cognisant of their social role and relevance, and of the particular nature of their value, the Sartrean concept of engagement appears apposite to the mission fulfilment of these hybrid entities: arts and cultural organisations are situated in specific times and places and their actions often have significant impacts on their locales and communities – indeed they are often credited with actually 'making' and 'shaping' places through processes of cultural regeneration. So it makes sense for them to engage with their communities and audiences in a Sartrean sense, particularly if we adopt Jacob Dahl Rendtorff's definition of Sartre's concept as a 'critical intellectual commitment' (2019, p. 93). This is surely an apt description of the ideal role of art and culture in our current era of social and political crisis, and it has the added advantage of reflecting established artistic genres such as Epic Theatre, Forum Theatre and community arts.

In line with this political interpretation of engagement, many audience scholars have noted the political aspect of audiencing itself, influenced no doubt by Plato's age-old warning that audiences can be 'activated' by the dangerous persuasive rhetoric and emotional manipulation that lie at the heart of performance (Hall 2010). Herbert Blau (1990), for example, contends that audience research is not simply a question of who speaks and who listens, but rather who constructs and perpetuates the 'dominant and oppressive systems of meaning' (p. 8). Art has long been appropriated for political purposes, most notoriously perhaps by the Nazis in the 1930s and by proponents of Epic Theatre such as Brecht from the 1920s onwards. Writing, drawing, painting, composing, storytelling and curating can all function as powerful political acts that can either intentionally or unintentionally sway their audiences. As a paradigm, engagement thus has the dual advantage of incorporating art's political history and resonance into contemporary audience research and of reflecting its direct links with policy.

Beyond political considerations, contemporary scholars also tend to highlight the physical manifestations and psychophysiological impacts of audience engagement. Bruce McConachie, for example, regards engagement as a psychophysiological phenomenon while Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason (2011) portray engagement in terms of kinaesthetic empathy. There is growing consensus that engaging audiences with arts and culture on a macro scale is imperative both to the cultural vitality of our communities (Brown and Ratzkin 2011, p. 35) and to the long-term health and wellbeing of citizens (Fancourt et al. 2020). Although the evidence base in many areas of arts and health is weak (Dowlen 2020), this is a view increasingly shared within cultural policy and one that is gradually starting to effect a more local and participatory approach to arts funding, which, for good and ill, is incrementally shifting its focus from artists to audiences, from venue to place, from artistic quality to social relevance, and from art to outcome. This is another compelling reason for

arts and cultural organisations, and for those who research them, to place more of their focus on engagement.

From the organisational perspective, the ultimate goal of engagement is 'to enable arts organizations to develop empathy with their audiences and communities, communicate persuasively to them, engage meaningfully with them, and shape resonant and relevant arts experiences and programmes with them and for them' (Baxter et al. 2013, p. 117). This relational perspective on engagement supports my earlier synthesis of existing definitions of engagement, which framed it as both a strategic management process and a socio-cultural benefit. As business-minded leaders might say, engagement is a win-win. Yet it remains under-theorised and under-researched, even by audience researchers; and it is woefully under-utilised by cultural organisations, where it is often tacked onto core marketing or promotional activity as a careless adjunct or afterthought (Walmsley 2019a).

As Maxine Greene notes, informed engagement with arts and cultural content does not happen automatically or naturally; it requires reflective time and dialogue (Greene 1995, cited in Reason 2013, p. 106). Reason goes on to add that 'the unthinking, unblinking eye of passive consumption can only be countered by ensuring that spectators are actively processing and evaluating their experiences and as a result become cultural producers of meaning' (2013, p. 110). This point responds to Blau's (1990) rhetorical question regarding how audiences can prepare (or *be prepared*) for their audiencing activity. Just as the co-production of cultural products cannot happen without artists to co-produce them, so is the co-creation of meaning dependent on some form of mediation, which is perhaps another useful synonym for engagement. As Deleuze argued, effective engagement can enable a work of art to leave the domain of representation to become experience (cited in Machon 2013, p. 109). This is again where the Sartrean notion of engagement as critical intellectual commitment might offer fresh impetus for arts and cultural organisations in renegotiating their value to their audiences.

As Reason and Lindelof (2016) acknowledge, audience research describes acts of attention and recognises that attention is a constructive or performative act (p. 17). However, as we saw earlier, attention is a dwindling resource (Crawford 2015) and this makes the need to understand what constitutes effective engagement all the more urgent. Aesthetic growth and personal development are key aspects of engagement and various commentators have highlighted the need for the sector to invest in the education and aesthetic growth of its audiences to help them 'acclimatise' to artistic work (Machon 2013, p. 84). As Bitgood has noted, attention thus emerges as a precondition for engagement, both in theory and in the theatre or museum. Arts and cultural organisations have a strategic advantage here: memorable live experiences are increasingly rare in our Covid-19 ravaged world where digital engagement is understandably flourishing. However, as they gradually gravitate back into public cultural spaces, audiences will continue to seek out more relational ways to engage with artists, and cultural organisations will need to offer innovative ways to facilitate this. The live element of arts and cultural experiences offers exceptional opportunities for audience engagement because, *pace* Philip Auslander, live art

does possess its own ontological integrity. Auslander (2008) is partly right to assert that live arts experiences rarely translate into tangible benefits to audience members – and this is a problem that cultural organisations need to solve; but what he fails to acknowledge is that the ontology of live art is based on the real and *potential* engagement of audiences and artists, as well as on the engagement of audiences with other audience members and, of course, with art itself. This triadic potential for in-the-moment engagement is another quality that demarcates live art and sets it apart from mediated and mediatised arts and entertainment (Walmsley 2019a). The implications of this for artists, producers, arts and cultural organisations, funders and policymakers are clear: more resources must be dedicated towards conceiving, developing and delivering high quality engagement opportunities; and alongside artistic quality, funding decisions should be dependent on the range and quality of engagement activities offered to audiences. Otherwise, Auslander will be proven right and live art will continue to lose sway over more mainstream and more accessible forms of leisure and entertainment.

We have seen in this section that notions and applications of engagement are shifting, and this conceptual evolution has been sharpened and hastened by the Covid-19 crisis. Cultural policy scholars and many cultural organisations are starting to take stock of the implications of both Covid-19 and the Black Lives Matter movements, as well as the ongoing climate crisis, and this is leading them to reimagine what the arts and cultural sector might need to achieve in the future. Audience research needs to lead in this endeavour; but, as we have seen in the course of this essay, it is currently rudderless. From the above analysis, and building on my earlier synthesis of engagement, we can conclude that a contemporary conception of audience engagement is relational and socially engaged. It moves beyond the tired intrinsic/instrumental dichotomy (Belfiore and Bennett 2007) to embrace the personal, inter-personal, collective, physical and spiritual values of arts and culture. It encompasses a live, political element based on an existential understanding of arts and cultural organisations having a critical intellectual commitment to their audiences. From my perspective, the duty of audience researchers, therefore, is to frame their investigations around this re-conception of engagement – and, indeed, to 'engage' themselves in the Sartrean sense of the term so that their field has a more tangible social impact.

Engagement as a paradigm for audience research

Now that I have deconstructed and reconceptualised the concept of audience engagement, I want to complete the essay by arguing that engagement offers a promising paradigm to underpin and inform the future development of audience research. As Kuhn (1970) asserts, a paradigm can provide identity and coherence to a field by generating a fundamental set of assumptions shared by members of a scholarly community. This begs the following questions:

1. Which, if any, *assumptions* are shared by audience researchers?

2. Which, if any, of these are the *right* assumptions in our current sociological and political context?
3. Might any of these assumptions be classed as *fundamental*?

One hopefully incontrovertible assumption shared by audience researchers is that audiences are worthy subjects of research. But which other assumptions unify audience scholars? My own review of audience research in the context of the performing arts (Walmsley 2019a, pp. 25–62) identified thirteen categories of research: histories of audience practice and behaviour; power, elitism and class; cultural policy, participation and co-creation; immersive performance; performance venues, spaces and places; performance as ritual; reception theory and semiotics; research methodologies; the audience experience; value and impact research; young audiences; arts marketing and management; audience engagement and enrichment. Whilst this taxonomy doesn't identify a set of assumptions *per se*, it does indicate the existence of a reasonably contained number of underlying foci, approaches and concepts that have thus far shaped research in the field. Some apparent examples would be: historiographies of audiencing; the power dynamics between artists, producers and audiences; modes and sites of audience participation; the processual relationship between decoding, meaning-making, value and impact; and the relationship of all of these to questions of health, wellbeing and policy. This synthesis doesn't cover the extant research on methodologies and methods nor the burgeoning research into diverse and marginalised audience groups and ethical practice, which also characterise research in the field. But it does offer a coherent set of thematic and conceptual foci that distinguish audience research from the fellow disciplines of arts marketing, cultural policy studies, media studies, performance studies and museology.

In the absence of a clear set of fundamental assumptions for audience research, we should consider broadening our conception of what actually constitutes a paradigm. Held (2020) defines a research paradigm as 'a philosophy, a worldview, that is, a set of metaphysical beliefs, assumptions, concepts, and values that informs the researcher's view of reality, what counts as knowledge and ways of knowing and guides research priorities, choices, and actions' (p. 1). This broader definition is helpful in outlining the strategic benefits of a paradigm over and above its functional role in demarcating a given field. It also introduces the useful aspect of *values*, which is particularly apposite given the historical and sociological contexts of audience research and engagement explored above. Studies and epistemologies of audiences have long highlighted, and indeed fallen victim to, the sacralisation of art and culture and the corresponding marginalisation of the audience voice (Conner 2013, Butsch 2008). In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movements and the Covid-19 pandemic, audience research has both a moral and an epistemological duty to set an ethical and sustainable agenda for research that accounts for and investigates the audience experiences of marginalised audience groups. As Kuhn noted back in 1970, disarray and crisis provide fertile ground for paradigm shifts, so the time is ripe.

Audience research clearly has the potential (and I would argue the imperative) to reconstitute itself on a paradigm of engagement and cohere around a philosophy of audience-centricity. As noted at the outset of this essay, positive strides in these directions have already been made in the context of media studies. Why, then, is audience research in the live arts, museums and galleries lagging behind? One obvious response would be the continuing primacy of artists and curators, which can effect a disregard for or even suspicion of live audiences (see Blau 1990). Another would be the pernicious hierarchy of knowledge in arts and humanities research, which is often dismissive of empirical work with audiences who are often regarded as subjective and unenlightened witnesses of their own cultural experiences. These elitist barriers are currently holding back the field: the application of such a paradigm would see the deployment of a diverse range of methods to elucidate the nature and impacts of audiences' live and digital interactions with the arts and culture; and, based on the value-based understanding of a paradigm, this would finally enable audience research to set its own distinctive and ambitious research agenda, whilst responding sensitively to growing manifestations of cultural and social inequity.

Whether we understand engagement in terms of attention, inclusion, involvement, absorption, flow, participation, commitment, co-creation, learning or even creative play, there is growing consensus amongst researchers that audiences are primarily motivated by a desire to escape the everyday through the kind of meaningful cultural experiences that Miranda Boorsma (2006) refers to as 'entire' experiences. This sociological driver is only likely to sharpen in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has de-peopled cultural spaces and exacerbated the need for solace from everyday hardship, reconfirming Schopenhauer's insistence on the transcendent power of art.

Conclusion

As Sue Turnbull (2020) points out, audience research can be traced back to the Payne Fund Studies in the United States in the late 1920s. But beyond the more mature field of media studies, audience research is still very much evolving and still has much to learn from its parent fields of aesthetics, cultural studies, performance studies and arts marketing, both in its theoretical underpinnings and in its empirical endeavours. But it is distinct from these fields in significant ways, most of which cohere around notions of engagement. This is why I have argued in this essay that we are witnessing an 'engagement shift' – a shift shaped by the affective and relational turns described above and expediated by the concomitant digital shift. In light of these radical socio-cultural shifts, it is now high time for audience research to flee the nest and determine its own course: although certainly more established in media studies, the discipline remains fractured and immature, and its dispersion across diverse traditions, epistemologies and art forms continues to hinder its development into a fully-fledged academic field. There are many reasons for this – historic, philosophical, sociological, structural and methodological. But if audience research is ever to attract the legitimacy, following and funding it needs to mature into a sustainable academic field then it will need develop a distinctive and coherent focus of its own.

However, one of the benefits of the dispersed nature of the discipline lies in its flexibility and freedom: audience research is a wonderfully broad church, attracting a largely itinerant congregation of diverse scholars and practitioners who are often able to roam free in this borrowed field, unfettered by the traditional constraints and hierarchies of their core disciplines and excited by the inherent opportunities for cross-pollination and trans- (rather than merely multi-) disciplinarity. This freedom enables audience research to be creative, disruptive and even anarchic, and there is a danger that any overarching paradigm could act as a straitjacket to innovative research, particularly as the field strives to reinvent itself following the Covid-19 pandemic and the resultant audience exodus and shift online.

I have highlighted in this essay how and why audiences should be treated as the active agents of their own aesthetic enrichment. There can never be, therefore, a one-size-fits-all approach to audience engagement. Engagement strategies and philosophies must embrace the diversity of audiences' unique experiences and therefore offer different touchpoints for engagement. Accordingly, any paradigm for audience research must encapsulate the inherently flexible and heterogeneous nature of the field. Like arts and cultural evaluation, it must not fall into the trap of over-standardising approaches and methods to capture cultural experiences – a trap which would merely perpetuate a false orthodoxy. Audience research is a creative and heterodox endeavour; and engagement is, above all, a philosophy and a culture – one that must be underpinned by an audience-centric ethos which recognises audiences as equal partners in processes of artistic exchange. Audience research, at least in the academy, must resist the understandable pressures from the cultural sector to constrain engagement to any reductive definition. As Corner (2017) maintains, the very advantage of an engagement-based approach lies in 'exploring diverse if adjacent territories' (online).

Engagement works as a paradigm for audience research *precisely because* of its conceptual porosity – but it only works if paradigms are understood in Held's (2020) broad terms as sets of metaphysical beliefs, assumptions, concepts, and values that inform researchers' views of appropriate methods and epistemologies. As a concept, engagement is flexible and malleable, and these are vital qualities for any paradigm that aspires to be embraced by quantitative and qualitative researchers spanning the sciences, the social sciences, the arts and humanities. However, there is a fine line between porous and vague: as we have seen in this essay, paradigms exist to guide research priorities, choices and actions; they must not, then, be so open or poorly defined and conceived that they ultimately become meaningless. A paradigm needs to cohere thinking and thinkers, and the concept of engagement could succeed here by guiding the field on questions of ethical audience research, on the need for a diverse portfolio of rigorous methods, on the rapidly evolving social role of cultural activity, and on the need to place audiences at the heart of enquiries into their own experiences.

These conclusions have significance far beyond the constrains of the academy because they strike at the heart of how human beings are responding to their rapidly evolving social contexts. History is repeating itself. As in the last century, twenty-first

century life has thus far been characterised by an ongoing climate crisis, a financial crisis, a race relations crisis, a public health pandemic and a global rise in populism. These phenomena have combined to foster a social context where people have relatively few opportunities to physically engage with one other and feel part of a community; and where they do, they often now feel vulnerable, exposed and unsafe. Arts and cultural venues have demonstrated their potential to act as vibrant community spaces that support empathy and wellbeing by bringing diverse groups together in acts of enhanced socialisation (Heim 2016). Governments around the world are increasingly cognisant of this and audience research thus has a unique opportunity in the 2020s to take its rightful place at the policy table and attract significant research funds to address our global challenges. Audience research is no longer niche; it must now emerge from its respective closets and step up to offer positive responses to the significant challenges we all face.

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Note:

[1] As Walker (2010) notes, Thomas Kuhn was frustrated at how social scientists had misconstrued and misapplied his original concept of the paradigm. I return to Kuhn's definitions later in the essay.