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‘I’m no expert, but...’: Everyday Textual Analysis with Film Audiences in the English Regions

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Abstract

This article draws on the film elicitation groups which took place as part of the AHRC funded Beyond the Multiplex Project (2017-21). The article proposes that four categories of ‘everyday textual analysis’ were deployed by the participants, and subsequently draws on these to suggest an alternative to more conventional modes of close reading favoured in academic film studies, and to reveal the potential to develop wider and more diverse audiences for specialised film. Sixteen groups were undertaken in late 2018 and saw participants from a range of backgrounds and regions in England responding to and discussing eight specialised films: *I*, *Daniel Blake* (Loach, 2017), *Things to Come* (Hansen-Løve, 2017), *Call Me By Your Name* (Guadagnino, 2017), *Dark River* (Barnard, 2017), *God’s Own Country* (Lee, 2017), *Loveless* (Zvyagintsev, 2017), *The Eagle Huntress* (Bell, 2016), and *Happy End* (Haneke, 2017). The aim of the groups was to develop insights into the ways in which audiences construct meaning through specialised film, with a particular emphasis on the interpretive resources that audiences draw upon in these encounters. This article traces the narratives that emerged in response to the films above and pays particular attention to the ways that audiences interpret such texts by recognising and reflecting on the formal features and characteristics as key elements of meaning making. While interview methods enable holistic reflection on audience behaviours, the presence of the film text within the elicitation groups represents a specific set of reference points for participants which surfaces and offers insights into the delicate ecologies that lie between the formal characteristics of specialised films and the sites and characteristics of their wider experiences of cinema.

Keywords: Everyday textual analysis, film elicitation groups, active audiences, specialised film

Introduction

In late 2018, as part of the AHRC funded Beyond the Multiplex Project, 16 focus groups took place across four regions of England: The North East (two rural and two urban), Yorkshire (four urban), the South West (two urban, one suburban, and one rural), and the North West (four urban). These groups sat alongside a range of other work packages and methods with the conjoined aim of exploring ‘how audiences engage with and form in different ways around specialised films in English regions’ (Wessels et al 2021a). For the purposes of this project, specialised films are understood through the lens of the BFI’s definition: ‘non-mainstream films including documentaries, foreign language films and re-releases of archive and classic film’ (BFI 2018), and the focus groups were specifically designed to examine the ways in which audiences engaged with the textual properties of these kinds of films. This work package was guided by the following questions:

1. How do audiences construct meaning through the stories and narratives of specialised films?
2. How do regional audiences engage with specialised films in relation to their own lived experiences?
3. In what ways do audiences respond to formal and thematic components of specialised films?
4. What narrative resources for interpreting film do regional film audiences have and do they share them?
5. What role does marketing, reviews and promotional material play in enabling audiences to make sense of specialised films?

To date, the published research emerging from these data has used a single film case study (see Forrest and Merrington 2021a; 2021b) to examine the ways in which particular kinds of interpretive resources are drawn upon in relation to specific generic features, and how narratives of lived experience are deployed to enable engagement with, or form a barrier to, particular kinds of viewing experiences (Wessels, Merrington, Hanchard and Forrest et al 2022). The concern of this article is to examine the data more broadly to better understand the ways in which audiences respond to the formal elements of a range of films across the dataset. Specifically, this article will explore how audiences analyse textual features in their viewing practices to draw some conclusions about the particular impacts of the specialised film experience, and the capacity of audiences to participate in the interpretation of specialised films. It also explores the ways in which talking about films at a

formal level - the kind of discursive interactions that might be seen as intrinsic to the specialised film experience - can work to deepen our appreciation of where and how film spectatorship operates in the life course and seeks to contrast this with more orthodox forms of textual analysis which pervade academic film studies.¹

While the focus groups were regionally diverse, they were also mixed in terms of their membership. Participants were drawn from varied social groups, ages, educational status, and ethnic backgrounds. While some of our group members self-identified as cinema enthusiasts enjoying active participation in their local film communities, others' relationships with the medium had lapsed, and some avowedly had *not* engaged previously in specialised film and had only a partial engagement with mainstream cinema. While our analysis of the coded data set revealed that those with formal training in film studies and other related fields of higher education freely and without prompt deployed analytical terminology to analyse the films under discussion (Wessels et al 2021c), the focus group data, as this article will show, points to a widespread developed and nuanced appreciation of the relationships between form and meaning in the films across the majority of our participants, regardless of educational background, suggesting that while barriers to participation in film culture exist, the potential rewards of 'engagement' (Blagrove 2021, p. 243) - of taking pleasure in the textual properties of the medium - are many. As such, the analysis of such narratives of interpretation might further challenge what Sonia Livingstone terms 'the authority of elite textual analysts' in defining the aesthetic value and affective impacts of the medium (Livingstone 2015, p. 441). By considering how audiences undertake what we might term everyday textual analysis, we are therefore able to better realise the limitations of a critical consensus which privileges a solely academic account of meaning making in and through film (see Wojcick, 2007, and Kuhn and Westwell, 2020).

While specialised film is a term developed by the industry to categorise a loosely organised and diverse range of film types united by their status as 'non-mainstream' it is broadly - although with some exceptions - analogous to the academic definition of 'art cinema' (see Bordwell 1979, Neale 1981, Hoyle and Newland 2019) whereby specific textual and institutional features - again largely those defined in opposition to the commercial orientation and narrative coherence and consistency of Hollywood cinema - are united. Importantly for our purposes, such attributions of 'art' in cinema tend to be associated with a greater emphasis on 'interpretative labour' (Forrest and Merrington, 2021b, p. 7) for the audience, meaning that the viewing strategies associated with - and perhaps triggered by - art cinema features can be seen to invite active questioning as a result of the ambiguities of the film text, generating a subsequent demand for complex analysis of textual features amongst a range of audiences. Indeed, the BFI's major 2011 audience survey, 'Opening Our Eyes', found that of those audience members who associated films with 'artistic value', half

¹ Full dataset available here: Wessels, B. et al (2021b). 'Film Elicitations', 'Beyond the Multiplex: Film Audiences Data Platform', University of Glasgow and University of Sheffield: The Digital Humanities Institute. Available at: <https://www.beyondthemultiplex.org/view/elicitations> (Accessed 15 August 2022).

specifically understood this in terms of formal elements such as '[m]usic, design and cinematography' (BFI 2011, p. 40).

Our methodological approach was in part designed to focus this attentiveness on the textual properties of the specialised films under discussion, to - in line with the research questions - determine how audiences make meaning from form. We termed our approach 'film elicitation', adapting methods (Phillipott 1993, Kolb 2008, Banks and Zeitlyn 2015, Harper 2002) which direct participants' attention on visual stimuli, to the focused contemplation of film. The approach also shares characteristics with methods deployed in audience research, whereby participants' are invited to focus on specific elements of a text in order to stimulate a response.² While such methods accentuate elements of the more organic and authentic audience experience by isolating specific elements of a text and inviting direct comment and reflection, they also help to anatomise - through isolation and emphasis - the modes and shapes of interpretation that are summoned by particular audiences in response to particular kinds of textual and contextual encounters with specialised film. The integration of film elicitation focus groups within a wider set of methodological approaches further develops empirically grounded audience studies (Barker and Brook, 1998, Barker and Mathijs, 2007, Di Giovanni and Gambier, 2018), and builds upon focus group methods developed in our pilot study (Corbett and Wessels, 2017), as well as small-scale reception studies of specific film texts (Geimer, 2017).

Our sixteen groups were divided into two strands. Strand A, comprising eight groups, showed four film clips, while Strand B also comprising eight groups showed another four, with eight films shown in total across the study. These were films that broadly reflected the pattern of specialised film exhibition in England during the period of the study, with a number of the titles having been explicitly mentioned during other strands of the project, such as the policy analysis or audience interviews. The films were also chosen to reflect the broad strands of specialised film as defined by the BFI, with a mixture of British cinema, documentary, and foreign language films. The films were as follows, Strand A (covering one focus group in the rural south west, one in the urban south west, two in urban Yorkshire, one in rural North East, one in the urban North East, and two in urban North West): *I, Daniel Blake* (Ken Loach, 2017, UK), *Things to Come* (Mia Hansen-Løve, 2017, France/Germany), *Call Me By Your Name* (Luca Guadagnino, 2017, Italy/France/USA/Brazil), *Dark River* (Clio Barnard, 2017, UK) and Strand B: *God's Own Country* (Francis Lee, 2017, UK) *Loveless* (Andrey Zvyagintsev, 2017, Russia), *The Eagle Huntress* (Otto Bell, 2016, UK/Mongolia/US) and *Happy End* (Michael Haneke, 2017, France/Austria/Germany). There were around 5-6 participants in each group, and the groups lasted two hours with a short break following the first two clips. Each participant was provided with a £20 voucher for taking part.

In the main, the clips were chosen because they distilled the core themes and aesthetic qualities of their wider whole, giving viewers a general impression of the overall

² See, for example, Barker and Ralph's study of film acting (2015), and Lisa Taylor's use of a David Hockney exhibition catalogue as a shared point of discussion for interviews focused on place and landscape in the artist's work (2016).

film. However, it is the case that in some of the groups participants had seen the films, while others had not, and this led to an occasional imbalance of knowledge about the film in question, with some participants qualifying their responses in terms of their lack of awareness of other elements of the film(s). There were also divergences in terms of the consumption of the film clips, with some groups taking place in community spaces while other participants experienced the films in purpose-built screening rooms.

Despite these unavoidable inconsistencies, what emerged across the groups was a rich and multi-layered set of discussions with the film text as the focal point. Participants frequently drew upon a range of interpretive resources from multiple domains of the life course (Wessels 2021b et al) to analyse the clips, explaining what they did or not find significant in the films, deploying a range of analytical frameworks to work through and articulate their particular experiences of meaning making. Because of the role of the clips in anchoring and providing a focal point for the discussion within a time limited group, the presence of the facilitator was more conspicuous than in more conventional focus group discussions. Here, the facilitator would ask each member of the group for their thoughts on the clip, and if responses were minimal, sought to support participants by suggesting an area to focus on.

In this sense, the film elicitation method combines the structure of interviewing with the discursive, polyphonous qualities of the focus group, providing participants with a platform to offer contesting or contrasting readings of a film, positioned ‘as functions of their life situations and engagements’ (Barker 2012, p. 189). Indeed, focus group participants were first invited to introduce themselves by talking about the role of cinema in their lives, and it was the elements of diverse lived experience revealed in these narratives that repeatedly formed a platform for their subsequent responses to film clips. Interpretation is then shown to be ‘polysemic’ (Livingstone, 2019, p.174), with the significance of the ‘lifeworld’ (ibid., p. 171) encouraged and centered through the method. Audiences are therefore positioned as ‘active’ (Livingstone 2015), bringing their own diverse narratives to the discussion as ‘extratextual knowledge’ (Livingstone, 2007, p. 7); not as a diversion from textual analysis but as a means of catalysing it and making it rich, moving away in the process from readings of the spectator as monolithic and instead acknowledging the dynamism of the ‘historically and culturally situated audience’ (Barker 2012, p. 189).³ By establishing a common framework across the groups - despite the varying levels of participation in specialised film culture - we were also able to map the dynamics of engagement and interpretation, and the *potential* for new (or renewed) participation in film culture amongst diverse groups, in line with Pitts and Price’s conclusion that ‘within every attender is a non-attender’ (2018, p. 271).

Across the data, four clear interpretive categories emerge. Firstly, we saw responses where participants’ quickly, fluently and with little or no invitation analysed the films,

³ The discursive dimension of film elicitation workshops might also be understood in the context of studies which adopt an ethnographic approach to audiences, acknowledging the experience of cinemagoing within wider narrative accounts of everyday life (see Kuhn 2002, and Kuhn 1999).

drawing on specialised language. Secondly, there were those who offered analytical responses that were no less robust than the former group but were often symbiotically meshed with intimate accounts of lived experience. Thirdly, there were those viewers who showed the capacity to articulate the formal elements of the films but required support and encouragement to do so. And finally, there were those who - while also sharing features with the other groups - frequently drew upon an awareness and identification of formal features to make sense of and therefore *name* particular categories, from film genres to cultural activities, to national cultures and identities as a result of their textual observations. This article examines responses through these specific categories, while also drawing upon the discussion of a single film (*The Eagle Huntress*) to illustrate how these frames of interpretation came together through a shared focal point.⁴

‘I was very struck [...] with the lingering viewpoints and the camera work’: Confident textual analysts

For those focus group participants who confidently deployed the language of textual analysis, the act of reading the films formally and unlocking their meanings was a form of distinctive pleasure and was clearly an overarching feature of their specialised film experiences. As Adrian (rural North East) put it in response to *Call Me By Your Name*, ‘for me, cinema needs to actually force you to think and if you don’t quite get it then that’s probably good. Rather than having it laid out on a plate for you, it’s good to be made to think and for it to prompt thoughts and ideas’.⁵ In the same group, and later in the discussion, we saw precisely this kind of live play of interpretation as Adam, when asked to reflect on the *Dark River* clip, first asks the facilitator if ‘Clio [Barnard] does her own camera work at all?’, showing a primary positioning of the filmmaker as a central and conspicuous authorial presence (Bordwell, 1979) before exclaiming of the character on screen that ‘he loved going round her head, because that was all hand-held, there was no clever dollies or anything like that’, and later ‘her facial expressions were very powerful and you know, with her looking like that and that movement of the camera, I thought it was great. The soundscape did well in producing the isolation feeling [...]’. Adam’s textual analysis is grounded in a technical assuredness and an attribution of value to filmic methods. When Adam introduced himself to the group, he made clear his qualifications as a spectator, having worked in the ‘film industry’ for ‘60 years’, with his proficiency in technical language clearly explained, yet there is no less a sense of affective pleasure in his statement, which links form to emotional response.

The sense of the pleasure that lies in interpretation was evident in the second group in this venue, as Arlo reflected on the open-ended visual (as opposed to dialogue-driven)

⁴ Participants’ anonymity is protected through the use of pseudonyms in this article.

⁵ Note, this quotation also appears in Wessels, B., Merrington, P., Hanchard, M., Forrest, D., with the Beyond the Multiplex Team (2022), *Film audiences: Personal journeys with film*. Manchester: Manchester University Press (forthcoming).

style of *God's Own Country*: 'I actually feel I quite liked the fact that it was more visual, there were just the odd grunt or the odd word here and there and it was a look, we put our own thoughts into what the grandmother was thinking [...].' Arlo takes pleasure in the ambiguity of the storytelling devices, framing their non-instrumental qualities in terms of viewer empowerment, and making clear that becoming aware of artistic intention can operate as a source of enjoyment for the active spectator.

While some of our films almost universally provoked engagement - either passionate enthusiasm or fervent criticisms - some of the less immediate and more formally austere films, such as *Loveless* and *Happy End*, proved harder to solicit rich and textured formalist responses. However, where participants did find meaning in the formal elements of these films there was a clear sense of enthusiasm, fluency, and, as in the earlier responses, empowerment in interpretation. Damon (urban Yorkshire) reflected on the long take aesthetics of the former film:

I was very struck initially with the lingering viewpoints and the camera work, [...] I think every shot was pretty similar and it was stationary, it lingered for a very long time, particularly the canteen thing with the two chaps talking, for example. It made you take everything in a bit more than normal. Quite often in films the camera will never stop moving, they're always panning in or coming out or it'll be a tracking shot or something exciting will be happening. It was quite nice for it to be a bit more calm.

In the same group, Emily described how she 'particularly enjoyed' the lift shot in *Loveless*: 'I think that when they showed [it for] quite a long time, just basically a row of blank-faced people in a metal box, that was kind of, oh yeah I see what's coming here.' There is a sense here of the ways in which durational aesthetics, while mundane for some, would for other participants provide a reward for their time. Arnold (urban North West) frames his engagement in Michael Haneke's *Happy End* - a clip comprised of two long takes - in similar terms:

I quite liked that. I'm not really sure why but I was quite immediately engaged by the situation and the way it was filmed and the things that were going on, the depth and complexity of all the characters and things, drew me into the scenes quite quickly, especially given the length of them, there was a lot of time given to develop character and interest in them [...] it's just really well, the way that they develop by having characters on screen and having it all quite slow-paced, they deliver a lot in each of the characters.

While for many these scenes were dull, with few participants referring to the long takes, Arnold actively anchors his analysis of the film in this challenging formal dimension, clearly correlating style with meaning and individual engagement. These responses point to

a confidence in deploying technical language and a sense that such interpretive frames of reference are themselves *invited* by the style of the film and the associated viewing experience - that such labour is an active condition of the pleasure of viewing such films. This assuredness in deploying the language of interpretation was not as clear in some of our other responses, but as we will see, this did not mean that our participants lacked the capacity to engage in interpretive activities.

‘[A]m I supposed to read anything into that?’: Tentative textual analysts

Frequently, when the facilitator probed participants’ initial responses, and asked them to comment specifically on formal elements, they did so with a high degree of sophistication. Thus, while these participants lacked the confidence of the self-defined cinephiles discussed earlier, their readings of the films indicated significant *potential* to participate in specialised film cultures. For example, the facilitator asked Christopher (urban North West) to elaborate on his initial response to *Call Me By Your Name*:

Interviewer:

You talked about the sound and silence. Was there anything that was happening in terms of the style that was enabling that emotional connection for you, beyond the music which you mentioned. Anything else?

Christopher:

I’m no expert, but I noticed that the shot with him on the phone, one half of the screen had the lady fanning herself and I thought, am I supposed to read anything into that? The short shot of the steps between two of the scenes, which didn’t seem to be anything but a sort of pause, just to create a little bit of space. It’s taking its time, the pacing was nice

Christopher is quick to contextualise his response by drawing attention to his apparent lack of ‘expertise’, suggesting some of the implicit barriers to engagement, by contrasting his own (limited) sense of confidence with that of the facilitator and other members of the group. However, he clearly performs an intricate reading of the film, undertaking mise-en-scene analysis, identifying ambiguity as an invitation to interpretation (Bordwell 1979) rather than a barrier to comprehension, and taking pleasure in the slowness of editing.

Similarly, April (urban Yorkshire) draws a distinction between ‘expert’ readings and her own apparently naive account, again because of prompting from the facilitator:

[...] Was there something about this which, in terms of the form of it, the camera angles, the style, the lighting, the acting, anything like that, that made it feel more closer to home, or was it more about the subject?

April:

No, the way it was shot it could almost have been a real-life, like a fly on the wall documentary. I didn't actually take that much notice of how it was shot because I'm not an expert in that but now you've said that, looking back at it yeah, it could almost have been like a fly on the wall type of thing you'd see on the BBC, like a day in the life of the Job Centre or something like that. There was a rawness to it.

Here, despite the caveats, April's reading of *I, Daniel Blake* is fluent in its appreciation of Loach's attempts to construct a sense of verisimilitude and shows a clear awareness of the film's deployment of documentary aesthetics and the purpose of such methods. What April lacks is the confidence to call what she is doing 'analysis' or 'close reading' and therefore to self-identify as a cinephile, but there is no doubt that she possesses the interpretive resources to participate in and benefit from specialised film.

April's realisation of realism as a formal method - arrived at through a contemplative engagement with filmic technique - was similarly identifiable in some of our other participants, who were more tentative but no less sophisticated in their readings than the more confident group members. For example, Elizabeth (urban South West) commented on the use of sound in *God's Own Country*: 'It had quite a nice use of sound, there was no attempt to have any continuity of sound really, you just suddenly stopped the scene and you noticed the sound obviously stopped with it, do you know what I mean?' Elizabeth's awareness of the formal element comes into being through the invitation to reflect and to move between the context of the filmic experience and the discussion of it. Asked to clarify her feelings on this element, she notes: 'Well, for me I liked it because it just made it really realistic and it made it, yeah, just made it very much like you were just kind of looking in on these people. It wasn't something that people had tried to control the way you were seeing it [...]' Elizabeth's response is significant because her pleasure in the formal dimensions emerges not from the conspicuousness of their presence but in their subtleties; she reads the characters and their locations as 'real' while being simultaneously aware of the devices which construct the reality illusion that she is willingly participating in. Her reference to what might be a more visible and therefore manipulative means of constructing meaning points to a resistance to being directed to particular interpretations, and again indicates that pleasure through analysis is found when viewers feel empowered.

‘[Y]ou could almost feel the heartache and the long train journey, that long journey of heartache’: Emotional textual analysts

As we have explored elsewhere (Forrest and Merrington 2021a; Forrest and Merrington 2021b; Wessels, Merrington, Hanchard and Forrest et al 2022) our participants frequently drew on narratives drawn from their own life course as the primary frames of their interpretation. This ‘bringing of “self” in relation to the film’ is a vital and distinctive component of audience research (and by extension filmic analysis) of this nature (Axelson 2008, p. 31), and it is true that in some cases this tendency towards personal response replaced the invitation to ‘read’ the films through more analytical frames. However, a number of the more emotive responses that were developed across the focus groups were notable for the clear relationships between awareness of formal elements and their affective impacts, indicating the ways in which close readings of film style do *not* negate personal, emotional responses. *I, Daniel Blake’s* realist immediacy and visceral content was a site for a number of these readings, as Chloe’s (urban North East) response suggests:

I haven’t seen this in the cinema and I haven’t experienced that myself but it made me feel really angry and almost anxious to watch this, because the camera was so close, the movements and everything, it felt like I was almost there. I really empathise with people and experiences, I take it very deeply, and I felt like I wanted to help and it was so amazing to watch Daniel step in and stand up for them, supporting the people, even though they were all thrown out he was the person that actually really cared, because the camera was moving around the room and everyone was kind of on the phones or something or concentrating on other things. No one put themselves in the same position, so that was really moving.

On the one hand it is clear that the emotional investment comes via immersion in the realist fiction - i.e. ‘Daniel’ is spoken of as a real person -, and Chloe is clearly affected by the content on a personal level, describing her anger and anxiety and the depth of her empathy. Yet she is also clear how these strong feelings are enabled through formal mechanisms: camera placement and movement, specifically. Similarly, Adam (rural North East), noted how the film was:

... very authentic, it’s almost as though it’s a hidden camera, the technique and the way, you know, to be able to get people to behave like this, because it is very, very real. Very unpleasant to watch in my book but that makes me very angry inside. I hate injustice and to me there was a lot of injustice in that office.

Again, the response combines a confident awareness of *how* meaning is constructed with a clear articulation of the impact of the formal devices, in this case the unobtrusive camera and its effect in eliciting authentic performances from the actors.

In the same group, when discussing *Call Me By Your Name* and the almost wordless train station departure scene, Alice remarked how:

[A]t the beginning of it there was no dialogue and that was very powerful, the feelings, emotions and all the unspoken as they were saying goodbye to each other, you could almost feel the heartache and the long train journey, that long journey of heartache.

As we saw earlier, devices which are viewed as non-instrumental are seen as enabling a more active mode of spectatorship, which is here actively identified as central to Alice's empathic, emotional engagement with the film. Alice's repetition of the reference to heartache further reinforces a sense of *personal* connection through textual analysis, and this was similarly evident in Archie's (rural North East) response to *God Country*:

And that's where the soundtrack, you actually hear it, you start to feel that it's all of a level, there's no build-up of wow, something's going to happen. It all just gently meanders along because they're not making it out to be something, oh god this actually happened here, it was just normal, it was natural and just off you go.

Interviewer:

The feeling of nature in the film reflected the relationship, did it?

Archie:

Yeah, especially if you live in the Borders, you get that sort of, I'm a self-employed gardener I'd be sat in places like that feeling incredibly cold and thinking, at least the view's nice. [They all laugh]

Archie's amusing reference to his own working life, and geographical location - the border between England and Scotland - is significant for the way that it follows his discussion of the film's formal properties (soundtrack, use of location), as he authenticates his textual analysis through the lens of his own lived experience.

‘I tend to move towards more, towards almost comfort food. This is not comfort food, this is harder’: Genre naming and category defining textual analysts

In his analysis of the BFI’s ‘Opening Our Eyes’ and ‘The Stories We Tell Ourselves’ studies, Ian Christie notes amongst the data the ways in which audiences repeatedly assign generic characteristics to national cinemas (and vice versa), with such audiences ‘bring[ing] preconceptions and expectations to their viewing’, arguing that ‘what makes a film “British,” or “American” or “French” in the eyes of a specific audience is the result of both a prior history of representation, necessarily selective, and a set of cues that determine the reading by members of this audience’ (Christie, 2012, p. 227; see also, Waldron, 2016, pp. 66-67). Amongst our participants, we saw repeated examples where individuals brought these kinds of interpretative resources and frames to their discussion of the films, with a consistent tendency to identify particular textual features as synonymous with such filmmaking traditions and/or national conventions and communities.

Call Me by Your Name’s conspicuously porous national characteristics (it is a co-production with sections in English, French, and Italian) made it a prime focus for such readings, as Amy (urban North West) demonstrates:

[...] for me it felt almost like two different films in a way. The first bit again felt very French, with not much dialogue, long pauses, you know, just lingering on the steps for instance and then what you take from that, and her smoking, and then the second part felt almost like an American arthouse film [...]

For Amy, the combination of iconographic cliché (the woman smoking) and formal features (long takes, minimal dialogue) marks the film as belonging to a particular national cinema tradition, which then gives way to another, as the formal and thematic registers shift. The film is therefore understood as a collection of influences, with the viewer in this case actively aligning those influences with specific textual features.

In discussion of *God’s Own Country* participants showed a similar willingness to assign particular features to generic categories, as Dorothy (urban North West) shows:

you get to see all the playfulness and the intimacy without it being full sex, which sometimes you do cut to quite a lot in a lot of stuff. I really liked that about it and I think it stands out quite a lot because you do get that, especially in a lot of gay cinema as well. I’m a big fan of queer cinema when they’re also doing something a little bit different and I feel like this film does. [...] And also the landscape is very striking in this, the cinematography, the way they film it, the waters, the colours, the dramatic stormy skies and stuff.

Dorothy's discussion of 'queer cinema' and 'gay cinema' speaks to a willingness to deploy knowledge of genre convention as an interpretive resource, and this is a facet of her reading of the film that sits within a more formally attentive commentary on particular elements of the film's style.

While discussion of 'queer cinema', French, and American arthouse cinema indicates a willingness to draw on established categories and textual codes to interpret the films in line with Christie's observations, we also saw evidence of our participants developing their own more personal categories according to specific formal features. Clark (urban South West) was particularly adept at this. In his initial discussion of *I, Daniel Blake*, Clark showed well developed knowledge of its 'official' genre: 'I know Ken Loach's films, I like social realism, but I tend to go more for melodrama', but as he develops his response, he begins to showcase a more authentic interpretative framework:

If I've got a choice of watching a movie at night if I'm with my wife or, I tend to move towards more, towards almost comfort food. This is not comfort food, this is harder, this was a harder watch when I watched it. I knew when I first saw it that it was going to be a tough watch because I've seen Ken Loach's films before.

The 'comfort food' category is offered as a more informal and personalised mechanism in order to - through contrast - articulate the particular labours of watching a Ken Loach film. In his next response, to *Things to Come*, Clark returns to the more clearly established interpretative register that we have noted elsewhere, whereby particular conventions are identified and then aligned with specific national genre conventions, noting that he 'always [has] to pay a lot more attention to French films. First of all because of the subtitles, because I don't speak or read French, but also because [...] they're kind of loaded with a lot of dialogue and I always find that there's a kind of intellectualism that comes out in French film that sometimes leaves me a bit cold'. This then moves to an understanding of stardom, 'I think also with Isabelle Huppert [...] she represents a lot of French cinema, it's like when you see her I find that she brings so much baggage with her of all these other films that I've seen her in', and concludes with a further discussion of the film's generic 'Frenchness':

I also sometimes find with French film, and this is from me watching quite a lot of French new wave film, that sometimes it just meanders and it doesn't quite go anywhere. I haven't seen this film so I don't know where it goes to but I always find with French film, and maybe I was finding this as well, is that there's always this little air of mystery that's being woven into everything, but sometimes it just doesn't go anywhere. [...] Beautiful to look at but I just felt it's a bit too loaded by Frenchness for my own liking.

While Clark consistently illustrates a highly advanced level of cinematic literacy, his response is still imbued with personal anecdote and reflection, justifying his analytical judgment through reference to that prior knowledge *alongside* a set of interpretive resources rooted in his own life experience and personal circumstances.

‘I’m never going to go and see that view but to be given the chance to really take it in was great’: Wonder, scepticism, and the knowing pleasures of analysing a documentary film.

To gain an appreciation of how these specific interpretative domains come together in practice around a single film, we turn to *The Eagle Huntress*. The film was notable in our focus groups as the only example of a documentary. Clearly the conspicuousness of a contrasting genre (when compared with the other examples under discussion) helped to draw attention to the film’s distinctive textual features, but it nevertheless elicited a broad range of rich responses to its specific elements. The film depicts the struggles of a Kazakh girl as she attempts to overcome conservative gender traditions to become an eagle huntress. The emotive and tightly constructed narrative qualities have led critics - and some of our participants - to doubt the film’s authenticity: ‘There have been suggestions that the audience has been misled for dramatic purposes: Aisholpan is not the first eagle huntress in her community; and it is alleged that the “opposition” to her vocation might not have been as vociferous as we are led to believe’ (Ide, 2016). Moreover, the documentary, and this particular clip, make extensive use of crane shots, and in particular drone shots to spectacularly depict the vastness of the landscape. Thus, the film’s ‘constructedness’ is palpable in multiple ways and, as we will see, our participants frequently developed readings which centered on these elements. As Thomas Austin’s work on responses to documentary shows, audiences are able to engage both with the documentary text as a source of potential knowledge *and* to recognise its artifice:

[...] viewers expected to find elements of authority (along with some dullness perhaps) in the documentary genre. But this does not mean that they assumed that documentary could offer unmediated access to 'the truth'. The general coexistence of a degree of trust with a degree of scepticism is significant because it refutes some problematic claims made by scholars about the gullibility of spectators, who are often assumed to approach documentary as a transparent rendering of 'real life'. (Austin 2005)

Similarly, many of our participants confidently showed an awareness of *how* the documentary was making meaning while simultaneously delighting in the pleasures of those effects. Carolyn (urban North West) was typical of this position:

I found it completely fascinating as a record of a way of life, it's astonishing that it still clings on in this century and how they're adopting some modern things, they've got the solar panel and the radios and so on, and yet they're still going out in the summer and putting up the gers and living there. The young woman is enchanting, the family, the faces are just absolutely marvellous and it raises questions about how could it be completely a documentary? I think some parts of it must have been re-enacted for the camera and, I don't want to give away the ending, but how astonishing that they started with this particular girl and this particular family but it seems inevitably to leads to the way it ends.

Clearly Carolyn is not duped by the film's creative interpretation of its material - indeed she openly suggests that it *is* scripted - and therefore she maintains a clear understanding of how the film's form is designed to elicit specific audience responses. Yet, this formal awareness does not diminish her sense of pleasure in the film as a textured representation of an unfamiliar life and story world. Cody (urban North East) expressed a similarly multi-layered account:

I was completely suckered in by it. [...] But that for me, I just think was a really good example of somebody spinning a narrative using documentary footage. However, I did pick up very much that a lot of it was staged, that did take me out of it ever so slightly. I don't know whether the film itself agrees with a lot of my standpoint views on certain things or whether it just kind of got me emotionally, and I was manipulated a bit.

Again, the awareness of being 'manipulated' is not achieved at the expense of pleasure - rather, interpretation is rooted in a conjoined attentiveness to formal conventions and a reflexive sense of the elements of film form that foster emotional response and enjoyment.

It was not the case that all our participants shared in the feeling of being complicit in the film's emotive and artificial formal characteristics. Basil's (urban South West) condemnation of the film was rooted in the realisation that he *was* aware of the film's conspicuous deployment of its devices:

[...] it was almost like a comedy mickey-take in a way when they all sat down and you could see they obviously had two cameras there and they were looking at it at the end of the day and you just thought, mm, I don't, I'm not feeling this. [...] it's not subtle is it? It's butted up against and it's that kind of - I disagree with it! [...] instead of telling you about this story they've stood up there with a big megaphone and blasted it at you.

Basil's cynicism aligns with a broader strand in several of our responses (Forrest and Merrington 2021b), with many participants openly resisting what they considered didactic formal elements, where meaning making felt overly directed and disempowering.

In a wider sense, however, there was clear enthusiasm for the film's spectacular and emotive qualities, and this tended to be rooted in an appreciation of its technical features. In these responses, disclosure of emotional engagement with the film was arrived at alongside and not in conflict with an awareness of the formal dimensions of the film as a text. For example, Elizabeth (urban South West) described how she was 'nearly crying, it was amazing, beautiful, it was incredible', and yet this sense of almost being overwhelmed by the film does not diminish her capacity to understand why she feels this way: 'they held the shot for a long time just to really let you get taken in by that amazing view because, as you say, I'm never going to go and see that view but to be given the chance to really take it in was great'. Indeed, the aerial shots in particular seemed to unlock for viewers a sense of cinema as enabling otherwise impossible perspectives, which have the capacity to transform one's own sense of place, as Dorothy (urban North West) noted:

I think the vastness of things always make you feel like you are [...] insignificant, but it kind of lifts you above yourself or the problems about humanity in general [...] But I always have that feeling when you look in films when you're above the Earth as well, looking at that, a lot of directors want to show that moment. I feel that when we're above things or we see a big wide shot of open space, it makes you feel like your problems are insignificant in a way and there's a connection there between something bigger.

Here, our participants are once more explaining how particular formal characteristics and cinematic conventions are resulting in specific reactions, acknowledging authorial presence and intent in the process. Similarly, Cheryl (urban Yorkshire) commented of the landscapes that it was 'very easy to get lost in them because it was so different to any landscape that I've ever experienced so I really liked that, I felt like it was really easy to get immersed in what was going on', going on to note that 'the aerial shot was amazing as well. I feel like the person who got to make that documentary, that must have been an amazing job to do because it's such an interesting story and it's such an interesting place.' Cheryl shows how being aware of the film's formal qualities also opens up the lines of empathy and identification not just with the film's characters but with its authors, too. This was also identified by Emily (urban Yorkshire):

It's a fascinating film to watch, not just for the cultural aspect, for the landscapes as well, they're stunning. I were thinking the really big wide shot that must have been, I'm no film director but it must have been a drone, it set me off thinking wow, how have they done that? I suppose shooting a film like this it must be quite difficult and

it made me think of how they involve themselves but not change, am I making sense?’

Emily’s reading takes account of the technology deployed to produce the meaning, the presence of the crew, the ethics of documentary filmmaking more broadly, and textual spectacle of the sequence, powerfully illustrating the richness and depth of a response which acknowledges form and content in unison.

Conclusion

Emily’s comment that she is ‘no film director’ reveals a tentativeness which belies the complexity and multiplicity of her response to the film. Although she never identifies herself as a cinephile - earlier describing how her commitment to tennis in the summer took precedence over visits to the cinema - when given the opportunity to reflect on the medium and its particular meaning-making qualities she shows a significant capacity to participate in the interpretive pleasures of specialised film. While our participants’ everyday engagement with what might be understood as ‘film culture’ varied dramatically, along with their confidence in deploying technical language and film knowledge, there was widespread evidence of a capacity and enthusiasm to approach the films critically and to identify their textual properties and their significance as works of art. Our participants frequently indicated the pleasure of such analytical activities, showed a willingness to switch registers between critical and more personal interpretative resources and illustrated an ability to assign specific textual characteristics to generic categories. Such conclusions point towards the necessity of the exhibition cultures and practice that uphold specialised film paying attention to the barriers to participation that present themselves in and through the experience of cinema viewing in all its forms. Our focus groups frequently showcased how - with the right conditions - there exists deep *potential* to develop lasting, transformative relationships with the medium for those who had previously not regularly engaged with specialised film.

While these conclusions are important for how we might develop audiences, they are also relevant to our understanding of what constitutes the ‘reading’ of film. The responses analysed in this article offer alternative approaches to textual analysis as a means of assigning meaning and value to films as aesthetic objects and experiences. The analytical narratives and frames of interpretation developed by our participants *are* attentive to questions of authorial agency and show an appreciation for the formal qualities of the medium, and there is evidence that those with formal and informal film education freely drew on film studies vocabulary and an established sense of film history, showing alignment with the kinds of academic and critical discourses that sit at the top of critical hierarchies. Yet, these reading strategies mesh with narrative fragments drawn from the life course, pointing towards a more multivalent and textured form of reading which is located within

the lived experience of audiences. In this dynamic, the film as a text, and the contextual experience that frames it, is analysed through recourse to everyday life, with quotidian narratives working alongside and in symbiosis with what we might understand as more orthodox ways of seeing and making sense of film. By tracing the relationships between interpretative processes and the more subjective and emotive frames that our audiences bring to their particular investments in a film, we might move towards an account of the medium which is inherently sceptical of those reading strategies (and attributions of value) which emerge *only* from academic textual analysis, and which fail to acknowledge the rich interpretative capacities of audiences.

Biographical Note

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