
Tom Stempel. *American Audiences on Movies and Moviegoing*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001. 280p.

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Stempel attempts to do for the movies what Janice Radway did for the Harlequin romance in *Reading the Romance* and Cathy Davidson did for the colonial American novel in *Revolution and the Word*: make the reactions of actual, everyday audience members count more in their critical assessment. Too often, he asserts, academic film critics fail to account for the lively “blood sport” of watching movies in America, or for “how personal moviegoing is” (xi). Thus, throughout his book, Stempel describes the experience of watching movies not only in terms of technique, performance, and theme, but also with an eye toward neglected factors such as the environment in which they’re watched (with a date, as part of a raucous crowd), the music (“wonderful and loud,” as one subject recalls of the *Raiders of the Lost Ark* soundtrack), and even the trailer that prompts us to attend the movie in the first place. Stempel’s approach is proudly and purely (well, almost) subjective: he’s interested in *how* people respond to movies and doesn’t much care to examine *why*. Rather than being a systematic study of audiences in terms of economics or psychology, *American Audiences on Movies and Moviegoing* is really a sort of collective memoir of a national lifetime going to the movies.

That’s a worthwhile goal, but Stempel’s achievement of it is uneven. Some problems are obvious—notably, that the 158 people he surveyed (mostly his own students at Los Angeles Community College) can’t really stand in for a whole nation of moviegoers. While Stempel suggests that many movies (such as *Star Wars*, the subject of its own chapter) work better than most critics admit when the audience’s whole experience is considered, his respondents often seem even harsher and pickier than most critics. Not only *Star Wars* and *Top Gun* but critical darlings like *Citizen Kane* and *The Godfather* receive their share of audience drubbings, and one wonders whether the predominance of Stempel’s own film-history students among those surveyed hasn’t introduced a subtle bias. Are some of these assessments influenced by a desire to impress the teacher with a keen critical eye and a resistance to being too easily impressed? (To be fair, Stempel also includes comments suggesting that *Kane*, *The Godfather*, and even *Star Wars* have changed some

viewers' ways of understanding not only the world, but life itself.) We should give Stempel a little bit of a break here: he intends this study to be a corrective to the overly objectified, sterile approach of many film studies, and so to complain about the intentional lack of quantified data would be to misunderstand the spirit of the book. We're meant not to be persuaded by his findings, but to *connect* them to our own moviegoing experiences.

Still, some implications of Stempel's study are more disturbing and detract from the value of the book. An arguably benign stereotyping of African American movie audiences pervades much of the chapter titled "Black and Dark," in which Stempel asserts, "Given the influence of religion in the African American community, several of the seventies horror films that appealed to black audiences dealt with pseudo-religious subjects" (96). The chapter continues, frustratingly, with several accounts of white viewers' discomfort at seeing movies like *Menace II Society* and *Nightmare on Elm Street Part 3: Dream Warriors* in gang-riddled areas of Los Angeles. While Stempel tries to mitigate the appearance of a racial bias in this section, noting that the only time he personally felt threatened by an audience it was composed "almost exclusively [of] young white males" (102), the shape of the book—the way Stempel has gathered and arranged these narratives—seems governed by some rather quaint assumptions about who Americans are. Despite his best efforts, the American moviegoing audience comes off in his book, unfairly to them, as a middlebrow monolith. Even for readers interested in the entire moviegoing experience, there are more locker-room style descriptions of getting lucky at drive-ins ("The thing that was so great about it was that I even got to hold her breast inside of her brassiere. I have never felt that good since") than are really required. Stempel throws in a few cursory movie-date narratives from women's perspectives to seem balanced, but the whole perpetuates a rather old-fashioned stereotype in which prim women ward off grabby, hormonal men (unless the man happens to be an especially serious film connoisseur, in which the stereotype may be amusingly reversed). A major flaw of the book is that it does not often challenge, but merely flatters, audiences' ideas about movies, moviemaking, and American life, especially when those ideas (in turn) flatter Stempel's own observations.

The main strength, then, of Stempel's study—that it takes average Americans' responses to the movies seriously—is part and parcel of its primary weakness. On one hand, Stempel gives voice to factors like the pure joy given by Gene Kelly's performance in *Singing in the Rain* that traditional film criticism might too easily ignore or dismiss. Then again, Stempel generally comes off as too dismissive of filmmakers' attempts to challenge the audience thematically or artistically. Spike

Lee's experiment with distortion caused by an anamorphic lens in *Crooklyn* is disparaged, for example, as "annoying" to audiences (151). Yet surely Lee didn't suppose, in employing the technique, that he was trying to appeal to an average audience member's comfort level. Is there no value in reaching a relatively small segment of moviegoers especially powerfully, as Lee has done throughout his career? Stempel writes with the implicit assumption that any filmmaker's job is to please as many people as possible. One would like to think, however, that taking the audience seriously doesn't have to mean *not* taking the director's choices as an artist seriously as well. The flaws of this book, one might argue, are merely the flaws of the moviegoing audience whose views Stempel claims to represent—a tendency toward nostalgia and stereotyping, an aversion to any form of artistic experimentation and most forms of social commentary, and so on—yet I'm not entirely convinced this is the case; nor, if it is, do I see all that much value in merely reinforcing what most people already believe to be true. A book like this one, I'd suggest, works best when it brings art and audience closer together; this book, however, in general leaves them as far apart as ever. ✨