Beyond the Multiplex: Audiences for Specialised Film in English Regions

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Beyond the Multiplex project background

The aim of the project is to understand how to enable a wider range of audiences to participate in a more diverse film culture that embraces the wealth of films beyond the mainstream.

- Context: unequal regional provision of specialised film and access to diverse film culture across the UK
- 3 year project: 2017 – 2020
- Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council
- Focused on four English regions: the North East, Yorkshire and the Humber, North West and the South West.
- Primarily addressing ‘specialised film’ but also looking at the relationship between mainstream and non-mainstream film

Interdisciplinary project team

- Prof Bridgette Wessels (Principal Investigator, School of Social & Political Sciences, University of Glasgow)
- Prof Andrew Higson (Co-Investigator, Department of Theatre, Film and Television, University of York)
- Michael Pidd (Co-Investigator, Director of The Digital Humanities Institute, University of Sheffield)
- Prof Simeon Yates (Co-Investigator, Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor Research Environment and Postgraduate Research, University of Liverpool)
- Dr David Forrest (Co-Investigator, Senior Lecturer in Film Studies, School of English, University of Sheffield)
- Dr Peter Merrington (Research Associate, School of Social & Political Sciences, University of Glasgow)
- Matthew Hanchard (Research Associate, School of Social & Political Sciences, University of Glasgow)
- Katherine Rogers (Digital Humanities Developer, University of Sheffield)
- Dr Nathan Townsend (Associate Lecturer, Department of Theatre, Film and Television, University of York)
- Dr Roderik Smits (Research Associate, Department of Theatre, Film and Television, University of York)
Challenge of film audience research and our proposed ‘solution’

- Snapshot surveys or small-scale qualitative studies do not capture the dynamics of film audiences, their experiences or their backgrounds in regional contexts.

- How to understand audiences in depth and at scale.

- How to link policy, production, distribution, exhibition, consumption and the meaning of film at a regional level.

- Therefore a multi-dimensional approach required that brings together different insights into audiences and how they are developed.

- Four research themes: Regional specialised film consumption / The meaning of specialised film for regional audiences / Place, venue and events / Policy and industry.
Research methods and data

- National film policy and industry analysis to assess regional access to film
- Secondary data analysis to develop socio-cultural backgrounds of film audiences nationally
- 200 semi-structured interviews (50 in each region) to understand film, cinema and film events from people living in English regions
- 16 focus groups (4 in each region) to explore the meaning of film for audiences
- 28 elite interviews with film policy makers, regional exhibitors, and distributors to understand the concerns and approaches to regional film provision
- A longitudinal survey (of three waves) in our regions to understand patterns of film consumption through time

Project outcomes

- Working with the BFI's regional Film Audience Network (FAN), in particular Film Hub North and Film Hub South West
- Stakeholder group – audience development workshops with regional organisations
- Online research resource – searchable database
- Book and publications
The picture from the UK: Patterns of film consumption

- In 2017, 760 films were released for a week or more in the UK
- In 2016/17 57.8% of adults watched a film at a cinema or other venue over a 12 month period (84% watched a film on television)
UK Screens and admissions by region, 2017

Source: BFI Statistical Yearbook 2018

The proportion of adults who watched a film at a cinema or other venue and adults who watched TV who watched a film, by demographic group, 2016/17. Source: DCMS (2017) Taking Part focus on: Film
This indicates that all three groups are more likely to consume film at the cinema than engage in any other form of cultural activity.

- **Group 1**: general consumers who have a high probability of consuming a wide range of culture, such as films, theatre, music and art exhibitions. Film has the highest probability of consumption.

- **Group 2**: limited consumers, who have a low probability of consuming culture across all areas. Film at the cinema has the highest consumption, followed by live music.

- **Group 3**: general consumers with specific cultural interests who have a high probability of consuming culture across all categories. The probability of them attending film at the cinema is highest of all three groups.

Sources: the UK government Department of Culture, Media and Sports (DCMS) ‘Taking Part’ survey 2016/2017 (DCMS, 2017); and the British Film Institute (BFI) ‘Opening Our Eyes’ survey (Northern Alliance and Ipsos MediaCT, 2011)
Five distinct sub groups (clusters):
1. Art house and foreign language film
2. Romance and romantic comedy
3. Drama, comedy, action and thriller
4. Fantasy and sci-fi
5. Classic and documentary

• Art house film/foreign language form a distinct cluster, and those who prefer such films are a distinct group that consumes film across multiple genres and formats

• Those who view film in many formats also watch art house and foreign language film, even if they do not prefer these genres
Patterns of film consumption

- Film, highly popular, blurring of preferences, five clusters of genres

- Art house film/foreign language form a distinct cluster, and those who prefer such films are a distinct group that consumes film across multiple genres and formats.

- 80.1% of those who fall in the ‘Specialised’ film genre group are also members of the class most likely to watch any genre of film

- Those who view film in many genres also watch art house and foreign language film, even if they do not prefer these genres

- People who watch ‘art house’ or ‘foreign language’ film are likely to be: under 55, earn over £30,000 per annum, hold a degree or higher qualification and live in a city

- The changing mainstream – rise of the boutique cinema chain, divergence in cinema pricing and online distribution and consumption
UK policy and funding overview – BFI’s Film Audience Network and support for film exhibition

- The BFI became the UK’s lead agency for film audience development in 2011 and they work alongside other organisations such as the Independent Cinema Office, Into Film, Cinema for All and Arts Council England.

- BFI Funding Priorities in Film Forever (2012-2017) “Strategic Priority One: Expanding education and learning opportunities and boosting audience choice across the UK.”

- Greater focus on audiences and diversity. 2012 - Film Policy Review Panel publish an independent report for DCMS: ‘A Future for British Film: It Begins with the Audience…”

- As part of the BFI 2022 national/regional devolution strategy, the BFI Film Audience Network created eight regional Film Hubs with a total annual budget of around £4m.

- The National Lottery is the primary source of public investment in regional film audience development. In addition to BFI FAN this includes around £8m annually for Film Heritage projects and the BFI Film Audience Fund to support special programmes and film festivals.
Mapping diverse film exhibition in English regions

1 - Diverse across areas of film exhibition
2 - Narrow diversity relative to size
3 - Small, independent but temporally limited
4 - Commercial dominance
5 - Limited or no opportunity to experience film theatrically

• Degrees of diverse film exhibition

• Sets of existing relationships - the context in which audiences may find themselves

• Possible / potential relations of local engagement in diverse film exhibition

• Dynamic and changing over time – possibility of new and changing relationships
Diverse film exhibition

Cosmopolitan urban centres such as Manchester, Bristol, Newcastle, Sheffield and Leeds, well served for both commercial cinemas as well as having at least one independent venue and often other areas of film culture such as a small production base, festivals or other cultural organisations with a focus on film or the moving image, such as archives, galleries, museums, universities etc. They may also have multiple layers of commercial cinema activity such as boutique cinemas.

Wide ranging opportunities for people to experience a diverse film culture.

“I think we’re very lucky. Here in Bristol, there’s lots of… Em, there’s lots of places you can go to watch films, em, and culturally diverse as well. So you can… You can get access to lots of different types of films…”

Narrow diversity relative to size

Cities such as Sunderland, Liverpool and Hull are well served for commercial multiplexes, but independent film culture is limited to small-scale, self-organised often temporary initiatives, but there may be other cultural organisations that engage with wider moving image culture such as museums or galleries.

Some opportunities for people to experience a diverse film culture.

“Probably, we don’t have as much as other cities or towns. We got a cinema but we don’t have an independent cinema, the mainstream shows Hollywood stuff… but independent British films, em, I had to say access to like the rest of the world is with Netflix and stuff.”
Small, diverse, independent but temporally limited

Often small towns such as Berwick, Keswick or Hexham, they may have a single screen independent cinema but no multiplex, often additional events or groups such as film festivals or film clubs, that happen at irregular intervals. Most initiatives are supported by volunteers and/or public funding to a large degree.

Some unique opportunities for people to experience a diverse film culture.

“I don't think Berwick would be the same without the Maltings [Arts Centre]. Yeah! We are very lucky to have it. If you want to get...like if you want..., blockbuster type films, Berwick is not great. I mean it is going to be like two months after its released that we get it (laughs), but the main thing is the stuff the film society show, I think.”

Commercial dominance

This might be more affluent towns or larger urban areas that have one or more commercial cinema, which could be a multiplex and a boutique cinema, but choice of film is limited to these commercial venues, may have some small-scale locally organised film events or clubs.

“I mean, you need a car here actually. You can’t just get to it on a bus or anything to see it ‘cause there is one of these out-of-town things, but they are building a new one right at this moment in the town. So that’s… Gonna be eight screens or something.”
What do audiences tell us?

Insights from the interviews and focus groups

- **Audiences** – relationships with film
- **Practices** – viewing habits and sharing film
- **Value of film** – the meaning of film watching in everyday life
- **Value of cinema** – theatrical exhibition
- **The significance of place** – diverse film cultures
- **Reasons for watching** – re-thinking escapism
- **Film preferences** – introductions to film beyond the mainstream

Nicole (North East interviewee)

“It’s pleasurable, it’s something that I enjoy doing, but it opens you up to different cultures, different people, different ways of living, different ideas about the world, I think it’s really important to watch things that you might not necessarily choose to watch actually because they might surprise you…”
What do audiences tell us? Factors influencing film and venue choice

- **Informed choice, seeking trusted sources of information**
  "I might go and see it, I don’t know. I just don’t know enough about it, I’d want to go and look it up and read about it first"

- **Friends and family**
  "I go from cues from my wife as well, she’ll say, fancy watching this?, ‘I am quite easily led, so if somebody said, stick with that, I probably would"

- **Independent cinema, trust and venue branding**
  "But every film I’ve seen here, most of them, I’ve loved. They’re just, for me, they’re aimed at not the mainstream but just off-centre and I love that, a bit of quirkiness"

- **Relationship to film subject:**
  "that’s too close to work and too close to home so I deliberately didn’t go and see it"

- **Mood**
  "…I’d probably want to be in the right frame of mind, possibly watch it in the daytime not the night time"

- **Choosing where to watch**
  "It’s the kind of film I probably wouldn’t come out to the cinema for but I would certainly watch with interest at home"
What do audiences tell us? Interpreting and understanding non-mainstream film

Viewers locate themselves in place and time

• Pleasure in landscape
• Imaginative exploration
• Imaginative travel

Emotional identification and investment

• Relating to characters

The pleasures and labours of interpretation

• Engagement and disengagement
• Subtitles

A sensory appreciation of film style

• Touch
• Empathy
• Physical reactions

"a window into a culture that you wouldn’t normally see”

"I could completely see what they were feeling, relating to my own experiences, just from the way that they hugged”

"I think, 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”

"I have a choice to either read the subtitles or watch what’s on the screen, and at that point I lost interest with the subtitles”
Developing audiences for ‘specialised film’ - Some key points and challenges

• The research aims to understand the richness of film experience and patterns of cinematic engagement

• Our data provides both large-scale patterns but also very rich individual experiences. There is both diversity of experience as well as identifiable trends

Re-thinking regional film culture - Developing diverse film cultures

• Reaching new audiences

• Community and cinema – starting with the audience

• Programming – diversity, new voices, young audiences
Thank you

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Find out more about our research and sign-up to our newsletter at https://www.beyondthemultiplex.net/

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