



Cinema-going, Audiences and Exhibition

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Published

2011

Journal Title

Media International Australia

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‘Cinema-Going, Audiences and Exhibition’

Karina Aveyard and Albert Moran

Introduction

In late 2010, Karina Aveyard participated in a discussion with a group of friends in Sydney about the upcoming release of *The King’s Speech* (Hooper 2010). There was an air of eager anticipation, largely among the females in the group, as the film starred the dishy Colin Firth and involved some interesting Australians in key roles. It was also being tipped as a possible contender for major category Academy Awards. The group’s members had an extended discussion about the cinema at which they would see the film – this was determined largely by whether it would be an excursion after work and therefore take place at one of the multiplexes in the city, or whether they would make a special event of it and see the film on the weekend at a suburban art-house venue. Ultimately the group members decided on the latter and went for a drink afterwards. Among the males in the group there was noticeably less enthusiasm for the film and the excursion to the cinema. One of the males remarked that *The King’s Speech* was not the sort of film that was worth seeing at the cinema. Lacking as it is in charged action sequences and dramatic special effects, it was thought by this friend as not offering value commensurate with the price of a cinema ticket. Another commented that although he was interested in seeing the film, he was too busy to see it at the cinema and would wait until the DVD release. Someone added that he would not have long to wait, given how quickly films seem to appear in this format.

While somewhat unremarkable in itself, this conversation is useful in highlighting some of the multiplicities of the modern cinema experience – the myriad of factors that can influence decisions about how films are watched and the viewing options that now exist outside the movie

theatre. As a leisure and cultural pursuit watching films remains more popular than ever before. Whether enjoyed at the cinema, played on a DVD or Blu-ray machine and viewed in the family living room, accessed online, or watched by oneself on a mobile device, the film experience is a living part of what it means to be socially connected in the early twenty-first century. Movies have the power to entertain, confront and transform – they can influence our outlook of life, death and everything in between. Film viewing also facilitates a range of important social and spatial interactions that intimately shape the lived experience of public and private life. Just over a hundred years since film first entered the margins of public consciousness it has never been easier for audiences to access and watch audiovisual content.

A brief history of the film experience

During the first half of the twentieth century, cinemas provided the sole point of access to filmed entertainment. Retrospectively this period is often seen as the zenith of film exhibition - the time during which cinema was transformed from its tentative beginnings on the periphery of public entertainment to a mainstream, regularised leisure pursuit. The cinema's rapid growth did ignite a level of moral panic and it became an important focus for contesting ideas around personal values, censorship, and high and low culture. However, arguments concerning the immorality of movie-going were not ultimately persuasive to the general public, and within a generation attending the cinema had become a habituated activity for significant sections of the population in the United States, United Kingdom, and elsewhere (Gomery 1992, Waller 2002, Hanson 2007, Shirley and Adams 1989). In Australia, film screenings began as part of touring shows and variety acts in the early 1900s. The first dedicated cinema venue opened in 1909 in Sydney, and within ten years Australians were going to the cinema on average as often as twenty times a year. While admissions

were subject to some annual fluctuations, particularly during the Depression in the 1930s, this level of attendance was largely sustained into the early 1950s (Screen Australia 2011a).

However, since the mid twentieth century cinema has experienced some mixed fortunes. From the 1950s until the mid 1980s admissions were in alarming decline in many parts of the world. Despite the best efforts of exhibitors to entice patrons back with innovations such as wide screens, improved sound and a series of incarnations of 3D, audiences tended to stay at home. Olins and Hanson (2007: 93-94, 125-128) have argued that in the United Kingdom, a large part of the problem was that after World War II cinemas had become run-down and were no longer enjoyable places to visit. In Australia and the United States the exhibition industries were boosted by the advent of drive-in theatres, which successfully capitalised on the increased suburban spread of metropolitan populations, the rise in private car ownership and the appeal of cheap family entertainment. While drive-ins were popular they were not able to arrest the overall declining trend. Throughout the 1970s in Australia, for example, cinema admissions averaged just two visits per year (Screen Australia 2011a).

This troubling situation for cinema did begin to turn around in the mid 1980s when major exhibitors began building large multi-screen film venues in retail malls and self-contained entertainment precinct developments. The success of these initial ventures and the boom in multiplex theatre construction that followed has been widely attributed to the dramatic resurgence in the popularity of cinema-going as a leisure activity around the world in the past three decades. In Australia within ten years of the opening of the first multiplexes in the mid 1980s annual admissions had more than doubled, increasing from 30 million in 1985 to reach 70

million by 1995 and climbing further to 90 million by 2009. The 2009 admissions equate to an annual attendance frequency of around 4.5 times per person – a far cry from pre-1950s levels but sufficient nonetheless to support an industry generating box office receipts in excess of \$1 billion a year (Screen Australia 2011b). The effectiveness of multi-screen exhibition in breathing new life in cinema-going has been underpinned by several key factors - the growth in screens has provided audiences with more opportunities to see films, albeit mostly mainstream content; co-location within shopping malls and leisure centres increased the number of potential customers passing the door, particularly among the vitally important 16-24 age group (Hubbard 2003: 1240, 1249); the new aesthetic and technological wizardry of the multiplex successfully created a space that people wanted to inhabit (Hanson 2007: 175-177); and a more consistent output of blockbuster Hollywood releases ensured this new generation of patrons have had something appealing to watch (O'Regan 1996: 111).

The second major influence on film consumption since the 1950s has been the development and widespread adoption of a range of home viewing technologies. As the vanguard of this change, it was television that initially introduced audiences to a new way of watching films, and a range of other content. The introduction of home video in the late 1970s/early 1980s liberated viewers from the programming agendas of distributors and broadcasters, delivering more control over what they watched and when. While home video has since been superseded by higher quality formats such as DVD and Blu-ray, these technologies function effectively in the same way - providing convenience and choice within a domestic setting, and generally at a lower cost than going to the cinema. To this the Internet has added a further option for the circulation and viewing of film content. As a low-cost and highly accessible distribution platform, the Internet

has become a popular site for sharing low-budget, specialised and/or sub-legal material that can be watched on personal computers, mobile phones and iPods. In cultural terms, these technologies have been significant in extending the locational interface of film spectatorship beyond the public domain to include the distinctive socio-political structures of the domestic sphere.

The presence of domestic viewing technologies has become commonplace, although most devices are not utilised solely for the purpose of watching films. In Australia 99 per cent of metropolitan households own at least one television, while 68 per cent have two or more (Screen Australia 2011c), 87 per cent have a DVD player (Screen Australia 2011d), and just over three quarters (78 per cent) of homes have access to the Internet (ABS 2009). Television and other non-cinema screens are becoming increasingly sophisticated and are often marketed as recreating the best of the cinema experience in the comfort of the home. The level of film consumption occurring via these formats is difficult to measure with any accuracy. However, it is clear that collectively they account of the majority of movie viewing. Non-theatrical windows, such as video, cable, broadcast television, now represent as much as 70 per cent of the revenues generated by Hollywood studio films (Belton 2002: 107). In Australia, the value of retail DVD sales surpassed cinema box office revenues for the first time in 2003 and has exceeded it every year since (Screen Australia 2011a, 2011e).

Surveying the Field of Film Scholarship

Over the past two decades cinema scholars have become increasingly interested in understanding the broader spatial and cultural aspects of film circulation and consumption. Framed in part by concerns to have emanated from other disciplines, such as history, geography and cultural studies, this emerging field of research has signalled a decisive critical shift beyond traditional text-centred analysis of films and their interpretation by audiences. For example, scholars such as Kathryn Fuller-Seeley (2006, 2008); Richard Maltby (2003), Graeme Turner (1999) and Gregory Waller (2004, 2005), have demonstrated how cinema-going is shaped not just by screen content, but also by the wide variety of times and places in which it occurs. In a similar vein, studies by Douglas Gomery (1992), Janet Harbord (2002) and Deb Verhoeven (2010), have foregrounded the industrial processes of distribution and exhibition as a means of understanding the practice of exhibiting and watching films at cinemas and in other viewing environments. A number of the contributors to this special issue have also made pivotal contributions to broadening and consolidating this area of research activity. Robert Allen (1990, 2006) and Kate Bowles (2007a, 2007b) have enriched the history of cinema-going activity by drawing attention to the situation of different marginalised audiences. Mark Jancovich (2003) and Janna Jones (2003) have demonstrated the myriad of factors that shape the economic imperatives and cultural aesthetics of cinema exhibition and attendance. Collectively these and other researchers have made important contributions to widening the scope of cinematic inquiry. However, a great deal more work is required in order to close the gap that has arisen between this field of research and other media disciplines with regard to socially and culturally situated inquiries.

Despite its obvious relevance to cinema studies, there has been a hesitancy in acknowledging the legitimacy of movie-watching outside the cinema. Several issues are of relevance here. First, the industry continues to promote feature films as possessing a distinctive 'cinematic' quality. This perception is shaped to a large extent by marketing, where the primacy of the theatrical release is asserted through its exclusivity, and the promotion of the cinema as the optimum setting in which to watch films. Popular advertising slogans in Australia include 'See it Now – Only at the Movies' and 'Bigger, Better, First – Only at the Movies!'. Other viewing formats are inferentially positioned as secondary, a view that is reinforced in industry terminology that marks them as 'non-theatrical' and 'ancillary' windows despite their economic importance.

The second issue of relevance has been the tendency among film scholars and other cinefiles to see movie theatre as the only authentic site for watching films. As British filmmaker Anthony Minghella explains '[T]he magic of cinema in the cinema is connected to two unique conditions – the sharing of an experience in an audience and the contemplation of images projected on a scale beyond the perspective of normal perception' (Beinart 2005: 7). Susan Sontag goes further declaring '[T]o see a great film only on television isn't really to have seen that film' (quoted in Klinger 2006: 3) However, scholar Barbara Klinger has been less dismissive of the importance of domestic film viewing. She argues that regardless of the distinctions drawn by the film industry and others, audiences now fully 'anticipate a continuum between private and public cinemas' that allows them to choose the viewing format that best suits their personal circumstances. Further Klinger contends the integration of film into the home entertainment landscape has greatly enhanced its popularity as a leisure pastime (2006: 3-5).

As a result of the critical disinterest in consumption within the home, there has been little research focused specifically on the uses of film content within these 'other' settings. Much of what we understand about how the organisation of the home can shape the practice of viewing is instead informed by television studies, such as David Morley's seminal *Nationwide* audience research project (1986) and work by scholars Roger Silverstone (1994), Ellen Seiter (1999) and Kirsten Gorton (2009) which emphasises the interconnections between watching television and the structure and process of everyday life. Another problem for cinema researchers interested in engaging with audiences in these new settings, has been the fragmentation that inevitably occurs across domestic platforms. At one time the audience for a film could be regarded as a tangible mass assembled in a particular time and place, and able to be quantified through data such as tickets sales, gross box office receipts and entertainment taxes. Domestic audiences, on the other hand, have been rendered much less visible by the privacy of the home and lack of meaningful measurability of this viewing activity. Inquiries based on investigating audiences within domestic settings has largely been within the domain of television studies, notably by scholars such as Ien Ang (1991, 1996), Tulloch (2000) and Webster et.al. (2006).

Investigations focused more broadly on the nature of the contemporary multi-platform consumption and communications environment have tended to be framed primarily through the concept of convergence. Work by Henry Jenkins (2006) and the various contributors to Janet Staiger's edited volume (2009) have emphasised the liberatory capacities of these new technologies, particularly the Internet, and the ways in which they can encourage greater consumer participation in the media chain. The attention given to film within these discourses has tended to focus principally on content flows - how corporate interests, such as Hollywood

studios, archaically attempt to control the movement of content through various release windows, and how the availability of content generated outside these systems are indicative of the freedoms of the new media frontier, albeit for a select and privileged group of users.

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This special issue of *Media International Australia* represents an effort to progress critical understanding of the broader social and economic formations that shape the consumption of films. It presents current critical perspectives from senior scholars, whose work has played a leading role in shaping this relatively new field of critical inquiry, together with articles by promising early career researchers. These contributors draw on studies conducted in Australia, but also internationally from Taiwan, United Kingdom and United States. The collection provides a range of diverse and compelling insights into the processes of film circulation and viewing both within the home and at the cinema. Accordingly these articles address important questions such as: Why do audiences seek out film content? How are films accessed and by whom? What place does film have in popular social memory? How does the site of consumption shape the meaning of these cultural encounters? By what processes can we identify and study audiences?

The first two articles in the issue are concerned with general matters of space and time. We begin with Robert Allen's examination of the shifting sites of film viewing in the United States and the differentiated experiences of audiences at the cinema as opposed to those watching in domestic spaces. It draws on material from his cinema history project, 'Going to the Show' centred on North Carolina between 1896 and 1930. Illuminating the experiences of African-Americans at the cinema during this period highlights how geographic place can shape the complexity and multiplicity of audience experiences. It also questions the primacy of individual cinematic interactions within this complex web of heterogeneous interrelationships. Examining another aspect of film's temporality Mark Jancovich considers the impact of time on movie spectatorship. Meanings of consumption have inevitably changed over a history of industrial, technological and sociological developments, from the early twentieth century to the present. Jancovich investigates how these and other chronological markers, such as the passage of life, annual and weekly lifestyle rhythms help to structure viewing practices.

Shifting the focus to consumption within the home, Janna Jones examines the significance of family 'movie-night' to contemporary young adult audiences in the United States. Based on rich ethnographic material emanating from student essays, Jones demonstrates how these ritualised nights-in help create spaces for shared family leisure time that enhanced domestic cohesiveness. The lack of recall about the film content consumed as part of these family viewing experiences is a significant finding and offers an important counter perspective to narratives wedded to the notion of the isolated and disconnected Gen Y consumer.

The fourth and fifth articles focus on various elements of screen technology. Kate Bowles engages with technological innovation and the recurrent commercial failure of 3D, tracing its early development to its most recent digital incarnation. Examining stereoscopic exhibition as a distinctive mode of presentation, Bowles highlights some of the tensions between industrial market analysis and theoretical perspectives on the imaginary spectator. Moving to the technological sphere of the Internet, Ramon Lobato evaluates the oppositional discourses of the free speech orientated anti-copyright movement and hardline intellectual property enforcers by focusing on positions advocated by digital pirates and their various arguments in favour of the deregulation of online content. Drawing attention to the online space as a site of liberation but also of class privilege, Lobato deconstructs some of the current myths that exist around prevailing free culture positions.

Authors Karina Aveyard, Hongchi Shiau and Kirsten Stevens use specific instances of spatialised consumption to highlight the diverse contemporary geographies of film viewing. Karina Aveyard examines how the distinctive contexts and meaning of film attendance in contemporary rural Australia is shaped by location. Connecting these experiences with those of audiences in other nations and time-frames reveals important connections between modern and historical film attendance practices, which have hitherto been obscured by scholarly neglect of the rural. Aveyard's analysis suggests these provide a basis for rethinking the way in which cinema audiences are categorised and studied.

The article by Hongchi Shiau and Karina Aveyard is based on empirical research on the exhibition of independent films in Taiwan. The study, conducted by Shiau, examines how

innovative private sponsorship arrangements have been used to support and sustain successful theatrical release of local films in a Hollywood dominated market. Focusing on the city of Melbourne, Kirsten Stevens engages with arguments concerning the sustainability of global film festivals. Rejecting concerns about the self-defeating trajectory of these events, Stevens contends their diverse and pervasive nature posits festivals as an innovative exhibition system filling the void created by an increasingly mainstream and predictable arthouse sector.

The issue concludes with an article by Amanda Malel Trevisanut, which addresses the issues of how we identify and study film audiences. The primacy given to viewing that takes place within cinemas through the industry's preoccupation with box office results all but ignores audiences that watch films in other formats. This is despite the fact that economic data suggests these 'alternative' sites of consumption increasingly represents the normative viewing experience. As Trevisanut demonstrates the perpetuation of this partiality by federal film agencies has important implications for film policy and the future of ongoing government funding in Australia.

In summary, the issue spans a diverse range of perspectives. It assembles current insights and analysis from some of the world's leading cinema scholars and combines these with new directions being forged by early career researchers. The aim of this collection is to extend and enrich critical understanding of the practice of movie viewing and the infrastructures that control the means by which this occurs. It also highlights how much more needs to be done in order for our research to more adequately account for the diversity and complexity of the film experience and its interface with everyday life.

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