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Launch of the Beyond the Multiplex: audiences for specialised films in the English Regions project.

A short report highlighting some key points from the day



Wednesday September 27th 2017 at [Showroom Cinema, Sheffield](#), South Yorkshire S1 2BX



The event attracted 38 representatives from BFI, ICO, FAN, Showroom Workstation, Sheffield Doc Fest, Watershed, HOME, Broadway, Glasgow film, Film Northern Ireland, Film London, Audience Agency, Cinegi, Birds Eye View, universities, INTO film and many more.

Overview

The launch of Beyond the Multiplex: Audiences for specialised films in the English Regions (BtM) was designed to introduce the project to stakeholders and to provide an opportunity to discuss how the project can better support stakeholders in their day to day work. Keynote speakers set out the current specialised film context including the challenges and opportunities ahead and the support available.

Four facilitated discussions about audiences took place during the afternoon covering policy, exhibition, research and audience development. Headlines from discussions:

- While a significant number of films are released each year, a large proportion of specialised films will not reach wide audiences even via online platforms.
- For venues and community organisers, a sense of 'place' is increasingly important; the location, the surroundings, the food and drink offer, the ambience and more is key to sustainability. These variables are difficult to separate so a holistic approach to promotion is essential.
- Unlike a standardised product there is no right way of selling a film, it is long-term work and crucially involves building trust between audiences and curators. Place-based cultural organisations also have to foster a distinct identity that may not allow much scope to experiment with new ideas.
- Findings from community cinema suggest that technology-driven exhibition is less important than the shared experience, the conversations and/or creating a 'vibe'.
- For independent venues getting the balance and relationships between mainstream and specialised programmes is another important aspect.
- Word of mouth was acknowledged as the most powerful marketing tool especially when it involved social media. Older audiences are more loyal and vocal in their support of other audiences, particularly young audiences.
- All groups highlighted the importance of the 16-30 year old demographic and understanding the audience member's journey, what stimulated their individual interest in film and where/how/when did their own personal journey into specialised film begin?
- Knowledge gaps about relationships and flows of audiences between traditional venues, festivals, pop ups and community cinema was a frustration as was the lack of information about online viewers and those audiences who did not engage with specialised film.
- The Holy Grail would be to collect data about the 'journey' of audience members over the long term. The 'ideal research' project would investigate the influence of 'place' on preference and behaviour and how online platforms impact upon choice and film watching behaviour.

The Launch of the Beyond the Multiplex project was well received with participants commenting on the 'buzz' created. Importantly participants expressed a desire to stay connected with the project throughout the research process. In terms of metrics, the Launch had encouraged over 150 interested parties to get in touch with the project team. Following the Launch we now have a wide and varied stakeholder group who we will update about the project with our quarterly newsletter and doubled our Twitter following.

Photographs from the day can now be viewed on the [project website](#).

Keynote Speakers

Professor Bridgette Wessels of Newcastle University hosted the launch. Bridgette leads the BtM project team, which comprises researchers from Newcastle, Liverpool, Sheffield and York universities.



Introductory talks from different perspectives were given by four industry representatives:

- Anna Kime (Film Hub North) who had been instrumental as a partner in the pilot project and supporting the Beyond the Multiplex funding application.
- Ian Wild (Showroom Workstation) talked about the changing film venue scene from arthouse to cultural film venue. He noted that although changes in the way everyone worked seemed small there were big differences in context such as the increasing use of social media platforms and a need to find out more about existing audiences, potential audiences and growing audience diversity.
- Catherine Des Forges (Independent Cinema Office) talked about the extent of engagement evidenced by ICO data and the potential that exists in finding new ways to use data, to tease out and evidence success stories.
- Sarah Jane Meredith (BFI) informed delegates of the different ways BFI supports film and the priority to grow diversity and allow for new ideas, testing new propositions, etc.

Bridgette Wessels then presented an [introduction to the project](#) emphasising the important role of industry partners and stakeholders. Representatives from the Audience Agency and the Film Hubs participated in the ensuing question and answer session.

Themed discussions



Ben Luxford (BFI) introduced the discussions and highlighted the large number of film releases each year and the challenges associated with diversifying and growing audiences for specialised film, e.g. 821 films were released in 2016. However, the top 100 deliver 92% of the gross box office (see BFI Statistical Yearbook 2017 for more information). The evidence suggests that the market share for the specialised film economy has decreased although BFI2022 highlights opportunities as well as the challenges associated with this metric.

The themed discussions gave delegates and researchers an opportunity to talk around these opportunities and barriers in the following four areas:

1. Audiences and Policy
2. Audiences and Independent Exhibition
3. Audience Development
4. Audience Research

Audiences and policy

Professor Andrew Higson and Dr Peter Merrington facilitated a discussion around strategy and the implementation of national audience policy at the regional level, especially BFI2022, which has a strong focus on developing audiences, e.g. by increasing audience choice.

The discussion focused on how venues and the cinema experience was changing as audiences responded to the pluralisation of ways to watch films (online, VoD etc.) and changing release patterns.

The discussion also addressed the increasing volume of films available highlighting that they were not necessarily widely accessible. The discussants questioned how, given the large number of new films released and the breadth of programme in the UK, an exhibition ecology can be fostered that maximises audiences. Responses to this focused on venues and organisations which provide a cinema experience and the successes and failures of online platforms to reach certain audiences.

It was questioned whether capital investment should be made in new cinemas in areas that are badly served by the existing provision. Despite its obvious potential to reach new large audiences for specialised film,

online viewing was not meeting expectations, however, discussants mostly acknowledged that the plurality of ways that audiences can watch film and in a variety of settings was important and should be factored into any deliberation of a supported and sustainable film ecosystem.

There was also a discussion about the role of the BFI and how production and distribution funding decisions were made, what priorities were given and how audiences were considered in this process.

It was acknowledged, that within the film ecosystem, there were different economic priorities and pressures from different quarters, e.g. cinemas, festivals, distributors, and funders.

It was agreed that approaches to audience development shouldn't take an 'eat your greens' approach to encourage film consumption, but that a broad film eco-system should be supported and audiences encouraged to explore and develop their own taste. Fostering access to a broad film culture for young people was also considered a priority so that young people are given the opportunity to develop a personal relationship with film accepting that this will change and develop over their lifetimes.

Audiences and independent exhibition

Dr Dave Forrest and Annabel Grundy facilitated a discussion around how different types of independent exhibition feature in audience experience taking into account the many ways audiences now experience specialised film, e.g. independent cinemas, events, art galleries, festivals, film clubs or by streaming services and viewing online.

Audience preference

In response to questions about shaping audience preferences it was thought the curatorial voice of the venue was fundamental and that curators have to ensure that they and the venue are meeting the needs of both their wider demographic and those of the loyal audience.

Preference begins with the programme and thinking through how we communicate with audiences, e.g. the 'tone' used in the promotional material, the venue, the holistic experience. When audiences come into a venue, do they feel comfortable, do they 'own' the space – a venue identity approach is about creating a sense of place. This raises questions as to whether people come for the films or is it the place that draws them. An example being 'HOME' where the aim is to provide and foster comfort.

An interest was expressed in the relationships between full time cinema versus pop up versus festival participation. The latter two categories drive risk-taking behaviours. People buy into the event/festival and that allows more variety and more challenging films to be included in the programme.

Identity and Cross-over

Discussants felt that people generally don't self-identify with a particular form of cinema going. It was also felt that people identified with the venues rather than the programming per se.

While venues do show some mainstream films to act as a gateway there has to be a balance and more understanding is needed about the relationship between mainstream films and the more specialised programme.

How do audiences identify with particular kinds of exhibition? Movio and other box office data can provide detailed information about an audience in terms of what they watch, who they watch with, what they buy etc... but there are other bits of data that are missing, e.g. we know little about audience members that don't visit or who come once or twice a year.

Venues require a clear unique selling point (USP). The long-term value of ideas around eventisation was questioned because venues, as place based cultural organisations have to foster a distinct identity which doesn't leave much scope to experiment with new trends.

Throughout, discussants returned to the concept of 'place' and that their film programmes relate to this sense of place identity. Audiences for specialised film were thought to respond better to a trusted curatorial voice rather than an algorithmic approach. Venues are social spaces and in the cases of Tyneside and Showroom people use the space without necessarily watching a film.

Understanding relationships and the flows between venues, community cinema, independent exhibition and their audiences was felt to be not well understood. Venues have to work at being holistically welcoming and at the same time find out more about their relationships and links to community cinema viewing.

Alternative cinema

Discussants expressed an interest in knowing more about DIY culture, 'pop up' cinemas and alternative experiences and how they feed into and relate to more established film culture that permanent venues seek to stimulate. The trends in community cinema suggest that technology-driven exhibition is far less important than the shared experience. Many new release films are about spectacle, e.g. Dunkirk is about the cult of the technology. On the other hand, the film, God's Own Country was about new release 'buzz' and stimulating new conversations. While consumer technology can deliver certain aspects of the cinema it rarely offers the scope, quality and communal experience of the cultural venue. At the same time this 'communal experience' can be off putting to some groups.

Other areas of interest for this group of discussants was the audience member's journey, what stimulated their individual interest in film and where/how/when did this journey being.

Similarly, to other sessions it was pointed out that the 16-30 year old demographic is crucially important to the success of film and venues although innovative engagement is required.

Audience Development

Anna Kime led this discussion around the types of approaches that might be used to develop audiences and any barriers or difficulties faced.

A wide term

While audience development was described as a wide term there was agreement that much more could be learned about the subject area, not least, why some people don't engage with a more specialised film offer.

Audiences can be split into either Loyal Audiences or New Potential Audiences but that belies the many ways that individuals begin to grow their interest in films and understanding their 'journey' towards specialised film becomes key if we are to develop audiences.

Place

For venues, ideas of 'place' are becoming increasingly important; and part of this is the location, the surroundings, the food and drink offer, the ambience and much more, variables that are difficult to separate.

Influencers

Creating influence by getting a conversation going was thought difficult because of the competition for people's leisure time and that big conversations around a single subject, like a film, do not happen anymore.

Word of mouth was acknowledged as a powerful marketing tool which included the use of social media. Discussants talked about the value of influence led programmes (where the audience become the influencers, helping to build the networks, grow film expertise and promote the offer).

Older audiences were thought of as the venue's 'bread and butter', and it was pointed out that they are also vocal in their support of developing or influencing other audiences, particularly young audiences (as the audience of the future they had to targeted).

Drawbacks

The actual job of developing audiences is not straightforward. Unlike a standardised product there is no right way of selling a film, it is long-term work and crucially involves building trust between audiences and curators. Drawbacks or difficulties faced by organisations who want to develop audiences for specialised film include:

- A price sensitive product which gets cheaper to consume over time
- The product is also seasonal so there will be different results depending on when the film is released
- Threshold anxiety, where groups of the local population feel the venue or location is not for them (this might be for a number of reasons)
- Many people miss films because they have no one to go with
- For people to attend a venue they have to trust all aspects of the venue itself and possibly other aspects such as the local transport offer.

Audience Research

This discussion focused on existing types of audience research related to specialised film and was facilitated by Professor Bridgette Wessels and Mike Pidd.

Quantitative versus Qualitative

While a lot of research concentrated on metrics - in terms of audience development qualitative data was found to be more useful. The relative absence of qualitative data being a frustration in the sector.

Discussants also found survey data tended to be too narrow in its focus or encompassed too few people. They wanted to see more research into the non-engaged perspective although there seemed to be challenges in getting at the perspective of the non-engaged in both qualitative and quantitative research.

Perspective was also problematic in the context of research investigations since it was not always clear who was conducting the research and subsequently if the questions and findings could have been influenced by a particular agenda.

Discussants felt that surveying or interviewing film goers was better done prior to watching a film (rather than afterwards).

Audience trust and engagement throughout the research process

Building trust and engagement with audience members under investigation will be dependent on factors such as region, context and place. These spatial concepts were expected to be significant e.g., residents of rural areas may be more suspicious of questionnaires and being asked questions than city residents who are more used to being surveyed, being asked questions and generally being detained for a variety of reasons.

This led on to the issue of 'fatigue' and whether the public now suffers from 'survey fatigue' (being fed up with answering survey questions). Some ideas were proposed to overcome reluctance to participate:

- Incentives – including information rewards, e.g. BBC class survey where respondents filled in a survey to find out their own class classification. The BtM survey might be pitched as a way of finding out something about yourself, such as projected longevity or what kind of film watcher you are (based on the types of films you watch and your cinema-going habits)
- Fully utilising Film Hubs who have already engendered a strong role in engagement and communicating trust, both amongst existing audiences but also amongst their members making Hubs significant in the research design.
- Empowering a local community to engage with the project and supply their own data
- Asking people to design their own film season or programme providing insights into understanding film preferences

This prompted discussants to highlight the importance of ethical and sensitive research design that did not overly encroach on an individual's privacy and personal space. Further, it would seem that researchers rarely do enough to explain what the purpose of the data collection is or what they will do with the subsequent analysis.

The Holy Grail

...is to collect data about the 'journey' of audience members over the long term. For example, looking for patterns in film watching preferences and behaviours over time. Do they change as we age? Presently this is only possible by asking older people to recall earlier memories. Is there an approach that can capture a more nuanced and more time relevant picture?

The 'ideal research' project would also show the influence of 'place' on preference and behaviour and provide insights for programmers. In addition to 'place' the influence of online platforms on choice and film watching behaviour, is also an important factor.