



# Beyond the Multiplex

## Findings and Recommendations

## Beyond the Multiplex: Findings and Recommendations

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See also: <https://www.beyondthemultiplex.org>



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## Introduction

This report aims to address Beyond the Multiplex's (BtM) core research question: How do audiences engage with, and form in different ways, around specialised and mainstream films? This question is fundamental in order to achieve the project's aim – to better understand how to support audiences to engage with a range of film beyond the mainstream.

The report uses BtM's theoretical framework and concepts, along with its key findings, to show the different ways audiences configure within English regions and how the audience as a process underpins specific audience configurations. The dynamics of these configurations materialise in the ways in which personal film journeys, geographies of provision, the mixed economy of provision, and lived film culture feature in particular instantiations of audiences.

The report first provides a summary of BtM's aims and research questions, before discussing the study's key theoretical conclusion, namely, that the audience is a process. Audiences form as multidimensional configurations of five main types of experiences. This report therefore discusses aspects of this multidimensionality that shape the different ways in which audiences form. The report offers insights that will be valuable to policy makers in informing audience development strategies, and to exhibitors and allied professions in supporting and enhancing audience experiences.

In discussing this, the argument expands to see the significance of film policy and practice in supporting people's personal journeys with film, and how these journeys have social and cultural value for individuals and the dynamics of wider culture. The report concludes with further areas of research, policy recommendations, and web links to the Beyond the Multiplex Audience Data Platform and downloadable datasets.

## 1. Summary of Beyond the Multiplex

The aim of the BtM project is to understand both 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, and how to optimise the cultural value of engaging with those less-familiar films. BtM focused on how audiences engage with, and form around specialised films in four English regions – the North East, Yorkshire and the Humber, North West and the South West. The project started with a working definition of audience formation as the processes of engagement with films that generate audience experiences. It explored this idea by undertaking empirical research in the four above-mentioned English regions which differ in terms of venue-based provision of specialised film; therefore, have less opportunities for people to engage with a wide range of film. The project's central research question was: How do audiences engage with, and form in different ways, around specialised and mainstream films? To address this question, the research examined film policy; analysed the socio-cultural profiles of film viewers and their preferences; undertook in-depth qualitative interviews with viewers in each region, film elicitation focus groups, a large survey of film viewing at three points over six months, and elite interviews with those working in film policy and industry; and developed policy recommendations using a Delphi methodology.

In order to address the aim and the central research question, BtM paid attention to the existing theorisation and conceptual development of film audiences, then advanced this knowledge using empirical research and an innovative methodology. The research began with a relatively open theoretical and analytical framework that sees audiences as relational and interactive within the broader context of film as a cultural form. Taking this as a starting point, the empirical research took an inductive approach across all the areas of data collection, analysing the data thematically within each dataset and across multiple datasets, assisted by a computational ontology. This produced the key argument in contemporary society, audience is a process, and this process creates distinct

instantiations of specific audience formations and experiences. The process is multidimensional, consisting of personal journeys with film, five main types of audience experiences, the geographies of film provision, film viewers' interpretive resources, and film policy, independent cultural cinema and mainstream commercial cinema. This argument advances theorisations of audiences and their conceptualisation by developing earlier theorisations of audiences as relational and interactive and by identifying audience types that will inform the debates about audiences being fragmented and diffuse.

## **2. Audiences: theorisation and concepts**

The ways in which audiences are defined, understood and theorised has changed ever since audience studies began. Advances in defining, understanding and theorising audiences are related to developments in film as a cultural form, which include changes in production, distribution and exhibition, changes in the types of films produced, and changes in how audiences can access and view films.

In general terms there has been a move from studies of cinema-based mass audiences to those depicting niche, fragmented and diffuse audiences. There has also been a shift from depicting audiences as passive, positioned by texts which give little room for interpretation, to one that sees the audience as active viewers who are able to interpret the texts in various ways. These general shifts and their theorisation, however, do not fully address contemporary differences in film audiences. There remains a general lack of understanding about how audiences are evolving and how best to think about these changes, conceptualise, and theorise them. This is significant for film policy makers, the film industry, and exhibitors, because the challenge they are facing is how to address changes in audience formation in order to develop audiences and new audience experiences. Achieving this requires not only gaining new knowledge about audiences, but also understanding how to think differently about audiences in order to take appropriate action. One advantage of finding new ways to think about audiences is that it helps to generate new ideas about how to develop and sustain audiences. Furthermore, it aids the stakeholders of the mixed economy of film to ascertain where they feature in audiences as a process, what their specific offering is and how and why audiences form around their film, screen, and venue options.

There is widespread recognition from scholars, as well as from the film industry, policy makers and exhibitors, that audiences and audience engagement is evolving. Scholars, policy makers and industry professionals have put forward many reasons for this, including technological change based on digital technologies and platforms, changing film preferences in relation to the socio-demographic profiles of audiences, and the degree film can compete with other media in the digital age. Although each of these do factor in the ways audiences for film engage, these factors do not fully grasp the dynamic of change, because social and cultural change is multidimensional, often context-specific and processual.

To counter these gaps in the knowledge, BtM has achieved an empirically informed theoretical development. Drawing on a mixed methods dataset that includes in-depth qualitative data, large-scale survey data as well as secondary analysis of survey data and policy documents, this theoretical development speaks to the dynamics and patterns of contemporary audiences. Informed by empirical data, it has produced an original analytical framework comprising concepts and meta-concepts, from which the study's theory was developed.

There was therefore a three-level analysis: first, an analysis of empirical data to identify the specific characteristics of contemporary film audiences in English regions; second, the development of concepts and meta-concepts to compile, collate, codify, decipher, and analyse the various dimensions, practices, and experiences of film audience formation; and third, the development of a relational and interactive theory of audience as a process:

- The process of engaging with film shapes an appreciation of film and what film offers – at individual, family, and peer levels and at wider community and cultural levels.
- The way film is shared and talked about at individual, family, and peer levels, in education, and in public and media discourse shapes levels of critical engagement with film and fosters an active engagement with film – whether radical and artistic film or film as entertainment. This enhances film for individuals but also creates audiences who actively question and challenge film narratives and representations for displaying bias or prejudice and for reinforcing stereotypes.

The audience is active in multiple ways – in how they engage, in their interpretations of film, and in questioning the norms and values represented in film. Film is also part of people’s social lives in the ways they share film and participate in audience experiences. Film provides a focal point for people to talk about and discuss, and these conversations vary across a range of topics, from new releases to details of the narrative. Film is part of a wider socio-narratology of social and cultural points of interests, of issues and of opening up new worlds and imaginations. The precise nature of these discussions varies in relation to the type of film, the subject matter and narration. Nonetheless, through critical engagement, film generates opportunities for discussion, reflection and identification with issues, characters, and situations. These opportunities have cultural and social value for individuals, for local and regional lives and communities, as well as wider society. Given this, it is important to increase equality of social participation and cultural engagement, so BtM set out to identify effective ways to achieve this.

### **3. Introducing the main argument: research framework, audience as a process, and the openness of film**

The argument made in this report advances theory and concepts of audiences, since acknowledging an audience as a process will enable film policy makers and providers to think differently about how they can engage with audiences and develop audiences.

This novel perception emphasises that ongoing communication outside of and beyond specific film screening is part of audiences, revealing the need to appreciate where a particular film provider sits in that process, and what their specific offer is compared to all the other options open to film audiences. It also recognises that:

- People configure into different types of audiences.
- They choose certain types of experiences for particular reasons.
- They mix and move between those experiences.

This understanding also raises questions about how film policy and provision can support people’s journeys with film across the range of offerings available. In so doing it identifies the role of cultural/independent cinema within the wider film environment as one that seeks to support personal film journeys by providing diverse programming and the opportunities to critically engage with film and develop film interest and knowledge.

The audience as a process is therefore part of the wider film and cinema environment of commercial film and cinema, independent film and cultural cinema, and film policy, which all shape film provision, distribution, exhibition, and programming. There is a relationship between film provision and audiences in that each exists in relation to the other. The power between the two is in constant play because, although film provision determines what is produced, released and distributed, audiences have an impact by deciding whether to watch a film or not and assessing its quality.

Thus, there is a creative aspect to both the decisions made about production and programming in relation to perceived audiences and creative in terms of audiences in the ways they may or may not engage with particular films. Framing this creativity through the lens of film as a cultural form makes film simultaneously personal and cultural. This is because film connects with viewers in a very personal way, something unique to a person, however, that connection is shaped by shared wider culture. Film communicates, interacts and mediates subjective and intersubjective understandings. Seeing film as relational with film audiences in this sense therefore provides a different perspective from theorists who assert that film is a mass industrial form of culture, as well as those who advocate a postmodern play of form, content and interpretation. In contrast, this report argues that there are creative and more structural aspects of both the formation of film audiences and of the film audience as a process.

There is one characteristic of film that is part of film audiences as a process, and which recognises the specificity of film as a cultural form and activity. This report terms the characteristic the ‘openness of film’, arguing that openness is a different concept from ‘popular’ – whether a popular cultural form or a popular activity. Film is a highly popular cultural activity and one that is deeply embedded into the socio-cultural lives of people living in English regions, throughout the UK and, indeed, for many people globally. Very often the popularity of film is conflated with seeing it as popular culture. There is a strong and established argument that film is a form of popular culture, and this is not being denied. However, the perspective of film as popular culture overlooks the artistic and experimental aspects of some types of film, and the way that their diverse stories, narratives and evocations invite people into different worlds and worldviews.

Film has the ability to open up opportunities for people to gain insights into different cultures because it is accessible, it enables a wide range of people to engage with it and offers different journeys for people to explore different aspects of film. These factors extend the notion of film being popular into film being open. Film being open – this openness of film – means that people can engage with it in varying ways (within the resources they have) to create their own personal journeys with film and generate what film means for them. In concrete terms this enables them to develop their film interest by exploring the range of film available, enjoying films with others in various types of audience experiences, developing their film viewing habits as they wish and in varying circumstances and life stages. It offers opportunities for individuals to develop knowledge and critically engage with film on the one hand, or to decide to view it more as a piece of entertainment on the other hand.

At the heart of understanding what film means for people, how they engage with film and participate as audiences are the relationships they have with film as a social practice and their interactions with film and within audience experiences. These relationships and interactions are situated in social and cultural lives and are contextual in terms of the characteristics of film provision, media usage, venues and place, as well as individuals’ interests, education, work and life situation, and stages of their lifecourses. A particular point about understanding film audiences is the need to acknowledge some of the social and cultural factors that influence the ways in which people relate to and interact with film – whilst recognising that these are not determining. Imagination, personal interests, and enjoyment of films (both specialised and mainstream) equally feature in engagement and audience participation in people’s creative relationships with film.

Theoretical and conceptual discourse in general has moved from viewing audiences as mass to seeing them as niche, and realising that their engagement with texts is active, rather than passive. The development of knowledge about audiences has been partly driven by the changing ways people can engage with film and the development of new ways of being part of an audience and in audience formations.

There are a number of factors that feature in these changing audience formations that have been identified by BtM. Some factors are changes at structural, economic and institutional levels that feature in shaping the ways that audiences can engage and form. Other factors are a range of social aspects that shape how individuals can develop a relationship with film, including their work-life balance, social life, family and friendship circles, wellbeing, financial situation, and life stage. In addition, there are cultural factors involving people's formal education and cultural education, as well as their engagement with various cultural and media content, involvement in specific community and cultural groups or networks, and their other personal interests. All of these factors combine in various ways to configure a basis of audience formation.

This process of combination and configuration materialises through a set of relationships that constitute film as a cultural form and the interactions within that cultural form. As far back as 1998 Livingstone had asserted that audiences should be conceptualised as relational and interactive in order to address the complex ways in which people, texts and media configure and to examine the various ways people engage with and participate in audiences. The concept is helpful and BtM developed the concept as part of wider theorisation of audiences in terms of film as a cultural form and in audience formation.

#### **4. The audience as a process**

The main theoretical conclusion reached by BtM is that the audience is a process. This is defined as a process that involves the ways people develop relationships with film and the level and types of provision. This process is realised through distinctive relations that audiences have with film and their film audience experiences, and through a specific set of interactions they have with film and within audience experiences. So, overall, the audience as a process is constituted through the relations and interactions of audiences. The key relations are with screens; venues and place; audience types; and other people, socially and culturally, in lived film culture. The interactions are with friends, family and wider communities; screens and venues; film throughout the lifecourse; film stories through interpretive work; and the practices of audiences. These relations and interactions form audience as a process in general terms. Film audiences' relations and interactions are interwoven and come together in varying ways, depending on audience members' personal life experience; life stage and circumstance; access and engagement with culture; the media (broadly defined) and screens; and with place-based film culture at the local level.

These relations and interactions are composed of a set of meta-concepts, comprising personal film journeys; geographies of film provision; a mixed economy of film provision and policy; types of audience experience; lived film culture; and social and cultural value of film. The meta-concepts identify the various aspects of the audience as a process that support interest in – and engagement with – film. Together, these aspects coalesce to form a process that underpins and characterises audience formation. A key feature of this process is that it is dynamic and flexible because relationships with film and with film audiences are configured in various ways with people drawing on their resources, life stage, experience, and interests to create their personal journey with film and their film audience experiences.

By understanding audiences as being both particular instantiations and in formation, BtM has produced a rich and dynamic knowledge of audiences and their experiences which includes what individual viewers bring to audiences as well as what producers, distributors, exhibitors and programmers bring to audiences. This novel theory of the audience as a process reveals what conditions are needed to support the development of audiences – both in terms of size and type of audience and in terms of active engagement with film, its narrative and its techniques of representing and telling stories. It highlights the importance of the resources people have to develop a relationship with film, how that relationship changes over the lifecourse, and the point that the relationship is personal to every individual within their own cultural context. This finding is a valuable insight for those, such as policy makers, seeking to develop audiences.

## 5. Personal film journeys

Personal engagement with film during the lifecourse is a journey through which people develop a relationship with film. This is both individual and collective. It is individual in the ways that film preferences develop and what film means for each person. It is also collective in that the stories film tells and how it tells those stories are part of broader socio-cultural life, connecting individual experience with wider social and cultural knowledge, topics, and narratives. The ways in which the connection between a person and film is lived and understood is through their personal journey, which is socially shaped through their access to resources, education, local film culture, and place of residence. However, this shaping cannot be reduced to social factors alone because, as discussed above, creativity is part of the development of personal lives, including the meaning film has for individuals, in how they develop film interests and preferences and where film features in their social lives. Thus, the social shaping of each personal journey is also culturally informed, since wider culture, symbolic systems and cultural knowledge feature in the ways audience members make sense of film, interpret film narratives, and judge film quality.

The engagement with film in these life journeys varies in several ways:

- An individual's level of critical appreciation of film.
- Creative engagement with film – how film opens up a person's imagination to new worlds and ideas or, in contrast, reinforces their existing biases and worldviews.
- How people engage with film at certain times of their lives, whether at the commonly experienced life stages or through particular circumstances.

More generally, variations occur through the opportunities individuals have to engage with film – through their access to film, to venues, programming and events, and to a local film culture.

Personal film journeys are part of people's lifecourses – and lifecourses are part of personal lives. In terms of personal film journeys this is seen through the ways a person progresses through life, gaining new experiences, new friends and family members, new jobs, homes, interests and so on. These changes feature in their film choice, types of audience experiences and the types of audiences they choose to participate in. Understanding this means recognising that the types of film and types of audience experiences people want changes in relation to their life stage from childhood to old age. This is not new information and film production, distribution, and policy focus on programming for different life stages, portraying stories that will appeal at particular life stages and will resonate with life experiences. Nonetheless, by defining the concept of personal film journeys, BtM has added a deeper processual understanding to what can be considered a marketing and business perspective. This will enable future analysts to assess and understand why certain types of film and types of film



audience experience appeal at particular life stages and how film choice and audiences vary in relation to specific life events or life stages in people's personal journeys.

This is important because, although there are trends in film preferences in relation to life stage, gender and age, as BtM shows, these do not narrowly determine what types of films people may choose at these moments. One key illustration of how film preferences are not strongly determined in socio-economic terms uncovered by BtM is education – both formal and informal, the level and type of formal education does feature in the ways in which people develop their film preferences, as does informal education through film clubs, the wider media and shared film interests with peers. As the project's socio-cultural index shows, those with higher levels of education engage with more film and with a wider variety of film than those with only school-level education. However, the index also suggested that this is not a strong correlation and – as the interviews, surveys and focus groups revealed, people learn informally about film and other cultural activities through their friends, clubs, media and wider cultural life, which also develops their level of engagement with film as well as their breadth, depth and range of film preferences. This rich understanding of the choices people make throughout their lifecourses is a useful finding which could also be employed in social and community strategies for using film to support people's health and wellbeing. The applied benefit of this is that it will enable those working in audience development to take a longer view of film engagement and develop strategies to facilitate people's journey with film throughout their lives.

Furthermore, applying BtM's notion of personal film journeys is a useful way to address the limitations of binary assessments that denote film viewing and audiences as being either passive or active, by recognising viewers' creativity of engagement within wider influences of narrative or representation, film distribution and levels of cultural resources. Personal film journeys recognises that the digital media-saturated worlds of Western societies raise people's knowledge of media and their digital literacy, which feeds into the ways they engage with and interpret film. This awareness will allow analysts to assess a specific aspect of film in society, that it is a highly accessible cultural activity. This concept recognises the double bind of film – whereby film allows for creative engagement as well as structuring of engagement but, equally, enables audiences to engage with film in ways that make film their own, because the individuals within those audiences gain meaning at both a personal and an intersubjective cultural level. Personal life journeys draw on the range of resources that people have - both socio-cultural and interpretive.

## **6. Geographies of film provision**

Geographies of film provision underpin the ways in which audiences form through personal film journeys.

There are five different geographies of film provision. These are: (1) diverse film cities, whose centres offer a broad range of venue types, providing a variety of films through various exhibitors and film-related organisations; (2) mainstream multiplex cities, which often have well-established local culture and leisure economies, but offer only a limited range of non-mainstream film; (3) diverse film towns, which have independent film exhibition, but no multiplex provision; (4) mainstream film towns, which often have a multiplex cinema but only limited levels of independent provision; and (5) limited underserved areas, where there is little or no film provision of any kind, often requiring travel to reach the nearest cinema.

## Diverse film cities

These city centres have a wide variety of film exhibition across mainstream and specialised film exhibition. There is a diverse range of activity such as film festivals, talks and events as well diverse programming. They have a diverse ecology of exhibitors and film-related organisations. These cities stand out as offering something different and unique within the regions, giving audiences a sense of choice and diversity in their film watching, in terms of both programming and audience experience. Examples include Manchester, Bristol, Newcastle and Sheffield.

## Mainstream multiplex cities

These are cities with mainly mainstream multiplex cinemas. They have well-established leisure and night-time economies but only limited independent film exhibition provision. Examples include Hull, Liverpool and Sunderland, which have similar-sized populations to the most diverse film cities but a smaller range of film exhibitors, being especially underserved for independent and non-mainstream film. Within these areas there are limited opportunities for audiences to experience diverse film culture beyond the commercial mainstream.

## Diverse film towns

These towns have a thriving independent local film exhibition ecology and often lack a mainstream cinema. They have developed a unique range of exhibitors offering audiences the chance to see a range of films that would not be available in many of the cities, either those we have categorised as being diverse or mainstream. Towns such as Hexham and Berwick-upon-Tweed in Northeast England, Keswick and Leigh in Northwest England, Stroud in the South West and Hebden Bridge in Yorkshire all have a range of different types of film exhibitors offering broad programmes.

## Mainstream film towns

Mainstream film towns have multiplex cinema provision from the main national chains but limited independent provision of any kind. Here programming is limited to watching what these chains show and, while there may be some local film clubs, these usually only engage a small audience. Examples includes Barrow-in-Furness, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Rotherham, Doncaster, and Warrington.

## Limited underserved areas

Underserved areas are those that only have irregular film exhibition via locally organised film clubs in community venues, and where film is mainly accessed via television, DVDs, and Video-on-Demand (VoD), and streaming and subscription services such as Sky, Netflix and Amazon Prime Video. These include urban and rural areas, some of which are close to areas with more highly developed film provision, where there is an expectation that local communities will travel to watch film.

The geographies show that place-based provision, types of venues and programming all have a distinctive role in underpinning lived film culture and personal film journeys. Place-based access is not the only access to film, since media such as terrestrial television has a history of programming film and, with the rise of digital media, platforms for film and digital television are expanding and have extensive market reach. Although relatively free from physical place-based constraints on film provision and audience events, the provision of film via media and digital streaming interacts with the geographies of place-based provision. This interaction of place-based provision and media and digital provision materialises in the types of screens used to view film and the context of those different screens. This means that the meta-concept of geographies of film provision constructed by

BtM is useful in supporting an analysis of the ways in which audiences configure the different types of film provision they have access to by shaping their film and audience experiences. It also points to the different geographical aspects of provision and the ways that provision across physical and digital nodes intersect with each other. BtM analysed the following points:

- Where there are gaps in provision that might well reduce the availability of a broad and diverse range of film.
- How access to one type of provision can complement another type of access, or how one type of access can limit people's ability to develop their relationship with film.
- How the characteristics of film provision are assessed by audiences in relation to their lived film culture.

These issues highlight the challenges for audience development in localities within regions and in finding ways to support equality of participation in film, since these inequalities are shaped by the mixed economy of provision as well as underlying social and cultural inequality. However, the role of BFI film policy, regional FHs and FAN and cultural cinema, film clubs and community cinema are important in addressing inequality. Evidence that BtM has gleaned about respondents' personal journeys with film illustrates that people's creativity and the openness of film means that with support audience development can be achieved and, thus, the social and cultural value of film can be realised.

## 7. Types of film audiences

BtM found that there are five types of audiences, which are: individualised, group, venue-specific, global, and digital audiences and that people take part in each of these audiences.

Individualised audiences are characterised by people choosing to watch films alone, either when at home, at the cinema, or in other places. This experience involves an immersion in film content, with people seeking to limit any distraction from that immersion by others. The opportunity to have free time to watch alone is often tied to being within early adulthood, a life stage where people tend to watch films in order to learn, to experiment and take risks, and develop their own sense of personal film preferences.

Group audiences are characterised across a range of groups that range from two, three or four people through to larger social groups. These are composed of friends, family and/or acquaintances which may or may not include children – who gather to enjoy the social and shared experience of watching together, while maintaining a sense of immersion in a film. This can also extend the enjoyment of seeing a film with friends and family into other shared activities around film viewing, such as having a meal or coffee together before or after seeing a film.

Venue-specific audiences form around an affinity with a particular cinema, based either on the physical building, the venue's film programming, or the sense of community amongst the other people who go there. Audience members' relationship with a particular venue involves making judgements about the type of audiences a venue attracts often generating a feeling that others who go to the venue share a similar interest in film.

Global film audiences involve a sense of oneness and of being 'in the moment' when watching newly-released or significant films in the same timeframe as others globally. Audience members are aware of others watching the same film and sharing its reception and a reflexive engagement with the cultural, political and social values that circulate around a particular film. This audience type forms around a specific temporality – watching at around the same time as others globally – and emerges through a shared perception that some films are more poignant and important than others.

Digital audiences are aware that others are watching a film too by drawing on algorithmically-generated reviews, metrics and other viewers' opinions, as well as social media group discussions as resources to make sense of how a particular film has been received by others. The choice of film watched by digital audiences is informed culturally and socially by peer recommendations.

Across all five audience types, people engaged with film across its cultural, social, political and community aspects. The cultural value of film and specific narratives and content were seen as important and the social value of film was appreciated through the way it brings friends and family members together to watch film. Feelings of community were also treasured, whether belonging to venue-based communities or being involved with global and digital audiences around films that raise cultural, political, and social issues.

## **8. Lived film culture**

Lived film culture acknowledges that film culture extends into the social and cultural lives of audience members. The term 'film culture' is usually understood to refer to the practices and ethos of producers, writers, film critics and experts, as well as a policy makers and commercial influences in film. However, BtM has demonstrated that, as film culture interacts with people in their social and cultural contexts, it takes on another aspect. This is because the ways in which people engage with film culture transforms it into culture that is lived and experienced, meaning that it is extended and adapted into lived film culture. Lived film culture identifies the ways in which film is part of people's everyday lives, ordinary cultural practices, and special events such as birthdays, seasonal holidays and social events. It also includes the ways these practices feed into and are part of the ways in which people talk about films in their everyday lives, as well as how the narratives, topics and representations in films that are part of public and everyday discourse. Given this, film is often used as one of the ways in which people make sense of many aspects of their lived realities. These might be things that are personal to them, such as a response to a new set of circumstances they are facing, or it could be a wider issue that is socially or culturally relevant. The aspects of this meta-concept are that film is a popular cultural form, which can be seen as 'people's art' because it is accessible and often relates to people's everyday lives and/or their imaginations and engagement with other cultural activities. This sense of people's art becomes lived in and through the experiences of everyday life and becomes part of everyday discourse and sensemaking.

## **9. Resources**

In socio-cultural terms, the resources people have includes their access to film; the types of film and level of variety of films available to them; education; their family and friends' interest and knowledge of film; and accessible and place-based local film culture such as film clubs, community cinema, independent cinema, and commercial multiplexes and boutique chains; as well as television and streaming services. Experiences such as going to university or moving home may provide opportunities to engage with a wider range of films through peers, film clubs and wider film venues. School or workplace film clubs also encourage engagement in a wider range of film that bridge formal and informal education. Where someone lives is a resource in terms of the access it offers them to specialised and mainstream film and to film culture. Those living in well-served cities have more opportunities than those who live in places that have mainly commercial cinema or very limited or no actual venues locally. In the underserved areas, people have to rely on television and streaming services, which are also well-used by viewers in all areas. These offer a wide range of programming, and, in many instances, home-viewing is a way to access both mainstream and specialised film. Most public service broadcasting and commercial broadcaster programming does not screen newly-released films, but they do cover a wide range of fairly new films as well as older releases. Streaming

services do offer new releases, both their own film productions, and other films in line with their digitally-based distribution business models. Although this makes film accessible and provides opportunities to explore a range of film, the audience experience is limited to one of three types of audience experience – individualised, group or digital, or a combination of the three. This limits the range of audience experience and potential engagement with wider place-based film culture in personal film journeys.

Another socio-cultural resource is education – both formal and informal. Research prior to BtM suggested that people’s ability to interpret film, especially specialised film, was determined by their level of education and their socio-economic status. However, BtM has discovered that people’s interpretive resources also include their life experiences and their knowledge of other types of culture (whether low-, middle- or highbrow, or all of these). Those with higher levels of education or film education draw on those resources – which are often formal and institutional bodies of knowledge – in how they comprehend and interpret film. On the other hand, those with less education draw on their personal life experience and informal knowledge of visual, music, sound and other art forms such as fashion and subcultures to comprehend and interpret mainstream and specialised film. Both types of resources enable people to engage with a wide variety of film by recognising mainstream cinema tropes across genres and find pleasure or reward from more experimental, challenging and artistic film. This confirms what the BtM film elicitation focus groups found – that, even though specialised film is often marketed to a more highly-educated urban group, it is in reality accessible to, and enjoyed by, a wider audience base. Whether using formal education, personal life experience, or both to understand a film, its narrative and representations, in overall terms, people engage and interpret film by thinking and talking about what a film means for themselves, their family, friends and other social groups and cultures. Hence, access to socio-cultural and interpretive resources supports the ways in which people develop their personal journeys and engage with the openness of film to develop both a critical appreciation of film and enjoyment of its entertainment value. However, there are inequalities in this access, especially in terms of geographically-based resources, media resources and local lived film culture.

## **10. Mixed economy of film provision**

BtM’s research and analysis found that the mixed – and uneven – economy of cultural or independent and commercial film exhibition create the characteristics of film provision. One of the ways in which this dimension is influential is that it is partly shaping the characteristics of film provision at the local and regional level, and digital provision at the national and global level. Multiplex chains and their mainstream programming are ubiquitous across English regions, often being located in out-of-town areas close to cities and major towns. The development of commercially-driven boutique chains complements this multiplex provision by providing smaller, intimate and luxurious venues in city and town centre venues. Independent and cultural cinemas are not evenly distributed across regions, and often they are located in cities that have a strong history of cultural provision with venues in city centre locations. There are also a range of community cinemas run by volunteers as well as volunteer or school run film clubs. The degree to which these types of venues vary in scale and scope across and within regions affects levels of participation in certain types of film audiences. In underserved areas, digital streaming platforms and television companies provide avenues to engage with mainstream or specialised film. Good broadband and home-based screens are important to enable people to watch films within an audience experience that differs from a venue-based one.

The level and variety of provision goes beyond just access to physical venues, extending to access to diverse programming, which provides opportunities for people to shape and develop their personal journeys with film across their lifecourses. The work of the commercial and independent film sectors and public film policy makers interacts with provision in terms of venues and programming – but

also goes beyond these. The commercial film sector focusses on generating box office revenue through a strong consumer logic fed by popular, blockbuster, middlebrow and some specialised films. Programming is shaped by mainstream studio productions and newer digital platforms and streaming and their allied distribution strategies. In the independent film sector publicly-supported film policy focuses on recognising and promoting the cultural and community benefits of cinema, and on audience development to realise these benefits. Films are valued for more than just their success at generating income, with attention being paid to their artistic merit, narrative, critical and experimental innovations and insights. Audiences are assessed in richer ways than being an aggregate of consumers. Part of the modus operandi of cultural cinema is to support critical engagement with film within a broader remit of cultural engagement. The appreciation of film is couched in the ways it can widen horizons, educate, challenge, and facilitate understandings of different perspectives, situations, and places.

The value of independent film extends beyond box office revenues to its cultural value. Understanding this, impacts on how audiences are understood and was fundamental to BtM's work. The current focus on audiences in BFI policy is on audience development. There are two main drivers for this: one is to develop audiences for specialised film in order to support specialised film production and two, to facilitate better access to specialised film so that more people can engage with films beyond the mainstream and experience a richer and more diverse film culture. The result of this is that regional film initiatives such as the BFI regional film hubs and the Film Audience Network (FAN) seek to provide varied programming by working with regionally-based independent/cultural cinema venues, film clubs, groups and their community-based members.

## **11. Social and cultural value of film**

The focus on value is often at the level of commercial or economic value. Increasingly the social and value of film has been identified, however, this is largely seen from a society wide perspective and seeks to show how film can support wellbeing, education and cultural diversity and cohesion. This sense of social and cultural value is difficult to measure and identify in concrete terms, which makes developing policy in this area more challenging to identify in concrete terms. As a result, some of the benefits of film might be unevenly distributed, since people living in well-served areas with diverse film culture, a range of venues and an active set of film-related activities will gain more benefits than those living in less well-served areas. BtM focused on the social and cultural value of film, which emphasises the way film is valued by people and audiences. Films have social and cultural value for people, cultural groups and communities, as well as for institutions. Film is meaningful for people in particular ways across the lifecourse, supporting them at a very personal level through their changing life circumstances but, beyond that, also supporting wider social and cultural sensibilities.

Its social and cultural value is held in a fine balance with the ways it enables engagement to be enjoyable and entertaining. Across its many types, film offers both social and cultural value in ways that engage people and provide personal gains for individuals – whether in terms of development, education, critical engagement and entertainment. The filmic ways that the techniques and narratives of telling stories connect with viewers, realises the social and cultural value of film for particular individuals and groups. These gains and the story-telling ability of film extend the potential of film to widen up their worldviews and to open up different perspectives on life and culture. The social and cultural value of film is not wholly balanced, however, because the more extensive reach of commercial film than specialised film mitigates the potential social and cultural value of a more diverse film provision. Furthermore, film is a companion for many people, helping them to make sense of particular issues and situations, ranging from a personal health issue to that of understanding the lives of others across the world. These social and cultural benefits are realised precisely because

film is accessible and can be both popular and artistic across a range of mainstream and specialised film.

## 12. Relational and interactive aspects of personal film journeys as a cultural form

There are structuring and creative processes in play in the ways audiences' form. The way the cultural form structures provision and audience formations is through the interdependencies of the relations of production, the narratives, and types of participation of, and in, film and film audiences. The cultural form of film embeds the relational and interactive aspects of film audiences within a holistic framework that addresses the provision of film and engagement with film in ways that recognises the distinctiveness of film. It addresses the relationship between the relations of production, the narratives of the form and the types of participation in film and film audiences. This concept can be used to address many types of culture and cultural activity, including film and film audiences.

The main theoretical contribution from BtM is its assertion that the audience is a process. This contention derives from the study identifying that the relationship between types of audiences and personal film journeys involves:

- The ways in which people engage with and consume film and their patterns of engagement and consumption,
- The relative – but not determining – influence of people's socio-cultural profile features in the formation of audiences, and
- The personal and creative ways that film features in people's social and cultural lives.

BtM found that these aspects are all constitutive of the relationship between the personal and audience experiences that craft film audience experience, including the films, their stories and narratives. BtM data demonstrated that individuals' relationship with film develops through their personal journeys, audience experiences, social experiences and education, thereby creating the interpretive resources they use to engage with film narratives. The ways in which individuals develop these resources varies in terms of their access to film, social and cultural milieu, education and film venues. Since film is a popular and open cultural activity, people bring a range of knowledge and understanding to particular films and genres. These are some of the dimensions of personal film journeys and types of audiences, and they extend into the dimension of geographies of provision because having local access to film venues features in how people develop their personal film journeys and generates opportunities to join venue-based audiences. Access to different types of venues is also part of this, so access to independent cultural cinemas, community cinema, and film clubs provide programming outside of mainstream film. This means that people have access to a wide range of film and different audience experiences and that in itself can support the ways in which they develop their interpretive resources for engaging with film narratives and texts.

The above relationships and the aspects that constitute these relationships also relate to film policy and practice and commercial film drivers and practices. Geographies of film provision as well as audience types and personal journeys feature in the ways individuals can access to specialised and commercial film and cultural and mainstream cinema. These geographies – in terms of actual physical venues – are part of the process of how audiences form, and geographies also include digital access such as film streaming platforms for home or mobile viewing. In terms of these geographies, individuals draw on their physical and digital access to film in the ways in which they develop their respective relationships with film. The work of venues, digital platforms and media and TV

companies and public organisations feature in the ways in which audiences form through the production, distribution and programming they do.

### 13. A typology of audience formation in English regions

Another theoretical contribution that BtM makes is a typology of audience formation. The empirical research carried out in the North East, North West, Yorkshire and Humber and the South West provides evidence about how people engage with film, develop a relationship with film and participate in various types of audience experience. An analysis of this data using the theory of the audience as a process within the relations and interactions of film as a cultural form has enabled an assessment of how audiences form in the regions that the BtM project studied.

At the regional level, evidence and analysis from each of the four regions showed that the numbers of people watching film at mainstream commercial venues, independent or cultural cinema venues, festivals and at home was broadly similar. The key point that BtM uncovered though was a variation between and within regions in terms of what types of audiences form, where and why. It is important to note that it was not the actual viewing figures or the box office takings that varied in our research data, but rather the type of audiences that form. This was shaped by the type of film provision that was accessible in a region, the choices people had and their opportunities for lived film culture. BtM found that these shaping factors were balanced with the ways in which people living in these regions had a relationship with film, developed their journeys with film, and shared film through the range of film audiences. The type of audience chosen therefore depended on several factors including the choice and accessibility of film, available time, and decisions whether to watch alone, with a group, at a venue, or digitally.

From this, BtM has developed the following typology of the ways in which audiences form in the four English regions studied. This is based in the ways in which people's personal film journeys interact with film provision where they live, and the wider social and cultural ethos around them. There is a similar typology across all the regions, with each region having four main ways in which audiences form.

The typology of audience formation in English regions:

- Active, consistent and diverse engagement with film because of access to a major independent cinema, multiplex cinema and a range of film events. These audiences are urban residents of all ages. They develop their personal journeys with film due to the access they have to film and cinema resources and so are embedded within a lived film culture. The types of audiences that form in these places are venue-specific, group and individualised audiences, but the venue-specific experience is complemented by digital audience experiences and individualised audiences at home, as well as particular global audience events.
- Active, varying in consistency and less diverse, because of less access to independent cinema and a heavier reliance on commercial mainstream venues. These audiences live in smaller cities and towns and are all ages. They engage with film and develop personal film journeys but, in terms of venue-based audiences, the limited choice of film restricts their development of a personal journey with film, and their viewing is shaped by their limited access to film, attendance of new releases and commercially-driven programming, and digital streaming of film at home. These audiences vary in how often they attend venue-based multiplexes due to the need to travel to such cinemas and in the ways, they select from mainstream provision. The audiences that form here are those defined in the audience types as individualised, group and digital.



- Active, independent-focussed and community-based audiences who only have access to independent film cinema in their town, village or touring cinema. These audiences are based in towns or villages that have developed a strong community-based lived film culture. Many of these independent cinemas only have one screen and, because of this, the programming is varied to offer appeal to a wide range of people. These audiences attend as venue-specific audiences consistently and develop their film journeys through the local programming and the community-based lived film culture. One version of this formation is rural touring cinema provision that also fosters community-based audience formations, for instance, village hall venue audiences. Another feature of places like these is holding annual film festivals. This fosters engagement with film for residents and visitors, and may enhance people's personal journeys, but only once a year. Thus, people have to find other ways to sustain their engagement with film for the rest of the year. For those festivals that have national or international recognition, audiences from wider afield also form by visiting the festival, usually as group audiences. As with the other typologies, these venue-specific, group, and individualised audiences are complemented by digital audience experiences.
- Active, underserved audiences with a consistent reliance on digital streaming and TV film programming. These audiences face difficulties in accessing any commercial or independent film venues, so the only way they can engage with film is at home and via digital provision. In these contexts, personal journeys with film are supported by subscribing to digital services and exploring what types of film are available across a range of platforms. These audiences' lived film culture is largely individualised at home, supplemented by other media such as social media, TV, radio, newspapers and magazines. The audiences that form in this typology are individualised, group and digital and, at times global, if a major release is available on streaming platforms.

The ways in which these audiences form is influenced by context and in each of the four regions studied by BtM there are diverse film cities and towns, mainstream multiplex cities and towns, and limited underserved areas. By scrutinising the level and type of film provision in different places in the four regions it became clear that there is a mixed economy of provision, and that provision is varied and unequal. Commercial multiplexes are common, have capacity for large audiences and provide for many people with a venue to see mainstream film, and in places without independent provision, they are where people are first introduced to venue-specific film viewing. Major independent cinemas offer choice beyond that of the multiplex in terms of their programming and film-related events. They also operate in a cultural leadership role at the regional level, as BtM found in their contribution to regional film hubs, the BFI's Film Audience Network, and their community and outreach activities. However, outside all of these central hubs of film (mainstream and independent), there are active, albeit small-scale organisations and activities that show a range of film and support personal journeys with film and encourage lived film culture where there is a lack of mainstream or major independent cinema provision. Places such as peripheral areas of cities and rural areas are underserved, so this is where there is a reliance on digital streaming and TV. Although this provides access to film, there is a lack of venue-based audience experiences and film events which are needed to enhance a rich lived film culture.

Audiences in the four regions BtM studied formed in varied ways and configured into one of the five main types of film audiences – individualised, group, venue-specific, global and digital – at particular instances and they took part in all five types at different times. In so doing they had different experiences. People configure their film audience experiences in relation to their circumstances, where they live, local venue film provision, TV and online streaming programming, and what they want from film at a particular point, in personal, social and cultural terms.

## 14. Further research

BtM studied four English regions, so further research is needed to determine whether the concept that the audience is a process is substantiated in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, other regions in Europe, and globally.

- Further research is needed to explore and ascertain what type of support is required to enhance the ways people develop their journeys with film.
- Further research is needed to identify what sorts of personal journeys with film develop a more critical engagement with film than others.
- Further research is needed to establish how independent film distributors, exhibitors, programmers and marketing managers can communicate to foster engagement and relationships with specialised film more widely across the population.
- Further research is needed to understand the ways in which people develop and extend their choice of film.

## 15. Policy and audience development

This report has demonstrated the need and value of strategic and targeted investment in the regions to develop the diversity of regional film exhibition. Based on the research findings, BtM has developed a set of policy recommendations aimed for the BFI, FHs, FAN, distributors, exhibitors, programmers, marketing, local and combined authorities, and film clubs that cover the themes of infrastructure and investment, strategic planning, audience development and research. These are given below. In consulting with regional exhibitors, it became clear to BtM that there are many opportunities and challenges for developing, sustaining and enhancing the provision of non-mainstream or specialised film in the four regions studied. Partly this relates to approaches from the top, at the level of national film policy and the investments made by the government to support film exhibition through the BFI, seeking to develop economic, social and cultural value. But it also relates to the grassroots level, supporting communities and audience development initiatives that make valuable interventions into the personal film journeys of those living in underserved areas. There are key roles to play for the BFI, the regional film hubs, exhibitors and local authorities in working together with existing and new exhibitors to develop regional film provision. Making independent cinema and the diversity of film genuinely available and accessible to all is an enduring – but worthwhile – challenge.

In terms of developing film provision in underserved areas, the top priorities are strategic capital investment, supported by a clear evidence base on the social, cultural and economic impact of independent film exhibition. Local Authorities in particular have a key role to play in this but BtM found that, in many cases, they were unaware of, or unwilling to engage with, independent film exhibition and the contribution it could make to regeneration, in both economic and cultural terms. Contributing to this is limited regional and local strategic leadership when it comes to coordinated film exhibition development, something that could be holding back development in the four regions. While the film hubs support existing provision there is no coordinated support or strategic local leadership that seeks to develop new provision in underserved areas. The film hubs may provide support for new initiatives, but these initiatives tend to be small scale, often volunteer-led and with limited ability to scale-up and grow. An approach that only supports new development where there is a local person or small group of people willing to set something up and run it voluntarily risks reinforcing existing inequalities of provision. There is valuable potential for establishing a coordinated approach to bringing new-release digital cinema package (DCP) cinema screenings to

underserved communities. In some cases, this would be best run by the community but in others a professional external operator could provide regular screenings in multiple locations to connect new audiences to the latest releases. At the heart of any future development there needs to be long-term strategic investment in audience development and programming. Short-term and one-off project funding initiatives can be valuable, but cinema going is a habitable and lifelong practice for audiences, and long-term investment in audience development is therefore beneficial. The potential for community cinema is often under-realised, and new projects often struggle to develop over time into sustainable operations, building new audiences as they grow. There is a need to take a more strategic and long-term view of investment in audience development, targeting specific audience demographics or geographies to establish and build trust between new audiences and exhibitors. This kind of approach is especially important when working to engage the most marginalised and underserved communities.

While there is funding support for programming that seeks to engage audiences culturally with non-mainstream and specialised film, there are limited opportunities for organisations to develop new initiatives and screening programmes which have a primary focus on the social value of communal film watching. BtM has identified this is another potential area for development. Film plays an important role in many people's lives, and for many film watching is primarily a social activity done collectively. There are many benefits to communal film watching. Moreover, film watching can shape people's social and cultural worlds at pivotal moments in their everyday lives – for instance, a remote rural community coming together once a month at a local community screening or a grandparent taking their grandchild to a regular children's film. Film watching can contribute to individual and collective wellbeing in creating a shared and familiar environment in which to spend time with others. This is the case regardless of what films are shown and, in underserved areas, introducing the social value of film through a long-term programme that grows and diversifies programming would be of benefit. Ultimately, the ambition of developing a diverse film culture is at the core of what many people working in independent film exhibition in the regions aspire to achieve. Continuing to support professional development for the exhibition sector through training, skills development, and long-term investment would enhance the sector.

The English regions could learn from approaches that have already been taken in Scotland, where Regional Screen Scotland works in collaboration with Film Hub Scotland and others to bring cinema of all types to remote or underserved communities. This close collaboration between research, funding, delivery and community organisations is working to address the most underserved areas in Scotland. The BFI's film hubs are undoubtedly making a valuable contribution to the regions in England and their networked, relational approach to bringing together organisations across regions and investing in new programmes is admirable, if under-resourced and, for the most part, strategically directed by the BFI in London. The hubs may support networking, diverse programming, and small-scale new events and festivals, but with no specific capital funding for cinemas, and no strategic planning for film exhibition development in English regions that encourages funding and support from Local Authorities and other stakeholders, there can be limited expectations of a shift in the current landscape. Most new cinemas that have been built in recent years are based on commercial models that favour high-spending leisure consumers (the so-called boutique chains). There needs to be space for investment that seeks to develop social and cultural value in the places that need it most. In some places, a more interventionist approach may be required, and BtM's categorisation of five different geographies of film provision will be helpful for this: clearly, mainstream multiplex cities and towns could be targeted for greater investment, while diverse film cities and towns could be grown and sustained.

## 16. Policy recommendations

### Infrastructure and investment

- The creation of new independent cinemas in underserved areas should be actively supported through capital investment, strategic planning and alignment with national and regional policy agendas such as Arts Council England's approach to widening cultural participation, COVID-19 economic recovery plans, the government's 'levelling up' agenda and town centre regeneration programmes. BtM provides clear evidence from the research that key independent venues such as Showroom in Sheffield, Watershed in Bristol and HOME in Manchester play a significant role in multiplying and enhancing a diverse local film culture and broadening audience engagement with film.
- A targeted scheme should be created to develop and sustain new film exhibition provision in underserved areas – drawing on existing expertise in FAN. This should create pathways for developing film exhibition provision – from the small-scale and itinerant to the professional, sustainable and permanent. It should focus on areas of most need and where communities will benefit from a strategic and targeted approach. There should be long-term and strategic engagement that aims to grow scale and sustainability over time, similar to Regional Screen Scotland's 'A Cinema Near You' programme.

### Strategic planning

- A film exhibition development group should be established in each English region or Combined Authority area, made up of regional exhibitors, FAN, the BFI and other stakeholders. The regional film hubs should have an enhanced role to take strategic leadership in advocating for, and developing, new film exhibition provision in the regions. Here, there is great potential to reach, build, and sustain new audiences for a more diverse film culture across the country, including areas with limited existing levels of provision.
- This group should develop relationships with Combined and Local Authorities to support regional and local strategic development plans for film exhibition. They should work closely with the Combined and Local Authorities, both to advocate for the cultural, economic, and social value of independent film exhibition, and to enable an enhanced role for Local Authorities to develop and sustain a diverse offer of film provision. These partnerships could be tied to community engagement.

### Audience development

- Rather than comprising short-term interventions, audience development programmes should be supported over the long-term. Many exhibitors interviewed by BtM felt that audience development work with underserved or under-represented communities required a minimum commitment of two to three years, instead of short-term initiatives or one-off projects. Audience development programmes and funding to support them should reflect this.
- Support should be provided for small audiences in remote or isolated areas as well as additional support to connect these audiences to new-release films. There is a need to support film licensing for non-profit, community screenings in order to create realistic costs for small-scale audiences in remote and community settings. This should aim to bring DCP new-release films to community screenings in underserved areas.
- Funding should be provided to support film programming that focuses on the social value of collective audience experiences, on community development, or health and wellbeing.

- Support and incentives should be provided to encourage existing exhibitors to innovate and think differently about where they exhibit. Funders should consider creating schemes that open up the potential for existing exhibitors to create new and dynamic programmes in areas of low provision, working in collaboration with grassroots organisations or initiatives.

### **Professional development**

- Professional training and development opportunities for film exhibition staff should be strengthened, along with coordinated support for professional development and the promotion of safe, secure, paid roles for cinema and festival staff.

### **Research**

- Ongoing regional research should be undertaken to develop a clear evidence base for the cultural, social and economic value of independent film exhibition. This will create a deeper understanding of the cultural, social and economic impact of different kinds of film exhibition, which will support the case for investment. There is a need to ensure that the research data and findings are accessible and shared with a broad range of stakeholders, including Local Authorities.

## **17. Further information**

All data as well as the search and visualisation tools that have supported the development of the project's research findings can be accessed from the website Beyond the Multiplex: Film Audiences Data Platform at <https://www.beyondthemultiplex.org>

The data (interviews, focus groups, surveys etc) can be downloaded for sharing and reuse from the DHI Data Service at <https://www.dhi.ac.uk/data/download/beyondthemultiplex>