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Introduction: In Search of Audiences

Ian Christie

That the audience is essential for film seems to have been understood for over a century. One of the earliest and best known accounts of attending a picture show, published by Maxim Gorky in 1896, spoke of visiting “the kingdom of shadows” and described the effect upon him of seeing those silent, gray ghosts.¹ Something more provocative than street scenes and baby’s breakfast would be needed, he predicted, if this was going to find “its place in Russia’s markets thirsting for the piquant and the extravagant.” Using oral history and other sources, Luke McKernan’s account of the development of London’s cinemas before 1914 turns on the discovery of viewers starting to “seek out films for their own sake” around 1905-06.² One hundred and fifteen years later, a report commissioned by the UK government on *A Future for British Film* was subtitled “It begins with the audience,” although some critics suggested that this was more paying lip service than taking seriously the interests of consumers.³

The problem has always been how to define such an ambiguous concept as “the audience.” Is it conceivably the specific audience for one screening – those present at the Nizhny Novgorod fair with Gorky one July day in 1896 – or, more commonly, the aggregated audience over time for a cinema or a film, as in the “the Theater Tuschinski audience,”⁴ or “the audience for *THE KING’S SPEECH*...”? Arguably, two concepts of audience have dominated the history of cinema: one is an *imagined audience* of “they” and “we,” often credited with preferences and responses which are mere hypotheses, or projections of the author’s assumptions and prejudices; and the other is an *economic or statistical audience*, recorded in terms of admissions or box-office receipts, which has become the dominant concept of “audience” for the film industry.

A third concept, however, emerged with the growth of the new human and social sciences, whose birth ran parallel to cinema’s development as a modern medium, with the *individual spectator* understood in terms of psychology, anthropology or sociology. Pioneering examples of this new approach would be Otto Rank’s psychoanalytic study, *The Double* (1914), which took a then-recent film *THE STUDENT OF PRAGUE* (1913) as one of its case studies,⁵ and Hugo Münsterberg’s *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (1916).⁶ Although neither of these had any immediate successors, this line of inquiry would be continued in post-revolutionary Russia, by members of the montage school of filmmakers and by the critics and psychologists who shared their interest in how film impacts on our

physiology and consciousness⁷ – a tradition that is invoked by present-day researchers, represented in this collection by Tim Smith and Torben Grodal.



Fig. 1: Nizhny Novgorod Fair, where Maxim Gorky first encountered moving pictures in 1896 and speculated on their future.

Before cinema could attract this degree of interest, it had become a massive social fact of the early 20th century, and soon stood accused – as Gorky and another early commentator, Apollinaire, had foreseen⁸ – of corrupting its mass audience by pandering to their base instincts. The idea that its narratives “taught” viewers, especially the young and impressionable, undesirable lessons about morality and crime, seems to have emerged very early, and may have been linked to assumptions about cinema’s intrinsic “realism” and the inherent passivity of the film audience.⁹ One of the earliest of such accounts was by the French writer Jules Romains, whose 1911 essay “The Crowd’s Dream Begins” described a cinema audience as if sleeping and dreaming a collective dream, from which they awake as they spill out into the street.¹⁰ D. H. Lawrence despised the “mechanical” images of cinema, and in a misanthropic recipe for mass euthanasia he proposed that “a Cinematograph working brightly” would help lure “the sick, the halt and the maimed” into “a lethal chamber as big as the Crystal Palace.”¹¹

Much of the impetus behind this negative view of the early audience may well have come from a combination of elitist distaste for the laboring masses of the

turn of the century, and the easily-ignored fact that film shows were the first popular entertainment to take place in darkness, with a proportion of those attending almost certainly not there for the movies, or easily distracted from the screen. Warmth, comfort, somewhere to sleep or pass the time; a chance to meet friends, and to make new ones; and a place for “a date” – all of these were, and have remained, important reasons for cinemagoing, even if they are rarely acknowledged in film scholarship.¹² Police surveillance reports noted that the darkness of the “penny gaffs” and nickelodeons provided a cover for “immoral” activities, whether prostitution or merely clandestine intimacy.¹³ We know from trade as well as police sources that the early cinema audience was often unruly – as discussed by Nicholas Hiley in this collection – and the extent to which such large-scale assemblies of working-class and poor people worried respectable opinion should not be underestimated. A study of “places of amusement” in Boston in 1909 revealed that some 480,000 seats were on offer weekly at venues showing moving pictures, compared with 290,000 for all kinds of live theater and opera.¹⁴ One reason for this disparity was abundantly clear: moving picture shows cost 10¢ or 15¢, while regular theater and opera cost \$1-2. The link can hardly be denied between audiences who could afford no other “amusement” and the spectacular rise of cinemagoing. Yet contemporary cinema scholars have sought to nuance a simple equation between poverty or immigrants and the movies, as Judith Thissen does here, challenging both the “embourgeoisement scenario” of earlier histories and the belief that cinema simply fostered the “assimilation” of America’s newly-arrived citizens.

The Boston report cited above was already describing picture shows as “a less desirable form of recreative amusement.” For some, perhaps most, early critics of the cinema as a popular amusement, there was no need to investigate what actually happened. A study in Pittsburgh carried out in 1907-09 reported on “the crowd of pleasure-seekers on Fifth Avenue” waiting patiently outside the 5¢ picture show and “determined to be amused.”¹⁵ The researchers, however, were not prepared to wait, and “left them standing in line for their chance to go in,” after what the *Survey* unselfconsciously described as “a working week of unmeaning hours.” What emerges from these very early studies, undertaken well before the rise of the feature-length “photoplay” of the 1910s is a contradictory attitude that admits “nickelodeons and dance halls and skating rinks are in no sense inherently bad,” but also criticizes them for creating “a desire for stimulation,” a “craving for excitement,” and ultimately for providing what “does not educate but does give pleasure.”¹⁶ The idea of leisure as “a thing spent, not used” struck at the very root of America’s founding Protestant ethic of self-improvement, and the cinema industry would work hard during later decades to demonstrate, confusingly, both its social value and its credentials as “harmless entertainment.”¹⁷

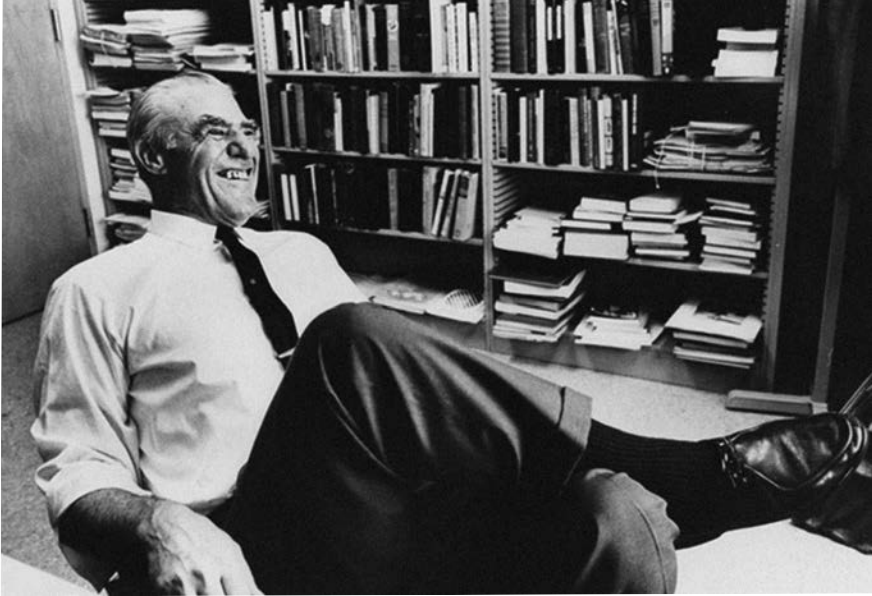


Fig. 2: Herbert Blumer, influential sociologist of the film audience.

It had to do so because much of the sociological research done in the United States during the 1930s was either commissioned or appropriated by moral crusaders who had an agenda against Hollywood. Thus the privately funded Payne Fund studies carried out during 1929-32 provided empirical material on film content and “effects,” which provoked widespread debate about the impact of films on young people. One of the Payne studies, *Movies and Conduct*, was by the Chicago sociologist Herbert Blumer, and its conclusion would set the tone for much subsequent discussion of cinema effects:

It seems clear that the forte of motion pictures is in their emotional effect. This is to be expected since in the last analysis they are a form of art – even though popular art – and their appeal and their success reside ultimately in the emotional agitation which they induce. To fascinate the observer and draw him into the drama so that he loses himself is the goal of a successful production. As we have sought to show, while in this condition the observer becomes malleable to the touch of what is shown. Ordinary self-control is lost. Impulses and feelings are aroused, and the individual develops a readiness to certain forms of action which are foreign in some degree to his ordinary conduct. Precisely because the individual is in this crucible state what is shown to him may become the mold for a new organization of his conduct. This organization, of course, may be quite temporary, as it frequently is. However, as our cases have shown, occasionally it may be quite abiding.¹⁸

Blumer's work, especially his gathering of autobiographies about film and behavior, has remained central to sociological research on personal responses to film; and there has been considerable revisionist discussion of the Payne studies, seeking to rescue them from the annals of censoriousness.¹⁹ However, the immediate outcome of Blumer's work, and of Henry James Forman's more polemical summary of the Payne findings in *Our Movie-Made Children* (1935), was an increasingly strict enforcement of Hollywood's Production Code, with a corresponding rise in levels of sentiment and euphemism.

The 1940s would see the peak of mass cinemagoing in many countries, and perhaps surprisingly the war period itself saw a number of notable studies of audience attitudes. In 1943, Mass Observation, a pioneer of modern public opinion research created by the poet Charles Madge, anthropologist Tom Harrisson and the filmmaker and Surrealist painter Humphrey Jennings, launched an inquiry into attitudes towards recent films among their correspondents.²⁰ The 1943 survey provides important and unique insight into how a cross-section of British people viewed what was on offer at their cinemas, with a particular circumstantial emphasis on contrasting attitudes towards US and British films and a strong sense of the context and specificity of wartime cinemagoing:

DESERT VICTORY – Factual stuff (sometimes with vivid beauty of desert photography) expertly edited – with outstandingly good music – and manages to be soberly inspiring even on a third seeing. (Wireless operator, Royal Corps of Signals, aged 26, Kent).²¹

LIFE AND DEATH OF COLONEL BLIMP was both in colour and was “different.” I liked it – why I cannot say. (Fitter, aged 23, Glasgow).²²

Once per month I go to the films. This is when my car is greased at a neighbouring garage, and I find it convenient to sit in the warmth and comfort of a cinema until the operation is complete. I cannot remember 6 films I have seen. I saw DEAR OCTOPUS this week. I liked it. It had not one damned Yankee accent in the whole film. The usual strident idiocies of Hollywood were absent. I did not, as usual, feel like vomiting. And even the news short did not as usual give the impression that Americans only were fighting the Germans. (Commercial traveler, aged 35, Leamington Spa).²³

I live in a village 6 miles from Reading and though I like a good film I am not a cinema fan. Each week I read the film reviews in the “Observer” and make a note of any films I'd like to see. Then I look at the local paper to see if any of these come to Reading. Usually there isn't even one a month I want to see. I enjoyed all the war films – NEXT OF KIN, IN WHICH WE SERVE, MRS MINIVER, etc. and there was a really good thriller SHADOW OF A DOUBT. MISSION

TO MOSCOW was terribly disappointing after having read the book. A real Hollywood shameless travesty of history. (Poultry farmer's wife, aged 52, Arborfield, Berks).²⁴

SING AS WE GO – an old film re-shown. I never miss Gracie Fields. She lifts me to a high plane as well as entertains me with her thorough affinity with human joys and sorrow. This is so alive. (Housewife and mother, aged 49, Accrington).²⁵

The sheer variety of cinemagoing experiences that emerges from these responses should be enough to challenge any sense of an undifferentiated “mass audience”; and indeed Mass Observation’s method of drawing on personal testimony was used by J. P. Mayer in his two important mid-1940s studies, *The Sociology of Film* (1946) and *British Cinemas and Their Audiences* (1948).²⁶ Mayer solicited “motion picture autobiographies” from cinemagoers through the popular magazine *Picturegoer*, and from some 200 of these created a remarkably rich account of what motivated and satisfied audiences, acknowledging his debt to Blumer, while also locating the phenomenon of mass cinemagoing within a framework that invoked the philosophers Karl Jaspers and R. G. Collingwood.²⁷



Fig. 3: The era of the mass audience: late-night shoppers queuing for the movies in Baltimore Maryland, 1943.

That films could have a profound effect on attitudes and behavior was also the hypothesis of another wartime study that drew upon social psychology and anthropology. The ethnographer Gregory Bateson undertook an analysis of the key Nazi propaganda film *HITLER YOUTH QUEX* (1933) during World War Two, as a contribution to understanding Nazi psychology.

Approaching the film with “the sort of analysis that the anthropologist applies to the mythology of a primitive or modern people,” Bateson pointed out how the film, in its systematic structuring of oppositions between the National Socialist Party and the Communist Party, illustrates the projective workings of Nazi subjectivity. Communists appear as unbearable self-images, what Nazis think they “would be like without their discipline or – psychologically speaking – what they are like under the veneer of that discipline.”²⁸

Anthropology had indeed taken an early interest in the potential of film, when Alfred Haddon took a camera to the Torres Strait Islands in 1898, to film Islander men performing ritual dances, describing it as “an indispensable piece of anthropological apparatus.”²⁹ And this tradition would continue with the field work of the French ethnographer Jean Rouch in Africa, which in turn informed his collaboration with the sociologist Edgar Morin on their reflexive film, *CHRONICLE OF A SUMMER* (1961),³⁰ whose subjects become its first audience, preceded by the latter’s pioneering book *Le cinéma ou l’homme imaginaire* (1957).³¹

In the 1970s, “film studies” started to become an academic discipline and spawned what has since become known as “film theory.” While the most influential – and controversial – axis of such theory was in fact spectatorship,³² and the idea that film texts in some sense constrained or “produced” their spectators,³³ there were at least three other important components of this revolutionary moment. One was a revival of the project for a “science of signs,” or semiotics, as a way of grasping the codes that defined film as visual communication.³⁴ Another was the “auteur theory”: a strategy to refocus attention on the vast, then largely unexplored body of work produced by commercial filmmakers, which required that “the spectator has to work at reading the text ... [so that] in a certain sense, the film changes, it becomes another film [...] It is no longer possible to look at it ‘with the same eyes.’”³⁵ And the third was a “social turn,” which directed attention away from the timeless film text towards concrete conditions of cinemagoing itself.³⁶

The legacy of this moment of disciplinary formation are still with us today, even though film studies has greatly diversified and to a large extent matured. Many of the contributors to this collection are effectively engaged in extending or questioning the axes of early “theory.” Thus Martin Barker challenges the normative assumptions that continue to underpin text-centered criticism which evokes “the spectator,” while demonstrating the richness of empirical research on real

audiences and its value in understanding such new phenomena as “alternative content” in cinemas. Roger Odin uses his well-honed “semio-pragmatic” theoretical framework to consider the significance of the cameraphone, arguing that it has launched nothing less than a revolution in film language. In his account of Méliès’s use of the viewpoint of “the gentleman in the stalls,” Frank Kessler combines a subtly auteurist approach with the methodology of the early cinema movement of the 1980s, emphasizing the importance of close study of technique and context, stripped of teleological assumptions. Nicholas Hiley’s pioneering essay on early British picture shows, reprinted here, played an important part in focusing attention on the previously missing audience. And in the tradition of the “social turn,” Judith Thissen re-enters the long-running “Manhattan nickelodeon” debate that Robert Allen initiated in his now-classic 1979 revisionist essay,³⁷ while Gregory Waller broadens the field of “cinemagoing studies” to include the hitherto neglected dimension of non-theatrical exhibition, and Ranita Chatterjee shows how this same historical approach can illuminate the social experience of cinema beyond Europe and North America.

Film theory in its first incarnation had little to say about television, which developed its own sphere of scholarship, largely defined by new conceptions of audience.³⁸ Annie van den Oever here sketches an account of how television aesthetics became part of the shared experience of later 20th-century filmmakers and audiences alike, while Raymond Bellour invokes the example of Serge Daney, one of the first major critics to engage fully with film on television and video, in his elegiac meditation on the cinema spectator now entering the era of digital storage and presentation. For some this is an occasion for mourning, while for others it offers exciting new opportunities, such as those explored by Laurent Jullier and Jean-Marc Leveratto in their account of cinephilia observed, and indeed refashioned, on the internet, and in my own account of recent empirical studies of film consumption in the digital era.

Three other contributions to the book introduce what are essentially new methodological approaches to understanding audiences. John Sedgwick and Clara Pafort-Overduin analyze box-office statistics from the 1930s to offer a comparative account of the typical mid-20th century distribution pattern for mainstream commercial cinema which provides a statistical architecture for the investigation of regionally specific audience tastes and so offers another type of evidence for film scholars – one based upon the film choices that audiences actually made. For his interpretation of the wide popularity of *THE LORD OF THE RINGS* trilogy (also studied through audience interviews by Barker), Torben Grodal draws on a growing body of speculation in evolutionary biology that seeks to account for the deep appeal of certain kinds of narrative and imagery. And in a dialogue with the psychologist Tim Smith, I explore what contemporary experimental investigation of the perception of filmed scenes can reveal about “normal” film-viewing habits.

It might be wondered, however, whether there is any “normality” in film viewing today, especially since cinemas around the world have started to devote a proportion of their programming to live relays of opera, theater and other forms of entertainment. Both Kay Armatage and Martin Barker here offer testimony to the success of this “alternative content” trend, a largely unanticipated consequence of the digital re-equipment of cinemas, which certainly offers a challenge to the standard model of cinema exhibition (bitterly resisted in some quarters, and welcomed as a lifeline in others). Historically, it recalls the fact that moving pictures first appeared as a novelty in music halls and vaudeville theaters, before their popularity led to the wholesale conversion of such venues into cinemas.

No-one can fail to recognize that there are more ways of watching film today than there have ever been. These range from the giant screens of open-air presentation, IMAX theaters, museums, concert-halls and opera houses, followed by specialist cinemas showing preserved and restored 35mm acetate prints, to the wide variety of other cinema theaters that are increasingly showing digital copies, sometimes in stereoscopic 3D (and soon at increased frame rates), in buildings ranging from shopping-malls and subterranean multiplexes to bijou historic auditoria; with a further spectrum of domestic and personal options that runs from luxury “home cinema” installations to television receivers of many kinds, computer screens, and mobile devices ranging from book-sized tablets, seat-back screens (in planes, trains and cars) to the ubiquitous smartphone. Many have maintained that the majority of these modes of viewing do not do justice to the aesthetic integrity of “a film,” and have lamented “the death of cinema.”³⁹ Others (including a majority of contributors to this book) might argue that “a film” is a historic concept, which has in fact been subject to more or less continuous modification during the history of, let us call it, “screen entertainment” (and indeed the span of “screen entertainment” should be recognized as much longer than that of cinema, starting with the Magic Lantern, and gathering momentum with a cluster of developments at the end of the 18th century, including the Eidophusikon, the Panorama and Diorama, and their many variations).⁴⁰

Such a juncture seems an ideal time to take stock of the varieties of audience experience that are on offer, between which many individuals move with seeming ease, adapting to differences in scale and definition, public and personal sound, even encapsulating one viewing within another, as the “windows” of our computer screens have taught us to do. We cannot pretend to be the virginal spectators of traditional *cinéphilie* or “classical” film theory, any more than we can imagine what it would have been like to witness the films and personalities that, between 1913 and 1915, created cinema’s first global audience: *FANTÔMAS*, *CABIRIA*, *BIRTH OF A NATION*, Asta Nielsen, Broncho Billy Anderson and Charlie Chaplin. We are often the “pensive spectators” evoked by Raymond Bellour and Laura Mulvey, well able to pause, rewind, fast-forward and channel-hop, and increasingly also distracted and multi-tasking spectators.⁴¹



Fig. 4: The interactive theater of the future for multitasking spectators, as envisaged by a digital projector manufacturer.

Despite the profusion of new screen (and sonic) experiences, and the new techniques for analyzing these, there is still much to learn from revisiting the rich literature of cinema after taking the “audience turn.” Just as Münsterberg has been rescued from near-oblivion by very different contemporary scholars – compare Bellour’s and Smith’s references to him here – so we can turn back to other early writers with a new perspective. Two great essayists, both strongly influenced by psychoanalysis, wrote about being part of a cinema audience, and about the complexity of that experience, not as one of rapt immersion in the film, but as inescapably “double.”⁴² Virginia Woolf, in her sole essay on cinema, written after attending a Film Society screening in London in 1926, recalled how “a shadow shaped like a tadpole suddenly appeared at one corner of the screen,” then “swelled to an immense size,” and “for a moment seemed to embody some monstrous, diseased imagination of the lunatic’s brain,”⁴³ For Woolf, willingly distracted from *THE CABINET OF DR CALIGARI* by this fleeting accident of projection (caused by dirt caught in the projector gate), the “monstrous, quivering tadpole seemed to be fear itself,” more effectively even than the characters and décor of this avant-garde Expressionist classic. The experience captured by Woolf could almost be considered as a recurrence of the pre-cinematic – recalling informal shadowplay and the Phantasmagoria – erupting into the ordered representation of narrative film, for which she felt little enthusiasm:

[S]ometimes at the cinema, in the midst of its immense dexterity and enormous technical proficiency, the curtain parts and we behold, far off, some unknown and unexpected beauty. But it is for a moment only.⁴⁴

Fifty years later, Roland Barthes, in many ways as ambivalent about cinema as Woolf, wrote in his essay “Leaving the Movie Theater” about:

[A]nother way of going to the movies [...] by letting oneself be fascinated *twice over*, by the image and by its surroundings – as if I had two bodies at the same time: a narcissistic body which gazes, lost, into the engulfing mirror [or the screen], and a perverse body, ready to fetishise not the image but precisely what exceeds it: the texture of the sound, the space, the darkness, the obscure mass of other bodies, the beam of light, entering the theatre and leaving.⁴⁵

Such phenomenologies of the viewing experience, from opposite ends of the “cinema age,” can add to the resources of oral history, and the often amateur “local cinema” histories, that make up the still largely hidden record of film reception. Asking real audience members what they think, as Blumer, Mayer, Barker and many others have done, and as the *Opening Our Eyes* study did more recently, is an indispensable technique; but it is not the only way to study audiences. As the audiences of the digital age become increasingly producers, commentators and even participants,⁴⁶ rather than merely the passive spectators of cinema’s folklore – with the potential for screen entertainment to become literally interactive, alongside the massive rival sphere of computer gaming – it does not seem any exaggeration to predict that this field of reflection and research is only entering a new era.

