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Inequalities in regional film exhibition: policy, place and audiences.

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Abstract

This paper questions the variety of film exhibition in four English regions. While a regional geographic frame is the focus of cultural policy in relation to film audience development in the UK, our analysis examines relational, localised and sub-regional film cultures to understand how differing levels of film exhibition influence people's sense of place. This is framed within a discussion of cultural inequality more generally. In the UK, questions of engagement with different types of film exhibition have gained greater prominence recently, but there has been limited attention on how audiences understand their geographic relationship with film exhibition. Drawing on 200 semi-structured, qualitative interviews with a wide range of film viewers across the North East, North West, South West and Yorkshire and the Humber, we assess perceptions of film exhibition in these regions. In doing so, we characterise five different modes of place in relation to the breath of film exhibition, from distinctive film cities to mainstream multiplex towns. In particular, we focus on how access to film is simultaneously narrated through both localised proximity to cinemas of different types and virtual access to film through online platforms. This work provides further evidence of the uneven provision of diverse film in England but shows how film audiences relationally interpret their engagement within film as a cultural form.

Keywords

Film exhibition; Place; Film policy; Audiences; Cultural inequality; English regions.

Introduction

In 2018, cinema-going in the UK reached its highest level since 1970 (BFI, 2019a). Since 2002 the number of films released annually in the UK has increased almost three-fold from 369 to 787 in 2018 and over this period the number of cinema screens in the UK has grown year on year (UKFC, 2003; BFI, 2019a). Despite this seeming buoyancy in film exhibition there are significant variations in different types of film exhibition across the UK. Contrary to the hopes of policy makers, the digital transformation of film exhibition in the UK over the last two decades has not increased the diversity of choice audiences have in cinemas across the country (Boyle, 2015). While a small number of large-multinational corporate cinema chains have increased their reach and market share over the last two decades, alternative forms of film exhibition have at best remained static and at worse decreased. The development of online streaming has not diminished the audience for theatrical cinema and new cinemas are being built in town and city centres (Hanson, 2016; BFI, 2019a; UKCA, 2019) but primarily targeting high spending leisure consumers, in a manner that may entrench existing inequalities in film engagement. UK film policy has historically focused significantly on supporting and developing the UK film production industry, with far fewer resources aimed at film exhibition, however central to the rhetoric of recent UK film policy has been a notion of developing a 'diverse film culture' that serves the whole population.

In this paper, we assess the inequalities in film exhibition across four regions to understand the geographies of film exhibition from the perspective of audiences. We do this by focusing the localised film cultures in specific towns and cities. Drawing on both territorial and relational conceptions of place, we have identified five specific

concentrations of relations of different types of film exhibition and consider these in relation to the towns and cities in the North East, North West, South West and Yorkshire and the Humber regions. The paper is developed from a mixed methods research project,¹ from which in this analysis we draw on 200 semi-structured interviews, a three-wave survey, data on cinema locations and data on public funding for film exhibition. Through our analysis of these sources we identified places that were exemplary as either under-resourced or relatively well-resourced in terms of different types of film exhibition. Drawing on the accounts of film viewers in these places we argue that film access is primarily understood through both localised proximity to cinemas of different types and virtual access to film through online platforms. In doing this, we consider place-based cultural policy, to argue that assessing and developing a diverse film culture requires an understanding of the spatial and temporal inequalities in film exhibition. We suggest a move that develops from broad regional frames to one that considers the dynamic relations of exhibition in different places so that targeted and ambitious investment can be made.

This paper is structured in three parts, firstly we present an overview and assessment of the landscape of film exhibition in the UK, taking account of developments over the last two decades in the film exhibition sector and film policy. This considers the use of regional policy framing, as well as notions of cultural diversity and how the allocation of public funding has been attributed to developing film exhibition. We then introduce the methods and data we have drawn on for our analysis, before setting out and discussing the different geographies of film exhibition

¹ Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded project: AH/P005780/1 - 'Beyond the Multiplex: audiences for specialised films in English regions'.

we have identified and consider the value of this understanding of film exhibition and place.

Research context: regions, policy and diversity

Film engagement across the UK, like many other types of cultural engagement, is shaped by geographic inequalities (O'Brien and Oakley, 2015). As we will show regional inequalities in theatrical film access and engagement have been evident for many decades and the 'region' has become the central way film policy, research and funding has been imagined, represented and deployed, a process that Newsinger (2009) calls 'territorialization'. It is worth beginning by assessing the persistence of spatial inequalities in film exhibition, and how they are consistently conceived in regional terms. As Redfern (2005: 52) shows, the UK Film Council identified the region as the most appropriate scale to develop film policy, with an awareness that the regions themselves wanted to develop their 'individual film cultures', but were 'alienated from the centre' (London) and were 'disorganised'. Arguably, these two issues are still highly relevant to regional film exhibition.

Regional inequalities in film exhibition have been evident in the UK for many years, regional screen density statistics have been reported in annual statistical releases since 2002, firstly by the UK Film Council and subsequently the BFI. In 2002, the UK had a relatively low number of screens per 100,000 of population at 5.3, compared with 8.8 in France, 5.8 in Germany, and 13.2 in USA (UKFC, 2003). By 2018, screen density in the UK had increased to 6.5 screens per 100,000 people but this was still significantly less than comparable countries (BFI, 2019a). Over this 16-year period, all regions in England increased screen density, however it was those in southern

England that increased the most and London consistently had the highest screen density.

It follows that research into cinema attendance shows similar regional patterns to screen density. Data from DCMS (2018), shows that the proportion of adults who watched a film at a cinema in 2016/17 was 66.3% in the South East but only 47.8% in the North East. This is also shown in the 'admissions per head' statistics reported annually by the BFI (2019a) using the ISBA TV regions, where in 2017 London had an annual admissions per head of 3.0, North West 2.3 and North East 2.4.

The increase in the number of screens can mostly be attributed to private investment in out-of-town, multiplex cinemas and the wider transformation of cinema-going in the UK since the first multiplex cinema opened in 1985. Although as Hanson (2016) notes, more recently there has also been a re-emergence of multiplex commercial cinemas locating in some town centres. This has occurred in response to changing planning laws, where some proactive local authorities have promoted cinema as a key part of the development of leisure and night-time economies alongside bars and restaurants (Hanson, 2016). While some of these developments have improved provision, more generally, the commercial multiplex has been associated with the homogenization of the cinema going experience, through the promotion of 'riskless' leisure consumption (Hanson, 2000; Hubbard, 2002 and 2004). There are distinct and historic regional inequalities in theatrical film engagement mirrored in the opportunity people have in these regions to watch films at the cinema and this extends to how cinemas are programmed.

The rise and dominance of the multiplex cinema has gone together with the dominance of limited mainstream film programming (McDonald, 2010). Between 2008 and 2017 the number of mainstream programmed cinema sites increased from 554 to 609. During the same period the number of cinema sites that predominantly programmed non-mainstream, specialised programmes decreased nationally from 168 in 2008 to 162 in 2017 (BFI, 2019a: 21). The regional geographic spread of these non-mainstream cinema screens shows stark disparities across the UK, while 34.6% are in London, 15.7% in the South East, 8% in the South West, 9% in Yorkshire and the Humber, 4.5% in the North West and only 1.9% in the North East (BFI, 2019a). Over the last decade, mainstream multiplex cinema venues and programmes have continued to grow, but people's engagement with films from outside of the commercially dominant major distributors has declined. In 2017, Walt Disney, Warner Bros., Universal, 20th Century Fox, and Sony Pictures held 77.7% of the UK market share as a percentage of the box office gross (BFI, 2018b: 67), an increase from 61.5% in 2008 (UKFC, 2009: 69). Despite the growing number of screens, the dominance of a small number of film titles reflects the decision-making process of programmers for the large cinema chains, whose programming judgements are based on potential profitability (Hanson, 2007). As McDonald (2010) shows choice is limited in multiplex programming, and this reflects the wider economic power structures of the film industry, where the market dominates programming decisions rather than any sense of cultural diversity. There are also structural and cultural issues that hold back European film (Renaud, 2015) and mainstream film programming has also begun to dominate cinemas that traditionally were associated with independent, art house or foreign language film (see Jones, 2017).

Moves to encourage greater pluralism have come from many sources over the history of film exhibition in the UK. Recently, calls for greater 'cultural diversity' in film policy have been important. Cultural diversity has been predominantly used as a means to think about identity in different contexts (Malik, Chapain and Comunian 2017; Pitcher, 2006), and it came to the fore in cultural policy in the New Labour years. In the film sector this has focused on inequalities in representation in the production workforce (Newsinger, 2012; Nwonka, 2015), but also on the defense or promotion of 'national' cinema against Hollywood power (Higson, 2000). Ideas of cultural diversity were prevalent in the rhetoric of the UK Film Council (Moody, 2017), and have been encapsulated in calls for the promotion and development of a 'diverse film culture' (UKFC, 2006: 28). UKFC set out the issues in their 2005 Specialised Distribution and Exhibition Strategy (UKFC, 2005:1):

Geography, income and education should not be barriers to the cinema experience... audiences in the UK still have access to a very limited range of material. The UK comprises a vibrant diverse cultural mix which is too little reflected in the range of films available on screen... The economics of film distribution and exhibition in the UK mean that films which lie outside the accepted mainstream, particularly those made in a foreign language, receive very limited exposure.

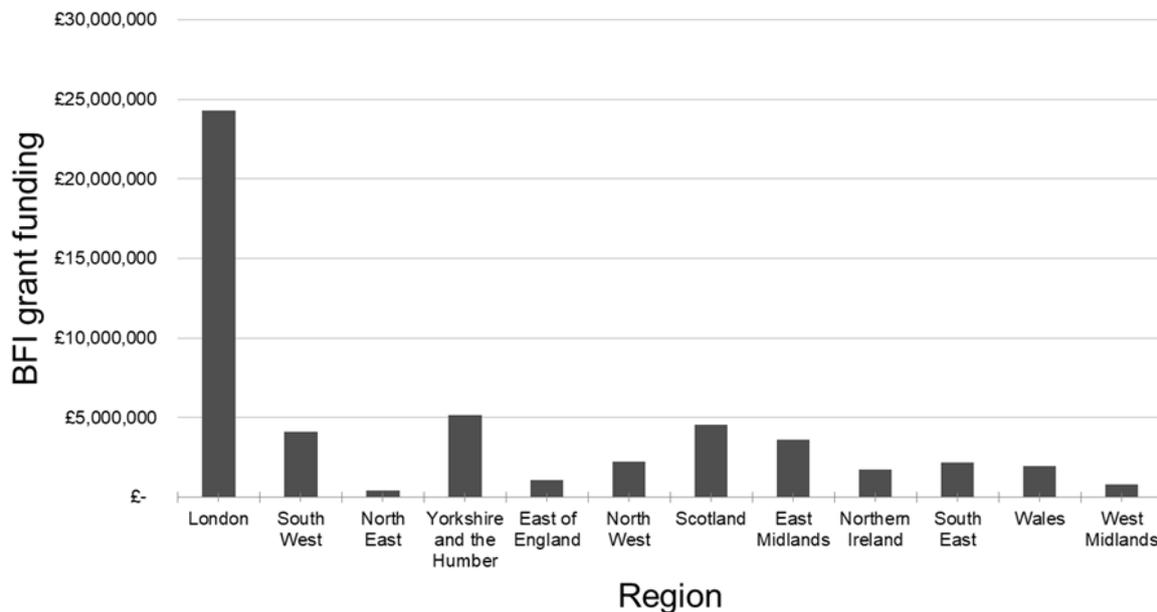
While through the New Labour and UKFC era a regional focus was strongly promoted, the impact on film exhibition in the regions was minimal. As Moody (2017:

410) argues, ‘...despite making smaller interventions in distribution and exhibition, the UKFC was primarily a film production finance organisation, and its greatest sphere of influence was over the types of films in which it chose to invest.’

DCMS announced the abolishment of the UKFC in 2011 (Moody, 2017: 404), with the BFI taking its place as the ‘lead agency for film’ (Vaizey, 2012: np; DCMS, 2012). In the same year, DCMS announced the formation of a film policy review panel (FPRP) and tasked it with a major review of UK film policy. Their report recommended a greater focus on developing audiences at a local level (DCMS, 2012), whilst acknowledging that ‘...the value of the sector needs to be understood in social and cultural as well as economic terms’ (DCMS, 2012: 29). The FPRP, identified the central goal of UK film policy should be to ‘increase audience choice across the UK’ (DCMS, 2012: 12), including a focus on localism, community and cultural diversity, something echoed by those working in the independent exhibition sector (Cosgrove, 2011 and 2012). The FPRP called for the establishment of a new network that should ‘provide direct funding for the co-ordination of clusters of local cinemas and film societies across the Nations and Regions of the UK’ (DCMS, 2012: 14). The BFI realised this in the form of the Film Audience Network (FAN), separated into regional hubs, covering all types of film exhibition and allocated a total budget of £3m over 2012-2017 (BFI, 2012). This was increased to an allocation of £15m out of a total BFI budget of £488.8m in the next five-year strategy (2017-2022), with the goal of ‘increasing the breadth and depth of film available to audiences’ (BFI, 2017: 30). The focus on developing new audiences and greater devolution of decision-

making to regions was clearly welcome but over the last decade London has continued to dominate BFI grant expenditure (Fig.1)².

Fig.1 - BFI regional grant funding by location of beneficiary 2011 - 2018

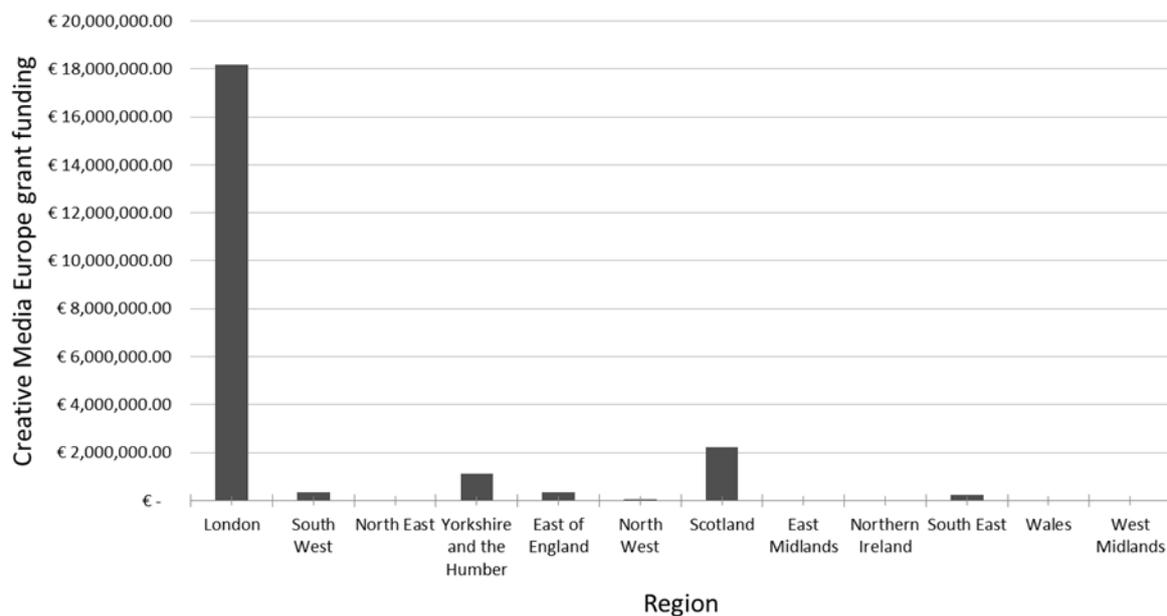


The data (Fig.1) shows most film exhibition money moves through London. This does not necessarily equate to where films are shown, as touring programmes and distribution funding may enable films to be shown in multiple locations. As much as this reflects the BFI’s funding priorities it also shows that many more London-based organisations have the capacity to apply and manage grants of any scale, something that speaks to the under-development of local film exhibition in many areas. This is particularly the case for distribution, where distribution companies that receive grants to show films nationally are overwhelmingly based in London. This lack of organisational development is seen more starkly if we look at the ability of the

² Data from the following BFI funding schemes for programming, distribution and exhibition (2011 – 2018): Audience Development; BFI Neighbourhood Cinema; Film Audience Network; Film Festivals; Programming Development; Strategic Partners; UK Audience Network; Big Audience; Breakout; Distribution; Large Scale Film Programme; Organisational Award; Programming Development; Touring Film Programme; New Models; Programming Development; Sleeper; Specialised P&A; Transition Fund.

regions (and the film organisations based in those regions) to attract international investment in the form of the Creative Europe programme (Fig.2)³. Not only have London based companies receive nearly five times as much as the rest of the UK, three English regions (North East, East Midlands and West Midlands) received no funding over a ten-year period.

Fig. 2 - Creative Media Europe grant funding by location of beneficiary, 2008 – 2018



Even accounting for the wider screen sector including European production funding, of all the projects that received EU funding between 2007 and 2017, only 2% were in the North East, 2% in the North West, 3% in the South West and 4% in Yorkshire and The Humber, while 67% were in London (BFI, 2018a: 17).

These kinds of regional inequalities are not isolated to the film sector, place-based inequalities in cultural funding have been extensively evidenced (see for example

³ Data from the following Creative Europe programmes (2008 – 2018): Access To Markets; Film Festivals; Film Literacy / Audience Development/ Film Education; Film Sales Support; UK Distributors. (Creative Europe, 2019)

Stark, Gordon and Powell, 2013 and 2014). The Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value (Neelands et al, 2015: 32) notes, 'publicly funded arts, culture and heritage, supported by tax and lottery revenues, are predominantly accessed by an unnecessarily narrow social, economic, ethnic and educated demographic that is not fully representative of the UK's population'. Notable attempts to address this include Arts Council England's move towards 'place-based' investment. Examples of Arts Council England's approach include *Creative Towns*, a research project addressing cultural investment, infrastructure and engagement in English towns (Bristow, 2019; Serota, 2019) and *Creative People and Places*, a large-scale investment programme running since 2013 that aims to raise arts participation in areas with least engagement as evidenced by the Active People survey (Gilmore, 2013). However, film, historically separate from Arts Council England's remit since its foundation, plays no explicit role in this programme.

Questions have been raised around how national cultural bodies conceptualise and understand the 'local' (Durrer, Gilmore & Stevenson, 2019) but what could be argued is different about film engagement, is the relative ubiquity of a narrow range of mainstream theatrical film. Approaches to understanding and developing local film exhibition differ across the nations of the UK. In Scotland, there has been a more coordinated approach to addressing inequalities in film exhibition provision than in England. Organisations such as Regional Screen Scotland have played an important role in developing a better understanding of the geographies of film provision in Scotland (see Drew Wylie, 2016) and evidencing the social, cultural and economic impact of film exhibition (Social Value Lab and Regional Screen Scotland, 2016). Regional Screen Scotland are also pioneering a new scheme, *A Cinema Near You*,

supported by Creative Scotland, Screen Scotland and Film Hub Scotland that aims to develop new and fledgling film exhibition in areas of lowest provision (see Regional Screen Scotland, 2020).

Taking all of this into account, from a policy perspective, as Aylett (2005: 346) argues, ‘...what is in question here is not the presence of mainstream film but its predominance, and the challenge which this presents to policy-makers to deliver pluralism in form, ethnicity and content as the basis of our film culture’. Moving beyond a regional frame to understand the relationship between film engagement and place at a local level is just one element to this, but important if the imbalances between London and the English regions is ever to be effectively addressed. Setting out clear regional inequalities also points to the need to question how inner-regional and local inequalities manifest, as well as how these regional inequalities are understood at the local level.

Methodological approach and data

While it is clear there are long-term and entrenched regional inequalities in film exhibition across the UK, and this has been evidenced annually in statistics published by the UKFC and subsequently the BFI since at least 2002, there has been limited research that questions what this means for those living in those regions. Attempts to engage people and places that are seemingly ‘disengaged’ with culture requires a shift in approach to evidence, away from simplistic ‘deficit’ models to an approach that accounts for specificity, that is relational and historical (Gilmore, 2013). Our analysis is based on findings that were developed to gain new insights into how people engage with film in regions of relatively limited exhibition. The four

regions were chosen because of their comparative range of existing film provision and alignment with areas covered by the BFI's Film Audiences Network organisations (which were aligned with Arts Council England's area boundaries).

The research datasets include 200 semi-structured qualitative interviews; the combined responses of a three-wave survey questionnaire (with a within-group subset sample of N=5,071, n=547, and n=317 responses) and datasets detailing cinema provision in the UK. The interviews followed a mix of purposive and snowball sampling, covering 50 people in each region (North East, North West, South West and Yorkshire and Humber), with a range of different film relationships to film watching as well as ages, educational levels, ethnicities, household incomes, occupations and locations. The interview questions focused on where and how people watched film, their experience and practices of film watching, and the importance and rationale for choosing different genres, venues, and social groups with whom to watch. The interviews elicited rich and detailed insights about how film features within people's cultural lives. To analyse the interviews we drew on thematic analysis, using an inductive process of qualitatively coding verbatim transcripts (Hanchard and Merrington, 2018). Using pseudonyms and including age details and a profession (where given by the participant), we present quotations from the interviews in order to illustrate key points within our findings.

We also gathered data on regional film exhibition provision and public funding for film exhibition to understand the different concentrations of organisations that show film in the four regions. This data includes organisations that received public grants for film exhibition (BFI, 2019b), the Cinema Theatre Association UK cinema database

(CTAUK, 2019) and Film Hub North and Film Hub South West membership (FHSW, 2019).

Different geographies of film exhibition

Across all four regions and reflecting the types of cinema exhibition available to people, our survey showed that films were most frequently watched at large commercial cinema chains (such as Odeon, Vue, Cineworld). 66.1% of people said that had watched at least one film at this type of cinema in the previous 12 months. Films were watched at small commercial cinema chains (such as Curzon, Everyman, Empire and Picturehouse) by 24.2% of the sample and 15.8% had watched at an independent or arthouse cinema. There was limited comparative variation between the regions in these patterns, but there was greater variance when we asked about perceptions of local cinema provision. In the regions collectively, those in the South West viewed their film provision as slightly worse than the other three regions, but across all the regions the choice or range of films on show locally was seen as a significant factor influencing what they watched at the cinema.

To move beyond these territorial regional frames and account for the dynamics of localised film engagement, we used our interviews to identify different modes of place in relation to film exhibition. In analysing the interviews, we considered people's perceptions of their film provision – and developed a framework accordingly. In doing so we accounted for the variety of different types of film exhibitors and programming across different geographies, in both spatial and temporal ways. Spatially, in terms of the concentration of different types of film exhibitors and people's view on their access to these and temporally in terms of the

frequency through time of different types of programming. Considering temporality is important for two reasons, firstly because of film release windows, where distributors privilege certain types of venues over others in the access they give them to new release films. Secondly, in many places programmes of non-mainstream film primarily comes in the form of periodic film festivals or film clubs.

Emerging from our analysis of the interviews, the five modes of place that make up this analytical framework range from areas with the most limited opportunity to see any film, to the towns and cities that almost exclusively only have narrow mainstream provision and to those that have a broad and unique range of film exhibition. This approach is not about fixing places within these categories, but about emphasising the relationship between sense of place and localised film cultures. This is to privilege the social and cultural relations that make up cinema going experience more generally (Allen, 2011). Of course, engagement with a broad range of different types of film is not just a question of geographic proximity. There are many other social, cultural and economic factors, including cultural capital (Hill, 2004) that influence film engagement as well as taste, transport, time, cost, age, life-stage, social relations and education. Yet at a basic level, the provision of diverse programmes must exist before people can engage with them.

Distinctive film cities

If we break the regions down into the current configuration of Metropolitan and non-Metropolitan Districts and Unitary Authorities, of which in the regions there are 102, with a total population of 21,029,352 (ONS, 2019) we only identify four with a distinctive range of different types of film exhibition. These are the cosmopolitan,

urban centres of Manchester, Bristol, Newcastle, and Sheffield. Within these city centres are multiple layers of activity, a broad ecology of different types of film exhibitors and film related organisations. These cities stood out in the interviews as places that possessed something different and unique within the regions. Diana, (35-44, charity worker) from Bristol reflected on the opportunity she feels the city gives her to watch film, 'I think we're very lucky. Here in Bristol, there's lots of...places you can go to watch films, and culturally diverse [cinemas] as well...You can get access to lots of different types of films'.

Within these city centres there are competing commercial multiplex cinema chains (such as Vue, Cineworld and Odeon) as well as commercial 'boutique' cinema chains (such as Everyman or Curzon). There is at least one independent, multi-screen cinema, usually a cinema that was previously part of the BFI's Regional Film Theatre network in some form, such as HOME in Manchester, Tyneside Cinema in Newcastle or Showroom Cinema in Sheffield. These cinemas, like Watershed in Bristol have long and rich histories within their cities, that track wider developments in film exhibition support and policy in the UK (Presence, 2019). In addition, there may also be single-screen, independent cinemas based on alternative economic, social or political models (such as Cube in Bristol or Star and Shadow Cinema and Side Cinema in Newcastle). The variety of different film exhibition venues in these city centres gives people a sense of choice in their film watching. As Andy (18-24, supermarket checkout operator) discusses:

I think Bristol...has a very good indie scene...but also the diversity of
Bristol is good as well... you get in Bollywood, you know, French

Arthouse cinema as well. And in Cineworld I know they show films from Poland... I think the variety of films...influences what kind of films I watch.

There is greater diversity in the range of films shown in these cities because some key venues have the ability and curatorial expertise to programme independently. This independence has enabled a wider film exhibition culture to grow - often supported through the independent venues are a range of different film festivals. Some film festivals are independent organisations, such as Encounters in Bristol or Sheffield Doc Fest, others are part of the programmes of the independent cinemas, such as ¡Viva! Spanish & Latin American Festival at HOME in Manchester. Beyond cinemas in these cities, there is also a broader engagement with other areas of film culture that includes a range of cultural organisations with a focus on film or the moving image, such as archives, museums, and universities.

For some people, access to the key independent venues within these diverse cities has broadened their film watching beyond their online engagement, 'I think it's great that the Tyneside [Cinema] is doing so well 'cause if it wasn't for that I'd be watching all my films on my laptop' (Ben, 18-24, footballer). For others having venues that show films they like are a secondary benefit, as Howard (55-64) describes:

I live in a small suburb of Manchester... the way I access film is, probably, mostly through the internet so... in that sense, it's not geographically bounded... if there's a film that was on at HOME... I might go and watch it because it was there... if I want to watch

something, I want to watch it and if it happens there at the cinema then that might be a preferred way of watching it but the decision to watch a particular film is independent of geography.

There was a sense from those we interviewed that the film cultures in these cities is somewhat rare and distinctive, and this influences audiences, as Lizzie (18-24, charity administrator), who grew up in Newcastle, expressed:

I've been lucky to live in places that have smaller independent cinemas that curate their programming more than a multiplex does, so that has influenced me. I've had access to more indie films than people who grew up, you know, in like the middle of nowhere with just a big shopping centre near them to go and see the latest James Bond or whatever.

In these distinctive film cities, sense of place through film culture was associated more positively with how these cities were viewed. The key independent cinemas in these cities were viewed as part of the fabric and imaginary of the city and seen to play a wider cultural role in the city. In some interviews there was a contrast between the types of independent cinemas that were seemingly 'integrated' and embedded to a certain extent in their local context, and the mainstream multiplex cinemas, programmed from afar, that were perceived to have little direct connection to the places or people they served. Nicola (25-34, theatre producer) discusses watching black cinema in Manchester:

I get frustrated, you see like black movies, like, Tyler Perry or like... Girls Trip, those kinds of films. They're not always on at mainstream cinemas... and then when it's on, it's on for a short run... I think in terms of like American black films they are not always shown. So that's difficult, and that's when people go to online, and then stream it. I think... I do have good access. I think because of online and streaming and pirate...if like I wanna really watch something...You can find it if you want it. It's sad that it's not necessarily showcased [in cinemas].

While in these distinctive film cities it is possible for many to watch a broad range of different types of film theatrically, there are ongoing challenges to evolve the programming in the cities to engage diverse and changing populations.

Living proximate to Manchester, Bristol, Newcastle, Sheffield and the different programmes available there also significantly influenced how people in the surrounding areas thought about their relationship to film exhibition. The median travel time to a UK cinema is 20 minutes, something that doesn't change in relation to different types of cinemas of their locations (Collins, Hand and Ryder, 2005). From a vicinity where it might be possible to travel (but not necessarily easily) to these cities, interviewees often framed their accounts their own town or city through a lack in relation to their neighbours. Examples included Rotherham's proximity to Sheffield and Sunderland's proximity to Newcastle.

These distinctive film cities are the only areas in the four regions that have a consistent, year-round alternative programme of film than is available in the

commercial, multiplex cinemas and where there is the opportunity for people to experience a diverse film culture. Importantly, these places have not become distinctive film cities recently, they have long histories of rising and falling independent film exhibition (see for example, Presence, 2019). The persistence of one or two key venues within the cities, despite change in policy and public support over many years, has been key to sustaining and developing a distinctive local film exhibition culture.

Mainstream multiplex film cities

Most people living in the four regions have similar geographical proximity to mainstream film programming through national corporate chain multiplex cinemas of one kind or another, but with limited opportunity to experience more diverse range of programming in a theatrical context. This is perhaps unsurprising in some smaller towns, but what we have found is that even in some large cities with established culture and leisure economies of different types there limited opportunities for people to watch a broad range of film theatrically. Large cities, that although they have similar size populations to the most distinctive cities, can have a limited, or narrow range of film exhibitors by comparison. This includes cities such as Liverpool, Leeds, Sunderland and Hull. As Colin (25-34, marketing manager) from Sunderland put it,

We don't have as much as other cities or towns. We got a cinema, but we don't have an independent cinema, the mainstream shows Hollywood stuff... but independent British films, I have to say, access like the rest of the world is with Netflix and stuff.

For many people in these regions, engagement with film exhibition never goes beyond the mainstream multiplex cinemas. In these places there are commercial, multiplex chain cinemas but independent film exhibition is limited to small-scale, self-organised, temporary or one-off initiatives, that do not engage large numbers. There may be other cultural organisations that engage with wider moving image culture such as museums or galleries and the cities may have an extensive cultural infrastructure in other areas, such as theatre or visual arts.

Within these areas there are limited opportunities for audiences to experience diverse film culture beyond the commercial mainstream. This was framed by some participants as a loss of previously more diverse exhibition in some places, here Jethro (65+, retired town planner) from the North West discusses his relationship with changing cinema exhibition in Liverpool:

I just don't go anything like as often... because the kind of social context within which I went to see the films, with friends and with family and the kind of cinemas, small... smaller local cinemas... including the Merseyside Film Institute, they have all gone...it's now either, on your own with a video at home, which isn't watching a film at all really... one end of the spectrum, or go to a big multiplex where it is very impersonal and not really a very nice experience.

This response shows the interrelationship between different types of film exhibition and the personal relationships that shape film engagement, but also the perceptions

of choice for those living in areas that have become dominated by mainstream multiplex cinemas. Choice between what here is seen as the limited experience of watching films in the home environment and the homogeneity of multiplex experience.

Liverpool has a range of commercial multiplex cinemas, offering different leisure experiences to audiences but not necessarily a continual programme beyond the mainstream. It has a Picturehouse, Everyman and an Odeon Luxe, as well as a 12-screen Odeon and a 14-screen Showcase. There are and have been independent initiatives in recent years, such as A Small Cinema (that ran from 2015 to 2017), and initiatives like Big Adventure Cinema, as well as organisations like Liverpool Biennial and FACT showing gallery-based artist moving image. However, for a city of Liverpool's size and that has gone through significant cultural investment (for example hosting the European Capital of Culture in 2008) not to have an independent cinema, on a scale of large northern cities such as HOME in Manchester, Tyneside Cinema in Newcastle or Showroom Cinema in Sheffield, seems at least odd and at most a significant oversight in the cultural development of the city. Leeds is arguably similar to Liverpool, although it is currently developing and has more established independent organisations such as Leeds International Film Festival, Pavilion and Hyde Park Picture House, which is due to expand with investment from the Heritage Lottery Fund. In these mainstream multiplex cities, the idea of diversity or distinction in film exhibition, is predominantly characterised by choice in leisure and entertainment experiences, rather than choice in types of film or film programming.

Mainstream multiplex film towns

Beyond the major cities in these four regions, the dominance of multiplex cinema and limited mainstream programming is also felt in most of the towns within the four regions. At a smaller scale, if they have cinemas, most towns in the four regions have multiplexes, towns such as Hartlepool, Barrow-in-Furness, Middlesbrough, Doncaster, Warrington, Swindon and Bournemouth. These may have one or more commercial cinemas, but overall choice of film is limited to what these multiplexes show, with the exception of some small-scale locally organised film events or clubs.

The characterisation of places as limited to mainstream film culture may be related to wider conceptions of cultural participation in general. Through this we see the differences in how people living in these places conceive their sense of place. In contrasting her choice of film between Manchester and Barrow-in-Furness (her hometown), Georgina (25-34) from Manchester describes not only the differences between them but what this means for her sense of place.

In Manchester, I have so much choice... so much access... if I go back and work in Cumbria I feel so frustrated, because there's just not the films. But I might have watched the trailer, and I think... "Oh, that's got to be in Barrow, like that's going to win an Oscar or something." I wrote to my local cinema when I was a teenager living there... to complain because they weren't going to show Juno... I was like... "how you're not showing this film...it's a mainstream film" and... they were... like "there's not enough interest around here". They treat the audiences in a really gentle way and... I just think it's

so dangerous because Barrow-in-Furness it's a town, it's like so masculine and so like much in poverty... I think that more than anything, they should be encouraging people to go and see films... rather than like showing garbage.

There are frustrations for those living in these places that extend beyond their limited opportunity to watch different types of film. As the quote above identifies, the types of film exhibition available in different places can characterise people's perceptions of place. Here we see the contrast between Manchester, characterised by the choice of film it offers, with a town, Barrow-in-Furness, that only has a single cinema, a multiplex with a limited mainstream programme, but also in an unprompted response how these places are viewed economically and socially as a result.

Limited areas

There are some areas that have very limited film exhibition of any kind. There are two patterns to highlight here, one rural, one urban. The first is that unsurprisingly in some rural areas extensive travel would be required to attend a cinema screening. While there may be some locally organised, irregular film clubs that take place in community venues, watching films in any other type of cinema exhibition would require traveling long distances. As Adele (45-54, hostel project worker) in the interviews mentioned, 'living in Whaley in the Peak District, there wasn't a cinema anywhere near us then, so... it would have to be a major undertaking to go and see something'. From those living in rural areas there was generally a pragmatism towards watching film, that often divided between the mainstream and other types of

film. Bryan (45-54, lecturer) living in a rural area outside Bath, commented 'access to film locally, is okay, I mean, there's a mainstream cinema, it's like an Odeon, sort of, multiplex... Within 10 miles in different directions. Independent cinema is a little bit hard to come by.'

The second feature of areas with limited film exhibition, are some well populated urban areas, that although they may be near other towns and cities with cinemas do not have mainstream cinemas themselves, or anything other than irregular community screenings. Rotherham is an example, a metropolitan district with over 250,000 people, it does not have any permanent cinema screenings of any kind. Rotherham's proximity to Sheffield (a city with six cinemas) plays a significant role here in how film engagement plays out for residents as travel to Sheffield is required to attend any film screening. As Cuthbert (18-24, student) from the area discusses, 'in terms of Rotherham, there isn't really a place you can really watch stuff in Rotherham in terms of like cinema... you have got to go to Sheffield.' Watching films is therefore primarily conceived in terms of watching through means other than theatrical exhibition, he continues:

In terms of access to like films, DVDs, and stuff like that, that's pretty good...and obviously, everybody's got Netflix or Sky or... Now TV, so that accessibility is alright in this area. So, I'd say it's just really cinema... that's probably... not very local to this area.

In this account, the seeming universality of online streaming is contrasted with the absence of cinemas, and a sense that certain places, in this case Rotherham, do not have the cultural identity that includes cinema.

Where those in these limited areas rely on the internet to watch films, then technological considerations also play a role in shaping their experience. David (25-34, computer engineer), who lives between Leeds and York, discussed how a poor-quality internet connection affected his ability to watch films more than anything else:

It's rubbish actually where we are. The internet is pretty rubbish. So we've got Netflix... but it's kind of whatever... it winds me up sometimes, and it's buffering... and there's no local cinemas or anything... and we don't have a DVD player anymore 'cause... you know, we're in the modern age.

In these rural areas the breath of films now available online has opened the possibility for many to watch a broader range of films, where they have sufficient infrastructure to access them. Those choosing to live in rural locations, have most probably not done so for cultural reasons, but where community cinemas and film clubs operate in these areas, we found they were highly valued for their social and community role.

Distinctive film towns

In contrast to many large urban areas that are dominated by commercial multiplex provision, we have identified several towns that have developed their own local

independent film cultures in these regions. Towns such as Hexham and Berwick upon Tweed in North East England, Keswick and Leigh in North West England and Hebden Bridge in Yorkshire. As Clementina (25-34, agricultural consultant) discussed, Berwick may not at first be associated with film, and mainstream film is limited but it has established an interrelated set of organisations that provide a unique opportunity to engage with a diverse range of films in the town at different times:

Berwick is such an interesting place... we do have major social issues as every small town... but... we have got this growing middle class and I guess the Maltings [Arts Centre] still caters [to] the middle class and not to the other social classes as much, but... I love... the educational activities that [the] Maltings does and the way they try to grab different audiences. I don't think Berwick would be the same without the Maltings... We are very lucky to have it. If you want to get... blockbuster type films, Berwick is not great. I mean it is going to be like two months after it's released that we get it (laughs), but the main thing is the stuff the film society show, I think.

As with the example of Berwick, the distinctive film exhibition programme in these towns tends to come through a single screen independent venue, sometimes part of an arts centre or mixed-use venue. Built around these venues are film festivals, film clubs and film societies, that show a diverse programme. In Berwick, The Maltings, a theatre and cinema mix-artform venue plays host to the annual Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival, and the monthly screenings of the Berwick Film Society. Both

presenting unique opportunities for local people to see diverse curated film programmes.

Similarly, in Keswick, in the Lake District National Park, the single-screen, independent Alhambra cinema hosts the Keswick film club and the annual Keswick Film Festival, both with a focus on world cinema. Bidy (35-44, information officer) described the uniqueness of the experience, 'when I'm in Keswick, we go to [the] Alhambra, and that's lovely. I'm amazed that these cinemas have sort of died out. I know people like multiplexes but it's so much nicer.' Jessie (65+, librarian) reflects on the experience the Keswick Film Festival provides, 'I think we saw 10 films at the last one...It's very nice to immerse yourself'.

There are also examples of places without independent venues but where an ecology of different programmes have developed. Leigh in Greater Manchester is one example where a film society has grown to produce an annual film festival and supports regular film discussion groups in a place that Jason (55-64, teacher) described as "a forgotten industrial town".

The diversity of film exhibition in towns such as Berwick has shaped people's sense of place, and sometimes challenged their expectations of what the town can be, as Clementina (25-34, agricultural consultant) mentioned, 'you know Berwick feels like a different place [during the festival]'. In Keswick, the location and wider sense of place is one of the draws for audiences, as Leo (65+, retired engineer) described, what appeals about watching film there is 'a combination of the films and the people and obviously the location'. Although, rather more problematically, this sense of place is

also conditioned by who doesn't participate. As in Keswick, Owen (55-64, retired) explained that 'because it's also a tourist area, it's also quite an expensive tourist area... a lot of people living here... are retired, from London. The...membership [of Keswick Film Club] has very few locals, they're all people that have moved here.'

Within these kinds of places there are potentially unique opportunities for people to experience a diverse film culture but it is limited to the moments when an annual film festival or monthly film club screening takes place, and they may be socially limited to particular groups. As with the distinctive film cities, the challenges may not be in programming but with which audiences are reached and opening the programmes to wider groups.

Conclusion

Through identifying these five different modes of place from our interview analysis we have attempted to move beyond a fixed territorial understanding of regional inequality and find a new way to address questions of the diversity of film exhibition in different places. This paper has argued for the need to reconsider the relationship between film engagement and place, questioning the territorial regional statistical conceptions that dominate film policy research. We have advocated for the need to take account of the localised sense of place that film exhibition contributes to in many ways. To do this we have considered relations of policy, funding, audiences and film provision. We have sought to raise these questions at a dynamic moment for how audiences are watching film. At the start of the rise of online streaming many may have felt that theatrical exhibition was once again under threat, and that

ubiquitous digital distribution to different types of films would solve the spatial inequalities in provision. But evidence in both instances is starting to show the opposite. Inequalities in cultural participation may have been reproduced and even enlarged through digital developments (Mihelj, Leguina, and Downey, 2019), and new cinemas are being built in some towns and cities across the country.

The persistence of spatial cultural inequalities is clearly connected to wider social, economic and political situations, but there are obvious examples of places where unique film exhibition ecologies have developed in the distinctive film cities and towns. In some places, an interventionist, deficit policy approach may be required, clearly the mainstream multiplex cities and towns could be targeted for greater investment, while distinctive film cities and towns sustained and grown. Distribution also simultaneously needs to be emboldened and reach into places that already have cinemas but where the programmes are narrow and risk-averse.

From our interviews, people were pragmatic and reflexive in how they approached their relationship to different types of film and to finding ways to watch films if they desired. Simultaneously, people accounted for many factors beyond simple proximity, from their level of interest, knowledge and taste in film, to their available time and money, to their ability to watch films via internet streaming and on television and DVD. In general, the opportunity to watch anything other than the broadest mainstream film theatrically was viewed as a rarity and when it was available, a privilege. Some in areas that were clearly underserved, in the mainstream multiplex towns and cities, were frustrated by not only the disconnection this gave them to wider culture, but also what it said about the identity of where they lived.

It is not possible to speak of a nationally diverse film culture without accounting for the regions, moving towards this cannot be done without having significantly better localised film cultures in many areas outside London. Policy needs to not only report on regional inequalities in film exhibition but find new ways to think about how diversity in film culture manifests in different places and seek to invest ambitiously in new ecologies of exhibitors. Organisations in Scotland have already started to do this, and the BFI's regional Film Hubs are making a valuable contribution nationally. The Film Hub's 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 local authorities, there can be limited expectations of a shift in the current landscape. New cinemas that are being built are based on commercial return and there needs to be space for investment that seeks to develop social and cultural value in the places that need it most. We have only addressed four English regions in this study, but from this it is clear that there is further need to provide greater opportunities for people to watch film beyond the mainstream in many places, and that there is great potential to reach, educate, build and sustain audiences for a wider more diverse film culture across the country.

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