

How Audiences Form: theorising audiences through how they develop relationships with film

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Abstract

This paper introduces and discusses a new theory of film audiences, which is that the audience, in all its variations, is a process. This refers to a process that involves the ways people develop relationships with film considering the level and types of film provision. Advances in theorising audiences are related to developments in film as a cultural form, which include changes in distribution and exhibition and in how audiences 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 (Livingstone, 2003). 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 (Livingstone, 2007, 2013). These general shifts and their theorisation, however, do not fully address the characteristics of contemporary film audiences. The process of audiences involves distinctive relations that audiences have with film and its exhibition, which involve a set of interactions (Hanchard et al., 2020, 2021). The key relations are with screens; venues and place; audiences; others in social and cultural life, and in lived film culture. The interactions are with friends, family, and wider communities; screens and venues; film throughout the life course; film stories through interpretive work; and practices of audiences. 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. The new theory of audiences addresses a lack of understanding about how contemporary audiences form, the types of audiences and audience experience, and how people develop meaningful

relationships with film. The insights of new theory can inform current scholarly debates about audiences and is relevant to film policy in terms of its focus on developing audiences.

Keywords: Audiences, film, theory, concepts

Introduction

Debates about the changing character of audiences in the digital age largely argue that audiences are now diffuse and fragmented (Livingstone, 2013, 2019). The continuing development of cultural industry, evolving market segmentation and the proliferation of screens and expansion of digital media feature in the ways in which people engage with film and participate in audiences (Hanchard et al., 2019, 2020b). Although trends in the commercialisation of culture feature in how people engage with culture, participation in culture retains a distinctiveness (Chaney, 2002). This is based in the meaning particular cultural forms have for people and the characteristics of participating in culture beyond the ethos of consumption. For example, film and film culture spans commercial popular entertainment and independent, artistic, and alternative cultural engagement. The changes in how people engage with culture feature in changes in audiences, their types, patterns, and experiences. Taking film as an example, changes include how people view film, participate in film audiences, their cultural values and interests, and their practices of viewing films and what type of audience experience they seek. To address these changes and to understand them requires attention on how audiences form, when they form, and why they form in particular ways.

This paper discusses how audiences for film form through the relationships people develop with film. These relationships develop through their personal journeys with film, access to film and venues, and the social and cultural dynamics of 'lived film culture'. These relationships underpin what film means for people and form the basis for contemporary types of audiences and audience experiences. The paper is based on research undertaken in the *Beyond the Multiplex: audiences for specialised films in English regions* project (<https://www.beyondthemultiplex.org/>), hereafter 'BtM' (Ref: AH/P005780/2). The project focuses on the way people engage with film and the ways in which various types of audiences come together. Funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council, the project ran from June 2017 to June 2021.

The paper first outlines current debates about audiences in terms of their patterns and trends. It then provides details of the BtM project, outlining the research questions, context, and research methods. It then discusses the key characteristics of audiences and their experiences, before discussing the concepts of audiences when understood as process. The conclusion argues that theorising audiences as a process shows that it is still sensible to

talk about audiences. The dynamics of how audiences form and the kinds of audiences people engage in vary, but these nonetheless are patterned and remain meaningful.

Current debates about audiences

The context of current debates about audiences is in the shift in types of audiences from mass audiences to a wider range of audience types (Hanchard, 2020a). Although there is inequality in cultural participation (O'Brien and Oakley, 2015; Merrington et al., 2020), the proliferation of audiences has led to debates about the fragmentation of audiences and audiences being diffuse, with some arguing that it is not feasible to talk about audiences as a single entity (Gillmoor, 2006; Jermyn and Holmes, 2006; Livingstone and Das, 2013). There is a combination of social, media and technological factors that feature in the ways in which audiences form. The digital age has made time more flexible and individualised and enabled a more diverse engagement with culture, which combines with the ways in which the cultural and creative industries feature in everyday life. One aspect is that digital and social media are embedded in everyday life and are part of a media-saturated world that enables people to connect and engage with culture in convenient and continuous ways (Livingstone, 2019; Wessels, 2018). Another aspect is that the cultural sector has also expanded, although unevenly, offering more access to culture adding to the provision of commercial culture in regional contexts, although also unevenly (O'Brien and Oakley, 2015; Merrington, et al. 2020). Although access to culture is enabled digitally, the physical and place-based venues remain part of an overall provision of culture, including film (Merrington et al., 2020).

The rapid development of online consumption and an increasing array of cultural events mean that the nature and formation of film audiences is changing (Christie, 2011). This not only raises attention to what the characteristics of contemporary audiences are but has also sharpened the debate about how best to conceptualise audiences and their formation (Livingstone, 2013). Large scale quantitative surveys of audiences and trends in viewing figures show that audiences are niche, and that people mix their viewing preferences and habits (Hanchard et al. 2019). Livingstone (2013) notes that small scale reception studies establish that audiences are plural in the ways they interpret film, that their cultural context matters, and that their readings of texts (in BtM's case, films) often differ from those developed through scholarly textual analysis. What these insights suggest is that audiences are varied and niche on the one hand, and on the other engage and interpret texts in diverse ways – both pointing to a plurality of audiences and audience experiences. This, however, might not mean that audiences are fragmented, diffuse or are no longer seen and experienced as an entity (Hanchard et al., 2020a).

Given the variability of audiences and audience experience, Livingstone (1998) suggests that audiences should be conceptualised as relational or interactive constructs to acknowledge the diverse sets of relationships between people and media forms. This requires a balance in research between attention to (film) texts and attention to audiences,

which, she argues can be achieved by looking at the practices of consumption. This means asking how texts – in our case mainstream and specialised films – are located and understood as part of people’s social and cultural practices. This emphasizes the modes of connection, relationships and communication that make up the development of ‘audiencehood’ (Livingstone, 2013). Addressing modes of connection, relationships and communication extends beyond consumption, it goes more deeply into the ways in which people develop their interests and identities throughout their life course.

Culture in this context links the personal with the social – it is a way in which personal experience is made sense of through reference to wider public meaning (Geertz, 1973, Smart, 2007). Although consumption is cultural, engagement with cultural activities, whether popular, middle- or highbrow, is indicative of a different type of participation from that of consumption (Chaney, 2002). Participation in cultural activities also involves values, self-development, creativity and seeing different aspects of the world around us (Wessels, 2014, 2018). Part of the motivation of seeking out audience experiences and deciding what type of culture people want to participate in is shaped by personal interests and wider social and cultural issues and values. This suggests that the relations and interactions people have with cultural texts – in the case of the focus of this paper, film – is shaped at the personal and the social level and involves interactions with ways of accessing, engaging with and participating in culture, such as technology, screens, venues, events and so on. Considering the ways in which audiences are relational and interactive can help identify what kinds of audiences there are and how they form in specific contexts. However, attention on how audiences form, and the kinds of relationships people have with culture such as film is relatively underexplored in audience studies.

These dynamics relate to debates about the ‘active audience’. The main thrust of the argument is that audiences are active in how they interpret texts, such as film and how they participate and engage with culture through their audience practices (Barker, 2011, Livingstone, 2013). The argument is a response to theories that see audiences as passive because they are positioned ideologically by the text (see Livingstone, 1998). The observations by Livingstone (2013) noted above, counters arguments about passive audiences and extends thinking about active audiences by encompassing the richness of engagement with culture may or may not feed into the ways audiences form. What Livingstone (2015) asks us to consider is that audiences are plural, messy, both individual and collective, and both consumerist and political. By asking this, she raises the challenge of how we can think about audiences in more fruitful ways that go beyond audiences being defined as a singular body to recognising richness of audiences, their various configurations and how they feature in the meaningfulness of people’s local and cultural lives (Livingstone, 2015; Livingstone and Das, 2013, Wessels, et al., 2023).

In relation to film audiences, research largely focuses on actual audiences in terms of audience trends and size, viewing habits and experiences and venue-based and online viewing (Wessels et al., 2023). These studies and approaches provide valuable insights, but they do not address how audiences form. What is meant by this is knowing about the ways

people can come together as audiences in various configurations, what the characteristics of those configurations are, and why they do so. It involves knowing what the underpinning activities are that support audiences in coming together for specific types of experiences. This focus is significant because it starts to identify the prerequisites for the materialisation of audiences – what resources, interests, knowledge, and motivations people have in coming together to participate in audiences, whether for film or in other cultural events. This is especially important in helping audience studies researchers to explore some of the perceived changes in audiences.

The focus on the process of how audiences form means research can address pre-audience event factors as well as post-event factors and the actual audience event itself. This means that research can identify and trace the ways people engage with culture, such as film culture, and from this assess what the characteristics of that engagement are, and how aspects of engagement may or may not feature in the formation of various types of audiences. This can capture how the process of joining an audience might well be different given access to social and digital media and in the ways the creative and cultural industries feature in people's social lives. Finding out more about the process of people's engagement with culture and how this underpins the formation of audiences helps to identify whether it still makes sense to talk about audiences and helps to identify the characteristics of audiences.

The BtM project: developing knowledge about film audiences

Research undertaken by the BtM project is at the centre of many of the debates about audiences discussed above. The argument made for the research was that although audience reception studies have made audiences increasingly visible within academic debate and although the industry and policy makers also gather intelligence about audiences, little attention has been paid to the specific contextual relationships and interactions between people, film organisations and film that generate and sustain audiences. The main research question asks how audiences engage with film and how they form in different ways. This question underpins the aim of the project, which is to understand how to enable a wider range of audiences to participate in a more diverse film culture that embraces the wealth of films (specialised and mainstream) and how to optimise the cultural value of engaging with film. Audience formation is understood as the processes of engagement with films that generate audience experiences. Drawing on industry definitions, the project covers audiences for mainstream as well as 'specialised films' (defined as films outside the mainstream, including small scale UK films, foreign language, documentary, archive and hard-to-pigeonhole films, and films with unconventional narratives, themes, or cinematic techniques).

The provision of mainstream film is good across England, but the provision of specialised films is lower in the regions than in London. Film distribution is organised at

both national and regional levels, which feeds into the range of films and film venues people have access to. To understand how audiences form in relation to varying access to film, the project undertook its fieldwork in four English regions. These are: 1. The North-East, which has a low ethnic minority population, mixed socio-economic profile, low educational levels, and high unemployment. The provision of specialised and mainstream film is high in its largest city (Newcastle), community provision is dispersed thinly across the region and the number of specialised film screenings is below the national average. 2. Yorkshire and the Humber, which has a low ethnic minority population except in Bradford, mixed socio-economic profile, and high unemployment. It has high provision of mainstream screens in urban areas but low provision of non-mainstream film. The region has a distinctive and thriving community cinema culture. 3. The North-West has a mixture of very high and low ethnic minority populations, and average employment rates. There is high provision of mainstream screens in urban areas, but only two independent venues in Manchester (HOME) and Liverpool (FACT), and the number of specialised film screenings is again below the national average. 4. The South-West, has a low ethnic minority population, high employment, and high home ownership. It has just below the national average for provision of specialised film (mainly in Bristol) and a developing community cinema culture across rural areas and towns.

The research design involved a mixed methods approach (Cresswell, 2014) that explores people's relationships with film, their audience interactions with film venues, screens, events, digital platforms, and specific types of films. The methods include secondary analysis of film provision data and audience data to identify patterns of cinema attendance and film preferences mapped against regional film provision (Hanchard et al., 2019 and <https://www.beyondthemultiplex.org/>). This is followed by interviews with individuals about their film practices and audience experiences, 200 semi-structured interviews were conducted (50 in each region, 18 years to 70 years, equal genders). Following on, a three-wave survey sought to identify whether the findings about audience patterns in the interviews reflected broader patterns at national and regional levels. The three-waves of the online questionnaire surveyed a representative sample of 5000 in wave one, followed by a smaller sample of 500 respondents in waves two and three. To delve more deeply into people's engagement with film texts, 16 focus groups were conducted employing film clips for discussion. To deepen knowledge about film distribution and exhibition, interviews with those working in the industry explored the challenges in supporting audience development. The data was analysed thematically and drew on Livingstone's definition of audiences being relational and interactive. After data collection and analysis, a series of workshops and surveys with policy-makers and industry representatives supported the development policy recommendations for audience development (Wessels, 2022; Wessels, et al. 2023). The project developed an open-access data platform so that researchers and those working in the film audience sector can access data, conclusions and recommendations, see <https://www.beyondthemultiplex.org/>.

An overall framework to address film audiences and how they form

To gain understanding of the process by which audiences form involves research addressing the different dimensions of audience formation and how they relate to each other. This involves identifying and assessing what the factors are that inform the development of types of audiences, including access to film and venues, patterns of film consumption, and audience interpretation of film. The overall framework is holistic, involving both audience practices, lived culture and film exhibition and provision. Taking this approach means that research and analysis can understand the dynamics of the ways in which film audiences form by considering wider social, cultural and contextual factors and what film means for people personally, socially and culturally. The significance of this approach is that it balances the influence of production and distribution factors that generate opportunities to watch film with the ways in which people's interest in film evolves, and the creative ways they engage with film and participate in film culture as audiences (Wessels, 2022; Wessels et al., 2023)

The starting point in addressing how audiences form is to identify the dimensions of audience formation and how these relate to film as a cultural form (Chaney, 1990). The oblong white boxes in Figure 1 below cover the aspects of an overall framework of film audiences and the blue circles represent the core dimensions and characteristics of people's relationship with film and film audience experiences. The dimensions involve the broader social and cultural aspects of film, covering the personal as well as social and cultural value people get from film. They include audience experience, as well as people's patterns of film consumption and film preferences. Another aspect of the framework is how and where people view film and participate in audience experiences, such as screen type, types of venues, how interest in film develops and how audiences come together in shared experiences of film (Wessels, et al. 2023).

These dimensions involve both personal engagement in film and wider social and cultural factors (see Smart, 2007 for a discussion of personal and social and cultural dynamics). In terms of personal factors, interest in film, talking about and sharing film involves the ways in which individuals develop capacity and capabilities to comprehend and interpret film (Livingstone, 2007) and build film knowledge and confidence to engage with a broad range of film and with film culture more generally. The wider social and cultural factors are those that focus on film provision, exhibition and programming that generate the opportunities for people to engage with film. This involves both commercial drivers and actors as well as film policy and cultural cinema. These aspects generate the context and are a framework that underpin the ways in which audiences form. This framework was generated by the pilot study that informed the BtM project (<https://www.dhi.ac.uk/fhn/>). The framework was then developed through the systematic and rigorous empirical research undertaken in the BtM project.

The thematic analysis of the empirical data, which draws on the concept that audiences are relational and interactive, identifies five types of audiences and five distinctive

film provision geographies in a mixed economy of film provision. At the centre of these, are people's personal journeys with film. These personal journeys are a process through which people draw on personal as well as cultural and commercial resources to engage with film and to participate in various types of film audience experiences.

The definition of audiences as being a process involves the ways people develop relationships with film within the level and types of film provision. The audience as a process is realised through distinctive relations that audiences have with film, and the experiences they have of being part of film audiences. The use of the word 'process' and term 'audience as process' seeks to go beyond ideas about the practices of 'audiencing'. The term includes a longer process of the ways in which people develop relationships with film over their life course in the specific contexts of film provision, exhibition, and access. The term addresses both access and provision of film and people's engagement with film in forming audiences. These relations involve specific sets of interactions, namely the interactions people have with films and how they are exhibited (film exhibition). They also involve interactions with the programming and types of film as well as the ways in which people interact with and in venues. Interactions are also practiced and experienced within different kinds of audiences. Thinking about the audience as a process therefore requires considering the way the relations and interactions that make up the process of engaging in film underpin the development of specific audiences.

The key relations involve people's relationships with screens, films, venues and place; with types of audiences and audience experiences, and with other people, socially and culturally, in lived film culture. Many of these relations are created through interactions of various sorts. These include interactions with friends, family and the networks through which film is shared and discussed and this becomes part of wider community life. They also involve the ways in which people interact with different kinds of screens and screen context, with distinctions made between watching films at home with family members on the TV and watching a film on a big screen at the nearest multiplex cinema as part of a large audience (Hanchard et al., 2019, 2020a, 2020b).

There are many types of interaction that feature in the relations between people and film in how audiences form and how they are experienced. Interactions with venues also feature and vary in terms of type. Interacting with a local independent venue often is often more personal and enables a more direct interaction with the programming policy. Participating in a film club involves interactions with other club members, whereas interactions with a large multiplex are often more transactional. Interaction also involves the ways in which audiences interact with the film text through the work of interpreting film (Forrest and Merrington, 2021a,b). This involves various types of interpretive practices that draw on formal education and personal experience as well the opportunity to discuss film in film clubs and events. There are also the interactions in the practices of participating in audiences and in the practices around film. These include how people organise seeing a film and how they join an audience: the practices of arranging to go to a film festival with friends and joining a festival type audience, going to a family film with children and joining a family

matinee audience at a local film club, or joining a digital audience for a global film release (Hanchard et al., 2021a; Wessels et al. 2023). In broader terms, and encompassing the interactions just noted, the ways people interact with film throughout their life course also features in the ways in which relations are developed with film and with film audiences. These interactions and the ways they shape and are shaped by the relations people develop with film is part of audiences as a process.

The four key dimensions in the process of the relations and formations of audiences are: the five types of audiences, the geographies of film provision, BFI film policy and commercial film practices, and personal film journeys. Each of these relate to one another and interact to create specific opportunities for audiences to form, and for actual audiences to come together in various ways, as shown in the figure below. 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 (Wessels, 2022, Wessels et al., 2023).

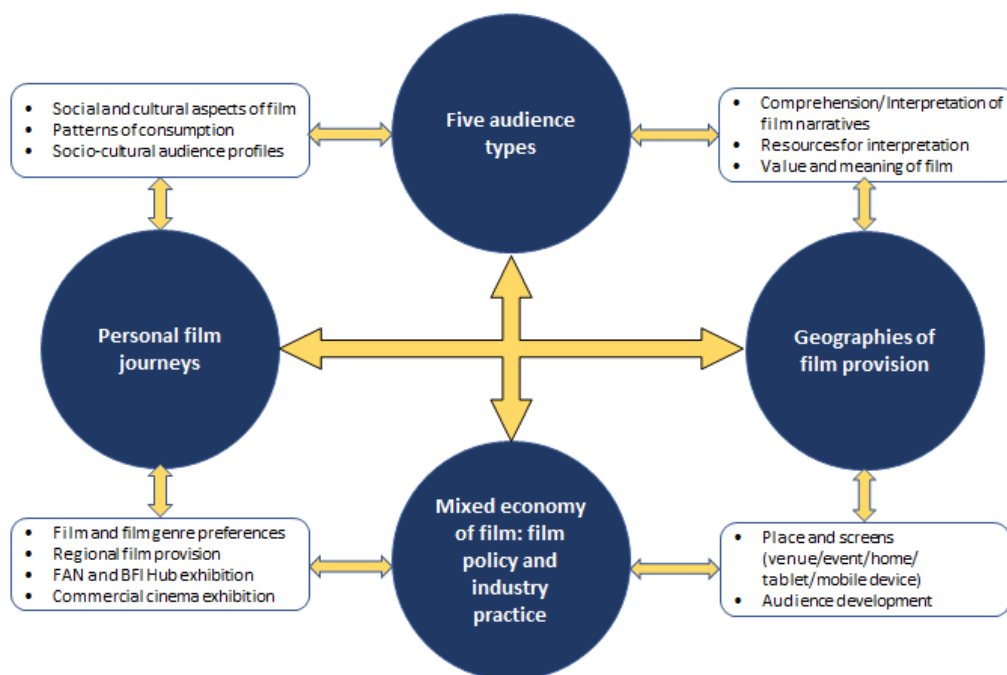


Figure 1: Framework to address how audiences form (Wessels et al., 2023)

An approach based on the relations and interactions of audiences and how they form provides a framework through which to explore the dynamics and characteristics of contemporary film audiences. To deepen the understanding about audiences and how they form, a set of concepts are needed to underpin the development of theory. The next sections of the paper discuss the concepts that underpin a theory of audiences, and the process of their formation.

Concepts of understanding film audiences as a process

To develop theoretical knowledge about film audiences, BtM developed a set of 'meta-concepts' that are key aspects in the formation of audiences. Each of these is constituted through a more specific concept (as seen in the BtM Final Report https://www.dhi.ac.uk/san/btm/btm_final_report.pdf and in Wessels et al., 2023).

The meta-concept of Personal Film Journeys indicates that engagement with film is personal in ways that join both subjective and intersubjective engagement in film and that position the individual within wider societal discourses, culture, and society. It refers to the ways in which the personal experience of film develops throughout a person's life course and how the development of personal film journeys varies in relation to a person's resources, life experiences and socio-cultural contexts. Within this, the concept of 'personal and cultural', highlights that the audience experience has elements that feel and are unique to an individual but are also part of wider culture. It serves to highlight the aspects of creativity in film engagement within the wider structural aspects of film provision. The concept of 'lifecourse' refers to the ways in which film is a companion for people throughout their lives. It links personal lives with wider social and cultural life and recognises stages in the ways in which people develop a relationship with film, how life events feature in what people watch and what type of audiences they join, why, how, and where. Resources are important in personal film journeys and include access to film, family and peer interest and knowledge of film, formal and informal education, and an accessible film culture. Interpretive resources include people's life experiences and their knowledge of culture.

The meta-concept of Geographies of Film Provision refers to the distribution, access, and characteristics of film provision at local, regional, national, and global levels. It highlights the geographical dimension of provision in both place-based and media-related viewing and audience formation. There are five types of geographies, diverse film cities, mainstream multiplex cities, diverse film towns, mainstream film towns and limited underserved areas (Merrington, et al, 2020; <https://www.beyondthemultiplex.org/about/are-there-geographical-and-place-based-distinctions-in-the-provision-of-film/>). The concept of 'diversity of provision', which refers to perceived provision and sense of place in relation to the range and level of films screened across mainstream and specialised film – both in reality and in people's perception of provision. The concept of 'access and choice' refers to the type of access in terms of venues, programming, events, and the level of choice at individual venues and across venues within a region or locality. This covers cultural as well as commercial cinema and mainstream and specialised film. The concept 'screens and contexts' covers the types of screens people use to access film in their local contexts of film provision. The concept of 'local, regional, national, and global' highlights that film has global and national circulation, and it is consumed and engaged in local and regional places (Merrington et al., 2020).

The meta-concept of Mixed Economy of Provision identifies the role of BFI film policy and cultural cinema as well the ways in which commercial film interact with the ways audiences develop a relationship with film and with types of audience experience (Paterson, 2017). The ‘openness of film’ refers to the distinctive feature of film and film viewing, which is that it is relatively open and accessible. It enables people with varying interests and resources to find ways to engage with film at different stages across life courses and develop a personal relationship with film. Commercial cinema provides wide and popular access to mainly mainstream film, whether at multiplex or boutique chain cinemas, or via television and streaming services. Cultural cinema is value-driven in seeking to provide rich and diverse provision of film by producing and exhibiting non-mainstream films and developing audiences’ critical engagement with film. Commercial and cultural value points to the two contrasting ways of understanding and measuring the value of film. Commercial value is gained through box-office and streaming returns and cultural value is gained through the artistic merit of film and critical acclaim. The concept of ‘audience development, regions, equality’ covers BFI film policy and cultural cinema’s role in audience development and in promoting equality of access to diverse film at a UK regional level (Wessels, 2022).

The meta-concept of Audience Experience entails the different ways people experience being part of a range of audiences. The concept of ‘types’ refers to the five distinct types of film audiences, each of which revolve around a specific experience. They comprise: (1) individualised audiences, formed when people choose to watch films alone; (2) group audiences, where people share the experience of watching films with others as a communal activity; (3) venue-specific audiences, where people watch films at a particular venue for the experience of watching films in that physical place; (4) global audiences, which encompass a sense of unity with other globally-dispersed people who are watching a new release or a film that is culturally, politically, or socially significant; and (5) digital audiences, which involve having a digitally-mediated awareness of other people’s viewing patterns as well as discussing and watching films online. People move across and between audience types, making choices about what kind of experience they are seeking. The concept of ‘practices’ refers to film watching practices that are associated with the five audience types as well as being common across each type, these include behaviour whilst watching and practices that embed film in wider lived film culture. Practices of watching film include how film is watched at home, at cinemas, festivals and when mobile (Hanchard et al., 2020a, b).

The meta-concept of Lived film culture identifies the ways in which film is part of people’s everyday lives, their ordinary cultural practices, and special events such as birthdays, seasonal holidays, and social events. This may be personal to them, it might be in response to a new set of circumstances they are facing, or it could be a wider issue that is socially or culturally relevant. Film as ‘people’s art’ often relates to people’s lives and/or their imagination and engagement with other cultural activities. This sense of a people’s art makes it a cultural form that is lived in through the experiences of everyday life and becomes part of everyday discourse and sensemaking. And the ways in which people engage with film transforms it into a form of culture that is lived and experienced within

social and cultural lived experience. Film culture is extended and adapted into a lived film culture and becomes part of people's relations with each other and part of everyday cultural discourse and sensemaking. Given this, film is often used as one of the ways in which people make sense of many aspects of their lived realities (Wessels, 2022; Wessels et al., 2023).

The meta-concept of the social and cultural value of film emphasizes the way that film is valued by people and audiences. This is realised as personal gains, whereby film is meaningful for people's personal life circumstances, supporting them at a very personal level but also supporting wider social and cultural sensibilities. The social and cultural value of film is realised through 'storying'. This refers to the techniques and narratives of filmic ways of telling stories that connect with people, which in so doing realise the social and cultural value of film for particular individuals and groups. Film is also valued for its story-telling ability to depict alternative worldviews and to open up different perspectives on life and culture for audiences. It is accessible, popular, and artistic across a range of mainstream and specialised films (Wessels, 2022; Wessels et al., 2023).

Relational and interactive aspects of film audiences as a process

Relational characteristics of film audiences

The ways in which people develop a relationship with film is multidimensional, across their personal film journeys. Audience as a process sees audience formation as a process involving ongoing engagement with film. The overall characteristic of film audiences as a process is the relationship between personal film journeys, geographies of film provision, audience types and the mixed economy of provision, including film policy and commercial film practice. The way this relationship works is through a set of four dimensions that are at play within audiences as a process. These are:

- Relations with screens
- Relations with venues and places
- Relations with audience types
- Relations with others socially and culturally in lived film culture (Wessels, 2022, Wessels et al., 2023).

Each of the above has a specific relational characteristic and shares a set of characteristics in terms of the overarching relational dynamic of audiences and film. Overall, the characteristics of the relations across the four sub-relations is created through personal journeys with film. Personal film journeys are both individual and social. The ways in which connection is fostered with film extends into a relationship with film that is based on what film means for individuals and how they understand and share that experience socially. The relationship is therefore reflexive, in that it is an ongoing process in which individuals reflect, consider, and learn about film and about the audience experience. That reflexivity is cultural

in terms of the symbolic aspects of film which are integrated into the social aspects of film through the practices of viewing, audience participation and sharing film (Corbett and Wessels, 2017). This makes the overarching relationship between audiences and film socio-cultural. This means that the relation with film involves the stories it conveys, which is individually interpreted and made sense of socially in a number of ways. Thus, film is part of sharing meaning that also tells a range of stories that engage people in different ways, and their interpretation is shared in various ways socially, through family and peer groups and through audience experiences (Wessels, 2022; Wessels et al., 2023).

This overarching relationship is shaped by the characteristics of a set of dimensions. These are how people relate to venues as particular types of spaces in material terms, such as size, comfort, type, facilities, and the personal meaning of a venue for people, as well as its wider cultural meaning and reputation. The other relational aspect that underpins the notion of audience as a process are the relations people have with each other socially and culturally through the ways in which film features in their lives. It is through the unique way films feature in people's mundane and everyday lives, and are also part of their cultural lives in significant ways that film becomes embedded as lived culture. The stories told in film are the point of connection between film as a cultural form and people's own cultural lives (Frank, 2010). The narratives, visuality and musicality of film offer different routes into film and film worlds for people. This engagement, comprehension and interpretation of film opens space for people to share their interpretations by opening up topics, situations and characters for discussion, which may foster thought and reflection on particular issues.

While people may interpret film differently – ranging from drawing on formal analysis techniques to drawing on personal experience – this difference prompts discussion about particular films. These discussions, whether just as part of the everyday or/and addressing certain issues in more depth, moves film from the screen and venue and beyond the audience moment into social and cultural life more widely. These types of discussions are enabled through people's social practices of watching films (Turner, 1999) and their relationships with venues, screens, audiences, and other people, and they are part of a whole process of the distillation of film into social and cultural life. Adding to the ways people talk about and share film, other activities support the ways in which film becomes part of wider culture. These include film reviews in other media, film-based merchandise, film talks and events, academic study, and a range of film festivals. The openness of film and the ubiquitous presence of media creates some variation and choice of film (Wessels et al., 2023).

The level of choice is limited by the dynamics of the commercial film market and the efficacy of film policy to broaden access to film beyond the mainstream. The relative lack of diversity of film is significant – given the way in which film becomes part of social and cultural life – because, as discussed above, the concept of lived film culture identifies the mesh of relations and interactions that underpin the communication of film socially and culturally. Furthermore, through communication, film becomes part of a lived culture that is at once shared and personal. Therefore, lived film culture as a set of social and cultural

relations and communications is one of the four aspects of the overall socio-cultural relationship that underpins the ways different audience types form, and the process of their respective formations (Wessels et al., 2023).

The ways in which dimensions of this socio-cultural relationship are in play – their interactions – shapes audiences as a process. As implied by the term ‘relationship’, the ways in which audiences form and materialise is through the characteristics of the relationships that are created through the practices and interactions of people, films, and the organisation of film as a cultural form. There are four main sets of interactions:

- Interactive social engagement with friends, family, and wider communities
- Interactions with screens and venues
- Interactions of comprehending and interpreting film
- Interactions that create and shape audience experiences

Interactions with friends, families and other groups and networks in the community typically involve the ways in which people plan their viewing, and with whom and where. There are patterns in these interactions, which are based on who people watch films with, where, when and what type of film. The interactions involve the practical organisation of film viewing, communication about film, sharing the meaningfulness of a particular film and/or film in general, and the symbolic, social and cultural value of interaction with film and audiences across the life course. The precise details of these interactions often change across an individual’s life course as they are influenced by family and friendship patterns, access to film, life stage priorities and changing interests.

Comprehending and interpreting film focuses directly on the interaction between a text and reader. The interaction between text and viewer’s knowledge ultimately shapes what the film means for a viewer (Forrest and Merrington 2021 a,b). Interpretation is personal as well as cultural, since people interpret films from their own experience and point of view and, in so doing, draw on shared cultural understanding. This may involve not only interaction during a film, but also the discussions people have about their own interpretations with others (Wessels, 2022; Wessels et al.2023).

These interactions are part of the sets of relations between films, screens, venues, places, and people which configure in various ways. These relations are dynamic and underpin the ways in which audiences form and configure at a micro level in the formation of specific audiences; at the meso level where audiences form around geographies of film provision, and at the macro level in terms of film policy, distribution and wider patterns of audience film, screen, and venue choice.

Conclusion

What makes audiences in the contemporary period distinctive is that they are ongoing processes that extend beyond moments of watching films, to include the ways that people share films with each other, in the communication between venues and individuals, between platforms, screens and people, and through lived film culture. Digital media and marketing techniques are in continuous communication with viewers while members of audiences also communicate with each other. This has created new forms of cultural engagement which are defined by this constant communication between audiences and culture, and through which audiences are always connected to culture of some description. The connection between people and areas of culture including film becomes a process of communication – whether via social media, posted reviews, mainstream media, mailing lists and so on. This process is marked by instances of joining a particular audience or engaging in a particular audience experience (Wessels et al., 2023).

Theorising audiences as a process contributes to current debates in audience studies. The notion of process addresses the ways in which audiences may seem diffuse and fragmented, but still contain a shared sense of knowing about cultural events, trends and so on. The ways people access this knowledge, and when and how they come together as types of audience vary, but nonetheless there is still a sense of audience experience. At the core of audience experience is the interplay between the ways in which engaging with film fosters interaction between the personal and the socio-cultural in developing a relationship with film. This relationship is shaped through people's personal journeys with film. These journeys are crafted from a set of resources that people have for engaging with film, their creativity and interests and the structuring and organisation of film provision. It is through the construction of personal journeys with film that one can see the underlying process of, on the one hand, audience formation and, on the other hand, audiences existing as a process. The various ways in which audiences are experienced solidify senses of personal meaning for film within audience members' wider social and cultural perspectives and lived experience.

The characteristics of the relationships and interactions of audiences with film and film audience experiences encompass the level and diversity of provision and programming, the resources people have in order to develop their relationship with film, and the ways film is shared and enjoyed in lived film experience. This is not a one-off audience experience, but rather a process in which people and film provision connect and interact to generate relationships with film. Audiences are therefore a process that materialise out of moments and spaces from relationships with film. These relationships are generated from venues, platforms and TV, screens, friends, families, and networks shaped by provision, narratives and the ways in which people engage with film.

The combination of personal creative engagement with film and the institutional and structural aspects of film provision is dynamic and varies in terms of journeys with film and

provision of film. The process between the agency of individuals and the structure of provision creates contexts in which audiences form and the instantiations of particular audiences. The ways in which individuals and audiences interpret, relate to and share film moves film from the screen into a lived film culture that fosters and sustains engagement and relationships with film. Through lived film culture, audiences materialise and configure in relational and interactive ways and find value in film at personal, social, and cultural levels. This relationship, lived as personal journeys with film, means moving away from theories and frameworks that reduce audiences to being fragmented and diffuse, or even the claim that they are ceasing to exist.

BtM has demonstrated that ~~they are a process of~~ an ongoing engagement with film materialise in five types of audiences and audience experience which are meaningful to individuals as they engage ~~personally~~ with film. Thus, audiences are a process and one that is dynamic and flexible, allowing individuals to engage with film and film audience experiences in varying ways depending on their personal circumstances, local contexts and personal, social, and cultural needs and interests.

This paper has described the innovative theory of film audiences as a process that was generated through the research of BtM. The strength of the theory is that it highlights the point that audiences and the ways they form are necessarily dependent on an ongoing engagement with film, which is fostered through the ways in which individuals create their own relationships with film. These relationships are part of an individual's personal journey with film, and that journey is felt as both uniquely subjective and as part of a person's shared intersubjective cultural engagement. These personal journeys are created by individuals, but they are shaped and grounded in wider institutional frameworks of film provision, distribution, and exhibition.

Biographical Note

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