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Superman vs Shrödinger's Cat: Taste, Etiquette and Independent Cinema Audiences as Indirect Communities

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Abstract

This article uses empirical audience research gathered at three East Midlands' independent 'art' cinemas to examine the cultural and social value of specific cinema spaces. It will argue that the value of 'art' venues lies in a sense of collective identity that participants see as lacking at commercial multiplexes. This collective identity is formed around a number of factors including taste, class, age, ideology and etiquette. As such, these audience members form 'indirect communities' that lack the face-to-face interaction of traditional community structures, but maintain a strong collective identity that distinguishes them from other cinema audience. For these audiences, 'art' cinema is not just about the film onscreen, but also about who you are watching it with.

Keywords: Cinema audiences, art cinema, independent cinema, taste, class, age, etiquette

Introduction

Each Halloween, the Broadway Cinema and Media Centre, a publically subsidised 'art' cinema in Nottingham, hosts the Mayhem Horror Festival. As part of the festival, the cinema's bar becomes the site of a fancy dress party, bringing together festival audiences into a specific space for social interaction that is independent from watching a film. At the 2009 event costumes included traditional (cinematic) Halloween fare such as witches and vampires, a gang of superheroes (including Superman) and, perhaps more unusually, someone dressed as Shrödinger's Cat. Whilst this anecdote may seem somewhat arbitrary, it in fact encapsulates a number of issues concerning the value of art cinema spaces and the nature of art cinema audiences. The forms of knowledge epitomised by the images of Superman and Shrödinger's Cat seem at odds; one is mass popular entertainment, the other is a thought experiment for quantum physics. Metaphorically, they represent the mass commercial chains and blockbusters that dominate UK cinema culture and the ostensibly

more 'intellectual', niche spaces of independently run art-house venues. However, the physical meeting of the two at a fancy dress party is representative of wider changes within cinema exhibition. Increasingly spaces such as Broadway are showing big budget blockbusters, whilst mainstream commercial cinema chains are showing independent and non-English language films. What, then, is the value of specific cinema spaces to their audiences? Why go to Broadway if the same film may be showing at the nearby Cineworld?

The social experience of cinema has become a growing area of academic interest. Richard Maltby and Melvyn Stokes call for a distinction between 'film history and cinema history: between an aesthetic history of textual relations between individuals or individual objects, and the social history of a cultural institution' (2007: 2; see also Hansen, 1991: 4-6). Much of the research that falls into the latter category has been historical in focus, using the cinema as a focal point for considering more general issues concerning memory or the changing meaning of urban spaces (for example, Waller, 1995; Kuhn, 2000; Geraghty, 2000; Jones, 2003). This article focuses on contemporary British audiences and in particular picks up on Maltby and Stokes' recognition that:

> writing the history of American cinema involves setting aside an idea of "the audience" as a unitary entity and detailing some of the ways in which tastes and practices varied markedly from region to region, between small towns and cities, between racial, ethnic and gendered groups. (Maltby and Stokes, 2007: 2)

In addition to the categories Maltby and Stokes describe, however, it is necessary to consider the more nuanced distinctions that may occur within a single city and that may not directly relate to 'race' or gender. Mark Jancovich, Lucy Faire and Sarah Stubbings, in their consideration of the history of cinema-going in Nottingham, argue that different cinema exhibition spaces within the same local area do not necessarily appeal to the same audiences: 'specific cinemas have different meanings for different people' (Jancovich et. al. 2003: 174). The term 'cinema' may relate to very different spaces that attract very different kinds of audiences. 'Cinema' may mean large out-of-town or city centre multiplexes, multi-purpose arts venues, privately run single-screen venues, theatres that show the occasional film, or even the local community hall with a temporary projector. Each of these spaces has very different cultural meanings for its audience. This article will consider how the nuances of cinema culture manifest within a particular sub-category of cinema audiences: those for 'independent art' venues. In this respect it complements many of the issues also discussed in this issue by Ailsa Hollinshead (2011: online), demonstrating the growing need to understand how cinema spaces function within their local communities.

This article is based on empirical audience research gathered at three cinemas in the East Midlands: Phoenix Square in Leicester, Broadway Cinema and Media Centre in Nottingham

and QUAD in Derby.[1] These three venues form the core of the PBQ consortium, a network of nineteen independent venues throughout the region. During this audience research, notions of community emerged as a key value of these spaces. Richard Butsch has explored changing perceptions of public groups and their impact on the construction of audiences. He argues that over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, public attitudes combined with changes to the architecture of theatre spaces 'required audiences to act as individuals rather than a crowd…The shift from multi-seat benches to single seats symbolized the redefinition of audiences from crowds to individuals' (2007: 296). This idea of the audience as congregating strangers continued through the twentieth century. In the 1980s, Ian Jarvie proclaimed that cinema audiences cannot exist as anything other than congregating strangers:

> Technically speaking a film audience is a quasi-group; that is, a body of persons physically present to one another and united by one purpose only, lacking other ties, structures, or traditions through time' (Jarvie, 1985: 183; quoted in Manchel, 1990: 705)

Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery similarly label cinema audiences 'unstructured groups' (1985: 156). However, Jancovich et. al. offer some evidence of an association between cinema audiences and community in anecdotal evidence of cinemas at which 'people not only knew one another but also looked after one another' (2003, 173). The idea of community as a semi-structured social grouping has potential relevance for understanding cinema audiences.

The PBQ venues offer a strong case for the discussion of cinema audiences and notions of community. This article will consider how the political economy of such spaces lends itself to considerations of community, especially in terms of the funding structures that sit behind these venues and the kinds of services they offer. It will go on to explore audience data gathered for this research, which demonstrated that 'community' operated within audiences in a particular way, one that is not fully articulated through existing models of traditional communities or through more abstract notions of community such as Benedict Anderson's 'imagined community' of the nation (Anderson, 1991). Instead, this data indicates the need to consider independent art cinema audiences as an example of an 'indirect community', that shares space and a binding communal identity based on taste, ideology and etiquette despite lacking direct, consistent interaction. Understanding these audiences in this way illuminates a number of pragmatic and theoretical issues. Not only does it provide venues with a greater awareness of their audiences and potential audience development practices, it also demonstrates the value of these spaces and offers a potential way forward for debates concerning the definition of 'art' film. As Barbara Wilinksy argues, 'art cinema can be seen as an alternative that allowed art film-goers to distinguish themselves from "ordinary" filmgoers' (2001: 3). Examining how this distinction operates

provides the chance to consider the value of cinema spaces and the nature of being part of a cinema audience.

The PBQ and its Audiences

The primary characteristic of the three venues discussed here is that they are not part of the large chains that dominate cinema culture in the UK (Vue, Odeon, Cineworld, Empire and Showcase). For decades theorists have considered ways to define a cinema culture that falls outside of the production, distribution and exhibition practices of the large Hollywood studios. Such venues are often referred to as 'art cinemas', including by participants in this research, with most research following David Bordwell's construction of art cinema as an aesthetic form (1999 (1979)) or Steve Neale's model of a set of cultural institutions (1981). However, as a number of scholars have recognised, 'art cinema' as a concept is slippery and affected by ambiguously defined political, textual and industrial factors (Jones, 2003: 237; Thanoulis, 2009; Andrews 2010). Often this definition is merely one of opposition, such as in Jeffrey Sconce's argument that focuses on such films as distinct because of the way they are positioned against mainstream content 'as "smarter", "artier", and more "independent" (however questionable and manufactured such distinctions might actually be)' (Sconce, 2002: 350).

In the UK, 'art' or 'independent' film has particular political connotations, primarily due to a desire to promote domestic film and the perceived role of Hollywood in processes of Americanisation (see Miller et. al., 2001). Before its dissolution, the UK Film Council offered a seemingly specific definition of what they call 'specialised' film:

> The UK market, in common with most others around the world, is generally driven by mainstream, US studio-originated material. In such a context, specialised films offer audiences a different experience of cinema. Such films are often characterised by an innovative cinematic style and by an engagement with challenging subject matter. As such, specialised films will challenge and educate audiences of all ages and backgrounds. (UK Film Council, n.d.: 1)

Films that qualify fall into a number of categories: foreign language, documentary, classics, mixed genre, a concept that cannot be reduced to a single sentence, or a privileging of story over production values or stars.[2] The three venues that form the case studies for this article all prioritise films that fit the UKFC's definition of 'specialised film' and so could conceivably be labelled 'art' or 'specialised' cinemas. However there is a need to examine this definition in more detail. Each of the venues discussed in this article has also increasingly programmed mainstream Hollywood content such as *Sex and the City 2* and the *Harry Potter* films in order to bring in more audiences and increase revenue. Similarly commercial chains do not exclusively programme blockbusters with independent or British-produced films often appearing and Cineworld, the UK's 2nd largest chain, frequently featuring Bollywood cinema

across its venues. As such, any clear delineation of 'art cinemas' in terms of programming is problematic.

Beyond programming, notions of community emerge as a key factor in how the PBQ venues establish their identities. On a funding level, they are enmeshed within their local and regional communities, with each venue being funded by ticket sales and a combination of grants from the East Midlands Regional Development Agency (through its media branch, EM Media), city councils and local businesses. They each promote a sense of loyalty via membership schemes that offer rewards to frequent visitors and offer cafes and bars that provide full meals and spaces for social interaction, rather than concessions stands providing snacks to eat during the film. The development and rhetoric associated with each venue are also strongly coded in terms of community. The Broadway began as the Nottingham Co-Operative society, slowly growing from a small-scale film society to the large multi-screen venue it is today. In 2011 Broadway launched 'Bsocial' (http://www.broadway.org.uk/bsocial), a social networking application that is based around the venue and explicitly developing a community amongst audience members (see john_with_beard, 2010: online). QUAD lists 'community work' as one of its key services and positions itself as a key component within its local setting: 'QUAD's activities generate £millions in terms of additional and direct spend with local suppliers as well as positive national and international media coverage for Derby' (www.derbyquad.co.uk/about-quad/pg3). Phoenix Square in Leicester was specifically built with community in mind; relocated in 2009, its new venue included residential spaces and small businesses. In press releases the venue describes itself as 'not just a film and media venue, we are a lively social hub and a relaxed working environment, that lives and breathe with its customers' http://www.phoenix.org.uk/index.php?cms_id=226). A sense of 'community' is evident through the construction of the PBQ venues as cultural spaces that counter the debates explored above, which position audiences as a group of individuals. To what extent, then, is this sense of community extended into their audiences? Do they see themselves as distinct from commercial multiplex audiences? If so, how do those nuances manifest?

Methodology and Samples

The research in this article took place in two stages. Questionnaires were distributed at the three venues during two evenings (one weekday and one weekend) in May 2009.[3] These questionnaires were followed up by focus groups in autumn 2010.[4] The sample was divided equally along gender lines (49% female, 51% male) but other demographic information indicated particular characteristics of the sample as a whole, especially when compared to the general and cinema-going population. Only 4% of respondents were aged under 19 whilst the UK Film Council states that teenagers are the most frequent cinema-goers (UKFC, 2009: 116). This may be a result of the focus on evening, weekday showings for two of the largest sampling days, when most of that age group have school commitments that may prevent them from going out in the evening. However, it may also indicate a skew in the

PBQ audience towards older age groups, something that qualitative data (which will be discussed below) also suggests. 89.3% of the sample was white, slightly lower than the regional population (92.4%, Commission for Racial Equality, online) but slightly higher than the UKFC's research on the general cinema-going population (which the UKFC identifies as 87.2% white, UKFC, 2009: 121). Phoenix in particular indicated a sample with less ethnic diversity than the local Leicester population, with only 4.4% of participants being Asian or Asian-British compared to an estimated 31% in Leicester more widely (Leicester City Council, 2008: 4). The most noticeable skew, however, was in terms of education level, with 30.5% of the sample having an undergraduate degree and 37.5% having a postgraduate degree, compared to 20% having a degree or higher in the general population (Office for National Statistics, 2001: online).

The demographic profile of the sample group indicates that the audiences for Broadway, Phoenix and QUAD were not 'typical' cinema audiences. However, as we turn to consider their attitudes towards film and cinema-going, these demographic specificities offer a context for the ways in which the sample form a community based on shared beliefs and spaces. Some research participants proclaimed willingness for the venues to be open to many different audiences; Rosemary, for example, said, 'I want [QUAD's] to be as diverse an audience as possible' (Rosemary, Q2).[5] However, across all discussions a clear sense of exclusivity emerged in two ways. In the first, PBQ audiences share a number of attitudes towards film and commercialism in rhetoric strongly reminiscent of Bourdieu's theories of taste and how, 'to the socially recognised hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, of genres, schools or period, corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumer' (Bourdieu, 2004 (1979): 1). Whilst Bourdieu's work predominantly refers to taste in different cultural forms, the same approach can be said to correspond to the same cultural form in different cultural circumstances. In the second, despite the above inclusive intentions, they are dismissive of audiences that do not fit into a specific set of criteria defined by class, age and etiquette. Both of these factors indicate how the research sample formed 'indirect communities' based on an active desire to seek out spaces and groups with similar cultural tastes and characteristics. However, as Graham Day argues, 'all too often "community" signifies something vague and ill-defined, an excuse for not thinking hard enough about what exactly it is that people do have in common' (Day, 2006: 2). It is necessary to consider more closely what value the PBQ audiences ascribe to the venues and what that value reveals about the nature of these audiences as 'indirect communities'.

'Healthy' Cinema: Loyalty, Taste and Ideology

The locus of the sense of community that emerged from the research was, naturally, the cinema venues themselves. Film-viewing was a central part of the sample's cultural lives, with 55.1% saying they visited the cinema at least once a month and a further 26.6% saying they attend 6-12 times a year.[6] The sample displayed a strong sense of loyalty to their local venue, attending them more than any other venue in the area, and each venue had a clear

catchment area from the local population.[7] This loyalty was reflected in how they engage with broader film culture. It would be conceivable to hypothesise that audiences who go to the cinema as frequently as this sample, and so see film as a central part of their cultural lives, would be interested in all sources of film information. However, the vast majority of the sample learnt about current and new releases through the venues' marketing, with 71.8% using the venues' print programmes and 41.6% using their websites. When this is compared to only 13.1% buying film magazines such as *Empire* or *Sight and Sound* and only 26.4% using generic film websites such as IMDb, the focus of these audience members' film-going lives around the PBQ venues becomes striking. In the focus groups, several participants commented that the venues acted as a taste guide, with many developing rituals around the arrival of the monthly programme booklet. Michael, for example, said 'I will look at the Broadway brochure at the beginning of the month and decide which films I'd like to see if I get to see them all' (B1). This loyalty was also expressed in the emotive language used to describe the venues. Questionnaire respondents described how attached they felt to the venues, with a number saying that they 'loved' them. Others said that they wouldn't think about going anywhere else. These venues had built up a relationship of trust with their audiences, with some participants saying 'I know it'll be a good experience' or that attending had become a habit and something they 'just did'; one even described Broadway as their 'spiritual home' (questionnaire respondent).

Twinned with an attachment to a shared space was a shared taste. However, this taste was far from straightforward and challenges many of the more aesthetic models of 'art cinema' that privilege 'objective realism, subjective realism and authorial presence' (Thanouli, 2009: online). To a certain extent, the sample did value 'art' films, those identified by Jancovich et. al. as 'privileging…the head over the body' (2003: 223). Barbara Wilinsky makes a similar distinction, arguing that 'Art houses offered an image of a more intellectual filmgoing experience. Attached to this image were notions of high culture, art, and prestige' (Wilinsky, 2001: 3). Participants enjoyed films that either presented a culture that was different from their own lives or, more commonly, films that were thematically or stylistically different from other films they had seen. British and foreign-language films were the questionnaire sample's favourite type of film, chosen by 86.3% and 71.2% respectively.[8] Focus group participants made comments that supported this data:

> you know, really America's not the only country in the world so you want to see life in other countries and from a different point of view. (Michael, B1)

> I like films that are about contemporary life, and are giving a different slant, or understanding or reflecting back things that are important today (Stephanie, P2)

> I like to have my brain engaged with what's going to happen next…and I like to be surprised at the end. (Lucy, B2)

> I just like looking at the different styles of cinema I suppose and the way stories are told slightly differently, different topics. There's a bit more range, you know. (Alison, Q2)

There is clear evidence within this group that the kind of 'discerning' and 'intellectual' taste associated with art cinema audiences persists throughout the PBQ audience.

However, this was not the only cinematic preference that was expressed in the focus groups and there was evidence that the group offered more nuanced cultural taste than Jancovich et al. and Wilinsky assert. Whilst those participants discussed above tended to be dismissive of Hollywood-produced content, a number equally recognised the appeal and value of blockbusters, particularly as a form of escapism. However, even these discussions had clear evaluative criteria, with only certain kinds of blockbuster being privileged:

> I'll watch pretty much anything that has a good plot and great characters. (Penny, B2)

> If it's really high quality, high production quality blockbuster- like *Inception*, say, which really bridges the two for me, then that's the ideal film for me...But I think blockbusters can be good, it's just when they have no plot, there's no sense to them, there's no meaning, it's just explosions…I don't want to know. (Carol, Q1)

> It's nice - sometimes you just want a film which just does what it says on the tin. You want explosions, you want that - but, on the flip side of that, they're rubbish as well, at the same time. You want something with a bit of meaning, with some good cinematography, some thought behind the script and visuals and things (Steven, P1)

Such responses demonstrate that taste cannot necessarily be categorised along the lines that the UKFC use to elevate 'specialised' film. Films that are thought of as 'rubbish', or that offer more visceral, rather than intellectual pleasures, also have a value for members of this audience.

Rather than a distinction between Hollywood-produced content or 'specialised' film, the key taste characteristic within discussions was the more ambiguous, evaluative notion of a film being 'well made', of displaying technical strengths across many aspects of film production, though primarily direction, cinematography, writing and acting. In this respect a blockbuster

may be just as 'good' as an independently-produced, small-budget film and may be equally embraced by many members of the art cinema audience. Bourdieu's assertion that 'cultural needs are the product of upbringing and education' (2004 (1979): 1) and that 'intellectuals could be said to believe in the representation...more than in the things represented' (2004 (1979): 5) is echoed in the demographic make-up of the sample as more educated than the general population and in participants' discussions of film as a cultural form with its own artistic history. However, this does not automatically and exclusively relate to films of non-Hollywood origin. In addition, while cultural taste does play a role in defining independent cinema audiences, it is not the overarching one. The fact that these venues show films that are not available elsewhere was given as a reason for attending them by 46.6% of the questionnaire sample. This was the most popular response, but was only just ahead of 'atmosphere/friendly staff' at 41.6% and was still *not* selected by just over half of the sample. There are clearly other factors contributing to the value that independent art cinema audiences place on venues.

One possible reason that is closely connected to a tendency towards more interest in specialised film than other film audiences is a broader anti-commercial ideology. A number of participants said that they like to support independent cinema and multiplexes were criticised through associations with commercialism:

> If you're being a bit rude about mainstream Hollywood, it's a little like going to McDonald's all the time... I don't really want junk food in general, I want healthy food, so I like healthy films (Madeleine, B4)

> *Lucy*: There's something faceless about the corporations of Cineworld or Showcase whereas [Broadway] isn't faceless at all.
> *Joan*: It's a part of Nottingham, and you're almost investing in it.
> *Lucy*: Yeah, you're not being fleeced here. You're being invited here.
> (B2)

> It's what goes with it...the popcorn...it's the materialism of it. It's really off putting. (Michelle, Q1)

> I think the strength of Phoenix is it's not commercial. Not only commercial. Profit-making is not its primary motive. (Amir, P3)

Their attendance at independent venues such as Broadway, Phoenix and QUAD becomes not only a statement of taste, but also a political one; they attend because non-commercial venues fit into their broader ideology and they want such venues to continue:

> you come [to Broadway] because you want it to continue. (Peter, B2);

> I like putting money into independent cinemas. (Mark, B3).

> I feel like, "oh my god, I've got to support this place because it'd be awful if it closed". I do think that. (Alison, Q2)

These participants' taste is part of a larger ideological position, with independent cinema venues acting a space that brings these two preferences to together; whilst multiplexes may show mainstream content, they do not allow audiences to break free from an overt commercial culture, something they desire to do.

Knobs, Yobs, Towneys and Chavs: Audience Demographics and Etiquette

This ideological perspective extended beyond cinematic taste to include beliefs about cinema audiences themselves. Participants in both the questionnaire and focus group had a clear sense of PBQ audiences being 'people like them':

> There's something about, um, I think, for me, being comfortable here and feeling like, um, you know, you, you , you're coming to a place that's kind of like-minded people, even though those people might not be like minded in reality, I think the perception is that is a certain kind of person that will go to Broadway. (Katherine, B1)

> It's just full of like-minded people and that respect, you know, that you're interested in what they're interested in. (Joan, B2)

> You come [to Phoenix] and you often see people that you know, and even if you don't know them you feel they're like-minded people, so therefore you feel comfortable in that atmosphere (Geraldine, P3)

For each of these participants there is a belief that they share certain, positive, characteristics with other members of the PBQ audiences and the venues become comfortable spaces because of this. This sense of like-mindedness was manifested through a number of ways. The first was related to the common taste discussed above, with a belief that PBQ audiences take film seriously, whereas other cinema audiences do not:

> [Broadway] is a cinema lovers' cinema basically (Peter, B2)

> I know there won't be any idiots there, they're all decent people. People who appreciate film (Seamus, B4)

> [Phoenix] is about people having a love of film. And I don't think you necessarily get that at the Odeon or Vue or the Showcase…[where] people just trip up...sit down and watch a film (Jeremy, P1)

The discussions explored above, in which participants displayed a particular taste that valued 'quality' films, emerge again here in a belief that the audiences for these venues take film more seriously; they see themselves as having a greater interest in film as a form than commercial multiplex audiences who see it as simply a night out.

Such discussions often became tinged with class rhetoric, an issue that offers a complex relationship to different cinema exhibition spaces. Elsewhere in this issue, Ailsa Hollinshead discusses the perception of art-house cinemas as 'posh' by members of Edinburgh's more deprived neighbourhoods, an attitude that ultimately prevents them from visiting such spaces (2011: online). Paul Grainge argues that 'the urban entertainment complex' helps to shape 'the lifestyle dispositions of a new middle class' (2008: 157). One of Grainge's examples is Nottingham's Cornerhouse, which houses a 14-screen commercial multiplex, a key competition venue for Broadway. However, my research sample defined themselves as 'middle-class' and *against* those that would frequent spaces such as the Cornerhouse. In the questionnaires, a number of participants commented that they liked the PBQ venues because the audiences did not contain 'chavs' or 'townies'. The use of derogatory, class-based terms indicates disdain for other cinema audiences and simultaneously characterises other cinema audiences as uneducated and lower class. These participants clearly feel a sense of social and cultural superiority to multiplex audiences, even if they may occasionally be part of that audience. In the focus groups the language was milder but similar connotations emerged. When describing QUAD, Maureen said, 'it's...full of middle class people like myself' (Q1). Joan similarly described Broadway as 'a middle class independent cinema' (B2) and a number of participants commented that Phoenix had a 'better class' of audience (Albert, P2; Adrian, P3; Amir, P3). Whilst participants were often self-deprecating about their own 'snobbishness' (Jacob and Carol, Q1; Steven, P1), the perception of PBQ as middle class spaces, and by implication their content as middle class content, remained strong.

Twinned with this privileging of the PBQ audience as middle-class were shared values connected with age and etiquette. As discussed above, the UKFC identify teenagers as the core cinema-going demographic. Focus group discussions suggest that not only the PBQ research sample older than the general cinema-going population, but they have a strong distaste for teenage audiences in particular because the latter operate to a different, unacceptable, code of etiquette. There is some historical precedence for cultural distinction through etiquette. Richard Butsch connects his discussion of the historical shift from 'crowds' to 'audiences' to changing standards concerning public behaviour, behaviour that often had political and class overtones: 'Crowds became worrisome, however, once

bourgeois republican government instituted an expectation that all groups in a society express their demands through legal channels of discussion and petition rather than through crowd action' (Butsch, 2007: 294). As Butsch goes on to explore, nuances of etiquette emerged according to different cultural spaces and classes: 'Whole sectors of cheap entertainment continued to allow or even encourage active audiences who hissed and hoorayed' (Butsch, 2007: 297). Urban nickelodeons later became part of this sector: 'Writers commonly referred to these neighborhood nickelodeons as social clubs' (Butsch, 2007: 297).

Such attitudes persist in the attitudes of PBQ audiences; for them, class and etiquette are about distinguishing the PBQ venues from commercial multiplex chains, and themselves from those chain's audiences:

> I've sort of got tired of sitting in the cinema where people were texting all the way through the film and I think that probably is an age thing, but you don't get that at the Broadway. You probably get a more discerning audience that have turned up to see the film, rather than just turned up to go out with their mates. (Laura, B1)
>
> You don't get a load of stupid, pissed up kids in here, you know, and teenagers out on a Friday night (Peter, B2)
>
> *Mark*: [You're] less likely to have a load of 14 year olds talking in the background
> *Gillian*: Rustling their popcorn packets.
> (B3)
>
> I don't particularly like, you know, too many kids running around (Sue, Q2)
>
> *Julie*: People here are more aware of the other people in a cinema.
> *Stephanie*: Yes, they are.
> *Ken*: Better mannered.
> *Julie*: A lot more respect for other people. If you make a noise-
> *Stephanie*: I'm glad somebody younger is saying that. Makes us feel better.
> *Ken*: Basic cinema etiquette.
> (P2)

Behaviour such as talking or using personal technologies, which would directly interfere with other audience members' ability to concentrate on the film, encouraged the most

passionate responses from research participants, as the vehemence of some of the above criticisms demonstrate.

Some participants (David and Seamus in particular) commented that inappropriate behaviour was beginning to become apparent at Broadway. However, the majority of the group saw the PBQ venues as having an unwritten etiquette code that is self-regulated by the audience themselves. Any action that may interrupt other audience members' immersion in the film such as making noise (whether by talking or eating) or using mobile technologies are frowned upon and actively policed:

> there's a possibility that when you get in there you're going to have some yob ruin it. There's always a chance that that could happen elsewhere and you know it would never happen here and if it did happen here everyone else would just kill them. (Lucy, B2)

> *Adrian*: [at Phoenix] because you won't have people talking behind you; you won't have them dropping peanuts down the back of your neck-
> *Grace*: Because if you do I'll tell them to shut up.
> (P3)

Within such an etiquette code, even activities with anti-social connotations outside of PBQ spaces, such as drinking, are welcomed and allowed:

> It's civilised here and at Broadway where you can take a drink in, you know, which you can't do in most cinemas, but it's nice. (Michelle, Q1)

> It's nice to be able to watch a film with a beer, and you can do that here. (Charlotte, B2)

Whilst debates surrounding binge drinking and the disruptive behaviour amongst young adults have become prominent in British press discourses, PBQ audiences perceive moderate drinking as a sign of the venues' 'adult' status and distinction from multiplex commercial chains. In fact Grace saw the licensed bars as a unique selling point for such venues (P3). The 'pissed up kids' of Peter's quote above are replaced by discerning adults who are capable of considerate, grown-up behaviour.

Independent Cinema Audiences as Indirect Communities

The participants in this research clearly shared strong demographic, taste and ideological characteristics. Manuel Cuadrado and Marta Frasquet, in their study of cinema audiences in Valencia, Spain identify three groups, differentiated in terms of why they choose to go to the cinema: social, apathetic and cinema buffs. PBQ audiences most closely fit the third

group, which Cuadrado and Frasquet describe as privileging the film-viewing experience over the social experience of film-going. Cinema buffs are:

> really interested in the cinema in itself. The individual goes to the cinema because s/he is fond of it and it not much interested in social, leisure or entertainment aspects. These are more frequent attendees...attends multiplexes showing films in the original language and film libraries...and is not so keen on multiplexes in shopping centres. Finally these individuals are older, most of them women and urban residents. (Cuadro and Frasquet, 1999: 266)

Elements of the cinema buff are evident in the PBQ sample. They are clearly highly interested in film and their loyalty to independent venues demonstrates just as keen an interest in the cinemas themselves. They prefer less mainstream films and spaces. However the focus group discussions indicate a deeper layer of commonality, beyond their motivations for attending the cinema. The application of notions of 'community' or other models of social groups to cinema audiences has been limited and predominantly negative. Frank Manchel, for example, in exploring Ian Jarvie's work, argues that:

> An audience, therefore, has nothing that binds it together other than the fact that it behaves in a specific way at a specific time in relation to a specific event. It differs from organized groups like professional associations that are structures, follow definite procedures and rituals, lobby for particular purposes, have designated leaders, and maintain a certain status in society. (Manchel, 1990: 705)

He goes on to argue that, 'Audiences for the movies... rarely make clear what it is they value' (Manchel, 1990: 706). What becomes apparent from examining the responses of PBQ audiences is that they clearly do know what they value, both about cinema and about cinema-going as a social and cultural activity, and notions of 'community' are a highly useful way of understanding how they function. At Phoenix, a sense of collective identity was explicitly mentioned. Amir commented how:

> Whereas coming here, I don't feel at all lonely, although I am on my own. So aloneness and loneliness don't go together at Phoenix. Whereas if I go to the Odeon...I feel like, "Oh, God, I'm on my own here," (P3)

Other participants in the same group referred to themselves and other audience members collectively as 'we' (Adrian, Grace, Geraldine) with Grace mentioning '*our* chief executive' (P3). Any dismissal of cinema audiences as communities fails to allow for the shared loyalty, attitudes and characteristics of this research sample.

However, the kind of relationship evident between research participants is not adequately explained through existing models of 'community'.[9] In the 1980s, Lawrence Felt offered a relatively detailed model: '[c]ommunity refers to both a form of human settlement (and therefore a specific type of social structure) *and* a set of values, beliefs, and rules alleged to be associated with such a settlement type' (Felt, 1983: 510). The PBQ audiences can be seen as having both a social structure (involving relations between audience members and staff) and clearly have a set of shared beliefs. Felt went on to identify seven key components that define an ideal version of community, and that will feature to a greater or lesser extent in any community:

1. Relatively small size.
2. Relatively low social density
3. Homogeneity of residents with respect to ethnicity, language and religion.
4. Relatively little occupational specialisation and social-class differentiation
5. Frequent and continuous face-to-face interaction amongst most community members.
6. A much greater proportion of social relations occurring with community members than with outsiders.
7. The relative absence of bureaucratic or highly hierarchical relations among community dwellers.
   (Felt, 1982: 510)

The PBQ audiences demonstrate points three and four, though offer limited examples of the rest of the list. As discussed above, there is a tendency for these audiences to have similar educational and class backgrounds. More importantly, these audiences demonstrate Felt's cultural definition of a community as consisting of members who possess '[a] strong psychological identification with the community and a clear sense of its physical and symbolic boundaries' and '[a] significant consensus on the values, beliefs and rules which define the community' (1982: 510). These form the core, defining characteristic of the audience discourses discussed above. They identify themselves as different from other cinema-going groups, clearly associate with a physical location, share taste and ideology, and conform to a set of etiquette rules.

The research sample also presents a sense of exclusivity in the same way that Linda Singer argues communities work to reduce difference: 'the function of community has largely been that of managing, consolidating, or overriding the dissembling effects of a *non*regulated interplay of differences' (Singer, 1991: 124). Research participants disliked audiences who did not 'fit' a particular archetype or who break the unspoken etiquette rules. Despite assertions by several participants that Broadway, QUAD and Phoenix are inclusive spaces, discussions were tinged with rhetoric of exclusion. They liked the venues because there are no teenagers, no one who acts 'inappropriately', no 'chavs' or 'knobs' and everyone

appreciates film. Jenna Jones writes that in the movie palaces of the southeastern United States the explicit exclusivity of segregation has developed into a more implicit sense of exclusivity through programming strategies:

> The theaters' exclusivity depends upon their films' lack of familiarity and popularity, and the fact that their regular patrons are well informed and sophisticated enough to make the choice to see films that have not been heavily advertised in popular periodicals and television. (Jones, 2003: 243)

Participants in these focus groups suggest that this exclusivity through programming extends into the attitudes of audience members. They value being different from commercial cinema audiences, and anyone who doesn't fit in may be welcome, but only on their terms.

However, such models are also inadequate for understanding the PBQ audiences in one key way: the privileging of consistent, direct interaction between members. In Felt's model above, such communication forms two of the key seven characteristics, with community members not only engaging directly with each other, but also *not* engaging as much with those outside of the community. Linda Singer similarly argues for the importance of communication, even if that communication is not in the form of face-to-face conversations: 'The call of community initiates a conversation, prompts exchanges in writing, disseminates, desires the proliferation of discourse' (Singer, 1991: 125). There was some limited evidence within focus group discussions of participants starting conversations with other cinema audiences, with the additional services provided in such spaces being a motivation for any direct interaction. Mark commented on how, 'I've gotten a lot of friends through doing Broadway courses, we've exchanged emails and keep in touch with what's coming up so that's helped to keep up with what's got good reviews' (B3). In the most extreme example, three participants in the third Phoenix focus group (Grace, Geraldine and Adrian) were members of a weekly film-viewing club that met after a screening to discuss the film they had just seen. On the whole, however, PBQ audiences do not have the conversations that Felt and Singer identify as being characteristic of communities.

This does not prevent 'community' being a useful tool for understanding these audiences and not all models of 'community' rely so heavily on interpersonal communication. A radically different model of communal identity is Benedict Anderson's model of the 'imagined community' of the nation. Anderson's model of nationhood has primarily been used to understand the mass audiences of television broadcasting (see Gripsrud, 1998: 23) and eschews the importance of interaction to the construction of a community, arguing that,'[the nation] is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson, 1991: 6). He goes on to write, 'it is

imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship' (Anderson, 1991: 7). In Anderson's model, a sense of community is created out of shared beliefs rather than actual social interaction. Individuals may not know other members of the community but they *feel* as if they are part of a collective social unit, with shared boundaries and ideologies. This belief in a unifying identity is apparent in the PBQ audiences' shared ideology, the strong sense of attachment that they have to each venue, and the explicit notion of fellow audience members being 'people like them'.

The PBQ audiences share characteristics of both the more traditional forms of community described by Felt and Singer and the more abstract community of Anderson's model, but do not completely fit either. They demonstrate a communal belief and etiquette structure, however they are not quite the same as a family, friendship or neighbourhood community. They are unlikely to know the names of anyone else in the cinema, beyond those they arrived with and intra-community interaction is predominantly fleeting. However, they are not quite the imagined community of Anderson's model. Even though each PBQ venue is large enough that nobody knows everyone else, they occupy a specific, contained geographic space and have some indirect forms of interaction such as short conversations about events in the venue, eye contact or brief, inadvertent touches. As such, neither model fully articulates the way PBQ audiences function. Instead they should be considered as what I term, 'indirect communities', a category that can also be used to describe sports fans at matches, theatre audiences, attendees at a rock concert or any other space in which people who are otherwise strangers come together due to a shared cultural identity:

	Community	**Imagined Community**	**Indirect Community**
Shared space	✔		✔
Shared ideology and taste	✔	✔	✔
Shared etiquette code	✔	✔	✔
Interaction	✔		

Such communities come from within a wider community, sharing a physical location, tastes and behaviours but do not have consistent interaction or form lasting personal relationships. They are bound together by both location and a common belief system rather than by consistent, daily interpersonal communication.

Conclusion: The Value of Indirect Communities

Community forms a central part of the construction of the PBQ venues' cultural identities; it is woven into how they are funded and positioned within their home cities. However, community functions within their audiences in specific ways. Linda Singer asks, 'From where arises the authority to constitute the "we" of community, and what position is assumed by the agent or apparatus of this constitution?' (Singer, 1991:126). For the indirect communities of PBQ audiences, they themselves hold the power to articulate their sense of community. They may not use the word explicitly, even if some participants in the Phoenix group heavily used the pronouns 'we' and 'ours', but their reliance on phrases that insinuate a collective identity indicates an understanding that there is something *different* about audiences at Phoenix, Broadway and QUAD. Conceptualising cinema culture as a set of indirect communities of limited interpersonal interaction but communal attitudes, ideologies and codes of behaviour offers a number of pragmatic and theoretical implications. For cinemas themselves, the strength of distinction evident in the PBQ indirect community demonstrates the risks involved in any shift in audience development strategies. As venues increasingly seek alternative revenue streams, there is the danger of alienating current audience members, if those who do not abide by the rules of the resident indirect community are allowed to enter.

Understanding cinema audiences as indirect communities, also offers a way of thinking through the nature of audiencehood. Even if such communities do not seem, on the surface, to be more than groups of individuals, the presence of shared attitudes and beliefs alongside loyalty to a specific space indicates that more is at stake in such social gatherings. A sense of commonality may emerge that whilst not being as concrete as families or friendship groups, still offers a sense of collective identity; such identity offers further insight into the pleasures of engaging with narrative forms in some public environments but not in others. In the case of 'art cinema audiences' conceiving them as indirect communities offers an alternative form of distinction for 'art' cinema, especially as distinctions based on formal characteristics or institutional context become blurred as studios amalgamate independent 'art-house' branches and cinemas increasingly show 'art' film alongside blockbusters. For many research participants, there is little distinction between films based on industrial source; a film can be considered good regardless of where they come from or what artistic aims they may have. To return to the fancy dress metaphor of the title, Superman can sit alongside Shrödinger's cat both in terms of the programming of such venues and the taste of many members of the audience. Despite this, however, they continue to see *themselves* as distinct from a more commercialised cinema culture, perpetuating distinctions between 'art cinema' and commercial venues; they reiterate Barbara Wilinsky's argument that 'art cinema can be seen as an alternative that allowed art film-goers to distinguish themselves from "ordinary" filmgoers' (2001: 2). The task now becomes examining the distinctive characteristics of various indirect communities, how they relate to each other and how (or even if) individuals move between them. Doing so offers

the opportunity to explore the continuing cultural value of cinema spaces and the complex matrix of social and cultural relations that constitute them.

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Appendix – Focus groups

Broadway Focus group 1 (B1) - 27th September 2010
Michael (56-65 years old)
Katherine (36-45 years old)
Jennifer (26-35 years old)
Laura (46-55 years old)

Broadway Focus Group 2 (B2) - 27th September 2010
David (36-45 years old)
Joan (36-45 years old)
Penny (26-35 years old; friends with Robert)
Robert (19-25 years old; friends with Penny)
Peter (36-45 years old; married to Lucy)
Lucy (26-35 years old; married to Peter)

Broadway Focus Group 3 (B3) - 28th September 2010
Gillian (36-45 years old)
Mark (36-45 years old)
Hugh (36-45 years old)

Broadway Focus group 4 (B4) - 28th September 2010
Seamus (56-65 years old)
Alan (65+; married to Madeleine)
Madeleine (56-65 years old; married to Alan)

QUAD Focus Group 1 (Q1) - 29th September 2010
Carol (36-45 years old)
Maureen (56-65 years old)
Charlotte (19-25 years old)
Jacob (46-55 years old; married to Michelle)
Michelle (46-55 years old; married to Jacob)

QUAD Focus group 2 (Q2) - 30thSeptember 2010
Sue (26-35 years old; friends with Luke)
Luke (36-45 years old; friends with Sue)
Rosemary (65+ years old)
Alison (36-45 years old)
Greg (36-45 years old; QUAD worker)

Phoenix Focus group 1 (P1) – 23rd November 2010
Rita (26-35 years old; relationship with Jerry)
Max (36-45 years old; relationship with Max)
Lorraine (46-55 years old)
Jeremy (46-55 years old)
Steven (35-45 years old)

Phoenix Focus group 2 (P2) – 23rd November 2010
Stephanie (56-65 years old; married to Tim)
Tim (56-65 years old; married to Stephanie)
Albert (56-55 years old; friends with Stephanie and Tim)
Ken (26-35 years old; friends with Julie)
Julie (19-25 years old; friends with Ken)

Phoenix Focus group 3 (P3) – 24th November 2010
Sylvia (26-35 years old)
Amir (65+ years old)
Grace (36-45 years old)
Adrian (56-65 years old)
Geraldine (65+ years old)

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Notes

[1] http://www.eastmidlandscinemaadvice.com/

[2] As Paul MacDonald has observed, the broad definition of specialised film provided by the UKFC can lead to unexpected titles fulfilling the brief, including the big budget Hollywood-produced *The Passion of the Christ* (dir. Mel Gibson, 2004) and pop documentary, *Jonas Brothers: The 3D Concert Experience* (dir. Bruce Hendricks, 2009) (MacDonald, 2010)

[3] Questionnaires were distributed at Broadway and QUAD on a Wednesday and Saturday evening. They were distributed at Phoenix on a Friday and Saturday as, at the time, Phoenix did not show films during the week. 263 were collected at Broadway, 134 at QUAD and 137 at Phoenix. One noteworthy aspect of the delay between questionnaires and focus groups was that Phoenix moved into new premises in the intervening time.

[4] A total of 41 participants took part in nine groups. Four held at Broadway (16 participants), two at QUAD (10 participants) and three at Phoenix (15 participants). For a list of participants, please see the Appendix.

[5] Due to length constraints, a sample of quotes will be provided for each point to reflect discussions of the groups as a whole; in all cases identical or similar sentiments were expressed by other participants. Participants will be identified by pseudonyms and group number.
[6] This compares to UKFC data that indicates 43% of the general population attend the cinema once a month (UKFC, 2009: 126)
[7] Broadway/Nottingham: 65.2 %; Phoenix/Leicester: 74.5%; QUAD/Derby: 75.4%. 82.8% of Broadway's sample said they mainly saw films and Broadway, 81% of Phoenix's sample said the same about Phoenix and 63.4% of QUAD's said the same about QUAD.
[8] This question used industrial origin, rather than genre, as a classification system. Other answers were given as follows: Independent American (66.5%), Contemporary American (64.8%), Classic Hollywood (44.9%) and Documentaries (43.4%).
[9] Definitions of 'community' have been a key debate within the social sciences and there is not the space here to explore them in full. See Day, 2006 for an in depth discussion of how notions of 'community' have changed.