

## **Making cinephiles: An ethnographic study of audience socialization**

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### **Summary:**

Recent decades have seen the emergence of a multitude of cinema education initiatives for children and teenagers. This ethnographic study of such a program for French high school students combines interviews, observations and archival research to show that this type of institution seeks to introduce students to a practice that differs from the typical youth experience and sociability with movies. Using Levine's work on the emergence of the differentiation between highbrow and lowbrow art and Bourdieu's analysis of social distinction, I illustrate how students' bodies and gazes are subjected to domestication efforts that use the institutional context of schools to impose a model of ascetic spectatorship and cinephilia, the passion for movies as works of art.

**Key words:** cinema, socialization, audience training, cinephilia, arts education, France

### **Introduction**

Generally speaking, the literature has considered cinema audiences from two different angles (Brooker and Jermyn 2003). A first strand, rooted in Film Studies, approaches films as texts, seeking to analyze how these cinematic texts construct the abstract position of the spectator. A second strand, which rose to prominence along with the field of Cultural Studies, focuses instead on the actual experiences of viewers, which are seen as shaped by their social contexts and backgrounds. However, these two approaches are rarely linked, and little work has been done on intermediary positions and institutions that attempt to adapt the actual behavior and reactions of audiences to what the filmic text requires, thereby also constructing an ideal position and attitude for the spectator.

This study will analyze such an intermediary institution, a cinema education program for French high school students, in order to answer the following research questions: What kind of viewer are cinema initiation programs in schools trying to create, and how do they go about it? What habits and norms are the focus of this socialization process? I argue that

this program seeks to instill in the students a bourgeois habitus and the hexis of cinephilia; these practices are in line with the growing social exclusiveness of movie-going, which can be linked to the recognition of cinema as an art form.

Using an ethnographic and sociological approach, this contribution will introduce a new perspective to audience studies – focused neither on the study of the filmic text nor on the reception of this text by the audience, but rather on how audiences are purposefully shaped through different institutions and discourses surrounding cinema.

I begin with a brief history of cinema audiences, a group exhibiting trends related to both gentrification and youth sociability, before retracing the development of cinema education in France. Different data-collection methods and sources are combined in an ethnographic study of one particular program. My analysis shows how both students' bodies and perceptions are trained with the purpose of introducing them to a bourgeois model of cinephilia.

### **Changing audiences: Social selectivity and youth sociability**

Following its invention by the Lumière brothers at the end of the nineteenth century, cinema first gained popularity as a fairground attraction, drawing a largely working-class audience. At the same time, upper-class audiences patronized private projections, and both groups later frequented the newly built movie theaters (Jeancolas 2001; Montebello 2003). Given its exceptionally low prices, cinema was a popular leisure activity, targeting and attracting all social classes. It further increased in popularity over the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: The mean number of movie outings per person per year in France rose from about six in 1930 to almost ten in the 1950s and 1960s. However, since then, the average visits per person have decreased drastically to less than three per year (Guy 2000), a decline that is correlated with and at least partially explained by the increase in television sets in private homes.

However, this decline has not affected all social groups equally, as repeated surveys on cultural practices have shown. While people in managerial and upper intellectual professions go to the movies as often as they did forty years ago (about 80% went to a cinema in 2008), those in lower socioprofessional categories visit movie theaters much less frequently nowadays (only 62% of office workers and 56% of manual workers went to a cinema in 2008) (Donnat 2009). French movie theater audiences have thus changed profoundly over recent decades due to the “relative retreat of the working classes” (Donnat 1999: 115, my translation)<sup>1</sup>. This provides evidence of an ongoing gentrification process among cinema audiences: Cinema outings have become a socially selective activity, practiced mostly by the upper classes, who are even further overrepresented among art-house audiences (CNC 2006).

Throughout this continuing gentrification of cinema audiences, young people have remained the main audience. Indeed, surveys show that younger people are much more likely than their older counterparts to regularly visit movie theaters<sup>2</sup>. This is a life-cycle effect rather than a generational effect: Every generation born after 1925 has displayed the

same pattern of intense practice during adolescence followed by a sharp decline around age twenty-five (Guy 2000). Various socializing agents intervene: As children grow older, family outings to the movie theater are replaced by outings with friends; youth sociability thus supplants family sociability. Nevertheless, social differences persist, such that children from culturally and economically privileged backgrounds go to the movies both earlier in life and more frequently than their working-class counterparts (Octobre et al. 2010).

### **Teaching cinema**

In addition to the influence of family and friends, schools also introduce and socialize children and adolescents to movie-going (Octobre 2003). School outings to see films in movie theaters have been a widespread practice in France since the 1970s, and a large majority of young people have visited a movie theater with their class at least once during their schooling (Guy 2000: 97). The school system thus contributes to socializing children into movie-going, playing “a role of cultural discovery” (Octobre et al. 2010: 234, my translation), both with these one-off visits and the more systematic programs that have been created over recent decades.

Schools are institutions of primary socialization, the “place where content and skills are acquired [...] which are explicitly presented as academic knowledge to be assimilated” (Darmon 2006: 63, my translation). Because schooling is mandatory, this “academic knowledge to be assimilated” is imposed on everyone. Its contents are defined in official curricula and interpreted by textbooks and teachers. If a new subject or approach is added to the curriculum, either at school or university level, this signifies the institutionalization and legitimization of the discipline and of certain types of knowledge.

There is thus a clear link between the development of Film Studies as an independent academic discipline in the field of higher education in France since the 1970s – a discipline with its own departments, degree programs, academic journals and conferences (Darré 2000; Bastide 2007) – and the introduction of cinema education programs designed for students in secondary schools. Various types of initiatives targeting different audiences co-exist, from simple cinema initiation programs consisting of visits to a nearby movie theater to formal, intensive Film Studies electives. What all these programs have in common is the fact that they are part of an ongoing effort to introduce students to “high art” and to lower symbolic obstacles to participation in art-house cinema (Becker 1982; Moulin 1992; Passeron 1991). Cinema is officially endorsed by the school system (and therefore by the state) as an art form that should be taught and valued. This perspective is in line with the significant financial support granted to the entire chain of art-house movie production, distribution and diffusion through the redistributive programs overseen by the National Center for Cinema, the public institution in charge of regulation and support for the French cinema industry. For instance, film projects can obtain selective grants based on artistic merit, and art-house movie theaters are heavily subsidized. Because art-house cinema is officially recognized as an art form, such films are seen as a “cultural exception” (Depétris

2008; Polo 2003), deserving of the state's protection against the otherwise insurmountable market forces of supply and demand.

### **Methods and materials: A monograph with multiple entry points**

This contribution studies "Students at the Movies" ("Lycéens au cinéma"), a very popular program in which 10% of all French high school students participate each year. Originally created at the insistence of independent movie theater owners, its organization is locally managed by cinema interest groups and nationally overseen by the National Center for Cinema (Forni 2009).

The program is very flexible and allows a great deal of latitude in terms of participation. Over the course of a year, teachers take their classes to independent movie theaters three times to watch movies chosen from among a list of a dozen films including classics, recent art-house movies and "world cinema". All students and teachers receive instructional booklets about each film, and teachers are encouraged to discuss and organize lessons around the movie before and after the screening. They can also request a specialized instructor to teach a guest lesson in their classroom after the screening. Because these teachers are given so much freedom, teacher and student experiences with the program most likely vary widely. I therefore decided to focus on the organizational side and the constant elements in this institution of audience training, seeking to analyze the goals, the means and the social representations involved.

In order to understand how this type of program socializes teenagers as audiences, I set out to create a monograph of "Students at the Movies" in one region of France, using numerous entry points and data sources. Secondary and archival sources included annual reports, contracts and instructional and presentation booklets for teachers and students from the past fifteen years, as well as several program-specific websites directed at students and/or teachers. First-hand materials were also collected and analyzed: I observed movie screenings in different movie theaters and instructors analyzing films in classrooms, and I conducted semi-structured interviews with local organizers, movie theater employees and instructors who presented guest lessons on cinema.

### **Results: Molding cinephiles**

Cinema initiation programs such as "Students at the Movies" are socializing institutions whose purpose is to introduce students to a specific set of attitudes, behaviors and reactions towards cinema that can be classified as cinephilia, the erudite passion for and recognition of movies as an art form. These norms, which are usually implicit, are here explicitly taught to students, molding their practices, bodies, perceptions and tastes.

### ***Fostering a practice***

As a first result, it is evident that cinema initiation programs encourage certain types of cultural practices. The movie theaters chosen for "Students at the Movies" are all

independent cinemas, some of which are art-house theaters and are therefore supported by the state. The school visits seek both to provide a captive audience in the present, thereby directly supporting these cinemas, and to introduce students to this type of movie theater in order to encourage return visits in the future. This is an explicit political objective; for example, the annual agreements between the National Center for Cinema and its local partners cite the goal of fostering a “cultural practice of quality by supporting the development of regular contact between young people and movie theaters”. The program is thus justified by the “creation of dispositions and habits known as conducive to future frequentation of culture” (Coulageon 2003: 160-61, my translation), which is expected to lower the symbolic obstacles to art-house theater visits. Furthermore, financial obstacles are also reduced; as the art-house employees always remind the students before the screenings, these potential future visits are heavily subsidized through another program, which provides so-called “cultural checkbooks” that can only be used in art-house cinemas. This linkage between these various programs, based in a school setting and during school hours, is intended to encourage students to come back by themselves in their free time, thus creating new art-house moviegoers. This particular type of practice – seeing art-house films at art-house movie theaters – is therefore the first element of cinephilia promoted and instilled by “Students at the Movies”.

### ***Domesticating bodies***

In his research on cultural audiences in the United States during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Levine (1988) has shown how the distinction between lowbrow and highbrow culture became possible through a process of audience domestication (with highbrow activities demanding attention, silence and order), as well as how this notion of a “good audience” as passive and receptive was historically and socially constructed. A similar attempt at audience socialization is undertaken by French cinema education programs: In addition to introducing students to a certain type of movie theater and film, “Students at the Movies” also teaches them how to behave inside the movie theatre, and thus how to be “good spectators”.

During the screenings, cinema employees and teachers use certain techniques of crowd control with the students, who are often described in interviews as “wild” or “noisy”. They have each group of students enter the movie theater separately, seating them far apart, and chastise students who are perceived as being too rowdy (talking, commenting on the movie, laughing loudly, etc.) during the screening. Student’s bodies are thus viewed as requiring domestication and taming; their bodily hexis, which Bourdieu describes as their “durable way of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking” (Bourdieu 1993: 70), is not adapted to art-house cinemas. This judgment also contains an element related to social class: Bodies and hexes are socially constructed and differentiated, and the apparent lack of self-control in a teenager is associated with the lower classes, who are considered to lack the refinement and self-control that characterize the upper classes (who represent the majority of art-house moviegoers and whose bodily hexis corresponds to

what is demanded and required in this space)<sup>3</sup>. To socialize the students into the accepted practice, the rules with which they must comply are made explicit:

Inside the movie theater, before the screening, Laure<sup>4</sup> (a theater employee) always gives a short speech, which explicitly includes the rules of behavior in the art-house movie theater. She stands at the front of the theater with her back to the screen and addresses the students [...]. Finally, she reminds them of the rules: It is forbidden to eat (“not like in the multiplex cinemas that you might go to”), and cell phones must be turned off. (Field notes from observation)

The theater employee explicitly makes reference to what she perceives to be the normal youth sociability at the types of movies that play in multiplex cinemas, where drinking and eating are encouraged and concession stands are placed inside the theater. The movie theater where Laure works does not sell drinks or food, and eating and drinking are forbidden inside the cinema. Multiplexes are thus disparaged as spaces of consumption, in contrast to art-house cinemas, which are constructed as spaces of culture and ascetic pleasure.

Both “good” and “bad” ways to see a movie are constructed here, and a disciplined posture is taught: Students are not supposed to participate (by talking, commenting, moving about, applauding or laughing) but should instead contemplate the film in solitary silence.

### ***Fashioning the gaze***

In the first chapter of *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) presents two attitudes towards culture, or modes of reception of cultural works. On the one hand, there is the ethical disposition, connected with the idea of the continuity of art and life, where function trumps form; Bourdieu associated this attitude with the working class. On the other hand, in the aesthetic disposition, which he associated more with the upper classes, form trumps content. Similarly, Baudelot, Cartier and Détrez (1999) differentiate two modes of reading among students: “ordinary” reading, characterized by an external goal of entertainment or documentation, and “erudite” reading, or reading for its own sake. These typologies are useful for the analysis of how cinema is taught in “Students at the Movies”. Indeed, the classroom lessons are intended to make students re-evaluate their first reactions to a movie, mostly rooted in the ethical disposition – responses based on the plot, sympathy or antipathy for the protagonists, moral judgment passed on a character’s actions, etc. – and encourage them to adopt an erudite aesthetic disposition, thereby creating and perpetuating a hierarchy of reactions and receptions.

A few days after the screening in the movie theater, some classes are visited by a specialized instructor<sup>5</sup> for a lesson in filmic analysis based on the film that was seen. The core of these lessons is the so-called “sequence analysis”. The instructor first shows the class an entire scene from the movie; he or she then shows it a second time, stopping the

scene every few seconds and asking a series of very precise questions on visual themes, sound, camera movements, lighting, perspective, etc. This procedure detaches the scene from the continuity of the film experienced at the first screening, and students are invited to distance themselves from their first impressions as they learn to recognize (or, rather, pay attention to) new aspects of the film and evidence of the movie-making process.

This deconstruction procedure separates the scene from the temporality of the movie and de-naturalizes it. Furthermore, these cinema lessons take place in classrooms during school hours, and thus they are firmly rooted in the educational environment. The instructors present the film as the result of a series of choices, as a “text” not unlike the texts students study in literature class: a work with its own language that can and should be decoded. The act of properly watching a movie as taught to students is thus quite far removed from their normal habits:

[After my presentation] about a dozen students came up to me and said, “Sir, we are sorry, we didn’t watch the movie correctly, we absolutely need to see it again. [...] We learned how to see it and now we need to see it again because it is a shame to miss such a film.” (André, instructor)

Indeed, watching a movie properly is something that is learned, and schools are the institutions taking responsibility for this audience socialization. Watching a film requires a number of abilities that are acquired in school (Coulageon 2003), and certain movies cannot be understood outside of this analytical perspective. In the scenario cited above, the students have internalized the academic and upper-class norm of distancing themselves from their first reaction to a film, a reaction rooted in ethics, and have re-evaluated their judgment based on aesthetics.

However, the actual practices of the organizers and instructors reveal a certain accommodation of the ethical disposition. For instance, the films screened in this program often have a young protagonist; the choice of these films indicates that the organizers rely to a certain extent on students’ identification with protagonists to ensure their interest in the films.

Another technique accommodating and exploiting the ethical disposition is found in the handouts for students, which contain a list of the film’s cast and crew, a synopsis, several short analytical texts and many images. Robert, an instructor and the author of many student handouts, explains the rationale behind the structure:

I changed the synopsis two or three years ago because I received feedback from many students [...] who told me, “but you’re telling us the entire story!” (Robert, instructor)

The synopsis on the first page of the student booklet for each film used to give a complete summary of the entire plot, as it still does in the teachers’ booklet. However, the students,

who receive these handouts before the actual screening, complained because they did not want to know the end of the story; they preferred to maintain some degree of suspense and surprise. They are thus primarily interested in the story – in the film’s content rather than its form. The acceptance of this attitude by Robert and the program in general (as exhibited by the replacement of the complete synopsis with an abbreviated version) demonstrates a form of pragmatism that attempts to capitalize on the students’ captivation with the story.

### ***Affirming cinema as art***

In training students to assume aesthetic dispositions when watching movies, “Students at the Movies” also seeks to convince them that cinema is an art form, notably by depicting the director as the author of the film and by emphasizing the film’s place in a universe of artistic references.

Throughout the guest lessons, films are described and analyzed as the result of a series of intentional decisions on narrative structure, photography, sound, actor direction, visual themes, camera angles, etc. This presentation is centered on the director: It is the director who is portrayed as the creator of the movie and the driving, decision-making force behind it. Other components of the program also support this model; for example, the students’ and teachers’ booklets feature the film title on the first page, followed by “a film by” and the director’s name, thus inextricably linking film and director. Even more significantly, teachers’ booklets contain a thorough biography and filmography of the director.

Thus, following the model promoted by the French New Wave and very much in use throughout art-house cinema, the director – who is often also the screenwriter – is considered to be the creator of his or her films, just like authors are considered the creators of their written works. This has two main implications: First, because directors possess such high symbolic capital, they can ennoble their movies simply through the use of their names (Bourdieu 1975; Bourdieu 1977). Second, as a consequence, the role of all the other people who worked on the movie is reduced to the mostly technical implementation of the director’s personal and artistic vision.

If a film is a work of art created and signed by a single author, it can be compared to other films by the same director. In their classroom lessons, the instructors often show excerpts from other movies to show continuity in the choices made by the director, thus reinforcing the idea of a coherent “body of work”. Moreover, this body of work is also inserted into a larger space of artistic references, spanning centuries and covering cinematic and other artistic domains (literature, visual arts, etc.). Both narrative and visual links to other works of art are made through the analysis of recurring narrative techniques and visual themes.

Thus, the movie is inserted into a referential space and is thereby justified as an art form. This referential space of cinephilia has certain accepted organizing and classifying principles: genre, director, artistic movement and period, rather than the plot or actors involved. This categorization is indispensable for the model of intellectual cinephilia, as any



given film can be interesting and significant not only in its own right, but also through its links to other movies and its position in the cinematic landscape.

### **Conclusion: An upper-class model of cinephilia**

In the context of both the gentrification of movie-going and the institutionalization of Film Studies in French schools, public cinema initiation programs seek to introduce students to the attitudes and practices of cinephilia. Using the language of religion, one might say such programs engage in proselytism, hoping to convert students to cinephilia and the vision of cinema as an art form. Because they impose a model of good spectatorship, shaping both the bodies and perceptions of students, these programs, situated within the socialization institutions of schools, offer a unique perspective on audience domestication.

The promotion of an ascetic bodily hexis for spectators – the solitary, silent contemplation of a movie – contributes to the identification of cinema as a highbrow art. Particular emphasis is placed on the aesthetic disposition rather than the ethical disposition, creating a hierarchy of legitimate attitudes and reactions to films. This model of spectatorship is clearly situated in social space: Bourgeois attitudes of *savoir-faire* and *savoir-être* (know-how and know-how-to-be) are taught, promoting postures and practices associated with the upper classes. However, this study does not allow us to draw any conclusions on whether these audience socialization efforts are ultimately successful. Indeed, further research on the reception of such programs by target groups will be required in order to evaluate their effects, their effectiveness and their consequences over time.

This case study has shown how intermediary institutions such as schools can both explicitly and implicitly attempt to mold spectators and create future audiences, be it for art-house movies or other art forms and institutions. Further comparative analyses of art education programs across different artistic domains would allow researchers to determine the similarities and differences between art forms that must rise above the social functions of their practice, such as cinema and photography (Bourdieu 1965; Moulin 1995), and disciplines that need not overcome this challenge, such as fine arts.

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Donnat uses the INSEE (French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies) classification of professions and socioprofessional categories. His use of the term 'class' is narrower and somewhat different from Bourdieu's use (cf. note 3).

<sup>2</sup> 90% and 84%, respectively, of those aged 15 to 19 and 20 to 24 have visited a movie theater in the last year, as opposed to one in four for those over 65 years old.

<sup>3</sup> Here I use 'class' in a wider, Bourdieusian sense: the result of a coherent system of symbols, practices, knowledge and preferences which distinguish and classify different positions in social space.

<sup>4</sup> All names of places and people have been changed to guarantee anonymity.

<sup>5</sup> Most of these guest instructors have academic degrees (generally a PhD) in Film Studies.