

Active audiences and reflexivity: How film audiences form in northern English regions

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Abstract:

While there are a plethora of approaches to studying the audience, including reception studies, historical studies, behavioural approaches and cultural studies, this article focuses on the way in which people seek to join venue-based audiences for diverse film. In doing so, we argue that people engage reflexively with film and film venues in forming audiences. This includes a sensibility towards audiencehood that reflects the venues, film programmes, and experiences of being part of an audience. This article draws on the How Audiences Form (HAF) project, which looked at engagement with independent and specialised film in three northern English regions. The paper examines the selection of film based on particular interests using established independent venues and the variety of audience experience using film clubs. In the context of uneven regional provision and unequal access to diverse film, we argue that out of this emerges a 'reflexive audience', in which people reflect on the difficulties of accessing film culture and begin to create their own audience experiences. This goes beyond the relationship between audiences and film/text and situates audiences within their social geographies and what matters to them in terms of film experiences.

Keywords: active audiences, film policy, reflexivity, regional film, social practice

Introduction

There are a range of approaches within audience studies that include reception studies, historical studies, behavioural approaches and cultural studies. The turn to reception studies, broadly defined, has made the audience visible in film studies and media studies

more generally. There is however little focus or research on the ways in which people seek to join audiences for specialised film or create opportunities to see film in areas with low provision of specialised or 'diverse' film (see definition on page 52 [below]). Little research has addressed the ways in which people seek to join an audience and in so doing how they start the process of forming an audience. To address this gap in knowledge, the paper discusses the experiences of individuals who actively find ways to engage with film and with the audience experience in the context of low levels of regional provision. The article draws on the 'How Audiences Form' (HAF) project, which focuses on audiences for specialised film in northern England (UK). The research found that individuals actively and reflexively seek out ways to create and join film audiences. Individuals use different experiences of film and audience experiences to create new opportunities to see film, or to join existing opportunities to see film where they are available. The development of interest in film and the desire to engage in a rich diverse film culture is a reflexive process. In this paper, we argue for a concept of the 'reflexive audience', which refers to a reflexive engagement in film by individuals that creates audience experiences around the diversity of film.

This article begins by examining the current status of film provision and policy in the UK, and outlines the British Film Institute's (BFI) recent policy to expand audience participation outside of central London for independent and specialised film. Next, we discuss the development of paradigms in audience research, and then the paper introduces the How Audiences Form (HAF) research project that this article is based on. The findings section discusses film venues and programmes. It emphasises the reflexivity of people and the importance of what matters to them in accessing independent cinema venues and creating experiences in film clubs, in the context of uneven provision. This suggests a reflexive form of social practice around film in the regions, based on selection of films that relate to particular interests and the availability of film venues. The discussion section links the findings to existing audience research and suggests 'reflexive audiencehood' as concept in which audiences engage with film beyond the relationship with the text.

Levels of provision: diverse film, venues and programming

Film is a popular aspect of people's social life. There is a diversity of film, which ranges from Hollywood blockbusters to small budget documentaries. Although mainstream studio produced film and its genres are dominant in the film market, there is nonetheless a diverse range of non-mainstream film. The BFI, for example, recognises the 'depth and diversity of the moving image' (BFI, 2017, p. 4), which expands its focus of specialised film in its previous policy (BFI, 2012). However, the opportunities to see a wide range of film are unequal across the UK. The main divide is between London and the North of England. Outside of central London, specialised films feature on only 7% of screens (BFI, 2012, p.13). London accounts for 36.1% (101 screens) of all screens showing specialised films (next highest is the South East region with 13.9% [39 screens]), with Yorkshire and the Humber having 7.9% (22 screens), and only 2.1% (6 screens) in the North East (BFI, 2016, p.127). Therefore, in terms of screenings, people in the North of England have relatively less opportunity to participate

in a wide range of diverse film, which limits the ways they can join audiences. The BFI funded Film Audience Network (FAN) is seeking to address some of these inequalities, however, there is still inequality of access to a wide range of film (BFI, 2017). Specifically, availability of mainstream film and multiplex cinemas is good throughout the UK but access to specialised film and smaller independent venues varies.

The BFI provide a definition for 'independent and specialised film', which includes British independent, foreign language with subtitles, documentaries, archive, classic, shorts and artist films (<http://www.bfi.org.uk/sites/bfi.org.uk/files/downloads/bfi-definition-of-specialised-film-bfi-neighbourhood-cinema.pdf>). However, this definition does not always align with actual programming at independent cinemas, film clubs and other venues. For the purpose of this article, we use the term 'diverse film', which refers to films that are usually not available at mainstream multiplex venues, and reflects the HAF research participants' desire for more variety in film choices. 'Diverse films' may be films produced by independent film studios, such as documentaries and shorts, foreign language films, 'art house' films, but this does not exclude less mainstream Hollywood produced films. Very often, independent venues will screen selective mainstream film alongside more specialised film. This type of programming provides opportunities for people to access a wider range of films.

Film venues and exhibitors are important actors in the programming of film and in providing access to film, which include independent cinemas, film festivals, community-based pop-up screenings, film clubs, and other one-off events, which can have a range of themes or niche activities. For example, the HAF project found a cult film night aimed at students and a rural town cinema run by a local council in Humberside, a coffee shop-based film club that emphasised sociability and conversation in Wearside, along with events such as 'Cycle to the Cinema' and a film club based in a housing association in South Yorkshire. These types of exhibitors and venues typically offer a wider range of films than those presented at multiplexes (see <https://www.hrionline.ac.uk/fhn/>).

Regional strategies to address uneven film cultural provision

There is a diverse output of film and yet for many people the main access is by home viewing or at corporately driven multiplexes showing mainstream film (BFI, 2012). Although the UK has a relatively long history of regional film culture (Newsinger, 2009), recent policy and industry trends have undermined film provision in some regions of the UK (Dickinson and Harvey, 2005). Provision of specialised film in the northern regions of the UK is much lower than London and the South (Jones, 2015). Mainstream film are predominately screened in out-of-town multiplexes and inner-city urban entertainment centres while the provision of more diverse film experiences is mainly via independent cinemas and film clubs, which are unevenly spread within regions (Jancovich et al., 2003; <http://www.hrionline.ac.uk/fhn/>).

However, the history of regional film culture includes the British Documentary Movement of the 1930s as well as the regional focus of the British New Wave cinema in the

1960s. The role of the regions expanded in the late 1960s by the establishment of Regional Film Theatres (RFTs) by the BFI. RFTs established partnerships with film societies, enthusiasts, and supporters that developed local film culture, including activities beyond film exhibitions to libraries, resource centres and production workshops at local and regional levels (Christie, 1981). The work of these groups in different ways illustrates that regional and local groups were interested in cinema as social practice in terms of the engagement in film from both production and consumption perspectives (Petley, 1989). There was some recognition of the legacy of regional film culture by New Labour when it created the UK Film Council, which had a remit to protect commercial film economically, while also subsidising cultural film production. The UK Film Council (2000) argued that film is a complex combination of industry and culture and both of these factors are equal in justifying public funding.

There was some loss of regional distinctiveness in early 2000s regional film policy. The administration of policy at this time was by nine Regional Screen Agencies, which was a network of public and private agencies that sought to integrate the 'centre' (i.e. London) and regions, and commercial and cultural priorities. This renegotiation of the relationship between centre and regions changed regional film culture because it adopted many of the values and practices of the mainstream film industry, including positioning the UK film industry within the processes of cultural globalisation (Harvey and Dickinson, 2005; Kim, 2003).

There is now a renewed focus on fostering regional film culture by the BFI (2012, 2017), and policy emphasises the value of film for drawing local communities together and as a medium for instigating social action (DCMS, 2011). Part of a strategy for expanding film engagement is to take the cinema experience back to communities where there is a lack of existing film provision (DCMS, 2011, BFI, 2012, <http://www.showroomworkstation.org.uk/info/filmhubnorth>). In place of regional distinctiveness, the focus is on increasing access to a diversity of film experiences in the regions. The argument, in policy terms, is that if access to film is improved, then this may support participation in film culture, encourage cultural pluralism through diverse film provision, and encourage the development of strong and vibrant film audiences at the regional level (BFI, 2012). This raises questions about the opportunities that people have for engaging with diverse film, in the context of uneven provision in England and a global commercial film culture. It is therefore important to understand the ways in which individuals seek to join audiences of diverse film, and in this paper we argue that the way people seek out film can be understood as 'reflexive audiencehood'. This takes place within the context of difficulties that people may face in accessing diverse film experiences, and we draw on data from northern English regions.

Understanding audiences

The history of audience studies is well-documented (Livingstone, 2013). There has generally been three overlapping phases of audience research: 'effects', 'uses and gratifications', and

'encoding and decoding' approaches. Stuart Hall's (1973) approach of encoding and decoding messages in mass consumer capitalist societies developed several strands of research, including ethnographies of audiences and studies of media discourses in creating audiences (Bratich, 2005). These studies identified that individuals have some level of interpretation (albeit within hegemonic culture) that resulted in the development of audience reception studies and notions of the active audience. These studies made audiences visible and recognised that members of audiences have agency. Barker (2012) argues that the development of conceptual approaches of the 'active audience' responded to presumptions in mass communications research, which saw audiences as vulnerable and subject to control and manipulation.

Livingstone (2013) also challenges the notion that audiences are mass and passive in character. She further argues that the character of audiences is historically and culturally contingent, citing family and living room-based audiences as an example. These critiques have informed the development of the study of audiences from simple, to mass, to diffused, to the participatory audience (Livingstone, 2013). The active audience approach applies to each of these types. The active audience approach is especially relevant to increasingly diffused and participatory audiences, and this approach starts from actual engagement with texts or films. However, audiences are also active in the ways they engage within their communities, select and interpret films (Srinivas, 2002). The practice of consumption of film and engagement in film culture is a creative interaction between films (texts) and viewers (readers) (Livingstone, 2013). The active audience perspective lends itself to the study of how audiences engage with film as a social practice.

Given the lower provision of diverse film in northern England (reported above) the opportunities for people to join in diverse film audiences is unequal. The inequality of provision at the regional level is a feature in how people engage with film because it creates barriers in accessing film. This barrier affects how people can create the ways in which they associate, respond critically, and participate in film culture and in local civil society (Livingstone and Das, 2013). As Livingstone and Das (2013, p.2) write:

[o]n the one hand, audiences (re)produce meanings by negotiating the mutual interface of text and reader. On the other, audiences (re)produce social relations by negotiating the material/social determinants that structure their everyday contexts of action.

This focus on the socially situated active audience means exploring how individuals seek out film audience experience and develop 'audiencehood', which is the desire to engage in film and feel a sense of shared experience around film. This definition involves a sensibility of affection for particular texts and audience experience (Hermes, 2009). Hermes (2009, p.116) argues that a relationship between cultural forms and audiences creates this sensibility and it is a 'form of engagement or mode of operation'. The desire to seek out audience experience interacts with points of consumption and direct interaction with films. Turner

(1999, p.3) characterises film as a social practice in terms of its ‘consumption, its pleasures and its meanings ... enclosed within the study of the workings of culture itself’. The analysis of the social practice of forming an audience addresses the interpretation of films by audiences, the sharing of filmic experience and what going to the cinema means for people as well as the significance of the venues and settings in which they watch films. From our findings, we argue that these practices and experiences are reflexive (see Discussion section below).

The opportunities that individuals have to experience film in these ways varies in terms of the programming at local venues and their own cultural knowledge of film, as well as the cost of tickets and/or pay per view on film streamed to the home. Therefore, different individuals have a range of routes into film and into genres and types of film. Film is diverse and when considered as part of a culture of the ‘moving image’ there is widespread engagement with it within contemporary media-saturated society. In relation to the observation that people are constantly engaging with media, Livingstone (1998) argues that it therefore becomes important to ask which types of audiences individuals decide to participate in, and why. This means that we need to understand why individuals form audiences for particular films. There are distinctions within film, with one broad distinction between mainstream and specialised film as well distinctions amongst genres. Another aspect is deciding to participate, and if so, in which type of audience, venue, and experience. There is a variety of ways to access film such as the multiplex cinema, the independent cinema, film clubs, mobile rural cinema, pop-up screenings, and web streamed film onto mobile, tablet, and television.

People have some choice in how they experience film, but the extent of that choice, depends on what opportunities they have to participate in film. The diversity of film and different types of access to film means that individuals interpret and select what they are interested in (and media more generally, Harrison and Wessels, 2005). By selecting and interpreting film and audience experience, individuals create a relationship with film and a sensibility around film. These selections are what matters to them and in so doing they create, what Hermes (2009), calls ‘mattering maps’. Mattering maps are the social geographies of particular places and types of film venue, and personal journeys into film and participation in film. The meaning film audience experience has for individuals – what matters for them – is combined with how they can use the opportunity they have to see film, such as access to venues and diverse programming. In this study, mattering maps help to identify how the meaning of film and sense of venue creates the conditions for individuals to find ways to create or join film audiences.

The process of selection and participation is not determined socially, culturally or technologically. Rather, as the data from the HAF project discussed below shows, individuals find ways to participate in film, in the context of uneven provision. For example, individuals will travel to an independent cinema in the nearest city, they will join a film club, they will organise a film club and they will share their interest in film in small group meetings in cafes, or take part in film festivals. This demonstrates that individuals are active and have a degree

of personal agency in finding ways to participate in film. There are barriers to participation such as lower levels of film provision locally and the cost of going to see film (Corbett et al., 2014). However, through reflecting on film experience, examining opportunities and what matters to them in terms of film culture, the participants in this study form audiences reflexively, and create what we term reflexive audiencehood (see Discussion below).

The How Audiences Form (HAF) project

The HAF research focused on Humberside, South Yorkshire, and Wearside as regions within the Film Hub North (FHN) area.¹ These regions experienced post-industrial decline in the late 20th Century and relatively different levels of regeneration. All three regions have higher unemployment than the national average (7.7% for Wearside as part of the North East, and 6.9% for Humberside and South Yorkshire, compared with 5.6% nationally, ONS, 2015). All three regions have mixed levels of film provision, with South Yorkshire having a major independent cinema in the region, Humberside having a small local authority venue in a rural town but very little provision in its major city (Hull), and Wearside having very little provision at all (Corbett et al., 2014).

Humberside includes Hull as the major urban centre, with a city population of around 260,000. Apart from a small local authority-run cinema in Goole, Humberside has three well-supported film clubs in and around the Hull area, and at least two other rural film clubs. South Yorkshire includes the major city of Sheffield (pop. around 560,000) where there is good provision of diverse film with the Showroom Cinema at the heart of the regenerated Cultural Industries Quarter in the city. The Wearside area includes the city of Sunderland (pop. around 280,000), which was formerly dependent on the shipbuilding and coal mining industries. Outside of the region's multiplexes, Sunderland only has a small film club run in a coffee shop (see <http://www.hrionline.ac.uk/fhn/>).

The research design used mixed methods to collect data from the case study areas. The triangulation of the data was through reflexive and thematic analysis (Huberman & Miles, 1998). Nine semi-structured interviews and three focus groups allowed us to explore the meaning of film and the survey allowed us to assess a wider range of perceptions about specialised film in regional life. Focus groups explored the meaning of film and cinema experiences for audiences. Volunteers at the Showroom Cinema (South Yorkshire), members of Friends of Hull Screen (Humberside) and Lamplight Film Club (Wearside) supported the recruitment of research participants for the interviews and focus groups. Each focus group was comprised of regular 'film-goers' (every couple of weeks) and occasional 'film-goers' (every couple of months) at local independent cinemas and film clubs. Interviews took place with community organisers, cinema professionals, and policy makers, recruited through FHN contacts in the three regions to explore their experiences of film provision within the specific communities and to provide contextual knowledge of regional film provision. A survey of film preferences, opportunities and barriers to watch film supported the qualitative data collection by identifying wider trends, which fed into the reflexive research design and data analysis (Silverman, 1985). The distribution of the

questionnaire was through public libraries, cafes and community buildings. Independent cinemas, film clubs, and film societies' programming data, genres of films shown, audience figures, and organisational data provided information about film provision in the regions studied (see <http://www.hrionline.ac.uk/fhn/>).

Findings

Reflections and examination of access to diverse film: venues and programmes

All the study participants were aware of the lack of venues in their region and the uneven provision of diverse film within regions. The participants pointed out that they had found a few venues that screen diverse film and named the following:

- The independent cinema *Showroom Cinema* in Sheffield.
- The *Cult Cinema Sunday* film club in Humberside.
- The *Lamplight Film Club* held in a coffee shop in Wearside.
- *Cycle to the Cinema* in South Yorkshire, a pop-up screening in National Trust woodland areas.
- *Open Cinema* in South Yorkshire, films screened in social housing centres.
- *Magic Lantern Film Club* in South Yorkshire, a film project in schools.

Even though they had some experience of diverse film, they all reflected upon and examined their general lack of opportunities to access diverse film. They noted the uneven provision across the cities in the North, citing that Sheffield (South Yorkshire) has a well-known independent venue (which people who can will travel to from across the north) and a range of different film clubs. However, they pointed out that Hull (Humberside) does not have a fixed-venue independent cinema, although it has a few well-supported film clubs and nearby Goole has a small local authority-run venue. They were also aware that Sunderland (Wearside) does not have a fixed independent venue, and only has one small film club.

The study participants extended the issue of access to venues to the choice of film. We found that participants had clearly examined and reflected upon the range and quality of programming in venues. A common reflection was that programmes at their local multiplex are limited when compared with the variety of film offered at independent cinemas or in film clubs. The participants in Humberside and Wearside in particular had examined and reflected on the lack of diverse film programming and this had been part of the catalyst for setting up their own film clubs. For example, a male focus group participant from Wearside states that at the multiplex cinema 'in Sunderland ... we spend half an hour deciding the best of a bad bunch [of films] ... and then still leave dissatisfied'. Across all the regions in our study, apart from Sheffield, our study participants were aware of poor provision of venues and programmes, and they had examined and reflected upon this. They demonstrated this by being able to discuss these easily and clearly in interviews and focus

groups. Further, on reflection, some had decided to act to try to address these matters, which we discuss next.

Reflexive responses to lack of venues and diverse film programmes

The lack of access to venues and diverse film programming frustrated our study participants and they were proactive in looking for more opportunities to access film and to create new opportunities to see diverse film. One participant in Sunderland (Wearside) set up a film club (*Lamplight Film Club*) with friends because they were upset about the lack of venues and lack of diverse film programming. She described the situation as:

HMV is the only place where you would buy a film [in Sunderland] and the World Cinema section is tiny ... when we were thinking about the film club and why it was needed and why we should do it; it's more than just film, it was about cultural provision in the city in general. It was about an economically deprived area and quite a culturally-deprived area and people not being able to access stuff... it's just not really feasible for people to go, "oh, yes, great, I'll jump on the Metro and go to Newcastle".

The *Lamplight Film Club* organisers said that they set up the film club because of the limited provision of diverse film in the city. They had reflected on existing provision and then examined what they could do. In so doing, they drew on what mattered to them and to others who wanted to see diverse film in Sunderland, and set up a film club. The reflexive character of this piece of social action has created audiences for diverse film. In this instance, what mattered was a desire to experience diverse film as part of an audience in a venue in the City of Sunderland. The reflexive engagement with the lack of provision was characterised by the social geography of the need to have an accessible venue and by the meaningfulness of diverse film for the film club audience. Here mattering maps and reflexivity helped to create and shape audience experience.

In Hull (Humberside), a similar reflexive process in generating opportunities to see diverse film generated a different type of programming and venue solution. Hull does not have a fixed 'bricks and mortar' independent film venue. The participants in the Hull focus group were very frustrated by this. They argued that this forces people to travel to access fixed venues that screen diverse film. For those with transport they travel as far as York, Sheffield, or Manchester to join audiences of diverse film. In the focus group, reflection extended beyond a dissatisfaction of the lack of access to a consideration of why the City of Hull had not invested in diverse film venues and programmes. One male focus group participant expressed the consensus of the group by saying that it is 'because it's always been a working class city with roots in the docks, and we've yet to really break free of that mould'. The group discussion challenged the commonly held assumption that only middle class people engage with 'art house' film because the participants said they were from

working class backgrounds and knew others with similar backgrounds who also liked diverse film.

The reflections and examinations in Hull had fostered a co-ordinated response to the lack of provision. In the first instance, people set up film clubs and societies that show diverse films, including independent and 'art house' film. Three film clubs then collaborated to form an umbrella organisation called Hull Independent Cinema Project (HICP). The purpose of the collaboration was to cross-market their individual activities, put on screenings under the HICP brand, and campaign for a fixed independent venue in Hull as a form of social activism. One study participant from Hull argued that the HICP is:

a sort of co-ordinated approach ... of course you want people to be out there doing their own things in all forms of culture; that's how a scene develops. You don't get a vibrant cultural or arts scene through central planning ... But what you do need is some sort of central place that collects information about what's going on.

This expresses that people value a diverse and pluralistic approach to culture, and can be active in bringing this about. Another area that the study participants in Hull raised was about perceptions of cost. A film club organiser describes how the idea of 'cost' features reflexively in the shaping of audiences for film clubs. There is a perception that Hull audiences are 'cost-conscious', which he argues raises questions as to whether 'they want to spend £18 for [a film] on Blu-ray' when 'they can come down to [the film club] and watch it for £4'. He noted that if people cannot 'access film clubs they buy films because they really want to see it'. This for him demonstrated how much people wanted to see certain films and further, it raises questions about inequality because not everyone can afford to buy the films.

Five 'cinema-goers' in their twenties set up the film clubs in Wearside and Humberside described above because they were concerned about the lack of independent film provision in their cities. The film clubs are popular in these areas and they provide opportunities for people to join audiences for diverse film. In so doing they also facilitate the development of audiences in those areas. This is another example of the ways in which people can examine and reflect on the lack of diverse film audience opportunities, and then from what matters to them they reflexively develop opportunities for audiences as well as joining audiences. What matters for them is that they wanted to provide opportunities for people to join audiences for diverse film within their region.

The social practices of joining audiences: selecting venues, films and experiences reflexively

The discussion above shows that although existing provision is low there are some opportunities for people to join an audience for diverse film. People select venues,

programmes and films drawing on independent cinemas, film clubs and pop-up screenings. The study found that people reflected on what mattered to them, which shaped a form of reflexive audiencehood. This means that in the process of exploring and selecting film, people generate audience engagement. Audiences develop through the interpretations that people make and act on with regard to what matters to them in film and audiences experience. There are variety of ways this happens and the character of venues feature in the way which people develop audiencehood. The ways in which people find ways to engage in diverse film involves finding out about, and examining, what is available and what type of experience they want. The study found two main patterns in relation to venues: (1) selection based on particular interests using established independent venues (2) variety of audience experience using film clubs.

In terms of (1) above, using established independent venues for particular interests, the study found that an active selection based on the interests that mattered to them. For example, one study participant from Sheffield said that his interest in music documentaries is only satisfied at the *Showroom Cinema*. This cinema's reputation for programming documentaries is strong: it hosts an international documentary film festival (*Docfest*) and documentaries make up the second largest proportion of their audience figures (<http://www.hrionline.ac.uk/fhn/venue/vis-3/>). The perception that the venue has of its role in the city and region also reflects audience identification of a city centre venue for the music documentary. *Showroom Cinema* understands this, as one employee explained: 'we're in the centre of the city and if we want to have a cohesive city with a broad cultural audience, then actually it needs to be venue-based. People need to be engaging with the venues in the city'. From the point of view of *Showroom Cinema* and our study participants, a city centre location with diverse programming supports audiences to address issues of ease of access, availability, and choice. Audiences recognise and value *Showroom Cinema* for diverse film with a unique feel. For example, one of our female participants in South Yorkshire says 'it's the *Showroom* experience: it's that originality, that freshness, it's the lovely floorboards, it's the art deco, it's a sweet little building'. Audiences therefore reflect on what *Showroom Cinema* offers in terms of what matters to them in the type of film they want to see and the type of experience they want.

In terms of (2) above, film clubs have distinctive characteristics in that people self-organise in film clubs or set up and/or take part in pop-up cinema screenings. There are differences between film club experiences. For example, our study found a film club that focuses on cult films (*Cult Cinema Sunday* in Humberside) and a film club that emphasises the social experience and audience discussion (*Lamplight Film Club* in Wearside). They both share the sociality of shared film experiences but the film type and film experience interact with different things audiences want and create. The underpinning ethos of *Cult Cinema Sunday* is a shared appreciation of cult classic films and it attracts older people who want to watch cult movies from their youth and younger people (often students) who want to view cult classics. The film club also holds film quizzes, sells film-related art prints, and film-specific catering such as 5-Dollar Shakes when screening *Pulp Fiction* and *White Russian*

cocktails for a screening of *The Big Lebowski*, as part of the experience of seeing a cult classic. The film club's organiser points out that 'it's a celebration, a social thing as well, about that movie, that genre, the movement, the fans, the fandom, the quotes, the shout-outs'.

A social film club offers a different experience for audiences because it focuses on shared enjoyment of watching and talking about a wide range of films. *Lamplight Film Club* in Sunderland (Wearside) takes place in a coffee shop once a month and a core group of 15–30 people attend, with a film screening followed by drinks and discussion. Amongst the most popular films screened at *Lamplight* include *Frances Ha*, *Rear Window*, *À Bout de Souffle*, and *Persepolis*. For the organisers, participation involves an open mindedness to new film experiences (including new releases, 'art house', independents, documentaries, and archive films) and freedom to discuss these films in a group. This is valued by them, as one study participant explained: 'there's this social element to it, and there's something about exploring a film with other people who care', the film club 'brings people together who would never have met each other in a normal day, or [are] from different walks of life'. This type of engagement features in developing new practices and interactions locally. For example, the film club attracted new family audience in screening the 1954 original of *Godzilla* when its remake was released. An organiser noted that 'we never even considered what's going on for children in Sunderland ... unexpectedly, we had five or six kids and their mams and dads' attend with the core audience of twenty-somethings, along with 'people in their 30s, 40s, early 50s'. Responses from attendees to that screening included 'it was mint!' and 'loved the round of applause at the end!'. Although film clubs tend to be organised around a core group they attract others and introduce them to new film experiences.

In reflecting on audience experience, the meaningfulness of films is important to our study participants. The ways in which people identify with, and interpret film, feature in how they develop audiencehood. For example, people reflect on and bring together a sense of place with film. A community worker in Mexborough, South Yorkshire developed community-based screenings and local people asked for films that reflect the local working class and mining history of the area, such as Ken Loach's films *Kes*, filmed in nearby Barnsley, and *The Price of Coal, Part 1* and *2*. There is also interest in experiencing film drawn from different genres or countries, as one participant says a film club opened his eyes to foreign-language film. He said that 'there's a danger about just going to the pictures that you just become self-selecting and you go and see things you think you'll like, so you never open yourself up as much'. The participants also value the exploration of film by discussion sessions, as one participant said: 'I've been really interested to hear some things that people have to say, which made me look at things in a different light'. The opportunity to engage informally at film clubs – to be active and interactive as an audience, for relatively low cost – increased awareness and subsequent engagement with diverse film.

In addition to venues, types of screening, and programming, people in the three case study regions highly value their particular experiences of films because it gives them a sense of focused immersion. For example, a participant from Wearside says 'when you're in the

cinema it's really easy to look at your watch and then two hours have gone, and you've just been fully immersed in this film for two hours'. The participants highlight the value of participation in a shared cultural event. One male participant from South Yorkshire described this: 'I'm quite a sucker for hype. If there's a film that's been talked about a lot, I just have to go and see it immediately'. The participants also raised the visual aspect of the cinema-screen experience of visually strong independent films, such as *The Tree of Life*. In overall terms, the participants experience independent cinemas and film clubs as a place to lose oneself in a thought-provoking film, either alone or with a small group of friends. As a participant states: 'one of my children... He says, "I just want to go on my own. I just want to soak it in, and then I'll go with somebody else another day to see the same film"'.

The social practice of film is not just about a diverse film programme and access, but also there is a strong sense of venue and community for the research participants, whether at independent cinemas, film clubs and pop-up screenings. In focusing on people's experiences, this section considered their agency as active and interactive audiences that participate in diverse film culture. People, by selecting, examining and engaging in film reflexively create audience experiences through a relationship with different venues, programming and the meaning of film. All of these aspects of audiencehood matter to people. These mattering maps, which are located in the social geography of provision and consumption of films, shape the reflexive development of diverse film opportunities in underserved regions. The study participants cite the character and ambience of venues, film programmes, and personal and collective experiences as valued aspects of their film viewing. The views of the study participants suggest that in the context of uneven provision and inequality of access, the agency of people to form active and interactive audiences reflexively is an important aspect of diverse film experience.

Discussion: reflexivity and reflexive audiencehood

Reflection on experience and examination of practices interact with new experiences and understanding, which are the characteristics of reflexivity. Social theorists such as Giddens (1990, 1991) argue that a defining feature of modernity is that social action and personal action is reflexive. Although Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) recognise that reflexivity is part of the dynamics of audiences and the experience of audiences, they mainly focus on what they perceive to be the narcissist aspects of engaging in film and focus less on how reflexivity is part of the social actions of individuals in forming audiences. The concept of reflexivity, however, extends beyond types of personality and a reflexive development of a sense of self. Reflexivity is part of practical actions and social activity more generally (Giddens, 1990). Social practices are reflexive because through reflection and examination of practices, individuals and collectivities reproduce, adapt and change social practices (Giddens 1990).

The findings in this article show that the study participants wanted to join audiences of diverse film. The desire to seek out film experience is part of the formation of audiences and this desire interacts with different types of venues and direct interaction with films. The

formation of audiencehood happens through a socio-cultural process in which individuals find out about films and reflect on their film experience, which is beyond engagement with films as texts (Barker, 2012; Livingstone, 2013). Individuals reflect on their audience experience and then through experience and imagination find ways to construct different types of audience experience within the contextual resources they have available. We term this form of social practice 'reflexive audiencehood'. This is where individuals draw on their personal experiences of being part of an audience and reflexively work with that knowledge in creating opportunities for shaping particular types of audiencehood. This feature of audiencehood merges senses of audience experience at a shared engagement level with the personal and subjective viewing of the film. They combine in particular ways in the interpretation of film, forming part of what film experiences mean to individuals. Another aspect of reflexive audiencehood is the practical action that individuals undertake in making audiences happen as a shared experience, whether by going to the cinema to see a film, joining a film club or taking part in a discussion about film. Here, in joining and participating in audiences, individuals create reflexive audiencehood. This focuses attention on the actions of individuals in order to be part of an audience that takes into account the extent of local resources and their experiences of film.

Considering this local context, inequality features in film participation in northern regions of England. Despite less provision of diverse film, people seek ways to enjoy film audience experience as evidenced above. This self-organisation and use of venues is different from independent cinema venues across the regions, but is part of the same desire to engage with diverse film programmes and experiences across northern English regions. As Livingstone (2013, p.5) argues:

audiences are collectivities, more than mere aggregates of individuals but distinct (though overlapping) with other collectivities... Collectivities raise questions of social roles and relations in society; they have properties at [the] social/cultural as well as individual level.

The diversity of film experiences in the three regions suggest different properties based on levels of provision. The Humberside and Wearside participants expressed desires for greater access to a wider range of films in fixed screening venues and opportunities for film clubs and pop-up screenings. The South Yorkshire participants, where there is already a stronger level of film provision, emphasised the possibilities for a diversity of film experiences to extend provision from the major city (Sheffield) into rural towns (e.g. Mexborough). In Wearside, there was a desire to establish and experience more diverse film culture in the city of Sunderland. The HAF research has shown that people's sense of personal agency, and how they examine and engage reflexively with film locally, is generating diverse film activity in the context of uneven provision and unequal access to film across English regions.

Conclusion

The paper has explored how individuals identify and join audiences for diverse film in Humberside, South Yorkshire and Wearside. Clearly, film is a highly valued and enjoyable part of people's social and cultural lives and people will find ways to engage with film. Our study participants were aware of uneven provision and unequal access to diverse film venues, programmes, and experiences, especially in Humberside and Wearside. By examining the lack of film provision and considering alternative possibilities such as film clubs and pop-up screenings, our study participants evidence reflexive engagement in creating opportunities for audiences to form around diverse programmes of film.

The mattering maps (Hermes, 2009) of our participants are oriented around the social geographies of their locality, on diverse film, audience experiences, types of venue, and different ways of engaging with film. Our study shows how the concept of reflexive audiencehood opens up research to address how audiences form. As a point of departure, this article highlights that film is something engaged in as a social practice where the meaning of the film, its venue, and audience experience come together. Attention to the wider social geographies of audiences, and the mattering maps they create as they engage reflexively with film are important in developing understanding of audiences and extends into making policy recommendations. Our policy recommendations are that: (1) FAN should work with active audiences and local organisers to increase opportunities for reflexive audiencehood and (2) devolve autonomy, resources and opportunities for more participative film audiences to shape the venues, film programmes and experiences that they want. HAF findings are informing an AHRC project, *Beyond the Multiplex* (<https://www.beyondthemultiplex.net/>), which aims to examine audience formation in English regions and explore further the opportunities for audiences to participate in a more diverse film culture.

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Note:

¹ There are nine regional film hubs in the Film Audience Network set up by the BFI (2012). FAN (<http://www.bfi.org.uk/what-s-around-uk/film-audience-network>) aims to address the uneven provision of diverse film and foster increased engagement with film.