

Hecklevision, barrage cinema and bullet screens: An intercultural analysis

Tessa Dwyer,
Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

Abstract:

Drawing on interviews with Hecklevision programmers and the founder of software company MuVChat, this article outlines three related 'live commenting' phenomena that cross diverse cultural contexts: Hecklevision in the US; 'barrage cinema' in China and online video 'bullet screens' (*danmu/danmaku*) in China and Japan. By comparing and contrasting these text-on-screen modalities of engagement, I draw attention to underlying connections around 'bad' behaviour and digital disruption while also noting some of the cultural specificities and discursive frameworks at play. This intercultural analysis aims to uncover what is at stake in technology-led, interactive screen experiences when audiences take centre stage via written rather than spoken interjection. Such 'live commenting' points to the 'textual intensity' of the digital era and the culturally distinct yet interrelated ways in which diverse audiences respond.

Keywords: Alamo Drafthouse, Bad-Film, Bullet Subtitles, *Danmaku/Danmu*, Interactive Cinema, Live-Commenting, MuVChat, Participatory Screenings, Texting, *Tucao*

In 2017, a Texan man sued his date for texting 'at least 10 to 20 times in 15 minutes' during *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* in 3D (Graham 2017). The film's director James Gunn lent his support to the Texan's court petition when he tweeted: 'Why stop at suing? She deserves jail time!' Tim League, founder and CEO of the Alamo Drafthouse cinema chain, weighed in on this texting-at-the-movies lawsuit, sympathising with the claimant's sentiment that such texting behaviour constitutes 'a threat to civilized society' yet suggesting that that the lawsuit be dropped in order to avoid burdening the courts (Graham 2017; Cunningham 2017). Instead, League offered the Texan a gift certificate equal to the amount of damages sought: USD \$17.31. Significantly, League's standpoint on texting is at the heart of the Alamo Drafthouse concept – with this gesture of support forming part of a co-ordinated

campaign against texting, seen as antithetical to the mission and philosophy of serious film appreciation and passionate movie-going everywhere (see Blake 2017, this issue; Weinel and Cunningham 2015). In 2011, the Alamo released an anti-texting promotional video that featured a recorded phone message from a former patron who had been thrown out of the cinema without a refund when she refused to stop texting. The video went viral, hence providing a particularly effective marketing tool for the Alamo and its zero-tolerance stance on texting. As David Thomas (2013) notes, the Alamo's hard-line policies on texting, talking and late-comers 'have garnered Tim League and the Alamo Drafthouse national attention'. Thomas adds that, pending an apology, Madonna has been banned for life from all Alamo cinemas after she was caught texting during the premiere of *12 Years a Slave* (Steve McQueen, 2013).

The Alamo's anti-texting stance is in no way unusual. Rather, it is standard policy in most 'serious' film-going establishments *as well as* multiplex chains – bridging arthouse, cult and mainstream circuits. At venues like the Alamo that are renowned for courting a certain type of passionate, cinephile patron – it's particularly expected. Headline-grabbing antics that flaunt such stringent policies on texting only serve to strengthen the 'quirky' independent Alamo Drafthouse brand. And yet ... there is a catch. At roughly the same time that the Alamo's anti-texting video went viral, the cinema chain launched Hecklevision – a novelty screening mode *à la* sing-a-long sessions and 'Movioke' (see Klinger 2008) that depends precisely upon mobile phone texting as its *modus operandi*. The Hecklevision concept encourages audiences not just to text while in the auditorium – but to actually incorporate texting into the screening experience, using text messages to publicly interact with – and indeed 'heckle' – the film. Hecklevision screenings are supported by MuVChat technology developed by Rien Heald which allows audience members to 'watch movies interactively' by live-texting comments that are 'displayed on screen along with the movie' (MuVChat 2017). Messages can be sent to MuVChat via regular texting services or through MuVChat texting apps and Heald reports that around 70% of the audience typically participates in the texting, with individuals sending around 35 messages per movie (Author interview, Aug 2017). Although the Alamo has now ceased its Hecklevision program, the concept and brand lives on, injected with new life at a range of like-minded, alternative cinemas including the Hollywood Theatre in Portland and Central Cinema in Seattle.

In the following discussion, I examine in detail some of the contradictions highlighted by the Hecklevision phenomenon in relation to cinema-going etiquette and decorum in the digital era. To do so, it is necessary to broaden the cultural frame of reference in which Hecklevision is typically situated, thinking beyond the discourse of alternative or cult cinema-going in the US towards related digital text-based phenomena in China and Japan. Indeed, my interest in Hecklevision was sparked not by US microcinema examples (see Zonn 2015 and De Ville 2015), but rather, by the related phenomenon of 'barrage cinema' in China and the online video sharing culture it leverages. Barrage commenting practices – both *online* and *off*– differ from Hecklevision in numerous respects, as I go on to detail. The major distinction relates to text placement: barrage commenting typically shoots lines of

text directly *into* or *onto* the image, and the aim is partly to intercept, commandeer or even entirely obscure the image. Barrage commenting initially caught my attention due to its indirect relation to subtitling and textual modes of screen translation – a long-held fascination of mine (see Dwyer 2017). Although language difference is not typically foregrounded in barrage commenting, the practice is also, intriguingly, referred to as ‘bullet *subtitling*’ (as well as ‘bullet screens’, *danmaku* and *danmu*), gesturing towards the blurring of textual terms, categories and practices facilitated by digital modes of screen engagement and interaction. In this discussion, I explore these varied practices and their interrelationship in order to outline an intercultural framework for analysis that helps to foreground the emergent, digital sensibilities underlying Hecklevision that are largely sidelined in its promotion, cultural branding and press coverage to date.

The interactive, participatory style of cinema engagement offered by Hecklevision is rarely discussed in relation to non-Western cultural practices and frameworks. Rather, it is firmly tied to well-worn modes of subcultural engagement such as the long-running audience participation screenings of cult favourites like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975) and *The Blues Brothers* (John Landis, 1980) (see Weinstock 2008; Fiske 2008). Such associations with established modes of audience participation are certainly valid, yet they nevertheless gloss over Hecklevision’s technological specificity and its links to emerging practices of textual play facilitated by digital technologies. By thinking cross-culturally, and examining related text-on-screen phenomena across distinct cultural regions, I ask what Hecklevision can tell us about barrage cinema and *vice versa*. Despite this intercultural objective, however, the following analysis ultimately prioritises Hecklevision over barrage cinema due to the fact that there has been little discussion of such events in China since 2014. Additionally, my research is largely limited to English-language resources, making extensive analysis of Chinese-language media practice difficult, despite enlisting Chinese-language research assistance and some translation.¹ Hence, the analysis presented here remains preliminary, requiring more extensive intercultural collaboration in order to advance further. Additionally, analysis of Hecklevision has been greatly assisted by the responsiveness of supporting software company MuVChat as well as cinema programmers at the Alamo Drafthouse (where Hecklevision began) and the Hollywood Theatre – one of a handful of venues where Hecklevision screenings currently run. The Hollywood was selected for this study over other venues due to the simple fact that programmer Art Santana responded to initial enquiries. Alternatively, MuVChat founder Heald got in touch after the Central Cinema forwarded my enquiry his way. The following discussion is informed by email interviews conducted with Henri Mazza, Santana and Heald from these key outfits and proceeds initially by detailing in isolation Hecklevision, barrage cinema and lastly, bullet screens within online video sharing. It then considers points of contact between these varied activities and their shared investment in and response to the textual intensity (Johnson 2013) that increasingly characterises digital technologies and modes of engagement.

Hecklevision

The term Hecklevision was coined by Henri Mazza at the Alamo Drafthouse and initially the concept did not involve texting at all – just yelling at the screen, according to Heald (Author interview, Aug 2017). However, it was only after the Alamo was approached by Heald, who pitched his MuVChat technology, that it really took-off. Mazza explains:

... since the Alamo Drafthouse is known far and wide as a chain that doesn't normally allow talking or texting during movies – and we REALLY don't like heckling – I thought it would be a fun experiment to try letting people heckle, but silently (Author interview, Aug 2017).

Specifically identifying text messaging and audience interjection as potential sites of brand conflict for the Alamo, Mazza draws attention to the blurry line that Hecklevision negotiates between social and unsocial cinema. Treading dangerous ground, as a potentially disrespectful and disruptive practice, Hecklevision has been carefully managed in the US alternative cinema circuit by aligning it with past practices, especially those associated with cult cinema, positioning it within existing traditions of 'bad film' appreciation and Midnight Movie screenings that, as Jeffrey Weinstock (2008, 8) notes, are imbued with a sense of rebelliousness and transgression. Hecklevision programming and marketing at the Alamo and similar venues consistently emphasises such associations. Films chosen for Hecklevision treatment tend to be typical Midnight Movie titles – sci-fi action films, retro 'bad film' classics and forgotten 'gems'. As the Hollywood's Art Santana explains, Hecklevision events feature 'movies that we all either watched over and over again because we were young and we perhaps "didn't know better", or because they were constantly run on TV (especially late-night filler) are hitting their 20 and 30-year anniversaries, and it's just fun to revisit them and wonder with an audience, "what the hell is this?"' (Author interview, Aug 2017). Typically, Hecklevision programs sit alongside a range of other novelty offerings. At the Hollywood, Hecklevision forms part of its 'Signature Film Series' which includes another thirty or so programs or festivals including 'B Movie Bingo', 'Samurai Sunday' and the 'Portland Black Film Festival'. At the Alamo, Hecklevision screenings were situated within a plethora of 'event' programming such as Videoke, Music Video Dance Parties, quote-a-longs, sing-a-longs and '*Birth.Movies.Death*' experiential screenings.

In this way, the Hecklevision concept appears to slot easily into pre-established cult cinema modes of participation that boast a long history in the US and elsewhere – with the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* only the most prominent example. Earlier examples include the participatory auditorium effects deployed by horror director William Castle in the 1950s and 60s (see Brottman 1997), as well as broader experiments with 3D glasses and 4D effects such as 'Smell-O-Vision' over this same period (see Blake 2017, this issue). For Leo Zonn (2015, 153), further links can be made to the vaudeville origins of much early cinema-going. In relation to the *Rocky Horror* phenomenon, Zonn (2015, 147) notes that this particular film 'has been entertaining audiences across America since 1975 by enticing and evoking specific

and collective audience responses at important junctures of the film'. As Weinstock details (2008, 6), 'attendees at *Rocky Horror* shout remarks at the screen, dance along with the characters in the film, and vicariously participate in the onscreen action through the use of props'. *Rocky Horror*'s iconic cult status (see Peary 1981, 302) has served to cement the link between audience participation and alternative, subcultural programming, which is exemplified by screenings at the Alamo amongst other alternative cinema venues. For Zonn (2015, 147), the particular cultural sensibilities at play within the Alamo's program appeals to a subcultural, non-mainstream audience that is quite narrowly defined. With this 'greater homogeneity of community', he states, 'barriers of non-engagement may begin to crumble' (Zonn 2015, 147).

The Hollywood Theatre introduced Hecklevision in January 2012 and its program is currently curated by Santana who took over in 2013 bringing guest comedians into the mix to text comments alongside the audience (Author interview, Aug 2017). According to Santana, the addition of professional comedians helps to 'keep things funny, along with keeping the energy up.' The comedy line-up accompanying the Hollywood's screening of DC Entertainment's *Steel* (Kenneth Johnson, 1997) in August 2017, for instance, included Jon Washington, Jeremiah Coughlan, Mark Saltveit, Dylan Jenkins and Alex Falcone (Hollywood Theatre, 2017). As Santana explains, these comedians 'sometimes come pre-loaded with... well-timed jokes' and add considerably to the overall quality and atmosphere of the experience:

... they also help set the tone of the event to keep it more about having fun and less about just tearing the film apart. We kinda love many of these movies, after all... (Author interview, Aug 2017).

As this comment makes clear, Hecklevision at the Hollywood aligns with a range of heavily ironic modes of 'bad film' appreciation. The Hollywood's Hecklevision screenings run on a monthly basis and have recently featured such titles as *Bio-Dome* (Jason Bloom, 1996), *Con Air* (Simon West, 1997), *The Garbage Pail Kids Movie* (Rod Amateau, 1987), *Ghost Rider* (Mark Steven Johnson 2007), *Masters of the Universe* (Gary Goddard, 1987), *Mazes and Monsters* (Steven Hilliard Stern, 1982) and *Spawn* (Mark A.Z. Dippé, 1997). Santana reports that screenings typically attract audiences of around 100 people, with some 'demanding seating for more like 200-300', providing an indication of the scale at which MuVChat technology can function (Author interview, 2017). High-demand Hecklevision screenings have included such events as the free live-to-air broadcast of the 2012 Presidential Debates with Barak Obama and Mitt Romney, and a screening of *Con-Air* with surprise guest, screenwriter Scott Rosenberg in attendance.

'Bad film' sensibilities also pervade promotion for Hecklevision screenings at Central Cinema in Seattle, with its website advising patrons to 'check the schedule for the next *disaster* of a movie in Hecklevision!' (Central Cinema 2017, emphasis added). Central Cinema hosts Hecklevision screenings bi-monthly, with recent titles including *Point Break*

(Kathryn Bigelow, 1991), *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1997) *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979) and *Edward Scissorhands* (Tim Burton, 1990). In 2017, some Hecklevision screenings were at capacity, including that for *The Lost World: Jurassic Park*. Interestingly, another noteworthy element in Central Cinema's Hecklevision program and promotion, that again trades off 'bad film' associations, is the lack of censorship or moderation. 'We have even turned off the built in naughty filter,' Central Cinema announces on its website, 'because some movies deserve to have certain words printed across them!' This unmoderated effect is a distinctive part of Central Cinema's Hecklevision offering. At the Hollywood, on the other hand, the feed is moderated via MuVChat's in-built filtering function. 'We do monitor the feed and shut people down if they're being abusive or crossing the line', states Santana, 'but it's rare that we have concerns' (Author interview, Aug 2017). In a *Seattle Weekly* article canvassing the city's broader bad-movie scene, Central Cinema programmer Doug Willot states:

We're very particular about the bad films we show for Hecklevision... A running theme seems to be things that move quickly and that people can make fun of, with enough action or ridiculous moments to keep you continuously engaged, if only by the amazement that the movie actually exists (qtd in Rindskopf 2016).

He also points out that some past bad-movie series at Central Cinema 'didn't do very well' and that the introduction of Hecklevision and 'making it interactive was the key' (quoted in Rindskopf 2016). According to Joe Koenen of Jet City Improv – a group that performs live redubs – 'bad movies invite live commentary, stopping, starting, and rewatching certain parts just to bask in the terribleness' (qtd in Rindskopf 2016). Pertinently, Santana notes that being 'able to interact and help entertain everyone without yelling over the movie or being aggressive about it makes it a lot more pleasant than many "midnight movie" free-for-alls where maybe one person will land a funny quip at the right time but you're mostly struggling to hear the actual movie's dialogue over constant audience commentary' (Author interview, Aug 2017).

In comparison to the so-called 'flying comments' of barrage cinema and bullet screens, the MuVChat technology that supports Hecklevision was specifically designed by Heald to avoid any 'infringement on the art' of cinema (Author interview, Aug 2017). MuVChat 'messages are displayed in a scrolling list below the screen,' explains Heald, so as not to 'interfere with the movie'. In this way, MuVChat and Hecklevision are far less disruptive of traditional movie-going protocols, norms and attitudes than barrage commenting, slotting more comfortably into the passionate cinema-going niche serviced by alternative outfits like the Hollywood, Central Cinema and the Alamo. Considering the more referential mindset underpinning Heald's development of the MuVChat prototype and software, it is interesting to consider whether or not Hecklevision holds special appeal to youth or millennial audiences. According to Heald (Author interview, Aug 2017), public

libraries do utilise MuVChat technology to attract teen audiences, yet the Hecklevision audience seems somewhat less skewed towards youth. When asked specifically about the demographic for Hecklevision programs at the Alamo, Mazza (Author interview, Nov 2017) states, '[o]ur crowd is always pretty millennial with some Gen X mixed in, and I think that the mix for those shows was similar to a lot of the other specialty programming that we've done over the years'.

According to Mazza, the Hecklevision concept and surrounding promotion didn't target one demographic over others. Nevertheless, as Stephen Gaunson (2016) and James Blake (2017, this issue) discuss, the phenomenon of mobile-friendly screenings (in their various guises) seems intimately linked to a tech-savvy, youth audience and attempts by cinemas to reconnect with this important market segment. This was definitely the case when multiplex behemoth AMC – the largest cinema chain in the US and the world, majority owned by Chinese conglomerate Dalian Wanda (Szalai 2016) – floated the idea in 2016, only to quickly retract the suggestion following 'viral social media backlash' (Gaunson 2016). At the time, AMC CEO Adam Aron identified the need 'to reshape our product in some concrete ways so that millennials go to movie theatres with the same degree of intensity as Baby Boomers went to movie theatres throughout their lives' (quoted in Lang 2016). Hence, in the US, the Hecklevision approach to texting at movies cannot be entirely separated from millennial dynamics yet it seems equally if not *more* invested in long-entrenched 'Baby Boomer' or 'Gen X' modes of subcultural play. For this reason, the fact that Hecklevision effectively updates former 'call-out' participatory practices specifically *for the digital age* is rarely acknowledged or emphasised in publicity around the phenomenon. In contrast, barrage commenting practices in China and Japan are firmly tied to youth audiences and emerging modes of online digital interaction. Moreover, these culturally diverse forms of interactive texting point to differing notions and categories of 'badness' in relation to films, audiences and cinema-going etiquette. Whereas youth-based texting at cinemas is typically seen as disruptive, disrespectful and mindless, when such behavior is differently framed and associated with more tongue-in-cheek modes of engagement via the bad-film scene, it is reshaped as culturally acceptable and legitimate. Notably, in both Hecklevision and barrage cinema, 'badness' is at play on multiple levels – affecting the types of films screened, the audience mindset (comedic, ironic and/or irreverent) and the un/censored comments themselves.

Barrage Cinema

In China, barrage cinema emerged in 2014 amidst a flurry of global media attention (see Coonan 2014; Qin 2014; Walsh 2014; 'Handy schlägt' 2014). Pioneered by production and distribution company Le Vision Pictures and video-sharing giant Tudou (tudou.com), the phenomenon was trialled over the summer at various locations across China including Luxin Cinema in Shandong Province, Grand Cinema and Ever Shining Circuit Cinema in Shanghai, as well as numerous cinemas in Beijing (see Huang 2014; Ma 2015; Menzel 2015, and Qin 2014). These experiments involved the films *Brotherhood of Blades* (Yang Lu, 2014), *The*

Legend of Qin (Robin Shen, 2014), and *Tiny Times 3.0* (Guo Jingming, 2014). Also in 2014, barrage commenting was trialled on Hunan Satellite TV (Menzel 2015). At the time, Tudou president Yang Weidong (Huang 2014) suggested his company could support around 5000 cinemas for barrage screenings, stating ‘for older people, they may think it is just a hype, but for young people, they think it is very normal’. He continued, ‘[e]veryday Tudou has many barrage subtitle users and we are witnessing the growth of barrage subtitle culture and its influence’ (Huang 2014).

The phenomenon is discussed in some depth by Winston Ma (2016) who focuses on its link to millennial film *Tiny Times*. ‘In the future,’ predicts Ma (2016, 201):

... specialized bullet screen cinemas equipped with cutting-edge technology may emerge, like the IMAX theatres, and it’s likely that every cinema will set aside a special section dedicated to bullet screen viewers.

For Ma (2016, 196; 204-5), barrage cinema in China is part of the ‘so-lo-mo’ (social, local, mobile) trend, which registers the rising prominence of home-grown, youth oriented themes and sees social media platforms facilitated by mobile internet technologies integrated within every stage of a film’s life cycle – from production and financing, to distribution and promotion, to feedback and evaluation. Exemplifying this trend, *Tiny Times* set a box office record in China for domestic features, outperforming Hollywood blockbuster *Transformers: Age of Extinction* during the week of its release when it made a record-making \$20 million despite minimal advertising and promotion (Ma 2016, 189). Despite this level of economic success and popularity, *Tiny Times* is commonly seen as lacking in any serious artistic or creative worth and regularly dismissed as a form of ‘lowest-common-denominator-filmmaking’. Indeed, as Ma (205) notes, it swept the 2014 Golden Broom Awards – an annual event that has been running since 2010 in recognition of the country’s ‘most disappointing films, actors, directors and scriptwriters.’ As Ma (206) explains, the Golden Broom Awards are ‘the Chinese equivalent of the Golden Razzie Awards in the US’. They also gesture toward points of overlap between barrage cinema and Hecklevision with both invested in ironic and/or irreverent modes of film appreciation that are further reinforced by China’s related practice of *tucao* – ‘the verbal art of commenting on someone or something by uncovering the truth about it in a sarcastic, harsh, and humorous tone’ (Hsiao 2015, 110). Although barrage cinema screenings of *Tiny Times* specifically sought to tap the film’s target demographic of mobile-connected ‘small town youth’ (Ma 2016, 204) – and were hence presumably less oriented towards bad-film sensibilities than either Hecklevision or the Golden Broom Awards – the commercial drive to leverage and extend the pleasures and interactive affordances of online video sharing ties them nevertheless to a mode of *subcultural* engagement built upon irreverence and unruliness exemplified by *tucao* – the characteristic mode or attitude of the bullet screen phenomenon.

Tucao has emerged as one of the foremost pleasures afforded by barrage commenting (see Qin 2014).² Before focusing on bullet screens online however, it is

important to note that despite the fanfare surrounding barrage cinema trials in 2014 and the grandiose claims and projections made by Yang Weidong and Ma, it is difficult to determine how much barrage cinema activity has occurred since. In 2015, certain screenings at the 18th Shanghai International Film Festival were promoted as a form of barrage cinema, whereby viewers could ‘post comments on the side of the screen’ (‘Internet takes’ 2015). By this stage, according to Wei Luo (2015), bullet screenings were routine for domestic films, although reports of such events are scant. Bullet screenings are mentioned again by Ma in a more recent interview for *China Film Insider* (Landreth 2017) and Bollywood blockbuster *Baahubali: The Beginning* (S. S. Rajamouli, 2015) was exhibited in a barrage-style screening in downtown Beijing in 2016 (Xu 2016). According to *China Daily* (Xu 2016), audience comments appeared on the walls and ceiling of the auditorium, rather than interacting with the film screen itself, and even this level of interactivity was limited to the previews. It is interesting that barrage functionality was selected to accompany this screening of *Baahubali*, as this decision could have been influenced by the uptake of online barrage commenting across the Indian region (‘New Emerging’ 2016). Indian online movie platform VMate, for instance, has adopted the ‘*danmaku*’-style chat function which it recently used as a promotional vehicle for the online release of *Madaari* (Nishikant Kamat, 2016) – with actor Jimmy Shergill and director Kamat joining in a live, three-hour *danmaku* session (Pandey 2016). After the event, Shergill expressed his enthusiasm for this new mode of interactivity: ‘I spoke to the viewers and my fans while the movie was screening on their phone. It cannot get better than this!’ (quoted in Pandey 2016).

Online Video Bullet Screens

According to Chinese social media entrepreneur Heng Cai of Star Station TV, ‘live commenting may be new to Western audiences, but it is so popular in Japan and China that it has become part of teen culture’ (Craig et al. 2016, 5465). Video-overlay barrage commenting originated in Japan around 2006, where it was introduced by video sharing platform NicoNico Douga (‘Smiley Smiley Video’) alternatively referred to as ‘Nicodou’, ‘Nicovideo’ and ‘Niconico’ – a user-generated video hosting site associated with *otaku* subculture – fandom around *anime*, *manga* and related novels and gaming.³ Unlike the user comments that appear on video platform YouTube positioned under the video stream in a separate box reserved for this purpose, Niconico pioneered the *danmaku* system whereby comments are superimposed onto the video image, moving ‘through the frame from right to left, displayed for about three seconds, as in television news tickers’ (Nozawa 2012). The terms ‘barrage’ and ‘bullet subtitles’ suggest how these comments tend to *assault* the viewer and *commandeer* the video feed. Comments scroll speedily across the screen and can multiply to such an extent that a curtaining-effect is created, whereby the image is almost entirely obscured. This effect is likened to the *danmaku* bullet screens of popular shooter-game Toho Project known for particularly complex barrage patterning (see Johnson 2016).

Barrage comments are limited to a certain number, usually somewhere around 1000 comments (Zheng 2016, 328). Unless selected by the video uploader to remain permanently, comments simply disappear once the limit is exceeded, replaced by newer entries. For Zheng, this factor lends barrage commenting a temporary feel that adds to its conversational tone. The comments are time-synched to the video stream, creating an effect that Hamano Satoshi (see Bachmann 2008a) has dubbed ‘pseudo-synchronous’ (*giji doki*). On YouTube, the comment feed that appears under the video is ordered according to the date of posting, with new comments appearing at the top. In contrast, barrage comments are synched to the video timecode. As Marc Steinberg (2017, forthcoming) notes, ‘the position of a given comment on the timecode of a video remains constant’. For Nozawa, this arrangement ‘makes the viewing of the video and the viewing of the comments not only a simultaneous experience but an integrally connected one’, leading to a sense of shared interaction and communal viewing. Expanding upon the concept of pseudo-synchronicity, Daniel Johnson (2013, 301) notes that barrage commenting produces an effect of ‘virtual liveness’ that ‘can always be re-experienced after the fact’. Additionally, he notes how this form of online, group communication engenders a distinctive mode of both writing and reading that is overtly challenging and obstructive, with image and text in open battle at times (303). Even the text itself is notably ‘counter-transparent’ often involving complex wordplay, symbols, animation, subcultural jargon, slang, and non-standard characters, as well as mistypes and other errors (304) – making it particularly dense and difficult to decode. Johnson also notes the phenomenon of ‘comment artists’ (*shokunin*) ‘who produce pixel-like images and static or semi-animated “sprite” characters out of symbols and shapes’ (307; see also Nozawa 2012). For Johnson, the counter-transparency that dominates such barrage commenting on NicoNico points to emergent modes of digital, online communication that enable a type of collective, anonymous performance based upon written language and text (311). Moreover, as Bachmann (2008c) notes, the NicoNico comments and tags partly express the ‘passion in Japanese culture for condensation’ that links to its highly complex writing systems involving the combination of three alphabets including Kanji based on Chinese characters and the expression of words through signs. Additionally, image-text combinations proliferate, with Bachmann also pointing to the presence of ‘telops’ (a form of written commentary and captioning) on Japanese television (see also Sasamoto et al. 2016; Maree 2015).

As Steinberg (2017, forthcoming) details, NicoNico’s barrage commenting forms part of a broader online culture around user-generated content or UGC. Indeed, NicoNico is closely linked to Japan’s ‘2channel’ (*ni channeru*) bulletin board (which preceded the English-language ‘4chan’) founded by Hiriyuki Nishimura, whose early endorsement of NicoNico saw channellers flocking to the site (Katayama 2008; Steinberg 2017, forthcoming). Nishimura is a board member of NicoNico parent company Niwango, and NicoNico is partly modeled on the ‘quasi-live feel’ of 2channel and the particular style of irreverent communication its open, no-filtering policy fosters (see Katayama 2008; Steinberg 2017, forthcoming). Although comments are supervised on NicoNico, and users must log in (see

Katayama 2008), Nowaza (2012) insists that anonymity via pseudonyms remains a crucial part of the appeal, with commenters partaking in complex systems of opacity, masking and facelessness that are quite prevalent within Japanese society and the characteristic actual-virtual negotiations that define popular culture forms like *manga* and *anime* (see also Nowaza 2016). Although not as popular as YouTube in Japan, Lisa Katayama (2008) reports that Niconico is nevertheless ‘twice as sticky’, with fans tending to ‘check back often to see how others have embroidered on their favourite clips’. Writing for *Wired* magazine, Katayama (2008) also draws attention to the cultural situated-ness of the Niconico phenomenon:

Nicodou is one of the few successful sites in Japan that isn’t simply a localized or reverse-engineered version of some Western concept. Like 2channel before it, the site seems to scratch a cultural itch that other countries just don’t have.

In a comment that prefigures barrage cinema developments within Asia, Niwango board member Tomohito Kinose adds:

In American movie theaters, everyone laughs out loud when they’re excited. You never see that in Japan — you’d probably get punched if you made a sound. But if there were a keyboard next to each movie seat that made comments show up onscreen, people would be typing like crazy (qtd in Katayama 2008).

Niconico’s barrage commenting system was introduced to China around 2008/2009 (Zheng 2016, 324) by *otaku*-oriented video sharing sites AcFun and Bilibili, known amongst *aficionados* as simply ‘A site’ and ‘B site’. Today, Bilibili constitutes one of China’s most popular online video platforms, and has diversified beyond ACGN subculture (325), while barrage commenting has been incorporated into many of China’s leading websites including Tudou, Yudou, Tencent, LETV and iQiYi (Liu et al. 2016, 284; Zheng 2016, 318). As Star Station TV’s Cai notes, amongst online video sites,

Bilibili has gained the most popularity with a very active community for UGCs, especially those interested in animation, comics, and games. Bilibili does not have ads, and most of its income comes from partnerships with online games and online series (Craig et. al. 2016, 5465).

According to Zheng (2016, 323), Niconico was Japan’s ninth most visited website in 2016, while Bilibili is China’s most popular barrage subtitle website and one of its top ten video sites (see also Liu et al. 2016, 284; Craig et al. 2016, 5465). As Lili Liu et al. (2016, 284) comment, this is no small feat, especially considering Bilibili’s relatively late launch into this

market in 2009, and its ‘lack of major financial backing’. In 2014, the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) reported 433 million online video users in Mainland China (Liu et al. 2016, 283), providing an indication of the fierce competition faced by video sites. In 2015, Bilibili’s estimated value reached 1.5 billion RMB (Yin and Fung 2017, 148) with the continuing popularity of Bilibili attributed foremost to its barrage comment system adopted from Nico Nico.

As it has developed in China, however, barrage commenting has some distinctive features from its Japanese precedent (see Zheng 2016, 324). Notably, it has had to respond to fluctuating levels of governmental control and censorship, with the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) announcing new rules on August 25, 2017 around ‘real-name registration’ for online users and bullet screen commenters (Ho 2017). As Pang-Chieh Ho (2017) reports:

... the CAC’s latest order will have a chilling effect on streaming sites like *AcFunTV* and *Bilibili*, both of which have made their name by fostering vocal, interactive online communities. Over the past two months, *AcFunTV* and *Bilibili* have faced increasingly stringent control from the government. In July, both websites were reported ... to have taken a large number of foreign movies and TV shows offline, a move many speculated had to do with censorship from the SAPPRFT, and on September 5, *AcFunTV* was fined (in Chinese) 120,000 yuan (\$18,500) for posting content in violation of government regulations.

According to Yiyi Yin and Anthony Fung (2017, 132), barrage commenting on Bilibili has cultivated ‘the subjectivity of self-expression, participation and empowerment’ for Chinese youth, enabling them to enter the public sphere via everyday modes of online entertainment, consumption and communication. Hence, they argue that an ‘alternative grassroots democracy is evident on Bilibili’, although they note that the site is becoming increasingly commodified via advertising (Yin and Fung 2017, 141, 150) as well as its own sophisticated system of ‘coins’ and ‘points’ that popular uploaders can acquire (see Chen 2014).⁴ Additionally, in 2017, the Central Communist Youth League of China (CCYL) joined the platform, announcing its own official Bilibili account offering a range of open online courses, youth-targeted videos, documentaries and historical insights, some with clear anti-Japanese sentiments (Guo 2017). According to Diandian Guo (2017), although the official response by Bilibili users to the presence of the CCYL is ‘Good job, my League!’, objections have been raised: some ‘users point out that commenters “cannot just write any reaction,” and that “it happens so often that what you wrote appears as ****”’. Despite this Party move to bring Bilibili into the fold and hence in line with official policies and regulations, media piracy and illegal content have played a decisive role in shaping barrage commenting culture in China due to the ACGN subcultural origins of the phenomenon, which was largely forbidden at the time (Fung 2017, 138; Chen 2014). Further, the phenomenon of *tucao* so

prevalent within barrage commenting has been much discussed as a culturally-specific form of net-speak that echoes and enhances the collective, group interactivity at play (see Hsiao 2015; Zhu 2014). For Chi-hua Hsiao (2015, 113):

A comment is not considered a token of successful *tucao* if it does not represent an idea echoed by most of the users in the community of *danmu* screening.

Tucao needs to be concise and to the point, brief and ultimately amusing, and it can involve a range of techniques including reduplication, alliteration, repetition and rhythmic patterning, punning, rhetorical questions, strong language and internet-specific lingo (see Hsiao 2015). While *tucao* is a specifically Chinese phenomenon it nevertheless shares certain similarities with the snarky irreverence displayed by 2chanellers (see Steinberg 2017, forthcoming) as well as the ironic stance cultivated within Hecklevision's bad-film programming.

Digital Decorum

According to Zheng (2016, 331), online barrage commenting actually channels or re-imagines the type of collective, community experience offered by traditional cinema-going for the digital, networked age. For Zheng, barrage commenting offers an antidote to the fragmented viewing practices that abound in mobile, digital, screen-infused environments, offering a virtual recreation of older shared viewing experiences. Barrage commenting offers a mode of interaction that is decidedly social. As Hsiao (2015, 119, 128) notes, it actively constructs a 'shared linguistic repertoire that emulates an in-group identity', encouraging modes of verbal play like *tucao* and 'cross-speaker poetics'. In a recent study into online video commenting, Soussan Djamshidi et al. (2016, 654) report that 76% of the participants 'felt more social and connected to other viewers' due to the presence of barrage commenting. Nevertheless, continuities between Hecklevision in the US, barrage cinema in China and barrage or *danmaku* online bullet screens, coalesce around concepts of 'badness' and ironic or disparaging modes of screen engagement. Across diverse cultural contexts, texting comments onto the screen or over the image stream within both *on-* and *offline* contexts is firmly linked to concepts of badness, ultimately displaying a certain level of disrespect for the screen content or filmmaker. In this way, the balance of power shifts as the audience makes its mark, asserting its centrality to the screen experience. The 'bad behaviours' that Hecklevision, barrage cinema and bullet screens facilitate are alternatively coded as irreverent, parodic, rebellious, disruptive and subversive. While on the one hand, this 'bad' through-line suggests that although these different iterations of interactive texting seem, on the one hand, to challenge traditional modes of audience decorum, they also, nevertheless, reinforce associations between texting and bad etiquette.

The intrusion of the textual into the visual realm of the screen frame defines Hecklevision and barrage commenting experiences, while also speaking to broader changes

instigated by digital developments and networking technologies. These lines of audience commentary that ‘fight back’ (Hsiao 2015, 128) *against* the image, so to speak, register the growing visibility of captions, subtitles, textual mediation and translation in the digital era as screens transform into interactive interfaces. As cultures of texting, tweeting and blogging ascend, subtitled and captioned images are gaining widespread currency and emergent image-text combinations abound, including the ‘image-oriented writing’ of comment artists on Niconico (Johnson 2013, 308). As Johnson intimates, digital modes of communication are increasingly characterized by textual intensification (311). Moreover, as digital technologies transform communication and distribution channels, forging new information flows and counter-flows, the accessibility and availability of screen media increases exponentially, with language diversification now a top priority for streaming media giants like Netflix and YouTube (see Dwyer and Lobato 2016; Viruet 2017).

Despite such possibilities, barrage commenting is usually monolingual as it is difficult to accommodate language difference due to the speed of commenting and the particular, nuanced verbal play and recoding that is fostered. On Niconico, Zheng (2016, 342) notes that comments in languages other than Japanese are often ‘despised as trolling’ even though officially allowed. ‘Typically, Chinese on Niconico is not a recommended behavior by the Chinese otaku community, and Japanese fans often directly express their annoyance of another language in barrage subtitles in response’, Zheng explains. ‘If people comment in another language on Chinese barrage subtitle websites, other comments often immediately scold them and tell them to “Zizhong” ... roughly meaning “Behave Yourself”’. Nevertheless, despite the language localism of barrage commenting websites, and the fact that the ‘the international fan community tends to disintegrate according to the languages’ (Zheng 2016, 342), cross-cultural dynamics persist.⁵ In China, barrage commenting originated with *otaku*-oriented video sharing, directly transposing a Japanese cultural practice into a new cultural context. Additionally, although Zheng reports that language difference is frowned upon within barrage commenting, even this fact provides evidence that it does occur – regularly enough to constitute a known annoyance or tension.

Hecklevision is certainly less textually explosive and antagonistic than barrage commenting – at the cinema and online. Hecklevision texting occurs beneath the screen image, not *over* it, and in this regard, it bypasses many of the most challenging and rebellious aspects of the bullet screen phenomenon in China and Japan where comments can become highly innovative in a formal sense, with repetition and reduplication, for instance, being used as an art form to create both rhythmic and visual patterning that can sometimes obscure the image altogether. As Ma (2016, 210) notes, barrage cinema in China seeks to recreate this emergent mode of virtual, digital communication and engagement by offering ‘the same social interaction during movie watching as viewers have in the context of online video watching’. In this way, barrage cinema in China seems distinctly less marginal and subcultural than the Hecklevision phenomenon. Although it projects a somewhat subversive attitude of disrespect or irreverence, barrage cinema in China is developing into a mainstream, corporate strategy. As Lui et al. (2016, 297) note, barrage commenting is now

regularly used by advertisers in China to encourage purchasing behaviours. Hence, by thinking about these distinct yet overlapping cultural practices across diverse cultural contexts, we can better understand the complex factors at play in the situated ways that norms of decorum are challenged yet ultimately reinforced. This article has only been able to gesture towards the cultural differences and intersections that structure these phenomena, representing only an initial, first step in this direction, with further collaborative cross-cultural research needed to more fully realise this task. Presently, it is expedient to divert attention towards commonalities, noting how these varied modes of interactive texting *at* or *on* movies makes the screen media experience both social and *un*social, at one and the same time. Hecklevision, barrage cinema and barrage commenting more broadly envision and facilitate a technological update on the concept of cinema-going as a collective, decidedly social experience. At the same time, this re-interpretation and extension of cinema's social dimension via the vexed issue of texting raises a host of challenges to cinema-going etiquette and convention, underlining a further, important consideration: how much is the social experience of cinema always, to some degree, about *un*social or unauthorised behaviours?

Biographical note:

Tessa Dwyer is Lecturer in Film and Screen Studies at Monash University, Melbourne and President of *Senses of Cinema* journal (www.sensesofcinema.org). She has published widely on language politics in screen media, including the recent monograph *Speaking in Subtitles: Revaluating Screen Translation* (Edinburgh UP, 2017). Tessa belongs to the inter-disciplinary ETMI (Eye Tracking the Moving Image) research group and is co-editor of *Seeing into Screens: Eye Tracking the Moving Image* (Bloomsbury, forthcoming). Contact: tessa.dwyer@monash.edu.

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Notes:

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² *Tucao* also refers to a particular style of interventionist fan subtitling (fansubbing) in which translation is deployed as a means or opportunity for cultural or political comment. See Zhang (2013).

³ According to Shunsuke Nozawa (2012), the term *otaku* refers to 'Japanese subcultural geeks'.

⁴ In China, barrage commenting has diversified well beyond Japanese ACGN content, and now involves US television series, domestic films and Indian dramas, for instance. It also has mainstream appeal and applications and is regularly deployed by brands such as Kentucky Fried Chicken, which teamed up with Bilibili for a live-stream promotion event in 2015. Concurrently, Niconico has broadened its scope from online to offline, and now incorporates a physical space for performance events in Tokyo, called Nicofarre (Johnson 2013, 302). The converted disco features internal walls and ceilings entirely covered with LED screens, onto which live comments from audience members appear. This move offline is perhaps part of Niconico's 'aggressive commercialization' via parent company Niwango, opening its headquarters and merchandise shop in December 2010, and launching television commercials in 2011 (see Nozawa 2012).

⁵ Niconico has actually released other language versions of its platform, beginning with Spanish and German versions in 2008 (Bachmann 2008b), with a full English version released in 2012.