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Sing and go wild: Embracing the cult-like musical experience of children's cinema

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Abstract:
Children remain under-theorised spectators in cinematic theory. Spectatorship models – apparatus theory, feminist film theories and embodiment theories – have not properly accounted for the child audience nor fully accounted for intergenerational experiences of children's cinema. Children's cinema is an errant and a bodily one, an experience of distraction, digression and sensorial abundance from the candy bar to the closing titles. Using an auto-ethnographic approach based on my experience of taking my boys to see *Sing* (Christophe Lourdelet and Garth Jennings, 2016), supported by embodiment and genre theories, I argue that this unruly experience is elicited by the affective appeal of the films, the confines of the cinema space itself and the food and beverages consumed. Contemporary children's films actively encourage a fantasy-infused, cross modal cinematic engagement that is akin to that of a cult film experience. A rowdy affective response, including dancing in the aisles, is incited through the use of popular tweenie pop music in *Sing* – a convention and bodily reaction that is notable across children's cinema. These unruly pleasures combine to create the 'unsocial' experience of children's cinema as positive one for both adult and child - from the opening titles to the closing title sequence.

Keywords: Children, Spectatorship, *Sing*, Cult Film, Film Musical, Affect, Cinema

Introduction

Although in the US children aged 2-11 years only comprise 13% of the population and 14% of the cinema goers[1] (www.mpaa.org, 2016. 15), children have been defined as the most powerful cinema going force (Bahiana 1996, 60).[2] They are also recurringly categorised as one of cinema's most 'unsocial' audiences. Children's cinema is a film going experience of distraction, digression and sensorial abundance from the candy counter to the closing titles. The aberrant behaviour of a child audience has been the subject of comedic scenes in

Hollywood films, from *Gremlins* (Joe Dante, 1984), where the Gremlins who destroy a theatre stand in for the child audience, to *Singles* (Cameron Crowe, 1992), where movie going with children is depicted as the demise of one of the last available adult pleasures for new parents. Special movie events such as sing-a-long versions of children's films and junior cinemas (Village Cinema's purpose built spaces that incorporate dance floors, play areas and toilet breaks during the screening) actively encourage this errant behaviour, whilst demarcating it as both culturally and physically separate to an adult cinematic experience (http://villagecinema.com.au/vjunior). However, very little sustained theoretical work has been produced on the experience of children's cinema, particularly as an intergenerational cultural form. This paper will begin to bridge this gap.

Using an auto-ethnographic approach, I examine the recent experience of taking my two boys, aged 7 and 11 years, to see the animated film *Sing* (Christophe Lourdelet and Garth Jennings, 2016) in a daytime session at a multiplex cinema in Melbourne. I further draw from human geography, child psychology, embodiment theories, and studies of the Hollywood musical and cult cinema to argue that the conventions of children's cinema seeks to elicit both a fantasy-based and embodied response from its child audience. Accordingly, an examination of a children's cinematic experience must include an analysis of children's bodily engagement with the material aspects of the cinematic space. The recollections of Annette Kuhn's respondents on the memories of cinema going as a child in the 1930s parallel my own observations of contemporary Melbourne-based child audiences, particularly the behaviours she defines as the 'naughtiness' and 'rowd[iness]' of children at matinees (Kuhn 2011, 94). This embodied engagement aligns children's cinema with cult cinema's mobilisation of the audience via calculated moments of textual excess. In *Sing* these moments are the musical numbers, which are actively pitched to a child audience familiar with its 'tweenie' pop song soundtrack. The intergenerational divide is broadened in the musical numbers set to pop music from the 1980s and 1990s, offering a nostalgic appeal to the adult care-givers accompanying the children in the audience. The use of the musical number as an invitation to participate aligns the musical, cult and children's cinema audiences in their transformation from spectator to participant. These elements combine so that was once defined as an 'unsocial' cinematic engagement is now encouraged as an amusing and pleasurable 'unruly' experience.

Locating the Child in Spectatorship Theories

Children remain an under-theorised spectator of cinematic theory. Spectatorship models from apparatus theory to embodiment theories have not properly accounted for the child audience nor fully accounted for the intergenerational experiences of children's cinema. In the 1930s this neglect was cultural and industrial, as the child audience was overlooked in the media's celebration of the arrival of sound film (Maltby 1999, 31). During this period children's cinematic attendance fell by 40% due to rising ticket prices, the distance to get to the theatres and, according to 1930s Hollywood reporter, Campbell MacCulloch, because children 'did not care greatly for dialogue pictures' (MacCulloch cited in Maltby 1999, 31).

Richard Maltby observes that in the 1930s Hollywood did not believe that, 'the child audience was large enough to warrant its own line of production, so that whatever was done to secure the child audience must have an appeal also for the adult mind' (Maltby 1999, 31). In contrast, in what is perhaps the most sustained consideration of the cinematic experience of the child audience, Annette Kuhn notes that a definition of and focus on a child audience has been evident in the UK since the 1930s. At this time the British Film Institute faced growing pressure to provide films that specifically catered to a child audience and their preference for 'movement, action, moral outcomes, heroic deeds, and happy endings' (Kuhn 2007, 333). As a result, the British Film Institute, 'resolved to look at the potential for putting together programmes of films specifically for children and present these at special children's performances in mainstream cinema' (Kuhn 2007, 333). The marketability of films for a child audience that are structured by an intergenerational appeal has persisted in the category of the 'family film'.

This has lead Stephanie Hemelryk and Kirsten Seale to denounce the intergenerational focus of children's cinema as marginalising the child spectator. They contend that:

> [T]he indeterminacy of childhood and children's texts seems affirmed by the lack of explicit acknowledgement of the child audience by the entertainment industry despite the importance of the youth market to box office receipts (Donald & Seale 2013, 98).

Across these considerations, children's cinema is defined by a relationship between specific film genres, notably the musical, the western and the comedy, their influences on the social experience, an ambivalent attitude towards the intergenerational nature of children's cinema, but most importantly, a persistent neglect of the child audience.

The marginalisation of the child spectator is equally evident in dominant film theories that continue to model the adult spectator 'as the active centre and origin of meaning,'[3] where vision governs a one-to-one relationship between the spectator and the screen, while cultural institutions regulate the social experience. As Richard Butsch argues, in the West,

> [F]or two centuries, despite dramatic transformations of entertainment media and audience styles, the conception of the 'good audience' in public discourse – in popular magazines and trade books, scholarly journals and books – has remained remarkably consistent (Butsch 2007, 293).

Barbara Klinger notes that this universalising of the cinema audience and practices underlies the majority of film theory so that, 'the entire film/spectator interaction is rendered as fixed and universal, effectively sealing it off from social contingencies' (Klinger 1989, 3). She elaborates:

> Most everyone who frequents movie theatres has experienced the phenomenon of the errant spectator who will sometimes respond audibly to filmic moments in excess of their function within the filmic narrative. […], these responses are clearly incompatible with dominant formulations of spectatorship that define the spectator's response as a product of the specific operations of a text (Klinger 1989, 3).

However, similar to cult cinema, children's cinema diverges from this model, providing 'a relatively rare instance of dominant viewing and a semiotic practice that refuses to play by the rules of the traditional film game' (Corrigan 1991, 29). Extending Corrigan's model of cult film spectatorship and Kuhn's consideration of cinema memory of the child audience in Britain in the 1930s, I argue that the cinematic experience with children combines cult spectatorship's disruptive practices and those of Klinger's digressive spectator. This produces a cinematic experience that is akin to one of attending pantomime: where errant spectators are not an aberrant phenomenon but a matter of course. Children's cinema encourages excessive, bodily and verbal responses both as a result of the formal and stylistic structures of the film as well as the viewing conditions that arise with a child audience – as I observed when I took my boys to see *Sing*.

The box office success of *Sing*[4], an animated musical 'family film' reflects the immense industrial shifts undertaken by Hollywood since the 1930s to actively cater to an intergenerational audience, particularly the child it neglected in the 1930s, to the point where *Sing*'s production company, Illumination (a subsidiary of Universal Pictures) solely caters to this market (Fleming, 2017). It also reflects the persistent tastes and definition of a child audience as requiring affect driven films with happy endings – two of the dominant conventions of the Hollywood musical. *Sing* belongs to the backstage musical genre and follows the middle aged central protagonist, a Koala called Buster Moon, in his attempts to keep his career as a Broadway musical producer and his theatre, afloat. Buster has staged a series of unsuccessful shows and, on the brink of bankruptcy, has decided to stage a reality TV styled talent quest, similar to that of the *Idol* franchise. Out of the hundreds who audition, a final six are chosen: Rosita, the housewife pig who is taken for granted by her tired, bored husband, and twenty-five children: the flamboyant pig, Gunter who becomes Rosita's stage partner; Johnny the teenage gorilla son of a Ronald-Biggs-styled leader of a gang of criminals; Mike, the classically trained crooner rat; Ash a teenaged punk-rock-wannabe Hedgehog; and Mena, the painfully shy young adult elephant R&B singer. The local TV news station follows this event from the massive turnout for auditions to the staging of the final show, criticising the oddity of Buster's passion until the successful staging of the talent show finale. *Sing*'s celebration of unconventional passion and transgressive behaviour was mirrored by the unruly cinematic experience of the children around me watching *Sing* – a response generated by the elements of the film and the cinema environment itself.

Straining at the Boundaries: the Embodiment of Children's Cinema

In *Sing*, the integrated musical operates as a filmic metaphor for the social tensions that have defined the children's cinema experience as straining at formally demarcated geographic, sensorial, and social boundaries. In its report on cinema attendances in Canada and the US, the MPAA reported that in the years 2012-2016 approximately only 6% of children aged between 2-11 years were frequent cinema-goers, where 'frequent' is defined as attending a cinema at least once a month. In contrast the greatest demographic of frequent moviegoers were the 18-24 and 25-39 year olds, where over 80% of these demographics attended the cinema at least one a month[5] (www.mpaa.org). Whereas film is a familiar medium for children, as a film-going audience they are, by and large, un-acculturated, attending the cinema infrequently: accordingly, they are still developing the habits for what has been universalised as 'good' cinema spectatorship.

In over twenty years of accompanying children at the cinema, both my own and other people's, and educating primary school children in my role as educator in the Screen Education Program at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI), I have observed the unruly bodies of contemporary preschool and primary school aged children when they attend the cinema. Within the space of their seats, I have seen children slouch, sit cross-legged, sit on extra cushions, lean on their neighbours, fidget, titter, giggle and respond excessively to narrative events as much as events in the cinema around them. I have witnessed children dancing, lurching about with laughter, calling out and asking an inordinate amount of questions – and not just about the film. I have also observed children participating in even greater levels of unruly cinematic behaviour when they breach the boundaries of their seats by leaving to consult with a member of their party a few seats down, abandon their seats for their care-giver's lap or hastily leave to go to the toilet and return – often several times during the film – and fall asleep. Collectively, these observations all point to the centrality of the unruly body associated with a child audience, where the affective pleasures of the film and the social experience of cinema attendance are discernibly embodied.

Embodiment theories recognise the affective ability of filmic elements to draw on individual memories and experiences in their elicitation of bodily responses from the spectator. This affective response shapes engagement with the text, so that 'the film experience is meaningful not to the side of our bodies, but because of our bodies' (Sobchack 2004, 60). The unruly bodies of child spectators extend from a screen-body engagement to a body-food-screen engagement, broadening the excessive sensorial experience of the cinema in accordance with Vivian Sobchack's assertion that: '[the] body … lives vision always in cooperation and significant exchange with other sensorial means of access to the world' (Sobchack 2004, 60). Sobchack accounts for this process of enculturation for the child spectator when she notes that, 'not yet fully acculturated to a particularly disciplined organisation of the sensorium-children experience a greater horizontalisation of the senses and consequently a greater capacity for cross-modal sensorial exchange than do adults'

(Sobchack 2004, 69). The cross-modal exchange of affective pleasures of the film text is elevated for the child spectator when it is entwined with the sensual pleasures of carbonated drinks, confectionary, popcorn and choc tops. I have seen evidence of the sensual pleasure of this exchange in the space of children's seats at the end of the screening: spaces which suggest that they have gone to war with popcorn and confectionary leaving their seats covered in a sea of wrappers and popped kernels.[6]

In her research on memories of attending the cinema as a child in Britain in the 1930s, Annette Kuhn's reports that one of her respondents, Ellen Casey, remembered that this sensorial exchange was equally a feature of 1930s children's cinema. Ellen remembered that, 'there used to be shelling the nuts on the floor, and then they'd take an orange, peel would be on the floor. All these were going backwards and forwards, and when you sat next to some children you could smell camphorated oil […]' (Kuhn, 2011. 93). Consequently, although the boundaries of their seat has demarcated a child spectator's physical space as congruent with an adult spectator since early cinema, children's behaviour makes this space a unique expression of their participation in the cinematic event, one which is often highly incongruent with that of an adult-filled cinematic audience.

Given that the spatial is socially constructed and that the social is spatially constructed (Massey 1999, 3.), Peter Kraftl's research into children's human geographies, particularly the materialities and practices of their everyday lives, usefully accounts for this intersection of social and geographic spaces. Kraftl argues that key institutions such as the school classroom provide pivotal sites for the regulation of children's behaviour. Similar to the classroom the cinema is, in Iain Chambers' terms, 'one of the languages we inhabit, dwell in, and in which we, our histories, cultures and identities, are constituted' (Chambers 1997, 230). Extending this, I argue that the cinema is a key institution where the 'channeling of habits,' including 'bodily comportment' and 'context specific skills' (Kraftl, 2016, 117.), are required, so that cinematic spectatorship functions as a socializing experience.[7] Annette Kuhn documents the growing enculturation of the child spectator through a range of memories of attending the cinema as a child. Early memories of child audiences detail the rowdy and mischievous behaviour that separates this audience from the adults in the cinema around them. She notes that a memory of one of her respondents, Mrs Casey, focussed solely on carefully distancing herself 'from the rowdy behaviour' (Kuhn 2011, 94). Campbell MacCulloch notes similar verbal and bodily responses from children in the 1930s: '"when are they going to do something?", the children demand, wriggling with boredom' (MacCalloch cited in Maltby 1999: 31).

This historic pattern of breaching expected social and geographic boundaries and being socialised into a cinematic behaviour that conforms to expectations of social and geographic containment, aligns children's spectatorship practices with the narrative structure of the Hollywood musical. In the musical the expectations of the realist narrative are ruptured by the direct address and heightened affect of the musical number and then contained by the narrative so that in Feuer's terms, 'the narrative gets sutured back together again for the final bow' (Feuer 1993, 43-4). Feuer argues that this process of

'demystification and remystification' (Feuer 1993, 44) is central to the Hollywood musical's myth of entertainment. *Sing* extends this convention particularly in the excessive social disruptions of its musicals numbers so that the social and geographic disruptions of the child spectator are visually and thematically paralleled in *Sing's* performance conventions.

In *Sing* the central characters are singing when they are introduced, an act that transforms their mundane domestic and street spaces into the higher realm of entertainment, where through their performance the 'proscenium is reborn out of ordinary space' (Feuer 1993, 24). Feuer argues that the pleasure in these moments is derived from the collapse of distance between the cinematic audience and the singer resulting from the film audience being performed to directly. Similar to the child audience in the space of their cinema seats, the performance of the characters allows them to overwhelm the mundane space that surrounds them, forming an affective and direct connection with the cinema spectator (Feuer 1993, 23-4). The spaces of Rosita's child-filled kitchen and Mena's relative-filled lounge room are hectic and claustrophobic, and the train station stairs, alleyway and closed bar, in which Mike, Johnny and Ash and her boyfriend perform are lonely and tough. The characters' voices, and their bodies that exceed or cram at the boundaries of these spaces, declare that, similar to the children in their auditorium seats, these prosceniums are restrictive.

The theme of imprisonment is literalised when this convention is used again in the prison cell of Johnny's father. When Johnny's father sees his son's talent broadcast on TV, his impulsive response is to break out of prison to go to his son to tell him how proud he is of him. Johnny's father rhythmically pulls at the bars of his prison cell until they dislodge, bringing most of the wall down with them. This cuts to an aerial tracking shot of Johnny's father gorilla parkouring his way across the rooftops of the city to see his son. This transgression of physical boundaries is replicated in the implosion of the Moon theatre as a result of its inability to contain Buster's ambitions. As these characters rupture the physical spaces that confine them, so the child audience strains at the boundaries of the cinematic space in which they are contained.

Dissolving the Fantasy/Reality Divide in Children's Cinema

The errant practices of the child audience are actively encouraged by the emotionally affective qualities of children's films, particularly animated films, even if the bodily reactions of the child spectators are not supported by the general viewing culture of the majority of children's films screenings. This disruption to the boundaries of cinema spectatorship is further encouraged at an affective level through the conditions of wonderment inherent in *Sing*'s diegetic realm and its resulting embodied responses.

The appeal of children's films 'comes from their makers understanding of central emotional experiences of childhood and adolescence' (Rustin and Rustin 2012, 170). In contemporary Hollywood, this understanding is conveyed by the writers, producers and directors attempts to elicit a highly affective response from their child audience and, similar

to the classical Hollywood musicals before it, their attempts to 'exert continuous control over the responses of their audiences' (Feuer 1993, 45). Michael Rustin and Margaret Rustin argue that fantasy, in its ability to induce 'intense identifications', has a greater impact on children than naturalism, so that 'animated films are often an art of fantasy par excellence' (Rustin and Rustin 2012, 171). The intense identification of fantasy and wonderment defines *Sing*'s diegetic realm from its humanoid animal characters, its saturated colour palette, to its joyous celebration of highly improbable and visually excessive narrative events, such as the flooding and collapse of the Moon theatre, from which all characters emerge unscathed. However, the fantasy and wonderment of *Sing*'s diegetic realm is best captured in the high-speed tracking shots that enable the spectator to move like Tinkerbell through the city, stopping to peer voyeuristically through the window of each character's home, or arrive unobserved next to the characters in their hangouts. This recurring motif of space and movement mimics the voyeuristic gaze of a child looking through the windows of a doll's house. The wonderment inherent in these stylistic conventions amplifies the affective appeal inherent in *Sing*'s use of the musical numbers' convention of direct address and performance spectacle to increase an emotional investment in the transcendent realm of artifice constructed (Feuer 1993, 24-27).

This in turn creates the conditions in which the real and the imaginary are more likely to blur for the child spectator, where cinematic engagement exceeds the 'as if real' to become 'real'. Kuhn suggests that the vividness of some of her respondents' early memories of films they watched over seventy years before was derived in part 'from the fact that the child experiencing them had not yet learned to negotiate the transition between the world on screen and the ordinary world' (Kuhn 2011, 87). The potential intensity of these experiences is encapsulated in the words of her respondent Tessa Amelan: 'It was … a silent film about the sea. And these waves were making this ship go, it was a sailing ship. And I was so frightened I got on to the floor to hide my face in my mother's lap' (Kuhn, 2011. 87). Another respondent recalls being taken to see *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (David Hand, 1937) when he was three and running out of the cinema and down the street in response to an image of the Evil Witch (Kuhn 2011, 91).

These responses illustrate findings from studies by child psychologists, Alison Bouchier and Alyson Davis, on children's inability to discern fantasy from reality. They found that, although 'there are individual differences between children in terms of their susceptibility to pretend-reality confusions', three quarters of 4-6 year olds and half of 6-8 year olds are frightened of imaginary creatures (Bouchier and Davis 2000, 153 and 138). Moreover, 'during pretence tasks many children consistently respond in ways which increase positive affect and decrease negative affect' (147), and for five-year-olds, the more affectively intense a pretend entity was, the more likely it was to perceived as real (Bouchier and Davis 2000, 147). For the young child spectator, the affective dissolve of the screen and the body is likely premised on this dissolve between the real and the fictional.

This inability to distinguish imaginary from reality differentiates the child spectator from the adult, whose affective cinematic experience maintains a critical distinction

between real and pretend. As Sobchack argues, our common sensuous experience of the movies includes feelings of 'kinetic exhilaration and freedom even as we are relatively bound to our theatre seats' (Sobchack 2004, 65), but 'however hard I may hold my breath or grasp my theatre seat, I don't have precisely the same wild ride watching *Speed* that I would were I actually on that runaway bus'. As a result, cinematic immersion for an adult is sensuous and based on an 'as if real' engagement with the film (Sobchack 2004, 72). In contrast, the relationship with the screen text for many members of the child audience *is* real, not 'as if real.' This engagement elicits the boundary-dissolving behaviours associated with the experience of a child audience where, unlike Sobchack's adult spectator, the child does not remain bound to their seat, or to the constraints of plausibility of the rational world. *Sing* layers these affective states of wonderment with an active solicitation of embodied participation through the direct address of the musical performance numbers to generate a film experience with parallels to the 'cult film'.

Shake it Off: The Cult Pleasures of Children's Cinema

In cult film and children's sing-along cinema screenings, this dissolve between diegetic space and real world space is formally encouraged by cues that invite the audience to act out the emotional excess displayed on screen. In the sing-along sessions, this cue is a ball that bounces over the lyrics – displayed as subtitles on the screen as they are performed by the characters. In *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975) the musical number, 'The Timewarp', is an informal but widely understood invitation for audience members to leave their seats and perform this number beneath the screen. These moments 'afford the viewer an exhibitionist's space, not a voyeur's (Corrigan 1991, 31). The centrality of children's errant bodies to a children's cinema experience draws a similar attention to their presence. These excessive bodily engagements resist the prescribed spectatorship role as 'furtive spectators, peeping through the camera, with the screen as a fourth wall allowing them to watch and excluding them from the events depicted' (Butsch, 2011, 297). Although this locates children and cult audiences as 'bad' spectators under universalising spectatorship models, it aligns children's cinema with the communally participatory cult cinema experience, where a 'unique audience-screen relationship' testifies to 'its unusual disregard for textual authority and systematic coherence' (Corrigan 1991, 32). However, in children's cinema this networked relationship is a product of the developing enculturation of the child spectator and their tendency towards a cross-modal experience of affect, rather than calculated disregard for textual authority and culturally expected spectatorship practices.

When I took my children to see *Sing*, many of the children in the audience acted in a manner similar to cult films participants, rising from their seats to dance-along with *Sing*'s musical finale. The finale commenced with Rosita on stage, dressed in her standard pink shirt and blue slacks outfit, 'doing the washing' in front of a black and white cardboard set, while performing her version of the popular Taylor Swift song, 'Shake it Off,' a number which itself celebrates breaking out of standard conventions and following your own path

regardless of what others think. After the first stanza of the song, Gunter's face appears in the washing machine and he joins in, transforming the song into a very tacky duet. There is a cut to Rosita's twenty-five piggy children in the audience, literally falling out of their seats with laughter. Their behaviour incites a look of panicked mortification from Buster, before the scene cuts to a news reporter sharing the children's mocking of the kitchiness of the performance. The whining tone of the lyrics and melody transforms to an upbeat pop anthem, which along with the visual performance, detail Rosita's refusal to be contained by the judgemental expectations of domestic femininity. Rosita goes behind the screen, a rising shadow denoting her metamorphosis, and she reappears dressed in a sexy, sparkly dark blue and gold fitted leotard, with the addition of a flamenco-styled train. Cult cinema's transformation via an 'acting out' is literalised in Rosita's performance as she becomes an exhibitionist rather than a furtive spectator. The silence and stillness of the real-life children in the cinema's auditorium around me, was replicated on screen in Rosita's piglet's collective gasp of transfixed awe and amazement at the pyrotechnic display that signalled her transformation. This moment generated an affective cinematic experience where, 'the image becomes translated into a bodily response, [where] body and image no longer function as discrete units, but as surfaces in contact, engaged in a constant activity of reciprocal re-alignment and inflection' (Elena del Rio cited in Sobchack 2004, 63). The next cut to the internal audience is to the piglets out of their seats enthusiastically dancing along with their mother's performance. *Sing*'s recurring visual motif of breaking out of spaces of containment escalates when Rosita's piglets stampede to join her on stage.

The little pigs' stage-invasion enacts the unruly viewing practices associated with a cult film experience, which Corrigan observes as invariably subverting and running contrary to the immobility and passivity which regulate standard viewing and reading practices' (Corrigan 1991, 32). Their unselfconscious embrace of their mother literalises the cult film's engagement with its audience, becoming 'part of an audience's private space' (Corrigan 1991, 27). This experience is amplified by the musical's revue-styled finale, and the conventions of direct-address in the musical performance numbers. These numbers fulfil this affective need by connecting the spectators of children's cinema with each other as well as with *Sing*'s characters and diegetic realm in a pattern of connective points, each escalating in their affective nature. The direct address of these numbers repositions the spectator from an outside observer to a participant in live entertainment (Feuer 1993, 29). This generates a screen-spectator engagement that is defined by a contained series of affectively excessive performances and enacts what Feuer argues to be 'perhaps the primary positive quality associated with musical performance […] its spontaneous emergence out of a joyous and responsive attitude toward life' (Feuer 1993, 443). Accordingly, although the cult film experience most closely accounts for that of children's cinema, this participation is encouraged by the affective conventions that are central to the musical genre.

The Musical's Active Encouragement of the Errant Spectator

The use of the musical number as an invitation to participate aligns the musical, cult, and children's cinema audiences in their use of moments in the film text as 'a perceptual or aural format for the audience's own performance' (Corrigan 1991, 31). The piglets fulfil the role of the film's internal audience designed to 'serve a symbolic not a realistic purpose: they are the celluloid embodiment of the film audience's subjectivity' (Jane Feuer, 1993, 27). The internal audience therefore provided a constant guide as to how to not only read Rosita and Gunter's performance but also how to appropriately respond. The children in the audience I observed who spontaneously and unselfconsciously erupted into song and dance may have felt authorised by the parallel actions of the piglets onscreen, enabling them to effect a dissolve between the geographic space of the diegetic realm and the cinema auditorium. The children around me danced in and out of their seats, clapped, waved their arms in the air, dabbed, laughed hysterically, stomped their feet and conferred wildly. It was at this point that the movement in the cinema auditorium around me paralleled that of the audience space depicted on screen. The children who had left their seats to dance replicated the transgression of physical and public/private borders on screen, creating a mobile spectacle defined by the collapse of screen world and real world spaces.

The affective cross-modal appeal of the musical number was amplified by an appeal to the musical literacy of a child audience familiar with Taylor Swift's songs and music videos, which model the same behaviour of her 'everybody get up and dance' music videos.[8] Tyler Bickford notes that Taylor Swift became a celebrity when she was a teenager and despite her growing maturity as an artist, Taylor Swift's star persona continues to be associated with a 'tweenie' audience with an age range from 4-15 years old. Bickford further clarifies that the tweenie-focussed music industry, 'makes mainstream popular music available to children. In part this is original products from artists such as Swift [..] which direct music with professional song writing and high production values towards children' (Bickford 2013, 135). The success of this tweenie appeal has made Taylor Swift one of the best-selling music artists of all time, having sold in excess of 40 million albums, which augmented by a star persona based around youth and vulnerability has led her to appear in *Times*' '100 Most Influential People of the World lists in 2010' (Moore, 2010) and again in 2015. (http://time.com). In *Sing*, the use of 'Shake it Off' in this performance number adapts the Hollywood musical's convention of reusing popular song to engage its adult audience. In this case, however, it is specifically a child audience's familiarity with Taylor Swift and this particular song that is being affectively engaged.

Accordingly, through the success of Rosita's number, the promise of a reality TV talent contest-styled musical performance is aligned with the appeal of the tweenie-focussed music industry and enacted through the personalisation and exhibitionism of cult cinema. This number is further coded by the fantasy of children's cinema where the ordinary is exceeded and for the child audience who danced, the musical's promise of extraordinariness through stardom was realised as much as it is for Rosita. Ultimately, the

re-suturing function inherent in the 'myth of entertainment' (Feuer 1993, 44), similarly functions to contain the anarchic affective excess of the musical performance number both on screen and in the cinema. On screen this occurs when Rosita's stunned husband strides up on stage, whisks Rosita into his arms and resolves this indeterminate space of performance with a kiss. Social order is further achieved through the plot resolutions enacted by Johnny's father's return to prison and the reconstruction of the Moon theatre. In the cinema's auditorium, this containment similarly occurs with the child audience, safely returned to their seats.

The Unsocial Cinema of Children is a Fluid, Intergenerational One

The alternative experience offered by children's cinema foregrounds the intergenerational relationships that define childhood. The adult care-givers are central to the enculturation of children into cinema, as 'adult presence seeps through children's apparently autonomous habit-regulation' (Kraftl 2013, 56). Within this role, adult-care givers are present first and foremost as the regulators of their children's citizenship in this environment.[9] Their cinematic experience includes the organisation of food and beverages, escorting children in and out of their seats, providing assurance, quietening unruly outbursts, arbitrating over petty disputes and whispering answers to often random questions and comments. The adult care-giver's spectatorship is therefore, mediated through their relationship with their children. However, as the child spectator ages their cinematic behaviours changes, so that in contrast to cult film, the mobile behaviour of the child spectator tends to dissipate with age and repeated exposure to the cinema. Equally the co-mingling of the significance of the events in cinema auditorium with those on screen also tends to dissipate and an awareness of the cultural expectations around cinematic spectatorship and peer conformity increasingly regulates behaviour. Even though their role may change, the intergenerational nature of a children's cinema is acknowledged by the appeal to an adult audience in addition to that of a child, in recent Hollywood animated children's films.

This stratification of the engagement of the audience by age became even more notable in the following sequence where Mike comes across an impromptu audience of adults gathered around a TV set in a window, all energetically tapping their feet as they watch. Their relatively immobile bodies match those of the adults sitting passively, perhaps tapping their feet around me in the cinema's auditorium. This was in stark contrast to the unruly physical participation of the piglets on screen and the child spectators around me, further denoting the demarcation of the adult experience of this number from that of these children. The two internal audiences thereby aligned the screen and real world audiences on the basis of age and bodily response, a difference that transcended reality and *species* to clearly denote the difference between adult and child audiences.[10] These separate experiences have been a persistent feature of children's cinema, that have in the past few decades been further coded by a nostalgic appeal directed at the adult caregivers whose choice it is to attend that film in the cinema with the children.

The use of artists like Elton John that aurally define *Sing*'s diegetic realm creates this nostalgic tension for the adult between their younger and their present day selves. As Iain Chambers notes, 'music, as a language of repetition, continually proposes this play between recalling and resisting the past' (Chambers 1997, 233). The nostalgic appeal of the pop song affords the adult spectator the ability to engage with the song as a lingua franca to a youthful incarnation of themselves. *Sing* announces this affective appeal to its intergenerational musically literate audience from the opening of the narrative. Set within an animated, colour saturated, anthropomorphised realm, in the city that is highly reminiscent of San Francisco, *Sing* opens on the stage with the emergence of the young diva, Nana, compellingly performing the yearning Beatles' classic, 'Golden Slumbers/Carry that Weight'. There is a cut from her performance to the young Buster Moon in the balcony, enraptured by the performance. His voice-over announces that this is the moment that he fell in love with the theatre, a proclamation that invites the cinema audience to share this passion as well. This dualistic engagement at the intersection of past and present selves is later layered in *Sing*'s use of Queen's (featuring David Bowie) 'Under Pressure', to affectively narrate Buster Moon's own pressure to emotionally grow up. In this musical montage sequence Buster learns to accept the help from his friends - staging the talent performance in the rubble of his theatre as a team production. For an audience unfamiliar with the iconic glam rock stars, the struggle implied by the use of this song, and the letting-go of past-selves, is spelled out through the News Reporter predicting Moon's impeding failure.

In contrast to this individual appeal, the nostalgic appeal of Johnny's performance of Elton John's classic anthem 'I'm Still Standing' affords a shared space of affective engagement for both adult and child audience. The musical's direct address in this number along with the cross-generational appeal of the song itself united the cross-generational diegetic audience, as well as the cinematic audience around me, as the song equally enveloped adults and children. This musical number represents a contemporary revision of Walt Disney's cross-generational movie strategy, where Disney classics were re-released for every generation so that the experience of going to a Disney movie with a parent could become a fundamental of childhood (Wasko 2001, 12). In recent children's films, this strategy is revised as a heightened and potentially highly memorable *moment* of shared intergenerational affective participation. Instead of conjuring memories of being taken to a movie with a parent, recent children's cinema invites children and adults to memorialise the shared experience of a song in the cinema with your parent, a song that they previously experience in their youth.

The identification generated by 'I'm Still Standing' signalled the acceptability of a whole-body, out-of-seat response to this performance number for children in the audience around me. The dancing children testifies to Cynthia Weber's argument that, 'dance is commonly thought of as liberating, transformative, empowering, and even dangerous [… where] corporeality is offered to us as a rhythmic, mobile spectacle' (Weber 2003, 1). This affective engagement aligned the adult caregiver as well as the child spectator with

Corrigan's cult film spectator, whose relationship with the city of images is that of a tourist who 'inhabits the city by only taking parts of it over' (Corrigan 1991, 27). This touristic engagement is encouraged by children's films, which attempt to regulate these moments of affect-driven rupture so that whereas cult films are claimed, children's films are clearly '*born* in order to become cult objects' (Echo 1985, 11).[11] For the inter-generational audience these screen musical moments are, 'privately and personally meaningful […] to suit their own fantasies' (Corrigan 1991, 27). The advantage of this personalised touristic cinematic engagement is that this moment can be re-experienced as a souvenir by downloading the song through iTunes. This produces a further boundary transgression as the cross-generational experience of children's cinema extends beyond the physical boundaries of the theatre and into the home. These factors – age, affective experience, and expectations – combine to provide an alternative cinematic experience unaccounted for by dominant models of film spectatorship, one premised on 'unruly' digression.

Taking its Final Bow

In *Sing* narrative closure is achieved by the use of Jennifer Hudson's soothing wistful Beatles cover on the soundtrack singing, 'Golden Slumbers/ Carry Weight,' mapped over a time lapse montage sequence depicting the rebuilding of the Moon theatre. The completion of the theatre-rebuild brings an end to the musical's indeterminate space, proffering an idealised image of community. The thrill ride that started inside the theatre ends on this highly jubilant note, outside in the sun-drenched streets, the public space of diversity and possibility. This mirrors the movement of the cinematic audience, entering the cinema, immersing themselves in its fictional world and then re-emerging into the complexity of real life spaces. For the cinematic audience, this movement is facilitated by the paratexts of the opening and closing credit sequences, defined by Jonathan Gray as 'airlocks' (Gray 2009, 30). In his consideration of paratexts, Jonathan Gray cites Gerard Genette's definition of 'paratexts' as 'texts that prepare us for other texts'. They form, he notes, the 'threshold' between the inside and the outside of the text (Gray 2009, 25). Significantly, for the child audience, it also seemingly signals the end of movement and a diminishment of *Sing*'s affective address. This calming return to order is then unexpectedly interrupted by the musical number used to segue from the final scene into the closing credit sequence. This creates perhaps the most uniquely child-like unsocial cinematic moment of the film, cementing the child spectator's place as 'cultural revisionists,' similar to cult film audiences (Corrigan 1991, 28).

Whereas the opening title sequence sets the conditions for a unified audience, the closing title sequence re-individualises the spectator, operating as a paratext that provides the cue that the audience are no longer bound by the cinematic contract of concealing their presence, and are now free to talk, stand, check their phones, gather their items, and leave the cinema. Unlike the opening credit sequence, which quietens the audience and commands attention, the end credit sequence tends not to be consumed as an integral part

of the viewing experience. The end title sequence is an airlock that in itself is at best partially consumed as a soundtrack, marking disengagement and departure, rather than being recognised as a component of the cinematic text. As Roland Barthes contends, 'the text is only experienced in the act of consumption. […] because no text can be experienced free of the individual reader' (Barthes cited in Gray 2009, 31). An audience leaving the cinema is not consuming the text.

In *Sing,* however, the black backdrop of the closing credit sequence provides a space for the squid from the theatre to complete their Berkeley-esque performance number, augmented by the names of the actors and production personnel which dance with the squid, to Stevie Wonder's (featuring Ariana Grande) 'Faith'. This non-diegetic musical number unsettles the authority of the narrative's final bow, and recodes the liminality of the credit sequence. In our screening, this musical number cued participation in a free-for-all dance party of children who ran down to cavort in front of the screen – redefining this space as a cinematic mosh pit. This reconfiguration of the end credit sequence created the most unsocial cinematic site, as the unified audience was a chaotic space of movement and various levels of willing and reluctant engagement with the screen. The closing credit sequences of these recent animated children's films can thereby be read as a return to the theatrical, a moment when characters emerge from the confines of the narrative and directly engage with the audience as they take their final bow.

Conclusion

Children's cinema is at best an intergenerational, amusing and pleasurable unruly cinematic experience derived from an infectious, affective, embodied participation mode similar to that of cult films. This experience disrupts the 'good' spectator conventions of adult cinema, as well as the dominant Western expectation of an adult spectator and the textual authority of the screen. The highly profitable nature of this errant cinema, the active encouragement of the unruly behaviour generated by children's films and the change in cinema architecture to accommodate this behaviour indicates an industry attuned to the rich array of possibilities afforded by this unsocial audience, a complexity that has been largely unexplored by screen spectatorship theories.

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Notes:

[1] Screen Australia does not track cinema attendance in patrons under 12, however as Australia's screen culture mirrors of the US, it would be fair to assume that this percentage would roughly account for the child audience in Australian cinema.

[2] If teenagers aged 13 -17 years are included in this group, children represent 24% of all cinema goers.

[3] Arising in the 1970s, apparatus theory is a model based in psychoanalytic, semiotic and gender theory, defining cinema as an apparatus combing both the apparatus of the film industry and an apparatus of the viewers mind. By hiding its conditions of production narrative cinema made the spectator feel like events were effortless unfolding in front of them like real life, thereby suturing them into the film's diegetic realm. (Creed 1998, 79).

[4] At the time of writing this article Sing was ranked number 2 for its opening weekend at the domestic box office and has grossed $US634 million on a budget of $US75 million. http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=illumination2016.htm. Its net profit was $US194 million. http://deadline.com/2017/03/sing-box-office-profit-2016-1202053426/.

[5] Over the past five years my own children have fallen into the 'frequent cinema goer' category, attending screenings at multiplexes, independent cinemas including the Astor, Cinema Nova and Westgarth, ACMI cinemas, rooftop and Moonlight cinemas to view children's films from Hollywood, Australia, UK, Japan, France, Spain, Mexico and Turkey.

[6] It is worth noting that this is a tendency that some patrons do not grow out of. However, it is my observation, shared by my colleagues at ACMI and students who have worked in cinema multiplexes that it is discernibly more prevalent with a child audience.

[7] For the purposes of this paper I am focusing on a children's cinematic experience as one based in mainstream Melbourne cinemas where the audience is primarily defined by preschool and primary school aged children. The child audience of Annette Kuhn's research and 1930s Hollywood extends this age range into the early teenage years. I acknowledge that children's cinema is a historically, culturally, politically, gendered diverse experience that is in a constant state of transition and change along with its targeted audience.

[8] I am grateful to Dr Fincina Hopgood for drawing my attention to this very incisive point.

[9] Peter Kramer notes that in a survey of US movie goers undertaken in1982, one fifth of respondents had been to a children's film, 'mostly women over 25, who had probably gone with their children'. (Kramer 1999, 95)

[10] Rick Altman notes that the use of popular song to generate an embodied audience engagement has been used since Nickelodeon cinema, where 'adoption of the latest hits as accompaniment staples just further encouraged audiences to tap their feet and hum along'. (Altman 2004, 226) It is significant that this subdued engagement is deemed to be the acceptable one for an adult audience.

[11] Timothy Corrigan disputes Echo's contention, instead arguing that 'No film, I would say, is naturally a cult film; all cult films are adopted children'. (Corrigan 1991, 27)