

## **‘Join a cast of 1000s, to sing and dance in the Revolution’: the *Secret Cinema* ‘Activist’ brand and the commodification of affect within ‘experience communities’**

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### **Abstract:**

This article traces the evolution of a specific activist discourse within the cultural branding of *Secret Cinema* experiences as these develop from marginal and subcultural events to highly profitable and highly visible commercial offerings. Through a detailed analysis of their most successful undertaking to date – the presentation of Baz Luhrmann’s 2001 *Moulin Rouge!* – I examine the irreconcilable paradox between their alleged political intentions and this event as the final and full realisation of the complete commodification of all aspects of their participant’s behavior and affective engagement. In doing so, I draw on the influential work of David Harvey (2005) in setting the neoliberal context within which to comprehend the ‘commodification of everything’, but here particularly; cultural participation. By further invoking the concept of the ‘experience community’ (Atkinson & Kennedy 2018), I illuminate the ultimately transient and fleeting nature of any political or activist sentiment that is activated through these experiences.

**Key words:** Secret Cinema, Affect, Activism, Experience Community

### **Participatory and Collaborative Research Methodologies**

This essay is part of a much wider collaborative project that has included a great deal of fieldwork related to the study of *Secret Cinema* and other participatory cinematic events. In previous work, Atkinson and I have examined the wider landscape of *Live Cinema* in general, and *Secret Cinema* in relation to novel forms of experience design that harness existing fan practices and pleasures. The extent to which the *Secret Cinema* offering directly engages the audience in an occupation of a detailed re-production of the original film-set, a process

through which the audience themselves become ‘extras’ that populate and complete the aesthetic appeal of these events; and an analysis of how *Secret Cinema* and other new purveyors of augmented and enhanced cinema (Rooftop Film Club, Backyard Cinema, Luna Cinema for example) invoke nostalgic pleasures in their re-presentation of well-loved classics (Atkinson and Kennedy 2015, 2016a, 2016b, 2017 & 2018). This on-going study of emergent, highly participatory cinematic exhibition practices and audience pleasures has required the elaboration of methodologies appropriate to the study of complex, live experiences. In these studies we have deployed a combination of discourse analysis, participant observation, in depth interviews, ethnographic practices and the analysis of participant produced social media. This article extends this multi-modal research approach to examine a further dimension that is a particular feature of the evolving *Secret Cinema* corporate identity – here signalled in the title as the opportunity for political engagement through participatory experiences.

In their marketing, positioning and design of these events *Secret Cinema* offer up an invitation to engage and participate which includes an explicit promise of additional value through this offer of a *politically, culturally or socially meaningful experience*. In one of his very many promotional interviews Fabian Riggall makes this statement of his intentions as cultural entrepreneur:

‘Our current world situation is so uncertain and as members of society we often just watch it go by in some respects’, says Riggall. ‘I think we have a responsibility culturally to debate these things and become *activists* through exploring film’ (my emphasis, cited in Chapman, Creators Project, Vice 2016).

And he repeats the sentiment in an interview for *Screen Daily*:

*Secret Cinema* is committed to creating powerful experiences in which audiences become *activists* in stories that matter during these uncertain times (my emphasis, cited in Rosser, *Screen Daily*, 2016).

Here, I trace the discursive tactics that shape the development of the sub-brand and the practices through which the *Secret Cinema* screenings are specifically selected, programmed and articulated in response to wider global events of political or social significance. I will then look at the case study of *Secret Cinema Presents: Moulin Rouge!* in detail in order to examine the ways in which participant affective engagement in both text and the paratextual invocation of a political milieu is put to work in the service of the overall collective live experience. It is through this lens that we see the ultimate commodification of affective intensity – this more detailed analysis also opens up further questions around immersive experience and the exploitation of affective labour bound up in what I argue is a shallow rhetoric of political participation and intervention.

I tease out some important insights that can be drawn from the study of participatory and immersive theatre – areas where there are some helpful overlaps with Secret Cinema in terms of the experience as ‘designed’. For instance, in relation to the production of elaborate interactive theatrical sets and performance spaces, and in the hiring of performers with a background in improvised, street or interactive theatre. Furthermore, the domain of immersive and participatory theatre is also relevant in terms of an analysis of the aesthetic and affective experience as ‘embodied’ and the transformation of audience in to performer, interactor, extra, and participant. Critical analysis of immersive and participatory theatre is becoming a rich resource for the study of increasingly complex live and experiential cinema events (see for instance the work of Josephine Machon in Atkinson & Kennedy 2018).

Astrid Breel, writing about participatory theatre, argues that: ‘[A]lthough audience experience is central to all forms of live performance, it is a crucial aesthetic component of participatory work, *as the responses and actions of the participants become part of the fabric of the show*. This means that understanding the aesthetic experience of the participant is vital to understanding participation as a genre of performance’ (my italics, 2015:369). There are direct and fundamental parallels here with the analysis of events such as those provided by Secret Cinema, that take us beyond the reach of contemporary understandings of film audience pleasures and behaviours.

### **A Brief History of Secret Cinema**

*Secret Cinema* (SC) (2007-) launched in the UK with an immersive screening of Gus Van Sant’s *Paranoid Park* (2007) in a disused railway tunnel – the location echoing the subcultural ‘underground’ aesthetic of the organisation’s early roots. They have since evolved as an increasingly commercial operation with considerable financial success in the elaboration of four key ‘brands’ of experience design. The first of these is *Secret Cinema Presents* – in this genre, the film is known and well-publicised in advance, these are usually very popular cult titles with a significant fan base. Secret Cinema have been extremely astute in selecting films where there is an available anniversary or other event through which to cross-promote and maximise visibility and marketing impact. For instance *Back to the Future* (Zemeckis, 1985) was exhibited during the season of the film’s 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2014, and *Star Wars: Empire Strikes Back* (Kershner, 1980) was screened in the season of maximum press interest in the run up to the launch of *Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens* (Abrams, 2015). SC Presents is the most *commercial* and the most *commodified* of all the brands, capable of harnessing and exploiting both a film’s loyal fan base and their own expanding audience base.

A critical dimension of all the events is the element of secrecy – this operates differently across each of the distinct brands – this *secrecy* of *Secret Cinema* relates to the elements of the experience design and the location of the event that is only released to ticket holders in the days before they are due to attend. The second brand, *Secret Cinema Tell No One*, are experiences where *neither* the film nor the location are known but the films

are usually popular or provocative classics such as *Dr Strangelove* (Kubrick, 1964), *Miller's Crossing* (Coen Brothers, 1990), *Brazil* (Gilliam, 1985), and *The Shawshank Redemption* (Darabont, 1994). In the third brand, *Secret Cinema X Presents* events follow the standard SC Presents format but are much smaller in scale – there is the same mode of communication and delivery as above but these are smaller in terms of audience capacity, the duration of the run and this is also reflected in the price. These events may combine new releases alongside cult classics, examples have been: *Casablanca* (Curtiz, 1942), *Diva* (Beineix, 1981), *Bugsy Malone* (Parker, 1976), these are branded as more exclusive events and often sell out very quickly. The fourth and final brand is the *Secret Cinema X Tell No One*: these are again much smaller scale events revealing neither the film nor the location and usually feature unreleased films – most recent examples have been the 2017 secret one week run of *The Handmaiden* (Park, 2016) which concluded on the evening of its UK release date (The Troxy, Limehouse, London 10 – 14<sup>th</sup> April, 2017), *Victoria* (Ministry of Sound, London in March 2016, and *Amy* (Kapadia, 2015) (Camden, London in June 2015 which notably supported the UK based youth mental health charity MAC- UK (<http://www.mac-uk.org/>)). These brands are now very well understood by potential audiences and participants and each of these SC experiences have been able to attract and retain a loyal group of devotees who are willing to pay a very high premium in order to experience augmented collective viewing events around a particular feature film (Atkinson & Kennedy 2015).

For all the *Secret Cinema* the promotions, marketing and all elements of the communication form a critical part of the overall experience design – each of these are crafted to reinforce this notion of secrecy that they signal so directly in their title and their website: 'Our experiences explore one of the forgotten pleasures in a time with constant access to information: secrets' ([www.secretcinema.org](http://www.secretcinema.org)). Their loyal participants play a significant role in reinforcing the secrecy message such that even post event/post experience participants will refrain from divulging critical information about the event. They will however generate a proliferation of social media commentary (not always positive – see Kennedy and Atkinson 2015b) that augments the visibility of the events. The tickets for *all* the experiences are also always released in stages, generating an economy of scarcity, maximizing social media buzz and in-crowd cachet around the release, in turn generating increased demand. In marked contrast to these underground aesthetics, *Secret Cinema* also deploys very standard marketing and promotional strategies such as the high profile press releases.

As well as reinforcing this tone of secrecy, the promotional and marketing materials are tailored to fit the specific films narrative – in terms of the language chosen, the emphasis given and how participants are particularly hailed or addressed. 'From the moment of the tickets purchase, audience members knowingly and complicitly enter a in-fiction space. Dramatic exposition is presented in social media spaces and audience members receive instructions to make preparations before attending the event, such as how to dress and what persona to adopt as part of the instantiation of the film' (Atkinson &

Kennedy 2015). Alongside this direct imbrication within the narrative world there is also the very specific intentions and meanings ascribed to the choice of film that is communicated through the choice of marketing language and promotional strategy.

This attempt to suture the selected film to a very specific set of contemporary issues is what I am examining here – extending Barbara Klinger’s analysis of the ways in which films are re-packaged and re-mastered and re-presented at different historical junctures as a process through which ‘the older artifact becomes a vehicle for expressing the concerns of contemporary society’ (2006: 248). Paying particular attention to how this alignment is implicated – reinforced or undermined – in the design and experience of the event. In the examples below we see not just the potentially nostalgic re-presentation and the narrative spatialisation of the selected films, but also the deliberate and overt attachment of the experience of participation in the events to broader socio-political context. Here I examine this interpellation of the ‘consumers’ of these events as ‘activists’ through their participation and it is the resultant complexities, contradictions and paradoxes that this produces, which forms the principle focus of this article.

### **The Evolution of the Secret Cinema ‘Activist Brand’**

Notoriously difficult to reach, Rigall only does promotional interviews and has refused all our attempts at direct research engagement. He has also blocked our attempts to engage with his team, and no one else speaks for *Secret Cinema* or gives interviews about the production – that includes the technical staff and the performers. It produces a curious state in which for the sake of analysis, the organisation *is* Rigall – we are left with no option but to work from the interviews he has given, the materials generated for their website and their social media presence. From this we get a very strong sense of the evangelical zeal of Rigall and the extent to which there is a desire to align the organisation’s offering within a particularly neoliberal discourse of the role of culture in activism and political or social participation.

Considered through this lens, we are in the territory so clearly marked out by David Harvey, in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), in which he describes the potential ‘commodification of everything’ and the extent to which ‘neoliberalisation unquestionably rolled back the bounds of commodification’ (2005: 70). Rigall’s entrepreneurial approach can be understood in relation to what Jo Littler (2009) is examining in Corporate Social Responsibility discourse. In this work, she looks at how CSR promotional discourse offers up a version of what she has described as ‘participatory capitalism’ such that ‘appeals to a workers’ *desire* for democratic and participative cultures. It activates it. ‘[...] leading to what Andrejevic describes as a process in which ‘the participation of consumers in the rationalisation of their own consumption is sold as empowerment’ (2004: 6, 15) (cited in Littler, 2009:64).

I will return to this significant notion of the participant as ‘worker’ below.

In this analysis, I highlight the paradoxical commodification of affective intensity in the *Secret Cinema* experiences and do so through a close analysis of their 2017 Presents

offering of Baz Luhrmann's extravagantly melodramatic *Moulin Rouge!*. *Moulin Rouge!* is a film that already functions to re-present a particular period to make a potentially political subversive juxtaposition. For instance, Ben Highmore analyses the film in relation to passionate culture – highlighting the centrality of context in the process of interpretation, the forces of emotional attachment and the political resonances within aesthetic practices. Before any of the re-staging to which the film is subjected within the *Secret Cinema* format '*Moulin Rouge!* [already] connects the bohemianism of the fin-de-siecle to the sentiments and sounds of songs and films that make up the cultural framework of the late twentieth century' (Highmore, 2009:104) – thus potentially eliding the century of distance and difference between these contexts.

Firstly though, I will summarise how this process of political alignment has evolved as a key trait of the overarching *Secret Cinema* corporate identity; and how this has become an increasingly critical element of their *Secret Cinema Presents* brand. As indicated, *Secret Cinema's Moulin Rouge!* is far from unique in its deliberate alignment with political or social issues in its marketing and promotion, indeed such an alignment has become a key element of the *Secret Cinema* corporate identity and Rigall's public declarations of his role as cultural entrepreneur. The earliest explicitly political alignment in *Secret Cinema's* programming was in 2010 when they screened *Lawrence of Arabia* (Lean, 1962) (September 2010) and positioned this explicitly as a response to the period of uprising described as the *Arab Spring*.

*Shawshank Redemption* (1994) (Tell No One) (October 31 – December 2, 2012, and January 10 – February 12, 2013). Ticket holders were summoned to a court hearing at Bethnal Green Library, and were individually sentenced before being transported in buses to a disused school where they were stripped of their belongings and imprisoned. *Secret Cinema* partnered with Amnesty International and Pen International (an activist /charity that campaigns for the release of writers who are incarcerated). Each night the audience would write a letter to a prisoner (details supplied by Pen Int.) 15,000 letters were sent.

*The Great Dictator* (Chaplin, 1940) – screened on 21<sup>st</sup> December 2014 – in 4 different cities, London (Troxy Cinema), New York, San Francisco and Rome – in response to Sony's cancellation of screenings of 'The interview' in North Korea. The event provided publicity for the global free speech charity Article 19, and participants were encouraged to make donations to the cause.

*Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) (4th June to 27th September 2015). As Atkinson & Kennedy have argued, *Secret Cinema* – 'aligned themselves with dominant mainstream media narratives through the inclusion of refugees into the opening narrative of the experience and their sponsorship of their partner charity the Refugee Council for which they raised £28,000. *Secret Cinema* furthered this alliance through a high profile screening at the refugee camp in Calais' (2016a). This alignment achieved a great deal of publicity for both Rigall and the Refugee crisis in the review literature and wider press coverage around this event. For instance, David Pollock writes in the *Guardian* detailing this wider political context and Rigall's activist motivations in his review essay that features an interview with

Rigall himself (September 2015) and Dougall Wilson provides in depth background of the crisis, outlining the process of staging the pop-up screening in the Jungle Camp and provide a detailed first-hand account of the 'protest' in the *Creative Review* 2015.

In the case of the *Secret Cinema Presents: Star Wars: Empire Strikes Back* experience, the discourse of rebellion and participant identification as 'rebel' were continuously emphasised through all communications. The REBEL X Communication channel provided *Secret Cinema's* in-fiction response to the real-world UK general election, May 2015: 'Territories across the galaxy woke up to shocking news this morning. Against all projected outcomes, the Empire has increased its strength following yesterday's election.' The audience participants are here addressed as politicised and potentially 'radical' subjects *sharing* a particular interpretation of these external/real world events.

This cross-cutting relationship between film text and contemporary cultural context intensified for the next major *Secret Cinema: Tell No One* event, *Dr Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) (17 February 17—March 2016). In this event, ticket holders were issued elaborately conceived identity papers by the fictional 'Department of Cultural Surveillance (D.O.C.S.)'. The promotional materials for the event positioned it in support of the charity War Child UK – with a similar opportunity for publicity, and an invitation to donation and further engagement. The pre-screening experience was replete with images and references to Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, and the highly detailed reproduction of the original film set included iconography that drew explicit parallels between the cold war era of the film's setting and the contemporary political landscape including allusions to a renewed fear of nuclear warfare.

*Secret Cinema Presents: 28 Days Later* (2002) (April 14 – May 29, 2016) was another very strong example of this imbrication of the social and political in to the spatialised narrative. The pre-screening discourse around the *28 Days Later* event re-cast and re-presented elements within the film narrative to suggest that the rapid transmission of the deadly zombifying virus RAGE was an outcome of the UK junior doctors strike. *Secret Cinema* publicity images became iconic for the junior doctor protesters and *Secret Cinema* offered reduced entrance for NHS workers during this run and 400 junior doctors attended a special event.

### ***Moulin Rouge!*: Aesthetic Excess & Affective Labour**

In 2017, for *Secret Cinema Presents: Moulin Rouge!* (14.2.17 – 11.6.17) Rigall partnered with Help Refugees, raising money for this charity and profiling the refugee crisis and issues related to refuge during the run. The promotional discourse aligned the film's narrative of bohemian tolerance and underground revolution in a direct response to Brexit and the recent global wave of conservatism. As with the *Star Wars* event in 2015, this positioning also tapped in to and capitalised upon a specific zeitgeist of revolution and revolutionary zeal that was appearing – this time, in early 2017 – in response to the apparent global wave of an alt-right uprising. The allusion to these wider political events is made clear during the experience itself when the actor performing the role of Zidler introduces the screening

through a clearly impactful address to the audience in which he talks of openness and acceptance. One respondent and blogger makes direct reference to this speech for instance: 'I made a point of tracking down the place I could go to donate to the charity, as I am sure many others did, after the rousing speech made before the film began'.

(<http://www.inthemousehouse.co.uk/2017/06/secret-cinemas-moulin-rouge-inspiring.html> – hereafter cited as 'itmh')

The extended run of *Moulin Rouge!* was also accompanied by an overtly activist motivated augmented screening of *I, Daniel Blake* (Loach, 2016) in the lead up to the UK general election of 2017. Screenings took place between 6<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> of June at the Troxy, Limehouse, London and at Blackfriars Ouseburn Cinema, in Newcastle. The events were delivered in partnership with SB.TV – an online music platform showcasing new music and was staged in support of The Trussell Trust charity – the UK-wide foodbank network.

In what follows, I deploy the multi-modal methodology set out above in a detailed examination of this particular event in order to illuminate the contradictions and paradoxes that emerge in the aesthetic and affective experience that are produced through the evolution of this complex imbrication of the commercial, and the political, at the heart of the Secret Cinema cultural offering.

At the most profound level, a contradiction is present in the positioning of the audience. On the one hand, in the direct pre-event communications and social media discourses *all* participants are positioned with the 'Underworld' of the film's narrative heroes and heroines in their assumed alignment with the principles of 'acceptance' and 'tolerance' and the values of 'truth and love' (a chant that is repeated over and over through the pre-screening activity that forms a major part of the experience). On the other hand, the pricing structure of the experience imposes or re-stages the social stratification and cold-blooded economic imperatives and privilege that the film's narrative seeks to critique and undermine.

**Pricing:** We offer different ticket types and a tiered ticket structure. **Creatures of the Underworld (Standing):** £49 (Wed), £59 (Thu, Sun), £74 (Fri, Sat) **Children of the Revolution (Seated):** £59 (Wed), £69 (Thu, Sun), £89 (Fri, Sat) **Aristocrats (Added Value):** £130 (Wed), £140 (Thu, Sun), £175 (Fri, Sat)

These events are already expensive to attend, Atkinson and Kennedy have argued (2016b, 2017) that the cost of participating at *any* level in a *Secret Cinema* event is already quite prohibitive, not least because the cost of entry is always accompanied by very strict dress code requirements that are expensive to achieve.

Once you have secured your ticket, and accessed the experience, you are invited to navigate a highly detailed re-construction of the places depicted within the film (what Atkinson and Kennedy have described as an interactive version of the film set or a form of narrative spatialisation – 2015, 2016a) – here specifically a reproduction of the interiors of Luhrmann's envisioning of Montmartre. There is a constructed air of excess and carnival in

the sounds and scenography, this is cinema-as-spectacle revised and augmented for the twenty-first century. A participant's journey around these reproduced 'sets' from the film – the English writer Christian's apartments, the French courtesan Satine's bedroom, the Moulin Rouge night club performance space is also interspersed with frequent opportunities for further acts of consumption. There were opportunities to purchase more accessories to complete or enhance your costume, to buy souvenirs such as posters related to the film experience, to buy and drink expensive champagne and of course to consume food. The savvy (or repeat) participant can also pay attention to the sounds and signifiers that indicate where the next 'live enactment' of the film will take place and hurry over to secure a prime spot to participate or spectate. For *Moulin Rouge!*, the sound was the ringing of a bell and the main signifiers were the crowd-controlling behaviours of in-costume security personnel.

We know that there were several repeat participants through the ecstatic proclamations in several interview comments and social media postings related to the #SocietyofLove:

I'm tempted to go back a third time just to see if it's possible to have another completely different experience at exactly the same event. (CA)<sup>1</sup>

Son said 'Mama it's Fri you going back to #moulinrouge?' I think I may have returned to #SocietyofLove too often #vivelarevolution (T1)

@secretcinema changed my life! happy I came back a 3rd time thanks to all the amazing people involved I will miss it forever #societyoflove (T5)

Whilst all participants in these *Secret Cinema* events play a key role in providing the animation, spectacle and participation that secures the success of the pre-screening entertainment, it was the 'Creatures of the Underworld' ticket holders who were the ones that were required to fully complete the experience for the other participants *during* the screening. Specific and elaborate identities were created for these participants, with a name and a bohemian designation (such as artist, poet etc). The role as participant and 'extra' extends beyond the complex interleaving of flaneurie, voyeurism and role playing enabled and structured through the improvised set and interactive spaces of the pre-film entertainment. For the 'Creatures' it is their ecstatic affective engagement *during* the film, made visible through their guided and instructed audible participation in singing and their visible participation in dancing scenes, which forms a critical, additional and essential part of the scenographic augmentation that surrounds the duration of the film screening. Their live singing, dancing and shouting were a critical augmentation to the spectacle. They filled 'the pit' in front of the stage in front of the screen and it is they who provided the interaction for the live actor's performance in tandem with the film.

In this way, for those who attended as ‘Creatures of the Underworld’ the invitation of the title – ‘Join a cast of 1000s, to sing and dance in the Revolution – was also a direct *instruction*. To ensure the full compliance of this group, there is a heavy-handed instruction speech before the screening that alerts the ‘Creatures’ to the fact that they must be compliant with the instructions, and must not break any of the rules of engagement and participation, otherwise they will be asked to leave. There follows two hours of exhausting participation – under strict surveillance and the performance is tightly controlled by ‘Zidler’ and his agents on the ground.

This is therefore *not* in effect an improvised performance in which the audience has agency in determining the *outcomes of the work*. On the contrary, it is a tightly managed and constrained performance that exploits and puts to service the very evident powerful aesthetic and affective pleasures experienced by the participants. Thus the apparent freedom embodied in the ecstatic aesthetic pleasures of abandoned dancing; loud singing and quoting along to the text, are underpinned by a structure of tight control and a process of direct commodification. This paradoxical relation between the participants’ willing and enthusiastically invested affective labour, the clear evidence of ecstatic pleasure and the – at minimum – fleeting activation of a political or activist sentiment and the darker forces of the neoliberal capitalist exploitation of cultural experience remains a significant challenge to articulating the complexities of these activities. Social Media provides evidence of these *moments* of political engagement:

Just made a donation to @HelpRefugeesUK as I missed them at @secretcinema’s event. Let’s keep the #SocietyOfLove going (T4)

Others described the utopian sense of escapism offered by the *Secret Cinema* experience as positioned against some of the political atrocities of the summer of 2017 in the UK:

What I loved most about @secretcinema #Societyoflove is escaping from a world I increasingly don’t recognize #lovenothate #finsburymosque (T3)

These apparent polarities of political engagement and hedonistic escapism pervade the audience’s articulation of their pleasures and behaviours. Adam Alston, writing about immersive theatre, describes the audience position thus: ‘the audience both enters an immersive world, and allows that world to pervade their thought and feeling and to motivate action. Such audiences enter experience machines and *become part of the machine*’ (my italics 2016:218).

These forms of participation clearly share key elements with other (also commodified or consumption oriented) fan practices such as cos-play, re-enactment, quote-alongs for instance, but they are also distinct in a number of ways – not least of which is the extent to which the participation is tightly controlled and delineated – through costume instruction, identity designation, in advance of the event itself and through highly

constrained and restricted movement within the scene of the events temporal and spatial unfolding. Alston, again describing participants in immersive theatre, captures it very precisely here: ‘the *audience’s own involvement* in immersive theatre, as a productive participant, tends to be *objectified* as a centrally significant component of a theatre aesthetic that is not meant to morph into an understanding of human agency, necessarily; it is there to be enjoyed or endured in and of itself’ (2016:219).

This oscillation between ecstatic, deeply engaged and affectively charged participating subject and the objectification of that participation by other participants – and by the commodifying structure of the overall experience is very prominently and markedly evidenced in my analysis of the role of the Creatures of the Underworld. To further complete the paradox of the general interpellation of the participants as ‘revolutionaries’ or ‘bohemian’s, the vivid enthusiastic participation of the Creatures is a further additional fully commodified augmentation for those in the mid-level and upper strata – the Children of the Revolution, seated one level up at either side of the stage, and the Aristocrats, seated one level up but directly in front of the screen, and directly above with full view of the ‘pit’ respectively. Both these upper strata have relatively comfortable seating with some additional food, drink and service enhancements for the Aristocrats specifically. These participants are distanced from the potentially disruptive and objectified passions of the Creatures in the pit – a position directly at odds with the alleged political mores of the entire discursive framework within which Rigall’s stages this re-presentation of the film.

### **Aesthetic Pleasures, Experience Communities and Residual Affect**

For all this evident commodification and the clear requisite exploitation of the participant affective labour, these experiences are clearly productive of extremes of pleasure and engagement. Many of the respondents and commentators on social media make exclamations of extreme pleasure in relation to their engagement as Creatures – for instance one respondent:

If you get a chance to go back as Creatures of the Underworld, do it. Completely different experience and right in the action during the movie. We stayed until the end and danced with the actors on the stage. Bloody excellent!! (CA)

In the following blog posting, the participant articulates several key elements that are representative of much of the respondent feedback.

On the two separate occasions that XXX and I attended the event, we had completely different experiences. We had different interactions with characters, discovered new areas that we had previously missed, joined in with different activities and ate and drank delicious food and cocktails! There is so much to see and do that no matter how many times you come to see the show, you will always come away with a different experience and that is why Secret Cinema’s

*Moulin Rouge!* excited me as much as it did, and why I am currently feeling such a huge mixture of emotions about the end of the run of this production. The highs you feel while you are there are literally euphoric and that is also why the lows you feel the following day are so hard to deal with. (itmh)

Such commentary is redolent with evidence of the intensity, generated through the richly participatory nature of these experiences and the extent to which they activate a 'euphoric' pleasure. Hence the reference to the carnivalesque and an excessive, unlicensed, unbridled set of behaviours; produced through the physical and emotional charge of collective public cheering, singing, and dancing.

### **Residual Affect**

In these examples above we see the evidence of how these temporary, affectively and aesthetically rich experience leads to the fleeting instantiation of what appears as an 'experience community' (Atkinson and Kennedy 2018) a temporary collective that which persists only for the duration of the event, and shortly afterward via social media, circulated and re-circulated by other 'experiencers' and crucially *Secret Cinema* themselves as a form of cumulative marketing. In our analysis of these events, this 'experience community' is notably shallow and fleeting, despite these moments of evident political engagement and despite the apparent power of the affective charge generated by the participative nature of the experience itself.

Sarah Atkinson (2018) elaborates a concept of 'residual affect' to capture the complex feelings and pleasures that might hang over or persist after an intense and participatory event has concluded. In our collaborative research we have been evolving a range of different techniques for capturing the affectual complexity in the post-event moment (see Atkinson and Kennedy 2017) – but we can also capture the vestiges of these through the often ecstatic social media proclamations and the shift to a mournful tone of longing:

Want to be back in Montmartre. Also can I please marry Toulouse.  
Thankyouplease [#heisjustthecutest](#) [#secretcinema](#) [#societyoflove](#) (T7)

@SecretCinema I think I'm over it then I listen to the #MoulinRouge soundtrack and realise I am really really not [#societyoflove](#) (T2)

I am so sad to have to say goodbye to such an amazingly indulgent, benevolent and awe-inspiring world but also so happy to have been able to be a part of it, even if only for a few hours of my life. (itmh)

Once the run concludes, however, all public evidence of the ‘experience community’ dissipates and there are no traces left of the fevered tweeting and re-tweeting of post-event pleasures.

## **Conclusion**

In the analysis above, I position *Secret Cinema*’s commercial offering in a trajectory within which Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser argue that ‘rituals of consumption increasingly stand in for other modes of democratic engagement with profound consequences for what counts as *civic resistance*’ (2012:9). The participation has the potential to stand in for or replace any other form of actual political activism thus risking to subvert Rigall’s evangelical intention to stimulate and encourage greater activism – to turn his audience in to activists *through* their participation. The analysis above also indicates the paradoxes that emerge in the processes of the commodification of participation – pleasurable or political or both. The controlling structure of the format at the heart of *Secret Cinema*’s brand also undermines any rhetoric of freedom or choice within which it is situated. Finally, the problematic stratification of price bands leads – in the case of *Moulin Rouge!* – to the direct objectification and exploitation of one group of participants in the service of the pleasures of those who can pay more. The Creatures of the Underworld, ‘may sing and dance in the revolution’, but they do so to command, subject to tight control and under the distanced and disembodied gaze of the Children and the Aristocrats who look on from above.

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- Dr Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Stanley Kubrick: 1964)
- I, Daniel Blake* (Ken Loach: 2016)
- Lawrence of Arabia* (David Lean: 1962)
- Moulin Rouge!* (Baz Luhrmann: 2001)
- Shawshank Redemption* (Frank Darabont 1994)
- Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* (Irvin Kershner: 1980)
- The Great Dictator* (Charles Chaplin: 1940)
- 28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle: 2002)

## Note:

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<sup>1</sup> Initials indicate an in depth interview with anonymised participants, T(number) indicates the text is drawn from Twitter.