

## **My Search for ‘Passion Pits with Pix’: Cinema history and 1950s Drive-In audiences**

Guy Barefoot,  
University of Leicester, UK

### **Abstract:**

The American drive-in cinema has often been known as a ‘passion pit’ or a ‘passion pit with pix’ and been associated with dating or delinquent teenagers. The label was frequently invoked in the 1950s, but often by those who insisted that drive-ins were well-policed spaces appealing to family audiences both as a film-viewing venue and for its accompanying attractions. This view was largely supported by surveys such as those undertaken by Rodney Luther in 1949 and 1950. The drive-in has also been seen as an inclusive space, appealing to those who felt excluded from indoor cinemas. In examining these differences, this study traces the ‘passion pit’ label back to its teenage slang roots and examines the different ways the label has been used and understood. It draws on diverse forms of evidence, from trade press reports to legal records, establishing the heterogeneity of the drive-in cinema, the drive-in audience and how that audience behaved, while also raising questions about the limits of this evidence.

**Keywords:** drive-in, family audiences, 1950s, sex, slang, teenagers

In the 1972 Broadway version of *Grease*, Sandy walks out on Danny at the drive-in, leaving her boyfriend to sing:

Gee, it’s no fun,  
Drinking beer in the backseat  
All alone just ain’t too neat  
At the passion pit wanting you.

Danny’s ‘wanting you’ makes clear that he has not gone to the drive-in just to watch a film. More generally, his language reflects a wider understanding of what happened (or what

some wanted to happen) in 1950s drive-ins. The phrase ‘passion pit’ repeatedly appears in popular culture but also in studies of popular culture, whether as a synonym for drive-in cinema or as a comment on what took place there. From Kerry Segrave’s ‘When I began to research drive-ins I had no preset ideas or preconceived notions – with the exception of the drive-in’s reputation as a passion pit’ to Mary Morley Cohen’s ‘Forgotten Audiences in the Passion Pits’, discussions of the drive-in cinema have found it difficult to avoid, or convenient to use, the ‘passion pit’ label.<sup>1</sup> For Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, ‘the prospect of sharing a darkened front seat for several hours brought many adolescent couples to the local “passion pit”’.<sup>2</sup> Thomas Docherty is more definitive, arguing that it was obvious that ‘the romantic possibilities of the drive-in were the most powerful inducement to regular patronage. Among ‘50s teenagers the back rows of any drive-in lot had a deserved reputation as the local “passion pit”’.<sup>3</sup>

Did they? Did teenagers even make up a significant proportion of the drive-in audience? A 1949 survey of drive-in attendance at cinemas in the Minneapolis St Paul area, the first of two supervised by Rodney Luther, identified an audience breakdown of those over twelve as ten per cent in the twelve-to-twenty age group, forty-eight per cent in the twenty-one-to-thirty age group and forty-two per cent over thirty.<sup>4</sup> According to Luther, the teenager was in a minority, meriting only a footnote in which he insisted that ‘all operators vehemently object to *Variety’s* description of drive-ins as passion pits with pixs’ pointing out that their largest patronage is the ‘family’ trade, that patrons’ activities are closely watched, and that nothing happens that does not happen in conventional theaters.’<sup>5</sup>

Faced with this discrepancy, when I started to look at drive-in cinemas and their audiences my initial interest was in the extent to which a concern with the 1950s American teenager had obscured other, as Cohen puts it, ‘forgotten’ audiences. Yet this forgotten, non-teenage audience, had attracted attention from an early stage. Luther’s survey was picked up in the trade press and newspapers immediately following its publication, and from the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s there were regular reports on the drive-in’s family appeal. Cinema historians could have paid more attention to the drive-in but accounts such as those by Segrave and Cohen have looked beyond the ‘passion pit’ label. The label has tended to be relied on most in wider historical overviews or where it fits the topic. Thus, following the lead set out in the Kinsey report on female sexuality in the 1950s, the authors of a recent survey of back-seat sex contextualise their study by referring to the long history of advances in modes of transportation influencing sexual behaviour, including drive-in cinemas, ‘often described as “passion pits”’, which in the 1940s ‘became another favourite location for sex in parked cars.’<sup>6</sup> Different accounts of American automobile and suburban culture assert that drive-ins ‘quickly gained reputations as ‘passion pits’ where the show in the cars was usually better than the one on the screen.’<sup>7</sup> The emphasis changes where the focus is on exhibition practices. Sheldon Hall, for instance, invoked Luther’s survey when he wrote that ‘Despite their reputation as “passion pits with pix”’, research indicated that the drive-in’s ‘target audience was the family group rather than teenage lovers, and in order to attract parents with children many theatres offered childcare

facilities, playgrounds and games such as miniature golf and bowling, and even laundry facilities'.<sup>8</sup>

From passion pits to laundry services, there are thus alternative narratives of the 1950s drive-in. But if teenagers had been in a minority at the drive-in in the 1950s, how had the drive-in gained its reputation? This suggested another line of investigation, less a concern with disproving the 'passion pit' myth by pointing to the laundry sink reality than an examination of the nature of that myth and how it came to be constructed. In his discussion of the 'drive-in theatre of the mind', David Church argues that the 'selective nostalgia' for a relatively innocent past of hormonal adolescent car-owners temporarily freed from parental oversight overlaps with the myth of the drive-in 'as a notorious site for the exhibition of exploitation films, especially as post-1950s censorship erosion allowed content to veer sharply towards the violent, sexual and sleazy'.<sup>9</sup> It is in line with the latter myth that 'drive-in movie' has become virtually synonymous with 'exploitation film'. It is worth pointing out, as Church does, that this overlooks the substantial part of the drive-in programme that differed little from other cinemas.<sup>10</sup> It is also worth examining, as Church does, how this has operated, both as a commercial strategy and a form of exploitation film fandom. We can also investigate not just the retrospective construction of backrow, backseat 1950s summer romance under the stars but the pressures that meant that operators felt they had to insist that they rigorously policed their drive-ins.

My concern here is therefore with a debate over the drive-in audience: who they were and what they did. Questions about who was expected to attend, who did, and for what purpose, were being asked from the drive-in's origins in 1933. The opening of the Drive-In Theatre in Camden, New Jersey that year, prompted *Motion Picture Herald* speculate about the 'fun Young America could have in a coupe under the added stimulation of a sophisticated Hollywood romance!'<sup>11</sup> Questions and concerns became more pronounced after the Second World War, at a time of increasing attention paid to teenage behaviour and (with the publication of the Kinsey reports) sexual behaviour more generally.<sup>12</sup> It was also a time of a rapid increase in the number of drive-in cinemas. While indoor cinemas declined from 17,689 in 1948 to 12,291 in 1958, over the same period the number of drive-ins increased from 820 to 4,063.<sup>13</sup> Thus the 1950s saw not just a shift from entertainment away from the home (the cinema) to entertainment in the home (television) but also significant changes in the nature of cinema-going, to the extent that in July and August 1952 there were more people in the United States going to an outdoor than an indoor cinema.<sup>14</sup>

Looking back at these debates itself raises questions about the nature of cinema history. This is one of a number of studies that builds on Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery's emphasis on the diversity of film history data and the value of non-filmic evidence for the film historian.<sup>15</sup> However, as a work of cinema and not just film history, it not only draws on diverse sources for the better understanding of how films are viewed but uses these to examine cinemas as spaces in which film viewing took place alongside other activities (including having sex, eating and drinking, even doing the laundry). It is concerned with

what we can learn from different sources, from individual accounts to market research surveys, and what such sources do not tell us. Like Annette Kuhn's study of memory and 1930s cinema, it examines the nature of the cinema-going experience rather than the reception of individual films, though it does this through examining what others have published on this topic rather than through questionnaire and interviews I have conducted.<sup>16</sup> I draw on this published material, first, to search for the origins of the 'passion pits' and 'passion pits with pix' labels and their use in the period immediately leading up to and across the 1950s. I will follow this with an examination of other narratives of drive-in attendance published in this period.

### **Petting Parks and Passion Pits**

Luther and others attributed the label 'passion pits with pix' to *Variety* but before the trade paper had used that phrase commentators had already identified its first part as teenage slang for the drive-in cinema. At least one account claims that 'passion pit' was used in this way as early as the late 1930s.<sup>17</sup> However, the earliest printed reference to the drive-in as a passion pit I have seen is a sentence in the 26 July 1948 edition of *Time*: 'The nation's youth were necking in drive-in movies instead of in shady lanes; teenagers in Indianapolis referred to them as "passion pits"'.<sup>18</sup> The association between parked cars and romance/sex has a longer history. In the words of David Lewis, 'The auto inspired more newspaper and magazine cartoons than any other artefact during the first three decades of the century, and many had sexual connotations.'<sup>19</sup> As well as cartoons, valentine and postcards, songs and advertisements frequently emphasised the connection. In the 1930s it was presumably this understanding (rather than any more definitive evidence) that led to suggestions that the arrival of the drive-in meant that 'No longer are Hollywood's secluded drives cluttered up with romantic couples searching for a quiet place in which to spoon.'<sup>20</sup> The subsequent speculation that the drive-in afforded 'a grand retreat for young love – just park and spark, as it were' was followed by the comment that 'attendance is by no means characterised by amorous youths. Adults who are patently fathers and mothers, frequently with a car full of youngsters, are to be observed driving in'.<sup>21</sup> The popular image was not necessarily supported by the published evidence.

The link between cars, sex and movies could be humorous but could be made as a complaint. In 1940 Harry Perlowitz protested at a 1940 meeting of the Independent Theatre Protective Association of Wisconsin and Upper Michigan that drive-ins were 'nothing more than petting parks'.<sup>22</sup> In 1947 restrictions were imposed on drive-ins in Montgomery County, Maryland in an attempt to stop them become, in the words of *Variety*, 'Licensed Petting Places': in imposing the order, juvenile court magistrate Alfred D. Noyes claimed that a drive-in in neighbouring Prince George county was a contributory factor to juvenile delinquency cases in his court.<sup>23</sup> And in 1948, only just after *Time* had identified 'passion pits' as teenage, Indianapolis slang, the British paper, the *Daily Mail*, looked across the Atlantic and reported that in the United States 'Drive-in cinemas, where you watch movies from parked cars, are being denounced by Church groups as "passion pits"'.<sup>24</sup>

Teenagers were attracting increasing press attention. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, *Ladies Home Journal* published a series of articles that stressed the importance that dating, cars and the movies had in the lives of teenagers. Subsequently reissued in the anthology, *Profile of Youth*, they ranged from individual portraits to wider surveys. One of those profiled, eighteen year-old Maxine Wallace from just outside Corinth, Mississippi, dated mostly carless farm boys, but identified the local options as including two small movie theatres and a new drive-in where 'everybody is too busy necking to watch the movie.'<sup>25</sup> In these reports, film-going often involved attending indoor cinemas, but a cross country survey of teenage habits and language described how in York, Pennsylvania, teenage couples 'may drive to a hamburger joint on the edge of town for a 'French poodle' (hot dog) and donuts with gobs of peanut butter in the hole, play miniature golf, enjoy a fast game of shuffleboard on outdoor courts, head for the 'passion pit' (drive-in movie) or join the two thousand fellows and girls who jam the Teen-Age Club on weekends for dancing and table tennis.'<sup>26</sup>

Like 'petting parks', the phrase 'passion pits' could be used to condemn the drive-in but it could also sit alongside donuts and table tennis as part of the everyday life of American youth. While the context could be mundane, the vocabulary invoked Hollywood melodrama in a self-consciously absurd way that undercut suggestions of moral panic. It was initially identified as localised. *Time* discovered it in Indianapolis, *Ladies Home Journal* in Pennsylvania, and a 1951 *Newsweek* report on teenage slang identified Seattle teenagers as referring to drive-ins as 'passion pits'.<sup>27</sup> It was quickly understood as a phrase used across the US. The *Newsweek* survey of teenage slang was picked up in other papers.<sup>28</sup> A 1954 newspaper feature on 'Teen Talk' included 'Love box, passion pit or passion pasture' for drive-in theatre, without linking this to a particular region.<sup>29</sup> One mother who had told her sixteen year-old daughter that she was not allowed to go to the drive-in wrote to the *Los Angeles Times*, asking 'What is your opinion of them for young folks? They themselves refer to them as "passion pits"'.<sup>30</sup> 'Since the outdoor movies are largely patronized by young people,' claimed Louise M. Ackerman in 1957, 'the language takes on youthful flavour. The official name of an outdoor movie theatre may be Starview, but the patrons will likely refer to it, because of the lovers attending, as the *passion pit*'.<sup>31</sup>

Teenagers could react against the spread of the term and the extent to which adult reports on teenage talk exist as a reliable measure of sub-cultural language or activity is unclear. A survey of adolescent attitudes and opinions published in 1965 recorded that 'The term "Passion pit" for moving picture drive-ins was resented. "No such thing!"'.<sup>32</sup> *Ladies Home Journal* itself subsequently quoted one teenager's annoyance 'that so many parents are against drive-in movies. Could it be because we call them "passion pits"? We can forget how literal minded parents can be, and that they are in such a sweat about anything that even *sounds* like sex.'<sup>33</sup>

The phrase became film industry slang when *Variety* added the 'with pix' suffix. At the end of 1948 it reported that, while the overall trend in cinema admissions was downwards, drive-in cinemas were 'mushrooming throughout the country' and that the

'hep operator has at least three adults to a vehicle as his goal. Thus he can offset charges that his spot is a camouflaged lover's lane... a "passion pit with pix" as some call it.'<sup>34</sup> *Variety* adopted and modified existing slang (teenage and African-American), drawing also on the vocabulary of *Cab Calloway's Cat-ologue: A Hepster's Dictionary*, first published in 1938. Subsequently other publications identified *Variety* as the originator of the term. A report on a *Time* feature on the drive-ins noted that exhibitors denied 'that their places are, in *Variety's* phrase, "passion pits with pix"', insisting that 'nothing happens that doesn't go on in a balcony'.<sup>35</sup> *Variety* 'calls them "passion pits with pix" wrote John Durant in the *Saturday Evening Post*, though the exhibitors he talked to 'all firmly stated that no more went on in the cars than in the rear seats of the conventional theaters.'<sup>36</sup> Similarly at the end of the decade Arthur Mayer argued that drive-ins were 'no longer what *Variety* once called "passion pits with pix" but highly respectable family institutions doing a rushing business in hot dogs, pop. and pizza-pie'.<sup>37</sup>

*Variety's* own reports tended to be framed in similarly distanced or negative terms. They included a reference to 'Drive-ins, once labelled "passion pits with pix" and a suggestion that 'drive-in theatres are faced with the prospect of again being billed as "passion pits with pix"'.<sup>38</sup> *Variety* made its point most strongly when it followed the sub-heading 'Passion Pits. No!' with the argument that the term was outmoded 'for outdoor theatres now cater almost exclusively to the family trade'.<sup>39</sup>

The 'passion pits' label was repeatedly invoked in the 1950s in a range of publications, but in quotation marks, associated with another publication or past practice, or in order to be contradicted. Was it therefore a myth, either a slang term that was not meant to be taken literally or a statement that this is precisely what the drive-ins were not? Alternatively, did the cinema operators protest too much? For champion of the disreputable 'drive-in movie', Joe Bob Briggs:

Drive-in owners try to duck their reputation as proprietors of sleaze on the screen and sex in the seats. They've been denying it since 1948. You thumb through the old exhibitors' journals, and once a year you'll find an article which reads, 'Drive-ins Used to Be Passion Pits, but Now They're Family Entertainment Centers.' To this day you'll find articles like that, and it's always last year they were passion pits.<sup>40</sup>

One variation on this was AIP producer Sam Arkoff's recollection of making exploitation films for the teenage audience, 'who helped drive-ins earn the nickname "passion pits" – crowding into backseats in the back rows'.<sup>41</sup> He went to suggest that drive-ins were soon, 'attracting more than teenagers. While dating adolescents still made up the majority of the drive-in audiences, the outdoor theaters installed playgrounds to lure young families through their gates.'<sup>42</sup>

Another was to reverse this narrative, as in the relatively recent suggestion that, 'drive-in movies, originally conceived as outdoor entertainment facilities for families, soon

became known as “passion pits”, frequented by newly mobile teenagers’.<sup>43</sup> Similar differences were part of the debate in the 1950s. The 1955 US Senate sub-committee investigating juvenile delinquency was told by William Mooring, film and television editor for *Catholic Tidings*, that ‘The drive-in was once regarded as practically sacrosanct to family entertainment, because people could take their kids along in the car. It is changing very much, not only here on the coast but I understand throughout the country.’<sup>44</sup> His complaint was partly that Californian drive-ins had taken to booking what he described as the ‘crime and violence and sex picture’ but also that some drive-ins:

not only show pictures that are calculated to provide emotional excitement for some young people, but that they condone and even to a degree encourage behaviour that obviously appeals for some police action. The general technique, as I understand it, that an eye is blinked at certain cars which are diverted to certain parts of the amphitheatre, and the understanding young patrons take along with them is they need not be overly concerned with the entertainment quality of the picture, that there will be no police patrol passing by and no interference from the manager.<sup>45</sup>

This image of the permissive drive-in operator has been picked up in later accounts. ‘Management occasionally helped matters along’ suggest one writer, ‘hiring “ushers” who served as “auto pimps” and providing prostitutes to make “car calls”.’<sup>46</sup> In trade publications and newspapers in the 1950s the insistence was rather that drive-ins were rigorously policed. One newspaper report quoted from a ‘well-known drive-in chain’s list of instructions to managers’:

One of the most important managerial tasks falling under the general heading of proper surveillance is that of preventing breaches of good conduct. In this regard a special officer or night watchman should be assigned to patrol the lot after 10 P.M., looking casually into every car without disturbing the occupants. He should go from the front ramp to the back ramp, and back again, never stopping, so as ‘to prevent any sort of misconduct’.<sup>47</sup>

Similarly, an operator quoted by *Variety* in 1959 explained: ‘We have three attendants checking the field. Where there are no heads in a car, our man raps on the window and warns the occupants. If on the second time around, they’ve failed to cooperate, we ask them to leave and never come back.’<sup>48</sup>

### **Bottle Warming and Swimming Pools**

It is at least clear that the reasons teenagers had for attending the drive-in was a subject of some anxiety. However, if one way of contesting the image of the drive-in as a passion pit was thus to insist that the drive-in was policed, a second was to emphasise that teenagers

made up a relatively small proportion of the audience. The surveys supervised by Rodney Luther of the University of Minnesota fed into this debate. The first of these took place between 15 August and 15 September 1949, and consisted of 1,624 interviews at five drive-ins in the Minneapolis-St Paul area.<sup>49</sup> The second, 'even more comprehensive' survey was conducted in July and August 1950 at six suburban, subsequent-run drive-ins in the same area.<sup>50</sup> The *Theatre Catalog* report on the second survey does not give precise numbers, saying only that it was based on responses from some 5,000 adults in over 2,000 cars 'selected at random from all theatres, on all days of the week, all weeks of the month, and for all performances.'<sup>51</sup>

In the 1950 survey 67% of cars contained two adults (defined as twelve or over), down from 74% in 1949, while 54% of cars contained children (down from 55%), with variations from 31% for second weekday performance to 63% for the first weekend performance.<sup>52</sup> 19.3% of all adults were between twelve and twenty (up from 10.4%), 45.1% between twenty-one and thirty (down from 48.2%), 22.3% between thirty-one and forty (down from 26.7%), 8.4% between forty-one and fifty (down from 9.7%), 3.2% between fifty-one and sixty (down from 4.4%), and 1.7% over sixty (up from 0.6%).<sup>53</sup> For those in the twelve to twenty age group, attendance was highest at the second weekday performance (41%) and lowest at the first weekend performance (11.2%).<sup>54</sup>

When *Variety* picked up on Luther's original survey it did so under the heading 'Drive-Ins Nab "Lost" Audience', identifying the drive-ins appeal to the over-thirties as the survey's most significant finding.<sup>55</sup> At an exhibitors' conference in Minneapolis, noted the report, Luther 'blasted popular concept that drive-ins are "Passion Pits with Pix", since only 10% of those interviewed were under twenty – the necking crowd.'<sup>56</sup> As already noted, Luther himself argued that drive-in operators rejected the 'passion pit' label in his *Journal of Marketing* article. For Luther there was:

little doubt that drive-in theatres offer strong attractions to certain identifiable types of patrons: (1) parents who ordinarily face the costly and troublesome problems of finding a baby sitter; (2) the aged and the handicapped; (3) wage earners and farm residents who dislike the necessity of dressing-up and who possibly resent the stylized amenities associated with a visit to a conventional in-town theatre; (4) those others who have reason to enjoy the drive-in's novelty, their wide variety of convenient services, the open-air atmosphere, car-side refreshments, and the special air of informality that is characteristic of the typical drive-in and its audience.<sup>57</sup>

Luther's second survey led him to similar but slightly different conclusions. Here he identified two drive-in audiences: those with and without children. He linked the former to the potential film audience 'lost' to conventional cinemas as a 'logical, loyal backbone of patronage for the drive-in theatre, come what may', but noted also that the latter group was almost as large as the former.<sup>58</sup> The convenience of the drive-in was thus 'certainly not

an advantage limited only to those with children, the aged or the handicapped'.<sup>59</sup> He pointed out small but significant shifts. Less children were attending weekday performance, more at weekends. The average number of adults per car had increased (with 30.6% containing more than two adults, up from 22.7% in 1949) and the average adult age had decreased, with a greater number in the seventeen to twenty age group, many of whom attended in groups of three or four to a car, accounting for the relatively high proportion of teenagers at the second weekday performance.<sup>60</sup>

The surveys conducted by Luther thus present a slightly more complex picture than has generally been acknowledged. They indicate that teenagers made up a proportion of the drive-in audience, but that this tended to be concentrated in the late weekday performance, and consisted less of couples than of larger groups, at least in the Twin Cities area at the beginning of the 1950s. For some at least the larger group was a reassurance: 'We have a sex problem but it has by no means increased in proportion with the use of cars,' claimed one High School Principle quoted by *Ladies Home Journal*. 'I think, myself, that the tendency at the high-school age to "swarm", not with just one or two in a car, but filling it up, is a safeguard.'<sup>61</sup> However, Luther's surveys were used by those constructing alternative narratives, based on the idea of the family drive-in audience combined with an argument about the drive-in's appeal to a 'lost audience'. The 'necking crowd' were identified as going to the drive-in for reasons other than what was on the big screen, but so also were those older or younger than the teenagers, if for other reasons.

Trade publications and drive-in operators placed particular stress on the family audience, that is, married couples with young children. 'No matter what the drive-in theatre started out to be, it has become a family institution', wrote one exhibitor, declaring that, 'Seventy to eighty per cent of the business of any drive-in is family trade that tosses the children into the car. Even the baby can be taken along – since most well-regulated drive-ins will provide a free bottle warming service'.<sup>62</sup> Reports repeatedly emphasised a bottle-warming service. 'The drive-in seems to have evolved for families with babies' announced another *Theatre Catalog* feature. 'More and more theatres are putting in bottle warming services in answer to an increasing clamor'.<sup>63</sup> One *American Weekly* cover illustration captured one perception of the drive-in audience: a couple sit close together in the front seat of their car, watching a western, but the man's right arm is not around the woman but holding a bottle with which he is feeding a baby in the back seat.<sup>64</sup>

Alongside the emphasis on the drive-in as a family space there was a repeated insistence that it was also an inclusive space. According to another account

Playgrounds for the small fry will provide dividends by assuring an early crowd for the first show. Pa and Ma do not have to dress up – they can relax and smoke – and invalid 'Aunt Mary', who has not been out of the house for years except for an auto ride, can be driven right into the theatre and enjoy the show.

Similar points had been and continued to be repeated elsewhere. In 1945 the President of Park-In Theatres, wrote that the drive-in audience consisted largely of those who had not been in the habit of going to the cinema, including:

mothers with small children (about 80 per cent); labourers and factory workers who, coming from a hard day's work in old clothes, did not want to go to the bother of dressing but wanted to relax in the open air; stout people who found the average theatre chairs uncomfortable; elderly people; people in ill-health; cripples and other shut-ins.<sup>65</sup>

In another account, the drive-in was identified as attracting a 'Forgotten Audience': 'the physically handicapped, invalids, convalescents, the aged, deaf people, expectant mothers, parents with infants and small children – whole families, dressed as they pleased in the privacy and comfort of their own domain on wheels'.<sup>66</sup> The point was picked up in *Saturday Evening Post*, where the drive-in was identified as attracting new fans, with 'moderate-income families who bring the kids to save money on baby-sitters' leading the list, ahead of workers and farmers who could come in their work clothes, the old, the hard of hearing, invalids, the fat, the tall and the teenage.<sup>67</sup>

Such reports make it tempting to construct a narrative in which the drive-in was underpinned by a democratic and inclusive ideal. In the words of one example of drive-in nostalgia, 'Rich or poor, everyone was welcome, making the drive-in movie theatre one of the great equalisers'.<sup>68</sup> That the reality may have been more complicated is demonstrated by the issue of segregation. Luther identified the drive-in as 'generally unsegregated', and in 1949 *Variety* reported that the strict enforcement of segregation in many parts of the South did not extend to the drive-in: as a consequence, African-Americans were flocking to the open-air theatres.<sup>69</sup> For Church, nostalgia for the 1950s belongs to the 'white, middle-class American' but published drive-in nostalgia includes material such as the memory that black migrant farm workers 'were always strangers... Rarely were we welcomed in the indoor theatres. But the drive-ins were different.'<sup>70</sup> However, they were not always different in the 1950s. Shannon Bell calculated that at least 85 drive-ins catering exclusively to African-Americans were built in the American South (Florida and Texas included).<sup>71</sup> Elsewhere that audience was excluded. The campaign to desegregate drive-ins in the Winston-Salem area of North Carolina was still running in 1962 and it was another year before segregation of drive-ins was abandoned in Little Rock, Arkansas.<sup>72</sup> According to Bell other drive-ins segregated their audience with separate entrances, rest rooms and parking areas, or catered to an audience officially excluded by setting up speakers at the back of the lot.<sup>73</sup> It is clear that there were variations depending location and the attitude of individual exhibitors.

At issue here was not just who attended but also what they came to see or do. If there is a consensus across different accounts it is that the nature of what was on the screen cannot fully account for the appeal of the drive-in. No form of cinema-going can be entirely explained by film titles but cinema's other attractions have taken on a particular significance

in explanations of how the drive-in has been understood, from the speculation in *Variety* that ‘necking’ explained the presence of cars at a Rochester drive-in during a snowstorm to Rodney Luther’s calculation that the average patron drove 17.6 miles to the drive-in, ‘undoubtedly right past one or several conventional theaters ... even though the majority of the patrons believe that the picture shown are either not as desirable as, or older than, those showing at conventional theaters’.<sup>74</sup>

In Luther’s different accounts the drive-in cinema was only in part a cinema. It was also a place offering pony rides, a laundry service and other attractions. Numerous other accounts emphasised the multi-faceted nature of the drive-in cinema. It shared some of what it offered with indoor cinemas which also sold food and drink, though as Segrave notes, drive-in cinemas were at the forefront of the increasing importance of the concessionary stand.<sup>75</sup> However, commentators repeatedly emphasised the extent to which the films and the refreshments were accompanied by other attractions and services. ‘You can eat a complete meal, get your car washed and serviced, including a change of tires, have the week’s laundry done, your shopping list filled and the baby’s bottle warmed’ wrote John Durant.<sup>76</sup> ‘Where once the outdoor theatre was considered just that ... a motion picture house without a roof...’ wrote Walter Bintz (in a feature on swimming pools at drive-ins), ‘more and more services and facilities have been added ... until today many outdoor theatres have taken on the functions and appearance of community centres’.<sup>77</sup> The drive-in was distinguished from other forms of cinema through its role as playground or amusement park. As one writer put it, this could range from simple and stationary playgrounds situated in front of the screen to mechanised rides: ‘miniature trains, motorboats, small ferris wheels, carousels, airplanes, buggies etc.’<sup>78</sup>

This image developed at a time when television was expanding as an alternative, more domestic form of spectatorship, and more generally in Cohen’s word ‘in the context of a culture in transition’.<sup>79</sup> Spatial and temporal barriers were being broken down through the rise of the automobile and the highway, a domestic architecture of picture windows, and television’s blurring of boundaries between private space and public entertainment.<sup>80</sup> In Cohen’s account the drive-in was a hybrid mode of exhibition challenging and expanding the film industry’s conception of a homogenous, easily defined urban audience, and which ‘actively solicited audience members forgotten or deliberately overlooked by mainstream theatres, such as children, housewives, people with disabilities, labouring men and teenagers’.<sup>81</sup> The drive-in cinema was both a public and private space. It offered an informal privacy that approached home television viewing as well as a social environment. It was a place where unshaven men could be seen standing in a concession line and children ran around in their pyjamas, and for Cohen it was ‘this element of forbidden mixing’ that ‘led to the perception of drive-ins as “passion pits”, places of illicit contact’.<sup>82</sup>

While there are other indications that the association between cars, dating and the movies had already prepared the groundwork for the ‘passion pit’ label, it is clear that the drive-in did combine the private and the public in a particular way. The car took people away from the home but allowed them to remain in their own space or to mix with the

crowd. Going to the drive-in could involve a lot more than watching a film. Alternatively it could involve a new form of film viewing. Thus Dudley Andrew remembers how the drive-in allowed audiences to 'freely criticise the film and discuss its effects with fellow cinephiles inside the private screening room of our station wagon. One could talk at the drive-in.'<sup>83</sup>

### **The Dark Side of the Drive-In**

Andrew's remembrance comes after his acknowledgment that 'many of today's Americans were initiated sexually and alcoholically at the drive-in'.<sup>84</sup> However, in researching this topic, it has proved difficult to locate more precise evidence of the drive-in as a passion pit. We need to treat reports on the drive-in attracting a lost audience with some caution, as such reports were needed to counter not just the suspicion that drive-ins were immoral places but also the charge that they took audiences away from other cinemas. Yet there is clear evidence that in the 1950s drive-ins did attract married couples with young children. In contrast, my search for passion pits has uncovered assertions, generalised allegations and denials. Even Segrave's chapter on 'Sex in the Drive-in' is essentially concerned with denials that this took place, qualified by individual and non-specific memories of how 'Families traditionally parked in the front row; teens who were dating parked in the middle rows; while those with serious sex on their minds took up the back rows.'<sup>85</sup>

It seemed that the evidence for back-seat sex at the drive-in was anecdotal, in contrast to the statistical evidence collected by Luther and others. I then came across the case of Mae Bell Kirkwood. On the night of 8<sup>th</sup> February 1946, Kirkwood, described as at the time a minor over the age of eighteen, visited the drive-in on Florida Street, East Baton Rouge, with James McFarland (also over eighteen). Kirkwood later testified that while there McFarland made repeated attempts to rape her, succeeding on the fourth attempt after he had struck her on the head and rendered her unconscious. Medical evidence backed up her story but McFarland was acquitted at the original trial and the appeal on the grounds that the sex was consensual. One reason for this decision was that, in the words of Judge Dory, this took place 'in a Drive-In Theatre, with other cars parked all around her, and it would have been a simple matter for her to have stepped out of McFarland's car and advised her neighbors of what he was trying to do, or at least, to have called out for help.'<sup>86</sup>

This is a single case, predating the 1950s, but a revealing one. The point here is not just the unsurprising confirmation that some people had sex at the drive-in but that the appeal of the drive-in as a dating location rested in both in its seclusion and lack of seclusion. The drive-in could be chosen for a date, not because the dark at the back of the lot allowed people to do what they wanted but in the hope that it did not. In Kirkwood's case this worked against her in that the understanding that she could have called for help but did not was interpreted as consent.

## Conclusion

'Absolutely they were passion pits', insisted one interviewee for a newspaper feature on the passing of the drive-in.<sup>87</sup> They were certainly called that. The term did not originate with *Variety* as many have suggested but as a form of teenage slang. *Variety* lengthened the phrase to 'passion pits with pix' but tended to use it negatively, insisting that it was a misrepresentation of audience behaviour. Other publications followed suit. The label persisted as the nature of the drive-in cinema, and the drive-in movie, changed.

These comments need some qualification. Evidence on the use of 'passion pit' as teenage slang comes through publications such as *Newsweek*, *Time* and *Ladies Home Journal*. There are limits to what we know about language before it existed in print or about the reality of audience behaviour in the 1950s. However we do have some information on the nature of the drive-in audience. It was certainly not restricted to teenagers. Those who argued that audiences were largely over twenty or under twelve could point to surveys such as those conducted by Rodney Luther as well as the number of drive-in operators who provided baby's bottle warming or installed children's playgrounds. Such accounts could in their own way downplay variations in the drive-in audience. In presenting his research on the drive-in, Luther emphasised the size and location of his survey: the 'Minneapolis-St Paul marketing area' was one commonly used by national organisations for sampling and market research.<sup>88</sup> Yet even his research indicated some shift over a short period of time, perhaps also because of a slightly different time of the year, on different days of the week and between the first and second programme. The nature of the drive-in audience could vary from region to region, across seasons, days of the week, time of the programme, and over longer periods of time. These are questions relevant to any audience study but in a particular way to the drive-in. It was a form of entertainment particularly associated with the summer that could bring in different audiences outside school and college holidays and to those drive-ins that operated throughout the year.

This diversity is evident even within accounts of individual drive-in screenings. Reporting on a Massachusetts drive-in in the 'Travelogue' section of British *Observer*, Francis Russell wrote:

On one side of me a group of teenagers are having a beer party, *sans* amplifier, their car radio turned to rock 'n' roll. On the other side a couple in a convertible are twined in each other's arms beside the steering wheel, oblivious of the fate of the blonde [on the screen]. Ahead I can see several children asleep at the back of a sedan. The mother and father, far apart in the front seat, stare at the screen while eating pop-corn...<sup>89</sup>

There were limits to drive-in diversity, particularly at those cinemas that segregated or excluded African-Americans. In addition, there are limits to the weight we can give to such eye-witness testimony. What is striking about the *Observer* report is that, while it presents a picture of a range of audience ages and activities, the way it was framed was more singular.

It was titled 'Drive-In "Passion Pit"'. The prevalence of the label was not diminished in reports that highlighted the diversity of the actual audience.

The term retained sufficient currency in the 1970s for Danny's reference to 'passion pit' in the original stage version of *Grease*. The same cannot be said of the film. Instead of the stage show's 'Alone at the Drive-In', in *Grease* (1978) Danny (John Travolta) sings 'Sandy', in which he makes no reference to 'passion pits' but worries about being:

Stranded at the drive-in, branded a fool  
What will they say Monday at school?

However, Hollywood's toned-down version retained not only the drive-in scene but also its different connotations. In *Grease*, the film, the drive-in is depicted as an exclusively teenage space (albeit acted out by people in their twenties and thirties). It moves from a trailer for *The Blob* (1958), the sort of teen horror film that has come to be identified as a drive-in movie (though ironically the trailer shows an audience fleeing from an indoor cinema) to Rizzo's (Stockard Channing) announcement of her pregnancy before attention shifts to Sandy (Olivia Newton-John) and Danny in what she refers to as the 'sin wagon'. It ends with Danny singing the song 'Sandy' on the seat of a swing in front of a screen showing versions of those concessionary stand advertisements that have themselves become the subject of nostalgia. The drive-in is imagined as teenage space, children's playground and film screening venue. This recreation of a recreation of an image of 1950s cinema-going is also a reminder that cinema-going has meant different things. People went there for sex, or with people who wanted that. They also went there to eat, play in the amusement park, do the laundry, no doubt, as reports from the 1950s so frequently insisted, to save on baby-sitting costs, and even to watch what was on the screen.

### **Biographical Note:**

Dr Guy Barefoot is Associate Professor of Film Studies and member of the Centre for American Studies at the University of Leicester. His publications include *Hollywood's Gaslight Melodramas: From Victorian London to 1940s Hollywood* (Continuum 2001, reissued Bloomsbury 2016), *The Lost Jungle: Cliffhanger Action and Hollywood Serials of the 1930s and 1940s* (University of Exeter Press, 2017) and *Trash Cinema* (Columbia University Press, 2017). Having undertaken extensive research into the adult audience for the Hollywood sound serial, his current project is a study of the 1950s American drive-in. Email: [gb80@le.ac.uk](mailto:gb80@le.ac.uk).

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- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*
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