

## **Review**

Sarah Atkinson & Helen W. Kennedy (eds.), *Live Cinema: Cultures, Economies, Aesthetics*, 2018. Bloomsbury Academic. 314pp. ISBN: 978-1-5013-2483-3. £26.09 pb.

This edited collection of essays on contemporary cinematic experiences is an essential guide to burgeoning forms of live, immersive, and participatory cinema. Sarah Atkinson and Helen Kennedy edit and frame the contributions with introductions to each section and an afterword. Both editors are experts in the field of experiential cinema, with numerous prior publications on the subject (see Atkinson, 2014; Atkinson and Kennedy, 2015; Atkinson, 2017). The book investigates and reveals emerging cultures of creative practice, the aesthetics of live cinema, and new forms of audience engagement and reception.

With a foreword by Barbara Klinger, the collection is helpfully organised into four sections: 'Spaces', 'Temporalities', 'Audiences', and 'Creative and Artistic Practices'. The fifteen chapters grouped under these headings examine various forms of ephemeral and hybrid live cinematic events from different perspectives. The authors are a mix of early career scholars, artists, and internationally renowned academics.

The first section, on spaces, explores the social and cultural geographies of pop-up cinemas in unusual locations and places. Sites include graveyards in LA (Linda Levitt), rural castles and country houses (Emma Pett), British pleasure piers (Lavinia Brydon and Olu Jenzen), and a canal boat cruising through London's waterways (Ella Harris). Contributions discuss the reappropriation of urban, rural, and post-industrial locations and emphasise the significance of the site of spectatorship on audience experience where senses are drawn beyond the screen and out to the novel environment. This is aptly demonstrated by Brydon and Jenzen's analyses of film screenings – both mainstream (*Pirates of the Caribbean*) and specialised (documentary *Re: A Pier*) – on the community spaces of Clevedon and Hastings Piers. Respondents report on the communal and sensual pleasures of watching a film on a pop-up screen whilst the sun sets over the sea, and the waves sound beneath them rocking the pier slightly.

The second section, concerned with temporalities, includes chapters on time-bound, spatial, and place-based events. Screenings programmed as part of film festivals are analysed (Lesley-Ann Dickson), intersecting with issues of film tourism (María A. Vélez-Serna), and cult film fandom (Rosana Vivar). Here we find different methodological

approaches ranging from participant ethnography, autoethnography, participant observations, focus groups and interviews. In findings that chime with those of the first section of the book, embodied film viewings are reported as being where the aesthetics and materiality of the site of spectatorship is integral to audiences' experiences. Immersion is key and offers an enhancement to regular cinemagoing. As Dickson observes, '... the festival experience extends beyond the visual pleasures of the screen, offering a more multi-sensory (physical/visual/aural/auditory), and temporally and spatially extended, experience'.

Audiences are at the heart of this publication; as Atkinson and Kennedy state, they are 'key to animating live cinema spaces' (p.135). The third section looks at audiences' experiences with participatory cinema and includes studies of 'opera cinema' (Joseph Attard), the tastes and practices of the Prince Charles Cinema's loyal audiences (Richard McCulloch and Virginia Crisp), participatory zombie cinema-goers (Helen W. Kennedy), and recreations of cinemagoing experiences of the 1960s (Matthew Jones).

The final section's focus is on creative and artistic practices and presents innovative, practise-based research into four different types of live cinema production. Unusually, all four chapters here utilise a form of creative writing (including script excerpts and allusive, sensory writing), to interesting effect. Philip Brophy is an audio-visual practitioner who presents an 'artistic essay' on live (re)scoring. Josephine Machon reports on being a participant at a large-scale immersive theatrical performance of *The Drowned Man: A Hollywood Fable*. Brendon Wocke writes on Edible Cinema's gastronomic cinematic experience. The final chapter here is from Sarah Atkinson on a co-production between the National Theatre, Omnibus Theatre Company, Edible Cinema and King's College London called *Hangman Rehanged*. This section of the collection speaks to the nascent and experimental nature of the intersection of live theatre, film, culinary appreciation, and music. The elements of creative writing within these chapters add a level of originality and curiosity, and advance creative critical practice within the field of audience studies.

This book, admirably curated and presented by Atkinson and Kennedy, provides important insights into the relatively recent public passion and appetite for site-specific event cinema via innovative and immersive research methods. The result is a collection of detailed empirical data and compelling analyses of diverse live cinema phenomena.

I write this review after a year of intermittent lockdowns and cinema-closures due to the global pandemic. This is an era when the communal act of physically attending a film screening with groups of strangers in cinemas, at pop-up screenings, and via film festivals has been temporarily suspended. This has meant that live cinema events have not been taking place, in the UK at least. A great proportion of film exhibition has been moved to digital platforms, including most film festivals. Some independent cinemas have offered YourScreen, an emergent virtual cinema service streaming acclaimed films that are not available on the streaming giants (Netflix, Amazon Prime etc.). With lockdown now easing in the UK, and the film distribution and exhibition industry rapidly evolving to survive, it seems likely that film exhibition and theatre may remain, at least partly, online, giving audiences the option to remain in the comfort and safety of their own homes. I perceive a need for

new research to examine the extent to which hybridisation of physical and digital now occurs, and the implications of this for live cinema, audiences, researchers, and the industry.

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### **Biographical note:**

Dr Anna Blagrove is Arts and Humanities Visiting Research Fellow at the University of East Anglia (UEA) in Norwich where she gained her PhD on teenage film consumption and cinemagoing. She is a Lecturer in Animation (Visual Effects) at Norwich University of the Arts, and Director of Reel Connections, a company that uses film to engage with community groups. Her research interests are on film consumption (especially young audiences), animation, and Australian and Japanese cinema. Email: [a.blagrove@nua.ac.uk](mailto:a.blagrove@nua.ac.uk).

### **References:**

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