

## Engaged/Vacant: UK audience engagement with specialised film and cinemas

Anna Blagrove,  
Norwich University of the Arts, UK

### Abstract:

The concept of ‘film audience engagement’ is discussed in relation to the author’s doctoral research and other academic and film industry definitions and usage. Focus is on UK audience engagement with specialised film and cinemas. Three definitions are presented with different emphases: the act of engaging with a single film text, wider engagement with film culture including digital and social media, and film engagement as expressions of taste and cultural capital. Film exhibition industry uses of the term ‘engagement’ are considered. At a time when the COVID-19 pandemic forced the closure of all cinemas, the post-pandemic landscape requires a deeper knowledge of audiences in order to engage them in film and ensure that cinemas do not remain vacant.

**Keywords:** Audiences, film, film audience engagement, film audience experiences, specialised cinema, teenage audiences, cinema-going, film consumption.

### Introduction

There has been a seismic shift in film consumption and cinema-going behaviours since the COVID-19 global pandemic struck in March 2020. The virus has brought about unprecedented ‘wide ranging and damaging impacts’ to the cinema exhibition sector in the UK that are ‘being felt across the entire industry’ (BFI, 2020). A complete shutdown of cinemas was ordered by the UK Government in March 2020, followed by a cautious reopening in July with strict social distancing regulations. Following a second lockdown in November and then a third in January 2021, all cinemas were closed again, ensuring that the future for UK film exhibition – especially the specialised and independent sector – is far from secure or straightforward. Meanwhile, the film distribution model was severely disrupted as major studios either postponed cinema releases or positioned new films onto Subscription Video on Demand (SVoD) platforms. These developments have led to steep increases of 52% more SVoD viewing in April 2020 in comparison with the previous April

(Dams, 2020) and a striking 76% reduction in box office numbers compared to 2019 (Gant, 2021). Within this critical contemporary context, the core aim of this article is to better understand current concepts of film audience engagement via a review of both scholarly research, including my own doctoral thesis, and an examination of industry discourse and practice. Comprehending film consumption's varied and flexible contexts is crucial to informing debate about cinema's uncertain place in the UK economic landscape and national culture.

The term 'engagement' is omnipresent in scholarly film audience studies discourse and audience development work within the UK distribution and exhibition industry. This article examines academic and institutional definitions, the context and uses in which it is applied, and the ensuing implications of the term. I approach the subject from two different angles: as a film and media scholar, and as an industry professional within the specialised film field (i.e. the non-mainstream sector including 'arthouse'). Within the contemporary context of the coronavirus global pandemic, I focus on the economic, cultural, and social implications of audience engagement for academia, and specialised film exhibition platforms and venues. In line with industry usage, specialised film and cinema is generally understood as 'non-mainstream films, [including] foreign language and subtitled films, feature documentaries, 'arthouse' productions and films aimed at niche audiences' (BFI, 2018, p. 231). To clarify – my focus on specialised cinema is not motivated by a consideration of the field as more worthy than mainstream cinema, more that audiences connecting with it are in the minority and independent film culture has greater need of audience research data.

### **Academic Research on Engagement with Specialised Film**

The objective of my doctoral research was to investigate the practices, values, and roles of cinema-going and film-watching using qualitative research methods for UK teenagers (Blagrove, 2020). My key concern was with how 13-18 year olds from different backgrounds defined and discussed their film consumption and visits to different cinemas, in the wider contexts of their leisure, cultural, and media practices. There was a particular focus on teens' engagement (or lack thereof) with specialised film and cinema due to the relatively low incidence of this demographic participating in this cinema type. I conducted focus groups, interviews, and participant observation encounters with 42 teenagers in schools, youth clubs, and cinemas in Norwich and Norfolk in the east of England. This in-depth qualitative data demonstrated that young people's socio-economic, geographic, familial, peer-grouping, and educational contexts remain a significant influence on film viewing practices, tastes, and gratifications.

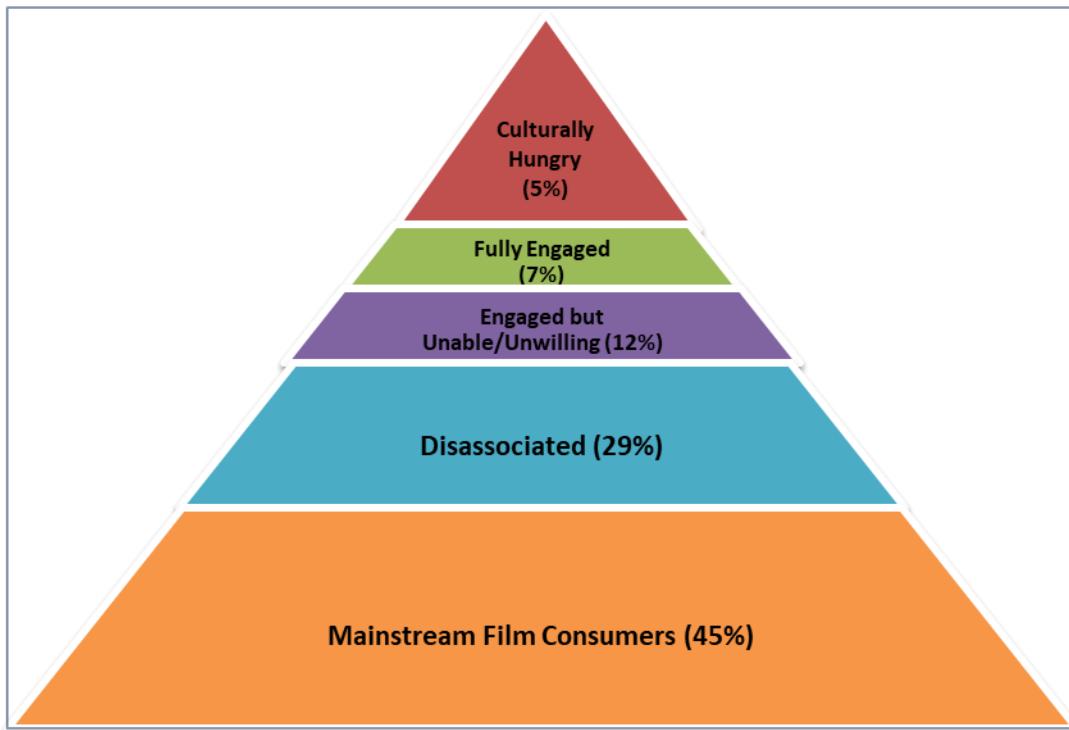
In a content analysis of my 281-page thesis, I found I had used the term 'engagement' 58 times. One such use is in reference to my teenage research participants' immersion in a film whilst viewing. I conducted participant observations with half of my young research respondents in cinemas, including a multiplex, an independent 'bargain-basement' cinema, and Norwich's Cinema City (part of the Picturehouse chain of boutique

cinemas). The purpose of these visits was to observe behaviours and practices and stimulate conversation about the actual films and venues in-situ. In terms of observed behaviour, there was evidence of sustained engagement in what was on screen, and therefore no distractions from talking with companions or from the glowing screens of smart phones. Of course, it is quite possible that my research participants moderated their behaviour due to my presence. However, the participants' sustained attention in a film on a cinema screen chimes with Heidi Grundström's view that, 'due to the instantaneity of living in a digitally networked setting, the space of cinema theatre is used for going offline' (Grundström, 2018, p. 5) and confirms socially accepted codes of spectatorship (see Hanich, 2017).

In the process of analysing my interview and focus group data, I organised my respondents into six participant groups named: 'Estate Dwellers', 'Boarders (of a boarding school) and Urbanites', 'Squad Members', 'Cultural Alternatives', 'Suburbanites', and 'Rural Dwellers'. The group names refer to socio-geographic criteria (Estate Dwellers, Urbanites, Suburbanites, and Rural Dwellers), performances of identity, (sub)cultural affiliations (Cultural Alternatives), and friendship groups (Squad Members). Working with these clusters enabled me to see that peer influence was strongest amongst the Squad Members, Estate Dwellers (especially the young males), and the Boarders. Squad Members looked to culturally coalesce with other Squad Members, whereas Cultural Alternatives aimed for (sub)cultural distinction. Parental tastes were most respected and followed by Boarders and Urbanites and they demonstrated the most commitment to their studies.

My research culminated in a case study of participation with different types of film and cinema, with a focus on specialised cinema. I assessed each research participant's level of engagement according to the knowledge, motivation, and specialised film-viewings and cinema visits that they reported on or demonstrated in our focus groups or interviews. As a result, I established a model, made up of five categories of specialised cinema engagement including: Mainstream, Disassociated, Engaged but Unable, Fully Engaged, and Culturally Hungry.<sup>1</sup> **Figure 1** depicts each category according to popularity in a pyramid formation, allowing a clear image as to the proportion of engagement, with Mainstream cinema-goers as a base, and Culturally Hungry at the top.

To elaborate on the groups as seen in **Figure 1**, detail follows on the sociocultural contexts of the young people that make up their memberships. The largest group, named 'Mainstream Film Consumers' is constituted of those that only attended multiplex cinemas. It is made up of 19 out of my 42 participants, or 45% of the total. Members expressed preferences for mainstream film culture and cinemas, in that it was significantly intrinsic to their leisure time. The most represented sub-group of participants were those that I named 'Squad Members' due to these young people being part of squads, or large interconnecting groups of friends. Their predilection for popular Hollywood cinema indicated that the group mentality extended to their mostly mainstream film consumption tastes and practices.



**Figure 1:** Specialised Film Consumption Categories (with % of participants)<sup>2</sup>

The next sizeable group, the ‘Disassociated’ (12 out of the 42, representing 29% of my participants) expressed a relative apathy or lack of passion for cinema-going of any type. They appeared to be busy with other (inter)active and social pursuits such as gaming, playing music, playing football, socialising with friends in public spaces such as parks, or attending a youth club. There were five ‘Estate Dwellers’ and tellingly, no ‘Boarders and Urbanites’ in this category, implying that those young people on the lower end of the social scale had preferences for leisure-time activities that had a more active, or interactive element.

The ‘Engaged but Unable’ group is made up of those that were engaged or interested in specialised film and cinemas, but were unable to participate at present, unless with parents. It is made up of six out of the 42 participants, representing 14% of the whole. All six of these members were from the ‘Boarders and Urbanites’ group. The reasons for this lack of participation could be attributed to some being time-poor due to the high demands of their education or feeling uncomfortable attending Cinema City with peers. They were all from relatively privileged socio-economic and educational backgrounds, but some felt that the arthouse cinema option was too expensive for them at their current life stage or that the multiplex was a more appropriate venue for cinema trips (with friends at least).

The three members in the ‘Fully Engaged’ group (representing 7%) were interested in specialised film and already regularly attending an art-house cinema or were consuming at home. ‘Urbanites’ Lila and Dominic<sup>3</sup>, and ‘suburbanite’ Michael made up this group. Lila and Dominic (who were in a relationship together), were regular attendees at Cinema City, Norwich’s Picturehouse, where they used their Picturehouse Memberships to get discounted tickets, choosing to watch independent films such as *The Lobster* (2015, Yorgos

Lanthimos). *The Lobster* is a surreal black comedy where single people are given 45 days to find romantic partners or else be turned into animals. In this focus group excerpt, Lila describes her feelings about *The Lobster* other specialised films of that kind:

*Interviewer That's quite a niche kind of film. It might not even have been on at the other cinemas – The Lobster?*

Lila No I think that was the first showing of it in that area...like, in Vue and places like that...I think they are showing it though, aren't they?

*Interviewer Not at the moment. [addressing the other two girls in the focus group] Have you two heard of it?*

Camilla I've heard it's really weird.

Lila It's so weird.

*Interviewer Is it good though?*

Lila It is. It's good. It's just really...weird...like I was sitting on the edge of my seat for the whole film. It's odd.

*Interviewer Is that a good thing?*

Lila Hmm....Dominic really liked it. I find them a bit weird...but then I do really enjoy watching them, I guess.

This excerpt demonstrates the peer taste influence that Lila felt from her boyfriend Dominic. Additionally, Lila had watched a broad range of films at Dominic's parents' house with him. This engagement can be attributed to the socialisation Dominic had received from his film-fan father and from their attendance at an elite state boarding school. The other member, Michael, was self-taught and had a curiosity about classic films and a dedication to watching canonical texts. He usually watched films alone in the comfort of his own home (including classic 1940s titles, unusually this was often via DVDs that he had found at car boot sales).

Two out of the whole cohort (5%) were culturally hungry but not attending specialised cinema due to lack of funds, awkwardness, or a greater ease with a multiplex cinema. Cultural Alternative Jamie and Estate Dweller Jack both expressed interest in specialised films and Cinema City as a venue but had only ever attended the Vue. Both attested to the Vue being convenient and familiar, citing these as the main reasons for attending it. Jamie and Jack were examples of the types of young people who, in Bourdieusian terms, although keen to engage in cultural cinema, may not have been able to realise this in the long term due to their lack of ease within the field and the 'rules of the game' (Bourdieu, 1990), unless some form of intervention was made (e.g. discounted or free ticket scheme, group events with peers). It is notable that 'Culturally Hungry' group were not actually attending cultural cinema screenings and so for these young people, engagement was more of a state of mind or yearning rather than a habit of physical attendance or consumption.

An initiative that shares similar objectives with my doctoral research is the large-scale research project 'Beyond the Multiplex: Audiences for Specialised Film in the English Regions'. This project aims to 'understand how to enable a wider range of audiences to participate in a more diverse film culture that embraces the wealth of films beyond the

mainstream; and how to optimise the cultural value of engaging with those less familiar films' (Wessels *et al.*, 2020). Another objective is to establish the ways in which people engage or interact with and relate to film. Research participants completed surveys and 200 interviews were conducted on the topic of their film consumption practices. The analysis concluded that five distinct patterns of audience experience could be established: 'individualised, group, venue-specific, global, and digital: each [being] characterised by a specific set of interactions with films, screens, and venues and relationships with other people' (Hanchard, Merrington and Wessels, 2020, p. 116). The five audience categories relate to the different ways and means by which contemporary English audiences engage with films and cinemas, be it alone, in social groups, and/or influenced by global or digital trends. Related findings from a precursor to the Beyond the Multiplex project, entitled, 'How Audiences Form', were that 'independent and specialised film audiences are diverse and have diverse interests', and 'diversity of types of film provision can also enable a variety of forms of engagement with independent and specialised film culture' (Corbett *et al.*, 2015, p. 4).

The potential value of audience research projects such as my own and that of 'Beyond the Multiplex' is that they can build bridges with the film exhibition and distribution industry, as well as with cinema outreach and engagement personnel, and become a developmental tool in themselves. This bridging of academia with industry can be observed in similar projects (Pitts, 2016; Corbett *et al.*, 2015; Hanchard, 2019).

The model of specialised film consumption engagement presented in my research provides a new paradigm of teenage audiences and their film and cinema-going tastes and practices. For the film distribution, exhibition, education, and engagement industry there may be findings that can assist the mitigation of any barriers to participation and encourage greater teenage engagement. It is key to attract and connect with the young people as represented in my 'culturally hungry' category. This could enable economically disadvantaged young people lacking intrinsic cultural capital to have a wider experience of film consumption and cinema-going via increased opportunities. These opportunities may come in the form of interventions that cut across social and cultural barriers and help to engender a greater sense of ease for those whose habitus dictates awkwardness with non-mainstream films, or specialised cinemas. As stated, in most cases there are practical and logistical (economic) considerations regarding specialised film consumption, and there are real challenges to encouraging younger audiences to venues whose core audiences are mostly middle-class and aged 45+. At the time of writing, the cost of art-house tickets (in Norwich at least) was almost double those at the multiplexes since prices were standardised to £5 every day for everyone as part of a discount pricing scheme piloted in selected cities. So reduced cost via vouchers or membership schemes is vital to attracting younger audience members generally and individuals with less disposable income. In a post-pandemic landscape, where unemployment is high, incomes are reduced, and audience confidence is at a low ebb, these schemes will be more vital than ever. Moving on from the specific

context of my own audience research, what follows is an unpacking of the vital term ‘engagement’ and its uses within film and media academia and industries.

## Investigating ‘Engagement’

The etymology of the word ‘engagement’ is linked with the French *engager* – to pledge (Merriam-Webster, 2021). This corresponds with one of the numerous meanings of the word listed in the Oxford English Dictionary as ‘a formal promise, agreement, undertaking, covenant’ (OED, 2020). Other definitions in the OED refer to an ‘appointment made with another person for any purpose of business, festivity etc.’, and ‘an attachment, prepossession or bias’ (*ibid*). This suggests that the word is loaded with a perception about commitment, be it commercial or for pleasure. It is also connected to the practise of socialising with others, and the possession of preconceived opinions. For the purposes of this article and in the context of my thesis however, it is necessary to define the term in relation to film audiences. To this end, I propose three main uses of the term:

1. Engagement with a film text whilst watching it.
2. Engagement with film culture in a broader sense.
3. The possession and expression of predispositions or tastes towards film texts, viewing methods and platforms, and cinemas.

However, these uses are themselves loaded with characteristics and implications, which I next discuss further.

### ***Engagement with a Film Text***

The first meaning of ‘engagement’ refers expressly to the act of consuming film in its various formats. Of course, the act of viewing can be undertaken either alone, with family, friends, or partners and this might be on screens at home, on portable devices in crowded public spaces, or in cinemas with strangers. These multiple modes of watching films each enable a particular experience in relation to a degree of immersion. Scott and Craig-Lees (2010) examine audiences’ engagement with different media and determine that the process consists of levels of ‘pleasure, arousal, and cognitive effect’ (2010: 39). They also state that the nature of engagement incorporates states of ‘immersion, transportation, flow, and engrossment [and] reflect the quality of an involvement or engagement with something’. (Scott and Craig-Lees, 2010, p. 43). Julian Hanich theorises on the effect of collective viewing in cinemas and concludes that this affords a ‘joint deep attention’ (2014; 2017; 2019), although he does concede that ‘we better engage with some films privately and alone at home’ (2019, p. 2). In contrast with this immersive mode of engagement, Katherine Hayles has posited on a type of ‘hyper attention’ which is characterised by ‘switching focus rapidly among different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation, and having a low tolerance for boredom’ (Hayles, 2007, p. 187). Hayles argues

that this mode is more evident in younger generations and that digital media culture has accelerated this shift in cognitive mode. It is evident that there are different levels to the intensity and duration of engagement that audiences experience with a text. This was apparent in my own research findings on teenage audiences as demonstrated by the 'Estate Dwellers' group. These participants generally demonstrated low educational engagement and a resulting abundance of free time filled mainly with digital gaming and social media use as well as some film consumption, and high levels of online peer sociability – activities often conducted simultaneously.

### ***Engagement with Film Culture***

The second use of the term has been applied more recently in a wider sense to refer to the levels of audience engagement with a diversified contemporary digital film culture. Sarah Atkinson's (2014) case studies of new forms of cinema engagement such as mobile cinema, online intertextuality, and games with filmed elements (including alternative reality games) frequently employ the word. Additionally, Atkinson and Kennedy (2015; 2016; 2017) investigate the contemporary revival of experiential cinema (such as Secret Cinema) with complementary input from Martin Barker (2013) on live event cinema. This work reveals 'new cultures of reception and practice, new experiential aesthetics and emergent economies of engagement' (Atkinson and Kennedy, 2017, p. abstract). This type of wider engagement with film culture can be aligned with the industrial analysis of digital and social media engagement where algorithms and big data are key to identifying and targeting high engagers. High engagement with film culture is epitomised by film buffs or fans – those audiences that are invested in not just film exhibition and consumption but multiple cultural elements including journalism, social media, and user reviews and production. There was little or no evidence of high engagement with film culture amongst my doctoral research participants, although there were signs of nascent film buffs emerging in the 'Fully Engaged' category.

### ***Engagement as Expressions of Taste***

The third definition of film audience engagement is one relating to 'attachments' or 'biases' (OED, 2020) towards certain types of film, viewing platforms, and cinemas. These predilections may relate to film genre, particular actors or filmmakers, film aesthetics, methods of watching (e.g. broadcast television, streaming services, YouTube, or DVD/Blu-ray), or indeed attending a chain-multiplex rather than an independent cinema. This connects with Pierre Bourdieu's concept of each of us embodying a habitus, or dispositions, about society and culture, that are instilled in us through a process of socialisation throughout our lives (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990 [1970]). This habitus in turn, leads to the manifestation of an internalised cultural hierarchy, a *distinction* of tastes (Bourdieu, 2010 [1984]) and directly links to Bourdieu's observation about members of social groups referring to exclusions to their tastes as 'not for the likes of us' (*ibid* 2010 [1984], p. 480).

Thus, audience members make matter-of-fact assumptions, rejecting certain films, modes of viewing, or venues, in favour of others, to express their cultural capital. This type of engagement with film is a pure, almost instinctual type of participation and is a film distributor's, marketeer's, or exhibitor's dream (if unwavering acceptance) or nightmare (regarding automatic rejections). Bourdieu contends that a person's habitus is not a state that can easily be altered or reversed. In my thesis I argue that Bourdieu's concepts are useful to a point, but do not subscribe entirely to his deterministic view on people's powerlessness against a hierarchy, with high culture at the pinnacle controlled by society's elite. In the contemporary digital media landscape, there is a democratisation of culture whereby individuals and communities have more agency in their cultural consumption. This agency is the very same that is targeted by engagement and outreach professionals, and film and cinema marketeers, seeking new audiences.

### Film Distribution, Exhibition, Learning and Outreach

'Engagement' is frequently used as a term in film exhibition and related industries, with similar meanings to the second definition outlined above. Specifically, industry professionals use it to refer to the act of audiences engaging with films, home entertainment platforms, social media, traditional media (e.g. press and magazines), and outreach projects. Having worked for many years in film exhibition and education contexts, audience engagement with specialised film and venues has always been a key aspect of my employment. Indeed, a key objective of the community interest company (CIC) of which I am Director, is to use film and music to increase creative participation and engagement amongst community groups and individuals of all ages, abilities and backgrounds (Reel-Connections, 2021). UK film exhibition, training and education organisations use the term 'engagement' in promotional material, industry reports, funding guidelines, and job titles (e.g. Film Engagement Lead, Access and Engagement Coordinator). The term is also often found in the materials produced via audience development, public relations, social media, and marketing professionals. A summary of the usage of 'engagement' in some of this discourse follows.

The British Film Institute (BFI) refer to 'promoting international engagement and collaboration with British filmmaking' in their online guidance on funding support (BFI, 2021). In the 'BFI 2022: Future Audiences' report, one of three main objectives is to 'engage young audiences across the UK and keep them for life' (BFI, 2017). The Independent Cinema Office (ICO) mentions 'engage' or 'engagement' 11 times in its 2018-19 Annual Report. To illustrate the different uses: one mention refers to a film fund helping subtitled films such as *Shoplifters* (2018, Hirokazu Kore-edo) to engage with UK audiences via a successful marketing campaign, another is a case study of Catford Mews, a new independent cinema, that has seen success with engaged and returning audiences, and another is in the context of a trainee who undertook a placement in Vietnam to discover new ways in which British exhibitors could encourage wider engagement (ICO, 2019). The British Independent Film Awards (BIFA) in partnership with The Audience Agency (funded by the BFI and National Lottery) published the report 'Under 30s and Film: Insights' (BIFA, 2019). The objective for

the project was to discover what the under 30s were watching, where, why, and with whom, for BIFA to maintain youth engagement with independent film. The concept of engagement is so central to this report, that in the body of the 61-page document permutations of the word 'engage' (including 'engagement' and 'engages') are repeated 37 times. The Audience Agency state elsewhere that 'it's critical to keep audiences engaged and enthusiastic' (Audience-Agency, 2021). Film marketing and distribution agencies such as Together Films promote that they provide marketing services to help deliver filmmakers' audience engagement needs (Together-Films, 2021). Into Film, the national film club organisation for children and young people, demonstrates a persistent emphasis on engagement in its statement about its partnership with the film industry:

Into Film offers distributors a route to market for new film releases to our extensive school networks. Leveraging our publicly funded work with schools, we offer marketing campaigns based on reach, *engagement* and expertise. We directly *engage* with over 1 million young people and over 5 million teachers and families via digital channels every year. Our campaigns are fully film-branded and expertly mapped to educational value and curriculum topics ensuring exposure and *engagement* in the classroom and promoting shared family moments at home.

(Into-Film, 2021, my emphases)

To summarise, the industry favours the term 'engagement' to indicate desired connections between British and international film industries, loyal audiences, and independent venues, new (young) audiences and independent films, as well as referring to the quality of engagement (i.e. committed and enthusiastic).

## Conclusion

There are clear economic implications of effective audience engagement for film distributors and exhibitors. If audiences experience immersion in a text – and then choose to recommend that film to friends, family, and social media followers – there is the possibility of 'word of mouth' success for a title. This was certainly the case for *The Greatest Showman* (2017, Michael Gracey), a film that did not receive an overly positive critical reception but garnered great box office success and a legacy as a feelgood crowd pleaser (Salmon, 2018). Additionally, audience loyalty to an independent cinema or specialised SVoD platform (e.g. MUBI, BFI Player) can be established, perhaps via a membership scheme and effective social media engagement, with 'deep engagement' being a desired effect.

However, my doctoral research revealed that there is an issue of audiences simply not being aware or interested in viewing specialised titles, the latter point being illustrated by my research participants that reported on non-mainstream films as 'weird', 'random', or 'odd'. For professionals responsible for audience development for specialised cinema, this issue is being addressed to some degree through education via formal routes at schools and

colleges (i.e. Into Film), but also through film clubs (Film Hub South East Young Film Programmers), festivals (BIFA), event cinema, or via online resources and social media engagement. Valerie Wee argues for this course of action: ‘it remains increasingly crucial that young viewers and media consumers be trained and encouraged to critically interrogate, evaluate, and challenge the media they consume, love, and promote’ (Wee, 2017, p. 139).

In a statement from 1999 that is still valid, Sonia Livingstone reported on the challenges of audience studies as viewers become ‘less predictable, more fragmented or more variable in their engagement with media, understanding the audience is even more important for theories of social shaping, design, markets and diffusion than, perhaps, was true for older media (Livingstone, 1999, p. 63)’. Referring to the contemporary crisis of the global pandemic; as of January 2021, all UK cinemas were forcibly closed again due to the third national lockdown, with no definite reopening date in sight (at time of writing). At the time of writing, many smaller, community-based independent cinemas showing more diverse films remain under threat of permanent closure. With many older people likely to not feel confident to return to cinema-going due to their vulnerability to COVID-19 (Tull, 2020), and younger people still a key demographic for audience development, this article highlights that more research is urgently needed on this issue of audience engagement. The technological and architectural features that cinema auditoria possess allow audiences’ a sustained engagement in more challenging film content. Cinemas can provide audiences with a much needed cultural and social resource that is currently in a very precarious position of economic viability.

### Biographical note:

Dr Anna Blagrove is a Lecturer in Animation (Visual Effects) at Norwich University of the Arts. She is also Director of Reel Connections, a company that uses film to engage with community groups. She gained her PhD from the University of East Anglia, her thesis presenting research into teenage film consumption and cinema-going. Anna’s ongoing research interests are film and media audience studies, animation, and national cinemas (especially British, Japanese, and Australian). Contact: [a.blagrove@nua.ac.uk](mailto:a.blagrove@nua.ac.uk).

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> I recognise that by establishing these categories I may be disregarding some nuance in taste variations. However, the context-setting and empirical analysis that was presented in my thesis provided a depth of understanding that cannot be condensed here.

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<sup>2</sup> 2% of my participants were unclassifiable due to the lack of data regarding their specialised film consumption.

<sup>3</sup> Names of participants are pseudonyms.