

## **The cinema is dead, long live the cinema!: Understanding the social experience of cinema- going today**

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### **Summary:**

This empirical study of contemporary film watching motivations and cinema-going experiences was set up to come to an understanding of the nature of the sociality of cinema-going, in an age when watching film is absorbed in convergence culture. The open question survey questioned 472 young moviegoers on their consumption of films, in both past and present. The identification of specific (extra-)theatrical practices results in perceptible patterns and understandings of cinematic experiences. At first, the notion of the embodied place comes to the foreground as a key factor of the cinematic experience. The discourse of the respondents aligns with theories on *immersiveness* and the technological superiority of the cinema experience over other modes of watching film. But respondents also construct a non-technologically centered (remembered) social engagement. The social site of cinema-going is constructed through social activities (companionship and leisure), contacts (unique heterogeneity of the audience) and conformity (communal experience of consensual predictability). The eventfulness and the sociality of cinema are arguments for a non-foundational ontology of cinema, which defies the demise of the medium. It is less a question of finding a normative mode of the experience of cinema, than of understanding cinema as a set of practices. Within the socially constructed momentum of cinema-going, *space* takes precedence over *place*. Thus, the cultural endurance of the cinema can be demonstrated as visibly as the accounts of its discontinuity due to the rise of multi-platformed film experiences.

## Introduction

Film scholars have long demonstrated that cinema-going is shaped not only by screen content, but even more so by the endless variety of times and places in which the screenings occur (Aveyard & Moran 2013, Maltby, Biltereyst & Meers 2011). But in the digital age of cinema, going to the movies is proclaimed as an outmoded way of watching film, as theatres are no longer the only way of accessing filmed entertainment. When cinema is proclaimed to be dead (yet again), this is usually argued by pointing out the outdated funnel model in distribution, as the theatrical release is seen as no more than the tail that wags the marketing dog (Allen 2011). Additionally, it is argued that audiences no longer need the cinema. Watching a film in premiere on the big screen, is not their only choice. It is merely an option among others. Cinemas are presented as cultural institutions sitting out a nostalgic term of office. The pleasure audiences take in the particular spatiotemporal framing of the cinema, is taken less and less into account by scholars intent on arguing for the digital transformations of multi-platformed, brand-extended, techno-participatory film experiences. This is certainly the case for the advocates of convergence culture and participatory *producers*, that seem to want to eat the cinema alive (Jenkins 2006, Livingstone 2013). But in spite of this technological determinism, historically, cinema-going has been proven to be an important social factor. Morley (1992, 157-158) stated that the cinema is best understood as having sold a habit, a certain type of socialized experience. One of the key findings of the historical research on the social experience of cinema is that cinema-going must have been less about particular films than about the experiences surrounding this activity (Maltby, Biltereyst & Meers 2011, Van de Vijver & Biltereyst 2013, Van de Vijver 2016). For nearly a century, cinema-going was experienced as an event poised between the everyday and the extraordinary. Cinema-going motivations and experiences are about the *immersiveness* of the theatrical experience and the social event (Van de Vijver & Biltereyst 2013). If, to a degree, going to the movies has been principally a social event, then what is the nature of this sociality and eventfulness in a digital era of post-cinema-going?

## New Cinema History

New Cinema History envisions a social history of a cultural institution, and aims to identify film as a cultural artifact consumed by a variety of audiences. The research in this field is characterized by microhistories of specific places and audiences, and it is differentiated from a historiography of the medium based on its aesthetic, critical and interpretative dimensions. New Cinema History urges research into the different historical places of film screenings and the acknowledgement of the diversity of audiences and their experiences of cinema-going. Bottom-up empirical research within New Cinema History underscores the strength of case studies, as it looks for local answers to global questions. Throughout its history, film has neither been universally distributed, nor exploited in a general way, and has certainly not been viewed or experienced in identical circumstances. Because of the

predominant focus on films belonging to the canon, entire historical periods of popular film have been neglected. Despite the sometimes rhetorical basis of New Cinema History, the advocates do intensify research threads such as economic historiographical work on popular film (Sedgwick 2000) and empirical film audience research on cinema-going and everyday life (Kuhn 2002, 2004). This generated research on audiences going against the hypothetical construct of the textually inscribed viewer. Using socio-economic, ethnographic and other methods, empirical research on film audiences has underlined their heterogeneity and emphasized the importance of social, cultural and historical conditions in audiences' experiences such as region, class, race, gender and ideology. In order to engage with lived experiences of actual audiences in their social, historical and cultural context of everyday life, scholars left the field of broad generalizations and large quantitative research designs to focus on close, detailed studies of specific places, people and chronologies. In this, New Cinema History embraces a multidisciplinary approach to fully understand the cinema audience, decanonizing the film text's centrality in cinema history.

Yet research on cinema history since the 1980s and the shift towards multiple screens remains a niche domain. Little has been written in film studies on the multiplex as a form of social or urban leisure (Hubbard 2003). On an industrial level, however, there have been significant analyses on the rise of the multiplex cinemas in the United States and the United Kingdom, and on the decline of traditional one-screen theaters (Gomery 1992, Acland 2003, Smith 2005, Klinger 2006, Fuller-Seeley 2008, Hanson 2013). Other studies looked at the impact on programming diversity (Barker 2013) and the effects of the digital turn on film distribution (Hanson 2007). On the other hand, audience research has been done on the 1960s (Stokes & Jones 2013) and 1970s (Barber 2011), often relying on box office data, attendance figures, or statistics. Contemporary empirical audience research has focused on festival or art house audiences (Hollinshead 2011, Dickson 2015), or genre preference (Meers 2003). But the ordinary everyday multiplex audiences since the 1980s have otherwise been somewhat disregarded (Corbett 2001), despite the fact that these represent the industry's initial target group. Moreover, audiences today are usually questioned within the context of the profound entwinement of cinema and digital culture, especially within convergence culture research. Yet the era of the multiplex is vital to the understanding of how the social functions in the experience of cinema today. The microhistory of the multiplex can lead to an understanding of the evolution of the film experience(s) since the fundamental changes in the film industry from the 1980s onwards; in production (blockbusters), in distribution (saturation release), in exploitation (multiscreen theatres) but most definitely also in experience (Hanson 2007). In the beginning of the 1980s, the social construction of going to the movies radically changed. It is relevant to understand this particular trend in the history of cinema, because to some scholars the multiplex, as a service-hatch rather than a social site, gave way to a new consumer audience labeled as *parcaholics*, or in hyper individualistic space bubbles (Hubbard 2003). Hubbard defines the multiplex audiences as consisting of car loving consumers reluctant to let their personal bubble be violated by people unknown to them. In a much more pessimistic tone,

Robert Allen (2011) noted that, with the evolution of film as a transmedia product, theatrical moviegoing will continue to decline. According to Allen, in the contemporary film industry, cinema no longer depends on the authentic experience or the regular repetition of social merging. With the growing importance of what the industry calls ancillary markets grows, the social has merely become an option.

Instead of inching towards another proclamation of the death of the cinema, the goal here is to understand the role, historically ascribed to cinema-going, of sociality and eventfulness for people born in the early 1990s. This age group, who are what Janna Jones calls the 'VHS generation' (2013, 389), would have their most common experiences of movies occurring in places referred to as non-theatrical exhibition sites such as bedrooms, living rooms or kitchens (Allen 2011, 42). This leaves them alienated and disconnected, partly because of the ubiquity of screens (Jones 2011, 97). Rather than an ineluctable dimension of the experience of watching a movie, the sociality historically ascribed to cinemagoing is for them no more than an option. Moreover, despite the efforts of New Cinema History, and besides the work of Adrian Athique (2010) on the multiplex in India, relatively little is known about going to the movies at the margins of Hollywood's Anglo-Saxon research. This study wants to address the demand for more research into contemporary European audiences and the similarities and differences between them (Biltereyst, Maltby & Meers 2012). Cinema-going quickly became a popular habit in Belgium, and in 1981 the Belgian city of Ghent was the first to introduce the multiplex cinema in Europe. Ghent is representative of the diversified film exhibition scene in Belgium. Its film exhibition scene consists of a commercial multiplex cinema – Kinopolis, with 12 screens and 3470 seats, and two art house cinemas, each with five screens. The city also houses an erotic cinema, a film club, an art cinema and a yearly international film festival, held since 1969. In 1981, the multiplex was the first purpose-built multiplex cinema (for instance the first multiplex in Britain was built in Milton Keynes in 1985) and was visited by representatives of American majors as an inspiration for multiplex cinema architecture. It remained the smallest multiplex of the now stock market listed Kinopolis concern, compared to their eleven other multiplex cinemas introduced in the 1990s. Since then, screen admissions have been rising. In Belgium today, the number of (digital) screens is 497, the average ticket price is 7,78 euros, and the number of admissions country-wide is 20,8 million or 1,83 admissions per capita.

From a theoretical point of view, the research will depart from the understanding of *place* as opposed to *space*, whereas *place* is a spatial site of cinema and *space* is a constructed social site of cinema-going (Massey 2005). Traditional film studies have systematically ignored the spatiality of the film experience. But social conditions and cultural practices are vital to the experience of cinema, and are thus theoretically and historiographically inseparable from it. Maltby (2011) points out that histories of film reception acknowledge that, historically, the primary relationship with the cinema concerned the social experience of cinema-going, because 'meanings and pleasures cannot be read off the text in isolation but are rather deeply embedded in the social contexts of its

viewing' (Allen 2004, 247). The space of cinema cannot be reduced to the places of filmic exhibition. Space is neither static nor neutral: it is relational and always in process (Massey 2005). After a historical turn in film studies (Higashi 2004), Allen (2006, 15) calls for a 're-spatialized notion of film and film history.' The spatial turn in cinema studies brings the way films are experienced in certain places at certain times and chronologies to the fore of empirical audience research. The meaning of these places are never fixed and, as meanings are tied to social and cultural factors (Jancovich 2011, 88), not merely individual in character. Massey calls space a 'simultaneity of stories-so-far' (2005, 26-28), meaning it is uniquely and unpredictably eventful. The cinema place is the most concrete thing the loose social actors have in common; in it they are gathered to watch a film. According to Allen, understanding space as the sphere of coexisting heterogeneity means that the audience cannot be conceptually reduced to the spectator, and that the experience of cinema does not exist outside the experience of space. As such, it is a product of historically specific practices of social interaction. Acknowledging the space of cinema means defining its sociality and inherent eventfulness. Allen continues to define the nature of this eventfulness: that which makes events eventful is that they are unique convergences of multiple individual trajectories within particular social sites (Allen 2011, 51).

Yet for all its acknowledgement of historical cinema-going practices as popular leisure activities, the sociality of contemporary practices is more often viewed as radically diminishing, due to the impact of the multiplex space and the changing nature of film as a transmedium. Jancovich (2011, 89) suggests that this analysis relies on the meaning of film consumption in terms of historical change. Generation Y experiences cinema as a 'textually disintegrated phenomenon experienced through multiple and unpredictable proliferating sites and modalities' (Allen 2011, 44). But this linear pattern of change can be countered by other criteria which are much more socially defined. Although Jones uses the concept sociability (the relative tendency or disposition to be sociable or to associate with one's fellows) instead of sociality, she (2011, 96) argues that 'while contemporary cinema-going practices are far less public than they once were, many of the fundamental elements of cinema's sociality in cinema's classic era persist into the present.' She fortifies her argument by examining the ritualized familial event called 'movie night'; its fundamental elements are then defined as an organization of leisure time and connectedness to other people. Because her research is focused on youngsters (a rather specific stage, finding themselves in different types of relationships and involving an anxious use of cultural consumption in the pursuit of identity) and family, Jones considers film consumption in the course of a life. Kevin Corbett (1998) also came to this conclusion considering cinema-going as symbolically important to the forming, maintaining and transforming of interpersonal relationships. Jancovich (2011) therefore concludes that film consumption is embedded within family dynamics and has a lot more to do with broader social contexts than with historical change alone. Pushing beyond the substitution effect, Corbett (2001) argues that not only cultural forces but also industrial imperatives are likely to preserve the cinema place. Corbett (2001, 30) argues that the trump of the multiplex is exactly that it 'symbolized the simultaneous

promise of a primarily social event wherein one could also experience highly individualized escapism', and it is the dynamic between these two I intend to research.

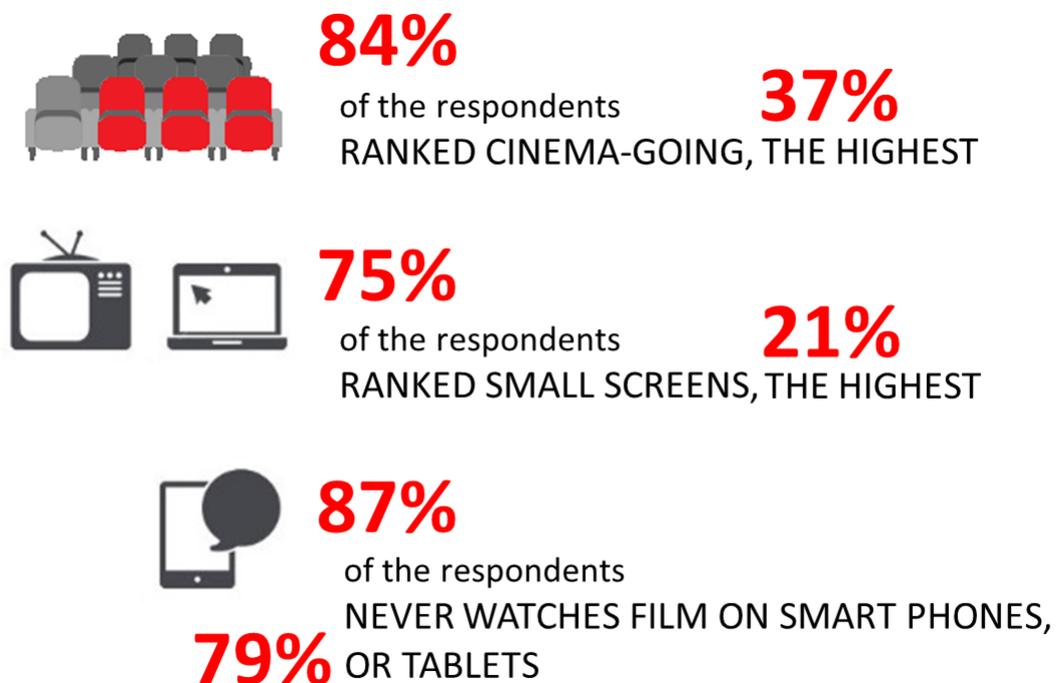
### **Questioning cinema consumption**

Maltby described researching cinema audiences as 'to pursue the heterogeneous purposes of the unidentified participants in a myriad of undocumented events' (Maltby 2011, 33). Within New Cinema History, there are many methods to be considered for researching audiences such as statistics or ethnography. For this research I set up an online survey within a class on international communication. The survey made use of nonprobability sampling; it was never a question of representativeness or of configuring the common divisor for cinemagoing experiences. Merely a sample of social actors (cinemagoers) is considered here; a group of people who refer to a common cognitive framework within a certain age group. The analysis focused on generational patterns; there were neither in-group comparisons nor a more traditionally chosen focus on race or gender. Although online research has its handicaps, much of these were anticipated by introducing the survey to the respondents in person and allowing them to work on their answers over a period of two weeks. The survey focused on contemporary and remembered multiplex cinema experiences. It included questions regarding contemporary media use, leisure activities and diversified digital visual consumption in order to contextualize. The survey consisted of a combination of closed and open questions; it was organized during four years in a row, between 2013 and 2016, and had 472 respondents. The closed questions were analyzed using SPSS software to provide a more statistical background on the media use of the respondents. The qualitative analysis of the surveys focused on a close reading of the answers to the open questions regarding the experience of the multiplex visits. The answers were considered as discourses, meaning the analyses did not assume demonstrable facts, but rather interpretable statements. The analysis focused on the creation of meaning regarding cinema-going within everyday life. The ordinariness of everyday life is unique to everyone but is also shared in its commonness by routinized behavior (Inglis 2005). To consider cinema in everyday life means analyzing the accessibility and availability of movies on a daily basis. The results are focused on understanding the generationally and local-globally differentiated experiences, memories, intentions or feelings concerning social cinema-going and watching movies.

### **On watching film**

Concerning preference, the respondents were asked to rank eleven possibilities ranging from DVD to art house (see Figure 1). Overall, the respondents show an overt fondness for cinema-going. Watching films on DVD and on computer or laptop were mentioned more often, though they were not valued or preferred over cinema-going. Watching films in a multiplex is ranked first by half of the respondents, followed by film festivals and art houses. Concerning smaller screens, two thirds of all respondents ranked DVD, but for the most part

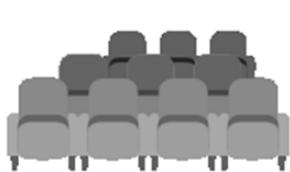
only in the third place. Watching films on mobile devices such as smart phones and tablets were least preferred; they are not ranked often, and if ranked, they usually end up in the last place.



**Figure 1:** Statistics on preferred movie-watching

To question their actual behavior or viewing frequency, respondents were asked to indicate their film watching behavior time-wise (see **Figure 2**). Half of the respondents go to the cinema on a monthly basis. A minority goes on a weekly basis. These latter respondents are thus defined as avid cinema-going audiences. Watching films on live or postponed television ranks second, followed closely on the third place by watching films on a computer or laptop. But the latter is ranked first when it comes to watching films more than once a week. Also, two thirds admit to downloading films illegally on a monthly basis. Concerning television, films are most likely watched postponed, but renting films by video-on-demand is not that frequent at all; nearly half of the respondents say they never have. Even DVDs or Blu-rays are not watched that frequently. These results indicate that watching a film on the small screens, as a habit, needs to be free of charge, whether on television or on computers. They either take the time, effort and money to watch a film on the big screen on a non-everyday basis, or they watch film regularly for free on the small screen, not wanting to wait or pay for the legal download.

The two following open questions first allowed respondents to explain why they value certain types of film-viewing experiences. The analysis of the motivations resulted in the formulation of seven main topics, divided in sociality- and non-sociality related factors.



**52%**

of the respondents  
**GO TO THE MOVIES MONTHLY**



**65%**

of the respondents  
**ADMIT TO FREQUENT ILLEGAL DOWNLOADS**



**75%**

of the respondents  
**NEVER RENTS**

**Figure 2:** Statistics on frequency of movie-watching

When it comes to indicating criteria relevant to preference, the major problem is cost; nearly all respondents complain about the ticket price of the ‘big screens’. This is the main reason for not going to the multiplex cinema more often. Today, going to the movies is thus made into an event because it is expensive and not because of the unique convergence of individuals constructing a social site. Film aesthetics seem to be important. Not only image quality is mentioned but also sound, and specifically the aesthetics of digital surround sound (Kerins 2011). These technical aspects and the continuous screening of a film in a multiplex is described as *immersive*. The discourse of the participants is in line with the idea of the cinema space as providing *immersiveness* through architecture and infrastructure, as one respondent observes:

In the cinema, the experience is complete, with popcorn. You can really lose yourself in the movie, without any distractions. This is also a good time to spend with friends. Even if you are watching a movie on your own, you are watching it together as you hear everyone laughing or getting scared.

Logistical factors are mentioned less often: a geographical relocation to watch a film is not cited as discouraging or dissuading. It is also clear that some of the advantages often advertised by the multiplex in town such as 3D, online ticketing and parking are lost on these respondents. The experience here is described as a pleasurable series of social and visual sensations; the pleasure of watching the film itself, but also the pleasure of the sensed experience of the audience. These factors related to sociality usually come up in the

context of film preference; the responses suggest that different genres of film demand different levels of social engagement. Some appreciate company in a non-theatrical atmosphere because of the possibility to talk freely at the same time. Talkative company and noisy theatres are judged harshly. The multiplex is hardly mentioned for its social atmosphere in such specific terms, but rather more for its cinematic experience; excellent sound/image quality and no disruptions are conditions for an immersive experience. The reasons for watching film in a non-theatrical environment are personal comfort, the range of film choice, spontaneity, convenience and control. The cinematic experience is appreciated for the possibility to be engulfed or immersed, yet it is criticized because it cannot be controlled. The control over the duration and experience of the film - to be able to pause, especially - is prominently mentioned as a plus for the small screen. Overall, the cinematic experience is defined and appreciated on a technical and personal level (*immersiveness* and film aesthetics) rather than on a social level. Personal comfort and control over the filmic experience keep these respondents in front of the smaller screens, which is more in line with habitual behavior. The social factor must be defined other than within a family context (cfr. Jones). Here, the social is defined within the comfort of the home; their bedroom, student housing or couch and with friends. These patterns of movie-watching are very much in line with a more native digital attitude; as true consumers, movies have become things that they own, hold and control. Watching a movie on television, laptop or personal computer is habitual. Going to the movies is an event, a cultural practice defined by an aesthetic choice of films worthy of the financial input and enhanced by the company in which they are seen.

### **On the multiplex experience**

To understand the cinema as a social space, the survey also specifically asked respondents about their experiences of the multiplex cinema. When describing their last visit, there was no preference for a specific timing, and a majority did see the evening show with friends. For most of them, the blockbuster was chosen beforehand, inclining towards non-habitual and non-spontaneous behavior. Remarkably there is very little mentioning of pre- or post-cinema-going activities, even if it was explicitly asked. When asked about their major motivation for choosing a multiplex, they do seem to feel that they do get their money's worth at the cinema. The financial factor is ranked high, but not as first and foremost, meaning this factor came up frequently but is not equally important to all respondents. The technical factors matter most because sound and image quality are ranked by half of the respondents, usually in first and second place. Programming is equally relevant. But surprisingly, the highest ranking for most of the respondents goes to visiting the multiplex as a form of social leisure. This was ranked by half of the respondents, and a third of them ranked it first. This is a surprising result as they initially described their visit as being less defined as social. To look into this factor on a more detailed level, the respondents were offered four open questions to allow them to explain what the multiplex means for them in their own words. First, they were asked to describe in their own words what it is like to visit

a multiplex. Some refer to the characteristics already discussed in the survey, such as the cozy atmosphere, but for the most part the multiplex is described in terms of the infrastructure, which can be impressive; the term 'big' is rather common here. This VHS generation did not grow up with the center cinema palaces the city knew before the 1980s, so nostalgia cannot overshadow the shoebox theatre, as the multiplex is derogatively nicknamed. As another respondent observed:

When visiting a multiplex, you get the full package. There's quite a specific popcorn smell. It's all very fancy. The seats are like movie star seats. It might even be overwhelming, because you're looking at a huge screen and the sound is coming from everywhere.

Next to the infrastructure are the descriptions of the hustle and bustle of mass audiences and blatant consumerism. The idea of being commercially guided is striking: from the ticket booth, through the shop, past the televisions blasting trailers and in front of the commercials in the theatre itself. Lures of extra expenses, such as consumption possibilities, are only met with a minor preference for popcorn, and the smuggling of other snacks is not uncommon. As Hubbard (2003) notes, the lobby of the multiplex is not designed to encourage interaction between people, which makes their disapproval a sign on the wall concerning their appetite for social leisure. But the anticipation of the cinematic experience is often triggered by the smell of popcorn, and the atmosphere is described as relaxing as well as exciting. The unwritten rules of the place itself, the guided practices, are described very negatively. Again, the idea of the cinema controlling the experience is here found to be offensive. There are clear unspoken rules about cinema-going behavior; talking is described as bothersome and eating noises are cited as disturbing the screening. This is because the architecture of the multiplex is designed as a shared space, yet paradoxically, acoustically it is engineered for individualized, subjectivized listening within an immersive, electrically mediated soundscape. As such, the unstructured group of individuals develops a set of properties, among them typical practices with which to draw the line between belonging and excluding. Remarkably it is this group consciousness, the being part of a mass audience that is most positively described; an anonymous form of sociality, silently immersed and attentive. The attentiveness is regarded as important, as the usage of social media, second screens or smart phones is disapproved of. The social atmosphere here has less to do with moviegoers' specific company but more with the unique heterogeneity and communal sense of predictability of the unknown audience. Together they constitute a society of social actors which share a common set of cultural references. The anonymous group cohesion is appreciated in the shared cinematic experience, but only if respectful; descriptions of mature behavior ('no fidgeting'), politeness ('no use of cell phones') and quietness ('no talking') submerge, and often the appreciation of the audience stems from its compliance to one owns behavior ('laughing when needed'). The latter is subsequently linked to the genre

of film that is being watched, most often comedy and horror. For instance, as one respondent observed:

It is social and antisocial at the same time. People usually go in group, but you're going to the cinema knowing that you'll sit next to a total stranger who also chose to see this film. During the film, the audience is a catalyst and a mirror for the emotions that the film is making you feel.

The outside of the auditorium is described mainly as 'busy' or 'rowdy'. For some respondents this entails a 'jovial atmosphere' and 'coziness', whereas a minority describes it as 'chaotic.' During the moments spent waiting in the lobby before the film, customers are surrounded by commercial incentives. After the movie, the hastiness of being rushed out as an audience is experienced as being treated 'like a number'. These industrial practices imposed on a temporary audience community otherwise held together by common practices, are perceived as invasive.

Another social factor is the explicit appreciation of cinema-going as a social leisure activity; visiting the multiplex with friends is cited very often in the individual descriptions of important factors of cinema-going. Peer pressure is indicated as well, as respondents indicated the film preference of the group as a reason for choosing a multiplex. Surprisingly, only a minority of the respondents indicate that peers have a personal preference for the multiplex itself. Explaining this, respondents indicate the contentment of the group as a priority: going with friends means keeping everybody happy. The 'charm', 'relaxation' and 'conviviality' of group film watching are cited. So although they do not consider going to the movies as a social practice, but more as an aesthetic choice, their more focused descriptions of the experience itself seem to tell otherwise. Here, the cultural practices are very much bottom-up appreciated and top-down contested. The coherence of the likeminded audience is constructed through a bottom-up unspoken rules of behavior that have a very classical theatrical nature.

### **On remembering the multiplex**

Finally, respondents were asked to describe their most treasured multiplex experience. Stacey (1994, 63) argued that 'if film history is to engage with ethnographic methods of audience analysis, as well as detailing cinema attendance statistically, then memory has to be a central consideration.' Studies of this kind have already revealed a rich tapestry of narratives on the social experience of cinema-going (Kuhn 2002). Memory implicitly contests both the empiricist objectification of film history and the epistemological authority of the interpretive analyst, and shatters any notion of a master narrative (Allen 2011). The aim here is to understand the personal, treasured memories of cinema-going.

The technical aspects constituting such a significant reason for going to the multiplex today, are not even mentioned in the memories of cinemagoers. Even though they might have opted for the best possible screening quality, treasured memories of multiplex visits

are all about the events and the sociality. When specifically mentioning a film, there are some film series that breathe eventfulness: *The Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter*. Concerning the first series, this has a lot to do with the overwhelming cinematic experience; the event has the characteristics of a spectacle, but not in the carnival-like atmosphere described by Jones (2013, 398) as dress-up. Queuing and fan based communal sense did not occur. These are the pure filmic experiences of landscapes, sound quality and excellence in projection. But *Harry Potter* and *Star Wars* movies are mostly remembered in terms of belonging to an imagined community. The films are remembered as an event because of a fan base: attending the first possible screening or belonging to the audience of the last *Harry Potter* film as end of an era. Or as one respondent remembers:

The last Harry Potter movie. Our generation grew up on these movies. And the fact that it ended? That was an extreme emotional experience.

When talking in terms of sociality, the memories of dating a girl- or boyfriend and the jovial experiences with friends are omnipresent in these memories. As one respondent for instance mentions:

My very first date with my boyfriend. We were supposed to see 'Angels and Demons'. Being 14 years old, all I wanted was kissing in the back row. Tough luck. Turns out he was a film buff and wanted to watch the whole movie.

So contrary to the drier reasoning of the respondents when choosing a multiplex as a *place*, their memories and retold experiences indicate a remembered *space*, which is more emotionally charged than it is technically or film aesthetically argued, and in which the sociality is of a more personal nature. They might be *parcaholics*, acknowledging the service-hatch, but they are hardly in hyper-individualistic space bubbles, as the multiplex is not experienced as *sociofugal* (Hubbard 2003). The treasured memories affirm a more certain type of socialized experience (Morley 1992, 157-8) than present day arguments suggest. Their constant mentioning of the expensive nature of cinema-going could prove a proverbial tip of the iceberg; if granted the opportunity, they would choose the full package cinematic experience. The social interaction characteristic of the multiplex is significant, as they obviously do not only engage with the place visually, but also socially, making this *place* into a *space*. The unique duality that emerges from the survey – the filmic experience based on technical excellence versus the remembered and treasured sociality and eventfulness of the cinematic experience – stresses the importance of specific life stages in studying the nature of cinema-going. These are generational differences defining the cultural practice of going to the movies. For this generation, going to the movies is all about the film or *place*, today; and about the remembered, and thus treasured experience or *space*, yesterday.

## Conclusion

This research addressed the relative absence of empirical data on contemporary cinema audiences in the context of changes in the sites of film consumption. It questioned why people still visit the multiplex and how they were using it. The study produced a bottom-up account of movie-watching patterns and tastes existing within a particular generational audience configuration. This approach was inspired by New Cinema History's constant focus on the importance of the diversity of audiences and the vital understanding of cinema as a social site of film consumption, rather than a mere service-hatch for film distribution. This four-year study demonstrates that film consumption today for the VHS generation still embodies a series of social activities that are meaningful within broader social contexts. For this group of respondents, there are clear patterns of experience, linked to the choice of film. There is a need for excellent cinematic experience linked to film aesthetics, followed by a need to simply spend time and an appreciation of social leisure. They are cinematic *flaneurs* who find great pleasure in wandering through cinematic and other media landscapes, alone and with others. Financially, our *flaneurs* might be a bit more burdened, which is apparent in their tendency to illegally download films and their appreciation of watching film for free on the small screen. Yet, granted the opportunity, the cinematic experience is preferred, as can clearly be read in the respondents' appreciation of film aesthetics and the remembrance of the social aspect. The motivations for going to the movies are not that different from those in the past, which balanced between the everyday ordinary and the eventful extra-ordinary, and for which social activity, leisure spending, and a decent price/quality ratio were equally relevant (Van de Vijver & Biltereyst 2013). Yet typical interaction rituals related to social practices, such as buying the tickets, discussing the movie or even dating, are less prominent in present day accounts. Much of this can be explained by what Jancovich discussed about life stages – even if this resulted in less regularized larger patterns such as structuring the life course on a yearly basis based on anniversaries, or on a more weekly basis. These are students and they are in a stage of life with specific determinations for their film watching habits: less financial freedom, keen on film aesthetic experiences and a peer 'pressured' environment. The eventfulness of cinema-going for them is restrained by the ticket price; this is not an audience that would likely be responsive to special events with higher prices that Kinopolis uses to target new audiences such as 'Opera at the Movies' or 'Cinema Deluxe'. The multiplex is consciously chosen beforehand, given a wide choice of film screenings, and there is an explicit concern for the price/quality ratio. Going in group is viewed more as a bonus, but less as a reason on its own, because it can constrain the choice of the film. When describing the multiplex, the guided-in-your-face consumerism is described derogatively. But being part of the anonymous crowd sharing common cultural practices is positively indicated as part of the cinematic experience. The difference in the cinematic experience of the multiplex as opposed to the art house cinemas in town, is solely based on technical advancements and programming strategies. Ghent is too small a city to divide cinema-going habits by geographically distinctive ambiances, described by Hubbard as two-speed cities with 'safer

spaces of a mobile, affluent consumer elite and the more dangerous, marginalized spaces of the less affluent (2002, 1240).’ The multiplex has been a part of the city center leisure district since 1981, and is thus not perceived as an ontological risk or security as described by Hubbard (2002). But programming choices do suggest a less challenging choice of film genre in the multiplex (yet this can be questioned regarding the preference for the horror genre) and a more intellectually challenging choice in the art houses.

On a more personal historical note, for these respondents, going to the movies was a social activity, remembered because of its treasured company or the membership of an imagined community submerged in the eventfulness of blockbuster experiences. The memories of sociality and the present dynamics of cinematic experience suggest that the substitution debate cannot be discussed in technological terms alone, and that the cinematic experience is nowhere near its demise. Starting from a bottom-up approach, these accounts balance the sometimes binary discussions in literature on the technological deterministic agency of hypothetical audiences, and the Bourdieuan emphasis on the structuring practices of the media producers. The audience here is not a construction of the researcher; the audience defines its own practices and routines. These specific practices, by these specific audiences, defined by a specific cinematic architecture, can result in certain detectable patterns or rules of engagement. *Space* comes to the foreground as a key factor of the cinematic experience, as these audiences articulate their experiences in spatial terms themselves. Furthermore, the eventfulness, the momentariness, and the sociality of cinema are argued into a non-foundational ontology of cinema defying the death of the medium. The bottleneck of film consumption is not merely to be understood in its contemporary place, because it is not a question of a normative mode of the experience of cinema, but of understanding cinema as a set of practices. By focusing on *space*, the socially constructed momentum embedded in specific times of consumption and routine, the cinema demonstrates a cultural endurance just as visible as accounts of its discontinuity, of multi-platformed experiences or of technological innovation. Technological determinism often argues the so-called death of the cinema as consequential to the transmedial nature of film today. This needs to be balanced, as cinema is best understood as still selling a certain type of habitual socialized experience.

### **Biographical note:**

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