

Attractions and distractions: Mums, babies and 'early' cinemagoing

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Abstract

This article reports on a small-scale audience study of women attending dedicated parent-and-baby screenings at one Glasgow cinema as a means of engaging with questions about exhibition context and cinema audiences that have been somewhat marginalised in contemporary accounts of film viewing. It uses Tom Gunning's account of early cinema's 'attractions' as a way of framing the various pleasures on offer for women in these screenings, including the ways in which they think about their babies' engagements with the experience. The interviews reveal the extent to which, whilst the film choice is by no means incidental to the 'Watch With Baby' experience, the women's accounts of the films are embedded in a very embodied account of cinemagoing in which the organisation of the space and the relationship of bodies within it is central. This does not – as canonical film theory suggests – depend upon the negation of the apparatus, but rather displays a fascination with its possibilities as they might be perceived by the infant audience.

Key Words: 'cinema of attractions', cinemagoing, mothers, babies, intimacy.

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In his influential 1990 article 'The cinema of attractions: early film, its spectator and the avant-garde', Tom Gunning argues that early cinema was a 'cinema of attractions': an exhibitionist cinema privileging spectacle over narrative with the exhibition context often foregrounding the technology as an attraction in itself. This emphasis shifted after around 1906, when Gunning argues that spectacle was subordinated to narrative, at least in mainstream cinema. However, he argues that traces of the cinema of attractions endure both in the avant-garde and in mainstream effects movies and the ways in which they are marketed.

Gunning's argument has been picked up in many contexts since its first publication, including – recently – by scholars writing on technological developments in filmmaking and distribution (such as DVD and digital cinema) modes, which, it can be argued, are similarly exhibitionist, foregrounding their technological base both in their textual features and audience address (e.g. Brown, 2008; Grusin, 2006). In this article I want to consider the enduring relevance of the 'cinema of attractions' in a rather different context, focusing on a cinema that is 'early' not in terms of its own historical and technological development, but rather in the experience of its viewers. Specifically, I will report on a piece of audience research I conducted with mothers of young babies (from 0-12 months) attending dedicated screenings for babies and their carers at one Glasgow cinema (the Grosvenor in Glasgow's West End). I will argue that the mothers' accounts *both* of their own 'Watch with Baby' experiences,¹ *and* of their babies' responses, chime with these accounts of 'early' cinema: foregrounding relatively abstract aspects of spectacle over narrative; demonstrating a self-consciousness about cinema technology; and an appreciation of the various ways in which the exhibition context shapes the possibilities for response.

Whilst Gunning's 'cinema of attractions' is the model engaged with most consistently in this paper, the account of cinemagoing which emerges here also shares similarities with accounts of *domestic* viewing which have often been written about – popularly as well as academically – in terms of 'distractions'.² Particularly in relation to television, distraction has been seen both as a commentary on the intellectual poverty of televisual content (it is barely distracting) and as a commentary on the domestic viewing environment which appears as an impoverished context for genuine engagement with screen media due to spatial and relational 'clutter' within it. Clearly these are loaded arguments and feminist critics, in particular, have complicated the easy dismissal of the pleasures on offer within these contexts (see, for example, Modleski, 1982; Hobson, 1982; Gray, 1992). For my purposes, what is important about this is the chasm between modes of understanding contemporary cinema viewing and this approach to the viewing of television. Studies of contemporary cinema audiences – at least in an Anglo-American context – can usually be more accurately understood as studies of *film* audiences, centring on how the audience (or a specific segment of the audience) understand, make sense of, or respond to, specific *texts* (e.g. Hill, 1997; Austin, 2002; Barker et al 2001; Barker & Mathijs, 2008). In contrast, work on television audiences has typically been more interested in viewing as a socially and autobiographically located *practice* (e.g. Hobson, 1982; Morley, 1986; Gillespie, 1995; Briggs, 2006, 2007; Wood, 2007). Partly, then, this sense that distraction can be equated with television might relate to the very different kinds of evidence that have been gathered about contemporary film and television audiences in Britain and the US. This is also in contrast to historical accounts of cinemagoing in these contexts, which do, in various ways, emphasise *cinema* and the complexity of the experiences on offer within it (e.g. Geraghty, 2000; Harper & Porter, 1999; Jancovich et al, 2003; Lacey, 1999; McIver,

2009; Stacey, 1994; Kuhn, 2002). That these accounts tend to be of cinema up to and including the 1950s is no accident. As cinema became less of a mass entertainment from the 1960s onwards, and films became more 'niche' in their appeal, so the film itself began to occupy a more central role in accounts of 'cinema'. With the rise of Film Studies as a discipline, and the particular influence of apparatus theory within it, the sense that cinema was a privileged site for the rapt viewing of film (and so was somehow synonymous with film) took hold. As Dimitris Eleftheriotis argues (2001: 181-2), one of the most enduring legacies of this theory has been the almost unchallenged dominance of their descriptions of exhibition venues in terms of their self-effacement, as dark, silent and non-descript backgrounds that facilitate spectatorial absorption in the screen.

Given shifts in patterns of cinema attendance, as well as the range of possibilities which exist for engaging with films outside of the physical location of cinemas, the time is ripe for film academics to return to the cinema itself as an object of analysis. However, this paper reflects not on dominant modes of contemporary cinemagoing, but on more marginal experiences. Nevertheless, as I will suggest, these experiences are useful for thinking through questions about what cinema is, or can be, *for*. In Britain, many cinemas are now seeking to address niche audiences in particular sections of their programme, not only through film choice and 'novelty' exhibition contexts (such as sing-a-longs, or late night fright-fests) but, also, through slots targeting demographically identified audience groups. Parent and baby, kids and senior citizen screenings are perhaps the most common of these, but the Glasgow Film Theatre, for instance, also offers screenings for children with autism and their families. Implicit in such programming is a recognition that various groups are not well served by 'regular' cinema, *but* that cinema is a relatively flexible space which can take on a particular role in the lives of communities. Although Gunning's examples are rather different – for instance, he notes that early modes of film exhibition recalled the fairground with the showman as an important but extremely variable factor in the experience – it is interesting to return to his work in this context because it does remind us that viewing film was, initially, an experience which was extremely specific: quite literally it was never the same twice. Around 100 years later, and in a period where it is often assumed that one of the rationales of the multiplex is to *standardise* the film-viewing experience, the mums in my study made quite similar arguments about the appeal of going to the cinema, as I will demonstrate.

The project

Before I move on to discuss some of the findings of this research I want to provide a brief introduction to the study and a description of baby screenings in this specific location. This is a small-scale study of women attending dedicated baby screenings at one Glasgow cinema – the Grosvenor – supplemented by five months of participant observation at that cinema from January-May 2008, when I attended these screenings with my baby son. Twenty-five women

were interviewed for this project, having been recruited through existing contacts, flyers and discussions at the Watch With Baby screenings.³ The mothers I interviewed all attended Watch With Baby at some point during the period of observation. They ranged in age from 27-44, all were white and the majority lived in or near Glasgow's West End. The five women who lived further afield actively chose the Grosvenor over more local multiplexes which offered dedicated baby screenings, at least in part because of its West End location and proximity to other baby-friendly venues and activities. Twenty-one of my interviewees (84%) were first-time mothers, all were in relationships with the father of their baby at the time of interview, and the majority (24/25) had been in employment or education prior to the birth of their child and were intending to return – often on a fractional basis - within a year of their baby's birth. In all of these respects, the women I interviewed seemed broadly representative of the many more women attending Watch With Baby who I spoke to informally over the course of this project and confirm that – in this cinema and this location at least – this is an activity pursued by women who, by a number of criteria, could be defined as middle class.⁴

Quite obviously, it was the shared experience of being a new mum that eased my entry into the research world and I was careful to position myself as *both* a researcher and mum. Whether in interviews or informal chats before and after the screenings, women were more than willing to talk to me and to offer often very personal details of their lives with their babies. Divulging personal details to a virtual stranger in this way is by no means an unusual experience in the lives of new mums. There is an official aspect to this (as in encounters with health care and parenting professionals) but there is also a more pleasurable intimacy in encounters with other mums who do not know each other outside of the baby context but who quickly and routinely strike up personal discussions based on shared experiences of childbirth, sleep deprivation and parenting anxieties. From the period of participant observation I knew that such conversations took place in and around the cinema and, indeed, this was one of the factors which most obviously distinguished these screenings from others in the same venue. There was a real sense of community with women chatting in the tea/coffee queue, in the aisles before the screening began, or whilst changing nappies or comforting fractious babies in the doorway or corridors during the film. I do not want to over-romanticise this - negotiating access to that community could be somewhat fraught for someone attending Watch With Baby for the first time – but the sense of shared experience and, to an extent, of a shared identity, did make this a quite particular kind of cinema audience. It also made it relatively easy for me, as a researcher who was also part of that audience, to initiate conversations about the research and recruit interviewees for the project. The interviews themselves were deliberately designed to mimic these more informal encounters and the success of this strategy was commented on by a number of interviewees who stated they had enjoyed the interview experience and/or suggested that it offered some

of the same opportunities as baby cinema (to get out of the house, have a chat with another mum).

The interviews took place in a location of the interviewee's choice (usually a local café) and the women brought their babies along and tended to their needs throughout. In the majority of cases I was also caring for my son during the interview. Whilst this obviously placed some practical constraints on the conduct of the interview, it helped to situate me within the group I was researching and avoided the connotations of surveillance attached to encounters experienced as more 'official' and 'authoritative'. It also meant that I was perceived less as an 'expert' on the issues and more as another interested parent: albeit one who had managed to find a novel way of managing her return to work. Childcare practices existed alongside the interview rather than providing interruptions: the interviewees incorporated talk about their cinema experiences into their childcare routines with relative ease and questions about cinemagoing would lead to more general reflections on the practicalities of childcare or vice-versa. All the interviews were recorded and the questions covered three main areas: cinemagoing patterns and preferences prior to their baby's birth; the experience of Watch With Baby for the women (e.g. motivations for and patterns of attendance; first experience; favourite and least favourite experience; comparison with other activities they engaged in with their baby) and perceptions of their baby's responses.

The concept and the cinema

The screenings these women attended represent a relatively new phenomenon in the UK. Dedicated screenings for babies and their carers have become a fixture of predominately urban cinemas in the last 5-10 years, usually occupying a midweek morning slot. In Glasgow during the period of research there were four cinemas offering such screenings: two Odeon multiplexes, both located in retail parks; the Glasgow Film Theatre, a city-centre independent cinema; and the Grosvenor, an independent cinema located in Glasgow's West End. Of these four, only the Grosvenor – which is the focus of this study – offered a *weekly* screening in 2007-08: it was by far the best advertised and best attended and a second Watch With Baby screening has since been added to its weekly programme.

The Grosvenor is in the heart of the West End set amidst many of its most popular bars and restaurants. This is one of Glasgow's more affluent areas, dominated by the University of Glasgow and home to many of its staff and students. The Grosvenor, which underwent massive refurbishment in 2003, houses two 100-seat auditoriums furnished with armchair-style seats and a small number of sofas. It shows predominately new releases: mainstream movies, with a smattering of the biggest foreign language or independent films. In addition to the dedicated Watch With Baby screenings (which have been a feature since very soon after the re-opening), the cinema offers a Brat Pack Kids Club on weekend mornings and a number

of themed nights or events. It is attached to a bar/ café (The Lane) and, upstairs, there is a large bar/ restaurant (The Loft).

The location of the Grosvenor was central to the appeal of 'Watch With Baby' for the women in my study. Although, as noted above, a majority of my interviewees were themselves local to the area, a small number travelled a significant distance to the cinema. The sense that they would be able to combine their cinema trip with other activities – having coffee or lunch with other mums, visiting friends or family, going shopping, having a walk around the area – meant that Thursdays were often earmarked as a 'day out' with cinemagoing at its heart. Those mums who had attended dedicated baby screenings at multiplex cinemas thought the experience offered by the Grosvenor was unique in this respect. With multiplexes typically located in retail parks and malls with shopping and dining facilities on hand and plenty of free parking (which is in notably short supply in the West End), this might seem somewhat surprising. However, Phil Hubbard's (2003) study of multiplex audiences in Leicester is suggestive here as he found that the multiplex was generally felt to *decrease* opportunities for interaction with other audience members. Whilst this was perceived positively by many of the respondents in his study, this would seem to undercut one of the central appeals of these dedicated baby screenings – that sense of being in an audience where everyone is, as many of my interviewees put it, 'in the same boat'.

All of the women in my study had experiences of multiplexes prior to the birth of their children and, for most, the multiplex had been their dominant experience of cinemagoing. A variety of factors influenced their choice of cinema before the birth of their child, including: convenience; proximity to other amenities; special offers; concessions; comfort of seating; size of screens. Interestingly, choice of *films* was rarely explicitly mentioned and so the emphasis on physical location which emerges very strongly in their accounts of the dedicated baby screenings is not necessarily specific to this kind of contemporary experience. However, it is notable that none of the women mentioned the appeal of being part of a particular kind of audience as decisive in their cinemagoing choices before the birth of their child whereas this was a key component of the appeal of *Watch With Baby*. Although Gunning does not talk specifically of the audience (and the possibility of being part of a *particular* audience) as an 'attraction', this is perhaps implicit in the links he makes with vaudeville and his descriptions of certain exhibition and textual practices which solicit an embodied response from spectators en masse (see also Hansen, 1994). Thinking of the audience as an 'attraction' is, therefore, in keeping with his account of early cinema and – although the specifics are obviously very different – it is a useful way of understanding the women's accounts of 'watching with baby'. Indeed, without exception, the women interviewed were positive about aspects of the environment at *Watch With Baby* screenings at the Grosvenor. They highlighted a variety of factors - the ticket price; the proximity to other amenities; the free teas and coffees before the film; the

comfort and spaciousness of the cinema itself – but the presence of other mums and babies was by far the most significant. Far from Hubbard's account of the appeals of the multiplex, here a sense of belonging to a particular audience and connecting with other audience members (as well as with staff) was central to the cinemagoing experience.

During the period of study, the size of the adult audience at Watch With Baby varied (see **Table 1** at the end of this essay), although 30–40 adults was the norm and adults not in the company of babies were refused entry. Although advertised as 'exclusive to babies and their carers', the vast majority of the adult audience was female and those men who did attend were usually in the company of female partners. Admission was £5, with tea or coffee from the adjoining café (which doubled as a pram park) included in the ticket price.⁵ The films on offer would generally be taken from the main programme which emphasised new releases: a fact appreciated by many of the women for whom this offered a valuable (and relatively rare) opportunity to engage with a world outside the sometimes all-consuming demands of a new baby. Although there was (and is) a policy not to show 18-certificates, a wide variety of films were shown (see **Table 1** at the end of this essay). The auditorium itself would be littered with car seats, bulky changing bags and changing mats. There were no trailers or advertisements before the film, the volume would be slightly reduced from standard screenings, and low level lighting would remain on in the auditorium throughout. Not surprisingly, the infant audience was often noisy. Adult and infant were rarely confined to their seats for the duration: there would be crawling and toddling in the aisles, nappy-changing at the back and parents standing by the exit with fractious babies. People would often arrive late or leave early.

As this brief description suggests, dedicated baby screenings pose something of a challenge to an account of cinema which emphasises its privileged position for the rapt viewing of films. It would be misleading to claim that the choice of film was incidental to the experience: some mums would pick and choose depending on the programme and an 'inappropriate' film choice could prove uncomfortable for reasons I have explored in more detail elsewhere (Boyle, 2009). However, for many other women Thursday-morning cinemagoing was a ritual, part of their weekly routine regardless of the film showing. That the film was not necessarily central to the pleasures on offer was also in evidence in the interviews as some of the women struggled to remember the specific films they had seen or acknowledged that these were not films they would have chosen to see in any other context. The lack of choice was not, however, necessarily a negative thing: not only did it allow women to experience something new themselves (arguably expanding their cultural capital by taking them outside of their usual preferences) but it also meant that they were part of a clearly defined audience, sharing a particular experience in a specific time and place.

Clearly, *Watch With Baby* is not – or is not *only* – about film. Rather, as I will discuss further in the next section, the exhibition context and the sense of belonging to a particular kind of audience are central to the experience.

'It's just the novelty of it.' (Andrea, 27/03/08)⁶

If you find the appeal of watching a film in the context described above bemusing or even disturbing then you are not alone. Dedicated baby screenings have attracted a degree of journalistic curiosity and even public revulsion, with one caller to a Radio 4 show suggesting that taking babies to the cinema amounted to a form of 'child abuse'.⁷ I never experienced this degree of hostility in describing my new cinemagoing experience to friends and colleagues, but responses were often characterised by a mixture of amusement, bemusement and curiosity. At stake in these responses is a sense that dedicated baby screenings challenge expectations and assumptions about what cinema is for (the rapt viewing of films) even if our lived experiences of cinemagoing often fall short of this ideal in various ways.

The women I interviewed typically held similar views before their first *Watch with Baby* screening. Going for the first time was, indeed, often motivated by curiosity and accompanied by mild anxiety given this was, essentially, a trip into the unknown. This applied even when women had heard from friends about these screenings and so had some sense of what to expect: still, the sea of prams in *The Lane*, the colonisation of the familiar auditorium by crying, crawling babies and breastfeeding mums, and the interactions between audience members marked this as a distinctly different cinema experience. Jenny, for instance, described a sense of 'awe' accompanying her first *Watch With Baby* outing (16/04/08), for Angela it was 'overwhelming, but in a good sense' (05/05/08), while Beth found it 'nerve-racking' until 'I realised how easy it was' (14/04/08). Susan also provided a vivid account of the strangeness of the experience and I want to quote from her interview at some length in order to pull out a number of themes key to the experiences of the women more generally:

K: And how did you hear about the screenings to start with?

S: It was through a friend I met at the antenatal. I knew they went on but to be honest I thought they sounded really bizarre until I physically had a child and then it sounded very very sensible.

K: So what sounded bizarre about it before and became sensible after?

S: I suppose the idea, you know, that all of these little people are sucking on people's breasts because to be honest the whole breastfeeding thing to me didn't make much sense prior to having milk coming out of me, it was an abstract thing in a sense. And also, for instance.... when my sister was breastfeeding she had massive mammaries, absolutely huge, and the idea of getting them out in public was... not that attractive but, you know, in the dark it's much easier.

K: So there's actually something about going to the cinema that actually makes even things like feeding that little bit easier?

S: Yeah. And you know that everyone else is in the same boat, so that if your kid kicks off... there's a sort of solidarity issue there as well, you feel like you'll be forgiven if you have a screaming baby [...] And also, because you feel you're not probably concentrating that much on it, on the actual movie, that you're not going to actually interrupt anybody that much. Because the people that have gone they seem to focus on the fact, oh it's really nice, they fall asleep and have a feed and you get to have a cuddle and it's a really sort of one-on-one time rather than being distracted by the telephone going or your mother popping in for the umpteenth time. And it's a bit secluded in its own little way as well so it's... it feels quite special for that.

K: Was that how other people had described it to you before you went?

S: Yes, yes, it was like having an hour and half long cuddle, kind of thing and I thought 'that sounds very nice'! Because to begin with you are so harassed with either feeding or with all of these tasks in your flat that you should be doing that just never get done, and this takes you away from all of that again. I suppose you're escaping through the movie but also escaping from the outside world in a sense. You're in a wee bubble for a wee while. It's just quite nice!

K: What was it got you along that first time?

S: My friend suggesting it was a great thing to do, and I was doubtful but again it was more the sociability for me, getting out and meeting other people and I thought oh I'll give it a go [...] she'd painted it in such glowing terms that I couldn't really refuse, kind of thing! She made it sound very very attractive. And just the bizarreness of the whole visual image of all these women converging like wildebeest on the Grosvenor with prams you know (laughing), it was kind of a bit like a David Attenborough programme you know, all of sudden this magnetic draw of all these women and prams all to the one site. It was just a bit trippy actually all and all. I think I came out and described it as – you know the Johnny Weissmuller movies, used to be on the TV, the black and white ones, when it was the school holidays?

[KB: Tarzan ones?]

Tarzan and all of that. And you know those monkey jungle noises they had in the background? That's what I thought the cinema sounded like! You know those wee sucky 'wah wah wah' noises and in fact I enjoyed the noise of the babies more than the first movie. I think I was listening to the music of them crying, like their wee choruses, I think I was paying more attention to that than what was going on on screen.

K: And that was enjoyable in itself?

S: Uh huh. I thought it was. It was trippy. Sitting in the dark surrounded by all these tiny people making their own wee noises, you know. (Susan, 30/04/08)

In this lengthy exchange it is notable that the only *films* mentioned are the Johnny Weissmuller films which provide Susan's reference point for describing the strangeness of being enveloped by the sounds of suckling babies in a darkened cinema. Susan's comments about breastfeeding highlight very forcefully the extent to which *Watch With Baby* is an *embodied* experience, and that (counter to conventional accounts of the cinematic apparatus) it is actually the darkness, seclusion and relative anonymity of the auditorium which facilitates this very intimate bonding with her baby. Arguably, this is a commentary on British attitudes to breastfeeding in public as much as it is a comment on the screenings themselves. Indeed, there is a more general point here about the extent to which public places in Britain are not necessarily experienced as baby-friendly. Many of my interviewees expressed uncertainty around where they would and would not be welcome with their babies: for instance, when I asked if they had ever attended any non-dedicated cinema screenings with their babies a number of interviewees commented that they did not think they were 'allowed' to do this. Part of the appeal of *Watch With Baby*, then, is that these anxieties about being 'out of place' can be set to one side.

The possibilities for intimacy within this space were not restricted to breastfeeding and the majority of my interviewees commented on the concentrated time these screenings offered them to spend holding and cuddling their babies: something that was particularly prized by those women who had more than one child. Interestingly, childcare could thus be transformed from domestic labour (to be fitted in around the other demands of the home and visitors to it), into an embodied, physical pleasure. This could be heightened by film choice – as when Emily describes the experience of breastfeeding her daughter during the childbirth scene in *Knocked Up* (Apatow, 2008) as 'a real bonding moment' which she found 'really emotional' (Emily, 11/03/08) – but was not generally dependent on it. As Susan suggests, the *ease* of caring for one's baby in this context was important as it allowed for mothering to be incorporated into the cinema experience relatively un-self-consciously. Other mums concur. Paula, for instance, states:

In some ways you're interrupted but in some ways you don't really notice being interrupted. Because she [her daughter] usually watches it, turns round and feeds and watches it again. And at home I think I'd be more aware that she was actually turning round to feed than I am there. And I feed myself in the cinema, which I don't generally in public. It's darker. (Paula, 18/03/08)

That the cinema was the only public space in which Paula breastfed her daughter was one of the factors that made this a relatively easy outing for her, whilst also allowing her to concentrate on the film without feeling like her attention was being pulled in multiple directions. It gave her the best of both worlds: the film was something for her (which all the women agreed on), but the cinema also made childcare both straightforward and physically pleasurable.

In Julie's account the film itself is far more central, but she also indicates that the ease with which she could meet her son's needs in the cinema was important: 'It's another world, out of the realms of nappies, breastfeeding and, oh he needs fed, OK, back to the movie.' (Julie, 16/04/08) Note how Julie presents the appeal of *Watch With Baby* as *other* to her experience as a mother yet describes having been able to incorporate caring for her baby into her movie-watching without fundamentally disrupting her sense that this was a world apart. In the domestic sphere the women typically experienced *competing* demands (childcare, housework, visitors, telephone calls) making media consumption within that context difficult and often fraught with anxiety.⁸ In contrast, cinema's demands are very *complementary* to certain aspects of mothering a young baby. The cinema caters for the mind but makes no demands on the body and, indeed, by 'fixing' the body in one place for a period of time it creates possibilities for physical intimacy and pleasure that have little to do with the content of what is unfolding on the screen. Thus although the women sometimes described their mode of viewing as 'distracted', the cinema still provided an opportunity for absorption not possible in a domestic sphere characterised by interruption and competing responsibilities. The difference, of course, is that it was not – or perhaps more accurately not *only* - the screen they were absorbed in. As Susan puts it, she was 'escaping through the movie' into fantasy or another world, but also escaping *into* the physical aspects of mothering.

The 'bubble' that Susan describes was clearly, on one hand, a very personal, enclosed and intimate space. Yet equally key to Susan's account are the other mums in the cinema and the sense of community and solidarity they provided. This exclusivity could also be somewhat daunting (and one must wonder, again, about how different the experience of fathers is likely to be in this respect). Indeed, Susan describes her first trip to *Watch With Baby* with a certain amused detachment, aligning herself with David Attenborough's iconic role in BBC natural history documentaries, observing the behaviours of the 'wildebeest'. Although Susan's particular take on this was unique, she shared with many others the sense that the cinema had become a colonised, unfamiliar space and that entering that space for the first time was both daunting and fascinating. The audience and exhibition context had become the attraction: indeed, it was not uncommon to see mothers taking photographs of their babies, partners and friends. In a sense, then, we were all ethnographers. The strange new world we were documenting was not, however, just the world of dedicated baby screenings and in the final section I want to consider how the babies themselves were often a source of fascination and how their presence shaped the ways in which the women responded to the films.

'You must wonder what they're actually seeing' (Karen, 10/04/08)

In the discussion of the 'novelty' value of *Watch With Baby* above, I outlined some of the ways in which the audience and exhibition context functioned as attractions in and of themselves, independent of any film being shown. That said, a number of my interviewees did describe still being able to 'lose themselves' in the story and emotion of a film (at least some of the time), suggesting that narrative *is* still important. Indeed, one of the primary attractions of *Watch With Baby* for most of the women was precisely this opportunity to do something familiar: 'like a normal grown up', as Beth put it (14/04/08), encapsulating the sentiments of many.

As such, watching with baby clearly does not entirely replicate the appeal of 'early' cinema as discussed by Tom Gunning: narrative is still significant even if it is not synonymous with this kind of cinema experience. However, in my interviews these accounts sat alongside a rather different way of thinking about the film that chimes much more obviously with Gunning's 'cinema of attractions', specifically his arguments about the way that early film subordinated narrative to spectacle, making an attraction out of the technology itself. Although, as I will demonstrate, the women's descriptions of their babies' behaviour in the cinema chime with the emphasis on spectacle in many ways, my argument is that, in this context, this is not an effect of the film but rather of particular conditions of viewing. The connection with Gunning's work is, therefore, that for both sets of audiences the cinema is a new, novel experience whose conventions are 'astonishing' in themselves and have to be learned.⁹

Cinemagoing – particularly in the context of *Watch With Baby* screenings - offers something different every time but within a specific set of boundaries that also allow for a degree of repetition and routine. Many of the interviewees commented on the boredom and isolation associated with aspects of mothering a new child, and here the cinema outing provided a useful distraction for mum that offered a break in routine whilst also itself containing routine elements to offer reassurance for their baby. So, for instance, a number of interviewees speak of their child's growing familiarity with the cinema itself and their recognition of certain elements of the experience: the bumpy pram ride over the cobbled streets in front of the cinema; the familiar faces in the audience; or the organisation of the cinema environment (the dimmed lights, the screen and so on). Sitting alongside the emphasis on routine in much contemporary parenting advice, however, is an assertion of the importance of stimulation and variety: something the cinema experience also offers. Indeed, this idea that cinema offered something *different* for their babies, was reiterated across the interviews. There were various aspects to this but at its heart was the fact that different stages in a baby's own development presented differing possibilities for engagement, understanding and pleasure. This, combined with the sense that the film and the audience was never the same twice, allowed the women to reconcile their pleasure in doing something 'for themselves' (by going to the cinema), with

their aspirations as (new) mothers to follow the advice handed down by various professionals to provide the security of routine alongside stimulation and variety.

For the babies, stimulation was clearly not driven by narrative and in recounting their experiences of going to the cinema with their babies, the women often commented on the attractions of the apparatus, and on the film itself, in a more abstract and often sensual way. The notion that cinema offers a stimulation for the senses emerges in many interviews.¹⁰ This depends not only the light and sound emanating from the screen but also, more keenly, on the physical organisation of the cinema and the proximity of bodies within it. Indeed, nearly all the women perceived the opportunity for physical intimacy – which Charlotte described as ‘cuddling for cuddling’s sake’ (12/03/08) – as one of the key benefits of cinemagoing for their babies. But it was not only the physical intimacy which was mentioned here: the presence of other babies in the cinema was also understood by some as a factor which engaged their own baby’s curiosity. Danni, for instance, described her son’s engagement with his ‘little buddies’ in the cinema, recognising the social aspect of cinema for babies, even when their own physical and cognitive skills are extremely limited (06/05/08).

A point mentioned by nearly all of the women was the response of the babies to the dimming of the house lights. Helen, for instance, reports that her daughter got ‘a wee bit excited with the lights going down’ (10/04/08) and Andrea – like many other women – comments that this was the point when her daughter would turn and look at the screen (27/03/08). Similarly, Marcia notes:

I’m aware of him [her son] following the noises and you know, initially what I find at the beginning of the film is that he’s caught by the colours and the movement and things and then it’s as though after that, after a wee while he gets used to it and he doesn’t respond as much. It’s just initially I think when the screen comes on and it’s all these colours and noise and he’s quite taken with it. (Marcia, 21/03/08)

The knowledge of the mechanics of the cinematic apparatus is not suspended here as in conventional accounts within film theory. Rather, like Gunning’s early cinema spectators, the women describe their babies’ fascination with different aspects of technology and exhibition practices, rendering these practices visible anew for the women themselves.

Comments about light were not, however, restricted to the cinema environment as most women also noted how their baby responded to light both on screen and from the screen. Karen, for instance, describes the film as ‘a big light’ and argues that it was this – rather than the specific content on screen – that her son responded to (10/04/08). This was a common theme across the interviews and led to a rather different set of criteria against which a film could be judged with the quality of the light and colour as key factors determining babies’ responses. There was a general consensus that brighter was better and this led to interesting

discussions of the kind of films that were particularly well suited to Watch With Baby. For instance, although Donna expresses an uncertainty and slight anxiety about her daughter watching scenes of violence,¹¹ the 'subtle' child sexual abuse storyline in *The Kite Runner* (Foster, 2007) was not a particular source of concern. Instead, Donna comments that the bright colours of the sun-drenched landscape and the kites against the blue sky had an abstract appeal for her daughter (25/04/08). The following extract from Paula's interview demonstrates how this more abstract awareness of the film's qualities is typically balanced with a curiosity about baby's development and understanding:

The Other Boleyn Girl [Chadwick, 2008] was quite a dark film there wasn't much light going on round about and I thought is she going to be interested in this? And I was watching her thinking are you getting bored here? [K: and was she?] No, I don't know. She certainly wasn't watching that as much as she was watching the other ones, but it could just be she's getting used to it. (Paula, 18/03/08)

When they watched *The Other Boleyn Girl*, Paula's daughter was just over three-months-old and – having attended for five consecutive weeks – Paula by then had a sense of her daughter's regular behaviour in the cinema. However, she is uncertain whether the changes she observed during *The Other Boleyn Girl* were down to her daughter's stage of development or to the abstract qualities of the film itself. Like many other mums I interviewed, Paula describes looking for clues in her daughter's behaviour, but recognises that ultimately her daughter's experience is unknowable. This could provoke mild to moderate anxiety if a film choice was felt to be 'inappropriate' for young children, but more routinely the women describe their fascination with, and curiosity about, their babies. Recounting the experience of the film can thus become very personalised: a form of (auto)biography where the women present their own development and aspirations as mothers alongside an account of their babies' particular responses. As such, no two accounts of a film are the same.

Andrea, for instance, attended *The Other Boleyn Girl* with Paula and their babies, and similarly noticed that the film was dark and unable to hold her daughter's attention. However, a few days before the screening she had taken her daughter to a farm where she had seen real horses for the first time and this added an extra layer to the experience:

when the galloping horses came on she was goggle-eyed at it and it's fascinating, you just wonder how much do you know? Are you actually understanding or..... I don't know what it is, but then she just fell asleep, she was bored with it.

Andrea's account of her daughter's fascination and boredom suggests another parallel between 'early' cinema and baby cinema, recalling Gunning's argument that early cinema was 'a cinema of instants, rather than developing situations' (1994: 123). Moreover, these accounts also demonstrate that observing their babies' reactions was part of the pleasure for Paula and Andrea – as for the other mums in my study - and for mums who attended regularly the weekly slot provided an opportunity to observe stages in their baby's

development that might otherwise go unnoticed in the daily routine: time to *watch baby*. For a number of the mums, what they were watching (particularly when their babies were very young) was a contented, sleeping baby, whilst for mums of older babies, managing their baby's changing needs posed new challenges, and, at times, frustrations and anxieties. Indeed, accounts of Watch With Baby are often accounts of a baby's changing routine and for *all* of the women in my study the point at which they did – or imagined they would – stop attending these screenings had more to do with their baby's physical than cognitive development. In other words, concerns about the baby's comprehension of 'adult' films – although sometimes expressed – were less immediate and determining than the practical difficulties of managing an older baby's demands in a relatively confined and darkened space.

Sound – more than image – was a cause of anxiety for the women. Loudness and, in particular, *sudden* noise was perceived as inappropriate for an infant audience: there was an uncertainty as to whether this might cause damage to their hearing (films play at a reduced volume in all dedicated baby screenings with this in mind) and evidence from their own experiences that a sudden noise could upset a baby, distract them from feeding or waken them with a start. That said, similar to the mothers' musings on what their babies could see and comprehend on screen, there was discussion about whether and when babies responded to the emotional register of a voice or a musical score. There was also an interest in the noises made by the babies and how these did – or did not – appear to correlate to the content of the film. For instance, a number of women noticed that during the screening of *27 Dresses* (Fletcher, 2008) the infant audience had seemed particularly noisy: something that challenged some of their assumptions about what is engaging for young spectators as this is a bright, light film with a bouncy soundtrack.

My own experience of this film was, however, slightly different. The following extract from my research journal indicates the extent to which my own engagement – both with the film (which I would not otherwise have chosen to see) and with the experience – was filtered through the immediacy of the connection with my son (who was eight-months-old and a regular cinemagoer by this point) and a more abstract attempt to understand what he (and the other babies) were responding to:

Not the kind of film I would normally have seen but a surprisingly enjoyable experience – probably more down to Alec than the film! He's definitely a lot less interested in the screen than he was initially. By the time the lights went down he was ready for a feed – he didn't fall asleep taking his bottle and I had to stand at the back for 5 mins or so, but he fell asleep in my arms and only woke up for the last 10-15 mins. The emotion of the film was definitely heightened by being there with Alec. When he woke up he was initially looking over my shoulder at the projection light for a while, then sat on the arm of my chair with his arm around me, and he kept giving me

kisses during the film's sappy ending. He seemed really quite content and it was a very special, intimate time with him. I was a bit tearful! Once more, Alec did seem out of synch with the other babies though as a lot of the babies were upset, to the extent that for the first time I can remember I couldn't catch some of the dialogue [...] There was nothing obvious about the film to provoke such reactions – no sudden loud noises or flashing lights and in fact the volume seemed lower than in other films (which might explain why I was more aware of the babies!). (Research Journal, 10/04/08)

This extract brings together a number of the themes discussed in this paper. As is common both in my research journal and in the interviews, the account of this particular cinema experience is, at least in part, an attempt to account for something even more intangible: namely a baby's development and behaviour. Although I try to stamp a kind of authority on my interpretation (he is '*definitely* a lot less interested in the screen') reading the journal as a whole makes a mockery of such certainties as shifts in Alec's viewing patterns confound my attempt to construct a linear narrative of development. Similar contradictions often emerge within the context of the interviews: however, the more significant point here is that the behaviour both of one's own child *and* of the other babies in the cinema is a key component of the experience, relating back to my argument about the exhibition context and audience becoming 'attractions' in themselves. The content of this particular film *is* significant to the experience described - in the way I note the complementarities of the emotional conclusion to the romantic comedy and my own experience in the cinema - but this is by no means predictable. Finally, sitting alongside this response to the film's fictional world and my immediate surroundings, is an awareness of the cinematic apparatus: the screen as an object; the system of projection; the local determination of sound levels.

This extract is by no means atypical of the ways in which the women I interviewed would discuss their Watch With Baby experiences. In many ways, what stands out in these accounts is the unpredictability of the experience even – or perhaps particularly – when the film itself offers fairly predictable pleasures. In parallel to my own account of *27 Dresses* is Emily's heightened response to the birth sequence in *Knocked Up* described above, for instance. However, the unpredicted responses to films were not necessarily entirely pleasurable. Rachel's experience of *Knocked Up* could not have been further removed from Emily's:

I didn't enjoy it as much as I thought I would, I got quite... I had a horrible, a terrible labour and when she started going into labour it just brought back my labour to me again, and I just was like, I thought I was going to have to leave, and that really surprised me coz I was quite looking forward to it, coz I'd picked it to go and see I thought it would be really funny and I was just like – it was all too much of a trauma for me still. So I didn't quite like that, it was something of a surprise, I must say. (Rachel, 09/04/08)

Rachel had been very much looking forward to the film and the generic pleasures it promised (pleasures that seemed fairly secure as she had actually seen the film before), but in reality it was almost unwatchable for very specific reasons. This is a concrete example of how 'watching with baby' could provoke a series of re-negotiations of women's own relationships with screen content as well as with the cinema environment. As such, even though some of the films on offer were at times critiqued as rather generic fare, the novelty of the *experience* could transform a response to a film, both positively and negatively. The unpredictability both of the baby's and, on occasion, the mother's response, added a certain frisson to this that was generally (although not always) a source of some pleasure in itself.

Conclusion

If we think of Gunning's account not only in terms of the development of the *technology* but also in terms of the development of the *audience* then the ways in which his account of 'early' cinema chimes with my interviewees' perceptions of their babies' 'early' cinema experiences is perhaps unsurprising. In both cases, we are interested in groups of people learning how to become a cinema audience. Trying to see cinema through babies' eyes makes one freshly aware of its conventions and technology, and provides a different set of criteria against which to evaluate and understand the achievements of a film.

What is perhaps more surprising is that elements of the *women's* own experiences also chime with these accounts of 'early' cinema: particularly in terms of the way in which the audience and exhibition context became attractions in their own right. This reflects the extent to which the women I interviewed were themselves 'learning' how to occupy cinema space anew. The idea that parenting (more specifically, mothering) is a skill or role to be *learned* is a relatively new one that has achieved a particular currency in Britain in the New Labour era. It is also an idea which has been embraced far more enthusiastically by the middle classes than by the working classes who have been most obviously targeted by governmental intervention in this area (Gillies, 2005). As such, the particular ways the women in my study talked about getting to grips with their role as mothers – and the extent to which cinemagoing worked within that autobiography – may well be peculiarly middle class. It may also, for rather different reasons, be peculiarly Anglo-American. *Watch With Baby* takes the form it does because it is positioned *against* a particular model of what cinema is and what it is for. The idea of cinema as a privileged site for the rapt viewing of films which has found such currency in Anglo-American Film Studies bears little resemblance to accounts of contemporary cinemagoing in other contexts, and it also betrays a very fixed sense of the organisation of cinema space.¹² However, given both the variety of ways in which audiences use cinema spaces, and the different venues in which it is possible to watch films, this research offers a useful opportunity to revisit those questions of what cinema is for.

This is an account that is very much located within a particular building in a particular city, but the broader point at stake here is the need for audience studies to grapple with *particular* conditions of contemporary public exhibition and how these shape the possibilities for audience engagement, understanding and pleasure. It also suggests the value of considering cinemagoing within a broader (auto)biographical context. The experiences recounted here relate to a very specific moment in the life cycle and are, as the women themselves acknowledged, different both to their experiences of going to the cinema before the birth of their baby and to their (usually limited) experiences of cinemagoing without their baby since. My argument is not that the experience of watching with baby should transform what we think cinema is for, but rather that studies such as this can offer an opportunity to thicken, complicate and contextualise our understanding of how, why and when cinemas matter to contemporary audiences.

Biographical Note

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Table 1: 'Watch With Baby' Screenings November 2007-April 2008

Date	Title	Tickets Sold	Cert	Genre
01.11.07	<i>Sicko</i>	11	12A	Documentary
	<i>Ratatouille</i>	10	U	Animation/ children's
08.11.07	<i>License to Wed</i>	17	12A	Romantic comedy
15.11.07	<i>Elizabeth: The Golden Age</i>	41	12A	Drama
22.11.07	<i>No Reservations</i>	25	PG	Romantic comedy
29.11.07	<i>Sparkle</i>	23	15	Romantic comedy
06.12.07	<i>The Darjeeling Ltd</i>	34	15	Comedy/drama

13.12.07	<i>The Golden Compass</i>	59	PG	Children's/fantasy
20.12.07	<i>It's A Wonderful Life</i>	47	U	Drama/romance/fantasy
27.12.07	<i>I Am Legend</i>	17	15	Drama/ sci-fi
03.01.08	<i>Jane Austen Book Club</i>	20	12A	Drama/romance
10.01.08	<i>Death at a Funeral</i>	27	15	Comedy
17.01.08	<i>Charlie Wilson's War</i>	47	15	Drama
24.01.08	<i>No Country For Old Men</i>	46	15	Drama/thriller
31.01.08	<i>A Mighty Wind</i>	31	12A	Comedy
07.02.08	<i>Cloverfield</i>	30	15	Action/ sci-fi
14.02.08	<i>Breakfast at Tiffany's</i>	18	PG	BOTH: Comedy/drama/
	<i>Knocked Up</i>	30	15	romance
21.02.08	<i>The Kite Runner</i>	44	12A	Drama
28.02.08	Closed due to fire			
06.03.08	<i>Juno</i>	47	12A	Comedy/ drama
13.03.08	<i>The Other Boleyn Girl</i>	43	12A	Drama
20.03.08	<i>Run Fat Boy Run</i>	N/A	12A	Romantic comedy
27.03.08	<i>The Diving Bell & The Butterfly</i>	39	12A	Drama
03.04.08	<i>The Savages</i>	N/A	15	Drama
10.04.08	<i>27 Dresses</i>	67	12A	Romantic comedy
17.04.08	<i>Son of Rambow</i>	53	12A	Comedy/ drama
24.04.08	<i>Shine a Light</i>	22	12A	Documentary

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¹ 'Watch With Baby' is the title the Grosvenor use for their dedicated baby screenings and is used throughout this article. For more about the cinema itself see http://www.socialanimal.co.uk/GlasgowWestEnd/Grosvenor_Cinema/.

² 'Distraction' is intimately linked to an analysis of commodification in the writings of the Frankfurt School: this is not the way I am using the term here.

³ Attempts were made to recruit fathers for interview through flyers and informal discussion, however none volunteered. There are many possible reasons for this – not least that fathers may be more likely to be in full-time employment during their child's first year – but it is worth noting that men largely existed on the fringes of the cinema community even when they were present. They were less easily integrated into the casual conversations and sharing of experiences and did not seem to have the multiple sites of connection (through participation in a variety of groups) that many of the women shared. This is reflective of men's marginalisation in baby culture more generally and there is a further project to be done exploring men's likely very different experiences of watching with baby .

⁴ The Scottish Government's *Growing Up in Scotland* study shows a strong correlation between the mother's age at the birth of their first child and patterns of economic dis/advantage (Bradshaw, Martin & Cunningham-Burley, 2008). Similarly, the NHS Information Services Division in Scotland found a strong correlation between mother's age at the birth of their first child and measures of deprivation. The most recent statistics available suggest that 48% of first time mothers in Scotland are aged 30+

(<http://www.isdscotland.org/isd/1436.html>): compare this with 84% (21/25) in my study. The *Growing Up in Scotland* report also indicates a lower take-up of ante-natal classes among

younger mothers – as ante-natal classes were often where women heard about Watch With Baby this might, in part, explain why the audience is older than the national average and broadly middle class.

⁵ The presence of buggies in the cinema became a contentious issue in February 2007 after a fire alarm (and visit from the fire brigade) triggered a change in policy as the buggies were found to be blocking exits. Since then, the policy has been that buggies are left in the bar area: a situation many of the mums I spoke to were not entirely happy with. In some bigger cinemas, buggies can still be taken into the screen.

⁶ Pseudonyms are used throughout.

⁷ Listener Maura Crawley made the following comments on Radio 4's *iPM*: "There's a new fashion going on at the moment where parents are bringing young babies into the cinema when they are showing adult films and I'm concerned about this because these young babies, in their development, haven't really reached maturity of any kind and they are open to all sorts of things that could damage their brains, or damage their eyes even, or even their hearing. I think it's absolutely shocking and I feel it's a form of abuse." (9th August 2008). There are arguably parallels here with the image of cinema's first audiences fleeing the auditorium in fear at the sight of a moving train in Lumiere's *Arrival of a Train at a Station*. As Gunning (1994) notes, there is no historical evidence of these responses and the fact that they endure says more about the ideological use that they serve than their veracity. Similarly, Crawley's speculations about dedicated baby screenings are not based on any direct evidence but rather marshal certain ideas about parenting, children and media 'exposure' (implicitly to violent and sexual content). For more sympathetic journalistic accounts of dedicated baby screenings see Rennie (2003), Rose (2004) and Groskop (2007).

⁸ For many, television was synonymous with bad or lazy parenting, for instance (see Boyle, 2009).

⁹ This is not, however, to suggest that early cinema audiences should be understood as childlike or naïve, and Gunning (1990, 1994) is quite clear on this.

¹⁰ There is a growing literature in Film Studies which thinks about cinema and sensation, often with quite direct autobiographical reference to the embodied experience of viewing. However, it is worth noting that this work typically emphasises the synaesthetic qualities of *film* (e.g. Beugnet, 2007) and its abilities to 'move' the body of the spectator in particular ways, and does not necessarily consider the *cinema* in the broader sense I have attempted to do here.

¹¹ I discuss the concerns about violence more fully elsewhere: see Boyle 2009.

¹² For examples outside of these traditions see Steve Derné on male cinemagoing in India (2000), Dimitris Eleftheriotis (2001: 180-209) on Greek outdoor cinemas of the 1960s, or Lalitha Gopalan's study of action genres in contemporary Indian cinema (2002). Both Eleftheriotis and Gopalan are partly interested in how an assumption of particular exhibition practices can be read into films from a particular time and place and the practices they

examine – while ‘marginal’ in film studies terms – are not marginal in their specific socio-historical context, unlike the current study.