

Cultural Cinema Exhibition in the 21st Century

On the 2nd February Watershed is hosting an event called Beyond the Box-office that will look closer at the UK Film Council's commissioned research into the relationship between film and culture. It is ironic that just when the UKFC (much criticised for focusing mainly on the industrial aspects of film) is being wound down they should be leading the debate on film as culture. Now, with responsibility for film policy in flux, it is essential that we engage with this debate and articulate a coherent policy response to film's cultural impact. As a contribution to the specific Beyond the Box-office debate and the wider policy flux I offer these reflections on the role of cinema exhibition.

Film is recognised as both the popular medium and the new art form of the 20th century. The question facing us is how will it evolve in the 21st Century in a landscape where digital delivery and multi platform consumption have and will continue to radically change the way we make and consume culture? What will be the role of cinema exhibition in this new environment and more specifically what will the role of independent cinemas be?

Over the first 100 years of its existence different kinds of cinema exhibition have evolved into two broad types:

The first is the commercial model that is driven by event films. To the audience this is largely about escaping for a couple of hours into a fictional world, switching off from reality to be entertained: a role that has been at the core of the film business since films started generating audiences. Commercial cinema is first and foremost about making money. The more popular the film is the more ticket sales and, critically for the cinema, concessions sales. Every aspect of promotion about the film is to sell it as a thrilling/emotional/moving good night out. This model is marketing led with cinema exhibition as the tightly controlled marketing 'window' from which all other forms of film consumption flow.

The second is the cultural (commonly called specialised) model that is more concerned with engaging audiences in the capacity of film to make and share cultural meaning. Films are viewed as generators of ideas and debates. The exhibitors' priority here is to provide audiences with opportunities to engage and explore these debates and to connect with the wider culture. In this model film exhibition becomes part of a continuum of discovery and exploration into wider cultural context. The multiplatform environment becomes a major opportunity to facilitate this wider context. Audiences are seen as active participants and members of diverse communities.

The commercial model tends to be dominated by a small group of multinational 'studios' collectively known as Hollywood with a narrow English language cultural focus while the cultural model is overwhelmed with global diversity of filmmakers, languages and cultural interests.

The commercial model is easy to grasp and has clear economic metrics. The cultural model is complex and as yet has no established metrics. The very scale of the commercial model tends to completely overshadow the cultural to the disadvantage of both culture and commerce.

However what is certain is that 'cinema' is a cultural form that speaks across boundaries, an art form that can convey cultural messages more universally than any other medium, and an art form that we reduce to only commerce at our peril.

As one begins to look at the exhibitor economics it gets even more complex. The multiplex is obviously a robust and 'efficient' model with cost driven out at all points – but efficient for what? For taking money from mass audiences responding to large marketing budgets. The very fact that the production and marketing budgets are so large pre-determines the need to appeal across broad demographics and militates against cultural diversity.

The independent cultural cinema model on the other hand is a fragile and diverse model. The cultural sector is specialising in films that do not have big national marketing budgets, films that are beyond the commercial mainstream, they need to be marketed by the exhibitor to a local diverse audience, an audience of many niche interests which is developed over time through engagement with cultural diversity, an audience that participates in the culture of film.

The commercial model is the exploitation end of the value cycle while the cultural model is the R&D beginning of the value cycle developing audiences for emerging talent. Both are vital and interdependent for a healthy film culture. The relationship with production has yet to be explored beyond the economic determinism of - one makes the film, the other delivers the box-office.

Over the past decade there have been attempts to develop audiences for 'specialised' film in the multiplex sector. BFI at Odeon appeared to be a really good idea but failed and quietly disappeared. The Digital Screen Network was hailed as the answer through new technology. It too has failed to develop 'specialised' audiences although it has accelerated the move to digital projection.

I suggest that both of these investments failed because they fundamentally misunderstood the dynamic of developing audiences for culturally diverse content. They failed to create the 'engagement' and 'participation' environment that is required for people to take cultural risks. The stripped back commercial exploitation model cannot create the open, trusted and personalised relationships that are so well developed in the independent cultural sector. The centralised national models also ignore the 'local' dynamic of cultural relationships. Each city is subtly different and it is only through place-based organisations that connections with the granularity of particular populations can be explored.

In 2002 KPMG researched a major report on Specialised Exhibition and Distribution for the Film Council. They made some very pertinent points about specialised exhibition which remain pertinent 9 years later:

- 4.3.2 Dynamic stand-alones have an important role to play in ensuring the continued diversity of the sector.
- 7.3 Available information on the characteristics of the specialised cinema audience profile is limited.
- 11.3.1 the specialised circuits show a mix of specialised and more mainstream product, and the mix varies depending on the location.
- 11.3.4 RFTs show almost exclusively specialised films.

Watershed was an RFT (Regional Film Theatre) and continues to champion specialised film and provide access to the cultural diversity of moving image through investment in exhibition, engagement, participation and production, with particular emphasis on working with young people in and out of school. Watershed has developed as an organisation that engages with the complexity of cultural and creative industries in the Bristol city region, making connections between creative content and audiences.

It is essential that we give new generations the opportunity to explore cultural difference and diversity so that they can develop their own creativity and voices. Independent specialised exhibition centres are a highly effective model for creating the opportunity to see a wide range of films with the engagement support to make meaning from new experience and ideas.

As responsibility for film policy shifts it is critical that these differences of approach are recognised and engaged with in meaningful ways. Culture and commerce are mutually interdependent and we need to develop a robust film policy that supports not only the economic health but also the diversity, and cultural impact of our film sector: a policy that covers the spectrum from culture to commerce.

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