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Introduction to Themed Section: Researching past cinema audiences

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Since Allen and Gomery's (1985) call for a revision of existing approaches, the emergence and rise in prominence of the New Film History tradition has irrevocably changed what it is to be a film historian. With film history no longer solely concerned with film aesthetics or viewing cinema as a 'reflection' of society (Chapman, Glancy and Harper, 2007: 2–3), films themselves are now not necessarily the chief focus of a historical investigation of cinema. Indeed, over the past twenty years – and particularly since the establishment of the strand of scholarship termed the 'new cinema history' (Maltby, 2011) – there has been a notable shift towards the study of all kinds of past film exhibition spaces and the tastes, responses and habits of the audiences who frequented them. This is illustrated by the growing number of publications, networks and major research projects on past cinema audiences which cross and connect the disciplines of film and media studies, cultural and leisure studies, and history and cultural geography. With this shift towards researching spaces of exhibition and their audiences, film historians have met the call to look beyond traditional film history methodologies and incorporate the use of a wide range of sources, from archival, industry and reception sources, to audience memories elicited through questionnaires, interviews and focus groups.

The *Researching Past Cinema Audiences: Archives, Memories and Methods* conference, held at Aberystwyth University in March 2018, offered a platform for debate amongst both established and emerging scholars who shared this desire to research past cinema audiences through a wide range of investigative foci. The nine articles in this themed section represent a cross-section of work presented at the conference. In particular

– and as encouraged by our conference call for papers – they represent the wide range of historical periods that are being focused upon within this field of research, from the formative years of cinema and cinemagoing in the early 1900s, to the period (from the 1970s and onwards) when, as Kuhn, Biltreyst and Meers note, cinema consumption became substantially connected to ‘non-theatrical modes of film distribution and exhibition’ (2017: 11) associated with television and home media. The articles in this section draw on a range of approaches to the topic of past cinema audiences. Some take a broader approach, drawing on a range of relevant examples from a particular period of cinemagoing in the UK, US and/or Europe (for instance, the articles by Mario Sluga, Richard Farmer and Guy Barefoot). Others centre on case studies or ‘microhistories’ (to use Daniela Treveri Gennari and Sarah Culhane’s term) of cinemagoing in particular cities, towns or rural areas in order to elucidate the consistencies and disparities between these case studies and wider understandings of cinemagoing patterns and practices during the periods under scrutiny.

Despite this variety in approaches, topics and periods, there are, for us, two key issues which are consistently addressed across all nine articles; issues which continue to be at the centre of debate within the field of new cinema history. The first is the need for creativity and flexibility in the employment of sources, and the ways in which these sources are analysed, interpreted and (frequently) combined, in order to answer key research questions pertaining to past cinema audiences. As illustrated by the articles in this section, the range of approaches adopted is continually expanding within this field of enquiry, illustrating the field’s continuing vitality and fertility in developing cutting edge methodologies relevant to both audience research and film historical research. Across the section, sources drawn upon for analysis and interpretation include pre-existing quantitative surveys, box office statistics, cinema pricing records, cinema programming ledgers, trade press articles, local and national newspaper reports, cinema advertisements, letters, memoirs, film magazines, past histories and publications on the cinema, artefacts owned by audiences, and poems and other forms of creative writing, as well as newly-generated cinemagoing memories drawn from quali-quantitative questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, oral histories and video-interviews. Hence, the range of sources drawn upon is vast (encompassing quantitative and qualitative materials, written, oral and visual data, and pre-existing and newly generated evidence), but what is also striking is the number of articles in this section which draw, productively and innovatively, on combinations of these forms of data in order to answer their research questions and progress with their enquiries. As Biltreyst, Lotz and Meers have noted, in their ground-breaking article on methods of triangulation in historical audience research, the ‘scarcity of resources’ when researching past audiences and past cinemagoing ‘forces researchers to be more creative’ in exploring ‘sources for reconstructing historical media consumption and reception’ (2012: 691). The range of scholarship within this Themed Section thus offers the reader a range of specific, detailed examples of how researchers have adopted creative approaches within their research enquiries, and have addressed the challenges and difficulties of combining very different kinds of data and materials (in terms of their provenance, purpose and medium)

with productive and illuminating results. We therefore very much hope that the articles in this Themed Section provide useful methodological templates for future researchers in the field.

The second key issue which many of the articles address or relate to (either directly or indirectly) is the role of the film text within research on past cinema audiences and cinemagoing. As previously noted, pioneering works in the field – in particular, Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst and Philippe Meers's key book *Explorations in New Cinema History* (2011) – have worked to distinguish new cinema history from traditional film historical approaches by challenging the centrality of the film text to such enquiries, and emphasising, instead, the wider role of cinema as a site of 'social and cultural significance' (Maltby 2011: 9) and cinemagoing as a changing social and cultural practice that constitutes much more – in its sociality and contextualisation in time, place and space – than just the activity of watching films. Kuhn, Biltereyst and Meers have noted, more recently, that the 'place of film(s)...remains a significant challenge for memory studies' and other forms of historical audience research (2017: 10), and this is illustrated by the case studies explored within this Themed Section. In a number of articles in the section (from, for instance, Jamie Terrill, Richard Farmer, and Guy Barefoot), findings and analysis highlight the ways in which the appeal of cinema, as a social, leisure and community site, related significantly to factors beyond the films screened – from the warmth and cultural and religious activities offered in a local cinema, to the role a cinema plays in the illumination of the built environment and urban landscape, to a consideration of the drive-in cinema as either a 'passion pit' or 'community centre'. However, in other articles – most prominently in the pieces by Sue Harper, Neizh Erdogan, Mario Sluga, and Treveri Gennari and Culhane – the roles of individual films and the ways in which they were framed, promoted, distributed and consumed nationally or locally (within particular regions or at particular cinemas) are productively assessed, illustrating how, in certain instances, a more film-focused enquiry can yield productive and illuminating insights of pertinence to questions at the centre of new cinema history, particularly regarding local variances in past cinemagoing experiences. As a result, the articles in this Themed Section contribute substantially to this ongoing debate by considering, in each case, the extent to which films and their promotion and reception – as well as people, buildings, journeys, spaces, technologies, places and activities – play a role in the cinemagoing contexts under investigation.

The Themed Section begins with an article developed from one of the conference's keynote talks by Sue Harper, a key and pioneering figure in the field. Crucially, Harper addresses the issue of methodological creativity and flexibility head-on in this piece. Drawing on her experiences of employing a range of methodological approaches across her career, research projects and publications, Harper considers the crucial issue of the role of the researcher in investigations of past audiences and its relation to the twin concepts of empathy and historical distance. Reflecting on the benefits and challenges of quantitative and qualitative methods and sources, Harper argues that researchers in the field 'should, at all

costs, avoid methodological rigidity', a principle which echoes throughout the Themed Section as a whole.

The next three articles all explore research questions and case studies associated with the formative years of cinemagoing in the early twentieth century, and, in order to do this, all draw, productively and inventively, on local and national newspaper articles and advertising as their key primary source. In 'Early Cinema-going and the Emergence of Film Culture', Nezhir Erdoğan focuses on newspaper coverage of the 'first cinema-specific building' in Istanbul, the Pathé Frères Cinema, in order to trace the discourses employed to frame the cinema's shifting appeals to potential audiences and their 'horizon of expectations' about the role of this (European, westernised) cinema within the emerging cinema culture in the city. Also drawing on and analysing the frames of reference within newspaper coverage (along with trade press and other accounts), Mario Sluga's piece, 'The Turn-of-the-Century Understanding of "Fakes" in the US and Western Europe', explores the complex discourses of authenticity, accuracy and quality employed by a range of distributors and exhibitors to promote a prevalent category of early film-making – 'fakes', which, in his words, 'stage an event or refashion an existing film as a representation of the event in question'. Assessing the terms employed in the press to frame such films, Sluga makes use of a range of evidence drawn from these sources, including reports which note and consider the responses of audiences to particular screenings of 'fake' films.

Jamie Terrill's 'More to the UK than England' then moves the section from the predominantly urban experiences of the previous two articles, to a focus on rural cinemagoing scholarship. Providing a contrast to Erdoğan's investigation of the activities of Sigmund Weinberg, the owner of the Pathé Frères Cinema, Terrill analyses newspaper coverage of the activities of a rural (rather than urban) cinema showman, Arthur Cheetham, in order to highlight the ways in which such showmen impacted on the meanings and appeals of cinema within specific rural areas, including through the forms of civic engagement achieved through the showman's activities within a particular locale. Through this investigation, Terrill argues for the importance of a comparative approach within Welsh cinemagoing scholarship, where different rural locales are compared, on a regional, national and global level, with other rural areas as well as relevant urban forms of cinemagoing. Terrill's work is therefore very much in the spirit of Treveri, Hipkins and O'Rawe's contention, in their recent volume *Rural Cinema Exhibition and Audiences in a Global Context*, that such comparisons will enable the identification of 'commonalities and anomalies in the rural experience' (2018: 18) at the expense of sweeping generalisations. The section then returns to the urban context in Richard Farmer's article, 'The Dying of the Light: The Blackout, Cinemas and Cinemagoing in Wartime Britain'. Drawing on a range of documents, sources and pre-existing reminiscence, Farmer explores the impact of the World War Two blackout on the cinemagoing experiences of audiences of the period, illustrating the significant role illumination (and subsequent lack of illumination) played in the appeal of, and audience interaction with, the cinema during wartime. As a result, Farmer's piece highlights the important ways historical audience research can elucidate the complex and

shifting meanings of the cinema in everyday life (as a building, institution, and source of pleasure), in different contexts and historical circumstances.

The following two articles draw on findings from two major AHRC-funded projects, *The Major Minor Cinema Project: Highlands and Islands Film Guild 1946-71* and the *Italian Cinema Audiences* project, but they also both offer, through these findings, crucial new models and approaches to researching the everyday experiences of past audiences through a wide range of written, oral and visual source material. In 'Reel to Rattling Reel', Sarah Neely focuses on a strand of the *Major Minor Cinema Project* which involved the analysis of pre-existing and newly-written poems and short stories about their authors' experiences at Film Guild screenings. By analysing these materials alongside the project's oral history interviews and other forms of correspondence, the article considers the value and worth of drawing on creative writing when working with and researching cinema memory, particularly when considering them as forms of memory narrative which are, frequently, inflected with expressions of the specifically local experiences of cinemagoing associated with the rural context of the Film Guild's activities. Moving from rural Scotland to small-town cinemagoing in Italy, Daniela Treveri Gennari and Sarah Culhane's piece, 'Crowdsourcing Memories and Artefacts to Reconstruct Italian Cinema History' has the issue of the role of the film text within new cinema history at its heart. Drawing on oral histories, video-interviews and crowdsourced artefacts – which relate to cinemagoing in Italy and include a range of visual artefacts – the article traces microhistories of cinema exhibition and cinemagoing in 1950s Italy at case study cinemas in two small-towns, Manduria in Puglia and Amelia in Umbria. The article draws effectively on the combined analysis of oral histories and the analysis of visual artefacts (including a range of film marketing material tailored to these local contexts) to illustrate the benefits of multi-source approaches, and the ways in which materials associated with individual film texts can productively contribute to nuanced histories of past cinemagoing and exhibition.

The last two articles in the Themed Section focus on audiences, tastes and practices which have long been subject to generalised accounts and assumptions – drive-in audiences and audiences for horror cinema. However, what also characterises these articles are the distinct ways in which they exemplify Sue Harper's call for an avoidance of methodological rigidity in the field. In 'My Search for Passion Pits with Pix', Guy Barefoot draws on a diverse range of pre-existing material – from legal records and surveys, to news reports and published recollection – to evaluate the long-held conception that the drive-in was predominantly a place for dating teenagers, and to weigh this up (critically and carefully) against a range of evidence which argues that the drive-in was largely a site for family audiences during the 1950s. Bringing things forward into the viewing context of the 1970s, 1980s and onwards, the section concludes with Martin Smith's piece, 'Researching Memories of *The Exorcist*'. Drawing on methods employed in his ongoing research project on audiences of William Friedkin's landmark horror film, *The Exorcist* (1973), Smith outlines and critically reflects on his employment of grounded theory methodology in his administering and analysis of questionnaires, interviews and focus groups designed to

enable audiences to recount their experiences of and interactions with the film. Taking the reader through each stage of his research, Smith returns to discussions of the important role of the researcher within qualitative historical audience research, and also provides insights and considers approaches which the article notes are of particular relevance to solo researchers working on small-scale audience projects.

We are pleased and proud to publish this range of scholarship, which represents the thought-provoking, cutting-edge and methodologically inventive work presented at the Researching Past Cinema Audiences conference in 2018.

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Jamie Terrill is an AHRC-funded PhD student at Aberystwyth University. His research explores the social history of rural Welsh cinemagoing prior to 1970, drawing on archival research and gathered audience memories. Along with Kate Egan, he was the co-organiser of the *Researching Past Cinema Audiences* conference. Email: jrt6@aber.ac.uk.

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