

'Exhibition – not production – is the most important phase of the film business'. Discuss.

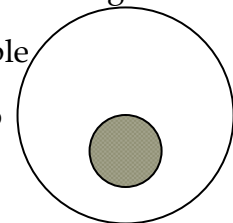
Film exhibition involves many practices coming together at a given time and place to enable viewers to watch a film. The first type of apparatus for showing films was the kinoscope. The kinoscope was used by one person at a time. When films began to be shown to audiences on a larger scale, projection systems were used. To begin with there were no venues for films alone. Other projected media were shown in the same place, at different times. Only as films became more popular did they begin to be shown exclusively in purpose built venues.

Discussing exhibition in relation to the largest film production initiations, Hollywood, seems appropriate. Exhibition sites are pivotal to the economics of Hollywood. The various retail outlets where consumers have paid to view a film assume enormous importance in the functioning of the film industry. Hollywood, at its height, was an integrated industry of self-sufficient status in which the major producers, distributors and studios also owned the movie theatres. The legal battle that broke up this monopoly is one of the most significant in US history.

The relationship between distributors and exhibitors became strained after they no longer shared a common financial interest. Conditions of exhibition cannot fail to have a significant impact on the film viewer. Many aspects of exhibition sites work subtly to construct the viewing experience; the physical and geographical surroundings of the place where the film is shown, the installation of cup holders or whether the theatres name derives from an exotic place, the corporation that owns it, or the shopping mall that houses it.

An issue that occurs throughout the history of film exhibition is whether audiences go to *the* movies or go to *a* movie. Does the entire experience that the companies are screening of the film provide primary pleasure or does the exhibition site provide little in addition to what appears on the screen?

Take a Hollywood Blockbuster like Independence Day. More people saw this film than were involved making it. The importance of exhibition, in its simplest, is that without exhibiting a film, there is little point making it. The object to the right suggests, in diagram form, the ratio of people involved in the making of a film to the amount of people who see the film in its total form, in my own way. The white area representing the audience with the black mass as the individuals involved in the making of the film. The diagram illustrates a Blockbuster film rather than an unknown independent. More independent films have a smaller gap between the ratio due to not being able to fund the needed publicity to gain a bigger audience.



In the early days, films could be found in places where people seeking leisure time activities could choose to watch them as one of many activities at the site. Fairgrounds and tent shows were typical of these venues. Although drive-in theatres use the film as the specific draw to the site, the casual friendly-family environment, outdoor location and extras like snack bars and playgrounds recalled the days of travelling film exhibitors screening their wares in fairground tents.

Nickelodeons became the first sites dedicated for film exhibition and were usually situated in busy retail districts. They treated the films they screened

as less of an attraction but as a consumer product. When multiplexes, usually situated in or near shopping malls, became the dominant exhibition sites in the 1970's, the association between exhibition and retailing of the nickelodeon days seemed to have returned. Intervening between these two periods of film as product was the movie palace era.

Movie palaces, which began to be built in the 1910's and their heyday in the 1920's, paralleled those legitimate theatres or opera house in which films had at first been only part of the entertainment package. The ambiance of the movie palace suggested that movie going was a cultural event, rather than a sideshow attraction or a break from a shopping trip.

When travelling movie shows came to town, they often played at the sites of various communal activities, like churches, schools and town halls. In suitable weather they set-up their exhibits and tents shows at country fairs, street carnivals and amusement parks. The fair or amusement park, like the cinema, offers pleasure in exchange for a ticket, uses music to entice and presents teasing exteriors that promise thrills or unbelievable sights if one steps inside. The amusement park-movie convergence moved into a different phase with the opening in 1955 of Disneyland, whose rides were based on film narratives.

Unlike many communal gatherings, film spectatorship takes place in the dark. A condition shared with the performing arts (although the darkened auditorium is a fairly recent component of the consumption of plays, dance, and music) lessening the spectator's identification with his or her companions.

Films base their appeal on the promise of transporting their audiences beyond the here and now of their daily lives. Often the trip begins before the projector

is turned on. This is especially true for the heyday of the movie palace. The famous exoticism of movie palace architecture and decoration copied the style of every distant land and historical period that the builders could think of. Not only were these theatres furnished like mansion or luxury hotels, but they were staffed by armies of uniformed servants, who opened doors, nursed the sick and tended the children.

Life requires periodic relief and escape is a consistent theme associated with film attendance. "To get out the house" is the response frequently offered by filmgoers as a reason for film attendance. This implies the imprisoning nature of the house, with a trip to the theatre as a glorious liberation. Film going is a communal exercise, but once the lights go down it is also an intensely private and covert one even if every seat is filled.

Film going consists of both public rituals and private space. This paradox leads directly to the association of film attendance with erotic pleasure. Many a first time erotic physical contacts between boy and girl have awkwardly developed in the glow of the screen. The drive-in to which one could so easily bring Grandma and the kids was also the notorious 'passion pit', where teenagers could simultaneously combine 'parking' with the movie date.

A cinema no matter what its design or its metaphorical trappings, is a retail outlet which sells a product. Once consumed, the cinematic product, when theatrically exhibited, lingers internally but leaves no reusable traces in the consumers possession. The emergence of home video and DVD at last made films into commodities rather than pure consumables. DVD's may have in fact taken films to far towards the commodity item status. Films are now sometimes over shadowed by the special features that are included on the DVD with the film itself.

The film-going experience could be thought of as a form of shopping. Studies have demonstrated how the movies serve as a shop window to stimulate consumer desire and how the studios directly co-operate with certain product manufacturers to promote their wares by representing them on screen, encouraging them to manufacture and market items inspired by certain films and performers, or having their stars advocate their use. This is all under the umbrella of product placement and endorsement.

Theatrical exhibition continues to evolve alongside almost thirty years of home video in all its various formats. The multiplex remains the dominant exhibition venue, as it adds more and more screens. The cultural history of the motion picture theatre shows us that this particular motion picture technology has a deeply rooted symbolic value.