

# **CINEMA AS A SOCIAL SPACE: UNDERSTANDING CINEMA-GOING IN BRITAIN, 1947-63**

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Studying cinema is not just a question of studying films, nor indeed the institutions which produce the films and the economic structures which sustain them. Studying how we watch films - in multiplexes, on video, in theme parks, on television - is an important part of understanding what films mean within a culture and how they fit into the broader range of entertainment activities which might be on offer to audiences. Studies of cinema architecture, of patterns of film distribution and screening, of audience responses can help us build a picture which is richer than the cinema studies model which tends to centre on the isolated spectator gazing at the screen. Recent work by, for instance, Sue Harper and Vincent Porter has provided invaluable insights into the British cinema audiences in the fifties, in terms both of their attendance habits and their tastes, while work on oral histories such as that of Annette Kuhn has opened up the question of how cinemagoers reflect on their past experiences of film going. In this article, I draw on such work but inflect it rather differently. Here, I am looking at how we might understand what cinema meant as a social space, how it was constructed not so much through audience numbers or bricks, mortar and capital but through the physical experience of being part of a mass audience in a space specifically designed for watching films. Gazing at the screen was only one of a number of things which could be done in the cinema and it is the way in which the audiences experienced and thought about the cinematic space which interests me here (1).

The paper is part of a larger project on British cinema in the fifties which proposes that, during the fifties, cinema became a residual site which provided escape from the obligations and expectations placed on the citizen/consumer of the modern, classless state. Although in the 1920s and 30s, cinema-going was strongly associated with the shifts and changes of modernity in Britain in the 1950s an increasing emphasis was placed on the domestication of leisure and on the importance of home entertainment; television becomes the up-to-date (and problematic) medium, leaving cinema looking old-fashioned. Part of that change is bound up with the physical experience of the cinema and, I would argue, the meaning of cinema as a social space changes during the fifties. In the immediate post-war period, cinema could still be considered as entertainment for all, a prime example of the modern, mass media and one which situated itself within a wide range of examples of popular culture. By the early sixties, cinema is being thought of as a medium which is old-fashioned and uncomfortable, has a fragmented audience, and is associated with the past.

There are a number of sources which can be used to establish the different ways in which cinema-going is talked about and thought about in the period. The industry itself was

constantly reviewing audiences and mulling over the reasons for popularity and failure of particular films or genres while nostalgic accounts, looking back on cinema-going of the past, also offers some insights. One source is the popular magazines which catered for the filmgoer and which, depending on their audiences, offered articles about films, stars, trends in the industry and predictions about what was going to happen in the future. This article is based largely on a study of two rather different British film magazines, the popular *Picturegoer* which was published weekly in the post-war war period and the more middle brow *Films and Filming* which first appeared in 1953 and was published monthly as part of a stable which included a theatre magazine, *Plays and Players* and a ballet companion, *Dance and Dancing* (2). In studying the magazines, I noted not so much comments about particular films or stars but comments about the experience of cinema-going either from readers in their letters or in the articles and editorials produced by professional journalists. To make the task manageable, I concentrated on three key moments, 1946-7 when only *Picturegoer* was being published; the mid fifties when both magazines were operating and the early sixties which saw the demise of *Picturegoer* in 1960 and the celebration of *Films and Filming's* 100th issue in 1963. Inevitably, this can only provide us with fragments of the cinema-going experience, fragments which are themselves over-determined by the practices of film industry journalism, but perhaps being chosen for publication provides some evidence that the comments these readers and journalists were making expressed something that was typical and resonant for their readers. I have combined this with some use of reminiscences by people looking back on their experience of going to the cinema at around the same time and with some comments on cinema made by sociologists of the period, often rather throw-away remarks made in the context of another object of study. This helps to reinforce the film magazine material and taken together these sources provide a vivid insight into the changing experience of going to the pictures in Britain in the post-war period.

The end of the war in Britain saw a boom in popular entertainment. As Paul Addison suggests relief at being alive combined with a little extra money found an outlet in mass entertainment; 'with many commodities on the ration and others in short supply, leisure was the most powerful magnet and the leisure industry a licence to print money' (1985:114). Addison lists the record statistics for a whole range of popular activities - crowds turned out for sports like cricket and football, went to dance halls, visited the cinema, joined cycling clubs and went to holiday camps. This explosion in popular entertainment is well described by Peter Hennessey who notes that 'it was largely pre-war pastimes which scooped the pool in the first years of peace' (1993: 316) . This included cinema which improved on its wartime popularity. 1946 was as it turned out a boom year, with 4,500 cinemas and annual attendance of 1,635 million visits from a population of 46 million (Addison 1985: 130). Attendances continued to be strong, though not quite on this scale, into the early fifties (1985: 3).

The cinema audience was predominantly youthful even at the height of this popularity. But the scale of cinema-going made it 'the most popular form of popular entertainment in the 1940s' (Addison 1985: 129) and its domination meant that cinema could be presented as if it were part of everyone's experience. This sense of a wide and heterogeneous audience and of the diverse uses to which the spaces of the cinema could be put can be found in a humorous *Picturegoer* column of Feb 1st 1947 in which Eric Hall describes a trip to the cinema with his wife. The couple want to watch the film but find themselves continually moving seats as their neighbours distract and disturb them: commercial travellers snoring, women talking, a small boy eating toffee, couples, with their hands hidden, embracing in the back row. The stereotypical nature of these complaints gives it credence as an account of a range of cinemagoers - people on their own, in family groups, with friends, with lovers - engaging a variety of social activities which would be familiar to regular picturegoers. Another columnist got into trouble with readers for complaining, rather more sourly than Hall, that women make 'bad film patrons' because they do not concentrate on the film but talk, eat and dote on crooners. (2nd August 1947 and letters of 30th August and 13th September, 1947). Although cinema-going in the late 40s was particularly associated with women, respectable middle aged men were still there; another *Picturegoer* writer, John Y Stapleton, comments that, when he asked some business men and a 'respectable police inspector' in a Lancashire

manufacturing town about their activities the night before, they were quite happy to admit they had been to see a double feature horror bill (Stapleton, 7th June 1947).

Rachel Low, discussing a social survey of cinema audiences in 1948, noted that cinema audiences went for 'an institutionalised night out' (1948: 107). Regular visits set up habits which affected how the cinema space was informally organised. Recalling visits to the cinema in the 40s, Suzanne White remembers how different spaces 'belonged' to different groups; she and her father 'always sat halfway back . . . at the back was all the courting couples, down the front was all the kids' (O'Brien and Eyles: 60). A reader's letter in *Picturegoer* in 1947 gives a sense of a regular audience which goes to the cinema as a social event and claims the same space every time; joining a correspondence about cinema-going in the North of England, the reader complains 'every Saturday night one can see a practically identical audience. One family. . . can be seen in exactly the same seats every Saturday at the second performance and they are no exception' (19th July, 1947). Presumably, although the reader is critical of such behaviour, s/he was there often enough to notice it.

Such anecdotes are important not because they are statistically reliable but because they tell us that it was still important for a magazine like *Picturegoer* to conceive of the cinema as offering an enjoyable experience to heterogeneous audience. Going to the cinema was perceived as an ordinary and natural event for all kinds of people. But at the same time, entering the cinema's space could also be presented as exciting since a physical sense of the cinema's glamour was also retained from the pre-war days. A cinema manager writing to the letters page points out that he has to wear a dress suit, 'be able to speak from the stage, mix socially with the local "big-wigs" [and] be an expert at publicity organisation' (10th May, 1947). Cinema remained a place of refuge from privations outside. As *Picturegoer* commented, during the crisis of the US film embargo and continuing post-war rationing, 'a certain austerity has come to the cinema [but] not nearly as much as in other everyday aspects of life' (3rd January 1948). Jackie Stacey explores the importance of the 'material pleasures of cinema-going' (1994: 99) for her correspondents, pleasures which involved both escape from domestic privations ('Sometimes one went to keep warm if coal were short' (94)) and the enjoyment of luxury, the deep pile carpets, plush seats and 'fancy lighting' (96). Large cinemas could dominate a town as Roland Miller recalls, for instance, in Exeter where the cathedral was much less prominent than the Odeon (Breakwell and Hammond 1990: 59). While it could be argued, that such comments are suffused with the glamour of nostalgia, it is by no means inevitable, as we shall see that memories of cinema-going will produce such a strong sense of physical pleasure.

Cinema's importance as the most popular mass entertainment medium continued into the 50s though audiences were declining; Corrigan argues that 'the key years are 1954-8 when some 500 million disappear from the annual attendances at cinemas' (1983: 30). The declining audiences and the reasons for it became something of an obsession in commentary and discussion about cinema. This affects how cinemagoers themselves think about their experience of the cinema. In the context of the rivalry with television, the sense of cinema as a social space begins to change and the contest between home and cinema (which had been comprehensively won by cinema in the 40s) begins to take a new turn. *Picturegoer* of 1955 (the year of the arrival of commercial television in Britain) regularly features letters contrasting the experience of watching films in the cinema and television at home. A hopeful reader points out that television could stimulate interest in film through interviews with the stars and extracts but generally the tone is competitive with readers feeling that they have to defend their loyalty to the cinema. One reader complains of the 'gloomy silence' when visiting friends who are absorbed in watching television and declares, in a determined fashion, 'I'm going to the cinema' (19th March 1955). Another reader comments that films at the cinema, unlike television, offered 'more varied programmes, large screens, colour' and can be watched without 'outside interference' (3rd April 1955). Cinema can still operate for some readers as 'an escape from everyday things' (2nd Sep 1955) and a woman reader claims that films are so good now that she goes to the cinema 'up to eight times a week' (9th July 1955). The wider audience is still there in the cinema; a woman of 40 writes 'I enjoy

everything the cinema offers' (27 August 1955) while a reader complains of a baby crying and another praises a cinema manager for giving 'priority admittance to the elderly and infirm' (5 August 1955) but its members are perhaps beginning to feel rather uncomfortable.

Thus, alongside the determined espousal of the cinema, there are letters complaining about continuous shows which made for interruptions as audience members enter at odd times (5 February 1955) and that tickets cannot be bought in advance (2nd July 1955). The magazine's response to a reader's complaint about the lack of comfort in many cinemas is indicative; ten years after the war, the editorial comments that 'wartime restrictions and shortages delayed plans' (5th November 1955), clearly indicating that cinema was stuck with wartime facilities and was not keeping up with the publicised expansion of consumer goods and domestic improvements in the home. One reader complains about a rude commissionaire and about the picture jumping (16th April 1955) and another emphasises the importance of good stills outside and properly closing curtains in the intervals (8th October 1955), both of which are often lacking. All these may be small things but they show that the cinema is losing its battle to be more comfortable, more special than the home. And what is on view is also beginning to change. One viewer bemoans the loss of old films screened on a Sunday (30th July 1955) while Hollywood is criticised for its 'brutality packed pictures' (25th June 1955). Another reader links the change in the type of film on show with changes in audience habits; mentioning Hollywood films in particular, the letter asks 'why so many X films? They stop the family having their Saturday night out at the pictures' (25th June 1955). *Picturegoer*, with its commitment to the mass audience, responds gamely that 'Filmdom is just as worried for there are more on the way' (5 November 1955).

Indeed there were and increasingly the social space of the cinema is marked by sense of threat and heightened sexuality. Hollywood comes in for criticism in a *Films and Filming* editorial for responding to television's challenge with films which are getting more lavish and longer; the metaphor to describe this is significantly brutal - Hollywood, the editorial warns, 'is about to pound our senses with spectacle' (February 1956). More prosaically, the threat to cinema was associated with the increasing dominance of young people in the audience. Later that year, another editorial commented on an industry survey which announced an increase in cinema-going among 16-24 year olds; *Films and Filming* was rather gloomy about this trend and commented on the need to educate the young in film appreciation to avoid the situation in which films will have to 'appeal [only] to the adolescent and emotionally immature' (August 1956). In the discourses about who controlled the shared space, the key 'mythical' figure became the working class male and particularly the teddy boy. A reader to *Films and Filming* associated the change in films with a change in the manners of the audience; she had enjoyed a British X film, *I am a Camera* (Cornelius/GB/1955), but complained about the behaviour of "'wolves'" at her local cinema in Torquay who, when X films were shown, made the assumption that 'screen morality being at a premium, so also must be that of the feminine audience' (December 1955). Sociologists commented on the phenomenon. F R Fyvel in *The Insecure Offender* found that teddy boys made the contrast between television and cinema, rejected television as not 'theirs' but found in the cinema a secure social space. The cinema was for them 'an addiction' (1961: 106) which helped to fill the empty expanses of time spent hanging around. It was also 'the sanctioned space to take one's girl to, with sex on the screen and a good deal of it in the auditorium too' (107). One cinemagoer remembers the notorious Monty, 'riding his bike across the stage during *Yield to the Night* (Lee-Thompson/GB/1956) at the Majestic' in Derby (Breakwell and Hammond 1990: 124) while Ray Gosling recalls that part of the pleasure of cinema-going was recognising familiar voices, catcalling from the young audience, ("Whopper's in tonight - be some fun"); 'films were things that were put up for us to barrack at the entire time' (1990: 31). Only *Rebel without a Cause* (Ray/US/1955) was exempt from such treatment.

Some of the contradictions at play in the mid-fifties can be seen in a juxtaposition of comments on another X film, *The Blackboard Jungle* (Brooks/US/1955) and how it was received in the social space of the cinema. In December 1955, *Films and Filming* uses the film as an example to argue that the cinema audience is changing for the better. It cites a

letter from the Home Office to licensing authorities about X certificates which makes the traditional argument about audiences; 'the cinema is regarded as family entertainment and an increase in the number of films to which children cannot be admitted, even if accompanied, would not suit the social habits of the majority of regular cinemagoers'. *Films and Filming* instead argues that the cinema should be seen as a space for serious film watching and suggests that there are at least a minority of filmgoers who want to pay attention to the screen and 'who rightly regard films of greater significance than a convenient way to kill time'. The success of *Rififi* (Dassin/Fr/1955) and *The Blackboard Jungle* are 'evidence that there is a widespread demand for a more adult, intelligent entertainment'. Demand there may have been but Ray Gosling remembers *The Blackboard Jungle* being received rather differently; 'a cheap film at a cheap cinema about a high school in America where the teenagers beat up the teachers . . . it was a jolly good boo, clap and foot-stamping film' (1980: 32). Not quite, perhaps, the adult response which *Films and Filming* was looking for and a clear example of the way in which the space of the cinema could be transformed by audience activity.

By the mid sixties, mainstream cinemas with their 'half-slumbering, kissing and cannoodling audience' (Breakwell and Hammond 1990: 124) seemed to be confirmed as a 'semi-private place' (Schofield 1968: 143) for the young to make love. Sociologist Michael Schofield in his sympathetic study, *The Sexual Behaviour of Young People*, found that 51% of those surveyed went to the cinema on a first date (55) and two thirds of the boys and three quarters of the girls went more than once a month (143). Young adults had always been always been an important sector of the audience but, as *Films and Filming* had feared in the mid fifties, they now moved into a position of dominance (Laing:110). What was unusual was not that the young were going to the cinema (cinema audiences had always been dominated by the young) but that increasingly they seemed to have the place to themselves. A Welsh reader in *Picturegoer* reports a liking for sexy films like *Room at the Top* (Clayton/GB/1958) and *Passport to Shame* (Rakoff/GB/1959); if more come out like that 'the boys in our village will pack out the house' (5th March 1960). Those looking back on their cinema-going days in the sixties associate the final fling of the teddy boys with the decline of the cinema. Roger Wakeling remembers the early sixties as 'a time of the last drain piped leg of the Teddy boy era' and recalls 'a gargantuan Ted' disrupting the final performance at a closing cinema in Nottingham (Breakwell and Hammond 1990: 30-31); another young cinemagoer remembers a matinee of *A Hard Days Night* (Lester/GB/1964) at which the 'Teds and greasers and hard-faced girls' make up the audience and comments on the 'rows of lads (who) have put their winklepickers on backs of their seats' (Breakwell and Hammond 1990: 21), proclaiming themselves to be dominant in the space of the cinema. Such memories, like those 40s cinemagoers interviewed by O'Brien and Eyles (1993) or Stacey (1994), go back into childhood and youth but conjure up a very different image of the cinema-going experience.

The ideal of 'the cinema' for a mass audience was under threat in other ways. While the main circuits, Rank and ABC, remained dominant there was, as Murphy shows, a tendency towards fragmentation and more specialist audiences among the smaller circuits and independent exhibitors; these cinemas provided some kind of rather shabby space for programmes of 'popular classics, foreign sex and art films and the 'X' films which the circuits were reluctant to show' (Murphy 1992: 105). *Films and Filming* in January 1963 celebrated the 'dramatic and sustained support for cinemas showing as a regular policy, only films of genuine artistic merit' which were largely European in origin. The nature of the cinematic space still remained a problem and *Sight and Sound* argued that the mix of art and sensation in some venues was putting the serious cinemagoer off since 'cinemas . . . get a bad name' (cited in Murphy 1992: 71). A reader's letter to *Films and Filming* in March 1963 criticised Rank for closing cinemas and transforming the cinema audience into mindless dupes; 'if Rank has its way we'll soon be a nation of bingo and TV maniacs'. Alternatives seemed to be possible and there were some indications of what the future might hold for cinemagoers. A report in *Films and Filming* in December 1963 described a boom in cinema building in America, with two or three auditoria being provided for 'people who are selective in their film going and want a wide selection of films at their disposal' while a prescient reader described the delights of watching 'distinguished films' on the BBC - the American *High*

Noon (Zinnemann/1952), the French *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Resnais/1959) and the Italian *Bicycle Thieves* (De Sica/1948), among them - and remarked, 'I would rather stay at home and watch good films than join the peanut munching idiots at the local flick-house' (November 1963). Multiplexes and video, here we come.

The changes in the meaning and importance of the cinema as a social space affected how it was understood in the context of mass culture as a whole in the late 50s. *Films and Filming* was pressing for cinema to be considered as an art form for adults and the heterogeneous audience enjoying a regular night out was no longer the dominant way in which the cinema audience was conceived. Its view of the traditional audience is once again summed up with the assertion that 'cinema is no place in which to kill time' (January 1963). The fate of *Picturegoer* gives a sad indication of what had happened. In pursuit of a young audience, the magazine abandoned its general audience and sought the youthful reader who, it was believed, was more interested in other forms of popular culture. By 1960, the magazine had combined with Disc Parade and the first cover of that year (2nd January) featured a young girl who did not even want to be a film star but instead aspired to be 'a television hostess or an advertising model'. Articles on 'Which pop star will be the star of 1960?' confirmed the new approach and four months later, the magazine announced that next week it would become *Date*, a 'sparkling new magazine for the teens and twenties' . . . with 'utterly luxurious feminine features' (23 April 1960). *Picturegoer* had been overtaken by new forms of popular culture in which cinema began to look rather old fashioned. Tony Bennett sees the late 50s as 'the critical turning point in the trajectory of popular culture' with the advent of 'a new type of popular culture which, owing to its specific association with youth, marked the development of pronounced generation division within the culture of the popular classes' (1981: 9). As cinemas closed all over the country, it was clear that cinema was not that new type of culture and could no longer claim to be *the* most significant and modern of the mass media.

Some sense of this can be found in the problematic representation which British cinema increasingly offers of itself. Two examples are typical of this. In Ealing Studio's *The Blue Lamp* (Dearden/GB/1949), cinema is contrasted with a nostalgic reference to another example of popular culture in the use of music hall and Tessie O'Shea's performance as an alibi for a robbery. One of the crimes of Tom (Dirk Bogarde) and his gang is that they misuse and pervert this wholesome entertainment by using it as a cover for their robbery. Moreover, the act of robbery and the consequent murder of PC George Dixon (Jack Warner) takes place in the cinema. The cinema is the place for teenagers - we see a young couple on a date, quarrelling as they leave - so it is an appropriate place for the young delinquent with all his connotations of sex and violence. In contrast, the virtues of indigenous popular culture are reaffirmed when the young killer is caught by the communal action of the crowds at the greyhound track.

Later on in the decade, *The Smallest Show on Earth* (Dearden/GB/1957) presents an apparently affectionate view of cinema which the trade press recognised as a reflection on the industry as a whole; 'an industry that can afford to laugh at itself in this way can't be in such a bad way after all' (*The Cinema* 27 March 1957, quoted in Chapman, 1998). But the film by no means endorses the ambiguous pleasures now deemed typical of cinema-going in the mid 50s. Matt (Bill Travers) and Jean Spenser (Virginia McKenna) inherit a rundown cinema, the Bijou. They attempt to prove that it is a going concern so that they can sell it to the owner of the rival cinema the Grand. The film features a number of versions of 'the cinema'. The Grand is the successful cinema - smart, orderly, plush - but it is strongly associated with the values of big business and commerce; it lacks heart. The lost past of the cinema is referred to in a wonderful vignette when the ancient retainers at the Bijou re-run, for the own pleasure, the silent British film *Comin' thro' the Rye* (Hepworth/1923). But the recurring image of cinema-going offered by the film is the unruly audience of the Bijou. In one sense, the Bijou is successful. It gets in a heterogeneous crowd - a mix of children, teddy boys, respectable middle aged women, families, old men - who enjoy the characteristic pleasures of the cinema - viewing, eating, drinking, kissing in the back row. In some ways this is the mass audience described in the 1947 *Picturegoer*. But the point of the film is that this version of cinema is

not only unsustainable but may also be undesirable. It is not just that the equipment is ancient and the building regularly shaken by passing trains. More importantly, the cinema crowd has the characteristics of the mob and refuses to be organised into neat rows and absorbed viewing; the audience throws things at the screen, consumes cheap films and ice cream with the same lack of discrimination and rushes out in an unstoppable flood to avoid the traditional standing for 'God Save the Queen'. All of this is played as comedy, and is now very evocative, but it is clear that the modern young couple cannot be expected to carry on in this old-fashioned way. In the end, they get their money from the owner of the Grand and leave not only the cinema industry but also the country.

Robert Murphy argues that the 1950s were a time of relative stability for the British film industry, when, despite the usual crises, 'film production enjoyed greater health and stability than might have been expected given the competition from television' (1992: 230). This stability is evident in a number of successful mainstream films which were very popular with audiences and the development of key genres, particularly comedy and the war film, which were a crucial part of the social formation of British society in the period. Nevertheless, I want to suggest that the relatively stable position of the industry needs to be put into the context of the changing attitudes to cinema-going and to the sense of cinema as an shared space. At the beginning of the period, cinema could still be considered as entertainment for all, a prime example of the modern, mass media and one which situated itself within the day-to-day experience of popular culture, more generally. Len England, looking back on his cinema-going days, links his work for Mass Observation, which he joined at the beginning of the War, with the importance of the cinema in everyday life. 'Mass Observation were pioneers of trying to get at what real people did and thought and felt. Cinema was at the centre of this - it was everywhere, in the back streets and everywhere else. It was the pop culture in those days' (O'Brien and Eyles 1993: 38). By the end of the 50s, that centrality is no longer the case. Cinema is being thought of and presents itself as a medium which is old-fashioned, uncomfortable and associated with past pleasures. For the general audience, cinema-going in the 50s is changing from being the quintessential modern form of popular entertainment to an old-fashioned and somewhat marginal pursuit. The changes in the experience of cinema-going, the sense that the social space of the cinema was being abandoned or taken over by relatively narrow segments of the mass audience, are an important factor in how cinema can be understood in this period.

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## Notes

1. Sue Harper and Vincent Porter offer a most illuminating account which can be read in parallel with this article about what films British audiences were enjoying in the cinema in the 1950s.
2. Clearly, other sources could be used including magazines such as *Filmgoer* and the more specialist *Sight and Sound*. Nevertheless, in the space available, *Picturegoer* and *Films and Filming* offer contrasting but complementary insights into how the cinema-going experience was discussed.
3. See Corrigan (1983) and Doherty, Morrison and Tracey (1987) for statistical material on cinema-going in the late forties and a discussion of the subsequent decline. See also Harper and Porter (1999) for further discussion and for their analysis of cinema-going on the fifties which analyses audiences in terms of indiscriminate, regular and occasional cinemagoers.

4. *Films and Filming* established a cinema-TV column in 1965 in which Allan Eyles previewed films being shown on television in the coming month.

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