2

Reimagining the History of the Experience of Cinema in a Post-Moviegoing Age

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In January 2008 two economists gave a paper at the American Economic Association that received considerable attention in the *New York Times*, National Public Radio and a number of other media outlets. Under the headline, 'Economists Say Movie Violence Might Temper the Real Thing', the *New York Times* lead read: 'Are movies like "Hannibal" and the remake of "Halloween," which serve up murder and mutilation as routine fare, actually making the nation safer?' (Goodman, 2008).

Followers of the 'freakonomics' trend of searching for correlations among huge data sets and then making causal and/or policy arguments based upon them, the authors discovered that over the past decade on weekends when violent R-rated movies were in wide release, the level of reported acts of violent crime in cities across the United States was lower than on weekends when violent films were not available. Contrary to the headline's suggestion, however, the researchers did not attribute this correlation to the cathartic effect of fictionalised media violence, but rather to the following alternative causal chain: young men between the ages of 16 and 25 are disproportionately responsible for acts of criminal violence in the United States. This demographic segment is also the target audience for R-rated violent films. Violent crime rates go up on the weekends, in part because more young men get drunk on the weekends. If young men go to the movies, they do so instead of going to bars and clubs where alcohol is sold. Therefore, by luring millions of young men into movie theatres for a few hours on Friday and Saturday night, as one of the study's authors put it, 'You're taking a lot of violent people off the streets and putting them inside movie theaters'.

Buried in accounts of this study was the fact that watching relatively non-violent films targeting the same young male demographic was nearly as 'effective' in reducing crime rates as slasher films. In fact, one of the authors suggested that a key implication of their study was that 'We need more Adam Sandler movies'. Moviegoing should be encouraged among teenaged males, but not for reasons that

are likely to be touted by Hollywood: 'If you can incapacitate a large group of potentially violent people, that's a good thing.'

There are a number of interesting issues that arise from this study and how it was framed in the press, but the one most pertinent to this essay is the confusion over the source of the empirical 'effect' purportedly discovered by the investigators. Their argument was not that crime-dampening properties resided necessarily in particular films or even in the act of viewing them, but rather in particular modalities of experiencing cinema: theatrical moviegoing undertaken by particular social groups at particular times on particular days of the week. Removed from this social and experiential context, any given film viewed under different circumstances (on an iPod, on DVD, downloaded from a P2P internet site) presumably would lose its power to affect behaviour. The logic underpinning the study's findings also suggests that any attraction, cinematic or non-cinematic, sufficient to lure large numbers of young men into movie theatres on Friday or Saturday evenings – mud wrestling, telecasts of rock concerts or sporting events, in addition to or instead of Adam Sandler movies – could provide the predicate for a similar social outcome.[1] This is, however, hardly the first time that the social importance of movies has been trumpeted at the expense of the social practice of moviegoing, or that the cinematic text has obscured its social context.

Re-Viewing Cinema History in the Post-Moviegoing Epoch

In 1999 I argued that the assumptions made by a generation of film studies scholars about Hollywood cinema as a cultural industry and about the normative modes by which its products were experienced were no longer valid (Allen, 1999). There were a number of 'drivers' of this transformation, but one of the most consequential was the extraordinarily rapid diffusion of the video cassette recorder and player in the early 1980s. Although marketed initially as a tool for recording television programmes and timeshifting their viewing, Hollywood had realised by the late 1980s that releasing video cassette copies of theatrical feature films for consumer sale and rental could give some films an indefinitely extended shelf life and bring in hundreds of millions of dollars of annual revenue. By the early 1990s, Hollywood was making more money from selling people movies to keep and watch wherever, whenever and however they pleased than it did from selling people tickets to see a film once in a place that had become a concession stand with small, dark rooms attached to it. For the last 20 years, watching movies in a movie theatre has been irreversibly declining as a normative mode of the experience of cinema in the United States, and in the meantime an entire generation has grown up with their earliest, most formative and most common experiences of movies occurring in places that Hollywood dismissively referred to as 'non-theatrical' exhibition sites: bedrooms, living rooms, kitchens, automobiles.

Not only has the principal site of the experience of cinema in the United States been relocated from 15 000 theatres to hundreds of millions of domiciles, the

character of the experience of cinema has undergone a profound generational change. In my 1999 essay, I argued that these changes were led by what until the video era Hollywood had marginalised as the 'children's' film – a genre that was transmogrified into the multigenerational 'family' film in the early 1990s. Any parent of young children in 1990s – and, significantly, there were more young children around in the 1990s than at any time since the 1950s – was well positioned to study the effects of the relocation of the principal site of cinematic encounter from the theatrical to domestic space upon what were becoming generationally normative reception patterns.

Our daughter, Madeline, was born in 1994. Her earliest and formative experiences of cinema occurred not in a movie theatre, but in front of a television set connected to a VCR. For her, cinema was experienced through a range of engagement strategies, including but not limited to: rapt, attentive viewing; successive obsessive attachments to one particular film and/or one particular scene in that film; distracted viewing; sleeping; humming, singing or speaking along with the film's soundtrack; acting out scenes from the film; dressing up like characters in the film; attempting to dress up others in the same room as characters in the film; performing scenes from the film; playing computer games based upon the film; playing with plush toy simulacra of characters in the film; eating breakfast cereal simulacra of characters in the film; wearing pyjamas depicting characters from the film; drawing characters from the film; manipulating the remote control to zip through disturbing or boring scenes, songs or dialogue sequences; replaying the same scene, song or dialogue sequence multiple times; increasing the volume in conjunction with replaying the same scene; pausing display of the film; and making narrative, causal and moral queries and commentary regarding the film to whomever happened to be in the same room. The presence of another subject from the same generational cohort made the contextual dynamics of any given instance of cinematic engagement even more complex, variable and unpredictable.

The students now taking cinema studies classes in the United States are, figuratively speaking, Madeline's older demographic sisters and brothers, all members of the 76-million-strong Echo Boom generation born between 1977 and 1995– the second largest generational bulge in American history next to the post-World War II Baby Boom. The residual attractions of screenings of slasher films to crime-disposed teenage boys notwithstanding, my own prediction would be that theatrical moviegoing – which has for them never been more 'authentic' than any other way of experiencing cinema – will continue to decline in importance for her generation if it continues to involve having to wear pants and shoes, travelling to some other place, paying nearly the equivalent of buying a DVD to see a film once in a dark room without wireless internet connectivity with strangers at a time determined by someone else's schedule, seated upright in chairs bolted to the floor, limited in the range of comestible accompaniments to criminally overpriced popcorn, candy and soft drinks, discouraged from talking, singing along, and walking around, unable to pause, replay or fast-forward, deprived of director's commentary track,

and absent alternative endings, outtakes, deleted scenes, bloopers, interviews with actors, directors and screenwriter, and 'the making of' featurette.

My daughter's generation understands cinema as a textually disintegrated phenomenon experienced through multiple and unpredictably proliferating sites and modalities. For her, the experience of cinema has always been decentred and fissiparous. The question I am interested in asking is how does her experience of cinema compare with that of her grandmother and great-grandmother? To address this question, I think that we have to see her experience of cinema as situated on the other side of an epochal divide, which we might call the moviegoing epoch and the post-moviegoing epoch. In other words, I am interested in asking the question 'What *was* cinema?' in relation to the century-long epoch of theatrical and extra-theatrical moviegoing in America and elsewhere – from the advent of projected motion pictures in the mid-1890s to the mass adoption of the video cassette player in the 1980s. What distinguished the experience of cinema from other aspects of everyday life and how was the experience of cinema related to other experiences? How did the experience of cinema change during this century? How were patterns of the experience of cinema formed at any given moment, and how and why did the meanings, value, relevance and consequences of that experience vary?

More and more movie theatres serve as haunted houses, not just because of the unnatural acts of mayhem they flash on the walls to lure in young men, but because they are the places where on Friday nights Hollywood studios summon the ghost of a bygone epoch in an attempt to suffuse its products with an aura of cinematic glamour strong enough to survive for a few months in the decidedly unglamorous domestic settings where they will eventually be housed. As theatrical moviegoing becomes a thing more remembered than experienced, we will be reminded that one of the most striking features of the experience of cinema for a hundred years was its sociality. For a century following the demonstration of Edison's Vitascope projector at Koster and Bial's Music Hall in New York on 23 April 1896, the experience of cinema in America and around the world involved groups of people converging upon particular places to experience together something understood to be cinema. As it emerged as a cultural industry, cinema depended upon the regular repetition of this social convergence under the sign of cinema, day after day, week after week, year after year, in hundreds of thousands of places by uncountable billions of people.

Because their first experiences with movies were as video cassettes or DVDs experienced at home, and because theatrical moviegoing remained only one of the many different ways they continued to experience movies as they grew up, our current generation of students is also the first generation of moviegoers in a century for whom the sociality of the experience of cinema is an option rather than an ineluctable and hence assumed dimension of that experience. It is worth pausing to remind ourselves of the magnitude of the social experience that was theatrical moviegoing. Making conservative assumptions about the number of commercial exhibition sites in the United States between 1896 and 1990 and the average number of screenings per week, my back-of-an-envelope calculation

produces roughly a billion unique social convergences occurring in movie theatres – not to mention the tens of millions of screenings in tents, amusement parks, church fellowship halls, fraternal lodges, high school auditoria, vacant lots and other so-called 'extra-theatrical' venues.

This book, and other recent collections of research notwithstanding, the full magnitude and implications of the sociality of the experience of cinema over the first century of film history remain inadequately reflected in the ways that film studies courses are taught and experienced by students. This line of enquiry does not register as being central to the field of film studies as a whole. The programme for the 2008 meeting of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, for example, featured more than 300 panels comprising papers by nearly 1000 scholars, on topics ranging from Aging American Actors and Second Life to *Battlestar Galactica* and the films of Sylvester Stallone. My rough-and-ready 'content analysis' of the panel topics and paper titles in the 85-page conference programme uncovered only three panels that seemed likely even to raise the sociality of the cinema as an issue, and all three of those were devoted to the much more circumscribed topic of film exhibition. Roughly two-thirds of the 1000 papers, I would estimate, were 'readings' of individual films or television programmes.

There are a number of reasons for this, including film studies' academic alignment with literary studies, and a normative pedagogic practice organised around the viewing, analysis and discussion of selected texts. The easy availability of copies of individual films provides a reassuring material basis for organising film studies pedagogy and, to a considerable extent, its critical and historiographic practice. The materiality of individual films now *seems* stronger than ever: arrayed as DVDs on bookcase shelves or gathering dust as video cassettes. Movies have become things that we own, hold and control. The availability of films as personal property and as experience-on-demand (through services such as Netflix) do not, however, produce textual or experiential stability. For example, the combination of Blu-ray DVD technology and display platforms with integrated internet connectivity makes it possible to view a 'film' as a part of a virtual gathering of friends and family around the world, and to communicate with each other in real time. Leading the way here, as it did in the early 1990s with the marketing of its animated films on video, is Disney, which is rereleasing some of its 'classic' animated films on Blu-ray, to the generation of girls slightly younger than my daughter.[2] This model of the social experience of cinema is based much more on the practices of social networking through Facebook or Twitter than on the experience of sitting in a dark room full of strangers at the mall. I can easily imagine in the not-too-distant future receiving a paper from a student on Disney's *Snow White* in which she says: 'For, me the most memorable scene is the one when that girl in Omaha said she had an uncle who looked just like Dopey.'

For nearly 20 years, Hollywood's profitability has depended upon people engaging with its products outside of US movie theatres, as both revenue and profits from the domestic box office shrank in relation to what the industry used to call 'ancillary' markets: video rental and sale, broadcast and cable television sales,

licensed products and video games. The theatrical release of a Hollywood film is now the tail that wags the marketing dog. Studios insist that even though very few films stand any chance of returning the cost of their production from the domestic box office, the publicity, reviews and audience interest generated by theatrical release are still crucial to the film's eventual performance in all markets and formats. As a consequence, Hollywood continues, however disingenuously, to tout theatrical moviegoing as the most authentic mode of cinematic experience (especially around the time of the Academy Awards each year). The spoken or unspoken corollary is that seeing a film 'on the big screen' in a movie theatre is still the only way to experience it as it was 'intended' by its makers.

For the generation of aspiring film-makers weaned in front of the VCR and introduced to 'film' production via the family's digital video camera, however, theatrical release is as much a bottleneck as a marketing platform. The proliferation of relatively inexpensive and user-friendly digital 'film' production and editing technologies has resulted in a huge increase in the number of so-called 'independent' feature-length fiction and documentary films produced each year in the United States. Even if an independent film is one of the relatively few selected for festival screening and manages to secure a theatrical distribution deal, pushing past Hollywood blockbusters to get a theatrical screening slot remains a huge challenge. In 2009, IFC Entertainment innovated an independent film marketing strategy that enables independent film-makers to go directly from festival screening to home-viewer end-user: simultaneously debuting the film on its on-demand cable and satellite channel. Joe Swanberg's *Alexander the Last* premiered on the IFC Festival cable channel the same day as its debut theatrical screening at the South by Southwest Film Festival in Austin, Texas. *New York Times* media writer David Carr predicted, 'There may come a day when much of the film business is a digital-in/digital-out affair, with all manner of "films" showing up on all manner of devices, and a consumer algorithm – think Netflix – driving what people end up seeing.' Director Swanberg told Carr, 'I don't care what kind of screen they watch it on. … New films are having a hard time finding an audience, and as a filmmaker I don't really care how the audiences access the work.' He added that he could imagine his films one day having their premieres on iTunes (Carr, 2009).

Representing the Experience of Cinema in the Moviegoing Epoch: 'Going to the Show'

I am engaged in a research and digital publication project that takes as its subject the social experience of cinema in the state of North Carolina between 1896 and 1930. Called 'Going to the Show' after my mother's term for moviegoing when she was growing up in North Carolina in the 1920s and 1930s, this project is being undertaken in collaboration with two units of the special collections library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC): the North Carolina Collection, and Documenting the American South, a digital library laboratory that creates,

develops and maintains online digital collections regarding the history of the American South drawn primarily from the outstanding archival holdings of the UNC library.

"Going to the Show" grew out of my use of archival materials from the UNC Library over the last 29 years in teaching and writing about the history of film exhibition and moviegoing. It was also inspired by the example of a number of my colleagues in the United States, Europe and Australia who are using digital technologies in a variety of innovative ways to collect, organise and display data and materials that illuminate the historical experience of cinema. "Going to the Show" is a historiographic experiment on several levels. It asks how experiences of moviegoing have been represented and what traces of those representations survive? How might those traces themselves be represented and manipulated in an interactive digital library? What aspects of the experience of cinema are highlighted in these representations, and what aspects are obscured or remain unrepresentable regardless of how much or what kind of 'data' my colleagues and I might be able to deploy?

"Going to the Show" is also a contribution to long-standing debates and discussions over the character of the experience of cinema in the United States in the first decades of commercial exhibition. It asks what historiographic benefits might be realised by shifting our perspective on the early history of moviegoing in the United States in three respects. Firstly, most studies of 'local' movie exhibition in the United States take the city as their basic unit of analysis: New York, Chicago, Lexington, Des Moines. How does our view of early movie culture change when we redefine 'local' in relation to another unit of political and geographic organisation: the American state? Secondly, what happens to our understanding of the role of movies and moviegoing in 'local' communities when, in the state chosen for study, patterns of urban development result in hundreds of small towns but nothing resembling a metropolis? Thirdly, how does another unit of geographic, social and political organisation – the region – affect the first two factors? Although regions can easily be assigned a homogeneity they never possessed, there is a strong case for looking at regional differences in the experience of moviegoing in the United States, particularly when the region in question is the American South and particularly when the period under examination is that known as Jim Crow: the half century of racial apartheid in force throughout the Southern United States from the 1890s through the 1950s. The archival resources of the UNC North Carolina Collection made it possible to reframe the historical study of the social experience of moviegoing in this way.

I also wanted to explore both the evidentiary and historiographic opportunities and limitations inherent in such an undertaking: what materials could be deployed in what ways for what purposes? What aspects of early movie culture remain obscured or invisible because they did not leave traces that were or could have been preserved? Finally, I was interested to see how the digital library expertise that my colleagues in the digital publishing unit of our special collections library had applied primarily to literary and oral texts – slave narratives, diaries, fiction,

oral history interviews – might be exploited in organising and displaying other kinds of historical materials, particularly spatial data.

Having used the North Carolina Collection many times, I knew that 'permanent' commercial sites of film exhibition in the state were documented primarily through city directories, preserved copies of local newspapers on microfilm, and Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps. Between 1867 and 1977 the Sanborn Map Company of Pelham, New York, produced large-scale (usually 50 feet to the inch) colour maps of commercial and industrial districts of some 17 000 towns and cities in North America to assist fire insurance companies in setting rates and terms. Each set of maps represented each built structure in those districts, recording its use, dimensions, height, building material and other relevant features. The intervals between new map editions for a given town or city in the early decades of the twentieth century varied according to the pace and scale of urban growth – from a few years to more than five. In all, Sanborn produced 50 000 editions comprising some 700 000 individual map pages.[3] Sanborn maps are widely recognised by urban historians and historical geographers as unique and invaluable resources. The North Carolina Collection holds original, unaltered and unbound copies of every known set of Sanborn maps produced for every town and city in the state that was mapped by Sanborn between 1896 and 1930. Movie theatres appear on Sanborn maps from 1908, along with the other businesses along Main Street in the more than 100 towns and cities that were mapped in North Carolina; they were of special interest to Sanborn, since the extremely flammable nature of film stock and its use only inches away from what was in effect an open flame made movie theatres potential fire traps for decades. The Sanborn maps show us how big each theatre was, what it was constructed from, whether or not it had a balcony or stage, and (by comparing successive map sets of the same area) whether it was renovated or expanded and how long it stayed in business.

Poring over thousands of map pages over the past few years, thinking about how they represent the experience of moviegoing, and about how the maps might be represented in 'Going to the Show', drove home for me the need to rethink not only the sociality but also the spatiality of the experience of cinema. What the Sanborn maps enable us to see, in ways that other representations of the social experience of moviegoing do not, is that the space of the experience of cinema in towns and cities across North Carolina, and, I suspect, in many other places as well, was not bounded by the places in which movies were shown. The maps show clearly that the emergence of movie culture in North Carolina is inextricably linked to the rise and development of urban central business districts.

We will represent the Sanborn maps in 'Going to the Show' in a way that they were never intended to be: with individual map pages digitally stitched together so that they form a composite overview of a town's central business district. The resulting map mosaic is then georeferenced so that we can use Geographic Information System (GIS) technology to layer information on them, compare successive map iterations, and show contemporary views of a given town's central business district (CBD) using Google Earth. With the notable exception of

African-American theatres located in black neighbourhoods, the first generation of movie theatres in almost every one of more than 200 communities we have documented were located in the middle of the CBD, or what most people simply referred to as 'downtown' – whether that 'downtown' consisted of a 10–12 square block area as in Wilmington, the state's largest city at the turn of the century, or as was more typically the case, a block or two of civic, social, religious and commercial structures facing each other along Main Street or grouped around a central square. The turn of the century was a time of enormous urban growth and change in North Carolina: new towns sprang up around cotton mills and furniture and tobacco factories; older towns grew and wooden buildings along Main Street were replaced with more substantial and imposing buildings faced with stone or brick. Rapid urbanisation in North Carolina did not produce big cities but rather hundreds of small towns. Downtown commercial real estate development followed the same pattern from town to town: the erection of zero-lot-line (that is to say adjacent) buildings with 25–50-foot frontage, 100–150 feet deep, and two to four stories tall.

The ground floor would be used for retail, and the upper floor or floors might be divided into commercial or professional offices or leased to fraternal organisations, of which there were dozens in nearly every town. Small businesses – hardware stores, drug stores, cigar stores, grocery stores, millinery shops – all vied to rent an affordable retail space in one of these buildings that was as close as possible to the centre of downtown, and viewed by as many passers-by as possible. Retail businesses might change locations when, at the annual lease renewal time (in Wilmington it was the end of October each year), a more central spot came open. No one would have thought it odd that one November a hardware store was transformed into a cigar store, or vice versa, and no one would have expected that someone starting a new retail business would have built a new structure to accommodate it. In the first place, few new retail businesses had the capital to do so, and it would have been much more advantageous to rent space in an existing building at the centre of downtown than to build on available land elsewhere.

For most white people living in towns or cities of any size in North Carolina and those living in the countryside around these towns and cities in the first three decades of cinema history, going to the movies was a part of the experience of the spaces of downtown social, cultural, commercial and consumer life. Understanding what went on inside the theatre requires understanding what went on outside. The devastation of downtowns of many American towns and cities in the postwar period has obscured their social, cultural and economic density and heterogeneity in the first half of the century. Movie theatres depended upon this density and this heterogeneity: so far as I can tell, for years in North Carolina cities and towns people did not go downtown because they wanted to go to the movies so much as they might have gone to the movies because they were downtown. When they went to the movies, they also went to the drug store or the coffee shop or the cigar store or the bank.

The Sanborn maps reveal a social geography of early moviegoing in North Carolina that bears very little resemblance to that depicted as being characteristic

of the 'nickelodeon period' based on representations of moviegoing in New York City. Moviegoing was a part of the experience of downtown, not a feature of working-class neighbourhoods. The idea that early white movie theatres anywhere in North Carolina might have represented an alternative working-class social or cultural sphere beyond or beneath the gaze of bourgeois authority would have been as risible as the notion that a main street coffee shop or hardware store might have served the same role.

Offering geographic snapshots of hundreds of towns over three decades at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Sanborn maps show that in most towns there was only one movie theatre in operation at any given time. This is confirmed by a 1938 *Motion Picture Herald* survey of film exhibition in the United States, which found 365 theatres in 196 towns in North Carolina, 40% of them in towns of fewer than 2500 people and two-thirds of them with fewer than 500 seats. In all but 24 of these nearly 200 towns, there was but a single movie theatre, and only nine cities had more than three theatres.[4] Douglas Gomery estimates that of the 25 000 movie theatres in operation in the United States in the mid-1920s, three-quarters of them were in small towns.

Given the fact that in 1920 most Americans still lived in small towns or outside an urban settlement of any size, the normative experience of cinema did not involve choosing which film to see, but rather whether or not to 'go to the show' and see whatever there was to be seen. By the 1920s, in many small towns the movie theatre appears on the Sanborn maps as the largest secular meeting space in town. Both the Sanborn maps and contemporaneous newspaper articles and advertisements suggest not how removed or obscured movie theatres were from what some might call hegemonic culture or how alternative or autonomous they were as public spaces, but rather how tightly woven they were, or aspired to be, into not just the town's social and cultural life but its civic life as well.

For most African Americans in the first three decades of the twentieth century, moviegoing was a part of the experience of Southern small-town urban modernity, not Northern or Midwestern metropolitan modernity. That experience was profoundly shaped by the rigorous and systematic organisation of space in every Southern town of any size, particularly the space of downtown, which was for African Americans a bewilderingly complex and dense social landscape made up of places where you could or could not sit, stand, eat, enter, drink, relieve yourself, walk or buy. In many towns black women could purchase clothing but they could not try them on or return them if they did not fit. I know of no movie theatres anywhere in North Carolina at any point during the time span of my project where blacks and whites occupied the same seating areas. The most common 'accommodation' of African Americans in those theatres that did admit blacks at all was a separate balcony. But because early movie theatres were almost always converted one-storey ground-floor retail spaces, the interior space of the theatre would not have allowed for a balcony. We really do not know what proportion of Southern theatres excluded blacks or whether this strategy tended to be employed more in larger or smaller towns, but it seems to have been a common practice that long

outlived architectural exigencies. The first theatre to admit blacks in Durham, North Carolina, was not built until the late 1920s, and was the only segregated white theatre in town until the desegregation of all theatres in the early 1960s.

There has been no systematic, comprehensive mapping of black theatres anywhere, including in the South, by film historians, and black moviegoing was largely ignored by the Hollywood film industry. A 1937 *Motion Picture Herald* survey found that only 1.5 % (232) of the nation's 17 000 movie theatres were black theatres.[5] 'Going to the Show' will include in its database every African American movie venue operating in North Carolina for which we can find documentation through the 1950s. Sanborn maps and city directory listings show that these theatres were features of black commercial development in black neighbourhoods away from downtown. Complicating the argument that black theatres might have represented an alternative public sphere for African-American moviegoers, particularly in the South, is the likelihood that many, if not most 'black' theatres were owned and managed by whites.[6]

The Eventfulness of the Experience of Cinema

For a century, cinema was experienced as an event, and, unless you were a wealthy recluse or the owner of your own movie theatre, it was a social event. What makes events eventful is that they are unique convergences of multiple individual trajectories upon particular social sites. Events are necessarily unpredictable and unreproducible. Historical events are, if you like, invisible to us, and they resist being represented either in words or images; and yet, events are the stuff of history. The largely unspoken and unexamined assumption of most film studies scholarship has been that the experience of cinema could be made uneventful, inconsequential and reproducible by reducing it to the abstracted, individual act of textual engagement: the only events that mattered were taking place on the screen. Where film studies has ventured into a consideration of the historical eventfulness of the experience of cinema, it has tended to focus on certain limited instances, audiences or time periods – the immigrant experience of the nickelodeon in 1907; or the experience of African-American movie theatres in Chicago in the 1920s, for example – implicitly or explicitly consigning the other 99.9 % of the billion or so theatrical experiences of cinema in the United States to the experiential black hole of 'bourgeois cinema' where, presumably either nothing 'happened' or whatever happened happened to everyone in the same way.

But I can find no theoretical or empirical grounds for believing this was the case. Rather, for a 100 years the experience of cinema was social, eventful and heterogeneous. Movie theatres were spaces where, to use geographer Doreen Massey's phrase, 'distinct trajectories coexist[ed]' (Massey, 2005, pp. 9, 140). As social sites, movie theatres were, to use another of Massey's felicitous terms, 'thrown together', and every cinematic event represented 'the unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here-and-now'. The unprecedented scale of the theatrical experience of cinema,

its undocumented, unpredictable, and ultimately unreproducible and unrepresentable heterogeneity and potential eventfulness mean on the one hand that the experience of cinema cannot be reduced to some reified notion of spectatorship and, on the other, that 'the movie audience' cannot serve as an object of empirical historical inquiry.

So, the question for me is not whether the inherent eventfulness of the experience of cinema should matter to us – of course it should and must – but rather what was the nature of that eventfulness? It is clear that Hollywood depended upon the routinisation of moviegoing as a social practice, and, seen in this light, the regularised and frequent change of cinema programmes was key to the strategy of encouraging habitual moviegoing. Conceptually, then, as a social practice moviegoing might be taken up as a part of the historical study of the everyday. This would certainly chime with the emergence of the ordinary, everyday and purposeless from the background of the mundane in certain strands of cultural studies and sociology.[7] This direction is also suggested in Annette Kuhn's memory work with interviewees who experienced cinema in Britain in the 1930s and 1940s, and who remembered cinema primarily as a social practice in relation to the patterns and rhythms of daily and weekly life, rather than as a distinct succession of individual viewing experiences or films (Kuhn, 2002).

For tens of millions of Americans in tens of thousands of towns, moviegoing became woven into the experience of urbanity, along with shopping in department stores and getting a soda at the drugstore. This is, in fact, an important social and cultural phenomenon that is quite difficult to document and represent. My students who are going through miles of microfilm looking for any notice of early moviegoing in local newspapers are surprised, and frankly disappointed by how quickly moviegoing became unremarkable and unremarked upon in the local press. Many theatres, particularly those in small towns, did not even bother to advertise on a regular basis until the 1910s.[8]

But emphasising the ordinariness of the experience of moviegoing runs the risk of obscuring the character of cinema's eventfulness, of taking it out from the shadow of the screen only to push it back against the distant horizon of the quotidian. The eventfulness of cinema in the era of moviegoing was always poised between the everyday and the extraordinary. The first challenge for any early storefront theatre proprietor was to make what only a few weeks before had been an ordinary hardware store into the Bijou, Rialto, Grand or Royal. Because moviegoing was primarily an urban phenomenon and because North Carolina (like most of the United States as a whole) was so rural in the early decades of the twentieth century, moviegoing itself was for millions of Americans extraordinary – something done only once a month or once a season.

Much has been made in cinema studies of the inherent playfulness of cinema. It depends upon the willing suspension of disbelief and upon several levels of illusion – from the illusion that we are watching objects in motion to the correspondence between the fate of the character on the screen and that of the actor playing the role. For 30 years, film theory has told us that the illusion of cinema

also depends upon the viewer becoming the cinematic spectator by accepting his or her role as desirous and complicit seer. But for a 100 years the psychic role-playing required for someone to laugh or cry at shadows was enveloped in another, prior role assumption – that of moviegoer. Although cinema studies has invested a great deal in conceptualising what was involved aesthetically, ideologically and sexually in playing the role of spectator, it has left largely unexplored what it might have meant to play the role of moviegoer at particular times and in particular places. For example, in the United States, Catholic objections to cinema have centred around the dubious morality of particular films. However, for conservative Southern Protestants like my grandfather, moviegoing, like dancing and gambling, was a morally problematic participatory event.

For African Americans in every town in the South at every time prior to the mid-1960s, playing the role of a moviegoer involved a complex and unpredictable social negotiation that took place outside the theatre as well as inside, before a ticket was purchased as well as while the movies on the programme were shown. One of the few exceptions to the segregated seating policies enforced in every white theatre that did admit African Americans was for African-American women who were looking after white children. They were the only African Americans allowed to sit in the 'white' section of the theatre. A librarian in Salisbury, North Carolina, told me that African American college students would sometimes wait outside the theatre for an unaccompanied white child whom they might pretend to 'mind' so that they could avoid sitting in the balcony.

Letting the experience of cinema slip comfortably back into the soft embrace of the everyday also distracts us from attending to the work and force involved in fostering and sustaining the ordinary, unremarkable and the routine. Among the materials we will georeference and layer over Sanborn maps are original architectural drawings for 34 movie theatres designed by Erle Stillwell between the 1920s and the 1950s. These drawings reveal more starkly than any other representational source I know how important it was to white theatre owners and managers that African Americans were physically and visually separated from white moviegoers via separate and inferior box offices, entrances, halls and stairways, seating and amenities. The drawings also make clear that where such accommodations were omitted in the plans (e.g. no provision for a balcony), it was not because the owner anticipated the day when blacks might be treated in the same way as whites, but rather that the exclusion of blacks was guaranteed so long as Jim Crow prevailed (Mitchell, 2006). These drawings will serve as reminders of what was involved and what was at stake in enforcing the ordinariness of the experience of cinema in the South from before the first movie theatres opened around 1906 until the desegregation of white theatres in the early 1960s.

Every cinematic event, no matter how unremarkable or unremarked upon in the historical record, represented the playing out of the actualised against the horizon of the possible. Because of the pervasive, unyielding, yet now largely invisible presence of Jim Crow, all 1300 of the cinema venues we have catalogued are haunted spaces, haunted, to use Nigel Thrift's phrase, by 'the unactualized possible without which they cannot be sensed and described' (Thrift, 2007, p. 121).

Sometimes, the possible was actualised. The spell of the routine and the everyday was broken. These eruptions of the possible are themselves historiographically 'messy' and, as we might have once said, 'overdetermined'. For example, here is an article I found by entering the terms 'moving pictures and riot' in the search engine for a database of small-town newspapers. It is from the *Fort Wayne (Indiana) News* of 29 February 1911.[9]

> Fort Worth, Tex, Feb. 28 – Police today made no arrests in connection with race riots in the business section of Fort Worth last night … A mob of 1,000 attacked a moving picture show on lower Main Street because it was conducted for negroes only. Whites resented its being established on the city's principal street. After smashing down doors and windows of this building, the mob proceded [sic] to attack a large number of negro saloons and dwellings, causing much damage. A score of negroes found on the streets were beaten and police did not interfere. … No lynchings were attempted.[10]

A subsequent article reveals that the theatre was owned and operated by a white man.

The same search also produced a series of articles from the Elizabeth City (NC) *Daily Advance* over a several-week period in September 1940, the first of which was headlined 'All Quiet Today After Negro Riot at Gaiety'.[11] The previous evening, local police and firemen, state highway patrol officers, and sailors from the local coast guard station were called to protect a black theatre when a 'sullen mob of Negroes' gathered in front to protest the firing of the African-American manager of the theatre by its white owner. The authorities came equipped with pistols, rifles, hand grenades, fire hoses and submachine guns. They were aided by white citizens who 'volunteered automatically' to protect downtown property. A few rocks and an empty soda bottle were thrown by the 'mob' before it was chased away and eight black men arrested. 'Ironically', the article noted, 'the picture at the theatre for the night was *Torrid Zone*.' It starred Jimmy Cagney and Ann Sheridan. Despite no direct testimony that they had done anything illegal, three of those arrested were convicted of assault and creating a public disturbance and sentenced to two years at hard labour.[12]

The surviving versions of films from the moviegoing epoch that we show in our film history classes are historical artifacts of limited value in representing the complexity, dynamics and importance of any particular cinematic event or the historical experience of cinema more generally. They are souvenirs of events of which they were a part, but by no means the only or even the most important part. What would a reading of *Torrid Zone* tell you about the cinematic event of which it was a part or the experience of cinema in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, in the 1940s?

For 100 years, individual films were among the most ephemeral aspects of the experience of cinema. Any particular film was but one part of an event that also involved other people, performances (cinematic and non-cinematic), things

(furniture and architecture), spaces, technologies and experiences: tastes, smells, sounds and sights. The economic logic developed for theatrical exhibition depended upon any given film being a part of the experience of cinema only for a single, very brief period of time, after which it became a part of the memory of an experience of cinema. In many towns in the United States well into the sound era, any particular Hollywood film was a part of that experience of cinema in that place for no more than 72 hours. Early movie theatres in the United States changed their programmes of short films as frequently as possible – every other day or even daily – and many in North Carolina (particularly those in one-theatre towns) did not regularly pay for newspaper ads to advertise their daily programmes until the advent of the feature film in the 1910s. Once a film was seen, it became even more ephemeral as a part of memory, competing for space with all the hundreds or thousands of other films someone might have seen in a lifetime, in most cases without the possibility of memories being confirmed or refreshed by a subsequent viewing.

The experience of cinema is open-ended in several senses. Spatially, the relationships that constitute the experience of cinema are not bounded by the borders of the screen, the theoretical space between spectator and image, the physical space between viewers, or the spaces between them and the places in which movies are shown. These relationships extend from the intimate to the global. Temporally, the experience of cinema does not begin when the lights go down or even when a ticket is purchased, and it does not end when the credits roll or we step back into the 'real' world outside the exhibition space. The experience of cinema is, for the most part, memories of experiences of cinema, and for a 100 years what was remembered as the experience of cinema was the experience of public moviegoing. The experience of cinema is open-ended with respect to determination and effectivity as well. The relations that constitute the experience of cinema are not fixed; the character of its heterogeneity cannot be predicted or assumed. The experience of cinema is a product of relations but, as Doreen Massey says about space more generally, 'these are not the relations of a coherent, closed system within which, as they say, everything is (already) related to everything else' (Massey, 2005, p. 11).

The heterogeneity and open-endedness of the experience of cinema require an open-ended and open-source historiography. For example, memories of moviegoing are the primary resources for documenting and understanding the African-American experience of moviegoing under Jim Crow. Oral histories, which we hope to add to 'Going to the Show' in a later phase of the project, exponentially increase the number and variety of available film histories; they implicitly contest both the empiricist objectification of film history and the epistemological authority of the interpretive analyst. They explode any notion of a master narrative of cinema history into what Della Pollock has called 'a somewhat humbler quilt of many voices and local hopes' (Pollock, 1998, p. 21).

Because of the enormity and diversity of the historical experience of cinema, studying and representing it is almost by necessity an interdisciplinary, collaborative undertaking. Illuminating the relational, heterogeneous and open character of the historical experience of cinema will require the development of new

representational strategies, as well as coming to terms with the intractably unrepresentable nature of historical experience. Massey suggests thinking of spatial representation not in terms of mimetic outcome but rather as activity, practice and experimentation (Massey, 2005, pp. 26–28).

When the object of cinema studies is recast as the experience of cinema, the film from the past that is available to the film historian can be seen as itself a representation, with mimetic limitations that are different in kind but no less conceptually and historiographically consequential than those of the map or the photograph that we rely upon to represent the location of long-gone picture palaces. As Michel de Certeau has put it, whatever else texts might signify, they signify and are always marked by the history of their own performance and 'the operations whose object they have been'. They are 'tools manipulated by users' (Certeau, 1984, p. 21). If space is the simultaneity of stories-so-far, any surviving filmic text is, if you like, an imagined simultaneity of all its spatialisations-so-far.

Digital technologies and the applications being developed for their use in social and cultural history have far-reaching implications for the kinds of questions we can ask, the kinds and amount of data we can gather, represent and make accessible. The sophistication, complexity, dynamism and infrastructure cost associated with these technologies also shape the way historians work, who they work with, what kind of knowledge they can claim, and how they share their work. At this point in my work on 'Going to the Show', I am struck by the enormity and complexity of the challenge of asking 'What was cinema?' about any place at any moment in the past. For me the kind of decentred, centrifugal cinema history I am proposing also suggests a humble, open and flexible theoretical stance, and despite having accumulated more data about moviegoing for an entire state than anyone else (so far as I know), my epistemological goals are and, I think, will necessarily remain modest. Reconceiving cinema as experience would, I think, open up multiple new research and teaching pathways and connect the study of cinema to other and different intellectual networks – uncertain, untethered pathways and networks that might carry teachers and students to places where movies as we think we understand them are no longer the only or even the most prominent features of the experiential landscape.

Notes

1 The civic benefits of moviegoing among young men, irrespective of what films they might actually see, were recognised a century ago. As Terry Lindvall has noted, theatre managers and local clergy in Norfolk, Virginia, a seaport and important naval centre, formed an alliance to encourage sailors on shore leave to frequent movie theatres in the belief that the more time they spent there the less time they would spend in saloons and brothels. See Lindvall T. (2007) Sundays in Norfolk: toward a Protestant utopia through film exhibition in Norfolk, Virginia, 1906–1926, in *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema* (eds R. Maltby, M. Stokes and R.C. Allen), University of Exeter Press, pp. 76–93.

2 See http://www.disneybdlivenetwork.com/.

3　See *Fire Insurance Maps in the Library of Congress: Plan of North American Cities and Towns Produced by the Sanborn Map Company* (Washington, Library of Congress, 1981). Most of the Sanborn maps published between 1867 and 1950 in the Library of Congress's collection were microfilmed and marketed by a commercial publisher in the 1980s. The large scale of the map pages required an 18× reduction when microfilmed, and cost considerations drove a decision to reproduce the maps in black and white rather than colour. Despite this cost-consciousness, the retail price of state-wide map sets ranged from $110 (Alaska) to more than $15 000 (New York), with the complete collection priced at $195 000. More recently Sanborn maps have been made available electronically to institutions on a state-by-state basis, but the displayed map pages are taken from the black-and-white microfilms rather than from colour originals. See Stuart Blumin's review of *The Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps 1867–1950* (Alexandria, VA: Chadwyck-Healey, 1982–86) in *Journal of American History,* 73 (4) (March 1987), pp. 1089–90.

4　*Motion Picture Herald*, 28 May 1938, quoted in Martin Johnson (2005) 'See[ing] yourself as others see you', in The Films of H. Lee Waters. MA thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, pp. 24–25.

5　For further statistical analysis of the provision of theatres for black moviegoers, see Chapter 13.

6　See Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), pp. 155–170. Stewart acknowledges that most of the black theatres in Chicago were owned by whites (p. 162). In her *Film History* article, Charlene Regester discusses several notable exceptions to this generalisation, in particular the theatres owned by the black exhibitor Frederick King Watkins in the 1910s and 1920s.

7　See, for example, Michael E. Gardiner, *Critiques of Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2000).

8　For a discussion of early representations of cinema in local newspapers, see Chapter 15.

9　See www.newspaperarchive.com.

10　A Mob in Fort Worth Starts Wild Race Riot, *News* Fort Wayne (Indiana) 28 Feb. 1911, p. 1.

11　All Quiet Today After Negro Riot at Gaiety, *Daily Advance*, Elizabeth City, NC, 10 Sept 1940, pp. 1–2; Trial of Negroes Is Set for Friday, *Daily Advance*, Elizabeth City, NC, 11 Sept. 1940, p. 1.

12　Three Negroes Sentenced to Roads for Two Years, *Daily Advance*, Elizabeth City, NC, 14 Sept. 1940, pp. 1–2.

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