

Innovative methodology for researching audiences of specialised film in English regions

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Abstract

The paper discusses the development of an innovative methodology to address the research question of how audiences engage with and form in different ways around specialised film in the English regions. The 'Beyond the multiplex: audiences for specialised film in the English regions' (AHRC funded) uses a multi-method approach and techniques from the digital humanities. It explores the relationship between audiences and specialised film by examining the practices of venue-based and online film consumption, how different audiences experience specialised film, how the industry and policy context shapes those practices and experiences, and the value of venues in the regional provision of film. The project focuses on audiences in the North East, Yorkshire and Humber, North West and Greater Manchester, and the South West of England and it works with BFI Film Hubs that seek to improve the provision of the diversity of film in English regions.

Surveys seek to ascertain audience figures and types of experience and small scale qualitative studies seek to understand audience experience. However, the sole use of either of these does not address how audiences interact with and relate to various types of film and cinematic experience or draw on their social and cultural resources in engaging in film *both at scale and in depth*. Furthermore, the above methods do not sufficiently address the industry and policy context in which such audience interactions take place. To explore *particular* experiences and *patterns* of audience experience, the project develops an ontological data model that formally describes film audiences and related data using taxonomies for controlling factors such as socio-cultural indicators, film type, venue/platform information, and rules for governing the definition of the relationships between film and audiences. The ontology is informed by data collected by: (a) a socio-cultural index that provides indicators of the potential people have to engage with film; (b) 200 in-depth semi-structured interviews with people with various levels of film audience engagement to yield data about film practices and experience; (c) a longitudinal survey of 2000 people across three sample points to ascertain how people engage with film through time; (d) focus groups using film elicitation to understand how people interpret specialised film and experience its stories; and (e) analysis of industry and policy documents and elite interviews with film industry and policy professionals to ascertain the role of policy and industry practice in shaping audience experience.

This mixed method approach creates different types of data, and the iterative development of the data ontology combined with data search techniques and visualisation will enable analysis to query the whole data set in line with the research questions and themes. The challenges of developing this methodology include how to create coherence across data sets and how to manage and curate the data for the ontology and analysis. Both of these factors are crucial in ensuring that the project findings and research conclusions are valid and reliable.

