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'Watch like a grown up … enjoy like a child': Exhibition, authenticity, and film audiences at the Prince Charles Cinema

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Abstract:
It is tempting to view the rise of event-led cinema as a symptom of shifting audience preferences – the inevitable result of cinemagoers increasingly seeking out 'immersive', 'participatory' and 'experiential' film screenings. The research presented within this particular article aimed to explore the appeal of such screenings by focusing on audiences at the Prince Charles Cinema (PCC) in London – a venue that is widely known for hosting sing-alongs, quote-alongs, and other participatory events. Our results, however, were surprising. Respondents to our questionnaire readily subscribed to a form of cinephilia that embraces a wide variety of tastes, but largely rejects participatory aspects of event-led cinema in favour of what they deemed to be a more authentic cinematic experience. Audiences repeatedly emphasised the superiority of the silent, reverential film screening, and many felt that the PCC's greatest quality was the way in which it reminded them of how cinemas used to be, not what they might one day become. Ultimately, the article demonstrates that cinematic events are by no means the only option available to audiences who crave alternatives to 'mainstream' cinemas. We call for a reconsideration of the immersive and experiential dimensions of traditional cinemagoing, and a greater emphasis on the viewing conditions that facilitate an affective bond between audience and film. To us, the search for alternative cinema experiences seems to be more about the desire for cinema to get better at what it already does, not for it to change into something entirely different.

Keywords: film experience; event-led cinema; authenticity; participation; nostalgia; cinephilia

Introduction

In September 2010, Secret Cinema founder Fabien Riggall explained the growing popularity of immersive film events in the following terms:[1]

> The more we become [physically] disconnected, with the Internet and social media, the more people want to share experiences. The multiplex is not dead, it's a great business model, but some people want a different cinema experience. They want to be challenged, they want to be inspired, they want a reason to connect. (quoted in Gant, 2010: 9)

These words rely on some spurious claims about the Internet and social media (Rainie et al., 2011), but they also hint at two problematic assumptions about the nature of contemporary film consumption. First, Riggall relies on an overly homogenous definition of 'the cinema experience', which he sees as being synonymous with multiplex cinemas. His description of this kind of cinema as 'a great business model' that is 'not dead' may sound supportive, but it also very clearly invokes discourses of commercialism and obsolescence. By extension, then, 'different cinema experiences' – like the events his company runs – are positioned as forward thinking and more artistically worthy. Second, by referring to people who like to be 'challenged' and 'inspired', he suggests that there is also a difference in the *audiences* who seek out these alternative cinema experiences. In his view, such people are in pursuit of something more intellectually stimulating than the implicitly throwaway experience of the multiplex.

Talk of 'new' cinema experiences and audience pleasures are fairly typical throughout discussions of event-led or 'experiential' cinema – that is, film screenings that are supplemented with live (and often interactive) events. Media coverage of this trend in the UK has invariably fixated on event-led cinema in its most exaggerated form, especially Secret Cinema's 'immersive' screenings, which typically involve elaborately designed sets and scores of actors. Yet, as Ali Plumb has noted in *Empire* magazine, this is by no means the only 'alternative' experience available:

> While Secret Cinema attracts attention for its every-once-in-a-while grand plans … interactive, audience-involving, as-fun-as-three-bags-of Haribo moviegoing has a more regular home in the form of the Prince Charles Cinema … in London's Leicester Square. (Plumb, 2014)

It is this 'more regular' incarnation of event-led cinema that we aim to explore throughout this article, and so a sustained focus on the Prince Charles Cinema (PCC) seems appropriate. The venue is a two-screen independent cinema in central London that shows a range of recent releases and repertory film screenings. As Plumb's article points out, however, the cinema is arguably best known for hosting cinematic 'events', including all-night movie marathons, themed screenings (e.g. the *Labyrinth* [1986] Masquerade Ball), Q&As with stars

and filmmakers, and sing-along and quote-along screenings of films like *The Sound of Music* (1965)*, Wayne's World* (1992) and *The Room* (2003) (cf. McCulloch, 2011)*.* Using the Prince Charles Cinema as a case study, this article questions the extent to which people who attend a renowned 'event' venue actually talk about it as an 'alternative' space whose product differs from other cinemas. Consensus in the press seems to be that event-led cinema offers a distinct set of pleasures from 'conventional' exhibition sites, but what forms do these pleasures take, and why is this difference perceived as valuable? We are interested in unpacking the appeal of participatory event screenings, but also in understanding audiences' broader attitudes towards a cinema that is well known for hosting such events.

Our findings surprised us. While respondents to our survey clearly saw the Prince Charles as an 'alternative' cinema, they largely rejected the appeal of its participatory events in favour of the 'authentic', or even 'nostalgic' cinematic experience they considered it to be offering. There was a strong emphasis on cinephilia, defined less by 'good taste' in film, and more by the *way* in which films should be enjoyed. To many of them, it was important that the cinema, staff and audiences all shared an affection for movies and 'correct' modes of spectatorship and film fandom. Ultimately, we argue that cinemagoing is *always* experiential, and so the search for 'alternative' cinema experiences seems to be more about the desire for cinemas to get better at what they already do, not for them to change into something entirely different.

Method

This article relies upon survey data collected throughout the latter half of 2015 as part of a wider research project on the Prince Charles Cinema. The research is ongoing, and the survey that this article refers to has been used as a recruitment tool for semi-structured face-to-face, telephone and video messaging interviews, as well as a primary data source in itself. Respondents were also recruited through informal conversations conducted during on-site ethnographic fieldwork, but it should be noted that the findings this article explores are based solely upon questionnaire data.

We wanted to find out two things: (1) to what extent do audiences see cinematic 'events' as being different from more 'conventional' cinemagoing, and (2) what is the appeal of those events, if any? Specifically, then, our discussion herein focuses on responses to just three of the qualitative questions we asked:

1. How would you describe the Prince Charles Cinema to someone who had never heard of it?
2. What appeals to you MOST about the Prince Charles Cinema?
3. What appeals to you LEAST about the Prince Charles Cinema?

The first of these was accompanied by the sub-question: 'To what extent is it similar to or different from other cinemas you have attended?' This wording was designed to encourage audiences to reflect upon particularly interesting or noteworthy aspects of the cinema,

hopefully leading them to discuss its 'event' screenings while also allowing for other issues to be raised. However, respondents' repeated emphasis on the 'distinctive' nature of the PCC has led us to wonder whether our phrasing might have inadvertently influenced participants' responses. As such, while this article explores the importance of 'distinction' within our findings, it is with the caveat that this was something that we specifically asked respondents to comment upon.

It is also important to clarify the methods used to procure our responses. After having sought permission to conduct our research at the cinema, the management kindly agreed to assist us with distributing our survey.[2] They circulated it to their mailing list in conjunction with a survey of their own (exploring audiences' experience of using the PCC website), which eventually led to us receiving 220 unique responses.[3] Conducting a survey in this manner was practically beneficial, enabling us to elicit a high volume of survey responses in a short period of time. However, using the Prince Charles's own mailing list as a recruitment tool also means that our audience sample cannot be seen as representative of the cinema's audiences as a whole. These are self-selected members of the cinema's own mailing list, which means (a) they are more likely to respond to survey questions in the first place (b) they are more likely to be positively predisposed to the cinema, and (c) they may also fall into a narrower demographic range than the venue's audiences as a whole. Thus, even though we received a good number of responses to our survey, enabling us to identify some fascinating and consistent patterns across the dataset, our findings do not necessarily tell a clear story about the PCC's audiences. Rather, the findings we discuss and the arguments we make are representative only of the 220 responses we received, and should therefore be seen as tentative explorations into an emerging cinemagoing trend.

Finally, the fact that our research questionnaire was circulated through the cinema's official mailing list prompted some participants to respond to our questions as though they were communicating directly with the cinema and its staff. Our survey was clearly differentiated from the website usability survey, with the names, affiliations and contact details of both authors/researchers prominently displayed before the questionnaire itself. However, despite this, several survey responses implicitly pointed towards direct communication with the cinema itself, using language such as, 'you guys play interesting movies' and 'wish you had a lift so I could invite less-able friends'. While this only appears to apply to a small number of participants, in methodological terms it is important to acknowledge that anyone who thought they were communicating with the cinema directly (rather than with an unaffiliated third party) might have tailored their responses accordingly.

'Eclectic (But Not Too Much)': The Prince Charles as 'Alternative' Cinema
Broadly speaking, this article is concerned with questions of value in relation to event-led cinema, and the extent to which some film audiences may be seeking alternatives to more 'conventional' cinemagoing experiences. The Prince Charles represents an intriguing case study in that regard, precisely because its programming seems to cater towards such a wide

range of tastes; one could just as easily define its product as 'familiar' as they could 'unusual'. In this section, we demonstrate that although the audience members we heard from justified their opinions in very different ways, the notion of distinction (and in some cases 'uniqueness') is absolutely central to the way in which many spoke about the venue and the films/events that take place there. We begin with a brief example from the national press to demonstrate just how central 'uniqueness' is to the cinema's identity.

In a January 2015 article entitled 'Inherent Vice: Why fleapits make the perfect film venue', the *Guardian*'s Ryan Gilbey succinctly articulated the distinction between the Prince Charles and other cinemas:

> Stand in London's Leicester Square, throw a fistful of popcorn and you will hit several cavernous Odeons and a neon-fronted Empire. Stroll a little further and the hip Curzon Soho will sell you yoghurt-flecked loganberries to nibble while you watch the latest Hou Hsiao-hsien. But [Paul Thomas] Anderson had chosen to unveil *Inherent Vice* at the deliciously crummy Prince Charles Cinema, where they serve free beer and greasy pizza with screenings of gore-fests unseen since top-loading VHS recorders walked the earth. (Gilbey, 2015)

This description of the PCC is notable on a number of levels. The phrase 'deliciously crummy', for instance, implies a venue whose relatively threadbare interior is valued by its patrons, perhaps standing as evidence of a carefree authenticity. Equally curious is the line referring fondly to 'gore-fests unseen since top-loading VHS recorders walked the earth', hinting at a nostalgic yearning for cult/trash cinema and obsolete film technologies. Most striking, however, is the way in which Gilbey distances the Prince Charles from other cinemas in central London – not only from ubiquitous nationwide chains like Odeon, but also from respected independent cinemas like the Curzon Soho. For him, multiplexes are 'cavernous' and 'neon-fronted', words that imply emptiness and artificiality, respectively. The Curzon, on the other hand, is positioned as a space that sells foreign-language art cinema and middle class snacks to discerning audiences – those who may be happy to pay more for a 'luxury' experience. He goes on to speak about the BFI Southbank in similar terms, tempering his praise for its 'splendid screens and exhaustive seasons' by ultimately concluding that it is 'very multi-platform, very corporate' (ibid). What is important here is that rival multiplexes *and* independents are both positioned in stark opposition to the PCC, whose 'free beer and greasy pizza with screenings of gore-fests' mark it out as being neither mainstream nor highbrow, and far less concerned with commerce or the demands of 'good taste'. The slogan that often adorns the building's large marquee during the summer months – 'Sod the sunshine, come & sit in the dark' – feels especially fitting, obscuring the cinema's commercial imperatives through the playful rejection of established social norms.

Figure 1: The main entrance and marquee at the Prince Charles Cinema, London (author's image).[4]

Responses to our survey reveal similar patterns, with even very brief answers placing a clear emphasis on the differences between the Prince Charles and all other cinemas. Words such as 'unique' and 'different' appear throughout, as do more obviously positive adjectives like 'cool', 'quirky', 'funky' and 'offbeat'. As James MacDowell has argued in relation to American independent films, terms such as 'quirky' can have a number of possible value-laden meanings:

> For marketing purposes, 'quirky' suggests a film to be a unique, and therefore desirable, product – though simultaneously not *so* unique as to discourage those who might be repelled by descriptions such as 'strange', or 'avant-garde'. For critics, the word conveniently allows them to express both a film's distance from one assumed 'norm', and its relationship with another set of aesthetic conventions. Finally, as some audience research into 'indie' film tentatively implies, a term like 'quirky' may help provide fans with 'a sense of belonging to a particular kind of interpretive community', specifically one that is 'at or beyond the margins' (MacDowell, 2010: 1).

We might say that to describe a cinema as 'quirky' is therefore to suggest that there is something attractively unusual or 'alternative' about its character – whether in relation to its programming, attendees, staff, or even the building itself – that sets it apart from its

rivals. It certainly seems relevant that responses to our survey were peppered with positive comments about the somewhat tatty décor at the Prince Charles. Echoing Gilbey's line about being 'deliciously crummy', for instance, one person expressed their fondness for the fact that 'it is not as "glossy" as the other cinemas on Leicester Square' (P063), while another described it as a 'slightly quirky, slightly sleazy, slightly cheezy, old fashioned independent cinema that, frankly, gives absolutely zero fucks and is going to continue being awesome and fabulous despite the raised eyebrows of the boring' (P094).[5] Notice the way that this second response moves from what appears to be a physical description of the cinema's appearance, through to an evaluation of its overarching attitude towards movies and the moviegoing experience. Those final words are particularly revealing, with their insistence that it will 'continue being awesome and fabulous' implying a complex, decision-making entity – one with a distinct personality that permeates all of the activities that take place there, as well as the people who attend. The reference to 'the raised eyebrows of the boring' is also fascinating, since it not only points towards an imagined audience who would resent the PCC's philosophy, but also implies that even the idea of that disapproving audience makes the cinema all the more valuable to him.

There are clear indicators of a cult or 'paracinematic' reception strategy at work here, in the sense that such comments so clearly 'exemplify the pride its audiences take in standing in opposition to official culture' (Mathijs and Sexton, 2011: 36; Sconce, 1995). Indeed, while cult cinema is a somewhat amorphous category, most scholarly work on the subject stresses its *contextual* as well as its textual dimensions. Mathijs and Sexton, for instance, define cult cinema as being 'identified by remarkably unusual audience receptions that stress the phenomenal component of the viewing experience, that upset traditional viewing strategies, that are situated at the margin of the mainstream, and that display reception tactics that have becomes a synonym for an attitude of minority resistance and niche celebration within mass culture' (2011: 8). Seen in this way, P094's comment about 'the raised eyebrows of the boring' stands out as overtly oppositional, expressing broad positivity towards the *distinctiveness* of the Prince Charles by pushing back against the imagined gatekeepers of 'legitimate' culture. The cinema's appeal is therefore, for some people, very much tied to its identity as a site of cult appreciation.

While some responses invoked this cult/mainstream dichotomy far more than others, one very clear pattern throughout our data was the notion of the PCC being 'unique':

Unique style and great movies (P065)

Different to any cinema I have been to in a good way (P020)

Almost the exact opposite of all other cinemas that are available to me (P030)

No other cinema near me has events like this (P211)

But what exactly do words like 'unique' or 'different' mean in this context? The occasional references to 'style' and 'events' in these examples provide some clues, and illustrate that there is no single factor underpinning the sense of distinction that our audiences seem so certain about. However, the attention they paid to the cinema's diverse programming is striking, especially since the venue caters towards so many different tastes. Its website, for instance, advertises numerous forthcoming seasons, which at the time of writing include: 'Studio Ghibli Forever'; 'Unicorn Nights: A celebration of all things LGBTIQUA'; a series of 70mm presentations (including *Gremlins* [1984], *2001: A Space Odyssey* [1968], and *The Thing* [1982]); and a Christopher Nolan 'Selectrospective'. Note that, with the possible exception of an extremely broad definition of 'cult' cinema, there is no obvious generic connection between these titles. Moreover, themed seasons play alongside a selection of new releases, as well as a regular programme of cinematic 'events', including the monthly participatory screenings of 'so bad it's good' cult hit *The Room* (2003), and the sing-along version of animated hit film *Frozen* (2013), which plays at least twice every week during school holidays, and at regular intervals the rest of the year.

In short, almost every conceivable kind of film can be found in the PCC's schedule – from current releases through to silent movies and Classical Hollywood, and from widely known blockbusters to obscure trash and foreign-language art cinema. Almost exactly one third of our survey respondents (33%, n=73) cited this *variety* of films and events as the cinema's most appealing selling point – more than any other category that we eventually coded for.[6] Interestingly, it was common for our respondents to explicitly tie the PCC's programming to its 'unique' identity, as the following examples demonstrate:

> A unique cinema with possibly the widest selection of films, from arthouse to trash (P070)

> It's totally unique in that they're also happy to show genre things with the same love as arthouse and documentaries. (P079)

> I think it's good to support cinemas like the Prince Charles as what they offer is unique in London. A bit of blockbuster, a bit of retro and a lot of quirky. (P175)

Of particular significance is the way in which these comments straddle both highbrow and lowbrow categories of film, with mentions of 'arthouse' cinema routinely juxtaposed with references to 'trash' or 'genre things'. Although this article represents our first attempt at engaging with a very rich dataset, comments such as these do beg the question of whether or not these audiences might be categorised as 'cultural omnivores' – high-status individuals who openly indulge in a wide range of low-status cultural activities (Peterson, 2005). More detailed ethnographic study would be required in order to answer this question with any certainty, but the possible relationship between diverse repertory programming and the diverse tastes of some of its audiences – that is, how a 'unique' cinema functions in the

context of its audiences' wider patterns of taste – would certainly be worth exploring further. For the time being, we can certainly say that the Prince Charles is highly valued for its diverse programming, which, at least in our research, has emerged as the cinema's single most appealing quality. The question, then, is about *why* this variety is valued so highly.

While there is some indication that the PCC's wide selection of films is especially appealing to those with a very broad taste in cinema, there is far more evidence for diverse programming becoming a marker of distinction in its own right – not just its most attractive quality, but the central way in which the Prince Charles differs from *other* cinemas. For instance, one response described the cinema as 'quirky, they pick different films to most places' (P079), while another declared, 'I like that it isn't new films because that's something you find in mainstream cinemas' (P075). Although the latter attendee is somewhat mistaken – the cinema *regularly* screens current and recent releases – what is important here is that their feelings towards the cinema are entirely grounded in their sense of how *different* they perceive the Prince Charles's product to be.

Another evocative comment explained that the PCC is 'different because the staff have a passion for the films and it shows when you're dealing with them. The range of films is eclectic (but not too much), and who needs another cinema showing the same old crap everyone else is showing?' (P005). Here, the cinema is valued for its willingness to deviate from the 'norms' of its rivals, both in terms of the people who work there and its distinctive programming. At the same time, however, the phrase 'eclectic (but not too much)' points towards a desire for distinction to take on a familiar form. In other words, while the cinema's plea for passers-by to 'sod the sunshine' is in one sense a playful invitation to reject 'mainstream' culture, 'come and sit in the dark' makes it clear that the idealised alternative is firmly entrenched in very traditional notions of the authentic cinema experience – watching a film in a dark room. Curiously, then, the Prince Charles Cinema's distinctly 'alternative' identity is somehow also dependent on its ability to offer highly conventional film experiences. In the following section, we argue that this apparent paradox should force us to question what we think of as 'experiential' cinema.

Are You Sitting Comfortably?: Rethinking 'Experiential' Cinema

As Mark Jancovich and Lucy Faire note, existing research into film exhibition has repeatedly shown that there is, and has always been, 'more to film consumption than the watching of films' (2003: 10). One frequently cited example is Douglas Gomery's work on the success of the Balaban & Katz chain of cinemas in the 1920s. He argues that, despite not having access to the most popular films, Balaban & Katz differentiated its product through five key factors: prime locations, ornate theatre buildings, exemplary service, high quality stage shows, and the pioneering use of air conditioning technology (Gomery, 1992: 43). Of course, our study of the Prince Charles is not only looking at a cinema from a different time and place, but it is also focused on a very different kind of cinema – one that would never claim to be offering a luxury experience. Yet, the broader point here is that the meanings and significances of moviegoing are often not defined by the movies themselves. Rather, to choose between

different cinemas is to choose between *different types of experience* (Jancovich and Faire, 2003: 12; also cf. Snelson and Jancovich, 2011).

When we first began planning this research project, terms like 'experiential', 'participatory' and 'immersive' cinemagoing were high on our agenda, as was a focus on the many sing-along and quote-along screenings that routinely take place at the Prince Charles. As such, these were the very terms we used regularly when attempting to recruit participants for this research, both formally (in the preamble to the online survey) and informally (when conversing with audiences and staff at the cinema itself). What we found in our survey responses, however, was an overwhelming emphasis on the value of far more 'practical' evaluative criteria, including the cinema's facilities, amenities, ticket prices and membership scheme. Thus, in this section we argue that terms such as 'experiential' and 'immersive' are potentially misleading, and risk downplaying the importance of more traditional and even seemingly trivial aspects of cinemagoing, all of which contribute significantly to the cinemagoing experience.

Figure 2: Curved seating in the PCC's downstairs (285-seat) auditorium (ThePCCLondon, 2013)

For example, when we asked people to discuss the aspect(s) of the cinema that appealed to them the most, some did mention its event screenings, but a far greater number were keen to talk about how much they liked the seating. 'The seats are very comfortable with a great view' (P192), wrote one, while another described them as 'the most comfortable seats ever' (P170). Others went into slightly more detail about why this should be important, stating, 'the chairs are really good (the way they kinda lean back is v comfy)' (P112), describing the cinema as 'perfect for a date because the arms [on the chairs] can go up (or down if a bad date)' (P095), or speaking fondly of the venue's 'quirks – such as the curved seating' (P195). These comments may be brief, but they are far from insignificant, especially given that seating also features prominently in references to audiences' *least* favourite aspect of the

PCC:

> In the main (downstairs) screen, the chairs are comfortable, but the way the seats are all on a decline can mean that watching long/multiple films can result in neck ache (P199)

> The downstairs screen. Anything over two hours begins to get quite uncomfortable, and the viewing angle is quite awkward. (P007)

> Weird funky seats in the lower theater that make for a strange viewing angle. (P029)

Clearly there is a certain amount of disagreement over precisely how comfortable the cinema's seating arrangements are. Yet, the preponderance of discussion on this topic is a strong indicator of the importance placed on comfort by attendees. The implications here go far beyond chairs or the 'strange' viewing angle; what is at stake here is the extent to which the cinema's amenities and layout can facilitate, enhance or disrupt the overall cinema experience.

We have already noted that the range of films on offer is an important point of distinction for PCC patrons, but interestingly, seating and pricing received almost as many positive mentions. Even in the comments above, we can see respondents linking the seating directly to the social experience of taking dates to the cinema, incorporating the curved chairs into a description of the venue's 'quirks', and using adjectives such as 'weird funky' to describe seats, just as others used them to describe the cinema's atmosphere, style, or programming. Our point here is that to think of event-led cinema in terms of 'experiential' or 'immersive' is to deny the immersive and experiential qualities of more traditional cinemagoing practices; for many people, a comfortable cinema facilitates greater engagement with the film being shown. The Prince Charles audiences we heard from seemed far more concerned with the affective value of doing cinema the 'right' way, not in a 'new' way, and they consistently repeated this idea across a variety of ostensibly everyday criteria.

Beyond debating how comfortable the cinema is, our questionnaire respondents were also keen to discuss its prices. It is telling that, despite being praised for their ambition, Secret Cinema's elaborate film events have increasingly come in for criticism in the British press for being too expensive. The *Guardian*'s review of the company's screenings of *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) in 2015, for instance, described the £75 entrance fee as 'ridiculous', concluding that the prohibitively high price tag made it into an event for 'superfans' only (Lee, 2015). Of course, this debate is relevant beyond event-led cinema, and should be seen in the context of rising cinema ticket prices throughout the whole of the UK, which have seen many audiences priced out of attending regularly (Poulter, 2014; PA, 2015).

The Prince Charles, by contrast, was consistently lauded by our respondents for its affordability, with comments such as, 'bargain' (P021), 'day tickets are CHEAP!' (P069), 'insanely cheap' (P089), 'much cheaper than the BFI' (P200), 'for a central London cinema it's cheap' (P215), 'good value for money' (P016; P193; P036), 'extremely good value for money' (P152), and 'fantastic value' (P015). Again, there is by no means universal agreement on this point, with pricing also featuring fairly prominently among answers to the question about the 'least appealing' aspect(s) of the cinema. For example, one respondent told us that they disliked 'The price, I know it's not expensive for what we get, but it can be hard to persuade people that it's worth the money' (P038). What stands out about this comment, though, is that it delineates two different ways in which ticket prices feed into the cinema experience. The first – clearly corroborated by the positive comments above – is that 'value for money' is an important criterion for evaluating the cinemagoing experience. The second, however, is the relationship between price and the social dimension of cinemagoing. Clearly, this person *wants* to share the PCC with friends, but their precise wording – 'it can be hard to persuade people' – implies that they have vivid memories of trying and failing to entice friends to come with them. Part of the issue, for some respondents, is that members receive significant discounts, whereas prices for non-members (which most new visitors would be) can be far higher. Membership thus becomes a key mechanism of distinction, whereby the price one is required to pay is seen to indicate how 'valued' each customer feels. As one person put it:

> The ticket prices (for members) are now the cheapest in London. As someone with limited funds (unemployed, in fact), I value cheap tickets, and am more than twice as likely to attend a £5 screening as a £10 one (let alone the £15+ becoming common in central London). (P188)

It should not come as a surprise to find audiences who prefer to pay lower prices than higher ones, but what *is* surprising is the way in which low prices are seen to be symptoms of the cinema's ethos. Quite simply, reasonable ticket prices are seen as the by-product of something larger – a sign that the Prince Charles sees its patrons as more than just a source of income, as the following comments illustrate:

> It's got a lot more heart than most cinemas. It doesn't feel like it's trying to eke more money out of you by upgrading your popcorn size or paying more for a "premium" seat. I appreciate that. (P168)

> It always feels like a treat to go there and you don't feel herded like you do at a multiplex. (P158)

> They seem to have a real "personality" and be run by real people, which is not something I get from the Picturehouse Cinemas [a nationwide 'independent'

chain], though I love them too. (P061)[7]

Each of these respondents focuses on the distinctive aspects of the cinema *experience* – what a trip to the Prince Charles 'feels like' compared to attending other cinemas – but notice that this distinction emerges directly from a strong sense of the PCC as an 'authentic' space. References to the cinema's 'personality' and 'heart' were commonplace, as were lines such as 'it feels like a real place' (P213) and 'it has a soul unlike the big American money grabbing companies … and I like to support independent places that have soul' (P173). These comments match closely with Sarah Banet-Weiser's definition of 'authentic' spaces, which she describes as being

> positioned and understood as outside the crass realm of the market. What is understood (and experienced) as authentic is considered such precisely because it is perceived as *not* commercial. [...] This arrangement is mirrored within individuals: the authentic resides in the inner self [whereas] the outer self is merely an expression, a performance, and is often corrupted by material things. [...] The inauthentic, commercial world alienates us from social interaction and constructs such interactions as spurious and dehumanising. (2012: 10-11)

For the Prince Charles, 'reasonable' prices are thus seen as the external manifestation of a cinema with an authentic, cinema-loving 'inner self'. The cinema that is perceived to be offering its audiences affordable opportunities to enjoy an eclectic range of films must, surely, have more interest in sharing those films than it does in making money. Its prices are by no means the only factor contributing towards the formation of the cinema's reputation, but it certainly seems to be one of the most significant. The PCC absolutely must be seen to be pushing back against notions of the commercial in order for audiences to describe in terms such as 'a unique nugget of cinematic gold amidst a sea of popcorn hangars' (P162).

What we hope to have demonstrated in this section is that the audiences we heard from drew strong links between seemingly minor aspects of the cinema's identity and the affective experiences they felt able to have there. As P102 succinctly noted, 'The reasonable price makes it possible for me to attend a lot and actually make a connection with the space' (P102). We would therefore encourage future researchers of event-led cinema to avoid using terms such as 'experiential' or 'immersive', which implicitly position 'conventional' cinemagoing as 'non-experiential' or 'non-immersive'. Film critic Mark Kermode has very made similar arguments about the industry-wide push for 3D film releases in the wake of *Avatar*'s (2009) success. As he puts it:

> "Immersive" is the word most regularly rolled out to counter the claim that 3D is all about pointy-pointy flimflam and to suggest that the format pulls you into the picture rather than simply waving things out of the screen at you, like the flying pickaxes of *My Bloody Valentine*. It's a good argument, sadly undermined by the

fact that a) almost no one saw *Dial M* [*For Murder*] in 3D, yet few complained that the 2D version was in any way "non-immersive"; and b) Hitchcock never went near 3D again. (2010)

Kermode concludes by declaring that '3D has never been the future of cinema. It is, was, and always will be the past' (ibid). We are not going quite so far as to dismiss the claims that companies like Secret Cinema, or the participatory event screenings at places like the Prince Charles, may have an important role to play in the development of cinemas and shifts in cinemagoing practices. What we are saying, however, and what we explore in more depth throughout the following section, is that the audiences who completed our questionnaire were far more invested in what cinemagoing *used* to be than in what it may become.

'A Step Back in Time': Nostalgia and the Value of Anachronism

Again and again throughout the responses we received, audiences talked about the Prince Charles as 'old school' or 'retro', and referred to its 'old fashioned atmosphere' (P150). Significantly, these adjectives only ever seemed to be used as terms of endearment, even in cases where the attendees' overall perception of the cinema was relatively downbeat. When asked to describe the cinema, for example, P066 wrote only that it 'tends to show films that are out of date so is a chance to catch up with films missed the first time. It used to be better'. Note that the phrase 'out of date' does not appear to be a criticism here, instead highlighting yet another positive point of distinction between the programming at the PCC and that of other cinemas. Several other respondents offered corroborating statements, including 'I really appreciate the extended releases of particularly popular recent films' (P091), and 'I like being able to catch films that are not quite recent releases: i.e. not "classic" rep screenings, but films that were released more than six months ago and are unavailable elsewhere in London' (P151). Each of these comments uses different wording to describe the original release date of the films in question ('films that are out of date', 'recent films' and 'not quite recent releases'), yet each is essentially referring to the same quality: the PCC consistently screens movies that most other cinemas have dispensed with. In a sense, then, the venue is valued by sections of its audiences for its ability and willingness to keep the cinematic past alive, even if that past is a relatively recent one. Film history is embraced, rather than discarded.

Furthermore, even though P066's declaration that the cinema 'used to be better' appears to indicate a broadly negative opinion, it also implies that the cinema's meaning and value is very much linked to their own nostalgic memories. This is further evidenced by a comment they made elsewhere in the survey (in our 'Is there anything else you would like to add…?' box), which read, 'I remember the PCC from way back, 1979. It used to do first showings and then changed to a budget rep cinema, both of which were good. There are now too many gimmicky events; I don't have the least interest in any of these.' Audiences who rejected the cinema's 'event' screenings were commonplace, and we return to this issue in more detail below. For now, though, these comments are noteworthy simply for the

respondent's resistance to the 'now', coupled with a nostalgic yearning for the way things 'used to be'. While they may have been more negative about the cinema than most of the responses we received, the way in which they couched their feelings about the Prince Charles in references to the past was by no means an anomaly. In fact, numerous respondents' descriptions of the PCC explicitly drew attention to its anachronistic qualities, as the following examples all indicate:

> It's different [from other cinemas]. A bit like going back in time. (P145)

> A step back in time to when Cinemas were Cinemas and not audiovisual entertainment megaplexes. In short a "proper" cinema. (P94)

> It's still retro which is its USP. (P100)

> The PCC to me feels like a truly traditional cinema experience with a very intimate setting. It reminds me of when I was small and cinemas only had about two screens and you had to be quite selective when you went and what you saw. (P123)

For many attendees, then, visiting the Prince Charles has more in common with the 'authentic' cinemagoing experience of a distant (but nonspecific) era than it does with the interactive and immersive events that some commentators have dubbed 'the future of cinema' (Plumb, 2014; Wagner, 2015). At this juncture, it is worth returning to Ryan Gilbey's abovementioned description of the PCC as a place that screens 'gore-fests unseen since top-loading VHS recorders walked the earth' (2015). In particular, notice that Gilbey links forgotten *films* to outmoded film *formats*. This seems especially relevant given the profound changes that digital culture has had on the film industry in recent years (Tryon, 2013), and most notably, the transition from celluloid to digital film as the preferred production, distribution and exhibition format (Rapfogel, 2012; Crisp, 2015).[8] In this context, the Prince Charles's decision to break ranks and retain its 35mm projection facilities has become a clear point of distinction for some of its attendees, several of whom singled this out in relation to our question about the most appealing as aspects of the cinema:

> What makes [the PCC] even more exciting is that [the films] are being projected on the big screen in 35mm. In a time where digital projection is rapidly taking over, seeing a film in 35mm is such a different and more enjoyable experience. (P081)

> The film projectors and occasional programming of films on film. Film is very special and needs to not be trampled on by the increase of digital. It's great there are still a few places that can show films as they are supposed to be seen. This is

probably the main reason I still put up with all of the [PCC's] faults I've mentioned. (P110)

These comments speak passionately about the perceived qualities of 35mm projection, but they also display a strong awareness of film being in the midst of a historically significant moment of transition (cf. Sperb, 2014). Even among more succinct responses, language choices appear to be important, as audiences refer to the Prince Charles' 'Dedication to 35mm' (P099), 'Commitment to 35mm' (P188), its 'Commitment to … keeping 35mm alive' (P088), or declaring, 'You don't do 3D, plus you are keeping 35mm screenings – thank you' (P195). 'Commitment', 'dedication' and 'keeping' all suggest a conscious, principled decision to persist with an increasingly unpopular format, while the reference to 3D appears to be a rejection of a more contemporary exhibition trend. The fact that this cluster of responses seems to value 35mm so highly is therefore an implicit disavowal of rival exhibitors' perceived hastiness or misguidedness in abandoning it. There seems to be far more going on here than simply an obligation towards an established media format per se, as the following comment reveals:

> I'm very interested in past technologies and how things were shown back in the day, so to see these movies in 35mm, often first time viewings, makes it for me as close as possible to seeing it on its original release. (P007)

Thus, the reverence for celluloid appears to go hand in hand with descriptions of the Prince Charles as being like 'a step back in time' – motivated by a nostalgic desire to recapture the *authentic viewing experience* associated with the film's original audiences (cf. Cubbison, 2005). Similarly, numerous responses indicated that the appeal of the cinema's repertory programming is partly rooted in the opportunity it presents for embracing nostalgia, although there are nuances within this. While some commenters made specific nods to the recovery of their *own* past – 'the obvious reliving my youth aspect of seeing the older movies' (P177); 'they show classic movies from your childhood that you can't see anywhere else' (P067) – we also heard from several who acknowledged that reclaiming the past is not always about returning to real, prior experiences:

> I normally mention [to other people] the fact I saw 28 Days Later for a £1 and how that's good because I was too young to see it at the cinema the first time round. (P102)

> It's a repertory cinema that show old classic movies (as well as recent ones)- movies you may never have had the chance to see in the cinema because you were too young. (P068)

As Michael Dwyer has argued, while nostalgia has often been discussed pejoratively and

accused of being ahistorical, it is 'the product of an affective engagement with the present that produces a sense of loss. Whether that loss is real or perceived is not the point. The point is that we find something lacking in our current conditions' (2015: 10). So, when audiences at the Prince Charles refer to the cinema's ability to figuratively transport them back in time, this is not necessarily about gaining access to previously inaccessible *films*. After all, as Jeffrey Sconce notes, 'there have never been more opportunities to sample the entirety of film history […] Between Netflix, bit torrent, TCM, and international Amazon, any reasonably motivated person can probably track down almost any extant title in the world in less than a few weeks' (quoted in Briggs et al., 2008: 48). Rather, the nostalgia that some audiences feel the PCC nurtures so well is more about gaining access to particular kinds of cinematic *experience* that are perceived as increasingly rare. We can see this even more clearly when we consider the large number of comments we received that lauded the PCC for showing films that one may have 'missed'. Yes, several of these comments about 'missed' movies were indeed referring to releases that were years, or even decades old, but far more people spoke about a less distant past:

> A great place to catch a film you may have missed at the box office before the DVD release. (P33)

> Great films (classics or good current films 2 months after, so good to catch up on the good film you may have missed). (P183)

Both of these comments are, in fact, referring to *recent* releases. Thus, what is interesting about the repeated use of phrases like 'the films you may have missed' is that it is applied so loosely to films of all ages. Missed films do seem to be associated with quality ('Great films', 'classics', etc.), as well as with personal taste, as in 'the films I want to see, whether they're trashy, revered, recently missed in the cinema, or 80 years old!' (P101). Notice that, throughout all of these comments, the idea of watching 'old' films on television, DVD or online is conspicuously absent, barely even registering as a possibility. For these people, there is a strong sense that films *should* be seen in the cinema, regardless of when they were first released, or whether the person in question has seen the film before or not. We will return to this issue below in relation to cinephilia. For audiences who do appear to place more importance on nostalgia, however, it is interesting just how nonspecific those references tend to be, as with this final example:

> [The PCC is a] place you can go and watch a movie like a grown up (in so much as people there aren't intent on trying to ruin it for everyone else) and enjoy the cinema experience like a child. (P131)

This response indicates no particular investment in the choice of film itself, and instead is far more concerned with the way in which the film is experienced. There is a clear emphasis on

behaving 'appropriately', and the distinction between how people of different ages might engage with a film is fascinating: 'Watch … like a grown up, enjoy … like a child'. The first half of the comment seems to refer to social etiquette and the importance of conducting oneself respectfully, but the second half unashamedly buys into something more difficult to grasp. 'Enjoy the cinema experience like a child' does not appear to have anything to do with the commenter's *own* childhood, nor to the behaviour of children in general, but rather to the (romanticised) *affective* experience of watching a movie. This distinction between what cinema audiences *do* and what they *feel* becomes especially discernible in responses that focus on the Prince Charles' event programming, which was far less popular than we expected.

'That ruins the movie for me': Opposition to Events and Participation

While the original impetus behind this research was to consider the nature and appeal of event-led cinema at the Prince Charles Cinema, the preliminary findings of our survey have highlighted that the venue's events were far less of a central draw for survey respondents than we had originally anticipated. This was particularly remarkable considering the fact that our data set was drawn exclusively from members of the mailing list – people who one might reasonably expect to be more knowledgeable and more enthusiastic about the events held there.

Indeed, the Prince Charles clearly foregrounds the status of the events within their promotional materials (e.g. printed events schedules, as well as an editorial emphasis on their website and in subscriber emails), and this was picked up by our respondents, 73 of whom mentioned events when asked to describe the cinema. While 42 of these did so in a positive sense, a further 29 were simply neutral statements along the lines of 'it has gained a reputation for "event" screenings involving audience participation' (P188), and two referred to events in explicitly negative terms. Furthermore, when asked to comment upon the most appealing aspects of the PCC, the numbers drop, with only 34 participants citing events as holding particular appeal for them. Even more pertinently, 27 respondents described certain types of events – especially sing-alongs and quote-alongs – as the cinema's most *unappealing* quality. Acrimony towards sing-alongs and quote-alongs was often communicated quite bluntly through comments like 'Singalong musical stuff. I hate it' (P122) or 'I will never attend Sing or quote-alongs' (P054). The firm, unambiguous tone of these comments stood out as unusual in the context of other answers we received to the same question, the majority of which (52%, n=115) were either left blank or littered with caveats. The following comment is fairly typical: 'My *one selfish wish* would be that they only show rep[ertory] cinema but *I understand why* they have to show the recent stuff too. The popcorn could be better *but I'm splitting hairs*' (P068, emphasis added). Audiences were often quick to offer justifications and/or excuses for their own complaints, which is a testament to the high regard most of them seem to hold towards the cinema as a whole. Importantly, though, this tempering of criticism seemed to disappear when it came to discussing events, with respondents seeming to be far more certain about their aversion.

We are not suggesting that people either 'loved' or 'hated' PCC events; there are certainly interesting nuances to their negativity, with a number of people describing participatory screenings in terms such as: 'Brilliant idea, … but not for me' (P163); 'Sing-alongs don't really appeal to me, but I appreciate that others love them' (P193); 'Can't see myself at a quote-along, but that's just personal taste' (P194); and 'I'm not interested in many of the event screenings, but I'm glad they happen' (P215). These responses suggest that the *idea* of event-led cinema is attractive to some extent, but the actual practice of attending such screenings may well remain unappealing. Moreover, it is significant that concerns over event-led cinema operated in relation to such a narrow definition of cinematic events; respondents almost exclusively reserved their negativity for sing-along and quote-along screenings, whereas other events like double bills, guest speakers and all-night marathons were rarely mentioned.[9]

Crucially, audiences consistently objected to the fact that interactive screenings actively encouraged participation *during* the screening itself, whereas references to other participatory activities *around* the screening (e.g. Q&As, fancy dress competitions, staying overnight in the cinema, etc.) were generally praised or simply not mentioned. The concern here seems to be that these forms of audience participation might be disruptive, and would ruin an otherwise enjoyable film screening. As one respondent explained, 'I much prefer my film-viewing to be quiet + only hear the film, not anybody else' (P163). In other words, numerous people saw the 'event' format of the screening as a threat to the sanctity of the cinematic atmosphere. Cinemagoing was frequently described as a uniquely 'immersive experience' that 'audience participation tends to obliterate' (P091). Notably, unlike the tempered criticism mentioned above, people who expressed this viewpoint were also far less likely to acknowledge that their opinion was simply a matter of personal preference. Instead, their comments implied that the norm of silent and somewhat reverential film spectatorship was the *only* way to enjoy a film screening. Even those audience members who were curious and somewhat tentatively interested in such events were nevertheless concerned that this sort of viewing environment might 'ruin' the film, and that event-led screenings therefore ran contrary to how films were *supposed* to be seen:

> I like films and want to enjoy them as they were meant to be enjoyed so i hate any audience participation things like sing-along and quote-along. That ruins the movie for me. If i wanted some idiot to speak the lines over the actors i could do that myself at home. (P149)

> [F]or my first time watching them, I'm not sure I want the audience to sing or quote it. I'd like to see it first in a "normal" way and then take part in the sing/quote along. (P183)

Concern over certain screenings transgressing the 'normal' and 'proper' way to enjoy films within cinematic space was often accompanied with a specific vitriol towards the audiences

for such screenings, who were marked as major contributors to the ruination of the cinematic experience. For instance:

> [I dislike] the audience of people who really want everyone to know how achingly cool they are by laughing at anything "different". I suspect the showings of *The Room* and the quote alongs foster a culture that makes people think they can make a showing about themselves. (P026)

> I prefer a quiet, reverent audience to a rowdy one. I think the audience participation events attract a different crowd, one looking for a "fun" social experience rather than a purely cinematic one. (P188)

> They programme some really great stuff (and on 35mm sometimes!) but for me it's usually a question of the following. "Do I want to see this at the cinema, the way it should be seen but probably have it ruined by talking, shouting and subsequent frustration OR track it down on a physical format (often not possible) and watch at home in peace?" (P110)

Between them, these three comments are illustrative of our two central arguments in this section. Firstly, audiences readily invoked two possible ways of watching a film – the '"fun" social experience' versus the 'purely cinematic' – but the latter is clearly positioned as the 'right' one. Secondly, our respondents consistently told us that the single greatest threat to the cinema experience is that the 'wrong' audiences might attend and behave 'badly' – laughing or talking during the film and breaking the reverential silence. Again, all of this is in spite of the fact that participatory event-led screenings are one of the cornerstones of the Prince Charles's reputation, both in terms of how the cinema promotes itself and its reception in the national and regional press. As Richard McCulloch's research into *The Room* has shown, even audiences who attend unequivocally participatory events will still have a strong sense of etiquette, and are more than capable of becoming frustrated when audience interaction is deemed 'excessive' (McCulloch, 2011: 208-11). In the following section, however, we demonstrate that the PCC audiences' views on cinema etiquette are actually more of an expression of how one should *feel* about film than arbitrary rules about how they should *behave*.

'There's Nothing Like It': Cinephilia and the Big Screen Experience

As we have seen, the idea that films *should* be experienced in a certain way was a recurrent theme throughout our questionnaire data, and the PCC seems to be highly valued for its ability to 'capture the essence of cinema-going' (P186). In other words, not only do some respondents clearly seem to see cinema patronage as having certain proper codes and conventions, but they also see the Prince Charles as a cinema that embodies the ethos of those experiential norms. By far one of the most consistently repeated of these norms was

the superiority of the cinematic experience. The importance that our respondents placed on 'the big screen' is especially interesting in relation to wider discussions about the 'withering away of cinema culture' and the concurrent rise of 'home cinema' (Tryon, 2009: 4). In *Beyond the Multiplex*, Barbara Klinger describes this conflict in detail, identifying what she sees as:

> a kind of schizophrenic identity for cinema, derived from its shifting material bases and exhibition contexts: it exists both as a theatrical medium projected on celluloid and as a nontheatrical medium presented […] in a video format on television. [T]his double identity assumes an immediate comparative aesthetic and experiential value. The big-screen performance is marked as authentic, as representing bona fide cinema. By contrast, video is characterized not only as inauthentic and ersatz but also as a regrettable triumph of convenience over art that disturbs the communion between viewer and film and interferes with judgments of quality. (2006: 2)

Klinger goes on to argue that this 'value-laden dichotomy' between cinema and home video is something of a fallacy, and convincingly demonstrates that 'new' technologies like video and DVD are as significant for film reception and cinephilia as they are for distribution (ibid). Yet, our research indicates that, for some audiences at least, the cinema experience very much retains its cinephilic value. Several comments explicitly lauded the Prince Charles as 'the place to go to see classics on the big screen and not just your TV' (P43), or noted that watching 'old films on the big screen [is] always infinitely better than any small screen' (P184). At this stage in our research, it is unclear whether these responses are literal statements about the size of the screen or metonymic references to the 'cinema experience' more broadly. What we can say, however, is that these comments explicitly distinguish between the quality of the experience offered by the movie theatre compared to the more 'routine' viewing context of one's own home.

What is especially interesting about the PCC's audiences is the way in which their references to the 'big screen' are invariably combined with nods to particular *kinds* of film, as seen in the following descriptions of the cinema:

> A haven of good and cult cinema, if there's a film you're dying to see on the big screen, chances are they're showing it. (P13)

> A great cinema experience to see the films you always wanted to see on the big screen. (P142)

> It creates amazing opportunities on a daily basis to see live on a big screen films that you had always wanted to be able to see on a cinema screen. (P182)

The similarities in wording here are striking; by referring to films they are 'dying to see' or that they have 'always wanted to see', these respondents gesture towards hugely affective and long-standing emotional attachments to the films in question, and position the cinema as the authentic context in which to view them. Our question about the most appealing aspect(s) of the PCC returned a particularly high number of references to the primacy of the cinema experience, and, tellingly, often in relation to films they had *already* developed strong feelings for. For example, audiences told us that they valued 'being able to see my favourite films on the big screen' (P159), explained that they 'like to have seen anything I really like on the big screen even if I own it and have seen it many times' (P149), and wrote wistfully about, 'Seeing old or rare films that I never got a chance to see on the big screen with the feel of watching it in a cinema. There's nothing like it' (P142). Phrases such as '*my* favourite films' and 'anything *I* really like' were common, indicating a tendency to prioritise personal taste over broader standards of 'good taste'. We can see this tendency even more clearly in comments that spoke highly of being able 'to revisit "classic" films (Yes! I do include *The Goonies* and [*The*] *Monster Squad* in the description) on the big screen' (P179). This person appears to be drawing a distinction between canonical notions of 'good' film and their own preference for 1980s family adventure movies. The clarification of their own definition of 'classic' implies that most people would not otherwise have included the two films they chose to mention – something they seem proud of rather than apologetic.

In his empirical study of British comedy audiences, Sam Friedman (2014) notes that his respondents who were low in cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) tended to concede the 'legitimacy' of more 'highbrow' comedians, even when they personally didn't like them. For instance, they would frequently employ vertical metaphors such as 'going over my head' or 'beyond me' to describe political or intellectual comedy, and Friedman interprets such statements as signals of deference to 'good taste' and to audiences with higher levels of cultural capital (Friedman, 2014: 83). The audiences we heard from at the Prince Charles, however, routinely invoked the notion of good taste only to then dismiss it as unimportant or even unattractive. P216, for instance, described the cinema by saying 'It's really the film lover's haven but not in a snobby way', and P039 admired the fact that it 'doesn't act all pretentious like some independent cinemas, just as likely to see a Frozen sing along there as well as the back catalogue of Wes Anderson.' What these responses suggest is that the definition of 'cinephilia' being worked through is highly *inclusive* in relation to the films themselves – there is very little evidence of fixed notions of cinematic canon, or discussions over film as art. Instead, we see emphatic and discerning statements about the *way* one should experience and feel about film. If audiences can be said to be on a quest for 'immersion', this seems to be about a desire to be entertained, engaged, and to connect as closely as possible with the characters and stories on screen.

This open tolerance for the other people's tastes can be seen in the repeated acknowledgements and celebrations regarding the range of programming offered by the cinema, which allows for cult, classic and new films to be enjoyed all under the same roof. According to P071, for example, the PCC is 'a cinema for people who love cinema, from

classic films to guilty pleasure movies and everything in between.' Through an emphasis on the 'love' of film and an appreciation for the variety on offer at the PCC, such comments point to an imagined audience, connected by a form of cinephilia defined more by cinemagoing practices than preferences for a particular type of film. As P049 suggests, 'it caters to people with lots of different tastes but if you love film you're going to love it'. Described by P170 as 'a cinema run by & for film-lovers; high- or low-brow', the Prince Charles is neither seen to be as elitist as an arthouse cinema nor as unspecialised as a mainstream multiplex. Overall, the expressions of love and emphases on having an affective relationship with the cinema and film in general proved to be significant within our survey. But, what is also significant is that the PCC is seen to be 'run by people who love film showing films for people who love films' (P167). Camaraderie is not just with the audience, but also with the cinema itself.

Importantly, then, when audiences make claims such as 'a movie should be experienced on the big screen' (P220), this is not solely a question of seeing films in the 'right' way; there is a social side to this too, as the following comments demonstrate:

> [I like] the fun and diverse programming, the dedication to 35mm, the informal atmosphere, the fact that it is clearly staffed and run by people who love films. It's a great place to bring friends to share my favourite films with them. (P99)

> The atmosphere creates the experience and the PCC feels like you're with friends. Apart from the obvious reliving my youth aspect of seeing the older movies, it also allows me the chance to introduce others to them in the format they should be seen (e.g. My partner had never seen The Blues Brothers and getting to see it on the big screen with friends cemented it as one of her new favourites). (P179)

Here, there is a clear emphasis on sharing beloved films with friends and loved ones. At first glance, P179's reference to seeing movies 'in the format they should be seen' could be interpreted as another reference to 35mm projection, but the explanation makes it clear that 'format' in this context has more to do with the combination of the 'atmosphere', 'the big screen' and 'friends'. In fact, several responses went as far as comparing a trip to the Prince Charles with a visit to a close friend's house.

> A cinema with a personality and a sense of humour! I like that there is a personal touch to the experience which is completely non-existent in other cinemas. It feels very much like you're seeing a film at a mate's house who has a big screen and not a business that takes itself too seriously. (P075)

> An independent cinema in the heart of London which manages to still remain friendly, fun, reasonably priced and retain it's own individual style and ethos. It's

like going to the cinema at your mate's house - if your mate owns a house big
enough to hold 2 cinema screens. (P041)

In addition to the 'mate's house' and 'big screen' references, both of these comments
emphasise the importance of individuality, fair pricing, and a prioritisation of 'fun' over
'seriousness'. What is particularly interesting, however, is that this conception of the ideal
viewing experience combines traditional ideas about the value and distinctiveness of the
cinema space with an acknowledgement of the familiarity and comfort of 'home cinema'. It
is crucial that we do not conflate sociality with participation, since the abovementioned
emphasis on etiquette tells us that attending with friends and partners may be more about
a *shared affective experience* than, say, being able to talk to each other during the film.

The optimal viewing environment therefore requires considerable unity between
audience members, and in that sense, it is significant that respondents frequently described
the PCC as being best suited to 'film fans' (P033) and 'film buffs' (P178). Contained within
some of these responses was an implicit suggestion that if you adhered to a 'correct',
'preferred' or indeed 'authentic' version of film fandom then this was absolutely the cinema
for you. As one person put it, 'If you're a *real* film fan it's a joy to visit' (P199, emphasis
added), while P036 stated, 'I know that if I go with the *right friends* I will be guaranteed a
good night' (emphasis added), seemingly acknowledging that they are agents of their own
enjoyment to some extent. In other words, the 'proper' way to experience a film is
simultaneously linked to the communal efforts of the 'right' audiences, as well as a
decidedly fannish attitude towards cinema more generally. For some, the sense of a
collective of individuals brought together by their love of film was valued for the way in
which it produced a 'quite knowing' audience, which in turn gave the overall experience 'an
underlying sense of camaraderie' (P004). It was important to several people that the PCC
attracted an audience who shared their values, cinemagoing tastes and conventions of
behaviour. Ultimately, at its best, the Prince Charles is seen as 'The perfect environment to
watch movies with a good respectful audience that you know loves movies like you do'
(P114). Thus, in spite of the prominent role that film events play in its marketing, for many
of the mailing list members, participation is surprisingly anathema to their own preferences
for behaviour within a cinema. To them, a good cinema is a 'respectful' one in which the
absence of visible or audible participation is what signifies true cinephilia.

Conclusion
The rise of event-led cinema has undoubtedly resulted in a widening of the concept of what
it means to 'experience' a film. Yet, throughout this article, we have demonstrated that
debates surrounding companies like Secret Cinema may well have exaggerated the extent to
which audiences are embracing these changes. Interestingly, for many of the Prince Charles
Cinema's patrons that we heard from, event-led participatory screenings seemed peculiarly
at odds with the kind of cinema-going experience that they considered to be the 'correct'
one. Despite the cinema's emphasis on events and participation, its audiences

demonstrated a preference for a more traditional, reverential, even nostalgic cinematic experience. Audiences or events that became (or were imagined to be) too rowdy were perceived to significantly disrupt or even ruin the experience of film viewing. While there was an openness to a wide variety of different types of film being on the PCC's programme (often accompanied by a rejection of a specific film canon), there was an overriding sense that 'proper' film fans would share codes of cinematic practice if not necessarily preferences for the same films. For these respondents, then, cinephilia is less about the screening of particular films and more about experiencing them in the *right way*.

We have argued that terms such as 'immersive' or 'experiential' – both so often used in relation to event-led cinema – are problematic as well as misleading. Not only do they imply a hierarchical relationship between event-led and more conventional cinema, but they also deny the experiential qualities of conventional cinemagoing, in which audiences are by no means less immersed or more passive. Indeed, most of the responses we received pointed towards a strong, affective bond between audiences and the cinema, which they perceive as the embodiment of a rare form of cinematic authenticity. For these mailing list members, the Prince Charles represents a place that is run by people like them and for people like them – 'proper' film fans who are committed to the value of preserving the authentic cinemagoing experience. It is worth reiterating that, while the respondents to our questionnaire very explicitly prioritised reverential silence over audience participation, we are by no means suggesting that these two modes of spectatorship should be thought of as mutually exclusive. After all, one person's opposition to Sing-a-long-a *Frozen* would not necessarily mean that they deemed all sing-alongs to be equally unpalatable.

We have only really begun to scratch the surface of this topic, but even within our relatively small-scale study, we have observed enormous complexity and nuance in the way that film audiences assign particular values to event-led cinema. So, where might future researchers go from here? As we move forward with this project ourselves, we will be aiming to explore how the abovementioned audience attitudes towards particular kinds of cinema experience correlate with the quantitative and demographic data we collected. It is curious, for instance, that the Prince Charles's sing-along programming revolves so heavily around movies like *Dirty Dancing* (1987), *The Sound of Music* (1965), *Grease* (1978) and *Frozen* (2013), all of which are strongly associated with female audiences. But does this mean that sing-alongs are primarily a female pursuit – perhaps the flipside of the potentially more 'masculine' quote-along (Klinger, 2008)? It seems to us that, rather than trying to discuss the appeal of event-led versus non-event-led cinema, the more pressing issue here is to distinguish between *different kinds of event-led cinema.* How do sing-alongs differ from quote-alongs, costume party screenings, themed marathon events, or Q&A's? Any attempt to study the appeal of event-led cinema, as though it were a singular, coherent form of cinematic experience, would to some extent be methodologically flawed from the outset. Future research would therefore benefit from unpacking the differences and similarities between these different forms, and questioning the extent to which audiences perceive them to be overlapping with (or diverging from) each other.

There is also much more to be said on the relationship between the perceived value of an event and the *context* in which it takes place. This is not just a question of spatial or temporal factors like the choice of venue, the weather, or the time of day, but also about how the event relates to individual attendees' *life course*. For what reasons might certain film events become more or less attractive at a particular point in someone's life? How do such events fit in with audiences' wider patterns of taste, behaviour, cultural consumption and/or social relationships? And how is it that some audiences can loathe talking or any other form of distraction during screenings, only to then deem such behaviour acceptable under other circumstances, perhaps even seeing 'participation' as humorous, liberating, or even their central reason for attending (cf. McCulloch, 2011: 197-8)?

Part of the difficulty in answering these questions lies in the relative newness of event-led cinema. Like Martin Barker in his study of livecasting, we are to some extent 'researching as the egg [is] hatching' (2013: 89), and it will be fascinating to see how audiences develop new expectations, preferences and behaviours as these events continue to evolve. Even if interactive events eventually turn out to be a passing fad, their increased prominence provides us researchers with an ideal opportunity to return to some very fundamental questions about why people go to (or stay away from) the cinema, and about the future of film consumption in a digital world.

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Notes:

[1] Secret Cinema is a British company that specialises in 'immersive' cinema events. Previous examples include inviting customers to become 1940s prisoners in a former school for a screening of *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), the recreation of fictional 1950s town of Hill Valley for a series of *Back to the Future* (1985) screenings, and most recently at the time of writing, elaborately constructed intergalactic sets from *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980). The word 'secret' in the company's name refers to the fact that, from its beginnings in 2007 up until 2014, audiences were required to buy tickets in advance without knowing either the film that would be shown or the location of the screening. See Snetiker, 2014.

[2] Both authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to all the staff and management at the Prince Charles Cinema for their assistance with this research, but especially to Gregory Lynn, Simon Thomas and Paul Vickery. Of course, we are also extremely grateful to all of our 220 respondents for agreeing to share their views with us. Without them, there would be no data to present.

[3] Of these 220 respondents, 56% identified as male (n=124), 42% female (n=92), and 2% neither male nor female (including non-respondents). Respondents fell into the following age categories: under 20, 4% (n=9); age 20-29, 32% (n=71); age 30-39, 41% (n=91); age 40-49, 13% (n=29); age 50-59, 5% (n=11); and age 60-69, 4% (n=9). Within this article, all survey participants have been referred to by number only (e.g. P144 or P076) so as to preserve their anonymity.

[4] Visible posters are advertising a wide range of films, including *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), a season of Alfred Hitchcock films, a double bill of crowdfunded action parody *Kung Fury* (2015) with 'so bad it's good' martial arts film *Miami Connection* (1987), and contemporary releases of *Dear White People* (2014) and critically acclaimed documentary *The Look of Silence* (2014).

[5] Quotations taken from our survey responses have generally been reproduced verbatim. In a small number of cases, however, we have taken the decision to correct obvious mistakes as a courtesy to those who took the time to participate in our research.

[6] Remember that the questions being asked here were all open ended and qualitative, designed so that audiences could tell us what *they* considered to be important. Our codes therefore emerged out of a process of analytic coding and hermeneutic interpretation (Kozinets, 2010: 118-35). Other commonly referenced points of appeal were: the cinema's *repertory* programming (29%, n=63); *distinction* (i.e. value defined in relation to other cinemas) (26%, n=57); the '*quality'* of films shown – both in terms of established taste distinctions ('great movies', 'classics') and personal preference ('my favourite movies') (24%, n=52); *price* and/or *membership* scheme (26%, n=56). All percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

[7] The Picturehouse chain – one of the only nationwide chains to routinely screen arthouse, foreign-language and independent film – was purchased by multiplex chain Cineworld in 2012. See Boult, 2012.

[8] The sharp decline of celluloid as a filmmaking format has been resisted, including a successful campaign by prominent directors such as Christopher Nolan, J.J. Abrams, Judd Apatow and Quentin Tarantino. Collectively, this resistance led to an agreement between 'industry leaders' and Eastman Kodak, who in 2014 announced that they would be continuing their production of celluloid film. See Hamedy, 2014.

[9] Criticisms of other, less participatory events (i.e. anything other than sing-alongs or quote-alongs) were rare, and tended to be restricted to relatively 'practical' considerations, such as 'there's not enough time between films during double bills & marathons' (P074).