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This study explored why individuals still attend movie showings in a theater environment when so many alternatives are available in the digital age. The goals of this paper were to understand the behavior of movie-going using theoretical research, qualitative interviewing, and ethnographical observation. A total of eighteen subjects were interviewed in three North Carolina cities: Winston-Salem, Lexington, and Charlotte. It was determined that movie-going is based on cultural geography, time, and population. Subsequently, the literature and field data strongly suggest that moviegoing culture and fandom carries different meanings for each individual. Since moviegoing has often been attributed as a unique social experience, each subject was asked to expound on how the moviegoing experience differed from that of in-home digital alternatives such as Netflix, Hulu, and illegal pirating. Nostalgia, social solidarity, escapism, and even religious behavior were reoccurring motivations for the participating moviegoers in this study.

WHEN THE LIGHTS GO DOWN: WHY DO PEOPLE STILL GO TO THE MOVIES?

by

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This project is dedicated to Judy, Shannon, Keely, Ashlynn, and Skyeler. The women in my life that made me the man I am today. And for the God, Most High: *Ad majorem Dei gloriam.*

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Nicholas Ryan Canada has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Persistence in movie-going (i.e. the sustaining of the movie theater industry and the respective audiences that it attracts) is a consequence of accretion. Over time, movie theaters have provided the ritual of visual entertainment and visual culture by differing American regions and territories. As a civilization, we have witnessed the emergence of the movie theater audience. In the first half of the twentieth century, it was not unreasonable for the American movie goer to gain access to the moving image exclusively through the local cinema, however, the evolution of technological advancement that is based on the even more persistent human desire for parsimonious convenience has proven to become a prevalent opposition for the American movie theater. There, then emerges the tug of war battle between the movie theater industry and its many rivals over the audience members. The “bootleg” market blatantly undermines the movie theater industry by offering pirated content while entertainment juggernauts such as Netflix produce original content from various studios to be viewed exclusively in the home. With such a profusion of choices to the consumer, it is no mystery as to why so many customers are now compelled to remain within the personal home. Many scholars, from Mayor to Metz, have conducted deep reconnaissance into the concept of movie theater audiences, however there have not been many publications on the reasoning behind the social act of going to the movies.

The research presented will attempt to successfully analyze why individuals, such as those previously mentioned, experience such emotional reactions to such events. I am not entirely certain as to what the phenomenon is. Sigmund Freud (1935) took the best approach when he wrote *An Introduction to Psychoanalysis*. He said succinctly: “We begin with an investigation, not with hypothesis.” (Freud: 1935).

In October of 2015, cultural journalist John Wenzel (2015) published an article via the Denver Post asking a rather overlooked question: Why do individuals still pay money to view films at the cinema? Wenzel’s question is not unfounded. This is especially true when considering the many alternatives that technology has brought the American public which I have already discussed.

2014 saw one of the biggest declines in movie theater attendance since the year 1995 (Tweedie: 2015). Despite this, the year 2015 also witnessed the reemergence of a cultural and iconic figure that brought audiences rushing back to their local cinemas. *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* became the top-grossing film of 2015 in fifteen days; an astonishing occurrence (*The Numbers*: 2015). This transpiration revalidated this question posed by Wenzel: why do people still go to the movies? Award-winning critic and writer, Clem Bastow (2016), even confessed to seeing the film seven times in an article she had published in the Guardian. In her article, she also revealed that she had viewed many films more than once in a movie theater setting despite many technological advances available as an alternative. The purpose of this study is to further understand the social act of going to the movies and why individuals still make the decision to view films in a

theater setting with so many seemingly more convenient alternatives available. The act of film watching is a social phenomenon and can be interpreted in a variety of ways using a sociological lens.

Because of the fierce emphasis that Americans place on popular culture and its various texts, sociologists understand that cultural norms, ideas, and customs are transmitted through film (Sutherland and Feltey: 2009). Robert C. Bulman (2005) understands that American citizens see an exaggerated yet absorbing reflection of reality and culture on the screen. Films are located at the center of a complex cultural process of production and consumption. Their location within this process provides us with a particular convenient site in which to conduct a cinematic ethnography to understand something about American culture (Bulman: 2005).

We have indeed witnessed an evolution in media as both consumers and spectators. Wenzel (2015) asserted that the movie theater industry is not endangered but actually far from it, despite the decline that occurred in 2014. This is especially true when cinemas are experiencing prominent box office performances from the likes of *Star Wars* or the newest *Avengers* film. Since the movie theater business is far from being endangered, one must attempt an inquiry of how the industry continues to wend towards success.

Consequently, I must address four research questions that will serve as pilots for this thesis: 1.) Why do individuals still choose to view films in a movie theater environment? 2.) What function does attending movies serve in the lives of individuals

and in society? 3.) How has the movie theater industry survived considering the growth of at home media? Redbox, Netflix, illegal pirating and other convenient alternatives have indeed served as a great threat to the movie theater industry but somehow, record profits are still being brought in, both foreign and domestic. Finally, 4.) what does the movie theater environment provide consumers that cannot be attained in the personal home? Is there a social psychological or sociological aspect that is present here?

When writing *The Imaginary Signifier*, author Christian Metz (1982) discussed the ambiguous complexity of that which is considered “cinema”. Also like what Metz proclaimed in *Imaginary*, if I can at least further an iota of social scientific understanding towards cinema-going, I have very little reason to remain unsatisfied because I have to admit that I am not entirely certain as what I am looking for. Before, during, and even after the construction of my field research, I often encountered quite the skepticism on the sociology of why people still attend movie showings. “There really isn’t much to look into here. People just want to see a movie, that’s it.” said a close friend of mine. I do not wish to entirely disprove such skepticism nor am I looking to undermine any sort of status quo but due to the lack of American sociological investigation on the social act of movie going, I do seek to demonstrate that the average movie-goer is the small piece of an incredibly limitless social mystery. The average movie-goer is anything but “average” (Metz: 1974). Each movie-goer, despite their motivation, is a contributor to something much larger than themselves. Durkheim (1912) used the example of the microbiologist who chooses to only study multi-cellular entities as opposed to also studying singular

ones. By doing this, the scientist has wrongfully concluded that life is only present in the organization of cells (Durkheim: 1912). By studying movie-going, we are continuing to further understand collective behavior amongst ourselves. Who would have been able to guess since the first movie showing by the Lumiere brothers in December of 1895 that volumes of societies would have eventually developed voracious social and psychological drives for entertainment and social cohesion?

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The most significant film exhibition event was the first public showing of a film by the Lumiere brothers in March of 1895 (Cook: 2016). Much like today, these gatherings were an artistic presentation from the members of the community for the community. Metz (1974) noted that the sociological and psychological comprehension of film is different than the sociological and psychological comprehension of cinema. Film is the object, be it good or bad that is consumed by the spectators while the cinema is a mental machine that has helped audiences internalize film viewing. This would imply that the film is the object being viewed while the cinema serves as the institution that allows its members to view it. There is a vast difference between film and cinema to Metz (1974); firmly proclaiming a salient sociological comparison between the two. Film can never replace cinema or vice versa. Film is only a small part of true cinema and only a small part of movie-going. Metz (1974) uses the illustration that film to cinema is the equivalent of a book to literature. Cinema is unique in that the “proper cinematic vehicle” is comprised of a set of technological, economic, sociological, and even industrial order (Metz: 1974). The sociology and psychology of cinema is the sociology and psychology of the public. Metz (1974) distinctly established a direct terminology in regards to the cinematic industry using a semiotic, linguistic, and sociological approach to film studies. To Wong (2011), cinema was not always about the images on display but rather the

institution and environment (Wong: 2011). Cinema is a form of mass communication and is often a group activity (Jowett and Linton: 1980). Cinema showings are the resources that attempt to further the knowledge of film understanding and practice. Previous scholarship discussed the significance of film showings through the film festival. Both Fuller (1996) and Wong (2011) declared the movie audience as a creation of and through the community. Fuller (1996) wrote that “movie fan culture was created through a dialogue between the film industry and its viewers.” (Fuller: 1996, pg. 115)

Movie audiences of the early 1900’s sought to view films because the activity provided a place for the social animal struggling to express themselves but audiences varied from region to region (Fuller: 1996). Popular culture (and thus, cinema going) quickly became a favored past time. All over the world, the movie theater is an extremely popular venue to be social. An example of such would be the unique surge of movie theater attendance in 2007. Despite a tanking economy in the United States, the movie theater still served as a popular social hot spot for individuals to gather and share their feelings with one another on a consistent basis. (Sutherland and Feltey: 2009).

Since the purpose of this study is not to analyze films or film content from a sociological perspective but rather the sociological analysis of the film viewing and the social act of gathering to view film, it is necessary to structure this thesis meticulously. To simplify this study, it is optimal to breakdown the theoretical framework and types of literature reviewed into three different elements: 1.) Research focusing on the social act of group gathering and behavior (including that of historical cases). 2.) Research focusing

on the social psychology of going to the movies and 3.) research concerning the function of the movie theater within American society. To appropriately assess the research questions posed throughout this thesis, the scholarly sociological approach alone is insufficient. Rather, it is the inter-disciplinary methodology that utilizes the previous scholarship of sociology, psychology, anthropology, religious/theological and film studies that one must rely on as a means to fully grasp the concept of movie-going. The scholars and sources that formulate this literature review also combine their own interdisciplinary methods and literature to understand their own reconnaissance. It is also worth noting that since movie-going has its original roots in North American and European cultures, only scholarship citing cases in North American and European countries will be included throughout this thesis.

Overview: A Brief History of Movie-Going and the Negotiation of Public Place

Many sociologists and historians gather historical data to demonstrate the historical and social significance of the phenomenon they have taken interest in. The purpose of this first section of the literature review is to educate on how movie-going audiences have evolved over time based on various sociologically significant events throughout time. I have already established that the theatrical entertainment goes back to Shakespearean and Greek theater (Badiou: 2013). Much like today, these gatherings were the spectacle of an artistic presentation from the members of the society for society as explained by Wong (2011). What forms out the reoccurrence of these group gatherings is that of the institution. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines an institution as a

significant practice, relationship, or organization in a society or culture. David Brooks noted in *The Social Animal* that culture refers to a collection of human habits, beliefs, and practices that regulate the social lives of society's actors (Brooks: 2011). Historically speaking, movie-going has created its own culture over time. Mayne (1993) addressed the common question: who is more likely to go to the movies? The question presupposes that one specific group of people gains exclusive access to movie-going above any other demographic in a specific region or territory.

Mayne (1993) noted that the act of going to the movies was allegedly once exclusive to prominent Western cultures. The audiences seek their pleasures and willingly become the subjects to Western discourse. The cinema would aid these Western audiences in emphasizing ideology; helping those subjects build these imaginary relationships with the real world around them. Cinema spectatorship alone, becomes an institution at this point and this same institution functions to help film-goers succeed in becoming subjects of the Western ideology (Mayne: 1993). I sense that this Western ideological vehicle becomes problematic when the idea of the subject alone becomes alienated. Since these social structures are constructed to recognize ideology, we will inevitably exclude the interlopers. Mayne writes:

To begin with, then, spectatorship refers not just to the acts of watching and listening, and not just identification with human figures projected on the screen, but rather to the various values with which film viewing is invested. (Mayne, pg. 31).

The “values” in which Mayne referred to are those of the West. This is similar to Kaja Silverman’s (1992) concept of the dominant fiction as product of ideology. Since fiction is used to reinforce the domineering ideology, subjects are upholding ideology by continuously subscribing to the dominant fiction (Silverman: 1992). If Silverman is correct, then the act of film-going is a privileged Western activity. Mayne (1993) picked up on this and accused the cinematic apparatus models as one that is comprised of Caucasian men and women (Mayne: 1993). There is obviously an implication of both the movie-going industry and the movie-making industry as imperial entities ran by patriarchal figures. In other words, many individuals often imagine the movie audience as a homogenous bunch. They fit perfectly with the ideal Western masses.

Though Mayer (1972) sought to understand the sociological meaning of the audience members and their investment in the movie image. Is it not strange that how the moving image on the silver screen always contributes more than aesthetics? The films and their respective producers are always recycling a common norm that our ancestors always enjoyed. That is, movies are a modern-day retelling of the myth (Lyden: 2003). Man, has always possessed an intense fascination with the myth while also discussing how the ritual is simply the myth enacted in present time. Mayer (1972) found that no documented society has ever lived without the myth. Social cohesion and the enforcement of sociability has always been prevalent in presence of the exhibited myth. But as societies’ actors evolve, so do our myths. The myth (i.e. the film in this case) is the

center of attraction and allure in both cases of religious and cultural experiences (Mayer: 1972).

Erving Goffman (1963) dissected the notion of collective behavior. While *Behavior in Public Places* mostly focuses on acts that are accepted or unaccepted in the public sphere of civilization, Goffman was aware that the gathering of the crowd in a public place is driven by a common or similar goal (i.e. rioting or civilians traveling on a sidewalk in order to get to work). However, he admits that little thought is given in regards to the peaceful social structure. People attending the local cinema is often given no attention by the media unless a blockbuster movie projected to achieve incredible revenue is released or when a crime occurs, much like the Aurora shootings back in 2012 in which both happened to occur. Since *Behavior* also focused on civility in the public spectrum, it is not to be ignored that there is an expected etiquette when attending the cinema. The highly successful movie theater chain, Goodrich Quality Theaters, is prominent a franchise in the United States. A list of policies and regulations is now viewable on the company's website though it is a list that concerns the anticipated behavior of all patrons and guests. When visiting the company's website and viewing their terms and conditions of usage under the "Frequently Asked Questions" section, reads the following:

Disruptive Patrons: If our management staff discovers patrons who are disruptive in the theater, at their discretion, the management may give the offending

patrons a warning or ask them to leave. At their discretion, a manager may offer a refund to assist in the process, or simply require that they immediately leave the building.

Cell Phones (Texting): Goodrich Quality Theaters respectfully requests all patrons turn off their cell phones before a feature. Our paramount concern is the excellent presentation of a film to our patrons. The light emitted from a cell phone is incredibly distracting to those in the line of sight. At the manager's discretion, an offending patron may be asked to shut off the cell phone, or may be asked to leave, with or without a refund. Texting is treated with equal concern.

Food: As a rule, Goodrich Quality Theaters does allow outside food and drink that must be consumed in the lobby. No glass bottles may be brought into the theater. Foods similar to what we sell, like popcorn and candy, may be brought into the auditoriums (2015).

This is a reinforcement of Goffman's (1963) assertions. One can see the expected engagement of compliance and civility within this public space. The above policies are only three of fourteen stated policies which also includes regulations on entry refusal, crying children, and the "R" rating policy. In the personal home, one can view a pirated DVD quality version of a film currently in theater syndication while being clothed in pajamas, texting on the cell phone, and eating fast food. This is not the case at the cinema so what continues to be the source for such attraction? More in-depth investigation is needed to answer this question and may even be simultaneously answered in the social psychology section in this review.

The movie theater and movie fan culture has undoubtedly enjoyed a bilateral relationship. With regards to the movie attendance and fan culture, a sense of belonging has been established. *Guibernau* (2013) found the mentality and conditions in belonging are the underlying cause in group behavior. *Guibernau* uses the example of belonging to the church. Because the church offers such a unique view of the world, it employs using rituals or ceremonies which concludes in the forging of life-defining moments. In return, the church demands loyalty to their norms. Laderman (2009) acquiesces in the opening of his book, *Sacred Matters: Celebrity Worship, Sexual Ecstasies, the Living Dead, and Other Signs of Religious Life in the United States* by bluntly stating: “The history of film is a religious history” (Laderman: 2009). The spectators have replaced the divine with the exhibited film. In other words: the film is our God. Our sacred text? The film’s content. Our profane somehow became profane and the religious architect of the movie theater is purposeful. We gather now in the evenings instead of the mornings to hear Hollywood’s sacred messages of morality and hope (Laderman: 2009). The movie-going community succeeded in transferring the religious community’s genetic makeup to become a identical clone in order create a following of its own.

This notion is a reiteration of a main argument as found in Emile Durkheim’s (1912) *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Durkheim discusses the social causality of why people choose to attend church, mosque, or synagogue. It actually has little to do with God or heaven but rather it is the social act of individuals gathering for a common reason as a means to worship society. It is no longer simply about the connection to a

higher power though this usually the common belief that holds a religious group together. There is an external force that enables social action as driven by society. Outside of each person is a power that addresses command. Our mental energy pilots us to act beyond material coercion. Social action is driven by obscure ways for ordinary observers to comprehend. We have invented a power that can power us to overcome our nature and form a connection with others and as Durkheim stated, is not confined to religious sacrifices by tribal members. Assemblies are created and maintained via individuals willingly coming together to honor and celebrate a common passion.

Society exists solely through collective consciousness; a force that organizes itself within us and becomes central within our being. But much like individuals coming together to participate in movie-going, clearly reoccurring members attend the same movie showings. Durkheim utilizes the examples of political and historical reunions that are only held periodically as a means to revive personal faith. These groups become personified under this common passion when engaging in the event. Durkheim, however, is not entirely concerned with the reunion or revival itself as much as he is concerned with the behavior of those who are acting differently as opposed to their normal behavior. Collective behavior arouses our distinction of reality: sacred and profane. Though movie-going is very much of the profane reality, Durkheim reveals that society is always finding new ways to create sacred things out of ordinary entities. If someone falls in love something, Durkheim notes, a sacredness can be crafted. Such investments are created by

opinions. Our opinions will aid us in investing ourselves into a state that is not dissimilar from the religious nature Durkheim discusses. He asserts:

The simple deference inspired by men invested with high social functions is not different in nature from religious respect. (Durkheim: 1912)

He also comments on how collective sentiments are only operable through movements in unison. Drawing upon studies conducted in observation of the Uluuru, Kingilli, and Warramunga tribes engaging in general effervescent behavior. What was discovered was that these aforementioned external forces imposed themselves upon these tribes and the members seemed no longer the same beings they were in normal scenarios. What came of this was the noted effects on how man is often metamorphosed by environment. Religious idea (and thus religious nature) is conducted out of effervescent itself and the effervescent social environment. This same religious idea invokes emotion amongst individuals participating in collective effervescence as our material lives are directly or indirectly derived from religion.

Guibernau (2013) found that belonging in social solidarity requires deference. If one decided to attend a Catholic mass, there is usually an expected etiquette that is provided. If a cell phone goes off during the priest's homily, it is often considered irreverent. This is not unlike the expected etiquette when attending the movie theater. Goodrich Quality Theaters possesses the exact same expectation among its patrons. The same is true for the crying child policy. Parents are often asked to step out of the room in order to tend to their crying child so that other members are not disturbed during the

event. This is not to say that going to the movie theater is the same as attending church. There are prominent exceptions between the two. For example, upon the defense of my thesis proposal for this particular project, a committee member noted that when one attends a Catholic mass, it is customary for one to stay afterwards and mingle or socialize with other members. This is not necessary upon the conclusion of viewing a film.

Alexander, Giesen, and Mast (2009) stated that the role of popular culture including but not limited to the acts of watching sports and going to the movies are indeed a quasi-religious experience. Much like attending a religious service, attending movie showings offer us an escape from (or an alternative interpretation of) reality as well as the encouragement we are often looking for according to Sutherland and Feltey (2010). Laderman (2009) concurs when illustrating that with uniqueness of such experiences are due to the fact that people are coming together and witnessing the inexplicable sensation much like when one has a religious impulse.

It is quite possible that comparing the act that is going to the movies to that of religious behavior would be met with resistance from scholars and members alike. After surveying internet boards and forums, some individuals believe that this comparison is nothing more than mere incredible certitude. In somewhat of a religious manner, individuals adore popular culture within American society but during the field research process of this thesis, I encounter skepticism quite often when I brought up the subject. “What’s the relation between the two?” asked an interviewee. “That seems a little farfetched to me.” they concluded. Some scholars conclude that film and religion are, by

no means, related in any realm. But Fuller (1996) found that religion and the act of going to the movies have actually not always enjoyed a causal relationship. From the early 1910s to even as far as the late 1950s, denominations such as the Southern Methodists and Southern Baptists condemned such worldly activities as secular devil's play. Ironically, the church had experienced a fit of jealousy by hosting their own film exhibitions as a means to make the experience more reputable and moral. We still see the use of film exhibition in the church communities to this very day as a means to reach out to parishioners and citizens alike. John Lyden's (2003) *Film as Religion* may serve as an unconventional entry in the world of film and sociology. A scholar of religion, Lyden takes an iconoclastic approach to the world of cinema going. Popular culture is a prominent aspect of American culture but Lyden notices that Christianity is equally as distinguished. Despite cinema going only being slightly over a century old, the approach that Lyden takes is still a rather field of study. Perhaps Lyden's work also reflects society's appreciation for not only movie going but also that of technological advances within society.

Lyden (2003) provided the necessary theological historical background as a means of building his argument. He refers to Paul Tillich's *On the Idea of a Theology of Culture* (1969). Taking a Hegelian methodology, Tillich approaches culture as either "theonomy" or "theonomously". Tillich also mentions that individuals wield a "directness towards the unconditional". The "unconditional" is not a specifically a higher entity or a sum of all entities but is actually perceived as a reality of meaning or a deeper

meaning that “shakes foundations” while building anew (Lyden: 2003, pg.15). But Lyden interprets this further by insisting that our religious operations are indeed the same or closely related to that of cultural operations that we bear witness to on a daily basis. He even adds on the attempt of separating religious culture from that of artistic culture.

Lyden asserts:

The Unconditional is not a thing within the world, but the depth of meaning present for all things in the world. This depth of true meaning is the religious substance expressed in cultural/artistic forms, and it is the job of the theologian of culture to interpret these forms to find this substance-without, however, falling into either heteronomous or autonomous interpretation. The challenge for a theology of culture is to avoid condemning culture as “other: than religion (as it is in fact the same substance) and also to avoid severing the connection between culture and religion so as to miss the deeper significance of culture”. (Lyden: 2003, pg. 16)

The “Unconditional” for us is, of course, the movie-going phenomenon. Since Lyden establishes that the same meaning found in religious substance is also present in cultural or artistic, he does clarify that religion is still not the same as culture but both substances are undeniably intertwined since culture has possesses religious aspects that are unable to be separated.

Smith (1978, 1982) defines the concept of religion as “a construct of one’s scholarly creational study” (Lyden: 2003, pg. 41) while Gertz (1973) explained that religion cannot only be defined by content based on theology or the belief in God. Both Durkheim (1912) and Gertz (1973) argue that religion is to be properly defined by the function that it may serve in a society rather than the act of faith itself.

Attending the cinema may be interpreted as religious behavior because participants are engaging in ritualistic practice. Bell (1997) found that the performative aspect of ritual is the same in secular societies as church going is in religious activities and movie going is not exempt from this notion. Lyden (2003) and Bell (1997) describe the ritualistic experience as when an individual of a society being inside a ritual time and space but is also outside of the profane time and space. Lyden articulates that this ritualistic experience revolves around one related element: the myth. The term, 'myth usually' retains a negative connotation to its usage. Myths are not simply false stories made up to preach the messages adopted from our ancestors. Aslan (2005) found that myths are based in truth and carry both spiritual and factual claims.

Since our myths become larger than life, we find new ways to keep them alive. Rarely are new movies a result of an 'original' idea. We keep our beloved myths alive by renovation and exhibition because they are key to our human understanding. By utilizing Mauss' (1924) employment of social facts, we see that the exhibition of myths would insinuate that our continuation of myth exhibition is a common experience of social evolution. We are continually attempting to escape our primitive pasts. The movie theater spectrum is no different from the performance theatre, the concert hall, or the sports arena. It operates on, as Mauss would articulate, an exchange function (Mauss: 1924). We pick up where our ancestors left off by continuing to operate under exchange functions. The exhibited film has become the commodity and has been transformed into a proper totem advertised, displayed, and sold to the eager tribe members. The film on

display gains value in both economic and nature due to the fact that it has succeeded in influencing our behavior as tribe members. Filmgoers and those of faith come together for the same reasons. They follow the tribal instinct to explore the myth. To escape the problems of the world and suspend doubts, anxieties, or trouble to honor the myth as we have been taught to do from generation to generation.

The Social Psychology of Cinema-Going

The sociopsychology of moviegoing is also contingent on cognitive investment. Morgan (2005) discusses how individuals gaze upon an image sacredly and that it is of no difference if it is an object of film or a religious painting. When the viewer gazes upon an object with focus, they are investing within the image. Viewers find themselves filled with spiritual significance when engaging in *visual culture*. The image we gaze upon is contributing to our reality, be it intellectually or socially. Norman Holland (2003) addresses the willing suspension of disbelief from a neuropsychanalytic perspective. He describes this suspension in great detail and discusses the ideas that we no longer perceive our own bodies and environment while simultaneously losing reality-testing skills by becoming emotionally attached to fiction. While Holland succeeds in educating scholars on the scientific explanation for our suspension which happens to concern the prefrontal cortex, the fascination of this suspension is not a newfound discovery.

Friedrich William Joseph Schelling was a German philosopher during the Romantic Period (1800-1850) and emerged during the same epoch as Jean Jacques Rousseau and Francisco Goya. Ferri (2007) narrates on how Schelling believed that there

were two ways in which we are able to free ourselves from reality: poetry and philosophy. Poetry enables one to transport into an ideal world as philosophy will make the real world vanish. In concurrence with Schelling's philosophy, Ferri also makes reference to Samuel Coleridge, an English poet and critic from the same movement. He not only points out how Coleridge took notice of the individual's ability to become invested in poems or stories but also how Coleridge historically connects to the visual technological innovation of the photograph. Coleridge offered the interpretation that the creative applicability and simplicity of the photograph sees one to willfully suspend disbelief. This same notion is still applied to the suspension of disbelief that one experiences with visual media today.

Though few sociologists have pondered over why individuals continue to attend movie showings in a cinematic environment, there has been a great deal of social scientific research on the movie audience. The audience member is not simply a mindless drone who is shoe-horned into a bucket seat on a Saturday evening to sheepishly applaud the moving image on the silver screen. On the contrary, Tudor's (1975) findings illustrated that the audience member is more than a mere unit and dismisses the use of the term "member" as non-contributing. The audience member attends the movies because this is a social act and it reinforces one's social interaction. It now becomes an extension of his or her world. Tudor was also instructive on the viewing differences amongst audience members as he discusses the effects on the human senses that one experiences when viewing television or film. Tudor stated that while watching television in the home

can also be a part in an individual's social interaction, it is the Cinerama that serves as the utmost compelling encounter for one to have such an experience like that one has in the movie theater environment. The senses are heightened when in the theater. The reason behind this is because as screen size and sound increase then so does one's interaction thus concluding that due to the nature of the viewing encounter, experience will be altered.

Tudor's claims are not unfounded. Previous research using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and inter-subject correlation analysis (ISC) suggests that human beings exert a noticeable amount of activity when viewing film though our activity varies based on the film (Hasson, Landesman, Knappmeyer, Vallines, Rubin, Heeger: 2008). The findings of Hasson, Landesman, Knappmeyer, Vallines, Rubin, Heeger (2008) would the notion that the audience member is also a participating observer. Take into consideration viewing a film on the television and compare it to viewing a film on Cinerama. Viewing a film on the television in the home, with light, occurs in a familiar environment and is that of an everyday experience. Tudor reminds that our awareness thins in regards to our social context therefore when viewing a film in Cinerama, distractions are minimized. Goffman's (1963) concepts of main involvements/focuses come into play here. In the movie theater, where it is dark and the only noticeable light comes from that of the widescreen projection, the projection becomes one's main focus. Tudor (1975) also asserts that this is why individuals experience more extreme emotions (such as weeping) in the movie theater environment.

Fuller (1996) described the interior design of the nickelodeon theaters of the early twentieth century as rather minimalistic and practical. This was due to the nature of the films of said era which required complete darkness in the auditorium and, at times, even posed as a serious safety or moral hazard for the patrons in attendance.

The father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud's (1917) explains the scientific significance of the human mind. Our dreams brandish a heavy leverage on our conscience and sub conscience respectively. In *Film as Social Practice*, Graeme Turner (1988) wrote the potential presence of psychoanalytic theory in cinema going. This may be met with a certain level of skepticism among scholars. Even Turner himself admits that this may not be entirely true due to the fact while the actors are not really present, they know that are participating to purposely be watched by audience members and this may not be true voyeurism.

Returning to Turner (1988), he noted that Freud's emphasis on the 'look' or the 'gaze'. With this 'look' the audience experiences a transformation. This transformation witnesses the audience member becoming 'the spectator' because the audience no longer looks but indeed spectate the moving image. The true determining factor of this transformation relies on the individual's self-definition and the supposed relationship of their environment. Much like in voyeurism, the spectator is now in a position of power; they can see while not being seen and are 'making an object' of the on-screen occurrence. Once this has taken place, this voyeuristic sensation taps into the individual's id because the 'look' of voyeurism is one of pleasure. Turner's final remark on this theory is that it is

due to the essence of an audience member's identification with the moving image which stimulates a multitude of emotional and physical reactions within the human mind.

I have already explained how Metz's (1974) conclusions on the proper cinematic vehicle separated the cinematic from the filmic and that the cinematic institution is one that is comprised of multiple societal elements. Metz's (1982) later work, which was also employed by Turner (1988), focused on Freudian theory and applied psychoanalytics. The cinematic institution is not simply a place, space, or industry. It aims to please. A demand-based industry, the institution seeks to fill cinemas with employees and customers alike. The mental machinery that drives this is indeed an industry within an industry. Overtime, film spectators have unconsciously and collectively internalized the desire to participate in the cinematic initiation which is in fact the same accretion found in Oedipus complex development (outer machine). A secondary machine that imprints itself within the cinematic institution is the social regulation of the film spectators' metapsychology (inner machine). The cinematic institution aims to provide "good object" relation with film showings while avoiding the dreaded "bad object" relation. This what Metz describes as filmic pleasure versus filmic displeasure. Since it is the spectator that willfully chooses to pay earned wages for an admission ticket, this is not a forced act. The purchasing of the ticket makes possible for further movie productions and products while ensuring an auto-industrial market. This kinship, as Metz asserts, is the catalyst that bridges the spectators' inner machine to the outer machine, an industry that creates, renovates, and sustains itself within the functioning market society.

Negotiation of the Public Sphere

Jancovich, Faire, and Stubbings (2003) note that the scene of early film exhibition and consumption as “places of chaotic intermingling”. The personal identity is then released as the moviegoer thwarts themselves into the world of strangers. Elias (1976) studies on the history of humanizing processes seem to match what Jancovich, Faire, and Stubbings are getting at here. The individual allows themselves to travel into a social jungle with no knowledge of whom they may encounter. For Elias, this involves a hidden trust. A trust that reads “I won’t harm you and I certainly hope that you will not harm me in return.” In this particular study, the individual’s vibe may read “I won’t hurt you, I hope that you won’t hurt me but instead, I hope that we can both enjoy this moment and consume our purchased good simultaneously with no direct interaction”. Despite notions of Marxism being fervently carried throughout the creation of film and exhibition, many findings from Jancovich, Faire, and Stubbings (2003) reflect attempts of modernists establishing places with an anti-bourgeois agenda.

Much like carnivals and amusement parks, different cinemas were made available to members of differing genders, races, and class statuses. My historical literature review aided in this process by shedding light on identity in film-going and the public sphere. Jancovich, Faire, and Stubbings (2003) found that while most early film exhibition sites were constructed to attract the low to middle class members, movie theaters eventually grew to represent different members from various echelons. Consumers on all levels, especially the lower class, took great pride in attending their respective neighborhood

theater. Early theater owners were engaged to promote their personality as a means to attract potential customers, a methodological approach which also saw the local theater become a representation of the community. Many locals then witnessed the emergence of this practice become imposing on spatial relations in the community (Jancovich, Faire, and Stubbings: 2003). Traffic only becomes problematic once there is a breakdown in civility.

This leads back to Goffman's (1963) notion of public behavior. The movie theater as a place would be simply known as an "open region" due to its "mutual openness". During the time individuals walk into the movie theater, seat themselves inside the cinema, attend the restroom, and leave the building, they reserve the right to avoid face engagement or any social interaction whatsoever. This is an unofficial contract that is seemingly programmed into most of society's actors. Let us not forget that this option is especially convenient when the gathering place forces the audience members to face away from each other towards the dominating silver screen. Though this civil inattention may often be broken for reasons that still involve some level of hidden trust. Fans waiting for the feature presentation to start may choose to talk to other tribe members outside of their direct party about the upcoming film or relevant details about its creation. They may also break civil inattention by asking for aid. For example, the lost audience member may ask someone else in the cinema for directions.

However, per my previous discussion on theater etiquette and the social psychology of moviegoing, choosing to break civil inattention at inappropriate times (i.e.

when the featured film is playing) could be met with harsh reactions (Goffman: 1963). Since we can now understand that the cinema, be it the local neighborhood theater or the popular multiplex, represents the community, class, and members. These places serve as a chaotic open market that encourages its patrons to be highly social at welcomed moments with positive collective behavior, it also discourages this same behavior in times that are considered to be inopportune. This sets the so-called standard for the negotiation of the movie theater as a public sphere regaling organized groups of complete strangers.

Identifying the Moviegoer and the Cinemagoing Culture

The final section of this literature review will briefly focus on identifying moviegoers. Fuller (1996) asserted that the movie-going culture and practice has varied throughout time based on regional, economic, racial, and even gender factors (Fuller: 1996). Audiences are constantly changing and the local movie theater is sustained by the dominant community or culture. Examples of this notion are prevalent throughout scholarship. If one happened to observe the Lower East Side of Manhattan Island between 1888 and 1914, they would have witnessed the Eastern European Jewish immigration that formed the predominantly Yiddish-speaking audiences of the late 1800's and early 1900's (Thissen: 1999). Griffiths and Latham (1999) also found audiences to be liable to change often when analyzing the shift in audiences in Harlem, New York (Griffiths and Latham: 1999). The first wave of movie theater audiences that consisted of first and second generation middle-class Irish, German, and British-Americans suddenly dissipated as audiences consisting of almost entirely African-

American citizens became the standard (this became an augmented precursor to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's) (Griffiths and Latham: 1999). While audiences were diversified by the presence of minority and immigrant families in cities such as Worcester, Manhattan, and Chicago, this was not the case in the South (Fuller: 1996). Small towns in the southern United States experienced more economic hardships and racial prejudices as a result of Jim Crow laws (Fuller: 1996). Going into the 1940's the southeastern states ranked the lowest in movie-going heading into World War II (Fuller: 1996). Fuller's (1996) data also found that southern, white, small-town men in North Carolina were more likely to attend a movie showing than their female counterparts. This is due to the average male farmer traveling into town and socializing with other (white) men while women usually stayed on the farm and labored. Religion was not helping the matter either. Fuller's (1996) work also found that religion and the act of going to the movies have actually not always enjoyed a causal relationship. From the early 1910s to as far as the late 1950s, denominations such as the Southern Methodists and Southern Baptists condemned such worldly activities as secular devil's play (Fuller: 1996). This entailed conservative church evangelicals to denounce movie-going as immorally hazardous "decadence of the cities" that was similar to drinking or smoking tobacco (Fuller: 1996). Ironically, the church had experienced a fit of jealousy by hosting their own film exhibitions as a means to make the experience more reputable and moral (Fuller: 1996). We still see the use of film exhibition in the church communities to this very day to reach out to parishioners and citizens alike.

In the West, however, movie-going proved similar to that of the northeast communities. Southwestern states such as Texas witnessed Mexican American citizens eventually attended their own communal movie while Chinese and Japanese citizens followed suit in southern California theaters due to the language and cultural barriers that were salient in the United States (Fuller: 1996). Fuller (1996) also notes the sociological study conducted by Albert Blumenthal (1932) when he wrote *Small Town Stuff*. Blumenthal (1932) noticed many of Montana's small town movie theaters played host to mostly women, children, and teenagers (Fuller: 1996), a trend that was similar to that of early 1970's United Kingdom movie-going as well as that of 1980's America (Mayer: 1972, Gomery: 1992). Like most American industries during the Great Depression, the movie theater business suffered immense economic loss. Despite the declining profits, audiences still flocked to their local neighborhood cinema to forget about the harsh realities many citizens were facing. This notion of escapism, per Paige (2008), offered a more pleasant alternative. Audience members found strong appeal during this dark chapter in U.S. history when screwball comedies and gangster thrillers also reiterated the idea of the American Dream (Paige: 2008).

Other scholars such as Gomery (1992) and Quigley (1957) have spoken about movie theaters that appeal to certain demographics. As the movie-going practice grew, society witnessed the emergence of more specialized and unique movie theater gimmicks. Newsreel cinemas, art theaters, foreign language theaters, and drive-in theaters became popular throughout the 1940's, 1950's, and 1960's respectively attracting new audiences

with more specified theatrical tastes (Gomery: 1992). For example, art theaters of the aforementioned epoch served as a public place for the gathering of college-educated individuals who were fascinated by artistic, foreign films (Gomery: 1992). This is pertinent as Quigley (1957) found that those of higher socioeconomic and educational statuses were more likely to attend movie showings. But as the 1970's came to a close and audiences finally started to become more integrated throughout the United States, Gomery (1992) also observed a new standard. From the 1980's onward, a significant number of American movie-goers were mostly likely to be college educated individuals (Gomery: 1992). It was with this data that one could finally conclude that movie —theater attendance or audiences, comprised of any demographic of people, was contingent on whatever socioeconomic and political trends were transpiring at the time. Later, skepticism emerged among pundits. Many believed that the movie theater business would no longer survive based on the booming home video industry (Gomery: 1992). Gomery (1992) took an aggressive stance on why the movie theater industry would survive well past the twentieth century. Discount theaters, new concession stands, advertising, the catering to the modern family, design, strict etiquette would all serve as inclusive benefits to many movie-goers well into the 2000's and this, Gomery asserts, is how the movie theater industry will continue to thrive as many entrepreneurs consider new innovations (Gomery: 1992). As it turns out, he was right.

Now that a brief yet appropriate historical background has been discussed on the complex nature of movie-going demographics, I must take the time to discuss the sociological significance of the above scholarship. We see here the establishment of the

public sphere. In each community, the movie theater has served as a public place for collective behavior to occur. In the early days of movie-going, audiences were molded by regional, racial, gender, and socioeconomic factors. Those of the Jewish, African-American, Mexican, Japanese, and Chinese communities came together and formed an exclusive sphere for its members. The negotiations of these communities transformed space into place- a sanctuary reserved for those marginalized and alienated. Despite audiences now being much more integrated, dividing factors still remain prominent when considering the nature of the contemporary audience. Fuller (1996) disclosed on the ever-changing audience that as the industry evolves, so do its consumers.

Group Behavior

Wenzel's (2015) statement of the problem overlooks the social scientific reasoning behind moviegoing. He provides his own opinion on the matter and its cause but does not attempt to reconnoiter movie-going from the standpoint of a social scientist. In his defense, Wenzel is not a scientist and his article was clearly not meant to serve as scholarly work. Wenzel is a reporter and a critic. His purpose here was far from attempting to answer the trend from that of a sociological lens.

Since I will eventually discuss the social psychology that is behind cinema going, it would benefit to articulate the socialization and group behavior behind cinema going. Cinema is a product made by society, for society, and consumed by society. Movie fans (and movie fandom) created a demand for the moving picture and, like any sensible

industrial entity, the industry responded. “Movie fan culture was created through a dialogue between the film industry and its viewers” (Fuller: 1996, pg. 115).

While discussing the creation of movie fandom in the United States, Fuller (1996) speaks on the difference between the movie-fans and the occasional movie goers. Going all the way back to the early 1900’s, the attendance rates varied throughout different regions and territories (Fuller: 1996). However, movie audiences are always labile. The movie audiences in any region, during any epoch are attributed to a variation in economic/financial, racial, and even gender factors.

There is also data on age and moviegoing. Mayer’s (1972) data revolving around movie theater attendance in the United Kingdom found that movie going was a prominent part of teenage and popular culture in the early 1970’s. This was not too long after Britain had experienced a drop in 500 million audience members in the post-World War II era (Jancovich, Faire, and Stubbings: 2003).

I have already discussed the persistent claim of how technological advancement will eventually mean the demise of the movie theater industry and how this argument, based on a lack of evidence, holds little clout. Corbett (1998, 1999, 2001) argued that most critics fail to understand how ‘going to the cinema’ and ‘staying in with a movie’ hold different meanings. He noticed that the social act of audiences viewing a movie served as a symbolic agent that was crucial to individuals’ daily lives and that this act transformed their interpersonal relationships with others (Jancovich, Faire, and Stubbings: 2003). A great example is the dating/married couple. Corbett’s study found

that film consumption in a movie theater environment for the romantic was not motivated by a particular film but rather, a desire to interact. This is an interesting assessment given my previous discussion on the social psychology of movie-going and Morgan's (2005) discourse on the 'investment' presented by the spectator which could lead to the suspension of disbelief and how this may clash with the notion of *possible* cognitive solitude involved in that investment as highlighted by Jancovich, Faire, and Stubbings (though most scholars, including Morgan argue that seeing is not an isolated cultural activity). He uses the example of how couples go to the movies as a means to celebrate special occasions such as birthdays or even Christmas and this idea of celebration is even given exceptional thought if one member of the party chooses to view a film that they do not wish to see (Jancovich, Faire, and Stubbings: 2003).

Jancovich, Faire, and Stubbings (2003) counter Corbett's study due to his conflict-free approach to ethnographical findings. Jones (2001) observed that the film consumption in Tampa, Florida was predicated on cultural-political state of its citizens. Many moviegoers eventually rejected the city's multiplex which was heavily associated with mainstream popular culture. This leads to the idea of place, identity, and space-based association. For Jancovich, Faire, and Stubbings, our unity may or may not through public events and media communication. In the case of movie-going, sound era films first came to New York City territories because of central metropolitan locations and thus, film-going culture in New York City was not a fair representation for other places (Jancovich, Faire, and Stubbings: 2003). This would mean that movie-going culture is a

reflection of the historical findings I have already went through. Since our place and identity are a product of the time and space we occupy in society, the same can be said for moviegoing culture.

Harper and Porter (1999) divide the cinemagoing public into three distinct groups: the indiscriminate moviegoers, the habitual moviegoers, and the occasional moviegoers. Jancovich, Faire, and Stubbings (2003) express their disappointment in Harper and Porter's lack of engagement on what these categories really represent. This is where I have to step in and repeat the originally stated question: What does it mean to truly be a part of moviegoing culture? For starters, Jancovich, Faire, and Stubbings acquiesce that the central motive behind moviegoing plays little regard to film content or audience tastes (Jancovich, Faire, and Stubbings: 2003).

Per Halperin (2012), one does not even have to be a formalized member of a particular culture to enjoy its benefits. For example, as a heterosexual male, if I wanted to associate myself with homosexual male culture, I could arrange to visit a club or engage in discourse with homosexual men on what it 'means to be a gay man'. I can then facilitate and observe their culture with or without incremental modification. Once I begin to replicate this culture or even if I elect to independently form and spread my own version of it, I have begun the process of what is known as cultural transmission (Sapolsky: 2006). This brings me back to my earlier review of Durkheim (1912). The fact that one is or is not gay, is essentially irrelevant. My connection with other homosexual men, even though I classify myself as a heterosexual male, can be enjoyed in a cultural

context as I have now succeeded in participating in the culture despite my position. We understand this process in relation to cinemagoing in the same manner. Even the so-called interloping moviegoer can enjoy the benefits of Durkheim's notion of social solidarity even if they seldom attend, have no desire to attend, or have no coherent comprehension of what it means to engage in moviegoing as a social act.

Conclusion of Literature Review

The previously reviewed literature suggested that the movie-going community is crafted around the relevant epoch. Clearly, audiences are as complex as the structures they dwell in. Our findings in historical movie-going revealed that audiences are contingent on whatever socioeconomic, sociopolitical, and ideological trends are occurring in the respective times and place. I finally understand that Durkheim's scholarship on the religious life parallels the movie-going culture. As occupants of the public sphere, our previous positions remain irrelevant if we so choose to engage in a culture that is totally alien to us. We also understand that the movie theater, as a place, bares a distinct difference from other movie exhibition sites. Its architecture, technology, and material amenities trigger our cognitive processing for the time we choose to remain there and why our experience in the movie theater environment varies greatly from our own personal home. Our mind reacts in a way that is not possible when we view film at home. We [the members of society] view the great 'myth' reimagined on the silver screen with our fellow citizens in an unusual suspension: we are present and engaged without having to commit to intimate discourse with those around us. Now that we have seen what the respected

scholars in multiple disciplines have offered us, we now move on to the public sphere itself. The time has come to take the advice of Austin (1983), as he instructs that the only way that the diligent social scientist can acquire a fully functional understanding of the filmgoing audience is to remain leave the classroom and explore the field itself.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The data through this study was acquired through various qualitative interviews throughout the state of North Carolina. The interviews took place in late July of 2016 and concluded in late January of 2017. A total of eighteen individuals were interviewed throughout the construction of this thesis. I sought out fifteen individuals who classified themselves as moviegoers, whether they identified as seldom, occasional, or frequent, and the remaining three to be movie theater personnel. To capture the best understanding of North Carolina moviegoers, three different areas were studied throughout this project: a rural area theater, a suburban area theater, and two metropolitan area movie theater were selected for this study. I attended the premier for five different films to note what types of individuals were attending certain premiers. For example, I noticed that young white males and females in their twenties were overrepresented for the premier of *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* and that African-American men in women in their teens and twenties were overrepresented for *Get Out*. With the exception of two subjects whom I met at a restaurant near the selected theater, I decided to use the movie theaters to meet subjects and subsequently interview them either in the main lobby or the facility's parking lot. The selected cinemas were the Lexington Cinema 8 in Lexington, North Carolina (suburban), the Grande 18 located in Winston-Salem, North Carolina (rural), the Regal Manor Theater and the AMC Northlake 14 both located in Charlotte, North Carolina (metropolitan).

Recruitment of participants proved to be the most arduous process throughout this study. Recruitment flyers were posted on Facebook.com and Craigslist.org for the Winston-Salem/Lexington, Greensboro, and Charlotte areas. Though the Facebook ad was shared and posted openly to the public, subjects only responded to the ad on Craigslist. The flyer advertised a moviegoing study to moviegoers in the state of North Carolina. In return for one qualitative interview, the participant would be compensated for one free movie ticket to any movie of their choice at any local movie theater. Some of the most common problems that were encountered throughout this project were pretty much expected. When the first flyers were posted over the summer of 2016, there many individuals willing to participate in the study. As in most sociological studies, many of these individuals moved away, changed their contact information, or simply declined to participate in the study. This was especially the case with movie theater management and staff. For the few staff members who did not quit their position, some employees were either promoted or transferred to another site. One participant in particular declined to take part in the study because he was very hesitant to see a movie alone (this will also be addressed in chapter IV). Each interview was recorded on Android device, later an iPhone, and converted to a file kept on a password protected laptop computer.

Interview questions were contingent on researched literature relevant to the study. I found that in order to complete understand the moviegoing phenomenon, it would prove prudent to ask questions that drew from both the sociological and social psychological spectrums. Participants were asked qualitative questions that required the disclosure of

their moviegoing habits and occasions. This included, but was not limited to, moments of nostalgia and certain memories that the participant disclosed of previous moviegoing experiences. For further data examination, the questionnaire also called for demographic questions such as race, gender, age, and, if the opportunity arose, questions of particular fandoms or religious participation. Participants were also encouraged to elaborate in thick description on their particular views on moviegoing and their take on the movie theater industry. Each interviewee was given a pseudonym for anonymity. The interview questions for moviegoers were arranged as follows:

For Movie Goers

1. How often do you go to the movies?
2. In your own words, please state why you attended the movies, today.
3. In your own words, how does attending the movie theater compare to staying at home and watching movies or television?
4. Whom did you come to the movie with today? Why?
5. Do you ever go to the movies alone?
6. Why do you attend the movies with others?
7. Is it affordable to attend the movies on a regular basis?
8. Do you or have you ever gotten irritated with someone who saw a movie without you?
9. Do you think that Netflix or Redbox is a threat to the movie theater industry?
10. What is your fondest movie theater memory and why?

11. Have you ever been on a date that involved going to the movies? Do you think that it is a good idea to go dates at the movies? Why/why not?
12. What are some forthcoming movies that you will most certainly be seeing in theaters?
13. Now I just have a few demographic questions. What gender do you identify as? What race or ethnicity do you identify as? How old are you?
14. What is your relationship status?
15. Do you have any children? If so, how many? Do you ever attend the movies with them?
16. Do you attend church or any other religious institutions? How often? Is attending the movies anything like attending church?
17. Are there any non-movie events that you attend such as concerts, parties, independent events, etc.?
18. Is there anything else that you would like to add or that you feel that I should know of?

For reasons of relevance however, the questions were altered to fit movie theater management and staff. While most questions remained the same, less questions were provided. Each staff (one per theater) member represented a different movie theater from the selected cities. The interview questions for movie theater management and staff were arranged as follows:

For Management and Staff

1. How does attending the movie theater compare to staying at home and watching movies or television?
2. Do you think Netflix or Redbox is a threat to the movie theater industry?
3. How does a movie theater generate revenue?
4. Where does most of the theater's revenue come from?
5. How often do you witness people attending the movies alone?
6. What are usually the busiest times of the year for the movie theater industry?
7. Why do movie theaters have midnight screening premiers?
8. Do you have any loyal customers whom you see on a regular basis?
9. What is your fondest movie theater memory and why (Families? Students? Youth groups? Etc.)?
10. What are your typical customers?
11. How did you come to work at the movie theater?
12. Now I just have a few demographic questions. What gender do you identify as? What race or ethnicity do you identify as? How old are you?
13. Is attending the movies anything like attending church or any other religious institution?
14. Is there anything else that you would like to add or that you feel that I should know of?

Film screenings/premiers observed:

The Legend of Tarzan

Suicide Squad

Star Wars: Rogue One

Fences

Manchester By the Sea

Jackie

Split

Get Out

Fifty Shades Darker

Most interviews took place in the lobby of the movie theater as chosen by the participant, with sixteen of the eighteen interviews taking place in a theater setting: Five interviews in Winston-Salem's Grande 18, Five in Lexington's Cinema 8, One in Charlotte's Regal Manor Theater, and four in Charlotte's AMC Northlake 14. Two participants, such as Jasmine, wanted to meet in a public area that they were more familiar with but these venues were never from the theater itself. Typically, I met each interviewee about one hour before the film started. Of course, sometimes the interviewee felt that the occasion would be "more genuine" after they had viewed the film in which I would reimburse them for their ticket and we could meet in the theater lobby after the movie's showing. While each interview was slated for ten to fifteen minutes, some interviews fell short and averaged around seven minutes or so. In other instances, the

more verbose participants, such as Jon, would go to almost as far as twenty minutes to thirty-one minutes.

The subsequent methodology used was field observation. On opening nights, I travelled to local theaters to provide “coverage” for debuting films. The first film screening that I observed on opening weekend was Garreth Edward’s *Star Wars: Rogue One* in December of 2016. At the encouragement of my advisor, I elected to also observe the opening weekend for *Get Out* and *Fifty Shades Darker* in February of 2017. These films were projected to draw audiences of specific demographics which is what made their openings the subject of investigation. I took field notes in thick description and noted that no individuals seemingly attended these opening nights alone. For example, I noticed that groups of friends, married couples, and families, attended the opening for *Rogue One*, which had sold out within two hours of the first three showings, though the event was mostly attended by groups of white teenagers and twentysomethings.

CHAPTER IV

DATA, RESULTS, AND DISCUSSION

Jancovich, Faire, and Stubbings (2003) noted that there are essentially three different types of movie-goers: those who seldom attend, those who occasionally attend, and those who often attend. Of the fifteen moviegoing subjects interviewed, about nine of those individuals attended the movies on at least a weekly basis while the remaining six of the moviegoing sample seldom attended. In this fourth chapter, I will discuss the highlights of my observations including the demographics of the interviewed respondents, who goes to the movies more generally, how certain respondents attend the movies, moviegoing as religious behavior, and their reasoning behind moviegoing based on the answers I received during my qualitative interviewing.

Demographic Findings

Out of the eighteen total respondents in this study, approximately ten were white males ranging from the ages of twenty-two to twenty-seven years old. Of these ten individuals, only one was married, three respondents identified being in a committed relationship while the remaining four individuals were single or dating around. Out of the five female respondents, two identified as black females, ages twenty-five and twenty-six and were both in committed relationships, while the remaining the three female respondents aged twenty (in a relationship), twenty-three (married) and fifty-five

(married). The older respondents identified as white males ranging from ages fifty (manager), forty-nine (married) and fifty-five (married). The remaining three individuals whose relationship status is unaccounted for were the managers or staff members of the selected movie theaters.

While respondents varied in race/ethnicity, sex, or religious affiliations, ten of the eighteen respondents in this study were aged twenty to twenty-seven years old. All respondents of this particular age group and two individuals, both aged fifty-five years old, responded to my study ad as posted in the Winston-Salem/Lexington, Charlotte, and Greensboro sections on Craigslist.org. Millennials have become the most prevalent pilots in this revolution of internet usage may have accounted for their overrepresentation in this study. The other two subjects, aged fifty-five, were both married and Mark, Valerie's husband, was a frequent computer user as he was also a software designer. The final subject, Jorge, found out about this study through his son who had read had also read about the study on Craigslist. No users expressed interest in this study via Facebook.com.

Male Subjects

Thirteen of the eighteen respondents for this study identified as male. Each male respondent was white. The greatest variant of male respondents was age. Of the thirteen male subjects, approximately ten ranged from ages twenty-three to twenty-seven years old while three remaining three ranged from ages forty-eight to fifty-five years old. With the exception to three movie theater managers, all of whom were white males, three subjects were married, three subjects were currently in a relationship while the remaining

four subjects were single at the time of this study. Since no subject attended the movies alone during this study, five of the subjects attended the movies with their spouse or partner while five moviegoing subjects attended with either friends or a close family relative.

Female Subjects

Five of the eighteen respondents for this study identified as female. Three subjects were white while the remaining two subjects were black. One subject was fifty-five while four subjects ranged from ages twenty to twenty-six. There were no single female subjects that participated in this study. Like their male counterparts, no female subject attended the movies alone. Two female participants were married while three were in exclusive relationships at the time of this study. Four of the female subjects attended the movies with their spouse or partner while one subject attended the movies with a group of friends.

Who is most likely to go to the movies? Mayne (1993) addressed that individuals wield an underlying, almost subconscious, assumption that the audience is homogenous. Clearly, the moviegoing audience is based on cultural place as well as time. When I covered the premiere of *Star Wars: Rogue One*, the cinema was packed with mainly twenty to thirty something white males while the premier for *Fifty Shades Darker* sported young white female subjects in their early to late twenties. This was always the case even for the bigger cinemas. All three movie theater staff agreed that even the most particular of films such as *Star Wars* or *Fences*, a film that drew a mostly African-American

audience during its opening night, will draw a general audience during non-busy times. Brad noted that arthouse cinemas draw older audiences but mainstream cinemas will draw younger audiences and families during the evenings. This is especially true during the weekend and summer evenings. Older audience members will come during the morning and afternoon times for the Monday to Thursday business days. As the hours and weekdays progress, younger audience members and families will more likely attend movie showings. For its opening weekend at the Regal Manor Theater, *Jackie* attracted white women aged twenty to seventy-five. *Get Out* also saw an overrepresentation of African-American couples and friends which at the AMC Northlake 14. During my observation of the latter films, I also noticed that no one seemed to attend the showings alone. For the Winston-Salem/Lexington cinema market, the observed showings included mostly twentysomething white subjects who were both male and female as well as white families. Greensboro premieres tended to lean towards more African-American twentysomethings and families while the Charlotte-metro area cinemas presented a balance of the two. The exception for this was of course the aforementioned arthouse cinema which consisted of twentysomething females and predominately older couples. This could also reflect the fact arthouse cinemas of the 1950's and 1960's consisted of college educated young people who have since aged.

The Movie Theater Experience as a Social Experience

One hundred percent of the subjects interviewed in this study agreed that the “movie theater experience” made the difference from viewing a film in the setting of the

personal home. Each subject had their definition of what the movie theater experience was. “For Valerie, a fifty-five-year-old teacher who was married, the movie theater experience was about sharing the public space with other members of the community which allowed her to make new acquaintances. For Leroy, a twenty-five-year-old college senior, it was the novelty of the new film accompanied with enhance sound effects. For Raven, a twenty-six year old bank teller, it was simply attending the movies with her partner as a means of intimate bonding. The most prominent and profound finding I discovered throughout this study was that moviegoing means different things for different people. As we progress through this chapter, it is pertinent to pay attention why movie going is (or in some cases, is *not*) important to these participants. I allow each member to bring their own assertions, values, and interpretations for the most coherent understanding of their behavior.

Leroy and Randy entered the Grande 18 about fifteen minutes before the movie started. I found out that the two had been neighbors and best friends since they before they could remember. They were also the so-called ‘repeat offenders’ (individuals who attend the movies often) that I often allude to throughout this study. They never confirmed or denied whether or not they were actually fans of the franchise itself but the two elected to see *Star Wars: Rogue One* for the positive reviews that the film had garnered. For variation, I chose to interview the two after they had viewed the film since most of my interviews took place before the fact.

Leroy was finishing his senior year of college at North Carolina State University. His winter coat and hat made his body language harder to read than all the other interviewees. Leroy and Randy spent a great deal of time at their local cinema. They could afford it too. They lived in a wealthy part of Davidson County, North Carolina and also arrived in top of the line Subarus. However, despite their economic background, the two were quite particular when it came to moviegoing as they hunted for the best moviegoing deals. I will touch more on this so called “strategy” later but when I asked the two why they chose to attend the movies that night, they both responded with the same answer. In short, they attended the movies for the social experience. Keep in mind that much like what I noticed in the literature review, this may mean different things for different moviegoers.

Moviegoing as a social experience was a different animal for Leroy and Randy as compared to Rosario, Trey, or Jon. While Leroy and Randy were focused on how moviegoing was a social experience for their particular friendship, Rosario and Trey believed that the moviegoing was a social experience because they were seeing the film on the big screen with *strangers*. These responses were head turners. Rosario noted that there was “just something” sharing a new experience with people whom she did not know while Trey and Brian expressed excitement of being part of a social event that took place in a public atmosphere. Each individual who participated in this study elaborated on how moviegoing was a social experience. The three movie theater managers believed that moviegoing was a social experience based on the fact that individuals could see a movie with both friends, family, partners, *and* strangers. For management, it was contingent on

the public place playing as the host for the social experience of moviegoing. The fact that the movie theater was a place that belonged to the public, made each case of moviegoing an event for the public.

Seven of the fifteen moviegoers attended the movies with either a romantic partner or family member. Mark and Valerie included moviegoing as a common activity throughout their marriage while Brian and Riley, a married couple in their early twenties, rarely attended the movies at all. Their reasoning for attending the movies rarely was that moviegoing was “a sometimes thing” and was more just about getting out of the house every now and then. Chester often the movies strategically with his stepfather while Jorge attended the movies with his son, Robert. Jon attended the opening of *The Legend of Tarzan* with his younger sister, someone who he was close with. Participants who were romantically involved, i.e. those are dating, engaged, or married viewed moviegoing differently than their single counterparts. For those who had been in long-term, committed relationships, moviegoing often served as a wonderful dating opportunity.

Mark: There’s a social aspect of going to a movie. So, if I am going with friends, it’s because I’m going to, you know, spend some time with this friend. We’ll go to a movie, we’ll have dinner afterwards, we’ll interact socially and have a conversation, learn a little bit about each other. What movies did they like, what movies did they not like so I’m getting to know my friends that way too. And of course, with my wife just because we’re being you know ... intimate social or intimate in a socially acceptable way. We’re not talking to each other but we may lean in and share private jokes with each other about the movie, about the actor[s], about something that’s going on within the movie. We will hold hands throughout the movie, we’ll share popcorn, so it’s an intimate setting for the two of us in a socially acceptable way.
(January 19th, 2017)

Raven saw moviegoing as not just to see a film but almost exclusively to spend time with her partner. Raven was also a classic cinephile but she was admittedly indifferent about seeing a film in a movie theater environment. It made no difference to Raven if the film was being presented in a movie theater or on her own personal television screen. For her, it was about being with her boyfriend.

Raven: My boyfriend is my moviegoing buddy ... It doesn't really matter to me because I just like to see the film, I don't necessarily need to see like all the other experiences that come with it. Maybe the reaction from the audience and that definitely enhances the experience and it makes it more fun but um, [looks down and pauses briefly] I'm ... but what I get out of it honestly is just seeing my boyfriend happy and spending that time with him.
(January 16th, 2017)

These narratives are not unlike those of Bryan and Riley. The two UNC-Greensboro students had been married for one year. They were not cinephiles nor casual moviegoers but they were seemingly affectionate with one another. While they two agreed that the theater experience and social atmosphere enhanced the viewing experience, they saw this activity as a couple's venture. They did everything they possibly could together. They actually viewed it as a bonding experience. To clarify: all interviewees believed that going to the movies for a first or second date was not a good idea. Couples with more longevity and maturity however, could view moviegoing as a bonding experience and can actually bring the two individuals closer together. Clearly, two people are denied this chance to bond if they are engaging in moviegoing at an early stage of the dating process. As time goes on, individuals seemingly enjoy the activity of not facing or talking to one another. From the answers given in these interviews, we see

that the collective suspension of disbelief is a solidifying experience for the two lovers. This would also suggest that romantic and social bonding does not have to involve direct contact, gazing, or conversation to be fully appreciated.

Affordability and Attendance: Strategic Moviegoing

Since moviegoing is based on individuals' ability to afford attending, I decided to look at how participants moviegoing methodology. The first four interviewees succinctly stated that moviegoing was not an affordable venture if it wasn't an occasional outing. As the study progressed, however, I noticed that the more likely individuals attended the movies often, they were more likely to approach moviegoing differently than their counterparts who attended on an occasional or seldom basis. Mark and his wife, Val, bonded through moviegoing.

Me: Well since you're a repeat offender, so to speak, about attending movies, is it affordable to attend the movies on a regular basis?

Chester: That's kind of where I uh ... I'm kind of lucky I live in the area that I do. About fifteen minutes up the road [referring to a theater on the other side of Winston-Salem] we have a bargain theater.

Me: Ok.

Chester: Two dollars and fifty cents to see films that are kind of, you know [looks up at the ceiling], let's say about a month or two old.

Me: So they're not 'fresh' [movies]?

Chester: They are not 'fresh' but the theater that we [referring to him and his stepfather] have been going to for the past year or two is a theater about ten minutes from my house that is six dollars for a 'fresh' ticket. It is sometimes a little bit cheaper if you go in the afternoon. That is actually a very large hurdle

for me. Until that theater came around, we hardly ... it was something that we were really excited for.

Me: Is it fair to say that you are pretty economic? You're pretty strategic about movie-going?

Chester: Yes, definitely!
(January 1st, 2017)

I encountered nine subjects who shared this strategic approach to moviegoing. Of these nine subjects, seven stated that they attend the movies often. While the overall study saw various individuals of different genders, races, and status, most of the members that participated in this study were textbook cinephiles (individuals who love film and moviegoing) (Cook: 2015). I noticed that most of the individuals who took place in this study were middle to upper middle class individuals, fifty percent of the overall respondents asserted that it was affordable to attend the movies on a regular basis. I noticed that what separated those who said that attending the movies often was affordable as opposed to said that it wasn't, was strategy.

Strategic cinephiles would do anything to attend the movies for little cost (including taking part in this study). Often when I asked: "Is it affordable to attend the movies on a regular basis?", I often phrased this as a rather general and even ambiguous question. This where the strategists took pride in their methods. Mark and his wife were perhaps the most strategic cinephiles that I encountered during the duration of this study.

Me: I have to ask. Because you go often, is it affordable to attend the movies on a regular basis?

Mark: Because I go to the cheap movie theater, yes. So I go to the “two-fifty dollar theater” just down the road or I’ll go over to K-Ville [slang for a theater in Kernersville, North Carolina] and attend one of the ... I think it’s four ... three dollar movie theaters. That’s about half the price the price if I go to one of the [other movie local movie theaters] ... so yeah, it’s way cheaper. (January 19th, 2017)

Mark and his wife attended the movies often. At least once a week, they search for almost any film playing at one of these discount cinemas. They even were strategic in their concessions purchasing. They would often sneak in their own snacks which, of course, was against movie theater policy. Sometimes, the two would even pop their own popcorn prior to entering the facility.

For the strategic moviegoing individual or couple, this routine seems to be rather affordable. How so? The strategist(s) choose to attend the most opportune times to see a movie. According to nine subjects, attending morning or early afternoon showings (also known as matinees), attending economic showings (also known as Stimulus Tuesdays in some theaters), using coupons or gift cards, or attending discount movie theaters are common methodologies for the strategic moviegoing subject. Three subjects chose to attend movie showings during opening weekend but still chose to do so in an economic fashion. Often, these individuals will attend earlier showings during an opening day or weekend. The social experience was still present for some but this is not the main focus for them. It is perhaps a different moviegoing experience for the strategist. I noticed that the strategists focused more on experiencing the film narrative, the technological experience while for some strategic moviegoers were less interested in the moviegoing experience. Rather, they viewed it as an opportunity to be intimate with whom they

attended the movies with. For example, Chester and his step-father had very little in common. Strategic moviegoing was an adventure for them. After their showing, Chester and his stepfather finally had something to talk about that was not related to work, school, or home life. This would prove these specific moviegoers as not being antisocial but rather, purposeful and intimate.

Moviegoing as Religious Behavior

It was the most difficult question to ask throughout the entire interviewing process and it never failed to make me nervous before asking. I had already had one bad experience after an interview and any time after that, I felt very uneasy asking. Brad sat across from me wearing his usual suit and tie. He took his job very seriously. He was, without debate, the most professional and serious subject I met throughout this study. I couldn't believe that I had doubts about asking this question so I looked down, looked back up at him and finally I threw out there:

Me: Is attending the movies anything like attending church? He looked confused. He had already expounded on how going to the movies was all about the social experience but was it a religious one?

Brad: For me? he asked.

Me: Sure ... or just, you know, something you've seen. What's your opinion on it? I replied.

Brad: Say that again. I complied.

Me: I mean ... I've never seen it that way.

He respectfully answered my last question for him and we shook hands. As I headed towards the front door he couldn't help but ask:

Brad: What did you mean by the church question? I mean, there is a church that meets here on Sunday mornings but that's about it.

Me: Well there is some sociological and religious literature on how film can be treated as a sacred entity. Especially when we're talking about strangers getting together to experience something they could experience in a private setting or at a later time.

Brad: Yeah, still don't see it that way. Anyway, thanks for dropping by. (January 20th, 2017)

This was perhaps one of the most typical reactions that I often received when asking this question although it was not the most extreme. I knew that Shawn identified as a Christian but he claimed that he only attended church "every now and then". He was twenty-seven, had previously worked as a middle school teacher and was on his summer break when I met with him outside of the premier for 2016's *The Legend of Tarzan*. So, Shawn received the same set of questions that every other moviegoing subject received. "Is attending the movies anything like attending church?" I asked effortlessly. His look of discombobulation eclipsed that of Brad's. Though the pause was brief, he looked around the room as if someone had hit him with jury duty.

Shawn: No. It's a difference. Everybody is together like in [attending] the movies and in church but the movies tend to be more entertaining and church tends to be a bit boring sometimes but there is a difference.

I preceded to ask him the last few questions I had for him before I subsequently ended our interview. I packed began to pack my gear and thanked him for his time and participation. Before I could head out he came back.

Shawn: Hey, I uh was kind of confused about the church question.

I didn't want to scramble to get by recorder back out as he seemed really uneasy but I did write down what he said to me.

Shawn: Why would you ask me that?

I still thought nothing of this so I thought that it may be best to explain things to him in laymen's terms.

Me: Well, in sociology, it's important to look at sorts of social behavior and draw similarities. When some of use look at religious behavior such as going to church, it may not always be about worshipping God but rather, getting together as a community.

Shawn: Ok, but it isn't the same thing. He quipped. You may want to be careful asking those kinds of questions.

Shawn didn't seem angry but he did seem borderline offended. And perhaps despite what scholars such as Lyden, Mauss, and Durkheim had asserted in their time, perhaps I was met with the well-known clash of ideology that exists between the academy and those who occupy the outside world.

The majority of interviewed subjects that I encountered during this project would take Shawn's side on this discussion. If the question was not viewed as unpopular, it was

most certainly shot down by most participants. Only four out of the eighteen participants believed that attending the movies was the same social behavior as attending religious institution. Of these four subjects, one identified as non-religious while the other three were occasional churchgoers. For the majority of the skeptics, their disavowal could be summed up in one sentence: “No, because going to the movies can be fun and going to church can be rather boring.” These answers seemed to run together after some time. The only skeptic whose answer really differed from the rest was Valerie. For her, church was a personal, spiritual venture as going to the movies was a personal one too but a polar opposite.

Me: Do you attend church or any other religious institution?

Valerie: Um ... occasionally.

Me: Is attending church anything like attending the movies?

Valerie: No.

Me: Why not?

Valerie: It's [church] more introspective. I'm paying more attention to myself [in church] as opposed to the movie [when I'm paying attention to something else]. (January 19th, 2017)

Valerie discusses her own investment in both entities. But the most colorful responses came from those who believed that attending the movies *was* similar to attending church. Of these four subjects, each one held different viewpoints on the matter. The most distant “Yes” I received was from Ian, a twenty-three-year-old movie manager out of the Winston-Salem/Lexington market and occasional churchgoer, who

didn't personally feel as if the two were the same but did see the same level of dedication from some of his most loyal customers. What really severed the relationship for Ian was that "no one would feel forced to come here [to the movie theater]". Rosario was not a churchgoer for reasons of being irreligious, Brian attended church "every now and then", while Jon considered himself an avid churchgoer though since school was starting he was unable to attend as much as he would like. Brian limned on the aesthetic similarities between the two such as the gathering of members to face the same direction for the same social cause and that there was "definitely something more there." Jon, given the churchgoer that he was, decided to engage this question much further.

Me: Do you attend church or any other religious institution at all?

Jon: I attend [Christian] church. Yes, I am Presbyterian and I ummm, do attend church on Sundays.

Me: How often?

Jon: To be honest, now it is every so often. There are some days when I just can't do it ... you know ... situations.

Me: Okay, well is attending the movies anything like attending church?

Jon: [Takes a long pause and looks down] Um, as for the uhh ... I guess it's like a ritual type of aspect, I suppose so. I guess it comes second nature. You want to go see a new film. You just go Hey, let's go to them movies. Um, as opposed to going to church it's more of a usual thing. I grew up in a very religious family and we went to church every Sunday our whole lives and uh, I've only recently had the freedom to do as I wish. But I still will go [to church] on occasions to hear the Word [Christian lingo for religious scripture] and uh, and also connect with the people at church.

(August 4th, 2016)

Jon's answer was the most elaborate answer for those who attended religious institutions. However, by far the most emphatic discussion I had on this topic came from a nonreligious subject. Rosario was a recent survivor of divorce and the first non-white subject who elected to participate in this project. We sat in the empty lobby. I had purchased her ticket for *Suicide Squad*, a film that she had already seen once. This time, she wanted to see it with a group of friends, the same group of friends she was waiting to arrive. Sporting a burgundy Harley Quinn t-shirt and skinny jeans, she was extremely relaxed and propped back in the recliner as she spoke.

Me: Do you attend church or any other religious institution?

Rosario: Nope.

Me: Okay. Is attending the movies anything like attending church?

Rosario: [Looks towards the front door before refocusing her attention on me] Sometimes, I would say it is. [She gives a look of deep thought and reflection]. I ... so when you are going to see something that really means a lot to you, and as weird as it sounds, is like going to comic book [based] movies for me. Especially, with other people. Like, everybody getting together and watching something that everybody cares about, I would equate to going to church where everyone is getting together where everyone is getting together to experience a personal ... feeling? [Sighs] I can't ... I can't describe how that feels. I don't know. Going somewhere and doing something with a bunch of strangers that you don't talk to but you're all receiving the same message, and the same feelings and the same emotions I would equate to going to church.

Me: Thank you for that. I really appreciate your honesty.
(August 15th, 2016)

Rosario cared deeply for comics and comic book based films. Her passion was quite prominent throughout our discussion. For her, it was almost as if going to the

movies often was a suitable replacement for going to church. She allowed herself to honor society by expressing her love for comic book based films. When her friends arrived, she met them with great enthusiasm and excitement. She told me that she was really excited to express her passion for comic book cinema for the sake of my study. They purchased their concessions and quickly ran towards the theater. When I look back on this now, I am reminded of Ian, the young movie manager out of the Lexington and Winston-Salem market who was also a skeptic about comparing churchgoing and movie going. While Ian personally did not believe that going to church was like going to the movie theater he smiled and said “You know though, for some people, you can certainly say that is the case for them [going to the movies represents a religious behavior for some moviegoers].”

Escapism

Some were aware of the escapist concept and actually brought it up during our conversation. “I like the escapism.” One interviewee remarked succinctly. Others were obviously less candid. Due to the idea of escapism never being formally addressed throughout this study, few participants decided to bring it up. But eventually, it did come up for at least four participants. Brian associated with the use of effects, picture size, and atmosphere, that he was personally “plunged into a new reality” and that the whole cinematic experience was a ‘nice escape from the realities of work and school.’ Mark, Brian, and Valerie were the only individuals who mentioned the notion of escapism throughout this study. This is reminiscent of Reynolds’ (2008) discourse on film

consumption during the Great Depression. Reynolds states that film going offers an alternative to reality- when consumers disassociated with harsh realities of the 1930's, a time when moviegoing experienced a surge in attendance due to members wanting to experience hope and laughter as an alternative to the then economic crisis of the respective epoch.

And the Memories Remain: Nostalgia, Association, and Connection

One person who discussed nostalgia association with moviegoing was Ian, a movie theater manager out of the Winston-Salem and Lexington area. As I entered Ian's office, I noticed the picture of his much younger self along with a group of other young individuals. Our conversation ran for about half an hour. He had been working at this theater for about three years now and though the job was not financially rewarding enough to maintain a living, he expressed genuine gratitude for his longevity. "I'm actually the only one in that picture who still works here." He said with a smile.

Of the eighteen subjects interviewed, only two recalled specifically fond memories of moviegoing that focused on the film alone. The remaining sixteen participants recalled their experiences quite vividly. Each individual retained thick recollection of a specific moviegoing experience that revolved around time, place, and a particular social experience with others. When I asked: "What is your fondest movie theater memory and why?", I never needed to ask a follow-up question. The answers provided were often given in such thick description, that subjects always seemed to recall the moment with ease even if they had many fond movie theater moments.

Leroy had been stone-faced throughout the entire interview. He answered every question as succinctly as possible despite my best efforts to get him to elaborate. Was he one of the subjects who wanted to end the interview as soon as possible just so he could see *Rogue One*? Perhaps. But as our interview was reaching its conclusion, I asked what his fondest memory that involved going to the movies. Suddenly, Leroy smiled. He almost laughed but somehow, he contained himself. “So, when I went to go see *Godzilla* [the 1998 Tri-Star production not to be confused with the 2014 Warner Bros. adaptation] and the reason it was so fond is because I remember how loud that movie was!” Leroy had previously mentioned in our interview how important sound effects and presentation were to him in a movie theater setting which, to Leroy, was the difference maker between viewing a film at the cinema and viewing a film at home.

Chester was, without a doubt, the most verbose respondent of this entire venture. Clocking in at almost thirty-five minutes, he spoke with passion and clearly showed up to be heard. He was one of the aforementioned “strategists” but for a person who went to the movies on a weekly basis, his fondest movie theater memory was not even two years old. When I asked him to answer the question regarding his fondest movie theater memory, he grunted and then looked down just to look right back up at me.

Chester: I’d probably have to say going to see the [Star Wars] *The Force Awakens*. Previously ... uh ... I think that was such a special occasion. I took the night off from work, we [him and friends] made plans like a month ahead and had everything set up right for then. So, I almost felt like, this is going to sound a little weird but it was almost like a date. You know, you made a date with your friends to go out and you set it aside unlike most films where it’s uh, a Saturday afternoon, Saturday evening or something. It’s just you kind of

do. It happens, you go and see the it but ... cause moviegoing was actually something that I didn't really do until they opened that two-fifty theater down the road [points outside the theater doors referring to a discount movie theater] ... but that Force Awakens, that was just something that was really special. [It] holds a real deep place in my heart.
(January 1st, 2017)

Chester was not the first to recall a moviegoing memory as a placeholder attached to someone else. Randy recalled going to see *Cast Away* when he was “a bit on the younger side” and how the impact of seeing the film with his grandmother had somehow made a lasting impact on him. The oldest of the two married couple who elected to take part in this project, Mark and Valerie, had been married for more than twenty years. Even though they were the only participants to recall the experience based on the film alone, it's worth noting that they did recall the same experience since it was one that they shared together. Trey, an unemployed college graduate, elaborated on going to see Disney's *Mulan* in 1998 with his mother and aunt and that he had always remembered this event because the theater had since gone out of business. Raven associated her father taking her to see 1997's *Spice World* as “just him being a good dad.” Four participants recalled their fondest movie theater memories based on time spent with a parent or close relative while a total of ten respondents recalled certain showings they spent with another close person in general (friends, parents, partners, etc.).

Chester was also not the only *Star Wars* fan to participate in this study. In fact, one-sixth of respondents recalled their fondest movie theater memory to be the premiere of a *Star Wars* film but this had nothing on the number of *Harry Potter* fans that responded. Five of the eighteen respondents said that attending a *Harry Potter* midnight

premiere as their fondest movie theater memory. These interviews demonstrated fandoms and nerd culture as prevalent in contemporary moviegoing and how fandom of film franchises such as *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* has created sub-cultures in movie-going. This is especially significant when considering the small sample size in this study. Nerd culture and fandom typically represents a marginalized and often alienated group of members. Since my interviews on *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* fandom were included during this study, I noted that interviewee's experience with midnight premiers and cosplaying have now become fond memories for those who participated. The movie theater also became a known place for active subcultures, such as fandom, and gave participants a sense of belonging that *Guibernau* (2013) asserted as a safe place for those in search of social solidarity.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

My literature review served as a suitable foundation for my field observations and data collection. The interviews recorded throughout this study supported the answers given by interviewees. Though each moviegoer and staff member provided their personal reasoning for moviegoing behavior, the idea of Durkheim's notion of collective effervescence remains constant. What one brings to moviegoing is pertinent but when individuals are coming together to view a film, it is rarely about the film. Throughout my interviews, I noticed that everyone classified going to the movies as an atmospheric, unequivocal social experience even though only three respondents felt that going to the movies was similar to going to church. Each interviewee also touched on areas other than the social experience. I noticed that for four interviewees, the hypnotic effect of cinematic technology such as surround sound and enhanced visualizations did make a difference and was one that they believed could not be duplicated at home which was reminiscent of the literature provided by Turner and Perkins respectively.

Gomery (1992) contended that previous predications that the home video industry were unfounded as the industry would always find a way to adapt. Only six participants, including one movie theater manager, believed that the digital alternatives of today posed serious threats to the industry. However, of these six, only one believed that alternatives such as Netflix and other streaming services was a "serious threat" while the remaining

five believed that these alternatives were “only somewhat a threat” as they expressed that the movie theater offers an experience that cannot be replicated anywhere else. A total of nine respondents in this study were white males aged twenty-one to twenty-seven years old. Their overrepresentation of this study is a product of two factors: 1.) Moviegoing is contingent on cultural geography (which is the explanation given by Jancovich, Faire, and Stubbings) and this study did cover rural, suburban, and metropolitan areas that are predominantly occupied by whites and 2.) since the ads for this study were answered exclusively through Criagslist.org’s Greensboro, Winston-Salem/Lexington, and Charlotte areas, which may suggest that white male users may be more proactive on.

Limitations throughout this study included an overrepresentation of male interviewees. Given that all respondents applied to participant in this study via Craigslist.org, it excluded those who did not have access to the internet on a regular basis and also only covered three well-populated cities in North Carolina. Since moviegoing is based on cultural geography and since moviegoing carries different meanings for different individuals, this study only reflected why people still attend the movies in Winston-Salem, Lexington, Greensboro, and Charlotte, North Carolina. This augments Mayne’s (1993) discussion on homogenous audiences and how audiences are often generalized as Caucasian males. Since only two participants were women of color, I noticed a vast under presentation of non-white participants in this study.

The Future of Moviegoing Research

This thesis has discussed why people still go to the movies in the modern era. Each interviewee brought something significant to our discussion. They all had particular memory tied to a specific time and place in their past. I cannot bring myself to honestly say that the movie theater industry is endangered. Threatened? Yes. Every type of business faces threat. But the movie theater industry has proven itself as a survivor time and time again.

A larger sample size would provide further insight on other issues not touched on in this study. I understand that moviegoing audiences are constructed from cultural geography and are consequences of demographical transformations over time. What could be a predictable environment for a particular audience now could easily change in less than a decade. Families move away, theaters close, people grow apart. A prominent limitation of this study could have been the recruitment process as older participants are less likely to be recruited through online communities. I will firmly assert that movie theater audience is one of the most unpredictable forms of social behavior I've ever encountered.

Since most people in this study assert that moviegoing is not similar to churchgoing, it would be perhaps unwise to discount their feelings on this matter. I still always remember my conversation with Rosario however.

Rosario: Like, everybody getting together and watching something that everybody cares about, I would equate to going to church where everyone is getting together where everyone is getting together to experience a personal ... feeling? [Sighs] I can't ... I can't describe how that feels. I don't know.

While my own skepticism remains, I do agree with Rosario that there certainly is something more to moviegoing than meets the eye. A future study that focuses solely on moviegoing as religious behavior could perhaps answer my outstanding questions on this matter. But this research is far from being concluded. I also have to take this research for what it is: a representation of North Carolina moviegoing in the here and now. Moviegoing patterns most likely will change over time in the Tar Heel state. There are several edits I could take for our next approach in moviegoing research. Furthermore, identifying moviegoers level of education, class status, occupation, and feelings of cognitive investment would provide a much more detailed account for individuals' moviegoing practices.

Epilogue: Final Thoughts

This study *can* be summed up in one sentence: the social act or practice of moviegoing carries different meanings for different members of society. Subsequently, the movie theater industry will survive as Gomery (1992) predicted. Unlike its competitors. The movie theater industry has an indomitable ability to adapt has our subjects and literature will attest to. Whatever new threat the industry faces next, it will find a way to overcome. Is moviegoing behavior the same as religious behavior? My answer is no but the two are not completely irreconcilable. Are the two social practices different? Yes, but they do seem to share some sort of identical philosophical blood. Remember: what moviegoing meant for Raven was not the same as what moviegoing meant for someone like Rosario. Both of these twentysomethings were women who enjoyed movies very much but for Raven, moviegoing was really about her partner and

her longing to spend quality time with him. Rosario loved films based on comic books and saw this experience as a way to express her love for this specific genre and fandom. When one actually sits down and converses with moviegoers, you realize that Metz was correct. The audience member is anything but average. Each individual brings something to their moviegoing. Whether they are a self-professed nerd, a cinephile, an escapist, an aesthete, or in search for quick recreation, they are indeed searching for something. What this means is completely up to the audience member. It could be cheap, mindless entertainment or it could be a chance to get closer to the person next to them.

C. Wright Mills (1959) taught many social scientists an important value that I noticed when collecting these personal narratives. To paraphrase him, he said that the things we do in the open world infrequently have to do with the things themselves. What we do is actually about doing these things and our relations with others. Moviegoing is about the social *and* the personal. It is not about the movie itself. The film showing, however popular or successful, is magnetic force that draws society's members together but it's only a social tool. Leaving the personal cave to do what can be done in seclusion demonstrates a Durkheimian notion that the mere presence of other members makes a difference. Is it reliability? Is it security? Perhaps. The one concept I can clarify confidently is that moviegoing is about belonging. As the punk band, *Beach Slang*, once asserted: the things we do to find people who feel like us.

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