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# Remember the Alamo: A Place of Cinematic Experience

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My grandfather was a vaudevillian who was often part of a theater troupe. He eventually made the transition to film where he had bit parts with a few speaking lines to a series of larger roles in 'B' Westerns. Among his reminiscences of the early days of theater are the stories of the many ways the audiences became involved with the event on stage from heckling to answering questions to cheering the inevitable outcome or punch line, and in fact my grandparents were married on the stage right after a play in which they had roles, with the audience present. It was 1918. Audience participation in early Twentieth Century stage and then film in the U.S. was common, but with modern cinema came a demand for the privacy of experiential space, in essence a cocoon. The sense of community in the U.S. movie theater today is based primarily on the fact that *you* and *they* are *here* to see the same film, but that is where the sharing stops. We wish to remain anonymous and private when we go to the movies and we expect others to do the same, while our engagement with the screen tends to be passive, at least outwardly.

An alternative to this model arose in the 1950s and 1960s when movies could be watched at home on network television and the trend increased dramatically with the introduction and rapid adoption of the VCR in the U.S. home in the mid-to-late 1970s, which was followed by the DVD, streaming cinema, and the iPad mini as examples of the digital revolution. The audience could watch the film within their own space, enjoying the luxuries of food, drink, and the right to openly participate with the film while being removed from any larger community; who cares if your next door neighbor is watching the same film? But the motion picture theater is hardly passé, never disappeared, and now functions as a complement to the home theater and other cinematic sites. Contrary to many predictions, the public theater remains an important place of cinematic exhibition, although the anonymous and

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passive viewer remains the expected standard within that site. But in an age of increased anomie not everyone wants to be removed from one another, and the filmgoer is no exception. Cinema-going to a select community means more than the experience of sitting in front of a screen in a near vegetative state for 90 min more, then getting up, stretching ones legs, and leaving with no acknowledgement of those who just had the same encounter.

A few theater entrepreneurs have responded to this potential market by creating a model of public film experience that includes food and alcohol delivered to each seat, which has necessarily included the physical restructuring of facilities to accommodate the service. This concept—known as the First Run Cinema Eatery (FRCE)—has slowly emerged throughout the country but still remains somewhat of a novelty when compared to the standard walk-in theater. Some of these theaters have taken the experience a step further by adding filmic programs and events. The result is a unique site of cinematic exhibition, which in essence is a place comprised of the theater, the films, a program that contextualizes and frames the films, and a discriminating audience. A nationally-recognized leader in this place construction is the Alamo Drafthouse of Austin, Texas.

The focus of this chapter is twofold. First, it is upon the Alamo and the ways in which its novel constructions of these particular programs are presented to a self-selected community that seeks experiences that are not provided by standard home or public theater settings. I conclude that this desire to participate in a more community-based cinematic experience reflects an ironic discursive mode as envisioned by Linda Hutcheon (1994) in which the audience seeks a momentary identity that distinguishes itself for even the brief moment of a theater visit. Second, the chapter presents a call for further study of sites of cinematic exhibition as mediated geographies, and as such is part of a larger project in which the many-faceted natures of the cinematic experience are explored through a geographic lens, especially within place-based notions of sites of exhibition.

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## Framework

I begin by assuming a broad-based cinematic network comprised of elements that are connected by the flows of people, ideas, and things. The elements that comprise the heart of the network—technology, the film and its narrative, the many people who construct the film, the cinema industry, society/culture, sites of exhibition, and audience—should be seen as primary, but not sole, points of reference. The pieces of the larger puzzle and the resulting linkages and flows that connect them can be described as simultaneously being influences and subjects, then, without the constraints of determinism. Here I draw on the cinematic work of Dixon and Zonn (2004), who consider the writings of Bruno Latour (1997) and Actor Network Theory (ANT) only in a broad and relational sense, and so they are interested in:

...how people and things are placed in relation to one another, such that issues of inclusion and exclusion, hegemony and dependence, remain at the forefront of analysis. All phenomena in such a network . . . whether they be human or nonhuman, can be considered

powerful in the sense that they operate as part of a collective to allow for a particular event to occur or entity to perform; in this sense all such phenomena are of explanatory significance. (p. 246)

The nature of engagement among and between puzzle pieces varies dramatically by scale and yet all are ultimately related to one another. Imagine the role of the cinematographer in the larger cinematic system, as one of many examples. This person and associated contributions can be envisioned within the larger network on the one hand, and as a discrete network with its own but never totally independent set of connected elements on the other. In the same way, the study of cinematic sites of exhibition includes the site itself as the initial and even primary consideration, but it must be contextualized within the frames of many influencing elements found at a variety of scales.

What, then, are examples of these sites of exhibition, these cinematic places? They may be the home theater, the walk-in, the drive-in, the mobile cinema that graces the rural and small-town landscapes from Scotland to India to Poland, the horse-drawn traveling picture show of early twentieth century Australia, the sheet on a wall in Lagos where 25 cents brings you Nollywood, the side of a building with boats floating nearby as in *Cinema Paradiso*, the desktop computer, and the DVD player being watched by a child on a flight from Los Angeles to New York (Corbett 2001; Klinger 2006; Zonn 2007). Each of these many possibilities can be described as a unique pattern, a distinctive scrambling of puzzle pieces that collectively constitute a cinematic place and that can be envisioned within a set of interconnections at a variety of scales. Focus here is upon a nexus of filmic elements and flows that help define the cinematic experience associated with a special place, the Alamo Draffhouse.

The study of cinema has long been dominated by a focus on the metaphor of film as text. Borrowed from literary traditions and cultural studies, textual analysis has spawned an extensive range of theory and forms of critique that enjoy a rich and intriguing history. Some of this work centers on a more direct audience-content engagement, usually under the rubric and nomenclature of ‘spectatorship’, and includes an array of valuable contributions focused on gendered and racial gazes, intertextuality, cultural politics, and issues of psychoanalysis, as primary examples. But this work is not of immediate value to this chapter, primarily because of its ultimate focus on the film’s text. I turn instead to two smaller sets of literature that are concerned more directly with the site-specific film experience.

One group of studies is concerned with the intentions of going to the movie theater, addressing the question ‘why do people go to the movies?’ Jancovich et al. (2003) begin their fine work by considering “film consumption as an activity” (p. 3), while Corbett (1998) says “. . . we know relatively little about a central component of the filmic experience: movie watching as a social act” (p. 34). He speaks to different meanings within a community of “going to the cinema” and “how movie audiences historically have used the act of movie-watching in their everyday lives, how symbolically important the act was within their lives, or how it has contributed to forming, maintaining, and transforming their interpersonal relationships” (p. 34).

The excellent set of U.K. based studies by Hubbard (2002, 2003a, b) explore the barriers and trends of film-going in a variety of settings.

This research on film-going, much of it ethnographic, provides valuable insight into the social and cultural natures of the audience, but it usually gives less direct attention to the venue. This gap is covered to a great extent by the ‘exhibition of film’ literature where the concern shifts to the inclusion of site-specific technological and aesthetic frames as they engage audience experience. Given the interest in technological evolution, these works are often historical. Examples include the reader by Hark (2002), a cultural geography of old theaters by Marling (2001) that notes “architecture of escapism” (p. 12) as a cinematic force, and the fine book by Jones (2003) that addresses a range of architectural history and preservation issues, economic circumstances, cultural memory, and the natures of the audience as she describes the restoration of old movie houses of the South. Other notable works of this substantive literature set include Douglas Gomery’s *Shared Pleasures* (1992), which is a history of American cinema in terms of the theater, the audience, technology, and prevailing economies and social trends, and the contributions by Robert Allen (1979, 1980, 1990), who noted that “we tend to talk of films being ‘screened’ as though the only thing going on in a movie theater were light being bounced off a reflective surface” (1990, p. 352). His work has focused on sites and experiences that range from the Nickelodeon to the theater of 1920s America, where:

... many viewers were not particularly interested in what was playing. They were attracted to the theater by the theater itself, with its sometimes bizarre architectural and design allusions to exotic cultures, its capacious public spaces, its air conditioning in the summer, and its auditorium, which may have been decorated to resemble the exterior of a Moorish palace at night—complete with the heavenly dome and twinkling stars. Regardless of what feature the theater chain had secured from the distributor that week, there was sure to be a newsreel, a comedy short, a programme of music by pit orchestra or on the mighty Wurlitzer, and in many theaters elaborate stage shows. (1990, pp. 352–353)

I turn now to a more contemporary site of exhibition called the Alamo Draft-house. Consideration of the Alamo and its cinematic experiences must certainly assume a vast range of social and technological issues unique to the early Twenty First Century, but there will be some intriguing similarities between the Alamo model and the noted theaters of the silent era that distinguish both from the normative model of the contemporary U.S. movie theater. I approach the Alamo’s distinctiveness, in terms of the noted patterns of ‘people, ideas, and things’ and suggest a means of engaging the subject matter that could prove fruitful for further studies.

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## Constructing the Alamo

The Alamo Drafthouse creates a unique experience for the filmgoer in physical and programmatic terms. All theaters provide special stadium seating with a sloping floor toward the screen, extra leg room, a table that fronts every viewer, a menu



**Fig. 9.1** Author (on far right) waiting for ‘ticket’ at Alamo Drafthouse Slaughter Lane (Photo by Misha Zonn)

for food and alcohol that can be ordered and served during the film, black clad servers who try to be as inconspicuous as possible, and in some places a free-ranging and eclectic entryway and interior design with displays that vary according to the film events. The programs include full-length films, shorts, cartoons, and events that range from the mainstream to the *avant-garde* to the provocative to the bizarre. The theaters that define Austin’s Alamo have collectively become a distinctive, well-known and even revered feature of the city’s cultural landscape, and over the last few years the concept has been spread by an image, reputation, and a newly defined corporation to other points in Texas and beyond. The Alamo is certainly not the first of its kind, but its unique combination of qualities and its large-scale prospects make it an intriguing model for the industry. As early as 2005, The Alamo made the front cover of *Entertainment Weekly* with an accompanying article that called the theater ‘movie-geek heaven’ where “One of America’s most fanatically unique moviegoing experiences’ could be found” (Cruz and Kirschling 2005) (Fig. 9.1).

The origins of the Alamo are straightforward. The story begins with Tim and Kerrie League, who graduated from Rice University in the early 1990s and moved to Bakersfield, California because of his internship with Shell Oil. In 1994, the husband and wife, both just 24, joined with a financial partner to buy a small, old movie theater, the Tejon, and opened it as a movie art house, showing cult films, classics, and foreign films. The low budget nature of the theater required them to manage all aspects of the daily operations, from scheduling films and running the

projector, to taking tickets and providing concessions. The experience eventually proved to be invaluable, but a variety of circumstances forced the Leagues to leave the enterprise and in 1996 they headed back to Texas, choosing Austin as the place to start over.

Only a year later, in 1997, they opened a theater in downtown Austin within a lively restaurant and entertainment district, and once again relied on the eclectic movie art house repertoire, but this time they added food and alcohol that was served to each seat upon demand and a variety of unique events. The University of Texas and its 50,000 students is relatively close, and Austin is a progressive city with a highly energetic entertainment scene, especially film and music. The Alamo was an instant success. They opened a second theater (Alamo Village) in 2001, a third (Alamo Lake Creek) in 2003, and a fourth (Alamo South Lamar) in the quirky and trendy South Austin in 2005. In 2007 they moved the original Alamo several blocks away to the tourist and music oriented Sixth Street district, where they renovated the old Ritz Theatre, calling the new venue the Alamo Draffhouse The Ritz, which has two screens and remains the quintessential Alamo. The Alamo South Lamar closed for renovations in February of 2013 and reopened in 2015.

The Leagues had expressed their dislike of operating a large scale business, and so they sold their franchise rights in 2004, keeping only the four initial theaters which they intended to operate themselves. The buyout group, Alamo Draffhouse Cinemas, Ltd., expanded the franchise with new theaters in several venues in Texas and one in Virginia. Tim League returned in 2010 as CEO of a corporation that combined the two temporarily separate units and has taken a strong leadership role in the company's further expansion. There are now four theaters in Austin, with a fifth under renovation, and there are two in Houston, three in San Antonio, one each in Colorado, Missouri, and Virginia. Four more are planned or are under construction in Texas, with others in northern Virginia, California, Michigan and three in New York City (Brooklyn, Yonkers, Manhattan).

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## Programming the Alamo

All Alamo theaters except the Ritz include current and mainstream cinema, classic, independent and international films, and the staging of filmic and even sports events, including English Premiere League soccer. Mainstream films clearly predominate at these theaters, although all have many or even most of the unconventional programs discussed below. The Ritz relies exclusively on alternative programs and remains the philosophical heart of the Alamo Draffhouse enterprise and concept.

The cinematic experiences of the alternative programming described here are likely to reflect a greater sense of audience engagement than with the mainstream case, if nothing else because the viewers are apt to be more narrowly defined in social, political, and sometimes demographic terms, at least partially because of the select nature of the films. Imagine the audience and experiences for *The Battle of*

*Algiers*, where the norms of behavior may still apply, although the communal bonds may be stronger. Then proceed to the bizarre ‘Spike and Mike’s Twisted Festival of Animation’ and the outlandish ‘Live Freaky, Die Freaky!’, a punk rock musical of Charles Manson’s crimes, where the audiences are likely to tend toward a greater homogeneity of community and barriers of non-engagement may begin to crumble.

An example of the next phase away from a normative non-engagement is probably the classic *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, which is shown on occasion at the Alamo and has been entertaining audiences across America since 1975 by enticing and evoking specific and collective audience responses at important junctures of the film. In some ways, this particular filmic experience is a prototype for many of the creative programmatic events at the contemporary Alamo, whereby audience, engagement, spectacle, and community become increasingly integrated. As suggested in the earlier metaphor of the puzzle, the piece known as the film becomes less dominant as the center of the total experience. This chapter now turns to several popular examples of these events at the Alamo, each with a unique, interactive, and community-based sensibility. Most of the descriptions rely on the promotional information provided by the Alamo websites.

## Sing-Along

These popular events encourage the audience to sing with a musical or full-length collection of videos, while associated interactive activities and props are often included. The Alamo defines the Sing-Along events as:

... full-on theatrical dance parties: taking the best parts of going to a concert and mixing it together with the best parts of going to a movie theater to create something completely new (and overwhelmingly awesome). You never feel out of place because, even if you’re not on your feet or dancing, they lovingly project all the lyrics on the screen so you can wail along with a theater full of people who love these songs just as much as you do, even if you don’t know every single word. [http://draffhouse.com/series/action\\_pack/](http://draffhouse.com/series/action_pack/)

One of the more popular examples has been the ‘Love Bites: the 1980s Power Ballads Sing-Along Extravaganza’, where you can join the audience by:

... singing and pumping your fist in the air to a soul shaking collection of both pro-love and love sucks power ballad music video hits from the ’80s and ’90s... We’ll hold lighters in the air and sway, we’ll pound our fists at the sky in defiance of those who would dare not love us, and we’ll do it all with teased hair and animal print tights on. It’s the perfect dinner date or post-dinner date or even no date activity! [http://draffhouse.com/movies/action\\_pack\\_love\\_bites\\_sing-along/austin](http://draffhouse.com/movies/action_pack_love_bites_sing-along/austin)

Other popular Sing-Along examples have included *Grease*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Moulin Rouge*, the ‘Justin Timberlake Sing-Along’, and the ‘Queen Sing-Along’.

## Quote-Along

These events call for full audience participation, by taking:

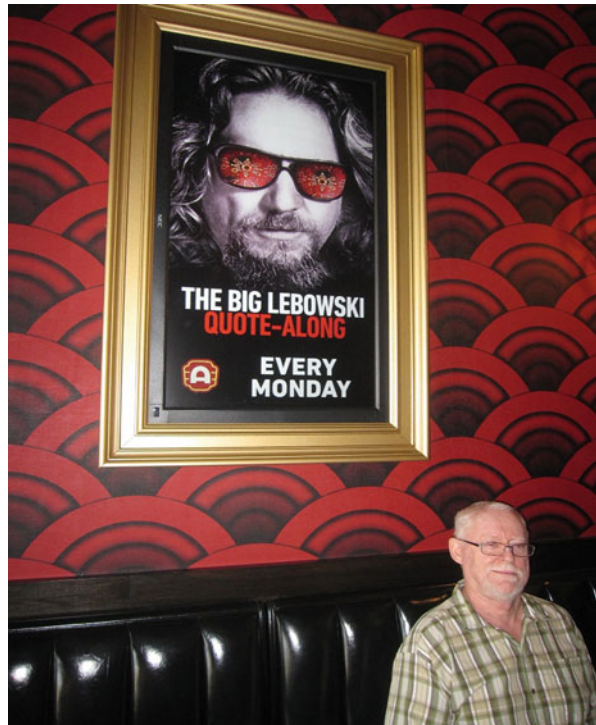
... your favorite movies and add in karaoke-like subtitles for the best lines so that everyone can yell out, “I know you are, but what am I?” right on cue with Pee Wee... And so even though the Alamo is usually very strict about kicking out anyone who talks during the movie, at The Action Pack’s Quote-Along series we’re more likely to kick you out if you \*don’t\* talk during the film. [http://drafthouse.com/series/quote\\_alongs/houston](http://drafthouse.com/series/quote_alongs/houston)

One of the more popular examples is *The Big Lebowski*, with its direct community appeal:

We hope all of you Little Lebowski Urban Achievers will come out and enjoy yourselves, so you can die with a smile on your face, without feelin’ like the good Lord gypped you... Enjoy discounted, \$5 White Russians during the show!! <http://drafthouse.com/movies/biglebowskiquotealong/austin>

Other popular examples are *Elf*, *Goonies*, *The Princess Bride*, *Robin Hood: Men in Tights*, and the classic *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (Fig. 9.2).

**Fig. 9.2** Author, a White Russian, thinking about White Russians. Alamo Drafthouse Slaughter Lane (Photo by Misha Zonn)





## Heckle-Vision

These events bring a previously unused technology into the film experience equation as yet another small but significant audience piece of the puzzle whereby the spectators rely directly on their cell phones as a means of engagement. In Heckle-Vision, the Alamo chooses:

...some hilariously horrible movies (but movies we can't help but love anyway) and through the magic of MuVChat technology we let you text your heckles silently from your seat as they then magically appear up on the screen alongside the main action. ANYTHING goes in this all out assault on crappy cinema and you can bask in the glory of your textual genius or recoup from a whiff as you prepare your next text. When you don't have anything to contribute to the heckle conversation you can sit back and enjoy other peoples' snarky comments. So charge up those cell phones and prepare your wit because it's heckling time! <http://drafhthouse.com/series/hecklevision/austin>

A popular example has been "From the minds of the Spice Girls (seriously: they got a writing credit for the idea)...*Spice World* had every excuse to be a bad movie—except it wasn't. No wait, it was just a terrible, awful film. But it's so bad, it's INSANELY ENJOYABLE! Which is why it creates the perfect recipe for...Hecklevision." [http://drafhthouse.com/movies/hecklevision\\_spice\\_world/austin](http://drafhthouse.com/movies/hecklevision_spice_world/austin). Other examples include *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, *Jingle All the Way*, *Burlesque*, *Johnny Mnemonic*, and *Anaconda*.

## Food and Film Events

These very popular events take advantage of films in which food consumption is integrated with the narrative by providing relevant cuisine that is served as the audience watches the screen. The chefs are well-trained and so the price is often not cheap, usually more than \$50. A very popular example is the annual Lord of the Rings Trilogy Feast (now held exclusively at the Austin Ritz) in which:

we snuggle up together in the theater and brave our way through the ENTIRE extended-cut versions of the LORD OF THE RINGS TRILOGY—nearly 12 hours—all while devouring food and imbibing drink inspired by Tolkien's Middle Earth! Each of the seven courses is served during Hobbit meal times (which is pretty much ALL the time)! When we reach the end and the King (spoiler alert!) ascends to his rightful throne, you too will be ready to return to the Shire and be greeted as a hero by your loved ones who didn't think you would make it all the way... and then pass out in a blissful food- and film-induced coma. [http://drafhthouse.com/movies/lord\\_of\\_the\\_rings\\_trilogy\\_hobbit\\_feast](http://drafhthouse.com/movies/lord_of_the_rings_trilogy_hobbit_feast)

The cost is around \$100, more if wine is included. Other popular Feasts focus on *Gone with the Wind*, *Like Water for Chocolate*, *Oh Brother Where Art Thou*, and *Lawrence of Arabia*.

## The Master Pancake Theater

Held every weekend in Austin's Alamo Ritz, this event has been popular for over a decade, and now has its own Facebook page. Originally called the Sinus Show, it is comprised of several comedians who sit in the front row with their microphones and give running commentary on popular but critically panned films and so it "is part of the Alamo tradition of pairing bad movies with live comedy (and beer)! It's smart, fast, and bust-a-gut funny." Recent examples include *The Hunger Games*, *Twilight*, *Spider-Man*, and *Robocop*. In addition there is the:

'Choose Your Own Pancake' . . . where you, the viewer, get to pick a movie for Master Pancake to mock, and then we make it up right there on the spot! Just bring the DVD of your choice, Master Pancake will narrow it down to 10 favorites, then the audience will vote on which of those they want to see mocked. Be prepared to give a short speech in defense of your movie. The audience has final say . . . CYOP is always a fun night, with lots of audience participation . . . [http://drafhhouse.com/movies/choose\\_your\\_own\\_pancake/Austin](http://drafhhouse.com/movies/choose_your_own_pancake/Austin)

## Videoke

The Videoke experience is "Kinda like Karaoke, but with acting," and relies on the individual's contribution to what is shown on the screen and with subsequent public interactions. The participant brings a clip from his/her favorite movie, and using subtitles on the monitor in front of them, acts or sings a scene. Dialogue may include material straight from the film or it may be original scripts, which range from the serious to the provocative to the absurd. The quality of participant ranges from local professionals to novices just having fun and, needless to say, alcohol is often involved. There are judges, cheering, booing, a final round, and prizes for the winner.

## Open Screen Night

Closely related to the Videoke is the case of open screen night, where the audience actually determines the tenor of the film-going experience by bringing to the screen a film (VHS or dvd) of choice, with the only major rule being that it can last no longer than 8 min, usually with a minimum of two. The Alamo description of this event says:

Inspired by open mic nights at your local coffee house, Alamo programmer Henri Mazza decided to put together the best bring-your-own-video night that's going on anywhere in the country. The concept is simple: we will show anything you bring with you. Anything at all. That's the whole point, see. You bring in a tape or a DVD, and then we all watch it together on the big screen. You can bring in an old Lego animation you made when you were 8, your thesis film from college, or a church youth group training video that you bought off of Ebay. Anything you'd like to show an audience . . . We have a rowdy audience, too, so generally after the two minutes is up, they'll boo and yell out for the gonger to do their bidding. The

final call, however, rests in the hands of the person with the mallet. That person can go for a movie that everyone loves if he so chooses, or he can let a movie run that everyone's booing. It's all up to the gonger. [http://draffhouse.com/series/open\\_screen\\_night/austin](http://draffhouse.com/series/open_screen_night/austin)

## Celebrity Guest

In this case, the Alamo brings directors, stars and other filmmakers to the screening of one of their films. The guests conduct Q&A sessions and on occasion “lambaste the audience and perform impromptu song and dance numbers. In any case, we feel this greatly enhances the film experience, and gives everyone who attends an intimate look behind the scenes of the movies we love.” Recent examples include the awarding of the Bad Ass Hall of Fame Award to Pam Grier at the opening of the Colorado Alamo, the inclusion of the actors who played children Mike TeeVee and Veruca Salt for the ‘Ultimate Willy Wonka Party’, and Crispin Glover, who performed “a one-hour dramatic narration of eight different profusely illustrated books. The images from the books are projected behind Mr. Glover during his performance.” Quentin Tarantino has hosted his own film fest several times at the Austin theaters, while Austinite Robert Rodriguez has been a guest several times, including his appearance to celebrate the 20th anniversary of *El Mariachi*, his directorial debut.

## Rolling Roadshow

Although this event does not take place at theaters it deserves brief mention here, because it is a moment when the filmic experience extends from the theater itself to other sites. In 2002 the theater created the Rolling Roadshow Tour whereby films are shown in surroundings that resemble those of the particular film being shown and are often presented at the actual locations where they were made. This event has been extremely popular for a decade and involves a concept of the filmic experience that includes a new technology set and venue that is beyond the scope of this paper but that deserves research attention in the near future.

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## Remembering the Alamo, Ironically

Allow me to return to the framework of Latour. This view is of a large puzzle—an assemblage—in which the parts are highly dynamic, interchangeable, and engaged, while the pieces may be human or even objects that have been constructed by individuals or larger communities. The larger shape in this case is the cinematic venue—a site of exhibition as the literature often calls it—that is a place certainly deserving of attention from researchers interested in mediated geographies, because it lies at the heart of the cinematic experience. The character and role of each part of the assemblage is likely to vary by design and each can readily shift its character by

the moment, thus providing differential experiences over short periods of time. The primary example here, of course, is the introduction of simple but unique programs and advertising aimed at select audiences.

So, in broad descriptive strokes, we can begin with the building itself and its interior design, including the walls, seats, tables, lighting, and acoustics, and then can proceed to the technical elements of the site, such as the sound system, the quality of projection and the screen itself. Then there are the programs, food and drink being served to the table, and there is the audience, beginning with you as an individual at that moment, the immediate audience that comprises your filmic neighborhood, and then there are yet broader stories of the nature of the film industry, trends in popular culture, politics, and more, which harkens to the multi-scalar nature of the assemblage. And finally, of course, there is the film.

My broader contextualization of the filmic process is not meant to minimize the nature of the film itself, but to help understand that a total focus on the film and/or its spectators can easily become a reductionist argument. Stepping back to contextualize film into a mediated venue-based experience enhances the understanding of where film engages American culture in both cause and effect. This does not mean, however, that in a broader view the complete experience becomes a site or excuse for a textual analysis of its own, which would allow the same pitfalls of the current text-based studies of cinematic geography that have provided an impressive array of intriguing but somewhat idiosyncratic works that have resulted in limited results as a collective sensibility.

Geographers have produced substantive works, in fact, that extend well beyond a primary focus on the textual image, beginning with economic geographies of cinematic construction (Lukinbeal 2002, 2004, 2006; Scott 2005) and more integrative theoretical and methodological analyses (Lukinbeal 2012), but these works remain the exception. Our emphases tend to be on the text and often the visual, although Craine (2007) stresses this shortcoming when he says that we should not "... prioritize the visual over the aural or any other sort of sensory-based form of media" (p. 149) and Andrew (2002) emphasizes the need for a more eclectic frame when he notes that "neither the producer, the text, the apparatus, nor the viewer is stable enough to hold us within a universal theory of the film experience" (p. 162). I do not suggest that taking a contextualized view of cinematic sites of exhibition in the form described here will provide immediate answers to overarching questions that have been asked and even those that should, but I do think it opens the study of film as a mediated geography to broader possibilities.

I should note that this essay began with several a priori assumptions about theater behavior that were clearly U.S.-centric. It may seem anecdotal, but my experiences of being a member of a crowded theater watching a Bollywood tale from the balcony in Dehradun, India, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* in Penang, Malaysia, and *Hero* in Singapore, suggest that expected and tolerated behaviors vary dramatically beyond our somewhat limited realm. This story remains, then, one of normative behaviors and those that 'push the envelope' at the Alamo Drafthouse. This chapter is about a constructed and mediated geography in which, for a brief moment, the nature of the public sphere is shifted ever so slightly by the producer's

design. Hansen (1991) writes that “. . . the emergence of cinema spectatorship is profoundly intertwined with the transformation of the public sphere” (p. 2), and so this seemingly modest shift of a few parts of the assemblage produces a considerably different experiential sense.

I recently attended the showing of *Monsters University* within the standard closed space of an Alamo Theater ([http://drafthouse.com/austin/slaughter\\_jane](http://drafthouse.com/austin/slaughter_jane)) with a group of ‘tweens for my granddaughter’s birthday, and weeks later I sat in what may have been the exact same room for the aforementioned *Big Lebowski Quote Along*. The nature of the public space and its audience shifted dramatically in these two cases, certainly as a function of the film but also by the nature of the program. In the first, the audience was quiet and reserved, while in the second there was a communal participation and realized camaraderie, which certainly included a higher rate of alcohol consumption! The experiences were very different, while the room, lights, technology, and composite surroundings remained the same.

Hansen (1991) refers to a “. . . a collective, public form of reception shaped in the context of older traditions of performance and modes of exhibition” (p. 3), and uses the example of the entertainment factor in the showing of a film of the Corbett-Fitzsimmons fight in 1897 in New York City that included running commentary and intermittent vaudeville acts in addition to the fight itself (1990, 1991). The works of Allen (1979, 1980, 1990) and Gomery (1992) cited above, are among a large and fascinating literature set that describes the experiences of these multi-modal sites of filmic exhibition, and, along with Hansen emphasize the nature of the audience’s composition. The programmatic nature of much of the Alamo’s itinerary is more than vaguely reminiscent of these settings, if nothing else because the film in itself is no longer the total focus and the audience has a different form of engagement than what we normally experience. The technology has changed dramatically of course, but the seemingly small shift in the assemblage—program, food, perhaps drinks, commentary, and audience participation—provide a unique experience and call for a distinct audience, or clientele.

And so, ironically, I return to my grandfather for one final thought about site and audience. I wonder how he—a fascinating, eclectic, and open-minded character—would have enjoyed these actions of the Alamo that are bent on integrating the audience, site, and show into an experiential place in which a community becomes a feature of the performance; indeed, I believe that in his eyes it would be a ‘show’. In this case, *you* and *they* are certainly *here* in an assemblage of ‘people, ideas, and things’, but instead of the normative experience of anomie, there is a demonstrated and self-conscious need for contact, even if it so often revolves around the seemingly absurd. But just who is this community? To paraphrase a student of mine who was speaking tongue in cheek but with some truth, the Alamo is adept at commodifying the ‘hipster’, among several vaguely-defined communities. Is the need for some form of social contact the sole reason for joining this club of vaguely like-minded film viewers, or is there something more?

Perhaps a part of the answer lies within the nature of irony, which Linda Hutcheon (1994) calls “the mode of the unsaid, the unheard, the unseen” (p. 9), this “strange mode of discourse where you say something you don’t actually mean

and expect people to understand not only what you actually do mean but also your attitude toward it” (p. 2). An important presumption of irony as seen by Hutcheon is that it should be viewed as a discursive strategy in which the intentions and attribution of meaning are embedded into communications within a community that help to reinforce the existence of that group, especially in distinction from others, and that should be considered “not as an isolated trope to be analyzed by formalist means but as a political issue, in the broadest sense of the word” (p. 2). To say the use of irony in the case of the programming and events of the Alamo is an expression of alterity or even subversion may be a stretch, but it is very possible that the Alamo has produced, and a select community—‘hipster nation’ as my student suggests—has bought, a product that at least partially reflects a common need to, quite simply, be different than the mainstream. If this is true, the content of much of the event material could be far less important than the act of presenting it. Regardless, it is clear that Tim and Kerri League have recognized a distinctive public need, and in incorporating it with other creative features of the film-going experience, have created a unique place that can be as engaging as my grandfather’s vaudeville stage.

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