

Audience Engagement and Development at a Town and Gown Cinema

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Abstract

This paper presents the initial findings of a research project investigating the audience engagement and development strategies of UK 'town and gown' cinemas. These are independent cinemas located on a university campus or strongly affiliated with a local university that cater to both the academic community and the general population. While there is growing scholarship on audience formation and regional cinema culture in the UK, there is little understanding of the particular challenges such cinemas face as they seek to offer a wide range of films while simultaneously serving a wide range of audiences.

The paper takes as a case study the Gulbenkian cinema, situated on the University of Kent's Canterbury campus. Drawing on quantitative and qualitative data about the cinema, as well as interviews with its programming and marketing team, it examines the Gulbenkian's current programming strategies, the relative success of different types of film screened in 2019-20 and the different types of audience that attend the cinema. It then outlines strategies that have been developed to tap into the various demographics that the cinema serves, including a number of student-focussed initiatives. In doing so, the paper offers an overview of some of the negotiations that must be made by a cinema that seeks to appeal to diverse and distinct audiences.

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1. Introduction

This paper presents the initial findings of a research project investigating the audience engagement and development strategies of UK ‘town and gown’ cinemas: independent cinemas located on a university campus or strongly affiliated with a local university that cater to both the academic community and the general population. Research into film audience experiences as part of the Beyond the Multiplex project has explored the cultural role of independent cinemas in providing access to specialised films and fostering a sense of community among those who attend them (Hanchard, Merrington and Wessels 2020). However, there is little understanding of the particular challenges town and gown cinemas face in terms of audience engagement and development. These venues have a complex remit that involves offering a wide range of films while simultaneously attracting a wide range of audiences, as well as serving teaching and research needs. As a result, the support and resources to build more diverse audiences that are offered by relevant networks – in the UK, for example, The Audience Agency, the British Film Institute’s (BFI) Film Audience Network, and the Independent Cinema Office – although helpful, are not always attuned to their specific needs. We aim to produce new understandings of how town and gown cinemas can balance different agendas so as to benefit both the universities to which they are linked and the wider community.

This is a pilot project that takes as an initial case study the Gulbenkian Cinema in South East England, an independent 300-seat venue that is part of a multifunctional arts centre situated on the University of Kent’s Canterbury campus. The Gulbenkian’s geographical position (it is a 30-minute walk from Canterbury city centre) means that it caters for different, but not necessarily mutually exclusive, audience strands, including the university’s students and staff and local residents in

Canterbury and the surrounding East Kent area. Opened in 1969, the arts centre, including the cinema, plays a significant role in the university's civic engagement and has helped establish it as a 'vibrant intellectual and cultural' centre for both the town and gown populations (Kumar 2020: 152). That said, the Gulbenkian exemplifies some of the challenges town and gown cinemas face in seeking to present a diverse programme of films to a range of audiences. In line with its core aims of presenting a varied film selection with a focus on independent and foreign-language cinema, it regularly screens examples of what the BFI classifies as 'specialised films', such as independent films, documentaries and subtitled non-English language films (BFI Research and Statistics 2016). But the cinema relies on a central programme of mainstream films to maintain commercial viability. And, while a key part of the Gulbenkian's mission is to engage young people, including but not limited to students, it must also cater to other demographics, such as seniors and families, that represent the majority of its audience, as well as functioning as a resource for university educators and researchers.

From our relationship with the Gulbenkian, both as academics at the university and as audience members, we know that the cinema employs a range of strategies to engage and develop its audience. The starting point for our research was a set of interrelated questions:

- Which audiences is the Gulbenkian trying to engage and develop?
- How is it going about this?
- How successful are the current strategies?
- How could they be made more successful?

Drawing on interviews with the Gulbenkian's programme manager and marketing officer, quantitative data provided to us by the Gulbenkian about the types of film that were programmed and the types of audience that attended screenings for the year 2019-20, and qualitative data that we gathered from a group of undergraduate Film students at the university about their perceptions of the cinema, we have begun to tease out some of the challenges that the Gulbenkian faces in terms of the sometimes contradictory facets of its identity.

2. Types of Films Screened, 2019-20

The data provided by the Gulbenkian assigns the films shown at the cinema to categories that the programming and marketing teams have devised in order to match films to audience demographics and key programming strands that they have identified over time.¹ The figures for 2019-20 show that the cinema's programming was centred on mainstream cinema, with Blockbuster American Films accounting for 25% of screenings, Big British Films for 21% and Family Films for 17%, meaning that these three categories constituted 63% of all screenings. Specialised films made up a significant minority of the programme, with Foreign Language Films accounting for 12% of screenings, Indie British Films for 4.5%, Indie American Films for 4% and Documentary Films for 3%, meaning that these four categories constituted 23.5% of all screenings. The remaining performances consisted of a few genres that the Gulbenkian categorises separately (Animation, Comedy, Drama, Horror, Musical) plus a number of 'Event Cinema' screenings,² which include outdoor cinema events and collaborations with academics on projects related to their research. For example, in February 2020 lecturers from the School of English, in association with the Centre for Gender, Sexuality and Writing, organised a talk to accompany a screening of Derek Jarman's *The Garden* (1990) as part of a series of events around LGBT History Month.

3. Average Audience Size, 2019-20

The Gulbenkian's primary focus on mainstream cinema appears to be justified by audience attendance figures, since these types of film are the best attended. In 2019-20, against an overall average audience size of 60 per screening, there was an average of 78 attendees for Family Films, 69 attendees for Blockbuster American Films and 64 attendees for Big British Films. As a result, the latter two categories were the largest income streams for the cinema, while in the case of Family Films, high attendance balanced out against lower ticket prices for these screenings, so that they also provided a significant income stream. It is notable that two other categories of film were also well attended: Musicals, which averaged 71 attendees per screening, placing them second only to Family Films, and Horror films. In our interview with the Gulbenkian's programme manager there was some discussion of how Horror does not typically do well for the cinema, but in 2019-20 this category averaged 64 attendees per screening, equal to the figure

for Big British Films. This anomaly is perhaps best explained by the small number of screenings for both Musicals and Horror. With each accounting for just 2% of all films screened, it would be unwise to assign much significance to these figures, since one or two popular screenings for these genres would be enough to skew the data. At the same time, this raises the issue of how the Gulbenkian classifies films, since most of those that the cinema categorises as Musicals (e.g. the Richard Curtis-scripted, Danny Boyle-directed *Yesterday* (2019)) or Horror (e.g. *It Chapter Two* (Andy Muschietti 2019)) could just as appropriately be classified as Blockbuster American or Big British Films. In any case, the success of these two genres does not alter the overall picture that it was mainstream American and British films that attracted the largest audiences to the Gulbenkian.

In contrast, attendance figures for all categories of specialised films were below the global average. Of these, Indie British Films were the most popular, averaging 56 attendees per screening, followed by Documentary Films with an average of 53 attendees. Indie American Films proved significantly less popular, averaging 39 attendees per screening, and for Foreign Language Films the average audience size was only 29 per screening, one of the lowest, and less than half the global average. These figures suggest that the Gulbenkian is currently only partly successful in achieving its goal of 'offering an engaging, innovative and high quality arts programme' (Gulbenkian 2021). The majority of the cinema's programming revolves around mainstream films, and attendance of specialised films is relatively low. Indeed, the Gulbenkian reports that its inclusion of foreign language films in its programme is mostly made possible because of a subsidy they receive from the BFI.

4. Tickets Sold per Price Type, 2019-20

The data provided by the Gulbenkian for 2019-20 does not indicate which types of audience attended which types of film, but because the cinema has a number of different price types (e.g. Children under 16, Seniors, Students), we were able to obtain an overall sense of audience demographics by looking at ticket sales by price type. Surprisingly, given the Gulbenkian's location on the University of Kent campus, students and staff make up a relatively small percentage of their audience. Audiences from the university (students and staff) accounted for only 20% of the total number of tickets sold (Students 15%, Student

members 2%, Staff 3%) and only 16% of the total amount paid for tickets (Students 11%, Student members 1%, Staff 4%). This was lower than the number of tickets sold to Senior audiences (23%) and significantly lower in terms of the amount paid (which for Senior audiences accounted for 28% of the total). For a cinema situated on the campus of a university with a student population of about 19,000 (University of Kent 2021), to have sold fewer than 4,000 Student tickets in a year suggests that there is an untapped audience here.

5. Strategies for Audience Engagement and Development

Aware that they are not fully engaging the local student audience, the Gulbenkian has developed a number of student-focussed initiatives in recent years. Notable among these are the open-air screenings that take place on the campus lawns at the start of the academic year, which aim to alert new students to the cinema's presence on campus. For example, in September 2019 the cinema held a free outdoor screening of *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler 2018) during the university's Welcome Week, which precedes the start of the teaching term. (According to the Gulbenkian's programme manager, the film choice for such events is guided by the popularity of certain films with the student audience on their initial cinema release.) This was followed by a two-week season of ticketed outdoor screenings of films from each decade since the Gulbenkian opened in 1969. Although the 2019-20 data indicates that 'Event Cinema' got slightly lower than average attendance, the outdoor screenings have proved successful with certain cohorts of students, such as those on the third-year undergraduate Film module Beyond Cinema, which calls attention to contemporary developments in 'ephemeral' (Vélez-Serna 2020) or 'live' cinema (Atkinson and Kennedy 2017) and uses the outdoor screenings as a co-curricular activity.

Throughout the year, the cinema has a range of concessionary prices for students, including annual Student membership, discounts on individual tickets and a regular '2 for Tuesday' deal that offers students and under 25s two tickets for the price of one. These initiatives have had some success in attracting students to attend screenings, with one of our Film students reporting that the 2 for Tuesday offer encouraged her to visit the cinema with a friend most Tuesdays during term time regardless of what film was being shown. On the other hand, another of our student respondents admitted with some embarrassment that he

had never attended the cinema in the three years of his undergraduate degree.

A number of student-centred activities are now run under the umbrella scheme Gulbenkian Uncovered. This initiative is part of the Young Film Programmers' Network, coordinated by Film Hub South East in response to the BFI's 2017-2022 strategy, and is funded through the Institute. Gulbenkian Uncovered builds on the previous Student Associate scheme (2015-16), which was born out of student focus groups organised by the Gulbenkian's marketing officer in 2015. These suggested that students were keen to engage more with the cinema's activities and to gain knowledge about how to curate and run screenings and associated wraparound events. Regular meetings are held with student members of the scheme where they can give their feedback on the cinema's programming plans, and the monthly printed programme includes a 'Pick of the Month' recommendation from Gulbenkian Uncovered. The scheme also provides a platform for students to pitch ideas. Since 2015, students have organised a variety of film screenings with wraparound activities such as talks and Q&A panels, sometimes in collaboration with Student Union societies. For example, a screening of *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* (David Yates 2016) was organised with the Hogwarts Society, a screening of *Call Me by Your Name* (Luca Guadagnino 2017) was supported by a panel of LGBTQ+ Society members, activists and allies, and Gulbenkian Uncovered members have helped put on free outdoor screenings of Bollywood films for WorldFest (the University's annual celebration of cultural diversity). In 2017, Gulbenkian Uncovered selected short films made by young people aged 16-25 from across the South East to be screened before feature films in the Gulbenkian's 2017-18 season (Thomas and Dodds 2018). In addition, Gulbenkian Uncovered members have received funding from Film Hub South East and the Young Film Programmers' Network to attend events where they could network with other young programmers from around the UK, including the Flatpack Film Festival in Birmingham, the This Way Up film exhibition innovation conference in Hull and the Independent Cinema Office Screening Day at the BFI Southbank in London.

In line with the Young Film Programmers' Network's remit, another area of focus for Gulbenkian Uncovered is to engage young audiences in specialised films. We have identified a tension here, in that the engagement is often deep but not necessarily broad. From our initial

conversations with those students involved in the scheme or those we might think are typically inclined towards specialised films (for example, Film students), there is great regard for this aspect of Gulbenkian Uncovered and the Gulbenkian's general inclusion of specialised films in its programme. This is exemplified by one former Film graduate and Gulbenkian Uncovered programmer who credited the initiative with broadening her taste in film, leading to an appreciation of Agnès Varda in particular. And in a seminar exercise in which we showed Film students trailers for three forthcoming films and asked them to choose the one they thought was best suited to the Gulbenkian's identity and audience, 29 students across two seminar groups unanimously selected the foreign-language film option (the Sudanese drama *You Will Die at 20* (Amjad Abu Alala 2019)) rather than the Hollywood and British films on offer. However, student programmers' interest in the Gulbenkian's specialised films or some students' association of the Gulbenkian with specialised films does not bear out in actual attendance. As discussed above, audience figures for specialised films at the cinema are relatively low. In addition, the Gulbenkian's programme manager reports that students make up the core audience for screenings of Blockbuster American Films and, although we do not yet have specific data on this, if only half the tickets sold for Blockbuster American Films in 2019-20 were bought by students, this would account for almost 70% of Student ticket sales. In terms of student engagement with specialised films, then, there appear to be contradictions between (at least some) students' perception of what the Gulbenkian offers, what the Gulbenkian would like to facilitate and what is actually happening.

While Gulbenkian Uncovered specifically targets students, the initiative is not strict on this issue, as demonstrated by one current Gulbenkian Uncovered programmer who now holds graduate status. This flexibility serves as an acknowledgement that there is significant overlap between the Gulbenkian's youth 'town' and youth 'gown' audiences. Indeed, a significant portion of the University of Kent's student body is local to South East England, if not the county of Kent itself. The Gulbenkian further links its town and gown youth audiences via its ART31 Youth Board, which spans a 13-25 year-old age bracket. This leadership project, funded through the Gulbenkian's National Portfolio Organisation status granted by Arts Council England, in addition to funding from Kent County Council, has a wider remit than programming and audience development. It has, for example, been involved in commissioning decisions for the theatre and café spaces,

and has developed spin-off groups TECH31 and SCREEN31, which offer creative skills training. In this way, the Gulbenkian is trying to ensure that it is not just a centre to host arts and artists from elsewhere but that it is actively developing the region's artistic potential via its youth, so as to nurture the next generation of film and theatre makers and technicians. The Gulbenkian, then, is helping to position Kent as a creative hub, feeding into wider talent development and place-making processes in the South East, most notably [Creative Estuary](#) and the larger, government-backed [Thames Estuary Production Corridor](#) project.

In addition to its schemes to engage young people, the Gulbenkian has a number of initiatives to cater to other sections of the local population. The cinema offers discounted screenings for seniors and families: a weekday matinee Senior Screen performance each month and Family Film screenings on weekend matinees. The cinema also provides a variety of accessible events. It presents a weekly screening with captioned subtitles (or screens a film with foreign-language subtitles if captioned subtitles are unavailable) and it has 18 seats that can provide audio description for film screenings. An Access scheme offers concessionary tickets to people with physical, sensory or learning disabilities, along with free seats for accompanying carers/support providers. Additionally, in association with the charity Square Pegs Arts, the cinema runs monthly Relaxed screenings that are designed to welcome people who will benefit from a more relaxed performance environment, including guests on the Autistic Spectrum, with sensory and communication disorders or a learning disability and parents who want to attend with young children. During these screenings, as with Family Film screenings, there is a relaxed attitude to movement and noise in the auditorium, creating an inclusive atmosphere in which to enjoy the film.

6. Conclusion

Our findings show that the Gulbenkian has a variety of initiatives in place to engage and develop diverse audiences, and that these are having some success. We have also identified some areas where more could be done, particularly as regards not fully realising the potential of the student audience. It is of course important to recognise that the student body is not homogenous, and so a one-size-fits-all approach is not appropriate. There is a potential to develop interest in specialised

films among some students, but there are others for whom mainstream blockbusters will always be more appealing. At the same time, research into patterns of film consumption highlights that even those consumers with a preference for arthouse and foreign language films tend to be 'extensive omnivores', and are likely to also watch films from other more mainstream genres (Hanchard, Merrington, Wessels and Yates 2019: 19). But it seems that, despite the Gulbenkian's location in the centre of the University of Kent campus, and its aspiration to be (in part) a campus cinema, it is currently more of a Canterbury cinema, with town dominating over gown.

While we do have some data from the Gulbenkian for 2020-2021, we have not included it in this paper, as it covers the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the cinema's activities were curtailed by enforced closures. Despite these restrictions, however, it is worth noting that the cinema has maintained its efforts to engage students. Gulbenkian Uncovered has continued with monthly online meetings, and members selected films for a number of virtual screenings (in a trial partnership with Curzon Home Cinema) that took place in March 2021 as part of the University's WorldFest programme. When the Gulbenkian reopened (with social distancing measures in place) in May 2021, the cinema offered half-price tickets to students for all films during the summer term, and a number of outdoor student-only screenings were held. The Gulbenkian also collaborated with lecturers from the Film department on a third-year undergraduate Film Programming module that ran between January and April 2021, in which students worked in groups to design a double bill to be screened at the cinema, considering the Gulbenkian's programming practices and audience demographics, with two of the double bills being selected for screening in May and June 2021.

The narrow time frame for our initial data collection offers only a snapshot of recent issues rather than a means of identifying how these issues develop or dissolve over time. In order to provide a more comprehensive account, further research is required. Analysing data on types of film screened and attendance figures going back at least as far as 2015 (when the predecessor to the Gulbenkian Uncovered scheme was launched) and matching audience demographics with specific programming strands will enable us to identify key audiences for different types of film, and to see what changes have occurred and what patterns emerge. Conducting focus groups with representatives of some

of the largest audience demographics (for example, seniors, students, general Canterbury residents) will let us collect qualitative data on participants' experiences and perceptions of the Gulbenkian and its programming. This will allow us to suggest how further audience development can be supported and will permit knowledge exchange and best practice learning across this particular strand of the independent cinema sector.

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Footnotes

1. The Gulbenkian's programme also includes 'Live & Recorded' screenings of theatre, ballet and opera productions each month, but data for these events is currently lacking, and they have not been included in our analysis.
2. This is the term used by the Gulbenkian in its classification system. We are aware that 'Event Cinema' in an industry context tends to refer to alternative content cinema or what the Gulbenkian categorises as 'Live & Recorded' screening – see previous endnote.