On the Nature of Audience

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Abstract

Taking influences from Gilles Deleuze's *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, this article explores the dynamic relationship between a film and its audience, with particular emphasis upon the latter. Currently there exists little to no framework upon which to examine the affects a film has on its audience, and the way in which an audience inter/acts with a film, beyond the Deleuzian notion of affect. The two are not mutually exclusive processes, however. This article demonstrates that they behave proportionately, and consequently, in response to the other.

This paper aims to re-establish and re-explore the conceptual behaviourisms of an audience, that have largely gone unnoticed and been left wanting since Gilles Deleuze and *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*. First published in 1983, the same year saw 183 films released theatrically worldwide, with just under half of those released the following decade, 300 in 1995, and a humbling thirteen of those released the decade after that, 2383 in 2015 (Movies Released in 1983, 1995 & 2015). Even a conservative calculation, one where each film is, for the sake of simplicity, considered to have a runtime of exactly 90 minutes, the difference between 1983 and 2015 is still ~3000 hours worth of footage. This figure does not take into account the domestic market for television, short films, or other filmic works, that have been released into the public domain without theatrical or corporate distribution; YouTube, Vimeo, vlogs, or any other websites containing video clips produced by internet users rather than corporate entities like Paramount Pictures or Warner Bros.. Nevertheless it would take the most dedicated of audiences just over a third of a(nother) year to watch this statistic, back-to-back, without interruptions. Barring the sheer impossibility of such a feat, when put into perspective like this, a number of observations are temptingly obvious to make: On the one hand, 2015 would appear to be a veritable renaissance by 1995 standards; while on the other hand, prevailing within an eminently disposable culture of hyper-consumerism: 'Consuming goods and services, not for their functional purpose, but for other purposes… consumption for the sake of consumption' (Sirgy 2001, p. 140). Yet these, too, are insubstantial claims in and of themselves. Not only do they presuppose how an audience is expected to act, they also lack the proper scrutiny, now decades overdue, of how it is they are already behaving towards an otherwise newly saturated marketplace. It is not simply that times have changed, but that audiences' attitudes towards time have, and without the meanwhile accompaniment of academic criticism on their behalf.

In order to scrutinise an audience's behaviour towards time, however, a basis with which to analyse the nature of audience itself is still needed; one almost entirely absent from academic criticism, arguably because it has so often been taken for granted. What is less conspicuous about this absence, and ultimately suggests why it continues to go unacknowledged, remains inherently tangled up in the clunky, uncooperative nature of its conceptuality. Besides Gilles Deleuze and his 'affection-image', 'something expressed… not [existing] independently of something which expresses it' (1983, 97), there is little to no straightforward explanation of how it is they are actually behaving. An audience resists being generalised about, in isolation and in specificity. Focus too much on any individual member's experience, and one negates the group's dynamic as a whole; while no audience as a whole can truly represent the community its constituency is a part of, be it regionally, nationally, or internationally. To further compound its resistance, as a purely responsive phenomenon, an audience is always prone to changes, in the members of its constituency, and the contexts for their attraction. Since no two constituencies are reproducible, even if the same audience were to watch the same context over and over again, Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (dir. Nolan, 2000) for instance, each subsequent viewing would leave an altogether different impression on the audience, like a residue, and the magic of *Memento*'s reverse chronology would be less effective each time. As a consequence, academic criticism is left objectively hobbled while popular criticism falls back onto the subjective first-person with ostensibly fewer repercussions.

That these two perspectives, objectivity and subjectivity, are then somehow inimical to one another's scrutiny, resists exclusively within the academic community. '[S]ubjectivity… moves like these feel dangerously selfish. The risk of falling into anthropocentrism is strong… [but] unavoidable, at least for us humans.' (2012, Bogost, 64). Yet objectivity is the one anthropocentric characteristic of an otherwise unexplained shift in academic analyses of recent years, away from theoretical outcomes; and is more a symptom of the empirical culture in which academia, and the Arts especially, now inhabit, than it is a justifiable excuse for lack of bipartisan analysis. Both objectivity and subjectivity are valid interpretations when scrutinising audiences, for a critic must still watch a film, they are in no way temporarily immune to its 'affect' (1983, Deleuze, 97). Dispensing with subjectivity in favour of objectivity, the academic critic limits themselves to an analysis of overarching themes and commonalities shared across all audiences simply by overwhelming, statistical chance; one that also assumes an audience is present to view a film, but cannot guarantee that they will stay (awake) and watch it. This does not mean dispensing with objectivity in favour of subjectivity, either; doing so would only place focus back on the individual member. A re-evaluation, rather, of the two perspectives is required, where objectivity and subjectivity are examined together and by one another.

For example, the British Board of Film Classification's case study on Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible* (dir. Noe, 2002) contains the beginnings of such bipartisanship:

> 'During [*Irréversible*'s Cannes Film Festival] screening, over 200 audience members walked out in disgust, whilst a handful reportedly fainted and required medical attention – but those who stayed the course gave the film a five minute standing ovation' (Irreversible, para. 3).

It is not a matter of then categorising these responses, however, into the aforementioned basis, but acknowledging them as vital components within the audience, existing potentially throughout a film. In denying this anecdotal aspect, a whole dimension of *Irréversible* remains inaccessibly moot: The 'disgust', 'focussed around two key scenes... a fatal attack on a man in a club [*Le Tenia*, played by Jo Prestia]... [and] the extended, traumatic rape of [Monica] Bellucci's character, Alex', though whether or not the 'disgust' was 'expressed' for both 'scenes' is largely unclear (Irreversible, para. 7). Were they to occur for just the 'fatal attack', one could argue that the audience's reactions are in direct response to the 'gratuitous' 'fire extinguisher... used to smash [*Le Tenia*'s] head into a bloody pulp' 'over 20 times.' (Irreversible, para. 7 & 8). Were they to occur for just the 'traumatic rape' instead, the same reactions would give credence to the notion that 'the viewer is thus held hostage to Alex's ordeal for a seemingly endless period.' (Irreversible, para. 9). Indeed this notion only carries weight when it is analysed in conjunction with the audience. That 'over 200 audience members walked out' actually 'expresses' more about the effectiveness of the 'traumatic rape' than the scene ever could objectively. Here 'the imprisonment of the spectator' (2002, 112) as Lev Manovich describes it, is at once realised and at the discretion of the 'spectator', the individual member's experience, as it is for every film; something *Alex* and the everyday victims of sexual assault do not have the luxury of choosing, but the audience, being figuratively 'held hostage' by the film, responds to instinctively.

These components are only revealed in the presence of very particular 'affection-image[s]', noticeably controversial ones. Depending on how much they disrupt 'the imprisonment of the spectator', some of these components could also be considered connotatively negative 'expresseds' (1983, Deleuze, 97). In the case of *Irréversible*, while appearing objectively negative because the nature of the audience is disrupted, they do have a subjectively positive impact on the interpretation of the film, simultaneously. To alleviate the simultaneity of the contradictory terms positive and negative, if the context of an audience is still understood to mean a film, then these components, 'existing independently of something which expresses' them, are conceivably its subtext. Use of the term "subtext" in place of the term 'expresseds' is in order to differentiate it from 'the set of the expressed and its expression', the 'disgust' being 'expressed' in the presence of very particular 'affection-image[s]', and the gamut of potential behaviours 'existing' latently within all audiences in response to an entire film. Where the two terms differ is in their specificity: This way no individual 'expressed' is preferenced over another, and the audience as a whole is at least acknowledgeable in the absence of an anecdotal aspect like *Irréversible*'s.

Now the absence of closer scrutiny becomes increasingly more apparent. Not every film has this anecdotal aspect, and not every film is as controversial or as widely criticised, or can be, as *Irréversible* is. Yet each and every film has an undeniable subtext; even in the complete nonattendance of an audience, nothing still happens. Unfortunately the solution resides within the problem: What has previously been explained, and thus explained away, within the operation of the 'affection-image', a two-step process whereby an object onscreen translated to be a 'face' offscreen by the audience is then retranslated to be a 'face' onscreen again (1983, Deleuze, 97). This same translation process underestimates, as well as oversimplifies, the nature of audience. Unlike the camera, the audience is not an objectively mechanical process, it could translate an 'affection-image', just as it could mistranslate the 'affect' of a film altogether, but it is

by no means ever forced to. How an audience translates what it decides to translate, if and when it is translating, and not how they go about that translation, could be said to be the nature of audience itself. The solution, then, is to reintegrate the subjective experience of a film as it is seen by an audience back into this translation process; where an anecdotal aspect is otherwise absent, the critic can supplement their own experience as an audience member, but must concede that it is not a permanent substitute for the experience of the audience as a whole, or the nature of audience itself.

There are a number of elements to this nature, however, that need not be reinvented in light of this reintegration. Roland Barthes' characterisation of the '*studium*' and the '*punctum*' of a photograph is such an example (2006, 25-27); and since photography and film share the same ancestry, there is no better framework on which to draw parallels from. The '*studium*' of a photograph is in fact similar to how the 'affection-image' operates in a film, in that it, too, requires an audience to 'participate' with a photo and complete its 'co-presence' (2006, Barthes, 25). It is something that Barthes 'perceive[s] quite familiarly as a consequence of [his] knowledge, [and his] culture' (2006, 25), and what Deleuze characterises as the 'icon' of the 'affection-image' (1983, 97). Where the '*studium*' and the 'punctum' differ, again, is in their specificity: If the '*studium*' is interpreted to be the objective component of the nature of audience, 'embodied in states of things… a determinate space-time, spatio-temporal coordinates, objects and people, real connections between all these givens' (Deleuze 1983, 97), then the '*punctum*', as 'this element which rises from the [photograph], shoots out like an arrow, [and] pierces [only] me[, Barthes]' (2006, 26) could then be considered the subjective component of the nature of audience.

For example, Gaspar Noé's 'face' in *Irréversible*, credited as one of two *Rectum Visitors*. Without the 'knowledge' of what Gaspar Noé's face looks like, or that he is even a part of his own film, his face is translated objectively and 'quite familiarly' as just another 'face'; like the '*studium*'. There is nothing technically wrong with this translation, either; it in no way diminishes the 'disgust' 'focussed around two keys scenes'; nor is it crucial to the audience's overall understanding of the film; because Gaspar Noé's face is still a 'face' regardless of it being recognised or not. Yet his face is technically, and simultaneously, mistranslated by those members of the audience who do not subjectively share in this 'knowledge'; his 'face' 'pierces' but a few members as being the one belonging to Gaspar Noé's face, like the '*punctum*'. When put into perspective like this, the audience's experience appears to be split, when the film is directly appealing to those potential components 'existing' latently within it instead; to an audience within the audience, running seamlessly throughout the first. In a moment of subjectivity, a previously hidden aspect of the nature of audience is alternatively exposed, and can now be properly scrutinised. That it serves no other purpose in the film than to be found by the audience, like an easter-egg, could not be construed in objectivity alone.

Already two conclusions can be drawn from this example: That the audience is capable of bringing 'knowledge' to a film, via its memory; and that they utilise this 'knowledge' in order to establish 'connections between all these givens' in ways not necessarily objective in their origin. One could also argue that in the absence of certain 'knowledge', placeholder 'knowledge' is reserved until certain 'knowledge' is acquired, as in the case of Gaspar Noé's 'face' and Gaspar Noé's face. Since 'knowledge' can be

both objective and subjective, the latter being contingent upon whether or not a certainty does exist, then the interrelationship between audience and film changes depending on the objectivity and subjectivity of an 'affection-image' better characterised as a "memory-image". It is memory from which this 'knowledge' is derived, and experience which contributes to that 'knowledge', but it should not be confused with the process of remembering. Remembering, rather, is the audience's process of accessing, identifying, and re/translating the 'affection-image', as well as consulting a repository of 'knowledge' unique to each and every audience member. Indeed the nature of audience is sustained only when the 'knowledge' of one audience member overlaps with another, and another, within the shared experience of the film.

It is this same repository of 'knowledge', or lack thereof, that *Memento*'s reverse chronology relies on for its effectiveness. Told backwards from the perspective of its short-term memory impaired protagonist *Leonard,* played by Guy Pierce, the audience knows as much about *Leonard*'s past as *Leonard* does at the outset of the film, as if they, too, had had their short-term memories impaired. The aforementioned magic of this effect, however, slowly wears off as the film unfolds, and the audience, memorising as much of the experience of the film as they can, eventually pieces together a sequence of events *Leonard* cannot. Subsequent viewings of the film nullify this effect because the audience is not actually impaired, it remembers, it has a residual 'knowledge' of the film after watching it, and is more likely to be remembering than it is memorising a film it has already watched. For an audience is not a static phenomenon; its members are constantly updating their repository of 'knowledge' external to a film, from film to film, to experiences altogether unrelated to the nature of audience. Without this repository of 'knowledge', it would be effectively impossible for an audience to translate the 'affection-image[s]' of a film: An 'affection-image' of a 'face' would have no 'knowledge' of a face to affect. It is therefore important for a film to share in some of the 'knowledge' its audience does, like a universal language they are both capable of speaking.

Yet this universal language can be an effect manipulated in and of itself when concerning examples like Stan Brakhage's experimental short film *The Dante Quartet* (dir. Brakhage, 1987). Hand-painted onto 70mm and 35mm film stock, most of its footage is abstract expressionist in style; swirls of indiscriminate shapes, colours, and patterns; occasionally superimposed onto 'a face, or a facial equivalent' (1983, Deleuze, 97), some hardly long enough onscreen to be qualified as such. Two typewritten and four handwritten title-cards divide the footage into, respectively: '*The Dante Quartet* [¶] *Copyright 1987* [¶] *By Stan Brakhage*' (1987, min. 00:02) and '*The Dante Quartet*' (1987, min. 00:05); '*Hell Itself*' (1987, min. 00:11-00:16)*, '*Hell Spit Flexion*' (1987, min. 01:50-01:52), *'Purgations*' (1987, min. 02:32-02:33), and '*existence is song*' (1987, min. 04:55-04:56). Besides this, there is very little for the audience to translate objectively except the colours as individual colours themselves. That the film reflects Brakhage's own frustrations with English translations of Dante's *The Divine Comedy* (Alighieri 2009) can only be qualified with a highly subjective interpretation Brakhage himself gave in a 2002 interview with Bruce Kawin as part of a DVD Commentary on *By Brakhage: An Anthology* (dir. 2004):

> '… I [Brakhage] can't handle the language anymore, like I can't read one more
> translation of *The Divine Comedy*… I realize it's in my eyes all the time, that I have a

vision of Hell… kind of a springboard in my thinking… purgation… something that's as close to Heaven as I would hope to aspire to, which I call "existence is song"… a visual corollary of it, but that is a story.' (dir. 2004)

Without this intertextual 'knowledge', however, the film acts like a 'springboard' for the audience to subjectively interpret its footage as they please; while the title-cards constrain their interpretations to whatever objective 'knowledge' the audience potentially knows about *The Divine Comedy*, or what they think Hell itself could be and what '*Hell Itself*' could mean.

A binary emerges from this dichotomy of 'knowledge', the one objective, the other subjective, the one internal to a film, the other external to a film, clearly dependent upon the audience (see Figure 1.). Both affect interpretations of a film differently, some more adversely than others: As in the case of Gaspar Noé's 'face' and Gaspar Noé's face, the objective 'knowledge' of 'face' is more important for audiences to know because the subjective 'knowledge' of his face still requires the objective 'knowledge' in order to successfully translate an object onscreen as a 'face' offscreen, and that 'face' as the one belonging to Gaspar Noé's face. Just as subjective 'knowledge' is not strictly required for an audience to translate an object onscreen as a 'face' offscreen, objective 'knowledge' is not required for an audience to be able to watch a film: When concerning an example like *The Dante Quartet*, were an audience or an audience member unable to read its English title-cards, they would still be able to watch the film, just without their interpretations constrained. Where the dichotomy differs, yet again, is in its specificity: That which is objective 'knowledge' to an audience can be considered internal to a film's interpretation because it is derived more from a film's 'affection-image[s]'; while that which is subjective 'knowledge' to an audience can be considered external to a film's interpretation because it is derived more from the audience's memories; but neither is a mutually exclusive process.

For example, J. J. Abrams' *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (dir. Abrams, 2015), as part of a continuation of George Lucas' *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace* (dir. Lucas, 1999), *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones* (dir. 2002), *Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith* (dir. 2005), *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope* (dir. 1977), Irvin Kershner's *Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back* (dir. Kershner,1980), and Richard Marquand's *Star Wars: Episode VI – Return of the Jedi* (dir. Marquand, 1983), requires, as well as cultivates, a mixture of objective 'knowledge' within subjective 'knowledge', and subjective 'knowledge' within objective 'knowledge', within its audience. Like its predecessors, *The Force Awakens* relies heavily upon the memory of its audience, and in turn, their subjective 'knowledge' of the objective 'knowledge' of the *Star Wars* universe, like a dialect within the universal language of film, for *The Force Awakens* to be at its most objectively effective. Even *A New Hope* had to first qualify its 'affection-image[s]' beforehand, through archetypal concepts its audience would already be 'quite' familiar with; concepts like 'civil war', 'Rebel', 'evil Galactic Empire', 'DEATH STAR', 'Princess', and 'freedom' (dir. Lucas 1977, min. 00:37-01:31)) in what has since become infamously known as its opening crawl. In doing so, the audience is subjectively primed for *A New Hope*'s objective adaptations of each concept; the 'DEATH STAR' as the seemingly innocuous moon of *Alderaan* of which it is not; as a way of easing 'real connections between all these givens' within the audience.

There are a number of advantages in cultivating such 'connections', as there are disadvantages, that *The Force Awakens* amply demonstrates. Characters like *Han Solo* (reprised by Harrison Ford) and *General Leia* (reprised by Carrie Fisher) are as potent as they are meaningless with/out the history of the *Star Wars* dialect; their coincidental appearance in the film has no objective reasoning otherwise; even with the mention of 'General Leia' (dir. Abrams 2015, min. 00:37-01:17) in the film's opening crawl, unlike Gaspar Noé's 'face' and Gaspar Noé's face, 'General Leia' is not an objective concept unto itself. The film's characters are continuing with, as the film itself is a continuation of, purely subjective 'knowledge' its audience is presumed to be aware of. That *General Leia*, for instance, was once 'Princess' *Leia* is only inferenced by *Han Solo* (dir. Abrams 2015, min. 01:20:23), and again insinuated by *C-3PO* (reprised by Anthony Daniels) in a humorous slip of the tongue (dir. Abrams 2015, min. 01:20:14-01:20:16); indeed, one could argue that it is only humorous because *General Leia*'s renowned status as 'Princess' *Leia* during *Episode*s *IV*, *V*, and *VI* has changed. Several other moments sprinkled throughout the film, serving no intrinsic purpose in and of themselves, also appeal objectively to the audience's subjective 'knowledge' of the *Star Wars* dialect: When *Finn* (played by John Boyega) picks up the same remote droid *Luke Skywalker* (played by Mark Hamill) did back in *A New Hope*, but unfamiliar with its purpose, tosses it aside (dir. Abrams 2015, min. 48:53); or when *Rey* (played by Daisy Ridley) unveils *Luke Skywalker*'s, formerly *Darth Vader*'s (voiced by James Earl Jones, played by David Prowse, Sebastian Shaw, and Hayden Christensen, respectively), lightsaber for the first time (dir. Abrams 2015, min. 01:05:30-01:05:32), the significance of this weapon's history is all but unknown to her.
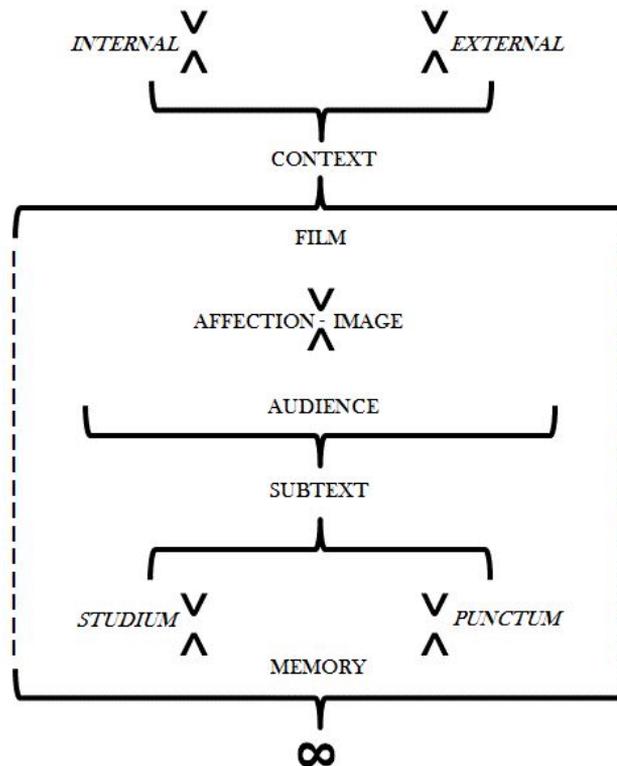

Figure 1.

Instead of easing 'real connections between all these givens', *The Force Awakens* actively encourages them, in what many popular critics have heavily criticised for being

too nostalgic. Yet this nostalgia is an altogether different process than remembering, or memorising, is for the audience; rather, it is a unique combination of the two processes, simultaneously, with its own effect. Where popular critics, like Dan Golding and Peter Suderman, are hasty to criticise 'material that asks us to remember some *Star Wars* films, but not others' (Golding 2015, para. 6) while 'appeal[ing] to nostalgia for the widely beloved original [*A New Hope*]' (Suderman 2015, para. 8), it is this same 'nostalgia' that further involves the audience into the film, as a film made especially for the audience. Their deliberate involvement is one also confirmed by Abrams himself in a December 2015 interview he gave with Scott Dadich:

> '*The Force Awakens* has this incredible advantage, not just of a passionate fan base[,] but also of a backstory that is familiar to a lot of people […] If you are a fan of [the] *Star Wars* [dialect], what they [the characters] experience [in the film] will have added meaning.' (2015, para. 7)

This "added meaning" not only comes from the film, but like the Larsen effect, is contributed to by the audience, thus amplifying its 'affection-image[s]' as well as their affect, and heightening the audience's overall experience of the film.

Quietly, the days of 1983, though no more or less important now than then, slip farther and further away by contemporary standards; and so they should, and so shall this, as the nature of audience, and that of film, continues onwards. Like *The Force Awakens*, this paper is as much a part of the present as it is of the past, one that could not be construed otherwise. It has revealed a subtle yet complicated series of processes running seamlessly and rather elegantly throughout an audience, without which the 'affection-image' would be unable to properly affect. Characterised here for the first time instead as a "memory-image", in an effort to redress, as well as empower, audience as concept independently of the 'affection-image[s]' for their attraction, theirs is a sorely misunderstood function in the appreciation of film, one which drives, and ultimately fuels, the industry of entertainment. While the impacts of this industry on the 20th and 21st Century audience are yet to be properly scrutinised in direct regards to time, with the preliminary groundwork for its nature now established, it is only a matter of—time.

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