

Why Do People Go to the Cinema?

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THE QUEST FOR CULTURAL IDENTITY: WHY DO PEOPLE GO TO THE CINEMA?

WE ARE currently witnessing an unprecedented wave of international symposia devoted to the attempt to save traditional cinema viewing systems from total industrialisation. In an epoch ever more characterised by a world economy based entirely on profit, and by what I would call a New Pragmatism deriving from the population explosion, it may in fact be understandable that artistic criteria suffer.

Centralised, intensive industrial monopolies exist by virtue of a levelling of public taste on a lowest-common-denominator basis, and thus appear to be imposing it. Subsistence of the American movie machine depends on popularising the mediocre. The temptation therefore grows to forego quality simply to maintain the cinema as a form of popular culture. It is overlooked that "popular" and "culture" do not always coincide. Mass acceptance becomes the measure; all other criteria become luxuries.

When we congregate to discuss ways of "saving" cinema, aware of the imposition of commercialism and its power pull, we assume that certain basic mechanisms of cinema viewing are axiomatic.

We assume, for example, that people choose the film they want to see. We also assume that they will go out of their homes to see it, or at least we continue to hope that they will, despite the fact that electronics can provide for a viewing at home. And we assume that some films have more of a public pull than others. But the assumption we almost never question, is that when people do go out of their homes for a cinematic experience, it is the film that makes them do so. And yet all of modern exhibition experience should help us disprove this "fact."

It is in this concept, "cinematic experience," that most research is necessary. In order to define and promote the cinema of tomorrow we must understand more fully what actually constitutes this concept. We need to understand more fully why people go to the movies. Even when television first began draining viewers from cinemas, we understood that the cinema offered a social experience which the home showcase does not offer. For many years we illuded ourselves that this fact alone would save cinema. Today we have realised that when it is a question of seeing a specific work, people are just as happy to see it in the living room.

And yet people still go to cinemas. Less of them go, but they go. But it seems that what we globally call "social experience" is important to only about a tenth of the total number of people who watch films, if we count home viewers. Are the social needs of these few different from the social needs of those who remain in their electronic lairs?

If we ever want to increase this percentage or even maintain it at its present level, we must first and foremost understand, in detail, the meaning of "social experience." We must understand it not only as a movie-going stimulant, but as a sociological drive as such. Because movie-going is only one form of social experience. The science of the drive of man to congregate is a science never fully seen in the light of modern community structures.

What we have established, the world over, as modern community structures, are systems of communal cohabitation that tend to isolate the individual. The car, the telephone, radio and television, the Internet, even modern dance, make it possible for the individual to remain ever more within his own space. We call all these "media of communication," whereas in actual fact they separate us.

And yet, ethologically speaking, the human being is a tribal animal, depending not only for his subsistence on others, but psychologically dependent on his reflection in the eyes of others for his own sense of identity. In order to survive, physically and mentally, we cannot remain alone. We simply need each other.

This need is our major instinct. Despite Freud, the need to belong is stronger than the need to survive (we go to war, ready to die, in order to be part of our group's sense of identity), and sex, obviously, is only a function of the need to belong. Throughout history, well-known recently and less well-known in "prehistoric" times, excommunication was a major punishment, power only a supreme way of belonging.

Today, isolated by technology, by the ever-smaller family, by the tradition of individualism, by the industrial obsession to compete, by hubris, the theory of man's supremacy, by the disappearance of nature, we are ever more lonely. We live, in a modern age, with instincts that can no longer be satisfied. The conflict between our biology and our reality is evident in all the things we do. We have invented the conflict between the individual and society to replace the conflict between our needs and our real life.

We will do anything in order not to be alone.

The drive to congregate represents an immense energy. If we understood it correctly, if we analysed its components accurately, if we applied our understanding and our analysis to the movie-going habit, we could not only learn why people go to movies, but might also learn of ways to make them do so. What is it, in practical terms, that people seek when they assemble? I am not a sociologist and not an ethologist, and my observations must remain personal and subjective. But what strikes us when we see a group of people slowly increase in number, as in a bar, at a party, at a football game, in a large Italian family?

First of all, in all these cases, the volume of the conversations increases. People in groups are simply louder than people in couples. Secondly, hierarchies are quickly established: one or a small group-within-the-group become the leaders, the central pivots. Often violence increases, mutual considerations decrease. Self-aggrandizement is rampant: people tell each other things in which they are shown to have excelled. Pride is shown. Superficiality grows. The general feeling is one of "me too, me too!" Most of the time it is not a pleasant development.

What all this means, probably, is that people are quite willing to give up their best characteristics in order to feel that they are part of a whole. It is better to be a little superficial than to be alone. To accept the group's values is the cost. It is the same as buying fashionable clothes which bear no relation to our own essence (the basis of the entire fashion industry). So we go to see *Rambo* because our friends are seeing it. The fear of loneliness is the basis of the American cinema monopoly.

These negative elements that human assembly produces cannot, however, to my mind, be the only symptoms of our social drive. According to Robert Ardrey we learnt to cooperate, and thus to seek cooperation, when we learned how to hunt in groups -- the only way to survive in a world where animals had teeth, skins, speed, strength, a million natural weapons, and all we had was intelligence. Cooperation became an instinct: through it we survived and will, perhaps, survive. We are a species that cooperates by nature. Isolation of the individual will kill us.

It would therefore seem logical, that seeing a film cannot be the only thing that will make people seek a social experience. Research conducted recently in Germany by the European Institute of Cinema in Karlsruhe seems to indicate that people choose a film they want to see on the basis of the situation in which it is presented, not on the basis of what film it is. This is crucially important.

In Locarno, Switzerland, the yearly film festival shows films on an immense public square, where in front of a giant screen up to 9000 people per evening congregate to see the film of the day. People go to this Piazza to see their friends, to have a meal, to gossip, to be part of the tremendous impact this public screening entails. And they will go every night, *never mind what film is showing*.

When I was a child, I saw my first film ever in a "cinema" in Gaza, in Palestine. This was during World War II. The film was divided into ten-minute segments, of which one was shown every hour. In between, belly dancers, magicians, bands and singers appeared on the stage. People went for the entire evening, to be part of that circus. The film was only part of that experience.

One of the great success stories of the modern cinema is the IMAX cinema. Here on a giant screen films are shown in the most technically-perfect way yet invented for a cinema. The camera itself has the film running horizontally, and it is 70mm in width. The result is an unsurpassed image quality. Tickets are very expensive, but people pay them and go to IMAX cinemas without asking what film is showing. In fact, there are very few Imax films, and they are shown again and again. And people go again and again.

The typical family situation where the question is asked, first, "shall we go to the movies tonight?" and only then, *in second place*, the question is raised as to what film they want to see, is too typical to be mentioned.

The same principle -- experience first, name of film second -- is also, of course, at the base of the whole Multiplex experience.

In the phrase "let's go see a movie," the stress is on "let's go!," not on "see a movie." It is therefore a useless calculation to say that people don't like a certain film. In fact, what they don't like is a certain situation. Box office results do not represent an accurate measure for the quality of a film, only an accurate measure for the way it is being presented.

Everything research has taught us about the origin of man shows that we were, for most of our history, hunters and gatherers. In other words, we lived on what nature provided. Individuality was not of great importance to the race's survival.

With the invention of agriculture about 9000 years ago, "artificial" food spurred the population explosion. A field became either mine "or yours." Nature was no longer the sole arbiter of our subsistence. The cleverer farmer had the biggest apples. The idea of possession began to control -- and to poison -- our existence. Individuality -- being a better farmer -- began to count. Survival now depended on it. For 9000 years we have been the victims of it, extolling its values over and above our natural instincts. Setting yourself aside or above the group suddenly was important. And deadly. There was no longer space for us all, only for the clever ones. Or the rich, or the powerful, or the cruel, or the intolerant. This we call modern history.

Nevertheless, individuality gave us culture, civilization, love, art, thought, science -- and cinema. We may not be instinctually individualistic, but individualism has given us everything good and everything bad that we have created. We cannot escape it. We must live with the conflict.

Today we are passing into a new era. Where it was essential in the past to be individualistic in order to survive, it now becomes less and less practical to be so. We are probably approaching, evolutionally, the status of bees or ants, where we are only useful to the survival of the species if we give up our differences. It is already "unpractical" socially or economically to have too many individual notions.

One of the more fortunate results of the conflict between instinct and reality which has marked the last few thousand years of our existence, is the growth of the faculty we call fantasy.

On a simplistic level: when it became clear to our ancestors that they couldn't live how their instincts dictated, they began to "imagine" another form of existence, more kin to their dreams. Unable to live these fantasies in the present, they catapulted them into what they began calling the "future." Possibly all of our inventiveness, all other creativity, all art, starting with cave paintings, all the fancy inherent in human imagination, but also all the fear (of the future) and guilt (over the past) are fruits of this most dramatic of human inventions: time.

Time is the weapon we invented to deal with the impossible present. The sense of time is what separates us from all other beings, and thus fantasy, a function of time, becomes the most central of human traits. And fantasy gave us -- among everything else -- the cinema. The cinema: the art of the orchestration of time. The cinema: the most potent weapon we have to deal with the impossible present.

These may seem extreme, and simplistic views. They may appear ill-placed in a lecture concerning the crisis in our movie-going habits. But if we do not research the very roots of our social behaviour, we shall not change the trend of the time. And the trend of the time is the loss of individuality, is the need to do as others do, the need to be an ant in the ant-heap, a sheep in the herd.

Once we decide that we do not like what may be a natural development, namely that culture is a luxury in an epoch of decreasing individuality, we must invent systems of survival for our cultural identity which are based on a deeper understanding of our instincts -- deeper than we are used to doing. We must take into consideration who the human being *is*, what we, the human animal, need in order to survive in a destroying ambience. We must look much deeper into our own past than we are used to doing.

In the nomad world of our ancestors we could afford to be judged by our peers on the basis of who we *were*. Today, in the world of possessions, we are judged on the basis of what we *have*. This difference is at the base of our entire, modern, social experience. All our daily encounters can, in some way, be defined by this dialectic.

Who does not, today, own large libraries of films on videocassette? Who has not come home from a trip to India with snapshots of the Taj Mahal? Who is immune to the illusion of independence provided by modern gadgets, cars, computers, houses, clothes?

All these are only proof of the basic psychological compromise of our time: individuality expressed through ownership, through having. We no longer experience the films, we own them. We no longer enjoy the Taj Mahal, we take it home. The car does not confer social status because we change as human beings when we change the car, but because we *possess* the symbols that represent the status. We *buy* the status. Billion-dollar industries are built on this fatal industrialisation of emotions.

Why do we become louder when we find ourselves in groups? Why do we suddenly talk of exploits, real or invented? Why do we get drunk more readily in company and always want to make our companions drink, too? Or take drugs with us? Or -- *à la rigueur* -- go to bed with us? Why do we go to the Piazza in Locarno without even knowing, sometimes, what film is playing? And, finally, why are we never really happy with what we have?

The ethologist -- the scientist who researches animal behaviour and applies his findings to homo sapiens -- has a simple answer to all these questions: *having* is not enough. Deep down, despite the deformations of thousands of years of upturned values, we still need the feeling of *being*. And we get the feeling of being primarily through being accepted by our peers. So we talk loudly, we tell stories about ourselves the heroes, we drink in togetherness, we copulate, we try to experience life sensually, from "to sense," which means being aware of what exists around us and perceive it emotionally. Sensuality is a synonym for togetherness.

Of course we do not only go to the cinema in order to escape loneliness. But we prefer, most of the time, to pay in order to see a film in company rather than take the cassette off the shelf and look at it alone. Somehow the emotional perception is different. Company makes a difference. And so we want to *have* that, too. We materially acquire what we emotionally crave. That is how our basic instincts have become big business.

Now fantasy can be purchased.

History cannot be wound back like a film, or stopped on a single frame. We shall probably have to live with the monster we have created, and find ways to utilise the new energies which commercialism imposes. Because these energies are there, and they can be steered. Once we accept that we are now in the business of selling emotions, there is nothing to stop us from choosing the emotions we want to sell. Salvation lies in this direction.

If, together with the showing of a film, we supply something -- anything -- that purveys the sense of existence, the sense of *being* alive, of being part of something bigger than ourselves (which is, by the way, what religions do), if we convey a feeling around the film to be seen which promises a sensual experience, if we create, around the film, an *event* based on participation, if the aura of social encounter is promoted and maintained, and if we establish this kind of film viewing as the norm, then there is no reason why we need to fall back on mediocrity to give people a feeling that they are in tune with the time. Quality, too, can be a norm. It just hasn't really been tried as such.

Of course, it isn't enough to give people popcorn, hamburgers, video games in the lobby and decent seats. There are many theories about what the New Filmgoing should actually consist of. Architects are at work trying to design a film theatre with a new, social dimension. Research is afoot to understand phenomena, like the Multiplex, that are already partially successful. And of course film makers continue their eternal struggle to find a formula for the film of tomorrow. But what we have so far are good ideas, no definitive answers

Lacking a final answer doesn't mean we don't have indications of the direction in which it may lie. We know that there has to be an event, something that home electronics, even with perfect technique, can never supply. We know that there has to be a social dimension, again something you don't get in the living room. We know that sensuality is not just sitting back and passively taking in a prepared emotion. We know that the evening cannot be limited to a film showing. We know that we must convey the sense of sharing and of actively joining a peer group, with the stress on "actively." We know the evening must live. That it must be

something, finally, that engages us, not something that makes us escape.

This last may be the most important. The concept of "entertainment," upon which cinema selling techniques are based, is in reality only another way of saying mediocrity. It has proven marvellously proficuous to carry people out of the real world into a sphere of total removal from their own lives. Entertainment has come to symbolise this removal. Cleverly, a stigma has been attached to works that do not remove us from truth. We are back to the first inventors of fantasy, back to the conflict between instinct and actuality. But everything marvellous that fantasy entails has been cut. Where once fantasy was at the base of our individuality, it is now the measure of our low-common-denominator mediocrity.

Therefore it is dangerous to rely only on the film to create an evening's event. A sense of togetherness is also provided by *Rambo*. Not because it is a "good" film. But because everybody else is looking at it.

This may be the real secret of the American success. To have brought public taste to a low level and then to have postulated this low level as the norm. The norm, because it is popular. Popular because it is the norm.

It would be another nail in the coffin of individuality if we accepted the notion that adjustment to a norm is only another form of individuality. And yet this is, more or less, what we are doing.

Mediocrity as the norm of life is certainly not a phenomenon limited to the world of the cinema. What is happening in cinema is only a small, tip-of-the-iceberg indicator of a much, much larger, phenomenological, cultural decline. The McDonald Lifestyle is rampant in all our pursuits: in dress, in food, in music, in social behaviour, in technology, in the form the media is taking, in the leisure industry, in business etiquette, in art, in education, in family relationships, in our disdain of history, in our destruction of nature, and in our growing lack of respect for ourselves.

Our cultural identity can only be maintained if we remember who we are. And if we respect ourselves for it. We are not endangered as cinema-goers; we are endangered as human beings.

(A working paper for the symposium The Cinema of Tomorrow, in Karlsruhe, Germany, 19 November 1996, organised by the European Institute of Cinema. Participants were well-known film makers, sociologists, technological experts, scientists and critics. The above are random thoughts in connection with the topic of the symposium, the purpose of which is to explore the future of the cinema as a public art.)



Figure 1: Going to the movies: Buster Keaton in his *Sherlock Jr.*

Author Information

Gideon BACHMANN is a distinguished Europe-based writer, critic, filmmaker and interviewer. He has over the years become internationally known for his writings on Pasolini, Fellini and others. He works out of London and Rome, and he is to be found at most of the world's film festivals acting as translator at press conferences.