

Thursday, 07 May 2020

OPINION PIECE

Contemplating the future of watching movies after COVID-19

By Dr Chris Broodryk, Chair: Drama Studies, University of Pretoria

The socio-economic impact of the novel coronavirus on movies, and specifically theatre attendance, has been profound. In addition to the COVID-19-related challenges faced by the entertainment industry (the makers), there is also the risk of losing movie theatre audiences who opt to pursue their entertainment elsewhere. This renders the still-dominant traditional film exhibition model of the physical movie theatre dedicated to screening feature films difficult, if not impossible, to sustain. It is still too early to make predictions about the future of the movie-going experience, but it is worth contemplating some key ideas and events.

Globally, cinema attendance, or movie theatre attendance, suffered a first blow when social distancing came into effect as reports and evidence of a fast-spreading coronavirus emerged from China and Europe. As the virus began to spread around the world, social distancing became self-isolation and then in some cases a mandatory national lockdown that regulates social behaviour. Drama and film festivals were cancelled (in Australia, even the Melbourne Film Festival scheduled for August was cancelled); major Hollywood films delayed their releases with up to a year; and movie theatres closed their doors for what remains an indefinite period of time.

According to National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF) half-year reports, the South African box-office earned R568.1 million in 2017, R631 million in 2018 and R590 million in 2019 between January and June of each year. Losing a month or more of this box-office income is an enormous financial loss with additional socio-economic repercussions. In South Africa, movie exhibitors Nu Metro and Ster-Kinekor were finding ways to remain open by facilitating social distancing by selling a limited number of tickets to screenings and by implementing “buffer seats” between customers. On 19 March, Ster-Kinekor announced that their movie theatres would be closed from 24 March in alignment with the national lockdown. Nu Metro also shut down their movie theatres from 23 March until the end of the lockdown period. (Keep in mind that in South Africa we've barely entered autumn, with the winter's full repertoire of colds and flus still heading our way.) Film exhibition in South Africa remains part of the bundled value services provided by “shopping mall complexes located in rich (mostly white) suburban areas” in which Hollywood products remain culturally and financially dominant, writes Astrid Treffry-Goatley (2010:48).

Movie theatres in the United States first limited the number of patrons allowed at screenings before all movie theatres started to completely shut down from late March 2020. Many major studio releases were pushed back for later release: the much-anticipated new James Bond film, *No Time To Die*, was supposed to be released in April but is now opening in November. Other major releases such as *A Quiet Place II* and *F9* have postponed their global releases by as much as a year, reported Jake Coyle for the Associated Press.

In the esteemed journal *Film History*, Richard Koszarski (2005) revisited the impact of the 1918-1919 influenza pandemic on movie theatres and production companies in the United States, as reported in the American film trade journal “Moving Picture World”. Koszarski recounts that in America 675, 000 deaths were attributed directly to the influenza. During this pandemic, some American distributors fought initial government

initiatives to limit infections, a conflict which nearly ended up in a major legal battle around the American government's level of control over private business. Movie theatres shut down. Koszarski points out that it is impossible to estimate the total financial impact of the pandemic-mandated movie theatres closures; certainly, the cost was severe. Indeed, Koszarski includes excerpts from "Moving Picture World" which indicate that while movie theatres had initially reopened to soaring movie ticket sales, these sales soon dropped significantly in major cities such as Boston.

Writing in The Atlantic, [David Sims anticipates](#) echoes history by expecting a sharp rise in movie theatre attendance following a period of self-isolation and government mandated lockdown. TIME's [Eliana Dockterman is more realistic](#), I think, in anticipating a dearth of content made for cinematic release as the corona crisis continues: at a certain point, there will be no more big-budget franchise films such as the latest Marvel releases to lure audiences back into movie theatres. During the lockdown both major movie studios and independent studios have simply not been able to continue with productions. In addition, there is the tangible likelihood that audiences would have become used to the more affordable streaming services of home viewing during lockdown. Families are developing new routines around how they consume content where going to the movies over the weekend is not currently an option. If streaming services posed an existential threat to movie theatres before, that threat is even greater now – even if Netflix cannot continue making its own content while the corona crisis is ongoing.

How would South African filmmakers adopt an alternative exhibition and distribution model that did not rely on the spaces provided by traditional movie theatres? Director Oliver Hermanus' critically acclaimed queer military drama *Moffie* (2020), based on the eponymous novel by André Carl van der Merwe, opened in South Africa on Friday 13 March 2020. Soon after the national lockdown was announced, Hermanus announced on Twitter that they were exploring alternative ways to get the public to see the film. By 31 March South African viewers were able to [watch *Moffie* online](#). Tickets cost R150, and the film has a limited viewing window. Keeping in mind that two adults could watch *Moffie* at home for R75 per person, and that no money is spent on parking fees and sweets combos, R150 for a single *Moffie* viewing is a very reasonable price. It's cheaper than a cinema viewing. In the United States, Universal Studios released their hit horror *The Invisible Man* online for \$19.99. Going by the current exchange rate, that's nearly R400 per single viewing, or nearly R200 per person for a couple who want to watch the film at home. In the United Kingdom, arthouse distributor [Curzon](#) will make *Moffie* available for paid online home viewing from 24 April 2020.

[Statista](#) puts the number of South Africans internet users in January 2020 at 36.54 million; of this number, 34.93 million are mobile internet users. According to a draft study of audience trends in South Africa by the [KwaZulu-Natal Film Commission](#) in 2017, content consumption on the internet is expected to demonstrate a compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) of 32.8% between 2015 and 2020, while cinema attendance would show only a 6.7% CAGR during the same period.

Making major feature films available online locally has emerged as a functional way to complement traditional exhibition, not replace it, since home viewing cannot replicate one of the key aspects of going to the movies: sharing an emotional experience with complete strangers in a public space. The notions of 'sharing' and 'public' go hand in hand. I address this and certain extant points below.

- A quantitative [audience research report](#) compiled for the NFVF by Devnomics in 2015 provides in its fourth section a "Catalogue of Detailed Findings – Adults" which amongst other things explores the frequency of cinemagoing for adults in South Africa. In response to the question, "How often do you go to the cinema to watch films?", more than 50% of the respondents replied that they go to the movies "as often as there is something interesting to watch". In addition, 33.21% of respondents indicated that they go to the movies at least once a month. The two other activities most associated with going to the movies are eating at a restaurant (33.90%) and going for a drink (22.08). In describing the characteristics of their ideal cinema, respondents indicated that safety and comfort are the two most important features of an ideal cinema.

Overall, the respondent feedback frames going to the movies as a highly social act often accompanied by specific rituals that further emphasise the social nature of a shared emotional experience. Very few people have the means to build their own private cinema, and the very idea of a private cinema itself is anathema to the idea of cinema as a shared social experience. Yes, we can attend so-called Netflix Parties and we can share our thoughts on responses to a film online using social media as a more rage-prone word-of-mouth mechanism. The joy of going to the movies is to share an experience shared with strangers who in the moment of viewing laugh suddenly or cry out at what's happening on screen.

- South African audiences are often reluctant to spend their limited disposable income on luxury activities such as going to the cinema, and they are particularly concerned about spending their money on local productions that are often perceived to lack the polish and professionalism of international features. In a time of higher unemployment figures and even more restricted disposable income for millions of people, the traditional moviegoing experience will probably remain as privileged an entertainment activity as it has always been, especially in South Africa. What makes audiences less or more likely to go to the movies? The number one problem, according to respondents in the Devnomics (2015) report mentioned above, is that going to the movies is too expensive, making them less likely to attend cinema screenings regularly. On the other hand, respondents indicated that they are likely to continue going to the cinema because of the freedom and breadth of choice on offer, and because it is a social habit. Interestingly, these are the two main reasons according to respondents why they would be likely to continue watching movies on the internet as well.
- There needs to be considerable state support for all aspects related to film, from revised production incentives to radical audience (re)development measures. The NFVF, the Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) and the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) will have to be creative in making it possible to resume existing production work and start with new productions. Local exhibitors will need to receive state support to make sure that local filmmakers still have access to theatrical exhibition with the support of local audiences. In a time of austerity and with South Africa's recent credit status downgrade to full junk status, these industry stakeholders face a considerable challenge. Sadly, the Cape Film Commission (CFC), which was a not-for-profit organisation, ceased to operate in 2016 due to lack of operational financial support from the local and provincial government.
- Finally, as much as online streaming platforms have it possible to sustain some viewing habits and provide access to local and international films, we must avoid algorithm complacency. Viewers have already become used to relying on advanced algorithmic implementation to suggest (or determine) viewing content for individual users. Netflix, for instance, uses advanced algorithm innovation to recommend viewing to users. During this time, it is important that we then additionally recognise the cultural significance of film criticism in facilitating and fuelling film debates and conversations in a way no algorithm can.

-Ends-

Media inquiries:

For interviews with Dr Broodryk, please call him on +27 (0) 84 528 7916 or email him at chris.broodryk@up.ac.za. Interview requests can also be made to Liesel Swart on 082 672 0067 or at liesel@roundtree.co.za.

ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on the Hatfield Campus, Pretoria. This 112-year-old institution is also the largest producer of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only university in the country that has a Faculty of Veterinary Science which is ranked top in Africa, and overall has 120 academic departments, as well as 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 55 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes.

UP is one of the top five universities in South Africa, according to the 2019-2020 rankings by the Center for World University Rankings. It is also ranked among the top 100 universities worldwide in three fields of study (veterinary science, theology and law), and among the top 1% in eight fields of study (agricultural sciences, clinical medicine, engineering, environment/ecology, immunology, microbiology, plant and animal sciences and social sciences).

In June 2019, the annual UK Financial Times Executive Education Rankings once again ranked GIBS as the top South African and African business school. The University also has an extensive community engagement programme with approximately 33 000 students involved in community upliftment. Furthermore, UP is building considerable capacities and strengths for the Fourth Industrial Revolution by preparing students for the world beyond university and offering work-readiness and entrepreneurship training to its students.

As one of South Africa's research-intensive universities, UP launched the *Future Africa Campus* in March 2019 as a hub for inter- and transdisciplinary research networks within UP and the global research community to maximise 4IR innovation and address the challenges and stresses our continent and world is facing. In addition, UP also launched the Javett Art Centre in September 2019 as a driver of transdisciplinary research development between the Humanities and other faculties. In 2020 UP will launch Engineering 4.0. as a hub not only for Smart Cities and Transport, but also to link the vast resources in technology and data sciences to other faculties via Future Africa. These initiatives are stimulating new thinking at the frontier of 'science for transformation'.

For more information, go to www.up.ac.za