

MAJOR PROJECT

MA EDITING & POST-PRODUCTION

Literature review and critical analysis

Date: 05.09.2024

Video Essay:

Link: <https://youtu.be/77SIKXBUzJ0>

MA Showreel:

Link: <https://youtu.be/uevBBvsNoLo>

Research question:

How today's audience generated, and what effect did it have on spectatorship?

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1. Literature Review

For my major project, I wanted to explore the shift in audio-visual consumption, and how since the mid-nineties it has affected the viewer and the industry.

As *Bela Balazs (1924, p. 8)* says “*More than any other art, film is a social art, one that in a sense is created by the audience. Every other art is shaped in its essentials by the artist's taste and talent. In the case of film, the audience's taste and talent will be the decisive factors.*”

The home computers and later the smart phones have created mass media consumption, first uncontrolled but later extremely orchestrated to the smallest detail. This led the seventh art into unknown territory.

I believe during my research I would gain a much deeper understanding about how the audience and the industry reacted to that.

1.1 The audience journey

People have watched movies on different kind of platforms throughout the years. It begun as magic, showing short clips in small cafe shops, saloons, storefronts and vaudeville theatres. As *Bela Balazs* states in *The Early Film Theory (1924)* “*Up to now the cinema has been the happy paradise of naivety where it was not necessary to be clever, educated and critical...*” Up to now they were only kids looking at a magic trick, but as movie theatres and studios expanded, films began their own journey of growth. This growth process subtly educated audiences about the possibilities of cinema, introducing more complex storytelling, the impact of editing, and the purpose of various camera angles. The addition of sound and the development of colour in films further enhanced the audience's engagement with the medium.

The 1950s-1960s saw a rapid adoption of TV sets in US households, growing from 9% to 95%, marking a significant shift in audio-visual consumption habits. Television's introduction started the creation of content tailored for small screens, changing audience behaviour more dramatically than the advent of sound and colour in cinema. The film stepped out into the light, left the darkness of the matinee as Barthes called in *Leaving the Movie Theatre (1975)* the “cinema situation”, the pre-hypnotic state of the “twilight reverie” has been left behind, and we entered to an era where the audience gave up the magic and excitement for a piece of furniture. People fell in love with comfort, and the power of turning a program off. The 1970s-1980s witnessed a shift towards private, personalized viewing experiences with TV, followed by the rise of home video technologies like 8mm cameras and VHS, empowering individuals in film-making. The mid-1990s brought another transformation with widespread adoption of personal computers and the internet, altering how people interacted with audio-visual information. The digital era, shaped largely by consumer needs for convenience and comfort rather than scientific or artistic innovation. With the disappearance of physical media, the audience overconsumed without being visually reminded. The first brick of the checklist generation has been laid down.

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The widespread use of mobile screens in our everyday life have flooded people with content 24/7. As *Leon Wieseltier (2015)* says “*I think we're accelerating ourselves beyond what our hearts and our minds can actually absorb. We're all just living checklist lives, we're all just getting things done.*” This is a crucial observation in my opinion as we are talking about a behavioural change that reaches every segment of our lives. The digital revolution in the last 30 years has shifted our perception of fulfilment, entertainment, joy. When films moved from the big screen to tv the form had to adopt, but with this new type of distribution, substance has to change as well. It is not about the frequent use of cuts or close up shots, or the loss of depth of field anymore, but about simplified, unchallenging storytelling.

In 2024, the line between digital natives and digital immigrants (*Prensky, 2001*) has dissolved, even if our computer knowledge is different, we are all participating in a system that has infiltrated every part of our lives. The early 2000s saw minimal digital engagement from the boomer generation, but contrary to expectations, they weren't left behind as they aged. For financial reasons the digital world could not afford to leave these people behind, so the tech industry prioritized user-friendly interfaces like touch screens and simplified content, effectively lowering the bar for digital adoption for everyone.

There is nothing wrong with being user friendly, in fact that is an inevitable part of progress of our everyday life. But technology became so convenient and so accelerated in problem solving that it makes real life issues seem more problematic, which has a direct effect on how depleted we are at the time we want to pick a movie. Decision fatigue in our population has reached a point where it's not only affecting how long does it take to make a decision, but it changes the way we see real life (*Tierney, 2011*). Going through our day wears us out faster mentally compared to previous generations with harder physical chores. That feeling, combined with confusion coming from the flood of content, keeps us from taking responsibility over our decision to choose a movie. Of course, whatever we end up watching with this behaviour it has less chance to succeed as with streaming we don't have the right tools to prepare ourselves for the movie, that “twilight reverie” is not there to guide us. After a long day, swiping through Instagram reels feels easier, with its bitesize emotions enough at the moment. As it works like a sedative, we only realise the next day what we had lost. This addiction makes us numb, pushes us towards boredom even if it looks like we have all the entertainment in the world. When we are bored, we want something that moves us out of our current state, we want something that's worth our time and we need assurance that we won't be in this dull state anymore so we end up choosing exploitation over exploration (*Agrawal, 2022*). When we can't decide what to watch we rather take a safe choice (*Friends, The Office*) than to take some risk and pick an unknown film or show.

I found it important to be as thorough analysing the current audience behaviour as I could, so that we could understand better where we are now and what are the possibilities to change the course of our current journey. What we are dealing with is an audio-visual addiction, where the advanced technology allowed us to overdose ourselves with an art form, and now we are on the verge of losing the ability to appreciate it.

1.2 The current playground

The mid-1990s marked the beginning of a digital transformation in media consumption, with newspapers launching online sites, the music industry embracing digital formats, and early forms of online video content emerging. These developments laid the foundation for today's personalized, on-demand media landscape, signalling a shift away from traditional media formats and towards more interactive and accessible content platforms.

1.2.1 The streamers

Netflix, the streaming pioneer since 2007, leads with 277.65 million subscribers by mid-2024, followed by Amazon Prime Video (161.7 million in 2023), Disney+ (launched 2019, over 150 million by early 2024), and HBO Max (76.8 million by end of 2022). The streaming industry has seen significant growth and evolution, with companies adapting to changing market dynamics through content investments, ad-supported tiers, and hybrid revenue models, removing viewers from cinema theatres.

1.2.2 Vertical streaming

There is another booming segment of visual entertaining in the form of vertical streaming platforms. *ReelShort*, the leading company in this area with over 30 million downloads, is spearheading a revolution in entertainment by offering 90-second "vertical series" that cater to smartphone users, particularly appealing to people seeking quick, engaging content. Despite criticism of low production quality, the format's popularity and financial success suggest vertical video streaming could become a billion-dollar industry by year's end, challenging traditional Hollywood models and serving the growing demand for easily consumable, mobile-first content.

1.2.3 AI storytelling

In 2023 Fable Studio, who worked on virtual reality projects since 2018, had announced their AI project called The Simulation. After they were able to create several unofficial South Park episodes, they launched their ai streaming platform called the Showrunner in 2024. This allows fans to take their favourite TV shows and movies into their own hands by using generative AI to create new plots using familiar characters. *"The vision is to be the Netflix of AI,"* says chief executive Edward Saatchi. *"Maybe you finish all of the episodes of a show you're watching and you click the button to make another episode. You can say what it should be about or you can let the AI make it itself."*

2. Critical Analysis

As I was planning my final project, I realised immediately that a poetic approach would serve my subject best. I wanted the audience to be able to get the essence of what we all went through since the cinema entered our lives, and how the last decade flooded us to a level that we can't comprehend. I built up my essay film so it could work on two levels. One would create an emotional response from the viewer, where the different clips following each other from different movies would help them to be invested to a psychological extent. The other level would be to make the spectator reflect on their actions by showing how overwhelming the content noise we live in.

2.1 Chapters

I choose the title *Beyond Perception* because I felt that the amount of visual content that we are bombarded twenty-four seven is just beyond what we can actually digest. The video has four chapters *The Sanctuary*, *Change beyond imagination*, *Shock*, *The kid*. I wanted them to reflect on how our relationship with cinema has changed throughout the years.

2.1.1 Chapter one – The sanctuary

In the first chapter I wanted to show mainly from the audience's point of view how this journey started. This chapter is the longest out of the four, as I found it important to give more representation to this "honeymoon" phase, so that I can lead the viewer to a joyful state. This would help the following darker chapters to create a deeper contrast creating a stronger reaction.

I collected clips where we can see people are arriving to the cinema, some late, some on time, some are already in, but they all got a ticket to enter the realm of movies. I find their childlike attitude fascinating, it's not simply joy or excitement, there are deeper elements. There lies the curiosity to understand each other and to share this with each other. For example, in *Annie Hall (1977)*, we see them waiting outside the theatre, listening to an unpleasant monologue, something you can escape from now, but for them that is part of their cinematic experience. Similar thing happens in *True Romance (1991)* where the two main characters meet by accident just by watching the same movie. The late entrance of the girl creates a beautiful contrast between the outside world and darkness of the theatre was another reason why I chose this scene.

As we get closer to the end of the chapter, I deliberately used clips of smiling, laughing clapping people falsely claiming a bright future.

2.1.2 Chapter two – Change beyond imagination

I chose the first clip for this chapter from *All about my mother (1999)* as a born of a new audience. With the appearance of TV, the only thing that mattered is the targeted and measured audience, as the clip from *Network (1977)* implies. *David Bowie's 1999 BBC*

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interview served as the spine of this chapter. I started his audio under the *Andy Warhol* (1982) clip, which I cut up to pieces and positioned them randomly, creating a jarring effect by its many jump cuts. Pop art wanted reinvent the previous cultural era, so by deconstructing it I tried to show the arriving of something different. I screen recorded various streaming platform menus to show the overwhelming number of films that are simply degraded to a sedative content. Entertainment became ubiquitous and now pleasure is in our hands and we can't help but overdose it.

“The shift towards virtual reality is a shift from one type of thinking to another, a shift in purpose, which modifies, disturbs, perhaps even perverts man's relation to what is real.” (Jean Douchet, lecture given in Paris on 20 March 1995 at a symposium called ‘Le Cinéma: vers son deuxième siècle’.)

Douchet's comment was prophetic and pioneer in many ways. Films, as other storytelling devices like books and theatre, are here to translate the incomprehensibility of life, and if we are less attached to reality, we are less able to tolerate films dealing with it.

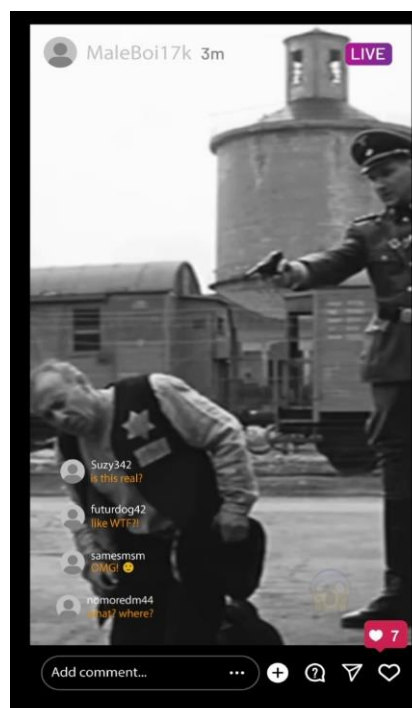
My aim was to put the viewer in an inconvenient position, so I used a shot from *Joker* (2019), keeping the laughter from this scene till the end, creating a deeper contrast with the sadness of audience members and a smile of a madman.

2.1.3 Chapter three – Shock

I chose to start this chapter with a clip from *Athena* (2022), a violent scene that shows the power of media. In the previous chapter I established how the audience got overwhelmed by the amount of content it received and how scaring was for our mental health. The background sound I used a section of audio from *Drowning by Numbers* (1988). As we are watching an absolute doom scrolling, the monotony of a kid's counting makes bed for anxiety, we know that as the numbers are growing something is coming, and we are hopelessly trying to cover our eyes or ears, and soon none of us can resist.

Second chapter I scrolled the menus of streaming platforms with real movies, this time it is Instagram reels, and ReelShort clips pointing out how our audio-visual consumption degraded to absolute comfort. To emphasise the shock element in the viewer I used a clip from one of David Bowie's songs, wearing a bandage with buttons over his eyes. He appeared as a prophet in the previous chapter but now it feels like the flood of content blinded him. Combined with *Alex's* (*A Clockwork Orange* 1971) screaming to stop it, and a song from *Requiem for a Dream* (2000) I tried to make the viewer bloated from overstimulation, the same way we are flooded by content every second. For the peak of this chapter, I used a clip from *Schindler's list* (1993), and to make it even more shocking I created an Instagram reel frame, with some messages and animation around it.

To show it as part of our daily scrolling I hoped to push the viewer from the indifferent state into an active position. The juxtaposition of a scene from a concentration camp inside a social media platform, increases anxiety in the viewer.



It was important to cut this on action, and let the audience imagine the next moment from Joachim Phoenix scared reaction, realising we can't sit still anymore.

2.1.4 Chapter four – The kid

Apart from the first clip, in this chapter which is there to set the tone, I only used black and white clips. Aesthetically it was helpful but the stillness of the pictures was crucial. We don't see cinemas anymore, or audience, not even sad ones. I took the sound of wind from *Satan's Tango (1994)*, which was there to connect scenes with its emptiness.

First, I gave the title Nothing to this chapter, but as I reached to the end, to balance the dark moments I realised it has to have a glimpse of hope. I do believe that no matter how bad things go, there is always hope in the new generation, as there is a short moment in every kid's life, where they still carry their innocence and not yet ruined by the world. I used the least number of cuts in this chapter, I let the scenes run longer so the viewer would have more time to reflect on the subject even before the movie ends.

2.2 Editing strategies and aesthetic and conceptual choices

As I used more than 70 different clips it was a real challenge of creating continuity. This meant not only to cut clips on camera or character movement, or to try to find match cuts to make visual connections, but to overlap sounds from one clip to another helping the transitions from one world to another. *"The images change, interrelate, grow, or diminish; the sound track is, in a sense, an accompaniment, a continuous flow (even though its intensity and perspective may vary) much like the musical theme that underscores a sequence. The listener's hearing is continuous-his viewing is not—and the cutter's greatest efforts are always involved with the image."* (Dmytryk, 1986)

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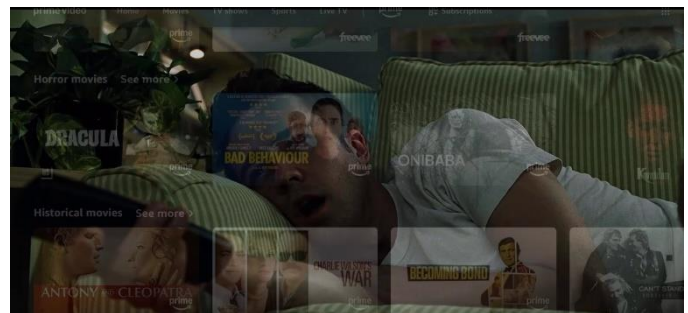
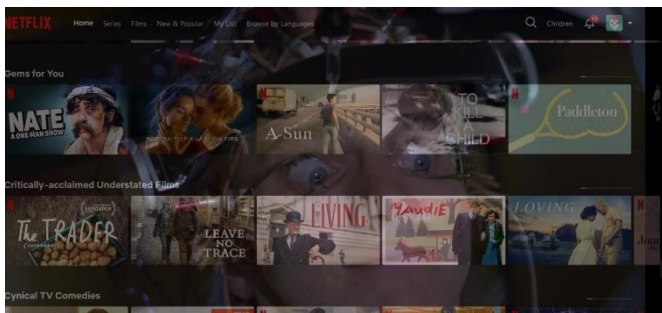
As my main task was to achieve continuity, I didn't want to risk using my narration. During my research I found scenes, that helped me to convey my message. While I only used dissolve cuts on videos where it was dramatically needed, I used it fade in and out on audio tracks constantly, blending different clips into each other smoothly with the help of J cuts and L cuts. Because of the form I chose, the narrative I created only worked if nothing alienates the viewer. I used the original audio tracks where it was possible, adding music only where it was necessary. *"Such a mixture of literal and nonliteral sounds communicates what the event is all about and also how it feels. It "shows" the outside and the inside of the event simultaneously."* (Zettl, 2011, p.303)

To understand the loneliness that was coming, it was important to find match-cuts to show human interactions during the first chapter.



I never intended to unify the clips by resolution or colour grading, sound and video editing technics helped me reach continuity. To establish the style of the film I needed to set the rhythm of the narrative. I needed to find clips with the right tone, to have an engaging dynamic which can help the story I wanted. I had a clip from *Day for Night (1973)*, where Jean-Pierre Léaud's character vehemently explains what is the right way to get to the cinema. This clip would've fit into the narrative, but since it was so energetic, so erupt I felt it would break the rhythm of the chapter. I had to find a similar clip that represented the same endorsement of cinema but with less power of emotions. I was able to replace with a young Jean-Pierre Léaud clip from *The 400 blows (1959)*.

I used superimpose effect in the second and third chapter as I had clips for both cause and reaction. To overlay action and reaction helped with the rhythm as I didn't have to break shots of the speed scrolling of streaming menus with the static shots of people's reactions. With this I was able to keep the flow of continuity.



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I tried to reflect in my film how the pace of storytelling changed from the 60's when the average shot length for mainstream Hollywood films was typically around 8 to 11 seconds, and how we are now around 3 to 5 seconds or even shorter. In the third chapter called Shock, I wanted to embrace this, to show this surge of cuts by creating a cacophonous state where harmony and rhythm is out of order. This has slowed down for the last chapter, creating a stronger contrast and giving some breathing space to the viewer.

2.3 Conclusion

Analysing how audience behaviour has changed throughout the years might seem a psychological or sociological question, but it has changed the film industry. Unlike traditional cinema, streaming allows for easier access but with that comes a potentially less committed viewership. The loss of the "pre-hypnotic stage" of movie-watching and the instant gratification provided by digital devices have altered audience expectations and tolerance for nuanced storytelling. This shift has led to a demand for less challenging, faster-paced comfort content with direct messages, making exceptions to this trend increasingly rare and noteworthy. But this measured demand is not based on taste, or knowledge, it is only a reflection of an indifferent audience.

With my project I mainly wanted to explore the current state of the audience, this confused, exhausted group of people who are represented by many choices but neither of those are fulfilling anymore. The only thing the algorithm understood was that we like comfort, missing the point that in order to be satisfied we need to be challenged.

Overall, I'm glad the way my poetic video essay turned out.

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