

Beyond the Silver Screen:  
Collective Reception among Movie Theater Audiences

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By

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On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this thesis.

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## ABSTRACT

Despite the individualistic action of sitting silently in a dark room facing a screen, movie-going often serves as an activity for first dates and family outings alike. This thesis explores the notion of group reception among movie-going audiences. While reception theories look to see how individuals interpret a piece of art based on background characteristics and audience studies look at different audience types and modes of viewing, there is a significant gap in our understanding of group reception. In this study, I have filled this gap by bringing in theories of collective behavior. I conducted 12 in depth interviews addressing movie-going experiences, in an effort to understand how seeing films in theaters impacts individuals' viewing experiences. I argue that rituals of theater-going, audience awareness, and collective reactions are three key components through which audiences can interpret a film collectively. Interestingly, not only does this act of collective reception occur, but it also plays a significant role in enlivening movie-going experiences. These findings speak to the broader significance of how being part of a group can dramatically impact one's personal experience.

It is a classic scene: a couple walks into a movie theater – it's their first date. Nervously, they make their way up the flight of stairs to the back row of seats. As the room darkens and the movie begins to play, one of them slowly places a hand over the other's shoulder, setting the stage for whatever romance is to come. However, what they watch isn't your typical romantic fare – just the opposite of it actually. As they stonily watch the drawn-out, grueling assassination of Osama bin Laden, Anna questions why she chose *Zero Dark Thirty* for a first date. Anna's story begs a common question: why would anyone choose to go to a movie on a date? Sitting in a dark room, staring not at each other but straight ahead, and not communicating do not necessarily scream romance and connection. But, time and time again, we find ourselves drawn back to theaters, compelled by the experience of seeing a movie as a part of an audience.

Despite the essential role of the audience in theater-going experiences, the movie business is struggling. Ticket sales have been in decline since 2002 with 2017 marking the lowest attendance since 1992 (Sakoui 2018). However, the movie business isn't just dwindling, it's also transforming. The advent of streaming, with options like Netflix and Amazon Prime, provides a compelling case for watching a film from the comfort of your couch (Sakoui 2018). With the presence of these diversions, what keeps us coming back to theaters?

This thesis investigates how seeing a movie in a theater impacts one's viewing experience. In answering this question, I contend that we go to theaters because we crave that social experience, as it is an essential part of what movie-going means. This paper explores topics regarding intentionality, audience awareness, and collective behavior in the context of theater-going. Existing literature states that audiences cannot receive, or understand, a movie

collectively; however, I argue that this social mode of reception<sup>1</sup> not only happens, but comes to define our movie-going experiences (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to understand how personal narratives of movie-going are impacted by the theatrical space, this literature review examines sociological approaches to reception aesthetics and audience studies. Trying to bridge the gap between those two theoretical frameworks, I also explore theories of group behavior and collective spectatorship. While there is significant theoretical literature that explores art consumption from individual and communal levels, it is worth noting that this field lacks a large body of empirical research. Because of this, I have turned to studies on spectatorship at sports events and group behavior in social movements. To conclude, I explore the intersection of collective behavior and movie-going, as it connects reception aesthetics and audience studies. Through this literature review, I hope to work towards an understanding of how audiences can receive and interpret movies as a group.

In sociology, Bourdieu's (1984) theory of cultural consumption serves as a base for investigations into individual reception and audience studies. In essence, Bourdieu (1984) argues that the formation of taste serves to differentiate between classes and class fractions (Seidman 2013). The concept of cultural capital emerges from this theory, which is a form of social currency awarded based upon cultural awareness and education. Not only are we raised to have a specific level of cultural capital because of our social class, but that cultural competency

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<sup>1</sup> In this thesis, I use several different terms interchangeably to express the idea of collective, or group-based, reception. They are: collective reception, group reception, social reception, and the social mode of reception.

also informs others about our social class, cementing our place in the structure of society. Contemporary studies often empirically apply Bourdieu's theory of social classification through cultural consumption to modern life. A study of movie-going habits found that members of an upper-class neighborhood attended more movies in theaters with a specific focus on art films, as compared to those in the working-class neighborhood, who went to fewer movies with a greater focus on popular blockbusters (Barnett and Allen 2000). This theory shines a light on how our cultural consumption behaviors reflect deeper realities about our social status. While Bourdieu's (1984) theory forms a base understanding, sociologists have additionally developed more perceptive theories for cultural consumption in both reception aesthetics and audience studies.

### *Reception Aesthetics*

Where Bourdieu's (1984) theory examines the impacts of art on society, reception aesthetics aim to understand how individuals understand art objects. The core theory from which the study of reception aesthetics stems is that audiences play an essential role in determining the meaning of any given art object (Alexander 2003). While creators can insert intended meanings into any work of art, it is the power of the audience to determine how the work will be understood and used. In essence, the consumer is the hero in the story (Griswold 1993). This idea is essential to studies of reception aesthetics as it informs us that the consumer, or spectator, has the ability to make cognitive decisions and reactions to the work, while experiencing it, that indisputably shape their own understanding of it. That said, there are also several processes at work subconsciously that impact a consumer's understanding of an art object, namely referred to as "horizons of expectations" (Alexander 2003). "Horizons of expectations" are preconceived notions, shaped by different demographic backgrounds, that a consumer has about an art object.

What this leads us to is a common understanding of reception theory – the spectator will attach meaning to the art object that is influenced by their background.

Reception aesthetics assume that art is “polysemic,” meaning that it can prompt multiple interpretations (Alexander 2003). This draws upon the larger sociological exploration of how meaning is created in individual lives (Alexander 2003). The first sub-theory that exists within reception aesthetics is referred to as “uses and gratifications,” which implies that people consume culture to gratify their own personal needs (Alexander 2003). Blumer and Katz (1974) propose exactly what those needs may be in their analysis of why people watch television. Their study found four clear needs for consumption: diversion; creation of personal relationships with characters on screen, as well as with friends and family from watching and discussing together; individual identity in comparison to on screen characters; and surveillance into the larger world (Blumer and Katz 1974). These motivations suggest that individuals not only watch for personal entertainment, but specifically because cultural consumption impacts one’s positionality within larger social systems. Regarding family relationships, for example, the television has been suggested to have replaced the hearth in the household, as the primary location for interpersonal interaction and bonding (Tuchman et al. 1978). These studies emphasize the role of cultural consumption as a necessary social tool to participate in and engage with society at large. In the context of reception aesthetics, they do not suggest that we, the spectators, place meaning on the art objects themselves, but rather on the shared experience of discussing and experiencing the objects together as a means of connecting with other people.

While understanding art objects as a catalyst for interpersonal connection forms one branch of reception aesthetics, other theories contend that we consume culture as a form of communication itself. Art objects transfer ideas and lived experiences from other groups,

classes, and societies (Storey 1993). We utilize these art objects to learn more about others who exist outside of ourselves. The creator of any given art object injects it with a preferred meaning (Hall 1980). In this case, the meaning would be an empathic response to this other culture – a willingness and ability to imagine oneself in the experience of another. All art objects have a preferred meaning, but that does not necessarily mean that it will be the meaning understood by the consumer. This process is referred to as encoding and decoding, in which the artist encodes meaning into the object through text, sound, and visuals and the consumer then decodes those meanings, incorporating myriad aspects of their identity (Hall 1980). In the translation of ideas, however, this can be lost, or misinterpreted. As spectators, we have the power to derive and create meanings from objects (Fiske 1989). That said, due to the “polysemic” nature of art objects, texts are interpreted through the mind of the spectator, which subverts and transforms the preferred meaning of the artist. Because of this, reception aesthetics emphasize that the experience of each individual spectator is unique.

### *Audience Studies*

Audience studies provide a necessary complement to reception aesthetics, specifically focusing on audience composition and how that group influences one’s consumption experience. Audience studies seek to understand how we consume art objects as a group, rather than as an individual. This begins with the idea of interpretive communities, which help to create guidelines for how to interact with an art object (Alexander 2003). An audience of dedicated theater-goers at a small, independent theater would be considered an interpretive community, as there exists a set of guidelines of how to interact with the art object on display. In this case, the guidelines would include sitting facing the screen, turning off your cell phone, remaining quiet



for the duration of the movie, and staying until the screening has ended. Even in a case such as this, when the audience likely does not communicate verbally, the unspoken code of conduct for movie-goers creates an interpretive community. Relating to Bourdieu's understandings of cultural consumption, Alexander (2003:215) explains, "People from different interpretive communities bring different horizons of expectations to the art objects they consume; therefore, they often interpret the same cultural object in different ways" (2003:215). Interpretive communities then not only provide a model for cultural consumption, but also work to differentiate between different types of audiences through those exact models.

As was outlined in the discussion of behavior among interpretive communities, there is a significant emphasis on attention in certain interpretive communities. Audience studies as a field also looks at levels of attention in engaging with various art objects (Alexander 2003). In the context of watching television, viewers may be distracted as they attend to other tasks, but the same idea can be applied to any art object (Modeleski 1984). Different objects by nature require different levels of attention, just as different levels of attention can be given to any art object. Classifying those different levels, there are primary (as close, exclusive attention), secondary (as attention given while carrying out other tasks), and tertiary levels (as a lack of conscious attention) (Turnstall 1983). Alternatively, there is a different explanative model for levels of attention, separating consumption into two modes – literary and video (Abercrombie 1992). The literary mode of viewing requires primary attention from the audience, involves chronological consumption, all while following behavioral codes. On the other hand, in the video mode, spectators either have primary or secondary attention, meaning the art object is not always the primary focus (Abercrombie 1992). Our current media environment, however, actually

emphasizes multitasking while consuming art because of the level of connection the digital age allows (Barnes 2010).

Turning away from describing the audience through levels of attention, audience studies also focus on the physical composition of the audience. There are three major types of audiences: simple, mass, and diffused (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998). A simple audience is present together in a physical, public space and they consume the art object directly (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998). A mass audience is comprised of multiple viewers that do not presently share a space, such as television viewers (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998). Diffuse audiences do not have a typical audience experience and relate to any art object in an indirect manner, as they are spread out over a variety of locations (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998). To further understand the different audience types, Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) drew up three different theoretical models of audience experiences. First off, they studied the “behavioral model,” which suggests that audiences are collections of individuals that receive the same stimuli, and then react in an individual manner (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998). They then brought in the “incorporation/resistance model,” which looks at how audiences decode meanings in a manner that reflects their social class (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998). Finally, they use the “spectacle/performance model,” which dually contends that individuals both see the world as observable and see themselves as constantly being at the center of what is being observed (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998). Drawing on sociologist Goffman’s (1959) work on self-presentation, they suggest that audiences perceive that the rest of the audience is both engaging with the art object and watching them (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998). Ultimately, they assert that individuals in audiences, no matter what their type, react to the art object, allow their horizon of expectations to color their reaction, and imagine themselves as the center of

attention. What results from this is a complex, dynamic understanding of the communal audience experience, as it is affected by space, attention, and other spectators.

However, there is a consequential gap between reception aesthetics and audience studies in that reception aesthetics focus on individual interpretation, while audience studies focus on audience composition; neither thoroughly address the question of group reception. By drawing on theories of collective behavior, I hope to bridge the gap between these two theoretical frameworks to define a social mode of reception.

### *Defining Collective Behavior*

Collectivity has been explored using several different theoretical sociological and psychological perspectives, focusing on crowd participation, social groups, and behavioral frameworks. Crowds follow patterns of social behavior, which differ from normal routine behaviors in that they are colored by collective expectations and actions (McPhail 1989, citing Blumer 1939). This key notion suggests that individuals lose their unique identity and transform into a homogenous part of a larger social mass. Where routine behaviors maintain and allow for individual identity as part of a group, elementary collective behavior involves the loss of the self and submission to group behaviors. In more contemporary theory, intentionality is identified as playing a key role in collective behavior, as are the interaction of behavior and physical place and social and personal identity (Reicher 1982). A contemporary, ethnographic study of the Manchester United football club applied Blumer's theory of collective behavior to the formation of its fandom (Millward and Poulton 2014). In line with Blumer's theory, they found that agitation and morale played a central role in group formation. As it is understood, collective

behavior centers around a group of people intentionally communicating and acting jointly in response to the same stimuli.

Viewed through the lens of social groups, collective experience gains a greater level of social complexity. Social identification theory suggests that social groups are determined by the individual membership of those that comprise them (Tajfel and Turner 2004). These social groups are characterized by a code of collective behaviors, which are labelled as positive within the group and differentiate between members of other groups (Tajfel and Turner 2004). Furthermore, the groups also share values, meaning they hold similar ideas of what is positive and what is negative (Tajfel and Turner 2004). Not only does this create a method of evaluation for members of other groups, but it also shapes the individual's understanding of their own place within a group (Tajfel and Turner 2004). The social identity theory then requires that individuals not only share behaviors, values, and personal identifications with other members of their group, but also that they take an active role in maintaining the structure of the group itself. A recent, qualitative study of decision-making processes in social movements echoed this notion, as the findings suggest groups with clear divisions of labor, or structural organization, as well as shared behavioral responsibility were more efficient in decision making (Leach 2015). From this arises the idea that structure and behavioral values play key roles in the development of group identity.

Where social identification theory focuses specifically on an individual's social group as a determinant of behavior, emergent norm theory focuses on how group dynamics impact normal behavior. Drawing on the aforementioned fundamental idea that individuals lose their personal identity when participating in collective behavior, emergent norm theory centers around the idea that new norms are created when interacting in a group setting. Space is created for new norms because, in the process of separating from one's individual identity, they abandon routine norms

for societal engagement and action. An inciting event, in this case identified as a crisis, creates a social situation that is seen as being outside of the norm, and thus a new behavioral code is created. This behavior is collective in the sense that it is both a response to the same stimulus and pushes members of the crowd to participate in a uniform way (Lemonik Arthur 2013). Emergent norm theory does not disregard social identification theory, however, as these collective behaviors are recognized to be influenced by social relations (Lemonik Arthur 2013).

While behavior does play a key role in shaping the understanding of a group, studies have shown that emotional recognition and mirroring within a group can lead to a more cohesive group identity and goal (Neville and Reicher 2011). Studying both a crowd of spectators at soccer games and a group of students in a protest, Neville and Reicher (2011) suggest that emotionality plays a key role in developing the “collective passion” for whatever cause the group may be gathered for, as does the physical act of congregating (Ismer 2011). While identities were far more uniform at the soccer game, individuals in protest were able to achieve a sense of personal identity recognition, as well as identification with the group (Neville and Reicher 2011). This notion points to the idea of the coexistence of both self-categorization and group belonging, where one can maintain both, rather than having to pick one over the other. This differs significantly from the previously explained crowd theory, in that members of a crowd may still maintain some level of individualism, while acting as a member of a larger group. From this emerges a notion of collective experience, defined by behavior, group identification, and emotionality – all of which can be directly translated to the experience of movie-going.

### *Movie-Going as Collective Experience*

Movie-going should be understood as a collective experience. It draws comparisons to other activities, such as singing in a choir or dancing in a ballet, because of their collective intention with a single, specific point of focus (Hanich 2014). As has been discussed, the viewer actively receives the film, hypothesizing, decoding, and making thematic connections throughout the watching experience. Because of this level of activity, “Quietly watching a film as part of a collective is a shared activity based on a *we-intention* and a *joint attention* focused on a collective intentional object” (Hanich 2014:339). Hanich goes on to explain this theory, coined as collective spectatorship. “*We-intention*” refers to the common interest that the audience shares while watching a movie, which is displayed by their physical presence in the audience and also their adherence to the behavioral code of the theater (Hanich 2014). “*Joint attention*” refers to the acknowledgement that the entire audience is devoted to a single point of focus, demonstrated by the silence and suspension of conversation (Hanich 2014). “*Joint action*,” is the coming together of three factors: following the behavioral code, “*we-intentions*,” and the normative agreement of viewing conditions (Hanich 2014). The action component of this idea comes from both the lack of motor activity throughout the audience and the presence of cognitive decoding (Hanich 2014). Specifically, because of the unspoken social contract of movie-going – the strict behavioral code – audience experiences become shared in intention and action (Hanich 2014, Williams 2004).

Current empirical studies have done relatively little to understand movie-going as a collective experience, or even as collective behavior. Motivations for movie-going are the closest thing to identifying audiences as groups and even those studies lack a lens of collectivism. Still, movie-goers attend the movies for three primary reasons: self-escape,

entertainment, and self-development (Tesser, Millar and Wu 2001). While these areas focus on individual motivations, movie-going is also social. Movie-goers commonly attend to gain cultural capital, with art films being more highly valued among the upper-class (Barnett and Allen 2000). Collective experience entails not only collective behavior, but also group identity and emotionality. Exploring beyond motivations to emotions, actions, and intentions, this study aims to build upon the aforementioned studies in hopes of understanding if and how collective reception occurs within movie-going audiences.

## METHODS

In order to investigate the social experience of movie-going, I conducted semi-structured interviews with Colorado College students. Colorado College is a small, highly selective liberal arts college in Colorado Springs, Colorado, at which I am also a student. All 12 participants are Colorado College Film Department Majors or Minors, either graduating in 2017 or 2018. This group represents a convenience sample and all participants have a heightened knowledge of the film industry. As students of film, they were able to draw more deeply upon their own experiences as they relate to their studies. Additionally, the participants all attended the 2018 Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah. This experience gave participants a unique perspective, in that they were able to draw comparisons between regular movie-going experiences and festival experiences. I also attended the Festival as a field research component, hoping to become close with the participants and invite them to interview for my study.

The figure below outlines the different participants in my study. It is worth noting that there is a significant gender difference in participants, as 11 identified as female and one identified as male. Exploring the Film Department's website, I looked at Majors and Minors

from previous graduating classes. While this imbalance is not typical of film students at Colorado College, there is no larger, visible trend in the gender breakdown of students within the Department. Previous research has found that while more than half of Visual and Performance Art Majors are female, the gender breakdown is not nearly as extreme as it is in my sample (Bui 2014). While the pool of participants is not representative of the gender ratio at Colorado College, there is more diverse representation in regard to race and financial aid status. In this case, financial aid functions as a rough family income index, as financial aid is calculated based on family earnings and need for aid. All participants self-identified as being from the United States with the majority hailing from the western side of the country. Though I do not anticipate the gender breakdown having a large impact on the study, it may result in greater representation of films that are marketed specifically towards females. This sample is limited by the fact that all of the participants are film students. Because of this, the study does not include the perceptions of casual movie-goers, who may not be as attuned to audience reactions. The demographic data below is written as reported by the participants during their interviews. The names of the participants have been changed to respect their confidentiality.



Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Race	Financial Aid	Percent Covered
Sarah	Female	White	No	0
John	Male, Non-binary	White	No	0
Anna	Female	White	Yes	75
Esther	Female	Mixed: Asian/White	Yes	75
Suki	Female	Mixed: Asian/White	No	0
Sophia	Female	White	No	0
Eleanor	Female	White	Yes	50
Erin	Female	White	Yes	75
Ellie	Female	White	Yes	25
Katie	Female	Mixed: White/Latina	No	0
Amelia	Female	White	No	0
Ali	Female	Mixed: Black/White	Yes	75

In winter 2018, I interviewed the participants about their different movie-going experiences. In asking the participants to interview, I described the study as exploring how we, as viewers, experience movies differently when we see them as part of an audience. I also alluded to the transformations currently occurring within the movie-going industry, specifically citing Netflix and other streaming platforms. Though I engaged with them at Sundance, I formally invited participants to interview both by email and in person during one of their class sessions. All logistical communication was either done over email or by text, at the request of the participant. Interviews lasted between one hour and one hour and 45 minutes. Interview

location was decided upon at the request of the participant, but they all took place with close proximity to the Colorado College campus. Participants chose to be interviewed at the Tutt Library, Wooglin's Coffee Shop, Cornerstone Film Department Lounge, and their own homes and apartments.

I divided the interviews into four thematically distinct sections. The first asked participants to recount their experiences at the Sundance Film Festival, focusing on their most significant audience experience at the Festival. As I had seen the participants at the Festival, we were able to discuss their experiences with a level of comfort and acquaintanceship. The second section focused on movie-going experiences outside of the Festival – what they had seen recently in theaters, what they remembered seeing in their childhood, and significant positive and negative movie-going experiences. In the third section, I asked about movie-watching experiences in private spaces, both recently and in their childhood. Finally, I asked the participants for demographic data, specifically race, gender, hometown, financial aid status, college major and minor, and postgraduate career plans. While certain probing questions were used at my own discretion, all participants were asked the same slate of questions.

Once interviewing was completed, I transcribed all interviews and then coded them using NVivo. I have removed any unnecessary dialogue, such as “ums” and “likes” from the transcriptions for the sake of clarity. I then analyzed the codes, dividing responses into thematic fields as they pertain to the social experience of movie-going.

As a colleague to many of the participants, it is likely that my position influenced the interviews themselves. Because of the small nature of the college, several participants were aware that I am a Sociology Major, conducting my thesis around movie-going experiences. With the camaraderie felt by students during projects of this nature, it is possible that they tailored the

answers or emphasized certain factors, in order to give me the richest data from their point of view. Additionally, because of my own knowledge of film culture, it is possible that participants assumed that I knew minute details about the films they mentioned. While I was often able to understand exactly what movie or plot point they were referring to, I could have very well missed certain intricacies in their responses.

## FINDINGS

### *The Ritual of Theater-Going*

Participants in this study frequently addressed the act of going to a movie in a theater as a ritualistic behavior, demonstrating intentionality within a movie-going audience. Intentionality in movie-going refers specifically to the conscious interruption of daily life by going to a movie – that audiences share a goal for the time they are in the theater (Hanich 2014). In general, they pointed to signifiers that reflected that level of intentionality that occurred prior to the movie, in the physical design of the theater, and after the movie had concluded.

Most participants began by describing the process of deciding to go to a movie in a theater. They pointed specifically to films that aligned with their own personal motivations – for example, a distinct interest in female-directed films, or a love for large scale action movies. For the most part, however, participants talked about their own preceding behaviors in theaters that have become ingrained in their own movie-going rituals. When speaking about movie-going, it is only fitting that participants began by talking about popcorn. One demonstrates intentionality in their movie-going experience, simply by putting emphasis on the presence of those golden kernels because of their close association with this special outing. Speaking generally about her own experiences, Katie said, “I like going to the theater because I like that collective experience.

I enjoy the experience of getting popcorn and being with people [during] the trailers, but when I'm at home it's not that same experience.” Katie’s emphasis on popcorn suggests that it is a part of the ritual of theater-going – that its presence highlights the intentionality one puts into that experience. In their interviews, Erin, Ali, and Esther also noted popcorn as being particularly relevant in their own movie-going experiences.

While buying popcorn does demonstrate a behavior that is very much tied to movie-going experiences, participants also noted several other, more dramatic behaviors that differentiate between individuals’ daily routines and the theatrical space. As Katie alluded to, the trailers that play before all movies are naturally part of the experience. John also talked about trailers, but in a more energetic theater environment. He described his experience going to see *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* with friends and family: “It was such a fun experience to be with all of them. We jokingly dressed up. I wore a Stormtrooper helmet and someone wore a Darth Vader mask. Even the car ride over was fun. Waiting through the previews, it was nice to have someone to talk to.” Dressing up as characters from the film as a group demonstrates an increased level of intentionality because not only do you go to the lengths of assembling the costume, but you also then show that commitment by wearing that costume publicly. In her interview, Suki spoke about a similar experience, also for a *Star Wars* movie, in which she wore a dress with the Millennium Falcon on it.

Sarah spoke about dressing up for an equally large film series – *Harry Potter*. She spoke with greater specificity about the environment attending a midnight premiere created, remarking on the ways in which the fandom influenced those ritualistic behaviors. She noted remembering, “Everyone has to take their witch hat off when the movie starts and [is] standing in line and talking about the books.” While these behaviors were geared towards the specific *Harry Potter*

premiere, the action of taking off the witch hats so that other people can see refers to the communal action of sitting down together to watch a movie, as an interpretive community (Alexander 2003). Knowing that the hats would block the view of other spectators, the witches and wizards prioritized the viewing experience of other's by removing their hats. This act, or behavioral code, suggests the intentionality of coming together in a theater to share a viewing experience (Hanich 2014, Alexander 2003).

These behavioral codes were more closely followed at the Sundance Film Festival, where participants noted a stricter behavioral code of conduct. Sophia commented directly on this, saying, "Generally, the audiences were pretty quiet. I was scared to do those things [using her phone] in those theaters because I saw some volunteers getting mad at a girl for using her phone which I was like, 'yeah, thank you. I don't want to see that light,' but after seeing that I was like, 'I can't do any of these things.'" This more intentional behavior and respect for the movie-going practice was intensified at Sundance, as volunteers attentively policed the theaters. While all of these preceding behaviors – getting popcorn, watching trailers, dressing up for a screening, and sitting down to watch something together – suggest Hanich's (2014) theory of intentionality in the film-going experience, participants also commented on how theaters are built to create intentionality among their audiences.

Theaters use their physical space to direct audience attention and build off of that intentionality that exists within a group of spectators (Hanich 2014). The communal hush before a movie begins is one of the most notable displays of intentionality, which often happens in conjunction with the lights going down. Again, commenting on his *Star Wars* viewing experience, John said, "There was a level of group excitement, where everyone's talking before and then the lights go down and you feel that excitement, like the lesser degree of a sporting

event.” That ritualistic silence, for John, communicates excitement. It is the audience nonverbally expressing their willingness to sit in that silence for the next two hours and give their attention to that movie. These cues, imbued into the design of the space itself, represent essential steps in the process of watching a movie in a theater. There is a social code of conduct in theatrical spaces that demands audiences to silence themselves with the dimming of the theater lights (Hanich 2014, Neville and Reicher 2011). The seats also represent a communal intention in that they all face the same direction (Hanich 2014). As Amelia pointed out, “[The screen] is such a center of attention in theater. It's like almost like we're praising it and, you know, it's this big thing at the front of the room that everyone is staring at. Everyone is seated looking in the same direction.” Esther and Eleanor both reiterated Amelia’s point about the role of the seats in developing a single point of focus. When participants walked into a theater, it was their expectation that all seats would face the same way; just as the audience expected that other audience members would follow those behavioral codes (Hanich 2014).

Though that intentionality is represented in the theatrical space itself, the majority of respondents also noted that there are technological benefits to seeing a movie in a theater. The superior projection and sound technology played a role in participants’ movie-going experiences (Hanich 2014). Anna explained this concept:

My family chooses movies that we'd like to see on the big screen, such as *Blade Runner 2049*. That was a movie that I was not going to watch at home because I knew that it had amazing cinematography and the sound was going to be great. It's like it was a movie where I wanted to see it on a big screen with big speakers... I'm a film person – sound matters, picture matters, seeing it in a good, color-corrected projector, 5 surround sound that matters to me.

As Anna, as well as most other participants, explained, the ritual of theater-going entails a level of spectacle, or the technological prowess that theaters offer. While this often aligns itself with larger scale action movies, Sophia noted the immersive qualities that a theater presents, in that

you are truly dominated by both sight and sound. In this way, physical space played an essential role for participants in their experiences at the movies.

After the movie concludes, participants also acknowledged several traditions that typically follow up their movie-going experiences, which again point to the special nature of this experience (Hanich 2014). For Ali, this begins with ice cream because, “that's what you do when you go see a movie naturally.” While ice cream may not have been central to participants’ post-movie experiences, it represents one of the many traditions that participants spoke about in their personal narratives of movie-going experiences. The act of chatting after a movie concluded came up most frequently in participants’ accounts, as they would typically discuss the film with those who attended with them. Talking about her experience going to see *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* with her family, Suki said, “It was your classic – ‘remember that moment,’ ‘what did you think of that moment?’” The tradition of discussing a film after it has ended demonstrates that same intentionality in retrospect in that spectators acknowledged they were present for the entirety of the film.

Beyond simple discussion, Esther specifically noted the concluding behavior of going to dinner or coffee with the friend or family member with whom she attended the film. She defined this process as making the movie-going experience more of an event. Yes, the film occupied her attention for some of the experience, but there was a broader experience that occurred around the screening. She explained, “At a theater, you know you're in it for the long haul. You're going to sit there until the movie's over... It's a more complete story experience because I often go out to dinner, or it's an event more than watching one at home. [There] is popcorn, theater seats, and you're with a bunch of other people.” Anna expressed a nearly identical thought, especially regarding going to dinner afterwards. In the quote, Esther nicely summarized the ritual of

theater-going, addressing preceding activities, the physicality of the theatrical space, and concluding activities. Although different participants may have different traditions, their experiences center around a communal intentionality, or the audience's shared goal of movie-watching (Hanich 2014). Whatever their days may have held in store, they acknowledged consciously interrupting the mundanity of daily life to have these theater-going experiences.

### *Audience Awareness*

Aside from these ritualistic tendencies, participants overwhelmingly noted their awareness of the audience. Aligning with the literature on audience studies, participants saw themselves as a focal point for the audience as they recounted their movie-going experiences (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998). Addressing her own general experiences going to movies, Sarah noted, "There was always a real group mentality about [going to movies], so what you would and wouldn't say definitely did have to do [with what] the coolest person in the group [was doing]." In this case, Sarah felt the need to conform to the social pressures of the group with which she attended because she presumed that they were also paying attention to her. She believed she would be judged if she didn't follow the behaviors of the group leader in the theater. Erin demonstrated this mentality as well, as she talked about going to see *Borat* at an eighth-grade birthday party. With a gaggle of pubescent girls, she attended a screening of the notoriously raunchy comedy. When the offense of this comedy became too much, she walked out. She reflected, "I was a pretty self-righteous kid, but I think I still felt bad about walking out. It did not earn me any cool points - [walking] out of a movie theater because I was uncomfortable with what I was being exposed to." For Erin, she assumed that her friends would



shift their attention from what was playing on the screen to what they were doing, fearing how her leaving would result in social consequences.

John echoed this notion, adding the idea that if he invited someone to go to a movie, then the movie-going experience reflected back on his own person: “I’m a big over-thinker – so I think about how other people are perceiving it, especially if I invited other people to see it. I’m very aware of if it’s good, if they like it, if I think they’re liking it or not. It makes me very conscious, whereas I feel more unconscious when I go to something by myself, or when I’m less aware of the audience.” In this example, John explained thinking about himself in the context of the audience. He recognized not thinking about himself when attending a movie by himself, but noted that with other people he is conscious of their reactions. This experience then reflected back upon him, as he questioned how the quality of the movie reflected upon his own identity. Amelia pointed this awareness of self out too, similarly noting that she felt bad for making her family watch something they didn’t like. In both of these cases, participants were aware of themselves in a social context, or were hyper self-aware, because they were worried how the experience reflected upon them (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998). In all of these cases, participants recognized that the screen was the obvious center of attention, but their self-awareness led them to believe that their fellow spectators were also interested in their actions.

Deviating from the literature on viewing modes within audience studies, participants also noted the degree to which they paid attention to other movie-goers within a theatrical space. At the most basic level, participants noted paying attention to others that were around them during less interesting parts of the movie itself. Esther exemplified this, as she talked about the beginning of watching *Call Me by Your Name*: “I was super aware of what my friends were doing because I was kind of bored. It was so slow, so I had time to notice my friend leaning

forward or whatever. I remember thinking about them, instead of being super in the movie.” When the movie did not grab her attention, she turned to those around her for entertainment. While Esther may not have made either friend aware that she was paying attention to them instead of the movie, she made them her primary focus. She used her awareness of others, specifically their reactions, to supplement a less interesting moment in the film.

Participants, however, noted doing more than just looking to the reactions for entertainment, they looked to them for validation in their own opinions. In describing his movie-going experience seeing *The Avengers*, John explained, “I went to see it with my dad and we both thought it was terrible. I was thinking, ‘geez this movie is so bad,’ but for some reason I thought my dad was enjoying it. I’ve never walked out of a movie before, but I would’ve walked out of that one. It was so funny because he was like, ‘I thought it was terrible, but I thought you were enjoying it, otherwise I would’ve walked out.’ So, we both had this, ‘it was so bad I would’ve walked out if not for the other person’s [reaction].” John was looking for personal validation in his opinion of the film, so he looked to his father to justify his disliking. Because of this John was extremely clued into what his father was thinking, only to learn in retrospect that he had completely misinterpreted his father’s take on the film, just as his father had misinterpreted his. It is possible that John and his father misinterpreted each other’s reactions because they were trying to align themselves with each other’s presumed enjoyment of the film.

Although both entertainment and validation can be found in fellow audience members’ reactions, being hyper aware of other audience members can also reflect back negatively on the person who recommended the movie, as was the case provided by Eleanor. This example relies on the notion that the quality of the film reflects upon the person who recommended it. For Eleanor, this phenomenon occurred when seeing *The Dark Knight*, which is a brutally violent

Batman film. In Eleanor's words, it shows, "Some of the worst parts of humanity." However, she paid more attention to the friend who had recommended the film to her and her mother than the film itself. Her mother was notably disturbed by the film. Eleanor explained her reaction: "That was the first time I had an anxiety attack partially because of my mom's reaction, partially because I was worried about Hannah feeling that it was her fault, but she did she recommended us the film, and I was mad at my mom for making her feel bad." That anxiety came from her paying attention to her mother's reactions and how those reflected upon Hannah, which in this case was clearly negative.

Situating this discussion within her experience at Sundance, Sophia noted the special nature of the audiences there. She expanded this idea, saying, "I was really aware of the audience at Sundance because it was Sundance. I knew that we were all here for this Festival - this big thing with all these big filmmakers and seeing all of this cool stuff for the first time. It was kind of like we are all in on it, but then if you go to a normal movie theater [movie-goers] just want to be entertained." Sophia explained that the intentionality of the Festival-goers came from the exclusivity of the experience, as participants were able to see highly acclaimed, world premieres there. Sophia found her attention turning to the audience simply because of the uniqueness of that experience. In all cases, participants turned to the other spectators for entertainment, validation, or reflective outcomes of the screening. Expanding Abercrombie and Longhurst's (1998) claim that individuals are self-aware in theaters, participants also used theaters as a space for social observation.

On the opposite side of this, however, several participants also commented not on audience awareness, but on anonymity and immersion within the theatrical space. Individuals noted that they felt far more anonymous when attending screenings alone, as John demonstrated,

“When I’m by myself at a movie, especially a movie I’m really enjoying, I almost kind of forget that I’m there. I feel much more absorbed in the story.” When not distracted by self-awareness or other audience members, John felt as if he could give his attention in its entirety to the film – a sentiment echoed by several other participants. Sophia expanded this notion, saying, “That is the closest you can get in terms of absorption because it’s so dark, it’s so loud, and it’s so big that that’s the only thing you’re really allowed to be engrossed in in that space, unless you’re disrespecting the space and using your phone or focusing on sipping your drink and talking.” This level of immersion that can be felt in the anonymity of a dark theater represents the polar opposite from the aforementioned ideas regarding audience awareness. When participants let go of that awareness, they felt completely engrossed in the movie. This, however, begs the question – is a complete lack of audience awareness something that spectators should strive to achieve? While the literature on immersive viewing habits suggests the answer is yes, participants argued the opposite (Abercrombie 1992, Turnstall 1983).

### *Collective Spectatorship*

Beyond just being aware of audience responses, participants largely talked about the collective reactions that arose out of that awareness. These reactions were both physical and emotional in nature, following the groundwork laid out by both theories on collective behavior and Hanich’s (2014) collective spectatorship. First dissecting physical reactions, there were several audible reactions that engaged spectators throughout the screening. In talking about this collective experience, Esther noticed the prevalence of laughing throughout her own movie-going experiences, saying, “With laughing and with comedy, if there’s someone who has a funny laugh in an audience, I laugh way more, or if there’s the laugh instigator then I’m going to be

laughing a lot.” Much like the rituals of theater-going, for participants, audible and physical reactions demonstrated a level of intentionality in that they reminded other audience members of one’s own intention – that you are still engaged and paying attention to the film (Hanich 2014, Lemonik Arthur 2013, Reicher 1982). Amelia also spoke about the presence of laughter in movies as a type of collective response, but talking about it in the context of attending children’s movies with her younger siblings. She noted that those environments are even louder precisely because children don’t hold themselves back in any responses, like laughter or oohs and ahs. In these two instances, laughter served as a unifier in terms of audience action and understanding of the film.

Ali similarly commented on laughter, but interestingly placed her discussion within the context of race, as she identifies as “mixed.” Specifically noting her own black experience, she talked about going a screening of *Black Panther*, an afro-futurist, superhero movie, where the audience was equally electric. She described a stand out moment:

There's this one line, where Michael B. Jordan's character Killmonger says, ‘hey auntie.’ And the way he says it, and auntie is such a black colloquial term that all the black people in the audience were just laughing because it's such a serious moment. And then he says, ‘hey auntie.’ And it's like, ‘what? This is hilarious!’ And, oh man, some of the heavy-handed script, [there were] moments where snapping could be heard or something like that. It was very familiar – a very familial space.

In this case, laughter and snaps – a sign of support in theatrical spaces – presumably united the audience around not only their shared intention of watching the movie, but also united them in their blackness both through their horizons of expectations and as an interpretive community (Alexander 2003). The experience highlighted both the audience’s demographic background(s) and their typical viewing behaviors. Throughout her discussion of the film, Ali clarified that these reactions referenced the revolutionary nature of the film, specifically that it deviates from the traditional, white Hollywood model. Ali’s use of the term ‘familial space’ is especially

interesting, as it denotes the community that was created in that theater. Those collective, physical reactions reinforced her own viewing experience because they placed her within a larger body of people that were having similar experiences, as she contextualized, “I felt very included and it felt like one collective experience shared by many people who were all experiencing this wave of black excellence together.”

Participants also pointed out one specific film screening at Sundance that was full of distinct physical reactions – *Holiday*. It is a foreign film that tells a female-driven, revenge narrative in brutal style. Every participant who attended the screening labeled it as their most significant movie-going experience of the Festival. John remembered one particularly visceral moment, where the main character unexpectedly murders another character by beating him to death with a blender. Upon hearing the crunch of the blender into the man’s skull, John remembered, “I had never seen a whole theater move so collectively. Everyone jumped out of their seats – it was so shocking.” John remembering that jump demonstrates a degree of collective spectatorship in that he was paying attention to both the film and audience. The film also features a seven-minute-long, uncut rape scene, which made both Anna and Esther feel physically ill. Eleanor also commented on connecting with other audience members during her experience at *Holiday*, saying, “I think there were a few people who felt similarly overwhelmed and violated by that experience.” Because of intense nature of the film, Eleanor found herself capable of connecting with others who shared that experience of violation. In these examples, participants felt far more integrated in the movie-going experience when they were able to join in on those collective reactions, whether they were laughter, enjoyment, shock, or disgust.

Reactions, of course, are not exclusively physical, as emotions also play a central role in movie-going experiences. For participants, this most notably came in the form of emotional

mirroring, in which they duplicated or built upon the emotions of other audience members. While crying may be the most commonly associated emotional reaction with movies, participants also noted communal feelings of disgust, discomfort, and joy. Erin noted a collective feeling of discomfort for a recent experience seeing *The Florida Project*, an indie film about a mother and daughter living in poverty on the margins of the Magic Kingdom in Disneyworld. Talking about the emotional environment of the theater, she noted, “I think if I had not been watching that in a theater, I would've been able to check out, if I wanted to hit pause, or look up, or look at my phone. I like being surrounded by an audience of people who are sitting in the uncomfortableness with you, [making] you feel accountable toward the movie.” Erin sat in discomfort with the entire audience, responding to the film’s honest, often brutal depiction of the poverty cycle. In this case, the idea of accountability is particularly interesting, as it demonstrates the intentionality Erin (and the rest of the audience) put into watching that film (Hanich 2014). Even though it was discomfort, the audience demonstrated in their experience that they were going to give it their attention notwithstanding that, or any other, emotional reaction.

Where Erin’s movie-going narrative explored the emotional environment, Anna spoke about emotional reactions, as they relate to one’s horizon of expectations. She pointed out a recent, special experience going to the movies – when she saw *Lady Bird* with the women in her family. Lined up with her grandmother, mother, aunt, and younger cousin, it was a showing of all generations. The film then, which takes a deeply authentic look at a white, mother-daughter relationship as the daughter prepares to leave for college, was a fitting work for this group. She explained their reactions: “I know that they loved it and I knew that I loved it. We got to the end and my aunt said at the exact same time as my mom, ‘I don't want it to end. Why is it over?’ at

the exact same time. I totally felt that too. I wanted to watch [it] again right now and all of us were totally there. That was really special.” Her mother’s remark both recognized her own enjoyment of the film and invited Anna to join her in that experience. By sharing her own emotional take on the film, the door was opened for Anna to share her response with her mother. As Anna explained, she felt unified with her mother in this reaction. This film is emotionally prescient and female participants directly responded to it, as Eleanor spoke at length about her emotional relationship with the film, likely because it drew upon her specific horizon of expectations (Alexander 2013). With the majority of participants being white women, they were able to connect with this story on a personal level.

Contextualizing a Sundance movie-going experience within a more specific horizon of expectations, Ali spoke about her experience seeing *Night Comes On* – a film about black sisterhood. Because of the relevance of black sisterhood to her personal life, she found the screening to be very impactful. Attending by herself, she found herself completely emotionally engaged with the film and audience. She explained:

I was sitting next to this older black woman and she and I were just crying together at the end because there was just one particular scene – shot, and it was heartbreaking. And so, we just sat together at the end of the movie and cried a little bit and talked about our families and she had a sister. We exchanged numbers and found each other on Facebook and it was like - I'm having emotions and she's having emotions and we're emoting together and sharing a common experience, then building off of that to a kind of friendship.

Because of this specific shared horizon of expectations, Ali had a stronger point of emotional connection with her fellow audience member (Alexander 2003). That mirroring of heartbreak through tears demonstrates a point of communal emoting. Those two women in that space created a community centered around their emotional response to *Night Comes On*, validating each other’s emotions. In participants’ audience experiences, emotional reactions served as a powerful reminder of engagement in and accountability towards the film.



However, there were times when participants talked about feeling differently than the rest of the theater. In these cases, the differing responses isolated individuals rather than keeping them emotionally engaged. For Esther, this alienation came during a screening of *Suicide Squad*, a crude, poorly-reviewed antihero movie. While she noted several reasons for disliking it – poor treatment of female characters first and foremost among them – she said that she may not have been the target demographic for the film, as it was more geared towards middle school boys. After that thought, she said, “I feel like people were laughing, and I remember being like I don't think that was very funny. The audience was cheering and I was like, ‘why are people into this?’” In this case, not only did those positive reactions isolate her within the audience, but they also actively worked to increase her disliking of the movie. Suki also talked about a similar experience when seeing *Wonder Woman*. In these situations, positive audience reactions isolated the participants and, as a result of their isolation, they disliked said films to a greater degree.

That being said, one can still be isolated in a screening while enjoying the movie.

Returning to Ali's experience with *Black Panther* – a film which she admittedly loved – she also experienced this alienation. When asked what her thoughts on the movie were, she replied:

It's hard because it's such an important movie, but I want to be able to critique it without people shitting on me. It depends on the audience. If I'm around other film people, I can talk to them [about] how the script was really heavy handed... When I'm talking to people who saw it just for the pure joy of some representation on film, they're a little hesitant to let anybody critique it.

Even in a screening where Ali greatly enjoyed the movie, she felt alienated because other audience members would not respond to her criticisms. Unlike the aforementioned participants, this did not make the screening a more negative experience, but required her to hold back certain reactions. In this way, there was an emotional and intellectual dissonance to her experience.

Audience alienation is essential to understanding collective spectatorship because it puts

individuals outside of that experience while it is happening. Participants noted seeing everyone else responding physically and emotionally together and because of that, they felt isolated.

*The quest for social reception.* Rituals of theater-going, audience awareness, and collective spectatorship are three key components through which audiences can receive a film as a group. However, social reception not only occurs, but audiences also consciously seek it out. Throughout their interviews, participants noted the special nature of seeing a film in a theater and actively receiving it with the other spectators, united in their responses to the same stimuli (Lemonik Arthur 2013, Reicher 1982). Several participants pointed out the sensation of social reception. Sarah summarized this experience, saying, “You're all connected, not just in that experience, but you feel that it's like going to a concert. There is an energy... a pull... an excitement and sometimes you can connect to that and that's really, really great.” Sarah’s comparison of movie-going experiences to a concert is not unique to her – it was also made by Erin. In these cases, collective spectatorship combined with an awareness of the audience actually enhanced participants’ movie-going experiences.

Anna, on the other hand, recognized that collective spectatorship is not necessary to social reception. Rather, she noted that it is simply the reactions themselves that truly interest her. She expanded this idea: “Even if I go with people who don't like movies, I love going with them because they aren't afraid to talk about it and say, ‘I hated it’ and I'll be like, ‘tell me more, like why did you hate it?’ I'm really interested in the way people perceive media and film – everyone’s opinion and feelings are valid and it's just to see how different people react to different things.” This example deviates from Sarah’s in that the responses do not necessarily have to be collective. The process of responding to the same stimuli and being aware of other audience members in those reactions defines the idea of social reception (Hanich 2014, Lemonik

Arthur 2013, Reicher 1982). Collectivity, in Anna's case, came through in her experiences viewing the movies and then discussing it with others, which references the role her own ritualistic tendencies play.

Many participants struggled to identify what exactly makes the theatrical experience so unique, often skirting around these ideas of ritualism and collective spectatorship. What unified their responses, however, was an unquestionable recognition that movie-going and social reception mark special experiences. In her response to my asking if she believes something is shared among audience members, despite having no direct communication, Eleanor came closer than anyone to a discernable answer. She said, "There must be a reason why we're still doing it other than the big screen. There's a ritual to it in some ways and [a sense of] escapism too. I think the darkness of a theater matters and also just the sense that we're all collectively deciding what's important. I really like being in screenings that no one is expecting what's going to happen." In this quote, Eleanor touched upon the ritual of theater-going, being aware of other audience members, and the unexpectedness that allows for communal reactions and thus, collective spectatorship. For many participants, this mode of social reception for movie-going defined their experiences and exemplified precisely what keeps them returning to the theater time and time again.

## DISCUSSION

Social reception, or the act of receiving a film as group, manifests itself in three key ways – the ritual of theater-going, audience awareness, and collective spectatorship. Rituals of theater-going communicate intentionality within a theatrical space, as they serve as behavioral codes that work to communicate a shared goal. That goal is that the audience will consciously interrupt

their daily lives to give their time and attention to a movie. Audience awareness oddly enough pulls spectators out of the movie-watching experience as they pay attention to not only the film, but also those around them. In these cases, individuals either believe that the audience is paying attention to them, or they are hyper-aware of audience reactions, concerned that a positive or negative experience will reflect back upon them. However, this audience awareness opens the door to being attuned with different collective responses, leading to collective spectatorship. These responses can be both physical and/or emotional in nature and involve communal reactions to the same stimuli: laughs, cries, cheers, etc. However, while these reactions often work to unite audiences, contrasting personal responses can lead to individual alienation, as exemplified by several participant narratives. That being said, individuals find collective spectatorship to be one of the principal motivators for movie-going experiences. That level of intentionality, awareness, and collective responses make movie-going experiences significantly more affecting.

Previous sociological literature fails to address the gap that occurs between the theories of reception aesthetics and audience studies. While reception aesthetics focus on the individual's response to the film, the act of coding and decoding, audience studies examine audience composition and levels of focus. Audience studies actually only ever mention collective reception when negating the idea of it. Theorists argue that while audiences respond to the same stimulus, they respond individually (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998). While studies on collective behavior help to mend that gap, there is still the generally unexplored notion of group reception. This thesis challenges Abercrombie and Longhurst's (1998) claim in that participants demonstrated that audiences do indeed receive and react collectively. While ritualistic behaviors and a level of audience awareness help to communicate this notion, collective responses suggest

group reception does occur. Reactions are mirrored, both physically and emotionally, as audience members respond to the same stimulus, which aligns with literature on crowd theory and group behavior (Lemonik Arthur 2013, Neville Reicher 2011, Reicher 1982). These responses – the disgust of watching an atrocious act, the sharing of personal tears, the deep belly laughter – are shared among individuals as they comprise the larger audience. Not only does this phenomenon of social reception occur, but it also actively inspires individuals to go see movies in theaters.

Hanich's (2014) theory of collective spectatorship should be seen as pioneering in this field, as it explores audience intentions, attention, and action. He argues that the intention is the shared goal of the audience to watch a film, the attention is the recognition of the film as the center point of focus, and the action as following the behavioral codes set out by the previous two components (Hanich 2014). These arguments regularly surface in the findings of this thesis, as intentionality, as it is communicated through behavior, forms a core component of social reception. In his theory, Hanich (2014) calls for future research that explores the process of collective spectatorship through qualitative data. Not only does this thesis respond to his call, it expands upon his theory by bringing a focus on audience responses. Through an awareness of communal behavior, these notions of intention, attention, and action gain greater significance because we can see the ways in which they contribute to collective reception. This opens a new door within sociological literature, as it fills the consequential gap between reception aesthetics and audience studies.

The methods of this study undoubtedly had an effect on its findings, principally because of the convenience sample of participants. Colorado College Film students comprised the sample because of both physical proximity and quantity of movie-going experiences. Because I

am acquainted with these participants, we were able to move past introductory material to have richer discussions. However, the participants' status as informants, as they have taken classes in film theory and phenomenology, certainly influenced their perspectives. They are students who are trained to have more of an awareness during movie-going experiences, so they do not represent the typical movie-going audience. Timing also influenced the study, as the Sundance Film Festival occurred the month prior to interviews, making those experiences much fresher in their minds. Future studies could address these inconsistencies, focusing in on a broader sample of casual movie-goers. Additionally, this thesis covered several topics in looking to understand if collective reception occurs. With this thesis arguing that it does, other studies could build off of this research to understand more specifically what those audience responses look like, both through qualitative research and participant observation. Lastly, participants often noted the unique level of community that they found at Sundance and how that impacted their viewing experiences. Future studies could hone in on the creation of community at festivals, both looking at Sundance and other large-scale film festivals.

Within sociology, this thesis represents a step forward in how we understand and study audiences. Collective reception serves as form of engagement that not only occurs in movie-going experiences, but actively works to enhance them. This notion, however, can be broadened out to the larger sphere of cultural reception. In any audience setting, the presence of and association with a community can serve to build upon that experience, whether it occurs in a cinema, theater, museum, or lecture hall. Keeping that in mind, this thesis points to the larger nature of communal gatherings in that people associate with others around them – be they strangers or family members. In those instances, we are unified in our responses to the same stimulus and because of that, the entire experience is enhanced. With movie attendance

continuously falling as at-home entertainment becomes more enticing, this thesis should be seen as a call for cultural engagement (Sakoui 2018). In our rapidly technologizing world, where an enlightening presentation is available as TED Talk or a revered film is a click away on a 13-inch screen, we have endless options for individual reception. However, we must understand the power of collective interpretation; that by creating meaning as a group, we transform not only the cultural object but ourselves as well. Movie-going experiences are defined and enlivened by the people that join us in making an audience. We owe it to ourselves and to others to engage with audiences – to join together in understanding – because they ultimately make for more impactful theater-going experiences that stay with us long after the screen fades to black.

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