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Experiencing Cinema / Ephemeral Cinema

Sian Barber

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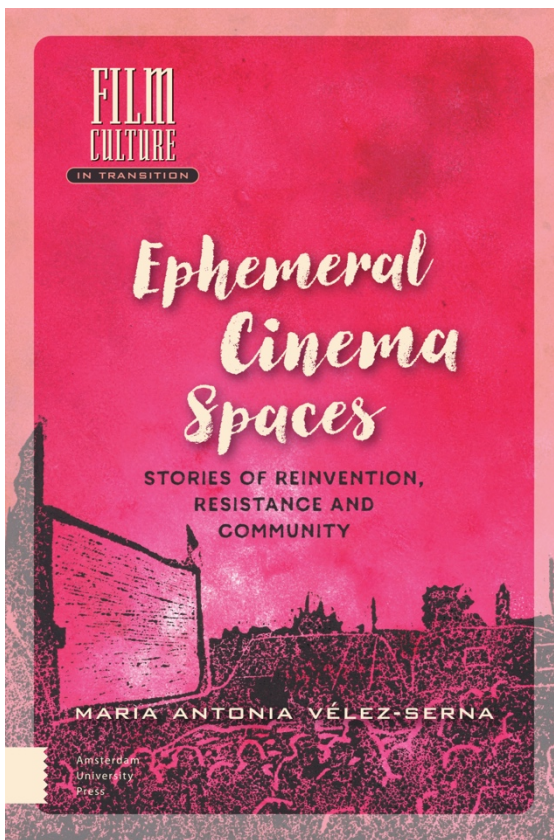
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This review examines two recent publications which explore cinema exhibition, alternative viewing practices, audience and reception studies. The books are María A Vélez-Serna's *Ephemeral Cinema Spaces: Stories of Reinvention, Resistance and Community* (Amsterdam University Press, 2020) and Emma Pett's *Experiencing Cinema: Participatory Film Cultures, Immersive Media and the Experience Economy* (Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2021). Both of these books explore notions of cinema in different spaces and the contrasting ways in which audiences, consumers, patrons, and viewers make use of different kinds of moving images. While both are heavily interdisciplinary, they have different foci and objectives. As their respective titles suggest, Pett's work locates experiential cinema experiences within the event economy using a cultural economy model to situate and explore her case studies. Vélez-Serna's work is more explicitly politicised, considering the acts of cinema-going identified within her fieldwork as acts of resistance and activism as much as they are acts of pleasure in the cinema-going experience. They are both, in their different ways, significant work, yet reading them together offers more than simply exploring alternative forms of cinema and film exhibition. Both embrace broad notions of what cinema is, what it can offer, and how film is repurposed according to both the desires of the consumers and the space in which it is located. As Vélez-Serna puts it, 'cinema is something people do as much as a place they go to' (p. 30).

Vélez-Serna situates her research as part of an evolving picture within film and exhibition, drawing on conceptions about cinema and the cinema experience. Her work 'talks about cinema in borrowed, shared or occupied spaces' (p. 48) and explores concepts such as DIY cinema, useful cinema, and cinema which breaks the traditions of film in a set space. She argues that her positioning of cinema as 'not a fixed category with borders to be drawn and policed, but a combination of emergent patterns' (p. 24) allows for an exploration of 'the boundaries of cinema as social practice' (p. 12), and she cites Karina Aveyard, Miriam Ross,

Sarah Atkinson, and Helen Kennedy, along with Charles Acland and Haidee Wasson's work on 'useful cinema', as part of the framework for her research.[1]

After conceptualising the evolution of cinematic practices and paying attention to concepts including the apparatus of cinema and the significance of the cinematic dispositive from media archaeology, subsequent chapters explore community cinema, cinephilia, useful cinema, and experiential cinema. Vélez-Serna's work is informed and driven by fieldwork that took place in Scotland between 2015 and 2018 and included attendance at almost 200 events which were determined by availability, access, and opportunity. In collating this material, the author drew on ethnographic tools such as field notes to record her impressions of screenings and events, and this was supplemented by 20 interviews with exhibitors and archival research.



Pett's book is also based on fieldwork – only her exploration is more geographically broad than Vélez-Serna's and focuses less on events personally attended, but rather gathers data

associated with specific events. This takes the form of 96 semi structured interviews and 452 survey responses, a mixed-method approach which offers 'a layered analysis across multiple sites of distribution, circulation, exhibition, performance and audience engagement' (p. 22). She adopts 'an interdisciplinary approach to the study of experiential cinema that draws on scholarship from theatre studies, cultural geography, economics, tourism studies, politics, art history and fan studies' (p. 21). Additionally, her research offers an opportunity to explore the different ways in which a range of different kinds of experiential cinema is engaged with and the responses of different audiences, groups, and communities. Her exploration considers what experiential cinema offers to consumers and so sits comfortably within evolving debates about immersion, fandom, fan cultures, and behaviour which take place in defined and communally inflected spaces. She draws on fandom scholars such as Henry Jenkins and Matt Hills, Paul Grainge for specific considerations of the significance of nostalgia and experience, and Joseph Pine and James Gilmore to offer both economic context and a neoliberal framework in which to situate these cinematic experiences.[2] Pett considers six case studies of different kinds of experiential cinema: pop-up cinema, virtual reality / augmented reality / mixed reality, installation within an art gallery, experiential cinema in rural contexts, activist exhibitions, and cosplay.

Both authors concluded their fieldwork before the pandemic, which fundamentally altered patterns of cinemagoing and film consumption. During the period of the pandemic in which cinemas closed and lockdown measures were imposed, new cinematic models of consumption and engagement were sought, developed, and attained, and it remains to be seen how the impact of the pandemic will fundamentally reshape the traditional cinemagoing experience. What these works offer is an insight into a span of years 2015-2018 when alternative methods of exhibition and engagement were being explored by different communities and groups, before the global pandemic made us all rethink the ways in which we engage with moving images. The challenge posed to the public space by the pandemic transformed viewing habits but also reaffirmed the significance and social cultural value of film as a medium through which people can connect. The pandemic did not see the death of cinema – any more than the coming of sound or the challenge of television or the internet did – but it did perhaps highlight the potential of alternative consumption and practices which had hitherto perhaps been seen as fringe. It also firmly demonstrated that the traditional cinema space was perhaps less central to the filmic experience than the exhibition industry wished to acknowledge.

In examining alternative viewing habits and practices and what these experiences can mean to consumers and participants, both authors have anticipated the debates about cinema, film, and viewing that would emerge after the pandemic, offering critical insights and drawing together a body of work on different kinds of cinema viewing and experience. In tracing the development of contemporary alternative viewing spaces from the fairground and village and labour halls, Vélez-Serna suggests that 'as theatrical film viewing loses ground in its

claim as the natural home of the movies, it becomes clear that the full time commercial, dedicated cinema is a historically contingent form that was always just one of many sites for the moving image' (p. 18). Similarly Pett suggests, 'the diversification of exhibition practices... [...] has brought into circulation a vocabulary for describing audience engagement with cinema that now frequently displaces the once traditional descriptions of "viewing" or "watching" films: cinemagoing can be "immersive" "interactive" "participatory" and perhaps most frequently, an experience' (p. 2).

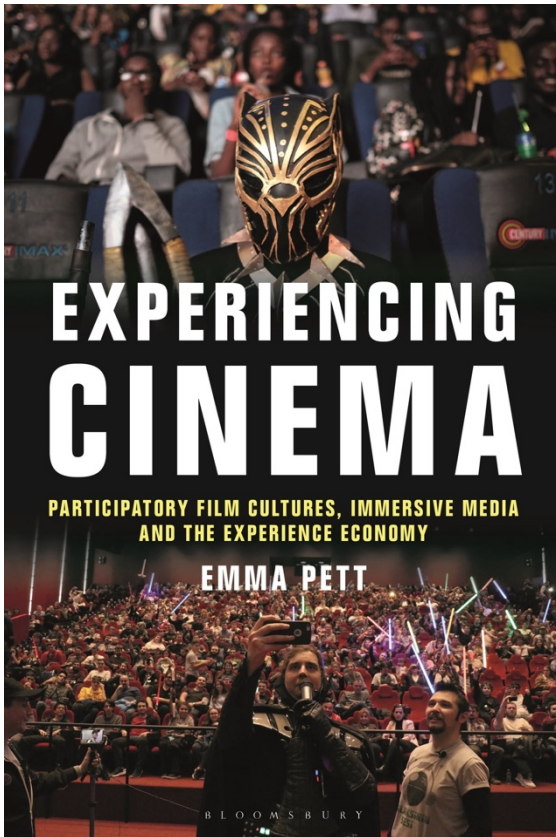
Another key theme that emerges after reading these works, particularly in Vélez-Serna's book, is the idea of sustainability and the shifts taking place in established models of alternative viewing. Pett argues that the commodification of the viewing experience has led to the gentrification of much event cinema, thus diminishing its perceived cultural value in favour of commercial imperatives, and in doing so has established a firm distance between its current incarnation and its initial association with cult and underground cinema. Similarly, many of the other events that she mentions fit into this same paradigm, where audience satisfaction and consumption is seen as a key driver for success of the individual events. By contrast, Vélez Serna suggest that that the relative absence of a stable audience for mainstream cinema – the many empty cinema seats, the crumbling infrastructure, the overheads, the employment of many people in the cinema space to deliver the cinema, who have no engagement or involvement with the film or the film experience directly – all underscore the fragility and unsustainability of the modern cinema experience.

Both authors discuss how an increasing interest in heritage and the reimagined cinema space – albeit one that is underused and rapidly becoming unsustainable – offers unique opportunities, both as a nostalgic physical space which can be filled with experiential cinematic events and also, as Vélez-Serna argues, as a 'previous disregarded community asset' which can 'bring people back into a space' (p. 64). This exemplifies one of the key themes of both books: the connection between community, film as an event, and the cinema space as a new apparatus (an evolution of the screen, sound, and spectator), and one which is fundamental in sustaining these alternative practices of viewing. Pett also suggests how the modern, urban landscape, with its 'empty properties, forestalled development and funding cuts are reimagined as a landscape of opportunities' (p. 35). Empty buildings are not simply disused spaces but are the staging space for a range of different visual experiences.

As noted, a major theme which emerges in both books, though articulated differently, is the notion of a cinematic or filmic community; like-minded individuals drawn together, perhaps by promise of the film experience on offer, or perhaps simply for the opportunities offered by the event itself. Pett points out the value of the experience beyond the film and how audiences as consumers frequently considered the experience as a whole, thus making the film secondary, while Vélez-Serna outlines the range of spaces in which film-viewing takes place and the significance of alternative spaces of exhibition in shaping the film experience.

Pett argues that prior research into rural cinemagoing has identified that behaviours and practices are driven by community ethos and not simply by social behaviour, and that we can perhaps extend this analysis to consider some forms of experiential cinema as community activities, which speak to the needs to individual communities – either geographically or ideologically situated. For Vélez-Serna, many of the community cinema events that she attended or participated in permitted an insight into the significance of such activities, frequently run by volunteers or community members and prompted and motivated by ‘the dual appeal between film culture and civic vocation’ (p. 80).

Pett’s work focuses on fan communities and explores concepts such as Disney Bounding, immersion, fan practices, and cosplay, while Vélez-Serna looks to some of the screenings she attended as embodying more politicised objectives, attached to local events, festivals of initiatives. When she does consider more conventional screenings, such as the night-time exhibition of *The Lost Boys* in a Theme Park, she is slightly more dismissive of the level of engagement with the film being screened, suggesting how ‘experiential and immersive screenings have been used to add value to otherwise mundane programming’ (p. 52). In doing so she suggests that the prevalence and continued presence of event cinema has made these practices much more mainstream and therefore less relevant to their positioning as alternative cinema practices. She argues that ‘in its more commercial vision, experiential cinema tends to work either to enhance the sensory pleasures available, or to reproduce elements of the narrative world in order to attract and direct audience participation’ (p. 149). It is this directed-ness that Vélez-Serna perceives as limiting; audience pleasures are so heavily mediated that the experience becomes predictable. Pett adopts a different approach and sees the range of practices available to audiences and participants as being enhanced by the possibilities of virtual or augmented reality or of viewing an installation, and argues that such practices transform the experiential cinema experience. She suggests that all of these additional elements offer more than simply repeating, enriching, or enhancing expected pleasures. Unlike straightforward screenings such as those typified by *Backyard Cinema* or *Secret Cinema*, with audience participation consisting of reciting dialogue or dressing up to attend the screening, the opportunities offered by more complex and sophisticated events demand and expect different levels of audience engagement. She argues, ‘liveness in the era of social media, VR and synchronous streamed events [...] becomes a multifaceted, highly differentiated concept’ (p. 193).



The strengths of the works are considerable yet there are also areas which remain underexplored, and which could benefit from further development. Pett's case studies are detailed yet feel like they could offer more, particularly when it comes to the chapters on cosplay and activist exhibitions. Both of these offer fascinating snapshots but deserve more attention, perhaps drawing in a broader range of materials and examples and paying more attention to different locations and activities in a range of spaces. Similarly, Vélez-Serna's preoccupation with events which were embedded in the community separates these events from broader ideas of experiential cinema that emerge across Pett's work. Her dismissal of the mainstream and more straightforward film exhibition events risks situating the events she does write about in a rarefied and activist lacunae, rather than a general one.

Both works also take pains to situate themselves within specific frameworks. Pett's careful positioning of alternative exhibition in the frame of cultural policy is useful, but provides a huge amount of detail before any of the case studies are explored. Similarly, Vélez-Serna includes two chapters on the critical and conceptual frameworks she will draw upon when

considering modern exhibition practices and how their roots are both in the history of film exhibition and also in critiques of the film apparatus and the conception of cinema itself. Again, this is useful and thoughtful but feels at odds with the rest of the work which focuses on the events themselves. Such critical positioning is helpful and could perhaps be presented at different moments to help unpack and further explore some of the examples. There are also moments of repetition – for example Cinema for All is introduced as an exemplar in one of the early conceptual chapters and then is reintroduced with more explanation in the following chapter.

The main benefit of both works is the range offered by the material. In one of her strongest chapters, Vélez-Serna explores the significance of archival film and how utilising atypical archival films and ‘minor’ cinematic forms such as home movies, local topicals, amateur films, or community video in their imperfect and unfinished forms, offer wonderful opportunities for local community engagement. The examples cited here are lively and fascinating and draw attention to community cinemas and cinema spaces within communities as loci for community activity around film and around community building more generally. In Pett’s work some of the strongest sections are those which fully explore the multifaceted and complex social practices associated with experiential cinema. Less the events themselves but fan accounts and participant recollections; the disappointments, the triumphs, the shared memories, the anxiety about the experience, and the significance of the experience itself, all add shape and texture to the cultural and structural frameworks set up at the start of the book.

The reflections offered by both authors on the significance of the audiences, participants, viewers, and consumers clarify that while the nature of cinema and experiential cinema in particular may be shifting, the cultural value of such cinematic events remains high and the opportunities offered by technology, innovation, and collaboration, as well as the challenge of economic sustainability indicates that cinema – in a range of forms and guises – is evolving once more and offering new, reimagined, and further pleasures.

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Notes

[1] Aveyard 2016; Ross 2013; Atkinson & Kennedy 2018; Acland & Wasson 2011.

[2] Jenkins 1992; Hills 2002; Grainge 2000; Pine & Gilmore 1998.