



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Rollercoasters and Reality: A Study of Big Screen Documentary Audiences

Citation for published version:

Hardie, A 2008, 'Rollercoasters and Reality: A Study of Big Screen Documentary Audiences', *Participations*, vol. 5, no. 1. <http://www.participations.org/Volume%205/Issue%201%20-%20special/5_01_hardy.htm>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Participations

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Hardie, A. (2008). Rollercoasters and Reality: A Study of Big Screen Documentary Audiences. *Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, 5(1).

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.





Current Contents
Past Issues

□ Hardie, Amy:

'Rollercoasters and Reality: A Study of Big Screen Documentary Audiences 2002-2007'

Particip@tions Volume 5, Issue 1 **Special Edition** (May 2008)

Rollercoasters and Reality: A Study of Big Screen Documentary Audiences 2002-2007

Abstract

Who are the documentary audience? This paper presents research carried out between 2002 and 2007, in the UK, Netherlands, Spain and Austria, which aims to define this largely unstudied group. Evidence from qualitative and sample quantitative analysis is presented to argue that this group is not, as often supposed, identical to the art-house audience. 442 questionnaires and sixteen focus groups are reported, carried out in four countries, over five years. Detailed results are analysed to demonstrate the differences between rural and urban audiences; audience expectations and realities of documentaries screened in the cinema; and an accurate demographic and psychographic picture of the various audiences that constitute the people who watch documentaries in the cinema. Strategies for encouraging bigger audiences, and for increasing current audience satisfaction are briefly outlined. The limits of this research are clearly set out, and further research recommended.

Keywords: Documentary Audience Cinema Demographic Focus-group Questionnaire

This paper sets out the results of the audience research that was carried out from 2002 until 2007, to support and scrutinize the attempts to increase an audience for documentary films. This research formed the foundation of what was to become Docspace, an organization (now a charity) that put its research into practical application after a 2002 report (Hardie) arguing that there was an untapped audience for documentaries on the big screen. The report called for action, and international partners to ride on the advancing wave of digitalization of projection equipment, and launched as the UK partner and co-founder of CinemaNet Europe, a network of independent digitally equipped cinemas in 8 European countries in November 2004.

A picture emerged of an audience that was not, as commonly supposed, interchangeable with the art house audience. Using expert interviews, focus groups and cinema audience questionnaires in 2002, 2004 and 2006/7, the research produced interesting information illuminating an audience group that very little was known about. This audience was made up out of many audience segmentations, with very little

cross-over. Segmentation into rural and urban, on one axis, and by subject interest on the other, yielded the most internally cohesive groupings. Common trends within the audience overall were the following factors: they watched very little television, and were highly educated and proactive in seeking out films that interested them. There was widespread uncertainty about what a documentary was, and a collision of expectation and reality – the audiences expected to be informed, but possibly bored in the process. Their experiences, however, were almost always of emotional roller-coaster narratives and exhilarating storytelling. Perhaps that is why, throughout the research, when around 50 % were coming to a documentary

coming. Perhaps that is why, throughout the research, when around 50 % were coming to a documentary in the cinema for the first time, and in each series of questionnaires, after viewing the film, 80 – 90% wanted to see more documentaries in the cinema.

First Steps

The first research was an initial literature review, a series of expert interviews and a sample quantitative study in Scotland. It was motivated by Grierson's challenging statement from the 1930s - "documentaries demand their own screening platform". (Grierson, John, National Film Board of Canada, 1939)

The literature review was all too brief – the only work I could unearth into cinema documentary audiences in the UK before November 2004 was by Alex Cooke at the University of Bristol as part of an MA and an MA by Ana Vicente, Understanding Cinema Audiences (thesis presented at University of Salford for MA), and a paper by Thomas Austin, Senior Lecturer at the University of Sussex. Vicente's thesis stressed the necessity of state intervention in documentary production and exhibition if the documentary format was to thrive. Austin's work revolved around *Etre et Avoir*, with a qualitative analysis of the audience response.

These three studies were invaluable in scoping out what was still needed, as well as providing a baseline of information. Michael Reilly (2004), for an MSc in Information and Library Studies, then wrote a relevant thesis on D-Cinema and Some of its Implications for Scottish Regional Film Theatres. This became particularly useful when viewed in tandem with the only substantial piece of original research, the report created in 2003 in the Netherlands, where Kees Ryninks celebrated a newly created position as head of documentaries at the Netherlands Film Fund with an interesting research initiative. He asked whether the new digital technology could not provide a window of opportunity to get the documentaries funded by the Netherlands Film Fund to bigger audiences. This research proved invaluable, and the partnership with Kees Ryninks was a key factor in the instigation of CinemaNet Europe.

The quantitative research in 2002 consisted of three documentaries screened once in the GFT in Glasgow or the Filmhouse in Edinburgh. Audience members were asked to fill in a questionnaire after seeing the film – ninety seven respondents in total. The films were Mahmood Tariq and Ken Faro's *Injustice*, Nick Drake's *A Skin too Few* and Judith Helfland and Daniel Gold's *Blue Vinyl*. These films are quite different in subject matter and attracted different audience segmentations – no-one went to all three films, and only two people went to two. The full report, including the questionnaires, is available as a download from www.docspace.org.uk: Docspace Report). The results from this sample indicated that:

- 70 – 85% of audience learns about the film through the cinema brochure or a special interest organization.
- 30 – 40% had not seen a documentary in the cinema before.
- 90% were university educated.
- 90% watch much less than the average amount of television (under 10 hours week)
- 90 – 97% would like to see more documentaries on the big screen.

One key factor that emerged was that there was no one audience for documentary films: there were several audiences, which self-segmented into subject interest. There was little cross-over between audiences for a music film, an environmental film and a human rights film. The accepted wisdom in the exhibition industry is that the documentary audience is interchangeable (in terms of demographics and attitudinal factors) with the art-house audience. When attempting to locate documentary audience research I was often told there was no need for documentary specific research, since it could be learnt from the art-house audience research. However, the picture that emerged was that audiences looked for

from the art house audience research. However, the picture that emerged was that audiences looked for different things from documentary than fiction screenings in the cinemas. This was to be tested further as the research progressed, and is articulated well by some of the focus group participants.

These results were sufficient to intrigue the Industry, specifically television producers and the exhibition sector, to support Docspace in making a pilot project to encourage these audience sectors to come to the cinema for more documentaries. The pilot project became a partnership between 8 countries, who applied for MEDIA funding under the digital pilot project scheme. The exhibition of documentaries using new digital technology was underwritten by a research project. The application was successful, and CinemaNet Europe launched in November 2004.

The launch of CinemaNet Europe with 8 documentaries screened in 8 cinemas in the UK provided the opportunity to develop the findings in the sample research carried out in Scotland in 2002. Questions designed to assess how similar the UK audiences were to the Netherlands audiences were also incorporated. The audiences were segmented and the segmentations were analysed, yielding information about their habits and preferences:

220 2 page questionnaires were filled in, in both Edinburgh Filmhouse and Glasgow Film Theatre from 596 admissions, a sample size of 37%.

The following tables are taken from the report produced by Michael Reilly and Amy Hardie: Opening Festival Research (2005). This took place in November 2004, and a total of eight films, chosen by an international jury, were screened over two days. These were a selection of recent and international premieres about a variety of subjects:

The White Diamond, by Herzog, a madcap attempt to use a hot air balloon to examine the Amazonian tree canopy.

The Power of Good by Matej Minac, a moving story of a British stock-broker who changed his life, and many children's lives, when he rescued 669 children during WW11.

Peace One Day by Jeremy Gilley, an inspirational story of one man's quest to establish a day of peace.

My Louis Armstrong Years by Mohamed Kounda. A 13 year old musical prodigy and his mother.

I am From Nowhere by Georg Misch. The effect of Andy Warhol's celebrity on the inhabitants of his birthplace.

Fleurette. Sergio Trefaut's film about his family.

The Damned and the Sacred by Jos de Putter, about a Chechen children's dance ensemble

Bola de Nieve by José Sánchez-Montes. A biopic of the sad man that always sang happily.

The 2004 research shows the opinions and findings of the audience at the outset of a two year documentary screening programme in Scotland. The first table shown here, table three in the original report (Hardie & Reilly 2005), examines the sources of information that resulted in the audience choosing to go and see the particular film.

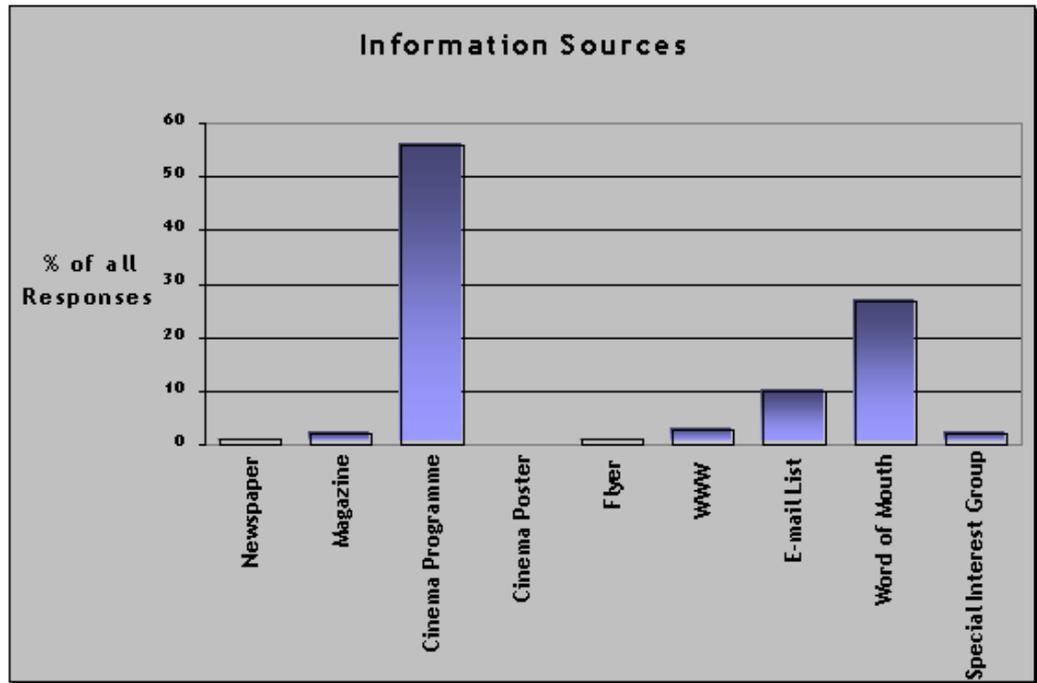
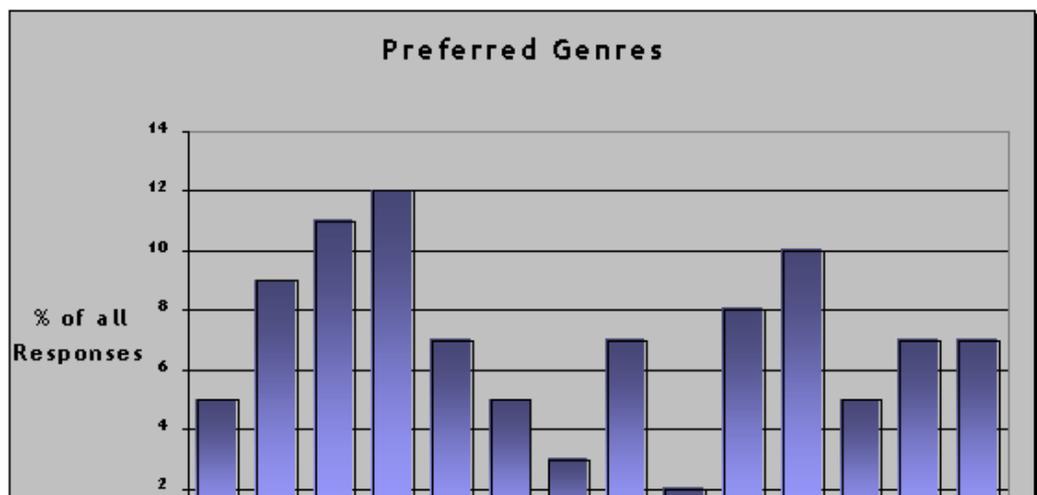


Table 1: Information Sources of Respondents

Clearly, cinema programmes are critically important, followed by word of mouth. Although this corresponds with the ways in which the Art-house audience obtain the information allowing them to choose which film they will see, later research shows that special interest group, mainly accessed through the internet, began to eclipse the Cinema Programme as the major source of trusted information.

Further questions were asked of the audiences, mainly to provide information to steer the programmers of the documentary screening programmes. The question and the answers are presented here as table two:

3.4 It is sometimes difficult to classify films but what types of cinema documentaries would you like to see in the future?



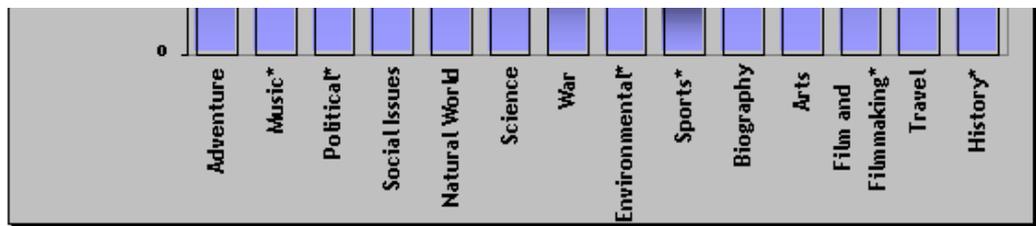


Table 2: Preferred Genres. Note * indicates a potential Docspace Season.

It should be first noted that the respondents were a self-selecting group attending particular documentaries. Nevertheless, issue-based documentaries whether Social or Political are most popular. Music and the Arts are also preferred. Sports as a documentary genre fares worst, but with the caveat that there was no sporting documentary exhibited during the Opening Festival.

3.5 How important would the following qualities be to a cinema documentary you would like to see?

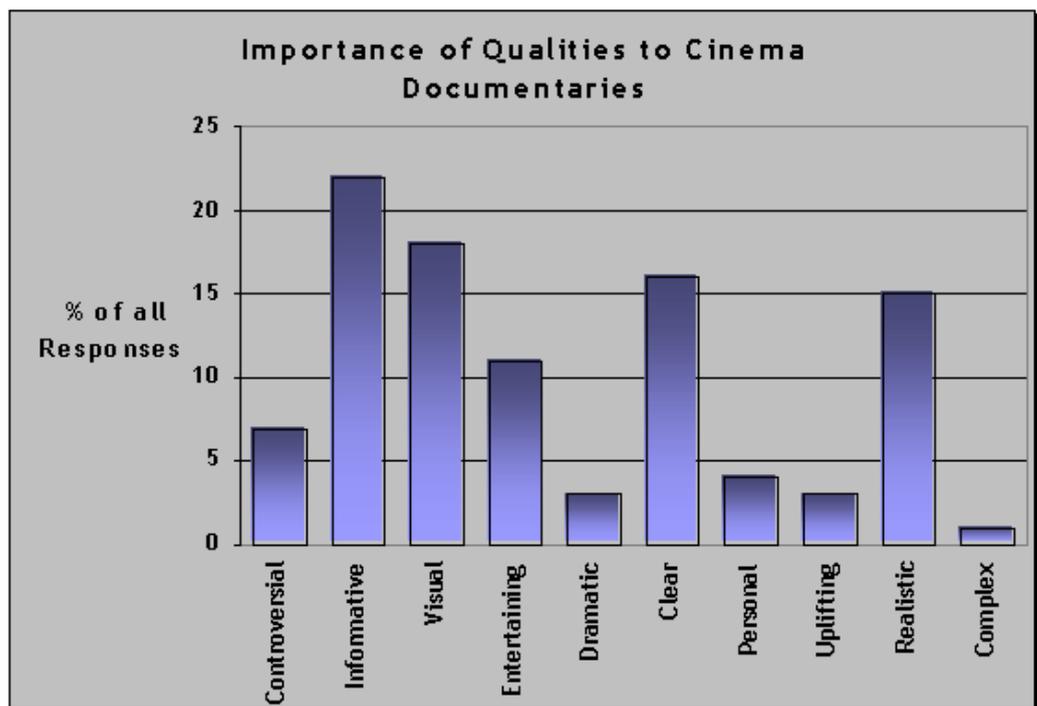


Table 3: Important Qualities of Cinema Documentaries.

It appears important that cinema documentaries are Informative, Visual and Clear. Realism is not considered to be the most important quality of a cinema documentary. A noticeable number of respondents considered Entertaining to be an important quality, particularly at the Edinburgh Filmhouse.

The lack of enthusiasm for Controversial documentaries suggests that a high-profile filmmaker such as Michael Moore operates very much like an auteur, or more likely, as a celebrity in his own right. Complexity is considered relatively unimportant, a finding that is accentuated when compared with the high importance attached to Clarity.

3.6 Tell us about you...

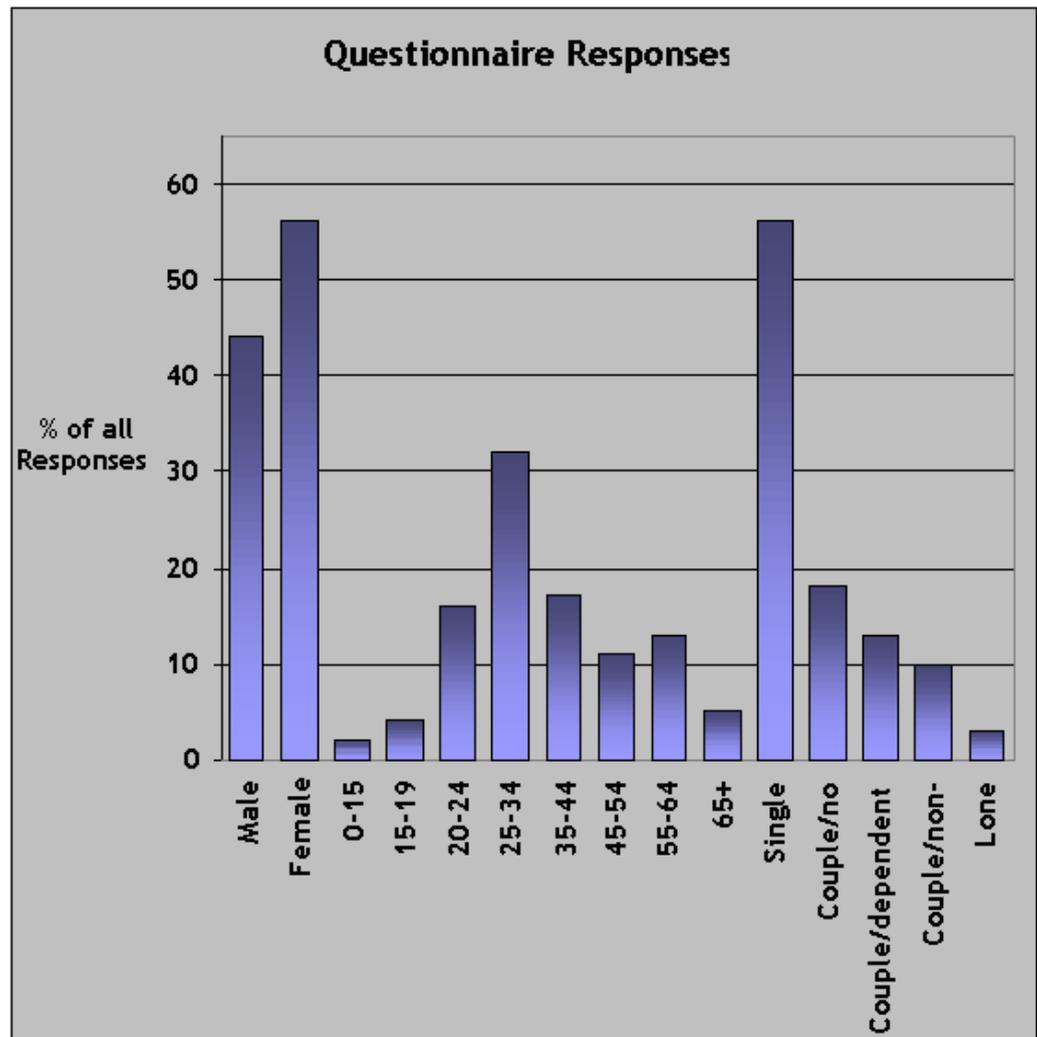


Table 4. Composition of Respondents.

Assuming the responses received are representative of the overall Opening Festival audience there was a high proportion of Singles attending. There was also a noticeable number of Couples with no children. Improving admissions from Couples with dependent children may require an effort disproportionate to any increase in admissions. The age profile is younger than that of arthouse audiences UK-wide – the average for the 25-34 segment is normally 21%. There is an interesting older segmentation at age 55-64. The ratio of females to males is also untypical of arthouse audiences.

3.7 Which of the following newspapers do you read regularly?

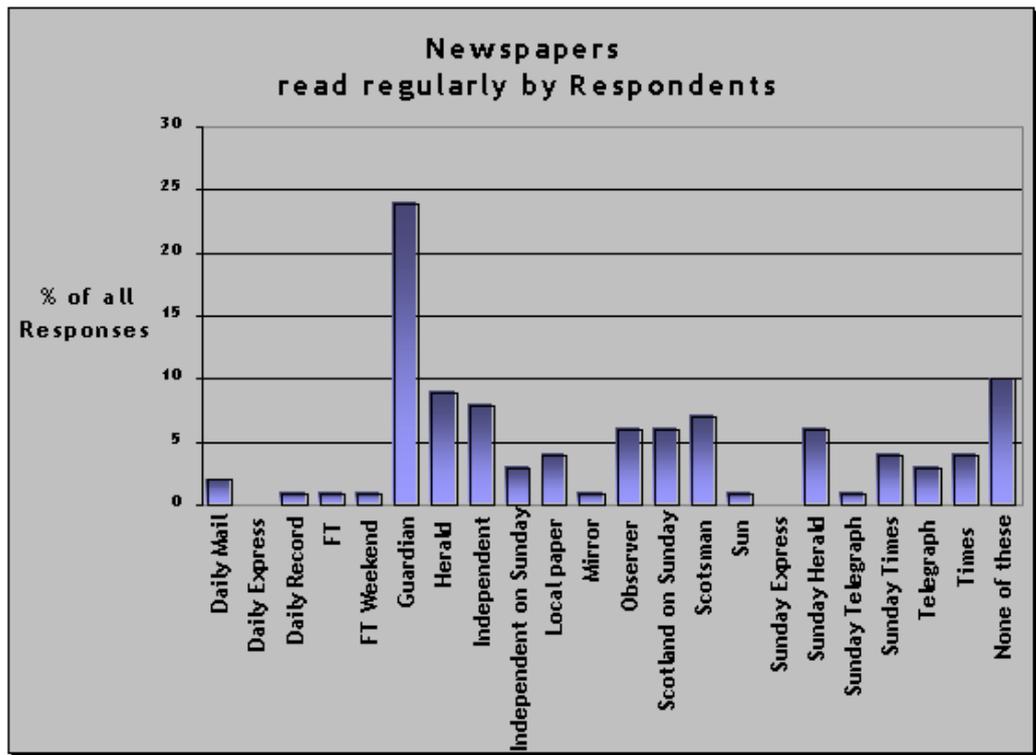
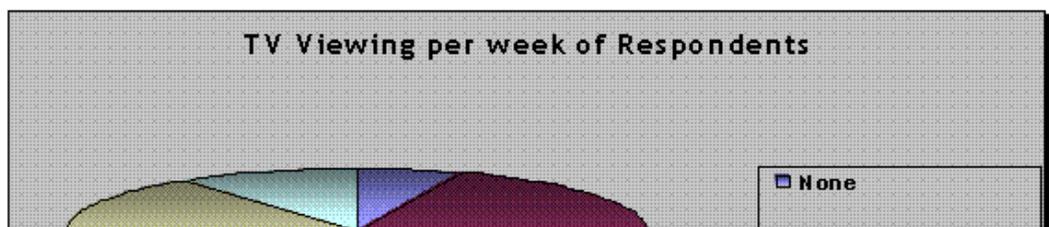


Table 5: Newspapers read regularly by Respondents.

The UK-wide 'Guardian' is by far the key newspaper among those who responded. The category of 'None of these' should not be discounted as it may well refer mainly to a popular free daily entitled 'The Metro'.

3.8 During an average week, for how many hours do you watch television?



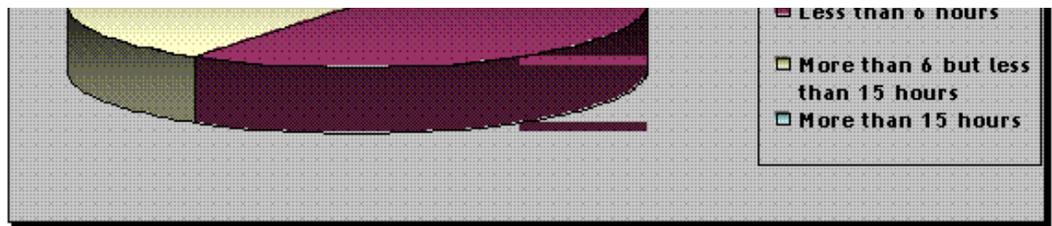


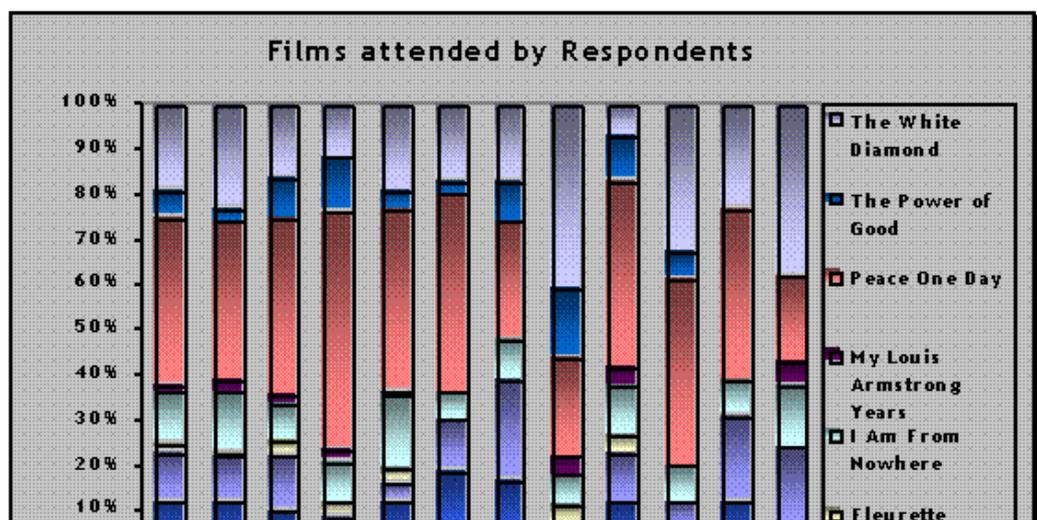
Table 6: TV viewing of respondents.

The vast majority of the respondents watch less than 15 hours per week. Some respondents were adamant that they watched none.

4. Segmentation Analysis

NB: Due to the often very small sample sizes of particular segments any analysis in the following section should be considered as indicative and as a suggestion for a further and more representative study.

4.1 Films Attended



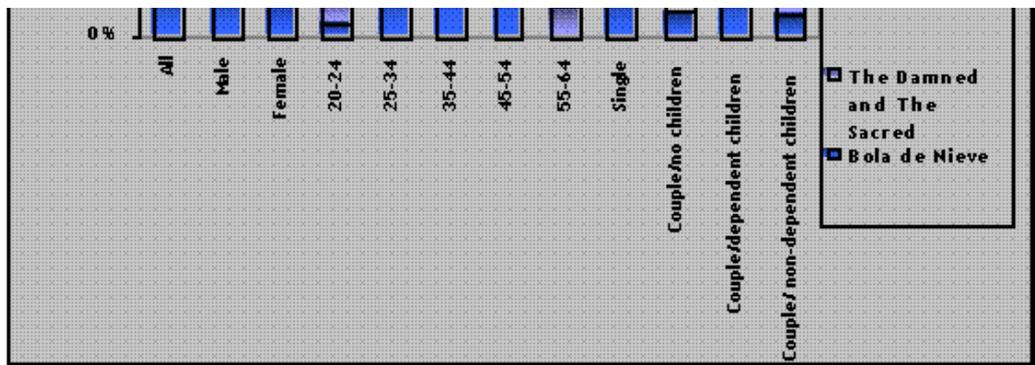
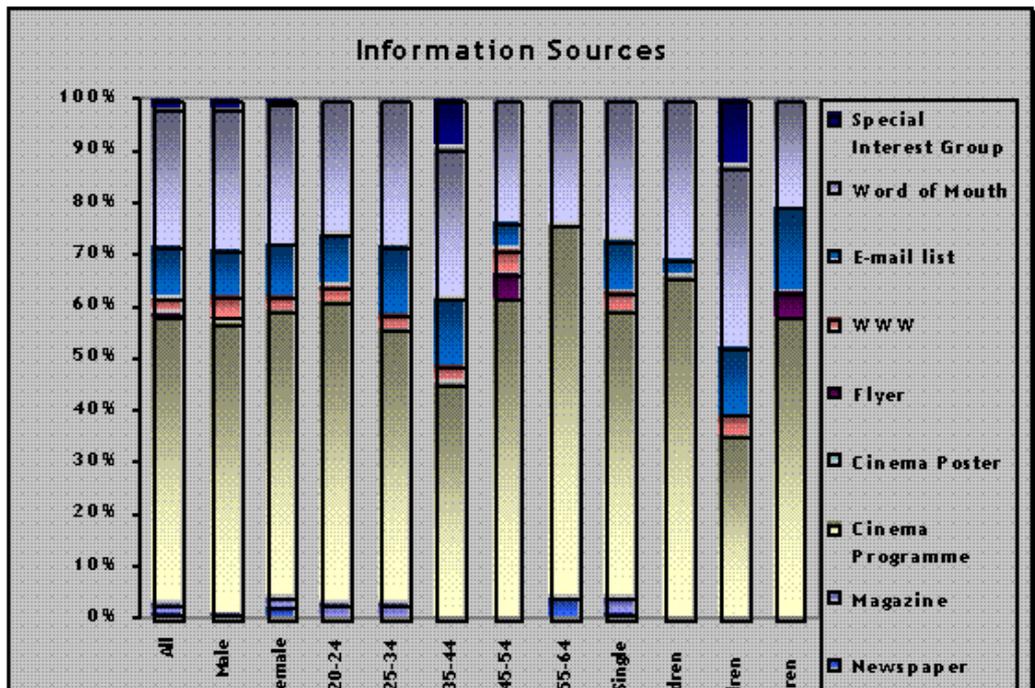


Table 7: Film attended according to segmentation.

The Female audience was different from the Male audience, mainly in their preference for *'Peace One Day'* at the expense of *'The White Diamond'*. The popularity of *'Peace One Day'* declined with age whereas *'The White Diamond'* audience increased, especially for those aged 55-64. The very visual nature of this Herzog documentary could have been a contributory factor. *'The White Diamond'* also gained many of its admissions from Couples rather than Singles. *'I Am From Nowhere'* was more popular with the younger cinemagoers. *'The Damned and the Sacred'* was especially popular with Couples with dependent children, which is unsurprising considering its content. *'The Power of Good'* had an untypical cluster at age 20-24 based on a recommendation by a University Tutor in Glasgow, and this particular film appealed predominantly to the older cinemagoer. Couples with children declined to attend this particular film – the subject matter was potentially disturbing. The most eclectic segments were those aged 20-24 and 55-64. Singles also seem more eclectic than Couples.

4.2 Information Sources



	Couple with no chil	Couple with dependent chil	Couple with non-dependent chil

Table 8: Information Sources according to segmentation.

Couples with dependent children are an unusual segment. They do not access the Cinema Programmes as much as other groups and are especially reliant on Word of Mouth. It may well be that they have to be reached in conjunction with other means such as E-mail lists and Special Interest Groups. The range of information sources appears to narrow considerably at later ages, which could be addressed by Information and Communications Technology.

4.3 Preferred Genres

Table 9: Preferred Cinema Documentary Genres according to segmentation. Note * indicates a potential Docspace Season.

The preference for the Political genre is clustered around the 25-44 age group segment. There are also preferences for Environmental and Travel among the 20-24 age group and Biography among those aged 45-64. The Environmental genre also scores well with this latter segment. The visual nature of any material may be the reason why the Natural World is strong with those aged 45 and over. The popularity of the Music genre declines a little with age. Travel appeals to those without dependent children. Couples with dependent children are the most distinctive segment of all: their preference for the most popular genres of Political and Social Issues is lower and their preference for relatively unpopular genres such as Science (there are well-documented worries UK-wide that children do not receive a suitable scientific education) is higher.

4.4 Important Qualities for Cinema Documentaries

Table 10: Important Qualities of Cinema Documentaries according to segmentation.

Realism is less important for those with children and more important for those without. Content that is 'Dramatic and Uplifting' is requested by those aged 45-54 more than any other age group, which to a certain extent explains the attendance patterns of *The Power of Good*. The age group 35-44 and 45-54 also seeks 'Entertainment' more than any other age segment. The importance of 'Visual' cinema documentaries becomes more marked with age, and this is corroborated by the performance of *The White Diamond*. The importance of 'Entertaining' documentaries is most pronounced in couples with dependent children. 'Controversy' fares worst with the key 25-34 segment. As there were no 'Personal' documentaries, apart perhaps from *Fleurette*, this category was small, although marked out as an important quality by the younger and older age-groups.

Further Research

As is apparent from the tables above, this questionnaire at the opening festival of CinemaNet Europe aimed to analyse the documentary screening experience for these particular audiences in terms of who the audiences were, as well as what they liked. We were interested in the fact that again, these audiences had some common preferences and behaviour, such as watching very little television, little interest in controversial films, and that their preferences change with age and life stage. We set out to discover more in depth information about these largely unstudied people.

We did this through setting up focus groups, and arranging to have the same guidelines followed by the remaining CinemaNet partners, (apart from Germany). Four countries were involved: Austria, the Netherlands, Spain and the UK. The focus groups were designed by Michael Reilly, based on the results of the earlier attempts to increase the audience for the documentaries that CNE was distributing every month across all its member countries. The rationale for the focus groups was to follow up on the preceding quantitative research, to investigate whether comparable attitudes existed amongst the countries, and to find out as much qualitative information as possible to build up a picture showing who the audiences were that were coming to the documentaries: who were not coming to the screenings, and their reasons for staying away; and whether it would be possible to increase the satisfaction for those who were attending screenings.

- How might the attendance of the existing documentary cinema audiences be increased?
- How might the attendance of the potential documentary cinema audiences to CinemaNet Europe screenings be encouraged?
- How might the attendance of existing art-house fiction cinema audiences to CinemaNet Europe screenings be encouraged?

The four partners held four focus groups each between September 2005 and June 2006. The aim was to spread the focus groups between rural and urban venues. Each focus group consisted of 4-8 participants plus a moderator. The sessions lasted for 75-90 minutes. The findings are available as a report from the docspace website (Hardie & Inglis, 2006).

Organisation of the groups

Participants in the focus groups were mainly recruited through invitations sent out to cinema email lists. Advertisements in cinema programme brochures and in foyers were also used.

Austria	Location	Venue	Participants	Viewing of documentaries in cinemas
1	Urban	Inst. for Media & Communication Studies	5	FEW documentaries seen at a cinema Arthouse cinemagoers
2	Urban	As above	4	SEVERAL documentaries seen at a cinema Arthouse cinemagoers
3	Urban	Filmmakers association	3	SEVERAL documentaries seen at a cinema Arthouse cinemagoers

Urban location in Vienna. (groups 1 & 2) and Salzburg (group 3)

Netherlands	Location	Venue	Participants	Selection criteria
1	Rural	Specialist cinema	7	FEW documentaries seen at a cinema
2	Rural	Specialist cinema	6	SEVERAL documentaries seen at a cinema
3	Urban	Arthouse cinema	7	FEW documentaries seen at a cinema
4	Urban	Arthouse cinema	6	SEVERAL documentaries seen at a cinema

Rural location in 's-Hertogenbosch. Urban location in Amsterdam.

Spain	Location	Venue	Participants	Viewing of documentaries in cinemas
1	urban		6	FEW documentaries seen at a cinema
2	urban		6	SEVERAL documentaries seen at a cinema

UK	Location	Venue	Participants	Viewing of documentaries in cinemas
1	Rural	Community hall	6	SEVERAL documentaries seen at a cinema
2	Rural	Community hall	5	FEW documentaries seen at a cinema
3	Urban	Arthouse cinema	7	SEVERAL documentaries seen at a cinema. Arthouse cinemagoers
4	Urban	Arthouse cinema	6	FEW documentaries seen at a cinema. Arthouse cinemagoers

Rural location in Carlops Village. Urban location in Glasgow.

Findings from Focus Groups

In all four countries, rural (and non-city) cinemagoers have quite limited choices about where they can see specialist films including documentaries. Often there is a lack of information in the popular media about the release of documentaries and cinemagoers have to actively search for details of screenings. However people in the Netherlands do not want to go through too much trouble in order to go to a film, they want to be able to see it at their local cinema.

In rural areas, family commitments and other local activities at the weekend mean that many participants in the focus groups want to go to cinema on weekdays. Lack of time, distance from the cinema, and lack of energy were cited as important factors which prevent cinema-going. However in Austria time constraints and personal commitments were not significant barriers to attending.

Rural audiences often treat cinema-going as a family event. Some go with friends who have similar tastes, and the friendly atmosphere of a community event is well liked. But if it's a family outing a documentary is unlikely to be chosen by UK participants because most documentaries aren't of interest to children.

Generally most participants go to the cinema because they want to see a specific film but short runs at cinemas, especially for documentaries, were making this more and more difficult.

Urban audiences

City audiences felt they had relatively good opportunities to see specialist and documentary films. There are many opportunities to see quality films in major cities such as Amsterdam. 'As soon as one festival ends, the next one starts' noted one participant.

Documentaries, more so than most fiction films, were seen to offer something to talk about with friends who share the same tastes, although it was recognised that it was sometimes difficult finding friends who would be willing to see a documentary. A significant number of participants preferred to watch films on their own: 'Once I got past the idea that it was ok to go the pictures on your own life has been different...' and 'I prefer to go on my own because you don't have to talk to anyone.'

Generally urban audiences would probably not choose a documentary at the weekend when they are looking to relax and reduce stress. 'It would depend on the documentary and if it's something you know is going to be quite heavy then I wouldn't leave that for a weekend. I'd generally like to be more entertained and see something a bit more relaxed.' And 'sometimes I think, I am not going to put myself through this [experience].'

Lack of information in newspapers and the limited release of documentaries (in Austria) were felt to be barriers to regular viewing. In the Netherlands the price of admission was felt to be too high. Participants can understand why major blockbusters might cost more since production costs are high, but they cannot understand why tickets for low budget documentaries need to be that high as well.

General issues

The single screening or short runs of most documentaries was widely considered a problem which often resulted in people missing films they would have liked to see. 'I find that you've got to be really organised about going to see stuff and 'you don't accidentally find out about documentaries.' In Spain, festivals were felt to provide important opportunities to see documentaries, and that festival prizes acted as a good form of recommendation about the quality of films.

Participants in Spain were generally indifferent about when to attend screenings – weekdays or weekends. One person said they often went alone during the week and with others at the weekend. All preferred a cinema near to their home and all cited 'escape' as the main experience they seek

Expectations

Some participants said they went to a particular film to gain a personal experience. Company was not required as they were totally immersed in the film. In all cases participants in the Netherlands expect to be able to see a film in relative quiet and to learn from documentaries.

Participants in all four countries had expectations that cinema documentaries would provide a high quality, visual, cinematic experience: 'A combination of beautiful images and information on a subject.' Some felt that the production standards of cinema documentaries should be comparable with fiction films, '...although they don't have to be slick productions in order to grab attention.'

However others felt that if the story or subject was compelling enough then lower production qualities could be ignored. Participants in Spain liked good stories, artistic qualities and social subjects; things they could 'relate to'. Quality is subjective, which was demonstrated when some of UK urban audience participants argued about the merits of the films shown under the CinemaNet Europe banner.

'When you see a blockbuster you know what to expect; independent films tell you something new... surprising stories, human stories'. The Spanish participants in particular articulated their desire for 'other perspectives, more critical views, more intimate, social value, more variety' than is available in mainstream fiction.

The word 'documentary' was felt to be an obstacle to reaching new audiences. 'I think when you hear the word documentary, the first thing that does come into your head is a fairly serious political, informative kind of thing.'

Participants who had not seen many cinema documentaries had differing perceptions of what films were classified as documentaries. They were uncertain whether reconstructions and re-enactments such as *Touching the Void* or *The Story of The Weeping Camel* were documentaries.

Cinema versus television

Many participants, especially the more regular viewers of documentaries, identified qualities which distinguished cinema documentaries from television documentaries. Cinema films had scale, the story was usually told visually, the subject or story was "dealt with properly". Socio-critical, controversial, and political subject matters were associated with cinema.

One participant noted that television documentaries generally do not deal with long timescale projects whereas cinema projects can cover periods of several years. Others felt that documentaries intended for television did not translate well to the large cinema screen.

Some Dutch participants said that documentaries were too serious and too 'difficult' to view in the cinema. They preferred to see these films at home where it is quiet. They want to relax when they go to a film and do not have the urge to learn anything.

Television documentaries were considered by Austrian participants to be more 'surfacy', an opinion which was voiced in several countries: 'Often there's constant music in the background in case you drift away. It's to keep you watching.' However watching documentaries on television was considered by some UK participants to be closer to radio and was good when doing several household activities at once, for example cooking or ironing.

In contrast, cinema documentaries tended to be lengthier explorations, which allowed audiences to 'tune into the subject matter'. One Austrian participant, who also watched television documentaries, had higher expectations for cinema documentaries – good cinematography, decent sound, and a certain artistic flair. Another said 'I think cinema documentaries can be more highbrow, because you cannot switch to another channel.'

Several participants, especially from the rural groups, did not have a particular preference for cinema or television when watching, commenting: 'It's the interest in the story that matters, not particularly because it was a documentary' and 'They're just films to me.'

Some participants admitted that although they preferred watching documentaries (and other films) at a cinema, they were conscious of the fact that the films might appear free of charge on television within a few weeks, and this affected their decision to see some films.

Reasons for choosing a documentary

The overwhelming reason for choosing to watch a documentary (at a cinema or on television) was the subject matter and, associated with this, enjoyment in learning something new about the subject, films which 'open your eyes'. Another participant, an infrequent viewer of cinema documentaries, said, 'If it's a fiction film, you might not particularly be attracted by the story, but you'll be attracted by the cast or the director, whereas with documentaries, if you're not into the subject matter you won't go, no matter how good a documentary it is.' An Austrian participant emphasised the point: 'I have a burning interest in background information, particularly the politic background. How does it work? How are decisions made?' Rural participants in the Netherlands choose to go to a documentary because they want to learn from it, although it is the subject of the film that is important, not whether it is fiction or documentary. Only occasionally did the name of the director attract audiences in Austria. While most participants in the Netherlands said that entertainment and relaxation is more important than authenticity and educational purposes, an Austrian participant said that, for them, the interesting thing about documentaries is being able to engage in a (virtual) discourse with the film by comparing your own perspective with the director's perspective.

People were impressed by documentaries with a story which had emotional appeal, films about real people. Different types of documentary – music films, social issue films, political films, sports films –

appealed to very specific audiences and not to a general 'documentary audience'. The power of documentaries to grab attention and make you think was noted by several participants:

When my wife and I came out of the cinema [after watching Fahrenheit 9/11] we were really angry – although we were probably manipulated – we had to go for a drink. That's what I like going to the cinema for – it's films that really affect you.....It has to be a subject that grabs me for me to spend that money.

Overview 2006

A picture emerged across all four countries participating of two major segmentations by psychographics:

1. those who find pleasure in learning or immersion in new information. They choose the film by topic. It seems as though they see themselves as intelligent, and are confident of their own choices. They tend to be highly educated. Interestingly, they avoid violent fiction films. This group seems to correspond with the *cultural creatives*; a group for whom autonomy and independence are high priorities (Ray and Anderson,

2000)

2. grazers – relaxation means entertainment, and 'serious', or learning is a turn off. Comfort and ease of access in viewing context is paramount. They are less sure of their own choices and tend to be less well educated. They see violent films as cathartic.

Potential Audiences – Rural and Urban

Four factors had emerged through the questionnaires as useful categorisations that were predictive of behaviour: rural and urban audiences; frequent documentary attenders and infrequent documentary attenders. The attitudinal factors associated with these categories remained broadly constant across national boundaries, yielding useful marketing and programming information.

A perhaps slightly surprising result is that all four categories enjoy the cinema experience for escape: but they do define escape differently. The frequent doc attenders enjoy escaping from the busyness of home or office to focus on a particular topic that they want to learn more about – they want to merge themselves in the film. The infrequent doc attenders want to be entertained and to relax in physical comfort – learning more about something smacks of forced schooling to them. Both groups prefer mid week screenings and have mixed feelings about Q & As – broadly they welcome them, but want an easy get out clause after the film.

All four categories also are happy to see cinema going as both social and personal – they are happy to go alone or in a group. For those who do want to go in company, finding others who want to see documentaries was not always easy. This suggests that the idea of a film-club, which was advocated by all sectors, could increase audience numbers.

All groups except the rural frequent doc attenders expressed a strong preference for seeing documentaries in seasons/mini-festivals/fixed weekly slot. Urban frequent attenders find it easier to choose from a range of films, and expressed most dissatisfaction with what was seen as a high cost for tickets. For all others, the cost of a ticket was a smaller factor than the cost of time, planning and the cost of babysitting. Rather more enthusiasm was shown by the rural audiences for alternative content

cost of babysitting. Rather more enthusiasm was shown by the rural audiences for alternative content, especially music, in the cinemas. This is perhaps to be expected, since rural audiences will have less access to concert halls, theatre, opera and sporting stadiums.

All groups were interested to buy or rent DVDs or download documentaries, especially the urban frequent attenders. They would consider a cinema outing an assurance of quality. Interestingly, the rural frequent attenders were the least likely to watch a documentary at home on DVD or through the internet – for them, film viewing belongs in the cinema. Many expressed frustration that cinema and DVD trailers gave too much away. All groups concur in disinterest in the technological developments of CinemaNet Europe, but also concur in interest in the added value of discussions, especially live and interactive events offered by CinemaNet Europe or Docspace.

In order to increase the numbers of those choosing to watch documentaries in the cinema, some focus groups were set up to identify potential, albeit currently abstaining, audiences. These focus groups were constituted from people who rarely go to documentaries, but who fit the general cultural profile established by earlier research in the UK and Netherlands of the documentary cinema viewer. The attitudinal factors defining these focus groups were that:

- They prefer mainstream cinema
- They prefer to go to theatre rather than cinema
- They don't go to theatre or cinema but they are interested in documentaries on radio or television
- They don't go to many cultural events, or watch much television, but they do care about particular subjects that are possible documentary subjects.
- The goal was to discover what actions were needed to get this group to go beyond their existing preferences.

This group are characterised as seeking escape and relaxation from the film, but also to connect with the main character or their predicament. They value the chance to reflect on a film, to respond superficially or in a deeper way. They all see going to the cinema as social, but all participants also enjoy going to the cinema alone. They all dislike violent films. Beyond these factors, it became clear that rural groups and urban groups report substantially contrasting preferences, requiring different measures to attract them to documentaries in the cinemas. These differences were found to be wide ranging, from the best method of informing them of screenings, to the choice of subject matter and even what is classed as a documentary. Given the rise of the internet and television, this is a surprising finding in itself, as it was commonly predicted that the force of information saturation would even out differences based on people's address.

The focus groups made some unsolicited suggestions for increasing their ability to see documentaries in cinemas. These were mostly made in response to a frustration that cinemas do not post the length of a particular film run in advance. Several participants felt they had missed out on a screening, or on a proposed trip to return to a film with friends or family. Perhaps as a way of solving this, the suggestion was made to create film clubs, particularly in the rural areas and one group suggested DVD rentals. Some participants, particularly those who watch few documentaries at present, advocated screening on a fixed day; some a mini-festival curated thematically.

Rural

To attract current non-attendeers to see big screen documentaries would require:

- Posters displayed locally
- Synopsis of film published in flier or poster
- Subject matter of film would have to be of interest
- Family friendly screenings would be more attractive
- Classic documentaries, Music and Nature documentaries most appealing
- Refreshments and a 'social' aspect – either a small reception or a short, informal Q & A would be welcomed
- Previews in newspaper would help
- Long runs would help

Urban

To attract current non-attendees to see big screen documentaries would require:

- Longer window between theatrical and television screening (more television watched in cities)
- Added value to compensate for the cost of the ticket – especially if it is imagined the film will be on television at some time.
- Reinforcement of screening info in several mailing lists/programme/newspaper (info overload in urban centres)
- Longer runs to let people get organized in advance and hear word of mouth endorsement
- Local history documentaries, political documentaries
- Chance to buy DVDs at a discount afterwards

One aspect common to both groups was an interest in buying or renting the DVD so that they could show a film they had enjoyed to family and friends. Interest was expressed in getting the DVD at a discount. It might be possible to make this as an 'added value' offer relating to point two above; offering the DVD at a discount could be a useful attraction publicized in the programme notes or in the cinema email list.

2. Existing Audiences: Enhancements

This section focused on people who do already go to documentaries in the cinema, and aimed to elicit opinions from them about what could be done to improve the number of films they came to see, and the quality of their enjoyment. Here, there was less difference between the rural and urban responses (beyond the differences already articulated through the preceding section). They tended to prefer going to the cinema during week-days. They actively seek out feature length documentaries, but expressed particular dislike for boring or repetitive story-telling. They discussed what would make the big screen documentary experience even more satisfactory for them:

- Screening Notes on the film
- Film Clubs
- Rental of DVDs of films which are held only a short time in the cinema.
- Contextual information about the film, preferably in other sources – websites, programme, TV, radio.
- Possibly a discussion with the director present, but this requires a prior commitment which can makes the audience wary & reduces the prospect of it being a night out: Response divided the

makes the audience wary & reduces the prospect of it being a night out. Response divided the focus groups and included the following:

- 'You are making far more of a commitment to engaging with a subject, rather than just going for a night out'
- 'It is fascinating to hear the director afterwards ...brings such an insight into why they were interested in the subject in the first place'
- 'For myself, to be asked to respond to something immediately is difficult and sometimes I don't like it'.
- Endorsement from critics and word of mouth was particularly valued in urban, rather than rural audiences.
- Films running for longer.
- Length of film run to be made clear by the cinema so audiences can plan viewing dates.

Barriers to big screen documentary attendance

- The rural audience was more conservative, and worried that they were going to see television, albeit on a larger scale.
- Urban audiences had the same worry about television and translated this into a worry about cost - it was not worth paying the money since the film would eventually be shown on television.
- Expectations of cinematic experience might be disappointed: 'most documentaries are made for television and therefore they won't embrace all the possibilities that big screen offers... I hate seeing TV translated to the big screen'

Both rural and urban audiences highlighted difficulties of fitting in the time.

Cost was a factor that came up again, more so for urban audiences.

Lack of information was highlighted, with different solutions proposed for rural and urban audiences (see question 1)

Attractions to Documentary Attendance. This took the form of the focus group expressing their opinions on what they value in the experience of the documentary screenings.

- Emotional storyline
- About real people 'makes you care'
- 'Surprising stories, human stories'
- Insight – 'get a complex, intuitive sense of who people are as you do in real life you got just from their faces and the way they spoke and their expressions and mannerisms, you got a real sense of them'
- 'Changes your perspective: things you don't know about, you know that really quite open your eyes'
- 'Become more curious about the world around you'
- 'Powerful engagement, which can't be matched by fiction - it's as though you are there: Documentaries have a power to shock, which fiction films no matter how outrageous can't do'.

Analysis of Audience preconceptions

This was a very interesting exercise where we asked the participants for key words they would use to describe a documentary. They came up with many words along the lines of this list below.

- 'Factual'
- 'True'
- 'Serious'
- 'Commentary'
- 'Analysis'
- 'Informative'
- 'Worthy'
- 'Boring'

When asked to remember the last documentaries (CNE and other) they actually saw, and to describe those documentaries, they then came up with a new list:

- 'Exotic'
- 'Interesting'
- 'Curious'
- 'Exciting'
- 'Thrilling'
- 'Scenic – great visual sweep to landscape'
- 'Identify with story – feel that you are there'
- 'Great Music'
- 'Cinematic - Particularly European films have cinematic qualities, they really know how to use a camera to tell a story as much as through dialogue'
- 'Riveting: you could see the reality, the expressions on their faces. I just remember I never took my eyes off the screen'

It's clear that what people expect and what they experience are two different things. Documentaries are heavily associated with television and education. The actual experience of watching documentaries on the big screen is an emotionally fulfilling experience, which also satisfies on aesthetic, musical and cinematic criteria. That this huge disparity is still evident, even after the public successes of *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *Capturing the Friedmans*, is perhaps surprising.

It seems that documentary, in the public mind, is firmly linked with television as a form, and education as an aim. The gap widens for the group which is the potential documentary audience and narrows for those who go to documentaries regularly. This latter group are less likely to be confused over whether a film is a documentary or not, but they also have a mixed response over whether it is wise to advertise a documentary as such. All do agree, however, that the subject matter of the film is the key that they would use in order to decide whether to go themselves, and how they would describe a documentary to encourage their friends or family to attend.

Focus Group Conclusion

Rural screenings offer the most potential to increase audiences for documentary screenings as they are currently underserved. Although there is no difference in programming preferences for both groups, two separate strategies could be followed to get audiences in – one for the grazers and one for the immersers. Grazers need to have film endorsed, and screening and contextual comfort needs to be high. Both groups want word of mouth recommendation and posters or programme fliers. Immersers want to know it will be satisfying intellectually and appreciate contextual added value such as notes, debates more than their physical comfort. The establishment of Film clubs seems to satisfy many of the barriers to entry and desired enhancements across all sectors.

Final Research

Docspace left CinemaNet Europe in 2006, and carried out the final audience questionnaire for Scottish venues only. The questionnaire was designed by Ron Inglis and Amy Hardie. The main aim of the questionnaire was to gather hard data on the current audiences attending Docspace screenings, and to test some of the results of the focus groups. 5 Cinemas, 3 rural and 2 urban, sent in results from a two page questionnaire. This final bit of research presents the findings from 125 questionnaires completed to date.

The first questions concern the visit to the venue, and the findings are that:

- Most (46.4%) of the audience planned the cinema visit a week in advance
- Most (40%) came with partner or friend
- Most (36.8%) came on foot, travelling less than a mile.

Surprisingly, given the huge increase in the number of documentaries released cinematically in the last two years, for 43.2%, it was still their first time to see a documentary at the cinema. And, as opposed to earlier questionnaires, most (45.6%) now felt they had adequate opportunities to see documentaries in cinemas (although 28.8% still reckoned the opportunities were poor). The facts certainly bear this out, as there were 33 major releases of UK documentaries in 2004, as opposed to 3 in 2000. Nonetheless, a large majority (83.2%) would still like to see more documentaries in the cinema, and 56% would be interested to help programme films in the cinema.

As in 2002 and 2004, the cinema brochure still accounted for the single largest source of information that motivated the audience to come, although it had dropped by around a third to 38.4%. As predicted after the 2004 research, the decrease in the use of the cinema programme was balanced by an increase in information gained through special interest groups, mainly through recommendation by word of mouth and by internet and email lists.

The second series of questions concerned cinema-going, and the results showed:

- Most (78.4%) went once a month or more. They were prevented from attending more frequently due to lack of time (46.4%) – which is the result we would expect from the earlier focus groups. Again, consistent with all the research since 2002, most (76.8%) rate the subject matter of the film very important in explaining their choice of attendance.
- Most would like Q & A sessions with the director or an expert (57.6%) and 31.2% would like accompanying written materials to enhance their experience of the film.

For the first time we asked what alternative events the documentary attenders would consider attending

For the first time, we asked what alternative events the documentary attendees would consider attending in the venues: most (51.2% would attend music concerts, with opera or theatre broadcasts (36.8%) not far behind. As expected from the focus groups, when we asked if they would consider computer-based games, only 4.8% were willing to consider attending, with a sizable 16.8% robustly refusing to come to anything at the cinema apart from films.

The questions then focused on what was specific to the documentary experience, aiming to substantiate earlier findings that suggested that the art house audience was not the same as the documentary audience. It was discovered that:

- Most were expecting a cinema documentary to be informative (72%) and thought provoking (78.%) as opposed to entertaining or exciting.
- The visual quality was not seen as very important but as important (62.4%),
- The desire to learn something new from a cinema documentary was a key motivation with 57.6% rating it important and 34.4% as very important.
- 59.2% wanted to have read a preview/review about the film, although a surprising 36.8% said this was not important.
- Asked about whether they usually stayed for a Q & A afterwards, most (48%) usually did.

Somewhat surprisingly, most (48.8%) would watch a documentary in the cinema even after it had been shown on television or released on DVD. If they did watch it on DVD or internet, it was the choice of time that made them watch it at home – they were largely uninterested in downloading it legally (64.8%), but 63.2% would be possibly interested or definitely interested in joining a film club in order to see and discuss more documentaries like the one they had attended.

The questionnaire then focused on information about the audience, with results very similar to the 2002 and 2004 questionnaires:

- Twice as many female respondents as male
- Most popular age segment was 25 – 29, with 52% of the audience overall over 30
- Students and public sector make up 42.4 % of the audience
- The majority were single or couples with no dependent children.

The majority of the audience are single - couples or single parents with dependent children count as just over 10% of the total audience. The most popular newspaper read is the Guardian, with 30.4% response, duplicating the earlier research of 2002 and 2004.

As noticed in the focus groups, most people go to the cinema to escape and relax – (52.8%). As noted earlier, the definition of escapism is quite different when it comes to documentary viewers and mainstream viewers, and this audience see no incompatibility with escapism and learning something new – which 80% say is the reason they go to the cinema to see a documentary. 76% describe this as engaging deeply with a subject they had previously known little about. Further exploring their motivation and experience, they were asked their opinion on cinema violence – 41.6% did not avoid films with scenes of graphic violence, and 44.2% did. They mostly (69.8%) distrusted film marketing, preferring to make their own evaluation.

Conclusions

The results of the three sets of questionnaires are remarkably consistent, especially given the change in

the amount of documentaries available on the big screen over the last two years. We are aware that our questionnaire samples are heavily biased towards Glasgow and Edinburgh, but the results are consistent with both the Dutch studies and the focus groups in UK, Austria, Spain and the Netherlands. A total of 442 questionnaires and 16 focus groups have been carried out between 2002 and 2007. They show:

1. The audience go to see a documentary in the cinema because of its subject matter
2. There is no one documentary audience, unlike the art house audience, and they are largely defined by subject interest with little cross-over between audiences.
3. Rural and Urban audiences have different priorities across programming, advertising and behavioural preferences, suggesting that they could be targeted differently to maximize the number and satisfaction of the audience.
4. In spite of the rapid increase in documentaries available in cinemas, for approximately half our respondents, it was still the first time they had seen a documentary on the big screen.
5. There remains widespread confusion over what a documentary is, and whether it is something that can only occur on television
6. Audience expectations of documentaries are of educational films: their actual experiences of them are of gripping narratives.
7. After seeing a documentary in the cinema, between 80 and 90% of our respondents wanted to see more.

Our sample size is small, but the consistency of the opinions elicited suggests that the findings are a worthwhile basis for future quantitative research. Of particular interest is the way that the cinema documentary audiences self-define in terms of subject matter. This would seem a key to the difference between the art house and the various documentary audiences. The factors listed above point to the necessity for distributors and cinema programmers to define a strategy to encourage documentary attenders that is specific to the both subject matter, and the location of the venue i.e. rural or urban. Although there is still confusion around the definition and expectation of what a documentary is, the audiences that do see a documentary in the cinema report that their experience exceeds their expectations. Much more work remains to be done in this fascinating and understudied field.

References

Austin, Thomas, *Seeing, feeling, knowing: a case study of audience perspectives on screen documentary*, private correspondence, University of Sussex 2004

Cooke, Alex, *Documentary on the big screen*, Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Bristol, 1995

Grierson, John, National Film Board of Canada 1939

Hardie, Amy, *Docspace Report 2002* available online www.docspace.org.uk

Hardie, Amy & Ron Inglis, *Focus Groups Research Report Austria, Netherlands, Spain & UK* 2006 available online www.docspace.org.uk

Hardie, Amy & Michael Reilly, *Opening Festival Audience Survey 2005* available online www.docspace.org.uk

Ray, Paul & Anderson, Sherry, *The Cultural Creatives* NY, Three Rivers Press, 2000

Reilly, Michael D, *Cinema and Some of its Implications for Scottish Regional Film Theatres* Unpublished MA thesis University of Strathclyde, 2004

Ryninks, Kees, *Market survey into the release of Dutch documentaries in film theatres*, internal report, Dutch Film Board 2003

Vicente, Ana, *Understanding Cinema Audiences* Unpublished MA thesis, University of Salford 2004.

Contact (by email): [Amy Hardie](#)

