Dr Dario Llinares in Conversation with Dr Sarah Atkinson

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ABSTRACT

Dr Dario Llinares interviews Dr Sarah Atkinson about the core themes addressed in her recent monograph *Beyond the Screen: Emerging Cinema and Engaging Audiences* (Bloomsbury, 2014). The conversation explores the context for new conceptualisations of cinema, which encompass and reflect the myriad ways film can be experienced beyond the auditorium in a digitally networked society. They also explore the historical antecedents for embodied cinema, discuss examples of expanded, extended and mobile film spectatorship, and postulate as to the effect of these transformations for film production, criticism and scholarship.

KEYWORDS

Expanded Cinema; Film Criticism; Film Theory; Digital Technology; Mobile Cinema; Spectatorship

Dario Llinares: I want to start by talking about the socio-cultural understanding of cinema as a space of spectatorship. It is often taken for granted yet at the same time imbued with a unique status. Could you put into some historical context some of the reasons why you think the space of cinematic spectatorship has become so culturally entrenched in the way that it has.

Sarah Atkinson: The notion of "going to the cinema" is something that is entrenched or embedded and invokes a specific type of spectatorship for most people that hear that statement. It's an auditorium experience, it's a collective experience. It utilises a big screen to create an immersive environment for people to experience a film in a way that they couldn't do at home. Obviously, before television became widespread in homes it was 'the' way to see films. The social practices of spectatorship have remained the same for over 100 years, as have filmmaking practices. What we are increasingly finding now are different types of spectatorship activities that are a result of emergent technological and social changes.

DL: If you go back to the emergence of cinema would you say that it was economic, or technological factors or more the development of narrative filmmaking that drove the development of cinema that we now take for granted.

SA: I think it's a confluence of those factors that you mentioned. Technology of course drives innovation but I wouldn't want to be deterministic in saying that was the main factor when you look at social practices how people used it and responded to it. Then the economies of cinema are very important. These areas are interlinked and still drive how people engage and consume cinema today.

DL: It's interesting how these interlinking factors have created a very specific, almost disciplined way of watching and you could argue that the emergence of cinephilia, and the appreciation of art-house cinema is linked to a very specific process of viewing i.e. you sit down, the lights go down, you concentrate without outside distractions and the text is given a kind of primacy in that situation.

SA: Yes there is a very conservative mode of engaging with cinema when you look at it in those ways. It's a product of industrial society. People use the cinema as a means of escape and its very straightforward in the exchange that happens. You buy a ticket, you sit and watch a screen. Audience numbers can be mapped really easily so there is a linear trajectory from how the film is watched to how its success is measured. It is still something we see today; how a successful film is measured economically out of this mode of viewing. But what we are beginning to have now, which I explore in my book, is the increasing use of multiple devices and multiple screens to engage with, so there is a shift in the way audiences are breaking with the accepted paradigm. Audience numbers are perhaps dwindling in certain age groups, particularly in the younger 16-20 demographic.

DL: It relates I suppose to the way that people have been socialised to watch, however if you look back throughout the history of cinema there have always been moments of transgression and there have always been attempts to move out of the dominant mode of watching. Thinking about the cinema of attractions, then you have got things like smell-o-vision, or the attempt to use buzzing seats and other gimmicks, and then of course different types of film arguably require a different mode of spectatorship. If you look at musicals or *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, which don't require that serious, concentrated mode of watching. Is that a history that is somewhat ignored perhaps?

SA: Those things that you mentioned tend to be put in the bracket of gimmicky. Another example is 3D, up until its latest resurgence, it has always been seen as a gimmick to try and get people through the doors. What I was thinking of in terms of the industrial society and that form of escapism, more people had demanding physical jobs where they were working in factories so cinema was an escape, it was a place to sit down, relax and take in a film and not have to physically work. Whereas now there is an actual labour in looking at screens, the predominant mode of work certainly in Western society is screen-based. So if you look at screens all day, what should your escapism be when it used to be to get away from what you do in the day. Cinema has perhaps become just another layer of screen-based fatigue.

DL: That's a really interesting point that perhaps hasn't been explored in thinking about how we integrate with screens today. How what people do in their day-to-day lives is mirrored so much in the kind of escapism, or the kinds of leisure practice that people engage in. If you have been sitting in front of a screen all day, do you really want to spend two hours in front of a bigger screen? Perhaps this 'fatigue' will increasingly promote interest in leisure practices that actively seek to get away from screens.

SA: Perhaps, ironically, this is one reason for the increasing incorporation of physical elements to the cinema that we have seen emerge and re-emerge. Examples of physical cinema, of course there was experimentation with vibrating seats in the 1960s, but now there are an increasing number of 4D experiences, that initially emerged within theme parks but are now being developed as main cinematic spaces in towns and cities. There are examples in LA and Japan of these 4D cinemas which have hydraulic seating and other physical aspects like scent, smoke or air fans, which are designed to create an immersive and embodied experience.

DL: This is the main focus of your book *Beyond the Screen: Emerging Cinema and Engaging Audiences*. In reading it I didn't get the sense that you agree with this 'cinema in crisis' discourse. You use the phrase 'cinema is in a perpetual state of becoming' and you explain that 'new frameworks for cinema engagement capture the physical, the cognitive, the visceral, the corporeal, the haptic'. These terms encapsulate the contemporary shifts in cinema experience but would you disagree with the notion that cinema is in crisis?

SA: No, it's an evolution. Cinema is shifting, it's changing, it has multiple meanings. The traditional, 'passive' auditorium mode is undoubtedly still the dominant form of cinema, particularly when it comes to certain types of films, which are suited to that environment, so there isn't a crisis in that sense. However, there are responses to the dynamics of the economic, technological and social landscape which is challenging the dominance of cinema.

DL: In the book this notion of emerging cinema you split into three categories: extending cinema, mobile cinema, and socially layer cinema. Perhaps you could give an example of each of those in order to define what you mean.

SA: Just as a caveat I think that it's important to say that in the fluid environment which we now inhabit, there are examples of cinema emerging all the time which perhaps don't fit into those categories. There is so much ephemeral activity now that we are in this era of live event cinema, and people are engaging in myriad ways beyond traditional cinema viewing. In working in such an environment you can only really take a snapshot in time, which I hope came through in the book. So, the first category I talk about is extending cinema, which is the move of the cinematic text across different platforms and parts of everyday life, which of course it has previously done, I don't claim this to be totally new. I cite the practice of ballyhoo which has been around almost as long as cinema, which is a marketing technique where live events are staged in the streets based around the film's narrative in order to attract people and get them talking about the film. So extending film narratives into websites is just a technological extension of that practice. It's common practice now - not just for marketing purposes - but to extend the narrative fabric and the diegesis through online networks. An obvious example that everyone will know is *The Blair Witch Project*, which didn't just use a website to advertise the film and the release date but actually created the inception of the narrative online. There have been lots of other examples since then such as *District 9*, *Memento* and *Requiem for a Dream,* which have all used websites to expand the filmic text into the real world.

DL: So the film in the cinema is one part of an overarching experience of the phenomena of the text. 'Text' is the wrong word actually, perhaps we're talk more of an event?

SA: And this also relates to Henry Jenkins and his work on *The Matrix* and the whole concept of transmedia. Narratives are being deliberately created to transcend mediums and one has to engage with all aspects to get a full sense of the 'hyper-diegesis'.

DL: And it's the internet and the digital age that has allowed interpretations of media that are much wider than just trying to define and critique the authorial intent of texts. There are multiple ways in which fans are engaging with texts in ways that make it impossible to suggest a text has a definitive meaning.

SA: Yes, the sites of meaning are dispersed across myriad network spaces. Where, in the hands of the audience, they are then shaped and changed in ever further and new productive ways. Secret Cinema is a relatively new phenomenon, which is actually becoming more commercially mainstream out of its niche, underground beginnings and seen only by a limited audience. In fact it's becoming a method in which studios are releasing films, the premiere of *Prometheus* was through a Secret Cinema event. Secret Cinema expands film beyond websites and online transmedia into 'real world' live events. The audience takes part within such experiences even being able to take on a character and being immersed into a 3 dimensional space of the film world.

DL: That actually alludes back to the very beginnings of cinema where screenings were part of a wider theatrical performance. It's ironic that in the digital age there has been this return to forms of embodied cinema experience. You mentioned the original clandestine nature of Secret Cinema and the focus on a highly cine-literate audience; the latest event was around *Back to the Future,* which was very mainstream, very much about a theme park kind of experience related thematically to a highly popular film.

SA: There have been a few events, which the company produced that were bigger, focusing on initial releases. *The Grand Budapest Hotel* comes to mind. Secret Cinema originally was based around films that perhaps had more of a cult following or recognition by more of a niche audience and was very much an underground event – their tagline is "tell no one" – their marketing is very clandestine using social media, word-of-mouth and they have a hidden location that people wouldn't know until maybe even the day before the event. In following the *Back to the Future* Secret Cinema event of 2014, you saw a very definite transition of the brand into the mainstream, which was something of a shock to the original fans. There were problems with this transition however. *Back to the Future* seemed to open the idea out

to a large amount of new fans. The very first day of the ticket sales the website couldn't cope with the volume of traffic, then Secret Cinema began with their usual approach not announcing the location and issuing complex instructions. This caused a social media backlash because people had bought family tickets for £120 and needed to book hotel rooms. The issue of wheelchair access came up and the company suddenly realised they would have to change how they handled communication. And then, as has been well documented, the event hit the headlines by cancelling the first week of shows, which caused a huge furore on social media and was something quite incredible to follow. It was fascinating to observe how fans deconstructed the whole concept and even ironically threw the text of *Back to the Future* back at the Secret Cinema company by manipulating imagery from the films in order to critique the PR handling of the event. This included carefully photo-shopped images of tickets disappearing in someone's hand - which is a reference to an iconic scene from the *Back to the Future*. These were really interesting examples of fan practices, which exemplify how this kind of cinema has to deal directly with fans who are already well versed in being interactive participants.

DL: This links to one of the other categories you mention in your book: Socially layered cinema. This is the concept that the conversation or the discourse that happens around a film becomes just as important or an integral part of contemporary film culture. The problems that Secret Cinema faced leading up to the first screening, that became more of a talking point than whether the event itself was good or bad.

SA: Perhaps ironically the company didn't embrace the fan involvement in a way they could have done. Fan participation is the key element to brands like Secret Cinema both in terms of widening audience engagement but also creating excitement around an event. Previously they had had much more controlled environments which helped to define the social media narrative, but this becomes more difficult as events become bigger and more mainstream.

DL: Can we also talk a little bit about the idea of mobile cinema? This concept also relates back to early cinema practices but also how cinema effects how we understand and see the 'real' world around us. Going back through the work of Baudelaire,

Walter Benjamin and then Frederic Jameson one can conceptualise the 20th century as creating a world that is viewed cinematically. For example when the tragedy of September the 11th happened one of the repeated comments was that it looked just like a movie. With the arrival of the digital age there is an argument that we a seeing the world through a kind of browsing gaze.

SA: The grammar that comes with browsing, and engagement with multiple screens, fragmenting viewing modes where audiences engage in multiple activities alongside viewing has impacted upon the aesthetics of cinema and contemporary visual storytelling. So filmmakers have incorporated the practice of texting via various kinds of representations on-screen, and this can also effect the ways in which exposition and character are developed of course. But then there are new viewing behaviours that have emerged which filmmakers have only just begun to experiment with. So a prototypical example is the recent film *APP* made in The Netherlands and was created through the incorporation of a synced application on your mobile phone. At the beginning of the film an inter-title instructed the audience not to turn their phones off but to turn them on. During the film when a character used a mobile phone - messages would then be sent to the audience's phones. Key piece of exposition would be delivered so if you weren't watching with a phone you would miss out on certain plot points. Such experimentations around enabling audiences to view two screens at once utilising phones but also tablets – which of course is a screen and a camera and has GPRS – offers new forms of digital storytelling.

DL: There was also a recent example where an audience was on a bus and were watching a film on an iPad that was set in the locations that the bus travelled through. In the mobility of the bus ride, and having the ability to look out of the window, while also watching the screen plays physical subjective engagement with the real and virtual.

SA: Yes, and in that example you are talking about the bus went round the locations of the film reinforcing that sense of seeing the world cinematically but on another level. It's almost a different type of augmented reality, attempting to place a viewer within the physical space of the film. Of course mobile viewing has entered the

mainstream in another way with streaming services like Netflix. People are tending to view content on their individual devices and this throws up the fundamental question: what is cinema? Are there certain films that require viewing on the big screen, and what happens to the notion of the cinema experience being a collective one? Creative producers are now beginning to rethink what kind of story can be told on specific platforms.

DL: Is there a generational aspect to these viewing practices do you think? So those born before the internet have witnessed a transition from pre-internet to post-internet viewing, and then of course those born after the internet have only ever known the online experience, particularly when it comes to social media, integrated into their very being. It's the digital natives versus digital immigrants debate.

SA: Possibly. There are lots of interesting effects that have come through technological transitions. We think of young cinemagoers today being ingrained within a digital existence but interestingly there has also been this return to analogue technologies in a kind of romaniticised way. Use of Polaroid photography, the popularity of vinyl, these have been recycled by young people who don't have the cultural, historical reference to it in their own lives, only maybe through their parents and their grandparents. This return to the physical, the desire to connect to a physical object, seems to come hand in hand with the dematerialisation caused by the internet.

DL: Also very well known filmmakers are part of this backlash, or perhaps more accurately they advocate shooting on physical film. Tarantino has taken over the Beverly Hills cinema saying he will only screen celluloid prints, and Christopher Nolan has said he will also shoot on film rather than digitally. Do you think these filmmakers have a point about preserving celluloid or is there a kind of cinematic elitism going on here?

SA: The people you mention are considered auteurs in the traditional sense so maybe there is a sense of wanting to preserve their own status as much as the concept of film as film. But there are other filmmakers, who are also highly regarded in cinema history, like Jean-Luc Godard and Martin Scorsese who have shot digitally and have

made films utilising 3D. So I think there is a real split between those who want to push technology as far as possible and those that are embedded within the romanticised ideal of traditional film. I think there is a place for both in the future.

DL: I think what has happened is the arrival of the digital has made it obvious that cinema is one of a number of spectatorship and production practices. Yes the projected celluloid film viewed in an auditorium has been the hegemonic form but that hegemony is beginning to fracture. I want to finish off by talking a little bit about the effect on film scholarship. I've been to various film studies conferences where I have raised these issues and often there is a hostile reaction. I don't know whether you have experienced the same and whether you think there is somewhat of a crisis in the discipline of film studies, or a least a need to look self-reflexively at what film studies actually does if the primacy of the film text in called into question.

SA: It's really challenging to our discipline, you do feel when you come to events or engage with cinematic texts that have multiple dimensions, how can you apply existing conceptual frameworks and theories that have been designed purely for close textual analysis or audience analysis? So the tools we have been used to in our discipline are arguably no longer appropriate or adequate. Going back to the Secret Cinema example I have been collaborating with a games scholar in order to be able to analyse the participatory nature of that experience. There was so much more than just the filmic text that defined the experience related to playfulness and gameplay. As scholars we need to expand the conceptual net in order encompass and explore the new possibilities.

DL: The way I understand it for myself is that there is a shift away from epistemological modes of understanding cinema to more phenomenological notions. A move of understand cinema as a process of knowing to a process of being. But there also a backlash to this not just within academia but within popular criticism and audiences who very much want to retain what they see as the purity of the cinema experience.

SA: Those who are worried about traditional cinema's demise really shouldn't be. I think the move to preserve smaller art-house cinema and to perhaps break up the dominance of the multiplexes is a good thing. But I think the emphasis of our conversation is this splintering of cinema spectatorship into niche forms and there perhaps isn't one over-riding practice that should dominate all others. This should be embraced because the development of new technologies is offering new ways of telling stories and involving audiences in exciting experimentations which might create economic as well as artistic benefits. Traditional auditoriums aren't selling tickets to certain demographics so new forms of engagement will always be searched for by creative producers and at the business level. I can only see it as beneficial to not be wholly precious about one particular type of film engagement.

Dr Sarah Atkinson received her PhD from Brunel University, London in 2009. Her research work examines text, process, apparatus and audience to map new spaces and modes of audience participation within contemporary transmedia narrative environments. Her monograph *Beyond the Screen: Emerging Cinema and Engaging Audiences* presents an expanded conceptualisation of cinema, one which encompasses the ways film can be experienced beyond the auditorium by a networked society. Sarah is Principal Investigator on two AHRC-funded projects: DEEP FILM Access (DFAP) which aims to unlock latent opportunities that exist within big and complex data sets generated by industrial digital film production; and Tracking IP Across the Creative Technologies (TRI-PACT) which aims to advance the research agenda and stimulate creative and strategic thinking around the management, protection, sharing, access, use and reuse of Intellectual Property (IP) within and across the domains of Film, Broadcast and Games.

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Dr Dario Llinares is Principle Lecturer in Contemporary Screen Media at the University of Brighton. He is currently researching the potential implication of modes of interactive spectatorship and their effect on auditorium viewing. He is examining the necessity for interdisciplinary methodologies to analyse film engagement and exploring the potential philosophical reframing of cinema in the context of the digital age. He has previously published research on masculinity, media and postmodernity, time-travel in film, the astronaut as a cultural icon and he is the co-presenter and producer of The Cinematologists podcast.

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