# THE DEPENDENT FILM DISTRIBUTOR:
# THE ROLE OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND THE EXPERIENTIAL IN THE UK AND IRISH THEATRICAL FILM SECTOR

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## ABSTRACT

This study considers the role of dependent entrepreneurship in the specialty theatrical film distribution sector in the UK and Ireland. It addresses a lack of research in the field of film distribution, which has a tendency to focus on second hand accounts. My thesis attempts to address this by drawing on my personal experience as a film distributor, adopting an innovative practice-led approach. This includes a combination of methods, such as iterative artefact creation across three foreign language film releases, audience questionnaires, and auto-ethnographic observations across a three-year period. This data is interrogated using a theoretical framework that incorporates existing debates around ideas of film distribution, entrepreneurship and the emergence of experiential cinema techniques, while exploring industry practices through national and transnational film perspectives.

I demonstrate how the concept of independence is a misleading term to describe those entities working in the UK and Irish film distribution sector, arguing that those commonly referred to as 'independent' should be more accurately described as 'dependent', due to their 'dependence' on third-party stakeholders, state funding organisations, exhibitors, streamers, partnerships and the audience. My research finds that distributors need to develop an entrepreneurial skillset and act as producer-distributors to make releasing specialty films economically viable in an increasingly fragmented and challenging market. I determine that employing local and transnational partnerships as well as utilising experiential marketing (or promotional techniques) can help to broaden the appeal of a film and reduce release costs. I show how embedding the concept of entrepreneurship into the study of film distribution can bring new perspectives when researching the practices of film distributors. I highlight the effectiveness of a practice-led approach for other media workers wanting to critically interrogate their own practice.

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# INTRODUCTION

This study considers the role of the theatrical film distributor in the UK and Ireland's specialty film sector. Drawing on my own practice as a distributor of predominately specialty films, including the use of auto-ethnographic reflection, iterative production and peer review, I consider the approaches distributors adopt to release specialty films in the UK and Ireland. I argue that film distributors need to develop an entrepreneurial skillset and function as a particular type of entrepreneur, that I describe as a producer-distributor. They also need to build and utilise transnational relationships and partnerships in their film campaigns and employ experiential marketing techniques to attract an audience. I interrogate this using a theoretical framework that incorporates ideas of dependence, entrepreneurship and the experiential. Ultimately, I conclude that those distributors commonly known as 'independent' are more accurately described as 'dependent' due to their dependence on third-party stakeholders, State film funding organisations, broadcasters, streaming services, exhibitors, transnational partners and ultimately, the audience.

The motivation for this study emerged out of my role as an experienced film distributor. In reviewing key debates in the literature, there is a divergence of opinion about the definition of 'independent film' but it does not comprehensively address the contemporary operations of UK film distributors. Nor does it explore their dependence on the various gatekeepers and stakeholders in the film value chain. While Higbee and Lim (2010, p8) point out that the concept of transnational cinema is an established area of enquiry within the discipline of film studies, the literature does not fully explore transnationalism as a means to reveal how it can be used to stimulate entrepreneurship in film distribution. Baschiera and Fisher (2022, p1) point out that the advent of online distribution, or streaming, has reshaped the circulation of feature films, bringing profound changes in the way films create audiences, generate market territorialisation and cross borders. Although there are debates about the impact on film consumption caused by the technology of streaming, the scholarship does not fully explore how the erosion of the exclusive theatrical window and how the windowing model provides opportunities for distributors and encourages entrepreneurship. There are lively academic debates about the nature of experiential cinema within what Atkinson and Kennedy (2016, p139) call "the wider context of

shifts towards an increasingly participatory cultural and creative economy". While Smits (2019) looks at the role of gatekeepers in the distribution process, the literature does not thoroughly address the enterprise distributors need to produce these events, nor the process involved in executing them.

I have been releasing films in the UK and Ireland through my company Swipe Films since 2004. I situate my practice in the 'specialty' distribution sector and use 'specialty' as a catch-all term to classify the types of films that my competitors and I release and as a useful way to avoid intermingling the terms 'dependence' and 'independence'. After examining the scholarship relating to the concept of independent films in chapter one and questioning a range of theoretical conceptions of independent cinema (King 2009 and Levy 1999), I define specialty films as those films, regardless of their language and how they were financed, that are targeted to a specific and limited audience, in a smaller number of cinemas than a commercial distribution release, with limited marketing expenditure and an emphasis on publicity, critical reviews and partnerships, to reach a discerning public. This definition encompasses 'independent', foreign language, arthouse and documentary films. The term 'specialty' reflects the diverse range of films that I have distributed in the UK and Ireland; such releases include the American film, *The Cat's Meow* (Peter Bogdanovich, 2004), the Georgian drama, The *President* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 2014), the Spanish language musical *The Other Side of the Bed* (Emilio Martinez Lazaro, 2002) and the boxing documentary *Cradle of Champions* (Bartle Bull, 2017).

Over the course of my study, the specialty marketplace, particularly relating to foreign language films in the UK and Ireland, has become more competitive. My findings chapters centre around three foreign language films that I released. The *BFI Statistical Handbook* (2017, p62) notes that the number of foreign language films in the UK and Ireland more than doubled from a low of 161 releases in 2009 to a high of 368 in 2016. That increase in films did not correspond to a substantial rise in foreign language box office with the total being £25.6 million in 2009 and a high of £30 million in 2016. By 2020, the year in which I released the subject of my final case study *One Way to Moscow* (Micha Lewinsky, 2019), foreign language films accounted for 36% of new releases at the UK and Irish box office (*BFI Statistical Yearbook*, 2020, p54), grossing a total of £18 million of which £12 million was for the Oscar winning South Korean film *Parasite* (Bong Joon-Ho, 2019).

Despite the reduction in box office in 2020 some of which was related to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were still a surprising number of players operating in the marketplace - 52 distributors handled 136 foreign language film releases that year (*BFI Statistical Yearbook*, 2020, p54), with 51 of those distributors, including myself, fighting to share only £6 million of box office revenues. To survive in such a challenging environment, I began to explore innovative and creative ways to monetise the release of foreign language films to help attract new audiences and to make the films stand out in a crowded marketplace. In this dissertation I give a first-hand account of current industry practice in the distribution sector in the UK, an approach that is not common in the scholarship in a field is typically dominated by ethnographic accounts (Machon 2018; Wocke 2018 and Kennedy 2018).

Given the fall in average revenues for foreign language films, I was keen to explore the adoption of experiential technology as a way to monetise my films and to increase box office and ancillary revenues. To survive in this sector, I argue that distributors need to keep abreast of technological developments, audience behavioural trends, and changes in business models, bringing in partnerships to broaden the appeal of a film, as well as exploring potential new revenue avenues, including those opportunities brought about by streaming. As a distributor I attend film festivals as a means to network but also to make acquisitions and maintain a supply of new releases. These acquisitions form the lifeblood of every distribution company as their successes fuel further acquisitions and potentially expansion; conversely their failures can make distributors more risk adverse while repeated box office failures can precipitate bankruptcy. As streaming becomes one of the pre-eminent non-theatrical means of viewing films, I address the impact it has on release strategies.

I was motivated to do this study because as a film distributor, I have witnessed a shift to an increasingly fragmented market where the appeal of independent and foreign language films consist of a small but niche segment of the theatrical marketplace, relying heavily on positive critical response, and awards recognition. In response I was prompted to explore ways in which to engage the audience, particularly after visiting the Cannes Film Festival and Venice Film Festival in 2017 and seeing the potential of VR in their programming. This made me focus on the experiential market, while initially relying on technology. Through the examination of my first case study relating to *Marie Curie: The Courage of Knowledge* (Marie

Noelle, 2016), I found that technology had its limitations and realised that the experiential and entrepreneurialism were the key areas on which to focus.

It is against this background that Chapters five, six and seven study explore, *inter alia*, why and how bespoke distribution strategies can be advantageous both for distributors and consumers. My aim was to use my practice and the three case studies to examine the changes in the business after almost two decades in distribution and the techniques that can be used to bring audiences back to foreign language films. It is against this setting that my research aims to explore a central question:

*What are the entrepreneurial techniques a dependent film distributor can employ to engage audiences?*

From this I identify three sub-questions that structures my research - to what extent does the concept of dependence define the practice of specialty film distributors; what role can experiential marketing techniques and transnational partnerships play in enhancing the cinemagoing experience and what entrepreneurial skills does a dependent film distributor need to draw on in their professional practice? To address these questions, the scope of my research in this study is through my own practice in film distribution across three case studies; the experiential factors that form a part of it and finally through an examination of current and developing literature in the field of film distribution. The complexity of this study has necessitated an atypical structure. The first three chapters contain a literature review, each of which examines a different but inter-linked concept – first, the role of independence, then entrepreneurship and, finally, the experiential in the film distribution business, primarily in the UK. In chapter one I begin by discussing the concept of independence and its limitations as a method to define the independent distributor. I use my expertise as an industrial practitioner as a lens to critique the concept. I then introduce and identify the concept of dependence as a device to understand film distribution and a framework for my research. I conclude that the term 'specialty', rather than independent, is a more accurate and less contentious way, to describe the films being released by dependent distributors.

I also examine how the combination of shortened theatrical windows, a reduction in box office revenues and cinema attendance during the COVID-19

pandemic has accelerated the dependence of distributors on streaming services and broadcasters as a key source of revenue generation. It is against this backdrop that I interrogate the changing role of the distributor in what Vlassis (2021, p593) describes as the new era of "platformisation". I identify a gap in the literature about the role played by entrepreneurship and partnerships in unshackling the distributor from its status of dependence.

Building on this, chapter two explores the literature on entrepreneurship and the extent that it addresses the film distribution sector. It argues that it is necessary to engage with concepts from entrepreneurship to have a fuller understanding of the work of distributors. I examine the distributor's dependence on third parties (or gatekeepers) in the film value chain and why entrepreneurial skills are key in order to survive and compete in a challenging distribution landscape in which consumer habits are evolving and theatrical windows are being reduced. I also look at the importance to distributors of industry networks and transnational relationships and the role institutions play in stimulating transnational entrepreneurial activity. In particular, I explore the intervention of national film funds, or what I call 'State Film organisations', in encouraging entrepreneurialism in film distribution, by offering incentives for the export of European cinema. Because of the system of theatrical windows and exclusive holdbacks, I also consider the cyclical nature to the entrepreneurship brought about by the system of theatrical windows and exclusive holdbacks and identify the building of industry networks as an important element for entrepreneurial distributors. By virtue of distributors being dependent on networks and gatekeepers, they must be entrepreneurial to survive in a challenging marketplace. I conclude that it is the state of dependence that necessitates, and encourages, entrepreneurship.

The third chapter develops this by exploring the debates in the literature about the impact of and importance of the experiential on the sector, how it can be used as an effective distribution technique to attract audiences and why its adoption fuels entrepreneurship among film distributors. That entrepreneurship can be demonstrated by packaging the experience with a set of appropriate partnerships that makes it more attractive to audiences. This leads to the appraisal that the experiential is not a contemporary phenomenon but has been developed over centuries by entrepreneurial business people that have used various technologies as a means of enhancing the

audience experience and achieving and increasing profitability. I conclude by emphasising that the experiential is an entrepreneurial, economic tool that can be used to good effect by the dependent film distributor.

Chapter four sets out my methodology highlighting the varied perspectives needed to explore the complex nature of film distribution. My research draws on a combination of data collection methods including iterative artefact creation across three foreign language film releases, audience questionnaires, peer review and auto-ethnographic observations as a film distributor. It starts with a first case study in November 2017 with the final case study being conducted in the middle of the pandemic in December 2020. This data is interrogated using a theoretical framework that incorporates ideas of dependence, entrepreneurship, experiential and transnational cinema. I also consider the ethical issues posed by the research practitioner's unique position of having to find the right balance between protecting crucial business data and relationships without compromising necessary research. Chapters five, six and seven present my findings, and enable me to document my transition from instinctual to reflexive practitioner. This iterative approach to my research, combined with auto-ethnographic observations, allowed me to track my progress as a researcher and practitioner over a three-year period.

My findings chapters focus on three foreign language films that I distributed. I collectively refer to them as 'The European Trilogy'. The first is practice-led research into the theatrical release of *Marie Curie*. In particular I examine the launch of a VR trailer for *Marie Curie* at its UK premiere as a technological device to attract a new audience for the film. I make the preliminary finding that it was the experiential aspects, not the technological side, that was the effective component at the film's UK premiere, particularly as the technology was too costly, cumbersome and unwieldy. I use a second artefact – the launch of the film at an experiential event in Ireland – as a way to consolidate the findings of the first artefact. This necessitated moving the scope of my research from the technological to an examination of a more experiential approach to specialty marketing. This structure allows me to demonstrate how entrepreneurialism is at the heart of theatrical distribution and how distributors need to be entrepreneurial to navigate the challenges of releasing specialty films in the UK and Ireland. This chapter also picks up on the themes of the literature review chapters by setting out how the process of creating an experiential event encourages

entrepreneurship. Some of the research presented herein was adapted into a conference paper and published as a chapter in the Udine/Gorizia Conference Proceedings (Mannion, 2019) set out in Appendix A.

Chapter six focuses on *Wine Calling* (Bruno Sauvard, 2018), a French language feature documentary about natural and biodynamic winemakers in France. It interrogates and reflects on its release strategy in the UK and Ireland. The first part of this chapter explores my work as a researcher on the creation and release of *Wine Calling* in the UK, with the second part assessing an experiential event created for its Irish premieres. The second part of the case study was undertaken to address questions raised by the UK release as to the importance and value of third-party partnerships and an examination of their role in contributing to the experiential nature of the screenings. In the process, I examine the role of exhibition, marketplace awareness, and partnerships to interrogate their place in producing an experiential event. I conclude that partnership-led experiential events, not technological-led VR solutions, are the most effective way to attract filmgoers and that a distributor needs to be entrepreneurial and develop producing skills to create, plan and execute a marketing campaign for an experiential event, acting effectively as a producer-distributor. This case study identifies the use of platformisation in the form of 'day-and-date' releases (where films are released in cinemas and on streaming services simultaneously) as a phenomenon that distributors can avail of to generate a faster flow of revenues, protect against market disruption and changes in consumer behaviour. Dependence is still at the core of this chapter as to achieve the theatrical element of a day-and-date release, distributors are dependent on a network of appropriate cinemas and partnerships, as well as Video-on-Demand (VOD) streaming services.

The final findings chapter concentrates on the experiential marketing campaign for the Swiss spy themed German language film, *One Way to Moscow*. This was released in December 2020 just as a national COVID-19 lockdown was lifted and then re-imposed for a further 6 months. It is a case study that shows the entrepreneurship a distributor needs to display when confronting disruptions in the economy. It consolidates the findings of the previous chapter by examining the need for distributors to be agile and respond pro-actively to adverse market conditions, in this case, the COVID-19 pandemic. This concludes that entrepreneurial skills, and

more particularly those of a producer-distributor, are more vital than ever to encourage and entice audiences to foreign language films, and the engagement with third party partnerships is a necessary lifeline that provides those films, and distributors themselves, the opportunity to survive in any disrupted marketplace.

In the concluding chapter, I summarise the main arguments of this dissertation before exploring their broader implications. I identify three key findings from my research - distributors need to develop an entrepreneurial skillset to function as a producer-distributor and build and utilise transnational relationships to release specialty films, particularly foreign language films; they should find experiential modes to attract an audience; they need to develop and utilise local partnerships to broaden the appeal of a film, increase marketplace awareness and reduce release costs. Ultimately, it is concluded that those distributors who are commonly known as 'independent' can be more accurately described as 'dependent' - dependent on third-party stakeholders, State Film organisations, exhibitors, streamers, and the ultimate end-user, the audience. The concept of independence is a misnomer, a misleading term to describe those entities working in the UK distribution sector. In closing, this thesis suggests various theoretical lines of inquiry that would benefit from further research in this area. I conclude that the contemporary arts education sector is well-positioned to adopt a practice-led methodology, given the increasing number of industry-active academics and researchers. I begin, in the next chapter, by investigating the film distribution business, primarily in the UK, and examine the concept of independence and its limitations as a term to define the independent distributor.

# CHAPTER 1
# FROM INDEPENDENT TO DEPENDENT DISTRIBUTION

Throughout this chapter I discuss academic work related to the film distribution sector, primarily in the UK and Ireland. According to Finney (2022, p18), the blinding speed of change over the last five years has been predominantly driven by the advent of streaming, shifting the film and content business from natural evolution to radical revolution. It is against this backdrop of changing business practices and the accelerated adoption of new industry norms that I examine the scholarship and begin by discussing the concept of independence and the term 'Indiewood' employed by King (2009, p3). I do so as a means to define the work of and frame the activities of a distributor in this fast-changing sector. I use my expertise as an industrial practitioner as a lens to critique the concept of independence and discuss its limitations. Focusing on the activities of the distributor, rather than the classification of the films they distribute is the best way to frame and to capture the essence of the productivity of a distributor, especially in an era experiencing seismic changes and the increasing dominance of streaming services.

I then introduce and identify the concept of dependence as a device to understand film distribution and a framework for my research. I draw on ideas from the literature relating to economics and the music business. I then look at how the dominance of streaming, the combination of shortened theatrical windows and reduction in box office and cinema attendance during the COVID-19 pandemic, is accelerating the dependence of distributors on streaming services as a key source of revenue generation. I then situate my practice in the specialty distribution sphere and employ specialty films as a more suitable term to describe the films released by dependent distributors in the UK and Ireland. Dependence is a thread that is woven through the creative industries – it is also a concept in the literature relating to the music industry and just like the film sector, is occasioned by digital disruption. It is against this setting that I interrogate the changing role of the distributor. In the next section, I explore the literature relating to film distribution and scholarship on independence.

## 1.1 *New Approaches for a Changing Terrain*

Knight and Thomas (2008, p354) describe distribution as "the largely invisible link in the chain" between exhibition and production. Yet they claim that "film distribution is still a woefully under-researched area" (2008, p366). A factor in its invisibility is, in my experience as a film distributor, the reluctance of distributors to share their industrial knowledge with outsiders, or to reveal the inner workings of their business operations. This is partly because of a desire to protect their intellectual property, but also to shield from view their revenue streams and profits. Carter (2017, p199) identifies, in the context of a case study about a successful video distribution company, another possible reason as being a desire to keep information away from competing labels in order to maintain a competitive advantage. Lobato (2009, p1) adds that distribution remains an obscure area of research in film studies and while it is tempting to "dismiss distribution as a neutral process in which media content is simply delivered to the audiences which seek it" this is rarely, if ever, the case. Crisp (2014, p2) goes further and points out that the small amount of literature on distribution has a tendency to focus on the dominance of Hollywood and often ignores the role of 'independent' distribution. This is exemplified by Cones (1997) and his study of feature film distribution, an authoritative work on studio distribution that ignores independent film release patterns.

In the late seventies, Guback (1978, p3) lamented that the study of cinema focused predominantly on theory and criticism, with a nod to "atheoretical history", adding that the literature about film is dominated by surface phenomena, a situation Guback (1985, p3) lamented "hardly contributes to a comprehensive understanding of what film is all about". As a result, he felt that an examination of cinema as an economic institution and a communications medium was neglected. Some of that criticism is still valid when it comes to film distribution. Kuhn (2009, p4) writes that by the latter years of the 1970s the then BFI funded periodical, *Screen*, was publishing "more material on television and on independent, avant-garde and other non-mainstream cinemas" and less on Hollywood. This provided some sporadic theoretical work on exhibition and distribution in a UK context. Scholars such as Picard (1989), Alexander *et al*. (2003) and Albarran (1996) all identify media economics as a research activity. Crisp, Gonring and Jasper (2015, p3) describe film

distribution as the grey space between consumption and creation. During the 1990s and 2000s, film distribution literature looked at the role of exhibition in the classic Hollywood studio structure. The work of Hark (2002), Waller (2002) and Gomery (1992) explore the contexts in which film was consumed and how those contexts impacted on the value and meaning of the cinematographic work.

While major works from Miller *et al*. (2001 and 2005) and Wasko (2003) contained sections on film distribution, the academic literature was often over-shadowed within more general studies of the film industry, particularly by an exploration of the Hollywood studio system. It is only more recently that the scholarship has begun to explore the realm of film distribution that was traditionally dominated by Hollywood and that is now being usurped by the streaming services, or "disruptive innovators" as Cunningham and Silver (2012, p7) describe them. While these studies provide a valuable historical analysis of the relationship between independent films and UK broadcasting, they rely predominantly on archives, secondary data and post-event interviews and peer reflections. None of this literature interrogates film distribution from the direct perspective of the distributor so it lacks the insights and contemporary perspective that an auto-ethnographic account would bring to the field.

An auto-ethnographic approach matters because it gives a first-hand insider perspective on contemporary industry practice. Such a perspective is particularly important to shed light on distributor work practices and the business context at a time when the industry is evolving faster than the literature currently explores. While Mayne (2014) and Keane (2014) examine independent film and public broadcasting, the volume edited by Wroot and Willis (2017) features a collection of articles focusing on physical home media distribution. They acknowledge that while there has been some critical engagement with this area, it has been under-researched in recent years, partly due to the rise in popularity of digital formats and the attention of many academics and researchers having turned in that direction. They argue that physical formats such as DVD and Blu-ray are still influential media and the various chapters that make up Wroot and Willis (2017)'s collection look at this influence through various case studies, from blockbusters including *Star Wars* (Scott, 2017), fantrepreneurship (Carter, 2017) to documentaries (O'Sullivan, 2017) and the education market (Elkington, 2017). While the notion of independence is referenced

in several of those chapters, it is not examined directly. Nevertheless, it provides an important study in the under-explored area of home entertainment film research. Bloore (2012, p34) and Ross (2010, p11) observe that sales agents and distributors each have their role to play in the processes of the consumption and production of films. Smits (2019) goes further by describing them as the primary gatekeepers that invest in films, adding value to those films by inserting them into the distribution process. Smits (2019) takes a case study on the Dutch distribution sector and examines how distributors make a selection from several thousand films available in the global marketplace. In doing so, he provides an understanding of the selection process, work practice and distribution strategies of Dutch distribution companies. He does so from an ethnographic viewpoint, so it lacks the first-hand perspective that an auto-ethnographical lens brings. Overall, the existing scholarship encompasses a broad range of analysis on various categories of film distribution, with the only common thread being that it looks at the activities in the independent distribution sector. In the next section, I look at how the concept of independence is examined and defined in the literature.

## 1.2 *Independence, or Dependence, in Film Distribution*

Independence, as a term, is not exclusive to cinema - it is an important concept that is employed in other creative industries and in general economics and business. At the outset it would be useful to contextualise the concept of 'independent' as it applies to film distribution. Levy (1999, p3) states that there are two different conceptions of independent film - one is based on the way what he calls "indies" are financed, the other focuses on their spirit or vision. Levy (1999, p3) observes that according to the first view, any film financed outside of Hollywood is independent, but the second suggests that it is an innovative spirit, a fresh perspective and personal vision that are the key factors. Scott (2005) believes that the characteristics of these firms are detailed in terms of their function within the Hollywood production agglomeration itself, and secondly, in terms of their role in external marketing and distribution. King (2009, p1) defines 'independent' thus: "At one end of the American cinematic spectrum is the globally dominant Hollywood blockbuster. At the other is the low-budget independent or 'indie' feature" and, beyond that, various forms of experimental, avant-garde, low-to- no budget or otherwise economically marginal production". As a distributor, the films I have released over the course of eighteen years could be viewed as the low-budget independent or 'indie' features that King describes. I have found in this sphere a niche that allows for a minimisation of capital investment while providing an opportunity for a solid return on investment. I have released several specialty films that under both Levy (1999) and King (2009)'s definition, would be positioned as 'independent' as none of these films were financed by a Hollywood or major film studio. Consequently, it would appear that I should be classified as an 'independent' distributor, albeit as a British-based variant.

In-between the Hollywood blockbuster and the independent feature, according to King (2009, p1), "lies many shades of difference". This is where King (2009, p3) situates his hybrid term "Indiewood", coined in the mid-1990s to denote a part of the American film spectrum in which the distinctions between the independent sector and Hollywood appeared to have become blurred. Indiewood is, for King (2009, p4), a cross-over phenomenon, a product of the success of several breakout feature films that marked the independent sector, especially from the early 1990s, as a source of interest to the big studio players. King (2009, p5) refines this further by making

'Indiewood' the catch-all term that could include certain films distributed or made by the major studios themselves, rather than their speciality or classics divisions. He includes films such as *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999) that appear to have been "confected consciously to buy into the market opened up by the independent sector and others that include radical components less often associated with the mainstream" (2009, p5). He then cites substantially budgeted examples such as *Three Kings* (David O Russell, 1999) and *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999). Under this definition, such British films as *The Favourite* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2018) (co-financed by Fox Searchlight and Film4), *Belfast* (Kenneth Branagh, 2021) and *Last Night in Soho* (Edgar Wright, 2021) both fully funded by Focus Films (a division of Universal Pictures) could be described as 'Indiewood' films.

The term 'independent' has been used by distributors, film critics and arthouse exhibitors as a marketable commodity for a certain segment of cinemagoers and a means to differentiate films in a crowded marketplace dominated by blockbusters and tentpoles. Independence as a term has its shortcomings, particularly in the context of my own distribution practice and those UK distributors that specialise in the release of foreign language and arthouse films. Many non-studio films that I and other so-called 'independent' distributors have released in the UK, have been funded by a combination of State, government, private and studio financing that do not neatly fit into the prism of 'independent'. The concept of independence does not reflect these methods of financing, the relationship dynamics of the film distribution; it does not address evolving business models and release strategies, nor does it address the new means of distribution afforded by streaming. In the next section, I will look at whether 'Indiewood' and the concept of independence are appropriate nomenclature in the pandemic era of film distribution.

It is my contention that the concept of the 'independent distributor', or indeed the 'independent producer' is a misnomer. A much more accurate description would be '*dependent* distributor'. In examination of the academic literature shows there is only scant reference to the concept of the '*dependent* distributor' or '*dependent* producer'. For a definition of *dependence*, I have looked to two works written in the context of contemporary world politics and policy. Keohane and Nye (1977, p8) describe it as meaning "a state of being determined or significantly affected by external forces" while Baldwin (1980, p475) goes further and defines dependence as

"a relationship of subordination in which one thing is subordinated by something else or must rely upon something else for the fulfilment of a need". To apply this definition to film distribution, it is necessary to characterise the nature of a film distributor's business. A distributor's survival depends on its choice of acquisitions and a strong marketing campaign that capitalises on its marketable elements. This is needed to entice audiences in sufficient numbers to ensure a return on its investment. Consequently, the path to break-even and ultimately profitability, is as Baldwin (1980, p475) envisages, "significantly affected by external forces" such as critical and audience reception as well as the willingness of broadcasters and streaming platforms to acquire the film. The inevitable consequence of this industry dynamic is that the relationship between the distributor and broadcasters and streaming platforms is one of subordination in accordance with Baldwin's definition. This is because distributors rely on broadcasting deals and advances from streaming services to move a film into profitability.

One secondary source that mentions the concept of the "*dependent* producer" is Bill Mechanic, the producer and one-time Chairman and CEO of Fox Filmed Entertainment. After over a decade of working in the independent film sector, Mechanic (2009) made a keynote speech at the Independent Film & Television Production Conference and observed that the one key thing he has learned is that "there is no such thing as an independent producer. There are only *dependent* producers. *Dependent* on distributors, financiers, and bankers, and distribution channels that understand the needs of the market even less than the corporations that own the studios. Which makes a truly independent producer even more truly *dependent* because the alternatives to the studio system are in many ways more difficult, not easier".[1] Speaking in 2006, the independent British producer Tony Garnett, best known for his work on films such as *Cathy Come Home* (Ken Loach, 1966) and *Kes* (Ken Loach, 1969), had a similar observation: "And all this talk about being an independent producer. I'm a *dependent* producer, because there are very few buyers and there are a lot of sellers" (2012, p41). While Mechanic and Garnett are not academics, their intervention is notable as it comes from the viewpoint of experienced industrial practitioners and sets out a contemporary overview of the nebulous concept of independence in the film sector. While their comments were delivered over a

[1] https://filmproduction.wordpress.com/2009/10/

decade ago, their thesis is even more relevant in this evolving age of the streaming services.

Discussion of dependence elsewhere in the film distribution literature is scant. Squire (2016, p461) makes one reference to the '*dependent* independent producer' but only in the context of film financing and distribution structures and maximising profits. He believes that the most common way for a producer to improve their profit participation is to "become a *dependent* independent producer, distributing a film through a major US studio (hence the term 'dependent') but raising additional outside financing through a variety of sources (hence the term 'independent')" (2004, p354). Elsewhere Wasko (2003) cites dependence as she looks at the workings of the film business in a more general social, economic, and political context. She notes that many Hollywood studios have deals with outside production companies and financiers for development and production outfits. Wasko (2003, p49-50) observes that while some of these companies represent key players in the industry and can command preferential deals, because of their dependence on the majors for distribution, their independence is actually 'relative'. It was Daniels *et al*. (1998, p213) who first described these operators as "independent *dependent* producers". Wasko (2003, p50) notes that others in the industry still refer to them as independent and finds it revealing that the top box office films often involve these companies with on-going pacts with the major studios.

In exploring this concept of *dependent*-independents, Wasko (2003, p60) argues, that the distribution process is designed to benefit the distributors, but not necessarily the production companies. In addition to their position within diversified conglomerates, the majors have distinct advantages that include distribution profits, enormous film libraries, and access to capital. Daniels *et al*. (1998, p60) clarify this further by observing that the studios have "Oz-like power over the motion picture industry and cash in abundance. Or perhaps more properly, access to abundant capital". Much academic research, including that of Wasko (2003) and King (2009), pre-dates the advancement in the sphere of streaming that is a focus of my research. More currently, Atkinson (2016) discusses contemporary developments in specialty film distribution, and specifically how this period of analogue to digital transition impacted upon opportunities, cultures, working practices, and structures in the film industry, and addresses the various causative forces behind their resistances and

adoptions. This literature neglects to interrogate contemporary film distribution practice relating to the release of foreign language films so this study affords me an opportunity to develop it using experiential marketing resources and case studies in chapters five to seven.

A definition of dependence must consider the backdrop of the changing dynamics of the industry evidenced by the shortening of the theatrical window, corporate consolidations and the increasing dominance of the streaming services. Given the limited academic discourse on the concept of dependence in the context of film distribution, I shall first widen the parameters of investigation to look for insights in the literature relating to dependence in other related creative industries. The music sector is one such industry that has evolved through digital disruption and where dependence has populated the literature. It has encountered similar issues in terms of piracy, a shift in consumer behaviour away from buying physical copies (CDs), and the pre-pandemic growth of live music.

Nordgaard (2018, p27) argues that the recorded music industry's *dependency* on access to audiences came as a result of a change in behavioural patterns that saw a moving away from physical retail to online access. Burkart (2014, p397) maintains that the music industry did attempt to provide digital and online access to music although their efforts were inadequate. Consequently, they became heavily *dependent* on external companies, such as Apple, Google and Spotify (Nordgaard 2018, p26). Nordgaard (2018, p26) further contends that *dependency* in this case works both ways - businesses built on content access, such as Apple, Google and Spotify, have a resource-*dependency* on the record labels and content providers. While much attention has centred on the music companies' dependency on online and digital platforms and their 'pipes to people', Nordgaard (2018, p26) believes that digital companies are equally *dependent* on content to drive audiences to their platforms. In effect Nordgaard argues that music companies are *dependent* on digital, while digital companies are in turn *dependent* on content to drive audiences to their platforms.

The dependency that Nordgaard outlines between the record labels and the streamers is analogous to the dynamic between independent distributors and streaming services. Distributors are dependent on the streaming services because the streamers act as the gatekeepers providing access to the end-user and distributors are dependent on the streamers to monetise that relationship. Just as technology

companies such as Apple, Spotify and Google became the leading platforms for the digitisation of music listenership, Netflix, Amazon and iTunes led the way for consumers to adopt platformisation as a force in film distribution. It is equally analogous to the dynamic between exhibitors and distributors given the mutual dependence of exhibitors on the supply of product and the reliance of distributors on exhibitors programming their films. As the literature on dependence in the music industry shows, dependence is not limited to the film distribution sector. It is a broader concept that applies to the wider creative industries and its existence is a direct consequence of the changing dynamics brought about by digital disruption and platformisation. To conclude this section**,** I define dependence in the film distribution sector as a state of subordination in which a distributor operates that is determined or significantly affected by external market forces, predominantly led by exhibitors, broadcasters, streaming platforms and the ultimate end-user. This concept of dependence reflects the numerous challenges and obstacles that distributors face in the operation of their business.

In the next section I explore the nature of the relationship between film distributors and streaming services and question whether it can be characterised by dependency. This is necessary because the streaming services are fast becoming one of the key customers of 'dependent' distributors, with distributors depending on their revenue to keep their businesses afloat and make it profitable. Therefore characterising the relationship between them is an important means of determining the balance of power in the changing film value chain. In the next section, I look at platformisation through the prism of the dependence of distributors.

### 1.3 *The Advent of Platformisation and the Nature of Dependence*

In the current academic literature, there is a concern among exhibitors and distributors that the subscription video on demand (SVOD) streaming companies - or "disruptive innovators" as Crisp (2015, p3) describes them, are eroding traditional cinemagoing. The influence of the streaming services is fundamentally changing the habits of consumers, causing them to be more home-bound - the concept of "connected viewing" according to Holt and Sanson (2014, p9). Lobato (2009, p31) goes so far as to address and describe distribution as a cultural technology, using a transnational perspective. This disruption on the film value chain caused by technology has been accelerated by the pandemic. The film value chain for film distribution is characterised by a series of 'holdback periods' typically beginning with an exclusive window for theatrical exhibition. Ulin (2010, p36) points out that 'holdback periods' - periods of time where no other type of distribution of a specific film is permitted - are used to ensure there is no competition from other distribution activity. Kehoe and Mateer (2015, p99) note that the length of each exploitation window – just over a 16-week theatrical window in the UK – and holdback period has become relatively standardised and that this restrictive model represents the framework of the supply-led market upon which the independent film distribution has been built. Finney (2010, p6) describes it as a "disintegrated model" because each element in the chain is dependent on a network of varying interacting companies and individuals.

The lockdown measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to Vlassis (2021), consolidated the economic advantage of US-based streaming platforms, while also providing an overview of the multifaceted strategies developed by them to strengthen their soft power and to become irreplaceable actors. Both Vlassis (2021) and Lobato (2018) observe that the likes of Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney+, AppleTV+ and HBO Max have a major impact on the balance of power in the global audio-visual economy. They note that platformisation drives changes in how people watch films and TV programmes, enabling the rise of the platform as being the dominant economic and infrastructural model in the industry (Evens and Donders, 2018, p4). In this context, Lotz (2019) sees the rise of global streaming platforms as leading different stakeholders to re-evaluate the key norms in the functioning of

audio-visual industries while at the same time triggering various governance and regulatory challenges for policymakers (Poell 2020; Vlassis *et al*. 2020).

While the concept of dependence is not explored by these scholars, I maintain in this thesis that the concept of dependence underpins platformisation. This re-ordering of key norms in the functioning of the film business requires the acquiescence of regulatory authorities and policymakers but is also dependent on the streamers acquiring and providing content from third party creators and distributors. The success of that acquisition strategy will attract new (as well as retaining) existing subscribers. From the point of view of dependent distributors, platformisation opens a new frontier of financial opportunity, but one where they are, in my experience, dependent on the streaming platforms' willingness to acquire new specialty product, the resource dependency envisaged by Nordgaard (2018). The fast adoption rate of streaming subscriptions by consumers, that has been accelerated by the pandemic, demonstrates the critical mass created by the streaming services in a compressed period. In the pandemic era, with the decline in box office revenue, it can be argued that platformisation is becoming the dominant structure, bolstered by the multi-billion-dollar investments by the likes of Disney, Warner Bros. Discovery, Amazon and Apple in their platforms and the concomitant overall increase in subscriber numbers enjoyed by them.

The success of foreign language films such as *Parasite* (Bong Joon Ho, 2019) and *The Worst Person in the World* (Joachim Trier, 2021) on the US platform, Hulu, and Netflix's success with foreign language TV series *Money Heist* (2017-), *Call My Agent* (2015-2020), *Lupin* (2021-) and *Squid Game* (2021-), demonstrate that platformisation can be a beneficial and much-needed revenue stream for dependent distributors and one which they will become more dependent on, as platformisation increasingly becomes dominant in the downstream revenue stream in the life cycle of a foreign language film. Lobato (2019, p28) makes the claim that the significant investment by Netflix in translation, dubbing and subtitling for specific local markets "rejects the necessity of localisation just as the commitment to produce series in multiple languages is indicative of global audiences continuing preferences for local content". In my experience, a streaming deal for a foreign language film with a platform like Netflix can surpass the traditional revenues from DVD and traditional home entertainment. This can provide a film distributor with a financial safety net that

makes it even more dependent on acquiring films that will appeal to streamers down-stream after its theatrical release.

The film business is depicted by Wasko (2003, p60) as a 'three tier system'. At the top are the "big studios or majors…. the second tier included a handful of smaller or less influential production or distribution companies, or mini-majors". The bottom tier consists of much smaller and often struggling specialist production companies and distributors. Using Wasko's three tier structure, my distribution company would be placed firmly in this lower tier, but even this is a fiercely competitive space. Wasko (2003, p60) observes that the majors claim to encounter intense competition in the film industry, as well as in other activities, yet "many companies have attempted to enter the distribution business over the years and have failed". Wasko (2003) is describing a competitive environment that pre-dates the streaming age. In this era of the "streaming wars" (Finney, 2020, p18), the tiering system needs to be altered to encompass the increasing dominance of the streaming services. While they pose a competitive threat to the dominance of the studio and mini-major system, they also provide a key source of revenue and act as a quasi-partner for the studios and mini-majors in the acquisition of their titles. For the much smaller and often struggling dependent distributors, they provide a much-needed ancillary revenue stream and a strategic outlet for the potential acquisition or sale of their titles in ancillary media.

In an era of consolidation of media conglomerates, Netflix remains an independent company, even as studio mergers and consolidation – such as Disney and Fox, MGM and Amazon and Warner Media and Discovery – have become prevalent. Fritz (2018, p102) notes that in its first decade of operation, Netflix paid tens of millions of dollars to Hollywood studios to have the internet rights to their content. Until it started making its own original content, Netflix was dependent on content deals with the major movie studios. Evens and Donders (2018, p1) describe platforms like Netflix, Amazon and Hulu as playing an active role in the financing, production, aggregation and/or distribution of audio-visual product. The content policy of Netflix demonstrates that a digital distribution company once dependent on content access acquired from 'bricks and mortars' Hollywood studios can become even more successful and dominant if it can find a means of becoming independent of restrictive Hollywood practices and content players. I would go further and conclude that Netflix

is not actually independent, it is still *dependent* on its critical mass of subscribers, dependent on third party content providers, but also on its credit line with banks (it has over US$18 billion worth of debt as of September 2021).

The reason why this dependence matters is because it defines the dynamic of the relationship between dependent distributors and a key streaming service, particularly at a time when Albornoz and Leiva (2019); Nieborg and Poell (2018); Vlassis (2021) maintains that the arrival of global online platforms represents an unprecedented change in production, consumption and dissemination of audio-visual content. For Vlassis (2021), it is the concept of inter-dependence, not dependence, that connects the streaming platforms, that makes them stronger in this pandemic era. Taking Vlassis' argument to its logical conclusion would mean that there is a collective mutual benefit – an inter-dependence – among the streaming rivals to alter consumer-viewing habits by diverting audiences from cinemas and driving premium content to their respective platforms. This gravitational pull away from the theatrical experience has an impact on the nature of the relationship between distributors and their core audience, leading Kirkpatrick (2018, p97) to observe that distribution companies do not "directly serve the needs of end-users; they're instead serving the needs of 'consumer facing' platforms". Although the word dependent is not used in describing the relationship between the distributor, streaming platform and the end-user, it is clear from Kirkpatrick's description of the axis between them that the distributor is dependent on the platforms as an important ancillary revenue stream for their titles and dependent on their acquisitions policy in order to reach the end-user. While Vlassis (2021) was writing about the period up to the first half of 2020, which includes the first three-month period of lockdown, the subsequent actions of the streamers point less to inter-dependence and more to a competitive and unilateral land-grab for new subscribers and a content grab for premium content. In conclusion, I would classify Netflix and the key streaming services as dependent distributors.

The theatrical windowing system has been modified and shortened during the pandemic to the advantage of the streaming platforms, creating a seismic shift in film distribution. The impact of the shortening of the theatrical window is leading to the reduction in box office receipts for distributors. Consequently, distributors are more dependent on the revenues from streaming services. This is the impact of platformisation in the pandemic era. In the next section I make some observations

about the dependent distribution sector in the UK that consolidates my argument that distributors should be classified as dependent, not independent.

### 1.4 *Classifying Dependent Distribution in the UK*

I have shown that independence as a term has its shortcomings, particularly in the context of the release of specialty films, including foreign language films. The concept of independence does not reflect the various methods of complex funding, often involving a combination of State, private, studio and bank financing, nor the relationship dynamics of the film distribution; it does not address evolving business models and release strategies, nor does it consider the new means of distribution afforded by streaming. Given the complexity and variations of the independent eco-system, defining an independent film is of less importance than classifying the distributor releasing the film, particularly as the distributor is the driving force behind getting it to market. Dependence is a state in which every so-called 'independent' film distributor in the UK operates. From my experience and an analysis of the scholarship, I contend that each distributor is *dependent* on several factors:

1) the availability of suitable films for the territory of the UK. It is a distributor's choice of acquisitions that is vital for its financial viability and stability. Kirkpatrick (2018, p38) observes that acquisitions executives working for streaming platforms focus "exclusively on buying the titles that stand the best chance of satisfying their loyal fan-base". Similarly, distribution companies acquire titles that they hope will satisfy targeted film-lovers and ultimately will appeal to the end-user on streaming platforms in the hope of what Lobato (2012, p2) describes as shaping "public culture by circulating or withholding texts which have the potential to become part of shared imaginaries, discourses and dreams";
2) the ability to close a deal for a suitable film on the right commercial terms with the sales agent/stakeholders. As Kirkpatrick (2018, p33) points out it is the distributor's job to broker the deals necessary "to eventually make them profitable";

3) the cashflow needed to fund the acquisition of the film and its resulting marketing campaign (Kerrigan, 2009; Kerrigan *et al*., 2020);
4) favourable critical response. While strong reviews are still important to attract audiences, Weiss (2018, p72) points out that social media channels have played a crucial role in democratising film criticism. Most dependent distributors harness social media to corral positive coverage and Frey (2017, p103) notes that Rotten Tomatoes offers a "greater access to a more diversified selection of criticism" and an increased degree of community and participation, that Weiss (2018, p69) observes will likely result in the diminishing of professional film critics' influence and importance. Distributors like Swipe Films and its competitors can employ these tactics in an endeavour to attract a younger demographic to films.
5) the distribution channels necessary to make the release a success in cinemas, and ancillary channels such as DVD, TV and VOD. Kirkpatrick (2018, p37) observes that what makes distributors so fundamental is that they serve as the film's direct link to the paying audience. Lobato (2009, p32) points out that "success in ancillary markets cannot occur without a box office presence which is very difficult without the support of an established distributor". Traditionally, a film rarely breaks even on its theatrical release, so distributors are *dependent* on the film's performance on TV, DVD and VOD channels to make a film a financial success. TV broadcasters, Film4, BBC and Sky each pay an upfront advance or minimum guarantee (MG) for the exclusive rights to play the film on TV. Those funds are vital to ensure the recoupment and profitability of a film. If those broadcasters pass on the opportunity to acquire an individual film, it will likely be a loss maker for the distributor. In the UK, every distributor is dependent on key nationwide cinema chains such as Curzon, Everyman and Picturehouse booking and programming the film in their theatres. Adamczak (2020, p245) notes that success in the field of theatrical marketplace "is the basis for creating an attractive catalogue and gaining a good position in negotiations with VOD services". While Adamczak (2020) was discussing the Polish marketplace, the streamers and TV stations in the UK operate, in my experience, on the same basis.

Having identified these five areas of dependence, I conclude that all UK distributors specialising in releasing foreign language films are dependent on the above factors (and various third parties) to ensure a positive financial return on film acquisitions. While it would appear appropriate to describe me as an independent distributor, it is more apt to describe my practice as a *dependent* distributor. Dependent distributors can also be used to denote my competitors including the likes of New Wave Films, Verve Pictures, Vertigo Films, Trinity Films and Modern Films. I contend that all UK distributors in this sector should be more appropriately described as dependent distributors.

As I set out in the Introduction, my distribution company operates in a sphere known as specialty distribution. Cones (1992, p484) describes specialty distribution as involving marketing "a film to a limited target audience, in a smaller number of theatres than a commercial distribution, with limited advertising expenditures and a strong emphasis on publicity and critical reviews to reach a discerning public". Cones (1992, p483) defines specialty distributors as succeeding by their skills in 'special handling', "marketing strategies for what may be quality films but which do not have obvious broad commercial appeal". While Cones does not use the term entrepreneurship to describe these skills, a distributor operating in this sphere, needs to be entrepreneurial in order to transform a film without obvious broad commercial appeal into a financial success and profitable venture. Having examined the scholarship, the terms 'independent' or 'Indiewood' do not properly reflect the types of film that my competitors and I acquire and distribute in the UK and Ireland. The term 'specialty' or 'specialised' is a more appropriate one to describe the films that I release, and to represent the types of films that my competitors and I bring to market in the UK and Ireland. 'Specialty' is also a useful description to avoid intermingling the terms 'dependence' and 'independence' throughout this study. I define specialty films as those films, regardless of their language and how they were financed, that are targeted to a specific and limited audience, in a smaller number of cinemas than a commercial distribution release, with limited marketing expenditure and an emphasis on publicity, critical reviews and partnerships, to reach a discerning public. Gomery (1992, p6) uses the term "specialised companies" to distinguish between the major studios and those distributors, including United Artists, that serviced non-studio based producers, and whose slate of releases did not resemble the programming of studio

distributors. Tzioumakis (2012, p29) points out that the concept of specialised (or specialty) films, removes the ideological and political implications and meanings that have been attached to the label 'independent' and its derivatives over the years. While Tzioumakis (2012) is writing in the context of contemporary American independent cinema, the concept of specialised distributors and specialty films can equally be applied to contemporary British, European and Asian cinema. In this dissertation, I situate my practice in the specialty distribution sector, where I have been releasing a range of specialty films, including foreign language films and feature documentaries, over the last 18 years.

Some of these films would be classified as independent under the terms of reference of Levy (1999) such as the Georgian film, *The President* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 2014), *Down to the Bone* (Debra Granik, 2004), the Spanish language *The Other Side of the Bed* (Emilio Martinez Lazaro, 2002) and the French language *Exils* (Tony Gatlif, 2004), or under the auspices of 'Indiewood' in the case of the English language *The Cat's Meow* (Peter Bogdanovich, 2004), a film that was co-financed by a mini-major, Lionsgate. Using specialty distribution or labelling the films that my competitors and I distribute as 'specialised' or 'specialty' is a more appropriate, and less contentious, catch-all term than 'independent'. Tzioumakis (2012, p29) views 'specialty' as less controversial, albeit in the context of American cinema. While I am a specialty distributor releasing specialty films in the UK and Ireland, I remain a dependent distributor. The nomenclature of being a specialty distributor releasing specialised, or indeed independent films, does not obviate the need to be classified as dependent. Throughout the rest of this dissertation, I use the terms 'speciality' and 'specialised' inter-changeably, and as a means to avoid confusion between the use of dependence and independence in film distribution. I further explore and develop the nature of and importance and limitations of dependence across the three findings chapters where I examine case studies of three foreign language films from my practice. In the next section I define dependence as it relates to independent film distribution and set out some overall conclusions.

## 1.5 *Conclusions*

I started the chapter by discussing King's neologism 'Indiewood' as a hybrid that exists between the Hollywood and independent spheres. I questioned if 'Indiewood' or indeed 'independent' could be used to describe non-studio UK distribution companies. This led to an examination of British and transnational academic literature on the concept of independence. I reached the conclusion that the use of 'independence' to describe my distribution business, and that of my competitors in the UK, is an inaccurate characterisation. This is because the key business decisions behind the choice of new acquisitions are informed by and dependent on the following key factors – the economic considerations affecting it; correctly predicting the response of exhibitors, critics, streaming services and the end-user; making the right judgment call as to the value of the UK theatrical, television and VOD marketplace and choosing and creating a marketing campaign to make the film appealing to its target audience. Marpe (2022, p1) observes that streaming has triggered an entirely new definition of what it means to be an independent film in the online era, one defined less by theatrical exhibition, a niche audience and a culture of prestige, and "more so by an 'anytime, anywhere' viewing culture, new structures and qualifications" at prestigious film festivals and awards, as well as algorithm-based viewer targeting methods that further narrow the audience from niche to individual. Marpe (2022) is alert to the changes wrought on the dependent film sector by streaming, and how the viewing of these films is being re-packaged as being less about the communal experience of viewing it in a cinema, more about the readiness of its availability to watch it at home. She also alludes to how specialty films are being marketed by the streamers as a product to precision target the individual consumer and how they are packaged up with garlands of prestigious awards to make it more appealing.

In the context of this study and the dependent film sector, I conclude by defining dependence as a state of subordination in which a distributor operates that is determined or significantly affected by external market forces, predominantly led by exhibitors, broadcasters, streaming platforms and the ultimate end-user. Dependence is a key theme in the UK and Irish film distribution sector. I maintain that dependence is a more appropriate term to describe the position of those UK film distributors

(including my own practice) that specialise in specialty releases. I use 'specialty' as a more suitable term than 'independent', to describe the types of films that dependent distributors release in the UK and Ireland. I also examined the impact the pandemic is having on distributors, particularly in the UK, by making them increasingly more reliant on streaming services and broadcasters for revenue. I also investigated how the concept of dependence applies to streaming services, particularly Netflix. In this regard, I take a different view from commentators such as Vlassis (2021) and Lobato (2018). They emphasise the inter-dependent nature of the streaming platforms, but I have argued that the pandemic era has made them even more competitive, and consequently less inter-dependent, and still dependent on their content providers. Kehoe and Mateer (2015, p108) see this as a time of opportunity for distributors in which they can develop alternative release models best suited to satisfying consumer demand, moving away from the restrictions of traditional distribution systems and, in the process, transforming the relationship between key segments in the film value chain. This is manifested in the global fight among streaming services for new subscribers. McDonald and Smith-Rowsey (2016, p1–2) stress that Netflix and the other key US streaming services, have a transformative effect in the relationship between content providers and consumers, becoming "synonymous with the growing, pervasive impact of technology". It is against this backdrop that I investigate in the next chapter the literature relating to entrepreneurship and dependence. The entrepreneurial context of film distribution has received little attention in the scholarship. The concepts of dependence and entrepreneurship are inter-linked in film distribution because operating as a dependent film distributor requires entrepreneurship. This is because of the necessity of an entrepreneurial mindset and skillset for film distributors to survive and thrive in a challenging marketplace.

## CHAPTER 2
## THE DEPENDENT DISTRIBUTOR AS ENTREPRENEUR

In the last chapter I examined the contemporary distribution landscape in the UK. I observed that a distributor of speciality films operates with much less creative, operational and financial freedom and is more appropriately termed a dependent distributor, reliant on gatekeepers that largely determine a film's profitability or otherwise. While the dependent state of the distributor might indicate a one-sided subservient relationship with the gatekeepers, the dynamic is more complex because broadcasters and the platforms are equally dependent on a constant stream of product, that can be supplied by third parties including distributors. This chapter explores the literature on entrepreneurship and the extent that it addresses or can be applied to the field of film distribution. The way through the seemingly intractable difficulties of being dependent is by being entrepreneurial. Examining entrepreneurship in this context allows for a further conceptualisation of dependence throughout this chapter, especially as the field of film distribution has not fully engaged with ideas from entrepreneurship.

I then explore the more specific concept of 'cultural entrepreneurship', and whether it is an appropriate term to adopt when defining the work of a film distributor. Next, I look at the importance of networks, in a domestic and transnational setting. I argue that while a distributor is dependent on third parties (or gatekeepers), entrepreneurial skills and networks are key in order to compete and survive in a fast-changing distribution landscape in which theatrical windows are being reduced and consumer habits are changing. Thereafter I look at the value of self-confidence, or self-efficacy, and 'alertness to opportunity' in the decision-making of distributors and in its interactions with the various gatekeepers and look briefly at the role of 'creative destruction' in the entrepreneurial actions of distributors. I also look at the importance of transnational relationships to the business of film distribution and the role institutions can play in the creation of entrepreneurial activity and, in particular, the role of State Film organisations in encouraging entrepreneurialism in film distribution, particularly with respect to European cinema. Finally, I consider collective entrepreneurship and the idea that a distributor should not be viewed as a lone entrepreneur, but rather as part of an industrialised set of dependent entrepreneurial firms. Because of the system of windows and holdbacks, I

conclude that there is a cyclical nature to the entrepreneurship that the literature on film distribution has not fully explored.

This chapter argues that the very dependence of the distributor requires it, even encourages it, to be entrepreneurial. This entrepreneurial skillset is needed to ensure a film is creatively marketed to appeal to the broadest possible target audience but also fiscally to monetise it in every available window to ensure that the gatekeepers in each window want to programme and acquire it, ensuring much needed cashflow. To break out of a cycle of dependence in every window, a distributor must exhibit a broad range of entrepreneurial skills, which demonstrate innovation, passion and conviction, pitching prowess, strategy and an understanding of data, as well as an awareness of the needs of the target audience and the fickle nature of the requirements of broadcasters, streamers and exhibitors. It is these entrepreneurial traits that enable distributors to survive in the film distribution sector. In the next section, I first set out why dependent distributors should be classified as entrepreneurs and then define what it means to be an entrepreneur in film distribution.

## 2.1 *Film Entrepreneurship*

According to Naudin (2018), the term entrepreneurship is derived from the French word 'entreprendre' meaning to undertake: a process in which the entrepreneur recognises and seizes an opportunity, and then as Bird (1989) and Kuratko and Hodgetts (1989) point out, undertakes to arrange, manage and assume the business risks and reap the rewards. That definition can be applied to the film distribution sphere - the distributor, as the entrepreneur, recognises the potential in a new film, seizes the opportunity by concluding a distribution deal with the sales agent and undertakes to organise and manage the marketing and distribution campaign for the film, all the while assuming the financial risks with the aim of realising the rewards. Ebbers and Wijnberg (2012, p102) classify film distributors, albeit in their role as film investors in the Dutch film industry, as "market selectors", because they try to predict what the market wants, as well as making, what Eliashberg *et al*. (2008) describe, as an attempt to guess the taste of potential cinemagoers. In my experience, distributors are only one of the market selectors in the film value chain – exhibitors also act as market selectors in deciding which films to programme and streaming services fulfil the same function in curating their product. As a consequence, for distributors' choice of films to reach the end-user, they are dependent on the decision-making of other key market selectors.

For Timmons (1989), entrepreneurship is the ability to create and build something from practically 'nothing'. Mokaya *et al*. (2004) view this as an undertaking that requires a willingness to take calculated risks, both financial personal and financial and doing what it takes to avoid failure. Kuratko and Hodgetts (1989) note that those involved in this process must possess the know-how to find, marshal and control resources. To do so, a distributor needs to be opportunistic, have good instincts, sound business acumen combined with strong marketing capabilities. Throughout the life cycle of a film, a distributor will have to work with a key set of partners – the filmmakers, exhibitors, TV channels and streaming services – without whose support the film will have difficulty in becoming a financial success and on whom it is dependent. Cones (1992, p483) describes specialty distributors as succeeding by their skills in marketing strategies and special handling for quality films that do not have obvious broad commercial appeal. While Cones does not use

the term entrepreneurship to describe these skills, a distributor needs to be entrepreneurial in order to transform a film without obvious broad commercial appeal into a financial success and profitable venture.

Entrepreneurship is defined by Drucker (1985) as the process of extracting a profit from new and valuable combinations of resources in an ambiguous and uncertain environment. Kirzner (1983) refines this further by defining entrepreneurship as the process of perceiving a profit opportunity and initiating actions to fill currently unsatisfied market needs or doing more efficiently what is already being done. The film distributor displays that entrepreneurial spirit by filling that unsatisfied market need with a new acquisition that it will market to an identified target demographic, often launched in the marketplace as counter-programming to larger-scale studio fare, filling the lacuna and creating an opportunity for it to appeal to cineastes and specialty film aficionados. Clearly, the role of the distributor in bringing a new film to market is far more complex than simply filling an unsatisfied market need – a distributor's work cannot simply be defined within those narrow parameters prescribed by Kirzner.

Kirzner (1983) was building on the ideas of Schumpeter (1934) whose work he viewed as too limiting. For Schumpeter (1934, p72), entrepreneurship is the process of creating a new combination of factors to produce economic growth that he views as the primary engine of economic development. His definition places an emphasis on innovation or "creative destruction", which can manifest itself in the form of a new product or production method, a new market or a new form of organisation. It is that sense of innovation that, in my experience, can be applied to the description of some film distributors. Each new film requires a bespoke and often innovative marketing campaign to reach its target audience and to make it an attractive proposition for those entities on which the distributor is dependent – namely, the exhibitors, the press, TV stations and streaming services (upon whom the distributor is dependent to make it a viable acquisition target) and ultimately the end user - the audience. In the first findings chapter I examine the campaign for *Marie Curie*, for which I took a Schumpeterian approach to entrepreneurship by creating a distribution campaign centred around the innovative use of technology (a VR trailer), a process that involved the 'creative destruction' envisaged by Schumpeter.

For reasons that I examine in greater detail in later chapters I reverted to a more 'Kirznerian' or opportunistic approach for the campaigns created in the second and third findings chapters. While risk is an accepted part of film distribution, the Schumpeterian model offers the greater probability of financial over-reach that many cautious film distributors will be hesitant to embrace. Innovation involves financial risks that could deplete a film distributor's capital reserves thus jeopardising its very survival. I would therefore define a distributor as an entrepreneur who has the ability and the network to build, create and profit from the release of films and is willing to take calculated risks to do so. In doing so, a distributor will become less dependent on gatekeepers in the various exploitation windows.

Dependence is the unwritten or subliminal component in this entrepreneurial activity. It is the very state of dependence that forces the distributor into action. Without that entrepreneurial will or zeal to package and re-package the film in every available window, it would never be on the radar of the various gatekeepers, and could never be as effectively monetised in every available downstream ancillary media. Distributors can escape from the restraint of dependence by using entrepreneurship to break free. Distributors operate in a highly competitive environment, fighting in a Darwinian-type survival of the fittest, to secure the newest and best acquisitions. With ten new releases each week vying for cinema screens, bringing ten new competitors into the marketplace, all of which are competing for a limited number of available broadcasting and streaming slots, distributors need to be entrepreneurial to get their product to market and make it stand out. In the next section, I explore the literature relating to the term 'cultural entrepreneur' and if it can or should be applied to the work of the film distributor as a more specific catch-all term to define the specialised work that the distributor undertakes.

## 2.2 *The Distributor as Cultural Entrepreneur*

As diverse academic disciplines explored the role of the entrepreneur, Naudin (2018) notes that new terms were coined, including the concept of what Loacker (2013, p130) calls "the culturpreneur". It is a term designed to merge cultural work and entrepreneurship. It is not the only neologism in the literature. Carter (2017, p197) examines the activities of a cult home video distribution company, the US label Vinegar Syndrome, in which he frames their practice as "fantrepreneurship", and in the process builds on the existing literature (McRobbie 1997; Hodkinson 2002; and Kacsuk 2011) by describing fantrepreneurship as both an economic and cultural process. McRobbie (2002) sees cultural entrepreneurship as consolidating an economic environment in which an enterprise culture can be characterised by self-reliance, competition and non-dependency on the state, leading to a reduction in social bonds between individuals. What McRobbie is describing is an entrepreneurial utopia that does not exist in the entrepreneurial world of UK film distribution. While a distributor can be described as a cultural entrepreneur, a distributor is dependent on third parties such as sales agents, exhibitors, streaming services and the ultimate end-user. Rather than distributors operating in an economic environment envisaged by McRobbie that can be characterised by non-dependency on the state, the state of dependency goes to the core of what a distributor, or a cultural entrepreneur in film distribution, can or cannot achieve in a competitive marketplace. An entrepreneurial distributor cannot be classified as self-reliant or independent when its financial viability depends on its networks and the ultimate end-user, the audience.

Some entrepreneurs tend to act first and wait to see how the market responds before adjusting their idea and starting again, as recognised by Alvarez and Barney (2007). Since film distributors essentially create a start-up business each time they launch a new film into the marketplace, it is inevitable that a distributor will adjust their criteria for future acquisitions if a release in a particular genre has underperformed or adjust the marketing campaign for the VOD release of the film if the theatrical launch has been disappointing. Early on in my distribution career, I acquired and released a Star Trek fan documentary, *Earthlings: Ugly Bags of Mostly Water* (Alexandre O. Philippe, 2004), that failed to connect to its core audience of 'Trekkies'. Because of that failure, I avoided any such fan-based documentaries

again. Distributors releasing specialty films typically have limited resources, often relying on what Scott (2012) suggests are their cultural and social capital. I maintain that the trial-and-error method is an attribute of the cultural enterprise, and a resilient entrepreneurial distributor will learn from a failure and adjust or start again.

Entrepreneurship is looked at by Mokaya *et al*. (2012) as being opportunity or necessity-based but regardless of the motivation, it is pursued as a viable career option. In my experience several of the founders of dependent distributors in the UK – from Altitude, Dogwoof to Guerilla Films - are pursuing it as a viable, albeit precarious, career option. Oakley (2014) maintains that many cultural workers are pushed into entrepreneurship rather than actively choosing to become one, creating a tension between what Naudin (2018, p43) describes as a 'can do' mind-set and a 'must-do' survival form of work. Smaller distributors including Modern Films, Guerilla Films, Dogwoof and Altitude were founded by entrepreneurs who actively chose to become one, rather than being pushed into it. I would classify their *modus operandi* as being one of 'can do' rather than a 'must-do' mindset and their longevity in the business is testament to both the savviness of their business judgment and the self-confidence or self-efficacy in their decision-making. Drnovsek *et al*. (2009, p330) observe that the self-efficacy of entrepreneurs has emerged as an important construct for understanding entrepreneurial success. A substantial body of evidence from scholars such as Boyd and Vozikis (1994); Krueger (2003); Segal *et al*., (2005) cite its influence on business growth and start-up processes. Markman *et al*. (2005) and Baum *et al*., (2001) define self-efficacy as the entrepreneur's task-specific self-confidence. In film distribution, crafting a new film release is one such task-specific endeavour that requires self-confidence to execute.

The process of identifying and acquiring a new film is an example of entrepreneurialism, for which confidence in its commerciality and marketability is required. That acquisitions process is task-specific and requires self-efficacy. It is a process that requires the distributor to have self-confidence in its decision-making, especially in a competitive marketplace where multiple distributors are bidding for the same film. In an industry where public relations is an important element of doing business, projecting self-confidence can sometimes be an important part of a distributor's façade in negotiating with the gatekeepers. Throughout the existing body of work there is a strong view that self-efficacy is a good thing for cultural

entrepreneurs to have. Shane *et al*. (2003, p267) argue that an entrepreneur who is high in self-efficacy is likely to "exert more effort for a greater length of time, persist through setbacks, and develop better plans and strategies for the task". Experienced distributors display self-efficacy by meeting adversity and persisting through such setbacks as exhibitors and TV channels turning down a film, sales agents rejecting an initial distribution offer and unfavourable critical reaction.

For Ashton (2011) and Beaven (2012) the idea of becoming a cultural entrepreneur is not a fixed identity; it is an on-going process as the entrepreneur navigates diverse circumstances and policy environments. The tension that exists between artistic aspirations and business is described by Naudin (2018) as adding to this dynamic, as a financial return is balanced with peer recognition and aesthetic rewards. In the distribution sector, financial success is the stability on which cultural entrepreneurs rely and that can only be attained by making sound acquisitions and by relying on a network of third parties that can enable that financial success. I find that cultural entrepreneurs in the distribution sector rely less on personal recognition than on the value of 'aesthetic rewards' that can take the form of awards recognition for an individual film at industry trade events such as the Cannes Film Festival and the BAFTAS. Such peer recognition for the film can be leveraged to appeal to a broader and wider audience segment, leading to a financial return that can bring its own 'aesthetic rewards' for the distributor, the cultural entrepreneur. In my own practice, I used the *imprimatur* of the Best Director award at the Cannes Film Festival for my French language film *Exils* (Tony Gatlif, 2004) as a selling point to secure a lucrative BBC broadcast deal for the film following its critically acclaimed UK cinema release.

A distributor does not always need to be enterprising during the life cycle of distribution. Swedberg (2007) makes the point that the association between the entrepreneur and innovative behaviour is not permanent, and an individual can alternate between acting as an entrepreneur for a period and then assuming a more managerial approach once the innovative activity has ceased. This logic can be applied to the work of a distributor where, in the first instance, an entrepreneurial skillset is needed to secure the desired acquisition, often by creating a convincing strategy and pitching a marketing campaign that wins over the sales agent. Hirsch (1972) writes that relationships with sales agents serve as an organisational filter through which potential film acquisitions are identified and classified. As a

consequence, a distributor is dependent on the sales agent and other stakeholders for a pipeline of new product. The transnational nature of the relationship between distributors and sales agents is demonstrated by my own case studies where *Marie Curie* was acquired following extensive negotiations with a German sales company, Films Boutique, at the Berlin Film Festival; for *Wine Calling* I negotiated the UK rights from the French sales company, WT Films, at the Cannes Film Festival having first seen the film at Unifrance's Rendez-vous In Paris market event four months earlier; I acquired *One Way to Moscow* from the German sales agent, Patra Spanou Film, after first screening the film at the Cannes Virtual Market in June 2020, with the deal being concluded virtually without ever meeting the sales agent in person. The implementation of the distribution strategy for each of those films involved a more managerial approach envisaged by Swedberg (2006) in supervising the publicity and marketing campaigns as well as managing the relationships with the director and principal cast.

Blaug and Towse (2020, p127) see the cultural entrepreneur as doing more than managing the activity - "typically they discover it and exploit its revenue potentialities with one quality that cannot be bought or hired, namely alertness to 'revenue generating arbitrage'". While a distributor's work involves the exploitation of a film (i.e. a cultural product), there is rarely anything cultural about developing and executing a release campaign for the film – it is the mechanical exercise of overseeing and delivering a release that will involve a combination of mundane tasks such as arranging transportation, co-ordinating print traffic, applying for and securing censor ratings, booking cinemas and negotiating rental terms, organising press screenings, hiring a publicist, arranging press interviews and junkets and securing the funds to pay for all these elements. The cultural aspect of the entrepreneurship is a fraction of the amount of labour involved in getting a film to market and the individual tasks are no more exceptional than in other areas of industrial activity of an entrepreneurial nature. Even in the industry itself, exhibitors, sales agents and distributors describe their slate of films as 'product', a term that highlights the industrial, rather than the cultural aspects, of their activity.

The cultural entrepreneur is defined by Blaug and Towse (2020, p158) as an innovator who generates revenue from a novel cultural activity, a definition that is in line with Schumpeter (1934). There is no doubt that many distributors demonstrate

innovation with the creativity of their marketing campaigns and choice of acquisitions, but since cinema is an industry that is over a century old, it can hardly be considered a 'novel cultural activity'. Indeed, it could be argued that few films themselves can be described as novel, either critically or commercially. The addition of 'cultural' before 'entrepreneur' is not noteworthy enough to differentiate the work of a 'cultural' entrepreneur in film distribution from the work of an entrepreneur on an activity that is purely non-cultural or industrial in nature. While a cultural entrepreneur can make the claim that they 'discovered' a film as per Blaug and Towse (2020), the discovery is often less to do with chance or luck, rather through an established network of relationships, often of a transnational nature, with key industry corporations such as sales agents, festival directors, filmmakers and producers, a subject I explore in greater detail in a later section of this chapter. From my own practice, the 'discovery' of all three films from my case studies came about not by luck or chance, but from viewing them at film festivals and from pre-existing relationships with sales agents. Ultimately that relationship, in my experience, is customarily transactional, and is less about the cultural aspects of the film's release and more about making an offer and negotiating a deal that is mutually beneficial.

While the term 'cultural entrepreneurship' encapsulates the work of a distributor, the pre-fix of 'cultural' is not significant enough or required as a qualification to describe that work. It is enough of a designation to regard a distributor as an entrepreneur, specifically working in the sphere of film distribution, a segment of the creative industries. In this context, as bland and anodyne as it sounds, the term 'film entrepreneur' would fit better than 'cultural entrepreneur' but even that is an unnecessary qualification. Having established and defined the dependent distributor as an entrepreneur, in the next section I look at the literature relating to the importance of networks and the work of the gatekeepers in film distribution on whom distributors primarily depend for their pipeline of acquisitions. Such an examination is necessary as the distributor as entrepreneur cannot operate in isolation, it needs to be part of the fast-changing eco-system of film distribution in order to monetise its product effectively.

## 2.3 *Networks: A Dependent Relationship with the Gatekeepers*

The identity of entrepreneurs working in the creative industries is encapsulated by Hinves (2016, p161) when he describes them as collaborative individualists that need the ability to network and work in partnership. It is the immersion in a creative community that Bilton (1999) regards as being a distinctive feature of work in the creative arts, making the process of becoming an entrepreneur a relational process that does not occur in isolation from peers or a wider network of creative practitioners. Naudin (2018) is of the opinion that the focus should not be on an isolated individual, but should consider the community, networks and working environment so that entrepreneurship can be scrutinised with a critical perspective. Shaw *et al*. (2010, p2) writes about the embedded nature of networks in entrepreneurship in the creative arts and points out that a strong network orientation combined with a portfolio of strategically targeted networking activities are integral to the process of becoming an entrepreneur. These researchers all point out that the entrepreneur must be prepared to collaborate with others, that success depends on navigating the embedded nature of networks because they provide access to valuable resources (Clough *et al*., 2019).

This is representative of the UK distribution sphere where an embedded network exists in each revenue window of a film's lifecycle – from Odeon, Vue, Everyman and Curzon in exhibition, to Sky, Film4 and BBC in television, and Netflix, AppleTV+ and Amazon Prime in VOD. A distributor must find a way to unlock the revenue in each window by becoming known, respected and accepted by the key protagonists and gatekeepers in the film value chain. My final case study in chapter seven relates to the Swiss title, *One Way to Moscow*. Figure 3.1 below shows the exploitation of the film in the various windows and holdback periods. It demonstrates a life cycle that is typical for day-and-date foreign language film releases in the UK and illustrates how revenues flow directly to the distributor in each exploitation window. I analyse it in greater detail in chapter seven.

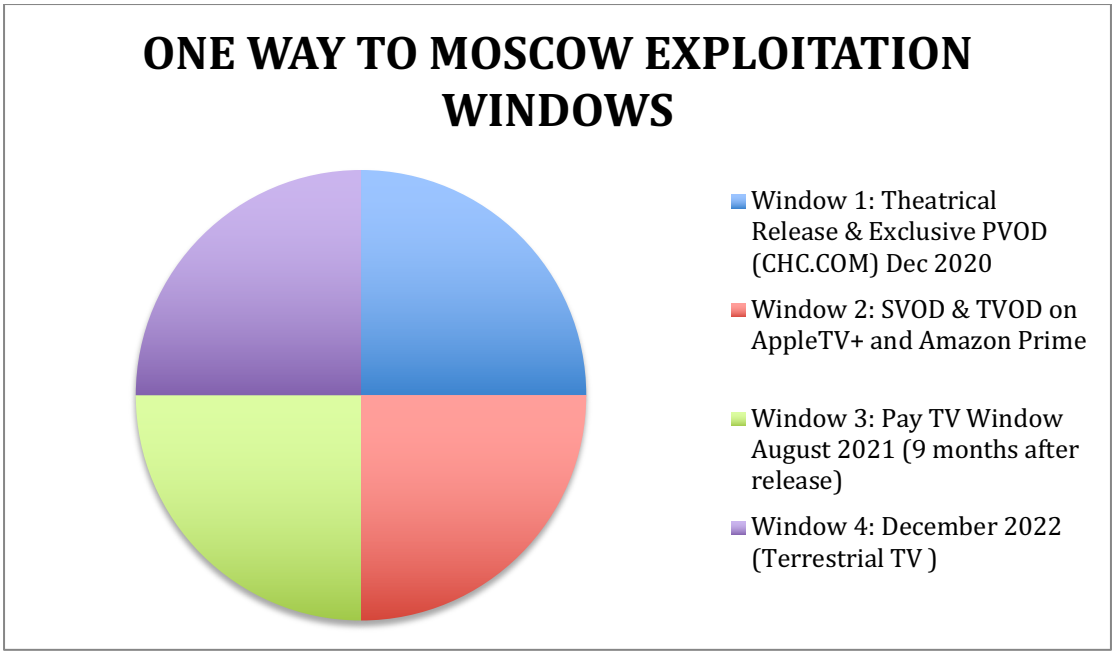


Figure 3.1 Pie Chart showing various exploitation windows in UK film distribution

In looking at the classic American model in the literature, Parkman *et al*. (2012, p5) note that some parts of the creative industries are dominated by oligopolies of large firms that control the production and distribution of their content (e.g., films, television and recorded music), while (Wilson and Stokes, 2005) point out that a large and increasing share of the creative industries is populated by small, young firms, and medium-sized organisations. In film distribution, examples of such small or medium-sized UK firms are Altitude, Guerilla, Trafalgar Releasing and Dogwoof. Parkman *et al*. (2012, p7) describe the market in which such entrepreneurs operate as one where "consumer demands are highly subjective, shifting and sometimes ambiguous". That capriciousness makes it difficult for an entrepreneur to have consistent financial success as it is always trying to second-guess what the audience or end-user wants.

Hollywood is described by Maltby (2003, p15) in Kirznerian terms as "essentially opportunistic in its economic motivation", but Maltby could equally be describing the dependent distribution sector in the UK, a sector that is also opportunistic in its need to survive in a difficult marketplace. Writing about contemporary British literature in the field, Naudin (2018, p46) notes that an entrepreneur in the creative industries is typically resourceful, particularly when faced with little financial capital to develop its cultural ventures. Scott (2012) notes, albeit in the context of DIY music producers, that different forms of capital are used,

specifically in a social context in which reputation and skills can be shared. In my experience building a good reputation is vital in film distribution and requires entrepreneurship especially when negotiating with a sales agent - a reputation for trustworthiness, transparency and honesty goes a long way in securing a deal when a sales agent must make a judgment call between similarly priced offers from rival distributors. Bilton and Leary (2004), Scott (2012) and Lee (2011) all write about the reliance on personal networks derived from an entrepreneur's friendship group and based on trust. That is manifested by distributors repeatedly working with the same collaborators - directors, sales agents, editors, post-production houses, art directors, media buyers and publicists.

According to Chen and Tan (2009, p1079) entrepreneurship in the international sphere is understood as "the process of creatively discovering and exploiting opportunities that lie outside a firm's domestic markets in the pursuit of competitive advantage" (Oviatt and McDougall, 1997; George and Zahra, 2002). Many film distributors are inveterate travellers to international film festivals that lie outside their domestic markets in their quest to uncover and acquire suitable acquisitions. Few specialty distributors in the UK rely on British films only, rather a transnational approach to acquisitions is adopted that includes American, European and Asian cinema. Networks have been theorised as a fundamental characteristic of transnationalism and the primary means of mobilising resources for transnational practices (Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007; Vertovec, 2003).

Higbee and Lim (2010, p8) observe that within the discipline of film studies, the concept of transnational cinema is certainly now an established area of enquiry. They cite the work of Lu (1997), Nestingen and Elkington (2005) and Ezra and Rowden (2006), all of whom have written books with transnational in its title. Higbee and Lim (2010, p9) also observe that there have been several attempts to apply a conceptual framework of 'the transnational' to film-making and film cultures. Kinder (1993, p7) comments on the need to "read national cinema against the local/global interface" while Lu (1997, p10–11), refers to "an era of transnational postmodern cultural production", in which the borders between nations have been blurred by new technologies. Naficy (1996, p121) proposes the category of "independent transnational cinema", which would combine the concepts of authorship (including the works of exiled film-makers from outside of the West working on the margins of

the European and American film industry) with genre. Higson (2000) and Bergfelder (2005) look at the limitations of the national in favour of the transnational in film studies. None of this literature looks in detail at the transnational nature of the relationship between distributors and sales agents in the film business. Film distribution, in my experience, is a transnational practice where an international list of contacts, or networks and relationships with foreign sales agents, overseas festival directors and programmers are necessary to ensure that a distributor does not miss out on a suitable acquisition opportunity. I explore how transnationalism is employed in the distribution of the European Trilogy in chapters five, six and seven.

The smaller distributors in the film business are representative of small business across all industry in the UK. Henley, Vorley and Gherhes (2021, p46) make the point that "small businesses are widely regarded as an important aspect of the productivity puzzle in the UK, representing over 98% of the business base". They note that the diversity of small businesses means that supporting micro-businesses and sole-traders is not straightforward - a fact borne out in small business policy over the past thirty years. Howkins (2002, p2) argues that the term 'creative industry' applies where "brain power is preponderant and where the outcome is intellectual property". Every new film acquired by a distributor is a piece of intellectual property or 'IP'. While there is no special tax treatment for distributors in their acquisition of intellectual property in the UK, they have benefited indirectly from government policy in the UK, Europe and several States in the United States, introducing tax incentives that has led to a proliferation of film production, increasing the pool and choice of acquisitions (IP) from which distributors can choose at film festivals and markets.

The policies of State government bodies, or institutions, also have a role to play in the entrepreneurial landscape. Institutions are the humanly conceived constraints that structure economic, political and social interaction (Estrin *et al*. 2012; North, 1991, p97). They have a role in shaping the national framework within which individuals choose social and commercial entrepreneurship (Baker *et al*., 2005; Baumol, 1996). The theory of productive and unproductive entrepreneurship espoused by Baumol (1996) is significant because it materially alters the focal point of academic inquiry toward the role of institutions in affecting entrepreneurship. Baumol's theory is based on the notion that an entrepreneur exploits a profit

opportunity not only within private markets but also within the legal and political arena. Thus, differences in the measured rate of private sector entrepreneurship is partially due to the way entrepreneurial energies are channelled by prevailing economic and political institutions, through the structure of incentives and rewards that they create for entrepreneurial individuals. This is exemplified by the governmental policy of offering film subsidies – examples of State Film organisations offering such grants include ANICA in Italy, Unifrance and CNC in France, German Films in Germany, and the pan-European Creative Europe Media Scheme. These distribution subsidies are designed to encourage the export of national cinema by offering foreign distributors a subsidy or grant for releasing such foreign films in the distributor's home territory.

These subsidy schemes have the direct impact of incentivising entrepreneurial-minded foreign distributors to acquire non-national French, German and Italian films, thus achieving the goal of the institutions to develop their national cinema abroad and to stimulate their transnational distribution. Shane and Venkataraman (2000) view entrepreneurship as moulded by the opportunity structure at a macro level and individuals' access to resources at a micro level. The case of institutional film distribution subsidies typifies this structure by virtue of government policy at the macro level offering incentives to distributors at the micro level to acquire foreign language films. The transnational exportation of films is at the heart of these schemes. For many UK distributors including Curzon, MUBI and Modern Films, these subsidies are an integral part of their acquisitions strategy as they minimise capital investment in the release of individual films, thereby reducing financial risk. This activity shows the role of institutions, in this case the State Film organisations, in effecting entrepreneurial activity in distributors in a transnational context in accordance with the theory of Baumol (1996). It also demonstrates how distributors' energies are channelled to acquire films from countries that offer these incentives. For foreign language titles, many smaller distributors are dependent on revenues from a State or European Union subsidy to ensure that there is enough funding to launch and execute a successful distribution campaign. The role of State institutions in the distribution sector is an example of the transnational networks – both public and private – that are available to entrepreneurial distributors.

One of the key attributes of the distributor as entrepreneur is the building and maintaining of relationships with the gatekeepers in the film business, as well as developing and maintaining key industry networks. Chen and Tan (2009, p1081) write those networks can be viewed as the link that connects "the supply side and the demand side, the structure and resources, and opportunity and individual characteristics at different levels". Networks facilitate entrepreneurs to access instrumental resources such as capital, information, technology, market, and expressive resources such as emotional support (Davidsson and Honig, 2003; Gold and Light, 2000), or new films in the case of film distributors. For Ostgaard and Birley (1994), writing about entrepreneurs in a resource-based framework, networks have been considered as a rare, valuable resource that is difficult to imitate. In the cloistered world of film distribution those networks are crucial to securing new product and in having the networks to bring that new film product to market. Chen and Tan (2009, p1081) see entrepreneurs as relying on their social networks to deal with uncertainty, acquire legitimacy, and counteract the absence of formal institutional support. Mason and Hruskova (2021, p59) describe entrepreneurial ecosystems as the "fertile soil" in which start-ups and in particular scale ups emerge. While these networks do indeed provide 'fertile soil' for entrepreneurs, it is also one on which a distributor must depend to survive in a competitive and challenging marketplace.

One such pivotal gatekeeper in the entrepreneurial eco-system is the sales agent whose role is to represent films on behalf of filmmakers and its financiers, and to conclude deals with distributors. Transnationalism is at the heart of a sales agent's endeavour as it must build and maintain relationships with distributors, broadcasters and streaming services in every continent to sell its film product effectively. Havens (2011) notes that major distributors tend to develop personalised relations with a group of selected sales agents, and Godart and Mears (2009) note that such networking arrangements are used to gain a competitive advantage and acquire a better sense of the state and profile of projects in which they are interested. Smits (2016, p32), when writing about the film distribution sector in the Netherlands, contrasts the strategy of "major independents" with the "specialist independents", about whom he observes usually "acquire smaller art-house films in a completed state, which allows them to watch finished films and base decision-making largely on

taste judgements". Smits' (2016) overview of the marketplace does not explore one common reality – that major independents, as he describes them, primarily succeed in acquiring its first-choice acquisition targets by virtue of having the competitive advantage of deeper pockets than specialist independents. This funding disparity is the fundamental difference between the two sets of distributors, not the depth of the relationship with the sales agent for the film envisaged by Godart and Mears (2009). This reality does not make the distributor any less enterprising in its approach, as both sets of distributors are entrepreneurs making their decision-making on taste judgments.

Smits (2016, p32) concludes that decision-making by "specialist independents" is as much guided by "aesthetic disposition and appreciation" as by carefully calculated taste. A distributor's acquisitions are carefully selected, but Smits omits an investigation into the dynamics of the marketplace and the intense nature of competition that exists when more than one distributor is vying to acquire a desired title. In an era of platformisation, specialist independents and major independents, as Smits (2016, p32) calls them, are competing not only with each other, but also well-funded streaming services for the same titles, leading to price increases on MGs, and the risk that the smaller distributors will lose out in a bidding war that favours the highest bidder. The films that I eventually end up acquiring are rarely the first-choice ones. In such a competitive environment, distributors need to display entrepreneurial nous by providing a compelling distribution and marketing strategy to ensure that the seller considers factors other than the MG when deciding between rival bidders.

It is not just the intense competition between distributors that makes the acquisition of new titles difficult and challenging in the UK dependent distribution sector, it is the high cost of bringing films to market making the recoupment and possibility of profitability more risky and remote. Finney (2014) observes that against the backdrop of the competitive pressures, marketing presents an ever-present and all-encompassing challenge at every stage of the journey towards finding an audience, starting with a film's inception.

The competitive marketplace in the UK has led to distributors displaying their entrepreneurial abilities by identifying a niche, exploiting it and creating a new revenue stream and distribution model. One example is the experiential cinema sector and in the next chapter I examine the further potential for growth in the sector if

distributors build experiential marketing techniques into their campaigns. In the next section of this chapter, I examine the Schumpeterian 'creative destruction' approach to entrepreneurship and Kirzner's theory of 'alertness to opportunity' to see how they can be applied to the work of the distributor. This is required as they are both valuable concepts that can help position the distributor in the film distribution eco-system. It is also needed to theorise the dynamics created by platformisation and the relationship with the various gatekeepers on whom the distributor depends.

## 2.4 *The Dependent Distributor as Entrepreneur*

Innovation and entrepreneurship, as Schumpeter (1934, p73) believes, allows economic systems to progress to more advanced states and avoid repetition. This view can be applied to film distribution, with the introduction of new technology – such as streaming - into the film value chain, and particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, where innovative releasing models by Universal, WarnerMedia/HBO Max and Disney have been trialled, and in some cases, taken hold. The film business has always been a technologically driven industry (Balio (1985); Gomery (1992); Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson (2003). As Schumpeter (1934, p73) puts it, "without innovations, no entrepreneurs; without entrepreneurial achievement, no capitalist returns and no capitalist propulsion". The distribution sector has been the source of innovation for over a century. The most recent cycle of the COVID-19 pandemic is resulting in a re-calibration of the theatrical windowing and holdback model, increased platformisation and other developments that affect the livelihood of the distributor.

The advent of platformisation has consolidated the role of an emerging set of gatekeepers into the distribution life cycle – namely, the streaming services, on whom distributors depend to reach the ultimate end-user. While Schumpeter (1934, p32) characterises creative destruction as innovation that results in increased productivity, describing it as the "process of industrial mutation that incessantly revolutionises the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one," the shortening and erosion of the windowing system is having a negative impact on smaller distributors because they are missing out on foreign language titles by being outbid by streaming services. In my experience, this has resulted in an increase in asking prices demanded by sales agents handling coveted foreign language titles making profit margins tighter and the risk assumed by distributors ever greater. Nieborg and Poell (2018) write about the platformisation of cultural production, but the impact of a shortened theatrical window only increases the omnipresence of platformisation, while diminishing the value of theatrical revenue, an important revenue stream for smaller distributors like Swipe Films.

It is therefore worth returning to Kirzner's (1973, p7) concept of entrepreneurship in terms of "alertness to opportunity", the discovery of knowledge

previously unknown, where an entrepreneur responds to opportunities rather than creating them. Kirzner (1973, p8) believes that entrepreneurship and a competitive market are inseparable and that the competitive process is in essence entrepreneurial. The competitive market in film distribution can be witnessed at transnational film festivals such as Cannes, Venice and Berlin where new films are premiered and launched, many of which are seeking distribution. The path to acquire a desired title at these film festivals can be extremely competitive and the distributor, acting as an entrepreneur, must be alert to the opportunity that the festival provides by identifying and pro-actively pursuing new acquisition targets from the festival programming. Using Kirzner's approach, the competitive market that the film festival enables, and the competitive process involved in concluding distribution deals, is in essence entrepreneurial. As a result, the distributor seeking to acquire the film in a competitive process is acting as an entrepreneur and that act of entrepreneurship and a competitive market are indivisible.

While Kirzner defines an entrepreneur as purely responding to an opportunity, rather than creating it, I maintain that a distributor is creating an opportunity for the stakeholders in the film - the filmmakers, the financiers and the sales agent – by providing an opportunity to release and monetise it on their behalf. Therefore, it is inaccurate to describe a distributor as only being alert to and responding to an opportunity. By identifying and creating an opportunity to monetise the film on behalf of the film's stakeholders, the distributor is acting as an entrepreneur. In doing so, the distributor also creates an opportunity for potential future stakeholders such as exhibitors, television channels and streaming services to exploit and monetise the asset. Because of the system of windows and holdbacks in film distribution - where the film can be exploited exclusively for a fixed period in cinemas, television and streaming - there is a cyclical nature to the entrepreneurship that the literature on film distribution has not fully identified or explored.

In this competitive environment, the often under-capitalised dependent distributor will lose out to the more deep-pocketed gatekeepers in the film value chain. Reiss (2010) writes that the balance of power favours the television channels and streamers by virtue of their deep pockets and the wide choice of films that they can choose from, leading to the implication that the distributor is dependent on them to make a return on their investment in the film. In conclusion, the business cycle of a

film's exploitation through the systems of windows is a feat of entrepreneurial engineering and it involves building, keeping and leveraging relationships and networks with exhibitors, sales agents, aggregators, streaming services and film critics. In the next section I consider the concept of collective entrepreneurship and examine if it can be used to define the relationship between distributors and streaming services to demonstrate that the relationship between them is a dependent one.

## 2.5 *Collective Entrepreneurship in Dependent Distribution*

Hesmondhalgh and Pratt (2005) study the creative industries by embracing a framework typically used to examine industrial clusters, suggesting that a creative firm can similarly achieve economies of scale and enhance their innovation, productivity, and growth by leveraging what Porter (1998, p7) calls the agglomeration benefits of clusters. Porter (1998, p8) defines clusters as "geographic concentrations of interconnected companies and institutions in a particular field". He cites Silicon Valley, the Californian wine sector and the Italian leather fashion industry as examples. Employing Porter's definition, the UK film distribution sector can be viewed as a cluster, given the concentration of film distributors in the geographical area of London focusing in a particular field that creates economic competition. They are linked by what Porter (2000, p254) calls "commonalities and complementarities", namely the pursuit of new films that can be acquired and monetised. Mezias and Kuperman (2001) explore the collective nature of entrepreneurship and the emergence of new industries, with a specific focus on the early film industry from the 1890s until the end of the 1920s. They argue that successful entrepreneurship should not be viewed solely as solitary individuals acting in isolation (such as the actions of Thomas Edison in inventing the Kinetoscope).

Instead, entrepreneurs can exist as part of larger collectives, a population of organisations engaging in activities similar to those of the entrepreneurial firm, which, in itself, constitute a social system that can affect and impact entrepreneurial success. Mezias and Kuperman (2001, p211) cite the success of feature length films as being dependent on and hastened by the development of distribution networks that replaced travelling shows and localised markets. Their success was also accelerated by the movement away from nickelodeons towards larger exhibition spaces, such as show palaces and theatres. For Mezias and Kuperman (2001, p212) the entrepreneurial period in the early American film industry begins in 1894 with Edison's commercialisation of the Kinetoscope and ends in the late 1920s with the foundation of the studios, which incorporated all three of the film industry's value chain pursuits - production, distribution, and exhibition - within a single corporate entity. Although they were writing before the streaming era, Mezias and Kuperman (2001, p215) point out that the contemporary American film industry still has remnants of the exchange

and distribution system with its roots in the community dynamics of the emergence of new industries.

Wyatt (1998, p1) observes that Hollywood studios constantly look to claim new commercial terrain and this current era of platformisation has echoes of the early American film industry entrepreneurship, particularly as there is a population of entrepreneurial firms - streaming services (Disney+, HBO Max, Paramount+, Amazon, and the UK firms, MUBI and Curzon Home Cinema) – claiming new commercial terrain and engaging in activities similar to those of the originating entrepreneurial firm (Netflix) in this sector. These streaming services could be collectively considered part of a social systems framework described by Van de Ven (1993), a social system that can affect entrepreneurial success. This theoretical framework, drawn from work by Garud and Ven de Ven (1989) and Van de Ven (1993) depicts the industrial infrastructure supporting entrepreneurship as including technological development, the commercialisation of innovation and the creation of consumer demand and markets.

The streaming services are engaging in all those activities. By adopting a direct-to-consumer streaming model, it is in the streaming services' collective interest that they succeed in collectively altering consumer behaviour to adopt streaming as their primary method of entertainment consumption. Viewed this way, individual entrepreneurs such as dependent distributors may be more successful in the venturing process if they recognise some of the ways in which their success depends on the actions of other entrepreneurial firms – the streaming services, in this instance - throughout this community. Instead of being fearful about the impact of the streaming services on their business model (and the potential cannibalisation of revenues) recognising that they are part of a collective of entrepreneurs could help distributors adjust to the challenges of platformisation, the changes in business model that it involves, and the opportunities and potential financial advantages associated with reaching the end-user in this segment of the value chain. Perceived through the prism of entrepreneurship, platformisation is a collective endeavour and one in which a community of populations and entrepreneurs – streaming services, distributors and the end-users - can be characterised as dependent. In the next section, I set out my conclusions.

## 2.6 *Conclusions*

In this chapter I have looked at the role of entrepreneurship, and cultural entrepreneurship in the activities of film distributors. I concluded that the term 'cultural' is an unnecessary pre-fix when characterising the entrepreneurial nature of a distributor. After an examination of theories of entrepreneurship from Kirzner, Schumpeter and Baumol, I identify self-efficacy, opportunism, and innovation as hallmarks of the film distributor as entrepreneur and conclude that an opportunistic approach is better suited to their long-term survival. I pinpoint the building of industry networks as an important element for entrepreneurial distributors. Within that network, I examined the interaction of distributors with the various gatekeepers in the film value chain and the dependent nature of the relationship between them. Because distributors are dependent on networks and gatekeepers, they must be entrepreneurial to survive in a challenging marketplace.

In particular, for a film distributor to survive in such an environment, an entrepreneurial skillset is required, firstly, to convince the film's gatekeepers – the sales agent, the filmmakers, the financiers – that the distributor's sales pitch and offer is the best one, leading to the distributor's dependence on the sales agent and other stakeholders for a pipeline of new product; secondly, to negotiate and conclude the commercial terms with the same gatekeepers (Reiss, 2010) in a fiscally responsible fashion, often in a competitive environment; thirdly, to convince the gatekeepers to the audience - namely exhibitors, television channels and streaming services - to programme the film on the right commercial terms; fourthly, to ensure the inflow of revenue, the distributor is dependent on the support of exhibitors in the first stage of release, television channels in the next holdback, and streaming services in the final window. These entrepreneurial endeavours are played out against the backdrop of consumer capriciousness, which Parkman *et al*. (2012, p9) describe as being "highly subjective, shifting and sometimes ambiguous", making the entrepreneurial task of selecting new titles and marketing them more problematic.

Therefore, I maintain that the acquisition and release of a new film by the distributor is an exercise in identifying and creating an opportunity to monetise it on behalf of the film's originating entrepreneurs. In doing so the distributor is also acting as an entrepreneur as well as creating a further opportunity for a different set of

entrepreneurial firms and potential future stakeholders - exhibitors, TV channels and streaming services - to exploit and monetise the asset over the lifetime of the distribution contract. This cyclical element of the entrepreneurship - driven by the evolving system of exclusive windows and holdbacks - is one that the literature on film distribution has not fully explored. The success of the distributors in securing broadcast and streaming deals throughout the lifecycle of the film will be dependent on the strength of the distributor's networks, that often will be transnational in nature. Finally, I look at the concept of collective entrepreneurship, and how it can be applied to the pervasive growth of platformisation and conclude that distributors and streaming services should be viewed as part of an industrial collective or an eco-system of entrepreneurs, dependent on each other, but stronger for it.

Distributors act as serial entrepreneurs as the launching of a new film is akin to bringing a start-up business to market. Each new film has distinct selling points and challenges, a brand new marketing campaign to be conceived, developed and executed with separate fiscal and creative challenges, often with a different demographic being targeted. In order to overcome dependence, distributors must be entrepreneurial. Entrepreneurship is what lifts a distributor from its dependent state, allowing it to craft new campaigns, be creative with budgets and find innovative ways to reach the target audience, including using transnational relationships and funding. All of this enterprise is geared towards making the film attractive to the consumer, as well as a desirable acquisitions target for broadcasters and ultimately the streamers in downstream ancillary markets beyond the theatrical window. At first it might appear oxymoronic that an entity so defined and restricted by its dependence could emerge to be entrepreneurial, but this is the skillset needed for a distributor to navigate through the layers of gatekeeping and monetise a film through its value chain. In the first two chapters, I have shown how dependence and entrepreneurship, often with transnational elements, have formed a significant part in the development of the film industry. In the next chapter I look at the role of the experiential in dependent distribution as a means of demonstrating why it is a key ingredient for the dependent distributor in the release of speciality films.

## CHAPTER 3
## THE EXPERIENTIAL IN DEPENDENT DISTRIBUTION

This chapter explores the role the experiential plays in dependent film distribution, both historically and in contemporary practice. It looks at the scholarship concerning the impact of the experiential on the sector and how its adoption fuels entrepreneurship among film distributors. In the previous chapter I examined the role of entrepreneurship and the importance of networks in the working practice of dependent distributors. Within those networks, I examined the literature on the interaction of distributors with the various gatekeepers in the film value chain and the dependent nature of the relationship between them. Because distributors are dependent on networks and gatekeepers, I concluded that a dependent distributor needs to function as an entrepreneur to evolve and survive in the face of evolving audience habits, technological innovations and a changing economic climate. This chapter discusses debates in the literature on the relationship between the audience experience and technology and examines the use and effectiveness of the 'experiential' as a distribution technique. While the literature shows a seemingly inextricable link between the cinema experience and the use of technology, particularly as a way to encourage cinemagoing and enhance the viewing experience, there has been a shift away from technology with the advent of the experiential cinema movement. I explore the field to examine how an experiential event is not only about the use of technology but also the entrepreneurialism involved in creating it.

For over a century, the economic model of the exhibition and distribution business has evolved through the introduction, implementation and exploitation of new technology, and industry innovations such as the introduction of sound and 3D. These technologies are introduced and developed to attract, build and maintain audiences. In this chapter I start by defining experiential cinema, I then explore the history of the experiential in entertainment and film distribution. I come to the conclusion that the experiential is not a contemporary phenomenon but has been developed over centuries by entrepreneurial business people that have used various technologies as a means of increasing profitability and enhancing the audience experience (CinemaScope, Panavision, Cinerama, and 3D). I interrogate the literature relating to the event cinema sector, where its entrepreneurs have been dependent on

technology to create experiences for its customers. I find that it is part of a wider experiential economic movement that uses a premium price stratification system that has historical antecedents in previous industrial cycles. In looking at the role of technology in film distribution and the relationship between cinema technologies and experience, I examine the literature that encompasses historical examples of new technology such as the coming of sound in the motion picture industry and, more recently, streaming technology, Virtual Reality and the metaverse. I do so as a means to situate the experiential in the evolution of film distribution, and in particular, examine how it informs the cinema experience. I point out that the experiential can be used as an effective technique to attract audiences, and employing it allows the distributor to be entrepreneurial. That entrepreneurship can be demonstrated by packaging the experience with a set of appropriate partnerships that makes it more attractive to audiences. I conclude by defining experiential technology and adopting it as a catch-all phrase. In the next section I explore the various types of experiential cinema and the popularity of event cinema.

## 3.1 *Experiencing Dependent Films*

Same & Larimo (2012) define experience as an economic offering and an interaction between a company or brand or service, and a customer that perceives and meaningfully experiences it. While that is a broad definition, Cooper-Martin (1991, p756) defines 'experiential' more specifically in the context of cinemagoing as being that "which consumers choose, buy and use solely to experience and enjoy". For Cooper-Martin (1991, p756) experiential products are delineated by their dominant emphasis on the consumption experience, the main benefit being the pleasure in consumption. Cooper-Martin treats cinemagoing as an experiential product, for which the consumption experience is an end in itself, with consumers choosing, acquiring and using an experiential product – the film - solely to experience and enjoy it. The dominant benefit of such an experiential product is what Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) describe as hedonic consumption, that is the emotions, sensations and feelings experienced during the usage of the product. To be successful, Poulsson and Kale (2004) argue that a marketing experience should have personal relevance for the customer, be novel, offer an element of surprise, engender learning and engage the customer. While a film *per se*, or even a film in an event setting, might not offer the full set of those experiences, it is clear that hedonic value is a primary draw for audiences in the act of experiential sphere of cinemagoing.

The terms 'experiential cinema' and 'live cinema' are often used inter-changeably in academic literature. Live cinema is defined by Atkinson and Kennedy (2018, p10) as cinema that "escapes beyond the boundaries of the auditorium" to occupy 'real' space. Live cinema entrepreneurs in the UK include Secret Cinema, Luna Cinema, Rooftop Cinema Club and Backyard Cinema Club. Atkinson and Kennedy (2018, p3) adopt the catch-all title 'live cinema' from a tagline from one of Secret Cinema productions - *Secret Cinema Back to the Future Advertising - The Live Cinema Experience* - as an umbrella term through which to capture the wide range of novel commercial strategies and emergent creative art practices (2018, p3). In particular, Secret Cinema is a world leader in delivering an experience for participants, where the world of a cult film or TV series, is lavishly recreated and brought to life. While the film itself is shown at the event, it is almost incidental to the

communal experience of reliving the film, the characters and the immersive world with a group of friends.

According to Harris (2016, p113), in live cinema screenings, elements of interactivity or performance inspired by the content of the film (such as live music or in-fiction sets) constitute a 'real' accompaniment to the 'reel' cinematic spectacle. Atkinson (2018) explores this idea further, considering how this period of analogue to digital transition has impacted upon opportunities, working practices, and structures in the film industry, and addresses the various causative forces behind their resistances and adoptions. While Jones (2018) describes live cinema as a film screening using additional performance or interactivity inspired by the film's content, Atkinson and Kennedy (2018, p141) categorise live cinema into 3 distinct groups:

1) In enhanced screenings the "social experience of film reception is given some degree of enhancement" (2018, p141), as in outdoor and open air screenings, but crucially "the filmic text itself is left entirely untouched" *(ibid)*;
2) Augmented cinema enriches a screening through specific resonances between the site at which it is shown and the film, often through sensory enhancement or "elements of non-interactive performance, though these experiences also remain orientated around the 'filmic text'" (2018, p141);
3) Their final category of live cinema involves 'participatory' events, in which there is some element of direct engagement with the audience in elements of the ordinary text ranging from singalong screenings to Secret Cinema's reconstructions of a film's diegesis.

The most seminal example of participatory cinema is *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975) and its popular Time Warp song. Austin (1981, p52), through an analysis of interviews outside the cinema in 1979, concludes that the social experience promised by the film's reputation and satisfaction of one's curiosity were potent drawing cards for first time viewers. For Atkinson and Kennedy (2018), the unifying aspect of live cinema events is their enhancement of and connection to a specific film. They believe that live participatory cinema is based on an aesthetic principle of an engaged and interacting body, taken, with the events as they unfold but, crucially, bringing the experience in to existence through shared performance and

interactions. They refer to this collective as an 'experience community' which they define as "temporally fleeting and shallow gatherings of people brought together in elaborate, highly constructed and crucially commodified narrative environments" (*ibid*., p11). Prior to the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, the experience community was a significant economic contributor to the distribution sector in the UK, demonstrated by the £28.5 million box office that it achieved prior to the pandemic in 2019 (*BFI Statistical Yearbook*, 2020).

Same & Larimo (2012, p9) observe that the experience economy - they use the neologism 'Exponomy' - is of increasing focus in the literature. Although the concept initially gained prominence in the context of business in an article by Pine and Gilmore (1998), it has been applied to retailing (Grewal *et al*. 2009; Verhoef *et al*. 2009), tourism (Leighton 2007), architecture, branding and sports (Brakus *et al*. 2009; Gentile *et al*. 2007) and Petkus (2004) adopted it for entertainment and the arts. Atkinson and Kennedy (2018, p12) refine it further by adopting the term 'the experiential cinema economy', focusing on the organisations or developments in contemporary media that help to comprise it. De Valck (2007, p19) points to the increasing importance of "total experiences" within the experience economy. This range of experiences benefits the consumer by offering wide-ranging choices across several sectors.

Experiential cinema is part of a broader global movement or economy that encompasses immersive theatre, concerts and music festivals, the common denominator of which is the use of technology to enhance the experience of its audience. Nordgaard (2018) argues that technology, or what he terms, digital change has fundamentally reshaped the music industries' value chains, and that the structures of the music industry have been re-organised. Kreuger (2005) sees the expansion of the live music sector in the last 25 years as highlighting a remarkable growth in both the consumer's willingness to pay ticket prices and capacity (increased venue numbers and size). Just like Secret Cinema's productions are 'event cinema' shows experienced by its audiences, concerts and music festivals can be viewed as embodying the same quality as they are 'event shows' experienced by its fans. Embedded in those experiences is liveness.

This concept of 'live' was explored by Harris (2018, p61) in the context of Floating Cinema – a barge moored on the Thames in Brentford showing classic films

– in which she views 'live' as indicating a 'bringing to life' of cinematic viewing practices, through which an attitude of discovery is adopted. Atkinson and Kennedy (2018) observe that the term 'live cinema' originates from those forms of creative practice which are part of a historical lineage of audio visual and artist moving image performance, emerging from the expanded cinema practices of the 1960s, and more latterly, The Pet Shop Boys rendition of *Battleship Potemkin* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1929), and performances of *Battle of Algiers* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966) by the band, Asian Dub Foundation. Wocke (2018) explores the sensory and synaesthetic dimensions of novel cinematic experience design. Both Wocke (2018) and Mathijs and Sexton (2011) cite the example of the cult film *Polyester* (John Waters, 1981) which was screened accompanied by audience interaction with Odorama *Scratch 'n Sniff* cards. The broad range and diversity of live cinema events explored by the literature reflects the demand of contemporary audiences for experiential entertainment. What is often overlooked in these case studies is the entrepreneurship and creativity demonstrated by the distributors (examined in the previous chapter) that is at the essence of these endeavours and the partnerships and networks that are created to entice audiences to these events. The adoption of the experiential as a technique by distributors enables entrepreneurial activity and a key argument of this thesis is to consider its impact. In many contemporary cases, the experiential needs to be supported by partnerships to enhance the offering to consumers. Distributors are often dependent on those partnerships working to attract cinemagoers that would not be reached in a conventional film marketing campaign. Whereas the previous chapter identified the key element of entrepreneurship in the distributor's DNA, this chapter shows how an experiential event requires a combination of entrepreneurial activity and partnerships to be effective.

Wocke (2018) analyses the gastronomic cinema experience of Edible Cinema, a collaboration with Soho House, that experiments with 'eat a longs'. Films screened included *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* (Tom Tykwer, 2006), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Tim Burton, 2005) and *Some Like it Hot* (Billy Wilder, 1959) and was targeted at a sophisticated clientele seeking an alternative and provocative leisure experience. As Wilinsky (2001, p1) points out, this form of entertainment is not unique as there has been a parallel development at what he calls "art film theatres" since at least the 1940s, that has used the provision of more elevated food and drink

choices as a method of distinguishing their events from standard concessions. Machon (2018) notes the premium ticket pricing for the Encino Cinema experience in the experiential theatre production of *The Drowned Man*. This bears the hallmarks of what Chan and Goldthorpe (2005) classify as a stratification system, more customarily used for the higher cultural arts. Once again, entrepreneurship is at the heart of these endeavours and the creation and adoption of a stratification system demonstrates the entrepreneurial skillset of the distributors that is complemented by the establishment of partnerships with the likes of Soho House. These networks are at the core of what make the enterprise attractive to consumers.

Event cinema, sometimes known as alternative content cinema (Barker, 2013), refers to the use of cinemas to screen a range of live and recorded entertainment such as theatre, opera, ballet, music, sport, gaming, and one-off TV specials**.** Dickson (2018), looks at festival events like the screening of *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1928) with live musical accompaniment in Glasgow City Cathedral. Dickson (2018, p100) concludes that "festival programmers find themselves responding to shifts in cultural consumption signalled by the experience economy wherein cinemagoers are becoming more inclined to experience film in event contexts and experiment with unorthodox screening environments". Dickson (2018, p100) is suggesting that in the temporal context of film festivals – and indeed other modes of event-led cinema – there are apparent shifts in spectator practices whereby audiences "live out their cinematic engagements through embodied experiences, consuming films in highly complex and active ways". Dickson (2018, p84) believes that the extraordinary rate at which the number of festivals has increased "signals a growing appetite for the consumption of film in event contexts". These cinematic engagements are not limited to the cinema or event space only. The annual Flatpack Festival often uses alternative content cinema venues in the West Midlands. At this year's festival, they hosted a screening of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (John S Roberston, 2020) with a new live score at Coventry Cathedral and an outdoor themed screening of *Ghostbusters* (Ivan Reitman, 1984) at Dudley Castle and Zoo. The inter-generational popularity of these events from Glasgow to Coventry and London is corroboration for what Dickson (2018) describes as the appetite for the consumption of film in those event contexts.

Atkinson and Kennedy (2018) provide an alternative vision of cinemas as a portable, flexible, performative medium. Redefined as such, cinema consists of multiple ways of enhancing, augmenting, or otherwise transforming films and film screenings into happenings that engage the sensorium and participation of audiences as a definitive aspect of film culture" (2018, pxvi). Given the nature of the enhancements offered to the audience, it might at first appear that the origins of experiential cinema lie in the 21st century, but that is not the case. The origins of experiential cinema are much earlier. There has long been the use of pop-up cinemas at contemporary event spaces and music festivals – even this is not a new practice. Chanan's (1996, p1) study of early cinema viewing practices reveals the antecedents of this medium in fairground showmen building special trailers and tents, with others adapting the music halls. Gunning (1990, p56) describes the era of filmmaking prior to 1906 as a cinema of attractions, an exhibitionist cinema that "directly solicits spectator attention, by inciting a visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle". The early entrepreneurs of that period knew how to attract an audience and it was through a cinema based on shock, spectacle and sensation. In the early years of the 20th century, small halls and disused shops were converted, and the first fixed cinemas appeared. *The Greatest Showman* (Michael Gracey, 2017) sets out how PT Barnum (played by Hugh Jackman) transferred his circus from a traditional theatre to a bigtop tent, which he intended as a temporary measure when his theatre burnt down. Chanan (1976) discusses the myriad of influences on the culture of early cinema, including the diorama, itinerant entertainers and the music hall. He looks at the relationship between photography and film, and analyses the early years of the film business, the developing aesthetics of cinema and the ways in which early cinema was received by its audiences in its first decade and a half.

According to Chanan (1996, p9), the starting point of the history of experiential cinema must therefore be an acknowledgement that cinema before it acquired its own identity "was immersed in a series of histories which conditioned the process of invention". He lists those histories as being the relevant aspects of economics, aesthetics, science and technology, concluding that the prehistory (and, later, history) of cinema is interwoven with them. Chanan (1996, p10) believes that the Magic Lantern, an early type of image projector commonly used for entertainment purposes, is particularly important in the origins of film because it involved

projection. He notes that they first appeared in the seventeenth century, with Samuel Pepys acquiring one in London in 1666, as a development of the *camera obscura*, which artists used as an aid. In the nineteenth century, it evolved into a public form of entertainment when new sources of illumination, such as gas light and later electricity, extended the throw and allowed projection before larger audiences. The common link behind all these examples of experiential entertainment is that the business people behind their adoption - the fairground showmen, storytellers and promoters - are entrepreneurs. They were early adopters of an experiential form of technology that appealed to audiences particularly as it provided what Rossell (2002, p2) calls the first opportunities for projected storytelling and visual entertainment.

This shows that the concept of the experiential is not a contemporary phenomenon, but one that has been in existent for centuries, and one which entrepreneurship and the experiential have been inexorably interwoven. The origins of experiential cinema go as far as the era of magic lantern shows, where viewers were able to experience 'magic'. Event cinema has developed considerably since Pepys (2003, p8) brought home a lantern "to make strange things to appear on a wall, very pretty". Creating and producing experiential experiences for audiences over the centuries could not have happened, evolved, transformed, been re-invented and flourished without three factors:

1) Entrepreneurs seeking and seizing the business opportunities presented. As Chanan (1976, p2) points out, successful fishmongers and butchers in the early 20th century, that were initially using their premises to show films grasped the opportunity by building new cinemas and demonstrated their entrepreneurial nous by becoming full time exhibitors.
2) By the 20th and 21st century, the experiential had been enhanced and augmented by the use of technology. Atkinson & Kennedy (2018, p17) note that the "increasingly pervasive relocation of screen away from the auditorium, and into exterior locations, on the one hand was made possible and 'easy' through new, accessible technologies" such as inflatable screens and directional audio. This led to the increasing frequency of these types of screenings and a diversification in the variety of spaces for screenings;

3) The marketability and monetisation of technology – which includes the experiential aspects brought about by sound, picture and seating - used by create a stratified system of ticket strategies (Chan and Goldthorpe, 2005) and pricing structure that allows them to charge premium prices for added extras and a range of enhancements to the experience. The use of technology not only allows entrepreneurs to boost the box office revenues, but to be an important driving force behind the pre-release consumer marketing strategy. Its appeal is demonstrated by the increase in revenues generated in the event cinema sector in the UK over the last decade.

The literature uses a variety of terms – liveness, experiential and immersive – often in an inter-changeable fashion. Throughout this study I prefer the use of the term 'experiential' to describe those events or screenings that take place in a cinema or a non-theatrical venue. In this context, I define experiential cinema as an event screening of a film in a traditional cinema or non-theatrical space that is enhanced by the audience experiencing the world of the film, or being immersed in it, through a themed set of activations that are triggered by or clearly inspired by the film. In the next section, I explore the relationship between cinema technologies and experience to consider if it provides an opportunity for entrepreneurial distributors to monetise it and attract new audiences to its product.

### 3.2 *The Role of Technology in the Audience Experience*

The film business has long used experiential technology as an advancement to improve the experience of the cinemagoer, often with mixed commercial success. Klinger (2006, p11) writes that the positioning of the smell-a-long may not initially strike one as being "technological driven, but the advancement of this is based on technological innovation". She cites the 2011 and 2014 screenings of my previously discussed example *Polyester* (John Waters, 1981) accompanied by Odorama Scratch 'n Sniff cards which were industrially reproduced for the film's redistribution by the Aroma Company. Just like its earlier introduction in the 1950s, the concept of Smell-o-Vision did not reach critical mass. The lifecycle of the smell-a-long was short. King (2009) discusses 4D cinema and gives the example of the *Terminator 2: 3D* (James Cameron, 1991) experience and Disney's *Honey I Shrunk the Kids* (Rick Moranis, 1986), both experiences involved spraying of liquids into the audience and also vibrating and motion effects built in the seats that were synchronised with the on-screen action. Atkinson (2018) also cites the growing success of the 4DX cinema experience – these are theme park ride-styled cinema experiences that are placed in multiplexes, malls and amusement parks, and the concept is to stimulate the entire sensorium within a cinematic and simulated environment. This is not new, as Atkinson (2014, p88) points out, pre-cursers to these 'novel' experiences include vibrating cinema seats in the 1950s.

The up-ending of film industry norms is similar across each significant technological upheaval in the 20th century. Dixon (2012, p4) observes that "with the rise of television and the decline of the proprietary lure of the theatrical experience, Hollywood fought back with a host of technological advances such as CinemaScope. Panavision. Cinerama, and 3D, all designed to deliver spectacle that could not be enjoyed at home". Dixon (2012) points out that Television had, of course, the advantage of being free. While Dixon does not expressly use the term 'experiential', it is clear that the power-players he describes in the film business – the studios – used every experiential device at their disposal to respond to each technological advancement, and perceived threat, available to the consumer in the home. Each of these innovations – from the advent of sound itself to the adoption of cinema surround sound systems and the creation of state-of-the-art multiplexes – are designed to

improve the experience of the consumer and should be classified as experiential, as well as technological, improvements to the act of cinemagoing. They are so ubiquitous that they have been overlooked by scholars in considering the experiential aspects of cinemagoing, and their role in inducing repeat visits.

This overview of technological change in Hollywood shows that the film business has been a fertile entrepreneurial ecosystem for decades. Henrekson *et al*. (2021, p1) note that while many identifiable entrepreneurs were instrumental in inducing behavioural adjustments and bringing about changes (Zukor, Goldwyn *et al*.), in most cases institutional changes resulted from a Hayekian process that was fuelled by "business entrepreneurs' joint efforts". For some academics, like Klinger (2018), formulations of the industry's epistemology and ontology have been strongly influenced by its indebtedness to technology. She cites "the apparatus of camera, projector, screen and auditorium and the spectatorial position these fundamentals construct" (2018, pxiv) as examples.

For others like Pardo (2013) the history of the film industry from its inception has been closely linked to the history of technological development. Therefore, Pardo (2013, p23) sees that the ways of consuming films are "dramatically changing and the film industry is desperately trying to re-adapt itself to this new scenario". As Atkinson and Kennedy (2016, p19) describe it, the increasingly pervasive relocation of screen away from the auditorium, and interior/exterior locations in event cinema, was made possible and 'easy' through new, accessible technologies. What can be taken from the literature is an acceptance of the crucial role technology has played in the evolution of the exhibition and entertainment business. While the literature focuses on the growth of the entertainment industry and the rise in box office, there is an absence of the discussion of the impact technology has played in enhancing the experience of the audience. Pardo (2013) was writing at a time when 3D technology was at its zenith but its appeal as a device to attract audiences is diminishing, based on the decrease in its box office share in the UK and other key territories in the last decade.

As Pardo (2013) sees it, the extent that websites and other virtual entities respond to the user in real time, they feel live to the user, and this may be the kind of liveness we now value. While Auslander (2012, p205) uses the term 'liveness', VR is an experiential technology. Cleeve (2019, p51) criticises the idea of creating a taxonomy of experiential categories, on the basis that such solutions invariably run

into what he calls a problem of 'infinite regression'—the sheer variety of ways in which our experiences can be neither one thing ('real') nor another ('mediated'; 'virtual') would necessitate the subdivision of those categories until such a point as they became functionally useless. While the adoption of the metaverse is currently in its infancy with respect to the creation and distribution of new film content, it offers a new realm for the experiential to be the focus of critical inquiry in the years ahead and for entrepreneurial distributors to use it as a potentially effective new tool to reach audiences and monetise the experience.

When I started my PhD in 2017, international film festivals like Cannes and Venice had started programming Virtual Reality (VR). It seemed like the frontier of a new exciting chapter in audience experience and motivated me to create a VR trailer for the release of *Marie Curie*, a case study that is set out in Chapter five hereof. Five years on, it is pertinent to consider where VR sits as a technology providing an experience for film audiences and to examine which stage VR and the metaverse is in its evolution as an experience in film distribution. Gomery (2005, p24) identifies a three-tiered approach for what he describes as the 'Theory of Technological Innovation' – the first stage being the 'development of the necessary inventions'; the second and most crucial stage, according to Gomery (2005, pxix), is innovation itself; the third and final one being the diffusion stage which concerns itself with becoming knowledgeable about and deciding among various investment policies available to the distributor. This can also involve a reallocation of resources on the distributor's part.

At the current stage of development in VR, it can be argued that there are no immediate economic benefit or profits available to the film practitioners financing or producing VR content. I would view it as a non-profit making marketing tool for promoting completed artefacts of films. The metaverse, as it relates to film, is also in the innovation stage, being used currently as an innovative marketing tool. As a recent example of the use of the metaverse in film distribution, Escandon[2] (2021) writes that Sony Pictures and the American cinema chain AMC released 86,000 free non-fungible tokens (NFTs) in November 2021, using blockchain technology as an incentive for cinemagoers to pre-book cinema tickets for *Spiderman: No Way Home*

[2] https://www.forbes.com/sites/rosaescandon/2021/11/30/amc-and-sony-plan-spider-man-no-way-home-nft-promotion/

(Jon Watts, 2021). It quickly sold out. Since the NFTs are not exchangeable, there is no profit component to the offer.

In the past decade, only studio movies have added a VR component to the marketing of their films. This is partly due to the high cost of creating VR. Apart from virtual production being used in big-budget Hollywood productions, VR is used primarily to continue the relationship with the film fan and the universe of the film itself. By contrast, Gomery (2005) refers often to the continuous investment by the studios (in the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s) into the development of sound to improve the customer experience. While the current VR works are mainly not being made for profit, it can be argued that it is still in an experimental stage where the products created are mainly for marketing purposes and to get the user (and current generation of cinemagoers) accustomed to the world of VR as part of a broader experience of the metaverse. I would maintain that with respect to VR and film distribution, the third stage of technological innovation has not been entered – *viz.* where distributors are, in the words of Gomery (2005, p56), "deciding among various investment policies" which involves a "reallocation of resources" on their part, to create *"for profit"* new VR product where consumers are charged for the experience. I would contend that only premium content will allow content creators, and distributors to monetise this new media, or as Huhtamo (2011, p1) describes it, to produce "the mappings of the new empire of network economies". These various evolutions and attempts to monetise the experiential are linked by a desire to enhance the consumer experience and demonstrate the entrepreneurial zeal that is at the core of being a distributor. At the current stage of development in Virtual Reality, there does not appear to be immediate economic benefit or profits available to the practitioners financing, producing or distributing VR content: instead it is a non-profit making marketing tool for promoting completed artefacts of films.

In relation to the experience of the audience, the literature indicates that VR technology has not quite developed to its optimum level and that it will take time and further developments to evolve to a standard and quality needed for mass adoption. Burt (2019, p58) notes, in the context of VR, that what is new and radical, if adopted, eventually matures and develops rules, structure and codes. Moody (2017, p49) references the evolution of narrative in the early years of cinema's development by adding that audiences will grow to understand these codes and structures, "in much

the same way as audiences did when first presented with edited cuts in cinema at the turn of the twentieth century". Rome (2019, p34) expresses confidence in the long-term viability of VR by adding that in the same way as there was an evolution of a film language over time, improved technology and "the maturing of VR as an art form will establish a universal language for VR" to which users will adapt. It is clear from the literature that the experiential will be at the heart of the development of this technology, providing an opportunity for entrepreneurial distributors to monetise it and attract new audiences to its product. In the next section, I survey the differing scholarly debates on the concept of the experiential cinema experience and examine the methods used to assess and enhance the experience of the audience. This is necessary because the entrepreneurialism and partnerships involved in creating an experiential event can only be deemed effective if the experience of the audience is enhanced by them. The distributor is dependent on positive audience reaction to the experiential elements, so looking at the literature examining that experience is a way of understanding the factors that induce cinemagoing.

### 3.3 *Cinema as a Shared Experience*

There is an emphasis in the literature on the experience of the audience with little investigation into the motivating factors behind the audience's attendance. Dickson (2018, p83) complains about the frequent disregard for audience opinion when drawing conclusions about their performance in an experiential event. Dickson (2015, p704) states that observations of an event, in the context of a film festival, operate as a stand-in for the voice of the audience. In reviewing the literature on audience reception at film festivals, Vivar (2018, p119) points out that even when the work provides an account of the experiences of the audience, their voices are hardly present. More than immersion in the social setting of the festival, Dickson (2015) calls for the consideration of questionnaires, interviews and qualitative responses when interpreting and approaching the audience's motivations to attend the festival. Chanan (1995, p9) also found this a failing of some of the existing scholarly work, adding that historical research can be carried out too narrowly by failing to consider what it was the audience saw, or "thought they saw, when they first saw a film: in other words, what the subjective experience of seeing films for the first time was like". It is beneficial for distributors to examine the experience of the audience, and their motivation in attending experiential, or participatory events so as to understand their motivations and behaviour.

Jancovich *et al*. (2003, p10) observe that existing research into film exhibition has repeatedly shown that there is, and has always been, more to film consumption than the simple act of watching a film. Klinger (2006, p157) describes "a kind of schizophrenic identity for cinema, derived from its shifting material bases and exhibition contexts". She believes that it exists both as a theatrical medium projected on celluloid and non-theatrically presented in a 'video' format on television. In her view this double identity assumes an immediate aesthetic and comparative experiential value (2006, p157). Distributors are cognisant of this double identity when crafting theatrical and non-theatrical campaigns for their films and often look for customer feedback to alter and enhance the offering for post-theatrical campaigns in downstream ancillary markets. This willingness to alter a campaign is part of a distributor's DNA as it increases the chance of reaching an audience if the box office

revenues were underwhelming. It also displays entrepreneurialism by being open to change course and adaptable in addressing conflicting market forces.

While Wise (2014, p9) identifies the importance of the concept of a shared cinema experience with other audience members, McCulloch and Crisp (2016) challenge the emphasis on the overblown celebration of experiential and participatory cinema experiences. They take the example of the Prince Charles Cinema in London, best known for hosting cinematic events including themed screenings and movie sing-a-longs. When the authors surveyed the audiences, they were surprised by their findings – while respondents clearly saw the cinema as an alternative venue, they largely rejected the appeal of its participatory events in favour of the 'nostalgic' or 'authentic' cinematic experience they considered it to be offering (2018, p154). They found a distinct emphasis on cinephilia, defined less by 'good taste' in films and more by the way in which films should be enjoyed. Even though the term 'experience' is not expressly used, it is clearly a motivating factor in their perception of cinephilia.

'Experiential' and 'immersive' are key terms that recur in the literature, but McCulloch and Crisp (2016, p188) argue that they are potentially "misleading and risk downplaying the importance of more traditional and even seemingly trivial aspects of cinemagoing, all of which contribute significantly to the cinemagoing experience". In their view, the contemporary rise in demand for innovative forms of experience appears to be more about the desire for cinemas to get better at what they have always done historically, not for them to change into something altogether different. For McCulloch and Crisp (2016) a term such as 'experiential' is problematic. It implies a hierarchical relationship between more conventional and event-led cinema, but it also denies the experiential qualities of non-event-led cinemagoing, in which audiences are not inherently less immersed or engaged or, more passive with the film (2018, p166).

Linked to the literature on audience reactions and motivations is an examination of the role of the venue, place or space in the overall experience. Klinger (2006) examines how entertainment media and technologies —from VHS, DVD to cable television and the Internet—shape our encounters with films and affect the ideological, cultural and even aesthetic definitions of cinema. She finds that cinema's powerful social presence cannot be fully grasped without considering its prolific recycling in post-theatrical venues such as the home. Atkinson and Kennedy (2018,

p20) expand on that point by noting that the filmic experience is significantly influenced by context, and the dramatically different ambiance of an outdoor screening has the power to transform the reception of a film. Similarly, Klinger (2006, p19) argues that if the same film were to be shown at a drive-in and specialty theatre, the patterns of consumption typically associated with each venue would influence the audience's behaviours and viewing attitude.

Although they do not expressly refer to the current millennial generation, Atkinson and Kennedy (2018, p23) conclude that for a generation that grew up watching films everywhere but the cinema, the relationship to film is different from that of preceding generations". With the increasing dominance of streaming, the impact of non-theatrical cinema viewing has been one of the significant causative factors in the decline in cinema admissions for specialty films, particularly among the millennial generation, and, to a lesser degree, the older audience. There is a surprising dichotomy between audience reactions and I would argue that it is a fallacy to assume that the individual members of an audience attend an experiential event for the same reasons. It is clear that there are differing motivations. The motivations vary – from social, nostalgia to newness. The more distributors have an understanding of their audience's motivations and expectations, the greater the opportunity to meet and exceed those expectations, and to grow the audience for the targeted film, and ultimately, the whole event cinema sector. In the next section, I set out my conclusions.

## 3.4 *Conclusions*

I have set out that experiential technology is a tool that enables entrepreneurship in film distribution and allows exhibitors and distributors the means to reach consumers and attract them to the cinema. While there are certain elements that are now considered ubiquitous in cinemagoing – comfortable seating, a state-of-the-art sound system and good print and screen quality - the literature shows that the experiential has been adopted by distributors, showmen and promoters going back to the era of the magic lantern. Its existence and prevalence have driven entrepreneurialism through several cycles of the film business over the last 125 years. The literature defines the experiential in different ways and contexts and uses different inter-changeable terms from immersive to liveness in an attempt to interrogate its essence. My preference is for the term 'experiential' and I define it in the context of film distribution as an event screening of a film in a traditional cinema or non-theatrical space that allows the audience to experience the world of the film, or be immersed in it, through a themed set of activations that are triggered by or clearly inspired by the film.

The scholarship reveals that the backbone of the film industry has been built on technological development and continuous innovation. In this context the literature shows that the adoption of new cinema technologies replicates the previous patterns of film distribution and exhibition, in particular, the movement to the era of talkies. Just like the adoption of sound technology led to economic consolidation and the creation of the studio system from the 1930s onwards, the popularity of streaming technology is being used to attract and keep new audiences, but its impact has led to another industrial cycle of consolidation, mergers and acquisitions. Technological change through various evolutions has made the film business a vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem and one that dependent distributors can employ to their advantage. New areas such as the metaverse offer fertile ground for the exploration of non-theatrical exhibition and shifting methods of spectatorship.

Experiential cinema is part of a broader global movement or economy that encompasses immersive theatre, concerts and music festivals, the common denominator of which is the use of what I classify as 'experiential technology' to enhance the experience of its audience. Experiential technologies can be defined as a technology that is an inducement for and can be used to enhance the experience of the

consumer. The distributor as entrepreneur is dependent on these technologies to reach and attract audiences. The literature shows that creating and producing experiential experiences for audiences cannot happen or evolve without three factors, namely: entrepreneurs finding and seizing the business opportunities; technology being used to enhance and augment the customer experience; the marketability and monetisation of technology as a device for entrepreneurial profitability.

Pine and Gilmore (1999, p12) declare that "while commodities are fungible, goods tangible, and services intangible, experiences are memorable". That encapsulates how the intrinsic value of entertainment experiences differs from other commodities, goods and services. The findings of this chapter led me to consider the role of and value of experiential technology in my practice. It was the catalyst behind the creation of an experience for the release of *Marie Curie* in chapter five. Experiential technology can enhance the way a film is experienced and consumed, but ultimately, in chapter seven, relating to *One Way to Moscow*, I explore the implications of cinemagoing *per se* being treated by audiences as an experience in itself, as highlighted by the pandemic. In the next chapter I set out my methodology.

# CHAPTER 4
# RESEARCHING DEPENDENCE IN FILM DISTRIBUTION

This chapter sets out the methodology used for this study. It establishes an approach that is practice-led, a choice of method that draws on my findings from the literature review and makes use of my insider knowledge as a dependent film distributor.-A practice-led enquiry is appropriate as it allows for a first-hand perspective of the film distribution sector and the factors that affect it. It also reveals the techniques involved in the creation of marketing campaigns for specialty films, particularly releases with an experiential component. I have, therefore, adopted a practice-led approach, that incorporates three specific methods, to investigate my work as a dependent distributor. These sub-methods include:

- Auto-ethnography
- Iterative artefact creation and dissemination
- Peer review as a research tool

Figure 4.1 shows the cyclical nature of my practice-led methodology. My auto-ethnographic approach uses self-reflection and an ongoing process of critical evaluation to observe my practice as a distributor across all the stages of my research. The second technique employs an iterative process to examine the distribution sector across three artefacts, allowing me to reflect on the production of each one. Finally, the device of peer review allowed me to gain a better understanding of industry perspectives and to test my own findings. This approach draws on my own practice as an industrial practitioner on three foreign language titles and, specifically, the experiential factors that form a part of their campaigns and an examination of current and developing literature. By doing so, this chapter shows how a practice-led approach can be a productive means to understanding film distribution. Being an industrial practitioner is a privileged position and one that not all researchers can adopt. As I set out at the end of this chapter, the methodology is one that can be applied by the rising number of academic researchers in the creative arts who are also practitioners. The primary question of this investigation interrogates the role of the film distributor by asking:

*What are the entrepreneurial techniques a dependent film distributor can employ to engage audiences?*

From this I have identified three sub-questions that has structured my research:

1) To what extent does the concept of dependence define the practice of film distributors?
2) What role can experiential marketing techniques and transnational partnerships play in enhancing the cinemagoing experience?
3) What entrepreneurial skills does a dependent film distributor need to draw on in their professional practice?


Figure 4.1: A Diagram Showing My Methodological Cycle

The next section demonstrates my investigative path where I unpack the methodology beginning with the tool of auto-ethnography.

## 4.1 *Researching Entrepreneurship in Film Distribution*

I found that few academics focus on the value of actually producing experiential works or use a practice-led approach to investigate specialty film distribution. Instead, there is a focus on historical and textual approaches and ethnographical methodologies. In addition, the experiential cinema body of research tends to concentrate on established brands and mainstream production. Kennedy (2018) examines the Twentieth Century Fox film *28 Day Later* (Danny Boyle, 2004) and Atkinson and Kennedy (2016) explore Secret Cinema's predominantly studio focused catalogue of mainstream experiential productions including *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi* (Richard Marquand, 1983), employing a range of methodological approaches the most significant of which was the use of multiple fellow participants as co-researchers. A practice-led approach allows for the specialty film sector to be more fully explored - not just the nostalgic and "old and well loved film releases" referred to by Atkinson and Kennedy (2016, p143) - leading to contemporary insights that can be used as a spring-board for further research. One prong in this practice-led research is the device of auto-ethnography.

Auto-ethnography is defined by Reed-Danahay (2006, p15) as a form of self-narrative that places the *self* within a social context and takes its origins from the "changing concept of both the self and society in the late twentieth century". According to Adams (2015), it uses the researcher's personal experience to describe and analyse cultural practices, beliefs and experiences. Auto-ethnography played an important role as it draws on my insider, rather than outsider knowledge, and resulted in greater authenticity in my findings. Reed-Danahay (2006, p15) identifies that auto-ethnography has a dual sense, referring either to autobiographical reflections that include ethnographic observations and analysis or the ethnographic study of one's own group.

Anderson (2006) notes that there has been growth in the use of auto-ethnographic research. Coley (2021, p128) suggests that the scope for innovation has added to its popularity, observing that "auto-ethnography enables researchers to experiment within their studies, freeing them from the constraints of more traditional methodologies". Sparkes (2002) sees it as being beneficial as it can enable the researcher to reflect critically on his own field of expertise, while Hills (2002)

suggests auto-ethnographic research has an innate advantage over an ethnographic approach as it allows greater reflexivity. I was able to use an auto-ethnographic methodology in examining and reflecting on the artefacts that I created. I did this by keeping a research diary and notebook for each artefact/case study that recorded my observations throughout its development and creation. Nadin and Cassell (2006, p216) believe that adopting a research diary is a simple and effective way of building reflexive practice into the research process, "creating a record of one's reactions to the research situation, which by its sheer physical existence, affords the issues raised a focus of attention which could otherwise quite easily get lost". In the case of the research diary for my first artefact, the autobiographical reflections contained therein proved instructive in my concluding that further research would be necessary to develop the field by creating a second artefact.

The second and third case studies allowed me to build on the first by creating a more systematic approach to data collection that allowed for a more critical interrogation of the findings. When I reflected on the research diary for the second case study, it allowed me to review the production process and the practices involved and led me to the conclusion that a further case study would be necessary, so the auto-ethnographic methodology became iterative through the diarising of my work. I brought expertise to this research, through my role as a practitioner. DeFilippi and Artur (1994, p291) identify a set of competencies for expert performance that reflect job related knowledge and career relevant skills and networks that are based on specific knowledge – know-why, know-how and know-whom – which the authors believe signal expertise. As a practitioner in the film distribution sphere, I was able to draw on this experience when developing and executing the case studies. Auto-ethnography also played an important role when reviewing the literature that consisted of academics, such as Atkinson (2018), undertaking some practice in distribution to understand it. However, there were some limitations when using this method.

A particular dilemma I faced was critical distance. Auto-ethnography, by its very nature, requires a critical proximity where the researcher treats his professional activity as objective. Reed-Danahay (2006, p15) acknowledges that such an approach can be challenging. To avoid this, my approach was to invite peer review, another aspect of my cyclical methodology, and industry experts to assess my first research

artefact. This proved to be instructive in the development of the *Marie Curie* VR trailer, discussed in the next chapter. The data gained from my approach provided me with empirical evidence that could be interrogated further using the theoretical and methodological framework set out herein. Le Roux (2017) cautions that auto-ethnographers risk their studies being seen as narcissistic, and he calls into question the criteria used to assess quantitative research, such as auto-ethnographies and whether they are appropriate for ensuring academic integrity. In the light of this academic scepticism, I supported my auto-ethnographic observations with a trio of other methods to ensure objectivity and to enable my findings to be carefully applied. This methodological process led to an iterative research cycle that I describe in the next section. Auto-ethnography and an iterative approach are inextricably linked in the three case studies. Being a film distributor requires reflexivity, involving an analysis of each film released and an assessment of what worked and could be done better. That auto-ethnographical and iterative approach cycle in my practice is necessary to ensure the stability of my business, but it is also an appropriate methodology to use to incorporate into my research.

## 4.2 *An Iterative Research Cycle*

Learning in qualitative research, Hunter *et al*. (2002) observe, often occurs iteratively and not through a linear process. Smith and Dean (2009, p8) describe analysing repeated activities within practice-led research as a technique in which research processes or creative practice "are repeated with variation". This reflects the nature of my practice where a film campaign can be adopted first for the UK launch and then reworked and adapted for the later Irish release. Coley (2021, p130) used an iterative methodology for his practice-based research into music radio production because it reflected the profusion of opportunities within his practice "to rework and adapt certain methods and technical procedures". Leavy (2015, p18) builds on that by noting that an iterative approach is often employed by qualitative researchers in the visual arts. It allows them to better accomplish what they already do and draws out the meaning-making process and pushes it to the forefront. This interpretation of iterative research is equally pertinent to the field of film distribution.

At the beginning of my research, I was consumed by being a practitioner and found it difficult to think in the mind-set of an academic researcher. For Hunter *et al*. (2002, p7) the key characteristic required is that the practice is "fundamentally exploratory, involving innovation and risk" in ways that are familiar to researchers in the broader community. These characteristics can also be used to describe the nature of my practice as an entrepreneurial practitioner, as they are the fundamental attributes of a dependent distributor. While my practice-led research suited the nature of my study, it incorporated a number of sub-methods. In pursuing the creation of my first artefact - the premiere of the *Marie Curie* VR trailer – I employed the device of a notebook in which attendees wrote their comments and observations about the event. When I reflected on this, it led me to adopt a methodology that employed an iterative pattern, allowing me to create other artefacts/case studies for review. This facilitated the securing of feedback from attendees, both from industry peers and the audience itself, in an appropriate manner that would help develop existing literature further. For the Irish premiere of *Marie Curie* set out in chapter five and for the second and third case studies and in chapters six and seven, the data collection evolved from the device of a notebook to more structured and targeted questionnaires filled out by a cross-section of the audience.

The use of questionnaire data is a commonly used industrial research device in film distribution, predominantly in the studio sphere, for audience test screenings and exit polls (Marich, 2013, p173). Questionnaires were employed by McCulloch and Crisp (2016) in researching the profile of audiences at the Prince Charles Cinema in London and a post-event on-site audience questionnaire was also used by Atkinson (2018) for an analysis of a production of *Hangmen Rehanged*. De Leeuw (2008) notes that deciding which data collection is best in a certain situation is often complex and depends on many factors, including the population under investigation, topic, types of questions to be asked and available time, thus presenting researchers with a difficult choice, often leading to multiple modes of data collection. I decided that a multiple-choice questionnaire was more suited to the types of audience and venues for the second and third case studies because they are easy and quick to fill out and allow for an instant reaction to the event that does not significantly delay the exit or inconvenience the cinemagoer.

Trotter (2012, p399) writes that a "partially unresolved issue for qualitative sampling is agreement on the ideal sample size" and he goes on to observe that the quantitative approach provides a specific number whereas the qualitative approach produces a process. Boddy (2016) reviews and discusses the sparse literature on sample sizes in qualitative research and notes that qualitative researchers have been criticised for not justifying their sample size decisions. Sim *et al*. (2018) argue that the decision over what constitutes an adequate sample size to meet the aims of a study is one that is a process of ongoing interpretation by the researcher. They see it as a context-dependent and iterative decision made during the analytical process as the researcher begins to develop an increasingly comprehensive picture of the main themes, the relationship between those themes, and where their conceptual boundaries lie. Having looked at the divergent academic views on sampling, I decided that a multiple-choice questionnaire was more suited to the type of audience and venue for the Irish premiere of *Marie Curie* because they are easy and quick to fill out and allow for an instant reaction to the event that does not significantly delay the exit or inconvenience the cinemagoer.

While Harari and Beaty (1990) argue that traditional questionnaire and survey approaches can easily generate superficial or inaccurate data, I was careful to ensure that the questions asked at the screenings for *Wine Calling* and *One Way to Moscow*

covered the research objective (de Leeuw, 2008) of accessing immediate audience feedback. This was to avoid specification errors and to ensure valid answers (Biemer and Lyberg, 2003) and to ensure that it measured the intended theoretical construct (Cronbach and Meehl, 1955) of assessing the impact of the experiential nature of the event. A sample of 20% of the audience was a sufficient percentage to meet my research goals and from which I was able to extrapolate the relevant themes and initial findings – as Emmel (2013, p. 154) points out, "it is not the number of cases that matters, it is what you do with them that counts". The audience questionnaires provided me with an opportunity to test theories and consider new and innovative thinking and approaches to my practice.

The practice-based work of Lindgren and McHugh (2011) each assessed a single artefact, whereas my research reflects on the creation of three case studies over a three-year period. It is this iterative nature that allowed the method to operate as an interlinking methodology rather than an individual set of methods. This iterative approach provided the opportunity to capture my developing practice across a variety of projects. Just like Coley (2021)'s practice-based approach helped in his transition from being an 'instinctual' to a 'reflexive' creator, the methodology that I employed re-positioned me from practitioner to researcher or, perhaps more specifically, to a critically reflective practitioner.

Being a critically reflective practitioner provided the interpretative framework that enabled me to take advantage of more immediate access to data, oversee data collection and to collect it at a much earlier stage in the development, production and distribution process. This critical transition is evidenced particularly in the second and third case studies where the conception and planning of the campaigns were done to ensure that a research component could be incorporated into them and for them to happen concurrently. In the previous chapter I outlined why an entrepreneurial skillset is an imperative for a distributor; it is also a useful skillset to bring to bear as a researcher, especially if it can be harnessed for the purpose of data collection. This 'critically reflective practitioner', or even 'entrepreneur as researcher' methodology leverages the practitioner's commanding role in the production of the artefact and has the advantage of opening it up for academic exploration and investigation from the earliest stage of planning and development through to reception by its intended audience. Traditional research methodologies can be hindered by a lack of access or a

protracted delay in getting access to relevant research. In being the instigator of the research object – the *Marie Curie* VR trailer - I was able to remove such hindrances and obstacles, proving that the practice-led approach was an effective one.

By adopting this methodology, I was able to interrogate the distribution of three European specialty films, the findings for which are set out in the next three chapters. The practice-led approach enabled me to continue researching and create a replacement third findings chapter when the COVID-19 pandemic delayed the completion of the intended final case study *Sparkling: The Story of Champagne* (Frank Mannion, 2021). A practice-led auto-ethnographic and iterative methodology across the three case studies allowed me to harness the existing relationships I had with European State Film organisations to ensure that further research could be conducted by getting feedback from the principals of those agencies. This practice-led approach enabled me to obtain the perspective of the third-party partners involved in the three case studies and to reflect on their contributions. This provided a framework for the evaluation of my observations against contemporary industry conventions and its practitioners, while allowing me to reveal my instinctual practices and to interrogate its production. The cyclical nature of the research focused on the distribution of three specialty films and the use of this methodology provides a deeper understanding of the process of specialty film distribution and broadens the literature on the field. In the next section, I discuss the process of artefact creation and its dissemination.

### 4.3 *Artefact Creation & Dissemination*

Candy and Edmonds (2010) believe that the artefacts that practitioners create are an integral part of practice whether or not there is a formal research process. They observe that for a creative practitioner, the object that is made is usually the main point of the exercise. The value of this method in my research was that the artefacts I created were used by me to enable an exploration into the experiential process and as Candy and Edmonds (2010, p5) describe it "within research, the making process provides opportunities for reflection and evaluation". Artefact creation also provided an opportunity to generate research questions from the exploration that is a normal part of practice. Candy and Edmonds (2010) take a broad view of the meaning of artefact – in their view it could mean an object, such as a table, or it might exist over time, such as a film. I classify the VR trailer that was created for the first case study as an artefact, but the experiential campaigns that were created for the Irish premiere of *Marie Curie*, and the case studies for *Wine Calling* and *One Way to Moscow* could also be classified as artefacts using Candy and Edmonds' interpretation. Therefore, I use the terms 'artefacts' and 'case studies' inter-changeably throughout.

In much of the literature relating to experiential works, an ethnographic approach was taken by theorists including Machon (2018), Wocke (2018) and Kennedy (2018) to examine experiential events involving films and theatre productions. The ethnographic approach has value but lacks the perspective that a practice-led approach allows in investigating the production of the artefact, its output, its role in the film distribution process and any financial aspects of the object of research. I began the iterative process by reflecting on the entrepreneurial creation of my first experiential artefact - the *Marie Curie* VR trailer. I developed it as a device to engage with a foreign language film and how to find new methods of drawing in audiences. I also embarked on its creation to test my own pre-conception that technology such as VR would be instrumental in attracting a younger demographic to specialty films; a common challenge I face as a film distributor. Once I reflected on the process and its dissemination, the value of the method of artefact creation was that it enabled the development of the research from an exploration of technology into the broader parameters of the experiential as a technique in film distribution.

By isolating the key component of the experiential within the production of the three case studies, my iterative research allowed meaning to develop through what Hunter *et al*. (2002, p389) describe as "labelling, identifying, and classifying emerging concepts; interrelating concepts and testing hypotheses; finding patterns; and generating theory". The iterative approach of artefact creation also helped me to alter my focus from the technological to label and identify my work with a nucleus around the experiential. It also allowed me to generate theory around my emerging concept of dependence. Black (1999) believes the validity of iterative research outcomes is dependent on the legitimacy of external, internal, statistical and construct components. I was able to interrogate the artefacts through such a process with data and statistics being provided from audience questionnaires and the external research component being primarily provided by feedback from my industrial collaborators. Coley (2021), when conducting his research as a freelance radio practitioner, observes that the various procedures and processes he employed in his practice required regular evaluation, which allowed him to continually question the rigour of his study.

Like Coley (2021), I continually questioned the rigour of my research, by disseminating my first artefact to industry professionals for their input and using its dissemination and their critical feedback to develop the trailer further. I also had to obtain approval from the Google Play and Gear VR platform to have the final version uploaded for consumer engagement, so the artefact's aesthetic criteria was, as Smith and Dean (2009) describe it "negotiable within the bounds of established cultural conventions" (2009, p159). This reflection led to the creation of the next case study, the June 2019 release of the natural wine themed French feature documentary, *Wine Calling* (Bruno Sauvard, 2018), the marketing campaign for which brought the experiential element to the fore. Once again, I reflected on this process through the familiar cycle of artefact creation (an experiential premiere event in London, and one in Dublin) and its dissemination and peer review. Once I reflected on the first two case studies, I chose as my third case study the experiential marketing campaign for the German language Swiss film, *One Way to Moscow*. The third artefact was developed from the iterative nature of reflection on the creation and dissemination of the first two artefacts. It was not my initial choice, as the COVID-19 pandemic delayed the release of my intended third case study, *Sparkling: The Story of Champagne*. That deprived me of the opportunity to develop themes that emerged

from the second case study (particularly the concept of the producer-distributor) but the release of *One Way to Moscow* functioned as an adequate substitute that permitted the use of the same methodology.

The iterative research process, according to Leavy (2016, p30), requires openness to new ideas and willingness to adapt to new insights. Hesse-Biber (2011) and Leavy (2016) write that all of the aspects of research methodology inform each other and are connected in an iterative process. Throughout my research, I aimed to reach findings where the outcome of the process was, as per Leavy (2016, p31) "an integrated form of knowledge or a hybrid of knowledge that is larger than the sum of the parts that went into creating it". Having considered artefact creation as part of my practice-led approach, I now assess the use of peer review as a research tool. This technique was employed alongside my auto-ethnographical investigations, and was necessary to complement the insights gained from observing my work as a film practitioner. The next aspect of my practice-led approach is peer review.

### 4.4 *Peer Review*

As a practitioner, my daily practice as a distributor can act as *a type of research* (Candy, 2006), but the highly individualised nature of research that comes from practitioner knowledge must be made evident to others. It is in the methods of such practice-led research that sharable outcomes become possible (Candy and Edmonds, 2010, p7). One such method to enable such a sharable outcome is peer review. Bolt (2007, p30) takes this further by distinguishing between practice and "praxical knowledge". Utilising Heidegger (1966) and his interrogation of the particular form of knowledge that arises from our handling of materials and processes, Bolt (2007, p30) believes that there can arise out of creative practice a very specific sort of knowing, "a knowing that arises through handling materials in practice". This is what she defines as "praxical knowledge" (Bolt 2007, p30). I found that a very specific sort of knowing came about from the creation of the first artefact, and this knowledge would only have come about through a practice-led approach to methodology. But this knowledge cannot work in isolation. Therefore, its dissemination through peer review is a critical method to ensure objectivity and to enhance the process of artefact creation and case study development.

Coley's (2021) practice-based approach, as well as his methodology of interviewing practitioners leads him to believe that his mixed-method approach gives the opportunity for the triangulation of his analysis and helps to ensure the validity of his research. I followed the same approach, although I acknowledge that such triangulation allowed for what Gray (2002, p72) calls "differences and contradictions to emerge". Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, p231) believe that triangulation is a practical way to check one set of data sources by collecting data from others. I pursued this mixed-method approach while taking heed of Hammersley (2008, p35), who caution that triangulation is an investigative strategy that offers evidence to inform judgments, not a technique that provides guaranteed completeness or truth.

The documentation, writing and theorisation surrounding the artefact is seen by Smith and Dean (2009, p6) as crucial to its fulfilling all the functions of research. To that end, I kept notes from the research (extracts from which are in the Appendices) generated by my case studies, including feedback from peers during and subsequent to its creation, which directly led to improvements and further

development of the final version of the VR trailer of *Marie Curie*, and the development of the second and third case studies. As Smith and Dean (2009, p14) observe, peer review is only the first stage in a process of evaluation because if the artefact is recorded or documented, then a "re-evaluation can take place later, and matters of public acceptance can play a more significant role". Influenced by this, the reception part of my practice-led methodology, across all three case studies, involved in the first instance, reception by my *peers* in specialty distribution. It also included the reception of the artefact by the *audience* from its exhibition and dissemination (although for the purposes of this research I am not constituting the audience as a peer group).

The process of finding interviewees and setting up interviews, Rapley (2004, p11) points out, is crucial to the outcomes of the research. For my first artefact, the initial research I used to inform the process was predominantly from my email interactions with the creative team and producer of the *Marie Curie* VR trailer. The next stage of research was from the reception of the artefact by the audience. Once guests had viewed the VR trailer, they were asked to write their feedback into a notebook. Mauthner and Doucet (2003) point out that reflexivity may alter as time, detachment and distance from the research process increases, consequently receiving immediate audience feedback was necessary to avoid those distortions. Despite the limited sample of my collection, I was able to draw some data that was used to inform the next cycle of peer review. The comments in the notebook were important, indicating that the highlight for the audience was the experiential nature of the event, rather than the VR technology. The device of the notebook proved useful, highlighting the need for better notarisation, and provided the catalyst to think about how my peers could respond to my work, and how I could be more strategic and structured in my approach to peer review. Smith and Dean (2009, p8) describe repeated activities within practice-led research as a methodology in which research processes or creative practice are repeated with variation. This reflects the opportunity within my practice to rework, rethink, and restructure and adapt certain methods by using peer review, and provides further evidence of my iterative approach.

By pursuing the method of practice-led research, I utilised my existing relationships with industry peers and the close availability of the audience as a research tool. In addition, I also requested peer review from the national institutions

that co-funded the first artefact – namely, Unifrance, German Films and the Goethe Institut. This gave my research a transnational perspective that is uncommon in the literature in the field, as well as an insider industry viewpoint that advances the academic literature on the subject. The transnational element ensured that the focus of the research was not just from a parochial UK perspective. It opened the research to those transnational collaborators who were actually co-funding the case studies (and inadvertently the research). Their perspective as financiers gave a valuable vantage point – their initial involvement was to ensure that their funds were well spent from a professional practice point of view, but their intervention was constructive as it validated the research that stemmed from my case studies. For the second case study relating to *Wine Calling*, I developed the peer review methodology further by focusing on a sample set of industry peers and a sample set of the audience. As a practitioner, I used my privileged access to my peer group of industry executives and distributors, to secure some instructive feedback, the data from which I was able to build on in my third artefact, all using a methodological iterative approach. The limitations of this perspective was the potential of a hidden agenda from rival distributors. If my approach and data had been so constructive and transferrable, it could have presented my competitors with an unfair advantage by inviting attention to it earlier than they would otherwise have known about it. This could have enabled them to copy my methodology for their own campaigns. In reality that did not happen and I was grateful for their feedback.

### 4.5 *Ethical Considerations*

Hammersley and Traianou (2012), Raune (2005) and Walliman (2011) note that all social research involves ethical issues, but the importance and character of such data varies. Yeschke (2003) identifies the lack of a universally accepted definition of ethics, or clear objectives, or consensus on appropriate behaviour when dealing with the subject. My experience differed from that as there is a clear frame of reference contained in the Guidelines relating to Birmingham City University's Ethical Principles & Practice Policy and Research Ethical Framework.[3] I sought peer review for all three case studies. I followed the Research Ethical Framework insofar as it applied to my research. "The dignity, rights, safety and well-being of participants" (2010, p2) in my interactions were my "primary consideration". All participants were told the purpose and that it would be used as part of my research, and their involvement was entirely voluntary, thus ensuring that informed consent was at the heart of my research.

Prior to the launch of the *Marie Curie* VR trailer, I ensured that I owned the necessary intellectual property rights to become the rights-holder for the trailer in the UK and Irish territory, thus ensuring there was no ethical or chain of titles issues with the dissemination of the VR trailer. At the UK premiere of *Marie Curie* where the VR trailer was launched, guests and peers were encouraged to write down their views and comments about the trailer. Prior to doing that, they were verbally informed by the VR production assistant that it was for the purpose of research, and anything they said or wrote might be quoted and used in my research. At the Irish premiere of *Marie Curie* and for the second and third case studies, the audience were informed that questionnaires were being distributed for the purposes of research and their completion was voluntary. With respect to my usage of questionnaires I ensured that the size of sample was not larger than justifiably necessary, and as per the BCU guidelines (2010, p2) all lines of enquiry were "pertinent" and did not "cause undue distress". Participants were "made fully aware of the true nature and purpose of the study" in accordance with the BCU Framework (2010, p3). I am confident that my research complies with the university's ethical guidelines.

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[3] https://bcuassets.blob.core.windows.net/docs/BCU-%20Research_Ethical_Framework.23.11.10.pdf

One of the challenges of being a researcher employing a peer review and practice-led methodology is the risk of unveiling or revealing commercially sensitive data into the public domain, in particularly private discussions with exhibitors. This is an area that straddles the boundaries of research ethics and industry propriety. Picturehouse, Curzon and Everyman are part of conglomerates and in the case of Picturehouse and Everyman, part of publicly traded companies, Cineworld Group PLC and Everyman Media Group PLC respectively. When I completed the first draft of the third findings chapter relating to *One Way to Moscow* in early 2021, I was concerned that my research would reveal commercially sensitive information about Curzon's new programming policy that was implemented as a response to the pandemic. While this information was borne directly from practitioner research, I was concerned that unveiling it was inappropriate for consumption in a research thesis. Although Kingsbury (2015, p37) maintains that "university researchers do not generally have a culture of maintaining secrecy and protecting research findings as confidential information or trade secrets", I have found that the research practitioner's unique position means having to find the right balance between protecting crucial business relationships without compromising necessary research. This poses ethical issues, not necessarily covered by the BCU ethical and research guidelines. One and a half years on from my initial practitioner (and programming) discussions with Curzon, their combined theatrical/streaming model is now an accepted part of Curzon's programming policy. An external examination of Curzon's exhibition and streaming programming would reveal this, and therefore the policy can no longer be considered commercially sensitive or involve any ethical issue.

My dual status as a practitioner-researcher also had its limitations and proved to be, in one instance, an unexpected hindrance. I found that exhibitors, in particular, were reluctant to go on the record about sensitive industry debates such as dynamic pricing, four-walling by streaming services, subsidy usage and data about the demographic breakdown of its audiences and users. This disinclination was fuelled by a concern that the information would not be used solely for research purposes. They feared that the data could hand their rivals (as well as distributors such as myself) a competitive advantage. For that reason, I believe that a researcher, as opposed to an active practitioner-researcher, will not encounter such hesitancy or resistance, as the purity of the academic status will ensure that there is no blurring of the lines between

practice and scholarship, between industry data being used for research only and commercially sensitive and confidential data falling into the hands of rivals and distributors such as myself. The only challenge for a pure researcher will be securing the initial access to industry practitioners. Even without such access, there is a wealth of publicly available information that can be the source of valuable research, such as the amount of subsidy awarded to exhibitors and distributors by State Film organisations.

In earlier drafts of the findings chapters, I had quotes from industry peers, predominantly working in the exhibition and State funded sectors. As a result of corporate policy, some of these quotes had to be anonymised or removed, in the light of only certain company directors being authorised to speak on the company behalf, even for scholarly or research matters. One of the challenges, across all three case studies, of being a film distributor and researcher is the frequent tensions between my commercial need to protect confidential information and data (particularly relating to film revenues and corporate and contractual negotiations) and the academic requirement for transparency as well as intellectual and statistical rigour. By setting fixed research goals at the outset of each case study and frequently consulting with my transnational partners and stakeholders, I was able to find a balance and manage these positional tensions in a way that allowed research to be conducted ethically and responsibly. In the next section, I set out my final observations on my methodological approach.

## 4.6 *Conclusions*

This chapter examined how a practice-led methodology can be constructively applied to and used as a potential model to research the dependent film distribution sector, particularly, the study of the entrepreneurial traits of film distributors. This approach employed an auto-ethnographic investigation, iterative research, and peer review with industry practitioners as the method of collecting requisite data. These techniques provided the framework for the investigation of my role as a dependent distributor, and was chosen to address the research question presented at the start of this chapter. It was also as a response to the limitations of past investigations in this field that lack the perspective that a practice-led approach allows in investigating the process of the production of an artefact, its output and its role in the film distribution process. In the same way that Coley (2021) argues that a first-hand perspective is needed to fully understand the freelance practices of radio production, my research in the-specialty film distribution sector also benefited from providing a first-hand perspective. That perspective was a privileged one that carries ethical burdens of ensuring that sensitive commercial data and information is protected and not compromised.

I concluded that this field is mainly viewed from a theoretical perspective, which overlooks the commercial and financial considerations of creating content in the realm of film distribution. This chapter also sought to address the various strengths and limitations associated with the methodologies employed in practice-led research. While there are perceived drawbacks in this form of research (a danger of a lack of critical distance), using auto-ethnography, an iterative process, combined with peer review allowed me to be more objective, thus avoiding the narcissism envisaged by Le Roux (2017). The cyclical nature of the process of the creation of and assessment of the case studies, provided me with an opportunity to test theories and consider new and innovative thinking and approaches to my practice. The iterative nature of the method allowed it to function as an interlinking methodology rather than an individual set of methods.

The second and third case studies, and the methodologies that I have used, expand on the literature to show that experiential marketing techniques can be employed on specialty film releases and not just on, what Atkinson and Kennedy (2016, p143) call, “nostalgia” and “old and well loved film releases”. Using the

methodological techniques outlined here, I explored how experiential marketing techniques have an important role to play in the viability of specialty releases in the UK. Smith and Dean (2006) observe that research-led practice and practice-led research are creating not only new forms of creative work and research, but also a noteworthy body of knowledge about the creative process which will feed back into the work of future practitioners. The foundation of my research was the interrogation of my practice as a distributor through case studies in the distribution sphere. This was by necessity a cyclical process. Hunter *et al*. (2002) observes that learning in qualitative research often occurs iteratively and not through a linear process. The cyclical nature of the process of the creation of and assessment of the three case studies, provided me with an opportunity to test theories and consider new and innovative thinking and approach to my practice. The methodology that I have chosen reflects the challenges of researching this area in the capacity of a theorist. I proposed a solution to this problem by offering a practice-led approach in which creativity and innovation can be produced, studied and reviewed in an industrial context. I examined examples of past practice-led and practice based experiential studies, such as Atkinson (2018).

In my case, the practice is central to my core work as a distributor. The value of an auto-ethnography was that it allowed me to be innovative in my approach to my research and the methods that I used to interrogate it through my practice-led case studies. It also allowed for self-reflection and a continuing critical evaluation process across the three case studies, particularly by the use of a research diary. Being a researcher-practitioner put me in an advantageous position as it allowed me greater and immediate access to research data. I was able to control, to some degree, the direction of my studies as I was creating research from my own practice. It also permitted me to continue practice-led research during the COVID-19 pandemic, when cinemas briefly re-opened in-between lockdowns in December 2020. This practice-led approach might at first seem specific to being a film distributor, and a privileged position that is not easily replicable. In fact, my practice-led methodology and its cyclical nature, provide a clear pathway for other creative arts researchers-practitioners to follow. The increasing number of academics with a film or television background, many of whom are still practising and generating artefacts that are researchable, ensures that this is a framework that can be followed by future

practitioners-researchers. In the next chapter, I discuss how my research, and my approach to it, has contributed to knowledge in the field by demonstrating that an experiential experience has the potential to be a powerful draw for audiences.

## CHAPTER 5
## *MARIE CURIE: THE COURAGE OF KNOWLEDGE*
## AN EXPERIMENT IN VIRTUAL REALITY

The following three chapters present the findings of my practice-led investigation, by interrogating the release of the European Trilogy over a 3-year period. The previous literature review chapter explored the debates in the literature about the importance and impact of the experiential on the film distribution sector and how its adoption fuels entrepreneurship among film distributors. This chapter investigates those themes by examining the launch of a VR trailer for *Marie Curie*. I make the finding that it was the experiential aspects, not the technological side, that was the effective component of the release. The next case study, *Wine Calling*, set out in chapter six, reflects on its release strategy in the UK and Ireland and concludes that partnership-led produced experiential events, not technological-led VR solutions, are the most effective way to attract filmgoers to foreign language film releases. Chapter seven sets out a third case study examining the experiential marketing campaign for the Swiss spy themed film, *One Way to Moscow* to show the entrepreneurship distributors need to display when confronting disruptions in the economy.

This chapter examines those themes of dependence and entrepreneurship by presenting the findings of my practice-led research into the theatrical release of *Marie Curie*. In the first section, I examine the launch of a VR trailer for *Marie Curie* at its UK premiere as a technological device to attract a new audience for the film. I make the preliminary finding that the most efficacious aspect of the event was the experiential not the technological side. In the second half of the chapter, I use a further artefact – the launch of the film at an experiential premiere in Ireland – as a way to consolidate my initial findings. This necessitated moving the scope of my research from the technological to a more experiential approach to the marketing.

It links to the literature review by addressing the themes of dependence, entrepreneurship and the experiential in the execution of the film's marketing campaign in the UK and Ireland. This structure allows me to demonstrate how the process of creating an experiential event encourages entrepreneurship. It also shows how dependence underpins distribution. I was dependent on the expertise of a specialist VR producer to create the VR trailer, dependent on State Film organisations to finance the trailer, and dependent on transnational and local partners to fund and

sponsor the premiere event. All stages of the release required entrepreneurialism to bring on board the financing and partners on whom I was dependent to attract the end user, the audience. In doing so, I use auto-ethnographical and iterative methodology that enables me to distil from my research that it was the experiential, not the technological elements, that was the main catalyst to attract the audience. My conclusions draw from a range of research material, including statements from the various partners involved in the creation of the artefacts, and encompasses a mix of academic and practitioner perspectives. An examination of both artefacts is structured through an exploration of the impact of technology, partnerships, exhibition and market awareness in the process. In the next section, I look at the emergence of Virtual Reality in the specialty film distribution sector.

## 5.1 *Emergence of Virtual Reality in the Film Sector*

Effective marketing is the lifeblood for a dependent distributor as it is the primary tool to gain awareness for a film and to persuade cinemagoers to buy a ticket. Reiss (2010, p76), for instance, believes that in the marketing of specialty films "you are trying to engage with your audience and get them to support you financially". Mingant *et al*. (2015) point out that although to the general audience film marketing is mostly visible through trailers and posters, film marketers' attempts to reach their target is a much wider-ranging activity. More than mere 'sales techniques', film marketing is, according to Creton (2014, p162), about "gathering the information and intelligence necessary to elaborate a production and commercialisation strategy". In practice this is demonstrated by a film release taking a minimum of 3 to 4 months preparation time. Furthermore, research from Liu (2006) and Moul (2007) shows that people base their expectations of a film on word of mouth, critical reviews and awareness of parties involved in the production, such as actors or director (Moul (2007; Simonton (2009). In the marketing of films, the trailer is still considered the paramount device for enticing audiences to see the film. Kernan (2004, p3) describes trailers as a form of "window shopping" and a "free sample", and McDonald (2019) sees them as condensing attractions and promises for the viewer.

Because of their importance as 'window shopping', when I am negotiating to acquire a new film, I insist on assessing the quality of the existing trailer provided by the sales agent, as it will often prove to be the fundamental building block around which a campaign will be built. Kerrigan (2009, p10) describes trailers as "probably the most important, effective and cost-efficient way of marketing a new film". In my experience, it costs at least £5000 to create a new trailer for a UK campaign. Consequently, it is preferable and more cost-efficient to use the existing trailer created by the sales agent. At this stage in the film value chain, distributors are dependent on sales agents to provide key assets such as a usable trailer and poster that sell the key messaging of the film effectively. For those reasons, I prefer to work with experienced sales agents that understand the importance of marketing and the necessity of creating and supplying high quality key assets. The better the existing marketing materials, the greater the probability the sales agent will close distribution deals for the film.

I find that distributors often negotiate free access to the sales agent's pre-existing trailer as part of the distribution deal terms. Mingant Tirtaine and Augros (2015, p11) use the term "operational marketing" to describe the form of marketing that occurs at the distribution stage and comprises the creation of the communications material (poster, title, teasers and trailers). In fact, as a practitioner, I have found that operational marketing starts even earlier, beginning at the sales stage when the sales agent creates the trailer that forms the basis of many marketing campaigns for specialty films in the UK and Ireland. In advance of closing a UK territory deal, distributors generally re-assure themselves that the sales agent's trailer will, in their judgment, work for attracting the target audience. If not, funds will need to be allocated to pay the costs of creating a new trailer for the UK campaign. In the next section I describe the process of creating a campaign for the release of *Marie Curie*.

## 5.2 *The Film Marketing Process*

As outlined in the introduction to this dissertation, I have found the last ten years to be a challenging time in the UK, particularly for distributors such as myself that specialise in specialty films. In this time, admissions and box office for such films in the UK have declined. According to the *BFI Statistical Yearbook* (2017, p11), 874 films were released into the UK market in 2017 – an average of nearly 17 per week – generating total admissions of 170.6 million. Of that total, the top 50 generated more than three-quarters (76.6%) of the entire year's box office, leaving 824 specialty films contributing to less than a quarter of the box office total (2017, p11). The Film Distributors Association chief executive Mark Batey (2018) summarised it as the "high-risk, brutally unforgiving business of releasing films in the heavily supplied UK theatrical marketplace".[4] It is brutally unforgiving because the consumer has a broad choice of an average of 14 new films each week (hence 'heavily supplied'), with cinema-owners culling new titles after only 3 days if they fail to perform on its opening weekend (Reiss, 2011). This ruthless culling can have the impact of ensuring that a distributor fails to recoup its marketing costs from a short theatrical release.

Swipe Films has the financial and workload capacity to handle the release of on average four films across all media including cinemas each year, and the decline in box office directly and adversely affects my business. To stay competitive, it is important to be aware of new industry developments and to be reactive to changes in consumer behaviour and trends. The main European forum for the launch of new films is the Berlin, Cannes and Venice Film Festivals which I attend each year to find and acquire new films to ensure a constant pipeline of releases and to keep abreast of new technological advances and changes. De Valck (2014, p41) believes that film festivals "are important sites for the consecration of art films" and that prestigious competitions, like the ones in Cannes, Venice, and Berlin, bring cultural recognition to their participants and prize-winners.

Like many distributors, I view a film that wins a prize at these festivals as a potential acquisition target, although Baumann (2001), De Valck (2007) and Elsaesser (2005) consider such festival selection as being more valuable than its commercial potential. Having been a regular attendee at film festivals for almost 30 years,

[4] https://www.screendaily.com/news/icon-film-distribution-sold-to-kaleidoscope/5127277.article

Baumann, De Valck and Elsaesser's evaluation is too narrow, particularly as the various stakeholders in the selected films view their participation as a showcase to exploit their commercial potential and conclude sales, while film festivals like Venice, Berlin and Cannes programme their editions with a mix of titles, many of which are selected with an eye to both critical and commercial success. Ruling and Pederson (2010, p320) point out that film festivals like Cannes, Venice and Berlin host markets for co-production deals and distribution rights and play an important market-making role in allowing industry professionals (including distributors) to network and develop a sense of the latest developments in formats, technology and aesthetics and to judge audience reaction and press coverage as indicators for trends and reception. This overview by Ruling and Pederson provides an accurate account as to why I attend these film festivals on an annual basis. In September 2017, I visited a new international section created at the Venice Film Festival (*La Biennale di Cinema*) called Venice Virtual Reality. There were 22 Virtual Reality feature films in competition. Writing around the same time as my visit, Van Kerrebroeck *et al*. (2017) is of the belief that VR provides a gateway for marketers to innovatively reach consumers and it was apparent from my trip to the Venice Film Festival that virtual reality was indeed a new technology being embraced by filmmakers and being employed as a marketing tool that could be used to enhance the experience of cinemagoers. I was keen to explore it further in my professional practice as a marketing tool that might impact positively on the box office for my forthcoming releases.

Swipe Films' next release was the transnational film, *Marie Curie,* a Polish/German/French co-production for which I had acquired the UK distribution rights at the European Film Market, part of the Berlin Film Festival. The film follows the ground-breaking Nobel Prize winning Polish scientist in the lab and in her personal life as she battles the male-dominated establishment, while dealing with the death of her husband, and embarking on an affair with a married colleague. It was a powerful film with a strong female lead and I viewed it as a film that could be marketable as a moving and ultimately tragic true story about a dynamic and world-renowned scientist. Since the film had a scientific focus – a famous double Nobel Prize winning scientist – I believed that a young scientific minded audience could be attracted to see it. This demographic was important because, according to the BFI

Statistical Yearbook (2017, p5) "15-24-year-olds remain the largest segment of the cinemagoing audience and outweigh those aged 55 or over by a factor of almost 3 to 1". Eastman *et al*. (1985) state that exposure to a film trailer produces increased expectations of the amount of certain content in a film, so if a trailer like *Marie Curie* highlights the scientific aspects, the film should fulfil that expectation.

According to Hixson (2006) it is extremely important for a film trailer to reach the widest possible audience, but in my experience specialty film trailers need to be more targeted and appeal to the widest possible audience with an interest in both specialty films and the subject-matter of the film itself. Inspired by my work trip to Venice and with the need to broaden the appeal of the film as much as possible, as well as to attract a young audience, I decided to make a VR trailer the cornerstone of my marketing campaign and the subject of my first artefact. The announcement was news-worthy enough that it merited an article in the trade magazine, Variety.[5] I wanted to investigate if a younger audience would be more likely to view the film if an innovative marketing tool such as a VR trailer, was created. If successful, the box office takings of the film would increase, and the investment would pay off. As a researcher, I was keen to use the process of releasing the film, and the technological and experiential aspects of the campaign as a means to provide some valuable and necessary research for my thesis. Given my 13 years of experience in releasing specialty films, I have found that audiences, particularly the younger demographic, often respond well to innovation and new technologies. In 2017 there was a growing sense that VR had the possibility to open up a new frontier in film distribution (Van Kerrebroeck *et al*., 2017) and I wanted to find a way of being at the forefront of that, and to explore the potentially new markets that it might reveal. Being innovative comes with a price-tag, and an entrepreneurial mindset would be involved in securing the third-party funding to minimise the risk and cost of funding such an endeavour. I knew that creating a VR trailer would be a challenge and that I would be dependent on my networks to bring in appropriate partners. I was confident that I would be able to raise the necessary financing, because I could use the success of *Carne y Arena* (Alejandro G. Inarritu, 2017), the critically acclaimed seven-minute VR film that I had seen at the Cannes Film Festival in May 2017 to demonstrate to financiers the appeal of VR and how it could be used to market a film.

[5] https://variety.com/2017/film/news/swipe-films-acquires-marie-curie-film-1202581435/

Simonton (2009, p411) highlights in the context of trailers that actors are very influential on cinemagoers as they have a proven track record that allows consumers to form pre-determined expectations of their acting ability as their "previous bodies of work are a good indication of what you can expect from them in a movie". Instead of casting a famous French movie star that would have made the marketing of the film easier, the director cast a new Polish lead actress, Karolina Gruzska, who was completely unknown in the UK and did not have a proven track record. Moul (2007) and Simonton (2009) also note the importance of having a director with a commercial pedigree but Marie Noelle, the director of *Marie Curie,* was little known in the UK, as her two previous films had not been released here. Elberse and Anand (2007) and Joshi and Hanssens (2009) make the point that other key marketing factors for audiences include posters and viral marketing campaigns, and in the case of foreign films, the country of origin of the film (d'Astous *et al*. (2007), box-office performance and award nominations and wins (Simonton, 2009) but *Marie Curie* had not been a blockbuster in Poland, nor had it won any awards at a major international film festival which, in my experience, is a draw for foreign film aficionados in the UK. This literature demonstrates just how dependent distributors are on market forces – the prominence of the cast and director are key factors in attracting an audience, as is the awards pedigree of the film. Their absence, as was the case with *Marie Curie*, puts the distributor at a considerable disadvantage that will require entrepreneurialism and an inventive marketing campaign to correct.

Despite these marketing challenges, I was confident that the *Marie Curie* film, with an innovative VR-led marketing campaign, could be made to appeal to a younger audience. From my past experience in releasing such foreign language films as *The President* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 2015), *Water & Sugar: The Carlo Di Palma Story* (Fariborz Kamkari, 2017) and *Sette Giorni* (Rolando Colla, 2017), I knew it would be tough to get a young audience to pay money to see a subtitled film. In the next section of this chapter, I look at the creation of the *Marie Curie* artefact through the following prisms of technology, exhibition, marketplace awareness and the power of partnerships to show its development, creation, reception and impact. In the next section I describe the process of the creation of the VR trailer and examine the impact of the technology on the film's campaign.

### 5.3 *The Value of Technology in creating a VR-Led Marketing Campaign*

To create the VR trailer, I engaged an award-winning German VR production company, Miriquidi Films, run by the producer, Michael Geidel. I met Geidel at the Cannes Film Festival in May 2017 where he was an exhibitor at the Cannes Marche du Film's NEXT VR programme. At the start of the development process, I had a grand vision for the VR trailer and intended that it would be available as a VR app for iOS, Android and Oculus, that it would include a cinema screen and 5 short film scenes/trailer; a themed room looking much like the lab in the film (as long as appropriate images were provided); interactive movable glass bulbs similar to the lab in the film that would trigger specific clips on the screen when moved. To achieve that, I agreed a four-figure fee for the developer Miriquidi Films to co-develop and co-produce the app with me and to perform basic maintenance for six months after the release of app, as well as hosting it under Miriquidi's publisher-contract in VR stores.

I sent Miriquidi all available stills from *Marie Curie* and a short 'making of' behind the scenes documentary. Although some foreign language films are acquired by distributors at the pre-production stage (Finney, 2022), I had only come on board as the UK distributor of *Marie Curie* after it had been completed. Unfortunately, the available stills and images limited what we could achieve – firstly, all the stills featured various members of the cast and crew visibly in shot. To be usable in a VR process, clean shots are needed of the sets and locations themselves. This is one of the frustrations of being a distributor – acquiring a film after it has been completed often means being a hostage to the quality (or lack thereof) of the marketing materials created by the sales agent and production company. Standards vary considerably. In this case, the producers of *Marie Curie* never envisaged a VR application for the film, so no suitable marketing materials were created. The struggles that I faced taught me that VR needs to be integrated into the film from the beginning, otherwise the VR producer's vision will be quickly compromised by a lack of assets, a situation that will negatively impact the quality of the final VR product. My experience proves that VR-related marketing needs to be integrated at the pre-production stage of the film, rather than the later distribution stage, or operational marketing stage envisaged by Mingant *et al*. (2015). It also demonstrates the dependence of the distributor on third parties – at this stage of the marketing process, I was dependent on the sales agent and

the producer supplying the base materials needed for the VR trailer. When it transpired that those materials were not available, I was left in an invidious position. I became even more dependent on the expertise of the German VR producer, in trying to find a creative solution to the problem, while also trying to ensure that the VR trailer would have the production values it needed to be appealing. It shows the perilous position a distributor occupies in a film's value chain. Boarding a film after it has been completed means a distributor is completely at the mercy of the sales agent for usable assets needed to market the film. Without those being available, the distributor will be even more dependent on its own resources and networks, marketing prowess and entrepreneurial nous to create an appealing marketing campaign.

As the creation of a VR trailer was going to be an expensive experiment, costing £25,000, I sought to secure third party investment. Given the absence of suitable funding in the UK, I looked to secure transnational sources of funding. Berry and Farquhar (2006, p15) believe that transnational scholarly discussion "should be extended to include the cinemas of other nations, including Western nations". This case study allowed me the opportunity to develop the importance of the transnational components of *Marie Curie* and how they were crucial to its eventual release in the UK and Ireland. Transnational cinematic flow, according to Berry and Pang (2008, p6) is not a spontaneous force of nature, but produced and shaped by various economic, social and cultural forces. The Polish Film Institute is one such economic and cultural force offering a subsidy to distributors for the foreign release of Polish films. I applied to the Polish Film Institute (PFI) for a grant. They seemed to be an obvious partner as they were the principal financier of the film.

The VR experience would emphasise that this is a Polish film about a Polish scientist and would be released in and around the 150th anniversary of her birth. Even though Johnston (1991, p5) believes that "anniversaries serve the purposes of commerce, scholarship and government equally", I failed to make that case effectively and the Polish Film Institute (PFI) turned down the application. This was a significant set-back to my plans to create the VR trailer. My new plan involved a drastic reduction in budget to reflect the smaller budgets available in other European subsidy schemes. This would inevitably lead to a reduction in production values of the VR trailer and dilute its scope. I applied to the two other State Film organisations that had been involved in the development of *Marie Curie* – Unifrance and German

Films - albeit with an application for a scaled-down VR trailer and a lower cost to reflect the parameters of their smaller funding budgets. They agreed to step in and co-fund the development and creation of the VR trailer.

During the process of creating the VR trailer, I found it to be an isolating experience. The reasons for this were the limitations of the VR technology and the constraints of what is achievable in camera on a limited budget. De La Pena *et al*. (2010) believe that the rise of virtual reality has led to the assertion that it is an empathy generator, while Gillespie (2019, p145) explores the broader politics of empathy and authorial control from a visual technology that purports to allow audiences a more objective 'see for yourself' style experience. It was extremely difficult to build in elements of empathy into the VR trailer, so I attempted to give the viewer a 'see for yourself' look at the world of film itself. I tried different iterations, but the existing production pictures from the film could not be made easily into a 360° laboratory. My German partner, Michael Geidel at Miriquidi, suggested selecting a different looking lab, but this would have contradicted the actual set of the lab used in the film and it was important to attempt to have continuity between the look and feel of the film itself and the trailer. In addition, we would have needed to find a 360° view from a lab that was suitable and did not work against our own 3D models with phials. With much more time and funding we might have been able to build such a view in VR. Reluctantly given our time and budgetary pressures, I accepted Miriquidi's compromise of the focus of the trailer becoming Marie Curie's bright science lecture room.

We developed the trailer app further so that the new version transported viewers into the lecture hall of Marie Curie, tweaking a pre-existing model that Miriquidi had built for another production – this was the most cost-effective way of building the VR trailer given our budget and time limitations. From a hardware perspective, the production process at that time in 2017 was slow and frustrating because a Virtual Reality headset requires an extremely high-definition display, and a vast range of motion sensors in the headset are needed to transfer all of this information to a console or PC so that it will react appropriately to the viewer's direction, and it is expensive for the consumer to access it. My initial vision to have an original and inventive VR trailer had now been compromised by budget

limitations. This new beta version still felt flat and sterile and the app could only be downloaded on Android smartphones, excluding those using an iPhone.

From watching the 22 features at the Venice Film Festival and developing the various cuts of the VR trailer app, I believed that if a physical component could be built into the VR, then it has a more visceral impact on the viewer. Elsaesser (2014, p302) writes that VR, when set up in opposition to the experience of cinema is "a fantasy of tactile, haptic, body-based sensations, rather than its virtual realisation". Influenced by Elsaesser's thinking, I came up with a strategy to add an immersive and physical dimension to the *Marie Curie* VR trailer app. I knew this would present an opportunity to attempt something different to launch the marketing campaign for the VR elements of *Marie Curie*. My frustration with mobile VR, was the limitations of integrating the physical into the experience – when watching VR, the viewer cannot hold an object, such as a phial or a Bunsen burner, without a controller. A viewer at that time would therefore need to have a high-powered PC and a professional standard VR headset to be able to integrate objects and have an in-built physical experience. Therefore, many users at home watching on Google Cardboard would not be able to enjoy the full VR experience that we were building.

My original vision for the VR trailer was to ensure that the narrative of the film was woven interactively and seamlessly into the technology of the trailer. Elsaesser (2014, p295) examines what he considers to be two oxymorons, 'virtual reality' and 'interactive narrative' and suggests that one way to overcome their seemingly contradictory status is to view them as transitional terms (like 'wireless' was for radio). In the creation of my first artefact for this study, I believe that I failed - for budgetary, creative and technological reasons - to effectively convey the story of *Marie Curie* (its 'interactive narrative') in the VR trailer and it was only through introducing an experiential element into the evening that I was able to successfully combine VR with the interactive narrative needed to make a pop-up event enjoyable for the audience. Elsaesser (2014) had incredible foresight to view VR as a potentially 'transitional term', as Meta is attempting to reinvent VR by integrating it into the broader terminology of the 'metaverse' with what Kraus *et al*. (2022) describe as promises that the metaverse will provide a new experience for users and customers in terms of work, communication and entertainment. Over four years on from this first case study, I would still maintain the VR is not a tool that will be used by specialist

distributors to attract audiences, primarily because of the same cost, technological and logistical reasons.

In a later section on marketplace awareness, I discuss the audience feedback to the VR trailer and how the positive feedback at the premiere exceeded my expectations. As a researcher, I was still developing a research methodology, and coming to terms with academic methods of data collection. I was still only employing the methods I traditionally used to do audience research as a distributor. Van Kerrebroeck *et al*. (2017, p177) believes that the sense of vividness that VR creates for the viewer in turn elicits a positive which stimulates the consumer's purchase intentions, "thus highlighting the strategic potential of Virtual Reality for marketing communications". What I found was the opposite – a disappointingly low percentage of those who viewed the VR trailer were inspired to buy a cinema ticket, a situation about which I write in greater detail in the marketplace awareness section of this chapter. Cleeve (2019, p180) writes about the assumption that "we simply do not fully understand the unique affordance of the medium, that we do not yet have a proper understanding of best practice for producing experiences in VR", but he does not consider the technical difficulties inherent in the medium at this stage of its evolution. While the technology of VR is advancing and evolving, it is still quite limited and limiting – part of this is a lack of awareness and knowledge among producers and directors about the assets and imagery that need to be made during the production itself to facilitate the creation of VR material. I have demonstrated that such a dearth of available production images and material hindered the development of the VR trailer.

Block (2001) notes, albeit from a management as opposed to a film perspective, that creativity can often work best when set within a framework of constraints. I succeeded in being creative at the premiere party at the Polish Hearth Club, by adding the experiential elements of the science laboratory, guests being fitted with a lab coat, as a professor performed explosive experiments. This overcame the limitations of the technology and created a memorable experience for the audience. When the *Marie Curie* VR trailer is viewed without the ambience of a science lab setting, it felt flat, sterile, uneventful, and anti-climactic. Prior to the UK premiere event, while I was developing the VR trailer, the feedback I had received from viewers of the trailer, was unenthusiastic. That changed completely with the

themed environment and spectacle surrounding the VR trailer at the London premiere. The creation of the VR trailer and the production of the premiere demonstrate the immense amount of enterprise involved in creating a launch event.

As a distributor, I had to manage the technological, financial, logistical and creative aspects of the event and the campaign itself, as well as ensuring that the transnational partners funding the trailer and the launch itself, were happy with the end result. I was dependent on these partners to make the launch happen, and they were dependent on my entrepreneurialism to execute it properly. For the launch itself, I was dependent on transnational partners - Unifrance and German Films - for the trailer funding and Miriquidi Film to set up and demonstrate the trailer; I was dependent on the Polish Hearth Club to provide the event staffing and catering, and dependent on the UK French Film Festival, Polish Cultural Institute and Cine Lumiere to promote it and attract an audience. It was only through this broad coalition of partners that the experiential element emerged as the most significant and appealing part of the evening. Without that combination of entrepreneurialism and dependence on partnerships, I would not have discovered the power of the experiential.

When I reflected on the evening and examined the feedback in my notebook (and from my industry peers), what I actually created with the London premiere and party was in keeping with the wider experiential cinema movement, a growing segment of the film distribution sector. Atkinson (2016) defines the experiential as an event that creates a curated experience for the audience. The *Marie Curie* pop-up premiere event at the Polish Hearth Club fits that description. While Pett (2021) says that experiential cinema is deep-rooted in unlocking a sense of nostalgia, my vision of the VR app was not to appeal to a sense of nostalgia, rather to create a pop-up environment where the audience had a vivid sense of seeing something new and innovative. The positive reception to the marketing of the *Marie Curie* VR trailer pointed to the experiential aspect of the premiere being the most successful part of the event, not the technological innovation of the VR trailer. The experiential cinema movement, exemplified by the phenomenon of Secret Cinema, showed that there was a market for experiential events and that distributors should consider adopting the experiential factor into its campaigns as a possible income generation technique. From my experience in creating a trailer app for *Marie Curie*, it should be classified

as part of that much bigger experiential movement. By showcasing the *Marie Curie* VR trailer in the real-world physical environment of Marie Curie's workplace and having spectacular chemistry experiments happening simultaneously, I created an experiential event for the viewer, that could not be reproduced at home.

Experiential marketing techniques have a role to play in the viability of specialty releases in the UK. This is further evidenced by Secret Cinema holding, what I would describe, as 'participatory' preview screenings in London of the South Korean film, *The Handmaiden* (Park Chan-Wook, 2016). Screendaily.com (2017) reported that tickets were £30 each, and 5,500 were sold across 6 screenings.[6] In keeping with the spirit of the film, the audience came dressed in black tie and evening gowns and were not allowed to speak, with communication being done through writing notes on pads. Those screenings alone, according to Screendaily.com (*ibid*), contributed to almost a third of the total box office of the film in the UK. So far in its nascent development, VR has been used in the production of Hollywood blockbusters but also as a marketing tool to build awareness of a film among its target demographic. As the success of Secret Cinema has demonstrated in the UK, audience participation is a key component of its success, and the experiential is fundamental to that. VR has the power to enhance that experience by transporting the viewer into the world of the film, but the cost and the limitations of the technology currently count against it. Distributors looking to integrate VR into their film marketing campaigns would ideally need to be involved at the film's pre-production stage to ensure that the necessary assets are created and available. The success of the *Marie Curie* premiere event has shown that there is an opportunity for UK distributors to seek out non–traditional, or non-theatrical, venues for their slate of films, so that audiences can 'experience' those films. In the next section I examine the role of the exhibitors in the distribution of *Marie Curie*.

[6] https://www.screendaily.com/news/secret-cinema-founder-talks-the-handmaiden-tie-up-future-plans/5116955.article

I chose November 7, 2017, as the date of the premiere of the film. This was deliberate, as it was the actual 150th anniversary of Marie Curie's birth, an appropriate historic date. Johnston (1991, p4) points out that the phenomenon of cultural anniversaries is "one of the major features of our time" and "dictate timing across the whole gamut of cultural production". He notes that a significant figure or event is likely to inspire one or more documentary films, and in the UK "almost any celebrand is guaranteed discussion on television and radio, as well as in the daily press". In distribution, anniversaries are often used as a promotional technique (Coley 2021) and cinema programmers adopt anniversaries as a suitable release date for biopics and re-releases of classic films such as the 50th anniversary of *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) in 2022. *Creation* (Jon Amiel, 2009) was released to tie-in with the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin while *Rodin* (Jacques Doillon, 2017) opened to coincide with the centenary of Auguste Rodin's death.

For specialty releases in the UK, distributors are dependent on the support of at least one of the three main chains - Curzon, Picturehouse and Everyman - particularly at their London sites. Those chains turned down *Marie Curie* as their programming selection was already full in and around the 150th anniversary. This was a significant blow, but I did not want to wait any later as I believed the anniversary was the optimum release period. Instead, I brought on board the Cine Lumiere – the leading exhibitor in London specialising in French cinema based in South Kensington in London, as the main exhibition partner for the film. I also partnered with the long-established French Film Festival UK for their 25th edition. *Marie Curie* had its UK premiere at the Cine Lumiere as part of the film festival programme in the presence of the director, Marie Noelle.

*Marie Curie* had a successful run in UK cinemas. My initial box office estimate for the film was £12,500 – this figure was arrived at on the basis of my distribution knowledge of the UK market, and by assessing the marketability of a foreign language title with a little-known director, an unknown female lead and a lack of awards. In the end, the film ran for more than four months in over twenty independently-owned cinemas, grossing over £21,000, an almost 60% increase on my

initial target. By comparison, Gant[7] (2017) notes that the well-received French thriller, *Scribe* (Thomas Kruithof, 2017) featuring French star, Francois Cluzet, opened to £9,768 four months previously and the Cannes Film Festival International Critics Week selected French film, *In Bed With Victoria* (Justine Triet, 2017) to £4,008 three months previously.

The UK release provides a case study in the importance of relationships with exhibitors, not just the main nationwide circuits, but also the regional network of cinemas. Curzon, Picturehouse and Everyman are the largest chains playing specialty films, particularly foreign language films. All three chains turned down the film, so I had to rely on my network of individual cinema-owners to programme *Marie Curie*. This network of cinema contacts had been built up over the previous 13 years as a theatrical distributor. My relationship with those owners and programmers enabled the film to be shown in cinemas across the UK for a period of four months. The release is a paradigmatic example of the dependence of distributors on their relationships with the gatekeepers of the audience - the cinema-owners. Without their backing, a film will never reach an audience. The release also shows how entrepreneurship is a key element for an effective campaign. Being turned down by the three main cinema circuits would normally be a devastating blow to a distributor, but a combination of resilience and the ability to call upon existing networks and relationships with cinemas allowed for bookings to be secured and a theatrical release to go ahead. The next section examines the launch of the VR trailer in order to show the impact it had on marketplace awareness, an important factor in a film campaign as it helps drive ticket sales.

[7] https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2017/jul/25/uk-box-office-dunkirk-summer-blockbusters-despicable-me-3

5.5 *The Necessity of Marketplace Awareness*

With 14 films being released on average each week, the UK is a congested theatrical marketplace. Building marketplace awareness is key to the success of the film so choosing the appropriate release date, or dating a film is paramount. I approached the Polish Embassy with a proposal to host the premiere party on the 150th anniversary of Madame Curie's birth. The Polish Ambassador agreed to host the premiere and after-party at the Polish Hearth Club in South Kensington in London. The aim of partnering with the Polish Embassy and the Polish Hearth Club was two-fold - to increase the awareness of the film among Polish expats in London with the hope of increasing the box office, as well as to save costs by having both Polish partners providing the funding for the premiere party. We created a *Marie Curie* themed event at the Club, turning one of the rooms into *Marie Curie's* laboratory. There were Bunsen burners, and beakers with chemicals of many different colours. The VR producer, Michael Geidel, flew over from Munich to ensure that there were no technical issues and to present the VR trailer to guests. On arrival at the 'laboratory' the viewer had to put on and wear a white lab coat before putting on the VR headset. A scientist performed flamboyant experiments using liquid nitrogen and other dangerous chemicals. I wanted the guests to experience the world of Madame Curie. This was an appropriate environment to launch the VR trailer. For many guests, this was their first experience of VR. The £2500 total cost of the venue hire, staffing, food and beverages was covered by the Polish Hearth Club and the Polish Cultural Institute in exchange for branding on the premiere invitation and free tickets. Securing this partnership and funding involved entrepreneurialism.

It was only when I reflected afterwards, that I realised that I had produced a pop-up event that had vaudevillian attributes (particularly with the scientist performing flamboyant experiments with "his continual practice of appealing to an audience and holding its attention" (Gebhardt 2017, p5). But instead of the on and off-stage entertainment happening simultaneously, the party took place after the premiere and was inspired by the subject-matter of the film itself. In re-creating Marie Curie's lab in a pop-up venue, I followed a long tradition of what Harris (2016) describes as aspects of early and pre-cinematic spectatorship where many early venues were dressed to copy the internal geographies of the films shown, or what

Hansen (1991, p93) calls a "perceptual continuum" between the worlds on and off screen. Giving the *Marie Curie* pop-up a scientific theme is reminiscent of the example Gunning (1986) cites of nineteenth century screenings of *Hale's Tours*, which featured shots taken from moving trains which were staged in an imitation train-carriage with conductors collecting tickets. Harris (2016, p3) views the way the leading experiential experience company, Secret Cinema, combines film exhibition with other forms of entertainment as an example of Secret Cinema's tendency for 'immersive' experiences within pop-up cinema, where "film worlds are expanded into 'real' space, offering haptic encounters with dramatised urban settings". The pop-up event at the Polish Hearth Club had similarities to these haptic encounters by combining vaudevillian elements (the scientist's spectacular show) with the immersive (the viewer wearing a lab coat while watching the VR trailer).

The trailer app was made globally available to download for free on Facebook's Oculus Store and Google Play Store. To encourage people to download the trailer, I did a cross-promotional deal with the Science Museum in London. Everyone who downloaded the app had the chance to win two tickets to see the *VR Space Descent* with the British astronaut, Tim Peake, at the Science Museum. The film opened just after Marie Curie's 150th anniversary on November 24 playing in cinemas across the country ending its run the following year in Chichester in April 2018. Its longevity at cinemas in the UK exceeded my expectations and projections. Michel and Willing (2020, p2) see collaborations as "the art of partnership and the creation of something new" and my collaboration with the Science Museum had the aim of creating something new by attempting to introduce the film to a new demographic. If done successfully, such collaborations can add appeal to the box office by utilising the reputation of the Science Museum as a means to recommend the film to its subscribers. I had no pre-existing relationship with the Science Museum. Setting up this promotion took entrepreneurial initiative as I was relying solely on my unsolicited pitch and the narrative of the *Marie Curie* film to appeal to the Science Museum's marketing team and sell the mutual benefits of cross-promoting it and its scientific elements. It also showed how dependent I was on a third party to reach a scientific segment of the population. Without the Science Museum's involvement, I would have needed to fund an expensive social media campaign to reach that demographic. It also displays how dependence spurs

entrepreneurialism. To avoid taking on the financial risk of an expensive social media campaign, I demonstrated entrepreneurialism to persuade the Science Museum to cross-promote the film and make their network of subscribers available.

After reflecting on the UK premiere, I was able to break down the evening into three component parts. Firstly, the technology did not work in attracting audiences. Secondly, the experiential aspects of the premiere event were successful and thirdly, that the film itself was well received and educational. The feedback from my peers was instructive. Writing in a notebook provided at the event for guests who viewed the VR trailer, Marlena Lukasiak, the Head of Film Programming at the Polish Cultural Institute felt that it was a "wonderful experience. Marie Curie in the 21st century. I am sure she would be delighted to see what can be done nowadays".[8] The director Marie Noelle was complimentary about the experience. One veteran British film distributor, David Wilkinson of Guerilla Films, described the experience in a Facebook post: "Swipe Films showed me a virtual reality trailer that they had commissioned to promote the film, which is without a doubt, the best trailer presentation I have ever seen. It is the way of the future. The only problem is that unless you have a VR headset and a laser pointer how are all of you going to see this wonderful innovation? But why let practicality get in the way of a revolutionary concept. The industry will adapt".[9] This industry recognition of the accomplishment of the artefact is an encapsulation of the problems that VR creators face in enabling widespread adoption by consumers, and in turn, the challenge that film distributors must confront if VR marketing techniques are to enter the mainstream.

What was clear from my conversations with guests was that the sense of occasion, dressing up as a scientist in a lab coat and the *milieu* around the viewing of the VR trailer had actually increased the viewer's enjoyment of the VR trailer itself. There was a sense of pleasure of having discovered something new. Overall, I was very surprised by the positive reception of the VR trailer. Examining the feedback from the guests made me question if a VR marketing tool in itself was a strong enough motivator to entice cinemagoers to pay to see the film. It felt that it was the whole experience (including the scientist performing experiments), as opposed to the actual technology of VR, that contributed the most to the success of the event. I was

[8] Marlena Lukasiak, notebook, November 7, 2017

[9] David Wilkinson, Facebook post, November 8, 2017

beginning to see the correlation between the Oscar winning VR short film *Carne y Arena* (Alejandro G. Inarritu, 2017), and the VR trailer – both introduced experiential factors into the artefact that enhanced the physical experience for the viewer while camouflaging the limitations of the technology itself.

The VR trailer was downloaded 290 times in the course of the release. We had 174 entries to the Science Museum competition, meaning that 60% of those viewing the VR trailer made an effort to win tickets to the *VR Space Descent with Tim Peake*. Mark Cutmore, Head of Commercial Experiences, Science Museum Group commented in an email to me following the event: "I was very happy with the number of competition entries. Audiences love the feel of viewing *Space Descent VR with Tim Peake* at the Science Museum which is why it is still running".[10] This 60% conversion rate is a significant audience engagement, but the overall number viewing the VR trailer was lower than I anticipated. While the Science Museum was happy with the contribution the film had made to the awareness of their VR exhibit, my minimum target was to reach 1000 views of the VR trailer. The average cinema ticket price in the UK in 2017 was £7.49 (£6.24 when VAT is removed). If we take a conversion rate of 10% (ie a tenth of all the viewers of the VR trailer went on to become paying customers of the film), it would lead to a total net box office haul of just over £181.

Even if one optimistically assumed that all 174 competition entrants paid to see the film, that would only add an extra £1086 to the box office (all 290 viewers of the VR trailer paying to see the film would have added only £1809.60 to the gross). In a later section on technology in this chapter I set out in detail the process involved in developing and creating the VR trailer and the reasons why the original budget was reduced from £25,000 to £3000. Given that the final VR trailer cost £3000 to produce, a return of £1086 was disappointing (a return of 36% on the investment). The fact that the VR trailer was viewed only 290 times in the course of the release demonstrates that the demand was not there. With these findings, it did not make financial sense to produce VR trailers for future Swipe Films releases. The lack of the appeal of the trailer was disappointing and this was compounded by how much time was spent creating and developing the campaign for the film. It took a great deal of entrepreneurship to set up and create the trailer, involving transnational partnerships

[10] Mark Cutmore, email, December 4, 2017

with Miriquidi Films and German Films in Germany and Unifrance in France, all of whom I was dependent on for their expertise and funding. A 36% return on investment was a poor result to show for all that entrepreneurship. The aim of the VR trailer was to introduce the film to a scientific demographic, using it as what Kernan (2004) calls window shopping to encourage the viewer to buy tickets to the film. The VR trailer failed to achieve that and it was a loss-making venture. I viewed the creation of the VR trailer as a failed experiment in building marketplace awareness among a scientific-minded demographic – it proved not to be the catalyst needed to convert the viewers of the VR trailer into cinemagoers in sufficient numbers. While it illustrated the importance of partnerships and the need to be entrepreneurial, it also highlighted that the distributor as entrepreneur must be a controlled risk taker. Provided it finds a way to minimise its financial exposure, an expensive flop such as the VR trailer will still permit some valuable audience research. In this case, it allowed me to pivot from the technological to the experiential and not to remain stuck in a technological *cul-de-sac*. The next section explores the partnerships that I engaged on the film and their impact on the campaign.

### 5.6 *The Power of Partnerships*

When planning a campaign for a film, distributors often bring on board third parties as a way of reducing the marketing costs and mitigating the expenses involved in the creation of the materials (Marich 2010). In the previous section, I described how the partnership with the Science Museum was a cross-promotion aimed at building marketplace awareness for the film among a young and scientific minded target demographic. Earlier in this chapter, I pointed out that the Polish Film Institute turned down my application for a grant. This demonstrates the value of existing networks and the need for distributors to develop new networks. I had no previous dealings with the PFI, nor had I any prior relationship with the Polish producer of the film who refused to help me with the Polish-language application, as he had no financial incentive to do so. Being an outsider with no prior track record with the PFI counted against me. Nor did I have a PFI executive championing the application internally. To overcome this roadblock would require entrepreneurial skills and the formulation of a new strategy where I could depend on existing networks to secure the requisite funding. Instead, my main partners for the creation of the VR trailer were German Films, Unifrance and the German VR production company Miriquidi Films.

When I reflected on the campaign, I concluded that a significant driver for the release was the role of transnational networks. I had previously released several French language films that had availed of subsidies from French government agencies – Unifrance and CNC. Having an existing relationship with these French agencies allowed me to secure the financing I needed to produce the VR trailer. Without their significant contribution, I would have personally needed to bear the cost and risk of funding the trailer. This would have been a financial disaster as the VR trailer failed to engage audiences and contributed little to the box office. Fortunately, due to the cost of the trailer being borne by the French and German State Film organisations, I was not personally out of pocket. This demonstrates the necessity to develop and build strong and embedded transnational networks, especially when attempting to secure access to third party distribution funds that are otherwise beyond the financial wherewithal of the distributor. Building networks inevitably involves entrepreneurship as State Film organisations need to be convinced of the distributor's credentials (usually based on its track record) before awarding subsidies. The high

cost of releasing a film in the UK combined with the uncertainty of its success leads to an environment where the distributor is dependent on its networks, State Film organisations and entrepreneurial ability to defray or subsidise its release costs and ensure that a release has a chance of being profitable.

When I reflected on the event itself, for any future iteration, data needed to be collected in a fashion that would allow for better post-event analysis. The limitations of the data collection at the *Marie Curie* UK premiere were reflective of where I was in my research studies. Schon (2017, pii) asserts that practitioners have the ability to reflect meaningfully on their "intuitive knowing in the midst of action and sometimes use this capacity to cope with the unique, uncertain, and conflicted situations of practice". I started my research studies two months earlier, at a stage where I was an instinctual researcher as opposed to the reflexive researcher that I needed to become. The limitations of the research were primarily because I did not create a systematic structure of collecting data that would allow me to analyse the audience reaction. The use of the notebook was instructive to get immediate feedback from the viewers of the VR trailer but it did not enable a rigorous interrogation of the technology versus experiential factors in its reception. A multiple-choice questionnaire would have allowed me to ascertain which of the various activities at the event was the audience highlight. Instead, I retrospectively interviewed the guests and my event partners, some of whom were contacted with a significant time gap. Despite these limitations, I drew the following conclusions.

The experiential elements of the premiere event, not the novelty of the VR trailer, was the main factor behind the overall success of the evening, This was borne out by Charlotte Saluard, the Head Programmer at the Cine Lumiere (the venue for the *Marie Curie* premiere and a key partner for the release), who observed in an email to me after the event, that: "I believe that the success of the event was because it was an experience. It was clear to me that the guests enjoyed the trailer because it was part of the overall experience of the evening".[11] Even though the key international film festivals such as Cannes, Venice, Berlin and Toronto continue to have VR Sections, this has not translated into film distributors in the UK or elsewhere utilising VR in their marketing or promotional activities. None of the cinemas that programmed *Marie Curie* wished to re-create the science lab setting for the VR trailer. Instead, the

[11] Charlotte Saluard, email, December 6, 2017

exhibitors preferred to continue with a traditional linear release pattern for the film. Even David Wilkinson of the distributor, Guerilla Films, who hailed the VR trailer 'as the future' never developed VR into their marketing.

While I recognised failings within my instinctual period as a researcher, I still gained substantial theoretical and practical experience to take forward into my next, more reflexive case study. I was able to interview retrospectively my partners and the key figures involved in the development and reception of the VR trailer, and my research was assessed from an active auto-ethnographic perspective, making my reflections more rigorous. The on-going and iterative nature of my practice added to my insights into audience demands, while interventions from industry figures provided the chance to test my observations against the views of other practitioners, thereby increasing my understanding of the subject. The next section of my findings reveals how this newfound knowledge was put to use, as a reflexive practitioner and researcher, while creating the practice-led study for the Irish premiere of *Marie Curie*.

### 5.7 *The Redux Event – The Marie Curie Irish Premiere*

To develop my research further, I created another experiential event. This was for two reasons – firstly, to put to the test my theory about the significance of the experiential element and to revisit it as a researcher given the limitations of the first event as a piece of research. Once again, I would need to bring in partners to shoulder the burden of the significant cost in hosting such an event. The best forum to do this would be through a premiere of *Marie Curie* in Ireland. The film had only been released in the UK, but Swipe also held all distribution rights to the film in the territory of Ireland. Since it celebrates the life of a great female scientist, I chose the occasion of the International Day for Women's Rights on March 6, 2020 as an opportune date for the Irish premiere of the film. It is an iterative usage of an anniversary as a promotional device (Coley, 2021) and another example of how an event or anniversary can "dictate timing" in the cultural sector (Johnston 1991, p4). To host the premiere of the film, Swipe Films partnered with the French Embassy in Ireland, Trinity College Dublin (School of Physics), the German Embassy and the Goethe Institute.

I put the event together in less than a month, with the French and German Government agencies co-funding its entire cost. The marketing plan was to premiere the film in Dublin on March 6, and then release the film exclusively at the Irish Film Institute, the main art-house cinema complex in Dublin, one week later on Friday March 13. To take advantage of the publicity and positive word of mouth generated by the premiere, the film would also be available simultaneously on VOD platforms such as Amazon Prime, Apple and Google, as part of a day-and-date release strategy. It was important for my research that the event was set up as being experiential. While the UK premiere focused on the new technology of the VR trailer and how it could be harnessed to entice audiences to a foreign language film, the Irish premiere focused on the experiential aspects.

The experiential setting was established in two ways. Firstly, instead of hosting the premiere in a traditional cinema, the screening took place in an old atmospheric wood panelled lecture theatre named after the Nobel Prize winning physicist, Dr Erwin Schrodinger who had delivered an influential series of public lectures there. It was also the theatre where the Irish Professor, Ernest Walton,

lectured for over 30 years. Walton helped to usher in the nuclear age with his colleague John Cockcroft, by splitting the atom in the early 1930s, for which they jointly won the Nobel Prize for Physics. Harris (2016, p11) notes the importance of 'site' in Secret Cinema's screenings and I carefully chose the Schrodinger Theatre as an appropriate site for the premiere, and one that harked back to the day of pre-cinematic spectatorship where many early venues were dressed to mimic the "internal geographies" of the films shown. At the premiere event, the sense of experiencing the world of the film was apparent from walking into the School of Physics Building – Walton's Nobel Prize Medal for Physics and Citation were hanging on the wall in the entrance, and there were portraits of distinguished physicists, including Schrodinger and Walton, on the walls. The old wooden benches in the Schrodinger Theatre gave the sense of antiquity that recreated the impression that we were back in the pre- and post-war era when the distinguished scientists Schrodinger and Walton lectured in this building, or even earlier to the early twentieth century to the time of Marie Curie.

The wine reception afterwards was held across the hall in the Fitzgerald Library, named after the Irish physicist and Trinity Professor George Fitzgerald whose Lorenz-Fitzgerald Contraction, became an integral part of Einstein's special theory of evolution. Fitzgerald also has the distinction of having a crater named after him on the far side of the moon. The Library was filled with cabinets and bookcases containing artefacts used by these famous physicists in their research work, including some of the improvised parts that Walton used for his nuclear accelerator in 1932. The technology aspect was also a part of the event. The audience had the opportunity to view the VR trailer in the Lecture Theatre after the screening of the film finished. In the end most of the audience chose instead to enjoy themselves at the drinks reception afterwards or to go home. The method of data collection was a set of questionnaires filled out by a sample set of 20% of the audience and interviews conducted with the various university and Embassy partners.

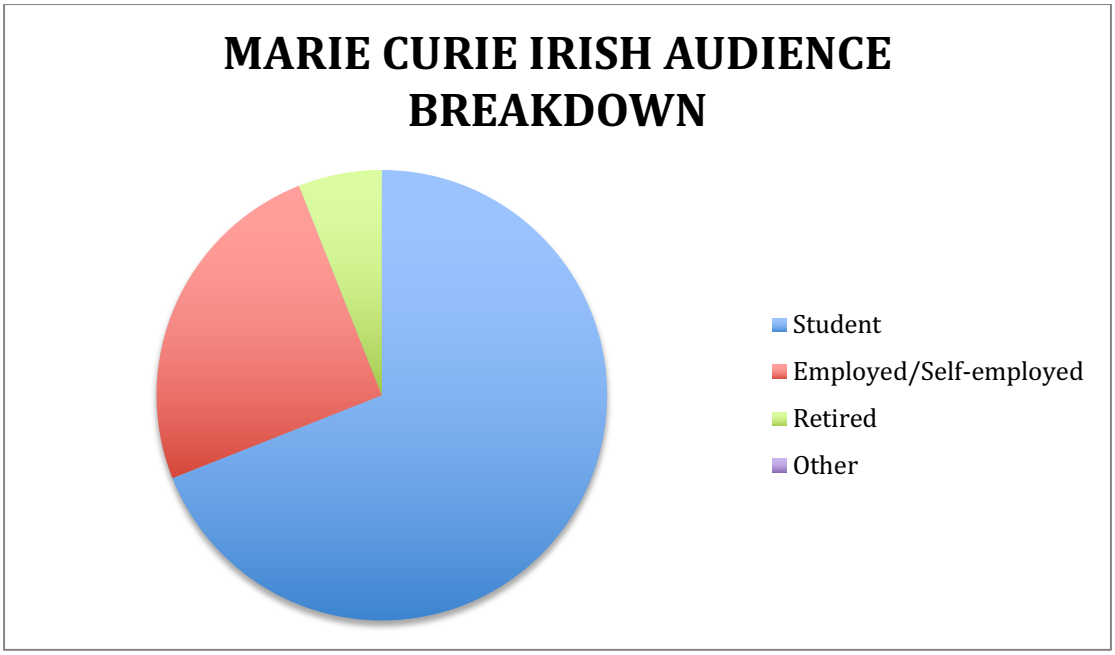


Figure 5.1 Pie Chart showing the breakdown of the audience at the *Marie Curie* Irish premiere

A sample of 20% of the audience filled out a questionnaire (in Appendix B). Figure 5.1 shows the breakdown of the audience – almost 70% were full time students, a quarter were either employed or self-employed, and the remainder were retired.

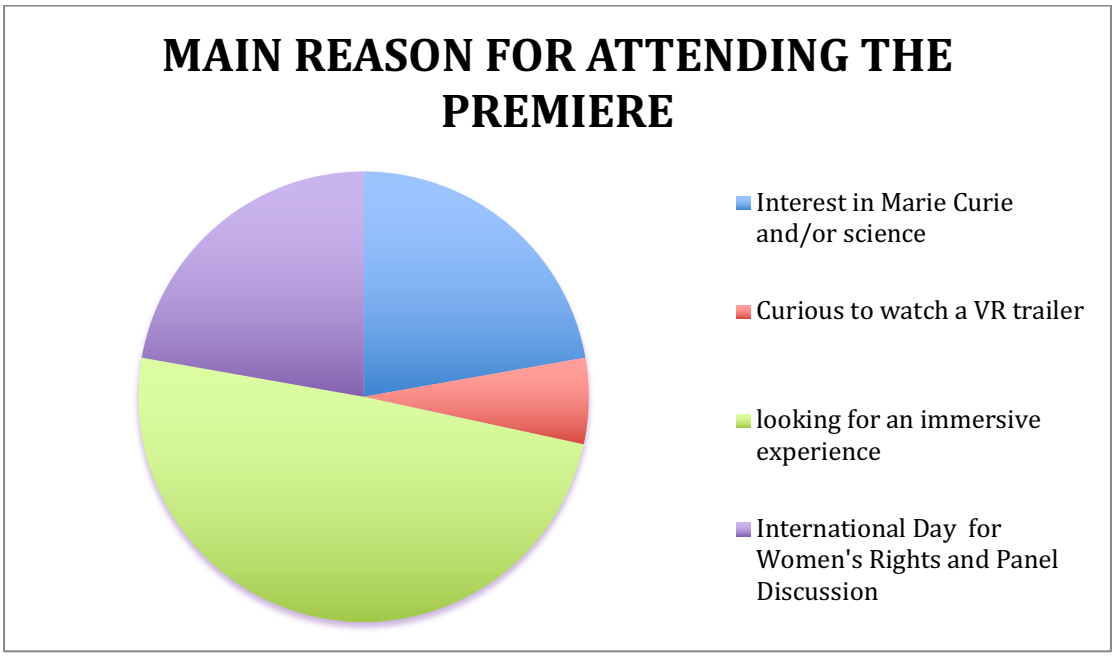


Figure 5.2 Pie Chart showing the reasons for the audience attending the premiere

As shown in Figure 5.2, 50% cited the main reason for attending as an opportunity for an experience, 22.5% mentioned International Day for Women's Rights and the Panel discussion, while a similar number cited an interest in Marie Curie or science, with only 6.25% being curious to watch a VR trailer.

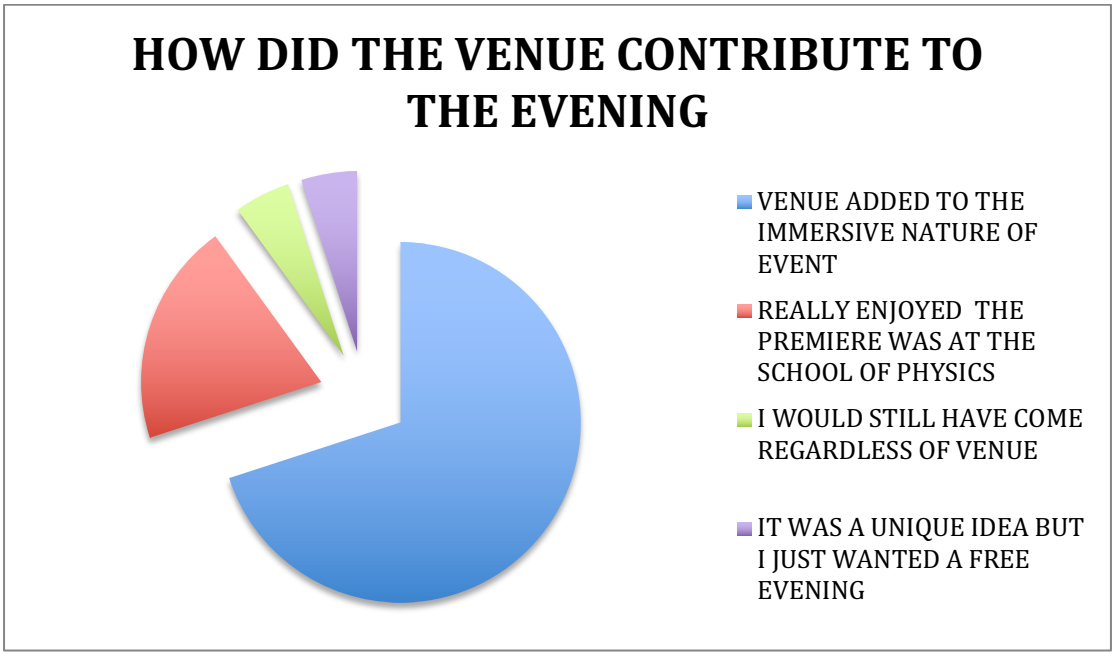


Figure 5.3 Pie Chart showing the importance of the event venue

Figure 5.3 sets out how the venue contributed to the evening, with 70% saying that it added to the immersive nature of the event, 20% really enjoying that it was held at the School of Physics, with 5% noting that they would have come regardless of venue and a similar number saying that it was a unique idea, but they just wanted a free evening.

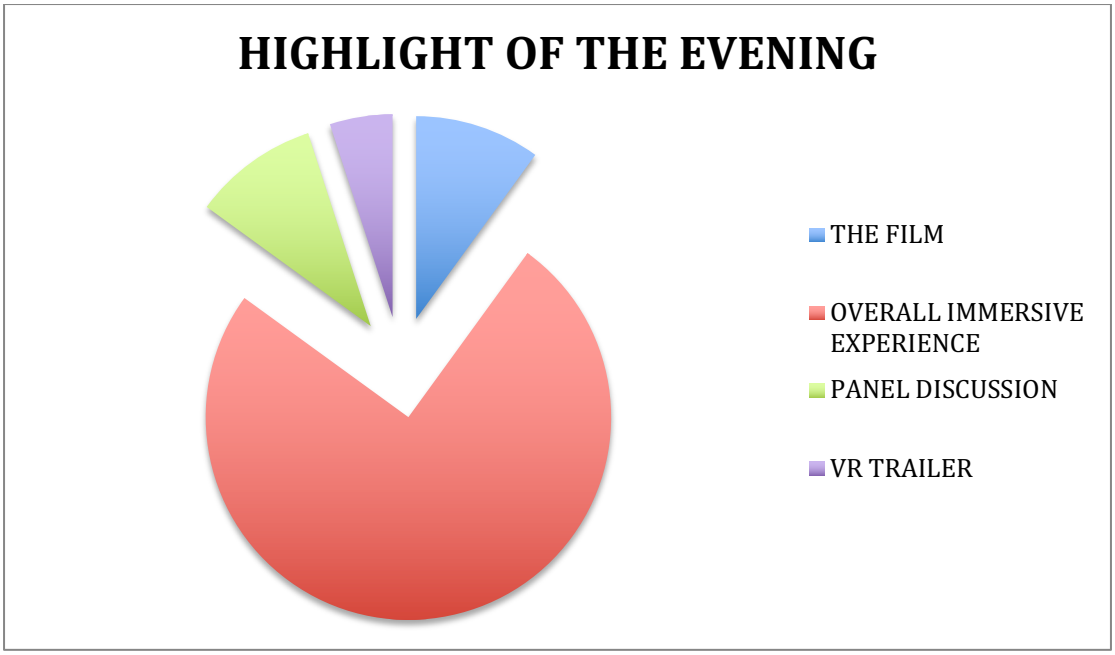


Figure 5.4 Pie Chart showing the evening's highlight for the audience

Figure 5.4 sets out the responses to the highlight of the evening, with an overwhelming majority of 75% citing the immersive experience, 10% the film itself, and an equal number citing the Panel discussion, with only 5% choosing the VR trailer. 75% of the sample audience confirmed that it was the experiential nature of the event that was the highlight of the evening. Having reviewed the questionnaires, it was clear that it was the experiential elements (see Figures 5.3 and 5.4) coupled with discovery that most resonated with the audience – many of the audience expressed astonishment at discovering that two Nobel Prize winning physicists had lived and lectured in Dublin, and that the atom had first been split by an Irishman. Many guests felt that the fusion of a biopic about a famous Nobel Prize winning scientist in an atmospheric venue, that turned out to be intertwined with the lives of two other Nobel Prize winning scientists (one of which was Irish) was an inspired choice. The sample of guests also indicated that they enjoyed the panel talk afterwards with two of Ireland's leading female scientists discussing the legacy of Marie Curie. My German and French partners also filled out questionnaires at the end of the evening, having viewed the film for the first time at the premiere. For them the highlight of the evening was the immersive experience.

Unfortunately, on Thursday March 12, the day before *Marie Curie* was to open theatrically, the Irish government ordered a national lockdown that forced all

cinemas in Ireland to close. This was the start of the first national COVID-19 lockdown in Ireland. Zioga and Velez-Serna (2021) observe that the pandemic created unprecedented challenges for cinema exhibitors in the UK and worldwide with venues being forced to close for months, operating with substantial uncertainty and ultimately re-opening with reduced capacity, all of which made their position precarious and raised questions and challenges for the sustainability of the sector. According to the *BFI Statistical Yearbook* (2021) the pandemic posed an existential threat, particularly to exhibitors. This first COVID-19 national lockdown had the consequence of forcing the cancellation of *Marie Curie*'s theatrical release, but the VOD release still went ahead. It was frustrating to have to abandon the cinema release as it prevented additional revenues to be made as well as depriving me of the opportunity to perform further research, as well as to assess the promotional impact of the premiere on the theatrical release and box office. Irish audiences still had the chance to rent or download the film in Ireland from March 13 onwards.

The Irish experiential premiere demonstrates how entrepreneurialism is at the heart of theatrical distribution and how distributors need to be entrepreneurial to navigate the challenges of releasing a foreign language film in the UK and Ireland. All stages of the Irish release required entrepreneurialism to bring on board the financing and partners on whom I was dependent to attract the end user, the audience. It also shows how dependence underpinned the Irish launch. I was dependent on transnational State Film organisations - Unifrance, Institut Francais, Embassy of France in Ireland and the Goethe Institut - to fund and sponsor the premiere event (and for their continued support when the event could have been cancelled due to a COVID-19 outbreak on the campus on the eve of the premiere). It also displays the power of networks in the distribution value chain. Unifrance had already supported the UK release and continued their sponsorship of the Irish release, while I was able to use Trinity College Dublin's alumni network to secure the Physics Building as the premiere venue. At the heart of this artefact is the experiential. In the next section, I reflect on the effectiveness of the event from a research and professional vantage point.

## 5.8 *Conclusions*

I began the iterative process of creating the *Marie Curie* VR trailer to test my own entrepreneurial assumptions as a film distributor that technology such as VR would be instrumental in attracting a younger demographic to foreign language films; a common challenge I face as a film distributor. This first case study highlights that the creation of VR technology is costly - and for most dependent distributors prohibitive - and monetising it is difficult. My initial findings led me to question the feasibility of utilising VR as a long-term solution. This needed further investigation, leading to the creation of the experiential event at the Irish premiere of the film. The first artefact developed the research topic of my thesis from an exploration of technology into the broader parameters of the experiential as a technique in specialty film distribution. The technological approach to the experiential in the first artefact had limitations, but the research from the Irish premiere indicated that an event with an experiential component had more economic potential. Fundamental to its success was dependent networks, relationships and partnerships, some of which were of a transnational nature.

The examination of the COVID-19 pandemic on the exhibition industry led Zioga and Velez-Serna (2021) to call for an exploration of how emerging forms and technologies of interactivity including Virtual and Augmented Reality, can facilitate new audience experiences in film venues. Zioga and Velez-Serna (2021, p11) propose that new technologies hold an underexplored potential to support the recovery of the exhibition sector and they suggest that cinemas can use "interactive technologies – from low-end platforms to high-end immersive technologies – to maintain audience engagement and entice cinemagoers to return to venues when it is safe to do so". The authors' approach differs from my practice-led one. Their recommendations, arrived at through an ethnographical methodology, are at odds with my findings, which were reached using a combined auto-ethnographical and practitioner lens. My first practice-led case study led me to the finding that an interactive marketing tool such as a VR trailer was not a catalyst to attract audiences to cinemas. The second case study built on that by focusing on the effectiveness of the experiential aspects of the Irish campaign. Unlike Zioga and Velez-Serna, I do not see any change in audience behaviour created by the pandemic that would convince me that new technologies,

such as VR, hold an 'underexplored potential' to support the recovery of the specialty cinema sector. Rather, it is the experiential element of cinemagoing that holds a greater appeal for audiences.

In developing the reflexive artefact of the second *Marie Curie* premiere (this time in Ireland), I adopted a streamlined process that had the experiential at its core. Throughout my research, I used a practice-led methodology, which interrogated my practice as a dependent distributor. During this iterative process of artefact creation, I developed from my initial position as an instinctual industry practitioner and researcher, to a reflexive stage with the case study of the *Marie Curie* Irish premiere, which employed this newfound knowledge gained from the previous case study. I concluded that the VR trailer was a costly endeavour that did little to enhance the audience and had little to no impact on the box office. It did succeed in drawing attention to the experiential, leading to a move in this direction with my research. It enabled me to question my assumptions as a dependent distributor and reveal new insights into real world distribution practices. This structure allowed me to demonstrate how entrepreneurialism is at the heart of theatrical distribution and how distributors need to be entrepreneurial to navigate the challenges of releasing foreign language films in the UK.

Once I reflected on the two *Marie Curie* case studies, I realised that curating an experiential event needs adequate strategy-making and preparation time. It became clear that by being involved earlier in, if not at the beginning of a film's genesis would give a distributor an advantage, and that experiential marketing campaigns will be at their most effective if there is sufficient lead in time. The iterative methodology that I used allowed me to reflect on the two campaigns created for *Marie Curie*. It was only as I reflected on my methodology that I realised that I had created two pop-up venues for the premiere of the films in a manner reminiscent of Secret Cinema's events. Unlike Secret Cinema where the film itself and entertainment can be enjoyed simultaneously, at both *Marie Curie* premieres, the film was screened first. The London premiere was held in a traditional cinema whereas the experiential aspects of the Irish premiere were perceptible to the audience as soon as they walked into the Physics Building at Trinity College Dublin – this was intentional and it created a much richer experience for the audience as demonstrated by the findings from the questionnaires.

The reflexive nature of my research allowed me to identify elements of my campaign that were not immediately apparent to me as a practitioner. As seen from the Irish premiere, there was a mix of audience reactions. It is a fallacy to assume that the individual members of an audience attend an experiential event for the same reasons. It is clear that there are differing motivations. The more distributors have an understanding of their audience's motivations and expectations, the greater the opportunity to meet and exceed those expectations, and to grow the audience for the targeted film, and ultimately, the whole experiential cinema sector. The technological aspects of the release were intended to provide an experience for the viewer, but it was the surrounding environment, not the technology, that proved to be the more effective stimulant and driver for the audience. The release is a paradigmatic example of how experimentation is important for distributors as a means to find their audience. By experimenting with technology, I discovered that the experiential was the most prominent driver for audience engagement.

A distributor is dependent on a trio of entities to exploit specialty films in the UK, namely: exhibitors to provide the venues for the release of the film; a network of local partners to support the campaign and build awareness of the film among the target audience and transnational partners including State Film organisations to fund the innovation and provide the subsidies and co-financing for the marketing and distribution campaign of the film. This demonstrates the importance of networks that distributors need to build to execute an effective release in the UK. The two premiere events show the flexibility that a distributor must possess to alter course if an initial strategy fails to connect with the audience. The change of strategy to focus on the experiential for the Irish release personifies entrepreneurship because the new campaign could only be implemented with funding from partnerships to finance and subsidise the cost of the Irish release. Finally, the entire campaign for *Marie Curie* demonstrates how a distributor is dependent on its choice of acquisitions and an appropriate marketing strategy to ensure that a film meets the distributor's targets and expectations. In the next findings chapter, I examine the campaign for the French language feature documentary, *Wine Calling*. It follows the thread of this case study by considering partnership-led experiential events, not technological-led VR solutions, as the most effective way to attract filmgoers.

# CHAPTER 6
# *WINE CALLING*:
# THE VALUE OF PARTNERSHIPS & TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKS

This chapter presents the findings of my practice-led investigation, by interrogating and reflecting on the experiential release strategy for the French language feature documentary *Wine Calling* in the UK and Ireland. In the previous chapter, the *Marie Curie* case study looked to the academic debates surrounding the use of technology in distribution to examine the VR trailer created for the release. My findings led me to question the feasibility of utilising VR as a long-term solution, thereby developing my research from an exploration of technology into the broader parameters of the experiential as a technique in film distribution. It also allowed me to look at the dependent distributor as entrepreneur and to demonstrate how entrepreneurialism is at the heart of theatrical distribution. It was an important case study as it set the focus for what follows and charts the beginning of my iterative process, implementing a VR trailer as a way to engage audiences and using transnational partnerships to fund this costly endeavour. I now show how distributors need to be entrepreneurial to navigate the challenges of releasing foreign language films. I do so by presenting the findings of my practice-led investigation, by interrogating and reflecting on the experiential release strategy for the French language feature documentary *Wine Calling* in the UK and Ireland.

The first part of this chapter explores my work as a researcher on the creation and release of *Wine Calling* in the UK, with the second part assessing an experiential event created for the Irish premiere of *Wine Calling*, produced as a reflexive practitioner and researcher. The second part of the case study was undertaken to address questions raised by the UK release as to the importance and value of third-party partnerships and an examination of their role in contributing to the experiential nature of the screenings. In the process, I examine the role of exhibition, marketplace awareness, and partnerships to interrogate their place in the distribution sector. Dependence stays at the core of this case study as it shows how distributors remain dependent on third parties (exhibitors, partners and the audience) in the planning and execution of the release.

This chapter builds on the findings of *Marie Curie* by concluding that partnership-led experiential events, not technological-led VR solutions, are the most economically beneficial and effective way to attract filmgoers. It also highlights the importance of platformisation in the form of a day-and-date release as a strategy that distributors can employ to generate a faster flow of revenues and protect against market disruption and changes in consumer behaviour. A distributor's dependence on cinemas and streaming services brings out an entrepreneurial skillset that distributors need to employ to execute effective release campaigns. My research on *Wine Calling* also developed my findings from *Marie Curie* by identifying the evolving concept of a hybrid producer-distributor in the specialty distribution sector. I argue that the approach of creating these artefacts, and examining the construction of their experiential surroundings, has been necessary to reflect a real-world industry perspective and to gain a realistic and contemporary appreciation of how film distributors can innovate and experiment with engaging audiences in a challenging market. The UK and Irish release of *Wine Calling* elucidates my thesis around dependence and enterprise in film distribution by showing that networks and partnerships are vital components in film marketing. It also sets out how dependence and entrepreneurship are intertwined and how dependence encourages entrepreneurship. It reveals a path as to how dependence can be a force for productivity when an entrepreneurial approach sets in train a set of partnerships that can ease the distributor from its dependence. My findings draw from a range of research material, including statements from the various partners involved in the creation of the premieres and a questionnaire taken from a sample of the audience. It is against that backdrop that I examine the experiential nature of the *Wine Calling* UK premiere in the next section.

## 6.1 *The UK Experiential Premiere of Wine Calling*

*Wine Calling* was released in the UK at the end of June 2019, a year in which, according to the *BFI Statistical Yearbook* (2020), 764 films were released in UK cinemas (23 fewer than 2018), with a weekly average of over fourteen new films. With such a congested marketplace, distributors need to create a high impact marketing campaign to stand out among the competition. Films from non-UK European countries (including French films) accounted for 1.1% of the box office (from 18% of releases), the same as in 2018. When the box office of foreign language European releases are compared with those of the previous year, there was a decline of 18% - £9.8 million in 2019 versus £12.0 million in 2018. Such a significant contraction creates a precarious marketplace of a type that led Marich (2009, p270) to note that "the reality is that prosperity is fleeting" for specialty distributors. By the start of 2019, when I acquired *Wine Calling*, distributors of foreign language films in the UK were competing for a slice of an ever-decreasing box office.

The primacy of a film's theatrical release is demonstrated by the fact that a film's value for every other rights area, or exploitation window, is established during its theatrical release (Lee, Jr and Gillen (2011, p6). While an exclusive theatrical window is long established as the primary initial release pattern for foreign language films, platformisation has eroded that leading to an increase in day and day releases. *Wine Calling* is a feature documentary about French natural wine makers. While there are more than 3000 wine growers in France, less than three per cent of them are working in organic or natural methods of wine production. The film follows a group of French natural wine-makers over a year, from the harvest to the bottling, revealing an increasingly global movement for sustainability and taste, free from chemicals and additives.

My experience of *Marie Curie's* release campaign, as discussed in the previous chapter, influenced my decision to acquire *Wine Calling*. This was for four reasons: firstly, there were common characteristics – both were French films with a similar target demographic that I knew how to reach; secondly, an experiential marketing strategy with the right partners could be successfully employed, increasing revenues; thirdly, I could depend on my networks and continue the relationship with existing cultural partners such as the Cine Lumiere and State Film organisations

including Unifrance, and avail of the latter's distribution subsidy thereby reducing the release costs and my personal risk; fourthly, it was an opportunity to do some more practice-led research and explore the shift away from the technological towards the creation of experiential events for the release of *Wine Calling* in the UK and Ireland.

The initial release plan was to release the film exclusively in cinemas, respecting the full theatrical window, followed just over 16 weeks later by a VOD release. The cornerstone of the theatrical release was originally intended to be a special preview screening. Here cinemagoers would be able to experience the world of the film in a unique way by physically sampling the wines appearing in it as well as being virtually transported to the French vineyards by means of a VR trailer. Due to the lack of demand for the *Marie Curie* VR trailer and the high cost involved in producing it, I removed the VR component from the *Wine Calling* campaign and instead embarked on a marketing campaign that brought the experiential, as opposed to the technological to the fore.

*Wine Calling* needed a different strategy from *Marie Curie* for several reasons. Firstly, in my experience the theatrical marketplace for feature documentaries, particularly a foreign language documentary, is significantly smaller than for feature films. I find that the profit centre for documentaries is on streaming and on VOD, with the theatrical release merely being a showcase to garner critical acclaim and attention, bringing awareness to the consumer. Secondly, there is a lack of exhibitor support. Eighteen months on from the UK release of *Marie Curie*, cinemas were booking fewer documentaries. Consequently, I did not have the same level of exhibitor support for bookings on *Wine Calling* as the exhibitors had less confidence in the film. The three main chains that I targeted – Everyman, Curzon and Picturehouse - declined to book the film. As the BFI Statistical Yearbook (2020) indicates, there was a significant decline in box office for foreign language films in the eighteen months since the UK release of *Marie Curie*.

Cinema in the UK, according to Kehoe and Mateer (2015, p94), is a supply-led market where exhibitors are the gatekeepers for curating entry into the theatrical retail environment. Once the three main cinema chains – or gatekeepers – rejected *Wine Calling*, the decision to position the film as a day-and-date release with platformisation at its core was appropriate and necessary. For cashflow reasons, I wanted to ensure revenues were generated quickly and returned to me from the date

of release. Stollfuss (2021) writes how platformisation is changing the practices of content production and distribution, specifically citing the example of German public service broadcasting. What I have found through my practice is that platformisation is changing the nature of theatrical distribution of foreign language films and documentaries in the UK. I was disappointed by the small number of cinema bookings I had for *Wine Calling* but moving to a day-and-date release strategy provided a viable substitute to an expensive and fully fledged theatrical release where the windowing system delays the generation of downstream revenues. This method of releasing, Kehoe and Mateer (2015, p95) note, represents a new way of monetising films that breaks away from the singular value chain of traditional film releases and places convenience and accessibility and convenience for consumers at its heart.

Given the positive experience on *Marie Curie*, I was keen to continue the relationship with Cine Lumiere as it is one of the leading destinations for new French cinema in the UK. *Wine Calling* provided a suitable opportunity to work together again and after pitching Cine Lumiere's head programmer, the West London venue came on board as the exclusive London site. It was programmed as part of a food themed festival called 'In the Mood for Food' in conjunction with the three day Great Exhibition Road Festival and echoes the themes of the nearby *Food: Bigger than the Plate* exhibition at the V&A throughout that summer. It also coincided with Cine Lumiere's *Fête du Cinéma*, with almost all tickets for £5, an initiative I believed would attract a younger and more adventurous audience. Partnering with a food themed festival and the *Fete du Cinema* initiative was a conscious entrepreneurial decision to use their platforms to broaden the reach for *Wine Calling* as well as I was dependent on their networks to attract a younger and 'foodie' audience. Just like the use of Marie Curie's anniversary, the need to tag unto an event like the Festival and the ticket initiative is another example of using an anniversary or event as a strategy (Coley 2021; Johnston 2017) to take advantage of an inbuilt audience and harness their advertising and PR.

*Wine Calling's* campaign focused on creating an experiential premiere at the Cine Lumiere at the end of June 2019. The audience, which consisted of paying cinemagoers, invited guests and industry experts, were offered free wine from the wine producers featured in the film. The natural wine merchant, Ancestrel Wines, sponsored the natural wine at the event and organic canapés were supplied by a

sponsor, Natoora, that specialises in a sustainable food chain supply of premium fruit and vegetables. Natoora also offered cinemagoers the chance to win one of two £50 vouchers and all guests were handed a free coffee voucher to redeem at their stores. Marich (2010) emphasises that promotions, such as the one with Natoora and Ancestrel Wines, help create buzz and attract viewers' attention amid the bottleneck of advertising clutter and intense competition among films. A tie-in is, at its core, an alliance between a film promoted by the distributor and the brand of the partnering company.

Brand alliance literature helps to understand the characteristics and effects of this marketing device. In a discussion about the brand alliance literature in studio film distribution, Karray *et al*. (2015, p705) point to the importance of the right brand fit in influencing consumer response to the alliance. Partnering with a well-known sustainable food chain (Natoora) and a niche natural wine merchant (Ancestrel Wines) on *Wine Calling* broadened the awareness of the film among our target audience of organic food and wine aficionados. The relationship with these companies demonstrates the entrepreneurialism that is at the heart of creating and executing experiential events. Establishing these partnerships involves a combination of pitching the film and presenting a case as to why it would benefit the other party. Finding mutual benefits is at the heart of productive partnerships which is why Lubbers and Adams (2004, p60) define them in the context of film marketing as "partnerships developed with other organisations that are designed to promote both organisations". Securing partnerships involves entrepreneurialism because distributors need to display an appreciation of the partner's needs and an understanding of consumer expectations that goes beyond the narrow knowledge of releasing films. These two partnerships also demonstrate the dependence latent in film distribution – I was dependent on the networks of Natoora and Ancestrel Wines to reach those consumers with an interest in biodynamic produce, a demographic that is hard to reach without resorting to funding a targeted social media campaign.

The audience were given the opportunity to sample both the wine and the produce during the screening, and afterwards at a reception at the cinema. In a post-event email, Jean Ziemniak of the Cine Lumiere observed: "It was the hottest day of the year (almost as hot as a vineyard would be in the south of France), and the cinema still seemed quite full. Watching a French film in a French cinema with French food

and wine made it feel immersive. I enjoyed discovering more about natural wine. These experiential events are very successful for us and distributors should do more of them".[12] This experiential event made an impact in the industry, so much so that the cinema chain, Everyman, approached me with a request to book the film at thirteen of their cinemas nationwide. The wine themed event convinced the Everyman that there was an untapped demand for the film among their core audience of foreign language film aficionados. I regarded this as recognition of the entrepreneurialism that I demonstrated in putting together the premiere as well as a testament to the latent power of my networks that Everyman approached me with their proposal to make *Wine Calling* the opening film in a mini-French season they were hosting. This was in spite of the fact that the film had none of the characteristic marketing elements outlined by Elberse and Anand (2007), d'Astous *et al*. (2007), Moul (2007 and Simonton (2009) – no major awards at film festivals, an unknown director, and little-known wines that were not available to buy at any supermarket or wine merchant in the UK. Alba and Hutchinson (1987) believe a consumer's attitudes and beliefs are usually more stable for familiar brands with higher familiarity levels. Everyman is a familiar brand to audiences in the UK and partnering with them on *Wine Calling* would be seen as an *imprimatur,* and would convey to our target audience a positive signal as to its high quality.

The approach by Everyman shows that the efforts of an entrepreneurial or dependent distributor can be recognised and rewarded provided it has developed the networks to enable opportunities to flow from it. Everyman had rejected the film when I first acquired it and presented it to them months earlier. My entrepreneurialism in re-packaging it through an experiential event made the film a more attractive and marketable commodity. My entrepreneurship changed the perception of the film in the eyes of a major cinema chain and created an opportunity for it to be programmed and re-packaged in a format that would appeal to their customers. Everyman targets upscale audiences with a state-of-the-art experience with luxury armchairs, plush seats with reclining backrests and footrests and in-chair waiter service. The cinema chain describes itself on its website as "redefining cinema. Bringing an innovative lifestyle approach to our venues, where you swap your soft drink for a nice glass of red wine and a slice of freshly made pizza served to your

[12] Jean Ziemniak, email, July 12, 2019

seat".[13] The only change Everyman made was offering a complimentary glass of Whispering Angel rose wine at every screening, preferring it to the natural wine featured in the film. While the enterprise helped secure the support of the Everyman, it also shows how entrepreneurship and dependence are interlaced. *Wine Calling*'s theatrical run was due to end after one week at the Cine Lumiere and the continuation of the theatrical release was entirely dependent on a nationwide chain like Everyman belatedly coming on board to programme it across its sites. The Cine Lumiere screening provided a 'proof of concept' or test run for the Everyman, demonstrating the experiential factor worked and would be a draw and suitable for their upmarket demographic.

The film played at thirteen Everyman cinemas across the UK in July and August 2019. In a post-release email to me, Roy Gower, the Head of Programming at Everyman commented that "*Wine Calling* created a nice tie-in between the storyline of the film itself and the offer of a complimentary glass of wine. At Everyman we offer a luxurious way to enjoy cinema, and our audiences like to discover something new when they come to watch documentaries. Our customer feedback was they enjoyed *Wine Calling* even more by being able to sample a glass of wine during the film. This made the experience more immersive".[14] Despite this positive industrial feedback, the box office takings over the two weeks that it screened at the Everyman were disappointing. It grossed a total of £1387.78 in the first week, giving a poor site average of £88.96 - by comparison, the BAFTA winning *For Sama* (Waad Al-Kateab and Edward Watts, 2019) had a £936 screen average on its opening weekend. Nevertheless, it was enough for the Everyman to continue to programme the film in thirteen of its sites for a second week. The second week's box office total of £427.84 with a site average of £32.91, represented a sharp drop of 70% from the first week. Once the film was released at Everyman sites, I made the mistake of not supporting it with a more significant marketing spend, relying too heavily on the cinema chain's internal marketing machine to promote it to their subscribers. Given that there are 10 new films opening every weekend vying for the consumer's attention, a film in its second or later week of release needs marketing or targeted social media spending to keep it fresh in the consumer's mind.

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[13] https://www.everymancinema.com/about-everyman

[14] Roy Gower, email, July 19, 2019

The visibility of the film and interest in it could have been sustained over the two-week period of its Everyman engagement by continuing the third-party cross-promotional partnerships. That would have ensured visibility, and maintained interest and awareness. The industrial partnerships with Natoora and Ancestrel Wines were only in place for the premiere itself, not for the run at the Everyman. I learned that offering a promotion of a free glass of wine is not enough to attract audiences in a congested marketplace. This situation shows how dependent a distributor is on partnerships and external factors and on making the correct strategic decision-making. Simply bringing on board the right partnerships is not enough, they need to endure over the entirety of the release to be effective and impactful, as I learned to my cost. This goes to the heart of entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship requires being pro-active and reactive throughout a film's campaign from inception until the actual end of its theatrical release. I incorrectly assumed that Everyman's inhouse social media postings and subscriber e-newsletter would be enough to secure strong attendance at the screenings. Even though Everyman is one of the strongest brands in the market, I should have done more to promote the screenings, particularly as I was aware that cinemagoing in July and August is historically low. By taking my foot off the promotional pedal, I squandered an entrepreneurial opportunity to maximise my theatrical revenues at one of the top cinema chains in the country. This shows the necessity of continuous entrepreneurial activity throughout all stages in the film value chain.

Overall, the UK release of *Wine Calling* did not meet my expectations. Despite the partnerships that I put in place, only 32.8% of tickets were sold for the experiential UK premiere. The UK premiere was held on the hottest day of the year when the temperature in London reached 33 degrees Celsius – the fine weather impacted on the number of tickets sold. Gant (2019), writing for the Telegraph website, states that "hot weather always creates a challenging environment for UK cinema box office"[15] and he reports that the takings across the UK-wide box office market were "down 26 per cent on the previous weekend" (*ibid)*. If that percentile reduction were factored into the box office total for the *Wine Calling* premiere, the expected attendance would still have been only 58.8%, which is still a disappointing

[15] https://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/2019/07/02/uk-box-office-reportjune-28-30-buzz-lightyear-rides-heatwave/

tally. In addition to that, the box office for the run at Everyman cinemas was also underwhelming.

*Wine Calling's* run at UK cinemas, particularly at the Everyman chain, brought the experiential elements to the fore of the film's marketing campaign, as it allowed audiences 'to experience' its world. I concluded that by bringing an experiential element to the marketing of *Wine Calling*, what would ostensibly have been marketing obstacles and challenges were turned into marketing advantages. Audiences were enticed into buying a ticket for the experience of viewing the film by being among the first in the country to discover and sample new natural wines while learning more about how they were produced and the sustainable methods involved.

The positive feedback at the premiere had exceeded my expectations. When I came to critically reflect on the reasons behind it, as a researcher, I was frustrated that I was still only employing and depending on the methods I traditionally used to do audience research as a distributor. For the next iteration of my *Wine Calling* case study, my methodology evolved to ensure that it was suitable for thorough academic analysis. The iterative nature of my research allowed me to correct that oversight in the development of the experiential marketing campaign for the Irish release of *Wine Calling*, particularly by the device of questionnaires. In the next section, I examine the impact of the experiential elements of the Irish release of the film.

## 6.2 *The Irish Release of Wine Calling*

Cinema, according to McLoone (2009, p19), "in small nations like Ireland exists in a cultural space bounded by the local and the global". A combination of local Irish and transnational films, in my experience, are programmed by key specialty cinemas like the State-funded Irish Film Institute in Dublin and perform strongly. While McLoone (2009, p5) believes that cinema in Ireland is a space alive with potential, the UK theatrical market is ten times larger than the Irish market - £1.251 billion in box office revenues in the UK in 2019 (BFI, 2020) compared to €117.4 million for the Irish box office (Wide Eye Media, 2020). Consequently, UK distributors spend less money and resources and focus less on the Irish marketplace. Hjort and Petrie (2009, p17) note that an analysis of small national cinemas (in which they include Ireland) reveals the emergence of regional alliances and networks that provide a transnational alternative to the "neoliberal model of globalisation driving contemporary Hollywood". As Hjort and Petrie (2009, p17) see it, transnational networks have been fuelled by a "focal awareness of small nationhood, and by film practitioners' desire to build lasting relationships with people who are grappling with similar problems". The Irish Film Institute has been a key partner in Ireland on my releases since I started distributing films there in 2004. It is borne out of the necessity, of a type observed by Hjort and Petrie (2009), of the Irish Film Institute having to build lasting relationships with transnational partners and distributors to ensure a continuity of new product.
This is matched by the necessity on my part to have a lasting relationship with a local exhibition partner in a small nation like Ireland, to ensure that I can maximise theatrical revenues from a much smaller marketplace. In grappling with the similar problems envisaged by Hjort and Petrie (2009) - a limited supply of new films from local producers in the Irish Film Institute's case, and the need to guarantee a certain level of theatrical revenues, in my case - we have built a mutually beneficial lasting transnational relationship and an informal alliance. The relationship is one where I am dependent on the Irish Film Institute as one of my key exhibition partners in Ireland. Without their partnership and the revenues that flow from programming my films, it is doubtful that an Irish release would be profitable. When it came to planning the Irish campaign, I was still cautious about committing a large marketing budget because of the possibility of lower theatrical revenues than the UK. In the light of the

decline of box office for foreign language films and documentaries, Kehoe and Mateer (2015, p95) write that a greater number of films are now competing for a limited cinema audience, resulting in a squeeze of revenues for the specialty distributor and an increasingly untenable commercial environment to operate within. It was against such a backdrop that I had to make decisions about the nature of the Irish campaign.

For the Irish release, I wanted to guarantee that the premiere was profitable – to do so, I expanded its reach in order to ensure that the premiere would have significant awareness among the film's intended target and was marketed in a way that would lead to sold out screenings. I set about securing partnerships with a range of cultural and industrial partners, a process that took several months. Given the inherent marketing limitations of the film and the smaller value of the Irish theatrical market, I was entirely dependent on partnerships to improve its marketability and re-package it as a film that would work for the domestic Irish market. From past experience I knew that finding a local Irish marketing angle was key. For that reason, I invited the founder of the Irish company, Wicklow Way Wines, to participate in the post-screening on-stage panel to talk about making wine in Ireland.

I focused on building a network of *active* partners whose role in promoting the film would assure it of a broader and greater reach and awareness – if successful it would be more cost effective than paid advertising, thus reducing my financial outlay on the campaign. For *Wine Calling*'s Irish premiere, the choice of cultural, educational and industrial partners would be important to succeed in widening the reach of the marketing campaign and increasing the numbers of tickets sold. I wanted to avoid what Aaker and Keller (1993), Simonin and Ruth (1998), Samu *et al*. (1999) call a poor fit that may encourage negative or undesirable associations and beliefs towards the allying brands. This selection of partners requires good business judgment, a key element of entrepreneurship.

The iterative nature of the campaigns for *Marie Curie* and *Wine Calling* were key in allowing me to interrogate my practice and to reach my findings. Pivoting from a traditional theatrical release for the UK release of *Marie Curie* to the day-and-date campaign for *Wine Calling* helped me to consider themes of dependence, entrepreneurialiam and platformisation. I set about creating an event that would allow for an examination of the experiential factors. While advertising is a significant part

of a film's marketing campaign, Lubbers and Adams (2001) note that Hollywood studios use other promotional tools such as tie-in promotions, product placements and spin-off merchandising to attract cinemagoers at lower costs. Karray, Smimou and Sud (2015) observe that Hollywood marketers are increasingly using more tie-in promotions as a device to make better use of their tightened budgets, employing partnerships that are often from different industries such as retailing, fast food restaurants and online services. A tie-in partnership is also an effective device used by distributors to defray the cost of an expensive marketing campaign. Varadarajan (1986) believes a tie-in is an attractive marketing tool because it allows distributors to promote a film, and reach a wider audience without incurring the full cost of heavy promotional campaigns. The iterative nature of creating an event for the Irish release allowed me to explore utilising cost-effective partnerships more effectively.

The related literature in how brand alliances can impact on the marketing of the product has mostly focused on the benefits gained by a focal, usually an unknown or little known brand, through its alliance with an established partner. Gammoh *et al*. (2006) and Simonin and Ruth (1998) find that such brand alliances can boost the focal brand (*Wine Calling* in this instance) in the form of raised consumer attitudes and Rao and Ruekert (1994) believe that there is a resulting higher likelihood of success. I planned to interrogate this further by examining the impact of the various partners on the marketing of the Irish release of the film. After some lobbying, pitching and several meetings with French institutions, *Wine Calling* was fortunate to be chosen to be the Irish centrepiece of the fifth edition of the global initiative, The Night of Ideas, spearheaded by the Institut Francais.

Celebrating the stream of ideas between countries, cultures, topics and generations, The Night of Ideas took place worldwide on January 30, 2020 with a global theme of 'Being Alive'. The centrality of transnational networks in my campaign is evidenced by the Institut Francais, The French Embassy in Ireland, Unifrance and Alliance Francaise becoming my partners on simultaneous Irish premieres of *Wine Calling* in Cork and Dublin. Between them, they underwrote the costs of hosting them including paying for the airflight of the director and producer from France to participate in the post-screening Question and Answer session (hereinafter Q and A) with the audience. I also partnered with two local wine merchants – O'Briens in Dublin and Le Caveau Wines in Cork. O'Briens sponsored

the reception and ran a competition on their social media channels to win tickets to the premiere and offered every filmgoer a €5 O'Briens voucher. The premieres were designed to enable the audience to experience the world of the film by sampling bio-dynamic and natural wines provided by the wine merchants.

The Irish Film Institute (hereinafter the IFI) hosted the experiential Irish premiere of *Wine Calling* in Dublin on January 30, 2020. It was followed by a panel discussion, moderated by an environmental scientist, featuring *Wine Calling*'s director Bruno Sauvard, an award-winning food journalist and the Irish founder of Wicklow Way Wines. When that ended, there was a French biodynamic wine reception sponsored by O'Briens Wine. For the simultaneous Cork premiere, I partnered with the Cork International Film Festival to co-host the event in partnership with the French Embassy in Ireland, Institut Français and Alliance Française Cork. The panel discussion on The Night of Ideas theme featured *Wine Calling's* producer, Nicolas Manuel, two food and wine critics, an academic, and the Cork International Film Festival director of programming. It concluded with a wine reception to sample organic and natural French wines, selected by local wine merchant, Le Caveau Wines. This builds on the experience in the previous chapter by being a specially curated event that was designed with the experiential at its core, instead of the inadvertent use of it at *Marie Curie*'s UK premiere. It was larger in scale – held simultaneously in two cities - and the key to its success was the choice and range of strategic partnerships. Unlike the London premiere of *Wine Calling*, where I partnered with a niche natural wine distributor (Ancestrel Wines) with an insignificant digital footprint, the Irish wine partner, O'Briens Wine is Ireland's biggest wine merchant with a broad social media presence and a loyal subscriber base. The data from the questionnaires show that their promotion of the film was a key factor in securing a large attendance for the event. The next section is a critical reflection that examines whether or not the experiential Irish premieres were a potent marketing tool in bringing in audiences to an otherwise inaccessible foreign language film that had under-performed at the UK box office.

The third-party partners began promoting the screening to their subscribers a month in advance of the premieres. The IFI had initially planned to screen the film in the smallest of their three theatres, with a capacity of 61 seats. Tickets were selling so well in the third week of January 2020 that the IFI moved the screening to their

largest screen with 258 seats. The film sold out the day before the event with an average ticket price of €11.50, making it a profitable enterprise. A sample of the Dublin audience was invited to fill out a questionnaire, the purpose of which was to allow me to analyse the demographic breakdown of the audience, to understand why they attended the event, and to ascertain the most influential factors behind that and pinpoint the most significant elements of the event (the blank questionnaire is in Appendix C at the end of the thesis). From a research point of view, the questionnaires (returned by a cross-section of 20% of the audience) informed my iterative approach to these events. Over 50% of the audience were full time students, a third were either employed or self-employed, and the remainder were retired, unemployed or stay at home parents. As shown in Figure 6.1 below, 43% of the audience cited the main reason for attending as an interest in the Night of Ideas event, 29% cited an opportunity for an immersive night out, 14% had an interest in natural wines, and an equal number cited an interest in French cinema.

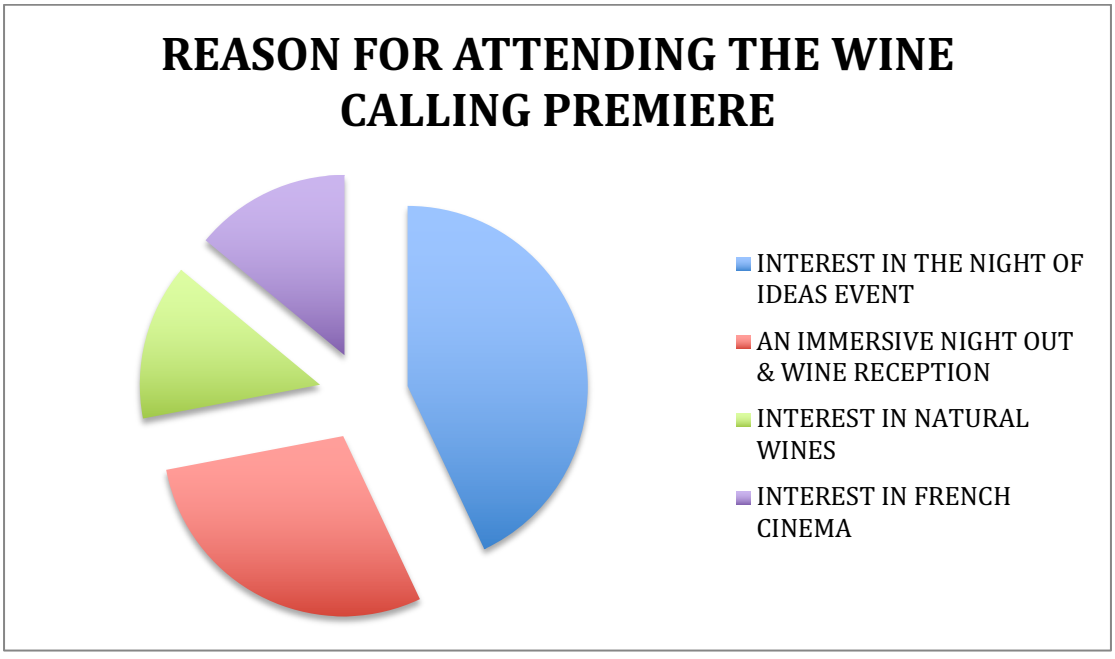


Figure 6.1: Pie Chart showing the reason the audience attended the premiere

Figure 6.2 below shows how the audience came to hear about the premiere – the largest segment of the audience, representing 36%, learned about it from the traditional film source of the host cinema, the IFI; 28.5% heard about it from a French partner source; 21.5% from O'Briens Wines, and 14% from social media. The tie-ins

with the industrial and cultural partnerships represented 50% of the audience. I interpreted this data as demonstrating that the partners, through their promotion of the event, were able to reach an audience that Swipe Films as a distributor would have found difficult to reach without investing in an expensive marketing campaign. Just over a third of the audience heard about it through the cinema (the IFI) hosting the event; a figure significantly lower than I was anticipating. I had expected the audience to be comprised primarily of regular IFI cinemagoers, a demographic that can be classed as a crowd that tends to be college educated (or in college). Marich (2009, p272) describes them as a group that "gravitates toward esoteric and personal films that are popular on the festival front, but which mainstream audiences find too talky and hard to penetrate". I concluded that it was the partnerships that led to a change in audience behaviour, especially when the findings from Figure 6.3 below are factored in.


Figure 6.2 Pie Chart showing how the audience heard about the premiere

Figure 6.3 below represents the break-down of the Dublin audience – 43% are regularly cinemagoers at the IFI, with 28.5% visiting the IFI for the first time ever, and a further 21.5% visiting the cinema for the first time in 2020, while 7% had only previously visited the café at the IFI, but not to see a film. Over 35% of the audience had never been to see a film at the IFI, Dublin's leading specialty cinema, while over

a fifth of the audience were seeing a film for the first time this year. When analysed in conjunction with the information from Figure 6.2 above, I would interpret these statistics as showing that half of the Dublin premiere audience were not active cinemagoers, but had been enticed to see the film by our third party partnerships. This lends weight to the argument that the cross-promotional partnerships achieved their goal of driving a new audience to an experiential event for a foreign language film. An analysis of the questionnaires also makes clear how dependent I was on the partnerships to target and reach the eventual audience for the film in Ireland – half of the audience had been induced to attend by the coalition of partners. I was dependent on the partnerships because I had a limited marketing budget, a common occurence among specialty distributors.

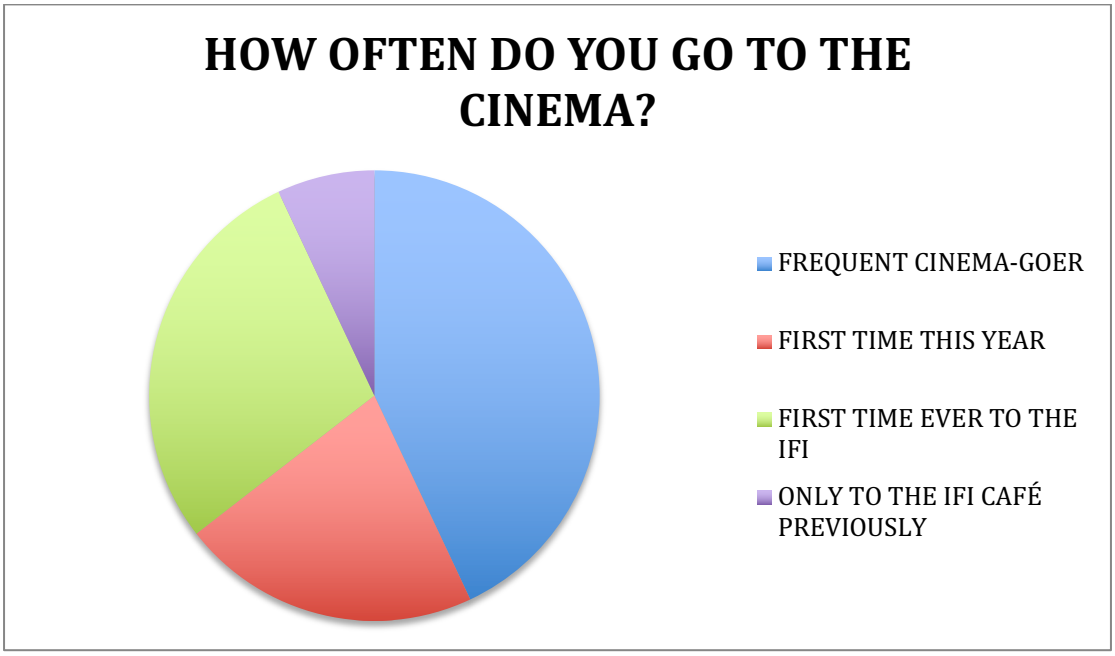


Figure 6.3 Pie Chart showing the breakdown of the audience at the premiere

Figure 6.4 below sets out the audience responses to the highlight of the evening, with 36% citing the overall experiential nature of the event (down from 75% at the *Marie Curie* Irish premiere at Schrodinger Lecture Theatre); an equal number citing the panel discussion and exchange of ideas; a further 21% the film itself, with only 7% choosing the biodynamic wine (this segment of the audience also expressed astonishment at discovering that Irish wine producers were producing natural wines - albeit fruit wines in Wicklow - and points to the conclusion that, just like the *Marie*

*Curie* Dublin premiere, audiences like to discover local elements/connections to a film). Combining the two categories – namely, those citing the panel discussion and exchange of ideas with the experiential - would give a total of 72%. It could be argued that the panel discussion has an experiential element to it that would lead to the *Marie Curie* Irish premiere and the *Wine Calling* Dublin premiere having consistent audience feedback in relation to the significance of their experiential aspects.

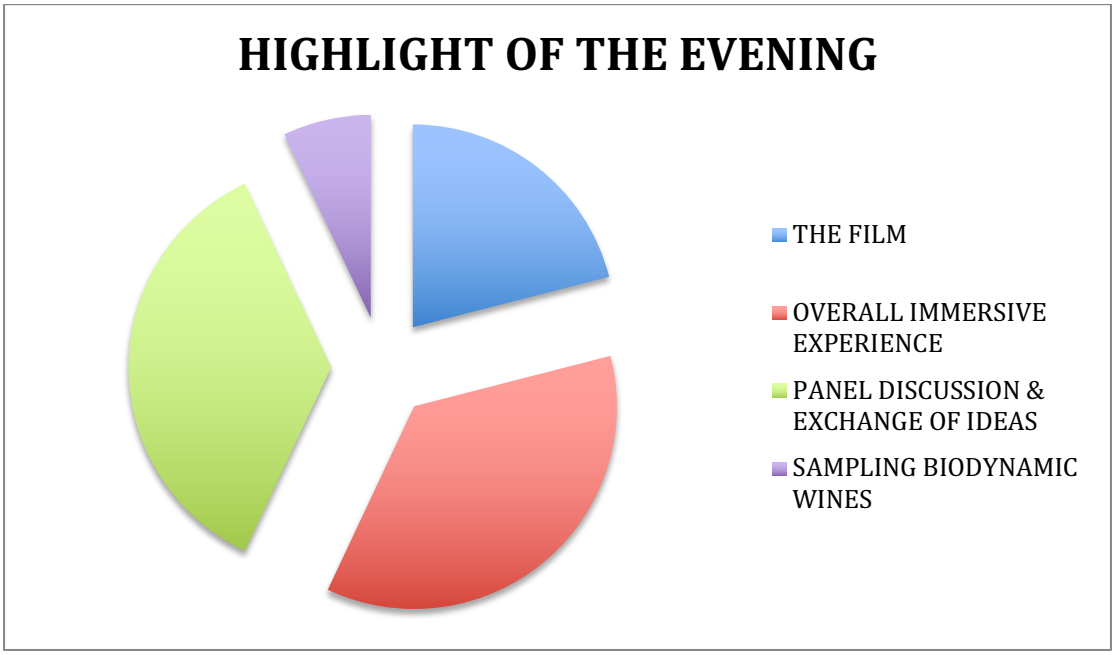


Figure 6.4 Pie Chart showing the event highlight for the audience

The process of the development of the *Wine Calling* experiential UK and Irish premieres can be distilled through the three main components behind their creation - firstly, through partnerships; secondly, through exhibition; and thirdly, through market awareness. In the next section, I start by examining the role of partnerships.

### 6.3 *The Power of Partnerships (Cultural and Industrial)*

In the previous chapter, I concluded that the *Marie Curie* Irish premiere signalled that, for the audience, the experiential nature was the most enjoyable element of the event, as opposed to the scientific or technological aspects. It made me examine the various factors behind that, as well as wanting to discover the reasons why it was a sell-out event. What I had overlooked in my research and analysis in the first findings chapter was an examination of the process of promoting the events and the methods employed to target and attract the eventual cinemagoers.

The common denominator between all the screenings of the films was the third-party partnerships that I instigated. Such brand alliances impact the participating brands mainly through what Karray *et al*. (2015, p705) refer to as "spillover effects" or the positive impact from the association with the film from the alliance. For the focal brand, Rao and Ruekert (1994), Rao *et al*. (1999), Shocker *et al*. (1994) and Agarwal and Rao (1996) argue that such alliances highlight the product's quality to the consumer, and can lessen the risk associated with the purchase by serving as a bond for the product's quality. For the UK premiere of *Marie Curie*, there were six partners, five of which were cultural, one of which was industrial (Sight & Sound). Ognisko Polskie (the Polish Hearth Club) and the Cine Lumiere were the key active partners promoting the film to their subscribers. Unifrance and German Films funded the VR trailer, providing one of the key experiential elements to the event. They did not contribute to the promotion of the film itself so I would consider them passive partners while the cultural organisations played an active role in the success of the event. *Marie Curie* screened in partnership with the 25th annual French Film Festival UK, a long-established film brand that hosts the premieres of French films in UK cinemas over a five-week period. International Women's Day is a renowned global event celebrating the social, economic, cultural, and political achievements of women and associating the *Marie Curie* film with it was a powerful factor in the promotion of the Irish premiere. For *Wine Calling*, it was a smart strategic decision to partner with the French Embassy and Institut Francais to cross-promote the release of the film in Ireland under the auspices of The Night of Ideas.

Many studio films, Keller (2008) notes, are developed by film-makers as brands through a formula combination of various brand elements that consumers find

appealing (the Marvel franchise being a good example), but Kohli *et al*. (2021) observe that most films are merely consumed as *films*, failing to be identified or engaged by consumers as brands. *Marie Curie* and *Wine Calling* are clearly in the latter category and I made no attempt to bring either film to consumer brand status, but when I reflected on the partnerships, it was clear that associating *Marie Curie* and *Wine Calling* with established brands, particularly the film festivals, was an attempt to broaden the reach of the marketing to attract niche audiences. Tie-in promotions according to Karray *et al*. (2015) are likely to benefit the promoted film by transferring positive attitudes and beliefs from the partnering brands. They can also increase awareness for the film, and enhance its perceived quality. By collaborating with these cultural partners, it indicated to our intended audience that this was a high-quality film. These partnerships were also intended to attract new audiences to the film, in the same way as I had envisaged VR doing for *Marie Curie*. What I learned from the previous case study was that VR was not the catalyst, its effectiveness lay in its partnerships with brands and the events that brought a new audience to a foreign language film. The *Marie Curie* Irish premiere had a diverse number of domestic and transnational partnerships (Figure 6.5 below), seven in total, comprising an educational institution, Trinity College Dublin, which hosted the premiere in its Schrodinger Theatre, with the French Embassy/Institut Francais funding and promoting the event, through their subscriber lists, in association with the German Embassy and Goethe Institute Ireland. Trinity College Dublin's School of Physics promoted the film and provided the panel of female scientists for the Q and A, all under the auspices of International Women's Day. This event 'sold out' three days before the premiere, although only 50% of ticket-holders attended the premiere, most likely because of a coronavirus outbreak at the university the day before the screening.

Another contributing factor of the appeal of the event was the *Marie Curie* Irish premiere taking place in a non-conventional cinema site, or what is known as a non-theatrical venue. This provided one of the key components for the event, and its unconventional nature was a draw for a portion of the audience as it was taking them out of a traditional cinema context to a place where films are not typically screened. The attraction of such a venue is in keeping with what Pett (2021, p11) calls "the proliferation of non-theatrical and alternative cinematic experiences that cater to an

increasingly fragmented film-going market", exemplified by the events of Secret Cinema. While there is scope for industry expansion for experiential film events at non-theatrical venues, it will require the film distributor to be entrepreneurial to ensure compliance with licensing and planning laws, health and safety regulations, as well as having public liability insurance in place. This is all costly and will likely reduce or nullify the distributor's profit margin.

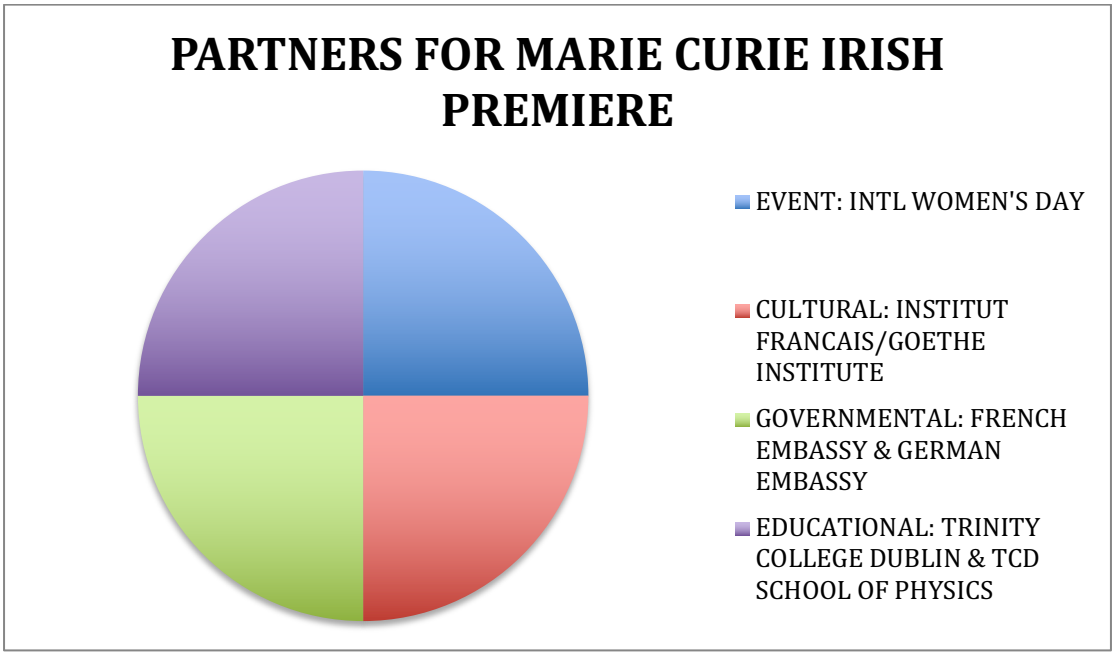


Figure 6.5 Pie Chart showing the partners for the premiere

The *Wine Calling* UK premiere had four main partners, two cultural and two industrial. It was also created in association with the Great Food Festival and an exhibition at the V&A but they were passive partners only as they did not significantly promote the event and consequently they had no impact. The *Wine Calling* Irish premieres had eight domestic and transnational partnerships, six of which were cultural, a further two being industrial. Unifrance and the French Embassy underwrote the cost of the premieres, while the Institut Francais, IFI and our main industrial partner, O'Brien's Wines, were active in promoting it to their subscribers nationwide. 50% of the audience were newcomers to cinemagoing in 2020, indicating that the partnerships had enabled a change in consumer habits. This was even more remarkable in January when cinemagoing is traditionally at its lowest.

The *Wine Calling* and *Marie Curie* Irish premieres achieved their aims because the films were able to attract cinemagoers because of two main factors – the experiential nature of the events, combined with the broad range of active partners that were able to cross-promote it effectively and increase awareness and visibility beyond traditional film industry channels and the customary and often expensive method of paid advertising. It also reveals how dependence can be a force for productivity when an entrepreneurial approach sets in train a set of partnerships that can ease the distributor from its dependence.

Every film, Ulin (2019, p57) explains, "is akin to an entrepreneurial venture where a business plan (concept) is sold, financing is raised, a product is made and tested (production), and a final product is released". A film producer by nature is a salesperson, an entrepreneur who packages and sells such a product by finding suitable partners that will finance it, and puts together the right creative collaborators that will bring the product to fruition. A distributor needs to be entrepreneurial and develop producing skills to create, plan and execute a complex marketing campaign for an experiential event. Heffernan (2000, p3) observes that higher rates of profitability has "shifted the emphasis from Fordist forms of standardised mass consumption to new forms of customised or 'niche' consumption which revolve around notions of difference and distinction". Knowing how to fill that niche identified by Heffernan needs entrepreneurial flair, especially as specialty distributors often lack the financial firepower of the studios to spend aggressively on luring audiences to their films. The type of demographic that distributors need to target are what Hill (2018, p3) calls the "roaming audiences" that are often inter-generational who traverse the media landscape with "an emergent sense of rights" (*ibid)* to engage with media when, where, and how they see fit, often in a pattern that disrupts the traditional expectations of distributors. In my experience, these audiences are adventurous and are looking for customised, niche and distinctive events that appeals to their sense of difference, such as the screening of *Marie Curie* in Trinity College Dublin. They are part of the phenomenon that represents what Pett (2021, p11) calls a contemporary shift in modes of film consumption that is not confined to the traditional cinema space but interacts with different geographical and cultural spaces and generational attitudes.

Building on the *Marie Curie* iteration, *Wine Calling* helps to critically examine the role of third-party partnerships in the production of an experiential marketing campaign. It reveals that a dependent distributor taking an entrepreneurial approach to marketing a film can use third party partnerships to bring it to a different, or wider audience. Therefore, I argue that to survive in the current marketplace, distributors need to be producer-distributors. Producer-distributors function as creative entrepreneurs. As outlined in the literature review, Kirzner (1983, p73) regards entrepreneurship as the process of recognising profit opportunities, "alertness to opportunity" and initiating actions to fill currently unsatisfied market needs. While I displayed alertness to opportunity by seeing the market potential for both *Marie Curie* and *Wine Calling*, it demonstrates that producer-distributors cannot effectively work alone - an effective experiential marketing campaign has to be created in collaboration with other partners.

Mezias and Kuperman (2001) explore the *collective* process of entrepreneurship, arguing that successful entrepreneurship is often not solely because of solitary individuals acting in isolation – they exist as part of larger collectives, a population of organisations constituting a social system that can affect entrepreneurial success, and characterised by interdependence of outcomes. Building a network of partners on *Wine Calling* allowed for the creation of a community that was characterised by the interdependence of mutual interests – we all worked together to ensure the events were a sell-out success, that appealed to and was attended by as broad an audience as possible. Our mutual self-interest was achieved by providing a memorable evening that achieved a combination of cultural, sustainable, industrial and commercial aims that each of the individual partners required.

Swipe Films is not the only distributor that could be classed as a producer-distributor. Secret Cinema is the market-leading distributor for experiential cinematic events in the UK. Describing the Secret Cinema organisation as a distributor is a misnomer - it is a hybrid producer-distributor and performs such a role on all its productions. Mokaya *et al*. (2004) maintain that entrepreneurship can either be opportunity-based or necessity-based but whatever the motivation, it is pursued as a viable business. The Secret Cinema organisation functions, like Swipe Films and other producer-distributors in the UK, as a combination of an opportunity and necessity-based entrepreneurial entity. Without bringing in suitable partners for our

ventures, our businesses would not survive, or thrive, in the UK's challenging distribution environment.

As well as collaborating with third party sponsors, such as Tesla on *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), Secret Cinema formed joint ventures with Netflix for their experiential productions of *Stranger Things* (The Duffer Brothers, 2016-) and LucasFilm and Disney on *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* (Irvin Kershner, 1980) and *The Guardians of the Galaxy* (James Gunn, 2014), without whom these events would not have happened. It is clear that a great deal of entrepreneurship is needed to execute these events and the standard description of a distributor as being an entity that tends to fill market segments, or niches, covered by the majors, is too simplistic and does not do justice to how the role of the distributor is evolving. The next section explores the importance of exhibition in the distribution of *Wine* Calling by showing how distributors are dependent on their programming policies.

### 6.4 *The Importance of Exhibition in Dependent Distribution*

The relationship between exhibitors and film distributors, Marich (2009, p252) notes, is characterised by a constant tug-of-war, with each side flexing its muscles when negotiating a booking agreement. Exhibitors in the UK always hold the balance of power in negotiations for bookings of specialty films. For a film to be successful at the box office, it needs to reach cinemagoers and to be marketed so that the targeted demographic is aware of the film and its release date and is promoted in such a way that will drive them to buy a ticket. Lee, Jr & Gillen (2011) observe that every distributor's first responsibility is to get its film's target audiences to theatres, as an effective campaign drives audience and audiences drive box office receipts. To achieve that, the UK distributor is dependent on securing bookings from nationwide cinema circuits, the three main circuits being Picturehouse, Curzon and Everyman. For *Marie Curie*, the three main circuits did not play the film, but I still managed to secure bookings for the film in over twenty cinemas across the UK. As discussed previously, this took entrepreneurship and relying on networks to overcome a potentially calamitous situation of rejection from the main cinema chains that threatened the cancellation of the entire theatrical release.

Foreign language films, Marich (2009, p277) observes, usually open on an exclusive basis, one theatre per city, "hoping to ride a wave of positive reviews in media and word of mouth to wider release". That was the case with *Wine Calling* when it opened exclusively in London at the Cine Lumiere in June 2019. For *Wine Calling*, the word-of-mouth success of the UK premiere was enough to convince the Everyman to book it for thirteen sites across the UK. When it comes to exclusive theatrical holdbacks or distribution windows, Ulin (2019, p37) explains that everyone (particularly exhibitors) "is fearful of a different right cannibalising its space, and accordingly the language of windows and distribution is all about holdbacks, exclusivity, and the term to exploit the rights. As a general rule, distribution is all about maximising discrete periods of exclusivity". For that reason, Irish cinema chains, like their UK counterparts, zealously protect their exclusive theatrical window of just over sixteen weeks to exhibit films. I made the strategic decision to avoid playing *Wine Calling* at those sites, and instead to do an exclusive engagement with the IFI which has a more flexible policy towards day-and-date releases.

The reason for this was fourfold – firstly, the IFI is Ireland's most popular three screen cinema renowned for playing specialty films and, therefore, the most suitable forum. Even though Marich (2009, p218) believes that exhibition "is a business with little brand identification or loyalty" with consumers traditionally making a cinema decision primarily by choosing the nearest theatre offering a desired movie, I have found that cinemas like the IFI have a loyal following and I was determined to tap into that market; secondly, the IFI, unlike the main circuits, permits films to be exhibited on a day-and-date basis; thirdly, the demographic profile of the average filmgoer at the four main Irish cinema circuits is not the typical foreign film aficionado; fourthly, I wanted to see a faster return on my investment by doing a day-and-date release. This simultaneous release strategy would result in revenues flowing through immediately instead of waiting four months or longer for the VOD revenues to trickle through, having respected the sixteen-week theatrical window.

The choice of exhibition partners defines the type of release for a film. In the case of the *Marie Curie* UK release, we respected the sixteen-week theatrical window and released the film on VOD after it had finished its exclusive four-month run in cinemas. It made financial sense to do so because I expected the film to perform well in cinemas and it did so. With respect to *Wine Calling*, I made the judgment that a simultaneous theatrical and VOD release would make more commercial sense for the release in the UK and Ireland. Marich (2009, p219) asserts that out-of-the-mainstream films become more accessible via a simultaneous cinema/VOD release putting less pressure on filmgoers to catch the film in cinemas. When the pandemic struck, the theatrical release of *Marie Curi*e in Ireland had to be cancelled but the day-and-date release allowed the VOD release to continue, ensuring the flow of revenues during the pandemic. Similarly, the day-and-date Irish release of *Wine Calling* took place 6 weeks before all cinemas were forced to close in March 2020, allowing streaming revenues to flow throughout the lockdown period. The release of both films in Ireland shows how platformisation can be effectively built into a theatrical release and to be used advantageously. Devising the day-and-date strategy and executing it takes entrepreneurialism. It was an acknowledgment that the theatrical revenues would likely be low but that monetisation should be accelerated in ancillary media to ensure positive cashflow from the film's exploitation happens as quickly as possible.

*Wine Calling* illustrates that the relationship between distributors and exhibitors is in flux. As Kehoe and Mateer (2015, p95) point out, traditional distribution systems, in the view of Ulin (2010, p299), are being re-evaluated with questions raised about the viability of release windows and more fundamentally, the appropriateness of exclusivity and timing upon which these windows are constructed distributors take a flexible approach when it comes to the exploitation of exclusive windows and holdback periods. Shifting from a traditional theatrical release strategy on *Marie Curie* to a day-and-date release on *Wine Calling* is an example a wider movement that represents a fundamental shift in the relationship between key segments in the film value chain, notably that between distributors and exhibitors. As Kehoe and Mateer (2015, p95) point out, this flexibility allows distributors to create a more attractive product "by conducting their business in response to consumer demands, as opposed to rigid market-driven conditions". This case study builds on the first findings chapter by identifying the use of platformisation, when combined with an experiential premiere event, as a viable means to adopt for the release of foreign language films, particularly documentaries. The extent to which that marketplace awareness impacted on the attendance of *Wine Calling* is examined in the next section.

### 6.5 *The Importance of Marketplace Awareness*

I have been releasing films in the UK and Ireland since 2004, and have found that premieres of my previous releases including *The Cat's Meow* (Peter Bogdanovich, 2001) and *Love Is In The Air* (Alexandre Castagnetti, 2013) are an important part of a distributor's toolkit to be used to build awareness. They allow the audience to participate in the film, especially when the cast and the director are present. Q and A screenings are popular among audiences and cinemas encourage distributors to arrange them as they charge a premium for those tickets, in line with what Chan and Goldthorpe (2005) identify as a stratification system, more customarily used for the higher cultural arts. Both the Dublin and Cork premieres of *Wine Calling* had a post-screening on-stage panel discussion featuring a range of speakers including academics, well known-food journalists, the film's director and a wine merchant all discussing the theme of the Night of Ideas, namely, Being Alive.

The right strategic partners can broaden a film's reach by reaching potential customers for the film beyond the traditional heartland targeted by film distributors. This was demonstrated by the response from the survey (Figure 6.6 below) – 43% of the audience had never sampled natural or bio-dynamic wines prior to attending the premiere and of that segment, 50% of them indicated that the prospect of sampling it was a driver for their attendance. Without teaming up with the right cultural and industrial partners, I would never have reached that segment of the population.

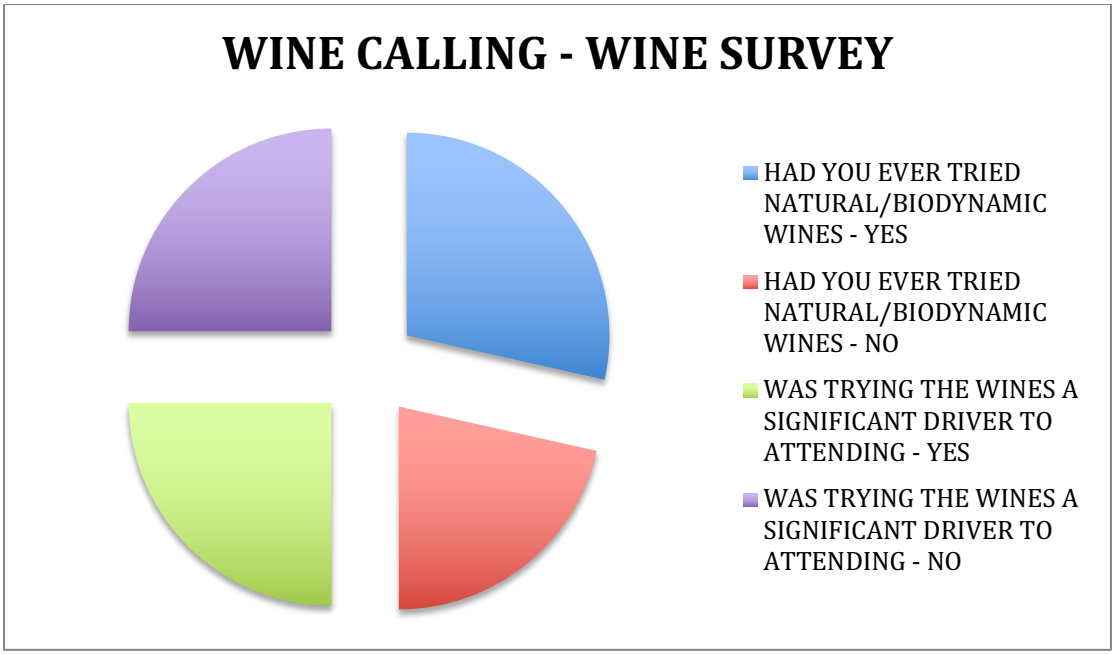


Figure 6.6 Pie Chart showing the importance of natural wine for the audience

According to Karray, Smimou and Sud (2015), "the brand familiarity of the movie's partnering firms in the tie-in is expected to positively influence box office sales". This was demonstrated in the response to the survey question – 28.5% of the audience was seeing a film at the IFI for the first time and a further 21.5% saying that it was the first film that they had seen in 2020; a further 21.5% heard about the film from O'Briens Wine, indicating that the awareness of the film and the desire to see it had been generated by the tie-in and third-party partnerships. The survey also revealed that at least 50% of the audience first heard about the film from one of the film's partners, demonstrating that the partnerships were effective in directing them to come and watch it. Karray *et al*. (2015, p705) suggest "that tie-in promotions are more likely to benefit movies that are completely unknown to viewers than movies with existing brand familiarity prior to their release". This was certainly the case for the 'weaker brand' of *Wine Calling* as it was a film with the marketing disadvantage of having no stars, no significant awards and the added impediment that the wine featured in it was not widely available in the UK or Ireland. It needed the right consortium of partners to bolster its visibility in Ireland.

By selecting a range of cultural, governmental, educational and industrial partners for both *Wine Calling* Irish premieres and the *Marie Curie* Dublin premiere, I was able to widen the reach of the marketing campaign. This increased marketplace

awareness, a key factor that contributed to both premieres being 'sold out'. Even though only 32.8% of tickets were sold for the *Wine Calling* UK premiere, with the exception of the tie-in with the Great Exhibition Road Festival (which engaged in no meaningful promotional activity), I did not think that the partnerships were a poor fit, and put it down to external factors including general audience apathy and the hot summer weather playing its part in keeping the likely targeted demographic away. The iterative nature of my research ensured that my error in judgment in using a passive partner, like the Great Exhibition Road Festival, was not repeated in this case study. Overall, the impact of the partnerships brought a wider audience to the two Irish premieres. The next section reflects on the development of my research from the *Wine Calling* case study.

## 6.6 *Conclusions*

What is clear from both the *Marie Curie* and *Wine Calling* campaigns is the extent to which the process of creating an experiential event becomes the catalyst for entrepreneurship. The second experiential event was more ambitious and involved entrepreneurialism and logistical prowess in ensuring that the film print, the Q and A panel participants and experiential elements were in place in time for two simultaneous events. The *Wine Calling* release personifies entrepreneurship as it involved making a series of strategic decisions that affected the nature of the release: firstly, selecting, pitching and enlisting the right partners in three different fields – cultural, industrial and governmental; secondly, the necessity of pivoting from a traditional theatrical release to one that embraced the use of platformisation in a day-and-date format; thirdly, producing two experiential events with a broad spectrum of partners, panellists and participants; finally, using my networks and engaging with transnational partners and successfully applying for and receiving subsidies without which the release would not have been financed and executed.

When I reflected on the organisation of the partner-led experiential Irish premieres, my practice showed that the right strategic partners can broaden the reach of the film by reaching potential customers beyond the traditional heartland targeted by film distributors, as well as changing consumer behaviour. The Irish release of *Wine Calling* consisted of simultaneous premieres in Cork and Dublin with a broad coalition of partners and was a logistical challenge as well as an all-consuming task to ensure that it all went according to plan; it involved all the skills of a producer to execute it properly. The concept of the producer-distributor is not a new one in the industry. As Gomery (2005, p87) points out, there is a long history of such entities going back to the merger of Adolph Zukor's Famous Players Film Company with the Jesse L. Lasky Feature Play Company in 1916. This continued through the decades to the creation of film companies in the seventies and eighties, such as the mini-majors, New Line Cinema and Miramax, entities that produced and distributed their films. While there is little academic consensus as to the definition of a film producer, Pardo (2013, p17) concludes that producing allows creative work and the producer's inherent responsibilities include not only organisation, planning and financial control, but also "creative aspects that affect the final result over which the producer has a

say". Defined in that way, producing is a highly specialised entrepreneurial activity and the curation of these experiential events embody the characteristics of producing.

In the contemporary UK specialty distribution field, I am not alone as a producer-distributor. Altitude Films produced or executive produced films such as *Amy* (Asif Kapadia, 2016), *Whitney* (Kevin MacDonald, 2018) and *Horrible Histories: The Movie* (Dominic Brigstocke, 2019) as well as releasing them in the UK. Studiocanal UK executive produced *Paddington* (Paul King, 2014) and *Paddington* 2 (Paul King, 2017) and Lionsgate UK executive produced *The Personal History of David Copperfield* (Armando Iannucci, 2019) and *Military Wives* (Peter Cattaneo, 2019) and *Ammonite* (Francis Lee, 2020) and released them in this territory. In Ireland, Element Films also produces or executive produces films such as *The Guard* (John Michael McDonagh, 2011) and *Calm With Horses* (Nick Rowland, 2020) and released them theatrically. By being involved in an early stage of the film life cycle, producer-distributors have the advantage of being able to secure and have timely access to the marketing materials, as well as a much-needed greater degree of control over the process and workflow. One of the catalysts of becoming a producer-distributor is to lessen the dependence on third parties and to protect against the higher costs of acquisitions of newly completed films. Getting involved at a much earlier stage of a film's genesis as a producer lessens the producer-distributor's dependence on third parties such as sales agents. This is because the producer-distributor is instrumental in generating its own films to release, thereby minimising the need to compete with its rivals to pay the substantial MGs demanded by sales agents for new completed films premiering at film festivals. There is an obvious caveat - the success of the producer-distributor's strategy is dependent on its acumen in choosing the right films to board at an earlier, and potentially riskier, point in the production process.

In the case of *Marie Curie*, the unavailability of stills hampered the development of the VR trailer, and on *Wine Calling* I faced a similar problem by only being involved post-completion of the film, thereby preventing me from having sufficient lead-in time to secure a tie-in of the natural wine featured in the film with the leading UK supermarkets. The entrepreneurial instincts that distributors develop across the production of these films make them better distributors – being involved earlier in the production allows them to build direct relationships with the cast and

director which can be advantageous in securing their promotional duties for the release of the film. It also allows producer-distributors to become joint venture partners by nurturing partnerships at the production stage that can be activated and cross-pollinated when it comes to the release of the film.

The *Wine Calling* Irish premieres were a monetary success because both premieres sold out and were profitable because I was able to control and defray their cost by bringing in appropriate partners. The third-party partnerships were effective because they promoted the screenings and attracted audience members that were not regular cinemagoers. The screenings worked as experiential events because the panel discussion and wine reception transported the audience to the world of the film and allowed them to experience the vineyards of France. What I learned from the *Marie Curie* campaigns was that I did not need expensive VR technology to do so. The realisation that the key ingredient was its experiential nature proved a crucial turning-point in the direction of my study.

This case study also developed the findings gleaned from the previous chapter by examining how foreign language films can benefit from being part of a transnational event such as The Night of Ideas or International Women's Day, or established film festivals like the French Film Festival UK. The release in Ireland of both *Marie Curie* and *Wine Calling* shows how platformisation can be built effectively into a theatrical release and be monetised by distributors. This case study builds on the previous one by identifying platformisation in the form of day-and-date releases as a phenomenon that distributors can avail of to generate a constant flow of revenues and protect against market disruption, changes in consumer behaviour and be a buffer against the impact of the pandemic. The use of a day-and-date strategy requires entrepreneurialism because it involves securing appropriate cinemas that are amenable to programming the film at a time when it is simultaneously available to consumers on VOD. The success of such a strategy is highly dependent on the depth of the distributor's networks and relationships with cinemas as well as its relationships with the VOD gatekeepers, and involves coordinating the launch of the film simultaneously across multiple platforms. To achieve the theatrical element of a day-and-date release, distributors will be dependent on a network of appropriate specialty cinemas and a network of VOD partners. The state of dependence implies subservience and subordination. As I have shown, a distributor is dependent on

exhibitors to programme the film, on streamers and ultimately on the audience to monetise it. Being a dependent distributor unleashes two positive forces – a drive to overcome it with an entrepreneurial acumen combined with a realisation that, with gatekeepers being equally dependent on distributors for new product, it instils a determination in distributors to fill that niche with its own slate of films. While a distributor is dependent by nature, I have shown in this case study that promoting a film with limited marketing hooks is a challenge and requires sustained entrepreneurship to monetise.

As a reflexive practitioner, I realised that effective data collection is at the heart of my practice-led research. My data collection for the UK release of *Marie Curie* was poor and I was determined to improve on it for my second artefact. Through the methodology of a survey conducted at the Dublin premiere of *Wine Calling*, I was able to critically evaluate the differing reactions and motivations of the audience, as well as assessing the contribution that the tie-ins and partnerships made to ensuring sold-out screenings for the experiential events for the film. The results from the data collection of the *Wine Calling* premieres allowed me to evolve my research from the first findings chapter by identifying the producing skills that a distributor needs to have to create an experiential marketing campaign and to survive in a competitive marketplace. Finally, a critical reflection on the *Wine Calling* campaign allowed me to conclude that partnership-led experiential events, unlike *Marie Curie*'s technological-led VR solutions, are increasingly one of the most effective ways to attract filmgoers to specialty film releases. To develop my research further in this area, the next findings chapter will reflect on the experiential marketing campaign for the Swiss feature film, *One Way to Moscow*.

# CHAPTER 7
## *ONE WAY TO MOSCOW*
## EUROPEAN (INTER-)DEPENDENCE IN A DISRUPTED MARKETPLACE

In this chapter, I explore the concept of entrepreneurship against the backdrop of disruptions in the economy. I do this by examining the experiential marketing campaign for *One Way to Moscow*. The previous chapter looked at the debates around dependence and partnerships and presented the findings of my practice-led investigation, into the experiential release strategy for *Wine Calling* in the UK and Ireland. It showed how distributors need to be entrepreneurial to navigate the challenges of releasing foreign language films through partnerships, often of a transnational nature. This chapter expands on the previous two findings chapters by exploring the impact of an experiential premiere event in a more challenging marketplace. Furthermore, it examines the need for producer-distributors to be agile and respond to market conditions, in this case, the role of the producer-distributor operating in a difficult environment like the COVID-19 pandemic.

This chapter also builds on the previous one by concluding that the entrepreneurial skills of a producer-distributor are more vital than ever to encourage and entice audiences to specialty films, and the engagement with third party partnerships is a necessary lifeline that provides those films, and distributors themselves, the opportunity to survive in a disrupted marketplace. While the pandemic formed the backdrop of this case study, my findings can be applied to any challenging marketplace faced by distributors including disruption from technology, platformisation and changes and evolutions in consumer behaviour.

I originally intended for my third artefact to be the experiential marketing campaign for *Sparkling: The Story of Champagne* (Frank Mannion, 2021) on which I serve as producer-distributor. I had intended to develop and theorise the concept of a producer-distributor, first introduced in the previous chapter, by using the campaign as a case study to demonstrate the benefits of being involved earlier in the evolution of a film at the pre-production stage. I planned to show that this would make a distributor less dependent by enabling entrepreneurship to commence sooner by putting in place marketing hooks and partnerships during the film's production. However, the COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on film distribution, creating

a “huge contraction in economic activity” (Mason 2021, p73). The pandemic led to the closure of all entertainment venues and the intended theatrical release on March 27, 2021 of *Sparkling: The Story of Champagne* was postponed indefinitely as all cinemas in the UK were force to close on December 16, 2020. It became a threat to my livelihood and that of my fellow distributors and entrepreneurs who as Naudin (2018, p2) describes, are negotiating the risks associated with self-employment as a price to pay for “the opportunity for autonomy, freedom and creative fulfilment”.

In response to the challenging conditions created by COVID-19, and *Sparkling: The Story of Champagne’s* ongoing delay, I opted to alter the focus of this final chapter, instead focusing on *One Way to Moscow*’s marketing campaign. *One Way to Moscow* is set against the backdrop of a real-life secret files scandal, known as the Fichen scandal, when it was discovered that more than 900,000 Swiss were put under surveillance because of their left-wing political convictions. I managed to release the film in the 12-day period (in-between tiered lockdowns) when cinemas in the UK were briefly allowed to open in December 2020.

The concept of dependence is explored throughout this case study while the transnational dimension of *One Way to Moscow* is revealed by the entrepreneurial role State Film organisations such as Swiss Films and Unifrance have on the distribution of their national films abroad. This chapter examines the design, process, organisation and impact of the attempted experiential campaign that focused on the spy themed nature of the film. It argues that while cinema is inherently experiential, distributors cannot rely on that goodwill alone to ensure critical mass for a new film. The offering needs to be enhanced by partnerships, including those of a transnational nature, and promotions that spread awareness and reach the intended target audience. The methods that I am using to present my findings are auto-ethnographical accounts, deploying what Caldwell (2008, p5) defines as “critical industrial practice", industrial knowledge derived from my interaction and observations with my peers and collaborators and a questionnaire (set out in Appendix D) drawn from a sample of the audience. It will use the same structure as the previous chapters by showing the role played by i) exhibition and ii) partnerships, particularly of a transnational nature and iii) the impact of marketplace awareness. The next section will examine the decision-making behind acquiring *One Way to Moscow*.

7.1 *Managing Risk: Acquiring a Film in the Middle of a Pandemic*

The advent of the pandemic is what Naudin (2018, p7) describes as a social context in which entrepreneurs operate that enables reflexivity and the potential for re-inventing entrepreneurship in the cultural arts. Shepherd (2020) makes the point that entrepreneurship research from scholars such as Schumpeter (1950) assumes that entrepreneurs are a main force of disruption, but as Shepherd (2020, p1750) notes "in the current case, it is a virus that caused the disruption". As a practitioner, I attend the Cannes Film Festival in May each year, primarily to view and acquire new films. That disruption was apparent from the decision to cancel the physical version of the festival. For the first time in its history, the festival organisers replaced it with a virtual Marché du Film or Virtual Cannes Market. Castro and Zermeno (2020) note that the COVID-19 pandemic has had an uncertain impact on the global economy, particularly for entrepreneurs and small and medium-sized enterprises that have suffered significant consequences. At the time of the Virtual Cannes Market, UK cinemas remained closed. The pandemic impacted my distribution business by making me alter the parameters and criteria for making new acquisitions. It was against this backdrop of economic uncertainty that I began searching for a suitable film to acquire. As an entrepreneur in such an environment, I took the decision to be fiscally cautious and to mitigate financial risk in an uncertain environment. Alpers (2019, p7) points out that the key difference between uncertainty and risk is that "most risks can be anticipated and measured with varying degrees of probability, whereas uncertainty is a subjective, multi-dimensional concept" that varies based on its origin and the degree to which it is experienced, making it difficult to measure. The current COVID-19 case is a good example of how this distinction plays out in practice.

For Sharma *et al*. (2020, p189), managing uncertainty involves a strategy that helps either "*reduce* (risk management) or *cope* with (strategic management) uncertainty; reducing uncertainty is a natural motivator" that guides behaviour. This is a good summary of the options faced by a dependent distributor operating during the pandemic. Sniazhko (2019) believes that coping with it allows firms to adapt their strategy to deal with the type of uncertainty faced by them. Sharma *et al*. (2020, p189) go further by observing that in this pandemic era, "reactive collaboration and/or

cooperation" such as shifting the uncertainty and risk to third parties is the most common strategy used to handle industry uncertainty. My approach was to ensure that the risk of acquiring and releasing a new film in the uncertain environment of the pandemic would be mitigated by third party partnerships and funding, thus reducing what Figueira-de-Lemos and Hadjikhani (2014, p334) describe as "the probability of undesirable outcomes and their impact" on my business at various stages of the value chain.

Film distribution is a capital-intensive business because it needs investment to fund a MG, or an upfront licence fee, for the acquisition of a film, and the further upfront investment of paying the cost of the delivery materials and the marketing and promotional costs of the release itself. With the uncertainty that the pandemic brought, I devised a new targeted acquisitions strategy - I would only acquire a new film provided it would be eligible for a distribution subsidy granted by a State public film fund for releasing it. This was to reduce my financial exposure and to mitigate against potential loss as a result of a prolonged pandemic. This demonstrated the survival instincts that a distributor needs to develop. To my knowledge, it is not a common strategy among my peers. The transnational support of European cinema has been a factor since the 1990s. Various governments, predominantly European, offer distribution support for the release of their indigenous films abroad – CNC and Unifrance in France offer foreign distributors incentives, as do the German, Italian, Swedish and Swiss governments. The European Union offers subsidies through Creative Europe, a programme according to Poort and Van Til (2020, p604), that aims to strengthen the competitiveness of the European audio-visual sector. While Poort and Van Til might claim that as the objective, the effect of it has been to encourage UK and other European distributors to acquire foreign language films. Of the 3500 films presented in the Cannes Virtual Market, I narrowed my focus to those countries that offered distribution subsidies. While this was a change of direction in my acquisitions policy, it is also representative of the unpredictability in the marketplace. It also shows how dependent I was on State Film organisations to minimise the financial risk of acquiring new product. To acquire new films, I was also dependent on sales agents in their capacity as the primary gatekeepers to new product at the Cannes Virtual Market. Sales agents and filmmakers always have a preference for their films being released theatrically over a straight to VOD release. A theatrical

release was not possible with the exhibition sector being indefinitely closed. I had to balance the desire to create a pipeline of new product with the necessity of minimising the release costs.

At the Cannes Virtual Market, I watched the Swiss film *One Way to Moscow*. This had been nominated for three Swiss Films Awards, winning for Best Actress, so had strong awards pedigree, an important factor for attracting an audience (Simonton, 2009). Swiss Films, the Swiss government film agency, offers a subsidy to foreign distributors for releasing Swiss films in the UK. I previously received Swiss Films funding for two Swiss films that Swipe had released – *Seven Days* (Rolando Colla, 2016) and *Blue My Mind* (Lisa Bruhlmann 2017). I was confident that I would be successful once again, as I received the precise amount of subsidy for which I had applied on my two previous applications to Swiss Films. While I viewed the film at the Virtual Market in June 2020, it was not until two months later in August that I finally made an offer for the film. The reason for this was caution and a need to evaluate the impact of the pandemic. Two weeks after the Cannes Virtual Market ended, government regulations changed so that cinemas were allowed to re-open from July 4, 2021, with social distancing measures. This was a positive development. While the Curzon Mayfair re-opened on July 24 and the Curzon Bloomsbury on July 31, many other cinemas remained closed. I concluded a short-form UK distribution agreement with the German sales agent, Patra Spanou, on September 16 and a long form distribution agreement on October 1, giving enough time to prepare the necessary paperwork and supporting documents for the Swiss Films' October 9 deadline. I then applied to Swiss Films for a subsidy of £9500 with an intended theatrical release date of November 27, 2021. I chose this date because I was encouraged by the prospect of what Chavadi *et al*. (2019, p31) call "the Bond effect" when UK audiences would return to cinemas in large numbers for the release of the pandemic-delayed James Bond film *No Time To Die* (Cary Fukunaga, 2021) two weeks earlier on November 12. The Swiss Films subsidy is paid 50% on theatrical release date and 50% on receipt of an audited breakdown of release costs. Consequently, a theatrical release is the trigger for the drawdown of the first instalment of the subsidy.

A near fatal blow to my release plans was struck on October 31, 2020, when the British Prime Minister announced that entertainment venues including cinemas

would have to close from November 5. The forced four-week closure would continue until December 2 when it was envisaged that restrictions would be eased and a tiered system would be put in place for all regions. The November 27 release date was no longer viable. Instead of dropping the film, I took the risk of betting on cinemas being allowed to re-open and moved the release date to December 4, 2020. If cinemas remained closed, I risked not being able to generate cashflow for my business – I would not be able to claim the Swiss Films subsidy, nor would I generate any revenues from the box office. The alternative was to release it straight to VOD. This was the least desirable option because in an over-crowded VOD marketplace (caused by the pandemic and cinema closures), the film would suffer from a lack of awareness, no press coverage and the same issues as *Wine Calling* and *Marie Curie* – namely no stars and an unknown director, the insufficiency of which is often an impediment for drawing an audience (Moul 2007; Simonton 2009). In such an environment, the best strategy was to pursue a day-and-date release where the film would be released in cinemas and on streaming simultaneously, without the traditional sixteen-week theatrical exploitation window being respected. The previous two case studies showed how dependent distributors are on the exhibition sector as a gateway to launch a new film, attract media attention and consumer awareness.

My plan of action for the Cannes Virtual Market shows the operation of the principle of 'the dependent distributor as entrepreneur'. Given the uncertainty in the marketplace, entrepreneurial instincts must kick in to create a plan to survive the pandemic. In this case, it was by using a third party State film subsidy to decrease my financial risk. It also demonstrates how integral transnational State networks are to the business of film distribution. Domestic pandemic recovery schemes were not open to UK film distributors, so entrepreneurship became an even more vital business strategy. As shown in the *Marie Curie* study, the Polish Film Institute rejected my request for funding because I had no pre-existing relationship with them. By having successfully applied to Swiss Films twice previously, I was held in good regard by them and knew how to navigate their complicated application process. At a time when in-person meetings were not possible, pre-existing relationships were pivotal to conducting business in the pandemic. This case study displays how a distributor is dependent on third parties in the operation of its business, but how entrepreneurship

can ease it from its state of dependence, even more so, when it is complemented by transnational partnerships.

The coronavirus pandemic, Cook and Vorley (2021, p278) note, has affected the business landscape, with innovative businesses particularly facing the prospect of running out of cash due to "a lack of availability of external finance or funding, and parts of sectors face being wiped out by economic contraction". In an uncertain environment, my financial resources were running low as the theatrical marketplace was suffering economic contractions. As a result, I needed to push through a theatrical release to draw-down the capital investment from Swiss Films, while, at the same time, the research for my doctoral thesis - was being impacted by the struggle to create an experiential event due to operational restrictions. Comunian and England (2020) point out that the term 'resilience' is often used in the literature on crisis and shocks. Robinson (2010, p14) defines adaptive resilience as "the capacity to remain productive and true to core purpose and identity while absorbing disturbance and adapting with integrity in response to changing circumstances." The assumption is that an entrepreneur - in this context a producer-distributor - with the right structure and approach, can adapt to funding cuts or reduced revenues. Despite the positive connotations assigned to the term by policymakers, Pratt (2017), in looking at the aftermath of the 2009 financial crisis, is critical of 'resilience' being used as a policy buzzword. Pratt (2017, p136) questions the association of the cultural economy with resilience and acknowledges that resilience does not necessarily lead to exponential economic growth, observing that the economic and social costs of constant reinvention are high.

At this time, I began to realise that resilience, combined with pragmatism and caution, are the very traits that will enable a producer-distributor to survive the turmoil of this COVID-19 era. Beirne *et al*. (2017, p217) identify the struggles and personal costs of resilience with cultural workers "resigned to exploiting gaps and opportunities, with a resilience that was often difficult to sustain and which took them on an emotional roller coaster". While the pandemic caused uncertainty, it needed resilience to predict how to react to a changing marketplace. I would conclude that resilience is a characteristic that needs to be in the DNA of any entrepreneur, not just a producer-distributor. Furthermore, Cook and Vorley (2021, p277) emphasise that there have been some potential positive effects with businesses having to "innovate

rapidly to adapt to new circumstances, resulting in business model changes". My experience setting up the release of the film certainly showed that the business model is evolving in the specialty film sector, particularly with respect to the convergence of a theatrical and digital release. The next section examines the role of exhibition in the release of the film and the impact of the closure of cinemas on the behaviour of the exhibitors.

7.2 *Exhibition as Resilience*

Given their historic focus on European cinema, my immediate choice of key exhibition partner for the film was Curzon. I approached their programming team with a choice of theatrical release dates of November 27 or December 4, 2020. Pinzaru *et al*. (2022, p1306) note that the "COVID-19 crisis revealed the ability of mature businesses to adapt in an agile manner - both in strategy and in operations". What this comment does not consider is the extent to which normal business decision-making was disrupted or delayed by the pandemic. Curzon is one such mature business, and like other cinema chains they usually programme their films at least two months in advance. As an example of how the pandemic had impacted the personnel and workload of a major cinema chain like Curzon, their Director of Programme, Damian Spandley (2020), emailed me on October 15 saying: "Sorry for the slow reply - with a reduced team right now and a huge number of requests coming in, we're struggling to keep up with demand. We're really only booking the cinemas around a week in advance, maybe two, right now. We've added the link to our schedule, and we're slowly working through, so please bear with us".[16] This email exchange is representative of the cross-industry slowing-down of decision-making that was partly caused by the furloughing of employees. On the same day as a month-long lockdown was announced on November 5 (with an anticipated end date of December 2), Curzon confirmed that they would programme the film from December 4 onwards at the Curzon Bloomsbury.

By then, I determined that the experiential campaign would work best with a focus on the spy themed nature of the film. In keeping with the remark of Jancovich *et al*. (2003, p10) that there is, and always has been, "more to film consumption than the watching of films", it was appropriate to extend the espionage themed universe of *One Way to Moscow* into a real-world event. This would require entrepreneurship at a difficult time when uncertainty, according to Panzaru *et al*. (2020, p722), seemed "to be the only certainty for some sectors deeply affected by the pandemic". My initial marketing plan had been to have an experiential screening where a third-party sponsor, one of the longest established commercial spy equipment companies in the UK, Lorraine Electronics, would dress the cinema and the auditorium with a

[16] Damian Spandley, email, July 15, 2020

combination of state-of-the-art surveillance and historical covert cameras (in keeping with the timing of the late eighties when the film is set). The audience would be put under surveillance from the moment they entered the cinema building – to ensure their consent, they would be so informed when booking the tickets and they would have an opportunity to review the footage taken of them at the end of this 'surveillance screening'. I presented a plan to Curzon whereby the Curzon Bloomsbury would host what I termed an 'Experiential Surveillance Screening'. I was pitching an innovative form of experience in keeping with what Crisp and McCulloch (2017, p153) call "the desire for cinemas to get better at what they have historically always done, not for them to change into something entirely different". While I was not asking for the Curzon Bloomsbury to change into something different, I was proposing that it do something entirely different.

The Director of Programme at Curzon raised objections around the concept, citing public safety concerns as a reason not to approve it. The pandemic and concomitant health and safety concerns about the interactivity of the event meant that an experiential screening would not be possible. As a distributor, I could have paused and postponed the release until the cinemagoing climate improved. However, in such an uncertain situation, it was hard to predict when that would be. The funding from Swiss Films could only be drawn-down when the film was actually released in cinemas. Once again, this highlights an unexpected effect of the pandemic making a distributor even more dependent on transnational State Film funding. I learned from the first two case studies that the impact of an effective experiential screening would build positive word of mouth as well as delivering strong box office returns. Yet, I needed and was dependent on the cashflow from the box office to cover my outgoings during the pandemic. This gave me the increased motivation to move forward with the theatrical release of the film. I decided to minimise my risk, or limit the downside risk as described by Sarasvathy (2001), by implementing a day-and-date release strategy.

I negotiated with Curzon that the film would be simultaneously available on their subscription video on demand (hereinafter "SVOD") platform, CurzonHomeCinema.com. The Curzon group is a vertically integrated company that distributes films, as well as exhibiting them in their cinemas, and curating a selection of third-party specialist films for their SVOD platform. In the same way as the

pandemic forced me to change my acquisitions policy, the pandemic caused Curzon to alter their policy in an attempt to ring-fence their revenues. They signalled to me that they would like to have an exclusive premium video on demand (PVOD) window i.e. that the film would play at the Curzon Bloomsbury and exclusively on CHC.com for a month prior to its availability on any rival platforms such as iTunes and Amazon. Curzon was in effect carving out an exclusive exploitation window. I agreed to an exclusive premium video on demand (PVOD) window, whereby CHC.com would be the exclusive streaming platform for the first month of release, launching on CHC.com and at the Curzon Bloomsbury, and then premiering it non-exclusively on iTunes and Amazon and other streaming platforms from January 11, 2021.

Given what I had learned from the processes in the first case study, I did not want to lose the experiential aspects of the campaign, as the data collection had shown that the experiential was its most successful component. I devised three spy-themed competitions including a 'Win A Spy Kit' competition and a spy-themed competition event that ran in the form of the placement of an A4 brown envelope marked "Top Secret" on each cinema seat during the opening weekend run of the film at the Curzon Bloomsbury. Only one envelope would contain a real diamond pendant. The partners on the film were Swiss Films, the Swiss Embassy in London, a spy equipment company, Spycraft, and Diamonds Hatton Garden, a family run jewellers located in the historical jewellery quarter of Hatton Garden. Data collection was done through questionnaires left on each available cinema seat. In hindsight, the decision to go ahead with a day-and-date release proved a strong strategic decision because entertainment venues such as cinemas were forced to close for 6 months from mid-December 2020 until mid-May 2021. It allowed me to continue my practice-led research. By releasing the film in cinemas in December 2020, I was able to draw down the funding from Swiss Films that was triggered by the cinema release. By releasing the film on PVOD at the same time in mid-December, I was hoping to exploit the anticipated bounce in revenues generated by consumers being locked down for six months.

Shepherd (2020, p6) examines "how resources are acquired and deployed under such extreme fluidity" in the pandemic and over time, "which elements (of the opportunity, business, community, and environment) are stabilised and which remain fluid, why, and to what effect" *(ibid)*. I had to evaluate how to allocate the marketing

spend for the film in the unstable theatrical marketplace. I found it challenging to get theatrical screens and press attention for the film – several influential film critics were actually furloughed during the time of the release in December meaning that the campaign could not use broadsheet reviews as a way to promote and gain awareness for it. The film had been booked to play from December 4 at Filmhouse Edinburgh, Queens Film Theatre in Belfast, Quad Derby, HOME Manchester and Watershed Bristol - these bookings had to be cancelled as those regions moved into Tier 3 which meant entertainment venues had to close.

These combined factors had a devastating impact on the box office, particularly at the Curzon Bloomsbury in London, partly because maximum capacity was reduced to 50% due to social distancing requirements. The film grossed only £219 on its opening weekend; by far the lowest gross of any of my releases. Even though the film's theatrical release was interrupted, I was fortunate to have chosen a release date that enabled the film to open in cinemas in December - cinemas in the UK remain closed for a further six months. The total UK box office that weekend was only £512,000 (representing roughly a quarter of the potential total number of cinemas open), compared to £15.4 million average UK weekend box office in 2019. Manchester, Bristol, Sheffield and Newcastle were closed because of being in Tier 3 at that time of December, depriving *One Way to Moscow* of additional regional engagements. In Scotland key cinemagoing cities such as Edinburgh and Glasgow had to remain closed because they were situated in Tier 3 and 4 of the Scottish system. In Wales, cinemas were forced to close on December 4, 2020.

Curzon Group was my key exhibition partner on the film, even more so when all our other regional cinema bookings were cancelled due to the tiered lockdown system operating in December 2020. Curzon was a collaborator, not just as a cinema owner, but also as a streamer, in effect acting as an exhibitor-streamer. This hybrid role reflects the change in exhibition that has been accelerated by the pandemic marketplace. Two of Curzon's key UK rivals are Picturehouse (which closed on October 9 and remained closed until May 17, 2021) and Everyman. In the case of Everyman, they had no source of income once their venues were forced to shut on December 16. They were adversely affected by the pandemic by not having a distribution or virtual cinema element to their business.

Partnering with Curzon proved to be a sound business move as it meant that when cinemas were forced to close, *One Way to Moscow* still had a source of revenue by playing on Curzon's CHC.com platform. In an email dated December 22, 2022, Charles Gant, a Screen International film journalist and box office analyst for the Telegraph wrote: "Digital platforms are essential, and especially the powerful brands including Curzon Home Cinema that have a direct marketing communication with members and customers, and can shine a valuable spotlight on titles like *One Way to Moscow*, where cinemas and distributors might struggle to do so".[17] Gant is emphasising the increased importance of streaming platforms in this new post-pandemic era at a time when the theatrical audience for specialty films has declined. CHC.com was of a strategic importance, not only to dependent distributors like Swipe Films, but also to Curzon itself because it became their main source of revenues while exhibition was shut. The Curzon programming team carefully curate a selection of films on their platform. Through their weekly e-newsletter, Curzon was able to pivot their core audience from their now-closed cinema real estate to the CHC.com streaming platform. *One Way to Moscow* was the beneficiary as it had a 2776% increase in revenue from the amount our previous Swiss release, *Blue My Mind* (Lisa Bruhlmann, 2017), had grossed on CHC.com two years previously.

Where does the exhibitor-streamer fit in the equation of the experiential economy? Due to health and safety reasons, Curzon would not authorise my Surveillance Screening. They have a company policy of not permitting the promotion of competitions in their communication with their subscribers, so the only form of promotion they would accept was the hanging of the *One Way to Moscow* cinema poster (which advertised the competitions) in their lobby and other public areas of the Curzon Bloomsbury. But since cinemas were closed until December 4, the opportunity to promote the film at Curzon sites prior to the release - via posters - was minimal other than the day of release onwards. Notwithstanding the limitations of its policies, Curzon was an important partner in providing both the physical and virtual real estate, but not for the promotion of the competitions. It was an active partner for promoting the film but a passive one with respect to the competitions. This left a lacuna that had to be filled by finding other sources and partners to promote the experiential competitions.

[17] Charles Gant, email, December 22, 2022

*Giones et al*. (2020, p7) believe that entrepreneurial action "must be situated in the entrepreneurs' assessment of the opportunities and environment where they operate". These principles can be applied to my response to the exogenous shock of my initial release date of November 27 being no longer viable because of the imposition of a lockdown. The pandemic is somewhat reminiscent of the situations described by researchers such as Villar and Miralles (2021) and Williams and Shepherd (2016) when studying the improvisational behaviour of entrepreneurs in the wake of a natural disaster. Giones *et al*. (2020, p186) question "whether entrepreneurs will benefit from planning to produce an organised response, and whether having a plan will be enough for them to navigate through the crisis". In the case of *One Way to Moscow*, it was less the case of planning an organised response, more a case of figuring out if the film could actually be released or not. As it happened, the film was released in the only 12-day period that cinemas in most parts of England were open – they were closed for a further six-month period.

While Correia *et al*. (2022, p917) point out that historical evidence "suggests that the more stringent are the lockdown conditions, the more robust will be the subsequent economic recovery", McCann and Ortega-Argiles (2021, p147) believe some sectors may take several years to recover. Sheiner and Yilla (2020) note that recovery forecasts span a continuum from the most pessimistic to the most optimistic scenarios and the lack of consensus is mostly due to the radical uncertainty context we are currently facing (Griffith *et al*. 2020). My research methodology enabled me to examine how the exhibition sector is mounting a recovery and to ascertain that other specialty cinemas in the UK have looked at Curzon's business model and realised the benefit, not to mention the necessity of having dual revenue streams. Whereas the pre-crisis UK model was an exclusive sixteen-week theatrical window, for the first time since I began distributing films in 2004, specialty cinemas have been encouraging UK distributors to release films in cinemas and on VOD simultaneously to take advantage of dual revenue streams. This might turn out to be what Guzman (2020) describes as a "quick pivot in the business model"[18] but it is a strategy that has implications for the industry.

[18] https:/uk.news.yahoo.com/barbara-corcoran-says-majority-of-her-shark-tank-companies-wont-make-it-through-coronavirus-trough-120214825.html

Specialty cinemas in the north of England, including HOME Manchester and the community cinema network, CineNorth, teamed up during lockdown to direct their customers to virtual screenings hosted by YourScreen. This was replicated in other territories – Kino Lorber's Kino Marquee virtual platform in the United States is widely used by cinemas; Yorck Kinogruppe is Germany's largest network of specialty cinemas and they partnered with the streamer, MUBI. In France, cinemas partnered with the La Toile white label VOD platform. The long-established pre-pandemic view that day-and-date releases would cannibalise theatrical revenues morphed into a new sense of reality and survival. The actions of the exhibition sector represented an entrepreneurial response to the crisis of the pandemic and these instincts combined with the government intervention of the BFI's Culture Recovery Fund led to the ultimate survival of many vulnerable cinemas. As of the start of 2022, the BFI had awarded £33.8 million to 209 cinemas across England, of which 89% were cinemas located outside London (BFI, 2021). HOME, for instance, has stopped its policy of virtual screenings while key regional sites including the Glasgow Film Theatre and the Filmhouse in Edinburgh are continuing it as part of their offering. While this trend suggests that the film distribution sector is still grappling with lower box office revenues, the producer-distributor is well placed to take advantage of the dual revenues on offer from certain cinema engagements. It is still too early to judge definitively if cinemas will continue the policy in the long term. In the next section, I examine the impact of the various partnerships, including Curzon, had on the performance of the film to assess their value on the experiential nature of the release.

7.3 *Partnerships: Networking the Virtual*

The COVID-19 situation creates new networking opportunities for entrepreneurial minded distributors. Levin *et al*. (2011) believe that lockdowns, physical distancing, and more isolation offer an opportunity to reach out to dormant ties, allowing the approach itself to become more natural and necessary. Support for the campaign of *One Way to Moscow* came from four cross-promotional partners in the UK - one new partner that I approached and brought on board, Spycraft; two partners that I had recently worked with – Curzon and the Embassy of Switzerland in the United Kingdom (hereinafter the Swiss Embassy) and one partner that could be classified as a dormant tie, Diamonds Hatton Garden (DHG). I had a successful collaboration with them on a French heist thriller that I distributed 7 years earlier. The partnership centred on *The Last Diamond* (Eric Barbier, 2014) where cinemagoers had an opportunity to win a diamond ring on Valentine's Day. I had not been in contact with DHG since that promotion so I would classify it as a dormant tie or partner. The newest partner that I brought on board, Spycraft, is an international spy equipment shop based in the UK that has specialised in surveillance electronics for professionals and amateurs for a quarter of a century. Spycraft became part of the experiential marketing campaign by offering a Spy Kit consisting of a wrist-watch with a recording device and camera and USB stick with a recording device and camera as a prize open to those who bought a ticket for the film.

The set of crisis response phases proposed by Lettieri *et al*. (2009) - in-crisis, post-crisis, and pre-crisis – is a useful guiding framework for entrepreneurial action under an exogenous shock such as the pandemic. They highlight individual aspects of each that impact an entrepreneur's preparation, perceptions, and potential response to the crisis. *One Way to Moscow* was being released in the in-crisis phase of the pandemic. On November 13, two weeks before the film's release, I received the news that the Swiss Films application was successful but with a significant deduction in the award granted. Swiss Films had awarded a subsidy of £5500 sterling, 58% less than I had requested. This was a set-back that made me re-evaluate the areas in which to focus the spending on the film. The lower-than-expected subsidy from Swiss Films meant that my response was to proceed cautiously with the release, and to minimise our marketing spend, to act with frugality. Giones *et al*. (2020, p186) observe that

frugality is an individual disposition associated with entrepreneurs designed to conserve resources, thereby contributing to resilience and increased preparedness in a pandemic. I learned from the previous two case studies the value of using third party sponsorships to minimise expenditure, so my frugality on those two campaigns had pre-emptively prepared me for the disruption that the pandemic could bring to a release of a new film.

The concept of frugality, Michaelis (2017) believes, has persisted over time as a way to reduce consumption while simultaneously building wealth in a period of economic turmoil. I was hoping that my campaign would increase my cashflow and build wealth during the turmoil of the pandemic. The various partnerships were designed to encourage cinemagoers to return to the cinema after the disruption of being forced to shut for one month, and the uncertainty of cinemas remaining open. These partnerships would prove more important in the light of the news on October 2 of the postponement of *No Time To Die*'s release until 2021, depriving the cinema sector of both much needed footfall and a global cinematic event that would be the catalyst for audiences to return. Although Wenzel *et al*. (2020, p176) observe that the long-term effects of frugality "on business turnaround are more mixed", I viewed frugality as a necessity to ensure the release of the film and to build cashflow for my distribution business during the pandemic. Reymen *et al*. (2015) point out that the entrepreneur's ability to time the investment of limited resources into innovation opportunities will make a difference in the long-term performance. With my transnational and domestic partners, I attempted to create an experiential element to the release in the form of spy-themed competitions with the aim of building positive word of mouth that would make a difference in increasing the length of time that it would run in UK cinemas. It was a strategy that had the objective not only to survive the crisis, but also to be better prepared to mitigate the impact of a future similar event.

The existing literature highlights that pandemic planning efforts can be directed to focus on upside potential (by aiming for revenue growth), as well as a focus on limiting downside risk outlined by Sarasvathy (2001) and assuring early profitability and positive cashflow (Brinckmann *et al*. 2011; Grichnik *et al*. 2014). I focused on the upside potential of the experiential screening and limited the downside risk by having my partners cover the costs, with Curzon providing the cinema real

estate. The partnerships would build much-needed awareness and the revenues that would emanate from the screening would provide positive cashflow for my distribution company. This was consistent with Giones *et al*.'s (2020, p186) observation that during this pandemic, entrepreneurs might opt for more cautious growth targets given the uncertainty and increased risks and greater financial resource-acquisition constraints in the market.

Each partner contributed to the awareness of the film among its target audience as can be seen from the results of the survey in Figure 7.1 below. Levin *et al*. (2011, p936) find that in contrast to the widespread view that network ties must be continually maintained to be useful or relevant, empirical evidence is provided by them to show that dormant ties, if reconnected, can be particularly valuable. Even though Diamond Hatton Garden's social media presence had less than 1000 followers, my decision to reconnect and work with them again after 7 years was based on our previous positive relationship. This was a good example of using a dormant tie for what Levin *et al*. (2011, p937) call an under-appreciated but valuable source of social capital, and one worth pursuing strategically and practically. While Spycraft and DHG did send out an email to their subscribers with information on the film, neither had a large database of subscribers. They are specialists in very defined and specific areas of business and there is no real cross-over between their business and film-making. My hope was that consolidating a marketing campaign around these disparate partners would collectively build awareness for and interest in the film across a range of audience demographics. The final active partner on the film was the Swiss Embassy. They promoted the film to their database of 4000 subscribers on their monthly e-newsletter, as well as offering a Swiss Army Knife as a prize, open to everyone who went to see the film in cinemas.

Figure 7.1 below sets out the audience response on the impact of the partnerships. On the opening weekend, we surveyed the 16 members of the audience who turned up for the screenings. They each agreed to fill out a multiple-choice questionnaire setting out their reasons and motivations for attending. While the sample represents too small a number to make definitive conclusions about cinemagoing trends, it is worth noting that it represents the opinions of 100% of the audience on its opening weekend. This is what the survey turned out:

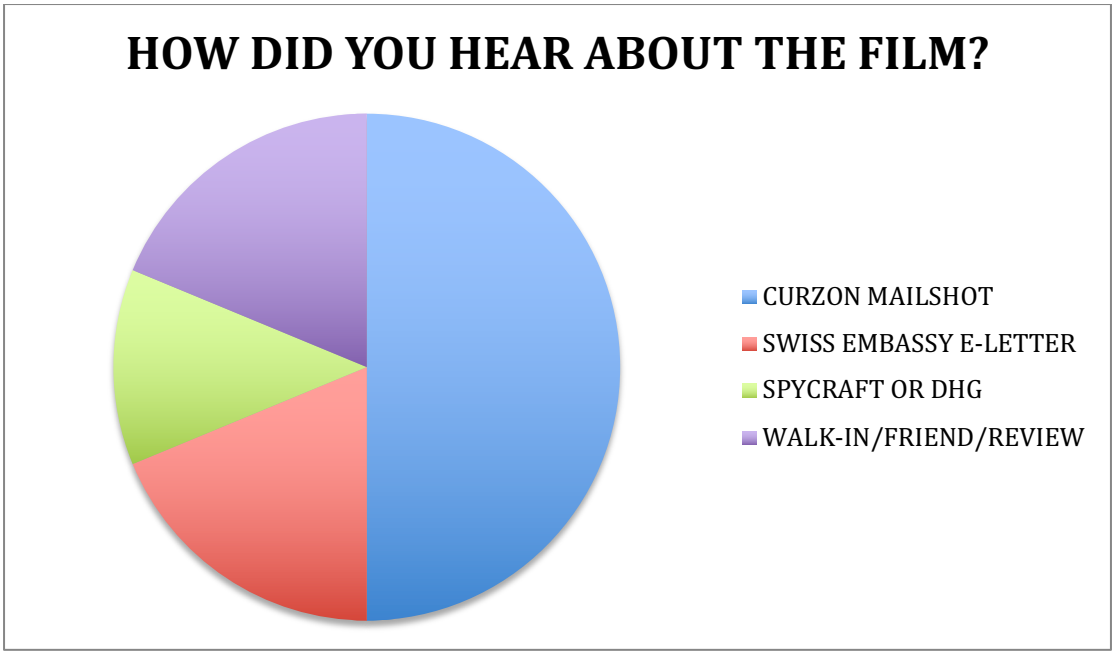


Figure 7.1 Pie Chart showing how the audience heard about the film

Almost a third of the audience had heard about the film from one of the third-party partners, while a further 50% had chosen to attend the film as a result of Curzon's messaging, thus demonstrating the effectiveness of the partnerships and reflecting the increasing importance of the producer-distributor finding a direct or indirect line of communication with its customers and having a positive and constructive relationship with the exhibitor. This points to the importance of network-building in film distribution, particularly when experiential marketing techniques are being employed. The practice-led research on this case study led me to the conclusion that Swiss Films should not be solely viewed as the co-funder of the film's theatrical release. Its role was so pivotal that it should be more accurately described as the key transnational partner on the film. De Bruin *et al*. (2007) discuss collaboration between entrepreneurs and state in New Zealand's film industry as evidence of entrepreneurship in policy-making and they make the point that entrepreneurial activity is not always separate from state support, citing the close working relationship between the government of New Zealand and the entrepreneurial filmmaker, Peter Jackson. Naudin (2020, p38) observes that this debunks the myth that the entrepreneur is a "lone hero" and confirms the notion articulated by Mazzucato (2013) that something as bureaucratic as the state engages in entrepreneurial activities and can actively create a market.

Working with the partners on the campaign for *One Way to Moscow* developed my research by leading me to conclude that the parameters of Swiss Films' international distribution subsidy shows that Swiss Films is acting as a State sanctioned entrepreneur encouraging foreign distributors to release Swiss films in foreign territories; that I was acting as an entrepreneur in partnership with Swiss Films and as a direct consequence of its distribution scheme; the Swiss Films fund was a market-creating catalyst for enterprise as demonstrated by my acquisition of *One Way to Moscow* in a manner envisaged by Mazzucato (2013). I consciously targeted films of Swiss origin at the Virtual Cannes Market because of the subsidy scheme of Swiss Films.

According to Dennison (2013, p24) the international trajectory of films is gradually becoming an increasingly "significant subject of interest for scholars, partly as a result of the formal disavowal of the 'strictly national' paradigm", and partly because of the growth in importance of international box office for contemporary films. It is this transnational nature of film distribution that is explored by this case study. Rather than disavowing the 'strictly national paradigm', this case study shows the importance of the national paradigm as a conduit to the transnational exploitation of foreign language films. The national paradigm remains vital because without its box office success, critical acclaim and awards recognition in the domestic Swiss marketplace, *One Way to Moscow,* would be unlikely to secure distribution in an English speaking territory like the UK. The domestic or 'national' success of a film gives it the marketability that a sales agent and a State Film organisation need to get buyers' attention and to secure its transnational distribution. Therefore, the transnational dimension or distribution of a foreign language film is often dependent on its domestic success being leveraged to gain buyers' attention at international film markets.

From 1992 onwards, Forbes and Street (2000, x) observe, that the effects of a European Union policy for the media "began to be seen, on European film production, and although less clearly, on film distribution". The establishment of the Creative Europe Programme in 2014 allowed film distributors in the European Union to access subsidies for the distribution of non-national films. While Forbes and Street (2000) look at the impact of European Union schemes such as MEDIA and Creative Europe in encouraging transnational distribution, there is less coverage about the role of

individual State Film organisations and their entrepreneurial activity in actively pursuing distribution deals for their local product. In my experience, these State Film organisations have a presence at major film markets like Cannes and Berlin, and use a combination of tactics to attract industry interest - glossy brochures, themed talks around subsidies and filming incentives, networking events where sales agents, distributors and producers mingle, as well as screenings organised by the sales agent. While this entrepreneurial activity could not take place as effectively during the pandemic, my knowledge of the Swiss distribution subsidy stemmed from the entrepreneurial activity of Swiss Films at previous markets and festivals. Transnational distribution especially for foreign language films requires this State-led entrepreneurship because of the competitive nature of European filming incentives and subsidies.

Because of Swiss Films' requirement for a theatrical release of the film, it incentivises distributors like Swipe Films to acquire and release Swiss films. The prerequisite of a cinema release is a recognition of its pre-pandemic value of being a revenue generator and the best mechanism to secure brand awareness for a foreign language film. Without that subsidy, I would have released the film straight to VOD, with the consequence of a much-reduced sense of awareness among its core audience, and, most likely, a big reduction in revenues generated from the release. Furthermore, it would have been competing with several new VOD releases without having the benefit of strong reviews, with an inadequate marketing budget to promote it. As a veteran distributor I had built a good working relationship with the *Guardian's* Film Editor and was able to secure a coveted review in the influential *Guardian* newspaper, demonstrating both the value of networks and how dependent distributors are on them in a competitive and congested media marketplace.

The impact of this third case study on my research was to recognise the value of transnational cinema partnerships, specifically the entrepreneurial nature of European State Film organisations and the influence their subsidies have on the distribution of their national films abroad. Looking across all three case studies led me to the conclusion that the film subsidies of the State bodies of three European nations – Unifrance, German Films and Swiss Films – enabled my entrepreneurial activity, supported it, and subsidised the release of the European Trilogy, which concomitantly allowed me to provide further research into innovative and ultimately

experiential campaigns. Such transnational partnerships are a vital component in enabling the release of foreign language films in the UK, but with entrepreneurship comes dependence. The viability of these transnational State Film subsidies is dependent on distributors being incentivised by the subsidy to acquire non-national product as well as the commercial quality of the product itself. Conversely, distributors like Swipe Films have become dependent on these transnational subsidies because they mitigate financial risk. While only £5500 was received by Swipe Films as a subsidy for *One Way to Mos*cow, the scale of the dependence on European subsidies is evidenced by the case of two of the biggest UK distributors specialising in foreign language films, Curzon and MUBI. Frey (2021, p70) writes that MUBI received over €1.5 million in a twelve-month period from August 2017 from the European Union's Creative Europe to support MUBI's 'Delivering European Cinema Globally' initiative. Even MUBI's 2019-2020 Industry report (2020, p1) acknowledges the pivotal nature of this funding, noting that "thanks to the support of the MEDIA - Creative Europe programme"[19] EU films accounted for 56% of its programmed films during the period of September 2019 - August 2020. In 2017, Curzon received over €500,000 from Creative Europe for distribution support for 12 foreign language films of European Union origin.[20] The dependence on these subsidies has established a *de facto* transnational partnership between these State and supra-State organisations and distributors in the UK and other European countries.

Since the beginning of 2021 and the formal removal of the UK from the European Union, UK distributors can no longer access European Union subsidies; a situation that made the unpredictable life of a film distributor even more uncertain, given the importance of the transnational component in their business. The precarious livelihoods of creative and cultural workers – dependent film distributors can be categorised as such - are widely acknowledged in academic literature (de Peuter, 2011; Morgan and Nelligan, 2018), but Comunian and England (2020, p114) contend that it has "often been invisible in the eyes of UK policy and policymaking". Comunian and Conor (2017) emphasise how this precarity seems to become visible only in times of crisis. I maintain that the global spread of COVID-19 and the Brexit-

[19] https://assets.mubicdn.net/website/creative-europe/MUBI_Industry-Report_2019-2020.pdf

[20] https://www.screendaily.com/news/creative-europe-supports-release-of-eight-european-films-in-uk/5124324.article

induced loss of European funding schemes for film distribution are two such crises. UK policymakers acknowledged the impact of the pandemic and the importance of subsidies with the announcement in July 2021 of a one-year ring-fenced fund of £500,000 to support the distribution of foreign language titles in the UK. It was administered by the BFI Audience Fund and was developed in consultation with industry partners including the UK Cinema Association and the Film Distributors' Association. This fund created a much-needed State Film partnership for UK film distributors, albeit for an initial 12-month period. The scheme expired at the end of June 2022 and no announcement of an extension has been made. The absence of its renewal will affect the desire of distributors in the UK to pursue and acquire foreign language films.

Bylund and McCaffrey (2017) believe that studying entrepreneurial action under uncertainty is at the core of entrepreneurship research. In reality, attempting to discern what responses constitute that which Brown *et al*. (2018) term a rational human action, versus that which Wiklund *et al*. (2018) call impulsivity reactions, becomes challenging. Classifying an action as impulsive or rational is pertinent to a decision I took to drop my publicity partner, DDA, the specialist film PR company, as a direct result of the lower subsidy from Swiss Films. I had intended hiring them for the film's publicity campaign. In normal times, the PR company is responsible for organising press screenings, and securing interviews with the director and cast with the national press, as well as promoting competitions and partnerships. Physical press screenings were cancelled and replaced with Vimeo links and it was uncertain if an experiential event would actually happen, or indeed if the release would go ahead on December 4. Amid such uncertainty, I dispensed with DDA's services. While dropping DDA could be constituted as "a rational human action" rather than an impulsive one, in retrospect, this was a mistake and negatively impacted on the release. The decision resulted in less marketplace awareness among the target ABC1 demographic, making the success of the film more dependent on my partners cross-promoting the film. The research of Stam *et al*. (2014) research shows that entrepreneurs' social networks are important for performance because they provide access to valuable resources (Clough *et al*., 2019). The PR company (with whom I had worked previously on the release of *The Cat's Meow*) would have put a dedicated

team in place to promote the film to the target audience and build much-needed word of mouth to make the film stand-out against a competitive theatrical marketplace.

Distributors will have to evolve into producer-distributors to be agile and meet the challenges in an increasingly disrupted marketplace. These entrepreneurial attributes are needed to confront the disruption caused by technology, platformisation, funding issues, changes to customer behavior, particularly with respect to the theatrical experience and external conditions such as pandemics. In navigating these disruptions, producer-distributors remain dependent on their networks, exhibitors, partners, streamers, State Film organisations and the ultimate consumer – the audience, an entity described by Lee, Jr and Gillen (2011, p3) as the highest priority participant without whom there is no film industry. Writing about the pandemic, Mills *et al*. (2021, p243) note that consumption of services, goods and increasingly experiences online can have significant implications on productivity. It is clear that it has already had significant implications for the theatrical distribution of films. *Mills et al*. (2021, p243) continue by noting that business models will have to change rapidly and develop to suit this new world.

To provide insight as to how entrepreneurs can respond to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, Giones *et al*. (2020) integrate three complementary areas of research – business planning, frugality behaviour and an entrepreneur's social support to propose a framework for entrepreneurial action under an exogenous shock. In the case of *One Way to Moscow*, business planning was demonstrated by persevering with a theatrical release in an uncertain marketplace on December 4, frugality behaviour was personified by the decision to drop the PR company, and the social support was provided by partners such as DHG, the Swiss Embassy and Swiss Films. The producer-distributor model allowed me to harness my entrepreneurial skills to put together four partnerships within a three-month period, to book cinemas and to execute a cinema release date that was a condition precedent to trigger the payment of a subsidy from the Swiss national film organisation, Swiss Films. In the next section, I look at the impact of marketplace awareness and the value of the experiential nature of the screenings.

### 7.4 *Marketplace Awareness and the Value of the Experiential*

The downside of pursuing a December 2020 theatrical release was that the experiential nature of the release was curtailed because of the pandemic. I was forced to change course by having to drop the experiential nostalgic surveillance screening. I did manage to persuade the Curzon to allow for some experiential activity on the opening weekend of release by having the audience participate in the film's 1980s Cold War era by finding a manila envelope on each cinema seat, one of which contained a DHG diamond. Curzon's policy of not promoting competitions in their communications with their subscribers deprived the experiential competition campaign of the oxygen of marketplace awareness needed to build the 'must see' factor that would normally compel audiences to see a film on its opening weekend. As I found in the previous chapter, a non-theatrical venue allows, in theory, for more creative freedom to pursue an experiential event like the Surveillance Screening, with the likelihood of greater control over such activities. In practice, the expense of creating an event in a non-theatrical venue - event hire, licensing, insurance, and other event related costs - is unlikely to make it financially worthwhile. As a result, distributors will remain dependent on cinemas like Curzon for the provision of the experiential aspects of foreign language film events, especially as cinemas have the necessary licensing permissions in place. Figure 7.2 below shows the age composition of the audience as derived from the questionnaire:

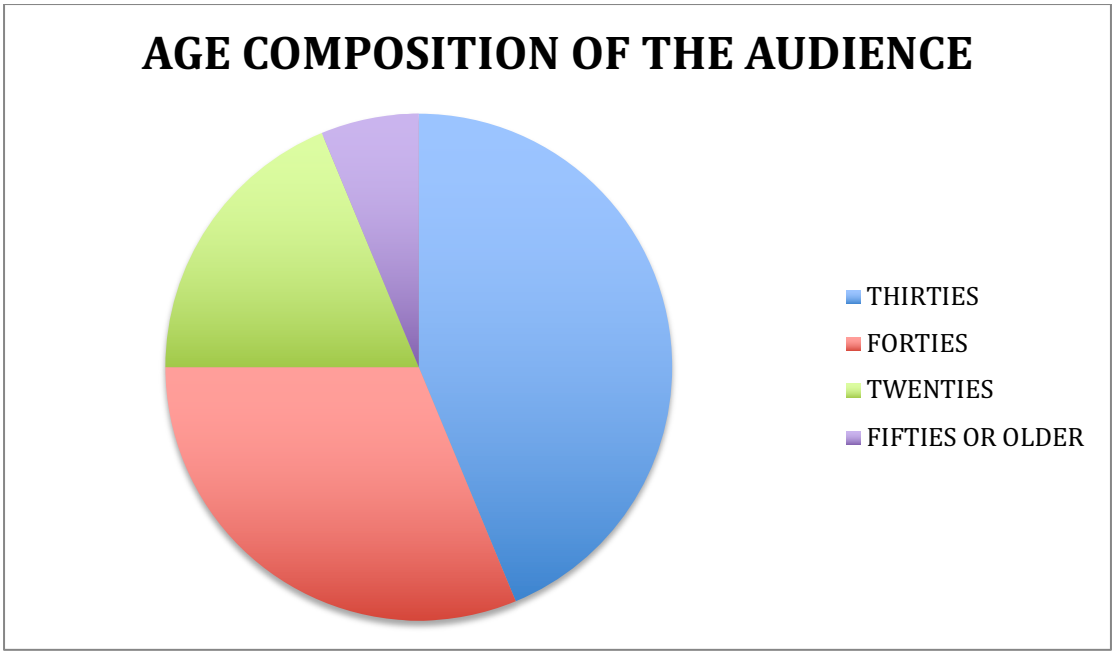


Figure 7.2 Pie Chart showing how the age composition of the audience

Given the pandemic and the unavailability of a vaccine, I was surprised to see that over a third of the audience were in their forties or fifties, which is the typical average age of the pre-pandemic Curzon consumer. My analysis is that the market awareness built by the messaging of the Curzon and my other partners was effective in bringing out the same demographic that was customary in the pre-crisis era. It proved to me the benefits or added value of introducing and building partnerships into the marketing of a foreign language film in an uncertain market environment. I had reduced the risk and uncertainty of a return on investment by a diverse offering of a combination of prizes and Cold War nostalgia. The results also point to the enduring appeal of cinemagoing among the traditional specialty film-loving demographic, although given the limited number of the sample, it is impossible to draw definitive conclusions, especially in a transitional period for exhibition. Figure 7.3 below sets out the main reason for attendance:

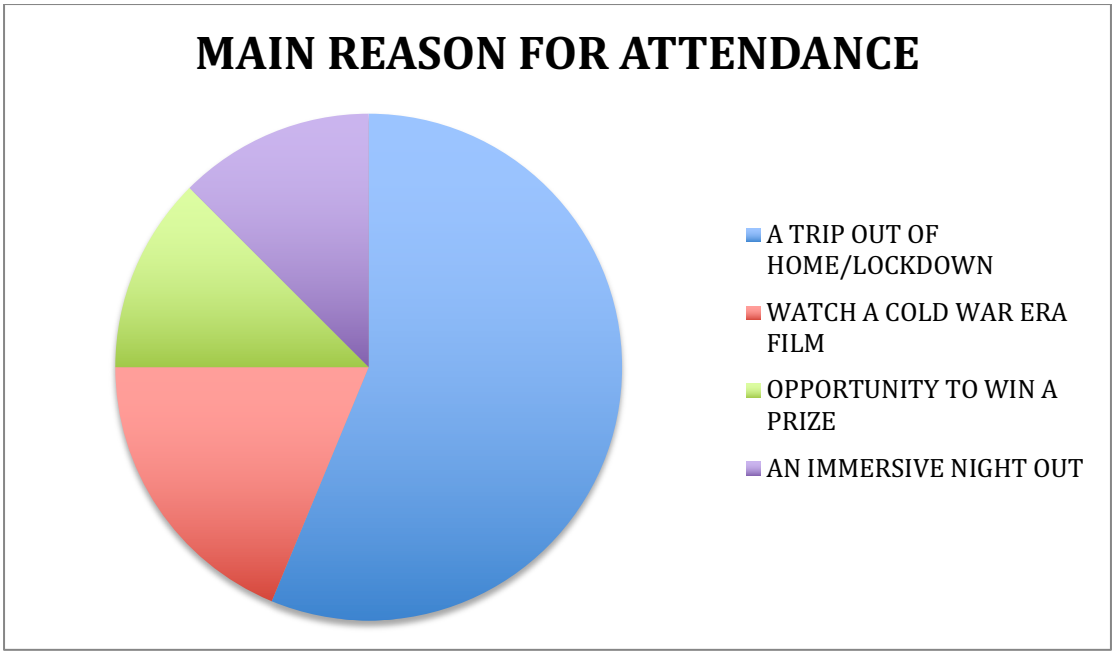


Figure 7.3 Pie Chart showing how the main reason for attendance

Figure 7.4 below sets out the audience highlights of the evening:

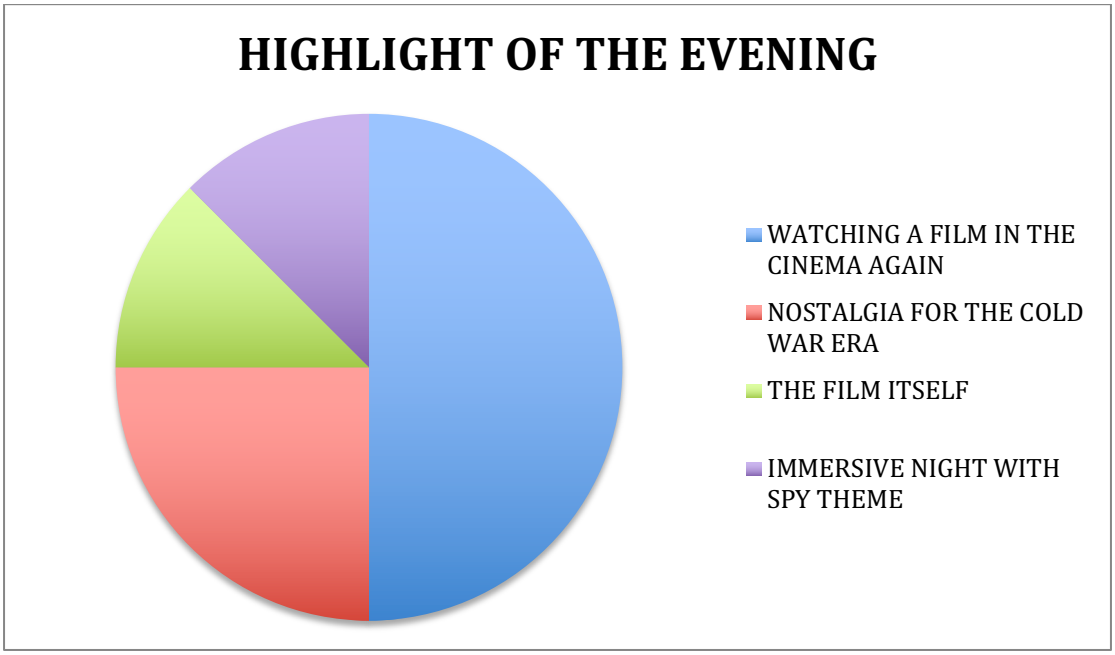


Figure 7.4 Pie Chart showing the highlight of the evening for the audience

Only two audience members were attracted by the chance to win a prize; over 50% of the audience used it as an opportunity to have a trip out of home, away from lockdown; almost a fifth were curious to see a Cold War era film, from which I take a

sense of nostalgia, especially as a third of the audience were old enough to remember the Cold War. This trend is in keeping with what Yao (2020, p241) calls "the flourishing 'nostalgia' of the Cold War in the Hollywood mass cultural productions" citing recent Cold War nostalgia films *Atomic Blonde* (David Leitch, 2017), *The Shape of Water* (Guillermo del Toro, 2017), *Red Sparrow* (Francis Lawrence, 2018) and *The White Crow* (Ralph Fiennes, 2018) as examples which explore both the historicising potential of nostalgia films and how they contribute to the memory studies of the Cold War.

The survey showed that the overwhelming driver of purchasing a ticket was not the experience of being part of a spy-themed evening or winning one of the prizes on offer. More than half the audience over the opening weekend gave the reason as the desire to see a film in the cinema again, while a quarter cited nostalgia for the Cold War era. Nostalgia has always been a key element of the success of the UK's leading experiential events distributor, Secret Cinema and also in some of the older Christmas themed films traditionally re-released by the studios over the Christmas period. It could be argued that the transnational elements to this nostalgia allow the spy narrative to retain currency to contemporary audiences. While there was no nostalgic element in the first two case studies, the sample questionnaires highlighted that nostalgia for the Cold War era was one of the motivating factors. Imre (2022) notes that "spies have made a remarkable international comeback in popular film and TV since the early 2010s".

TV series and feature films, from the Oscar winning *The Lives of Others* (Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2007), *The Bridge of Spies* (Steven Spielberg, 2015), *Red Sparrow* (Francis Lawrence, 2018), *Red Joan* (Trevor Nunn, 2018) to TV series like *Deutschland '83* (Edward Berger and Samira Radsi, 2015) and *The Americans* (Gavin O'Connor *et al*., 2013-2018) revolve around spying and surveillance and all benefited from transnational distribution. Imre (2022) believes that while the focus on espionage and surveillance in these films and TV series draw on inspiration from the Cold War, they convey a decidedly contemporary sense of ambiguity and dystopia that is associated with the erosion of trust in democratic institutions. For her, the resurgence of Cold War spies, particularly on streaming platforms is not just a symptom of nostalgia or *Ostalgie*. Rather, it calls into question the post-Cold War discourses of freedom, given the capacity of streaming services

and digital media companies to surveil their users. While the survey did not address such issues, the fact that the audience was motivated to see a spy-themed film at a time when the State were monitoring the enforcement of the COVID-19 lockdown in the pre-Christmas period, is beyond the scope of this study and one for future researchers to explore.

The specificity as well as the importance of encounters with history on screen – such as the real-life spy scandal in *One Way to Moscow* - has been recognised by many scholars (Mazierska 2011; Landsberg 2015 and De Groot 2015). Bondebjerg (2020, p13) notes that historical dramas are appraised for their 'ability to make the past come alive, to make us experience and imagine the past in a way that involves both knowledge, identification and emotions". Releasing a film set in the Cold War era allowed the audience to experience and imagine the past. Bondebjerg (2016, p3) argues, albeit in the context of transnational TV dramas, that one might think "of national particularity meeting transnational co-production and audiences as a formula for what is developing in Europe right now". *One Way to Moscow* fits that description as the domestic Swiss context of the real-life Fichen spy scandal is one of 'national particularity' and the Cold War element of the storyline enabled its transnational distribution because of the popularity of the genre. Although *One Way to Moscow* had a simultaneous theatrical and streaming release, Bondebjerg (2016, p5) goes so far as observing that for streaming services, the transnational storytelling has already become a new creative strategy. According to Rehorova (2022, p12), espionage is "by definition a transnational phenomenon, that transcends its specific historical and geographical setting", and is therefore likely to support the engagement of audiences across multiple territories. This was the case with *One Way to Moscow* which was theatrically distributed transnationally in multiple territories including Germany, Spain and Poland using Swiss Films subsidies.

Although Bergfelder (2005, p321) points out that film studies has historically lagged behind other academic disciplines in using concepts such as "global diaspora" and "transnationalism", the scholarship has developed since then. Higbee and Lim (2010, p8) identify three approaches to the study of transnational cinema – the first approach tends to focus on questions of production, distribution and exhibition, in particular "the movement of films and film-makers across national borders and the reception of films by local audiences outside of their indigenous sites of production".

A second approach analyses the transnational as a regional phenomenon by examining film cultures/national cinemas which invest in a shared cultural heritage and/or geo-political boundary. This includes work by Lu (1997, p10-11) on transnational Chinese cinema or "an era of transnational postmodern cultural production") and a collection on transnational Nordic cinema from Nestingen and Elkington's (2005) and Higbee and Lim (2010) on Chinese and East Asian cinema. The final approach to transnational cinema relates to work on "diasporic, exilic and postcolonial cinemas" (Higbee and Lim 2010, p8), which aims, through its analysis of the cinematic representation of cultural identity, to challenge the western construct of national cinema as Eurocentric and stable in its ideological, narrative and aesthetic formations (Enwezor 2007, Marks and Polan 2000, Naficy 2001 and his category of independent transnational cinema). The one thing that transnational debates have not done very well is look at the process of film distribution in depth. Looking at transnational cinema through the prism of State film funding opens up a gap of originality in the field. Furthermore, the audience data confirms a nostalgia for the spy narrative that has been kept alive by transnational and co-production releases.

The sample also indicated the key role that transnational and domestic partnerships played in the awareness that led to audience members attending the film on its opening weekend. Almost a third of the audience learnt about the screening through our key partners – Swiss Embassy, DHG and Spycraft – while the increasing importance of the exhibitor was emphasised by 50% of the audience hearing about the film through Curzon's network of newsletters. While it is a small sample to extrapolate key findings for my research, 100% of the audience attending the film on its opening weekend filled out the questionnaires. The third case study of *One Way to Moscow* develops on the previous findings from the first case study that indicated that experiential events are a key attraction for audiences, by drawing the conclusion that cinemagoing *per se* is experiential and a draw in itself, and that nostalgia is one of the motivating factors. Given the small sample, I invited industry colleagues to examine the findings of the survey. Harel Kuzi (2021), director at DHG, wrote in an email: "Even though your audience numbers were small, it was a successful promotion for us. We had several inquiries off the back of the film. I am glad we did it, and I would be happy to do something similar again".[21] The ABC1 customer base of the Curzon

[21] Harel Kuzi, email, April 24, 2021

was an attractive one for DHG and viewed by them as potentially lucrative, so much so that my business relationship continued with DHG for the campaign for *Sparkling: The Story of Champagne*.

The snapshot of the December 4, 2020 weekend box office indicates that cinemagoing *is* inherently experiential – the top two films at the box office were Christmas themed re-releases. Despite new releases such as *Mank* (David Fincher, 2020) and *The Prom* (Ryan Murphy, 2020) in the marketplace, *Elf* (Jon Favreau, 2003) and *Home Alone* (Chris Columbus, 1990) were the top two films at the box office. Box office was down over 90% from the same period in 2019 with *Elf* taking only £48,244 through Warner Bros, compared to a dismal gross of £296 for *One Way to Moscow*. Several Christmas titles were re-released and made it into the Top 10 including the late 80s set *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, 1988), *The Muppet Christmas Carol* (Brian Henson, 1992), *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (Tim Burton, 1993), *Polar Express* (Robert Zemeckis, 2004) and *It's A Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946). An animated version of Charles Dickens' Christmas classic *A Christmas Carol* (Jacqui Morris, 2020) was the highest-grossing new release, taking £22,795 from 91 locations.

I asked some industry colleagues to look at my findings. Nathaniel Samson (2021), of the VOD aggregator, The Movie Partnership, with whom I collaborate on all of Swipe's VOD releases, wrote in an email dated April 29, 2021: "we specialise in VOD working with all the streaming platforms from Netflix, Sky to Amazon. Independent films get a bounce from a successful theatrical release when they hit VOD, so the cinema experience is important for feeding the supply chain. *One Way to Moscow* did poorly at the box office, but looking at the VOD numbers, it built up enough awareness that translated into rentals when it made its debut in January".[22] Samson implies that the film's VOD numbers were positively impacted by the awareness brought by the theatrical release. The results of the questionnaires combined with an examination of the box office of the weekend of December 4, 2020, show that a cinema trip is experiential and that while it is enough of a draw in itself to merit a cinema visit in the pandemic era, it needs to be complemented by partnerships. Charles Gant (2022), a film journalist and box office analyst, wrote in an email dated December 22, 2022: "I think your point that cinemagoing is immersive is

[22] Nathaniel Samson, email, April 29, 2021

pretty much universally accepted. For arthouse distributors entering the theatrical space, the numbers often simply don't add up – especially given fixed costs such as the BBFC certificate. For that reason, savvy distributors might consider what support they can receive from countries' national agencies and cultural bodies (just like you did in securing a Swiss Films subsidy for *One Way to Moscow* and support from the Swiss Embassy in London). The dynamics of the market are not in favour of some of these titles (including *One Way to Moscow*), and some kind of public intervention – from somewhere – is required. In the months ahead the entrepreneurial approach that you talk about for indies, with third party partnerships, is a smart one".[23]

This peer review from Gant points to the strategic value of partnerships as well as the case that cinemagoing is by its nature experiential without the necessity of special features being added to the experience. Van de Vijver (2017, p129) in an article about the social experience of contemporary cinemagoing, observes that the pleasure an audience takes in the particular spatio-temporal framing of the cinema, is taken "less and less into account by scholars intent on arguing for the digital transformations of multi-platformed, brand-extended, techno-participatory film experiences". The intrinsic experiential quality of cinemagoing was emphasised by Roy Gower (2021), Head of Film at Everyman, when he commented in an email to me about the experiential nature of the Everyman screenings: "It's hard to say how representative your survey was, but it mirrors what our customers were telling us before and during the pandemic and what we strive for at the Everyman".[24] Creating an experiential event for the target audience is beneficial, but not a necessity to secure their attendance and that in this new era, the humanistic experience of going to the cinema is part of a century long tradition that will not disappear because of the pandemic.

While the size of the sample is too small to be making a definitive statement, an argument could be made that the findings are skewed because of the unique viewing context of the pandemic. However, there is evidence in the pre-pandemic scholarship that indicates that it is representative of contemporary cinemagoers. McCulloch and Crisp (2016, p188) note, in an article about the Prince Charles Cinema (PCC) in London's West End, that "cinemagoing is always experiential".

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[23] Charles Gant, email, December 22, 2022

[24] Roy Gower, email, April 29, 2021

They believe that using labels such as immersive and experiential has the potential to be misleading and risk downplaying the importance of even seemingly trivial and more traditional aspects of cinemagoing, all of which contribute significantly to the cinemagoing experience. McCulloch and Crisp (2016, p188) observe that the results of a survey circulated to audience members of the PCC, show that large sections of their patrons "demonstrated a preference for a more traditional, reverential, even nostalgic cinematic experience". While the authors go so far as saying that the popularity of event-led cinema has undoubtedly led to an expansion of the concept of what it means to experience a film, it is clear that cinemagoing is inherently experiential.

## 7.5 *Conclusions*

In this chapter, my third case study developed my research by exploring the entrepreneurial role national film and cultural agencies – State Film organisations - have to play in releasing European films, particularly the Swiss national film body's international subsidy scheme. 18 years ago, Kerrigan and Ozbilgin (2004, p230) noted that "concerns with US domination of European cinema screens and the apparent lack of success of policy makers to support sustainable development of the film industry has meant that these issues have remained topical for policymakers and researchers". There is now an established government policy in several European countries – France, Germany, Poland, Switzerland and Sweden as well as a central European Commission funded scheme, the Creative Europe Programme – that incentivises European distributors to acquire and release foreign language films of European origin. Kerrigan and Ozbilgin (2004, p231) observe that "many marketing academics and practitioners neglect the role that policy plays in shaping the practice of marketing," but my findings develop the research in this area by using *One Way to Moscow* as a paradigm example of a European film that was specifically acquired and theatrically released in the UK as a direct result of a government policy designed to export national audio-visual works in foreign markets. With capital being difficult to raise in a disrupted market, these State Film organisations will become increasingly crucial in enabling transnational film distribution to take place and potentially flourish. In such a capital-challenged marketplace, film distributors are even more dependent on the subsidies of State Film organisations to support the release of their films in the UK and Ireland.

The release of *One Way to Moscow* allowed me to develop my research to consider that cinema is itself experiential. This was borne out in two ways during the week of release. Firstly, the nostalgic nature of the films in the Top 10 of the box office. Secondly, the responses of the audience to the questionnaires. A trip to the cinema is inherently an immersive experience, but the pandemic and associated health and safety reasons prevented audiences from returning in significant numbers. The resilience factors of entrepreneurs who confronted past crises are examined by Castro and Zermeno (2020, p2) in order to apply them to overcome the disruption of the pandemic and contribute to post-COVID-19 entrepreneurship. At the end of the last

global financial crisis, my resilience saw me through as I chose to rely on my library titles to see my business through and build cashflow. I did not release any new film during the financial crisis in 2009 as I waited for the theatrical market to improve. Jorda *et al*. (2022) consider the medium-to long-term effects of pandemics stretching back 500 years and how they differ from other economic disasters and conclude that significant macro-economic after-effects of pandemics persist for decades, in contrast to what occurs after wars. Castro and Zermeno (2020, p73) reach a conclusion that is consistent with the neoclassical growth model – namely, that capital is destroyed in wars, but not in pandemics. In the film distribution sector, access to capital has been impacted even at a governmental level, as demonstrated by Swiss Films awarding a significant smaller subsidy than it had on my two previous Swiss titles.

The pandemic had an impact on my research as I was counting on producing an experiential event for my third case study. I had intended to develop my research further by examining the effectiveness of an experiential event as the catalyst for audiences to return to the cinema in a time of disruption during a pandemic. Instead, I could only create a watered-down and much diminished version of an experiential experience that had little impact at the box office. The pandemic had an industry-wide impact on event screenings, causing Secret Cinema to pivot to a series of virtual 'Secret Sofa' screenings in which they partnered with Haagan Dazs. From a research point of view, it was only through my entrepreneurial nature – the producer-distributor role that I embodied - that allowed me to pursue and force through the theatrical release, and to bring on board various transnational and domestic partners. This allowed me to create much needed cashflow for my business, but also gave me an opportunity to consider the evolving nature of the theatrical marketplace. McRobbie (2011) notes that the idea of a pro-active and self-sufficient entrepreneur blends with the autonomous artist, while Banks and Hesmondhalgh (2009, p415) talk about the "still-resonant autonomy of artistic labour". The producer-distributor, and indeed the distributor, is far from autonomous and is still dependent on outside factors, such as competition from rival sources of entertainment, the weather, the pandemic and the uncertainty of whether or not cinemas will programme its titles.

This third case study enabled me to identify the emergence of the combined exhibitor-streamer entity as an emerging force in cinema in Europe and North America, and their increasing importance in the emerging post-pandemic

marketplace. I identified the ascendance of streamers such as Netflix and Amazon that are using the theatrical as a form of marketplace or brand awareness for their product – *One Way to Moscow* competed against Netflix's theatrical release of *The Prom* and *Mank* at the Curzon Bloomsbury. Two weeks previously Amazon had released *Borat 2* (Jason Woliner, 2020) in the same cinema. This study is taking place against a backdrop of a seemingly transitional period where the traditional model of a film distributor is being challenged by exhibitors and streamers, but it is clear that in the period since cinemas have re-opened in the UK, the exhibitor-streamer entity is becoming more established. The exhibitor-streamer entity is still dependent on third parties, including distributors, to provide the content pipeline needed to ensure a steady source of revenues. The implication for distributors is that they will need to evolve into a specific type of entrepreneur - a producer-distributor - to survive in this marketplace, as entrepreneurial skills are a key component of the distributor's survival toolkit. The transnational dimension of *One Way to Moscow* is revealed by the entrepreneurial role State Film organisations such as Swiss Films have on the distribution of their national films abroad.

As Kuckertz *et al*. (2020) identified in their fieldwork with entrepreneurs impacted by the pandemic in Germany, the way forward requires balancing the building of resilience in addition to being ready for new entrepreneurial opportunities. I would maintain that the producer-distributor has the skillset to do so. Researchers also need to have resilience and an entrepreneurial mindset to create meaningful research and navigate the minefield of a challenging research environment. The third artefact allowed me to develop on the previous research by reaching the conclusion that cinemagoing is experiential and a draw in itself, and that nostalgia is a motivating factor. *One Way to Moscow* is late eighties nostalgia, set at the end of the Cold War. The chapter consolidates the findings of the second findings chapter by concluding that the producer-distributor is an even more vital component in a challenging marketplace. While cinema is inherently experiential, distributors cannot rely on that goodwill alone to ensure critical mass for a new film. The offering needs to be enhanced by cultural and industrial partnerships (including transnational State Film organisations) and promotions that spread awareness, visibility and reach and appeal to the target audience.

## CONCLUSION

This study has argued that those distributors commonly known as 'independent' should be more accurately described as 'dependent' - dependent on third-party stakeholders, State Film organisations, broadcasters, streaming services, exhibitors, transnational partners, and ultimately, the audience. Therefore, the concept of independence is a misleading one to describe those entities. In the European Trilogy case studies, it is apparent that I was acting as a dependent, as opposed to an independent, distributor. I was dependent on outside partners, both financially and creatively. To avoid intermingling the terms 'dependence' and 'independence', I situated my practice in the 'specialty' distribution sector and used 'specialty' as a catch-all term to classify the types of films – 'independent', foreign language, arthouse, documentary films - that my competitors and I release in the UK and Ireland. From my practice research on the European Trilogy, I have identified three key findings. First, distributors need to develop an entrepreneurial skillset and function as a particular type of entrepreneur, that I describe as a producer-distributor. This is to ensure that their business can survive in this new era, and to minimise the capital expenditure involved in releasing films in an uncertain marketplace. Second, experiential marketing can be created and employed by distributors as an effective technique to attract an audience. Third, transnational and domestic partnerships should be developed and utilised by distributors to broaden the appeal of a film, increase marketplace awareness and reduce release costs. In the next section I explore the impact of dependence and entrepreneurship and the transnational in UK distribution.

## 8.1 *Dependence and Entrepreneurship as forces in UK Distribution*

I started my research journey believing that technology, in the form of VR, would prove to be a necessary tool in the distributor's arsenal to ensure that audiences would be compelled to pay to see a film. Chapter five charts the beginning of my iterative process, implementing a VR trailer for the release campaign for *Marie Curie* as a device to engage audiences, using transnational partnerships to fund this costly endeavour. This was a pivotal case study as it set the focus for what followed in the other two findings chapters. I concluded that it was the experiential nature, not the technological aspects, that had the most appeal. Experiential campaigns are a draw for audiences and distributors do not need expensive technology, VR or otherwise, to create an effective experiential strategy. By employing an entrepreneurial skillset and using third party partnerships – both of a transnational and domestic nature - to offset the costs, distributors can find a way to build effective experiential elements into their campaigns that can attract audiences and grow box office revenues.

The next chapter on *Wine Calling* identified the use of partnerships as an essential part of the toolkit of being a distributor and a hallmark of the entrepreneurial skill-set that distributors need to survive and thrive in a challenging marketplace. Chapter seven, relating to *One Way to Moscow*, pinpointed the use of platformisation in the form of a day-and-date release as a strategy that distributors can employ to generate a faster flow of revenues and protect against market disruption and changes in consumer behaviour as well as being a buffer against the impact of the pandemic. To achieve the theatrical element of a day-and-date release, distributors are dependent on a network of appropriate cinemas and streaming partnerships. Such dependence brings out an entrepreneurial skillset that distributors need to employ to execute effective release campaigns.

The dependent distributor as entrepreneur, while implicit in the first findings chapter is a theme that is woven into the second and third case studies. In the case of *Marie Curie*, I was dependent on transnational State organisations – German Films and Unifrance – for the funding of the VR trailer; reliant on the German VR producer, Miriquidi Films, to execute my vision for the trailer, and for the release of the film; I was dependent on exhibition partners such as Cine Lumiere, the French Film Festival UK and the Science Museum to reach the intended target audience. On *Wine Calling*,

I was dependent, particularly for the Irish release, on the *imprimatur* of International Women's Day and on State organisations, Unifrance, Alliance Francaise and the Goethe-Institut to cross-promote the film to the intended audience, as well as dependent on their financial resources to mitigate the capital risk that I faced with the release costs. In the case of *One Way to Moscow*, there was dependence on Swiss Films to decrease my financial exposure for its theatrical release in the midst of a temporary lifting of the COVID lockdown in December 2020.

The dependence on a combination of governmental, cultural and industrial partnerships in the European Trilogy also encouraged entrepreneurship. The reason why entrepreneurship is so vital is because the dissemination of films in the UK and Ireland is changing. Streaming, in the form of the phenomenon of platformisation, is on its way to becoming the primary means of viewing foreign language films. This is a significant development that coincides with a shift in the length of the theatrical cinema window (a reduction from just over 16 weeks to 45 days in the UK). Chapter seven shows that the erosion of the theatrical window allows for further entrepreneurial activity and an opportunity to pivot towards streaming without having to be hamstrung by the 16-week long theatrical window.

The impact of the *One Way to Moscow* study on my research was to recognise the entrepreneurial nature of European State Film organisations and the influence their subsidies have on the distribution of their national films abroad. Looking across all three case studies led me to the conclusion that the film subsidies of the State bodies of three European nations enabled my entrepreneurial activity, supported it, and subsidised the release of the European Trilogy, which concomitantly allowed me to provide further research into innovative and ultimately experiential campaigns. Such State Film partnerships are a vital component in enabling the release of foreign language films in the UK. As well as incentivising and encouraging entrepreneurial activity, they personify the importance of transnational partnerships in the release of foreign language films. Transnationality is a theme that runs through the European Trilogy and my thesis demonstrates how entrepreneurship and network-building are interlinked. For a European specialty film, particularly a foreign language film, to be released in the UK, it is difficult to ensure profitability without the capacity to receive a distribution subsidy, without engaging partners, often transnational ones, that can mitigate the cost of the release.

Transnationalism is crucial to this form of entrepreneurship. In the case of *One Way to Moscow* the role of Swiss Films was vital, and their distribution incentive was the catalyst for the film being released in UK cinemas. Across all three case studies, the transnational nature of the partnerships was a key element in enabling the acquisition and the release of the films, as were the entrepreneurial skills displayed in developing and forging those partnerships. The European Trilogy shows how transnationalism, entrepreneurship and dependence are interlinked in the distribution of specialty films, specifically foreign language films. When matched with experiential marketing techniques, they are a force that can be used to ensure an impactful campaign that can make a film with marketing challenges stand out against its competitors. In the next section, I explore the value of my methodological approach.

## 8.2 *Researching Dependence in Film Distribution*

I used the European Trilogy case studies as a means to explore the sector, taking an iterative approach to my research. I combined this with auto-ethnographic observations allowing me to assess my progress as a practitioner, as well as a researcher. My research drew on such data collection methods as iterative artefact creation across three specialty film releases, audience questionnaires, peer review and auto-ethnographic observations as a film distributor across a three-year period ending during the pandemic in December 2020. This data was interrogated using a theoretical framework that incorporates ideas of dependence, entrepreneurship, experiential and transnational cinema. The iterative nature of the research worked well as it allowed me to consolidate findings, particularly with respect to the experiential nature of the campaigns for the Irish release of both *Marie Curie* and *Wine Calling*. It allowed me to pinpoint the importance of transnational partnerships and entrepreneurship and to recognise that adopting expensive VR technology had limited effectiveness. The *Marie Curie* case study looked at the appeal of VR in the promotion of a specialty film, concluding that it is not an effective tool, thus obviating the need for other distributors to pursue such a costly marketing technique. The methodological approach to the research in this chapter was instructive in identifying the experiential as an important trigger for audiences. The auto-ethnographical methodology allowed me to use practice-led research to question the use of technology in my campaigns. It enabled me to consider the value and impact of platformisation, to assess the importance of transnational partnerships and to examine the nature of independence in my own practice and to identify the element of dependence in the DNA of distributors.

The practitioner-led methodology allowed me to interrogate not just my practice in greater depth but also the role of entrepreneurship, with the resultant development of the concept of dependence and transnational cinema across all the findings chapters. McDougall (2015, p5) stated that practice researchers should provide "new knowledge which disrupts conventional practices or ways of thinking that need disrupting to make things better for people". During this period of disruption in dependent distribution, my research can be used by entrepreneurs,

practitioners and researchers alike, to question the role and effectiveness of the experiential from the dual perspectives of the target audience and the distributor.

The distribution and marketing campaign for any contemporary specialty film can be examined by researchers using the same theoretical framework set out herein. Concepts such as entrepreneurship, dependence, the experiential and transnationalism are all themes that can be explored, developed and refined by researchers in their examination of new content, especially in the post-pandemic marketplace. While many academics write from an ethnographical point of view, my objective was to encourage other researchers to write from an auto-ethnographical viewpoint. I set out to show the benefits that accrue from taking a practice-led approach in getting a first-hand insight into the distribution sector. While it might seem like a privileged position for a researcher, the practice-led approach can be used to unveil new findings and debates about current industry practice in a fast moving and challenging environment. As a result of a growing emphasis on employability and commercial relevance, Mateer (2018, p139) notes that universities are increasingly involving practitioners in the delivery of their film and television courses. He views it as a useful way to add credibility and perceived value. Likewise, film education researchers, such as Bergala (2016), see value in practitioner involvement in teaching. While it is a privileged position, the role of a practitioner-researcher is not unique.

There has been a long tradition of academic-practitioners in the film business going back to the 1920s (Petric, 1974). The film distribution sector might seem like a citadel guarded zealously by secretive gatekeepers and distributors, but my research shows that insights can be shared by a methodology that is practice-led and auto-ethnographical by nature. The arts education sector is well-positioned to adopt such an approach, given the increasing number of academics in higher education institutions that are practitioners or have practitioner experience in the film industry. My research centred on my practice in film distribution, but my practice-led methodology can be applied to any arts and cultural related project undertaken by any industry-active academic or researcher. A significant number of media academic-practitioners are teaching only, but my aim in this study is to show the benefits that can accrue from undertaking research and adopting my methodology. Mateer (2018, p24) argues that "only when universities review their policies, working practices and institutional attitudes towards industry can they truly make the most of what

practitioners can offer and begin to close the theory/ practice divide, to the benefit of all". I maintain that practice-led research is the most appropriate means of getting a first-hand contemporary perspective on the distribution sector and the accruing insights will benefit both the researcher and develop the scholarship and can be used as a much-needed bridge between industry cultures and academia.

Rashid and Yadov (2020, p3) point out that the plans of many research students were at risk due to the "sudden interruption in their research plan by the pandemic". I found myself in that invidious position. Given that my research was practice-led, the sudden and what turned out to be the prolonged, closure of cinemas in the UK and Ireland, impacted on my research and resulted in the postponement of my intended third case study of *Sparkling: The Story of Champagne*. This could have caused an interruption in my studies if I had not employed my entrepreneurial skills as a practitioner to drive through the release of *One Way to Moscow*. While an ethnographic approach is the predominant one in film distribution studies, my status as a practitioner pursuing auto-ethnographical research had a significant benefit allowing me to continue my thesis uninterrupted during the pandemic.

The position of a practitioner-researcher is not without frailties as it fails to ensure that research will remain unaffected by external forces such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The experiential elements of the *One Way to Moscow* campaign were thwarted, as were the numbers participating in the research as fewer cinemagoers made it out in the first weekend after the lockdown was lifted. This limited the numbers providing the feedback on the opening weekend. While the position of practitioner-researcher allows a researcher to take advantage of the networks built by being an active practitioner and secure research insights from industry experts, it comes with disadvantages. My dual status as a practitioner-researcher proved a hindrance, as I found that exhibitors were reluctant to go on the record about sensitive industry debates such as dynamic pricing, four-walling by streaming services, subsidy usage and data about the demographic breakdown of its audiences and users. This disinclination was fuelled by a concern that the information would not be used solely for research purposes. They feared that the data could hand their rivals (as well as distributors such as myself) a competitive advantage. For that reason, I believe that a standalone researcher will not encounter such hesitancy, as the purity of the academic status will ensure that there is no blurring of the lines between practice and

scholarship, between industry data being used for research only and the concern that commercially sensitive and confidential data could fall into the hands of rivals and distributors such as myself. The only challenge for a researcher will be securing the initial access to industry practitioners. In the next section, I examine the impact of my findings on the film distribution sector.

## 8.3 *New Directions for the Field of Film Distribution*

My study shows that the way forward for the distributor is to maintain entrepreneurial activity by continuing to release specialty films in the UK marketplace. The erosion of the theatrical window allows for an opportunity to pivot towards streaming without having to be hamstrung by the 16-week long theatrical window. I devised the concept of the dependent distributor in the literature review to describe more accurately those distributors that are commonly known as, or given the nomenclature of, independent. The current literature is developed by my introduction of the concept of the dependent distributor. A distributor becomes less dependent when it flexes its entrepreneurial muscles. By developing and maintaining partnerships, especially when of a transnational nature, distributors will have the advantage of spending less on the marketing and distribution of new acquisitions. In chapter one, I considered the film distribution business, primarily in the UK and discussed the concept of independence and its limitations as a method to define the 'independent' distributor. I used my privileged position as an industrial practitioner to critique the concept and introduced dependence as a means to understand film distribution and a framework for my research. The identification of dependence is important because it changes the framing as to how researchers should classify those distributors working in the specialty sphere. The term 'independent' implies that distributors have the freedom to be autonomous, individualistic, unconventional, maverick and in their professional endeavours. In actuality, to survive in the sector, distributors need to be fiscally disciplined and require the support of gatekeepers in exhibition, broadcasting and streaming, as well as the patronage of the end-user.

Using dependence, instead of independence, reflects that reality and is a more accurate embodiment of the position of specialty UK film distributors. It led me to define dependence as a state of subordination in which a distributor operates that is determined or significantly affected by external market forces, predominantly led by exhibitors, broadcasters, streaming services, transnational partners and the ultimate end-user. Dependence is a prism through which further research and debates can take place to examine the extent of that dependence and if external market shocks such as a pandemic or a recession can exacerbate it, or conversely, if a stronger economy can free distributors from its shackles. The notion of dependence liberates 'independent'

films from a contested vision of its conception as it oscillates from being characterised in the literature based on the way 'indies' are financed, or alternatively on their vision or spirit (Levy 1999, p3; King 2009, p1). Instead of the scholarship concentrating on the precise classification of the type of film ('independent' versus 'studio' or 'mini-major'), the concept of dependence alters the focus to the entity releasing them, namely, the distributor. This provides a fresh approach and opens up further avenues of research as it will permit study, ethnographic or otherwise, of the developing nature of a distributor's *modus operandi* as it reacts to external forces, customer behaviour and platformisation.

Chapter two looked at the academic currents on entrepreneurship and the extent that it addresses the film distribution sector. My work builds on the scholarship by identifying that distributors' dependence on networks and gatekeepers encourages, and often, induces them to be entrepreneurial to survive in a challenging marketplace in which consumer habits are evolving and theatrical windows are being reduced. The term 'transnational cinema', Higbee and Lim (2010, p10) note, is used as a "shorthand for an international or supranational mode of film production whose impact and reach lies beyond the bounds of the national". The danger they find with this usage is that "the national simply becomes displaced or negated in such analysis, as if it ceases to exist" *(ibid)*. My contribution to the literature of transnational film studies is to introduce the crucial role played by State Film and cultural organisations in the export of their national cinema and the entrepreneurialism it engenders in distributors. This is through incentives and subsidies for the export of European cinema. These incentives provide the transnational element for those specialty films made primarily for the domestic market. Rather than the national being displaced or negated, the national is heavily emphasised in the release campaign and is in effect used as branding. The use of subsidies has the effect of encouraging distributors to mark the nationality of the film and to use it as a form of branding in its marketing. This was the case with the European Trilogy - *One Way to Moscow* was branded as a Swiss film and both *Wine Calling* and *Marie Curie* were labelled as French films. Further research should be done on the role of transnational partnerships in specialty releasing, including foreign language films, and how distributors can develop and employ them to broaden the awareness while minimising marketing spend. By characterising the distributor as an entrepreneur whose professional practice

encompasses transnational elements, it allows for further research to explore the impact of the loss of European Union funding on the acquisitions policies of UK distributors. The loss of such funding could potentially lead to fewer European films being acquired and released by UK distributors and the necessity of more third party partnerships being used to promote a specialty film to a broader yet more targeted demographic.

The third chapter explored the role technology plays in dependent film distribution in creating an experience, both historically and in contemporary practice. My findings build on the literature by singling out the adoption of experiential marketing techniques and how its adoption fuels entrepreneurship among film distributors. That entrepreneurship can be demonstrated by packaging the experience with a set of appropriate partnerships that makes it more attractive to audiences. The use of technology and its various evolutions and iterations has provided a rich seam of research in film studies. Meta's metaverse should provide a useful source for future research as distributors begin to adopt experiential marketing strategies that incorporate it. Further research should be undertaken to assess the inherent draw of the experiential nature of cinema in a post-pandemic environment. The field can be developed by addressing the impact of home viewing and prolonged platformisation on audience behaviour. The building blocks for further research into day and day releasing and platformisation are contained in this study. Researchers should examine the evolution of post-pandemic release strategies to evaluate the benefits flowing to distributors and other stakeholders. It can also be developed by identifying which factors will be influential in making consumers return to the theatrical experience, especially the older demographic, that comprise the traditional heartland of specialty cinema.

Ultimately the fundamental success of any distributor will depend on the creative and business judgment behind the acquisition of new product. Key partnerships, whether of a domestic or transnational nature, will allow the distributor to mitigate its potential losses by securing third party financing, outside expertise and access to a broader or more defined demographic as the individual film might require. These alliances will also allow distributors to increase profitability by ensuring that less personal or company resources are spent on the marketing and distribution of the supported titles. More research is necessary to evaluate the role of local and

transnational partnerships in providing a more solid financial foundation for distributors, aiding their long-term survival. Future research can examine the extent to which cinemagoing has been impacted in the aftermath of the pandemic and the concomitant change in consumer behaviour brought about by the popularity of streaming platforms. In the light of this, researchers need to look at the importance of the theatrical component in specialty film releases. Do the statistics and diminishing box office returns provide more evidence that the chief revenues from specialty films will be in television, streaming and other ancillary media, not in the theatrical marketplace?

Additional research in the field can be done on the prospect of the growing influence of the subsidies of State Film partnerships in stimulating entrepreneurship. As I have shown, the governments in France, Sweden, Italy, Germany and Switzerland incentivise foreign distributors, including those in the UK, to apply for subsidies for the release of local product in their territories. These subsidy programmes remain available to UK distributors. Further research can be undertaken to study their impact in a post-Brexit marketplace where European Union funding, on which some UK distributors have been dependent, is no longer available. In this thesis, I have explored the impact of State funding across all three case studies. My contribution to knowledge is to maintain that far from creating what Hozic (2014, p229) calls "a structural or ideational firewall", these State policies have the net impact of actively encouraging dependent distributors to acquire commercially risky films (such as *One Way to Moscow* and *Marie Curie*) while reaping the potential reward of a distribution subsidy for so doing.

I had intended my final case study to focus on the release of *Sparkling: The Story of Champagne*. I decided against it being my third case study for two reasons. Firstly, lockdown restrictions delayed its completion depriving me of a period of extended research needed to break it down and analyse properly; secondly, the pandemic caused uncertainty as to when it could get theatrically released – this arose from a glut of films waiting to be released when cinemas were permitted to be re-opened post-lockdown in May 2021 and the possibility that the opening date might be repeatedly postponed. I intend to use the release of *Sparkling: The Story of Champagne* for further research with the theoretical framework set out herein - entrepreneurship, dependence, the experiential and transnationalism - being

appropriate themes to explore, develop and refine. The theatrical release of the film in the UK will provide more evidence that in the aftermath of the pandemic, experiential marketing techniques are more important than ever. It will also highlight the theatrical element to a film's release as still being an important medium for generating publicity, awareness and critical acclaim, as well as boosting downstream revenue generation in ancillary media. It will follow the same practice-led approach and auto-ethnographical observations to investigate if the centrifugal force of revenues from specialty films will be in television, streaming and ancillary media, not in the theatrical marketplace.

There remains a mutual interest among exhibitors and specialty distributors to ensure the survival of the theatrical component of releasing. This is despite fiscal risks being involved in theatrically releasing specialty films, against a backdrop of consumer and economic disruption. The adoption of a combination of State Film subsidies and a set of third party partnerships is an economic and release model that specialty distributors should embrace to ensure that the financial risk of a theatrical release is minimised and that revenues are maximised. To do so, would protect the theatrical element and ensure that it continues to act as the catalyst that triggers the down-stream revenue generation of a specialty film in every window.

Allen (2011, p81) writes that reconceiving cinema as experience would open up multiple new research and teaching pathways and "connect the study of cinema to other and different intellectual networks – uncertain, untethered pathways and networks" that might carry the researcher to places where films "as we think we understand them are no longer the only or even the most prominent features of the experiential landscape" *(ibid)*. In this study I have attempted to situate cinemagoing in the sphere of experience, but, unlike Allen, I would still place cinemagoing, despite the changes brought about by the pandemic, as one of the most prominent features of the experiential landscape in the realm of the arts. While I have not attempted to connect cinema to the uncertain, untethered pathways envisaged by Allen (2011), I have tethered it to the certainty that the experiential still has an important role to play in the viability of the theatrical element of film distribution. The dependent distributor can market that experience and enhance the offering by adopting entrepreneurial techniques to avail of subsidised marketing funding from transnational cinema sources while simultaneously cultivating appropriate third party partnerships. My

research findings provide a solid foundation for future researchers to examine the multiple new research pathways envisaged by Allen in reconceiving specialty cinema as experience.

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# APPENDIX A

# MARIE CURIE CONFERENCE PAPER

*Exposing the Moving Image: the Cinematic Medium across World Fairs, Art Museums, and Cultural Exhibitions*

Gorizia/Udine/Pordenone FilmForum 2018
XXV Convegno Internazionale di Studi sul Cinema
*XXV International Film Studies Conference*
Gorizia, 28 febbraio – 3 marzo 2018 / February 28th – March 3rd 2018

Università degli Studi di Udine
Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici e del Patrimonio Culturale

Università degli Studi di Bari "Aldo Moro"
Goethe Universität Frankfurt-am-Main
IMT School for Advanced Studies Lucca
Université de Lausanne
University of Malta
McGill University – Montréal
Université de Montréal
Concordia University – Montréal
Université du Québec à Montréal – UQAM
Université Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3
Universitetet i Oslo
Università degli Studi di Parma
Fachhochschule Potsdam
Universität Potsdam
Stockholms universitet
Università degli Studi di Sassari
Universiteit Utrecht

Associazione Palazzo del Cinema – Hiša Filma, Gorizia

Digital Storytelling Lab, Udine
LA CAMERA OTTICA, Film and Video Restoration, Gorizia

CineGraph, Hamburg
*Cinefest*, Hamburg

labdoc - le Laboratoire de recherche sur les pratiques audiovisuelles documentaires, Université du Québec à Montréal

GRAFICS – Groupe de recherche sur l'avènement et la formation des institutions cinématographique et scénique, Université de Montréal
LIRA – Laboratoire International de Recherches en Arts

Mediateca Provinciale di Gorizia "Ugo Casiraghi"/Goriška Pokrajinska Mediateka "Ugo Casiraghi"

Associazione Home Movies – Archivio Nazionale del Film di Famiglia
Musei provinciali di Gorizia – Palazzo Attems Petzenstein

Corso di Laurea in Discipline dell'Audiovisivo, dei Media e dello Spettacolo (DAMS)
Corso di Laurea Magistrale in Scienze del patrimonio audiovisivo e dei nuovi media / International Master in Audiovisual and Cinema Studies (IMACS)
Dottorato in Storia dell'arte, cinema, media audiovisivi e musica

Corso di Laurea in Relazioni Pubbliche
CEGO – Centro Polifunzionale di Gorizia
SCOM – Servizio Comunicazione

CRS – Centro Ricerche Sceneggiature, Udine
CINEMATICA, Laboratorio Cinema e Multimedia, Udine
CREA, Centro Ricerca Elaborazione Audiovisivi, Gorizia

In collaborazione con le riviste / *In collaboration with the journals*:
CINÉMA & Cie, G|A|M|E, L'Avventura. International Journal of Italian Film and Media Landscapes

Con il sostegno di / *With the support of*:
Regione Friuli Venezia Giulia
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Camera di Commercio Venezia Giulia
Zona Franca Gorizia
Consorzio per lo Sviluppo del Polo Universitario di Gorizia
Comune di Gorizia
Transmedia
Azienda Vinicola Livio Felluga

Coordinamento scientifico / *Scientific Coordinators*:
Diego Cavallotti, Simone Dotto, Andrea Mariani, Leonardo Quaresima, Simone Venturini (Università degli Studi di Udine)

Comitato scientifico / *Scientific Committee*:
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# Exposing the Moving Image

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*A cura di/edited by*
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# sommario/*contents*

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# The Role of New Technology in the Marketing and Distribution of Independent Films: Producing a Virtual Reality Trailer for *Marie Curie: The Courage of Knowledge* (Marie Noelle, 2017)

This article considers the role of new technology in the marketing and distribution of independent films. I am a film distributor, as well as being a second year PhD student. My doctoral thesis is a response to the challenges facing independent distributors in the cinema marketplace in the UK. My objective here is to examine whether new technologies and marketing techniques (such as Virtual Reality and experiential cinema) can win audiences back to theatres, and in turn to enhance the experience of independent film, and that of cinema-goers themselves. To do so, a case study will be used of a film that my company, Swipe Films, released in cinemas last year called *Marie Curie: The Courage of Knowledge* (Marie Noelle, 2017). The marketing campaign for the film – in particular the Virtual Reality[1] trailer created – will first be looked at and then this paper will conclude with my observations from the whole experience.

## *The current UK independent cinema landscape*

It is a challenging time in the UK, particularly for independent distributors that specialise in independent and foreign language films. Admissions and box office for such films in the UK has declined over the last 10 years. According to the BFI Statistical Yearbook,[2] 874 films were released into the UK market in 2017, an average of nearly 17 per week, generating total admissions of 170.6 million. Of that total, the top 50 generated more than three-quarters (76.6%) of the entire year's box office, leaving 824 independent films contributing to less than a quarter of the box office total. The Film Distributors Association chief executive Mark Batey (2018, p. 1) summarised it as the "high-risk, brutally unforgiving business of releasing films in the heavily supplied UK theatrical marketplace."

In addition to being a second-year practice based PhD student at Birmingham City University, I am also a practitioner, running the London based independent film production and distribution company, Swipe Films. It is important for my practice to be aware of new industry developments and to be reactive to changes in consumer behaviour and trends. We release on average four films across all media including cinemas each year, and the trough in cinema admissions and DVD sales directly and adversely affects my business – titles released range from feature documentaries such as *Acqua e Zucchero: The Carlo Di Palma Story* (Fariborz Kamkari, 2017) about the acclaimed Italian cinematographer and *Sette Giorni* (Rolando Colla, 2017), a love story set on a Sicilian Island, and a romantic comedy set in London and Paris, *Taking Stock* (Maeve Murphy, 2016), starring Kelly Brook.

In September 2107, just as I was starting my PhD, I attended the Venice Film Festival, and was inspired by a new pioneering section called Venice VR. There were 22 Virtual Reality Feature films in competition, and the

jury was presided over by Ricky Tognazzi and the iconic film director, John Landis, who has directed films such as *Blues Brothers* (1978), *An American Werewolf in London* (1981) and *Trading Places* (1983). There were 22 Virtual Reality Feature films in competition. The world of VR seemed exciting and innovative and I was keen to explore it further in my professional practice. It became apparent that virtual reality was a new technology being embraced by filmmakers, and being employed as a marketing tool that could be used to enhance the experience of cinemagoers. I was curious about how it might be employed as a marketing tool. So I was on the look out for the right film and the right marketing campaign to put it to the test.

The primary methodology for this and my doctoral research will be a practice led approach. Practice based research should allow me to create three artefacts – the first being the Virtual Reality trailer – over the course of my PhD studies. The second and third artefacts will evolve from the lessons learned and knowledge gleaned from the preceding artefact, through the methodology of the cyclical nature of interviews with peers, the use of artefact dissemination, and auto-ethnography.

*Independent film distribution & technology*

In current academic literature, there is a concern among exhibitors and distributors that Video on Demand (VOD) streaming companies – or "disruptive innovators"[3] as Crisp describes them – namely, Facebook, Netflix, Apple, Amazon and Google (the so called "FAANGs") are eroding the traditional cinemagoer's interest in movie-going. The influence of FAANGs is fundamentally changing the habits of consumers, causing them to be more home-bound – the concept of "connected viewing"[4] according to Holt & Sanson. It was against this backdrop that I began to investigate the implementation of and experimentation with new technological advances to examine if they can draw the coveted 15-35-year-old demographic to viewing independent and foreign language cinema releases.

The PWC Global Entertainment & Media Outlook Report (2017, p. 4) predicts that the UK's VR industry will grow at a faster rate than any other entertainment and media industry. It estimates that "the VR sector will be worth £801m in 2021, all of which is consumer spend. With over 16m VR headsets in the UK alone, innovative brands and content creators have a real opportunity to engage with consumers on a new level if they can enhance their experience." These statistics give me a platform to analyse what impact VR will have on the independent film distribution, and what role the "experiential" plays.

Academic work on independent film distribution is limited. As Knight & Thomas state "film distribution is still a woefully under-researched area."[5] Crisp goes further and points out "the small amount of literature on distribution tends to focus on the dominance of Hollywood and often ignores the role of 'independent' distribution companies."[6] Lobato (2012, p. 2) also believes that distributors "shape public culture by circulating or withholding texts which have the potential to become part of shared imaginaries, discourses and dreams." Many academic research textbooks, such as Geoff King's *Indiewood, USA*[7] pre-date the advancement in the sphere of the new technologies that is the focus of my research. More currently, Atkinson (2016) discusses current developments, and specifically how this period of analogue to digital transition impacted upon opportunities, cultures, working practices, and structures in the film industry, and addresses the various causative forces behind their resistances and adoptions. The current landscape of academic literature on independent distribution affords me an opportunity to develop it and move it forward in the realm of new technologies and experiential cinema.

Pardo (2015, p. 23) writes that from "its very inception the history of the movie industry has been closely linked to the history of technological development… As a consequence the ways of consuming movies are dramatically changing and the film industry is desperately trying to re-adapt itself to this new scenario." I plan to situate my research in the historical context of previous technological innovations in the film business and to explore if this current cycle of technological innovation is somewhat analogous to, for instance, the period of transition from silent movies to the "talkies" era in the 1920s, a time also described by Huhtamo as "the variations of moving image apparatuses and devices."[8] I intend to do this with particular reference to my ex-

periential work on creating my first PhD artefact, the world's first Virtual Reality trailer for a foreign language film. But before analysing the impact of my trailer, it is important to put the creation of VR and, indeed the technology of Virtual Reality itself, into the "entangled historical" context of "the archaeology of technological novelties."[9]. Huhtamo states that "the advent of new media has challenged many scholars to investigate the media culture of late modernity."[10]

Gomery (2004) provides a study of the period of transition from the silent era to the "talkies" era and the economic and social factors that drove it. A historical analogy can be made between the current new technology and the then new technology of the "talkies" in the 1920s and 1930s. An initial review of this historical literature has led me to identify two crucial differences – the transition of sound was driven by the cinema-going audience demanding the exciting new technology of sound, and secondly, the economic benefits and increased profits that would accrue to the practitioners (namely the studios) from producing enough content to meet that demand. Conversely, Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson (1985) write about the process involved in the transition to talkies, but their theory is that it was driven by the demand for new and innovative ways to tell new stories. At the current stage of development in Virtual Reality, it can be argued that there are no immediate economic benefit or profits available to the practitioners financing/producing VR content. It is viewed by some industry experts as a non-profit making marketing tool for promoting completed artefacts of films.

Gomery refers often to the continuous investment by the studios (in the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s) into the development of sound to improve the customer experience. I have also examined academic discourse on film distribution and the development of VR as a marketing tool. The industry expert, Graham Breen, the EMEA project manager at HTC Vive, is of the opinion that VR offers an "amazing opportunity to build something that can completely change how people interact with their world" with the "only limiting factor being the imagination of those developing the virtual experiences."[11]

The current academic literature on the current state of VR in the film business is, in many cases, hampered by being out-dated. For instance, Bennett, Furstenau & MacKenzie[12] in their collection of essays endeavour to place changes in animation, film stock, the depiction of robots and the development of "synthespians," or neurological accounts of cinema audiences, within more broadly defined techno-cultural processes around cinema. 10 years on from its original publication, these arguments seem out-dated.

Going further back, the collection of essays in Hayward & Wollen,[13] covers the genesis of virtual reality and explores the popularisation of Virtual Reality. It feels antediluvian, being a quarter of century old. Similarly today the studios, particularly Google and Facebook, are investing to improve the technology to enhance the customer experience and widen the audience base. It is in this area of technological development and continuous innovation, that I would argue that the new cinema technologies do actually replicate the previous patterns of film production and exhibition, in particular the movement to the era of "talkies." Against that background, it seems appropriate to discuss the VR trailer we created for *Marie Curie*.

## *The* Marie Curie *Virtual Reality trailer*

In February 2017, I attended the "world fair" of the Berlin Film Festival in my capacity as an independent film distributor, where I saw and acquired the rights to the transnational film, *Marie Curie: The Courage of Knowledge*. The film is a Polish/German/French co-production. As every science student knows, Marie Curie was a ground-breaking Polish scientist who won two Nobel Prizes, discovered radium and polonium and died tragically at the age of 56 from cancer. The film follows the scientist in the lab and in her personal life as she battles the male-dominated establishment, while dealing with the death of her husband, and embarking on an affair with a married colleague.

The film had not yet been released anywhere in the world. So we had to create a marketing campaign without the benefit of relying on marketing materials from other territories. In order to market the film as broadly as possible, as well as to attract a scientific minded audience for a film about the famous double Nobel Prize winning scientist, we created the world's first Virtual Reality trailer for a foreign language film. The process

of creating this was to serve as my first artefact for my PhD. The marketing challenges were that the film was first of all in a foreign language (Polish and French) and secondly about a Polish scientist who died almost 100 years previously.

For the purposes of authenticity, the director cast a new Polish lead actress, Karolina Gruzska, the problem being she was completely unknown in the UK. Distributors are always looking at finding new ways to get a new audience or demographic to pay and see our films. I knew that the Marie Curie film would appeal to students who had an interest in science (physics and chemistry). From my past experience in releasing foreign language films in the UK, I knew it would be tough to get them to pay money to see a film that was not in English. Scientific minded people (particularly students in the elusive 15-25 age bracket) typically do not like to read subtitles.

We chose November 7th, 2017 as the release date of the film. This was deliberate, as it was the actual 150th anniversary of Marie Curie's birth, so it was an appropriate historic date. We spent about three months creating the VR trailer app. I created a focus group among the students at BCU and gave them the opportunity to view and review each cut of the VR trailer. Their feedback was instructive – their consensus was that viewing a VR trailer is not a social activity. In fact they found it to be an isolating experience. Even though the students were viewing the trailer in the company of their classmates, the experience was a solitary one. One of the reasons for this, I observed, was that the limitations of the technology and what can be achieved in camera.

James Cameron, director of such technologically innovative films as *Avatar* (2009), *Terminator 2* (1991) and *Aliens* (1986) observed as much when he stated: "Now what most people are calling VR right now isn't VR. It's really omnidirectional camera. And because you don't really have any spatial control – any spatial movement is baked in – you [only] have the ability to look around in an environment, and that's not true VR. [In] true VR, you can move around. And you have a lot of control over where you are spatially in the environment."[14]

In the development of the VR trailer, I was influenced by Cameron's observation, so I developed the trailer app further so that the final version transported viewers into the lab and lecture hall of Marie Curie. From watching the 22 features at the Venice Film Festival and developing the various cuts of the VR trailer, even though VR technology is still quite limited, I believed that if a physical component could be built into the VR, then it has a more visceral impact on the viewer. I had originally observed this from Alejandro Iñárritu's *Carne y Arena* (2017), which won a Special Oscar; the first time ever the Academy has recognised VR as an art form. This short was financed by the Prada Foundation and centres around a Mexican immigrant attempting to cross the border into the United States. The director made each viewer take off his shoes, so they could feel the desert sand of Texas under their feet, thus adding to the visceral impact of the film. I felt we could adapt this to suit our VR trailer app, but that we would still need to do something different to launch the marketing campaign for the VR elements of *Marie Curie: The Courage of Knowledge.*

We decided to launch the VR trailer at the premiere of the film, something that had never been done before. The Polish Ambassador, who wanted to honour the memory of the person who is regularly voted as the most respected Pole of all time, kindly agreed to host the premiere and party afterwards at the Polish Embassy in London. We turned one of the rooms into Marie Curie's laboratory. There were Bunsen burners, and beakers with chemicals of many different colours. On arrival at the "lab" the viewer had to put on and wear a white lab coat before putting on the VR headset. A scientist performed flamboyant experiments using liquid nitrogen and other dangerous chemicals. This was an appropriate environment to launch the VR trailer. For many, this was their first experience of VR. In the interest of peer review, I invited several practitioners, such as other film distributors, directors and publicists.

The trailer app was made globally available to download for free on Facebook's Oculus Store and Google Play Store.[15] To encourage people to download the trailer, we did a cross-promotional deal with our partner, the Science Museum in London. Everyone who downloaded the app had the chance to win two tickets to see the VR Space Descent with the British astronaut, Tim Peake. We had hundreds of entries to that competition. The Science Museum was thrilled that visitor numbers were up to the VR exhibit, thanks to the extra awareness the promotional partnership brought to the Science Museum. The film opened on Marie Curie's anniversary on November 7th. The film played in cinemas across the country for four months. So it has been a consider-

able success in the UK. The VR trailer was a potent marketing tool that was successful in bringing a scientific audience to an otherwise inaccessible foreign language film.
The feedback from my peers was instructive. For instance, one leading British film distributor described the experience: "Frank from Swipe Films showed me a virtual reality trailer he had commissioned to promote the film, which is without a doubt, the best trailer presentation I have ever seen. It is the way of the future. The only problem is that unless you have a VR headset and a laser pointer how are all of you going to see this wonderful innovation? But why let practicality get in the way of a revolutionary concept. The industry will adapt." This comment is a perfect encapsulation of the problems that VR creators face in enabling widespread adoption by consumers, and in turn, the challenge that film distributors must confront if VR marketing techniques are to enter the mainstream.

*The evolution of Virtual Reality in film marketing*

So where does the *Marie Curie* VR trailer sit and at what stage is VR in its evolution in film distribution? Gomery (2004) was particularly insightful in identifying what he described as the "Theory of Technological Innovation" (2004, p. 24), and, more specifically, a three tiered approach – the first stage being the "development of the necessary inventions." The "second and most crucial stage," according to Gomery (2004 preface, p. xix,), is "innovation" itself. The third and final one being the "diffusion stage" which is concerned with the "learning about and deciding among various investment policies open" to the distributor… and it also can involve a "reallocation of resources on the part" of the distributor. At the current stage of development in Virtual Reality, it can be argued that there are no immediate economic benefit or profits available to the practitioners financing/producing VR content. It is viewed by some industry experts as a non-profit making marketing tool for promoting completed artefacts of films.
To date, only studio movies have added a VR component to their films. This is partly due to the high cost of creating VR. VR is used primarily to continue the relationship with the film fan and the universe of the film itself, as was the case with Warner Bros.' *Ready Player One*'s (Steven Spielberg, 2017) VR campaign, where a behind the scenes world could be viewed for free in advance of the film's release in cinemas, and Pixar's Oscar winning animated film, *Coco* (Lee Unkrich, 2017), where the Coco VR World could be viewed for free in many Disney Stores around the world.
Secondly, it could be argued that there is an evolving, but not yet an insatiable demand, from cinemagoers for new VR content. Gomery refers often to the continuous investment by the studios (in the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s) into the development of sound to improve the customer experience. The industry expert, Graham Breen, the EMEA project manager at HTC Vive, is of the opinion that VR offers an "amazing opportunity to build something that can completely change how people interact with their world" with the "only limiting factor being the imagination of those developing the virtual experiences."[16]
With *Ready Player One*, predominantly set in the VR world of the Oasis and based on the cult millennial book of the same name, Warner Bros. deliberately pursued an immersive marketing campaign that complemented the storyline of the film. It became a global success, grossing over $580m worldwide. Given its success, Warner Bros. intends it to be a valuable new film franchise. Condis observes that "gamers are often observes as media-savvy tastemakers, early adopters who can be studied by corporations looking to study which franchises will become mainstream hits."[17] Condis' thesis is that *Ready Player One* "illustrates the anxieties and uncertainties of embodiment and identity in the digital age by constructing a pop culture 'canon' of texts that all participants in video game culture must know."[18]
Using Gomery's three part process, it can be argued that the VR world is in the second stage of technological innovation, but about to enter the final diffusion stage. While the current works are mainly not being made for profit, it can be argued that it is still in an experimental (or "innovative" stage as Gomery described it) where the products created are mainly for marketing purposes and to get the user (and this generation of cinema-goers) accustomed to the new world of VR with all its current limitations.

The film business is, like it name suggests, *a business*. But, in my view, the era of VR being deployed as only a useful marketing device will soon be ending. The next stage has already begun. For instance in the UK, Disney and Lucasfilm offered consumers a VR experience called *Star Wars: Secrets of the Empire*, which was set in the busiest shopping centre in London – the Westfield in Shepherd's Bush. It was a fully immersive adventure. It cost a staggering £32.50 (38 euros) for a 15 minute experience. IMAX has teamed with cinema chain Odeon to launch Europe's first virtual reality entertainment centre. The two companies launched the IMAX VR Experience Centre in Manchester, England and charge £10 (12 euros) for a 12 minute Justice League themed "thrilling cinematic Virtual Reality Experience that allows the viewer to step into the shoes and master the powers of the iconic DC Super Heroes: Batman, Superman and Aquaman."
So I would maintain that we are already entering the third stage of technological innovation where distributors are, in the words of Gomery, "deciding among various investment policies" which involves a "reallocation of resources" on their part, to create "*for profit*" new VR product where consumers are charged entry for the experience. It is my contention that it will continue to be mainly Hollywood studios that create VR content for their major cinemas releases. For most independent distributors the cost of creating VR content is simply too high to justify the limited return on investment.

### *The experiential cinema movement*

Experiential or Immersive cinema takes the cinematic experience to another level, and integrates sources of entertainment that go beyond simple movie projection. Cooper-Martin defines "experiential" in the context of cinema as being that "which consumers choose, buy and use solely to experience and enjoy,"[19] movies being an example of this. Hosting social events and adopting virtual reality experiences, cinema owners and event cinema organisers (like Secret Cinema), aim to not only add a sense of novelty, but also to transform the traditional movie-going experience from simply being passive, to something more engaging, or "immersive."
Secret Cinema is a phenomenon in the UK and the world leader in delivering an experience for participants, where the world of a cult film, such as *The Empire Strikes Back* (Irven Kershner, 1980), *Moulin Rouge* (Baz Luhrmann, 2001), *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985) and, most recently, *Romeo and Juliet* (Baz Luhrmann, 1996) and *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) is lavishly recreated and brought to life. While the film itself is shown at the event, it is almost incidental to the communal experience of reliving the film, the characters and the immersive world with a group of friends. Secret Cinema teams with the original studio behind each movie – Fox, LucasFilm, Universal & Warner Bros. – in a revenue sharing model. Secret Cinema's screenings are part of the sector of theatrical distribution known as "event cinema," and more often described as "experiential."
Atkinson (2016) explores this idea, and considers how this period of analogue to digital transition has impacted upon opportunities, cultures, working practices, cultures, and structures in the film industry, and addresses the various causative forces behind their resistances and adoptions. Atkinson explores this in greater depth in her 2017 collection of compilation essays, co-edited with Helen Kennedy, entitled *Live Cinema: Cultures, Economies and Aesthethics.* The preface outlines that they "adopted the catch all title 'Live Cinema' from the Secret Cinema Back to the Future Advertising - The Live Cinema Experience as an umbrella term through which to capture the broad range of emergent creative art practices and novel commercial strategies"[20] that they were identifying.

### *Implementation of VR and experential events in UK distribution*

From my experience in creating a trailer app for *Marie Curie*, I have the following thoughts as to where Virtual Reality sits in the current marketplace. I think it is part of a much bigger movement, that of the domain of "Live Cinema," as Atkinson and Wallace generically described it. In my view, for content creators, the term

"Experential Cinema," is a more appropriate term. Experential Cinema certainly encompasses a *live* element, but the *experience* itself is a far more marketable commodity than just the "*liveness*" aspect. In my case study, by showcasing the *Marie Curie* VR trailer in the real world physical environment of Marie Curie's lab and having spectacular chemistry experiments happening simultaneously, we strived to create an experential adventure for the viewer, that can not be reproduced at home. I have learned, through an examination of box office statistics, audience feedback and peer review, that experential marketing techniques (such as the creation of a VR trailer), has an important role to play in the viability of foreign language releases in the UK. I have also learned that giving the audience a choice of how to experience a film is an important aspect in the presentation of it to the important 15 to 35 year old demographic.

This is further evidenced by Secret Cinema holding, what I would describe, as "participatory" preview screenings in London of the South Korean film, *The Handmaiden* (Park Chan-Wook, 2016), charging £30 a ticket, and selling 5500 tickets across six screenings. In keeping with the spirit of the film, the audience came dressed in black tie and evening gowns and were not allowed to speak, with communication being done through writing notes on pads. Those screenings alone contributed to almost a third of the total box office of the film in the UK.

Last year, over the course of seventeen weeks in a single east London venue, the immersive Secret Cinema screenings of *Moulin Rouge* grossed almost £5m, at an average ticket cost of £50, more than 4.5 times the cost of the cinema ticket in the UK (£7.70). While VR can be viewed cheaply at home with just google cardboard and a smartphone, there is no revenue benefit for the creator, so studios and distributors are beginning to position VR as a premium product that has the potential to lure the cash-rich 15-25 year old demographic out of home to the multiplex or mall. The USP is that it can provide state of the art immersive content where Giuseppe from Gorizia or Larry from London can *experience* or become Jeeg Robot, Batman or Superman.

Both the consumer feedback from my focus group of students at BCU during the development of the VR trailer and the peer review of the completed version was important in forming my thinking as to how best to harness the power of VR in the distribution of independent films. One of the main reasons that independent film audiences go to the cinema is to be immersed into the world of a film. It is an escapist form of entertainment. So far in its nascent development, VR has been used as a marketing tool to build awareness of a film among its target demographic. As the success of Secret Cinema has demonstrated in the UK, audience participation is a key component of its success, and the sense of immersion is fundamental to that. VR has the power to enhance that experience by transporting the viewer into the world of the film, but the limitations of the technology currently count against it.

"Trailing the trailer" has been a concept in studio marketing since 2014 when Universal enlisted Beyonce to tweet a teaser trailer for *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Sam Taylor-Wood, 2014) (which featured a new version of her song, *Crazy in Love*) and the trailer ended up having a record 100 million views in its first week of launch. I adapted this for *Marie Curie* by trailing the trailer at the premiere of the film. This "trailing the trailer" had not been done before in the VR world, so is a new concept in VR film marketing. In the case of *Marie Curie*, this was such a success, particularly for positive word of mouth that it could be adopted for other campaigns. I believe that other film distributors could successfully adapt this for their VR campaigns. In independent film distribution, promotion is vital, but as the launch of the *Marie Curie* VR trailer reveals, the actual film promotion itself can be promoted so as to lead to more independent cinema programmers, and ultimately more cinema-goers being motivated to see the film. In the opening week of release of the film, we conducted an exit poll at the Ciné Lumière cinema in South Kensington – that poll showed that the VR trailer encouraged a scientific minded segment of the audience to purchase a ticket for a foreign language film, something that they had done in the previous eighteen months.

The second key point, is that the way that independent film distribution is being distributed is changing. Secret Cinema has clearly demonstrated that there is an appetite among independent cinema-goers for the viewing of films in non-traditional venues. Warehouses, car parks, and derelict building sites have all been successfully used by Secret Cinema. There are popular open-air screenings such as the Film4 season of films in Somerset House in London, Luna Cinema's screenings in the Pavilion of Kensington Palace, the Rooftop

Film Club where viewers sit in Directors' Chairs at the Queen of Hoxton pub in London. These all show that independent film audiences in the UK are happy to embrace new forms of locations, as long as the distributor can market it as an "event," or an immersive experience in keeping with the spirit of the movie. To date, these non-traditional screenings have mainly been of classic films, but as the success of the *Marie Curie* film has shown, there is an opportunity for UK distributors to seek out non-traditional venues for their slate of films, so that independent audiences can "experience" those films.

What I have learned from my research is that if independent distributors can create innovative and disruptive VR content and/or build in a unique experential factor into their marketing, then there is the potential that audiences will be more frequent visitors to the cinema or the mall. I believe that the prediction of the authors of the PWC Report that there will be 21m VR headsets in the UK in 2021 is ambitious. Independent distributors could benefit from doing more research into the impact of "participatory" screenings on foreign language releases, and analysing the factors that make them a success. That will be the focus of the next phase of my research.

For my next project I am distributing *Wine Calling* (Bruno Sauvard, 2018), a feature documentary about natural wine makers. I am developing an immersive and experiential marketing campaign for that film, which I hope will lead to the second artefact that I will create for my PhD thesis. The initial release plan for that film is to create a series of special preview screenings where natural wine producers, merchants and supermarkets such as Whole Foods and Sainsburys host free wine tastings (most likely in non-traditional cinema venues) to cross-promote the film and their natural wine range.

On March 28th, 2018, the UK Government unveiled its £150m Industrial Strategy Fund designed to support the creative industries. £33m was allocated for immersive technology products, experiences and services including new uses of virtual and augmented reality. This Fund could provide me with opportunities to create artefacts for my practice and/or to analyse the work created by other distributors in this new technological domain. I am also exploring ways to build a Virtual Reality component into *Wine Calling*'s campaign, and I will be applying to the Fund to do so. In this way, I hope that cinema-goers will be truly immersed in the world of the film and will be able to experience the film in a unique way by physically sampling the wines appearing in the film, meeting the wine producers in person, as well as being virtually transported to the vineyards where the wine was produced in a VR trailer. What I learned from the *Marie Curie* VR trailer, is that immersion is a key factor among independent filmgoers, so I am hoping that a VR trailer will enhance the experience for the viewer and help build much needed word of mouth for the film across social media. Therefore, this second artefact will be developed with the knowledge gained from my findings from the creation of my first artefact and will incorporate both an immersive physical experience element and VR elements.

More globally, I believe that UK distributors should avail of the UK Government's £33m portion of the Industrial Strategy Fund that has been allocated for immersive technology products to experiment and create VR marketing materials, including trailers. The Fund provides a great opportunity for all UK distributors and producers to create products that can be used to immerse independent audiences into the world of their films. £33m is a significant resource to be able to call upon, and content creators should use this funding opportunity to conduct market research to figure out what does and does not work for independent cinema-goers. I will certainly be applying to the Fund for two reasons – to develop my understanding of what works best to immerse audiences, as well as to develop the academic literature by writing about my findings from my practice based research in this field. It is my contention that while the success and development of independent cinema, VR cinema at large and VR as a marketing tool are inextricably linked, more research needs to be done in this area, and as importantly, more VR products need to be created to deepen the understanding of their impact on audiences. That way, as a practice based academic I can observe their impact and develop the literature on the subject.

One of the challenges I and other content creators and marketers face is the relentless force of change in the entertainment business. The business is changing rapidly, as is the format of how the viewer consumes entertainment content. The world of immersive entertainment is rapidly evolving and changing, as is the political economy surrounding it. The "curse of the now" looms large over my academic career, my research and my

professional practice. Is VR a fad or will it evolve from being a niche interest into becoming a legitimate and profitable medium? There is a danger that my academic research in this field (as well as my professional practice) could become out-dated by changing consumer habits and evolving technologies.

I believe that my professional academic development will benefit from my engagement with the entertainment industry in my capacity as a practitioner. My work as a distributor will allow me to continue to craft marketing campaigns that have an immersive or experiential element to it. My work as a producer will allow me to be a content creator.

What is clear from my research so far is that premium content will allow content creators, and distributors to monetise this new media, or as Huhtamo describes it, to produce "the mappings of the new empire of network economies."[21] If not, in my view, there is a danger that VR, in particular, could be in danger of going the way of such past technical cinematic innovations as Smell-O-Vision and Silent Movies.[22]

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*Notes*

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[22] This paper was originally delivered in the scenic medieval town of Gorizia. It is said to have been founded by Julius Caesar in 50BC, the great Roman Emperor who famously said "Veni Vidi Vici." To paraphrase him, VR has come, it has been seen, but it has not yet conquered… Veni. Vidi. Sed Non Vici.

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**APPENDIX B**

**MARIE CURIE QUESTIONNAIRE**

## Marie Curie Film Survey

Thank you for joining our survey. This information will be used for PHD research. Please give us your feedback by filling in the information bellow.

**What is your employment status and gender?**

- ◯ Employed full time
- ◯ Student
- ◯ Retired
- ◯ Unemployed
- ◯ Homemaker
- ◯ Other...please state.....
- ◯ I am male
- ◯ I am female
- ◯ Other (please specify).....

**What is the main reason you came to the screening? (Tick as many options as you like)**

- ◯ Interest in Marie Curie and/or science
- ◯ Avid independent/foriegn language movie goer
- ◯ Looking for an immersive experience of watching a film in a science lab environment
- ◯ Just wanted something to do this evening
- ◯ Free screening with a drinks reception
- ◯ I was curious to watch the Virtual Reality trailer for the film set in a science lab
- ◯ International Day for Women's Rights and the Panel Discussion
- ◯ Other.....please state

**How did the venue contribute to the evening?**

- ◯ Really enjoyed the fact that the premiere was held in the School of Physics
- ◯ The venue added to the immersive nature of the evening
- ◯ I would still have come to see the film regardless of venue
- ◯ The venue suited the film and it was a unique idea to hold it at Trinity
- ◯ Choice of venue was not important, I just wanted a free evening
- ◯ Other...please specify

**How old are you?**

- ◯ 18 - 25
- ◯ 26 -35
- ◯ 36-45
- ◯ 46 - 55
- ◯ 56 - 64
- ◯ 65+
- ◯ What were the last couple of films you have seen?
- ◯ Would you go to see another film in an immersive environment?
- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ No, I want to see films in a cinema

**What was the highlight of the evening?**

- ◯ The film
- ◯ The overall immersive experience
- ◯ The panel discussion
- ◯ The drinks reception
- ◯ The Virtual Reality Trailer
- ◯ Other....please state
- ◯ FEEL FREE TO GIVE US ANY OTHER GENERAL COMMENTS BELOW.....

**APPENDIX C**

**WINE CALLING QUESTIONNAIRE**

## WINE CALLING FILM SURVEY

Thanks for joining our voluntary survey to be used for PHD research, you hereby give consent for the use of this data. Please give us your feedback below.

### WHAT WAS THE MAIN REASON FOR COMING TO THE EVENT?

- ○ Interested in The Night of Ideas
- ○ An immersive/experiential night out (including panel & reception)
- ○ Interest in French cinema
- ○ Interested in natural and biodynamic wine
- ○ Other.....
- ○ ARE YOU AGED 18-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56+
- ○ ARE YOU MALE/FEMALE/OTHER....

### HOW DID YOU HEAR ABOUT THE EVENT?

- ○ Through Institut Francais/French Embassy/The Night of Ideas
- ○ Through O'Briens Wine
- ○ Through Irish Film Institute Programme/newsletter
- ○ Social media
- ○ Other.....

### WHAT WAS THE HIGHLIGHT OF THE EVENING?

- ○ The film
- ○ Overall experiential/immersive experience
- ○ Panel discussion/exchange of ideas
- ○ Sampling natural/biodynamic wines
- ○ Other.....

### HOW OFTEN DO YOU GO TO THE CINEMA?

- ○ Frequent cinema-goer
- ○ First time this year
- ○ First time ever to the Irish Film Institute
- ○ Only to the IFI Cafe previously
- ○ Other.....
- ○ Had you tried natural/biodynamic wines before? YES/NO
- ○ Was sampling natural/bio wines a significant reason for attending? YES/NO

## APPENDIX D

## ONE WAY TO MOSCOW QUESTIONNAIRE

# ONE WAY TO MOSCOW/CURZON BLOOMSBURY FILM SURVEY - DECEMBER 4-6

Thank you for joining our voluntary survey. This information will be used for PHD research and you give consent for this data to be used. Please give us your feedback by filling in the information belo

### WHAT WAS THE MAIN REASON FOR GOING TO SEE THE FILM?

The film itself/The Cold War setting
An immersive/experiential day/night out
The Cold War setting of the film
Opportunity to win prize (diamond, Swiss army knife).....
Other (please specify.....
Are you male/female/other.....
AGE -ARE YOU: IN YOUR TEENS/20s/30s/40s/50s/60s/70+

### HOW DID YOU HEAR ABOUT THE FILM?

Swiss Embassy/e-letter
Curzon newsletter/mailshot
Through Spycraft
Through Diamonds Hatton Garden
Other....

### WHAT WAS THE HIGHLIGHT?

The film itself
An immersive/experiential day/night out with a spy theme
Watching a film in the cinema again
Nostalgia for the Cold War cinema
Other.....
FEEL FREE TO GIVE US ANY OTHER GENERAL COMMENTS BELOW. Thank you