FEATURE FILM AUDIENCE TESTING IN AUSTRALIA: CAPTURING THE AUDIENCE BEFORE IT BITES

CATHERINE GRIFF
PhD student, Swinburne University

Introduction

Just because you are making a singular artistic vision does not mean that you can’t consider who the audience for your vision might be. Many if not most of the marketing tools that filmmakers can use to reach their audience should not hamper their creativity, and might even enhance it. (Jon Reiss, 2010, Think Outside the Box Office, p. 79)

Producers of screen fiction face a daunting challenge in capturing the attention of audiences. Films are watched on multiple platforms at a wide array of venues. A new perspective is demanded on the part of content creators who seek to fathom and anticipate audience response wherever viewing or interaction takes place. New delivery and information platforms are challenging for audience research specialists. The Internet and social media have endowed the audience with a new power, giving it a visibility and voice to express early judgements on screen entertainment.

This paper approached the audience through the lens of feature film audience testing. My main focus is test or preview screenings, whereby a selected audience views a film prior to its release, at various stages of completion. These are sometimes known as production screenings because they focus on testing story, character and elements that can still be refined. These can be distinguished from marketing or distributor screenings, which occur later, with a larger audience to assess appeal across demographics, and to focus on elements of the marketing campaign (trailer, poster etc), plus potential for the all-important word of mouth (recommendation to friends).

Test screenings are fertile grounds for both academic and industry enquiry; they allow the creators of the screen experience direct access to an audience, before the film’s public release. Such testing attempts to address the perennial one of divining entertainment tastes of the audience.

Focus group discussion frequently follows these screenings, offering an opportunity for the intrepid producer to be judged by the sought-after audience. Rather than a standard viewing experience, this opens a relationship between creator and audience.

The extensive academic literature on film audience research gives little consideration to audience testing, which is categorised under marketing. The audience has been dissected in every imaginable context. Studies often focus on audience behaviour and specific segments such as women, ethnicity, fans, regions, and genres.

Since audience testing is an aspect of market research aimed at selling the film, the relevant literature often deals with the mechanics of film distribution and sales. Leading industry analysis can be found in relation to film marketing. International film executive Angus Finney discusses testing under ‘users, consumer behaviour and market research’ in The International Film Business — A Market Guide Beyond Hollywood (2010). He acknowledges the value of testing and is concerned that professional market research can be unaffordable for independent producers.

To examine the practice of audience testing in Australia, I undertook a pilot study of screen producers who released feature films in 2009 /10. In addition the perspective of other key roles in the domain were canvassed: distributors who use audience testing to hone marketing; research companies who undertake audience testing and render the results; and the federal funding agency whose policies stipulate a quarantined marketing budget.
The paper also outlines overseas practice, particularly in Hollywood — where testing is virtually mandatory.

Art, commerce and consumers

Marketing analysis casts film as a product, which is often an anathema to the creative production team who views itself as storytellers or even myth-makers. Audience testing highlights the familiar dichotomy between art and commerce.

Alan Finney, chair of the Australian Film Institute, and formerly in senior distributor roles with Village Roadshow and Disney: ‘The old divide between art and commerce still applies across the industry, including the way content creators versus the marketing team view the film’ (via email 27/6/11). Kathleen Drumm, Head of Marketing at Screen Australia (SA), believes the split between art and business can influence local box office performance (interviewed 22/7/11).

Critics say audience testing against the big, interesting or quirky ideas — and that marketing language uses a raft of technical terms and scientific jargon, which obfuscate the lack of certainty in its predictions. But the counter argument emphasises the importance of how the research is used, since it can be a source of learning, insight and new creative angles (‘Is the researcher killing the creative?’, Campaign magazine, 24/7/09).

Global Hollywood 2 by Toby Miller et al. locates film market research in a wider political economy of consumer surveillance. He elaborates on the perception of the audience by marketers as ‘a threat to be controlled rather than respected’.

Today, the presumption that audiences are an untamed labour force that must be domesticated for consumption justifies film marketing’s ever deepening surveillance of people’s feelings, opinions, loves and hates in a much more intense, even righteous, quest for knowledge of the filmgoing experience.

Global perspective

Marketing concerns are certainly making inroads into the content of movies and TV shows in Western Europe. But across the Continent — where many film directors are considered auteurs … there remains a stigma associated with Hollywood-style test screenings, focus groups and other commercial tools. (‘Testing Times in Europe’, Variety, March 2011)

Germany has generous federal and regional subsidies for production funding but not for marketing. In Italy, test screenings and focus groups are said to be rare. ‘But the deeply ingrained marketing mindset of Italian producers often seeds content creation, spawning movies tailored to appeal to specific audience segments or calculatedly aiming for crossover appeal.’ Test screenings are reportedly standard for mid to high budget films in Spain. The growing importance of market research ‘is a sign of changing times in the Spanish film industry, which is evolving from a subsidy-based sector to more box office-driven business,’ according to Telecino Cinema CEO Ghislain Barroois (Variety, 2011).

In France, ‘a film is first and foremost considered a work of art, so there is a reticence to consider it as a product’, says Anais Flores at Paris-based research company Mediametrie.

Before it was disbanded, the UK Film Council supported audience testing via the Premiere Fund. Sally Caplan, formerly head of the Fund, said test screenings generally led to subtle changes: ‘They are good at pointing out where a film is dragging. When you’ve seen it a hundred times, it becomes very hard to tell.’

According to Film Victoria’s Arresting Audience Summit in 2010, audience testing is a staple of the filmmaking process in the US and UK. Film Victoria said that testing has been available for some time in Australia, yet claimed few Australian producers use it.
While test screenings are less common in Australia than in the US and UK, the practice is widespread according to producers, distributors, and professional research companies consulted in my research:

In Australia big-audience screenings are used primarily for decisions about the marketing of a film, but in Hollywood they have a bad name because test scores can be used by the studios to bludgeon filmmakers into re-editing and even re-shooting films. The prize for doing so, of course, is the studio will use its financial muscle to open a film on many screens, and to promote it heavily. (‘When Directors Go on Trial’, Sydney Morning Herald, 28/6/07)

The aforementioned Global Hollywood 2 provides an in-depth and critical analysis of Hollywood style marketing. ‘The studios make vast numbers of pictures, predicated on the correct assumption that they know nothing about audience tastes and that approximately 95 per cent of films will fail abysmally … The anxiety involved in the filmmaking business provokes an extraordinary need for the ritualised use of marketing in all phases of a film’s life.’ ‘The irony that flows from the screen industries’ apparently insoluble problem of how to ‘know’ audiences might help attenuate worries about the surveillance activities taking place in global Hollywood.’ (ibid, p. 288)

Miller stresses the main users of marketing information are large entertainment conglomerates plus it is important to understand US marketing conglomerates to explain why ‘global consumer surveillance in general, and audience research in particular, concentrates it’s spying on the US population’. (ibid, p. 294)

The company that dominates audience testing in the US is NielsenNRG (formerly the National Research Group). Neilsen Media is working to keep pace with monitoring the four-screen environment (TV, Internet, mobile, plus out-of-home viewing). Ironically, renowned director Francis Ford Coppola is credited for the founding of NRG, though he is critical of the way it is now used. ‘I started it for use by the director, and now it’s the studios that use it, often to present evidence to the director. The best preview would be if no one but the filmmaker was there with the audience so he or she could interpret the information.’ (New York Times, 25/6/00)

There are abundant Hollywood horror stories where market research results have been used to pressure filmmakers into making changes; to bland out controversy in the hope of wider appeal; to predict disaster for hits and vice versa. Less visible are the majority of cases where adjustments following testing improved the clarity and impact of the film. There are pros and cons entailed in film testing. Detractors make accusations of rigged results, handpicked test audiences, dubious statistics and dilution of exceptional drama. Nevertheless, my conclusion is that filmmakers cannot afford to ignore the direct avenue to the audience opened by testing because it is the ultimate arbiter of box office success.

Miller’s incisive exposure of the US marketing juggernaut has alarming global implications for the role of audience:

People’s preferences in Hollywood, whether popular or intellectual interpretations of a film’s value, barely influence what gets screened (less what gets made) via the figure of the audience, a construct built from, and known through, the institutional discourses of the state, the academy and the film industry. (Miller op cit, pp. 330–331)

Yet the US is a world apart in respect of film profits to be made as well as the power of marketers. Film audience testing is of course only a fraction of the marketing arsenal. Internationally there is ample evidence of legitimate and effective audience testing. Such research can yield an enhanced film experience bearing the imprint of audience ideas and tastes.

Producer perspective

One reason for Hollywood’s success may be the routine testing that Australian films have lacked. You’ve made a film for people to see … you need to see it with them, to experience it through them in order to get a better understanding of the rhythms. And often there are things
that are obvious to the storytellers, because they’ve been carrying the story for a long time, that completely escape the audience. (Director Phillip Noyce in Sydney Morning Herald, 25/9/01)

The producer perspective was investigated through a pilot survey of producers of the 63 Australian features released theatrically in 2009/10. The questionnaire was emailed (mid April 2011). Fifty-two responses were received, achieving a good response rate of 83 per cent. The features of the two years covered a broad spectrum in terms of budget, genre, profile, and box office performance. The main findings painted a clear and consistent picture.

The majority of producers had undertaken some form of audience research (71%). Respondents who had not tested their films were most likely to cite budget restrictions as the obstacle. Professional research is costly (around $20,000 for a screening and focus group) and marketing funds have often been absorbed by other demands towards the end of production. The other main hindrance was timing, when the schedule could not accommodate re-edits or re-shoots. Some producers blamed opposition from the director to undertaking testing and/or to accepting the audience perspective. A minority of the non-research group claimed their project did not warrant testing because the target audience was apparent from the outset, as in the case of genre films.

A key finding of the pilot survey was over half of producers had undertaken the audience testing themselves. This rose to 60 per cent when taking account of producers who said they’d been in charge of the process with input by distributor’s agent or a marketing specialist. The do-it-yourself approaches to testing were too diverse to be comparable. Some had employed marketing professionals at least to conduct the testing and had adapted templates from authoritative sources. Others had organised screenings for family and friends who bore no resemblance to the target audience.

Despite contrary advice, it is likely many independent producers will continue to pursue their own audience research rather than pay for professional expertise. Several key Australian informants suggested it would be valuable for guidelines on the fundamentals of audience research (similar to what is on offer with budgeting kits).

Almost three-quarters of those who used audience research did so at the fine cut or rough assembly stage. The great majority (92%) claimed to have made changes to their feature following research. The nature of these changes encompassed a broad spectrum from re-editing to a new ending. In general the changes did not entail re-shooting but tonal adjustments and plot clarifications.

Overall, producers claimed to be satisfied with the audience research process since most (91%) said they would conduct the testing in the same way in future.

Robyn Kershaw, producer of the successful Bran Nue Dae and Looking for Alibrandi, was enthusiastic about testing: ‘I try to be invisible and listen and really investigate the answers and the culture of the focus group and the questionnaires. I try to focus on what is really being said by the audience.’ She described her gains from research as ‘a stronger hold on the perceived audience, a clearer sense of the elements in the film that worked and the ones that needed further refinement. Also, a stronger sense of how to market the film.’ (Film Victoria Audience Summit, 2010).

Testing was widely agreed to be more useful for comedy, thrillers and sequels than for drama. Producer of the Last Ride and forthcoming feature A Few Best Men, Antonia Barnard, was involved in research for both features. Like many who differentiated by genre, she considered the testing process more appropriate to her latest project, an international comedy, than to the earlier, low budget local drama (via email 22/6/11):

The director found the testing process in the US to be a really helpful tool. I was surprised how he reacted to the US testers. I knew he hated the idea, but the US guys were so professional and knowledgeable about the process, the audience and the rest, he was prepared to listen and absorb.
My experience with Last Ride was interesting, but the local people simply don’t have the knowledge those US dudes have. Of course, they probably test once a week, which makes it easier, but I found the Australian research company to be dry and automatic in their process. The US company sent their people to Sydney to run the focus group etc and I found they were incredibly on the ball.

So overall, I would say the process is a good one, as long as you have highly experienced people doing it for you, and you don’t finish the film before you test it! However, one of our US producers was obsessed with the reports, and I don’t think you can cut an Australian film to US numbers.

Filmmakers were inclined to treat test results as information and a broad indicator of audience response. Most emphasised the need to follow your instincts and not to be bound by test results. A producer/director of George Miller’s calibre is in a position to uphold his vision even in the face of US opinion. Testing of *Babe Pig in the City* in the US revealed audiences found it ‘dark’. In response, Dr Miller lightened the tone of the score and reduced the pit bull dog chasing Babe sequence, as well as appearances by Micky Rooney’s character. On release, the film was still criticised for being too ‘dark’ — especially by the rival Disney studio.

**Distributor perspective**

Lori Flekser, General Manager, Motion Picture Distributors Association of Australia points out there are a lot of small companies who are successfully distributing film and making money. ‘Smaller films often require smaller marketing budgets, which are more easily recouped. Also, social media campaigns, often at low cost, are used to market and distribute films, opening a window of new opportunities for smaller distributors to reach audiences.’ (email 19/6/11)

Paul Wiegard, Managing Director of independent distributor Madman, routinely uses audience testing (via DBM for the past four films) to clarify perceptions of the audience. He is well aware such research is not a ‘pure science’ but nevertheless it can be a form of ‘risk management’; testing marketing materials, demographic response to the film and useful in confirming their ‘assumptions are accurate’ (interviewed 22/6/11).

Madman has had ample exposure to producers conducting ‘guerrilla testing’. This may consist of a series of discussions with a small trusted audience at various junctures. With the producer guiding focus group type analysis of the film, Wiegard has seen favourable responses elicited through leading questioning. ‘A helpful list of tips would be invaluable to assist producers in achieving objective and meaningful audience feedback.’

He has observed Australian viewers struggle to articulate what they don’t like in a film and is adamant that a professional facilitator is best placed to extract and interpret criticism.

Madman’s staff of one hundred, have varied and broad experience which helps shape the marketing and release strategies. The company approaches each feature individually and is clear what audience testing can offer. Wiegard says it helps his task of advising a producer, contrary to unrealistic expectations, their film won’t appeal to a universal audience.

Alan Finney also found audience testing can allow the distributor to justify the scale of the marketing campaign and the release strategy (including release date, number of prints) as well as the creative campaign (poster, trailer, advertising).

Richard Payten, formerly of Globe and Dendy Films, currently a director of film distribution company Transmission, has a long history with audience testing though a company he co-founded Movie Measure. In the nineties, he was frustrated by Australian features being released despite clearly identifiable problems. Audience testing regularly confirmed his hunches and identified weaknesses. Payten doubts another industry would be crazy enough to devote vast resources to a project and release it without seeking some prior indication that it would be successful (interviewed 21/7/11).
Payten said the real art to audience testing is the recruitment of potential viewers since analysis is only useful if participants have an interest in the sort of film under scrutiny. Payten also stressed that a single set of test results is not so meaningful. Real value lies in the comparisons and context professional companies offer via a database showing how one film rates against relevant others. A paramount consideration in relation to testing is the need for sufficient funds at the end of production to make recommended changes.

**Independent and lower budget films**

The expense of professional testing has clearly prompted many Australian producers to conduct their own research. The only champion of this option appeared to be Jon Reiss whose *Think Outside the Box Office* is a global educational phenomenon:

**Do your own test screenings.** Get opinions, but don’t show your film to everyone at once. Keep some trusted fresh eyes for the fifth, seventh, or tenth screening. Listen to what people are telling you, but again, filter it through your inner guide and vision. (Reiss 2010, p. 80)

If there is no consensus among producers about the efficacy of audience testing, there is also no consistency in the advice to filmmakers on methods for gaining marketing advice. While there is general agreement about the importance of audience feedback, there is little agreement about the filmmaker’s role in obtaining it. ‘The Insider’s Guide to Independent Film Distribution’ under the heading Get Objective Third-Party Feedback refers to a ‘rule’ but in fact cites yet another opinion: ‘I can’t stress this enough: feedback is critical! I recommend giving a finished cut to at least ten people in your target market, and particularly to anyone you know in the distribution field.’ However, she continues: ‘You can’t please everyone all the time. A general rule of thumb is that if three of your testers have a problem with something, then it’s a real problem.’ (Parks 2007, p. 52).

Peter Castaldi, director of Pack Screen, independent distribution consultancy, observes some producers fear audience testing and only want to engage with an audience via the distributor at the release of the film. On the other hand, he says many low budget producers constantly test their films and make changes. Being avid filmgoers, they form relationships with local independent cinemas, which take e-cinema files and offer good four booking deals. Friends and associates invited to screenings complete simple questionnaires for discussion after the screening.

Castaldi’s advice to low budget feature producers is to ‘exploit the mobility of the digital format. Test a first fine cut. Buddy up with a local cinema and absolutely exclude your friends and family totally from the audience. They are incapable of telling the truth!’ (email 24/6/11)

The ‘family and friend’ style of audience testing is certainly widespread as producers explain their friends are respected filmmakers. The danger is when insights of friends are equated with the response of a target audience — as distributors, funding body and professional researchers warn. Perhaps this was less a risk for a filmmaker of Sydney Pollack’s status: ‘I test my films my own way, in front of people I know whose taste I respect. The danger in testing is taking it too literally so you end up making the audience picture, not yours’ (*New York Times* 2000). Making the ‘audience picture’ may not be such a bad thing in Australia:

Despite the excesses of the system, it is encouraging that Australian filmmakers are catching on to audience testing. It is a belated admission that films have to be made for an audience beyond the filmmakers’ friends and family. (*SMH*, 28/6/07)

**Funding body perspective**

The former Australian Film Finance Corporation commissioned a large-scale research project in 2008, to investigate ‘how Australian films are perceived by local audiences. The findings of the report are not re-capped here but its key conclusion was respondents believed Australian filmmakers make films for themselves, rather than for a real audience. (*Maximising the Appeal of Australian Movies with Australian Audiences*, Bergent)
Screen Australia (SA) was launched in 2008 as the principal Federal screen funding agency, with a mandate for change — marketing and audience engagement have been given new prominence. Marketing Guidelines released in March ‘11 cite ‘an integrated focus on audience and market awareness throughout the process from idea to screen’. The emphasis on marketing is highlighted by the Dedicated Marketing Budget, whereby SA funded feature projects are required to include the cost of specific marketing and promotional materials in their production budgets.

Kathleen Drumm has found testing useful, as the results help to inform the completion of the cut. ‘The findings illuminate the audience’s emotional response to the film; the clarity of key story points; the level and timing of engagement with the main characters and help the producer, distributor and sales agent to refine a film’s positioning statement, log line and campaign artwork.’ Drumm is inclined to recommend all SA-funded features conduct independent audience testing. Exceptions might be lower budget titles, without significant audience expectations. SA has regularly urged producers who receive feature funding, to commission professional audience research, however staff are aware that the ‘family and friends’ model still frequently takes place. She is concerned that the price of test screening can be an inhibitor — ‘we are looking forward to a more competitive environment of service providers’ (email 18/8/11).

Drumm noted that producers were sometimes averse to testing, given their film was in a vulnerable, incomplete state. Producers worried that the audience could not legitimately judge, when elements such as music or special effects were unfinished.

Marketing staff point out distributors and exhibitors who handle local films are businesses, which devote professional time and resources to promoting the project.

SA’s CEO, Dr Ruth Harley, was impressed by several recent cases where films were effectively ‘tuned’ as a result of audience testing. However she considers a do-it-yourself approach is far less value in gauging the audience. ‘Australian features seeking a broad audience must make use of the same marketing tools as international films they sit alongside.’ (interviewed 24/6/11)

**New world of audience influence**

A significant shift in the influence of the audience is that it can now ‘bite back’ via the Internet. Ignore feedback before a film is locked off and it is likely to be heard via Facebook, Twitter and other social media sites, before the opening night audience has reached the cinema exit.

Screen audience testing offers a relationship where the filmmaker can expand the role of storyteller by connecting, in person or online, with viewers, critics and fans.

The Audience Studies Reader concludes with a lengthy discussion of audience engagement: ‘The experience of being part of an audience will change, … the overflow of a media text onto the Internet can in fact make for a more egalitarian relationship between producers and their audiences.’ (Brooker & Jermyn 2003, p. 333)

The influence of the audience is on the ascendancy due to the Internet. The online audience has given rise to a revolution in preview screenings. Not only do participants spread their own reviews, the Internet has allowed more and cheaper testing to be conducted online (especially for television, which was not covered in this paper). These issues are raised by industry authors such as Peter Broderick and Jon Reiss who champion the opportunities for producers to engage, collaborate with and build their audience directly, thereby reducing marketing and distribution costs, while retaining control of their creation.

In the digital era, Reiss preaches the 50:50 rule: 50 per cent of the time and resources to make the film and 50 per cent to connect the film to your audience: ‘Community outreach, crowdsourcing, crowd-funding, and other ways of engaging your audience and collaborators is one of the most
exciting aspects of this new model of filmmaking, distribution, and marketing. The surface has only been scratched as to the creative potential of these new techniques …’ (Reiss op cit, p. 114).

Audience testing is not being lauded here as the magic ingredient in creating and selling screen entertainment. Strong test results are no guarantee of box office success. Nevertheless, in addition to the quantitative scores, test screenings invite debate and qualitative assessment that transcends box office measures of value.

The pilot survey reported in this paper revealed a high proportion of producers: had undertaken audience research; managed the process themselves; made changes arising from audience feedback; were satisfied with the outcome.

The advantages of professional screen audience research were testified by the contributors to this paper: independent distributors, industry press, research companies, federal funding agency and above all, the majority of Australian independent producers of recent feature films. While all these informants may have vested interests, their overriding goal is to engage with successful feature films that connect with a global audience. The evidence that audience testing is important lies in popular recent Australian films that put it to good use including: Animal Kingdom; Bran Nue Dae, Legend of the Guardians; Mao’s Last Dancer; Mary and Max; Tomorrow When the War Began, Knowing, Daybreakers.

This research was undertaken for an ARC Project (LP 100200656) — Spreading Fictions: Distributing Stories in the Online Age.