

THE FUTURE OF AUDIENCES

What effect has the disruption of 2020 had on the attitudes of audiences? Will cinemas be able to regain confidence to entice the public back into theatres, following a prolonged period when the ever-increasing reach of streaming services?

Close-Up's Michael Rosser spoke to three key European experts representing cinemas, streaming platforms and young audiences to take the temperature of the current situation and look ahead to what the future might hold for audiences.

MARGRET ALBERS: "CINEMAS RUN THE RISK OF DISAPPEARING OFF THE RADAR FOR CHILDREN"

By Michael Rosser

Margret Albers is president of the ECFA (European Children's Film Association), an ambassador for films aimed at young people which aims to provide access to a wider variety of European cinema for children worldwide.

ECFA has around 130 members comprising companies and organisations from 40 different countries, including filmmakers, producers, promoters, distributors, exhibitors, TV programmers, festival organisers and film educators.

What impact has the virus crisis had on how young audiences approach watching film?

As a result of the pandemic, cinemas in Europe were closed for most of the year and the impact on young audiences in particular should not be underestimated. Children are explorers and, of course, they explore the places and platforms where they can find content interesting for them. Cinemas run the risk of disappearing off the radar of children's film reception.

How do you see both platforms and cinemas serving audiences in future?

The sheer mass of films and series available is already immense and with the multitude of streaming services it will undoubtedly continue to grow. It will be very exciting to see how audiences behave. Will streaming fatigue set in if people spend more and more time selecting and not actually watching? This can be a chance for cinemas, because they curate their programme.

Do you think platforms and cinemas can find better ways to work together, or at least coexist?

Currently, the situation is very unsatisfactory. Large studios release films intended for the big screen on their own platforms, while streaming services use short theatrical releases to gain access to certain funding, festivals or awards. Unfortunately, this has little to do with content and does not take adequately into account the audiences or the platform-specific experience. In order to coexist successfully and even work better together, it would be necessary to take the latter in particular (audiences and platform-specific experience) more into account from the development to the distribution of films.

What do you think the industry tends to get wrong about how we think about audiences today?

Unfortunately, the industry is still very much in the 20th Century. The current approach to development, marketing and distribution is based on the experience of a generation that did not have the variety of freely accessible AV material and interactive media that is available to the young audience



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today. Not only do cinema, television, streaming services and free online offers compete for the "media time" of children, but also social media, the games industry and, last but not least, the book market.

I have the impression that the industry is not sufficiently aware of the complex media environment in which young viewers operate and, moreover, does not take their needs, wishes and abilities seriously enough.

Do you think the pandemic will have a long-term impact on audience behaviour?

The trend to consume films at home sitting on the sofa was certainly reinforced by the pandemic. I believe in the cinema as a special place for special film experiences - but I am familiar with it. The longer cinemas remain closed, the more difficult it will be to put cinema back on the radar of young audiences.

What excites you about the future of film distribution and exhibition?

The amount of content is immense. This "white media noise" leads to frustration (also) among children. How and where can you find good content? For content providers, this means the reverse: it is becoming more difficult to be found.

I very much hope that the crisis will encourage distributors, exhibitors and funders to try out new, target group-specific and perhaps also unorthodox marketing approaches such as co-creation, community building, and enforcing cooperation with institutions and companies outside the industry.