



From reel to real

While the cinema-going experience has changed down the years, the reasons why people go to the movies remain the same. They go to dream, to escape from reality and to live someone else's life for two hours. The cinema is more than the dictionary definition of a building where films are shown; it is the venue for a first date or the first experience of a horror picture.

In days gone by, when there were fewer choices of leisure activities, the cinema offered entertainment to the public at affordable prices. Before the multiplexes became widespread in the 1980s, cinemas were much bigger.



Gary Mak thinks that the audience in the past was more attentive to the movies than today's audience.

"We felt we were sharing the movies because everyone in the audience seemed to be experiencing the same emotions," says Ho Shu-kwan, 41, who grew up in Sheung Shui. Ho says he frequently visited the cinema because most children did not need to pay for tickets. They just followed grown-ups with tickets.

He recalls sitting with a group of children on the floor of the cinema during a packed screening of the Japanese superman movie *Ultraman Seven*. "The cinema was very full and we couldn't find a seat because we did not buy a ticket."

What Ho misses most are the large screens in the old theatres. "It doesn't not feel like I'm watching a movie

when I look at the screens they have now," he says of today's mini screens.

For many fans, cinemas today are just not as atmospheric as they used to be, and midnight screenings were perhaps the most atmospheric of all.

"The audience was attentive and expressed how they felt about the film explicitly."

"The business was so good that cinemas offered midnight screenings every weekend and often played to a full house," says Shek Kei, a veteran film critic at *Ming Pao*. Gary Mak, director

of Broadway Cinematheque, says many audience members at these screenings were *goo waak chai* (gang members) and their responses were unique.

"The audience was attentive and expressed how they felt about the film explicitly," says Mak recalling the audience reaction to Wong Kar-wai's *Chungking Express* at one midnight screening. He says viewers swore whenever they did not understand or were annoyed by the film.

But not everyone has such misty-eyed memories. Leung Shu-ming has mixed feelings. He was a hawker selling food outside the Hang Lok Theatre in Shek Wu Hui in the 1970s when he was a teenager. He misses the vibrant streets around the theatre, which were full of hawkers and crowds of filmgoers before and after a show.

"We got to know the regulars because they came really often," he says. "Teenagers would spend the whole night around the theatre. Some factory workers who lived locally also came together to enjoy leisure time after work." Leung says the presence of a theatre helped to foster community bonding, something that disappeared after Hang Lok Theatre was pulled down.

Despite his attachment to the prosperous streets near Hang Lok Theatre, Leung did not have a very

good impression of the theatre itself. He says the cinema was dirty; audience members brought in all sorts of food, such as fishballs, chicken legs, char siu rice, watermelon - you name it. People spat on the floor and threw rubbish everywhere. The theatre always had a strange smell.

"It was not like today's cinemas where snacks allowed are strictly limited. I really appreciate the clean environment of the new cinemas."

It was not just food. Before the ban on smoking in cinemas in the early 1990s, a mist used to hang in front of the screens. "My clothes smelt of cigarettes every time I left the cinema," says film buff John Chan.

Many old cinemas were two or three-tier theatres accommodating thousands. The biggest cinema ever in Hong Kong, Paris Theatre in San Po Kong had 3,000 seats. Unlike the standard seat prices of today, seats were divided into front stall, middle stall, back stall, lower circle and upper circle. The seats further from the screen cost more.

"Every day after school, we went to the cinema and bought front stall tickets," Chan says, "when the lights dimmed and the movie started, we moved to the middle stall before sitting in back stall seats after the intermission."



Snacks allowed are limited strictly by the cinemas these years.



Unlike the situation in the past, the seat prices of today are standardised.

It was common for a family of eight to buy just five tickets. "When there was a full house, some just sat or stood in the aisles," Chan says. "Of course, if you went to King's Theatre in Central, the audience there were more well-mannered and you would not see anything like this."

Apart from a hierarchy for seat prices, there was also a hierarchy of cinemas. Critic Shek Kei explains that first-class cinemas like Queen's Theatre in Central showed Hollywood

and European films, cinemas showing Mandarin movies were the next rung down, followed by those showing Cantonese movies. This only ended in the 1970s when Cantonese movies gained prominence.

Chui Hin-wai has witnessed the best and worst times of Hong Kong cinemas. He started as an usher at Ruby Theatre in 1971 and is currently the director and manager of the theatre department of the Sil-Metropole Organisation Ltd. Sil-Metropole was formed by the merger of three left-wing film companies in the 1980s.

Another characteristic of cinemas back then is that they were also classified by their political affiliation. Left-wing cinema operators once ran as many as 10 cinemas in Hong Kong, including the legendary Astor Classics Cinema in Yau Ma Tei and Ruby Theatre in To Kwa Wan. They were outlets for the mainland's film productions at a time when China was largely cut off from the outside world.

Chui says a short documentary, *China Today*, would be shown in the left-wing theatres before each film. The programme showed an official version of life in China at that time and was one of the few public channels of information about communist China.

During this time, the colonial government also ran propaganda films. At one time, all cinemas in Hong Kong were required to show



“Rank films”, short documentaries showing life in Britain.

During the Cultural Revolution, portraits of Mao Zedong were seen outside left-wing cinemas, alongside political slogans. “When Mao Zedong appeared in newsreels, everyone in the audience stood up and applauded,” Chui says.

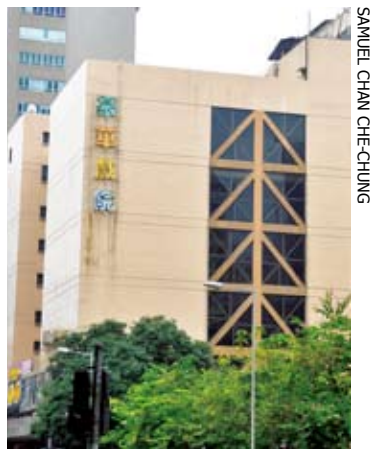
Apart from that, left-wing cinemas were similar to others. When mainland film productions suffered a drastic decrease during the 1970s, Astor Classics Cinema began showing James Bond movies and even erotica. “We would show any films as long as it complied with the laws of Hong Kong,” he says.

Growing up in cinema was an “exhilarating experience” for Chui. He worked as an usher, billboard painter, box office worker, projectionist and even an editor during his days in Ruby Theatre. He knows everything about cinema operation.

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In the past, there were not enough copies of films to go round for all the screenings around town. As each film comprised many reels of film, cinema operators had to employ motorcyclists to deliver the reels of film from one cinema to another. Show times had to be carefully staggered to avoid interruption halfway through the film.

With all his years of experience, Chui is able to dispel a myth that has fascinated many people down the years - the haunted cinema. There was a superstition that some seats in cinemas were reserved for ghosts. Chui explains



Dynasty Theatre has the most number of seats among the cinemas in Hong Kong at present.

the spare seats are reserved as backups in case the box office staff mistakenly sells a single seat twice.

With the demise of the old single-screen cinemas, many of the myths and memories will become just that, memories.

Many old single screen cinemas have been struggling for survival since the emergence of multiplexes in the mid-1980s. Many switched to showing adult movies.

“Before VCDs became popular, there were as many as 300 to 400, most of them the elderly, who came to see porn movies in one screening alone,” says an assistant manager at Dynasty Theatre in Mong Kok. He adds the cinema stopped showing adult movies two years ago because they had run out of film copies.

Perhaps the loss of the human touch in cinemas is a trade-off for a more comfortable cinema-going experience. “The (slope of the) viewing floor in the past was often too gentle and the sight of the screen was blocked by the heads of those sitting in the next row,” John Chan recalls. Critic Shek Kei says the lighting, sound and picture quality have improved. The spaces between rows have been widened too.



Nowadays, there are more spaces between the seats in the cinemas in order to provide a better environment for the audience.

Cinema lost its former glory after television became popular, it suffered further blows with the rise of other forms of entertainment like karaoke, the internet and video games. Yet, cinemas still have a unique charm.

“Today’s audiences go to the cinema looking for something that they cannot possibly experience watching a DVD at home,” says Chan Chi-leung, general manager of UA Cinema Circuit. That is why they invested in IMAX in 2007, a film system that delivers crystal-clear images and impressive sound effects.

UA Cinema Circuit has invested tens of millions in IMAX and



Chan Chi-leung believes that IMAX is worth investing in as it increases UA's competitive power.

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3D projectors. But Chan says the investment is worthwhile, as no competitor can overtake UA in the next five years. The success of *Avatar* at the box office would seem to prove him right.

It is not just films like *Avatar* that are meant to be seen only in cinemas. Broadway Cinematheque (BC) shows non-mainstream and masterpieces by auteurs to local film-lovers. Its success is a phenomenon in itself. The cinema is located off the beaten track in Yau Ma Tei and is not attached to any shopping mall, unlike most cinemas in Hong Kong nowadays.

The project could not have been possible if the boss of Edko Film Ltd, which owns Broadway Circuit had not been a film buff himself. “There has never been any pressure from the management of BC to meet a target turnover,” says BC director Gary Mak. Edko Film, a major film

distribution company in Hong Kong, also secures a supply of imported films for the cinema.

Mak hopes that BC is a place where the passion for film is in the air. “From the selection of films to staff employment and programmes, all these efforts are to create a film-loving ambience,” he says.

He sees BC as a place where film buffs gather to spend the whole afternoon instead of leaving right after the movie ends.

“BC offers a total experience of film and culture by combining bookstore and café in the same place,” says Mak. The café is named Kubrick after the director Stanley Kubrick.

“Kubrick pushed the envelope every time he makes a film in a very different genre,” says Mak. “That’s the spirit we want here ... a place for audience to feel the power of cinema.”



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