



The Mistake of Limited Film Distribution

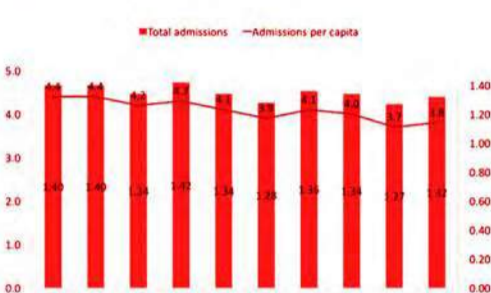
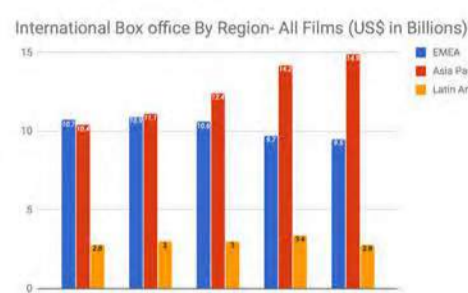
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Statistical evaluations from the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) imply that box office has been rising, despite the rate of admissions shrinking. There are arguments that this pattern is the result of increasing ticket prices, where audiences are being priced out of admission, whilst the swamp of similar, effects-laden blockbusters and franchises which swallow the screens and leave mid-to-low budget films outside of smaller multiplexes - confined to major cities and independent cinemas.



That being said, since 1983, the industry has been in a state of recovery from the damaging dip which was the 1970s. Trends imply that over time, the rates of admission in the UK, and, by extension, the rest of the world have generally been increasing, and the current numbers are merely either a temporary state of turbulence or a foreshadowing of an industry in trouble. However, there's evidence of there being serious money with greater access to award winning films; this year, Oscar contenders have all witness significant box office bumps as a result of their accolades.

However, outside of cities and large towns, current distribution methods make it hard to watch more obscure films outside of major cities. 70% of box office and 60% of the UK's screens are owned by Odeon UCI, Vue and Cineworld. Their largest (city-based) multiplexes tend to prioritise big budget ticket sellers, as well as key awards contenders. Whilst pictures like *The Post*, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing Missouri* and *Darkest Hour* have received wide releases, the likes of *Phantom Thread* and *Call Me By Your Name* are strangled under limited release patterns which confine themselves to major cities.

The 'limited release' platform is often designed for two major purposes. The first reason is that studios can keep distribution costs down by releasing in a small number of screens which are guaranteed to earn money, instead of wasting distribution on locations with little audience presence. The second is that it can work as a testing ground for wider releases. However, this method has been known to be unreliable since the dawn of mainstream Hollywood. Infamously, 2015's *Steve Jobs* did this; it had a limited run in L.A. and New York, two weeks before its wide release, where it did exceptionally well, and ranked 15th in history for those which had followed the same popular release pattern. However, when it was released to the wider public, it was one of the biggest and most surprising box office bombs that year. Jules Dassin's classic 1949 film-noir, *Thieves' Highway*, garnered a similar release platform and fate because, despite the rave reviews from those who saw it, the film played poorly in rural America - as it simply wasn't a film which people wanted to see at that time in America.

Reasons such as this are often pitted as justifications as to why certain releases are better to remain within cities. However, when interviewing Blackpool residents, there was clear frustration over release patterns - despite the town's moderate size. In the town, there's one major multiplex cinema, as well as another and one independent cinema in two neighbouring towns. However, residents listed films such as *The Shape of Water*, *Phantom Thread*, *The Disaster Artist*, *Lady Bird* and *Call Me By Your Name* as significant examples they had trouble seeing; all of them being incredibly popular, awards contenders. This doesn't even account for popular foreign language films such as *Raw* and *A Fantastic Woman*; all of which weren't shown.

Often, films with limited release patterns are confined to independent cinemas. According to the 'Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' (DEFRA), many of these independents reside within the South of England and major cities. Even large Northern towns such as Blackpool suffer from this, where 139,195 residents are deprived of these offerings. The next nearest location where new releases are reliably shown is the Northern hub of Manchester, a 65 mile stretch away from the seaside resort.

Many of the individuals who were interviewed alluded that, despite their preferred viewing being within a cinema, they would often either resort to piracy or wait for it to come on streaming services such as Netflix. These two are pervading issues in the industry; whilst streaming services such as Amazon often produce films with the intention of wide cinema distribution, such as *Manchester By the Sea*, *The Big Sick* and *Shaun the Sheep: The Movie*, Netflix has made concerted efforts to prioritise films on their lossy streaming platform, with small, limited cinema release windows designed to horde in those who aren't subscribers. In addition, online movie piracy losses are predicted to exceed \$52bn for the industry in 2018, and if cinema goers are being forced into participating in this pattern, the problem shall arguably only continue to expand.



However, trends imply that cinema exhibition is a platform under fire in general, and studios are often reluctant to participate in cinema exhibition. In 2013, industry giants George Lucas and Steven Spielberg exclaimed how the theatres were under threat from Hollywood itself, with Lucas stating that "the pathway to get into theatres is really getting smaller and smaller," "you're talking about Steven Spielberg and George Lucas can't get their movie into a theatre!". Whilst in a different context, cinema goers outside of major cities feel this pain, and if a major town such as Blackpool is unable to get some of the year's hottest awards contenders onscreen, there's little hope for many theatre goers elsewhere.