

# IN THE NAME OF THE PUBLIC: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO THE TASTES AND HABITS OF FILM AUDIENCES

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The article “Forget Your Troubles and Be Happy: Una aproximación etnográfica a la ideología del entretenimiento en el cine estadounidense contemporáneo” represented the culmination of the first phase of a research project through which we tried to analyse systematically the ways in which the average Spanish moviegoer responds to the ideology of contemporary Hollywood films and genres. It has been two years since the publication of that article and in the meantime we have continued to examine the particular relationship established between films and audiences in an effort, first, to understand the motivations of the spectators that frequent the cinemas every day and, second, to grant them the place they deserve in critical discourse.

In our research, we followed in the footsteps of ideological criticism and recent reception studies, two approaches that concentrate on the spectator and place audiences at the core of film analysis. The work carried out by critics like Andrew Britton (1986) or Richard Dyer (1981), which we referred to in the aforementioned article, has been instrumental in disclosing the unwritten contract between mainstream Hollywood cinema and its worldwide audience. Nevertheless, we strove to overcome what we saw as a limitation in these approaches. Dyer, for instance, described the pleasure of film entertainment as utopian to the extent that the vast majority of Hollywood products mirror a reality that spectators can

comfortably recognize as their own but that remains forever out of reach. The work of other analysts like Robert Ray (1998) has followed the same trail. However, in their analysis of mainstream films, these critics regard audiences both as submissive and indifferent to the films' ideology, and, although it is often the case that the experience of critics and audiences are often worlds apart, the authors do not seem concerned to discover what real spectators think about these issues. Nevertheless, other critics such as Jackie Stacey (1994) or Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby (1999) have combined film theory with a rich body of ethnographic research in order to put spectators back into film theory. Likewise, we set out to gather the opinions of actual moviegoers, bringing them within the range of critical study.

Our research revealed an interesting ambivalence towards the ideological impact of films. Spectators remained, in general, oblivious to this ideology. They did not show particular interest in the so-called films with a message, nor did the ideological content of films shape their preferences. Yet, they were not unaware of Hollywood's attempt at cultural colonization. Although the specific ways in which ideology in a film works often escaped them, spectators perceived and responded with mocking distance to less polished examples of Hollywood's assault on peripheral cultures like cliché-laden teenpics or the unrestrained exaltation of the US and its unique success in producing cinematographic blockbusters.

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Our initial step was directed both towards finding out the motivation that drove people to movie theatres to watch some films and not others, and to exploring the impressions these films made on the audience. We carried out a qualitative study based on a number of non-structured interviews that gave the respondents an opportunity to express themselves in their own terms during the course of a flexible and casual conversation. From there, we set out to expand our investigation to include wider social aspects, namely a detailed examination of the audience's behaviour and preferences. Once more we had recourse to the techniques used in the social sciences. However, on this occasion we decided to question the spectators directly. Our conception of films as part of today's social tapestry, intimately linked to economic, cultural, and political actualities, as well as our approach to film research as outlined above, with the increasing importance given to the audience, required us to confront a number of subjective aspects related to real spectators and, therefore, to devise a suitable method to elicit sociologically relevant data.

## 2. Research Design

The aim of the second stage of the research was to investigate the movie-watching habits and preferences of residents in Zaragoza aged twelve and more. As in the first stage, the population under study was divided into three groups: teenagers

(respondents aged from 12 to 18), university students (respondents aged from 18 to 30) and adults (respondents aged from 30 onwards).<sup>2</sup> Since we were more interested in carrying out a qualitative study in order to draw conclusions about the information gathered than in the statistical representativeness of the results, the respondents were selected following a non-probabilistic sampling method (Cea 1998: 180). A state school and several faculties and university schools were chosen for the first and the second groups. The third group was composed of some of the parents of the teenagers in the first group, several members of the staff of ten different private companies in the city and the University of Zaragoza, as well as some people attending continuing education courses. As this is a qualitative study, such a partial sample cannot claim to be wholly representative of the population of Zaragoza. Nevertheless, as the conclusions will show, a number of general patterns in film consumption emerged from our research.

At this stage a questionnaire was devised as the study instrument because, as Cea suggests (240), it made it possible to collect the information in a structured way while it also made data processing and analysis easier. It was a self-administered questionnaire, that is, one in which the respondents themselves read the questions and answered them. Our choice of this type of questionnaire was not only due to practical considerations but was also determined by the kind of questions asked. Since many of our respondents would have been in a classroom when answering the questions, this type of questionnaire seemed to be most likely to bring in the highest number of answers at the same time. Furthermore, a self-administered questionnaire gives the respondents more time to think about the answers while, at the same time, partly reducing the bias introduced by the respondents' urge to give what is considered to be the socially correct answer when the questions are read out by an interviewer (241-50).

The questionnaire consisted of eleven questions (see Appendix 1) designed to obtain pertinent information about a wide range of issues, namely,

- a) The ranking of cinema among the respondents' hobbies.
- b) The number of movies watched by the respondents per month both at the cinema and at home and, which of these two locations they preferred for movie watching.
- c) The country of origin of the movies they preferred to watch.
- d) Their favourite types of movies and their all-time favourites.

Apart from the questions dealing with the respondents' favourite movies and hobbies, the rest were closed-ended questions. In the open-ended questions, such as the question related to the type of movies they preferred to watch, the respondents were asked to give three items.

The questionnaire was administered over a four-month period from September 2001 to December 2001. A total of 1,014 questionnaires were collected. The number of questionnaires for each group was roughly similar: 342 in the first group, 333 in the second group and 339 in the third group. The sample consisted of 555 women and 455 men (4 respondents did not specify sex). The data were subjected to descriptive statistical analysis through cross-tabulation and frequency analysis. A chi-square test was used in order to compare the categorical variables (sex and age). The statistical analysis was done using the *Manugistics Statgraphics Plus* software package.

### 3. The Results of the Survey

In this section we shall be referring to the results obtained, looking at each question separately. We have decided to look at the results for the three age groups together, as we believe that a contrastive analysis of the data gathered from each group (adolescents; University students; adults over thirty<sup>3</sup>) may prove more revealing.

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#### 3.1 A Look at Spare Time Activities and Movie-Watching Habits

##### 3.1.1 Which are your favourite hobbies?

In general, the teenagers under survey prefer playing sports (20%), going out with friends (10.11%), playing videogames (9.86%) or listening to music (7.8%) to activities such as going to the cinema or renting a film to watch at home (6.77%), reading (5.66%) or watching TV (a surprisingly low 3.86%). Indeed, going to the cinema or renting a film imply spending money (some would say that *a lot of* money, especially at the weekend) unlike sports or some other activities, given the availability of, say, pirate copies of music or videogames on the Internet, to mention a current popular example. Admittedly, the same could be said about films, though the time it takes to download them may discourage many fans.

As for University students, cinema is not, yet again, one of the respondents' favourite hobbies. It ranks fourth among the female respondents' hobbies (11.11%) and fifth among the male respondents' (only 4.9%). Both men and women prefer other activities such as sports, music and, unlike the teenagers under survey, reading. Interestingly, the cinema is much more popular among the female respondents of this group (11.11%) than among the male ones (4.9%). This suggests that females are more cinema-oriented than males. However, as will be explained next, movie-watching rates (as evinced by questions 2 and 3) were very similar for the men and women of this group.

Although watching films seems to be one of the adult group's favourite pastimes, they clearly prefer other leisure activities such as reading, sports, or listening to music. In terms of gender, cinema is a more popular pastime among women than men. This, once again, seems to confirm the cinema as a much more 'female' activity than a 'male' one. For these adult women, cinema was their second choice, reading being for a large majority their first, while men opted for sports, reading, listening to music, hiking, tourism, and do-it-yourself above films.

Overall, it can be concluded that the cinema is not a clear favourite for any of the groups, as it ranks fourth or fifth, preceded by other activities such as sports, music or reading. However, women seem to be keener on the cinema than men, except in the case of the teenagers, where the percentages obtained were fairly similar. These data will be further elaborated on in later subsections.

### *3.1.2 How often do you go to the cinema?*

More than half (59%) of the adolescents that responded to our questionnaire stated that they go to the cinema between once and twice a month. However, 28% of them go to the cinema less frequently than once a month and only 10% go more often than twice a month. In more general terms, two thirds of these teenagers go to the pictures at least once a month. On the other hand, analysing these responses separately, it can be observed that more girls than boys go to the cinema regularly. 76% of these girls go to the cinema at least once or twice a month whereas 64% of boys do so. It is worth mentioning that a slightly lower percentage of girls than boys opted for the cinema as one of their favourite spare time activities.

The results obtained from the University students' questionnaires were somewhat different. Most of the respondents (50%) in this age group go to the cinema once or twice a month. The answer that ranks second is "less than once" (28.44%), which means that less than 25% of the respondents in this age group go to the cinema more than twice a month. As in the case of the adolescents that participated in the survey, this is not a high rate of attendance at the movie theatres or multiplexes. The percentages for men or women offer no significant differences in this case.

As for the adults, most of the respondents (61.07%) claimed that they go to the cinema less often than once a month. However, the percentage of people that go to the cinema between once and twice a month (30.9%) is relatively high, rising to 33.33% in the case of women. Therefore, in this age group, women also seem to go to the cinema more often than men. It is also interesting to note that these people go to the cinema less often than the University students, all in their twenties, that responded to the questionnaire. This possibly reflects their increasing work and/or family responsibilities and their diminishing spare time.

As can be seen, women constitute the bulk of the cinema audience. In addition, these overall results also confirm the critical view that young audiences are the most numerous cinema-going group. As Doherty asserts (2002: 1), “without the support of the teenage audiences, few theatrical movies would break even, fewer still become hits, and none become blockbusters”.

### *3.1.3 How many videos or DVDs do you watch at home?*

Things change when it comes to analysing people’s movie-watching habits at home (on TV, VCR or DVD). About 25% of the adolescents say they watch between three and four films a month, but around 50% respond that they watch four or more. This means that the large majority of these informants watch at least three films a month at home, which is, we believe, a significant number. There are no noticeable differences between the frequencies obtained for girls and for boys. One possible explanation for the differing results obtained in this question and the previous one (cinema-attendance rate vs. home movie-watching habits) is the fact that cinema tickets are too pricey for this kind of public, whereas video rentals are more affordable, especially when the whole family watches the film at home, in which case the parents would probably pay for it.

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Let’s now turn to analysing the University students’ answers. Many of the respondents (32.11%) say they watch only one or two films a month at home. The answer that ranks second is, again, “less than one” (24.31%). In this case, however, the percentages for these two answers only account for 56.42%, which means that, when compared to the previous question, there is a higher percentage of respondents that watch more than three films a month at home. As for the percentages for men and for women, no significant differences were found.

Movie watching, whether at home or at the cinema, does not seem to be the favourite pastime of the University students under survey. Once again, there might be several explanations for this, such as cinema ticket prices or their preference for other social activities, such as night clubbing or going to the pub, which are not always open to adolescents. In the case of those students living away from home, it is relevant that DVDs or VCRs are not usually available in student flats or in common rooms in Halls of Residence.

On the other hand, the results show that, on the whole, adults watch less than one film a month at home. Yet, the percentage of those people that watch more than one rises significantly as compared to the number of films that they watch at the cinema. 13.62% of the informants state that they watch between three and four films a month, and up to 15.33% claim to see more than four films a month. But then again, there is a tendency for adults over 30 to see fewer films than University students, even at home. Finally, when it comes to watching films at home, the

difference between the number of films watched by adult men and women is not as large as when attendance at movie theatres is compared.

In conclusion, it can be said that the number of films watched at home is inversely proportional to the respondents' age. In other words, the older you are, the fewer movies you watch, which confirms the fact that as well as being "the most numerous cinema-going group", as suggested in the previous section, teenagers are also the most powerful home-cinema consuming group.

### *3.1.4 Do you prefer to watch movies at the cinema or at home?*

Most teenagers seem to prefer watching films at the cinema to watching them at home. This preference is even more evident in the case of girls (almost 50%), compared with 38% in the case of boys. This is hardly surprising, given that this activity was usually identified as a bonding and fun activity by teenage girls in the first stage of this continuing research project.

Likewise, the University students under survey appear to prefer watching movies at the cinema to watching them at home. While this preference is very clear as far as female University students is concerned (70.51% prefer to watch movies at the cinema while only 25% prefer to watch them at home), the percentages for the male University students are much closer to those of the younger age group. 49.18% claim to prefer watching movies at the cinema while 45.90% prefer watching them at home. These results are very much in line with those obtained for the teenagers.

In general, adults also prefer watching films at the cinema. It seems that one's age does not affect this widespread tendency: 69.58% prefer the movie theatres while only 26.76% prefer watching films at home. However, if we analyse men and women separately, it is revealing that while 74.12% of the women questioned said that they preferred watching films at the cinema, only 64.63% of the men claimed to prefer cinema-going.

The results obtained for the three groups are fairly consistent, as both men and women of all ages prefer the cinema to the comfort but also the limitations of the living room, which seems to confirm Patrick Phillips' opinion (2003: 92-93) that the technology of cinema exhibition holds audiences much more powerfully than television does owing to the cinema screen size, the quality of sound and images and the spectator's lack of control over the screening. Phillips has also called attention to the "upturn in cinema visits at a time when VCR and DVD systems and multi-channel satellite/ cable TV dominate domestic entertainment".

Finally, we found it significant that considerably more women than men preferred to watch films at the cinema. An important finding, then, would be that the bulk of filmgoers are female, at least in our particular context.

## 3.2 Defining Film Tastes

### 3.2.1 *Do you prefer to watch films from...?*

The majority of our teenage informants (56%) prefer US films to those from other industries. 22% prefer to watch Spanish films, whereas a surprising 6% prefer other films. It is interesting to note the way in which the answers given by girls differ from those given by boys. 59% of girls prefer American films, compared to 54% of boys. Yet, only 17% of girls prefer Spanish films, compared to 27% of boys.

Most of the respondents in the group of University students (55.5%) state a clear preference for American movies. 23.85% favour Spanish movies. These results are remarkably similar to those given by the adolescents. Yet, unlike the teenagers, no significant percentage differences were found for men and for women.

As for the films that adults prefer to watch, 43.31% said that they preferred Spanish products; only 28.71% had a preference for films from the US. There are no relevant differences for women and men. These results contrast with the preferences of younger moviegoers, who clearly preferred US films. It is clear that age *does* influence one's choice in this case. Adult audiences seem to have a preference for stories that are closer to them, rather than the typically spectacular narratives from Hollywood.

### 3.2.2 *Which type of film do you prefer to watch?*

In this rather lengthy section, we refer to the different genres that the respondents prefer to watch. A wealth of information was obtained, thus we have tried to be as descriptive as possible in order to be able to reach some general conclusions.

As far as the films preferred by teenagers, comedies were chosen over and above the rest (22.86%). Action films rank second (17.4%) and horror films third (12%). Yet, comedy is only the second option for boys (21.39%), closely following their first choice, action films (22.19%). Science fiction films (12.29%) are in third place, ranking above horror films (10.69%) and suspense films (5.61%) a poor fifth choice. Their last choices, predictably, were romantic films and dramas.

Girls, for their part, overwhelmingly prefer comedies (24.24%), followed by horror movies (13.88%), action movies (12.87%), romantic movies (11.86%, compared to the boys' 2.77%) and suspense films (7.32%) in that order. Unlike boys, girls do not appear to be interested in science fiction films (only 6.56%), but seem to have a much more varied taste than boys in terms of their favourite film genre. Finally, neither boys nor girls are attracted to dramas.

It is worth mentioning the extent to which the results of this survey confirm the existence of 'gender-neutral' genres, such as comedy, but also of 'female' and 'male'



genres, such as romantic films in the former case, or action films and science fiction in the latter. Significantly, however, a substantial proportion of girls chose action movies, which came slightly higher than romantic films in the ranking, and many more teenage girls than boys claimed to prefer horror films, which is perhaps another surprising finding among people in this age group. Hence, two interesting conclusions may be drawn from these results. Traditional notions of femininity are challenged, in as much as romantic and dramatic films are not among the clear favourites for these girls. On the other hand, it seems that boys prefer to assert their masculinity publicly by watching action films and disdaining romantic movies (only about 2% claim to like them).

Substantial differences along gender lines were found for University students' preferences. Women in this age group prefer suspense films (21.2%) followed, with similar percentages, by romantic films (17%) and comedies (16.9%). Men, however, chose comedies, especially spoofs (20.2%), followed by suspense films (17.5%) and action/adventure films (15.8%). In line with the teenagers, romantic and horror films seem to be one of the least favourites among the male respondents (5% and 4.4% respectively), while science fiction is the least favourite among the female ones. Once again, horror films seem to be more popular among the women respondents than men. On the other hand, dramas obtained very low percentages in both cases. As can be seen, there seems to be a common preference for both comedies and suspense films.

Once again, it is worth pointing out that 15.8% of the male respondents and 13% of the female ones chose action/adventure films as one of their favourite genres. Although usually considered a 'masculine' genre, action/ adventure films also seem to appeal to these female respondents more than those genres usually considered to be 'female', such as dramas. However, it should be recalled that action/ adventure films, like most Hollywood films, usually include a love story or a handsome male star in an attempt to make them appealing to women too. These results seem to parallel Doherty's argument (2002: 128) that since younger children will watch what an older child is interested in and girls will watch what boys are interested in, "to catch your greatest audience, you zero in on the 19-year-old male". This might explain the popularity of action movies among female teenagers and University students.

In addition, University-age women state a clearer preference for romantic films than teenage girls, maybe due to a certain settling of their sexual identity and drives. In any case, from the results obtained it can also be concluded that, as is usually assumed, men do not like (or refuse to admit that they like) romantic films (only 5% claimed to like them.) However, romance ranked higher than horror among these respondents (5% and 4.4%), although this percentage is not significant

enough to call into question traditional notions of masculinity. However, these results confirm the higher appeal of horror films for the teenage audience.

Regarding the overall favoured genres, adults manifestly prefer action films. The second favourites were suspense films, whereas comedies and horror films came third and fourth respectively. Women prefer suspense films and comedies with similar percentages (17.25% and 17.75%). Their third option were melodramas, followed by romantic films. Once again, it should be highlighted that women's first option contradicts the popular belief that women prefer tender, romantic products, which are found in fourth place. Men, for their part, plainly prefer action films (24.31% compared to 13.26% of women), followed by suspense films,<sup>4</sup> while comedies come third. In this latter case, traditional gender preferences do not seem to be challenged. In fact, many gender differences still remain, such as the fact that 14.42% and 13.1% of adult women chose dramas and romantic films, compared to 8% and 3.7% of adult men. However, a similar number of men and women chose comedies and suspense films, which strongly establish these as 'gender neutral' genres.

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Hence, these men and women tend to corroborate to a large extent the belief that action and romantic films are male and female genres. Even though, as has been explained above, romantic films were not the first choice for women (only 13.1% of the female informants mentioned them among their four favourite genres), this percentage falls to a significant 3.7% in the case of men. Drama films are also clearly preferred by adult women. Finally, although science-fiction films did not turn out to be a very popular genre among either of the groups, it seems to be more of a "male" genre as only 6% of these women chose it compared to 10.8% of men.

Among the three groups, there is an overwhelming tendency to choose comedy as one of the favourite genres, regardless of the gender of the respondent. Suspense and action films are also very popular among most of the respondents in all the groups. However, certain genres seem to be the exclusive territory of a particular group, as is the case with horror films and teenage girls, science fiction and teenage boys, and dramas and adult women.

### *3.2.3 What are your all-time favourite films?*

This must have been the hardest question to answer. One can imagine that choosing only three films from the whole History of Cinema is not an easy task. However, the results obtained proved extremely interesting for our research not only because they allowed us to see whether the choice of films matched the choice of genre to which we referred in the previous section, but also because they showed some significant generational differences among the respondents, as well as a generalised marked preference for recent products over older films.

At the time of the survey, most of the titles mentioned by the teenager group were very recent, a fact that suggests that for teenagers, the newer the film, the better. Also, since these informants had obviously watched these films at the cinema, the film-going experience was clearly decisive for their choice. This confirms their general view that watching films at the cinema is much more enjoyable than watching them at home. Indeed, in the previous stage of our research, the teenagers interviewed seemed to remember not only the stories they had particularly enjoyed, but also the social experience that went with this.

For the teenage group, *Life is Beautiful* (1997) and *The Matrix* (1999) ranked first *ex aequo*. Following their lead was the Spanish production *Torrente: El Brazo Tonto de la Ley* (1998), as well as the horror spoof *Scary Movie* (2001) and *Titanic* (1997). These results confirm to a large extent those obtained through the question relating to the respondents' favourite genres. If we analyse these results separately, we can see that girls clearly prefer *Life is Beautiful* (an unusual sort of dramatic comedy) and *Titanic* (a romantic story with special effects and moments of action), whereas *The Matrix* came third. Yet, the first *Torrente* film (an action comedy) got an overwhelmingly vote from the boys, as against the residual vote from the girls, followed by *The Matrix* (a science-fiction action film) and then the sequel *Torrente II: Misión en Marbella* (2001) and *Scary Movie*. Once again, these separate results also seem to confirm the more general conclusions that boys prefer comedies, action films and science fiction, whereas girls prefer comedies, action/adventure and romantic films.

As has been mentioned, the majority of these teenagers' favourite films were very recent. Indeed, another interesting fact became apparent: some of the films that obtained votes, such as *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (2001) or *The Lord of the Rings: the Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), were just about to premiere in Spain but had not been released yet when the survey was carried out. We therefore think that market forces in the shape of trailers or popular culture products such as books and videogames may have been at work, forces that help to publicize a new film among the teenage audience.

Finally, a certain lack of cinema culture among these teenagers can be deduced from their questionnaires, or at least a reluctance to watch not-so-recent films (or is it just the fact that commercial TV does not offer them the chance to watch them?) Among the 'oldest' films mentioned, the most popular one was *Pretty Woman* (1990), even though the musical *Grease* (1978) also managed to capture a significant proportion of the vote, though small, of course, compared to *Titanic*. Both of these films, nevertheless, have become regular TV classics, at least in the Spanish context.

Indeed, hardly any of these adolescents mentioned classical films among their favourites, with the notable exceptions of *Duck Soup* (1933), *A Night at the Opera*

(1935), *Stagecoach* (1939), *Casablanca* (1942), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958), *Some Like it Hot* (1959), *Psycho* (1960), *The Birds* (1963) and *The Exorcist* (1973). In any case, these classics obtained between 1 and 3 votes in a sample of more than 300 questionnaires, which makes them marginal. Apart from reflecting the obvious influence of marketing on these teenagers, these results suggest, in our view, a certain lack of knowledge of and interest in cinema History, on their part, and possibly their parents', which contrasts with a working knowledge of History of Literature or Art, compulsorily acquired at primary and secondary school.

Let us now consider the University students' answers and whether the films chosen as 'favourite movies' support or contradict the respondents' answers to the previous question. As in the adolescents' case, most respondents claim to prefer US movies. However, the film that ranks first in both men's and women's answers is *Life is Beautiful* (1997). There are also three Spanish movies: *Torrente*, *Tesis* (1996) and *The Others* (partly produced with US money, and with English-speaking actors and a Hollywood star, Nicole Kidman, in the protagonist role).

In the case of women, their favourite genres were suspense (first in the ranking), then romantic films and comedies (second and third). Their favourite films include five romantic films: *Titanic*, *Pretty Woman* (1990), *Ghost* (1990), *Dirty Dancing* (1987) and the classic *Gone with the Wind* (1939); three suspense films, *The Others*, *The Sixth Sense* (1999) and *Tesis*, but no 'pure' comedies since *Life is Beautiful* has many comic moments but is an unusual sort of comedy. As for the boys, their favourite genres were comedy, suspense and action/ adventure. Their favourite films included two comedies, *Brácula* (1997) and *Torrente*, both Spanish, then a suspense/ horror film, *The Others*, and three films that could fall into the category of hybrid action/ adventure films: *The Matrix* and *Star Wars* (1997) (science fiction and action/ adventure), as well as a 'pseudo-historical' action film: *Braveheart* (1995). On the whole, then, their favourite films seem to match their genre preferences.

Like the teenagers, they mentioned very few classical movies. The only major exception was *Gone with the Wind*, although only 1.92% of women voted for it. This information reflects, once again, their apparent lack of film culture. In fact, the other 'oldie' mentioned was *Dirty Dancing*, which suggests that their knowledge of the History of Cinema is circumscribed to the last fifteen years.

As for the adults' favourite films, the men mentioned *Casablanca*, *Star Wars*, *Gone with the Wind*, *2001 A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Life is Beautiful*, *Titanic*, *Out of Africa* (1985), *Ben-Hur* (1959), *Dersu Uzala* (1975) and *Todo sobre mi madre* (*All about my Mother*) (1999), in that order. The women, for their part, mentioned *Gone with the Wind* (the film with by far the highest vote), *Life is Beautiful*, *Out of Africa*, *Titanic*, *Casablanca*, *Pretty Woman*, *Ghost*, *Todo sobre mi madre*, *Rear*

*Window* (1954), and *Solas* (1999). Relatively few recent films were mentioned, which contrasts with the results from the other two groups. Interestingly, the men's all-time favourite films do not correspond entirely with their favourite genres, though the women were consistent in their choice of genres and films. The men had opted for action films, suspense films and comedies, but only *Star Wars* and perhaps *Ben-Hur* could be categorised as action films. *Life is Beautiful* may in part be considered to be a comedy, but the other favourite films listed do not correspond to any of the three genres mentioned above. In fact, there are many dramatic films, even though only 8% of men said that they preferred this type of film. Finally, as was mentioned earlier, this group of adults claimed to prefer, by far, Spanish to US or any other country's films. Yet, the only Spanish films mentioned among their all-time favourites were *Todo sobre mi madre* and *Solas* in the case of women, and *Todo sobre mi madre* in the case of men. We think this may be due to a conscious rejection of American films en bloc, which is in some measure contradicted by their actual choice of films.

Some interesting patterns emerged out of these results. In spite of the overall popularity of comedies among the three groups, hardly any comedies were mentioned in answers to the last question, with the exception of the teenagers. In our view, this may be due to the fact that comedies are not supposed to be the most highly 'respected' of genres, as evinced by the fact that very few comedies (if any) have won 'Best Picture' awards, whether in Spain or the US. Comedies are supposed to carry an inferior cultural value, which may in part explain the absence of comedy titles among the younger or older adults' favourite films. It may be added that this cultural bias against comedy is fully and enthusiastically shared by film critics (see for example King 2002).

However, the Italian Oscar-winner *Life is Beautiful* proved to be the most popular film of all times for both men and women in all the age groups. Indeed, this well-respected film satisfied many of the audience's preferences. Its combination of comedy and serious drama, together with its 'Europeanness' and the fact that it deals with blistering historical facts with a tender touch, turn it into a much more 'respectable' film that the general audience can warm to.

#### 4. Conclusion

As mentioned in the Introduction to this paper, one of the aims of this research was to obtain objective data as far as the tastes and habits of film audiences were concerned as it is easy for critics to fall into the trap of speaking for the general audience when discussing films. The results of our research may have sometimes confirmed or contradicted what is usually taken for granted (that men are into

action-adventure films while women fall for romantic stuff and so on). However, it is only through this kind of research that we can gain an understanding of actual spectator preferences and begin to take them seriously.

Our research has shown, among other things, clear generational differences as far as cinema attendance, favourite genres and movies are concerned. Women in general, and teenagers in particular, form the bulk of the cinema-going public. In addition, some genres, such as horror and science fiction, appear to be the exclusive domain of teenagers, while other genres, like action-adventure, suspense, and especially comedies, seem to be equally popular among male and female spectators of all ages. Conclusions such as these have not only provided us with some useful initial insights into the public's real preferences but they may also help us to further our understanding of the workings of the film industry.

The results of this investigation, which we hope to be able to elaborate on during the current and future stages of our research, may prove essential if we want our critical work to be supported not only by our own subjective perceptions but also by objective evidence provided by the members of the public.

## Appendix 1

### ENCUESTAS ZARAGOZA. 2001

Lugar de realización:

Edad:

Sexo:

Profesión:

A. ¿Cuántas veces al mes vas al cine?

- menos de 1
- 1-2 veces
- 3-4 veces
- más de 4

B. ¿Cuántas películas al mes ves en vídeo/ DVD?

- 1 menos de 1
- 1-2
- 3-4
- más de 4

C. ¿Prefieres ver películas en el cine o en casa (vídeo/DVD/TV)?

D. ¿Prefieres ver películas de ...?

1. Estados Unidos
2. España
- Otros países

E. ¿Qué tipo de películas son tus favoritas? (señala un máximo de 3)

1. de acción/aventuras
2. de risa
3. de amor
4. de suspense
5. de terror
6. de ciencia-ficción
7. dramáticas
8. otros

F. ¿Cuáles son tus tres películas favoritas de todas las épocas?

G. ¿Cuáles son tus hobbies favoritos? (un máximo de 3)

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup>. These are labels that were adopted for the sake of clarity as it goes without saying that University students are part of the adult population. In addition, we are aware that not all the population aged 18 to 30

are in Higher Education but for practical reasons we chose to carry out our research among the students at the University of Zaragoza.

<sup>3</sup>. It is worth mentioning that the majority of the respondents in the latter group were teachers, administrative staff, social workers, unskilled workers, housewives, and self-employed people.

<sup>4</sup>. The extraordinary weight of suspense films both among men's and women's preferences may be due to the popularity of Alejandro Amenábar and the release of his hit film *Los Otros* (*The Others*) (2001) at the time.

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