

Event Cinema as Adaptation

A stage, a screen or a compromised experience?

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Abstract:

With the rapid rise in popularity over recent years of live cinema screenings of theatrical performances, known as ‘event cinema’, this paper examines this new medium of entertainment and the extent to which it is a hybrid of two quite different media. It explores the differences between storytelling and direction techniques on stage and on screen, and the extent to which remediating between the two changes the way the audience experiences the performance. It asks what audiences for these events are looking for and expecting, and examines some sharply differing approaches which have been taken by different screen directors. Finally it suggests that as remediations these are, in effect, adaptations of the original stage work, and that therefore the screen director should take editorial responsibility, and credit for what has become a separate artistic entity from the original stage performance.

I. PAPER

Recent years have seen an exponential rise in the popularity of a new kind of entertainment event – the live screening of theatrical shows, usually referred to as ‘event cinema’. Opera, theatre - musical and otherwise - ballet and concerts have been streamed to cinemas all over the world. These enable much larger audiences to enjoy the event than would be possible if they were restricted to those who are able, and can afford to attend the events in person. A 2015 report for the Arts Council, England looked at what was prompting these events:

‘Producers and broadcasters of event cinema note that extending the reach as a key benefit of their productions; providing audiences with the opportunity to attend cultural events that they may otherwise be unable to access, due for example to their geographic location, or prohibitive cost of tickets’

[1]

But there are interesting questions to be asked about to the very nature of the events and their delivery medium. Live theatre and the screen present their stories in very different ways and it could be argued that these events, by combining both means of delivery, confuse the disciplines and muddy the

waters in terms of the creative vision of the two directors who have been involved.

The Arts Council report also suggests the need to assess ‘evidence, or otherwise, that audiences consider event cinema a new art form in itself.’ [2] and that is something I propose to address in this paper, in which I will examine what the audiences for event cinema might want, and what they are actually getting. I will look at some of the different ways the events can be directed and suggest ways in which the results can be, and indeed have been an enhancement of the original production, but how they can also fall between two stools and fully satisfy neither the screen nor the stage audience. I will suggest that, by virtue of the fact that they are remediations, these are, in effect, adaptations and should be viewed as such, recognising that the live and the relayed event offer different experiences, each to be judged on its own merits or demerits.

Ever since outside broadcasts became possible in the 1930s television has exploited the possibility of presenting live entertainment by covering it with several cameras and transmitting it live, or recording it. Indeed some of the earliest dramas presented by the BBC were no more than outside broadcasts from a West End theatre. This clearly presented a problem in terms of performance style. Actors pitching their lines to the back row of the theatre seen in close up would appear to be overacting unacceptably. The BBC then began to recreate these productions in the studio where the acting style could be suitably adjusted, but they were still stage plays, written to be performed in that medium.

The intrinsic difference between stage and screen writing and performance has frequently been pointed out. It is discussed at length by all the contributors to Susan Beth Lehman’s *Directors: From Stage to Screen and Back Again*. In his Foreword to that text Steve Brown suggests that they are ‘fraternal twins, children of a common dramatic parentage. One twin is perhaps more verbal, the other more visual, but, from cinema’s beginning, they have shared a deep symbiotic relationship’ [3] and Lehman herself adds that ‘Whereas plays are stories told in dialogue, movies are stories told in pictures.’ [4]

In his seminal work on screenwriting ‘Story’, Robert McKee offers a suggestion of the respective ratio of the verbal to the visual between stage and screen:

‘We watch a movie; we hear a play. The aesthetics of film are 80 percent visual, 20 percent auditory. We want to see, not hear as our energies go to our eyes, only half-listening to the soundtrack. Theatre is 80 percent auditory, 20 percent visual.’

[5]

As the television medium found its feet, and its own voice, the drama it began to offer, whilst still using the techniques of these studio transfers, was now specifically written for the screen. It could be performed live in the studio with all the intimacy that offers, whilst being viewed by a live audience of millions in a way which would previously have been unimaginable. Shows such as *Coronation Street* [6] and the ground-breaking police series *Z Cars* [7] were early examples of this, and both these shows also demonstrate how the new medium, along with a new breed of writers, was instrumental in developing television’s new, socially realistic, voice.

While these new developments forged ahead, the outside broadcast from the theatre fell out of fashion. Live relays of concerts, opera and ballet continued, I would suggest because these are intrinsically non-naturalistic media, which require the audience to ‘suspend their disbelief’ as suggested by Coleridge [8]. But straight drama in the theatre offers, if you like, a heightened form of naturalism which was being supplanted by the new television genre. The close-up of an actor pitching to the back row of the theatre offered in the corner of the living room worked against the ability to believe, or to suspend that disbelief. As Lehman says of the advent of the screen performance in the cinema:

‘Films are inherently realism. No longer needing to present a character large or loud enough to carry across footlights and to the back row of a theater, the size of movie screens made the characters literally larger than life. Any small expression or line inflection would translate to the audience. Film found a naturalism not conducive to any stage performance’

[9]

Things changed in the early years of the 21st century when High Definition TV became available, making it possible to project a television picture onto a cinema screen with an acceptable level of image quality. And so the theatrical performance could once again be offered in a space large enough to accommodate a theatrical style of acting. Although the earliest relays of this kind tended to be of opera – as the Arts Council report suggests ‘it was the Met Opera’s 2006 series *Met Opera Live in HD*, which really paved the way for the expansion of event cinema within the arts’ [10] – theatre directors began to realise that they too could take advantage of this new technology to present their work to a larger audience. As Lyn Gardner suggests in her article for *The Guardian* ‘The audience for a single live broadcast of a Shakespeare production by the RSC is about the same as the audience for an entire year at the Royal Shakespeare theatre in Stratford’ [11]. However, as the Arts Council report suggests, in financial terms it is the cinemas which benefit, while the producers’ benefit is in terms of marketing and publicity:

‘Event cinema is an attractive business prospect for content producers, allowing them to make their content more accessible to new audiences who otherwise may not be able to experience productions due to the costs or their geographic proximity to events. Financial returns are not always expected, as was the case with the subsidised arts sector consulted during this study’

[12]

But however successful they might be for cinemas and for producers it is interesting to look at the essence of these essentially hybrid events. As I have suggested, theatre and cinema present stories in fundamentally different ways. In the theatre they are told by actors during a continuous performance which is completely ephemeral, and the audience is actively involved in the event. Their laughter directly affects the actors’ performances, as do their gasps or their silence. Paul Aaron suggests: ‘There is no such thing as a performance of a play that is the same as it was even at the matinee on the same day. Whereas, whatever showing of *Avatar*, I’m watching the same movie. Film is frozen’ [13]

Aaron’s point is essential to the different experiences of both audience and performers. Actors in the theatre respond to their audience, whilst on screen they only have the professional audience of the director whilst creating it, and, crucially, they do not have full control of a performance which they are delivering in a piecemeal fashion. While a theatre director has some degree of control over what the audience sees, and can use various techniques to control focus, the cinema director’s control is complete. Gilbert Cates suggests:

‘Essentially, when you do something in the theater, everybody sees everything at the same time. All you can do as a director is find a stronger spot on stage for an actor in a key scene. You can light them brighter and dim everyone else, but the audience can still choose what they want to look at. The wonderful thing about a movie is, you really are playing God, because you choose what the audience sees, and that choice is really very important.’

[14]

So when a live theatre experience is relayed using numerous cameras a second director is taking over from the one who directed the stage performance and so remediating it, and adapting it into something quite different. The screen director, though he or she cannot affect the pacing of the show, can totally control what the audience sees, and this might offer a very different focus from what the stage director had in mind. In effect he is a member of the audience who is offering his vision of the show to audience members in the cinema venues, who cannot in any way affect what they see.

At these screenings there are, in effect, two audiences getting something entirely different from what they are seeing, and both experiences are, arguably, compromised. The theatre audience, whose ticket prices are usually reduced, have to put up with cameras in the auditorium, and sometimes visible radio microphones on the performers – this is particularly noticeable when the cast are scantily clad, as, for example, in NTLive’s 2011 performance of *Frankenstein* [15]. Meanwhile the

cinema audiences have to accept the screen director's personal view of the show, and cannot affect it in any way, nor show their appreciation to the performers. Paul Aaron points out that:

'we go to the theater praying that we will be driven to rise to our feet at the end. Nobody rises to his feet applauding at the end of a movie. We will always have a hunger for that visceral moment that can only happen in a live connection'

[16]

It is interesting to note that at the end of live screenings cinema audiences are often moved to applaud because they feel they have experienced a live performance, and perhaps they are also prompted by seeing the cast take their curtain call and hearing the live audience applause. Audience responses to and expectations of event cinema were analysed in a 2014 English Touring Opera report by Karen Wise, and summarized in the Arts Council report:

'Qualitative thematic analysis revealed overlap in what is valued by audience members when viewing opera in cinema or theatre. The key themes identified are: liveness, participation, appreciation of excellence, specialness, and involvement. Notably, "liveness" and "specialness" are attributed more so, but not exclusively, to the theatre experience. In this context, "liveness" relates to physically being in the same space as the event, whereas for cinemas it is associated more with having a shared experience with other audience members, either within the cinema or the theatre being viewed. They also found mixed reactions to cinema viewing whereby some felt close-up views of performers provided on screen enhanced the experience, whereas others found the film medium to be a distraction.'

[17]

This 'liveness' is clearly an important factor in event cinema. During the 2011 live screening from London's Donmar Warehouse of Michael Grandage's production of *King Lear* [18], with Sir Derek Jacobi in the eponymous role, the satellite failed during Act IV. Given that the audience watching in the theatre was a fraction of those watching the relay around the world the decision was taken to stop the show and restart the scene once the satellite connection had been restored, emphasizing to the remote cinema audience the event was live, and that they outnumbered by many times the handful watching live in the theatre. But these events are also regularly also offered as 'Encores' – where the recording of the live event is replayed, offering the cinema audience exactly the same as the night it was live, except that the glitches, as with the Jacobi *Lear*, have been removed, and there is no longer that, perhaps intangible, sense that they are sharing the live experience. However, as Wise (2014) suggests, the very fact of sitting in a darkened room with numerous others adds a degree of 'liveness' – and makes the experience essentially different from seeing a story on screen at home where it can often be stopped and started at will.

The screen director for event cinema does have a clear choice, and, I would argue, a responsibility to choose whether to prioritise the stage or the screen experience. Long before live HD relays were possible Philip Casson directed a TV version of Trevor Nunn's highly-acclaimed 1976 RSC production of *Macbeth* [19], starring Sir Ian McKellen and Dame Judi Dench. This was the same cast transported from the original Young Vic venue into a television studio. They used the same pared-down style, minimal props and 'black box' set as the stage production had done, and the performances, although essentially the same as had been seen in the theatre, were brought down to the intimate level which screen permits. The result is something which has the adrenalin and live feel of the theatre, with actors very much working together and feeding off each other, but also with the intimacy of the screen. Even though no audience was present, the performances are clearly driven by at least the memory of what the cast had experienced in the theatre. But in no way does this production seek to offer the naturalistic sets and locations expected in a production devised for the screen – such as, for example, Justin Kurzel's 2015 film starring Michael Fassbender [20]. This latter, of course, cut out whole swathes of the text which the studio version had retained, highlighting once again a fundamental difference between the visual and the verbal media, as suggested by McKee (1999).

So a screen director for event cinema can decide that a screen performance is what is on offer – and considering that, as I have suggested, the size of the audience viewing in that medium will be many times the number viewing live in the theatre this is surely a reasonable decision. I would argue that it would be perfectly reasonable, for example, for the screen director to ask the cast to bring down the performance level for the screen. The output from the radio microphones they are wearing can be offered through the sound system to the live audience in the theatre, ensuring that the performances can be heard. But if the physicality of the performances is also brought down for the screen then the theatre audience's experience must, of course, be compromised even if the cinema audience's is enhanced. But then they know they have signed up for a compromised performance, and paid less for their tickets.

Two starkly differing decisions about whether these are primarily stage or screen events have been taken in recent live screenings. When Fiery Angel relayed Sir Kenneth Branagh's performance in *The Entertainer* [21] in 2016, screen director Benjamin Caron chose to present the entire show on one camera, slightly adjusting the shot as the performance continued but never offering close-ups. This was clearly an unequivocal offering of a theatre event, and perhaps the decision was taken precisely because a theme of the play is the nature of performance.

In stark contrast when Cameron Mackintosh offered a screen version of Boubilil and Schoenberg's *Miss Saigon* [22], screen director Brett Sullivan took a very different approach. A 25th anniversary performance was recorded, as live, in 2014 with an additional gala celebration involving the cast of the original 1989 production. But it was not presented live. Instead it was massively enhanced with additional footage recorded at subsequent performances in January 2016, as well

as archive footage of the Vietnam War which is the setting for the musical. The result is unquestionably a screen experience which would not have been achievable live, but is nevertheless firmly based on the live stage performance – which Mackintosh was at pains to make clear:

‘As this was a filmed live performance, the orchestra and vocals were taken directly from the show’s sound system – one take and no overdubs! ... It was decided not to digitally remove the stage microphones to remind viewers this was a stage event rather than a film.’

[23]

What Mackintosh and Sullivan have created is a new art form which is a clear and unashamed hybrid of stage and screen. It may be that it only works with a musical because, as suggested earlier, of the suspension of disbelief which an audience needs to appreciate that art form. Arguably it would not work so well with a straight play because of the naturalism, as well as the more visual, less verbal language which the screen audience tends to expect.

I suggested earlier that, since it is remediation, event cinema should be regarded as a kind of adaptation, and if we accept that then it becomes important to apply the same criteria. The adaptation debate has long since moved on from the suggesting a need for fidelity to the original work to the acceptance that an adaptation should be judged in its own right – as a separate work with different intentions from the hypotext. In offering her *Theory of Adaptation* Hutcheon suggests:

‘Because we use the word adaptation to refer to both a product and a process of creation and reception, this suggests to me the need for a theoretical perspective that is at once formal and “experiential.”’

[24]

In other words an awareness of how an audience will experience a work must be central to the work of the writer or director who is in control of that experience, and, as I have suggested, the stage and screen audiences’ experiences in event cinema are fundamentally different. Hutcheon also argues: ‘To be second is not to be secondary or inferior; likewise, to be first is not to be originary or authoritative.’ [25]

As Brett Sullivan demonstrated with *Miss Saigon*, the event cinema director can take a stage performance and from it offer an excellent screen experience which is very different from what the live audience enjoyed. It matters not whether it was better or worse and it need not be compared to it, but rather judged on its own merits.

What seems clear is that event cinema is a new art form which is developing in its own right, and finding its own – perhaps new – audience, and its own voice. Just as the author of an adaptation must take full responsibility for the new work created, so the director of a live screening must make a clear decision as to whether it is a stage or a screen experience on offer.

The risk otherwise is that the experience becomes a compromise of both – the stage experience undermined by the intrusive cameras and the screen experience marred by the inability to interact with the performance.

I have long argued that the job of the screen director, in fictional or factual work, is a combination of control – a firm grasp of the story being told; coverage – ensuring that the audience sees everything they need to in order to follow the story; and creativity – using the camerawork, editing and soundtrack to clarify and to enhance that story. I would argue that an event cinema director using a multi-camera setup who sees the job as simply offering coverage of the event is short-changing the screen audience. They cannot offer the stage experience, so they must take responsibility for offering an excellent screen experience using all the creative resources that involves. With *Miss Saigon* Brett Sullivan took the decision to sacrifice the live event completely to offer the best possible screen experience, to be enjoyed, in perpetuity, like a film. I believe he offered a bold and exciting way forward, offering a significant contribution to this new art form and underscoring the need for directors of event cinema unashamedly to seize artistic control of the material they are adapting.

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