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INFLUENCE OF PRIOR KNOWLEDGE ABOUT FILM
DIRECTORS ON AUDIENCE RECEPTION OF THE FILM

Dissertation to Universidade Católica Portuguesa to obtain
a Master's Degree in Communication Studies — Media and
Entertainment

By

Alina Kuzo

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Abstract

With the widespread popularity of film-watching as a leisure activity and the universal availability of information about films, it has become important to understand how different kinds of knowledge influence viewers. Among these, directors are often received as responsible for the film as a whole. At the same time, there is a common opinion that directors matter only to cinephiles and film experts, while regular viewers pay little attention to them. Nevertheless, studios and streaming platforms compete for well-known directors and highlight their names in promotional materials to attract audiences.

This dissertation explores how prior knowledge about and awareness of a film's director shape viewers' expectations and responses. It examines how audiences use directors' names and associations with them as interpretive tools during the processes of selection and viewing. The study is built on a literature review that defines key terms such as film audiences, their characteristics in the digital age, audience types, film reception, and knowledge. It also engages with concepts of film brand, director brand, and genre. For the empirical component, eight focus group discussions were conducted.

The findings demonstrate that viewers often rely on previously collected knowledge. In some cases, a single viewing experience can significantly shift reception of a director, reinforce positive expectations, or create negative associations that discourage further engagement with their films. The study argues that directors can function as brands whose names and styles operate in ways similar to genre labels, guiding interpretation and influencing film selection. While not all directors achieve a brand status, viewers across different audience types demonstrate the ability to interpret a director's presence, shaping their individual reception.

Keywords: Film Audience, Prior Knowledge, Film Reception, Film Director

Resumo

Com a ampla popularidade do visionamento de filmes como atividade de lazer e a disponibilidade universal de informação sobre cinema, tornou-se importante compreender como diferentes tipos de conhecimento influenciam os espectadores. Entre estes, os realizadores são frequentemente percebidos como responsáveis pela obra cinematográfica no seu todo. Ao mesmo tempo, existe a opinião comum de que os realizadores só importam para cinéfilos e especialistas em cinema, enquanto o público em geral lhes presta pouca atenção. No entanto, estúdios e plataformas de streaming competem por realizadores de renome e destacam os seus nomes em materiais promocionais para atrair audiências.

Esta dissertação explora como o conhecimento prévio e a consciência relativamente ao realizador de um filme moldam as expectativas e respostas dos espectadores. A mesma, examina como as audiências utilizam os nomes dos realizadores e as associações a eles ligadas como ferramentas interpretativas durante os processos de seleção e visionamento. O estudo assenta numa revisão da literatura que define conceitos-chave como audiências cinematográficas, as suas características na era digital, tipos de audiência, receção cinematográfica e conhecimento. Aborda ainda os conceitos de marca cinematográfica, marca de realizador e género. Para o componente empírico, foram realizados oito grupos de discussão.

Os resultados revelam que os espectadores recorrem frequentemente a conhecimentos previamente adquiridos. Em alguns casos, uma única experiência de visionamento pode alterar significativamente a perceção de um realizador, reforçar expectativas positivas ou criar associações negativas que desencorajam o interesse futuro pelas suas obras. O estudo defende que os realizadores podem funcionar como marcas, cujos nomes e estilos operam de forma semelhante a etiquetas de género, orientando a interpretação e influenciando a seleção de filmes. Embora nem todos os realizadores alcancem o estatuto de marca, os espectadores de diferentes tipos de audiência demonstram capacidade de interpretar a presença de um realizador, moldando assim a sua receção individual.

Palavras-chave: Audiência Cinematográfica, Conhecimento Prévio, Receção Cinematográfica, Realizador

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Introduction

Background and relevance

In the digital age, information about films is nearly unavoidable, as it spreads through social media, reviews, promotional content, and platforms such as Letterboxd and Rotten Tomatoes. This extensive accessibility of information raises questions about its impact on film reception. It can affect the audience's expectations and its approach to reading films; the volume of this information flow makes the choice of the film to watch and information to collect more challenging (Finsterwalder et al., 2012; Hart et al., 2015; Grundström, 2018; Frey, 2019).

At the same time, many film marketing and film promotional strategies rely on the director's name, in a way to "facilitate consumption" (Hart et al., 2015, p. 12). The names of popular directors frequently appear on posters or trailers (Johnston et al., 2016), even when the director only contributed minimally. Audiences "interpret film marketing communications prior to viewing," and this impacts audiences' "satisfaction and future film consumption" (Hart et al., 2015, p. 12). Also, critics often appeal to directors when analysing films. There is a popular opinion that "a casual moviegoer might show up for the actors. And a cinephile wants to talk about the director" (Remnick, 2025, n. p.). I aim to find out what such names mean for all types of viewers, and whether they help audiences to select a particular film or mean little to them.

The academic focus on directors' roles in communication studies has evolved in waves (Elsaesser, 2005). In the last two decades, research has shifted to studying individual directors (Rao et al., 2017) and how their specific auteur persona links to themes and "a specific institutional apparatus... to achieve recognition with an increasingly media-savvy film audience" (Hill-Parks, 2010, p. 47). Contemporary studies also examine film critics' impact on audience perceptions (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2012; Peng et al., 2013; Debenedetti & Ghariani, 2019) and actors' personal brands in shaping film reception (Barbas, 2002; Ralph & Barker, 2015). These studies highlight the link between audience expectations and responses. "Fantasies can play a role in pre-selection of films, where imagining the watching experience is related to fantasies conjured up by communications clues" (Hart, 2015, p. 2).

My study aims to find how this applies to directors and how the audience's knowledge about directors influences viewership and spectatorship. It is also essential to

explore the role of directors from a participatory culture perspective. Directors can be a unifying element for their films, offering audiences a consistent lens through which to interpret their work (Buckland, 2020).

However, the question arises of how fantasies and expectations differ depending on whether they are formed by audiences who acquire knowledge about the film and its director, and those who do not: “Before a film, we are indeed all individuals, responding according to our own backgrounds, interests, affiliations” (Christie, 2012, p. 231). This study, therefore, aims to find out whether affiliation with the director can influence, or even shape, the entire understanding of a film and the overall response to it. Many researchers highlight the importance of viewers’ knowledge of a film genre, which can connect “with a sense of who makes the film” (Barker & Brooks, 1998, p. 77). Thus, there is an opportunity to explore connections between film genre, film author, and film reception.

Moreover, the experience of watching a film is increasingly individual and interindividual (Casetti, 2011a), and it is more connected to the approach to watching films than to socio-demographic characteristics. That is why this study focuses on a particular viewer’s experience and obtained knowledge, rather than on social groups such as women, leftists, or Gen Zers. However, the study does pay special attention to differences between the reception approaches of different types of film audiences.

The personal interest in this topic stems from my professional background. As a former film critic, I have long been fascinated by the connections between viewers’ knowledge, expectations, and their opinions about films. No two viewers experience the same film in exactly the same way. Also, during my work in film promotion and marketing, I often had to consider which names and brands associated with a film should be emphasised in advertising campaigns. It was crucial to identify what would resonate with potential audiences and what might be better left unhighlighted. On a personal level, I am particularly interested in the role of directors and auteurs in contemporary film consumption. This curiosity extends to how regular viewers, those who are neither professional critics nor cinephiles, are influenced by prior experience with a director, or by the absence of it.

The connection between individuals and cultural domains, including cinema, and viewers’ participation in film discourse has become a dynamic process of

communication—whether through social media, published reviews, or platforms such as Letterboxd. This process is characterised by moments of joining specific audience communities or engaging in “shared audience experiences” (Wessels, 2023, p. 299). Thus, beyond personal interest, this topic has broader significance that extends to audiences, the film industry, and cultural production. Research in this area can inform how media organisations, studios, and distributors design content and marketing strategies, as well as how public discourse around cinema develops (Buckland, 2020).

In practical terms, examining how directors influence viewers’ choices and perceptions can reshape our understanding of their position within film studies and within the industry. The findings can also help all participants in the film ecosystem, from filmmakers to marketers, develop strategies that take into account the director’s impact on box office performance, audience engagement, and a film’s longevity. In this way, directors’ names and reputations can be more effectively integrated into promotional strategies, with communication channels used more precisely to reach different audience segments.

As a probationary step, a part of the research results was presented at the *16th International Conference: Cinema — Art, Technology, Communication AVANCA | CINEMA 2025*.

Research goals

The primary research objective is to find out whether the prior knowledge of the film director influences the audience’s reception of the film, and if it does, in what way. In the exploration, the study draws on Barker’s and his co-researchers’ concept of audience expectations (Barker & Brooks, 1998; Ralph & Barker, 2015) and theories of directors’ personas. This study takes a reception studies approach, focusing solely on audience familiarity with directors, excluding social factors. The research examines exclusively European audiences.

To answer the research questions, I developed the topic “Role of Prior Knowledge in Film Reception.” This topic is broader than the main research question, as it was assumed that prior knowledge about a film’s director is a specific case within the wider concept of prior knowledge. While the goal was to draw conclusions relevant to the digital era, I did not place the era’s specificities at the centre of the analysis, as I believe the main aspects of this topic are not significantly influenced by it. However, I consider time-related

specifics when discussing sources of knowledge formation and acknowledge that today's patterns of film consumption and reception may influence audience types to some extent, though not substantially.

The study also examines whether the director's role as an author retains significance today. By exploring these aspects, I also aim to understand the directors' contemporary role as creators of the film and their "brands" for viewers. Keller (2008) and Kohli (2021) deeply developed the concept of film brands, but "film-makers" in their studies became the "element" of "formula combination" of the brand, not the brand itself (Kohli, 2021, p. 369).

The differentiations between types of audience were essential for this study, though I proposed that if prior knowledge about the film director plays an influential role in the reception, the effect can vary for different audience types. However, the social and demographic characteristics of the audience are not the focus of this study: I aimed to gather a variety of participants to avoid biases of one generation or one gender.

The study applied qualitative methodology and adopted focus group research, which includes three main steps to collect data: the audience filled out the questionnaire, watched the specific film selected with the information collected from the questionnaire, and participated in focus group discussions. Then, I analysed data using combined inductive and deductive coding.

Research gap

Cultural hierarchies and "widely-shared acceptance of ... authority" are connected with "audience demand" (Debenedetti & Ghariani, 2018, p. 30). At the same time, audience reception and perception are shaped by "the constant flood of information" (Grundström, 2018, p. 19). All viewers approach a film "responding according to ... backgrounds, interests, affiliations; and this is no less – indeed, one is tempted to speculate" (Christie, 2012, p. 231). As Kohli (2021) argued, "many films are developed by filmmakers as brands through a formula combination of various brand elements that consumers find" (p. 369). In discussing or promoting their films, "an industrial auteur would link the themes and artistry of the film with a persona, connecting, in a sense, the actual author with the abstract author function" (Hill-Parks, 2010, p. 47). Furthermore, "It is this association, for film distributors at least, that allows the filmmaker to achieve recognition with an increasingly media-savvy film audience" (Hill-Parks, 2010, p. 47).

Hart et al. (2016) developed the idea of how “we interpret film marketing communications prior to viewing (including what prior experiences we draw upon)” (p. 378), and how this can impact viewers’ satisfaction with the film.

O’Reilly and Kerrigan (2011) studied film brands, but as they noted, their ideas were “applicable to mainstream commercial films” exclusively (p. 769). Hart et al. (2016) examined how viewers’ experience is shaped by different factors, but their main method was self-ethnography, which did not allow them to explore a wider variety of audiences. Forrest (2020, 2023) explored viewers’ responses to specialised films and emphasised that “prior knowledge” was not his main focus.

Barker and his colleagues (1998, 2005, 2012, 2016), by contrast, focused on viewers’ expectations built around comic or literary brands adapted into films, or on viewers’ perceptions of acting. His methods and approach are closest to this study, but here the focus is on directors, who remain relatively underexplored in contemporary academic research. Although directors received significant attention during the spread of auteur theory, as a concept, they have since moved to the margins of scholarly interest. Many studies now focus either on specific directors and the “authorial reading paradigm” (Todd, 2012, p. 124) or on distinctive directorial styles and particular types of films. Yet the concept of the director could be reframed by new approaches to information collection, content selection, and film viewing.

Given the close interlink between film perception and film marketing (Finsterwalder et al., 2012), it becomes essential to ask whether Kohli’s (2021) and Keller’s (2008) claim that “all films are brands at a basic level” also applies to directors’ names, or, in other words, whether directors themselves can be considered brands. Furthermore, building on Jenkins’ (2000) idea that “genre has this power even before watching” (pp. 170–171), the study aims to find out whether a director’s name, or any knowledge about them, can carry a similar power.

Finally, this study also aims to propose a general framework for classifying film audiences, identifying their types that can describe the diversity of viewers without diving into overly fine distinctions. It further seeks to define prior knowledge in ways that are most relevant for reception studies and film discourse, including the broadest possible variety of such knowledge.

Dissertation Structure

The study includes several parts. The first one, the literature review, is dedicated to observing the existing theoretical framework of the main concepts and themes. Divided into three chapters, the literature review begins with examining different ideas, definitions, and concepts of film audiences and their classifications, as well as describing the main types that are relevant to most of today's theories and to my research. Also, it touches on the peculiarities of film audiences in the digital age.

The second theoretical chapter includes meanings and definitions of the concept of film reception, how film reception differs from film interpretation, what the film experience is, and what the relations between these terms present. Here, the study applies the Reception Studies approach and also touches on the Semiotics approach to the theme. The study analyses and observes factors that influence the process of reception and/or interpretation.

The third chapter of the literature review defines the concept of prior knowledge, conceptualises types of it and sources for such knowledge formation. In this chapter, concepts of expectations and directors' brands have been explored, and the theory of genre has been studied.

Next, the empirical part explains the methodology and all the steps of data collection. It is followed by the presentation of the data, then discussions that also result from an application of the theoretical perspective to the findings. Finally, the last part concludes with takeaways, limitations of the study, and future opportunities for development.

1. Film audiences: types and peculiarities

1.1 Audience and audiencing: definition of the entity and the process

The term “audience” is criticised because of its vagueness and misuse: thus, Barker and Brooks (1998), following Tudor (1974// 2013) and Radway (1988), highlighted that “Audience is not a satisfactory term. ...Now, though, there remain problems with the word, there are more to do with diversity of meanings, and unresolved conflicts between uses” (p. 104).

A cinema audience, or film audience, as described by Westwell and Kuhn (2020), is “a body of individuals watching... film.... The cinema audience comprises people who assemble to watch films in cinemas and other venues, both public and private, as well as those who consume films via alternative platforms such as video, DVD, home cinema, and television” (p. 161). If to turn to the same authors, it is possible also to find their notion that when researching the reception studies point of view, which explains cinema audiences “as a social group comprised of real people in possession of cultural capital” (Westwell & Kuhn, 2020, p. 1276).

The understanding of film audiences is not homogeneous, just as the film audience itself is not. When considering that it includes “real people,” we encounter different peculiarities among various audiences, as well as diverse scholarly approaches to studying them. Additionally, audiences have constantly evolved over the decades and continue to do so due to changes in mediation, ways of watching/consuming cinema, and interactions with it. One of the most recent studies, conducted by Walmsley (2021), distinguishes various approaches to studying audiences of performing arts. He identifies 13 types of academic approaches based on the main focus of research or its methodologies: “histories of audience practice and behaviour; power, elitism and class; cultural policy, participation and co-creation; immersive performance; performance venues, spaces and places; performance as ritual; reception theory and semiotics; research methodologies; the audience experience; value and impact research; young audiences; arts marketing and management; audience engagement and enrichment” (Walmsley, 2021, p. 310).

Thus, Walmsley demonstrates that audiences can be studied from different perspectives, with various characteristics placed at the center of research. Walmsley’s perspective is particularly curious, given that in recent years, researchers in audience and

reception studies have sought to redefine audiences because of significant changes in consumption patterns, especially regarding cultural goods.

What cannot be ignored in the process of studying audiences is the period under study: because of the aforementioned constant changes in the cinema mediation and new technologies that shape the audience and their behaviour. Thus, in the introduction to his classic book about film audiences Christie (2012) started by referring to Jules Romains's essay "The crowd's dream begins" (1911//1988), which described film audiences as "if sleeping and dreaming a collective dream, from which they awake as they spill out into the streets" (p. 12), which was relevant to the early age of film audiences. Or, as Nikdel (2015) referred to Baudry (1974), "the cinema as a distinctive physical space works to lure the audience into a passive, dream-like state" (Nikdel, 2015, p. 3). Then, regarding the present days, consumption of the "flow of content across multiple channels" (Jenkins, 2003a, n.p.) characterises today's cinema audience.

The approach to defining and distinguishing audiences has undergone frequent change, a transformation that can be traced in the evolving ideas of individual scholars. Christie (2012) focused on two dominant concepts of the audience: "one is an imagined audience of 'they' and 'we,' often credited with preferences and responses which are mere hypotheses, or projections of the author's assumptions and prejudices; and the other is an economic or statistical audience, recorded in terms of admissions or box-office receipts, which has become the dominant concept of 'audience' for the film industry" (p. 11). Also, Livingstone (2007) claimed that "audiences cannot be completely passive" (p. 1), arguing claims of cinema audience researchers who highlighted "the inherent passivity of the film audience" (Christie, 2012, p. 12).

Still, Livingstone (2018) also described an active film audience, one that is "an interpretative audience, far from simply subject to the causal influences of powerful others" (p. 6). With shifts in audience behaviour, she later questioned whether we were witnessing "The End of Audiences?" (Livingstone & Das, 2013). In her more recent studies, Livingstone (2018) revisited the notion of audience passivity, highlighting that even within academic discourse, the concept of a passive audience is often perceived as homogeneous and "pejorative," contributing to moral panic (p. 6).

Following Fiske (1992), she further developed the idea of "audiencing," arguing that "as object became audiencing as process, transcending binaries of public/private by

refocusing on people's mediated participation in society, whether through fandom, protest, or other forms of public connection" (Livingstone, 2013, p. 2). The idea of the audience as a process rather than an entity has been taken and further explored by Wessels (2023), who studies film audiences with a particular focus on their development and the specific characteristics of British audiences.

Over the past decade, Wessels (2023) has made significant contributions to theories on changes in audience behaviour, particularly in distinguishing active audiences from passive ones. As she notes, "There has also been a shift from depicting audiences as passive, positioned by texts which give little room for interpretation, to one that sees the audience as active viewers who can interpret the texts in various ways" (p. 285).

Wessels (2023) seeks new ways to conceptualise audiences, as in her work on audience theory, "How Audiences Form: Theorising Audiences Through How They Develop Relationships with Film", in which she builds on and develops the ideas of Livingstone. As already mentioned, Livingstone contributed to the concept of active audiences. Wessels continues to explore shifts in audience dynamics within the digital era, defining them through their approach to perception and interpretation. Wessels also engages with the concept of "extra-textual knowledge" (Livingstone, 2007, p. 6), which is particularly relevant to this study, as well as the idea of "preferred readings" (Livingstone, 2007, p. 8). These concepts closely relate to the exploration of how prior knowledge influences viewers' preferences and perceptions. This discussion will be revisited in the following chapters.

If the audience is a process rather than a fixed entity, then without engaging in the process of consumption (which itself is a subject of debate in terms of its scope), the audience does not exist. This perspective allows for the classification of different types of viewers. Some may engage with film as casual spectators without a professional approach, while others may adopt a more analytical or semi-professional stance, sometimes approaching film consumption with near-cult-like dedication. Additionally, some regular filmgoers are drawn to mainstream and popular films, while others focus on specific actors or directors. With digital accessibility, audiences are no longer confined to traditional cinema spaces; film consumption now occurs across various platforms and in various settings.

1.2 Types of film audiences: fans, cinephiles, filmgoers

According to Wessels and Livingstone, audiencing includes not only watching films, but interacting with them, interpreting them, and often engaging in discourse by sharing thoughts on social media and reviews. Participation is essential, as audiences cannot exist without actively processing film consumption. This perspective is significant to my study, as it suggests that all audiences, regardless of their social background or approach to cinema, function as a process. My research aims to explore the factors that influence this process and how it connects with specific elements of films. In my case, I will focus on film directors, who, in some instances, are perceived as the authors of the film or as central figures within the film's discourse, shaping its themes and messages. From this perspective, audiences can be categorised into different groups based on how they consume films, as the act of consumption itself lies at the core of what defines the audience.

Based on numerous theories (Barker & Brooks, 1998; Jenkins, 2003b; Elsaesser, 2005; Chinita, 2016; Barbas, 2021; etc.), I distinguish three groups, which do not contradict the primary studies in Film Studies, Reception Studies, and Communication Studies, but combine various approaches: Films fans; Cinephiles; Regular filmgoers, or movie-watchers.

Film fans

According to Westwell and Kuhn (2020), film fans are characterised as follows: “typically involves passionate, even obsessive, loyalty and attachment to the object of devotion. In cinema, commitment may be to a film genre (science fiction and fantasy film generate particularly devoted followings) or to a particular film or star” (p. 621). Barbas (2021) on the one hand, and Kuhn (2002) on the other, studied film audiences in the ‘20s, ‘30s, and ‘40s from different points of view, and showed the activity of these audiences. Barbas focused on “film fans” but also noted the types of the audience: she distinguished them into film fans and regular moviegoers (Barbas, 2021). However, neither of them can be described as entirely passive, even more indifferent “regular movie-goers” because they were active even in the step of choosing the film to watch, then taking actions to watch it (movies were available only outdoors), the level of their engagement in the process of film consumption is entirely different. Fans involve “enthusiastic consumption” (Kuhn, 2002, p. 622); it can be vicarious consumption of trivia or other information about objects of their loyalty. It is so in the digital era as well: fans are interested in the interaction with social

media sites (Morrissey, 2016), participation and interaction with different digital platforms for reviewing and with databases (Frey, 2021). Jenkins was one of the first scholars to study digital fandom specifically and online fan practices, and he argued that “viewing media fans are active participants” (2003b, p. 282). He highlighted that fans often were not treated seriously and “gets marginalized and/or exoticised, treated as something that people do when they have too much time on their hands” (Jenkins, 2003b, p. 282).

In the digital age, viewers changed: they no longer need to go somewhere to watch a film or to find information about the film or actors, or to share their opinions about the film, but the number of opportunities to interact with the film, to get knowledge about the film, or to present themselves as film fans, increased:

As the audiences of the digital age become increasingly producers, commentators and even participants, rather than merely the passive spectators of cinema’s folklore – with the potential for screen entertainment to become literally interactive, alongside the massive rival sphere of computer gaming—it does not seem an exaggeration to predict that this field of reflection and research is only entering a new era (Christie, 2012, p. 21).

So, moviegoers, if to stick to Barbas’s term, became more passive, while film fans became even more active after getting different channels for this activity.

In Audience and Reception studies, the term fandom is also significant: it marks “a group status, and a space in which one fan’s interests are shared with others” (Morrissey, 2016, p. 353). Fandoms and fans are both associated with a particular film, genre, or even actor or director. Scholars often study fans or fandom to understand how they are primarily engaging with popular culture (Morrissey, 2015; Chinita, 2016). Elsaesser (2005), then Daly (2010) noted that fans tend to obtain “data—trivia, fine detail, esoteric knowledge, but tend to avoid any form of interpretation” (Daly, 2010, p. 88).

Thus, fans are highly loyal to particular cinematographers, films or series, cinematic genres, who tend to interact with the object of their interest via social media, databases, different websites, and tend to be part of groups. Often, fans are studied from the perspective of popular culture, but cannot be limited by it.

Cinephiles

This group began to be studied in the 1960s, when Film Studies were actively developing, but representatives of it can be found earlier as well, even though they did not identify themselves as such and were often studied as representatives of film fans, despite

having their own peculiarities: “Cinephilia began early and continues to the present. It may be discovered equally in testimonies by reviewers who saw the first films ever made, by filmmakers of the cinematic avant-garde of the 1920s, in writings in *Cahiers du cinéma* from the 1950s and 1960s, and in cinephile blogs in the 2010s” (Keller, 2020, p. 6).

Cinephiles are “knowledgeable, sophisticated and expert” (Elsaesser, 2005, p. 37), which is precisely what distinguishes them from other people who enjoy watching and discussing films. Technological changes “favour largely this paradigm of expertise” (Jullier, 2009, p. 203): people can easily, legally or illegally, watch entire filmographies of directors, actors, and composers, as well as find any information about any film.

Chinita (2016) characterises cinephiles by their knowledge of film classics and history and their need to watch many high-quality films. On the other hand, film fans build communities by delving into the cinematic universes of certain mainstream film franchises and watching the same films multiple times. However, knowledge can be a debatable characteristic due to the widespread accessibility of databases. Thus, this “elitist definition of cinephilia, which was... legitimised by Bourdieu in ‘Distinctions,’ when he stated that cinephilia is ‘linked to one’s cultural capital rather than to simple cinema attendance,’ and then also situated it ‘beyond direct film experience’” (Jullier & Leveratto, 2012, p. 144; Bourdieu, 1984, p. 28), may be irrelevant and must be updated; the parameter of expertise is questioned and devalued. “Almost everyone can participate in contemporary cinephilia” (Westwell & Kuhn, 2020, p. 378), consuming and engaging with cinema through new technologies. Additionally, contemporary cinephiles are characterised by “omnivorousness,” which “has also been made possible by the commercial success of directors who dared to promote in their films the eclectic dimension of their own cinematographic tastes” (Van den Oever, 2012, p. 145).

However, all of these definitions fail to provide a strong peculiarity that helps distinguish cinephiles from film lovers (whom I will define in the next group as a subgroup), maintaining differentiation in an intensely subjective way. Therefore, I add that cinephiles actively participate in the creation of film discourse, like film fans. Still, unlike fans, they are highly interested in cinema in general, whereas film fans more often focus on specific types of films, genres, actors, or directors. Additionally, cinephiles may be interested in the professional side of cinema, including production; however, compared to outdated definitions, their expertise in the topic is not necessarily exclusive and can be

acquired from relevant social media accounts, databases, and other platforms (Elsaesser, 2005; Jullier, 2009; Jullier & Leveratto, 2019; Keller, 2020; etc.).

Besides, Keidl (2024) studied cinephile fandom, “specific disposition of film spectatorship that cannot be reduced to either cinephilia or fandom” (p. 281). The scholar referred to Jenkins (2015) and claimed that “the line between cinephilia and fandom” is very thin and blurring, reminding that “vernacular clichés and prejudices” of high and low culture exist for cinephiles and fans respectively, “the fan as a cultural dupe and cinephile as cultural elite” (Keidl, 2024, p. 283). Highlighted that both cinephiles and fans struggled with such limitations, especially, Keidl (2024) distinguished a limitation of reducing a film fan to one specific fandom, and according to his article, cinephilic fan can be defined as

creative producers, who extend and expand the films they love and criticize across media. Not only do they love to make films and other media themselves, as did cinephiles before them. Cinephilic fans love to (re)make the same film all over again across various media and formats. It is up to film and media scholars—and those interested in fandom, cinephilia, and audiences in general—to further examine how these works shape cinephilia (p. 301).

Regular filmgoers

Regular filmgoers (regular picturegoers, regular moviegoers, regular cinemagoers, regular film consumer, regular spectator, ordinary viewers, general public) are mentioned by different scholars in various theoretical books (Jullier & Leveratto, 2012; Hiley, 2012; Livingstone, 2007; Jenkins, 2000; Jenkins, 2003b) but rarely have a separate definition because regular filmgoers are simply those who watch films without any specific characteristics defining this habit. Barbas (2021) mentioned them as a distinct group from fans: if fans are intensely loyal and deeply interested in a particular type of cinema, filmgoers just go and watch films from time to time. Additionally, when cinephiles are described by Keller (2020), Frey (2014), or Elsaesser (2005), they often use comparisons to these people who watch films without any specificity in this activity. For instance, Aboulaoula and Biltreyst (2021) mention regular audiences when describing cinephiles: “Contrary to regular film audiences, cinephiles have an almost obsessive relationship with films and cinema” (p. 474), or as Jullier and Leveratto (2012) describe them, “contributes to making the cinephile a quite distinct character from the simple regular spectator” (p. 152).

The explanation of this type can be found while exploring statistics on general attitudes towards film watching. Regular filmgoers form the average audience—people who watch films from time to time, know some information about cinema or particular films, and have some preferences in genres, plots, or film crew, but do not have any obsession with film watching or obtaining information about cinema.

Within this group, I want to define a subgroup, film-lovers, a type of audience who enjoy watching films and have opinions about some, but are not obsessed with any particular genre or cinematographers. They also do not have substantial expertise, nor do they consider film-watching or participation in film discussions critical to them, but still see it as a pleasant leisure activity.

For his study, Messaris (1981) divided film viewers also into three categories but based on their production experience or knowledge about it: “ordinary viewers, i.e. people with no special training about films; viewers with training in film criticism but no production experience; and viewers with extensive production experience, derived either from amateur activity or professional employment” (p. 54). For my research, I explore only non-professional audiences, which means viewers who are not paid for professional activity connected with cinema production or reviewing. However, viewers can have specific knowledge about cinema, its production or editing, and I will take this into account while analysing the data.

Additionally, many researchers distinguish specific types of audiences, such as “everyday amateur experts” or cinema enthusiasts, describing viewers who enjoy “active participation in their local film communities, [whereas] others’ relationships with the medium had lapsed” (Forrest, 2023, p. 225); avid viewers, who are obsessed with “silver screens and films as integral in their social life,” and “non-avid” viewers, who seldom go to the cinema, usually in connection with a box-office success or their personal interest in certain celebrities (Hassan et al., 2016, p. 68); or groups of “cinephobes,” who are contrasted with cinephiles (Casetti, 2011a, p. 58). These classifications and additional types are insightful and provide some interesting points of view for study. Still, they will not be used in the current research to avoid a framework that is too narrow.

This study does not focus on particular groups, but instead covers various types of audiences while analysing the results of the empirical part based on viewers’ self-presentation.

1.3 The concept of “one film—one audience”

However, we must also acknowledge the semiotic approach to defining the film audience. The classification presented above is based on the approach or attitude of the audience towards film consumption, which is common in Audience Studies. While Semiotics and Reception Studies focus on meaning-making and explore audiences exclusively as participants in this process, my approach diverges. A key scholar in Film Reception Studies, Bordwell, is particularly relevant to my discussion of film perception and prior knowledge. Bordwell (1985) “takes as a starting point the ‘hypothetical viewer’ who should actively cooperate for a film experience to emerge. This is a competent viewer who ...constructs a story from the representations of the film.” Furthermore, “In Bordwell’s view, the spectator is not a particular person, but a ‘hypothetical entity executing the operations relevant to constructing a story out of the film’s representation’ (Bordwell, 1985, p. 30)” (Biltereyst & Meers, 2018, p. 27).

Additionally, it is essential to mention the concept of maintaining the “one film—one audience” (Biltereyst & Meers, 2018, p. 34) perspective, in which “a film generates and sustains audiences” (Wessels, 2023, p. 289). This approach to audience analysis can be considered alongside the current classification: a one-film audience may still consist of film fans, cinephiles, and regular filmgoers. This one-film approach is not in conflict with the concept of audiencing or audience as a process; in contrast, it expands upon it. The audience formed for a particular film engages with it, processes it, and is then reformed with new participants each time. As Livingstone and Das (2013) state, “Audiences are always situated, and situate themselves, between text and context. Thus, they have always required and will continue to require a dual lens from those who seek to understand them” (p. 3).

In this study, I aim to categorise audiences to avoid focusing solely on either fans or cinephiles. Also, I see that film fans becoming part of the audience of the particular film can present another type of audience for other films because they are fans only of a specific genre or actor. As a part of the empirical part of this study, I survey participants to determine the type of audience they belong to and use this information in the analysis of the results. One of the additional findings of this research could be an exploration of how prior knowledge about a film directly influences its reception among different types of audiences.

1.4 Peculiarities of film audiences in the digital era

We've mentioned the term digital era, or digital age. Since the '90s, it has been noted that cinema has been a diminishing cultural force, one being "displaced by systems of circulation and transmission which abolish" the traditional dynamic between projector, screen and audience (Friedberg, 1999, p. 440). Audiences in the digital era, or digital audiences, have their peculiarities that define their behaviour. However, as Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) noted, "it is ... often difficult to disentangle the real changes in the cultural forms, and how they are appropriated, from the changing frameworks within which researchers talk about those changes" (n.p.). Frey (2019), referring to Keen (2007), noted that there are different views on how audiences are shaped by digital era and digital cinema: "some celebrated a new era of active grassroots democracy and declared a definitive end to gatekeeping and cultural hierarchies; others complained about passive, dumbed-down consumers and humanity losing its monopoly on determining cultural value (Frey, 2019, p. 164).

Llinares and Arnold (2015) noted that digital technologies not only form and define the exhibition of the film and its "form" but also the "communication practices" (p. 6), which have become wider, and the sharing of information about films has become ubiquitous. Also, they added that, in general, the area of studying the digital age includes

broad contextual explorations of the multi-faceted implications of digital technology on cinema (Keane, 2007; Tryon, 2009; Rombes, 2009); fandom and new fan practices (Shefrin, 2004; Christie, 2012); new conceptions of the interactive audience (Cover, 2006; Hesselberth, 2014); and theorisations that look to expand the understanding of cinema in light of digital transformations (Iordanova & Cunningham, 2012; Atkinson, 2014) (Llinares & Arnold, 2015, p. 6).

Westwell and Kuhn (2020) defined the term digital cinema as the use of digital technology "during film production, distribution, or exhibition" and as "the ways in which a widespread introduction of digital technology... shaped... film culture" (p. 494). Continuing Deleuze's (1985) ideas presented in "Cinema 2: The image," Daly (2010) proposes the term "Cinema 3", which is "a cinema of the user", turning out to be the "interactive-image" (p. 82). She found the terms viewer and user unsatisfactory and proposed "viewser," meaning that the same person not only watches a film but "participates with it across other media platforms" (Daly, 2010, p. 82). This new type of viewer does "websurfing, networking, and hyperlinking" while watching and does it

naturally because these activities are already part of their everyday lives (Daly, 2010, p. 89).

Yet, Atkinson (2014), in “Beyond the Screen: Emerging Cinema and Engaging Audiences,” argued that new forms of consumption and new screens which viewers use for film-watching shape the process but don’t change it significantly.

I identify three main characteristics, or types, of film consumption in the digital era:

1. Using digital platforms for film viewing

A key characteristic of film consumption in the digital age is the technological shift, particularly regarding the screens viewers use to watch films. Tryon (2012) focuses on devices which viewers use to watch film; describing the launch of a new app for film watching, he wrote: “Like other digital delivery platforms, the app was announced as a transformative way of watching television and films” (p. 287). There is a main characteristic of the digital device approach to changing consumption behaviour in the digital age (p. 287). As a result, the discourses of platform mobility help to define a new mode of spectatorship, one that is associated with “active and engaged viewing, but often solitary” (Tryon, 2012, p. 287). This loneliness and independence allows viewers to make their own schedule and avoid strict time frames “by theatres and broadcasters,” and that is how “time-shifting potential has contributed to a further casualization of the practice of film and television watching,” (Tryon, 2012, p. 289), making it more convenient for viewers.

Westwell and Kuhn (2020) highlighted this opportunity to shift between different devices as one of the main peculiarities of “digital cinema”: “Convergence allows films to be screened across different devices and contexts: viewers are no longer obliged to choose between watching film in a cinema or at home on television” (p. 496).

The platform which viewers use to watch films is as important as the device. Numerous studies explore how viewers choose films on these platforms, how recommendation systems function, and how platforms curate and present content. Of course, this academic discourse is partly framed by the concept of platformisation (Poell et al., 2019). However, my focus is not on content presentation and distribution but rather on “viewer behaviour” (Mikos, 2016, p. 159). VoD (Video-on-Demand platforms) is not necessarily a threat to cinema or traditional television, and Tryon’s respondent evaluated it as “no substitute for cinema” (2012, p. 289).

As for definition, video platforms are

“commonly associated with a transformed infrastructure in which the Internet has become a site for renting, purchasing and downloading movies, often for instantaneous viewing. These distribution practices came to include a range of methods: streaming video, digital downloads, electronic sell-through and VOD” (Tryon, 2013, p. 19).

Participants in Tryon’s study noted benefits of this kind of platforms, such as the opportunity to make their personal schedule and to select content on their own, “for repeat viewings, given that users’ access to collections” (Tryon, 2012, p. 289) and keep films with easy access to be watched. Daly (2010) argues that digital platforms not only make film-watching more convenient but also integrate it into an online discursive space, making “the narrative... more complicated and intertextual” (p. 85).

A variety of devices on which films can be consumed, “scheduling flexibility and independence are identified as the most important motives for VoD consumption” (Puffer, 2015, p. 26). Tryon (2012) also argues that this mobility and benefit for viewers are independent from pre-scheduled TV programs or multiplex schedules (p. 289). Furthermore, VoD and other digital film platforms offer several advantages, including the ability to watch films and series in their original language with subtitles (Mikos, 2016, p. 156) or the opportunity for “binge-watching” (Mikos, 2016, p. 159).

At the same time, viewers do not always have full access to their desired films because they are “often constrained by geo-blocking, data caps, streaming rights, and other institutional and economic factors” (Tryon, 2012, p. 289). Lotz (2017) offered a different perspective, highlighting the advantages of online platforms over linear broadcasting. She argued that digital viewers encountered far greater volumes of content due to the technological capacity of digital platforms to support virtually unlimited offerings: “broadcast signals could only transmit one message at a time, and cable maintained the norms of the broadcast paradigm despite technological advancement. Internet-distributed television does not have this limitation” (Lotz, 2017, p. 2). Lotz (2017) argues that the ‘new viewing practices’ facilitated by SVOD platforms (i.e. Subscription Video on Demand) revolve around the concepts of “availability,” expansive on-demand libraries, and “reliability”, ensuring that content remains accessible (p. 40).

Competition between various digital platforms forced viewers to grow the number of titles in their libraries, that viewers face the necessity to make a choice and to look for

content on these platforms among the enormous numbers of titles: “Given the vast amount of audiovisual content uploaded to the Internet every day...the problem for viewers is ... exacerbated by the limitations of text-centric search engines and a corresponding lack of metadata accompanying audiovisual content” (Sørensen, 2014, p. 37).

Nevertheless, Tryon (2012), Grundström (2018), Aboulaoula and Biltereyst (2022) acknowledge that while consumption patterns and audience behaviour have evolved, these changes represent a logical progression rather than a radical transformation: “What is really important when we talk about film audiences in the digital era, they continue to watch films in theatres, even attending opening night screenings in order to experience being part” (Tryon, 2012, p. 288). Frey (2019) supports this perspective, showing that this shift is not significant, as home viewing had already been prevalent long before streaming: “viewing films at home had been the norm for a long time before streaming” (p. 164).

2. Communication about films through digital platforms

Behlil (2005) is sure that technological development gives cinephiles “the choice to participate in a more socially engaged form of film obsession and share their ideas with others” (p. 117). However, the availability of this choice does not necessarily mean that cinephiles feel the same need to meet as they once did (Elsaesser, 2005). Moreover, while various “technologies... have the potential to disrupt traditional viewing habits and protocols” (Tryon, 2012, p. 290), numerous platforms allow users to write reviews and critiques, lowering the entry barrier to expressing opinions about films.

Casetti (2011b) presented an overview of various practices of consumption of information about film and sharing opinions about it, such as users’ blogs, tweets, and reviews, concluding the whole scope as a “multimedia product” (p. 9).

At the same time, the desire to discuss cinema and watch films existed long before the digital age:

This type of community, complexity, and multimedia intertextuality was available before digital and computer technologies. The French New Wave and its community in *Cahiers du Cinéma* and other journals and cineclubs of the time was a networked and intertextual form of cinema experience. But this took place solely in a handful of urban centers and required great effort and an almost cultlike commitment. (Daly, 2010, p. 85)

Jenkins (2002) studied sci-fi fan communities that interacted via letters, conventions, and fanzines; as he notes, the fans have moved beyond the boundaries to

become increasingly powerful communities. He continued to develop his ideas further to highlight that “audience activism” was growing in digital spheres (Jenkins & Deuze, 2008, p. 7). Daly (2010) highlighted that, if fans or cinephile communities engaged interactively and communicated actively across different accessible media, digitalisation made this approach “almost unavoidable” for people who are interested in cinema because everybody who has access to the internet could participate in such communities (p. 85).

3. Using digital platforms as a source of information about films, and also for archiving, listing and other activities connected with film consumption

Elsaesser (2005) claimed that cinephiles in the digital age used technology not just for consuming as many films as possible but for archiving and keeping memory and knowledge to make the personal experience a part of a common one due to disks, torrents, files, electronic archives and other technological goods. Digital audiences, especially fans and cinephiles, prefer forms of listing (creating lists of films marked as watched and dividing them into collections or playlists) and use social networking platforms for film viewers like LetterBoxd as a “well-organised movie diary and as a source of information to obtain strangers’ and friends’ movie ratings and read movie reviews/comments” (Aboulaoula & Biltereys, 2021, p. 491). Digital platforms enhance audiences’ engagement with films and series by encouraging the deciphering of secrets, hints, narrative cues, and symbolic prompts. The inherent ambiguity of information on these platforms can foster conspiratorial interpretations, which may be strategically employed by creators as a means of fan engagement and as part of promotional campaigns (Waugh, 2024).

I explore audience reception of films and the formation of their knowledge, considering the peculiarities of the digital era but keeping in mind that digital technologies “transform film viewing and consumption, and blur the boundaries between film and other media” (Westwell & Kunh, 2022, p. 495) of film reception, audiences’ communication and other interaction with films have not changed entirely. Theoretical frameworks established before the digital age remain relevant but must be adapted to modern audience characteristics. So, as we see, film audiences exhibit distinct behaviours in how they consume films, discuss them, and acquire information about them, including recommendations. However, digitalisation does not replace prior film experiences but rather expands and complements them. It makes viewers more interactive, provides them

with greater opportunities, and broadens the fan or cinephile community since participation now requires less effort.

Casetti (2011b) concluded that viewers have become “active protagonists”, because given the opportunity to choose platforms, mode of watching and discussion, they “remodel them onto themselves, thanks to a combination of precise practices which invest the object, the modalities and the conditions of vision” (p. 6). Tryon (2012) followed Casetti: “Instead viewers ‘intervene’, a process that entails everything from choosing when and where to view a film to what platform will be used... spectators essentially become protagonists who actively shape their viewing experience” (p. 292).

2. The process of film reception

2.1 Reception: meanings, definitions, and synonyms

Belsey (1998), a theatrical critic, comparing film reception with a reception of a theatrical performance, assumed viewers who encounter the film “seeing from a singular point of view... with passively taking that as a given whole... and thus prone to receive an already structured understanding” (Barker, 2012, p. 188). Thus, these critical points, in a simple and direct way, note the two main steps of such encountering: seeing the film and understanding it, or, as Barker (2012) called these steps, “vision and cognition” (p. 188).

Livingstone (2007) claimed that the term ‘reception’ is a general one for the viewing experience and focuses on interpretative processes (p. 2). Referring to Corner (1995), Livingstone (2007) describes three steps in the reception of a TV series:

- “First, comprehension refers to the process of decoding ... the meaning.
- ... the level of textual meaning is decoded through processes of implication and association.
- Lastly, the viewer’s response to these decoded meanings depends on his or her own contextual and personal circumstances” (p. 2).

Sense-making becomes a part of reception, including “comprehension and interpretation”; one characteristic of interpretation is that it is “socially located” (Livingstone, 2007, p. 3) and “places considerable, although different, demands on the viewer, and both of which make more or less use of textual and extratextual knowledge” (Livingstone, 2007, p. 5).

In media and communication studies, as well as in Film Studies, the term ‘reception’ is often used to describe the entire interaction between a film and its audience, encompassing viewers’ and critics’ reviews, viewers’ social media activities, and box office metrics (Balanzategui et al., 2018; Frey, 2015). Frey (2015), in his book on film criticism, discussed reception in a broad sense, including box-office factors: “international reception of Truffaut” (p. 67), “American reception of Soviet films” (p. 18), “the film suffered from a poor reception upon its initial US release” (p. 117). He also uses the same term when writing about the viewers’ interpretations of a film: “the critic shapes the reader’s reception of the film – or at least provides the preconditions or point of departure” (Frey, 2015, p. 113). Also, scholars use ‘readers’ for film viewers who are processing the reading the film, interpreting.

A widely accepted understanding of the term, which is not contradictory to the perspectives mentioned above, is reception as the final step of a film's production—its ultimate goal: “This selection process operates, from creation to reception, filters that allow cultural works to be discovered, then supported and finally presented to the public” (Debenedetti, 2006, p. 38). Sinnreich (2020) used this term similarly: “the massive acceleration of the feedback cycle between production, reception and redistribution enabled by these media platforms” (p. 215). Casetti (2011b) claimed that the term “filmic experience” is almost identical to reception and more suitable for discussing audiences, because it means both a process of viewing a film and attempts to recognise “stimuli and their effects to the point of assuming the role of spectator” (pp. 5–6).

Tsitsou (2023) explores film reception by audiences, considering this process to include film interpretation. She presents an argument regarding the term “audience engagement with film,” describing it as an “active process” which includes also “active process of sense making” (p. 246). She refers to recent research on British film audiences, writing that audiences are “formed through their active interaction with film” and synonymises this active interaction with the term “engagement” (Tsitsou, 2023, p. 248). In her empirical analysis, the researcher focuses on audiences' interpretations of films, which include both immediate reactions and more long-term sense-making while discussing the film.

Thus, Wessels (2023) further argues that the interaction between audience and film is linked to the resources viewers can invest in it and to the nature of the particular film itself. Thus, it is not a one-directional process, but an interaction in which the film influences audiences and their sense-making, while audiences, in turn, also shape the film's reception. This position is directly connected with the understanding of the audience as a process, which Wessels develops. It correlates with Keller's (2020) approach in her study on cinephiles, where she focuses on the perceptive side of the process rather than the object of perception. This perspective highlights the process of perception and meaning-making that ultimately defines viewers.

Casetti (2011a) defined three key elements of the film experience:

- Experience of a place (the researcher focused on the cinema theatre, yet we see that the experience of place also includes digital platforms).

- Experience of a situation that is both real and unreal.
- Experience of a diegetic world (made up of images and sounds that can also have their own consistency and depth. This means that the spectator interprets filmic reality as something in which they might be immersed, thanks to a complex interplay of projection and identification with what appears on screen. Thus, he is talking about interpretation as part of the experience (pp. 59–62).

Once again, I observe that viewing and perception constitute a process that can be influenced by place or platform, by personal experience or “situation.” The act of interpretation can be seen either as part of filmic reality, as “a representation of the world” (Casetti, 2011a, p. 62), or as something that exists separately from it, occurring only on screen.

Hanchard, Merrington, and Wessels (2020) distinguished five types of film experience: “individualised, group, venue-specific, global, and digital” (p. 115), and these patterns characterise various “relations and interactions people have with films, media, venues, and with other people” (p. 129). Also, they highlighted that people can be flexible and move between them, also having preferences.

Thus, I determine that the term reception, which is both central to my field and most suitable for my research, has two meanings: 1. A broader one that encompasses all stages and levels of interaction between an audience and the film they watch. This includes gathering knowledge about the film, pre-watching interactions, post-watching interactions, film reviewing, film discussions and talks, and the process of watching itself; synonym of film/ filmic experience. 2. A narrower meaning referring specifically to the process of watching the film and interpreting it (meaning-making) from the perspective of an individual viewer, or “interpretive labour” (Forrest, 2023, p. 225).

While acknowledging the broader definition, my research will focus on reception in the second, narrower sense: how a particular viewer’s prior knowledge influences their reception—the process of watching and reading the film.

2.2 Interpretation as a part of film experience

According to Jenkins (2000), “reception theory and audience research ask basic questions about how we make sense of the movies and what they mean in our lives” (p. 166). Considering film interpretations, or “cognition” and “meaning-making,” I will stay

within the frame that it is part of the reception process and, as Barker and Brooks (1998) highlighted, part of the process of participation in the film (p. 53). The same idea is presented by Bordwell (1985), who highlighted that “The artwork is necessarily incomplete, needing to be unified and fleshed out by active participation of the perceiver” (p. 32). “While each approach has addressed a different aspect of the text, clearly, both comprehension and interpretation occur when making sense of a film” (Livingstone, 2007, p. 3).

To identify what influences interpretations of a film, we need to understand how the process of interpretation unfolds. Bordwell (1985) repeatedly claimed that spectators must “construct a story” (p. 40) or engage in the “spectator’s ongoing construction of the story” (p. 49). He also highlighted that film viewing is “a complicated, even skilled activity” (Bordwell, 1985, p. 33), expanding on Kristeva’s ideas about “infinite meaning-making” (Kristeva, 1980, p. 106). Yet, while staying within the field of communication studies and not delving into a purely semiotic perspective, where Kristeva and Bordwell worked, we still see that the process of meaning construction is an integral part of film consumption.

Staiger (2000) disagreed with Bordwell, showing that “the context is more significant than the textual features” (p. 30). She highlighted that viewers can have different strategies for watching and interpreting films, and they (strategies) can be influenced by different things: “aesthetic preferences and practices, knowledges and expectations... whether I am thinking of myself as a professor or a woman or a neo-Marxist” (Staiger, 2000, p. 31).

Casetti (2011a) writes about “spectatorship as a performance” (p. 65), discussing interpretation as well. Different scholars define interpretation as a performative and creative process, or, as Forrest and Merrington (2021, 2023) named it, audiences’ “interpretive labour”. This process of meaning-making is initiated when the viewing process takes place.

More attention has been paid to the role of the reader than to what they are reading, with the result that the focus on the interaction between the two is getting lost. However, there is an important analytic distinction between the author of a text, itself complex in relation to broadcasting institutions, and the characteristics or conventions of that text, a distinction which gets lost under the broad category of ‘encoding.’ (Livingstone, 2007, p. 10).

Thus, in this citation, Livingstone shows that several participants take part in the interpretation process: audiences (who are reading a text), the author of the text, and its characteristics, including or excluding broadcasting institutions or, as they are referred to, venues or platforms where the process of consumption occurs. Wessels (2023) concluded the same: “The ways in which individuals and audiences interpret, relate to, and share films move films from the screen into a lived film culture that fosters and sustains engagement and relationships with film” (p. 300).

2.3 Aspects/factors which influence the process of reception

Abercrombie and Longhurst (2012) also highlight the importance of the performance itself and its influence on how audiences interpret it: “When members of an audience attend to a performance, they concentrate their energies, emotions, and thoughts on the performance and try to distil from that performance a meaning of one kind or another” (n.p.). This aligns with the idea that one film corresponds to one audience, as audiences focus their attention on distinguishing different performances and different films.

At the same time, researchers argue that the process of interpretation is no longer one-directional but rather interactive and interlinked: meaning-making is not only about uncovering hidden meaning in the film text but also about assigning new meaning to it. It is not only a process of decoding but also encoding, which should be understood as the “recognition of the structurally unequal yet semiotically open processes of the circulation of culture” (Livingstone, 2007, p. 5). Then, I aim to find what exactly shapes viewers’ reception and its interpretation, or sense-making stage.

Both Livingstone and Wessels emphasise the role of personal experience. “Yet, interpretations are embedded in an interactive nexus between the self, personal experience, and representation; they are active and reflexive processes despite carrying assumptions” (Tsitsou, 2023, p. 245). People can watch and interpret the same film differently, analysing a formal technique and technologies used in a film or comparing the film’s plot their firsthand encounters and individual journeys: variety in these attitudes to analyse films initiate discussions about the film, and Wessels argues that “these relationships are generated from venues, platforms and TV screens, friends, families, and networks shaped

by provision, narratives and the ways in which people engage with film” (Wessels et al., 2022, pp. 297–299).

As we see, the platforms and venues can also influence the interpretation and meaning-making, and this position is close to Walmsley (2021), whose main focus direct to the engagement between audience and cultural goods: “Just as the co-production of cultural products cannot happen without artists to co-produce them, so is the co-creation of meaning dependent on some form of mediation, which is perhaps another useful synonym for engagement” (p. 308) So, there is an opinion that meaning-making is dependent on the venue and type of the platform where the film audience watches the film.

However, Forrest and Merrington (2021), in analysing the same processes of interpretation and meaning attribution, focus on viewers’ understandings of place, country, language, practices, narrative, and directorial approaches. In their work on the perception of “specialised” films by British audiences, researchers explore viewers’ interactions with various types of films, including specialised productions, blockbusters, and films in both English and non-English languages. They examine “viewing strategies... to determine how audiences make meaning from the film” and mention the audience’s “interpretive labour” (Forrest, 2023, p. 225). In the research, scholars look for patterns in how meaning is created by viewers and what references or frameworks help them to interpret films. They distinguish between “expert reading” and “naive account,” basing these conclusions solely on viewers’ self-representations. Thus, their description of audience interaction with film includes “the act of reading the film” and interpretation as a dynamic process. It directly correlates also with Barker and Brooks (1998), who mentioned “specialist audience” for a particular film or genre, and a general audience (“anyone who just likes an ordinary Good Action Film” if we are talking about action genre, or any other genre without strong requirements) (p. 76). This specific approach to reception/reading films in some cases aligns with my classification of audiences described above: fans can perform expert reading or represent specialist audiences for particular films, while being a naive audience or part of the general audience for other movies or genres, so, “some audiences learn to appreciate and engage better with each different array” (Ralph & Barker, 2015, p. 754).

As I have already referred to Forrest and Merrington (2021), these processes of engagement and interpretation can be influenced by different factors, and knowledge is among them. Livingstone (2007) also claimed that “interpretation is fundamentally socially

located so that the experience and knowledge of the reader plays a central role in decoding the text” (p. 3). Caruso and Shafir (2006) argued on the mood's impact on consumer choices and effect audience response.

Interestingly, for digital viewers, the process of meaning-making and reading becomes even more significant, as this audience is more interactive. Thus, Casetti (2011b) defined two types of spectators: traditional and modern. The modern spectator does not simply receive a text but rather “a hypertext, with its various components, links and expansions,” explaining this with the example of interlinking different films through a unifying image, face, or visual style (Casetti, 2011b, p. 3). Daly (2010) also highlighted this necessity for viewers, or “viewer,” to find hidden meanings or links with other films or events: “For digital citizens, this provides an interactive game, so the movie is not just passively consumed but must be figured out” (p. 90). The scholar noted that it is impossible for film creators to “control the references and connections, which the viewer will make” (Daly, 2010, p. 94). Modern viewers, often using technology, connect films and their ideas with references, other texts, contemporary media influencers, and other stories, as everything can become part of cinematic discourse.

Thus, I aim to define how particular types of knowledge influence different audiences’ engagement, interpretation, and appreciation of one film over another. First, I need to define what prior knowledge of the film can include, and what sources exist for acquiring it.

3. Knowledge about a film

3.1 Prior knowledge about the film: types and sources

Viewers can access almost any information about any film: “the production methods, the locations, the actors, the costs, and the marketing... not just actors like Marilyn Monroe who exist in an iconic realm outside the movies in which they appear; increasingly information is readily available on all aspects of a movie” (Daly, 2010, p. 92).

In the article “What a Performance,” Ralph and Barker (2015) explored the concepts of “known figures” and “myth” in relation to the audience’s knowledge of a story. They also focused on how knowledge about the actors starring in a film shapes viewers’ expectations, stating that “perception and evaluation of the film can respond” to these expectations (p. 748). In his chapter “Crossing out the audience” (2012), Barker also referenced Bourdieu and Bordwell and, following Campbell (2005), discussed connections between “evaluations of the film” and the informational frameworks within which viewers and critics engage with a movie.

Grundström (2018) argued that “besides visiting the websites of the chosen theatres to read the synopsis, searching for additional information online beforehand is a central part” of the film-watching experience. As one of the main reasons, she named “the current price of cinema admission, one can’t run the risk of going to see a film without any prior knowledge of it” (p. 18). The practice of gathering such knowledge becomes at the same time necessary and risky to spoil “the excitement of going to see a new film” (p. 18).

Livingstone (2007) argued that textual and “extra-knowledge” about the TV product is used by viewers in the process of both “comprehension and interpretation,” in “making sense” (p. 5). Exploring “analytical judgement” of the audiences of specialised films, Forrest (2023) concluded that interpretive resources of viewers are even “rooted in their life experience” and prior knowledge (p. 236). Wessels (2023) continued their ideas, noting that “the interaction between text and viewer’s knowledge ultimately shapes what the film means for a viewer” (p. 298). Bordwell (1985), in his books about the meaning-making of narrative films, used not only the term prior knowledge but also “background knowledge” as a synonym (p. 30).

Still, there are different types of prior knowledge, or extra-knowledge, based on its source (where a viewer received this information) or its object (what this knowledge is about). I will use the term prior knowledge following Barker and Brooks (1998, p. 78) and

Hart et al. who argued that it “acquired through past film consumption literature and film theory, the diary extracts were coded into key points” (2015, p. 6).

I have categorised knowledge into different types based on the nature of the information it contains and the manner in which it is acquired.

I already mentioned **knowledge of genre** (Barker & Brooks, 1998; Ralph & Barker, 2015). Forrest (2023) describes viewers whose “willingness to deploy knowledge of genre convention as an interpretative resource” (p. 235).

Messaris (1981) explained **how knowledge about the film production process** affects viewers' response to a film: “Knowledge about film-making makes a viewer less likely to ignore the artifice in a film. However, this ‘effect’ doesn't seem to hold in the case of indirect knowledge about film, i.e. the kind of knowledge” (p. 55). He showed that the interaction between this kind of knowledge can be shaped by the genre of the film: “Kind of filmmaking has dulled audiences' awareness of the filmmakers' presence. This argument is often invoked by experimental filmmakers whose ‘obtrusive’ style is seen by untutored audiences as an error” (Messaris, 1981, p. 53), as well as the level of depth of audience's knowledge. Distinguishing viewers into three groups, Messaris (1981) used the source for such knowledge formation as a factor for dividing: he showed that knowledge can be taken from educational institutions and courses, from work experiences, and from reviews (p. 54). Flanagan (2003) argued that audiences rapidly develop their “competencies ...and knowledge of the technical, creative and fiscal policies of Hollywood film” due to widening access to the information (p. 25)

The next type of **knowledge about the film is information about the film crew:** actors, directors, and other filmmakers. Regardless of whether we unite them into one broader group, the knowledge about different participants involved in film production—actors, directors, and more specific members—varies the audience's point of view and shapes the viewing experience in different ways.

Bourdieu (1984/2020) defined knowledge about directors as one “more closely and exclusively linked to educational capital than is mere cinema-going, which is more dependent on income, place of residence and age” when “knowledge of actors varies mainly and considerably with the number of films seen... least-educated regular cinema-goers knew as many actors' names as the most highly educated” (p. 18). Barker and Brooks (2015) also distinguished perceived and accumulated information about

adaptations, remakes, and figures as knowledge that can shape the audience's relation to the film (p. 753).

I am not going to explore and categorise types of knowledge based on its level because the types of audience explicitly contain the level of knowledge about films: as I wrote above, fans have knowledge about specific films, genres, or persons; cinephiles have deep, almost expert, knowledge about various films and production specifics; regular audiences, filmgoers, have basic or limited knowledge.

Next, I aim to define **sources for formation knowledge about films**: where viewers get the information about films before watching.

Frey (2015), in “The Permanent Crisis of Film Criticism: The Anxiety of Authority”, categorised three types of **online media** where users can participate in film discussion:

- Social media,
- Websites that are “designed to communicate information about films ... and comment on them” (i.e., IMDb) (p. 128),
- Online versions of traditional media, such as magazines or newspapers with special film review sections or specific “online-only film reviews, are produced in the institutional context of aggregate sites such as Rotten Tomatoes”, Metacritic, and Movie Intelligence Review (p. 128).

Agreeing with this classification in general, I also argue that it is necessary to add video platforms (as VoD or SVoD) that allow users to publish reviews on-site (for example, MUBI), comment while watching (for example, Wink) and the platforms which gather different information and marketing materials about the films they present.

Obviously, these media can be used not only for sharing opinions, but also for collecting information and as a source for prior knowledge formation. Later, Frey (2019), in his study “The Internet Suggests” studied the AI recommendation systems, which can be also used as a source of the information about films together with “word of mouth from family, friends, or colleagues... advertising, review aggregators like Rotten Tomatoes, trailers... human critics’ reviews”, and also mentioned “Rotten Tomatoes, Twitter, and other online communities” (Frey, 2019, pp. 164, 167). The scholar didn’t specify where the reviews should be published, so we can conclude that it is not only the media he grouped in 2019 but also printed media. Social media can include Twitter, as he noted, or classical social networks. Also, specific social networks can be such a source, as, for example, Letterboxd

that helps film viewers “pour garder une trace des choses” (Souvanlasy, 2024, n.p.) [“keep track of things”, translated by author] as it is published in *Le Monde*, to explain why this social network grows increasingly and who uses it more.

Film reviews constitute an important source of knowledge about films. A common approach to studying the influence of prior knowledge on viewers’ perception/response is to examine how film reviews shape audience expectations. Numerous studies have addressed this perspective. For example, Hennig-Thurau, Marchand, and Hiller (2012) linked “reviewer judgments to motion picture success” (p. 251). Viewers can find in reviews not only the emotional direction for future perception but also the information about the production process or about the film crew. Film reviews can be published on any platform mentioned above in Frey’s classification, also reviews can be published in traditional media or even quoted on the film posters (Debenedetti & Ghariani, 2018).

Based on Debenedetti and Ghariani’s (2018) study, we also can consider **advertisements** as a source of knowledge about films. He referred to Baumann (2007) and argues that advertisements give the audiences commentaries from professional critics, and also can share “graphics, advertising hooks, the labels of industry operators, prizes and awards” (Debenedetti & Ghariani, 2018, p. 33).

Kerrigan & Yalkin (2009) showed the importance of **marketing communication** on formation of the film image for potential audience and build “want-to-see” approach (p. 2). Daly (2010) noted the importance of **databases** where viewers are looking; these services become a part of “storytelling and visuality” which is a natural continuation of viewers’ everyday use of technologies and “might contribute to new habits and desires in the viewer and therefore new expectations for cinema” (p. 90).

Also, knowledge can be formed with **word of mouth** or **myths** which have existed around the film, studio, and particular member of the film crew or cast: “The concept of spectatorship also refers to how film consumption and its associated myths are considered to be culturally significant and activities of a symbolic nature for consumers, who are found to have agency over media texts such as films” (Kohli et al. 2021, p. 371). Hart et al. (2015) named “friends’ opinions” among information sources but specifies that often these friends’ opinions can be a starting point for viewers to start searching additional information, proves or details on different sources (p. 384). Kerrigan and Yalkin (2009) argued that word-of-mouth can be more influential than marketing materials. Staiger

(2000) also mentioned myth, for example, “myth of Hollywood” (p. 84) taking about public discourse around the directors or actors. These general ideas, myths, can form unconscious knowledge and form expectations from planned film watching:

For Bakhtin, there is no moment when the text stands outside cultural circulation and makes its meanings clear and unambiguous. The words and images writers use do not come from some neutral place such as a dictionary but rather from ‘someone’s else’s mouth’ still dripping with meanings and associations from their previous use (Jenkins, 2000, p. 168).

Frey (2019) argued that the use of recommendation systems, another characteristic of film distribution and viewing in the digital age, represents “continuations and transpositions of word-of-mouth tips, professional criticism, and industry advertising” (p. 166). Viewers receive recommendations, and thereby acquire knowledge, via these systems, which are integrated into digital content-viewing platforms. Frey (2021) distinguished between “curation-style platforms” and “algorithm-informed services” (p. 5), emphasising “the fact that human experts—rather than algorithms—hand-pick this content and present ... films to audiences... They provide content variety and added value to many film consumers” (Frey, 2021, p. 3).

Clement and Davies (2020) provide a detailed account of the features of video platforms’ recommendation systems:

Recommendation Engine has the ability to predict whether a specific client would prefer an item or not based on the client's profile. Recommendation Engine is an essential automated system to filter some entities like products ,movies, songs or ads. A recommendation engine works on three basis, collecting, analyzing and recommending. Recommender engine research is frequently based on comparisons of recommendation accuracy, thus the better the evaluation scores the better the prediction. Movie or video Recommendation Engine gives a mechanism to help clients in classifying users with comparative interests (p. 1).

These systems generate recommendations based on content tags, user data (such as profile information and declared interests), or a hybrid of both methods (Clement & Davies, 2020, p. 2). Major video platforms, such as Netflix, Amazon, YouTube, and Facebook, have developed proprietary recommender algorithms and employ them not only to present content and suggest titles to users, but also as part of their marketing strategies and overall commercial advantage (Hallinan & Striphas, 2016, p. 118). This practice has become so widespread that the term “algorithmic culture” has emerged (Striphas, 2012). It

can be defined by its primary goal—“complex alchemy of audiovisual matchmaking” (Hallinan & Striphas, 2016, p. 117) in which users and content are paired to form an ideal consumer/product match. At the same time, its inner workings remain obscure; as recommendation systems became competitive assets, they also became “a black box, or a kind of known unknown” (Hallinan & Striphas, 2016, p. 118).

In recent years, gathering knowledge and recommendations through GenAI NLP models such as ChatGPT has become more popular among viewers and has entered the field of academic study (Zhou et al., 2023; Bennmarker, 2023). Natural Language Processing (NLP) refers to a scope of AI focused on developing and implementing algorithms that interact using human language to perform complex tasks, such as assessing the similarity in meaning between texts and documents (Radford et al., 2018; Lauriola et al., 2022). The main difference from traditional recommendation algorithms lies in the “increasing users control” over the process: users can describe their specific preferences to receive more tailored recommendations. However, not all are satisfied with the volume and variety of suggestions offered (Bennmarker, 2023).

3.2 Knowledge and expectations

According to Kohli et al. (2021), viewers may “classify films based on their anticipated film experience” (p. 370). Hart et al. (2015) claimed that “By associating an actor, director, studio or character with a particular style of film”, the viewer indicates whether the film meets certain standards, and this increases the film’s attractiveness and decreases uncertainty (p. 380). Jenkins (2000) used the term ‘textual activators’ to describe “advertisements, film trailers, newspaper reviews” and other sources that shape audience expectations of a film (p. 169). Some textual activators have “a power to predetermine audience response” (Jenkins, 2000, pp. 170–171) and lead audiences’ reception in a particular way.

The concept of expectations about a film is central in *Knowing Audiences: Judge Dredd, Its Friends, Fans and Foes*, by Barker and Brooks (1998), which I frequently refer to, and in which they examined how “many kinds brought prior knowledge and expectations, in the form of hopes and fears, to bear on the film” and how this shaped spectatorship and influenced their “strategies of viewing” (Barker, 2012, p. 187). Barker and Brooks's studies form a key part of the theoretical framework for this research and also

influence the methods I use in my empirical studies. They also linked expectations with readiness to watch films (1998, p. 53).

What viewers expect influences how they receive the film: “how they feel after consuming the film based on their expectations pre-decision” (Hart et al., 2015, p. 3). Barker (2012) in his later works used the term ‘investment’, which “refers to the multifaceted ways in which, and degrees to which, audiences become involved in cultural forms and activities” which can include “the complex kinds of preparation, expectations, hopes, and fears with which people approach such experiences, and the pleasures, surprises, frustrations, and disappointments they can experience” (p. 190), “knowledge of film genres interweaves with expectations, with the basis for judgment of particular films” (Barker & Brooks, 1998, p. 76). Scholars also mentioned the idea of “ideal expectations” (Barker & Brooks, 1998, p. 80). Also, they wrote about the cinematic process from the audience’s perspective. It includes, on the one hand, a “set of social aspirations, routine, predictions, shared knowledge,” and on the other hand, “making their own strategic operations” (p. 80) and that “film viewing can start long before” (p. 76) a person starts actually to watch the film. All of these show the direct connection between the knowledge viewers have before film-watching, the expectations they form based on this knowledge, and the process of film reception. Wessels (2023) noted that knowledge can be related to “pre-event” (p. 289) factors that influence the audience’s expectations and, as a result, engagement with the film.

Expectations are connected with the semiotic term ‘schemata’. Schemata, according to Bordwell (1985), “generate hypotheses about what we will see next”, form “visual recognition” (p. 31, 32). Schemata do not exist solely in the viewer’s mind but function as a tool that helps them “make sense of the film narrative” by drawing upon a foundation of prior knowledge. When viewers form expectations, they test them throughout the viewing process, applying what Bordwell (1985) describes as the “wait-and-see strategy” (p. 38). Bordwell further explains that schemata can be useful: “When we of being ‘aware of manipulation’ in a Lang film and ‘unaware’ of such manipulation in Hawks film, we are usually referring to the narration greater or lesser acknowledgement that a tale is being presented a perceiver” (p. 58). However, viewers can also be misled, potentially resulting in misinterpretation if they apply the wrong set of schemata, which leads to inaccurate expectations.

Thus, viewers can anticipate certain stylistic elements even in the absence of explicit information. For instance, if they are aware that a particular composer frequently collaborates with a director, they are likely to develop specific expectations. Livingstone recalled a term ‘soap opera effect’ (2007, p. 7) to identify the effect of “prior knowledge of a character’s motives” on audience reception. This knowledge becomes responsible for the connection between episodes and helps them to build a subsequent narrative. Any knowledge about all cinematic genres, not only television ones, can form expectations from the film narrative and provide a “significant reference point” for a film (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001, p. 6).

However, researching the influence of knowledge and presumable expectations on viewers, I agree with Staiger (2000), who highlighted in her book “Perverse spectators: The practices of film perception” that viewers “must rely on his or her knowledge” (p. 17). Still, they do not necessarily have it, and such an absence can also represent a context of film viewing.

3.3 Films, actors, and directors as brands

We see similarities between cult films and film brands. In the essay about *Casablanca*, Eco (1985) identified that cult movies should be “wobbly and disjointed ... should not display a central idea but many. It should not exhibit a coherent philosophy of composition. It must live on in and because of its glorious incoherence” (p. 4), so, describing what a cult film is, Eco focused on the textual characteristics. In his turn, Corrigan (1991) focused on the audience’s characteristics: the film becomes cult when it is extremely popular within the audience and stays like that for a long time.

“All films are potentially cult objects because all films are ‘already ramshackled’, containing both gaps and excesses, traces of cultural appropriation,” claimed Jenkins (2000, p. 168) and added that the initial genre of the film determined “response as well and influences the priority of the viewer: what they pay more or less attention to. Genre has this power even before watching” (pp. 170–171). Kohli sees that cult or iconic status is not equal to brand but it helps the film to be identified as a brand because such films already have a strong emotional connection and value “storyline, characters, etc. which ... resonate with them” (Kohli et al. 2021, p. 393).

Film brand associates with the condition when, considering a film as a brand, a viewer recognises “a brand’s symbolic meanings and the brand’s ability to express and enhance a consumer’s identity” (Kohli, 2021, p. 369), so a film brand can be close to a cult film, from the audience reception point of view. As Kohli referred to Keller (2008), “all films are brands at a basic level,” but some films can “establish themselves as strong brands by combining various elements such as name, logo, symbol, brand characters, slogan, jingle, signage” as an investment to the interaction with audience and application to the recognition (Kohli et al. 2021, p. 372).

Recognition of the brand can lead to positive engagement, positive word-of-mouth (Tuškej et al., 2013), all of which are likely to contribute to positive box office success and revenue flows (Kohli, 2021). However, it can also form negative expectations and deprive a potential viewer of the desire to watch the film. Regardless of positive or negative expectations these brands or genres formed, all of them played a role of textual activators. In any case, filmic brands as well as director and actor brands bond emotionally with viewers to the film, and activate their “ability to integrate ... intellectual and emotional spheres” (Kohli et al. 2021, p. 382).

Marketing and promotional strategies may employ the film brand, as well as actor or director brands, as “a unique selling point ... for example, an appealing combination of cast and crew” (Kohli et al., 2021, p. 370). The concept of “brand” is thus applicable both within Reception Studies (Hall, 1980) and Marketing, where it generally denotes a recognisable entity. Crucially, the presence of a brand enables audiences, after viewing, to “follow the film’s premise onto different platforms (e.g. TV serials, novels and video games), due to their familiarity and fascination with the storyline and characters, which encourage them to explore deeply other related facets” (Kohli et al., 2021, p. 371).

Westwell and Kuhn (2020) emphasised the strong connection between brand identity and directors within the fields of economics and marketing, highlighting its significance for distribution. They also noted that this connection may be even more prominent in the context of “digital cinema and the convergence of film and television” (p. 173).

The concept of actors and directors as brands was introduced by Levin, Levin, and Heath (1997) and subsequently expanded upon by other researchers. The idea that brand names influence how audiences perceive audio-visual products (Levin et al., 1997, p. 175),

including experimental ones, aligns with my perspective on the connections between prior knowledge, expectations, and reception. Scholars argued that audiences' reactions on films where "well-known" actors participated are mostly "more favourable" (Levin et al., 1997, p. 175), "star power" effect was experimentally proven, and "in the movies was a perception that top stars... are associated with high quality products" (Levin et al., 1997, p. 180).

Significant to note that brands of actors and directors can differ. According to Gledhill (1991), actor-star is a "construct of three components: star as a real person; as a character in the film, and as the star's persona" (Bhowmick, 2021, p. 2). When the directors don't have a character entity, their brand construct with real personality and the director's persona.

Jenkins (2000) described certain directors, authorial legends, as highly visible filmmakers and gave some examples, such as Alfred Hitchcock or Rainer Werner Fassbinder (p. 169). Analysing the critical reception of the film *Thelma and Louise*, he paid attention that critics used previous characters starred by leading actresses to interpret current characters, their motivation, and actions: "Stanley Kaufman (1991), for example, drew strong parallels between waitress characters which the actress played in other films, while Douglass maps Sarandon's performance as a bisexual vampire in *The Hunger* (1983) onto *Thelma and Louise*" (Jenkins, 2000, p. 171). It leads to a limited and very individual frame of interpretation based on the prior knowledge of this particular professional viewer. Hart et al. (2015) assumed that viewers can develop their tastes over time "through the consumption of other films, therefore, they can make assumptions about a film based, at least to some degree, on prior experience of actors, genre, director or other elements of the film brandscape" (p. 377).

Despite Kohli et al. (2021), who, in contrast to O'Reilly and Kerrigan (2013), argued that actors, directors, and production studios do not dictate brand status, but collectively constitute a film's identity, I contend that directors' brands function in a similar manner, particularly when a director's films exhibit a distinctive style, narrative features, and allow audiences to form specific expectations based on the director's name. Below, I present examples of such directors' brands.

At the same time, Flanagan (2004) argued that directors and their identities are "more central to convincing potentially sceptical audiences of the serious merits of event

movies (especially those working from culturally ‘debased’ source material like comics)” (p. 26). Orgeron (2007) shared this view, citing examples from the 1970s such as Bertolucci, Lean, and Cimino. He introduced the concept of “brand-name vision,” suggesting that “contextual meanings are already determined, the way a movie is seen and received” is already shaped by the audience (p. 57). Furthermore, Orgeron (2007) discussed Wes Anderson, who was a central figure in his study, as an example of a director who successfully became a brand. He noted that this approach gained popularity in the early 21st century, when directors began participating in advertising and utilising DVD bonus materials to articulate their creative positions, styles, and perspectives, thereby actively constructing their brand. As Orgeron (2007) put it: “Anderson's carefully constructed authorial persona” (p. 56).

Ralph and Barker’s (2015) article “What a Performance” focused on viewers’ responses to film acting, placing actors’ performances at the centre of analysis. Their interviewees confessed that “knowledge half-guides, half-interrupts” their “appreciation” of the film, shaping viewers’ “predictive expectations” and also forming personal attitudes; for example, a viewer may dislike a particular actor based on prior knowledge. Barker and Brooks identified different kinds of “relations between audience and film acting” (2015, p. 753). While some of these are grounded in the specific experience of watching a particular film, others are shaped by prior knowledge or experiences.

Staiger in her book “Perverse spectators in practices of film reception” (2000) studied a case of Marlen Dietrich’s brand or myth, and how it affected the reception of actress’s films: “Discourse about Dietrich’s “real” life and the romantic story offered motivations for a fan to interpret the film’s ambiguities in quite another way” (p. 88). Also, the scholar noted that “not all moviegoers were fans of the actress” (p. 89), and many people could interpret films differently and also didn’t understand hints to Dietrich’s personal life in film reviews.

3.4 How a director’s style contributes to the formation of a distinct film type, or a specific genre

Forrest and Merrington (2021), as mentioned earlier, also examined the sources of knowledge about films in their studies on film perception. They investigated questions such as: When viewers come to the cinema, what do they know about the film? Where did

they acquire this information? How did they choose their sources? While they did not focus on these questions as a primary objective, they could not avoid addressing this aspect of film perception. Their work is particularly relevant to my research as they analyse current tendencies in film perception using mixed methods (Forrest & Merrington, 2021; Wessels et al., 2022; Forrest, 2023). One of their research participants claimed, “I know Ken Loach’s films,” to explain why he wasn’t surprised by the narrative of the film and knew what to expect.

In his initial discussion of *I, Daniel Blake*, Clark showed well developed knowledge of its ‘official’ genre: ‘I know Ken Loach’s films, I like social realism, but I tend to go more for melodrama’, but as he develops his response, he begins to showcase a more authentic interpretative framework. (Forrest, 2023, p. 235)

Forrest focused on the connection between genres and the *type of film* based on its director. However, as scholars specified, describing the goal of their research, “to ensure both a diversity of participants and to enable us to work with a range of films, we did not want to make prior knowledge a condition of participation” (Forrest, 2021, p. 5). Thus, regardless of relevant insights in their research, they require additional testing and research.

Hart et al. (2015), in the article, based on self-ethnography research, shared that they “made sense of the ‘type of film’ on offer based on the actor(s)” (p. 380). They assumed also that the director, “as the project’s artistic head, arguably bears most responsibility for the final product and overall quality, providing insight into the ‘type of film’ on offer, thus supporting the theory of auteurism” (p. 381).

Following Hart and Forrest, I can identify specific “genres” of the film with the brand of its director. Using the example from Forrest’s article, we can conclude that Ken Loach is a director brand: his name forms an expectation of what viewers will find in the film from the stylistic, narrative, and character points of view. In contrast to the mentioned scholar, the concept of prior knowledge is central to the current study.

The idea of “type of film” or “genre” based on the director and the director’s brand correlates with Bordwell’s (1985) “stylistic schemata”: “directors’ style can appear even in the structure of the film that varies from the traditional one” (p. 34). Simplifying this idea, Barker and Brooks wrote that “when you’ve seen the first film, you understand them all” (Barker & Brooks, 1998, p. 53).

Often, directors work not only in the recurring stylistic approach, which mostly goes to Film Studies, but they also can “include actors from ... previous movies” (Daly, 2010, p. 95) or even the sequences and whole scenes, as Lynch did in *Inland Empire* (Todd, 2012). Kerrigan and Yalkin (2009) described such films that had the same stylistic approach or even fragments as “similar films” for audiences’ reception. Most of Tarantino’s music scores are as prominent as Leone’s and Morricone’s, and most of his fans were not surprised that half of the music score in *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) was written and performed by Ennio Morricone. The regular Tarantino viewer, predictably, responded with amusement rather than shock to most of these features (Oever, 2012, p. 126).

Barker and Brooks (1998) claimed that “a combination of intense knowledge of character with a sense of belonging to his world and a commitment to his authenticity” (p. 79) influences viewers’ experience a lot and provides emotional bonding between a viewer and the film with familiar characters. I argue that the same link can be created because of intense knowledge of the director; however, the level of such a bonding is influenced by the level and type of knowledge, and the type of audience viewer related to.

Returning to the term ‘cult’, which can, in some ways, be considered a synonym for brand, Flanagan (2004) argued that the “cult cachet is the assignment of an auteur director from a non-studio background” (p. 19). The scholar distinguished between the “auteur” and the blockbuster film director, their respective “values” and concepts, and noted the contrast between “mass taste vs. independent or art house sensibilities” (p. 19). However, he also observed that “authorship in popular cinema” can be evaluated as well (p. 19). Nevertheless, I do not entirely agree with this view, as many auteurs direct blockbusters, while numerous arthouse films are made by directors who do not possess cult status.

In his book on the films of David Lynch, Todd (2012) asked, regarding the reception of *Mulholland Drive*, “what constitutes a Lynch film, an auteur picture or a genre picture?” (p. 136). I argue that, in some cases, these categories may converge: a film created and presented by a specific author can come to represent a distinct genre in itself.

In the article dedicated to the authorism of Christopher Nolan, Bhusal (2025) listed the following peculiarities of the director as an author: “stylistic signatures, including his visual aesthetics, nonlinear storytelling techniques, and exploration of scientific concepts such as relativity, time dilation, and astrophysical phenomena”, also mentioning “fusion of

science fiction and human drama” (p. 115). Furthermore, it is evident that, for Bhusal (2025), it is important to analyse the “film's narrative structure, character development, and symbolic motifs” (p. 115) to identify stylistic schemata.

Authorship (auteur) theory is based on ideas presented in the French magazines *L'Écran Français* by Astruc (1948), and *Cahiers du Cinéma* by various writers, but mainly Truffaut (1954) and Bazin (1957). Later, it was developed and examined by numerous U.S. scholars, particularly Sarris in *The American Cinema* (1962). Sarris asserted not only the necessity of the director's creative control over the film, but also the presence of a strong personal vision, “aesthetic cults of personality” (Wollen, 1998, p. 53): ‘The film even has personality, but like *The Longest Day* and *Mutiny on the Bounty*, it is a cipher directorially... Over a group of films, a director must exhibit certain recurring characteristics of style which serve as his signature’ (Sarris, 1962, p. 7). Flanagan, following Sarris (1962), offered the definition of the auteur:

a director whose central themes have been developed across a series of texts; the creative identity behind a sequence of films bearing some kind of stylistic signature; a figure whose works are marked by some form of commercial struggle, often reflected in unusual, self-propelled or institutionally assisted modes of production. (Flanagan, 2004, p. 19)

“The auteur framework retains ultimate power in presenting meanings” (Hill-Parks, 2010, p. 66); thus, it can strongly influence the interpretive labour of viewers. Analysing Christopher Nolan as one of the most popular directors, Hill-Parks (2010) argued that his “auteur persona [helps] set expectations of his films as well as other films within similar genres or industrial conditions” (p. 17), which leads to “authorial reading paradigm” (Todd, 2012, p. 124) while viewers receiving the film.

Examining the cinematic landscape at the beginning of the century and blockbusters directed by “authors”, Flanagan (2004) listed the following directors: Larry and Andy Wachowski, Ang Lee, Christopher Nolan, Steven Soderbergh, Quentin Tarantino, Sam Raimi, and Bryan Singer. He also quoted Lewis: “the most successful blockbuster directors these days... are significantly less well known than the films they've made” (Flanagan, 2004, p. 20). This suggests that a director's brand is not necessarily linked to the popularity or box office success of films they direct: popular films may be directed by individuals unknown to the public, while films by iconic directors may not achieve commercial success.

Orgeron (2007) contrasted “dependent ... to independent filmmakers” (p. 43), a distinction related to earlier classifications of arthouse and blockbuster directors. These categories can align with the studio system, yet they may also be interpreted from a stylistic perspective, specifically, whether or not a director possesses a distinctive, independent style. Flanagan argued that “the vision and personality of the director... more notable in the case of an art house” (Flanagan, 2004, p. 27). However, Kidman, researching contemporary film franchises and the approach of big studios to directorship, claimed that a director’s personality can be important for promotional strategies and influence viewers’ choice of films to watch. But Kidman emphasised that these directors did not have a particular style that could influence viewers’ reception. He specified that they do not fully create a specific visual style in blockbusters and mostly perform the role of successful managers. He offered examples of J.-J. Abrams with his *Star Trek* franchise, emphasising some exceptions for these rules, such as the partnership between Warner Bros. and Zack Snyder, who was recognised by viewers with his vision (2021). At the same time, he highlighted that the publics did not see an author in many franchises and the absence of such an authorial person did not influence the commercial success of many franchise movies: “without any such leadership, encouraging audiences to trust the underlying property or star actors rather than a particular author or overseer” (Kidman, 2021, p. 10).

Orgeron (2007) also argued that “the cinematic creator as construct—of the studio or of the self—is certainly not a new phenomenon”, and cited Alfred Hitchcock as an example of a “created creator” (p. 42). Referring to Neupert’s (2007) history of the French New Wave, he claimed that the idea of a director persona often results from a number of “biographically centred publications” (p. 42). The scholar emphasised that this is even more relevant in the digital age, “where the cinematic text’s ‘second-life’ on DVD is capable of reassigning, emphasizing, or even creating authority, and giving the illusion of a privileged relationship between author and spectator” (p. 42).

Regardless of whether scholars argue that the influence of the author is constructed through their life and self-presentation, this study argues that authors can be identified by their films and authorial style alone, rather than by publications about their biographical events. Hill-Parks (2010), referring to Tzioumakis (2006), suggested that the “industrial auteur is a director who contributes to the promotion and publicity of his or her films while

also building a reputation as an artist” (p. 45). This creation of the director or artistic image can be achieved through the official discourse surrounding the film, then “expanded upon and emphasised by critical and audience interpretations of the persona”. The persona, or brand, can subsequently be used by marketers to promote the film; in such cases, it is expected that future audiences will recognise and understand references to this persona or brand. The scholar argued that in marketing strategies which utilise the director’s persona, marketers and studios position the audience as “passive subjects rather than participants” (Hill-Parks, 2010, pp. 45–47).

At the same time, Flanagan asserted that “directorial identity” is increasingly important for “sceptical audiences” when evaluating films and cultural events associated with cinema (Flanagan, 2004, p. 26). A distinctive authorial style and a clearly defined director persona often become the basis for the creation of “a very particular, seemingly inclusive fan community” (Orgeron, 2007, p. 42).

Staiger (2000) analysed authorship as a technique and argued that authors “duplicate recipes and exercises” (p. 10); the repetition of acts becomes their individual signature. She defined being an author as “an ongoing process” (Staiger, 2004, p. 2), which correlates authorship with being an audience—both are understood as dynamic processes rather than fixed states. And these actors’ states “provide for audiences a sense of coherence within a text,” a feeling of a canon, and their authors’ presence “holds a story world together but also brings it a sense of artistic legitimacy” (Kidman, 2021, p. 9).

While many scholars (Flanagan, Hart, Orgeron, etc.) focus on distinguishing directors as dependent or independent, or as working in art-house or blockbuster cinema, Staiger (2004) explored alternative perspectives and worked with the concept of “minority authorship” listing the following performative tactics used by such directors: “creation of alter egos, silence, repetition: from mimicry to parody or camp, recombination, inversion, accentuation” (p. 3). Although the present research does not focus specifically on minority authorship, I consider these tactics relevant to any auteur and propose that they can serve as analytical criteria for determining whether a director can be identified as such.

The creation of an alter ego can occur in different ways: “when an author takes up a subsidiary character in a text to speak for the author or when an author places a subordinated cultural figure into the lead role” (Staiger, 2004, p. 5). Repetitive elements may include references to other, mostly classical, films, or even the remaking of fragments

from their own earlier works, as demonstrated by directors such as Gus Van Sant or David Cronenberg, according to Staiger (2004, p. 12).

As previously discussed, knowledge of genre forms viewer expectations and shapes reception. As Hart et al. (2015) noted,

Hennig-Thurau et al. (2001) argue that different genre classifications provide viewers with a first reference point for a film, and function as a ‘quasi-search’ characteristic through which consumers assess product traits without having seen a particular film. Many prior film consumption studies consider genre as a determinant of box office success (p. 8).

I argue that if a director possesses a recognisable style, some viewers come to perceive their name as a brand, and their films as representative of a specific type of cinema or even as constituting a specific, unconventional genre. Recurrent elements, deliberate creative strategies, and consistent stylistic choices, such as casting preferences, musical selection, and other cinematic features, can shape and reinforce audience expectations. When these expectations are consistently met, it becomes possible to speak not only of a director’s brand but also of a genre defined by the director’s name or stylistic signature.

In identifying how a film brand can evolve into a distinct genre, “translating ... brand into a movie formula” (Braithwaite, 2023, p. 489), I follow Braithwaite’s research on Hallmark movies and how their distinct characteristics transform the brand into a genre. Braithwaite (2023) focuses on audience responses to these films, the similarity of their production processes, and the senses viewers make of these films, their interpretations. These films are produced according to a formula which, while flexible, maintains a “difference in repetition”: “The interchangeability of tropes, scenery, and even writers suggests that the driving force behind the genre is Hallmark itself” (Braithwaite, 2023, p. 493). According to the classical definition of what genre is

particular genres have elements... which are absolutely... exclusive to but of exclusive and particular combinations and articulations of elements, or the exclusive and particular weight given in any one genre to elements which in fact it shares with other genres. The body and the voice are not the only elements involved here — decor, colour, dress, camera movement, editing and so on are all involved; all are transformed (Neale, 1980, pp. 22–23).

Of course, similar elements can appear across different genres, but they function differently depending on their balance and context. As Neale (1980) notes, “For instance,

violence also marks the horror film... But what defines the specificity of this particular genre is not the violence as such, but its conjunction with images and definitions of the monstrous” (p. 21). If we adopt the classical and widely accepted definition of film genre provided by Westwell and Kuhn, “shared characteristics of film form, film style, iconography, or content, and audience expectations and responses”, we can further argue that a director’s (auteur’s) stylistic signature may be sufficient to constitute a genre in itself, allowing their brand or style to be understood as a distinct genre category.

Speaking about directors and their confluence of audience response, Bordwell (1984) specified not only the director’s persona I referred to earlier, but also “authorial signature” that becomes something like a trademark for a film (which is quite close to the term brand). Among the types of such signatures, Bordwell distinguished motifs (like Fellini’s parades), camera techniques (like Chabrol’s high angles or Antonioni’s long shots), or narrational peculiarities. He offered the examples of Cocteau, Welles and Fellini once again, naming them “baroque narrators”, realist narratives such as Rossellini. Also, he described Fassbinder as a director who changed his narrator’s persona from film to film. Bordwell argued that viewers had to see such films as a part of the whole body of their works (pp. 206–212).

This “type of work” is directly linked to “the reference to typical works” created by the director, as a type of work can be associated with “a period relative to those of another period, or within this class, of the works of one school relative to another, or of the works of one artist relative to the works of his school or period, or even of an artist’s particular period or work relative to his whole oeuvre; it is inseparable from an awareness of stylistic redundancies” (Bourdieu, p. 44). These types of works are closely connected with genre, as they align with the core characteristics described by Neale (1980): “The existence of genres means that the spectator, precisely, will always know that everything will be ‘made right in the end’, that everything will cohere, that any threat or any danger in the narrative process itself will always be contained” (p. 28).

Films of a particular type create a unified entity, bound together by the director’s vision or style. For example, films by David Lynch form a “Lynchverse” (Nochimson, 2013, p. 163), or, as Todd (2012) noted, the term “Lynchian,” which emerged in the press in the 1990s, became established as “a brand no less, offering defined commercial attractions” (p. 109). Hills (2018) used this term to explore viewers’ expectations from the

third season of *Twin Peaks*, examining whether the series displayed “textual authenticity in fans’ eyes... and brand consistency” (p. 313). The connection to brand/authorial vision, for viewers familiar with it and who form their expectations accordingly, can be more significant than coherent world-building (Hills, 2018, p. 314). Todd (2012) offered the example of *Inland Empire*, where “there appeared very little other option than to read the film as a Lynchian affair,” and *The Straight Story*, which, released after Lynch’s brand had taken shape, seemed so ‘straight’ that it surpassed the horizons of expectation for a David Lynch film (p. 125).

Considering all the literature I have analysed, I aim to explore in greater depth whether the type of work formed by prior knowledge about a film director influences viewers’ responses to the film. I will investigate whether a viewer, who lacks knowledge of the director’s brand, might respond similarly or differently to the film. In this case, stylistic, narrative, and other peculiarities could be received in entirely different ways compared to viewers who are aware of the director’s brand.

Additionally, based on empirical results, I will explore the possibility of asserting that the type of film, defined by the director or author’s name or style, could be classified as a specific genre. This genre would operate in the same way as traditional genres: it forms expectations during the viewing process and influences the reception of the film. In the absence of knowledge, or a “total lack of awareness” (Hart et al., 2015, p. 3) about the brand or genre, the viewing experience may be disappointing, less engaging, and could lead to the “rejection” of the current film and other films by the same brand, type, or director.

4. Methodology

4.1 Qualitative research design

To answer the research question and examine the relationship between the existence of prior knowledge among the film audience and their film reception, I adopted qualitative methods, as they provide a better “understanding of individual film audience experiences” (Hanchard et al., 2020, p. 118). Qualitative research methods are a more “suitable way of gaining insights” into analysing the interaction between audiences and films, considering their “experiential” nature (Hart et al., 2015, p. 1).

I adopted focus groups as the primary method, following Barker and Brooks’ approach to studying film reception and its connection to expectations, who used focus groups to explore how viewers made sense of a film while gathering also their assumptions, expectations, and experiences, and noting what their natural vocabularies were:

Focus groups... are essentially group interviews, with the emphasis on group interaction. The researcher’s role is to supply the topic and to moderate the discussion, keeping it focused on the topic, though not at the expense of letting participants say what they want. (Barker & Brooks, 1998, p. 23)

Some researchers, such as Hughes and DuMont (1993), also characterised focus groups as group interviews: “Focus groups are in-depth group interviews employing relatively homogenous groups to provide information around topics specified by the researchers” (p. 776). Other scholars define them as group discussions (Smithson, 2007, p. 357).

Also, my approach can be described as film elicitation, “which directs participants’ attention ... [to] focused contemplation of film” (Forrest, 2023, p. 226). This method is widely used in reception and audience studies, for example, by Barker and Brooks (1998), Barker and Mathijs (2007), Ralph and Barker (2015), Corbett and Wessels (2017), Forrest and Merrington (2021), “as well as small-scale reception studies of specific film texts” (Forrest, 2023, p. 226).

Following the completion of the literature review and analytical framework, I conducted a series of focus group discussions with two preliminary steps: each participant was asked to complete a form and to watch a selected film. Most of the discussions were conducted online on Google Meet, recorded, and subsequently transcribed. One focus

group was held in person, and it was also recorded and subsequently transcribed. After the discussions, I carried out an analysis, including coding of the collected data, to identify key insights.

4.2 Number of focus group participants

A focus group is generally understood to consist of 6–12 participants, with an interviewer or moderator posing questions about a particular topic; however, there is no universal consensus on this matter (Masadeh, 2012): Smithson (2007) identifies the average size as “a group of 6–12 participants” (p. 358), when Barker et al. (1998, 2015), whose methods I primarily adopt, typically gathered three people in each focus group. The researchers explained this as a way to provide more interactive space for participants, and more focused on the same aim.

Smithson (2007) further noted that in “larger groups, there is a likelihood that some participants will remain silent or speak very little, while smaller groups... often provide an environment where all participants can play an active part in the discussion” (p. 358).

As Masadeh (2012) explains,

Ultimately, there is no rule: different researchers have noted ranges in size from 4, 5 or 6 to 12 participants; from 6 to 8 participants... According to Boddy, groups are most often composed of 8 respondents, although focus groups have been conducted with 10 to 23 participants, and as many as 31 in one focus group. Eight to 12 participants is common practice in the USA, while 5 or 6 is widely utilised in the UK and other countries (p. 65).

Smaller groups often yield interesting and relevant data, providing greater opportunity for all participants to speak and engage with various themes in detail (Brannen et al., 2002). For this research, it was important to maintain participants’ interest in the discussion, so I opted for smaller group sizes. As it comes to the number of focus groups, although there is no definitive rule, Krueger (1994) “argues that focus group research should comprise a minimum of three groups” (as cited by Masadeh, 2012, p. 65).

Initially, I planned to conduct four focus groups with a total of 30–32 participants. Later, I revised this plan, opting for fewer participants per group while increasing the overall number of focus groups to eight. Additionally, during first interviews, I observed that groups comprising four individuals were less conducive to interaction than three-person groups, particularly when participants were unfamiliar with one another and focus

groups were conducted online. For online focus groups, I found it better to decrease the number of participants, which helps them to stay focused and “play an active part in the discussion” (Smithson, 2007, p. 358). Consequently, I structured groups with an average of four participants, some of them containing three participants. One focus group was hosted offline; its participants were familiar with each other, and it included seven people.

4.3 Characteristics of participants

Some researchers (Hughes and DuMont, 1993; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003) argue that participants should be homogeneous to maintain the most consistent discussion, while others suggest that including representatives from different groups may lead to a more interesting or in-depth dialogue: “heterogeneous groups can produce very interesting discussions” (Smithson, 2007, p. 358). For this research, recruiting participants and assembling them into coherent focus groups was particularly important, as I aimed to ensure consistency across the groups. This consistency could be achieved through shared interests, for example, I conducted a focus group comprising members of the same society of musical experts, or through existing social relationships, such as a group of individuals from the same village who knew each other well and shared similar film-watching habits. I also formed several groups in which participants did not know one another but reported comparable approaches to watching films, even if their survey responses indicated differing levels of expertise in cinema. Thus, focus group discussions proved to be a valuable method for exploring the perspectives of participants with shared experiences “to examine a particular subject of interest, and it is known as an effective” approach (Akyıldız & Ahmed, 2021, p. 7).

For this research, participants’ socio-demographic characteristics, such as gender or age, were not of central importance. However, I did aim to ensure variation across groups, and paid attention to avoiding a situation in which almost all participants were only men or only women, from the same age group, or composed solely of cinephiles or, conversely, regular moviegoers.

To narrow the scope of this small-scale study, I limited participation exclusively to individuals residing in European countries. Due to the nature of some of the films selected for viewing, all participants were required to be over the age of 18. All focus groups were conducted between April and June 2025.

In total, there were 32 participants in eight focus groups. Sixteen of them were men, and sixteen were women. Still, the separate focus groups were not identical in their gender distribution: one group consisted solely of female participants, and some groups mainly included male participants. The age of participants varied between 19 and 42 years old.

Considering location, most of the participants were residents of Portugal (16); others lived in Serbia (3), Russia (8), Poland (3), Germany (3), and France (1).

Additionally, the 33rd potential participant declined to take part in the discussion after they watched the film. Their responses, submitted via the form, were excluded from the analysis.

4.4 Recruiting participants

I recruited participants in various ways. It was important from the beginning to gather different people with various perspectives on film watching to avoid focusing only on cinephiles or only on film fans. Because of that, the most obvious and easiest way to get participants through existing groups about films and cinema was not the first choice for this research. Sometimes, it was surprising when cinephiles occurred spontaneously. At the same time, regardless of the ubiquity of cinema watching as a hobby, for many people it was not apparent why their opinion about films can be interesting for academic goals—they were convinced that only people who were film fans or experts could provide any helpful information about film watching and reception.

I tried to find several participants through announcements on Facebook in groups dedicated to cinema in general and specific directors. However, the call didn't get any responses while calling to friends, and the snowballing method yielded better results.

So, I used my personal network and spread the announcement about the opportunity to participate in the focus groups: "When cinema-going is 'just something you do,' it is not always easy to get people to commit time to talk about it" (Barker & Brooks, 1998, p. 20). I asked friends who run channels on Telegram to post the announcement about an opportunity to participate in the research (see examples in Appendix A). Also, I sent an ask to the friends who have a wide circle of acquaintances. My request also included a short description of the research, an email address created specifically for the research, and my contacts on WhatsApp and Telegram for people who will be willing to participate to

connect me easily. As a result, most of the participants applied on Telegram or WhatsApp, and two participants sent an email to inform me about their acceptance to participate.

It is important to note that I aimed to avoid the participation of my own direct acquaintances, friends, colleagues, or relatives in order to minimise bias. Thus, even when using work-related networks, I sought participants with whom I was unfamiliar. Only the pilot interview, conducted to test the questions, involved my husband; however, these responses are not included in the analysis in any way.

4.5 Focus group steps

This qualitative research consisted of the following steps: participants filling in the questionnaire, film viewing, and group discussion. The intention was to explore a number of focus groups, with different cultural characteristics, and “analyse their talk about the film” (Barker & Brooks, 1998, p. 23).

1) Filling in the questionnaire

When each focus group was formed, I created a group channel on Telegram or WhatsApp for six of the focus groups. When all participants were added there, I posted a short description of the research, its goals and process, and the link to the form with the ask to participants to let me know when they filled it in. For two focus groups without a group channel, I sent the link to the form personally via email, Telegram, or WhatsApp, depending on where the participant reached out to me.

The form (see Appendix B) served as a preliminary stage designed to refine the focus group process. As Smithson (2007) notes, focus groups are often complemented by other methods in order to “produce the best sort of data for the research question” (p. 358). Participants were asked to fill in the form aimed at identifying their film-viewing habits. The form included neutral questions to classify their viewing preferences, as well as a direct question asking how they define themselves as viewers. In addition, participants were presented with a list of directors and asked to indicate which ones they were familiar with; this helped me narrow the selection of films for the experiment. This information was used to organise people into focus groups (Barker & Brooks, 1998, p. 22).

Although this study does not focus primarily on the social characteristics of the audience, I included questions about participants’ age and country of residence to

understand the diversity of the sample and to gain further insights and interconnections across the data.

The form allowed me to achieve several other goals:

- To identify how participants categorise themselves as audience types;
- To compare their self-identification with how they could be classified based on their responses regarding typical film-watching habits;
- To refine our film selection by determining which directors and films participants were already familiar with.

The goal of the study is to explore how a director's brand or prior knowledge about a film director influences audience reception. Thus, I included in the survey a list of directors who are internationally recognised and whose names are often used as brands. Some of these directors have been extensively studied in terms of their brand identity, while others are frequently discussed in the media as having a strong and distinctive style.

For the film list (see Appendix B), I selected one or two films for each director, deliberately avoiding their most well-known films. This was done to ensure the chosen titles had not been previously seen by cinephiles or participants familiar with the directors. If two films were selected, typically one was older and one more recent, or one was relatively popular and the other less so. If only one film was added for a particular director, it was a moderately known title, not the most iconic or widely associated with the director, and therefore less likely to have been viewed by participants.

The form was distributed via Google Forms. All questions were mandatory except three: the question regarding age; the optional comment field about directors (attached to the question "Does the director influence your decision to watch a film?"), and the request for feedback at the end. Participants could skip these three. The question about the age was answered by all of the participants.

2) Participant grouping and films to watch

As a result, I created four pairings of focus groups, each with the same film for both focus groups in the pair. This approach was intended to make comparisons more meaningful and to generate more relevant insights. I decided on a selection of four films to avoid results being overly influenced by a single film's specific features.

The final film set included works from different decades, covering a range of genres and themes. Thus, the earliest film, *Brief Encounters*, by Soviet Ukrainian director

Kira Muratova, was produced in 1967. *Benny's Video*, by Austrian director Michael Haneke, was produced in 1992. The most recent film, *Challengers*, by Italian director Luca Guadagnino, was released in 2024.

Initially, I planned to focus primarily on European directors, while one U.S. director, Wes Anderson, who was also included on the list in the form, turned out to be totally unfamiliar to all participants of one of the focus groups. I was surprised to find this, because Wes Anderson is widely known for his distinctive, recognisable style, has a large fan base, and is widely studied in both popular media and academic contexts (Orgeron, 2007; MacDowell, 2012; Buckland, 2012; Blanco-Pérez, 2022). Therefore, I decided to include him as the fourth director with his film *The Royal Tenenbaums*, to yield potentially more interesting insights.

Film title and its director	Number of participants familiar with the director	Number of participants unfamiliar with the director	Focus groups
<i>Benny's Video</i> , directed by Michael Haneke	5	5	Group 2, Group 6
<i>Brief Encounters</i> , directed by Kira Muratova	3	4	Group 1, Group 4
<i>Challengers</i> , directed by Luca Gaudanigno	3	4	Group 8, Group 3
<i>The Royal Tenenbaums</i> , directed by Wes Anderson	2	6	Group 7, Group 5

After all participants filled in the form, I shared a link to the selected film with the details about this step (see Appendix C). The discussion meeting was then scheduled via these chats. There were three exceptions: participants in two of the focus groups (Group 4 and Group 8) asked to avoid joining the group chat due to limited availability. Instead, they received the form link and research information individually via email or personal message on WhatsApp, and their discussion time was arranged separately.

Another exception was for the only in-person focus group (Group 6). For this group, there was no online chat or interaction—only direct coordination with the organiser

of the screening. The organiser of the screening sent the form to all participants separately via personal messages on WhatsApp. Because of this, I added to the first list of the questionnaire the explanation of the cause of this focus group (the same as one presented in Appendix A), the introduction of the research, and the steps, as well as the disclaimer that they can leave the focus group at any moment if they feel uncomfortable and find the film harmful. Also, it was repeated orally before the film.

Participants of all online focus groups watched the assigned film independently online, with specific instructions not to search for any information about the director during or after viewing (until the discussion). If they did search despite the instruction, they were asked to note what information they searched and why. Participants in the in-person focus group watched the film together from the beginning to the end of the credits, and the discussion started immediately afterwards.

On this step, one of the potential participants (they were added to Focus Group 2), as I already mentioned, declined to join a discussion because they found the film too emotionally difficult for the particular period of their life.

- **Discussion of the film-watching process**

All online discussions took place on Google Meet. I shared the link with all participants of each group in advance. At the beginning of each discussion, participants were reminded of the purpose of the research. I acted as both interviewer and moderator, and informed them that the discussions would be recorded and encrypted for research purposes, but that no video or audio recordings of participants would be published anywhere. Participants were then allowed to ask any questions. At this stage, all participants agreed to the conditions. Regarding questions before the start, several participants from different groups asked the same question: why this specific film had been chosen to watch and discuss. I explained that the choice of the film was based on the form answers of all group participants. No other questions were raised before the start.

The discussions had a form of semi-structured interview: I provided a discussion with a concrete structure to ensure the opportunity to compare the ready discussions when this step finishes (Mortelmans, 2013).

There were three groups of questions (the complete list of questions can be found in Appendix D):

- Questions about the general approach of participants to film selection and watching

- Questions about the list of directors in the form they filled in, and also about their attitude to the director's role. Later, after the first three discussions, I added the question about the participants' favourite directors. It was done when I realised that participants in their reflections felt linked to the list of directors in the form and tried to talk only about them, and if they did not know these directors well, they felt unsure about the value of their answers. So, I added this question to stimulate participants to talk more about other directors.
- Questions about the film they were asked to watch: the experience, interpretations.

The first group of questions was the same for all participants, regardless of their knowledge about the directors. The second group of questions were partly based on the participants' answers in the form. Thus, one of the questions invited them to share their associations with the directors they marked that they were familiar with. Before every discussion, I analysed participants' answers in the form and selected three directors who had been marked as familiar by all members of the group.

	Woody Allen	Christopher Nolan	David Lynch	Wes Anderson	Greta Gerwig	Wong Kar-wai
How many groups (all participants) marked them as familiar	7	8	4	6	2	1

Participants could share any associations that came to mind. With the questions about associations, I aimed to investigate, in the case of popular directors, which factor and what information are most influential and valuable for viewers: publicity, gossip, or directors' films. If films were the primary factor, I further sought to determine whether this influence is shaped mainly by the director's style, particular titles, the actors or other collaborators involved, or additional elements.

With focus group 5, I decreased the number of questions in the second part because all participants in this group found it difficult to talk about directors, despite marking several as familiar. One of the participants did not even understand the director's role in the film production ("I don't know if the director can give some tips to them? Something to say when the actor is not really into the character. Can the director say something, or give some tips to them?"—participant 14).

Some participants in different groups mentioned that during the process of filling in the form, they found many names unfamiliar, yet, after they googled, they realised that they had just forgotten the names but knew these directors' films. Moreover, I faced a different situation: in focus groups 3, 5 and 6, some participants answered the question about associations, that they did not know these directors, although they marked them as familiar. In focus group 3, for example, two participants mixed up a name of Wong Kar-wai: Participant 9 explained that he mixed him up with Kim Ki-duk, and realised it during the conversation; Participant 10 said that she probably mixed him up with somebody too and gave the association with the name as "something with Japan, you know, with a beautiful, gorgeous woman with long hair," when Wong Kar-wai is a Hong Kong director (IMDb, 2024, n.p.).

The third group of questions was related to the process of watching the film assigned in the task: participants were asked to describe how they watched it, their impressions, to interpret the film, and to identify its genre or style. The questions in this section partly differed for those who watched a film by a familiar director and those who watched a film by an unfamiliar one. The former were asked to identify similarities with the director's other works, describe the director's style using their knowledge, and interpret the film. The latter were asked to construct an idea of the director, focusing primarily on film interpretation and memorable qualities and details. This distinction was made because I aimed to compare the interpretations and stylistic characteristics identified by viewers with and without prior knowledge of the director.

Additionally, participants who watched a film by an unfamiliar director were asked whether they would remember the director's name and whether they would consider watching more of their work in the future. They were also asked how the emphasis on the film's director might influence their relationship with the film itself. All participants were further asked whether the film prompted any interest in learning more about topics related to it, and to define its genre and style. This last question was challenging for several participants, who said they were not familiar enough with genres to categorise the film, or were unsure what aspects to include in a style description.

Masadeh (2012) argued that "length of Focus Group Sessions Opinions on the ideal length of sessions fluctuate between half an hour to two-and-a-half hours per focus group" (p. 65), noting that different authors proposed various lengths more or less correlated with

this length, but the priority is the “minimal time available to get the maximum amount of information on the topic being discussed” (Masadeh, 2012, p. 65). Akyıldız and Ahmed (2021) specified that it is important to generate new ideas and insights by including participants who “enjoy communicating with each other” (p. 6); however, it is sometimes unpredictable whether participants will enjoy the conversation, especially when they are unfamiliar with one another.

My focus groups lasted between one and three hours. I initially agreed with participants on a one-hour duration, but in most cases, they were willing to continue the conversation beyond that time. The longest focus group—the in-person session—lasted three hours, while the shortest one, focus group 3, lasted 55 minutes, as the participants did not enjoy the film and were less talkative during the discussion.

Five discussions were conducted in English. In focus group 5, one participant was less fluent in English than the others, and another participant, with whom they were closely familiar, translated several questions for them and helped express their thoughts in English. It was suggested that they share their ideas in their native language, Portuguese, which they did on several occasions. These Portuguese responses were translated into English during the transcription process. Three focus groups were conducted in Russian, as it was the native language of all participants. These discussions were coded in the original language, and selected quotations were later translated into English.

4.6 Transcript preparation

All discussions were recorded using the Fellow.app Notetaker software. Fellow.app Notetaker is a meeting management platform designed to support the “meeting workflow with AI—from preparation, to recordings and follow-ups” (AI Meeting Notetaker, n.d.). It includes tools for transcribing recorded meetings.

All focus group discussions were recorded using Fellow.app, including the in-person session (for which I used a combination of Google Meet and Fellow.app on a MacBook). After each focus group discussion, I downloaded the video recording of the meeting as an .mp3 file and the transcription as a .txt file. All transcripts were then manually reviewed to correct mistakes made by the software during transcription (Creswell, 2009, p. 191; Gibbs, 2007; Weston et al., 2001; Berthet, 2023). I noted that the software omitted all swear words used by participants, and that almost all names

mentioned during the discussions were incorrectly transcribed. Additionally, statements from different participants were sometimes misattributed. Therefore, further manual revision of the transcriptions and recordings was a necessary step.

During this step, I also translated the Portuguese fragments into English in the transcription of the discussion with focus group 5, applying the assistance of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools—ChatGPT. I subsequently reviewed the translation to ensure accuracy and clarity, according to the guidelines established by Universidade Católica Portuguesa regarding the ethical and responsible use of AI in academic work.

4.7 Tagging collected data

When I prepared and organised all gathered data to the reliable state, I started the process of coding, which “organises dense data into manageable amounts and helps to make sense of it by revealing trends and patterns” (Berthet, 2023, p. 80) and helps to bring meaning to gathered information (Rossman & Rallis, 1998; Creswell, 2009, p. 186). Practically speaking, the coding process can be described as “circulating between reading, coding and thinking about the raw material in terms of overarching concepts and categories, whilst also comparing and contrasting the coded material” (Berthet, 2023, p. 80). Williams and Moser (2019) noted that the central aspect of the coding process is “ensuring that coding procedures are defined, rigorous, and consistently applied in order to conform with validity and reliability standards associated with qualitative research” (p. 47).

As Saldafia (2009) defined, a code in a qualitative study is “most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 3). There are various approaches to coding, yet I mainly followed grounded theory coding methodology that includes three steps: open, axial, and selective coding (Berthet, 2023; Larossa, 2005; Williams & Moser, 2019; Creswell, 2009). The coding process of this study consisted of both deductive and inductive codes, and followed principles of Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Mortelmans, 2013) and thematic coding (Gibbs, 2007; Aboulaoula & Biltreyst, 2021).

I started with deductive coding: I created “a list of initial codes” (Berthet, 2023, p. 83), such as “pre-event,” “viewing experience,” “director’s role,” etc., which emerged

during theory analysis. Then, while reading the data and coding with these pre-created codes, I also identified and created new codes that emerged in the process, such as “previous knowledge,” “gathering knowledge,” “visual style,” “colours,” “film crew,” “narrative,” “trends,” etc., moving to the inductive step of coding. To ensure consistency and avoid a “shift in the meaning of the codes during the process of coding” (Creswell, 2009), I followed “clear definitions” for all emerging codes (Berthet, 2023, p. 85).

After the first step of coding, I developed a qualitative codebook with a list of all codes (see Appendix E) that emerged during two cycles of open coding, and categorised some of them into groups. I also merged several codes with similar meanings. For example, the codes “viewing experience,” “pre-event,” “actions after watching,” and “watching habits” were merged into “viewing experience”; while the codes “viewers’ expectations,” “wrong expectations,” and “expectations based on the director’s previous work” were merged into “expectations.” After merging, I “re-coded the relevant data” (Berthet, 2023, p. 86).

I used MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software (QDAS), as the faculty provided free access to it. MAXQDA (MAXQDA, n.d.) is described by scholars as “an excellent PC-based program from Germany that helps researchers systematically evaluate and interpret qualitative texts” (Creswell, 2009, p. 190) and “ideal for the content analysis method, which is commonly used in communication studies” (Lombard et al., 2002; Yildiz & Tam, 2023, p. 53). By using it, I tried to achieve more transparent, reliable, and fast analytical processes. QDAS does not automate the process of coding or analysing, “researchers ... need to perform a series of operations on these programs to extract meaningful and useful information from the data set” (Yildiz & Tam, 2023, p.54), but it helps to achieve more reliable results and offer “a much more manageable analysis process” (Allen, 2017). “Because QDAS could provide more transparent analytical processes (Jakobsen & McLaughlin, 2004; Woods et al., 2016), it became easier to ensure validity and trustworthiness” (Yildiz & Tam, 2023, p. 62). As Gibbs (2013), Allen (2017), Yildiz & Tam (2023), and Berthet (2023) highlighted, this kind of tool enables “large volumes of data to be processed more efficiently with less effort” (Yildiz & Tam, 2023, p. 61).

4.8 Ethical consideration

Ethical aspects were considered throughout the research theme selection, data collection, and analysis. At the beginning of each focus group, participants were asked for their consent and informed of the purpose of the study. They were assured that participation was entirely voluntary, that they could decline at any time, and that data would be used confidentially for academic purposes exclusively.

As a researcher with a background in film criticism, I approached the study with certain expectations about directors' influence on audiences. I am aware that my cinephile orientation could have shaped the way I hosted the focus groups. To diminish this, I made a deliberate effort to recruit different types of viewers. During discussions, I maintained a neutral moderator-observer position.

Finally, I acknowledge that the majority of focus groups were conducted in English, which was not the native language of either the participants or me, as the researcher. This may have had a nuanced influence on participants' responses. To minimize such effects, participants were encouraged to reflect in their native language if they found it helpful.

Participants were given my contact details for further questions or if they wished to be informed of the study's results.

All data is presented anonymously: the participants' names were removed and replaced with an assigned number.

5. Analysis

5.1 What influences the film selection process

Interest in the director or other crew members

The director is mentioned as a starting point for film selection the most often, even by occasional viewers who watch fewer than 10 films a year. For example, Participant 3 said the name of the director is more important than appealing trailers, but she specified she gathers information from online memes:

“I’d probably look at who directed the film first. I think choosing a film based on the trailer is, well, a bit of a mistake. So yes, if we suppose that I’m actively deciding whether to watch something new, then I’m more interested in who made it than in how they’re trying to sell it to me visually.”

For some participants, a director’s name can be the only reason to watch the film: “Let’s say, for example, I like Woody Allen. If he releases a new film, I won’t watch the trailer, I’ll just go see the film” (Participant 5). It is one of those typical ways participants end up watching a film. It is relevant for Participant 5 and Participant 8, who are cinephiles, for Participant 22 and Participant 2, who are film fans, and for occasional filmgoers, as Participant 3 or Participant 24: “If something comes out in the same style he used to film in, then I’ll gladly watch it from Tim Burton. Well, basically, that’s probably why I watched *Wednesday* in the first place.” The difference between representatives of different types of audience is in the number of directors these participants are familiar with and can recognise; for Participant 24, it is just two: Tim Burton and Quentin Tarantino.

In focus group 3, where I gathered representatives of all audience types, all participants claimed that the director has the most influence on the film selection:

- “For me personally, it will be the director first, then the cast, and again, I will at least check out the trailer to get some impression, and maybe read the first reviews from film critics.” (Participant 11, a film fan)
- “For me, of course, it’s the director’s name, and maybe if it’s a film from a genre that I like.” (Participant 8, a cinephile)
- “It also affects me strongly: if I know that a new film has come out from a director whose previous film I liked, it really motivates me. The director’s name, yes, works like magic.” (Participant 9, an occasional filmgoer)
- “For me, it’s probably the same thing.” (Participant 10, an occasional filmgoer)

Important to note that the director was not mentioned in the theme of the discussion or in the question, but participants themselves initiated the conversation with a precise focus on directors from the beginning, before I started to ask them about directors specifically.

Participant 10 shared that “big director’s names” influence her film choices, while unfamiliar ones do not. They neither attract her to watch a film nor actively put her off. Participant 5 claimed that a director matters, especially when they bring a “unique visual or narrative style, or strong previous works, then there’s trust in the new film.” However, a director does not matter if “the film belongs to a favourite franchise, the plot or theme is interesting, or a favourite actor/actress is in the film” (Participant 5). A similar idea was shared in focus group 8: “Directors matter if it’s one of the ‘big’ guys” (Participant 28). A film fan, Participant 22 from focus group 7, shared the same opinion: “If it’s one from my list of favourites, I definitely watch it. If the director is someone I don’t know or have no opinion about, that doesn’t influence my decision at all.” Participant 1 noticed that some films are “more director-centric, and all those thoughts I summed up were really about the director’s craft rather than the acting”, when other films are not.

At the same time, participant 13 who initially claimed she was not interested in directors realised during the discussion that although she does not pay attention to the director before watching something, if she ends up liking a film or series, she will look up other works by the same director to find something similar, so, it can be “secondary” selection process:

A bit of a contradictory thing because I said that I don’t really care about the director. The director, the filmmaker. But I do. When I know that, like if I watched a series or a movie that have a common director, I want to see more of that director. Then I Google the name of the director, and I see the type of films that I will enjoy.

However, she did not consciously think in terms of authorship and did not have a favourite director and could hardly name any director names. Participant 2, focus group 1, also claimed that the director’s name was one of the most critical decision-making factors while selecting a film; he often uses the director’s name as a starting point to find similar films; as a tool for searching, he uses ChatGPT:

Well, first of all, ... the director’s name is very important. There are so many good directors with big names that, basically, you could spend the rest of your life watching their filmographies. Then... lately, I’ve actually started using ChatGPT.

There's really no shame in that. I just ask it, "Suggest something... I like these kinds of films, can you recommend something similar from directors like these?"

Only in one group did all participants say they are primarily interested in actors and do not pay attention to directors. Several participants from other groups expressed the same view: they are interested in actors who, like directors, can have either strong or weak personal brands. For example, in one group, two participants mentioned that Zendaya's name can appeal to select the film: "Zendaya is obviously a draw" (Participant 27, focus group 8). At the same time, several participants in different groups mentioned that actors' names can influence them for negative decisions when watching a film: "When it comes to actors, it's actually the opposite. There are actors I dislike, and I don't watch films they're in" (Participant 7, focus group 2).

Other crew members were mentioned by only Participant 8 from focus group 3, who is a cinephile with an expert background. He mentioned cinematographers when discussing the advantages of the examined films, and concluded that he would watch other films shot by the same cinematographer. Also, another participant, who is a film fan, said that occasionally she selected films released by the particular production studio: "I look for A24 films because they're usually good" (Participant 29, focus group 4).

Scrolling social media

Participants find and select films to watch when they scroll through social media, most often Instagram, followed by TikTok and Telegram, and encounter occasional "pop-ups", "shorts", or posts containing fragments or visuals from films. If they find these appealing, they add the mentioned film to a watchlist or view it as soon as they can:

Just scrolling on social media, and that, and then you might see something pop up like a preview or something like that. And if it's obviously nominated for Oscars or won some awards, that also gives you an indication that it could be good and might be something that's worth watching. (Participant 27, focus group 8)

Here, Participant 27 described a process echoed by most participants, who typically discover films via social media. Initially, they notice a mention of a film that captures their attention: whether through its title, plot, recognition of the director or actors, or a twist in the storyline: "Normally, on social media, that's where I go and find most of the movies... For me, it is like the story of the movie. They post clips of the movie on Instagram. I watch that part, and I'm like: I want to watch what happens next" (Participant 12, focus group 5).

Recommendations from social media can be divided into two groups:

- **Occasional recommendations:** spontaneous pop-ups, posts or reels that appear on a feed and capture the viewer's attention.
- **Sought recommendations:** when viewers follow trusted accounts to obtain information and suggestions about films. The latter case is more relevant for cinephiles, who pay attention to specific aspects of films: "I follow some groups that only post visuals. They do not give the plot or any details, just the film's title and the director's name. If the visual part grabs me, I might watch the film based purely on that" (Participant 5, focus group 2).

Word of mouth and trends

Recommendations from close friends, memes, critics, and awards can be considered together as forms of social influence. When a film is widely discussed, participants reported feeling inclined to watch it. The motivations for this varied: some wished to join the discussion, others viewed it as part of pop culture, and still others wanted to form their own opinion. In this context, it may refer to a viewer's close social circle, professional reviewers and influencers, journalists in mainstream media, or even meme creators.

I don't really find out about new film releases. It's more like, when I see some memes — like when everyone had joked about Barbie–Oppenheimer for the 50,000th time — I'm like, 'Oh, I guess that's an actual film.' And yes, it turns out it is. So, is someone talking about it? Yes. Then somehow it makes its way into my information field. (Participant 3, focus group 1)

When word of mouth goes beyond, it becomes "hype"; Participant 27 and 28 both used this word as a factor which influences their selection: "Something that's maybe been hyped up a lot that I thought, okay, I really want to see this in the cinema" (Participant 27); or at least as a reason for a film to be noticed: "it was with Zendaya, so it was really hyped" (Participant 26). Hype is mentioned as something impossible to avoid ("you can't escape it," as Participant 22 said). If the film is hyped, viewers obtain some information about it, even if they did not have such an intention: "Plus, of course, all kinds of waves like *Anora* and, I don't know, *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer*, they reach you, obviously, even if you don't keep track of things" (Participant 22).

Hype is also characterised as a part of pop culture, as Participant 20 from focus group 6 noticed, talking about Cristopher Nolan as a director. Participant 3 from focus

group 1 characterised it as “an information field.” Participant 19 described it as a kind of environment where information circulates:

All the time, my friends talk about that. Your parents talk about that. Like they just circulate in your noosphere. And then you just know what to do, what to watch. It’s like this very powerful inner sensation that you have to cherish in order to regrow it into something that calls for good taste, so to speak.

Participant 10 and Participant 29 refer to this phenomenon as a “trend”, which compels them to explore why a person is trending and to learn more about their films: “If they’re trending, but, you know, let’s say their name has come up. So, for example, Greta Gerwig. Oh, who is she? Oh, I liked her other films. What else has she done? And then someone mentions her other work. Okay, I’ll check this out” (Participant 29).

Both these terms, trends and hype, can be illustrated by the words of Participant 1 from focus group 1: “Like *Paddington*, for example: wow, I missed it when it came out, I should watch it. Everyone’s talking about it, I’m curious what they’re talking about”. The information field or hype, whether created by the media or within a viewer’s close circle, generates the impression that a film is an important part of pop culture and worth watching. It creates a sense of urgency or necessity and actively motivates viewers to engage with the film. In such cases, viewers often possess some prior knowledge based on the hype and form expectations accordingly.

However, the nature of these expectations can vary, depending on who or what is generating the hype and the emotional or intellectual colouring it carries. Memes, ongoing discussions among friends or family, and media coverage all influence viewers in different ways, shaping distinct types of expectations.

Lists of films

Viewers’ own lists, along with those published on online platforms and in printed books:

Participant 16: I had a book as well. I don’t have it here in Portugal, but I had it in Brazil. It was like a book about movies that you need to watch before you die. So I would just like sometimes to open a page and watch whatever I find in the book.
Participant 18: Yeah, I have it too!” (Participant 16 is a film fan, Participant 18 is an occasional filmgoer).

Personal lists are often compiled based on word of mouth, for example, when friends recommend a film to a viewer, who then adds it to their list: “When someone in my

life says ‘You should take a look’, I put it in my backlog. I’ve got a huge list in my notes” (Participant 28).

As such, these lists frequently reflect current trends and popular discourse, as I have mentioned earlier, as well as the lists of awarded films at the Oscars or popular festivals like Cannes or Venice, which some viewers mentioned as a source list of films: “Or maybe some Oscar nominations. I see the list and check what is the most interesting for me” (Participant 26).

The distinction between these lists and the trends category described above lies in their structure and tangibility. Lists provide a concrete and often deliberate reference point: they may exist online (for instance, on Letterboxd, which was mentioned by different participants representing different audience types), in print, or as handwritten notes. In contrast, *trends* shape selection through broader, informal tendencies that are “in the air”, that is, unstructured social impressions rather than curated or recorded artefacts.

A list may overlap with other factors, such as being found via social media or reflecting the complete filmography of a particular director or actor. As the data suggests, cinephiles are more likely to build their viewing habits around the filmographies of individuals they are particularly interested in. Personal lists thus represent not only a factor influencing film selection but can also serve as an intermediate step: viewers discover a film, add it to their list, and later return to watch it.

Genre influence

Preferred genres are more or less constant, as observed among those participants who mentioned genre as a starting point in their film selection. These participants identified specific most or least favourite genres, indicating that their choices are not dependent on mood or situational context; rather, they tend to watch specific genres consistently. For example: “For me, it’s like those sh**ty Christmas movies. I am into that. Like, the worst of the worst that come out and no one wants to watch, that is for me” (Participant 17) or “I don’t typically watch many musical films, so I like to watch action movies or mystery or crime or romance or mix” (Participant 13).

For several participants, certain genres represent negative selection, meaning films they actively avoid. As Participant 29 mentioned: “I won’t be interested in military films. ... But the military for me is just very boring. So, I won’t watch any if I have a choice.” Similarly, Participant 12 avoids mystery and films with any kind of paranormal aspects: “I

don't like paranormal things and also horror movies... So those types of movies are always excluded.” Participant 22 expresses an opinion that some genres usually lack technical quality: “Well, roughly speaking, some kinds of superhero films are usually mediocre from a technical point of view.”

I observe a correlation between participants’ genre preferences and their audience type. Those who rely on genre as a selection criterion tend to be regular filmgoers or, less frequently, film fans. No cinephiles mentioned genre as a significant factor in their film selection process. Participant 5, whom I defined as a cinephile, mentioned genres but mainly in the context of openness to any of them: “I don’t have any taboos when it comes to genres, except for trash—the kind that’s universally recognised as trash. Everything else I want to watch, I want to try different genres.”

Participant 22, classified as a film fan, also reflected on his genre preferences. He noted that his favourite genre is dramedy and that this aligns with his appreciation of certain directors: “I like about two dozen directors who work in the same genre, which is referred to as dramedy.”

5. 2 Awareness of a film director’s style, or its absence

“The more I watch her films, the more it seems to me that it’s not a bug, but a feature”

With the research question, the study proposed that awareness and prior knowledge about the film’s director help viewers receive and interpret the film. To examine this proposition, viewers’ perception and interpretation of films were compared.

- Eight of my participants had solid knowledge about the director of the film they watched. Such participants were present for all the examined films.
- Eight had slight knowledge.
- Sixteen did not know the director.

The study found that all participants who had solid knowledge about the director were cinephiles or film fans. If participants had slight or no knowledge, there was no correlation with audience types: representatives of all types were present.

Knowledge can be based on previous viewing experience or gathered information from any of the sources discussed above. Starting his analysis of the Kira Muratova film, Participant 2 said: “I hadn’t seen a single one of her films before, but I’d heard about her a million times.” Often, such information is coloured by specific emotional affection

expressed by the source, and participants' prior knowledge may be complemented by previous emotions or someone else's interpretations, the prism of which can influence future interpretation. Thus, Participant 2 had expectations about Kira Muratova, despite not knowing she directed feature films ("I thought she was only a documentarian."). The admiration expressed by a media personality or influencer created, for Participant 2, the image of Kira Muratova as a "decent character": "[Nikolay Solodovnikov, the YouTube blogger] often mentions her there and almost cries when he talks about her. So I thought that she must be a remarkable figure if someone gets teary-eyed just remembering her."

Such emotional linkage can also be created through family or friends, not just media or social media influencers: "the biggest expression about Haneke I actually received a couple of days before this event, ... I came to my dad and asked him... And he's like, Haneke... wow, such a stupid director" (Participant 19). In such cases, these individuals who shared their opinion become influencers for the viewer, shaping initial impressions and potentially steering their interpretation in a particular direction.

This participant added that he had watched two Haneke films prior to this conversation, and had not formed a clear impression: "I watched Haneke before, right? I watched both *Funny Games* and *The Seventh Continent*. And, you know, I have something to say about them as well: I never get them. They are very hard to emotionally affiliate with" (Participant 19). Because of this, in the contest between his father's strong emotional view and his own vague impressions, the opinion of the influencer had a more substantial effect. In the end, both during the viewing and in the interpretation of the film, these prior emotional expectations may compete with the viewer's personal impressions of the particular film:

I am already inherently biased by my father's powerful words... I am very positive about coming to the same conclusion as my dad. I'm lacking enough critical thinking to actually think for myself in this situation. ... But, you know, negative marketing is also marketing. (Participant 19).

If the knowledge gathered from other people's opinions influences, prevents, and competes with the viewer's impression, or plays an additional, helpful role, prior knowledge formed through previously watched films by the viewers themselves affects the meaning-making process during film viewing. Since viewers are already familiar with the visual style and narrative approach, they do not need to spend time or mental resources

adjusting to this specific style. Their interpretation of the film can therefore be shaped and developed using tools and frameworks derived from earlier works: “I think I’m seeing it through the lens of the context of, like, all his other movies he’s made” (Participant 21).

By comparing previously viewed films with the new one, viewers find it easier to construct meaning. They may even reuse interpretations from previously watched films, adapting them to the new context rather than building a new understanding from scratch. This process of comparison helps them feel comfortable in both cases: whether they are trying to take a more expert approach to their film viewing, or whether they are watching for pleasure.

Viewers who seek to be more expert gain a point of reference from which to begin their interpretation of the cinematography and to locate the film within the director’s filmography; they feel prepared for the viewing experience. For instance, Participant 23 in Focus Group 7, who tends to emphasise his attentive approach to film viewing, began discussing the film by immediately comparing it with other Wes Anderson’s films he had seen: “Besides, again, his visual style and narrative style are not that developed yet”. Participant 22 from the same focus group highlighted the pleasure of recognition that he sought: “I also follow it, in a way, when I watch some new film, for example. I know what I’m going to get in terms of the visual aspect, I already know that.”

Thus, the curious comparison I can observe with participants who watched the film by Kira Muratova showed that even the reception of specific and more technical aspects of films can be shaped by knowledge gathered during watching other films by the director. Thus, Participant 1 (focus group 1) found the similarity between different films directed by Kira Muratova: “This impression came up based on the films I managed to watch: the sound [in her films] isn’t very good. She never really focused on sound. And the more I watch her films, the more it seems to me that it’s not a bug, but a feature.” In another group, Participant 30 (focus group 4), who never watched films by Kira Muratova before, shared that she struggled with the sound in the same film, which came as an unpleasant surprise and, at some point, ruined her impression: “And I didn’t like the sound, being honest. Because it has so many background noises. And it really irritated me”, “the background noises were very annoying.”

Participant 1, however, was prepared for this aspect, having previously analysed it and recognised it as a consistent feature of the director’s films. He was ready for it;

Participant 30 was not. She perceived it as a technical issue and even attempted to fix the problem. Thus, the prior knowledge and experience of watching Muratova's films proved helpful for Participant 1 and enhanced his viewing experience. In contrast, interpretive resources of Participant 30 were overwhelmed by this aspect, which could have been mitigated by prior knowledge or, at the very least, made less distracting.

This difference in reception can be observed among participants who watched Wes Anderson's films, particularly with the visual and narrative peculiarities of his work. All participants who watched his films paid attention to the same aspects, aligning with the earlier mention that Wes Anderson is known for his highly distinctive visual style. As claimed above, I aimed to explore how such a distinctive style is perceived by different viewers, those who are familiar with it and those who are entirely unfamiliar, despite being filmgoers.

Among the aspects that all viewers noticed were the use of colour, meticulous attention to detail, framing of shots, and the "theatrical" or "literary" nature of the film, expressed through its chapter structure and stylised dialogues, which reminded some viewers of stage plays. For viewers who had never seen any film directed by Wes Anderson and had no exposure to his style, even through trends, memes, or word of mouth, these elements were surprising, unexpected, and, at times, unpleasant.

Additionally, participants across the spectrum of prior knowledge commented on the genre and narrative peculiarities of the film. Here again, I observe the same polarity of opinions: those who were aware of Anderson's style found these narrative features worthy of attention. At the same time, those unfamiliar with his work perceived them as slow and confusing, particularly in combination with the film's stylistic specificities: "It was too slow" (Participant 15, unfamiliar with the director); "Why didn't I like it? Well, I don't know, probably because it's too... I don't like how to put it, you know, it goes like a play, right?" (Participant 24, unfamiliar with the director).

Viewers who had seen previous films and those, who had not, perceived the level of style and visuality differently. If, as quoted above, unaware viewers characterise the film as too slow or too colourful, Participant 23, who had watched several of Anderson's films, noted that this one was more realistic than his other works, and that the specific visual style was less apparent compared to his earlier films:

With Wes Anderson here, I noticed the handheld camera that follows during the fight scene at the end of the film, and also at the beginning, in some moments there

too. It didn't feel like Wes Anderson at all — I thought, oh, that's cool, I don't remember seeing that before. So, probably, out of all his films, this one is the most realistic. (Participant 23)

Thus, this knowledge base becomes a starting point for meaning-making and a source of references and interpretive tools that help viewers engage with the film. Without it, the director's stylistic specificity may appear too unfamiliar; viewers may lack the interpretive tools needed and are more likely to focus on the “weirdness” or “strangeness” of what is happening. Others, by contrast, perceive the story within a familiar framework.

In the case of Wes Anderson, almost all viewers familiar with his work expressed positive opinions about his films, regardless of how many they had seen. For those acquainted with his style, his name evoked positive associations, even in the case of Participant 21, who said he was not a fan of Wes Anderson, but still noted, “I love the repetition on how he's like building his own shared universe, even though they're all the same movie pretty much. I'm not a big fan of Wes Anderson. Feel like they're [his films] whimsical. Almost like they're like modern fairy tales or something like that.” This was confirmed by Participant 12 from focus group 5, who did not know Wes Anderson, but after watching his film, ensured that she would recognise his other films because of the bright specificities of his narration: “I think I would recognise it maybe if he does that in other movies. Like the narration of the story that's happening and the images... I think that's something that you recognise when you see it.”

“I ended up confirming my own assumption. It might not have happened, but it did”

Participants from various focus groups shared that they made assumptions based on their knowledge of the directors—if they had such knowledge, of course. Two focus groups watched Michael Haneke's *Video Benny*. This film provoked controversial emotions and reactions, and I analysed how these emotions correlated with the expectations based on whether participants had prior knowledge of Haneke or not. Five participants had watched his films before, four had never seen any of them, and one participant indicated on the form that she did not know Haneke but realised during the screening that she had seen his film before.

Haneke does not have a distinctly unique, publicly acclaimed visual style; his specificity lies mainly in the provocative and controversial approach in the exploration of themes he applied to (Cunningham, n.d.; Criterion Channel, n.d; Pages, 2010; Doherty,

2025). Therefore, it was essential for us to not only find the way viewers interpret and the knowledge they use for such interpretations, but also whether they could define Haneke's style or uniqueness in his films, describe it, and if they have any perception of the director's brand, how that brand affects their future approach to selecting films he directs.

Participant 5 and Participant 16, who participated in different focus groups, mentioned that the director did not try to make the film appealing or attractive to viewers. Participant 5 referred to this as part of his statement about the film's visuals:

"I felt that these were rather cold films. That's it. Not even that they show a real palette. I just found them cold. Not in the middle. Usually, films are made more appealing and warmer. If they want something realistic, then somewhere in the middle. But here, they are specifically cold."

Participant 5 shared that he expected *Benny's Video* to be a "heavy film" because *The Piano Teacher*, the film directed by Michael Haneke, which he had seen earlier, was: "For me, this was his second film. I'd seen — *The Piano Teacher*? *The Piano Teacher* — a few years ago, and... Naturally, I made this mistake, which turned out not to be a mistake. I just decided that since *The Piano Teacher* was a heavy film, this one might be the same." Participant 5 also demonstrated how his expectations were formed before watching, explaining that he relied solely on prior knowledge (he followed instructions and avoided additional research before watching and discussion) and shared his research journey he made before the film based on the knowledge he already obtained about the director:

I made a thesis for myself that wasn't backed up by anything. The director is probably about such-and-such age, which means he was born around then, which means he might share certain beliefs. What came out in the late 60s, yeah? Mass culture. So I understood that — well, from the titles, of course, it's obvious — but something about mass culture would be transmitted to us here. It just came to mind, and I had to start watching through that filter. On the other hand, the film literally began with video violence, so it turned out that I had confirmed my thesis for myself. It might not have happened, but it did. (Participant 5, focus group 2).

Thus, it turned out that the complex of knowledge obtained from another film of the same director and knowledge about the director as a person formed the expectations from the film, and during the film watching, Participant 5 met his expectations. However, when Participant 5 enjoyed the director's approach, Participant 16 (focus group 6) also pointed out that the director clearly did not try to make the film pleasant for viewers:

I think it was a little painful to watch. It felt like it was a four-hour-long movie. To me, it's a less Hollywoodian version of *Let's Talk About Kevin*, which is very climactic and exciting, and there are lots of, like, plot twists and stuff. I can understand what the director was going for, but I think that it could have been made in a way that's more exciting and more climactic.

When Participant 5 is a cinephile, Participant 16 is a film fan, and their approach to watching “unpleasant films” is quite different. It is also curious how expectations and attitudes towards a director can shift based on a single film experience. Participant 16, who was familiar with Haneke and had seen two of his films, expected something “disturbing” and turned, in fact, too disturbed by *Benny's Video*: “I had an idea of his movies from *Funny Games*, and I really like *Funny Games*. I don't like this one, so maybe now it's leaning me towards the negative side. Is that how he usually directs his movies? Is this like his pattern?”

In the same focus group with Participant 16, Participant 19, who had also seen three of Haneke's films before and had not particularly liked them, initially did not see a clear connection between them. However, after watching *Benny's Video*, he changed his opinion of Haneke. He became more interested in exploring the director's work: “I'm invested. I'm enjoying it. I'll always look at the movies from a more critical perspective, but they entertain me enough for me to, like, express that critique.”

The emotional involvement of a film can be shaped by a viewer's prior experience with the director's previous works. For those familiar with the director, the “benchmark” for their impression is not necessarily their all-time favourite films or the best films they've seen, but rather the director's earlier films: “I like this movie more than I like the previous ones. I could argue about some objectivity within the meaning of the movie. But in terms of pure perception” (Participant 19). In other words, they compare the new film primarily to the director's past work, not with occasional films from their own film-watching experience. Meanwhile, viewers unfamiliar with the director tend to evaluate the film against their broader personal favourites or the most impressive films they've seen in general. As a result, the director is judged either in the context of their own filmography or in competition with cinema more broadly, depending on the viewer's prior knowledge.

In the case of Haneke, awareness of the subject matter and the director's general approach played a significant role in shaping viewers' emotional responses, as did the associations they constructed based on that particular viewing experience. This knowledge

enables one to prepare for the topics and directorial approach, avoiding the feeling of weirdness and unexpectedness.

With *Benny's Video*, some participants also made assumptions about the visual style and colours: "From him, maybe I thought that would be kind of disturbing because that's what *Funny Games* is. I also expected the shooting methods to be similar and the colouring similar to *Funny Games*, like more greyish tones, bluish" (Participant 16).

A strong directorial approach and distinctive treatment of subject matter can leave a powerful impression, both positive and negative. This can either spark a desire to watch more of the director's work or lead to a sense of aversion, making viewers unwilling to engage with their films again in the future. Participant 7 claimed, "I'd say he's an unknown director to me, and he'll remain that way. The only useful takeaway for me is that when I see his name as director, I won't watch the films." At the same time, she engaged in quite an impressive interpretive process and was willing to discuss the film longer than planned. However, she formed her idea of Haneke based primarily on the emotions she experienced during the film, and she expects to feel the same emotions from his other works.

5.3 Expectations

I have already mentioned and quoted participants talking about expectations when analysing how they selected films and their knowledge and reception of the director's approach: what they expected from the particular director and whether these expectations were met. We see that knowledge shapes expectations, and expectations become one of the main elements in constructing a response to the film for viewers. Based on discussions, I defined several approaches to distinguishing expectations without the focus on the director, but viewers' expectations in general:

- **Basis for forming expectations**, on what source the expectations were based: prior experience with the crew, trends, reviews, scores, and ratings of the film, publicity, friends' opinions, trailer, and prior knowledge about the specificities of cinematography of the particular country or specific era.
- **Subject of the expectations**: expectations regarding the overall quality of the film, the plot, the themes applied, the visual style, etc.
- **When the expectations were formed**: prior expectations or those that were formed during film viewing.

- **The level of expectations:** zero expectations, average expectations, decisive expectations.
- **The polarity of expectations in the meaning of emotions:** positive, neutral, or negative expectations.

Of course, the same expectation can be characterised and described with different types at the same time because these types characterise them from various angles. Still, I share examples of the expectations and analyse them using this classification.

Expectations distinguished by the basis or source

“I was expecting something disturbing because *Funny Games* was very disturbing. I was expecting something like that, and it was kind of disturbing. Not as much as I thought that it would be, but still disturbing.” — Participant 16 formed his expectations based on the prior experience with the same director, as well as Participant 5: “I just decided that since *The Piano Teacher* was a heavy film, this one might be the same.”

Participant 8, analysing the examined film, claimed that he expected “many dialogues between characters,” as he had viewed other films by the same director and gathered this expectation from his prior experience. He was surprised that he did not meet the same narrative approach in the examined film.

“If it’s nominated for Oscars or won some awards, that also gives me an indication that it could be good and might be something worth watching,” Participant 27 specified within the factors and sources forming his expectations, friends’ advice, social media ads, and a list of awards. Participant 26 from the same focus group shared that her expectations about the examined film were formed due to the word-of-mouth in the community and the trendy name of the leading actress: “I can say my expectations were high because I like tennis, and it was much promoted in a tennis community, and there was Zendaya, so it was really hyped.”

Expectations can be based on the director’s gender. Discussing the process of usual talks about films with their friends, Participant 9 mentioned Céline Sciamma: “It could even be someone like Céline Sciamma, who, from a male perspective, is extremely difficult to engage with.” Participant 2 noted that he expected that Kira Muratova’s film would be “feminist” and that he met this expectation.

I also discussed the gender aspect, particularly with participants of focus group 4, who had prior knowledge that the director was a woman and interpreted the film through this lens. Participant 31 noted that the director's gender was visible in the film and in the construction of the characters: "I would say the male characters have no depth. So that for me was screaming, you know, female director at any point. And I'm not criticising her for taking it like that, but it was clear to me. But what felt to me was that she was depicting the entire story from the women's perspective." A similar view was expressed by Participant 29:

I feel like maybe a lot of my comments now might be just biased with previous knowledge. ... There were two main female characters, and you couldn't say anything bad about them. You didn't understand them, and you wanted to know more. And you know, the young girl was pretty, but she was dressed conservatively. Like the male gaze wasn't there. The male opinion was utterly absent.

In another focus group, Participant 18 described a film directed by Sofia Coppola as "girly," while Participant 22 primarily emphasised the presence of "women" in films, directed by Greta Gerwig. These responses suggest that female directors often generate expectations tied to a "female gaze" and a presence of more female characters, whereas male directors are more often perceived as neutral figures, for whom gender does not add any additional value.

The level of expectations: zero expectations, average expectations, decisive expectations.

"My expectations were high because I like tennis, and it [*Challengers*] was promoted in the tennis community, and there was Zendaya, so it was really hyped. ... It is a good movie if you don't have high expectations," — I have already quoted Participant 26 who shared that a high level of her expectation formed from different sources, and in the end, they led her to disappointment with the film: "I expected more, let's say, more drama, but it was a nice quality movie, but maybe [I expected] a little bit more an Oscar nominee movie" (Participant 26).

"I didn't have a very clear image of what to expect in my mind. I don't have an obvious director's picture. You know, maybe some aesthetic like, you know, decisions like this realism, like very pushed forward rallies, like cool short scenes and very long shots" — Participant 19 shared that he did not have high expectations, regardless of having

experience with the director's other films, and in the end, it led him to more positive impressions.

When a viewer has a high-level expectation, it can be the reason to watch the film, as Participant 23 shared: "Of course, many people criticise Wes Anderson for the fact that in all his films this [visual style] is very pronounced. But personally, I really like this visuality. In fact, it's one of the reasons I go to see his new film. I know what I'll get in terms of visuals. It's a little plus, a reason to watch."

Zero expectation, as several participants noticed, can have a positive effect on the emotional impression the film made: "I wasn't expecting anything at all, so anything that was even slightly good already had a positive effect. So, apparently, you need to reset the metadata if you have the chance — watch something you just happened to watch by accident. Then you end up learning not so much about the film, but about yourself," shared Participant 3. Unlike positive expectations, which can lead to disappointment, zero expectations cannot cause it, even if the viewer dislikes the film.

Participant 10 shared a similar idea when describing the process of film selection: "Sometimes I like to go see or watch something I haven't seen before, or don't know who it is. And that sometimes determines my choice. Neither the actor nor the director. Sometimes it's interesting to watch just like that."

The polarity of expectations in the meaning of emotions: positive, neutral, or negative expectations.

The more emotional type of expectations is closely tied to the future impression of the film, whether the viewer will like the film in the end or not. This type of expectation has a strong influence on the whole process of film watching and can influence future film selection.

Almost all participants of Focus Group 5 had emotional expectations from the film that they needed to watch, most of them were positive because they were familiar with actors and actresses, and also, as Ludmila mentioned, because she expected something more interesting from the film for discussion, but she did not meet such expectations: "Before I watched the movie, I was like: oh, that's interesting because it has many famous, famous actors, so the film must be interesting. So it's a thing that captures our attention" (Participant 14).

Participant 13 said that she had “high expectations,” meaning positive both because the film was part of the study and there were many famous actors and actresses on the poster, but she was disappointed: “I had high expectations ... but overall, I didn't like the movie” (Participant 13).

Participant 10 had the same impression watching *Challengers*:

“I think I had positive expectations. I wanted to watch it because of the actors I saw in the cast — they were familiar to me. I thought it would be a good film that would captivate me with its unconventional story. And probably I started feeling disappointed right in the middle. Even by the twentieth minute, it was already clear how it would all end.”

She also added that positive expectations led her to disappointment when she realised that she would not meet them. She mentioned the expectations she had from the plot while watching the film.

Only one participant of the focus group 5 obtained negative expectations, which were based on the trailer: “And I saw the trailer. And I realised straight away I wouldn't like the movie. So when I saw the movie, I didn't like it” (Participant 15).

A contrary situation was observed in the same group with Participant 8, who had negative expectations about the film because he did not like other films with the same director. He even asked before watching the film if his negative relation to the director would affect the study. During the discussion, he shared that he did not meet his expectations, even though he had not wanted to watch any other films by this director:

My expectations were negative, but actually, in general, I even liked it, mainly because of the camerawork. First of all, I was, on the contrary, surprised by this camera in terms of the ball and so on, the low-angle shots, and all those techniques that Luca Guadagnino had never used before. Overall, I had the feeling that it would be a very static camera, a lot of melodramatics, a lot of theatricality, and an excessive, on the contrary, exposure of the characters, which already gets tiresome. Instead, it was rather lively, focused exactly on what was needed. (Participant 8)

Additionally, I observe a connection between this type of expectation and situations where viewers refuse to watch a film with a specific actor, as mentioned by several participants from different groups, for example, Participant 7: “Regarding actors, rather the opposite. There are actors I don't like, and I don't watch films with them.” On the other hand, Participant 1 from Focus Group 1 and Participant 29 from Focus Group 4 mentioned that they watch films with actors and actresses they are interested in at the moment: “That

is, I fell in love with Natalie Portman, which means I absolutely have to watch her entire filmography for the rest of my life.” Although I did not develop this topic during the discussion, it is evident that if a viewer refuses to watch a film with a specific actor, they expect to dislike the film, or conversely, if they like the actor or actress, they expect to get an emotionally positive experience. Negative expectations can be formed about the directors after only a couple of films, as Participant 11 noticed: “If it’s a director who made two terrible films, then there’s a 99% chance I won’t watch their third one.”

When the expectations were formed: prior expectations or those formed during viewing.

Most of the expectations I discussed were formed before watching the film, as viewers brought them into the experience before the screening began. However, some expectations emerged during the viewing process itself: as participants followed the plot, recognised the genre, and became familiar with the film’s visual style, they constructed expectations as part of their meaning-making. These types of expectations were described primarily by participants who lacked prior knowledge of the director. Thus, Participant 7 from focus group 2 shared that she “understood what to expect next” after several scenes: “When the boy showed her the gun, at that moment I realised what would happen next”, “The first scene, yes, made it clear what would happen. And basically, the fact that Benny was rewatching that video made it clear what to expect.”

Participant 18 constructed her expectations not about the plot but about the level of expression: “I mean, even the killing scene was out of frame. So, yeah, I was expecting it to be harder to watch than it actually was” (Participant 18).

What they are about: expectations regarding the overall quality of the film, the plot, the themes applied, the visual style, etc.

I have already discussed various examples of expectations related to different aspects of a film, including plot, themes, and visual style. In principle, expectations can extend to any element of the viewing experience. For instance, Participant 25 from focus group 7 noted that he anticipates a “British style” and a “British cast” in the films of Guy Ritchie. Similarly, Participant 2 from Focus Group 1 shared a range of expectations he held before viewing and reflected on how, even when those expectations were met, the film still managed to surprise him.

One of his expectations was based on the era the director of the film lived in:

I was expecting something, probably, sort of Soviet aesthetic, I guess... Something like German [a Soviet director]... And that's exactly what I got. But in the end, it surprised me. I mean, it's far beyond what I expected. It really stands out from the Soviet cinema I'm used to. It's got this kind of Tarantino-style editing with jumping chronology. That was strange. I definitely didn't expect that.

He reported that he had expected a Soviet-style film. Instead, he encountered a style that differed from his expectations, incorporating elements from another era and country, which he found both surprising and highly positive. His next expectation concerned a "feminist film," an assumption constructed on the basis that the director was a woman in the 1960s. This expectation carried a slightly negative connotation for him, yet he ultimately was not unsettled by it: "And of course, I could have expected it to be a kind of feminist film, but I didn't really think about it, and yet that's what I got. But it didn't put me off." In addition, he noted that he had not anticipated the visual and narrative specificity he encountered, which highlights the absence of clear expectations regarding these aspects of the film.

Overall, I observe a correlation between the types of expectations viewers hold and the types of audiences they represent. Occasional filmgoers and film fans primarily form emotional expectations, often based on the recognition of actors or actresses, and they tend to focus on plot-related expectations, which can evolve during the viewing experience. In contrast, cinephiles typically base their expectations on prior knowledge and their experience with other works by the same or similar directors. As a result, cinephiles are generally more open to engaging with a film, anticipating similarities with the director's previous works rather than focusing solely on immediate emotional or plot-based expectations.

5.4 Associations with the director's name

"If you're watching a Tim Burton's movie, you can tell that it's by him. It has very specific vibe"

During discussions, all participants shared associations with the directors they marked as familiar while filling in the form on the first step of the focus group. I asked them to characterise directors who are familiar to all members of this particular group. I changed this approach to only one group, Focus Group 5, in which participants marked just a few directors, all of whom were different. This question should have helped me identify

the most relevant and widely used angles viewers use to interpret directors' names and the type of knowledge they typically acquire. In the participants' answers, I encountered various angles: colours used in directors' films, information about the personal life of the director, titles of their films, themes they applied and narrative approach. I observe correlations between found angles and the director, as well as between angles and the type of audience.

In the end, Christopher Nolan, Wes Anderson, David Lynch, Woody Allen, and Greta Gerwig were the most recognised directors from the list across all focus groups. A curious situation took place in focus group 3 when all participants marked Wong Kar-wai as a familiar director. Participant 8, a cinephile, shared his associations with this director from mostly the visual field ("The easiest one is Wong Kar-wai, the associations are, well, night, some kind of electricity, those... red and green colours") when three other participants (two occasional filmgoers and one film fan) realised that they mixed this director up with someone else or could not remember this director anymore (Participant 9: "I confused Wong Kar-wai with Kim Ki-duk, so I don't know anything about him"; Participant 10: "I also feel like I confused him with some other director. Somehow, I associate him with Japan, you know, with a beautiful, gorgeous woman with long hair"; Participant 11: "With Kar-wai, honestly... I mix directors up; I can't even remember a film. If you tell me a film, I'll immediately recall it and be able to say.")

The associations with Woody Allen (was familiar to all participants in seven focus groups):

- Bad reputation, "pedophile" (8)
- Big name, importance for the culture, "overrated" (7)
- Any kind of humour (7)
- Concrete films (5)
- Location (New-York) (4)
- Glasses, appearance (3)

Woody Allen is associated with his personal life, publicity, and his works. At the same time, his public image unites bad reputations and importance for pop culture ("People do not really respect his name. I've heard of them. Not just because he's a pedophile, because he's, you know, pretty big," Participant 18). Three of the participants

mentioned that his image seeps through his films: “With Woody Allen, I just find that I don’t have that much desire to watch his work. It’s one of those few cases where, for me, it bleeds, like, through,” Participant 32 claimed.

At the same time, one of the participants mentioned not in this part of the discussion but later, that the information from the media did not influence his attention to the director:

I know all about this, I’ve read about it, but, firstly, it’s kind of all clear, but unclear at the same time, and you can have different attitudes towards it. But personally, it doesn’t affect me much, because after I learned all this, I still went to his films many, many times, and it kind of didn’t matter to me. (Participant 23).

Several participants identified specific films directed by him as their primary point of association. In Allen’s case, this is particularly notable because he also played the leading role in these films, which may contribute to his strong connection with his works and public image, perceived by viewers as “the same” (Participant 21). Two participants also mentioned the director’s approach to work: “Woody Allen is a Stakhanovite, a man who makes an impossible number of films that I will never watch” (Participant 1).

Additionally, participants highlighted different types of comedy or a “special approach to comedy” (Participant 1). They associated him with a genre or location of their films (“New York. New York, and a melodrama set in New York” — Participant 2).

Some of the participants, especially cinephiles, who obtained much knowledge about cinema, combined many associations on one answer: “Feels like he’s just a creepy guy. His movies are creepy. *The ABC of sex* is creepy, and he’s just pretentious. New York, my man, just in love, like, with hearing his talk and pretending like he’s always the smartest guy in the world” (Participant 21).

The associations with Christopher Nolan (was familiar to all participants in six focus groups):

- Concrete titles (5)
- Popular, mass cinema (4)
- Pretending to be smart (4)
- Complicated plot (4)
- Visual or sound specificities (3)
- No specific associations (participants are familiar with the director) (3)

- Narcissism (2)
- Time as a main theme (2)
- Innovative (2)
- Smart (1)

Christopher Nolan is associated primarily with his films; his personal life and appearance have not been widely discussed. But at the same time, several participants shared associations based on his films that present the characteristics of the director's personality: "I would say that he tries to create some kind of untouchability, like 'I'm so hard to understand,' and all that sort of thing. Sometimes it seems to me it's a bit too much... It's like he sometimes uses this to his advantage, so that everyone's like 'How cool!' and everyone admires him" (Participant 22). Also, Participant 21, a cinephile, while analysing Nolan, concluded: "Narcissistic... addicted to his own farts."

Several participants mentioned the words "smart" or "intelligent," and also convoluted and complex plots: "Christopher Nolan is like super complicated, big ideas mind f**ked. It's the kind of movie that you need to read a little bit about after you watch it, because it's usually a very convoluted idea that he works on" (Participant 16), or "I like watching a Nolan film for the first time, like with *Tenet* in the cinema, and trying to figure out what's going on before the director actually tells me, before the final act" (Participant 5). I can conclude that in the case of Christopher Nolan, the films and the personality are bonded and present a unity. Viewers had knowledge of his films that constructed the expectations on the film's plot and narrative characteristics.

The associations with David Lynch (who was familiar to all participants in four focus groups):

- Certain titles (4)
- Visual style (3)
- Themes (3)
- Nothing can be easily understood (2)
- Mystics (2)
- Director's appearance (1)

Associations with David Lynch are primarily linked to his films, visual style, themes, and the concrete works he directed, including films and TV series. One participant

mentioned his appearance (“Lynch himself, it goes without saying, the black shirt is literally the first thing that comes to my mind about him,” Participant 22). Many of participants who were familiar with David Lynch described their associations in a very emotional way: “A person whose any film you can recognise within 10 seconds, or even from a single shot sometimes; a person who created such a cinematic language that you still watch it and can’t believe it was all invented by one person” (Participant 1), “I’m not trying to understand what Lynch wanted to say; I’m just enjoying watching, that is, watching purely for the emotions, the optional pleasure, the feelings” (Participant 5), “He made *Twin Peaks*. It’s just a terrible series. Well, I mean, it’s very good. It’s just that it left such an impression that when I rewatched it, I felt the same strong emotions I felt back when I was 17” (Participant 10). Thus, in the case of David Lynch, it can be seen that most participants connected the emotional impression they got while watching his films to the director himself.

The associations with Greta Gerwig (she was recognised by all participants only in two groups):

- Stories about you (3)
- Viewers’ positive emotions (3)
- Title (2)
- Ambitious (1)
- Female characters (1)
- Margo Robbie (1)

Although I collected fewer associations with Gerwig than with other directors, the same pattern emerges: the emotions viewers experienced while watching the director’s films are closely linked to her name. For Gerwig, Participant 29 noted an association with the actress Gerwig worked with and described Gerwig’s personal trait as “ambitious.” It is important to note that Participant 29 also indicated a high level of interest in Gerwig and precisely explored information about her.

Because the list of directors from which participants could choose was limited, I allowed those who did not recognise any director on the list to propose one they wished to discuss. In focus group 5, all participants were unable to name any directors. In focus group 6, Participant 18 identified Tim Burton and Sofia Coppola, associating them with

the films' specific mood, "vibe," visual approaches, themes, and the narrative perspective, or "lenses," used to tell a particular type of story.

I really like the visuals in her movies. I like how she talks. Her movies feel like escapism. But at the same time, it's not like everything is just going right. I guess you could say that she romanticises certain things that shouldn't be romanticised, but it kind of depends on the perspective that you look at it. It's kind of a balance between talking about real people and real issues, but at the same time, from a sort of ethereal lens. I think she makes very girly movies. Tim Burton is fun. He also has, like, sort of an aesthetic kind of weird in a way that I like. And it's just like a very specific thing. Like, if you're watching a Tim Burton's movie, you can tell that it's by him. You know, it has a very, very specific vibe.

Participant 18 also emphasised that the styles of these two directors are easily recognisable: when watching their films, it is immediately apparent that these particular filmmakers directed them.

Similarly, Participant 24 from focus group 7 adopted the same approach, selecting Tim Burton as the director through whom to describe and identify associations:

Something dark, but always very fun, family-friendly, fantasy. And now he has Monica Bellucci as his wife. Oh, and his older films with Johnny Depp, by the way, are amazing. Johnny Depp and Helena Bonham Carter had a great pairing. Absolutely brilliant. Well, basically, that's probably why I watched *Wednesday*.

Thus, for her, the director is associated firstly with their film style, mood, and genre approaches, as well as with the films they directed and the personal life and leading actor of the film.

Participant 25 from the same group chose to describe Guy Ritchie:

He makes these somewhat pretentious films, where everyone also has to be stylish, like *The Gentlemen*. One of his films I liked very much was *Arcore*. And it also had elements of sci-fi and detective. I like his films that feel kind of masculine. And also British. They really have that British-style vibe. And, as far as I know, his casting is mainly British.

So, the participant specified the concrete films he remembered, a mix of genres, a specific style of the film, and also the "masculinity" of the films.

5.5. Additional knowledge

"From the perspective of clinical psychology, I found the film really interesting"

When participants analysed the examined film during the discussion, they applied different knowledge, aspects, and memories, and used various tools. Participant 24 shared the association: “In some way, maybe the colour scheme or something else, it reminded me of *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. There’s something about it that’s from there. But I liked *The Grand Budapest Hotel* more because it’s a comedy.” She did not know that Wes Anderson directed both *The Royal Tenenbaums*, the film her focus group watched, and *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. However, upon examining the visual characteristics and narrative peculiarities of the films, she utilised her prior knowledge and film-watching experience to determine that these films are “similar.”

As I already quoted Participant 2 and Participant 1 from focus group 1, they both used other directors to interpret the examined films. Thus, Participant 1 found that Kira Muratova used the same methods as Alain Resnais, and Participant 2 characterised her approach to video editing as “Tarantino-style.” Participant 21, while analysing *Benny’s Video* and the theme to which Haneke applied, mentioned Mary Harron’s *American Psycho*. Participant 16 found similarities between the examined film and *We Need to Talk about Kevin*. Additionally, Participant 19 from Focus Group 6 and Participant 5 from focus group 2 referred to other Michael Haneke’s films. So, viewers try to use their prior film-watching experience to respond to the film and construct meaning-making. This process is based on the similarities viewers notice in films, such as the same colours, visual methods, narrative style, or themes applied.

If the participants do not obtain a sufficient amount of film knowledge, they use knowledge from other spheres. This suggests that the depth and specificity of viewers’ prior knowledge is particularly significant when it comes to recognising directors from distant countries or earlier eras. In the absence of sufficient cinematic knowledge, viewers are often compelled to rely on broader historical or geopolitical frameworks. Nevertheless, it still can be seen that viewers’ interpretive labour requires some form of knowledge. However, viewers rarely seek it out actively either during or immediately after watching. As a result, they draw on what they already know: cinephiles may rely on their knowledge of cinema and its key figures; experts in other domains refer to their disciplinary backgrounds.

For instance, Participant 2 and Participant 3, who are music experts, applied knowledge about music history to find parallels or interpretive keys, and recognised the

musician who starred in the film and tried to explain several scenes and the director's decisions using this knowledge: "I thought for a long time about why people looked... look as if they were much older than they do now. There, Vysotsky is 28 or 29 years old when he's acting in it. He was born in '38, and the film is from '67. So, he's 29 or 28 years old.", "He's also actually a stage actor, not only a singer, as far as I understand. He played Hamlet.", "I have the impression that in this film he was just playing himself, just walking around with a guitar, basically relaxed, feeling pretty good."

Participant 10, an occasional filmgoer, gave an example where, to form ideas about Agnès Varda, she applied her knowledge of French culture because she had worked with the French language. Participant 13 found that she obtained much knowledge about celebrities and actors and explained why Gwyneth Paltrow played her depressed character so well: "She was so, like, into the character. Into the character. And we knew why! We knew why — she [the actress] was depressed."

Participant 28 used terms from psychology while analysing *Challengers*, and mentioned that, though he did not like the film, it was curious for him to be a case study. Participant 27 from the same focus group mentioned that he disliked the film but appreciated the choice of music, as he is a fan of techno and could see the value in the soundtrack.

Participant 3, an occasional filmgoer, who emphasised a lack of knowledge about films, when discussing Wes Anderson, applied the knowledge about memes: "He didn't like the memes about symmetrical shots. Remember when everyone was making those reels, pretending they were shooting a Wes Anderson film? And then he came out and said it was awful, horrible."

All participants in focus group 4 attempted to interpret the film's meaning by drawing on their knowledge of the era and the country where the director lived. The same approach was taken by focus group 1 participants, who watched the same film. Still, the difference was that focus group 1 participants were mainly familiar with the director and her films, whereas focus group 4 participants were not. They made guesses to explain the plot and visual specificity of the film: "If you weren't a state-sponsored artist and you were doing work illegally. So now I'm thinking, well, how did she produce her films? Why was it in black and white? Because if she were state-sponsored, she could have had the funds to do it in colour." (Participant 29)

Thus, with almost all participants, I see that they draw on any kind of knowledge they have to respond to the film and construct meaning. The knowledge they apply depends on the viewers' interests and prior experience. People try to use knowledge directly connected to the film; if they do not have that, they turn to cultural references, then to historical knowledge, professional expertise, their hobbies, and personal life.

“I don’t like this film, so maybe now it’s leaning more towards the negative side”

Discussing associations with the directors, I have noticed that some participants mentioned that their opinions about some directors changed, could be changed, or the examined film could also change their opinions into strongly positive or negative ones. These changes could be triggered by a single film or by the constant repetition of something viewers dislike (“Back in 2001, I would have said, ‘Wow, Wes Anderson, I’m going to the movies.’ But if someone tells me now that a Wes Anderson film has come out, I’ll say, wow, you guys go watch it yourselves.” — Participant 1; “I love the repetition of how he’s building his own shared universe even though they’re all the same movie pretty much.” — Participant 21; “I can say that I’ll probably skip new films by... Nolan and Lynch, so as not to spoil my impression of their earlier work and, so to speak, not get upset... Unfortunately, their most recent ones haven’t really resonated with me, and there was a feeling of self-repetition and, overall, a slight sense of something derivative.” — Participant 22).

Participant 7, an occasional filmgoer, formed a solid opinion based on one film she watched during the focus group’s participation. She had not obtained any knowledge of Michael Haneke before the participation; she characterised the examined film as “destructive” (focus group 2). Describing her film selection preferences, she mentioned that the director’s “surname is not a priority” and added that she had a list of actors she avoided in films to watch. However, discussing the examined film, she claimed about its director: “What I took away from it is that if I see him listed as the director, I won’t watch the films.” Thus, regardless of an absence of interest in directors, she associated her strong negative opinion about the film with the director, not with the country, actors, or something else. About the same film, by Haneke, Participant 18, who is an occasional filmgoer, noticed they were “not the target audience,” regardless of the active participation in the film interpretation.

Participant 10, an occasional filmgoer from focus group 3, created a parallel between the film of Luca Guadagnino she watched beforehand, and concluded that the “theme about unusual love” is “very-very important for him.” “He wants to show it and analyse it,” so this theme is leading to an association with the director after she watched two of his films. Participant 8, a cinephile from the same group, changed his opinion about the director positively after watching the examined film. If earlier he had found similar unpleasant aspects in the director’s film, he found the examined film different, and he no longer saw any similarity. Thus, he decided that it would be interesting to watch the next film by the same director.

Participant 19, a cinephile from the focus group 6, changed his opinion about Michael Haneke after watching the examined film: he found the last film emotional and entertaining, which he did not meet in his previous works, so his opinions switched to positive and to readiness to watch following films of him: “I will always look at the movies from more critical perspective, but they will entertain me enough for me to like, express this critique.” Participant 16, an occasional filmgoer from the same focus group, changed his opinion to negative:

I had an idea of what his movies were from *Funny Games*, and I really like *Funny Games*. I didn’t love this one, so maybe now it’s leaning more towards the negative side. If I were to learn about a new Haneke movie, I would probably be unsure if I want to see it. Is that how he usually directs his movies? Is this like his pattern?

Thus, we see that one film can change the approach a viewer has about the director, especially when the emotions the viewers felt while watching the film were strong. Here, we can connect this approach to the director with expectations I analysed earlier: the director’s name forms expectations, and these expectations are strongly linked to the last emotions viewers experienced while watching the film. Emotions can be evoked by the film’s themes, visuals, and narrative peculiarities.

6. Discussion

This study explored how prior knowledge about a film director shapes viewers' reception of a film. Analysis of focus group data revealed several interlinked themes: the role of knowledge about the director in film selection, and other factors which can compete with the interest in the director; the various types of expectations and the factors shaping them; the ways prior knowledge influences emotional involvement in a film; awareness of the director and its influence on the response to the film; and how these processes differ across audience types. I also found that different directors evoke distinct associations, and that the director's image, along with the expectations attached to it, shapes viewers' choices and responses. Conversely, the absence of such an image often led to negative reactions toward certain films.

6.1 From knowledge to expectations, and a director's universe

Flanagan (2004) argued that "directorial identity" is essential for some audiences to evaluate films, and especially emphasised "sceptical," expert viewers (p. 26). Orgeron (2007) asserted that distinctive directorial style and a defined director persona form the basis for inclusive fan communities (p. 42). However, I found it misleading to limit the influence of the director's identity only to an expert audience, represented in my research by cinephiles or film fans. The director's identity influenced different types of audiences, but what this identity included varied across audiences. Based on this initial proposition, I anticipated obtaining broader results than studies focusing exclusively on cinephiles. Accordingly, I recruited participants with the aim of representing different audience types as equally as possible.

Participant 5, a self-proclaimed cinephile, believes that a director matters, especially when they bring a "unique visual or narrative style, or strong previous works, then there's trust in the new film." However, a director does not matter if "the film belongs to a favourite franchise, the plot or theme is interesting, or a favourite actor/actress is in the film." The first part is particularly relevant to the initial research question: narrative or unique style can outweigh the lack of an interesting plot, and these elements help form expectations just as much as the quality of a director's previous work. Expectations can also be negative, as Participant 11, defined as an occasional filmgoer, added: "If it's a director who made two terrible films, then there's a 99% chance I won't watch their third

one.” Thus, the film can be “pre-sold” based on the director’s specificities (Todd, 2012, p. 131) and viewers’ prior knowledge about them.

Viewers tend to make assumptions based on prior knowledge, which relates to the idea of the “soap opera effect” (Livingstone, 2007, p. 7), where viewers predict the plot or plot twists based on their familiarity with the genre. Participants from various focus groups shared that they made assumptions based on their knowledge of the directors, if they had such knowledge, of course.

At the same time, cinephiles specifically emphasised that some films are director-centric, while others are not: “In this case, it helped, because the film turned out to be more director-centric, and all those thoughts I summed up were really about the director’s craft rather than the acting” (Participant 1). In the discussion of *Challengers* by Luca Guadagnino, Participant 8, a cinephile, noted that the film differs from his other works. He did not recognise the director’s style here (before watching *Challengers*, he could describe and specify Guadagnino’s style), and he suggested that for this film, the cinematographer or cameraman might be more important than the director.

Though I do not use the auteur theory specifically to analyse the results, I still see the correlation between findings and Sarris’s argument based on Basin’s presentation of the auteur theory that “the body of a director’s work rather than isolated masterpieces, it is expected of great directors that they make great films every so often” (Sarris, 1962, p. 8). The concept of a “director’s body of work” proved relevant across all examined audience types. For cinephiles, who are familiar at least contextually with the notion of the auteur, this concept is well established. At the same time, even for more casual viewers who watch films only occasionally, the idea that a director’s works share similarities resonates with their approach to watching and interpreting films.

In some cases, the body of the director’s works, if these works have a distinct, recognisable style, can be perceived as a part of the same world created by the director, even if these films do not have similar characters or location, it was especially often noticed by cinephiles. Film fans mentioned that they know what to expect from films directed by such directors. This constant recognition attracts them; occasional filmgoers, unaware of the director, discover similar yet distinct films due to the colours, peculiarities of the dialogue, and other stylistic and narrative approaches.

Staiger's (2000) idea about repeated "recipes and exercises" (p. 10) that become directors' individual signatures and about authorship as a process, correlates with the concept of "audiencing." Changes or stagnation and excessive repetitiveness in the author's style lead to changes in the viewers' attitude towards a particular director.

The mentioned similarity and repetitiveness, along with the interpretation of different films as part of a director's universe, can be analysed through a transmedia lens. Kidman (2021) claimed that "auteur makes more sense than ever: the idea of a unified creative vision and sensibility that holds things together," and also she refers to Gray's "Transmedia Architectures" (Kidman, 2021, p. 9). Jenkins (2003b) analysed the tendency of media audiences to buy "products or experiences" that have "a prolonged relationship with a particular narrative universe" (p. 284). The findings regarding expectations and their strong influence on film selection and watching, as well as further reaction and associations, are strongly connected with these ideas of transmedia storytelling as attractive and appealing to audiences, which tend to build long-lasting relationships with the experience.

A negative appeal can also be analysed from this point. If viewers do not like the film and experience negative emotions while watching it, they tend to avoid seeing another film that can be related to this particular one. Memorising its director, as a creator, "responsible person" or "project's artistic head" (Hart, 2015, p. 7), can be the easiest way to identify the potential negative experience in the future and avoid it.

I argue that "a more authentic interpretative framework" (Forrest, 2023, p. 235) is available to viewers who are familiar with a director and have accumulated knowledge about them. Such viewers employ a more precise interpretive framework, drawing on analogies with transmedia narratives, and thereby facilitate "interpretive labour" (Forrest & Merrington, 2023, p. 225) in both "expert reading" and "naive account" (Barker & Brooks, 1998).

I quoted Barker and Brooks (1998), who argued that viewing experience can be strongly shaped by "a combination of intense knowledge of character with a sense of belonging to his world" (p. 79), also, this bonds audiences and films. I argue that a similar connection can be established through intense knowledge of a director. However, the degree of such bonding is influenced by both the type and depth of knowledge, as well as the audience type to which the viewer belongs. As with films by directors who possess

a distinct style, viewers may perceive these works as belonging to a unified universe. In this context, transmedia storytelling approaches can help explain the negative emotional responses of viewers unfamiliar with a director's previous works; for them, the experience may feel akin to entering a story mid-way, without the necessary background.

Nevertheless, the director's works may still be received as a coherent narrative universe, which can produce significant shifts in audience attitudes and generate disappointed expectations. Todd (2012) illustrated this phenomenon with reference to two films by David Lynch, *Lost Highway* and *The Straight Story*: "*The Straight Story* ... was so 'straight' that it defeated horizons of expectation for a David Lynch film," which exists in the audience's perception of the paradigm of Lynchian cinema (p. 125). A comparable situation, though in the opposite direction, emerged in this study. Two cinephile participants responded to directors in ways that contradicted their prior expectations: Participant 8 regarded Luca Guadagnino as overly sensitive, with excessive detail and dialogue, and did not anticipate encountering a different mode of filmmaking from him; Participant 19 assumed that all films by Michael Haneke would be "cold" and "unsensitive" and was positively surprised to discover a work of his that diverged from this image. These two examples, however, reflect highly personal interpretations and differ from the impressions reported by other participants in the same focus groups.

6.2 From expectations to brand

I see a correlation emerging between the type of reaction and the audience type. More expert viewers expressed a willingness to continue watching the director's films, even if they may encounter unpleasant content there. Some mentioned that they would prefer to read a synopsis in advance to mentally prepare for what they might encounter on screen. In contrast, occasional viewers, even when their interpretations of the film were deep and close to those of expert audiences, often said they were unlikely to watch more of the work of the director whose film was unpleasant. As Participant 18 put it, they felt they were "not the target audience," or noted that they simply preferred more pleasant viewing experiences.

A pleasant experience can be one of the concepts which is necessary to be evoked when we talk about brands. If I claim that the director represents their own brand, their name should evoke clear associations in viewers. These associations should reside in the

same field, whether not equal, but similar, “although many films are developed by filmmakers as brands through a formula combination of various brand elements that consumers find appealing” (Kohli, 2021, p. 369).

A first-order association with directors’ brand for most participants was a standout or particularly impressive film of theirs, a flagship film. The features and characteristics of these films spread across the entire director’s work and essentially create the director’s brand as well. However, a brand can also be formed without the involvement of films, based on the same trends or the public persona of the director, which may be unrelated to authorship or the film brand. At the same time, some viewers try to connect the public persona with the film persona into a single unity, so they complement each other, forming one cohesive brand. The most obvious example is Woody Allen and his star persona, “star as a real person” (Bhowmick, 2021, p. 2). At the same time, any other activities or professional career outside cinema can also be included in the director’s brand and build strong associations with their films, thus combining into a single brand: “feel like he’s just a creepy guy. His movies are creepy. *The ABC of sex* is creepy, and he’s just pretentious. New York, my man, just in love, like, with hearing his talk and pretending like he’s always the smartest guy in the world” (Participant 21).

A director’s brand can be formed based on various aspects and factors, not only from their films but also from different viewers’ points of view. It can be connected with visual specificities, even just the colours directors most often use (“The easiest one is Wong Kar-wai, the associations are, well, night, some kind of electricity, those... red and green colours,” — Participant 8), narrative peculiarities (“I think I would recognise it maybe if he does that in other movies. Like the narration of the story that’s happening and the images... I think that’s something that you recognise when you see it” — Participant 12), motifs and themes, or the locations where the plots of the director’s films usually take place (about Woody Allen: “New York. New York and a melodrama set in New York” — Participant 2). It can also involve attitudes toward film production, such as production expenses, the frequency and speed of film releases (“Woody Allen is a Stakhanovite, a man who makes an impossible number of films that I will never watch” — Participant 1). The director’s brand can include the era, the setting, and a flagship film that becomes a brand in itself. Sometimes it is the spirit, mood, or “vibe” of the film, as Participant 18 described films directed by Tim Burton and Sofia Coppola.

As can be seen, this can be achieved with visual tools, or it can also include the director's ideas. However, for the brand construction, viewers expect to be able to recognise that a film is made by this particular director. Thus, if the name brand works at the pre-selection stage, the director's brand, constructed through the style of the film, operates during the film's reception. When these combine, as Participant 18 experiences with Tim Burton and Sofia Coppola, Participant 24 with Tim Burton, and many participants with Woody Allen, Christopher Nolan, and Wes Anderson, I can speak of a complete director's brand that forms concrete expectations. Suppose the director's name can unite all these directors' films due to their repetitiveness and the formation of expectations around similar topics and their representations, while simultaneously changing from film to film and being constructed differently, yet maintaining the same level of fame.

All of these characteristics and associations show that many people, even with different backgrounds in different focus groups, use the same epithets to describe Wes Anderson's directorial approach and his films. Most of them refer to quite clear characteristics of his visual style, and even the participant who had not watched his films and described him through memes she remembered still used the same word *symmetry*: "He didn't like the memes about symmetrical shots. Remember when everyone was making those reels, pretending they were shooting a Wes Anderson film? And then he came out and said it was awful, horrible" (Participant 3).

I assume that a director's brand and the brand of their flagship film may compete with one another in audience perception. For example, among the focus group participants, Wes Anderson was associated almost exclusively with his visual style, whereas Christopher Nolan was more frequently described in relation to one of his films. David Lynch, by contrast, was characterised in terms of both his style and distinctive features, as well as through specific films. Thus, Wes Anderson's brand is linked primarily to his directorial approach, Nolan's brand operates in tandem with *Inception*, *Interstellar*, *Batman* trilogy, and Lynch is received above all as the director of *Mulholland Drive* and *Twin Peaks*, their flagship films.

Unfamiliarity with a director's brand can lead to a negative response to a film. Messaris (1981) argued that experimental filmmakers' "obtrusive" style is received by untutored audiences as an error (p. 53). This observation can be extended more broadly to

directors with distinctive styles: audiences without prior knowledge of a director may perceive as obtrusive not only experimental features but also any unusual or unfamiliar elements. By contrast, familiarity with such features enables recognition; they may still be judged unpleasant, but they are no longer received as errors. In this sense, a director's brand can function, from the viewer's perspective, in a way similar to a film genre.

6.3 From brand to film type, or genre

Describing the specificities in Gus Van Sant's films, Staiger (2004) mentioned "a predictable set" (p. 8). This term can help us to describe these sorts of expectations and "fantasies" (Hart et al., 2015, p. 12) viewers get when they know the director of the film and expect particular visual or narrative decisions, themes, and actors they have already observed in the previous films. I see similarities between such a "predictable set" for a film of the specific director and the specificities of a particular genre. Hart et al. (2015) shared that he "made sense of the 'type of film' on offer based on the actor(s)" (p. 380). I argue that a director forms the type of film for viewers as well, and as I argued above, together with the director's brand, forms expectations and affects the reception of the film.

The idea of "type of film" or "genre" based on the director, or director's brand, which correlates with "stylistic schemata" (Bordwell, 1985), explains the viewers' approach to expect the specific set of features from Wes Anderson's or Christopher Nolan's films. As I quoted in the Literature Review, Kerrigan and Yalkin (2009) defined films that had the same stylistic approach or fragments as "similar films" for viewers, or as already mentioned, as a part of the director's universe. During the pilot interview, the respondent characterised the genre of *The Royal Tenenbaums* as "the film of Wes Anderson," and it correlates with how most participants characterised the narrative, style and mood of his films. However, not all directors form such a specific genre. When Participant 31 characterised films directed by Ridley Scott, he discussed that these films are "high-quality action films," without any particular characteristics.

Todd (2012) discussed how viewers mainly received films directed by David Lynch: as films of the specific genre or as "auteur pictures" (p. 136). I argue that, in some cases, these categories may converge: a film created and presented by a specific author can come to represent a distinct genre in itself. For David Lynch, as for Christopher Nolan, it works, also considering that almost all participants had a prior knowledge about these

directors, explicitly based on the previous experience with their films. At the same time, when we discuss films of unknown directors for viewers, such a genre could not be formed, and in this case, participants approached more general knowledge of the genre they obtained, or other films of other directors they watched. As for Kira Muratova, when participants tried to describe her film from an era or national angle, or as for Luca Guadagnino, when viewers who did not watch any of his other films compared *Challengers* with other films about love triangles.

Referring to Neupert's (2002) history of the French New Wave, Orgeron (2007) argued that the idea of a director's persona often emerges through "biographically centred publications" (p. 42) or through supplementary materials related to films, particularly when the director controls such materials. However, the analysis indicates that viewers construct expectations about a film primarily through their prior experience with the director's other works, rather than through external sources. Among the 32 participants, almost none reported analysing a film through the lens of director interviews or similar paratexts. Instead, their expectations regarding "genre" or "film type" were consistently shaped by other films they had previously seen, with the director serving as the key connection across works. The process of gathering information from interviews or biographical narratives, as described by scholars, appeared to be more relevant for post-viewing reflection than for shaping initial reception.

Malone (2024) specifies that genre can be described and received by viewers from different angles: feature, tradition, and function, with most of these perceptions grounded in "background knowledge." When considering the "aesthetic principles" that directors "stick" with (Todd, 2012, p. 125), a parallel can be drawn between genre features and director-specific features. These features may function in similar ways: they can serve as recognisable functions, be received as part of a tradition within a national cinema, era, or cinematic school that the director represents, or even reflect transitions in style, particularly in the case of canonical or highly popular directors.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Research outcomes

In order to answer the research question of whether prior knowledge of a film director influences viewers' reception of a film, I drew on theory to define the concept of the film audience from relevant perspectives and theoretical frameworks. The study examined the relationships between film reception, interpretation, and film experience, and outlined the classifications of prior knowledge. I also identified connections between the concepts of film brand and genre. Empirically, I collected data through qualitative approaches, conducting eight focus groups, and analysed the data using both inductive and deductive coding.

Knowledge can affect all stages of the film experience (Cassetti, 2011a): the selection of a film, the pre-event phase (Wessels, 2023), and the process of interpretation or “meaning-making” (Barker & Brooks, 1998; Foster, 2023). However, the influence of knowledge depends on the type of audience. Cinephiles, for example, typically possess more knowledge and apply it more deliberately in the pre-event and selection stages. Viewers with knowledge of the director and those without such knowledge receive the same film differently. If viewers acquired their knowledge from other people, those who shared their opinion become influencers, shaping initial impressions and potentially steering future viewers their interpretation in a particular direction. If knowledge derived from other people's opinions competes with or supplements the viewer's impression, knowledge formed through previously watched films affects meaning-making during film viewing even more directly.

Thus, viewers without prior knowledge of a director rely on whatever information they already possess, even if it is not connected to the film. At the same time, knowledge does not necessarily change the final interpretative outcome: cinephiles with extensive knowledge may arrive at the same interpretation as occasional filmgoers without any kind of knowledge about the director. But the same outcomes in the process of interpretations do not mean the same emotional outcome.

A single film of the director can form expectations—either positive or negative—and shape future decisions about watching other works by the same director. Yet one film alone may not be sufficient to form an opinion about the director or “brand”: this requires

recognisable stylistic features strong enough to be identified independently of the director's name.

A director's brand can be shaped by external factors such as cultural trends or online mythology around them. These external elements can influence not only film selection but also interpretation. Though cinephiles tend to base their opinion more on the knowledge about the director's films, when filmgoers tend to rely on knowledge about the director's personal life or traits, in some cases, the star persona of the director can be more influential to viewers than the film director's persona, and they can be united.

Following Hart et al. (2016) and Forrest (2023), we can identify "genres" of film associated with particular directors, but not all directors succeed in building a brand. Moreover, the distinction between expert and "naïve" (Barker & Brooks, 1998) viewers is not absolute: occasional viewers may also receive directors as brands, while cinephiles and fans approach them with varying levels of critical awareness. More often, a director's brand includes flagship films, which provide lenses for the reception of the future director's films. If the flagship films are united with same stylistic approaches, like visual or narrative specificities, or specific gaze, the director's film can be received as specific types, or genre. For some cinephiles, it can represent a disadvantage, because the repetitiveness can be received negatively.

Participants' prior knowledge was often complemented by previous emotions or by others' interpretations, which acted as prisms through which they understood films. Sometimes viewers reused interpretations from earlier films, adapting them to new contexts rather than constructing a wholly fresh response. For example, in the case of Kira Muratova, focus group participants demonstrated how even highly technical aspects of reception could be shaped by knowledge acquired from the director's earlier works. Participants across groups also reported that their assumptions and expectations shifted depending on a single film experience, underlining how fragile and dynamic such reception can be.

Emotional involvement was also shaped by prior familiarity. For those who knew a director's earlier films, the benchmark for comparison was typically that director's previous works. By contrast, viewers without such knowledge compared the film against their broader personal favourites or the most impressive films they had seen in general.

Thus, directors were judged either within the context of their own filmography or against cinema as a whole, depending on the presence of the viewer's prior knowledge.

Expectations play a crucial role in film reception. Knowledge shapes expectations, and expectations become a central element in constructing viewers' responses. Across almost all participants, I observed that viewers drew on any form of knowledge available to them in order to respond to the film and construct meaning. If direct knowledge of the director or film was lacking, participants relied on cultural references, historical knowledge, professional expertise, hobbies, and personal experiences, or construct director's persona and their potential authorial angle with the information they can obtain with no additional labour: it could be a genre, era, country of the film, age or gender of the director, or any other details. Even when viewers represent occasional filmgoers, who watch films rarely or do not pay close attention to the director, in the end, directors are influential for them, because they are still received as a brand and the responsible person for the film.

7.2 Limitations and potential development

The findings have several limitations. First, the number of participants was relatively small; however, the sample was strong in terms of avoiding bias, as I recruited individuals with whom I had no prior relationships. Although this study was initially designed without focusing on participants' social specificities, I did aim to include a range of ages. Still the study was limited to participants between the ages of 19 and 42. Expanding the sample to include older participants would provide a broader perspective. Moreover, it would be valuable to collect additional background information, such as level of education and professional occupation, alongside age and place of residence in Europe as it has been done this time. In the future research, however, focus groups could be more systematically structured from a socio-demographic perspective.

Another limitation concerns film selection: I tried to achieve a broader sample of films, however in the future study, films should be chosen through media discourse analysis in order to identify the most relevant and widely discussed directors at a given moment. In the study, many of the findings emerged from discussions of directors who were not the primary focus of the examination.

From an academic perspective, the findings contribute to research on the director's role in shaping audience reception. While much recent scholarship has focused on specific

directors or on reception shaped by social media and critics, I draw attention to a less frequently discussed question: what is the role of directors in the process of audience formation and film reception? One of the advantages of the research is that it focuses on different types of audience and follows distinctions between cinephiles, film fans, and regular filmgoers' approaches.

The findings may also have practical applications. They can inform film marketers and studios in developing strategies that consider how a director's name, familiarity, and recognition can influence box-office outcomes. Similarly, video platforms could use these insights when curating and promoting film catalogues, taking into account the significant role of a director's name in shaping viewers' selection and reception.

Following Hart et al. (2016) and Forrest (2023), I suggest that certain directors may come to signify a particular "genre" of film through their personal brand. Not all directors, however, achieve this level of recognition, and not all viewers perceive directors through this lens. Nevertheless, the findings show that casual viewers, as well as cinephiles and fans, are capable of receiving directors as brands.

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Appendices

Appendix A

A shared message, example 1

Hello everyone!

I'm conducting a study for my Master's dissertation on how people perceive films, and I need participants who are willing to spend a few hours taking part. There's just one condition: people I know personally cannot take part in this study.

So, dear friends, I have a small request — if you know anyone who might be interested in joining, please pass on this message and my Telegram contact.

You don't need acquire any special knowledge about cinema to take part (if someone knows a lot, great; if not, that's absolutely fine). What's needed is:

- Send me a message, and I'll add the participant to a chat with the relevant focus group. The chat will be purely functional and I'll close it as soon as the group finishes.
- Fill in a short Google Forms survey (about 15 minutes).
- Watch one film (I'll share a link) at your own pace over the course of a week (no longer than 2 hours).
- Join an online meeting to discuss the film (about 60 minutes). We'll agree on a convenient time and hold the meeting via Google Meet, so no extra apps are needed.

Many thanks in advance 

A shared message, example 2

As you may remember, I'm doing my master's right now. I'm in the final phase, and it's time for focus groups. I need to run several, at least six, but the challenge is that I can't use friends for the research. So I'm trying to find people I don't know who could spend around 3 hours on this.

Could you please let me know if you know anyone who might be interested in watching a film and discussing it?

At the moment, I'm mainly recruiting English-speaking participants. I still have a few places in the Russian-speaking group (in case your flatmates might be interested 🤔), but I'm mostly looking for English-speaking participants from anywhere in Europe.

What do you think, could you ask around for me, if possible? No pressure of course ☕
People don't need to be cinephiles or film buffs, absolutely anyone is welcome.
If someone's interested, they can message me on Telegram or email me at
focusgroup042025@gmail.com.

And this is a general description to share:

Hi!

I'm getting my Master's in Communication Studies, currently conducting research on film reception and recruiting focus groups. You don't need any special knowledge of cinema or to be a film fan to take part.

What's involved?

- Complete a short survey (~20 min)
- Watch a film (chosen based on the survey)
- Join a discussion (~1 hour on Google Meet)

The discussion time will be arranged according to participants' availability. All responses will remain anonymous and will be used solely for research purposes.

If you're interested, please email me at focusgroup042025@gmail.com or contact me on Telegram.

Appendix B

Example of the form all participants had to fill in

Focus Group 5

Hi! Thank you for participating in the research!

This survey is the first step; it will help me get to know you a bit better and lay the groundwork for the next step. It will take you about 15-20 minutes to complete it.

* Indicates required question

1. What's your name? *

2. How old are you?

3. What country do you live in? *

4. Which definition fits you best? *

Tick all that apply.

- ☐ Movie-goer – You enjoy watching films, but don't pay much attention to what exactly you watch. You don't have strict rules, just some preferences.
- ☐ Fan – You're a fan or supporter of something or someone in cinema: a genre, an actor/actress, a director, a specific film, a franchise, etc.
- ☐ Cinephile / Expert – You really love cinema and feel like someone who has deep knowledge about the industry.
- ☐ I just watch films from time to time.
- ☐ I wouldn't say I like cinema.
- ☐ Other:

5. How often do you watch films? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ 2/3 times a year or more rarely
- ☐ Monthly
- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ 2/3 times a week
- ☐ Every day or almost every day
- ☐ I don't have any specific habits or schedule — I can watch a film or skip it

6. Why do you watch films? *

Select the reasons that apply, or add your own.

Tick all that apply.

- ☐ This is one of my hobbies
- ☐ Just for pleasure
- ☐ To kill time
- ☐ To discuss them later with friends, colleagues, or others
- ☐ I'm interested in culture and art
- ☐ I'm interested in cinema
- ☐ I'm a fan of actor/actress/composer/director/anything else connected to cinema
- ☐ Professional reasons
- ☐ To spend time with people close to me
- ☐ Other: _____

7. Have you ever been part of any fan communities related to cinema? Or maybe you used to be in the past?

If not, feel free to skip this question.

8. Have you ever published any film reviews — either professionally or as an amateur? *

Tick all that apply.

- ☐ Yes, professionally
☐ Yes, as an amateur
☐ No, never

9. Do you read anything about a film before watching it? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Yes, I try to do that regularly
☐ Sometimes
☐ It depends — if something catches my attention, I'll read; if not, I won't
☐ Almost never
☐ No

10. Can occasional information about a film influence your decision to watch it or skip it? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Yes
☐ Maybe
☐ No
☐ I don't know

11. Does the director influence your decision to watch a film? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Yes, definitely *Skip to question 13*
☐ Sometimes *Skip to question 12*
☐ Not really *Skip to question 12*
☐ I don't know *Skip to question 13*

12. In what situations does the director influence your choice to watch a film, and when do they not?

Please see the list of directors below. Mark those you recognise and indicate how familiar you are with their work. There are no objective criteria — just go with your personal opinion. Please note: do not google the names while answering, and try not to look them up after completing the survey to avoid influencing the next steps.

0 — I know nothing about them

1 — I've heard of them, but not much

2 — I know them quite well (as far as I can tell)

3 — I have a strong opinion about them (e.g. I love their films / I dislike their films)

13. Christopher Nolan *

Mark only one oval.

0	1	2	3
☐	☐	☐	☐

14. Wes Anderson *

Mark only one oval.

0	1	2	3
☐	☐	☐	☐

15. David Lynch *

Mark only one oval.

0	1	2	3
☐	☐	☐	☐

16. Paul Thomas Anderson *

Mark only one oval.

0	1	2	3
☐	☐	☐	☐

17. Ken Loach *

Mark only one oval.

0	1	2	3
☐	☐	☐	☐

18. Luca Guadagnino *

Mark only one oval.

0	1	2	3
☐	☐	☐	☐

19. Kira Muratova *

Mark only one oval.

0	1	2	3
☐	☐	☐	☐

20. Taika Waititi *

Mark only one oval.

0	1	2	3
☐	☐	☐	☐

21. Ridley Scott *

Mark only one oval.

0	1	2	3
☐	☐	☐	☐

22. Sofia Coppola *

Mark only one oval.

0	1	2	3
☐	☐	☐	☐

23. Greta Gerwig *

Mark only one oval.

0	1	2	3
☐	☐	☐	☐

24. Wong Kar-wai *

Mark only one oval.

0	1	2	3
☐	☐	☐	☐

25. Denis Villeneuve *

Mark only one oval.

0	1	2	3
☐	☐	☐	☐

26. Federico Fellini *

Mark only one oval.

0	1	2	3
☐	☐	☐	☐

27. Woody Allen *

Mark only one oval.

0	1	2	3
☐	☐	☐	☐

28. Coralie Fargeat *

Mark only one oval.

0	1	2	3
☐	☐	☐	☐

29. Matthew Vaughn *

Mark only one oval.

0	1	2	3
☐	☐	☐	☐

30. George Clooney *

Mark only one oval.

0	1	2	3
☐	☐	☐	☐

31. David Fincher *

Mark only one oval.

0	1	2	3
☐	☐	☐	☐

32. Michael Haneke *

Mark only one oval.

0	1	2	3
☐	☐	☐	☐

33. Agnès Varda *

Mark only one oval.

0	1	2	3
☐	☐	☐	☐

34. Aki Kaurismäki *

Mark only one oval.

0	1	2	3
☐	☐	☐	☐

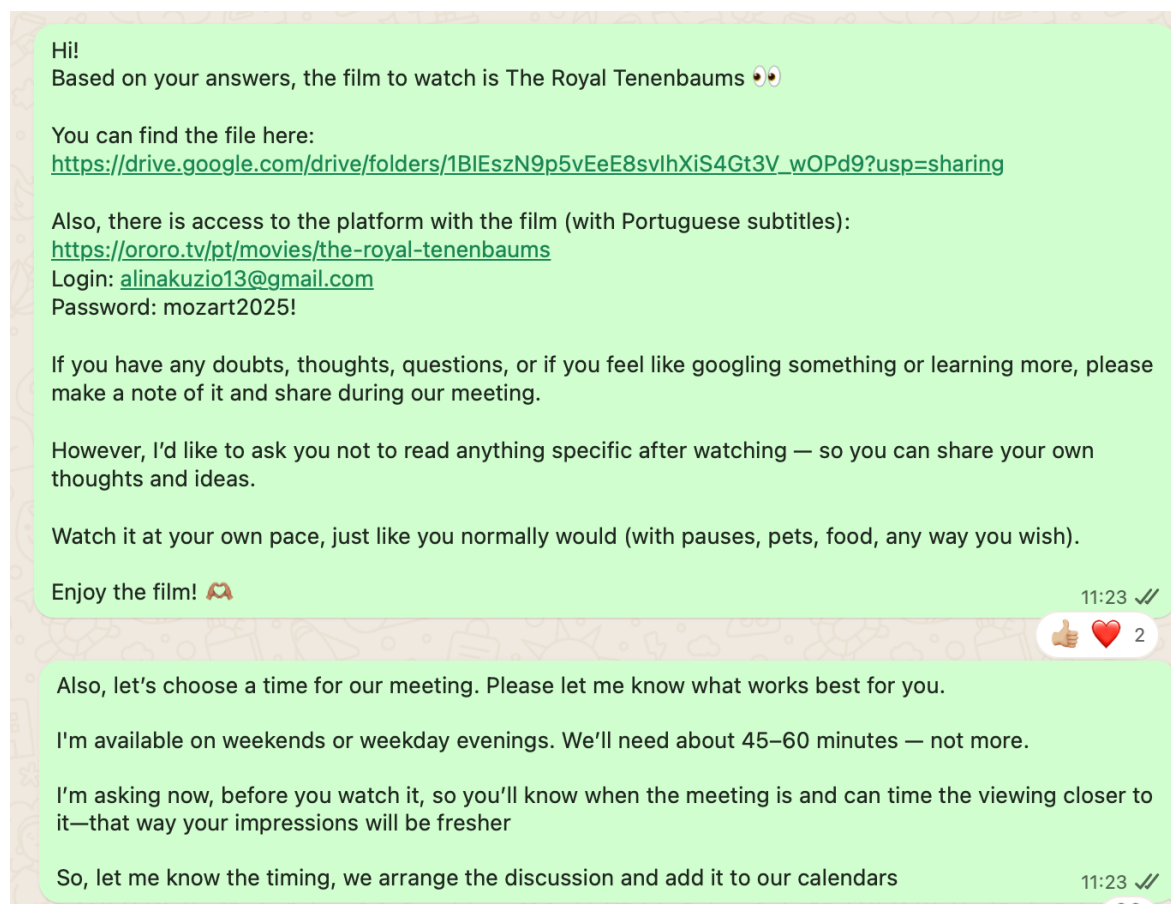
Skip to question 35

Please check the films you've watched.

You can google a movie poster to remember and realise whether you've watched it or not.
But try not to read anything regarding these films.

Appendix C

An example of a message with the instructions for film watching sent to the group of on of the focus groups on WhatasApp



Appendix D

Questions for those who have watched a film by an unfamiliar director

Common general questions:

- How do you usually find out about movies?
- How do you usually choose a movie to watch?
- What might prompt you to watch a film? /// What do you think can influence your decision to watch a film? For example, the crew, a rumor, friends' advice, news, awards?
- Imagine a typical situation: you've learned about a movie and decided to watch it. Walk us through how that is happening, the regular process of watching a film. What do you do before, during, and after watching? Do you have any specific traditions// habits?
- And while you're watching, what matters most to you? (The plot, the people on screen, the technical execution, the style, the ideas, or maybe reactions of people around — anything at all, any answer is valid.)

Questions about the form:

- When we asked you to name directors and titles you know, how easy or hard was that to recall?
- You all mentioned that you know **DEPENDS ON THE ANSWERS**. What associations do you have with them? Do you know them as celebrities, as directors, or in some other way?
- A new film by one of them is coming out. To decide whether to watch it, is it important for you to know who directed it, or are other factors more important — like the plot, awards, actors, or a striking trailer?
- Do you have a favorite director?// What directors do you know?
- When you hear about a film from an unfamiliar director, what would make you *give it a chance*?/// Can you think of a time when you watched a film *just* because something about it intrigued you — even though you knew nothing about who made it?

- You noted that you don't know or barely know the director of this film, Wes Anderson. Have you never heard of him before? // Do you still feel unfamiliar with them, or do you remember something about them?

Questions about the viewing experience:

- Did you manage to watch the whole film? // Tell us how you watched it: in one sitting or several, alone or with someone?
- Did you like the film?
Yes — why?
No — why?
- How did you interpret the film?/// Who do you think it's for?
- What attracted your attention? /// Was there anything that particularly struck you?/// What elements did you pay most attention to?/// What aspects were most memorable to you?
- Are there any films, books, plays, or anything else it reminded you of? // Were there any real-life stories or knowledge that came to mind while watching?// Have you got some memories or ideas of something while watching?
- Was there anything you wanted to know while watching, something you wanted to Google or read about or get known later?
- How would you label its genre or style?/// Do you see a particular style in the film?//How would you describe the film's atmosphere or "feel"? Did it remind you of any specific time, place, or mood?///Were there moments you found hard to understand — visually, narratively, or emotionally?
- Is the country or language of a film important to you here?
- Now that you've seen one of his films, do you feel like you get something about this director — his worldview, tone, obsessions?// How would you describe him? // What stands out to you about his work? // What kind of films do you think he usually makes? What makes them unique? // Do you think his other films are similar?
- If you were to introduce this director to a friend, how would you describe him or the kind of work he makes?

- After watching this film, do you want to watch more of his work? // Is his name now more likely to draw you in, turn you away, or make no difference?
- Would you like to add anything about the film or your experience of it?

Questions for those who have watched a film by a familiar director

Common general questions:

- How do you usually find out about movies?
- How do you usually choose a movie to watch?
- What might prompt you to watch a film? /// What do you think can influence your decision to watch a film? For example, the crew, a rumor, friends' advice, news, awards?
- Imagine a typical situation: you've learned about a movie and decided to watch it. Walk us through how that is happening, the regular process of watching a film. What do you do before, during, and after watching? Do you have any specific traditions// habits?
- And while you're watching, what matters most to you? (The plot, the people on screen, the technical execution, the style, the ideas, or maybe reactions of people around — anything at all, any answer is valid.)

Questions about the form:

- When I asked you to name directors and titles you know, how easy or hard was that to recall?
- You all mentioned that you know **DEPENDS ON THE ANSWERS**. What associations do you have with them? Do you know them as celebrities, as directors, or in some other way?
- A new film by one of them is coming out. To decide whether to watch it, is it important for you to know who directed it, or are other factors more important — like the plot, awards, actors, or a striking trailer?
- Do you have a favorite director?
- What directors do you know?

- When you hear about a film from an unfamiliar director, what would make you *give it a chance*?/// Can you think of a time when you watched a film *just* because something about it intrigued you—even though you knew nothing about who made it?
- How often do you explore films by directors you don't know? Would you say you're open to that, or do you tend to stick with familiar names?

Questions about the particular directors and viewing experience:

- You mentioned that you know **DEPENDS ON THE ANSWER**. Have you actually seen their films, or are you just familiar with their name or reputation?
- How would you describe their work? / What, for you, distinguishes them as a filmmaker?/// How did you first hear about them?/// Would you say you tend to like them, or not particularly?/// Would seeing their name on a film make you more likely to watch it, put you off, or make no difference?
- Were you able to watch the film in full? Can you describe how you watched it—did you watch it in one sitting or over multiple sessions, alone or with someone else?
- Talk us through your experience: what did you expect, and what surprised you? If you had expectations, what were they based on?
- How did you interpret the film? /// Who do you think it was made for?/// What do you think the director was trying to say with this film?
- Are there any other films, books, theatre performances—or anything else—that this film reminded you of?/// Were there any real-life stories or experiences that came to mind while watching?
- Do you think it helped that you were already familiar with their work?/// For you, was that connection a positive aspect or did it interfere with your experience?/// In your opinion, is this film similar to their previous films?/// Would you say this film is connected to her earlier work?
- Were there moments in the film where you wanted to look something up or find out more?
- After watching this film, did you feel inclined to explore more of this director's work?

- How would you describe the film's style?/// How would you characterise the director's style overall?

Additional questions

- You knew the director of this film—did that knowledge (e.g., of their background, gender, previous work) influence your viewing in any way?
- Was there any specific information about the director that stood out or shaped your impression of the film?
- Was there perhaps a particular story or anecdote about the director that came to mind and affected the way you viewed the film?
- Would you like to add anything about the film or your experience of it?

Appendix E

List of codes

Promo

Filmic brand — was deleted

Film style — was merged with Director's visual style or Genre, dependent on a quotation

Trends

Star persona — was merged with Trends

Trailers — was merged with Promo

Previous knowledge — was merged and renamed to Knowledge

Gathering knowledge — was merged and renamed to Knowledge

Country or era linked to the director

Classic director, big name, important for the culture

Idea about director which is not connected with their films

Gender

Recognition of the director's name// Familiar director — a code was united with the previous one

Mixing up directors' names — a code was deleted

Emotional associations with the director

Changed attitude towards the director

Similarities between director's films

Reception of the director's style across the films — a code was united with the previous one

Director's peculiarities — a code was renamed to Director's approach

Director's role

Idea about the director based on the one film

Director's intention — was deleted

Themes director applies — was merged with Director's approach

Visual of the film

Director's visual style

Use of colour — was merged with Visual of the film or Director's visual style, dependent on each quotation

What does appeal in the film

Genre

Story about production

Focus on crew/cast

Noteworthy aspects — was merged and renamed to Aspects, details

Attention to specific details — was merged and renamed to Aspects, details

Memorable moments — was merged and renamed to Aspects, details

Intertextual references

Narrative peculiarities

Process of film selection — was merged and renamed to Selections, choice

Factors influencing the film choice — was merged and renamed to Selections, choice

Viewing experience

Pre-event — was merged with Viewing experience

Actions after watching — was merged with Viewing experience

Watching habits — was merged with Viewing experience

Viewers' expectations — was merged with Expectations

Wrong expectations — was merged with Expectations

Expectations based on the director's previous works — was merged with Expectations