Opinion
NCR Voices



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The 96th Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences awards ceremony — better known as "the Oscars"—is scheduled for this Sunday, March 10. In general, I am not a big fan of award shows. I don't tune in for the Grammys, Emmys or Tonys, but I do have a soft spot in my heart for the Oscars.

There's just something about the movies. While I don't consider myself a true "movie buff" in the way some people are obsessively knowledgeable about movie history and details with the focus of a baseball fan who is a hobbyist statistician, I do enjoy watching a wide range of films.

Like most people today, I watch nearly all television programs and feature films via streaming services. And, again like most people, the lockdown of the pandemic only increased how regularly I turned to Netflix or Hulu to consume that kind of entertainment. There was literally nowhere else to go.

It seems that every generation brings with it a shifting cultural dynamic that appears to the old guard to threaten the very existence of the TV and film industry. Whether it was the addition of sound (the "talkies") in the first part of the 20th century, the popularity of broadcast television in the middle part, or the succession of recording and viewing technologies (VHS tapes, Laserdiscs, DVDs, Blu-Rays), which have been eclipsed now by online streaming, business analysts and media critics have been quick to ring the death knell announcing the imminent implosion of the industry.

But Hollywood continues to reinvent itself, even if it encounters bumps on the road and tensions between stakeholders, such as what we witnessed last year with dual strikes by the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA). The writers and actors had a legitimate concern about how profits were (and weren't) being shared and the potential threats of emerging artificial intelligence technologies.

Even though the strikes are now over and "awards season" is well underway, the prognosticators of industry doom are at it again. Part of the concern centers on the postponement of productions, which necessarily limits the number of new Hollywood releases available this calendar year. One journalist noted that the "broken rhythm" of big productions this year "poses further questions about when the theatrical marketplace might return to a place of strength."

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However, the other concern seems to be the declining number of viewers going to brick-and-mortar theaters. This was an issue even before the pandemic, but the combination of global lockdown and the rise of streaming services, as well as shifting cultural trends and tastes, combine to help explain the seeming loss of audiences for feature film attendance in person.

That may be a broad national pattern. But for me personally, I have found myself returning more often to the movie theater and rekindling a love for the experience that, despite the high-definition options streaming services provide, still cannot be replicated at home.

So with an eye toward Sunday's celebration of the art of motion pictures and my renewed appreciation for the in-person movie theater experience, I want to make a case for returning to the theater, even when you may be able to stream the exact same content at home. I see at least three benefits to getting off the couch and going to the box office.

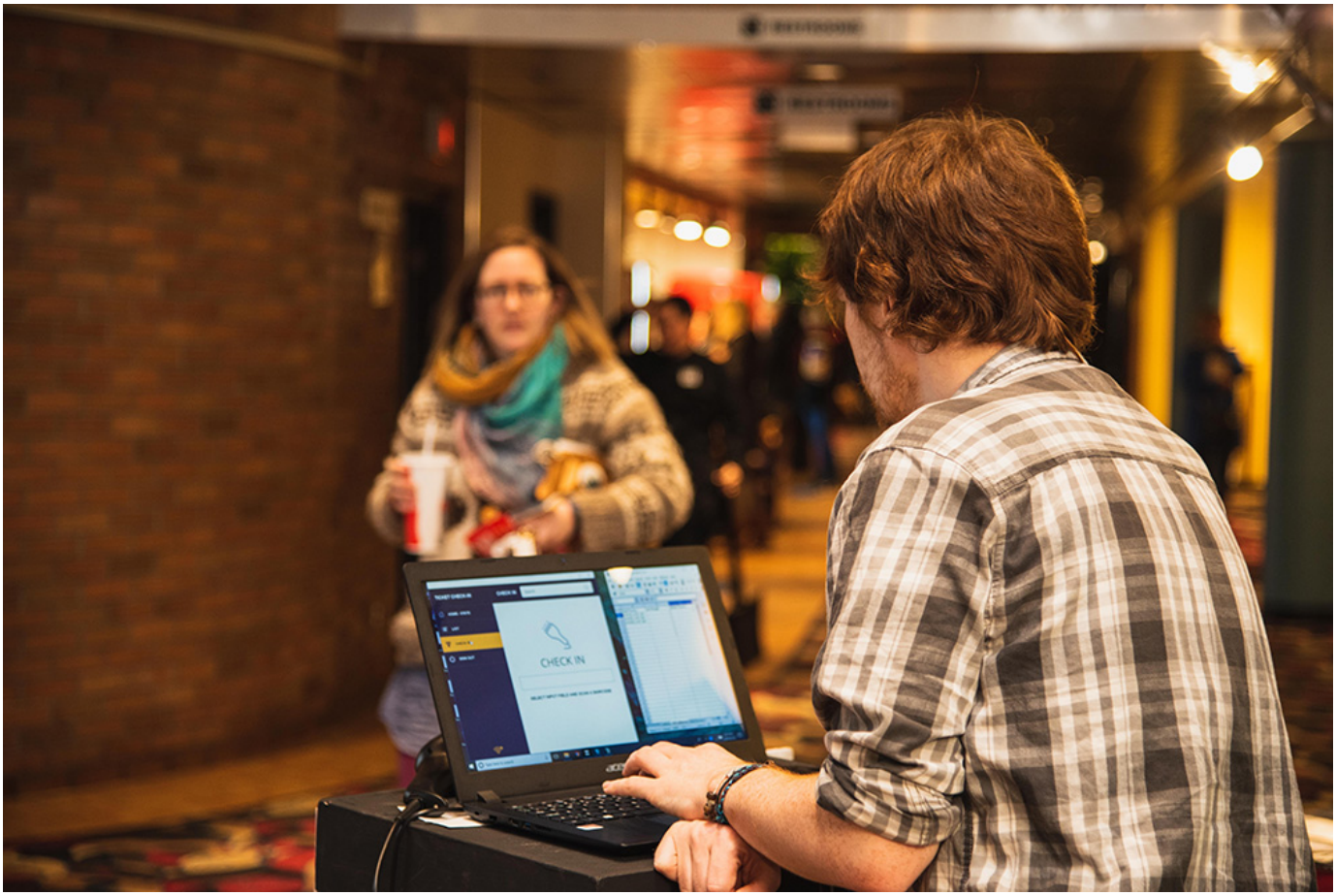
The first benefit is personal, yet something that I assume others will find relatable. Viewing a movie in the theater provides me with the much-needed social accountability to keep my phone silenced and put away. Sure, nobody is stopping me from leaving my phone off at home or placed in another room. But there is something about the movie-theater-as-superego that makes it feel a lot easier to ignore would-be text alerts or unthinkingly scrolling through social media feeds while simultaneously trying to watch a film.

Being in a different physical space has helped me to be less distracted, not only by my phone, but also by the temptation to talk during the movie or engage in some kind of multitasking. It has helped me to be more present and attend to the story, acting, cinematography, music and other details I might otherwise miss if I were watching even the same film on a smaller screen and in a different place.

This reminds me of the importance of liturgical spaces and why it is good that we have designated worship environments like churches and chapels. It's true that we can pray anywhere, but there is something different about praying in a space that is there precisely for prayer. It hones our attention, and our surroundings are designed to help facilitate a disposition of prayer and reflection in a way that other locations are not.

Movie theaters feel analogous: While not necessarily sacred places, they are intentional sites for a specific purpose not easily replicated elsewhere.

Another benefit is less personal and more communal. While I have mixed feelings about the economic pros and cons of the mass media and entertainment industry with its corporate handwringing about shareholder profits, I do like to support local economies whenever I am able. Local theaters, especially those rare gems that are not owned by one of the few remaining mega-chains, are often managed and staffed by people in the community.



(Pixabay/Vlad Vasnetsov)

I consider myself fortunate to live in a small Midwestern city where even the ticket cost for a weekend showing of a new blockbuster is under $10. It is true that ticket prices vary by location and market, and that the cost of concessions are oftentimes staggeringly high, but there is still something meaningful to me about the real encounter with people who are running the theater.

Obviously, there are people who also work for the big streaming services, but the algorithmically mediated interface viewers have with the services is many degrees removed from a genuinely human encounter. This lends itself to an experience that feels far more utilitarian and anonymous than the literal transaction one makes in buying a theater ticket from a person and knowing that in some way that purchase supports that person's livelihood in part.

Finally, the last benefit that I have come to appreciate is the shared experience of watching a movie with others. Sure, you can invite friends and family over to your home, but there's something notably different about the unspoken esprit de corps of a gathering of strangers who have come together for a common purpose and a shared experience.

This has struck me as particularly meaningful today. In our increasingly polarized social, political and ecclesial contexts, there's something deeply reassuring about people coming together without identifying their partisan persuasions or seeking only to affiliate with other like-minded people.

Admittedly, some movies are likely to draw a more homogenous audience than others. But even in those instances where a film is coded to attract a particular group, anyone can still buy a ticket and watch the show.

You may assume that everyone in the theater believes the same thing or thinks the same way as you do, but if we are being intellectually honest, we must admit we simply do not know that much about the strangers in the theater, apart from the fact we have all come to see the same thing together.

As we await the announcement of the winners on Sunday, celebrating some of the great works of motion picture art this year, consider going to the theater the next time you want to watch a new movie. You might be surprised at what a difference it can make.