

## **What the country tells us - the place of the 'rural' in contemporary studies of cinema**

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### **Abstract**

Cinemas have an important place in the social and cultural life of many Australian rural towns. They are valued as spaces around which residents of isolated communities can gather and interact, have a role in mediating concepts of identity and in promoting positive emotional attachment to place. Rural cinema histories suggest these aspects of non-metropolitan movie-going have been significant since the very early days of this screen format. This article examines the role of geography in shaping the circumstances and meaning of cinema-going in contemporary rural Australia. It also explores the connections between modern and historical film attendance practices, which have hitherto been obscured by scholarly neglect the rural. These interrelationships suggest a basis for rethinking the way in which cinema audiences are categorised and studied.

## **Introduction**

Cinema is one of the most popular forms of cultural entertainment in rural Australia. The diversity of screen content, together with the cinema's relative affordability, draws together audiences from a wide range of demographic, socio-economic and geographic situations. Cinema-going does not require any special skills or interests in order to participate, unlike other popular social collectives, such as sporting clubs, professional organisations and hobby groups. In contrast to licensed hotels and clubs, cinemas are open to people of all ages limited only by the classification of the film being screened. In rural places in particular cinemas provide an important point of connection to the global cultural and communications landscape. While most of the films screened will eventually be accessible elsewhere on formats such as DVD and the Internet, the cinema provides a unique setting for their consumption - one that draws audiences into a variety of geographically-specific personal experiences and social interactions.

This article examines the circumstances and meaning of contemporary film attendance in rural Australia. It addresses two principal questions - why do people go to the movies in non-metropolitan Australia, and what consequences and affects follow from these cinematic encounters? The discussion is based on material gathered from seven rural cinema case studies conducted across several states, covering a range of cinematic situations from regional multiplexes through to community-led, non-commercial enterprises in small and remote towns. Focusing on the significance of rural cinemas as a local space of feeling and of social activity, the article explores how cinemas can have a role in encouraging local residents to more positively connect with the place in which they live and the people with whom they share it.

Historical accounts of rural cinema-going in Australia and the United States suggest that film attendance has, since its very early days, been significant for reasons that extend beyond the screen. Further, comparative analysis of past movie-going experiences with material from my contemporary Australian study, indicates significant continuities in the meaning of attendance across different regions and multiple timeframes. These connections signal a basis for expanding the ways in which audiences are aggregated for the purpose of critical study. In particular they highlight some of the limitations of traditional linear chronological demarcations, such as pre and post television or home video, and the organisation of audience studies around national borders, ethnic groups and sub-sets thereof.

### **Rural Cinema Histories**

Film history has been at the forefront of critical inquiry into the circumstances of film circulation, presentation and consumption in rural locations. With their vast expanse of isolated rural landscapes and agrarian based economies, the United States and Australia have provided a highly productive focus for such investigations. The relatively small but significant body of research to emerge from these locations has drawn attention to the diversity of situations in which people have watched films and the extent to which the meaning of these experiences are shaped by geographic location. As several film historians have argued, scholarly neglect of the rural has tended to obscure the significance of these important spatial connections (Allen, 2006: 64-65; Fuller-Seeley and Potamianos, 2008: 5-6). In countering the dominance of urban narratives researchers in the United States have used population records to demonstrate that in the early days of cinema large numbers of people initially encountered film in *rural* rather than urban settings. In 1910, 63 per cent of Americans lived on farms or in towns with populations of less than 10,000 people (Fuller-Seeley and Potamianos, 2008: 9). The demographic

landscape was much the same in Australia around this time, with 55 per cent of the population living in settlements of this size in 1906 (Hugo 2001). Failing to adequately account for these differentiated cinematic experiences has, as Allen argues, tended to squash ‘a complex and dynamic cultural and social geography into a simplistic binary grid of city/country’ (2006: 64).

The role of geography in shaping distinctive rural distribution and exhibition practices has been clearly demonstrated in a number of historical studies. These also highlight significant parallels between industrial practices and geographical imperatives in Australia and the United States. Focusing on cinema operators in country areas of Queensland, Julie James Bailey (1997) and Denis Cryle et. al. (2000) have explored the commercial disadvantages imposed by their rural situation and the necessity of being able to adapt to local conditions. Similarly, Gregory Waller’s (2004) profile of itinerant exhibitor Robert Southward emphasises the resourcefulness and improvisation of entrepreneurs who brought films to audiences in marginalised places in the United States in the 1930s. Research by Anne Helen Wilson (2006) and Waller (2005) has examined the strategies used by rural exhibitors to attract audiences in different national contexts. In particular it has looked at how these operators actively cultivated strong local community connections as a means of ensuring financial success.

With a slightly different focus, Kate Bowles (2007a) and Dylan Walker (2007) have examined how physical environments have influenced patterns of exhibition and attendance in Australian small towns. Ross Thorne’s (2007) micro-study of the Strand Theatre in Canowindra looks at how rural infrastructure, in this the case the rail network used to transport film prints, determined what was screened at the cinema. Scholars such as Kevin Cork (1995), Nancy Huggett (2002), Allen (2006), Kevin Corbett (2008) and John Taylor and Cynthia Troup (2010) have engaged more specifically with

the experience of rural audiences. They have looked at how cinema-going was connected more broadly with the social and cultural rhythms of everyday rural life in particular locations. Their work also points to the similarities in the experiences of audiences watching films in small, geographically remote settings across the Australia and the United States. Adding to the richness of these accounts is analysis of the development of movie fan culture, which emphasises elements of connections rather than differentiation between metropolitan and rural audiences (Fuller 1996, Huggett 2002).

### **Contemporary Rural Cinema Studies**

Despite a growing interest in the history of rural cinema, relatively little is known about its contemporary situation, either in Australia or internationally. This omission is surprising when considered against the broader conceptual shift that has taken place within cinema studies over the past decade or so. This critical turn has seen film scholarship become increasingly engaged with film-going as a socially and geographically situated activity – a practice that is fundamentally shaped by the diversity of the times and places in which it occurs. However, in Australia only a handful of researchers have engaged with rural cinema in its modern contexts. They include Karen Crowe (2005, 2007) whose work examines the revival of cinema in small towns in New South Wales and the misappropriation by policy-makers of the concept of ‘community’; and Lisa Milner’s paper (2007) about the community/local government partnership that led to the restoration and reopening of the Bowraville Theatre in 2003. With a less critical focus, the series of documentaries produced by Ross Thorne (2006, 2009a, 2009b) explore the establishment of non-commercial cinemas in rural areas through interviews with patrons and volunteers. Articles about rural cinemas also appear from time to time in trade and mainstream press - for example in Australia Kaufman 2009, Metcalfe 2003, Smith 2001, and in the

United States Leigh Brown 2010. These stories tend to emphasise the resilience and resourcefulness of particular communities and highlight the role of the local cinema in countering the hardship and isolation of country life.

Several factors have contributed to the critical neglect of the rural. The feasibility of undertaking research in non-metropolitan locations can be limited by geographic distance and budgetary constraints (Bowles 2008). Beyond these practical considerations, the rural is often conceptualised as a place that is disconnected from cultural events or phenomena to do with modernity and progressiveness (see Creed and Ching 1997). More specifically, Bowles has argued that the ascendancy of discourses connecting film attendance with urban modernity has added to the difficulty in making the case for the rural within cinema studies (2008). On the one hand this emphasis is understandable. Cities have unquestionably been at the centre of most the major spatial, aesthetic and technological innovations in public film presentation over the past twenty years or so. However, not all aspects of culture and media usage fall within this spatial boundary. In Australia around 40 per cent of national screens are located outside the five major capital cities and account, on average, for a third of annual box office revenues (Screen Australia 2010a, 2010b), yet we know very little about the experiences of audiences in these rural settings.

### **Rural Cinema in Australia**

Inspired by the spatial turn in cinema studies, my research on contemporary movie-going in non-metropolitan Australia aims to extend critical understanding of the meaning and significance of these screen experiences. Rural cinemas do more than simply facilitate entertainment and enjoyment. They

provide a public setting for a variety of important interpersonal transactions – where friendships are consolidated and extended, romances blossom (or fail), and teenagers are able to contest some of the boundaries of their emerging adulthood and social freedoms. As sites of positive experience, rural cinemas can also help foster a sense of attachment to geographic place. This examination of Australian rural cinema draws on material gathered from thirty two detailed oral interviews with audiences across the micro-study sites and the distribution of a three-page written survey in two locations yielding 136 responses. It also includes incorporates the perspectives of cinema owners and managers, fifteen of whom have been interviewed from the case study sites and elsewhere.

The physical and aesthetic elements of the Australian rural cinema experience are often quite different from the metropolitan. With low turnovers and profitability many rural cinemas find it financially impossible to keep pace with the latest trends in film presentation, such as surround sound and digital 3D. However, rather than contributing to a sense of audience dissatisfaction and disengagement, many rural cinemas are held in high regard by their patrons and feature prominently in local social and cultural life. In this respect, the current situation of Australian rural cinema highlights a number of parallels with both domestic and American audiences dating back to the early twentieth century.

Developing a framework to facilitate analysis of the contemporary and comparative dimensions of rural cinema-going, the following discussion focuses on three interconnected thematic concerns - locality, familiarity and identity. These concepts are implicit throughout much of the rural cinema history outlined in this article and have figured prominently in cinema experiences articulated by audiences who have participated in my contemporary rural Australian study.

## Locality

This concept of locality is concerned with the specificities of place – the individual characteristics of a cinema, its patrons and the town in which it is located and how these combine to shape the contexts and meanings of the film experience. The significance of locality is explored through analysis of how place, and more specifically population, can shape the importance of film content within the context of ‘film-going’. As Fuller-Seeley and Potamianos (2008: 8) observe, films are generally made with global consumption in mind but are actually encountered by audiences in diverse localised settings. In metropolitan multiplexes, the breadth and quality of the films and the exclusivity of the cinema release window are considered crucial to attracting patrons. These features are emphasised in popular national advertising slogans, such as ‘Only at the Movies! Now’ and ‘Bigger...Better...First...Only at the Movies’. Phil Hubbard’s research on multiplexes in the city of Leicester concluded that content, specifically blockbuster films, has been crucial to the growth and success of large cinemas (2002: 1239).

My investigations at multiplexes located in large rural towns in Australia also suggest the desire to see specific films is a key factor influencing admissions, particularly for teenagers and young adults. At the modern, five-screen complex located in the mid-size regional city of Coffs Harbour (population 65,000, ABS 2006<sup>1</sup>), interviews conducted with the manager and three teenage patrons indicate that film content can be responsible for significant fluctuations in attendance. As the cinema’s manager explained:

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<sup>1</sup> Population information is sourced from the measured data for rural populations compiled by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in its National Census. The most recent Census was conducted in 2006 with the next survey due in mid-2011.

Friday night is a big night, especially for teenagers and young adults. Our admissions on that night can vary a lot throughout the year depending on what we are screening. If it's something big like a *Twilight* or *Harry Potter* film we will generally get pretty busy but for films without a high profile we usually get less people.

Sue Mahoney interview, 3 December 2009

Similarly the local teenagers stated that the absence of appealing films tended to result in their non-attendance and the pursuit of alternative social and entertainment activities.

At the other end of the rural exhibition spectrum sits the single-screen Playhouse Cinema, a small venue with a seating capacity of just 80 that shows films only on weekends. It is located in the small town of Barraba in north west New South Wales, which at the last Census had a population of just 1,200 (ABS 2006). During a weekend visit to the town in August 2009 I interviewed the Playhouse's owner and a group of four teenage male patrons. In contrast to the teens in Coffs Harbour, these young men indicated their decisions concerning attendance were not strongly influenced by what film is screening. As one young man explained: 'We just turn up, we don't mind what the film is. There's about 15 of us from school that go [to the Playhouse Cinema] every Friday night'. The cinema's owner confirmed this core group of teens comes to just about anything he programmes on Friday evenings, from serious arthouse films to mainstream blockbusters (Andrew Sharp interview 15 August 2009).

Across the globe in the United States, a recent newspaper article about contemporary American rural cinema suggested a similar connection between the diminution in the importance of the film and

population density. It quotes a patron at the Dakota cinema in Crosby (population 1,000), as follows: 'If we were in Los Angeles or Phoenix, the only reason to go to a movie would be to see it ... but in a small town, the theatre is like a neighbourhood. It's the see-and-be-seen, bring everyone and sit together kind of place' (Leigh Brown 2010). Looking back to the period between 1920s and 1950s in Australia, Cork's (1995) study of cinema-going in the Parkes region emphasises the importance of the social aspects of cinema-going in a relatively small rural community. The majority of Cork's interviewees reported they went to the cinema primarily 'for the outing' while only a small number went specifically to see particular types of films, such as westerns, serials or cartoons (1995: 12).

These connections are far from being conclusive findings. However, they do suggest that in some rural locations, particularly very small towns, the desire to see particular films may not be the primary reason people seek out the cinema. The teenage males I interviewed in Barraba spoke at length about the desperate lack of youth-orientated activities in the town and how quickly the cinema had become central to their social life after it had opened eighteen months earlier. Their experiences offer a stark contrast to the teens interviewed in the much larger town of Coffs Harbour who had other options in the event the latest film did not appeal. In this regard locality – both as a geographic situation and as a socially constructed space – has been important in shaping their differentiated cinema experiences.

## **Sociality**

While sitting in a darkened room with attention fixed on a screen offers little chance of engaging in meaningful conversation, the wider context in which the act of public film viewing takes place can offer a myriad of opportunities for social interaction. These of course occur mostly outside the

screening and often outside the cinema itself, taking in activities such as the planning and anticipation of the event, travelling to and from the theatre and pre or post movie get-togethers and discussions. Discussions with rural audiences in Australia reveal that cinemas are regarded as important places in which residents of varying ages, interests and backgrounds can meet and interact in a relaxed and intimate local setting. The quality and quantity of interpersonal interactions that occur around local cinemas are often also very important to audiences, as comments received from a written survey of patrons at The Picture Show Man Cinema in the small coastal town of Merimbula (population 3,800, ABS 2006) indicate:

‘It's very enjoyable going to the cinema in Merimbula – it's good combination of a well-run business but still small enough to be friendly and personal’

Merimbula resident, male, 56-65 years.

‘A place for young/old, rich/poor and local/tourist’

Merimbula resident, female, 46-55 years

Similarly a regular patron at the First Avenue Cinema in the coastal town of Sawtell (population 12,000, ABS 2006) explained:

The Sawtell cinema isn't very modern and the seats are pretty uncomfortable but I live locally and I like the friendly atmosphere there. I usually have a bit of a chat with the owner as I buy my ticket and I often see other people I know there ... it is quite different to going to a cinema in a big city like Melbourne where I used to live.

Sawtell resident, female, mid 40s

Milner's paper about the community-run Bowraville Theatre (population 1000, ABS 2006) highlights the priority that was placed on creating a sense of belonging and personal connection for local residents at that cinema. As both a scholar and one of the cinema's leading volunteers she explained: 'we have worked hard to ensure that the theatre is not an anonymous multiplex spewing Hollywood fare: we even have ushers. There is no placelessness here' (2007: 10). These accounts offer a rather stark contrast to the superficial sociality that Phil Hubbard found characterised the modern multiplex experience in Leicester (2003: 262-264). He concluded that while these audiences considered cinema-going to be a social activity, they rarely engaged in meaningful interactions with anyone other than their pre-arranged companions. He notes in particular the tendency towards muted and somewhat mechanical movement through the foyer and the processes of buying tickets and items from candy bar into the cinema auditorium.

The historical component of Corbett's research with rural audiences in the United States indicates that cinemas are also remembered as 'unifying social forces' within their local communities (2008: 242). As one elderly patron, who had also worked at this particular cinema in the 1940s, explained:

It's a family theatre. If you go there, you become knit, you know each other. You know he sits there, oh, he's missing, is he sick today. I'd better call him on up, see if he's all right. You get to know people by a theatre like this. (cited in Corbett 2008: 244)

Based on research centred on film-going in the 1920s and 1930s at Cobargo, a small, isolated town on far south coast of New South Wales, Bowles concluded the ‘social experience of getting together with other members of the community .... was a critical element in sustaining modest rural picture shows operating under very marginal conditions’ (2008, see also 2007a). Considered against contemporary accounts of rural cinema-going in Merimbula, Sawtell and Bowraville, these historical studies suggests that cohesive social contexts have been a key feature of the non-metropolitan film experience over a long period.

## **Identity**

My interviews with contemporary rural audiences in Australia indicate there are often strong connections between cinemas and positive articulations of local identity. These are feelings which no doubt have their origin in the nature of the rich sociality outlined above. Decades of decline have significantly eroded the quality of life in many Australian rural towns and given rise to increasing levels of economic disadvantage and social dislocation (Productivity Commission 2009, Australian Human Rights Commission 1999). The ability to retain a cinema venue is seen by some local residents as a potent symbol of their local town’s resilience and success, as one respondent to the written survey conducted in Merimbula passionately explained: ‘I hope that unlike other small villages/towns in Australia we NEVER surrender this facility’ (capitalisation original text, Merimbula resident, female, 46-55 years). Strong emotional attachments to the cinema are nurtured and developed through attendance but this may in turn also drive cinema patronage. As sociologist Sheldon Stryker contends, ‘the meanings which persons attribute to themselves ... are especially critical to the process producing their actions’ (2001: 1254). If people perceive local access to cinema to be highly important, there is a

greater chance they will actively support it in order to ensure its survival and derive a sense of satisfaction from these acts. As one Merimbula resident succinctly explained: ‘We are lucky to have a twin cinema in a small town like this and we like to do our part in keeping it viable in and out of tourist season’ (Merimbula resident, female, 46-55 years).

Rural cinemas are often a highly visible component of small town infrastructures, which also contributes to their recognition and perception of value within the local landscape. They are generally located within the streetscapes of town centres, rather than in shopping malls as is common in metropolitan areas, and are buildings many residents pass as part of their daily routine. As sites of past and anticipated future experience, they are venues where enjoyable and perhaps even memorable events of people’s lives have taken place. As such they are regularly described being crucial to the local way of life, as these statements from patrons at the First Avenue Cinema in Sawtell indicate:

‘It’s very important that the community supports this cinema, because Sawtell and the Coffs Coast without it is unthinkable’

Sawtell resident, female, early 60s

‘the whole character of the main street would change if we lost the cinema’

Sawtell resident, male, mid 60s

Likewise, one of the contemporary rural patrons quoted in the *New York Times* article described her local cinema as ‘kind of the heart and soul of our town’ (Leigh Brown 2010).

Corbett concludes from the historical component of his research that rural cinemas were often ‘central to the identity of the town’ and its lifestyle (2008: 244-246). Other studies of early movie-going have drawn attention to how rural cinema operators openly cultivated strong social and civic connections with local residents as a means of ensuring their commercial survival (Allen 2006: 67-77; Waller 2005; Wilson 2006). Bowles’ study of cinema-going Cobargo offers an interesting contrast to these narratives. While the town’s cinema operator was considered a familiar figure, she argues his failure to participate more widely in local affairs meant he was not considered *part* of the community in the same way as other prominent town personalities at the time. Bowles concluded the Cobargo cinema was not centrally important to the rural communities in this region, although they lent it just enough support for it to keep going’ (2007b: 253). Both these historical accounts and those articulated by audiences in contemporary Australia draw attention to the duality that underpins the link between local identity and cinema attendance. They demonstrate how a geographically-situated concept of self can be shaped by film-going but also how these perceptions of identity are reinforced through attendance.

## **Conclusion**

This survey of rural movie-going has explored the significance of contemporary Australian cinemas to the residents of the communities in which they are located. It has also examined the connections that exist between the meaning of these experiences and those of audiences attending cinemas in earlier timeframes and different regional and national locations. The key themes of locality, sociality and identity demonstrate there are rich and, at times, complex social and personal meanings attached to the experience of going to the cinema in rural areas. As both contemporary research and historical studies have shown, film venues have constituted, and continue to operate as, important sites of social

interaction. They have a role in facilitating meaningful and memorable interpersonal contact and in helping to build a sense of local identity and social belonging. More broadly the contemporary-historical links suggest the need for critical scholarship to being to explore what lies beyond and outside the chronological and nationalistic delineations that tend to dominate audience research.

This article has demonstrated that disregard for the rural has had implications that extend beyond simply creating a gap in empirical knowledge. Its neglect as an area of critical inquiry has obscured important spatial and chronological interconnections, which suggest a basis for rethinking the way we approach the study of film audiences. In this regard this article adds another dimension to arguments advanced by Allen (2006) and Fuller-Seeley and Potamianos (2008), who contend that the neglect and the resultant devaluation of the rural have profoundly limited our understanding of how the cinema experience connects more broadly with society, culture, time and place. Addressing these kinds of conceptual and empirical deficiencies is crucial to the ongoing credibility of spatially-focused cinema studies, for two reasons. Firstly, as Bowles has argued, by connecting with other interests and perspectives, such as those found within sociology, economics and geography, the relevance of cinema studies, and its concurrent potential for longevity, is significantly enhanced (2007b: 254-255). Secondly, by engaging more comprehensively with the varied situations of film consumption, cinema studies is distinguished as a discipline that is thoughtfully and comprehensively engaged with its subject.

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