

Rural Cinema: Film Exhibition and Consumption in Australia and the United Kingdom

Author

Aveyard, Karina

Published

2012

Thesis Type

Thesis (PhD Doctorate)

School

School of Humanities

DOI

[10.25904/1912/309](https://doi.org/10.25904/1912/309)

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Rural Cinema: Film Exhibition and Consumption in Australia and the United Kingdom

Karina Aveyard
BA, MLitt

School of Humanities
Arts, Education and Law
Griffith University

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy

July 2012

Abstract

This thesis investigates the contexts of film exhibition and consumption in contemporary rural Australia and the United Kingdom (UK). As the site of most detailed fieldwork, Australia forms the primary focus of the investigation, while information gathered in the UK provides material for contextualisation and comparative analysis.

The public screening of films takes place in a wide variety of settings in rural areas of Australia and the UK. These range from modern multi-screen venues operating in large regional centres, through to older-style twin and single screen cinemas found in smaller places. In very small and remote settlements, where film exhibition is generally not viable on a commercial basis, screenings are held in purpose-built and make-shift facilities by local councils, community cooperatives, film societies and a few small-scale entrepreneurs.

As a commercial enterprise, the fortunes of film exhibitors are closely tied to wider economic and demographic trends. Over recent decades there has been a significant increase in the overall number of multiplexes in rural areas. However, this growth has taken place almost exclusively in large settlements, where it has been underpinned by broader increases in industrial activity, employment and population, as well as the rise in cinema-going frequency since the mid 1980s. In smaller, relatively stable towns, scaled-down single and twin screen cinemas are regularly able to survive and sometimes prosper. But in areas of social and economic decline film enterprises can be highly marginal concerns. For smaller operators adaptation and innovation are often key skill requirements. Initiatives such as in-house movie clubs, low ticket prices, and efforts to personalise patrons' film-going experiences all form an important part of their marketing strategies. For other cinemas the secret to longevity can centre around creating a sub-commercial operating structure, one which allows the enterprise to utilise financial support mechanisms such as government funding and volunteer labour.

This study investigates the different industrial, cultural and geographic factors that influence movie exhibition in non-metropolitan Australia and the UK. Systematic analysis of the various screening settings identified above is organised around an original five-tiered

clustering model. This typology classifies cinemas on the basis of their scale and operational characteristics under the headings: Large Commercial Cinemas; Small Commercial Cinemas; Subsidised Cinemas; Community Cinemas; and Improvised Cinemas. These delineations form the basis for Chapters One to Five of the dissertation. Each chapter examines the defining characteristics of the category, its historical contexts and presents analysis of relevant trends and issues, such as digital projection, piracy and government intervention. Profiles of case study cinema sites are also included. These are designed to further illustrate the key features of the category under discussion and underscore the value of the cinema model as an organisational and conceptual tool.

The second major interest of this thesis lies in exploring the socio-cultural meanings of modern rural cinema-going. This provides the focus for the final Sixth Chapter of the thesis. The findings from this study indicate that rural cinemas operate as sites of popular entertainment and cultural engagement. At a rudimentary level this may be understood as a relatively straightforward commercial transaction – one in which money is exchanged in return for the opportunity to see a particular movie at a fixed time and place. However, going to the cinema is also important for reasons that extend beyond the screen. Rural film theatres are often highly valued as positive spaces around which isolated communities can gather and interact. In small towns where there can be little to do outside drinking at the local pub, cinemas provide an important alternative space for building community connections and broadening social inclusion. They add to the vibrancy of rural places and make a positive contribution to local economies. As local spaces of feeling and of social activity, rural cinemas can have a role in encouraging residents to more positively connect with the place in which they live and the people with whom they share it.

Declaration

This is a statement to certify that:

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma at any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Karina Aveyard

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List of Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACOFS	Australian Council of Film Societies
AFACT	Australian Federation Against Copyright Theft
AFC	Australian Film Commission
BFFS	British Federation of Film Societies
BFI	British Film Institute
CEA	Cinema Exhibitors Association
DCI	Digital Cinema Initiatives
DFP	Digital Funding Partnership (UK)
ICAA	Independent Cinemas Association of Australia
MPDAA	Motion Picture Distributors Association of Australia
NFSA	National Film and Sound Archive
NSWFTO	New South Wales Film and Television Office
STFF	Sydney Travelling Film Festival
UKFC	UK Film Council
VPF	Virtual Print Fee

Acknowledgements

This has been a great project to work on. I would like to acknowledge a number of people who have helped contribute to its success. First, my sincere thanks goes to all the rural cinema owners, managers, volunteers, film-goers, distributors and cinema historians who shared their knowledge and experiences with me. A number of people were particularly generous with their time and ideas: Anna Balgrave, Kieren Dell, Brian and Sarah Guthrie, David Kilderry, Steve Meggs, Alice Morelli, Denis Parkes, Sean Perkins, Andrew Pike, David Saunders, Andrew Sharpe, Ross Thorne and Susan Wilson.

This research was made possible by a Linkage Grant from the Australian Research Council, and I warmly thank the industry partners, the National Film and Sound Archive and Screen Australia, for their financial support and active involvement. I am very grateful to Kim Ireland for her interest in the project, which was crucial in the early stages, and subsequently for the input and assistance of Anne Landrigan, Jane Cruickshank, Matthew Deaner, Brendan Smith and Jacqui North. I also wish to express my gratitude to the Menzies Centre for Australian Studies at Kings College London, the School of Humanities at Griffith University and Mrs Sarah Dingwell, who provided additional grants that enabled me to conduct comparative research in the United Kingdom.

Over the course of this study, many others have given encouragement, advice and inspiration at key stages. I am most grateful for and appreciative of the support I have received from Kathy Fuller-Seeley, Ailsa Hollinshead, Mark Jancovich, Janna Jones, Wendy Keys, Ramon Lobato, Lisa Milner and Deb Verhoeven.

Most of all, I am grateful for the expert insights and guidance provided by my supervisor, Albert Moran. I am indebted to him for the assistance he provided throughout this project.

On a personal level, I want to express my thanks to my parents John, Barbara and Jan for always encouraging and supporting me throughout my education and university studies.

Finally, but not least, I would like to thank my husband Peter whose support has been unwavering throughout this endeavour. Your wisdom and advice at vital times has been invaluable. I could not have done this without you.

Other Acknowledgements

Material from this thesis has appeared, in modified form, in other scholarly publications as follows:

- Parts of the journal article ‘What the Country Tells Us – the Place of the “Rural” in Contemporary Studies of Cinema’, *Media International Australia*, 139 (2011), pp. 124–32 appear in the ‘The Place of the Rural in Contemporary Studies of Cinema’ section of the Introduction, the Critical Contexts section of Chapter 2 and throughout Chapter 6.
- Material from the case study of The Picture Show Man Cinema, Merimbula (Chapter 2) appeared in the journal article ‘More Than Making Do: Rethinking Cinema Attendance in Regional and Rural Australia’, *Studies in Australasian Cinema*, 5(1) (2011), pp. 7–18.
- Parts of the journal article ‘Coming to a Cinema Near You: Digital Cinema, Exhibition and Audiences in Australia’, *Studies in Australasian Cinema*, 3(2) (2009), pp. 191–203 appear in the digital cinema sections of Chapters 1 and 2.
- Parts of the journal article ‘Australian Films at the Cinema: Rethinking the Role of Distribution and Exhibition’, *Media International Australia*, 138 (2011), pp. 36–45, appear in the industry overview sections of Chapter 1.
- Parts of the journal article ‘The Place of Cinema and Film in Contemporary Rural Australia’, *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, 8(2), <http://www.participations.org/Volume%208/Issue%202/3a%20Aveyard.pdf>, were used throughout in Chapter 6.

This project was conducted in accordance with protocols for the ethical conduct of research set by Griffith University, under the approval reference ART/28/08/HREC.

Lastly, I acknowledge and warmly thank Sue Jarvis for her proofreading work on the thesis.

Introduction

The Place of Cinema in Rural Australia and the United Kingdom

Cinema is one of the most accessible and popular forms of cultural entertainment in rural Australia and the United Kingdom (UK). The diversity of screen content, together with the cinema's relative affordability, can draw together audiences from a broad range of demographic, socio-economic and geographic situations. Cinema-going does not require any special skills or interests in order to participate, unlike social activities based around sport, professional association or art and craft interests. Movie theatres are open to people of all ages, limited only by the classification of the film being screened. While most of the films screened will eventually be accessible elsewhere via formats such as DVD and the internet, cinemas provide a unique setting for their consumption – one that draws audiences into a variety of geographically specific personal encounters and social interactions.

Films are exhibited in a wide variety of settings in non-metropolitan areas of Australia and the UK. There are significant similarities between the two countries in terms of the form and pattern of these different screening situations. In large regional centres, the cinema landscape is dominated by modern multi-screen venues with wide screens, comfortable seats and an extensive selection of latest releases. In smaller towns, older-style twin- and single-screen cinemas are more common. In very small and remote settlements, where film exhibition is generally not viable on a commercial basis, screenings are held in purpose-built and makeshift facilities by organisations such as local councils, community cooperatives and film societies, as well as a few small-scale entrepreneurs. These latter types of cinemas generally operate on a part-time basis and often as not-for-profit ventures. For the purpose of this study, they are termed 'sub-commercial'. This label reflects the fact these are generally not driven by the same profit-making imperatives as dedicated commercial operators. However, at the same time, it also recognises they are still driven by the need to attract a regular audience to cover costs and to demonstrate their relevance and value to funding partners, volunteers and the wider community.

Rural cinemas operate as sites of popular entertainment, enjoyment and cultural engagement. They are also highly valued as positive spaces around which isolated communities can gather and interact. In small towns where there can be little to do apart from drinking at the local pub, cinemas offer an alternative space for building community connections and broadening social participation. They add to the vibrancy of rural places and make a contribution to local economies. While the majority of box office takings are generally returned to metropolitan-based distributors, these businesses spend money on some locally sourced goods and services, and provide important employment and training opportunities.

As a commercial enterprise, the fortunes of film exhibitors are closely tied to wider economic and demographic trends. Over the past three decades, there has been a sustained phase of cinematic expansion in selected rural areas of Australia and the UK. Encouraged by the success of multiplex venues in city locations, major exhibition chains have been increasing their non-metropolitan screen capacities via new constructions and the expansion of existing sites. However, these developments have been restricted to locations with relatively high population densities. In Australia, analysis of the location of multiplex cinemas (complexes with four or more screens) suggests a population of at least 30,000–40,000 is required to support such a venue. There are some exceptions, but these tend to be located in popular tourist destinations where a regular turnover of out-of-town patrons is available to supplement local audiences. In the UK, the minimum population threshold is slightly higher, and this may be attributable to a lower average cinema-going frequency than in Australia (on a per capita basis).¹

In contrast, in areas where populations and economies are declining, many cinema enterprises have become increasingly marginal. For exhibitors in small towns, adaptation and innovation have become crucial to their survival. Strategies such as minimising operational overheads, offering generous in-house movie clubs and low ticket prices, and efforts to personalise the film-going experience all form an important part of their business approach. In more isolated and remote locations, other cinemas are able to survive only by abandoning their commercial

¹ In the seven years 2003–09, annual cinema admissions in the United Kingdom averaged 2.7 times per person. Over the same period in Australia, admissions were higher – averaging 4.2 times per person (UK Film Council, 2010, *Statistical Yearbook 2010*, <http://sy10.ukfilmcouncil.ry.com/9.4.asp>, accessed 7 July 2011).

aspirations and instead adopting a sub-commercial structure that can help alleviate the financial strain.

In broad terms, the social and economic disparities between metropolitan and rural populations give rise to distinctive operating environments for rural exhibitors. Since the end of World War II, there has been a significant trend away from non-metropolitan living in Australia. Declining employment brought about by the increasing mechanisation of agriculture and other primary industries has helped encourage people to drift towards the brighter opportunities available in the city. Over the decades, this has resulted in major losses in many rural towns and brought about closures of secondary businesses and public services. More recently, these problems have been exacerbated by a widespread, prolonged drought, and the ongoing and highly uneven impact of a series of government-led competition policy reforms introduced in the mid-1990s (see Productivity Commission 1999; Australian Human Rights Commission 1999). In numerous places, these events have contributed to substantial losses in local employment and further deterioration in the accessibility and adequacy of key facilities, such as health, education and training, banking, telecommunications and basic utilities (water and electricity). Examining the effect of the economic reforms in particular, the Productivity Commission concluded that in some rural places their impact had been sufficient to threaten the ‘critical mass’ of entire towns (1999: 386).

Across the globe in the UK, the Rural Services Network identifies the high cost of housing, the inaccessibility of public services – particularly public transport – and a lack of employment opportunities as the areas of most serious concern for non-metropolitan populations (Rural Services Network 2011). The rise in second home ownership by people whose primary residence is in London (or another of the country’s major cities) has pushed up prices in many rural villages. For permanent residents in rental accommodation, this has placed increasing pressure on household budgets. For others, it has put local home ownership beyond their reach. This trend has also had other detrimental impacts on life. With significant numbers of homes occupied on a transitory basis, revenues for local shops decline, as do clients for services such as education, health and public transport. Falling turnovers and high property prices have seen many shops and pubs converted to housing, while other services such as schools, doctors and buses have been downgraded or lost altogether. Less tangible, although nonetheless real, is the way absentee home ownership can alter the ambience of a

village or small town. Fewer people going about their daily routine can diminish the vitality of a settlement.

The diverse economic and social conditions found in rural Australia and the UK have a major influence on the way in which cinemas operate in different locations, including whether they can be sustained at a commercial level. As this thesis will demonstrate, these conditions give rise to several distinctive modes of exhibition. They also have a major influence on the film-going aspirations and emotional responses of audiences in different rural locations.

Aims and Significance of This Study

The aims of this study were twofold. The first objective was to conduct a detailed analysis of the industrial, cultural, geographic and historical factors that shape the varied circumstances in which films are screened to audiences in contemporary rural Australia and the UK. The second goal was to examine the significance of rural cinemas as sites of cultural consumption and social interaction.

With regard to the first aim, systematic analysis of the different exhibition settings found in rural Australia and the UK is organised around an original five-tiered clustering model. This model categorises cinemas on the basis of their operational characteristics, and provides a robust and innovative framework for mapping the economic and cultural geographies of commercial and non-commercial film exhibition. In most cases, the hierarchy as it descends corresponds with *declining* population densities and prospects for commercial viability, and *increasing* geographic remoteness, as follows:

- Large Commercial Cinemas
- Small Commercial Cinemas
- Subsidised Cinemas
- Community Cinemas
- Improvised Cinemas

The majority of rural towns host only one type of cinematic enterprise, but there are a few exceptions. For example, Bundaberg in Queensland supports a four-screen Reading Cinema (Large Commercial) as well as the single-screen Moncrieff Theatre, which is owned by the local council (Subsidised Cinema). Similarly, Taree in New South Wales sustains Fay's Twin Cinemas (Small Commercial) and the Taree Film Society (Community Cinema), which organises the screening art-house films that would not normally be shown as part of Fay's mainstream program.

With regard to the second aim of this project, the analysis explores the social and cultural meaning of rural film attendance. At one level, going to the cinema constitutes a straightforward commercial transaction, one in which money is exchanged in return for the opportunity to see a particular movie at a fixed time and in a particular place. In this scenario, patrons may be understood as being enticed largely by the film product on offer and the appeal of the environment in which it is to be screened. However, going to the cinema can also be important for reasons that extend beyond the screen and the theatre. As local spaces of feeling and of social activity, rural movie theatres have a role in encouraging residents to connect more positively with the place in which they live and the people with whom they share it. The examination of both commerciality and sociality of rural cinema-going this aspect of the research is structured around three thematic concerns: sociality; identity and belonging; and films.

This study represents the first major investigation into contemporary rural film exhibition and attendance practices in either Australia or the UK. Further, it constitutes one of only a handful of critical projects of any scope to engage with film viewing in present-day, non-metropolitan contexts. Around a third of all Australians and Britons live outside capital cities and other major metropolitan centres (ABS 2010; Office of National Statistics 2011a). Despite the salience of these figures, the fact remains that very little is understood about non-metropolitan film consumption in either country. This neglect has profoundly limited critical understanding of the rural screen industry and its situation within the national, global and transnational cinema landscape. It also represents a major gap in knowledge about film audiences at a time when critical interest in cinema-going as a social practice has never been greater (e.g. see Bowles 2007a; Allen 2006; Jancovich et al. 2003; Hubbard 2003, 2002).

Disregard for the rural also has implications that extend beyond academic studies. Strategies to enhance access to culture have come to be seen as a key component of broader public programs aimed at improving rural life. However, many of these initiatives currently are informed by and justified largely on the basis of anecdotal evidence. More formal, systematised knowledge, such as that compiled in this study, has the potential to assist with the funding and implementation of more effective policies and strategies.

Research Questions

This study of rural cinemas and their audiences addresses several key research questions:

- How, where and when are films exhibited in non-metropolitan areas of Australia and the UK?
- To what extent do national and global exhibition industry trends and issues influence rural operators? In particular, how have non-metropolitan cinemas been constrained or liberated by the development of digital film projection technologies?
- Why do people go to the movies in rural areas?
- Can cinema attendance contribute to an enhanced sense of community or social belonging? Who has access to and who is excluded from this collectivity?
- How divergent are contemporary rural audience experiences across different geographic locations and exhibition situations? How might these connect with rural cinema-going in other places and across different historical periods?
- Has critical neglect of contemporary rural exhibition frameworks and audiences obscured important conceptual and methodological issues?

Methodology and Sources

This study is based on material from three primary sources: case studies conducted at rural cinemas in Australia and the UK; analysis of the film exhibition industry; and an investigation of broader rural economic and social trends and issues. The collection and interpretation of data was guided by a combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques, including

interviews, written surveys and visual ethnography. This approach was well suited to the project's aim of establishing elements of empirical knowledge and interpretative social and cultural contexts.

For reasons of accessibility, the most detailed case study work was carried out in sites around Australia where research continued over a two-year period. As a result, Australia is positioned as the primary focus of the discussion and analysis. Work in the UK was undertaken over a shorter period of sixteen weeks. Due to issues of manageability and budget, the latter investigations were concentrated in the eastern counties of Norfolk and Suffolk. While material from the UK does not match the Australian research in terms of its comprehensiveness, it is nevertheless highly significant. It has extended the breadth of empirical knowledge about rural cinema, and provided the focus for the comparative analysis that is interwoven throughout this study. Investigations into the situation of cinema in the UK suggest that the cinematic clustering model has applicability beyond the Australian situation. These have also helped identify important areas of commonality as well as more unique aspects of cinema-going in these two national locations.

The UK and Australia provide a sound basis for a comparative study. While not directly analogous in geographic or demographic terms, both operate under similar governmental structures, and within similar public arts and culture funding environments. They are also countries where evocations and images of the rural feature prominently in articulations of national identity. The fact that they differ significantly in terms of land area and levels of remoteness was also important in terms of investigation potential contrasts. However, rather than marking points of differentiation it was significant to observe that rural populations in the UK often perceived themselves to be just as disconnected and cut off as people living in Australia in far more extreme situations of isolation. These feelings highlight the relativity and subjectivity that is inherent in the shaping of rural identities (see Creed and Ching 1997).

In industrial terms, the positioning of Australia and the UK within the Anglo-American film hierarchy raised further interesting points for comparative analysis. To extend the tiered system proposed by Tunstall and Machin (1999), the United States (US) may be regarded as being the leading film nation, with its domestic industry having the highest level of autonomy and financial stability and the lowest level of content importation. In order of declining

independence and increasing foreign content, the US is followed by the UK at number two, Australia and Canada at number three and other English speaking markets such as New Zealand and Jamaica at number four. In the mid-range, the UK may be regarded as more progressive than Australia, and thus in some instances has the capacity to point to emerging industry trends as well as to highlight inherent structural limitations that shape the capacities of smaller nations. The latter was demonstrated most clearly by the higher level of sub-commercial activity found in the UK, where the pool of government grants and subsidies available to such enterprises is larger.

Cinema Case Studies

Detailed investigations were carried out at ten cinema sites located around Australia and five sites in the UK. These locations are listed in Appendix A, along with other rural cinemas visited during the course of this research but examined in less depth. The case study locations were selected on the basis of their capacity to illustrate the diverse and distinctive situations in which films are screened in rural areas. These micro investigations inform the research as a whole. Within each chapter, analysis of each of the five exhibition categories (according to the model set out above) is complemented by a more detailed examination of two relevant case study cinema sites (presented in the 'In Focus' section).

The work undertaken at each site included a tour of the cinema venue; interviews with the cinema owner/manager and local residents; attendance at a film screening;² and spending some time in the local area in order to get a sense of its general mood and character. I also lived for two years at one of the case study sites, Sawtell, located on the New South Wales mid-north coast. During this time, I was a regular patron of the local First Avenue Cinema and became involved as a committee member in a community group that was established in 2009 to support the cinema during a period of financial difficulty. The 25 interviews conducted with cinema owners and managers from the case study sites and elsewhere are listed in Appendix B.

Interviews were also carried out with 32 audiences in Australia and twelve in the UK. In accordance with ethics approval, cinema patrons who participated in this research are not

² The exception was the Blyth Cinema, South Australia, where I was not able to attend a film screening.

identified by name but are distinguished in this study by their gender, age and place of residence when referred to in written outcomes. In order to broaden audience participation beyond oral testimonies, a written survey about cinema-going was distributed in four locations – in Australia at Merimbula and Sawtell, and in the UK at Fakenham and Wells-next-the-Sea. A total of 570 questionnaires were circulated, yielding 205 responses (36 per cent). A pro forma of the questionnaire appears in Appendix C and tabulated results from the survey are included in Appendix D.

Industry Analysis

Research into the distribution and exhibition industries was informed by a range of sources including box office and cinema data compiled by the Motion Picture Distributors Association of Australia (MPDAA), Screen Australia, the British Film Institute (and formerly as the UK Film Council) and the British Federation of Film Societies; interviews with industry professionals, such as film distributors, regional film festival managers, rural arts organisations and rural film development officers (detailed in Appendix B); industry and governmental reports, such as Beinart 2005, the Australian Film Commission 2000, Pike 2000a, 2000b and Ritchie 1996; and trade and mainstream media. Through the NFSA, access was also granted to the archived files from the Regional Cinema Program which operated in New South Wales in the 1990s and 2000s. This material underpinned the development of knowledge about how the exhibition industry operates in non-metropolitan areas and identification of key trends and issues, such as film programming and access to prints, digital projection, profitability and the often delicate nature of the relationship between exhibitors and film distributors.

Rural Analysis

Analysis of the social and economic situation in rural Australia and the UK was used to inform and contextualise the findings from the cinema case studies and film industry investigations. This work was based on reports, including those published by the Australian Productivity Commission (1999, 2009), Australian Human Rights Commission (1999), Kenyon and Black (2001) and the UK Rural Services Network (2011); demographic and economic data published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and Office of National Statistics (UK); news items in metropolitan and rural print media; and local resident interviews. Research focused on rural media (e.g. Ewart 2000; Van Vuuren 2007) and rural

policy (e.g. Herbert-Cheshire 2000; Hodge and Monk 2004; Pritchard and McManus 2000) provided background on how rural issues have been conceptualised and discussed in critical studies.

The ‘Rural’ in Contemporary Studies of Cinema

There has recently been a growing unease within cinema studies about taking the urban (or even more the metropolitan) landscape as the prime object of research, as scholars begin to acknowledge differences in the exhibition structure and film experience within villages and small towns. (Meers et al. 2010: 277)

As Philippe Meers highlights, interest in the circumstances of film circulation, presentation and consumption in rural settings has been growing over the past decade or so. Film history has been at the forefront of this broadening of cinema studies. The US and Australia have formed the primary sites for these investigations (e.g. Bowles 2007a, 2007b; Fuller 1996; Allen 2006; Waller 2003–04), although other projects have originated in locations including Belgium (Meers et al. 2010) and New Zealand (Geoff Lealand’s online project <http://cinemasofnz.info>). The relatively small but significant body of research to have emerged from these studies has drawn attention to two important factors. First, they have highlighted the wide variety of situations – both commercial and sub-commercial – in which films have been screened to audiences. Second, they have demonstrated the extent to which the meaning of these viewing experiences has been shaped by the specificities of their location. As several film historians contend, scholarly disregard for the rural has tended to obscure the significance of the geographic dimensions of cinema-going. It is argued that this has also given rise to a reductionist narrative that has seen the cinematic experience linked primarily with the rise of twentieth century metropolitan modernity to the exclusion of its other spatial formation (Allen 2006: 64–5; Fuller-Seeley and Potamianos 2008: 5–6).

In countering the dominance of metropolitan/modernity discourses, Kathy Fuller-Seeley and George Potamianos use 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 fewer than 10,000 people (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). In the UK, changes in urban/rural proportions over the course of the twentieth century have been less dramatic. Nevertheless, in 1911 just under 30 per cent of the population lived in a rural area, which at the time equated to around 12 million people (Hicks and Allen 1999). Failing to adequately account for these differentiated cinematic experiences has, as Robert Allen argues, tended to squash ‘a complex and dynamic cultural and social geography into a simplistic binary grid of city/country’ (2006: 64).

Geography has also been demonstrated to be significant in determining how the cinema industry has operated over the past hundred years or so. 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 and reshape their businesses to fit local conditions. Similarly, Gregory Waller’s (2003–04) profile of itinerant exhibitor Robert Southard 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 by 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 in New South Wales looks at how rural infrastructure – in this 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), Robert 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 patterns 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 US. 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).

Despite this interest in the history of rural cinema, relatively little is known about its contemporary situation. 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 (for example Jancovich et al. 2003; Jones 2003; Fuller-Seeley 2008). Some recent accounts of rural cinema-going practice exist, but they are very limited. Karen Crowe (2005, 2007) has examined the revival of cinemas in small towns in New South Wales, and the misappropriation by policy-makers of the concept of ‘community’. Exploring some interconnected themes, Lisa Milner (2007) has looked at 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) chart the establishment of non-commercial cinemas in rural areas of New South Wales through interviews with patrons and volunteers, and footage of cinemas and their rural landscapes. Articles about rural cinemas also appear from time to time in trade and mainstream press – in Australia (Kaufman 2009; Metcalfe 2003; Smith 2001a), in the UK (Morris 2011; Humphries 2003) and in the US (Leigh Brown 2010). These stories tend to centre on somewhat predictable themes. Specifically, they emphasise the resilience and resourcefulness of particular communities and highlight the role of the local cinema in countering the hardships and isolation of country life. While mainstream media provided some useful contextualisation for material gathered in this study, of themselves the articles do not stand alone as empirical sources.

Several factors are attributable to the neglect of the rural as a site of critical inquiry. The feasibility of undertaking research in non-metropolitan locations can be limited by geographic distance and budgetary constraints (Bowles 2008). However, beyond these practical considerations, the rural regularly is conceptualised as a place that is disconnected from cultural events or phenomena to do with modernity and progressiveness (see Creed and Ching 1997). These attitudes play a role in limiting the appeal and immediacy of the rural as a subject for scholarly investigation. More specifically, Bowles (2008) argues that the

ascendancy of discourses linking developments in film attendance with a specifically metropolitan-based sense of modernity has added to the difficulty in making the case for the rural within cinema studies. 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 20 years or so. However, not all spatial aspects of culture and media usage fall within these urban/rural oppositional boundaries. As this study demonstrates, a more comprehensive understanding of the geography of cinema must consider instances of distinctive local variation alongside those of the metropolitan mainstream.

Research focused on the present-day experience of cinema in rural situations contributes to expanding the overall body of empirical knowledge, but it also highlights some important methodological and conceptual issues. In terms of research practice, the spatial disaggregation of rural cinemas offers unique opportunities for self-contained case studies. The various micro-investigations conducted as part of this study were crucial in highlighting the primacy of local factors, rather than regional or national issues, in determining individual community reception and capacity for cinema. It was, for example, clearly demonstrated that in small and isolated towns cinematic deprivation is of itself not sufficient either to create the impetus for or sustain a community enterprise to fill the gap. In such instances, factors such as local history, economic circumstances, the availability of a suitable venue, and the skills and capabilities of the potential volunteer workforce were shown to be equally relevant.

The rural case study profiles in this thesis also contribute to enhancing and extending the ways in which scholars identify and study the vast array of regional, national and global screening situations. The cinema classification model further highlights the economic and socio-cultural diversity that exists within both the commercial and sub-commercial sectors. As a methodological tool, micro investigations conducted as part of this study are constrained by the specificities of their location. However, if cinema is conceived – as Allen (cited in Bowles 2007a: 95) suggests – ‘not as a set of geographically dispersed sites but cultural, social and economic networks’, the possibilities are greatly enhanced. The case study approach has been widely and productively used in a range of other cinema research projects, including Phil Hubbard’s study of multiplex cinemas in Leicester (2002, 2003), Jancovich et al.’s work in Nottingham (2003), that of Janna Jones in the southern United States (2003) and

Kate Bowles' research in Cobargo (2007a). Writing from the experience of conducting his own film audience research projects, Kevin Corbett observes how simply talking with people about their cinema experiences can offer a highly effective means of investigating the richness and complexity of this cultural practice (2008: 247–8). Fuller-Seeley and Potamianos argue that localised studies can be crucial in revealing new concepts that force scholars to rethink accepted ideas and interpretations (2008: 12).

The cinema model provides a framework for engaging with the more intricate detail of how different cinemas operate, how they are sustained and even why they close. It goes beyond the simplistic and metro-centric multiplex vs independent/art-house dichotomy that has tended to dominate exhibition research (e.g. Klinger 2006; Harbord 2002; Acland 2003). Instead, it successfully highlights the diverse range of cinema ventures that exist in rural Australia and the UK. The model also provides a useful framework for examining audience responses to different exhibition settings. However, applied in this way, the model reveals commonality and similarity rather than lines of distinction. With the exception of audiences attending Large Commercial Cinemas where there was some marked differentiation in comments, patrons across each of the other types of rural cinemas identified in this study articulated remarkably analogous details and emotions about their cinematic encounters. Contextualisation of these findings with historical material from Australia and the UK, as well as from the US and Belgium, reveals further striking connections. These suggest 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 of these.

This survey of rural cinema scholarship is intended to provide a broad overview of historical and contemporary research and debates on non-metropolitan exhibition and attendance. More extensive discussion appears in the 'Critical Contexts' section of each chapter, where analysis of the relevant scholarly research is framed more specifically around the subject under examination. Chapter 1 traces critical analysis of the modern multiplex phenomenon and its implications for large rural cinemas. This is followed in Chapter 2 by a more detailed reflection on the case study as a methodological tool. Chapter 3 examines the background for government assistance for rural cinema enterprises, while Chapters 4 and 5 examine issues to

do with the neglect of marginal film enterprises. The final chapter looks at concepts pertinent to how we understand and study film audiences in rural locations.

Geographic Parameters and Definitional Issues

This study is centred on cinema exhibition and film consumption as it occurs in non-metropolitan areas of Australia and the UK – that is, in places outside capital cities and other very large cities. In a local context, this excludes the five major state capitals,³ as well as places such as Newcastle, Wollongong and Geelong. In the UK, it eliminates the Greater London area and big cities like Birmingham, Leeds, Glasgow, Manchester and Liverpool. However, this non-metropolitan demarcation encompasses a wide and varied range of geographic and demographic situations, taking in larger regional centres, smaller towns and tiny villages, and hamlets with only a few hundred residents. Within these broad delineations, instances of cinema exhibition are equally diverse, as indicated in the classification model outlined above. However, they do not always directly correspond, and for this reason the clustering model is constructed around cinema type rather than settlement type.

In Australia, non-metropolitan areas are typically referred to as ‘regional, rural and remote’. While this term appears in widespread general use, there is no agreed, formal definition for what it actually refers to. Even the policy research centre, the National Institute for Rural and Regional Australia (NIRRA), established in 2009, does not advance a clear explanation for the term. In fact, since November 2010 its web forum has been hosting an ongoing debate on this very topic (NIRRA 2011). One key issue for researchers attempting to arrive at an agreed definition is that low population densities are not always directly linked to a corresponding level of geographic isolation. For example, depending on its proximity to other larger settlements, a very small village may not always be remote, while a larger town may be so isolated it is not appropriate to consider it as regional.

³ Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) attempts to account for these complexities in its Australian Standard Geographical Classification Remoteness Index.⁴ This organises the national population into areas that share common characteristics of remoteness, rather than defining settlements based on population alone – although analysis of the latter does inform the compilation of the regional boundaries. The Index comprises five categories: Major Cities, Inner Regional Australia, Outer Regional Australia, Remote Australia and Very Remote Australia. The non-metropolitan areas covered by this study equate broadly with the locations that fall outside the Major Cities category. This is home to approximately seven million people (31 per cent of the national population) (ABS 2005, 2010). Two issues relevant to the parameters and emphasis of the cinema model are important to note here. First, not all the residents of non-metropolitan Australia live in settlements that have regular public film screenings. This point is equally applicable to the UK. Second, there is no consistent relationship between the locations of the various types of rural cinema identified in the clustering model and the ABS's remoteness regions. Hence, beyond its capacity to delineate metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas, the ABS Index is of limited value as a basis for more detailed analysis.

Comparative analysis of population data compiled in the UK was also undertaken, and further assisted with the determination of 125,000 population figure as the point of city/rural demarcation for this study. The Rural/Urban Definitions for England and Wales, devised by the Office of National Statistics (ONS), comprises four categories: Urban, Town and Fringe, Village and Hamlet, and Isolated Dwellings (2011b). The leading category, Urban, is defined as settlements with over 10,000 people. This very broad definition limited the usefulness of the ONS data because of its lack of capacity to delineate between people living in major cities and those in smaller, but nonetheless significant, settlements. In contrast, the classification used by the Scottish government proved highly useful for comparative purposes. The top tier of its population categories is roughly comparable with the ABS Remoteness Index category 'Major Cities' (Scottish Government 2011). The Scottish system divides the country into six types of settlement area:

⁴ The Index is based on the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia developed by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care and the National Key Centre for Social Applications of GIS (ABS 2005).

- Large Urban Area (population over 125,000)
- Other Urban Area (population 10,000 to 125,000)
- Accessible Small Towns (population 3,000–10,000)
- Remote Small Towns (population 3,000-10,000)
- Accessible Rural (population less than 3,000)
- Remote Rural (population less than 3,000).⁵

An obvious limitation is that this provides measured data for Scotland only. However, by applying these definitional parameters to the wider UK, I was able to construct an estimate for the rural population of the nation as a whole that was comparable to the Australian ABS data. Using detailed population data from the ONS, settlements with more than 125,000 people were disaggregated from national figures. This indicated that approximately 20 million people (32 per cent) in the UK live in what may be understood as non-metropolitan areas.

For reasons principally of brevity, this study refers to the non-metropolitan areas identified above as ‘rural’. In the Australian context, it avoids the repetition of the cumbersome ‘regional, rural and remote’ terminology that, in strict definitional terms, is no more precise. The use of the term ‘rural’ also aids consistency with the UK, where this term is in widespread use. Areas that lie outside the rural are identified either as the ‘city’ or ‘metropolitan’. The term ‘urban’ is not applied in this context as its meaning can relate to a particular style of dense living that can occur in both metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. For example, people living in the built-up areas of Mildura in Victoria (population 46,000, ABS 2006) may just as legitimately be regarded as living in an urban setting as those in a major city such as Sydney or Birmingham. References to ‘country’ are also deliberately avoided. The socio-cultural connotations associated with this term have the potential to complicate the locational meanings that underpin this study. For example, cultural phenomena such as country music or country living home decor may be considered to be *of* the rural, but may not necessarily be geographically positioned there.

⁵ Accessible is defined as those areas within that are within a 30-minute drive from the centre of a town with a population of 10,000 or more.

Chapter Outline

This thesis is divided into six sections. The first five chapters examine the operational characteristics of the five categories of the cinema clustering model outlined: Large Commercial Cinemas, Small Commercial Cinemas, Subsidised Cinemas, Community Cinemas and Improvised Cinemas. The final Chapter Six looks at the experiences of audiences in these different viewing situations.

Chapters 1 to 5 address questions related to how, when and where films screened to audiences in rural areas of Australia and the UK. In doing so, they also highlight the strong similarities that exist between non-metropolitan cinemas across the two nations. Analysis of current trends, including the shift from 35mm to digital projection, piracy and the rise in government funding, demonstrates the complex network of relationships that exist between forces circulating at global, national and local levels of discussion. These draw attention to the importance of geography in understanding the contours of the modern rural cinema landscape. Each cinema chapter also incorporates two case studies relevant to the category. These finer perspectives further illustrate the defining characteristics of the tiers of the model, and help underscore its value as an organisational and conceptual tool.

The opening sections on Large Commercial and Small Commercial Cinemas are concerned with types of for-profit film exhibition. These categories are differentiated from one another on the basis of screen capacity, although from this fairly rudimentary demarcation various other distinguishing geographic, aesthetic and operational features also follow. Chapter 1 looks at large cinema complexes with four screens or more, defined locally by the MPDAA and Screen Australia as a ‘multiplex’ (see MPDAA 2011).⁶ Large, multi-screen cinemas are characterised by a contemporary aesthetic that incorporates high-quality film presentation technologies, ergonomic seating, latest release movies, modern decor and features such as online ticketing. Most are owned by chain operators – companies like Village Roadshow, Greater Union and Birch Carroll and Coyle in Australia, and Odeon, Cineworld and Vue in

⁶ International definitions of ‘multiplex’ vary. In the United Kingdom a cinema venue with five or more screens is regarded as a multiplex (see UK Film Council *Statistical Yearbook 2010* <http://sy10.ukfilmcouncil.ry.com/9.1.asp>). The European media research agency MEDIA Salles defines a multiplex as a venue with eight or more screens (see MEDIA Salles *2008 European Cinema Yearbook* <http://www.mediasalles.it/ybk08fin/index.html>).

the UK. The chapter places the development of non-metropolitan multiplexes over the past two decades within the wider context of increasing corporate domination of exhibition, and draws attention to the impact this has had on competition as well as the increasing standardisation of public film viewing.

Still with a for-profit focus but on a more modest scale, Chapter 2 focuses on Small Commercial Cinemas – complexes that are made up of one to three screens. Such theatres typically are found in small to mid-size rural towns with populations of fewer than 20,000 – locations that are of little interest to the large conglomerates. As a result, the concentration of independent ownership is very high within this tier. In contrast to Large Commercials, there is considerable variation within this category. At one end are relatively modern but small multi-screen venues showing recent films, through to older-style, single-screen venues showing mostly second-release titles (that is, after the metropolitan release has peaked). These variations demonstrate how the attendant economic and geographic constraints of rural locations shape the possibilities and characteristics of commercial cinema in marginal places.

The next three chapters look at different situations of sub-commercial cinema. Chapter 3 examines Subsidised Cinemas – enterprises that depend on regular public funding to support their operations. The level of subsidy varies between sites, ranging from venues supported partially through to those wholly reliant on public bodies, such as local government and arts organisations, and not-for-profit entities, like trusts. The chapter argues that a rise in state intervention in and support for film exhibition has been closely tied to broader policy developments to do with rural assistance, sustainability and renewal.

Community Cinema provides the focus of Chapter 4. These are volunteer film enterprises operated by volunteer-led community groups, and include film societies as well as other local collectives. Unlike Subsidised Cinemas, they do not have access to ongoing financial support from larger public sector organisations. While Community Cinemas may have access to one-off grants, this funding is generally not of a regular or dependable nature. As the chapter argues, the features of Community Cinema are shaped to a very large extent by local conditions – the individual personalities who do most of the organising; the resources and facilities available within particular towns; and the socio-economic conditions around which groups coalesce.

Chapter 5 completes the cinema hierarchy by examining the marginal situation of Improvised Cinemas. These are privately run, ad hoc film-screening enterprises that operate in very remote and isolated areas – either in fixed locations or on a mobile/touring basis. While most operate in the hope of returning a profit, many are unable to achieve much more than break-even, and this contributes to their inherent instability. Improvised Cinemas provide us with a window into cinema at its most isolated, unconventional and independent, and attest to the enduring appeal of watching a film as part of an audience, even in very austere circumstances. The chapter also reflects on the boundaries of the cinema model by examining the situation of some isolated operations that do not fit wholly within any of its categories.

In Chapter 6, we shift from the business of exhibiting films to looking at the experience of audiences at cinemas. The analysis here is concerned primarily with understanding the socio-cultural meaning of film-going. It addresses questions to do with why people seek out the cinema in rural areas and what these encounters mean in the context of everyday rural life. This study demonstrates that going to the movies can help facilitate participation and a sense of connection with the global communications landscape. However, it is also argued that the cinema is about much more than simply bringing the world to the bush or the dales. Audience testimonies indicate that these venues function as positive affective spaces around which the residents of small towns can gather and interact. They can also have an important role in helping to build and consolidate social networks and affirm local connections for the people who use them. The place of the film is also considered as a key feature of the experience, and provides the basis for exploring some of the conceptual tensions that exist around trying to account for the socio-cultural multiplicities of the movie-going experience.

A conclusion then draws together the key findings of the thesis. This closing section also explores the relevance of this research beyond the interests of academic researchers and looks at its implications for future investigations.

Chapter 1

Large Commercial Cinemas

Introduction

Since the early decades of the twentieth century, commercial considerations have determined what most cinemas look like, where they have been located and what kinds of films they have screened (see Gomery 1992: 3; Hanson 2007a). These same imperatives shape the key points of differentiation between the commercial and sub-commercial types of cinema identified in the clustering model presented in this study. Where local conditions dictate there is a good chance of generating sizable financial returns, dedicated for-profit cinemas will dominate the landscape. Where conditions are not commercially conducive, corporate interests tend to be absent. This creates space for a variety of grassroots and subsidised enterprises.

This chapter examines the business of film presentation at Large Commercial Cinemas, the first of the five general types of exhibition situations found in Australia and the UK. Large Commercial Cinemas are distinguished by their high screen density – the relatively large number of screens they incorporate within a single complex. The threshold applied in this study is four screens or more, and this correlates with the classification of a multiplex used by Screen Australia and the MPDAA.⁷ The term ‘multiplex’ consequently is used interchangeably with Large Commercial Cinema in this dissertation.

The principal focus of this chapter is on how the film industry and its attendant institutions regulate and control the framework of mainstream viewing in rural areas. As the dominant mode of film presentation, Large Commercial Cinemas have come to embody the modern exhibition industry. These cinemas possess a distinctive viewing aesthetic – one that incorporates contemporary decor, high-quality image and sound, a steady turnover of the latest release movies and modern conveniences such as online ticketing and ample car parking. As a business proposition, they represent a significant capital investment in buildings and technology. They are therefore found predominantly in large regional centres where the

⁷ Definitions vary slightly internationally. For example, while Screen Australia defines a ‘multiplex’ as a cinema with four or more screens, the UK Film Council and Dodona Research (Europe) uses the threshold of five screens or more (see UKFC 2011d).

number of local cinema-goers is sufficient to generate a profitable rate of return. Typically, a population of at least 30,000–40,000 is required, although there are some exceptions. Popular tourist destinations, where a smaller pool of permanent residents is boosted by a regular influx of holiday-makers, are also often able to support multiplex enterprises.

To understand the dynamics of large-scale rural exhibition, it is necessary to first consider where Australian and UK operators fit within their respective national industries.

Accordingly, the first part of this chapter provides an overview of the major commercial groups operating in both countries. Exploring how the contemporary Australian and UK industries arrived at their present situations, the second section explores the major developments in exhibition over the past century, and looks at their relevance to large rural operators. With this background in place, the chapter moves on to examine the arguments that have emerged from critical research on the economic impact of the multiplex cinema and its meteoric rise as the dominant form of film presentation.

The chapter then moves on to examine the operational characteristics of Large Commercial Cinemas, focusing in particular on corporate affiliation, film programming, profitability and demographics. It also considers the interconnections that exist between multiplexes in city and rural locations, and across national borders. Extending some of these concerns, the following sections, on migration to digital projection and industry organisations, examine key business issues, corporate representation and industry regulation. The chapter concludes with the ‘In Focus’ segment, which profiles two Large Commercial Cinema enterprises: the Birch Carroll and Coyle cinema in Coffs Harbour (Australia) and the Regal Movieplex in Cromer (UK). These micro-investigations illustrate the relevance of the themes identified in the preceding discussion at a local level.

Major Exhibitors

The modern exhibition industries in Australia and the UK are big business. In 2010, the Australian box office exceeded A\$1 billion for the first time, while in the UK it generated receipts of £944 million (UKFC 2011a). These burgeoning markets are tightly controlled by a handful of major companies that operate cinemas across multiple locations (often referred to

as ‘cinema chains’). Almost all the movie theatres owned by these large corporate are multiplexes. They range in size from four to over 20 screens, and encompass both city and large rural town locations. In Australia, the leading four companies – Greater Union (including Birch Carroll and Coyle), Hoyts, Reading and Village – control 61 per cent of national screens (Screen Australia 2011a). The concentration of ownership is even higher in the UK, with the five major players (UK majors Cineworld, Odeon, National Amusements, Vue and Ward Anderson) owning 75 per cent of screens (UKFC 2011b).

Since their emergence in Australia and UK in the 1970s, multiplexes have grown rapidly to become the dominant mode of film exhibition (Hanson 2007a: 164). But this supremacy has been achieved only as a result of massive capital investment. Large cinemas are expensive to build and fit out. This barrier to entry gave big corporations – which have ready access to capital – a major head-start in the multi-screen market. Further, the pattern of multiplex growth suggests it has been strategically planned and controlled by these conglomerates. Chain cinemas have tended to avoid building their multiplexes in close proximity to one another, which has helped prevent the dilution of audiences across more than one cinema site in a particular geographic area, and no doubt helped to lift profits. However, these kinds of practices have brought the cinema industry to the attention of competition regulators in both Australia and the UK. Several investigations have been held, but to date regulatory authorities have not imposed any judgements or conditions that would force significant structural change upon either industry (Asher 1997; ACCC 2001; Monopolies and Mergers Commission 1994; Office of Fair Trading 2010). In Australia, addressing these non-competitive practices has been complicated further by cross-ownership and partnership arrangements between the major exhibitors. For example, Greater Union and Village – which theoretically are competitors – operate a number of multiplexes as joint ventures. Further muddying the waters is the fact that Greater Union has a major shareholding in Village.

Chain exhibitors in Australia have a relatively stable and long business history. Greater Union and Birch Carroll and Coyle can trace their beginnings back to the 1910s. Hoyts also emerged around the same time (Shirley and Adams 1983: 22–3, 32–3, Cryle et al. 2000: 1–2). Village, a more recent entrant, was established in the 1950s, making its mark first with drive-ins and then moving into hard-top venues. US-based Reading Cinemas is the only relatively new player. Establishing itself in the 1990s, Reading has built up a sizable network of multiplexes

in metropolitan and rural locations (*Encyclopaedia of Business* 2011). In contrast, the UK cinema market has been more volatile, with an over-supply of screens deemed to be a major issue. Debra Allison (2006) argues that this has contributed to audience fragmentation, which in turn has put downward pressure on profitability. These problems have seen many of the venture capital groups that funded the initial multiplex construction boom in the 1990s exit the industry. The recent situation of Odeon, the largest cinema chain the UK, is indicative of the instability. Odeon has been sold three times since 2000, and is reportedly on the market again, with its present owner – the private equity firm Terra Firma – looking to offload the business (Davoudi 2011).

Chain exhibitors in Australia and the UK dominate metropolitan markets and control a sizable share of rural cinema-going activity. Locally, the four major companies control just under 60 per cent of the non-metropolitan market, with the balance held by non-aligned independents (see Table 1.1). The largest block of non-metropolitan screens is owned by Greater Union/Birch Carroll and Coyle, while Hoyts, Reading and Village all have significantly smaller holdings. Village’s network is concentrated in Victoria, while Hoyts’ cinemas are centred around large regional settlements in New South Wales (Central Coast, Port Kembla and Lake Macquarie). Reading operates multiplexes across four states (New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria and Western Australia). In overall terms, these rural interests represent roughly a quarter of the national screen capacities of leading chains Greater Union, Reading and Village (see Table 1.2). However, box office data suggest that these sites do not make a proportional contribution to group earnings. According to data from Screen Australia, in 2010 earnings per screen from cinemas located in capital cities was \$660,422 compared with just \$410,780 for venues in non-metropolitan areas (Screen Australia 2011b, 2011c).

Table 1.1: Multiplex sites and screens in rural Australia

Exhibitor	No. of screens	% total screens	No. of sites	% total sites	Average screens per site
Independents	146	41	31	50	4.7
Greater Union/Birch Carroll and Coyle	113	32	16	26	7.1
Village	42	12	7	11	6.0
Reading	39	11	6	10	6.5
Hoyts	12	3	2	3	6.0
Total	352	100	62	100	5.7

Source: MPDAA October 2010

Note: Excludes cinemas located in cities and regional centres with populations over 125,000.

Table 1.2: Australian Major Exhibitors – rural multiplex screens

Exhibitor	No. of rural screens	No. of national screens	Rural screens as % of total
Greater Union/Birch Carroll and Coyle	113	480	24
Village	42	219	19
Reading	39	146	27
Hoyts	12	325	4

Source: MPDAA October 2010

Due to differences in the way cinema information is published in the UK, comparative data are not available. However, based on a detailed survey of cinema site listings on the Cineworld, Odeon and Vue websites, several general observations can be made. Each of these major companies operates multiplex sites in cities and in large rural towns in much the same way as their Australian counterparts. Analysis of *site* locations indicates that non-metropolitan cinemas account for around a third of national operations (see Table 1.3). Due to inconsistencies in the way screen numbers are presented on the Cineworld, Odeon and Vue websites, it was not possible to conduct this analysis based on *screen* numbers to match the data for Australia.

Table 1.3: UK Major Exhibitors – rural multiplex sites

Exhibitor	National sites	Rural* sites	Rural sites as % of total
Odeon	111	40	36
Cineworld	78	33	42
Vue	67	24	36

* Towns with populations of less than 125,000

Source: Cineworld <http://www.cineworld.co.uk/cinemas>, Odeon Cinemas http://www.odeon.co.uk/fanatic/cinema_finder, Vue <http://new.myvue.com/cinemas/about-vue-cinemas/cinema/livingston>, all accessed 27 July 2011.

There are a number of companies in Australia and the UK that operate smaller networks of cinemas in rural areas, although most do not have business histories going back as far as the majors. Local multi-site operators include Majestic Cinemas, which has been built up over the past decade. Majestic has five cinemas in rural New South Wales (Singleton, Port Macquarie, Nambucca Heads, Inverell and The Entrance). Other multi-site operators include Peninsula

Cinemas,⁸ with three sites in Victoria (Warragul, Sorrento and Rosebud), C-Max (Devonport and Palmerston) and Forum 6 (Tamworth and Wagga Wagga) (MPDAA 2011). In the UK, non-aligned cinema groups take in Hollywood Cinemas, with five sites in Norfolk and Suffolk (Dereham, Fakenham, Great Yarmouth, Lowestoft, Norwich), and Merlin Cinemas, which has ten cinemas spread across southern and eastern counties (UK Film Council 2011a; Hollywood Cinemas 2011).

These smaller cinema groups generally are referred to within the industry as independents because the networks they control are minor compared with those held by the majors. While not influential on a national scale, the ability to pool exhibition of activities across multiple sites has several commercial advantages. For example, mini-chains have the capacity to move prints across different sites in order to maximise returns, as the owner of Majestic Cinemas, Kieren Dell, explains:

Sometimes we negotiate to take films that we think have only two weeks in them but then put it on two weeks at Nambucca and then two weeks at Port Macquarie, and having several sites obviously allows us to do that. (Dell interview, 29 July 2009)

These cinemas also benefit from the capacity to consolidate film programming tasks across numerous sites, and are often able to negotiate cheaper wholesale prices on candy bar equipment and supplies prices because of their capacity to buy in bulk.

History of the Rural Exhibition Industry

This section provides a brief chronology of the major events within the Australian and UK exhibition industries that have taken place over the past hundred years or so. While these have been covered elsewhere (e.g. see Collins 1987; Shirley and Adams 1983; Hanson 2007a), this section places these events within a rural focus and contributes some new perspectives assembled from historic industry publications.

⁸ Both Majestic and Peninsula operate a mix of Large and Small Commercial Cinemas ranging from single-screen through to six-screen complexes.

This section focuses in particular on how modern chain operators were created, and the impact of national trends and events on rural businesses. Public screenings of short films began in both Australia and UK in the late 1890s. These early films were shown in a range of improvised venues, including live theatres and temporary structures, often as part of larger programs of entertainment. Within a decade, the supply of longer, feature-length films from Europe and the United States had increased significantly and a more permanent exhibition industry started to emerge (Shirley and Adams 1983: 3–5, 14–16; Hanson 2007a: 25–9). This led relatively quickly to the establishment of cinema circuits through which the relatively scarce supply of film prints could be circulated before moving on to independent and one-off sites (James Bailey 1997: 111). These early circuits formed the basis for the horizontally integrated way in which the industry is organised today. Like most new technological innovations, cinema was a phenomenon first experienced in the cities, and this is where the first circuits developed. However, cinema also spread relatively quickly into rural areas, where city-based operating structures soon followed.

In the early days, it was travelling showmen who brought films to audiences in small towns. However, by the 1920s permanent venues had begun to appear, mostly in larger settlements where cinema-going became a popular and regularised leisure pursuit (Shirley and Adams 1983: 15–16; Hanson 2007a: 12–15). It did not take long for energetic rural entrepreneurs to start accumulating movie theatres across multiple locations, although many single-site independents also flourished at this time (Thorne et al. 1996; *Film Weekly* 1938–39; Hanson 2007a: 35–58). The major issue for early exhibitors was securing timely access to film prints, which inevitably had to do the rounds of the city venues before they were permitted to fan out into rural areas. Chain operators had (and continue to have) a distinct advantage in their negotiations with distribution companies because they could guarantee screening of a film through a network of locations, rather than just at a single site. As a result, they tended to get films first (James Bailey 1997: 111–12). In Australia, concerns about the unfairness of this business practice, along with anxiety over the cultural dominance of Hollywood films, has given rise to a series of government inquiries. These include the Royal Commission that reported its findings in 1928 (Pike and Cooper 1998: 87), the 1934 investigation by the New South Wales Government and the 1972–73 Tariff Board inquiry. However, these are regarded as having done little to bring about substantive change to the ways in which large corporate interests dictate the flow of cinematic content (Australian Film Commission 2005; Scarano

2010). UK governments have been slightly more proactive, although similar problems related to the control of Hollywood and big business have persisted in that country too. A quota for British films was introduced in 1927. By the 1950s, this had evolved into a system of levies and subsidies delivered through the British Film Fund Agency and the National Film Finance Corporation respectively. These mechanisms were abolished in 1985 by the market-orientated Thatcher government, but have gradually been reinstated in various forms under the distribution and exhibition initiatives administered by the British Film Institute and the former UK Film Council (Hanson 2007a: 69, 91, 129).

During the first half of the twentieth century, there were a number of dedicated rural cinema chains in Australia. One of the most successful and enduring of these was the Queensland-based group Birch Carroll and Coyle. This consortium was formed just prior to World War I in a deal struck between George Birch and Edward Carroll. Before the formation of their partnership, both had operated cinemas separately in southern Queensland, including sites in Brisbane. Virgil Coyle, who had theatre interests in the Townsville area, joined the partnership later in 1923. This created the foundation for what would eventually become a statewide exhibition network. Birch Carroll and Coyle embarked upon an ambitious program of theatre construction in key towns across Queensland. The emphasis was on the creation of grand, sophisticated cinematic spaces with a distinctive northern architectural aesthetic. In the 1920s, the group established an association with large Sydney-based exhibitor Union Theatres (later to become Greater Union), which was crucial to ensuring it had access to a consistent supply of quality films. This relationship continued until 1991 when Birch Carroll and Coyle was acquired outright by Greater Union. In recognition of its impact in the Queensland market, the Birch Carroll and Coyle branding has been retained by Greater Union in cinemas throughout the state and at some sites in northern New South Wales (Cryle et al. 2000: 1–2; Greater Union 2010).

Information about other rural circuits is scarce. Cryle et al.'s study of Birch Carroll and Coyle is a valuable resource, but currently sits as a one-off against far more detailed histories of metropolitan cinema activity. Some useful material for this study was retrieved from *The Film Weekly Motion Picture Directory*, an annual index of cinemas published between 1936 and 1971 (National Library of Australia 2011). This magazine printed listings of operating cinemas organised by ownership and state location, and this has been helpful in building a

picture of rural exhibition activity. The 1938–39 *Directory* lists a number of rural cinema groups, including J.K. Capitol Theatres (sites including Wagga Wagga, Inverell, Tamworth and Moree), Snider and Dean Theatres (Bathurst, Cessnock, Dubbo, Kurri Kurri) and Star Theatres (sites throughout Tasmania) (1938–39: 40–49). Also among the records are listings for Hoyts Country Theatres, a specialist rural arm of Hoyts that operated for almost 50 years between the 1930s and 1970s. While the *Film Weekly* lists indicate that other major exhibitors had some theatre interests outside the cities, Hoyts was the only major exhibitor to run a dedicated non-metropolitan division. Hoyts Country Theatres began in locations including Albury, Ballarat and Goulburn, and expanded largely through acquisitions. These included the purchase of J.K. Capitol Theatres in the mid-1940s, which in the view of Hoyts company historians gave them ‘the best country outlets’ (King et al. 2009: 25). However, major downturns in cinema attendance during the 1960s and 1970s saw Hoyts move to divest itself of its rural interests. It sold out to local independent competitors and to the other major chains, Greater Union and Village (Kilderry interview, 5 October 2010). Since then, Hoyts has concentrated largely on its metropolitan interests, and continues to have the least number of rural screens of the all the local majors (see Table 1.2).

The exhibition industry changed dramatically in the years following World War II. Admissions dropped dramatically, and this led to the closure of large numbers of cinemas between the 1950s and 1970s. Hanson observes the shift in cinema-going habits coincided with broader changes occurring within British society (2007: 117). The same was true in Australia (Collins 1987: 214–32). The trend towards suburban living drew people away from city centres where cinemas had traditionally been located. The mass uptake of television created an alternative viewing space within the home, and contributed to changing household leisure patterns. These were dark days – particularly for the UK, where the impact was severe. Between 1952 and 1976, annual admissions went from 1.3 billion to just 104 million, a fall of 92 cent (Hanson 2007a: 93). Exhibitors attempted to entice patrons back to the cinema with innovations such as wide screens and 3D, but they had little impact. The situation did not improve significantly until the 1980s, when the multiplex construction boom began (Hanson 2007a: 98, 160).

Cinema admissions also fell in Australia over the same period, although slightly less dramatically. Annual attendance declined from 140 million in 1952 to 29 million by 1976, a

fall of 80 per cent (Screen Australia 2011d). Local exhibitors tried the same gimmicks as those used by their UK operators, with a similar lack of success. However, unlike their English counterparts, exhibitors in Australia did receive a boost in the form of drive-in theatres. Mirroring developments in the US, drive-ins emerged in Australia in the mid-1950s. They were popular with local audiences, but were not able to arrest the overall declining trend in admissions that lasted for several decades. Drive-ins tapped into the new suburbanisation of the population, the rapid rise in private car ownership and the appeal of cheap family entertainment. Encouraged by the availability of large tracts of cheap land in outer city locations and the success of similar operations in the United States, Greater Union and Hoyts were the among the first to build drive-ins in Australia. Hoyts opened its initial site in February 1954 in the Melbourne suburb of Burwood, and others quickly followed (Kilderry 2011). Village was established in the early 1950s and opened its first drive-in Croydon (Melbourne) by 1954. From there, the company worked to build a network of outdoor theatres and later diversified into indoor sites, which are now the cornerstone of its business (Village Roadshow 2010).

After demonstrating their potential in city locations, drive-ins began to be built in rural areas. By the late 1960s, drive-in historian David Kilderry estimates that most towns with a population of 10,000 or more had an outdoor theatre (Kilderry interview, 5 October 2010). However, these often came at the expense of the local hardtop venue, as many traditional operators failed to survive once a drive-in opened its gates in the town. Outdoor theatres remained popular until the early 1980s, when a number of factors began to erode their viability across Australia. Like television several decades before, the emergence of home video around this time was blamed for encouraging audiences back into their homes. Perhaps more importantly than just shifting viewing patterns, home video opened up a new site for viewing B and C grade films and R-rated soft porn. These films had been an important part of many drive-in programs, but after the mid-1980s tended to by-pass cinema release and go straight to video. The ability to watch the R-rated content at home had particular appeal in some small towns, where locals were often well known to one another and repeat attendances for these types of films had the potential to create an unflattering reputation for the individuals concerned. In terms of blockbuster film releases, the early 1980s were a lean time – a stark contrast to the previous decade, when drive-ins had done well with big films like *Jaws*, *Star Wars*, *Superman*, *Rocky*, *The Godfather* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

Compounding these issues was the fact that at many drive-ins the picture was often dull and the sound poor. Many operators had spent little on their projection equipment since the 1950s, and it was beginning to show. Hastening the demise of drive-ins was a rise in land values, particularly in capital city areas. With admissions plummeting, selling out became an attractive proposition for many operators. Kilderry estimates that in the space of just three years (1983–85), half Australia’s drive-ins closed (interview, 5 October 2010). By the late 1980s, the multiplex was in its ascendancy and the drive-in was fast becoming a distant memory.

Critical Contexts: Understanding the Rise of the Multiplex

Multiplex cinemas now represent the dominant mode of film presentation in Australasia, North America, Europe and parts of Asia. In Australia, almost 80 per cent of screens are located within cinema complexes of four auditoriums or more (MPDAA 2011). Similarly, in the UK three-quarters of all screens are contained within large complexes of five screens or more (UKFC 2011c).⁹ The advent of the multiplex has been widely attributed to the dramatic resurgence in the popularity of cinema-going over the past three decades (O’Regan 1996: 111; Jancovich et al. 2003: 197; Hubbard 2003: 1240). Attendance figures from Australia and the UK underline the persuasiveness of this argument. Within ten years of the opening of the first local multiplex in the mid-1980s, annual admissions had more than doubled. They increased from 30 million in 1985 to reach 70 million by 1995. By 2010, this figure was over 92 million (Screen Australia 2011d). Following a parallel trajectory, UK attendance rose from 72 million in 1985 to 115 million ten years later (Hanson 2007a: 160). By 2010, this had grown further to 173 million (UKFC 2011b).

The success of multiplexes in breathing new life into cinema-going has been attributed to four key factors. First, the proliferation of screens has provided audiences with more opportunities to see films – albeit mostly mainstream content (Allison 2006). Second, the relocation to shopping malls and leisure centres increased the number of potential customers passing the door, particularly among the vitally important 16–24 age group (Hubbard 2003: 1240, 1249;

⁹ These figures are not directly comparable. The UK Film Council defines a multiplex as a cinema complex with five or more screens. This differs slightly from Screen Australia’s definition of four screens or more.

Hanson 2007a: 156). Third, the new aesthetic and technological wizardry of the multiplex successfully created a space that people wanted to inhabit (Hanson 2007a: 175–7). Lastly, a more consistent output of blockbuster Hollywood releases ensured that the new generation of cinema patrons had something appealing to watch (O'Regan 1996: 111).

Research focused on the dynamics of the film industry has drawn attention to how multiplexes have changed the business of producing and circulating films. In particular, it has emphasised the interdependent, exclusive relationships that exist between large exhibition chains, major distributors and Hollywood-produced blockbuster films (e.g. see Gomery 1992: 104–5; Acland 2003; Allison 2006; Hanson 2007a: 177–82; Verhoeven 2010a, 2010b). These cosy associations have been criticised for limiting the diversity of screen content by favouring formulaic studio films designed for mass appeal. Barker and Brooks (1998: 195) argue that multiplexes function as sites for 'unashamed indulgence in trash', and there is some merit in such an argument. Multiplex screens are typically booked from several months up to a year ahead, based around the upcoming release schedules for the studios (Aveyard and Moran 2009: 11; Allison 2006). This practice inevitably reduces the number of screens available for more specialised and low-budget films. However, as a commercial proposition, the partnerships between the major exhibitors and Hollywood studios have been highly successful. Tom O'Regan (1996: 111) contends that they have not been all bad for consumers either. He argues they have encouraged significant new investment in cinematic infrastructure, and brought audiences back to the movies in large numbers.

Research on the multiplex industry has tended to focus primarily on its metropolitan situation. Given the fact that large cinemas first emerged in cities, this emphasis within earlier scholarship is understandable. However, with multiplexes now providing the site for a large proportion of rural cinema-going activity, it is appropriate that critical studies begin to address these wider spatial formations. The neglect of the contemporary rural multiplex environment has left two important questions unanswered. First, is there anything distinctive about the way in which large multi-screen cinema industry operates in rural locations? And second, do rural multiplex audiences respond to or use this viewing environment differently from their city-based counterparts or rural audiences attending smaller venues? The first question provides the focus for the rest of this chapter, while the latter question is addressed in Chapter 6.

About Large Commercial Cinemas

In some ways, multiplexes – whether rural or metropolitan – are very similar. As Stuart Hanson observes from the UK perspective, large multi-screen cinemas tend to ‘conform to certain styles of design and function’, which are aimed at maximising audiences and screening capacities (2007a: 158). Within these multi-screen complexes, foyers are crucial revenue-generating spaces, and are given over almost entirely to sales in various forms. This is where tickets and profit-rich concessions (candy bar items) are purchased; additional revenue is generated from video games machines; and current and upcoming films are advertised via large poster displays and television screens playing trailers in a continuous loop. Within the actual auditoriums, patrons can expect to find relatively large screens, comfortable seats and a high technical standard of film presentation, including access to 3D. In terms of screen content, both rural and metropolitan multiplexes offer a range of current releases that are refreshed on a regular basis.

However, while city and rural multiplexes conform to this fairly general typology, there are some notable differences between them. These relate principally to operational scale and the adoption of new technologies. In terms of scale, large movie theatres in rural areas typically have fewer screens. This is directly related to the fact they often service smaller populations. Instead of building ten or more screens within the one complex, an exhibitor is more likely to opt for installing a more modest six or seven. In Australia, city-based multiplexes house an average of 8.9 screens (MPDAA 2011). As Table 1.2 indicates, this is lower in rural locations, particularly at independently owned cinemas. This reduces the operator’s financial risk, but has an impact on film programming and audience choice. At city multiplexes, it is a common practice to run certain films – particularly blockbuster releases – across numerous auditoriums at slightly different starting times. The aim is to capitalise on the popularity of a film in the early weeks of its release, but this is less practical when there are fewer screens to play with. Fewer screens can also mean less variety. While major releases are always guaranteed a run, it is often more difficult for cinemas to find space for niche or specialised titles.

In terms of technological change, most rural multiplexes have begun converting from traditional 35mm to digital projection, although this has been rolled out at a slower pace than in most city locations. The majority of venues in Australia and the UK now have at least one

digital 3D-capable screen. Across other aspects of the film-viewing experience, innovations like luxury auditoriums (known in Australia by brands Gold Class, La Premiere) and gigantic screens (branded as Xtremescreen and V-Max), have been slower to emerge. Even relatively large rural towns can lack the critical mass of people to provide a viable return on the capital outlay required to create these high-end viewing experiences. These options are found in some non-metropolitan locations, such as The Regent in Albury, New South Wales, which has a Gold Class and specialist Showcase auditorium for art-house and documentary films (Regent Cinemas 2011a), and Maroochydore, which has Vmax and Gold Class screens (Maroochydore Event Cinemas 2011). However, for the present these kinds of features remain exceptional rather than commonplace outside city limits.

Turning to the defining features of Large Commercial Cinemas, the remainder of this section examines their operational characteristics. It looks at the key differences between chain-owned and independent theatres, as well as factors that determine geographic location, selection and programming of film content, and profitability. Subsequent sections look at the development and implementation of digital film projection technologies and industry associations, before the chapter turns to the cinema case studies in the 'In Focus' section.

Ownership

Corporate affiliation has a significant impact on the structure and operations of Large Commercial Cinemas. At theatres owned by major chains, most operational and strategic decisions are taken at a metropolitan-based head office. Policies are then applied uniformly to all venues in the group. These include determinations about cinema design and branding, what films are screened and for how long, the arrangement of session times, ticket and candy bar pricing, and the terms of audience loyalty programs. This can limit the scope for individuality, as Steve Meggs, a former manager of the Reading Cinema in Dubbo, New South Wales, explained: 'In Dubbo there wasn't much scope for responding to local conditions at all. Almost everything was dictated by Reading's central office.' (Meggs interview, 13 July 2009) However, being part of a chain can have its advantages. Reflecting the buying power that accompanies large corporate size, major cinema groups are in a position to negotiate more advantageous terms with distributors over access to film prints and revenue splits. Chain cinemas also get access to television, radio and print film advertising that is paid for by, or at least shared with, distributors. Another benefit of scale is the

availability of capital for technical upgrades, such as the installation of digital 3D projection and surround sound, and other enhancements like the refurbishment of tired-looking foyer areas and upgrades to seating.

Independently owned multiplexes are for the most part a rural phenomenon. In the cities, theatre locations generally are tightly controlled by the major chains. There is often little space for non-aligned operators to gain or retain a place in the market other than as niche art-house exhibitors. However, outside metropolitan areas independents have been able to prosper in larger towns where the major chains do not operate. One of the key operational differences between chain-owned and independent cinemas is the absence of centralised management. Whereas chains are governed by policies from head office, operational and strategic decisions at non-aligned cinemas are undertaken on site by local owners and managers. This creates more scope for flexibility and customisation, particularly with regard to programming. For example, after testing audience demand for alternative content (operas, ballets, etc.) a few years ago, the CMAX cinema in Devonport, Tasmania now includes these events as a regular part of its schedule (CMAX Cinemas 2011; Elliot 2009). This localised experimentation would not have been an option if the venue had been operating as part of a major chain.

However, there are some downsides. Booking films can be a time-consuming task, especially when there are multiple screens to consider. Exhibitors have to negotiate with each distributor separately, and this can sometimes be a complex process. To streamline their operations, some independents outsource this task to a professional film booker. However, most cinema owners I interviewed were happy to keep the job in house, partly due to cost but also because they valued the relationships that had been built up with distributors – in some cases over several decades. Booking agents tend to be more widely used by smaller commercial cinema operators (one- to three-screen venues). The role of film bookers is discussed more fully in the next chapter.

Independently run multiplexes typically do not have significant problems in accessing films at the same time as their metropolitan release. In comparison with smaller cinemas, they generate relatively high returns per screen, and are therefore of greater interest to distributors. However, because independents control smaller numbers of screens, they are in a weaker

negotiating position than the major chains. This does not generally create too many problems for major releases; however, for titles in more limited release, chains usually receive priority, and this can result in significant delays for independent cinemas. As the owner of Majestic Cinemas, Kieren Dell, explained:

[For the film] *Samson and Delilah* there are only 21 prints of that in the whole country. It was doing really good business in the city and we are about to run it at the end of August as part of the NFSA's Big Screen Festival that will be held in Nambucca [Heads]. We will then get a print which we will have waited three months for because of the limited number ... This is an example where we have to wait behind the city. It will go to there first, then to larger places like Newcastle and Wollongong, then to larger regional centres where there are more people and then finally to places like Nambucca ... When you have to wait so long you then start to come up against the DVD release date and it may not be worth showing it. (Dell interview, 29 July 2009)

Locations

The number of multiplex cinemas in rural Australia and UK has increased significantly over the past two decades. This growth has been underpinned largely by new constructions (Hanson 2007a: 144–57). Like city multiplexes, the majority of new rural cinemas have been built in shopping malls and entertainment precincts away from town centre areas. Examples of the former include the Birch Carroll and Coyle cinema in Cairns, which is situated in the Central Shopping Mall and the Forum 6 cinema in the Centrepoint Shopping Centre in Tamworth. Similarly positioned out of the CBD, the Birch Carroll and Coyle complex at Coffs Harbour is located within an edge-of-town leisure development that incorporates several family restaurants, bars and a children's indoor play centre.

Where the capacity for extension exists, some older cinemas have been refurbished to keep pace with increased demand for screens. This has enabled them to remain within traditional town centres, and contributed to sustaining a more vibrant social life in these areas. For example, the Regent Cinema in Albury, New South Wales was built as a single-screen venue in the 1930s. It now houses nine screens but remains in its original CBD location (Regent Cinemas 2011b). Similarly, the Regal Movieplex located in the heart of Cromer in the UK has

been extended from its initial single screen built in 1914 to its current four-screen configuration (Love email communication, 18 July 2011).

Film Programming

As outlined above, rural multiplexes generally are guaranteed access to most mainstream films at the same time as their metropolitan premiere. This practice of concurrent releasing can be highly advantageous. It allows rural exhibitors to capitalise on publicity generated by national promotional campaigns, which are usually coordinated and paid for by a film's distributor rather than the cinema. These promotions typically include television, print and online advertising, as well as attention generated by movie reviews and media coverage of stars and red carpet premiere events.

Most Large Commercial Cinemas offer audiences access to varied film program, although the emphasis is typically on mainstream Hollywood releases. At cinemas owned by major chains, centralised film booking tends to result in a standardised line-up across all sites in the group. On-site managers are able to request specialised or niche titles that are not pre-programmed for their cinema. However, the willingness of head office staff to accommodate these demands can vary between companies. Some managers interviewed for this study reported a high degree of inflexibility in this regard. As Steve Meggs, former manager of the Reading Cinema in Dubbo, explained:

They [Reading] generally did not adapt the programming at all to local audiences. I used to ask for films that I thought would work well with the local audience, but was usually told by management that they didn't think they would. Sometimes I got the films I wanted, but more often I didn't. *Lantana* was a classic example. I thought it could do well but head office thought it was too sophisticated for a rural audience. After a lot of haggling, I eventually got a print and it did really well. (Meggs interview, 13 July 2009)

Other managers described situations where central administrators had been more amenable, but they also found that it was not always possible to get the films they wanted to screen because the number of prints was limited (Mahoney interview, 3 December 2009; Kilderry interview, 5 October 2010).

Profitability

The ongoing viability of a commercial cinema enterprise is contingent upon it being able to cover operating costs and return a profit. The majority of cinema income typically is derived from ticket sales, but candy bar and screen advertising revenues are also crucial. At rural multiplexes in Australia and the UK, ticket prices are generally 10 to 20 per cent lower than at comparable city venues. In terms of local cinemas, for example, a standard adult ticket is typically priced at around \$14–15, with premium options like 3D rising to \$18. In contrast, metropolitan charges start at around \$18 for a standard ticket, increasing to around \$23–25 for extras such as digital 3D or large-screen auditoriums (Xtremescreen, Vmax) (Greater Union 2011; Village Roadshow 2011). This differentiated pricing reflects the lower average incomes of local residents, and possibly also the lower level of capital investment tied up in the cinema. It is also a contributing factor to the lower average returns per screen for rural operators outlined earlier in this chapter.

In terms of ancillary revenues, films attracting audiences in the 16–24 years demographic tend to generate the strongest candy bar sales, and are therefore often among the most profitable for cinemas (Mahoney interview, 3 December 2009; Aveyard and Moran 2009: 41). Younger patrons are more likely to buy popcorn and soft drinks, where pricing mark-ups are generally at their highest. Advertising is also an important additional source of revenue. Most Large Commercial Cinemas are tied in with the screen promotions group Val Morgan. As members of this network, they are guaranteed access to a steady supply of national advertising campaigns.

One of the largest operating expenses for cinemas is film hire – the fee paid by the exhibitor to the film distributor for showing a movie. The fee is calculated on a percentage of gross ticket sales. It can range from around 35 per cent up to 60 per cent of receipts for blockbuster releases. The fee generally operates on a sliding scale that is at its highest in the early weeks of release and begins to decrease after the initial four- to six-week peak period has passed (Mahoney interview, 3 December 2009; Meggs interview, 13 July 2009). Films that continue to attract a significant audience beyond the four- to six-week mark can therefore be highly lucrative for exhibitors.

Digital Projection and Large Commercial Cinemas

Cinemas in Australia, the UK and elsewhere are on a path towards full-scale conversion from traditional 35mm to digital film projection. However, while 35mm was a fairly standardised format, digital has a number of permutations, ranging from high-resolution data files to DVD. The different formats for projecting data files are often distinguished from one another by their screen resolution. Early commercial systems operated with resolutions of 1.3K or 1.4K,¹⁰ sometimes lower, and are referred to as ‘electronic cinema’ or ‘e-cinema’ (Inglis 2008: 13). The 1.3K system was considered capable of matching 35mm in terms of quality, but was highly problematic for the Hollywood studios because the data files they played could not be encrypted. This left the film in question open to easy illegal duplication (Wessel 2007: 106; Inglis 2008: 13). As a result of these concerns, the studios did not allow widespread distribution of their movies on e-cinema.

Digital cinema was nevertheless a highly attractive proposition for the Hollywood majors because of its potential to significantly reduce the cost of film distribution. The studios reportedly spend around US\$1 billion annually on 35mm film prints worldwide (Culkin and Randle 2003: 88), but digital ‘prints’ can be produced for as much as 80 per cent less (Lake interview, 29 October 2008). The scale of the potential cost savings underlines the persuasive economic argument for the conversion – the hurdle for the studios was to find a solution to the security issues. They did so by developing their own proprietary format. Launched in 2005, their ‘Digital Cinema Initiatives Specification’ has a range of in-built anti-piracy specifications. These include dual encryption of digital film prints and digital projectors designed specifically to prevent direct copying of files at cinemas. The DCI Specification also established the 2K resolution as the minimum projection standard for studio films (Digital Cinema Initiatives 2009a, 2009b), although higher-end 4K systems have now also entered the market.

With its technical standard in place, the studios were poised to capitalise on the economic benefits of digital cinema. However, exhibitors were less enthusiastic. Many contemporary cinema-goers reportedly have difficulty distinguishing between images projected digitally (in

¹⁰ The 1.3K resolution equates to 1300 pixels across the horizontal frame, 1.4K to 1400 pixels and so on, with higher resolutions generally equating to a high-quality image (Watson 2007: 2).

standard 2D format) and those on 35mm. As a result, there were concerns as to whether digital cinema had sufficient novelty to significantly increase attendances and pay for the significant cost of the new hardware (Belton 2002: 104; Wessell 2007: 106; Inglis 2008: 13). To encourage exhibitors to make the transition, the Hollywood studios proposed a scheme known as the Virtual Print Fee (VPF), which would compensate cinemas for the cost of installing digital projection equipment. Under this scheme, the studios pay a fee to the movie theatre (or third-party hardware provider) each time a first-release print is shipped to the venue. To be paid over periods ranging from seven to ten years, VPFs are intended to cover approximately 65–80 per cent of the cost of the new digital equipment (Inglis 2008: 19–21; Lake interview, 29 October 2008; Perrin interview, 3 June 2011). The balance is funded by the exhibitor. As the owners of large circuits, major exhibitors have had ready access to the studios to negotiate VPF terms. In contrast, independents have been at a distinct disadvantage because of their small size. Rather than bargaining over several hundred screens, they may represent as few as five or six. In Australia and the UK, this problem has been addressed partly by collective bargaining by industry organisations. This is discussed further in the next section.

While digital cinema represents a boon for distributors, it is not entirely without some benefits for exhibitors. Once entire multiplexes are converted there will be time and cost savings. Screenings will no longer require such close monitoring. There will also be less preparatory work. It will no longer be necessary to splice separate cans of film together to create a single screening reel, and then break them down again for shipping back to the distributor. The film is simply downloaded into the cinema's server, and is then ready to go every time at the press of a button. While new operators require training in the use of the digital equipment, the expertise needed is far less technical. Digital technologies also create opportunities for cinemas to diversify into the screening of non-film content such as opera, ballet, music concerts and preschool entertainment (such as *The Wiggles*). These can help increase revenue and boost revenue in quiet periods, such as Sunday and Monday nights and during the day. This content can be particularly attractive to audiences living outside metropolitan areas because of the lack of opportunity to see these kinds of events live. To date in rural areas of Australia, alternative content has been screened mostly by independent operators, such as CMAX in Devonport and the Wangaratta Cinema Centre (CMAX 2011; Wangaratta Cinema Centre 2011). Major chains have begun using these non-film events in some of their

metropolitan venues, but are yet to roll them out widely beyond that. In the UK, the programming of non-film content is more widespread and incorporates more events that are screened live. This is partly a function of having a wider network of satellite installations, which is essential for streaming in real time, as well as more conducive time differences. For example, audiences in the UK attending operas screened from The Met in New York are able to see a matinee performance in the early evening, whereas in Australia they are watching them at mid-morning.

Digital technologies have also given rise to another resurgence of 3D. Strong box office returns for 3D versions of films, such as *Avatar* (Cameron 2009) and *Up* (Docter and Peterson 2009), have encouraged exhibitors to self-fund 3D installations (Hancock and Jones 2009: 109; Jones 2009: 103). In Australia, DCI-compliant stereoscopic systems currently cost around 50 per cent more than the 2D version (Wilson 2009), but higher returns from 3D have been used to offset the additional expense. However, more recently there have been signs that 3D may have peaked, with recent box office data pointing to declining returns from this format (Reuters 2011). To date, it has been big companies with access to capital – such as Hoyts, Odeon and Village – that have accounted for the majority of 3D installations. With the systems capable of playing films in both 2D and 3D format, they have proved to be a potentially self-sustaining model for digital conversion in some large rural towns. However, 3D has not been viable in many smaller places where cinema audiences are too small to generate sufficient revenue to cover the capital cost of the equipment.

Since the introduction of the DCI specification in the mid-2000s, the number of digital screens in Australia and the UK has risen dramatically. This growth has been driven both by VPFs and the success of 3D. In Australia, numbers have increased from 27 in 2006 to 452 in 2010, representing 23 per cent of the national market (Screen Australia 2011e). The majority of these have been dual function 3D/2D installations (MPDAA 2011). The most recent data available from the UK reveal a similar pattern of growth. In 2005 there were 38 digital screens; by 2009 this had grown to 642, also representing 23 per cent of the national total (UKFC 2011d). There the conversion was boosted by the £12 million Digital Screen Network scheme administered by the former UK Film Council. Under the program, over 280 screens across the country (metropolitan and rural locations) were fitted out with DCI projection

equipment on the proviso that they would increase the screening of specialist and limited-release films (UKFC 2011f).

In terms of the pace to full conversion, industry estimates vary from one to three years. Most of those interviewed for this study believed that once the threshold reaches around two-thirds, the time to full conversion will be very quick. Steven Perrin, Chief Executive of the Digital Funding Partnership in the UK, estimated in June 2011 that within twelve to eighteen months digital screens would outnumber 35mm installations in Europe (Perrin interview, 3 June 2011). Several exhibitors and distributors interviewed in Australia expressed similar views about the likely timeframe of the changeover.

Industry Organisations

In both Australia and the UK, film exhibitors are represented by formal industry organisations, although the basis of their membership and functions differs in some key areas. These organisations are often particularly helpful for independent operators, who can be more fragmented and isolated because of their non-alignment. Some independents help alleviate these problems by developing informal relationships with other exhibitors in their local area. They discuss industry developments and day-to-day operational problems, and sometimes make agreements about sharing film prints between their respective venues. However, formal organisations are often in a better position to deal with industry concerns on a large scale. They can be more effective in lobbying governments and in raising awareness of issues in the mainstream media.

Australia

There is no single organisation representing the exhibition industry, although operators coalesce around a number of formal structures. The exhibition industry is guided by the Code of Conduct for Film Exhibition and Distribution. This is administered by a committee comprising major and independent cinema exhibitors and film distributors. The Code is an industry-led initiative, and was established in 1998 in an effort to ‘provide a framework for fair and equitable dealing between all distributors and exhibitors’ (FEDCAC 2011). It was intended to help address the problems smaller exhibitors had with gaining timely access to

product and the terms of film hire contracts. The major cinema chains and Australian distribution arms of the Hollywood studios are signatories to the Code, along with numerous independent exhibitors and distributors (ACCC 1998; FEDAC 2011). Veteran independent distributor and exhibitor Andrew Pike was closely involved with the early drafting of the code. Together with his former business partner, Geoff Gardner, Pike was responsible for creating the mission statement about equitable dealings. However, like many of the other cinema owners I interviewed, Pike believes the Code has done little to improve the day-to-day situation. As he explained:

The [mission] statement is there but it is betrayed by everything that follows it and it is betrayed by everything that has been done since in the operation of the Code. But essentially what the Code tried to address, and failed I believe, is that problem of fair and equitable access. (Pike interview, 10 December 2009)

While chain cinemas are members of the Code, they generally have little call for its protection. Nor do they look to collective industrial representation in other forms. Their businesses are almost entirely dependent on being able to access Hollywood films. However, the major studios are equally reliant on the chains to ensure that their products reach a wide market. These interconnections give rise to a level of access and open negotiation between the two parties that generally does not exist for smaller operators.

Australian independent cinemas do have access to some representation through the specialist industry lobby group, the Independent Cinemas Association of Australia (ICAA). As at July 2011, 39 of the 69 members listed on ICAA's website were from rural areas, operating a variety of cinemas from multiplexes through to single screens. Several members, including Majestic Cinemas and Big Screen Cinemas, own theatres in more than one location (ICAA 2011). As these figures indicate, ICAA does not represent anything like a majority of rural independents, and its charter states it does not intervene in negotiations between exhibitors and distributors. However, the organisation has been responsible for several significant achievements. These include the establishment of the 'accessible cinema circuit', equipped with systems for hearing- and vision-impaired audiences (ICAA 2011). More recently, ICAA has been working to negotiate a VPF deal with the Hollywood studios on behalf of its members, after the US conglomerates made it clear that they would not deal with small exhibitors on an individual basis (Sarfaty 2009). In 2010, ICAA struck a deal with Omnilab

Media to administer the VPFs, and to source and manage the digital projection equipment; however, since then the deal has hit trouble. A recent legal ruling against the private companies involved in the deal (not ICAA) over their conduct during the negotiations has put the arrangement in some doubt (Dallas 2011). It leaves many independent cinemas in an uncertain position at a crucial time.

The industry also provides exhibitors with several opportunities to get together throughout the year. ICAA runs an annual conference for its members, but the biggest event is the Australian International Movie Convention. The conference is held on Queensland's Gold Coast, and is attended by major chains and a range of independents – although for reasons of cost, many smaller cinema owners do not attend.¹¹ The 2010 conference attracted over 900 delegates. In addition to cinema owners, those in attendance included local and international film distributors, technology providers, film producers, snack food companies and screen advertising groups (AIMC 2010). Alongside presentations and trade displays, the Convention features numerous screenings of upcoming releases. These provide exhibitors with valuable opportunities for networking, to preview new films and to keep abreast of industry trends and issues.

The UK

The UK industry is a more centralised in terms of its industry associations. The leading cinema group, the Cinema Exhibitors Association (CEA) represents 90 per cent of operators. Like ICAA, it lobbies governments and others on a range of issues concerning its members. However, the CEA goes further by providing advice to cinemas on regulatory matters, including royalty payments, and helping to promote movie-going more widely (CEA 2011). One of its most successful marketing campaigns has been 'Orange Wednesdays' – a deal by which two-for-one tickets are available each Wednesday at CEA member cinemas for customers with Orange mobile phones. The promotion was launched in 2004, and by its fifth anniversary (in 2009) was estimated to have encouraged an additional three million visits to UK cinemas (Murphy 2009).

¹¹ In 2011, registration for the Movie Convention was around \$1,000 plus travel and accommodation, http://www.movieconvention.com.au/page/Register/2008_Fees.

The CEA was also behind the formation of a major digital cinema initiative known as the Digital Funding Partnership (UK) (DFP). The DFP's purpose is to assist small and medium-sized cinema operators with the financial cost of converting to digital projection technology. The group represents a network of over 400 screens and has successfully negotiated VPF subsidy with each of the Hollywood studios. Under the deal, cinemas are required to contribute around 25 per cent of the capital cost (£12,000–15,000), while the rest is paid for over a period of ten years by progressive VPF payments. The first installations of digital equipment under the scheme have commenced. At the time of our interview in mid-2011, Chief Executive Steven Perrin anticipated that 100 screens would be converted by the end of that year, with all cinemas in the network to be digital by the end of 2012 (Perrin interview, 3 June 2011).

In Focus

This final section of the chapter profiles two Large Commercial Screen cinemas – the Birch Carroll and Coyle (BCC) Cinema in Coffs Harbour (Australia) and the Regal Movieplex in Cromer (UK). Detailed studies at these locations were conducted as part of the field-based investigations upon which this research is based. As outlined in the Introduction, this work involved visiting the cinema and its local area, attending a film screening, and conducting interviews with the cinema owner and local residents. The BCC venue in Coffs Harbour is owned by Greater Union, the largest exhibition chain in Australia. In contrast, the Regal is part of Merlin Cinemas, a small, non-aligned group that owns ten rural movie theatres in the south and east of England. The profiles below describe and analyse how these different venues operate. They illustrate the defining characteristics of the Large Commercial Cinema typology, and demonstrate its value as an organisational and conceptual tool. The discussion also explores the more subtle variations that can exist within the broader category parameters.

Birch Carroll and Coyle, Coffs Harbour, New South Wales, Australia

The BCC Cinema is located in Coffs Harbour, a large regional town on the Mid-North Coast of New South Wales, with a population of 47,700 at the last Census (ABS 2006). The cinema was established in the mid-1990s and is positioned within an entertainment precinct on the

edge of the town centre that also houses a family restaurant, bar and indoor children's play centre. The decor – particularly the colour scheme – is beginning to look dated, but the theatre has most of the standard multiplex features: large candy bars, a video games area, comfortable seats, and good sound and picture quality. At the time of my visit, the cinema was managed by Sue Mahoney, a woman in her late twenties who had worked for BCC since she was a teenager, when she began working part-time on weekends and after school. In total, around 25–30 staff are employed by the cinema on a casual and permanent basis.

The complex has five screens, including one fitted with digital 3D. The latter was installed in November 2009 to capitalise on the blockbuster release of *Avatar* (Cameron 2009) in the 2009/10 summer holidays. The cinema's auditoriums are of varying sizes. Cinema One holds 320 patrons and is generally reserved for new releases. Cinema Two seats 280 people and houses the 3D projector. As Mahoney outlined, its placement in the slightly smaller venue was strategic, and reflected some of the economic constraints associated with the staggered pace of the digital rollout:

The reason the digital projector didn't go to Cinema One was because there is still a lot of big films not being released in digital. Also in regional areas there a lot of preview activity so we have a lot of 'night before' media screenings and events where people can win tickets, etc. and these are traditionally held in Cinema One, our largest cinema. (Mahoney interview, 3 December 2009)

On my last visit to the cinema in July 2011, the 3D projector was still located in Cinema Two. The cinema's three other auditoriums each seat 165 people and are used principally for films expected to attract smaller audiences and for major releases in the final weeks of their theatrical run.

Coffs Harbour is a popular tourist destination, and the cinema relies on the influx of holiday-makers for a substantial portion of its income. As Mahoney explained:

Summer is a massive time of year for us and we get a lot of tourists in. If it rains in summer or school holidays we are turning people away. Probably our biggest competitor is the weather. When the weather's great we are still busy in

the school holidays but when the weather is not good it doubles the admissions.

(Mahoney interview, 3 December 2009)

Over the rest of the year, admissions fluctuate considerably. Mahoney reports that ticket sales are highly dependent on the appeal of the particular films that are showing. However, having only five screens limits the programming options. There are no issues about gaining access to films in wide release, but for films with a more limited number of prints the cinema can find it difficult. Mahoney says the cinema shows a lot of limited-release titles as second-runs – that is, after the print has been used at another cinema (usually one in a metropolitan area). She cited the example of *Young Victoria* (Vallée 2009), which the cinema did not get until several weeks after its national release.

As the cinema is dependent on holiday trade, children's and family movies are a key part of the program. With a sizable young population boosted by the presence of a satellite campus of Southern Cross University, films aimed at the 16–24-year-old market – including horror – tend to do well too. However, Mahoney explains that this audience tends to be highly product driven:

An interesting example of that for us is Friday nights, which are either dead or massive and it depends entirely on having product that appeals to the young adult market. *2012* [Emmerich 2009] did quite well recently, and with films like that we will get big Friday nights. If there's not product out for that market then Friday nights will be much quieter, still reasonable admissions but not huge.

(Mahoney interview, 3 December 2009)

Another area of visible corporate influence is charitable activities. Like many rural cinemas, the Coffs Harbour cinema hires its auditoriums to not-for-profit groups for fundraising purposes. Auditoriums are offered at discounted rates but priced so as to deliver a positive return to the cinema. The cinema's most generous terms are reserved for Camp Quality, the Greater Union corporate charity. While it is a thoroughly worthwhile cause, it is nonetheless significant that support for it is mandated at a national rather than selected at a local level.



Image 1: Birch Carroll and Coyle Cinema, Coffs Harbour, December 2009



Image 2: Candy Bar, Birch Carroll and Coyle Cinema, Coffs Harbour, December 2009

Regal Movieplex, Cromer, Norfolk, UK

In many ways, the Regal Movieplex offers a stark contrast to the Birch Carroll and Coyle complex in Coffs Harbour. The Regal is located in Cromer, a mid-size rural town on the north Norfolk coast, with a population of just under 8,000 at the last UK Census (ONS 2001).¹² It is positioned within the main town centre and is only several hundred metres from the sea front and iconic Cromer Pier. The cinema was built in 1914, and its history mirrors many of the important trends in film presentation over the past century. The cinema opened as the Cromer Theatre of Varieties, and was originally a mixed-use venue used for films, live shows and boxing. Responding to the rapidly growing popularity of cinema-going as a leisure pursuit, the theatre converted to a full-time cinema in the 1920s, with seating capacity of 660. Later it was caught up in the nationwide downturn in film-going after World War II, and closed temporarily in 1976. By the 1980s, it was back in business – although one owner went into liquidation during this period. In 2005, the Regal was acquired by Merlin Cinemas, a small rural exhibition company with interests mainly in the south of England.

In an effort to adapt to the emerging multi-screen environment, the Regal's auditorium was divided to create a twin-screen complex in 1989. Further renovations in 1991 and 1994 added two more screens. The latter remodelling was achieved without extending the exterior of building by utilising the former rear stalls area and office space. With no additional land available surrounding the site, the cinema had little choice but to work with what it had. These extensions brought the cinema up to its current configuration of four screens and enabled it to remain in the heart of the Cromer CBD, which has been important for capitalising on the flow of people through the retail centre of the town. The Regal's four auditoriums are significantly smaller than the BCC Cinema in Coffs Harbour – two are capable of seating 125, while the other two hold 66 and 54 respectively. These reflect the small population on which the Regal draws, and also the physical constraints of the site. However, while the cinema works well, in order to squeeze four auditoriums into what was once a single auditorium, some compromises had to be made. The foyer area is very small and there is little space to linger before or after a screening. The ticket and candy bar counters are also correspondingly compact. There are a few posters on the walls, but no TV screens or space for video games. In terms of technology, films are still screened solely on 35mm. However, Merlin's General Manager, Tim Love,

¹² A more recent national Census was conducted in the UK in April 2011, but the results were not available for inclusion here.

reported that there were plans to upgrade to digital projection at Cromer in the near future (Love email correspondence, 28 May 2011).

As a seaside town with an attractive pier and beach area, Cromer is popular with holiday-makers. It is within easy reach of Norfolk's main city, Norwich, which is about a 30-minute drive or 45-minute trip by train away. Cromer is also relatively close to London, with the train journey from there taking around three hours. However, like many places along the Norfolk coast, Cromer has suffered in recent years as a result of the rise in cheap air travel to destinations in Europe. These have made it feasible for increasing numbers of UK residents to holiday in much warmer seaside locations in countries like Spain, Portugal and Greece. Fortunately, though, the Regal does not rely as heavily on holiday-makers as Coffs Harbour does. As Tim Love explained:

The tourist trade offers us a summer boost but is not essential to the business. We have a strong local customer base that supports us well all year round, we can take as much money in the winter on a non holiday week with the right films. This year we did very well with *The Kings Speech* [Hooper 2010] we have a quality audience in Cromer so the right film really works. (Love email correspondence 28 May 2011)

Families are a key audience segment for the Regal, but most of its business is generated by seniors and adults 40 years of age and over. Like Coffs Harbour, the weather can play a role in driving attendance by tourists. Love reports that admissions rise when the conditions are inclement, although he observes that visitors at these times are often not too fussy about what they see: 'The tourists will come and watch anything if the weather isn't good. The locals tend to only watch the films they want.' (Love email correspondence, 28 May 2011)



Image 3: Cromer Pier, Cromer, May 2011



Image 4: Regal Movieplex, Cromer, May 2011

Films are programmed at Merlin's head office in Penzance, Cornwall, but they are tailored to each of the company's different sites and their specific audiences. On-site managers also actively contribute to this process. The focus is on mainstream releases, but Love reports that 'more arty films and quality films' tend to do especially well at Cromer. Horror films – which typically rely on a young adult audience – generally do not work, but Love notes that are often very successful at other sites within the Merlin group. Due to its group size, Merlin does not tend to experience problems with accessing prints – although, as with the Coffs Harbour cinema, there can be delays for anything in more limited release.

Conclusion

This overview of the history and current operations of the BCC Cinema in Coffs Harbour and the Regal Movieplex in Cromer highlights the key themes of this chapter: the rise and consolidation of conglomerate interests in commercial exhibition, and the impact this has had on competition and the economic constraints of rural locations. These case studies also illustrate the characteristics and definitional parameters of the first tier of the cinema model – Large Commercial Cinemas.

Turning to the first of the four themes (rise of conglomerate interests) explored in this chapter, exhibition histories demonstrate that cinema operators have sought to exploit the economies of scale throughout the twentieth century. Amassing a large group of cinema sites is an effective strategy for reducing costs and increasing turnover. With greater size and profits comes enhanced buying power and unimpeded access to the main source of the product upon which cinemas rely. Horizontal integration also provides access to capital, which has enabled large chains to influence the shape and distribution of industry developments, such as the construction of drive-ins and later multiplexes.

The subdued nature of competition among Large Commercial Cinemas was the second major issue explored in this chapter. Unlike companies in other large industries, film exhibitors tend not to compete directly with one another. This is more pronounced in rural areas, where a town – regardless of its population – will generally only have one commercial cinema. The size of the town does shape the scale of the cinema enterprise, but having more people rarely

appears to create room for more players. It means the battle for admissions is not fought between different cinemas, but between the cinema and other forms of entertainment and conditions, such as the state of the weather, as the interviews with Mahoney and Love highlight. The impact of big corporate domination is also illustrated by the digital cinema transition and the VPF subsidies. While the industry is geared to ensuring the major exhibitors receive access to assistance, it is only through collective bargaining that independents are able to participate in this process.

The third theme of the chapter concerns the fiscal constraints that shape rural commercial activity. Lower population densities give rise to different operational imperatives that influence not only the nature of the exhibition site but also the circulation of film content within it. These factors highlight the importance of considering Large Commercial Cinemas as a distinctive form of exhibition, rather than a sub-set of the metropolitan. As demonstrated, scholarship concerned with the business of exhibiting films in large multi-screen arenas has to date been limited by its tendency to ignore this diversity. It has also failed to adequately account for how rurally situated businesses are beholden simultaneously to both multi-national forces and localised conditions.

The next chapter looks at commercial exhibitors operating in more marginal situations, which exist largely outside the interest of the conglomerates examined in this section. Here the exhibition business begins to take a very different shape. Building on the critical interest that has developed around the experiences of film-goers in more exotic and eclectic cinematic locations, we examine the economic and industrial contexts of small commercial operators.

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Chapter 2

Small Commercial Cinemas

Introduction

Beyond the multiplex, numerous single-, twin- and three-screen venues (Small Commercial Cinemas) continue to survive and prosper in rural places. From the early 1900s to the late 1970s, these were the standard configuration for movie theatres. However, as outlined in the previous chapter, the industry has since become geared towards much bigger multi-screen complexes. This has pushed smaller cinemas towards the periphery of commercial activity – both economically and geographically. In metropolitan locations, small cinemas have largely been superseded by the multiplex, other than for a few art-house or cult venues and family-orientated suburban theatres. In rural areas, smaller operators continue to survive. However, this is usually only in locations where the population is relatively small and/or remote, and these are not attractive to major exhibition companies because they cannot support large cinemas. The disinterest of the majors in this scaled-down sector of the market is demonstrated by their almost complete absence from it.

Small Commercial Cinemas typically make less money than the multiplexes examined in the previous chapter. This is a reflection of both their reduced screen capacities and the smaller populations they have from which to draw audiences. They generate less revenue for distributors, and therefore often sit in a weaker bargaining position with regard to issues such as access to film prints and VPF subsidies. However, on the upside, being independent and small can provide greater scope for diversity and can give operators the capacity to actively respond to local conditions. While the end result may fall short of the slick multiplex experience, rural audiences often react very positively to these more homely spaces. As Chapter 6 will explore, some patrons develop strong emotional attachments to their local cinemas precisely because of their non-conformist, personalised characteristics.

This chapter looks at the characteristics of Small Commercial Cinemas – how they operate and what pressures affect their current and future profitability. It begins with a brief examination of the history of exhibition outside multiplex spaces. In part, this runs parallel to

industry chronology in the previous chapter, but diverges at the point where multiplexes arrive to focus on what has happened to small operators since the early 1980s. The following section continues the review of critical contexts by highlighting the fact that much of what we know about small cinemas comes from individual micro-studies. While this research has been extremely useful, it nonetheless contributes to the current lack of broad understanding about exhibition of this type. The chapter then addresses the defining characteristics of Small Commercial Cinemas in detail, and looks at their operational challenges. Subsequent sections analyse two important issues – digital cinema and film piracy. Finally, we examine two case cinemas in Australia that illustrate the diversity that exists within this exhibition category and the relevance of industry trends covered earlier in the chapter. While both cinemas in the ‘In Focus’ section come from Australia, it should be noted that additional fieldwork was undertaken at a Small Commercial Cinema in the UK – a three-screen cinema in Fakenham, Norfolk owned by Hollywood Cinemas. Findings from this investigation also inform this chapter and are incorporated within the general discussion.

History of Small Commercial Cinema

At one level, the history of exhibition from the late 1890s to the 1970s is the history of low-density cinema. During this period, almost all cinemas were single screen, although they were not necessarily small businesses. Historical records and surviving theatre buildings in Australia and the UK attest to the fact many of these venues had very large seating capacities, ranging from several hundred to well over 1,000 (Thorne et al. 1996; Wicks interview, 29 March 2011). Attendance figures indicate these theatres were generally well patronised and highly profitable (Screen Australia 2011d; Hanson 2007a: 60–61). It was not until the 1960s that twin screens started to become popular, and not until the late 1970s that much bigger multi-screen complexes began to colonise the cinema landscape.

There has been little in the way of a broad systematic or sustained investigation of rural cinema in either Australia or the UK. There have been some historical studies of early larger-scale enterprises – for example, the Birch Carroll and Coyle research conducted by Cryle et al. (2000). However, more commonly scholars have tended to concentrate on individual micro-studies as a means of exploring the characteristics of marginal cinema operations. For

example, both Robert Allen (2006: 67–77) and Greg Waller (2003–04, 2005) have looked at sites and exhibitors in the US, while Anne Wilson (2006) concentrated on the Gippsland area of Victoria. These studies draw attention to how exhibitors openly and consciously cultivated strong social and commercial connections with local residents as a means of ensuring their commercial survival. Allen notes that one of the distinguishing characteristics of cinema operators in rural areas of North Carolina was ‘how tightly woven cinemas were and/or aspired to be in their town’s social, cultural and civic life’ (2006: 67). Wilson’s research in Australia documents how Gippsland exhibitor Jack Glover was actively involved in the local community. Glover served on the committees and boards of the local show society, girls’ grammar school, Rotary Club, Masonic Lodge, the Diocese of Gippsland and the bowling club, and at the time of his death was also a local councillor.

Kate Bowles (2007b) adds another dimension to this research by arguing that the marginality of the cinema enterprise in Cobargo was attributable partly to the fact that its owner was not more highly regarded within the town. She notes that while he was a familiar figure, 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 was led to conclude the Cobargo cinema was not perceived to be centrally important to the local community, although people lent it ‘just enough support for it to keep going’ (2007b: 253).

While these projects reveal some commonalities between sites, in most cases they are too geographically dispersed and simply too few in number to underpin a wider account of rural cinema history. Bowles’ ‘counter-narrative’ provides us with a glimpse of what diversity and even contradictions might be revealed through further studies. However, returning to the issue here – which is to try to construct a broader overview of rural exhibition activity – two sources in Australia have been particularly useful: Thorne et al.’s inventory of cinemas in New South Wales (1996) and the *Film Weekly* annual directories. These provide a useful starting point for discovering more about the wider distribution and operation of cinemas.

The *Film Weekly* annual directory demonstrates that throughout the period of ascendancy of the single-screen theatre, it was not uncommon for larger rural towns to have more than one cinema. This often consisted of a glamorous picture palace that sat alongside a more basic venue consisting of not much more than corrugated iron on a timber frame. While the picture

palace would serve as a place for special occasions or outings on a Saturday night, the more rudimentary theatre was for everyday viewing. For example, between the 1930s and 1950s, the town of Bingara in North-West New South Wales supported two cinemas. While it is now a very small place (population 1,200 at the last Census: ABS 2006), Bingara was at that time a thriving mining and agricultural centre. A local resident and former usher interviewed as part of this study recalls that one cinema was a highly ornate venue called The Roxy.¹³ Here the tickets were more expensive but audiences were able to see the latest films in plush surroundings. The cinema was popular with couples on dates and among wealthier sections of the population. The town's second cinema, The Regent Theatre, was housed in more basic set-up in the Soldiers Memorial Hall. It offered a no-frills alternative that was accessible at a much lower cost, but the trade-off was that the films were often significantly older (Bingara resident, male, mid-seventies).

As the example of Bingara highlights, access to films was one of the key factors that distinguished high-end cinemas from smaller-scale operations. The availability of film prints remains an important point of demarcation in Australia and the UK today. Conflict over access to films has a long history. In the early days of exhibition in Australia, the UK, the US and elsewhere, the Hollywood studios imposed a hierarchical 'run-zone-clearance' system. Under this arrangement, first-run theatre – many of which were owned by the studios – received priority access to film prints. Then came second-run theatres, third-run and so on until the film had done the rounds of the country. Julie James Bailey's research on exhibition in Queensland recalls that between the 1930s and the 1960s, studios typically allocated ten prints to Australia. She notes these were carefully controlled by distributors through designated release zones commencing with Sydney and Melbourne. From there, a film would generally take several years to circulate through lower tier metropolitan and rural cinemas (James Bailey 1997: 111–12). With no DVD or television revenues to follow, distributors were focused on maximising earnings from film theatres. Cinemas receiving films last were the least economically significant, and – not surprisingly – were often located in rural areas (Collins 1995: 42–3; Schatz 1999: 16–19).

¹³ The Roxy at Bingara served as a case study of Subsidised Cinema for this research, and is examined in further detail in Chapter 3.

This system no longer functions in such a formalised manner, but the economic disparities that exist between large and small theatres still have a major impact on the accessibility of films. Upon a movie's initial release, distributors typically place prints with larger, mostly metropolitan cinemas, which are more likely to attract bigger audiences and therefore generate higher financial returns. It is only once this 'first' season has peaked and prints are freed up that the film becomes available to smaller cinemas. Simultaneous release is sometimes possible for titles in very wide release. However, for other films, small cinemas can wait anything from four to six weeks – even up to ten weeks or more in some cases – for a print. For rural theatre owners, these delays add to the challenge of staying ahead of a film's forthcoming DVD release date, which now rapidly follows the end of its metropolitan run, and unauthorized viewings that occur via internet download and pirated DVDs – both factors that can significantly erode audiences.

Critical Contexts: The Case Study as a Conceptual Tool

As the detailed survey of rural cinema scholarship in the Introduction to this thesis highlighted, much of the knowledge we have about non-metropolitan film exhibition is derived from research based on case studies. Conducting investigations on this basis raises particular methodological considerations. In relation to this study, these were discussed under the heading 'Methodology and Sources' in the Introduction. The purpose here is not to go over that ground again, but rather to complete this element of critical reflection by considering the conceptual implications of using micro-studies as a primary source of material.

In the framing of this study, the decision to conduct multiple case studies rather than just a few was a measured one. On the one hand, it meant that less detailed work could be undertaken in each location. However, spreading the investigation over a wider number of sites had the potential to provide more material for comparative analysis. This approach proved highly effective in two respects. First, it highlighted the extent to which each cinema was unique, and influenced by the particular confluence of events and conditions found in particular places. Even under the generalised headings of the cinema model, every cinema could arguably be seen as different. However, the case studies also demonstrated that when

viewed in another way, these cinemas could be understood as also being very much alike. While each cinema was shaped by the peculiarities of its location, the case studies revealed the same *kinds* of factors were affecting exhibition in each place. Broadly these can be summarised into three elements: local demographics; the level of economic prosperity (or decline); and the constraints (or possibilities) imposed by the physical geography of the location. These factors are returned to throughout this dissertation, and underpin its analysis and structure.

Other scholars have similarly argued that micro-studies can have relevance beyond the specificities of their subject or site of investigation. Kate Bowles (2007b: 254) contends that the validity of case studies can be enhanced by contextualization within the wider cultural, economic and geographic frameworks in which the acts of film consumption take place. Similarly, Robert Allen (cited in Bowles 2007a: 95) claims that, in order for critical studies to more adequately account for the complexity of cinema-going, it needs to be theorized not as an activity that occurs at discrete, geographically dispersed sites but as part of interconnected and multifaceted social and commercial networks. By combining data from the varied micro-studies with an analysis of the exhibition industry at a national and international level, this study has attempted to construct the kind of broad framework proposed by Allen. While this research is not complete in empirical terms, it is nevertheless informed by a range of sources and sites. In doing so, the intention is to provide a more comprehensive and satisfying account of movie-going in contemporary rural Australia and beyond.

I turn now to a more detailed examination of the distinguishing features of contemporary Small Commercial Cinemas in Australia and the UK. The following section highlights the issues of diversity and adversity, drawing attention the innovation and ingenuity of rural operators and the barriers they face. It also demonstrates the areas of commonality that exist within cinemas in this category, and explores the demographic, economic and geographic factors that shape their points of differentiation.

About Small Commercial Cinemas

While Small Commercial Cinemas generate less revenue overall than multiplex sites, they nonetheless constitute an important sector of the rural exhibition industries in Australia and the UK. These cinemas tend to operate in more economically marginal locations, and this has a direct impact on their scale and profitability. Government reports in both countries highlight the difficulties and financial pressures associated with operating small, independent cinemas (Beinart 2005; Ritchie 1996; Pike 2000a). These include issues to do with getting timely access to films, the negotiation of reasonable contractual terms with distributors, adapting to the realities of low audience numbers and coping with technological change.

In terms of sheer numbers, there are in fact more Small Commercial Cinemas in rural Australia than there are multiplexes – 204 compared with 62.¹⁴ However, Large Commercial Cinemas account for more screens – 352 compared with 286. Almost three-quarters (71 per cent) of Australian small cinemas are single-screen venues (MPDAA 2011). Directly comparable figures are not available for the UK, but UK Film Council statistics provide some guide as to Small Commercial Cinema activity. In 2010, three-quarters of UK screens were housed within complexes with five screens or more (defined in that country as multiplexes),¹⁵ while 916 screens (25 per cent) were classified as traditional or mixed use (UKFC 2011d). Due to differences in the way data is compiled between the two countries, the UK figures include some four screen venues (these would be defined as multiplexes in Australia). However, my fieldwork in the UK suggests that four screens do not represent a highly popular configuration. Therefore, conservatively estimating that at least half the 916 traditional or mixed-use screens in the UK are in venues with one to three screens, this sector can be assumed to represent at least 13 per cent of the national market. This is very similar to the Australian figure of 14 per cent (MPDAA 2011; UKFC 2011d).

¹⁴ MPDAA's cinema listings include some subsidised or non-permanent sites such as army bases, and community cinemas, but the vast majority of sites they track are commercial enterprises.

¹⁵ Defined by the UK Film Council as a multiplex. In Australia, a multiplex is defined as a venue with four or more screens.

Ownership

Almost all Small Commercial Cinemas are independently owned. In Australia, only one small film theatre is operated by a major exhibitor – the three-screen Warnambool Cinema owned by Village. Tracking of multiplex sites in the UK via company websites suggests that none of the three largest operators – Cineworld, Odeon and Vue – operates small cinemas. This situation reflects the extent to which large multi-screen complexes have come to dominate the exhibition market. The absence of chain operators in the small cinema market is directly related to issues of demographics and profitability – big cinemas need big populations.

In contrast to the situation with Large Commercial Cinemas, there has been very little investment in new small theatre construction since the 1980s. This relates both to the problems independent businesses often face in getting access to capital funding, and the low returns that typically are generated by cinemas in areas with sparser populations. There are some exceptions, such as The Picture Show Man Cinema in Merimbula (see the ‘In Focus’ section of this chapter for further discussion), but these are uncommon. Some older cinemas have managed to divide their once-large single-screen auditoriums into twin- or three-screen arrangements, such as the Cameo Theatre in Murray Bridge, South Australia and the Hollywood Cinemas in Fakenham and East Dereham, Norfolk. These expansions have allowed operators to screen a more varied program and helped them keep pace with the increasingly rapid throughput of new releases.¹⁶

More recently, growing interest in preserving older cinemas and the granting of heritage orders has restricted this kind of remodelling at some venues, particularly in Australia. The Saraton Theatre in Grafton, New South Wales provides an interesting case study of the tensions that can arise between preservationist and commercial interests. This grand Art Deco-style cinema has been owned by the Notaras family since it was built in 1926. The Saraton can seat up to 1,100 patrons, and was ideally suited to the pre-World War II period when many people were going to the cinema at least once a week. As audiences became smaller and attendance more infrequent, the space became impossible to fill, and as a result took on a cavernous, deserted feel that was distinctly unappealing to patrons. The possibility

¹⁶ In Australia, over 300 films are released each year, equating to an average of six new releases per week (Screen Australia 2011f). In the UK, over 500 films are released each year, an average of almost 10 per week (UKFC 2011e).

of dividing the auditorium into two was stymied by the cinema's listing on the Heritage Register in the late 1990s. This decision also made it difficult for the central CBD site to be sold and the cinema demolished to make way for another building. This dramatically reduced the value of the land and came as a bitter disappointment to the Notaras family. However, a sizable vacant area of land at the back of the cinema gave rise to some possibilities. In the late 2000s, the Notaras family decided to restore the main auditorium, which had become very rundown, and constructed a building to house two smaller screens on the unused land. In 2010, the Saraton was reborn as a decidedly more modern and thus far more commercially successful triple-screen venue (Thorne 2011).

A serious problem for independently owned cinemas is their lack of corporate clout. This has an impact on numerous areas of the business, including the availability of films, access to screen advertising and the lack of availability of distributor-funded marketing. In terms of booking films, the situation in Australia is dictated largely by the market, which leaves many small operators in a weak position. As Col Brissett, the manager of the First Avenue Cinema in Sawtell, New South Wales, explained:

Getting films is a big issue for us. Apart from kids' school holiday films, we can't usually get anything until the four-week policy is over. In some ways this is good because once the policy is finished the distributors will let us do things like only screen the film once a day, which wouldn't be an option if we got it on [national] release ... Another hassle is that distributors often don't give us much notice about when we will get a film. So sometimes we'll only have a week to promote it before we put it on, which doesn't give us a lot of time to build awareness. (Brissett interview, 31 July 2009)

Going against the majority of comments from Small Cinema operators, Trevor Wicks, CEO of the Hollywood Cinemas chain, reports that he rarely has difficulty in booking films for his five cinemas in rural Norfolk and Suffolk. However, this apparent contradiction needs to be understood against the kind of films screened at Hollywood's five theatres in rural Norfolk and Suffolk. These rarely stray from very popular, mainstream titles – and these are the titles most likely to be in wide release. This means the number of prints available is generally far higher than for other more specialised or limited appeal titles.

Locations

Small Commercial Cinemas are typically located within town centres. This is due principally to the age of their buildings, which in most cases predate the multiplex boom. Very few are found in edge-of-town self-contained destinations, such as shopping malls and entertainment precincts, which do not exist in many smaller settlements simply because there are not enough people. The location of Small Commercial Cinemas within CBD areas is important. It means they are places that many residents pass as part of their daily or weekly routine. As sites of past and anticipated future experience, these cinemas are places where enjoyable and perhaps even memorable events of people's lives have taken place. As is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6, Small Commercial Cinemas are often regarded by residents as a central component of their 'local' way of life. This is something that is reinforced by their integration into the local streetscape.

There are some exceptions, such as the Majestic Cinemas site in Nambucca Heads, which is located in a small shopping centre on the Pacific Highway, approximately 2.5 kilometres from the CBD. The shopping precinct was built in the mid-1980s after the highway was re-routed to bypass the town centre. The cinema's owner, Kieren Dell, says the location gives patrons access to ample parking but the paucity of complementary businesses impacts on broader social flows, especially in the evenings:

People will sometimes go over to the café after a movie during the day but there are no restaurants out here, so at night it is very much a case of coming to the film and then getting in your car and going home again. (Dell interview, 29 July 2009)

In contrast, for cinemas located within town centres, there is often a much greater selection of cafes, clubs, pubs and/or restaurants nearby. The interrelationships that can arise between cinemas and hospitality venues are illustrated in Sawtell, where the cinema was forced to close for six weeks in March and April 2009 following extensive flood damage. During the time it was shut, a number of the local cafes and restaurants reported noticeable downturns in their business and inquired regularly of the manager Col Brissett as to when the cinema would reopen (Brissett interview, 31 July 2009).

The aesthetic characteristics of Small Commercial Cinemas can be diverse, reflecting both the age of the buildings and their original purpose. They range from modern venues that offer a scaled-down version of the contemporary multiplex through to more dated, older-style venues. Newer types of cinemas are generally confined to places where there is a dynamic local industry or a significant tourism market to boost admissions and the turnover of the business. Examples include the three-screen Sale Cinema in Sale, Victoria, where the local town benefits from the local RAAF Base and nearby gas plant, and the twin-screen movie theatres in Port Macquarie (owned by Majestic Cinemas) and Merimbula (The Picture Show Man Cinema), which attract large numbers of holiday-makers.

In inland areas where towns are more likely to be struggling economically, cinemas tend to be more austere; this is the case in places like Inverell, New South Wales and Murray Bridge, South Australia. Similar patterns exist in the UK, where cinemas along the southern coast tend to be better maintained than those in other regions, such as rural Norfolk and Suffolk where the majority of my fieldwork was carried out. The lack of modernity provides space for more personal touches like handwritten signs and quirks such as old, wonky seats and outside toilets. The front window of the First Avenue Cinema in Sawtell, for example, functions like a community noticeboard, displaying information not just about the cinema, but also for local charities and other cultural events.

Film Programming

At Small Commercial Cinemas, the task of film booking and scheduling is generally carried out in house. My interviews with cinema owners indicated that most placed a high value on their individual relationships with distributors. However, they also acknowledged that day-to-day negotiations could sometimes get a little frustrating. Some cinemas avoid these conflicts altogether by engaging the services of a professional film booker to arrange films on their behalf. As these bookers typically work for a range of sites, they often have greater negotiating power than cinemas ordering films for stand-alone sites (Rhys-Jones 2002). However, I did not find that these services were in widespread use. Cost is one factor, but a number of owners also explained that they were unwilling to jeopardise the relationships they had built up with distributors by delegating this role to a third party.

In rural areas, small cinemas often serve audiences within quite large geographic areas. They therefore have to strike a balance in their programming between screening mainstream Hollywood films and content for more specific audience sub-groups within their local communities. In metropolitan locations, these distinctive interests are more likely to be catered for in different venues, but this is generally not practical in a rural setting. The Picture Show Man Cinema in Merimbula, for example, has a program that is heavily skewed towards Hollywood releases, but it also screens at least one film per week – usually a non-studio title targeted at the town’s large retiree population (Parkes interview, 26 April 2009). Similarly, the standard program at the First Avenue Cinema at Sawtell occasionally includes documentaries that highlight environmental or social issues, such as *An Inconvenient Truth* (Guggenheim 2006), *Garbage Warrior* (Hodge 2007) and *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Moore 2004), which appeal to the substantial green and/or alternate lifestyle demographic in the local area (Brissett interview, 31 July 2009). Conversely, the Hollywood Cinemas in rural Norfolk, including the site at Fakenham, cater predominantly to audiences with very conventional tastes. Consequently, their program is focused around blockbusters and children’s movies, and the company screens very little art-house or specialised content (Wicks interview, 29 March 2011).

Independents taking films mostly on second release (that is, after the initial four- to six-week release period has passed) generally have more flexibility than larger venues when it comes to programming. They are sometimes able to negotiate to take films for shorter periods than the standard four- to six-week run, making it more feasible to screen specialised or niche titles. For example, The First Avenue Cinema at Sawtell screened the acclaimed but confronting Australian film *Samson and Delilah* (Thornton 2009) for just a week. Similarly, it took the *Wake in Fright* (Kotcheff 1971) re-release for two weeks only. In cases where particular films have proved to be very successful, small cinemas often have more options to extend their season and even bring titles back after they have closed when there is sufficient demand. *Australia* (Luhrmann 2008) was a particularly successful film in regional and rural areas during late 2008 and early 2009. It ran for three months at The Picture Show Man Cinema at Merimbula (Parkes interview, 26 April 2009). At Port Macquarie on the New South Wales North Coast, the film had three separate seasons over a four-month period (Dell interview, 29 July 2009). In a multiplex context, lengthy seasons such as these are less common because of pre-booked commitments and the need to be turning product over on a regular basis.

Profitability

In Australia and the UK, the film market is geared to screening films on a large scale in multiplex theatres. In commercial terms, the industry does little to accommodate small operators, and many navigate what is at times a precarious balance between profitability and financial failure. While this simply reflects the forces of a free market, it does create some particular issues for the ongoing viability of small-scale cinemas.

Film distributors naturally concentrate their efforts on dealing with exhibitors representing hundreds of screens, and this is also where major screen advertising campaigns are placed. As for-profit enterprises, small cinemas have no access to government arts or culture subsidies other than the odd business development initiative. Small Commercial Cinema owners therefore tend to have to work hard in order to survive. They need to be dynamic and creative with their programming, and to have the capacity to respond intuitively to changes in their local circumstances. Specifically, there are six factors relevant to understanding the economic viability of small cinemas:

1. ticket pricing
2. film hire terms
3. access to screen advertising
4. cyclical nature of the exhibition business
5. access to capital
6. environmental change.

Most Small Commercial Cinemas recognise that keeping ticket prices as low as possible is very important. Census data show that people living in small settlements are more likely to have below-average incomes, and this has a direct impact on their discretionary spending capacities. As Kieren Dell explained about his company's cinema at Nambucca Heads:

One demographic issue around Nambucca [Heads] is that it is a fairly low socio-economic – quite a lot of people on the pension which is their only income, a large indigenous population and huge disparities of income. We find cost becomes a real issue. (Dell interview 29 July 2011)

Standard adult ticket prices are generally pitched lower than the rural multiplexes examined in the previous chapter. While the latter average around \$14–15 for an adult ticket, Small Commercial Cinemas tend to be in the \$10–13 range. For example, The Warwick Twin Cinema in Queensland charges \$10.50 for an adult, The First Avenue Cinema in Sawtell \$12 and The Picture Show Man Cinema in Merimbula and Majestic Cinemas in Nambucca Heads are both priced at \$13 (First Avenue Cinema 2011; Majestic Cinemas 2011; Picture Show Man Cinema 2011; Warwick Twin Cinema 2011). Similarly in the UK, the Hollywood Cinema at Fakenham charges £6.30 for an adult ticket. In larger regional towns in the UK, prices are usually slightly higher, averaging around £7 to £8, while in London and other major cities standard adult admission runs at £8 to £9. As owner Trevor Wicks explained, ‘we make it affordable for families – mum, dad and the kids – to come to the cinema and they are our main business’ (Wicks interview, 29 March 2011). Across Australia and the UK, the competitive pricing at small cinemas reflects the balance that operators seek to achieve between being economically accessible to the local population and making a profit.

With regard to film hire, many small cinemas are not able to screen films until after their initial metropolitan release has peaked, resulting in a delay of at least four to six weeks. All the cinema owners interviewed indicated that this was frustrating in terms of programming, but perceptions about the economic cost of these waiting periods did vary. Some cinemas reported that for blockbuster releases (such as *Harry Potter* or *X-Men* films), local residents were often prepared to travel quite long distances to larger towns with multiplexes to see the film at the time of its national release. This was an even bigger issue in the UK, where the distances involved were sometimes much shorter. The result of this is that by the time a print becomes available to the small cinema, a sizable proportion of its local audience may already have seen the film and it may not be worth screening it. Another consideration is the fact that movies are now generally released officially on DVD within three or four months after their national premiere. As the quote from Kieren Dell in the previous chapter highlighted, by the time the DVD date is approaching, it is often no longer be viable to screen certain films, even if a print is available. The delays also create more scope for illegal copies of films to erode the audience base.

However, currency is not always everything, as Col Brissett at The First Avenue Cinema explained:

The timeframe for art-house films is not so significant here. The video stores around here stock hardly any foreign films, maybe a few big titles but that's about it. That means we can run a film like the Israeli film *The Lemon Tree* [Riklis 2008] twelve months after its national release and still do well with it. (Brissett interview, 31 July 2009)

Cinemas screening second- release films are also able to derive some economic benefit from the fact their film hire splits with distributors will often be lower. For example, while a distributor may demand as much as 50–60 per cent in the early weeks, they may be willing to reduce this to 35–40 per cent later in the release. However, it can be harder to attract an audience at this stage of a film's release. Unlike many large rural cinemas, most small operators do not receive any assistance from distributors for advertising and other promotions. Very few theatres have the resources for regular television promotions. They rely instead on cheaper alternatives such as local newspapers, radio, and their websites and email newsletters.

Screen advertising is another key issue affecting the profitability of small cinemas. This is particularly important in Australia, where few are able to access national screen advertising, which is a highly lucrative income source for Large Commercial Cinemas. In the local industry, most major campaigns are booked through the specialist agency Val Morgan, which tends to deal only with chains and other major theatres. This has left small operators dependent on local businesses, many of which do not have the financial resources to produce advertisements on 35mm film. Small cinemas have responded to this problem in two ways. First, some have purchased low-resolution digital cinema systems (known as 'e-cinema'), which can play commercials shot on lower cost formats such as digital Betacam and mini DV. This has made cinema advertising more accessible for rural businesses, and has been used effectively across a significant number of sites, including The Picture Show Man Cinema in Merimbula. As owner Denis Parkes explained, this kind of ancillary income is crucial to his cinema – 'we couldn't operate without the extra income we get from the candy bar and screen advertising' (Parkes interview, 26 April 2009). The second cheaper, but less lucrative, solution has been for local ads to be projected on 35mm slides, which show a still rather than moving image.

Exhibition tends to be a cyclical business in most locations. For small cinemas, the standard quiet periods can be particularly challenging, as the cinemas may actually become loss-making enterprises during these times. Despite efforts to cut costs, it can be difficult to make ends meet when there are as few as eight to ten people in the audience. In these instances, the ability to maximise admissions during periods such as school holidays becomes critical to economic survival. Col Brissett, manager of The First Avenue Cinema in Sawtell, makes a major push to get his weekly program leaflets into local motels and caravan parks during the summer, and hopes for rain that will draw tourists away from the beach. In quiet periods, he attempts to boost attendances through self-programmed film festivals, which he runs twice a year. Films that prove popular during the festival are often screened for several more weeks after its close. His most successful festival title to date has been *Amelie* (Jeunet 2001), which ran for three months (Brissett interview, 31 July 2009). While The Picture Show Man Cinema at Merimbula is not quite so marginal, its owner nevertheless also looks to make the most of holiday periods. His initiatives include a deal with a local bus company to ferry children from surrounding towns to the theatre and a special 'two for one' ticket deal promoted through local motels and holiday apartments.

The link between environmental change and cinema profitability is illustrated by the impact of the lengthy and severe drought that affected eastern Australia during much of the 2000s. The drought had a major negative effect on commercial activity in many rural towns as jobs disappeared and farmers had less money to spend. This flowed across into a range of tertiary services and small businesses, including many cinemas. The owner of The Picture Show Man Cinema, Denis Parkes, reported that the drought had a noticeable impact on his admissions over a five-year period. Somewhat counter-intuitively, he found the global financial crisis of 2008–09 helped lift attendances as audiences sought out the relatively inexpensive entertainment of the cinema in increased numbers (Parkes interview, 26 April 2009).

The final issue identified for small operators is access to capital for maintenance, and technical and aesthetic improvements. Low profit margins have an impact both on the ability to accumulate cash savings and the cinema's capacity to borrow money. As a result, it is in this sector of the market that the transition to digital film projection raises the greatest concern. It is also where ICAA and the Digital Funding Partnership (UK) have directed a

considerable portion of their energies. The cost of installing a DCI Specification system is substantial, and is likely to prove out of reach for some small operators unless they have access to some kind of subsidy arrangement. Cinemas unable to make the conversion to DCI digital are likely to face an uncertain future as the supply of 35mm prints dwindles. Once the conversion is complete, they will not be able to screen any new Hollywood films – on which most operators rely for the majority of their income. Analysis of the implications of the digital conversion are continued in the next section.

Digital Projection and Small Commercial Cinemas

As outlined in the previous chapter, the introduction of the DCI Specification in 2005 came with a clear directive that it was to be the only format in which the Hollywood films would be screened in cinemas (Digital Cinema Initiatives 2009a). Studio films are the cornerstone of most commercial cinema businesses, and without access to them most could not survive. The issue for many small operators is that the DCI Specification equipment is very expensive relative to their turnover. The cost of a compliant system in Australia recently was estimated at around \$200,000 (Bennett 2011), while in the UK it currently runs at around £60,000 (Perrin interview, 3 June 2011). For some small cinemas, a capital outlay of this magnitude is simply beyond their reach.

The VPF subsidies are designed to expedite the transition to digital exhibition. They are proving to be effective at the upper end of the market, but these deals generally are not being offered to small cinemas. The reasons are twofold – first, their low box office earnings are too low to justify payment of the VPF subsidy. The second problem is that many rely on screening second-release prints – that is, prints that have already been used for a metropolitan season. But most studios want to pay the VPF only once for a particular film – to the cinema that screens it first, not subsequent venues. While the studios are agreeable to subsidising first-release cinemas, what will happen with regard to subsequent seasons at other theatres is a contentious and as yet unresolved issue.

While the low cost of manufacturing digital prints may encourage the studios to widen the scale of releases, any expansion would almost certainly have its limits. Distributors will continue to seek assurances of a minimum return from a cinema before committing to supply

it with a first-release print. Even in a low-cost digital environment, many small cinemas are unlikely to be able to meet the required thresholds. If the studios are able to restrict their VPF payments to first-run cinemas only, this may place further downward pressure on the expansion of prints.

The Digital Funding Partnership in the UK and ICAA in Australia have attempted to address the problems of scale by pooling the resources of small and medium cinemas. However, some minor-scale enterprises have inevitably been left out again because they cannot bring enough of a financial contribution to the table (Ewart 2011). If no assistance is forthcoming, the outlook for these very small cinemas is rather bleak. There are currently 180 single- and twin-screen film theatres in rural Australia, and there are legitimate concerns that the economic imperatives of the digital transition may force a significant number of them to close. The Dungog Cinema in the New South Wales Hunter Valley, which hosts the iconic Dungog Film Festival, has been one of the early casualties of the digital transition. As its proprietor explained in a newspaper article published in September 2011:

It's extremely disappointing to be the ones to close Australia's oldest cinema, but we've had no choice. We can't get new release movies and we can't afford to make the transition to digital screening technologies. The cinema is no longer viable but I feel we have failed the people of Dungog. (Brett Hopson, quoted in Buchanan and Ellis 2011)

With the exception of Stuart Hanson (2007b), academic research on digital exhibition has tended to give little attention to the implications of the transition on peripheral and niche exhibition markets. Rather, they have represented the conversion as a largely unproblematic and globally standardised proposition. The principal contention being that the introduction of digital cinema would not radically alter existing industry power structures and that markets, therefore, would remain relatively unaltered (Belton 2002; Culkin and Randle 2003). However, this position is compromised by its failure to consider the role that national and local forces can play in mediating and shaping global phenomena. Engaging with the specificities of place does not necessarily diminish the significance of global discourses. Instead, it allows researchers to become attuned to how these forces intermesh and give rise to distinctive and varied outcomes (Ward and Moran, 2007: 83–4). A critical examination of digital cinema in Australia that looks beyond the studios and multiplexes opens discourse to

an examination of how this transition is occurring outside the mainstream. More specifically, it provides an approach to interrogating the uneven, and at times disadvantageous, development of technological change in rural locations.

Adding another dimension to the digital cinema debate in Australia is the use of e-cinema formats, predominantly by Small Commercial Cinemas. These systems are rapidly becoming redundant following the introduction of the Hollywood studios' proprietary DCI Specification, which effectively halted further expansion of lower resolution formats. While its use did not become widespread in the UK, e-cinema was until very recently still being deployed in significant numbers in rural Australia. It continues to be used in many of these cinemas, and is therefore relevant to understanding wider digital developments.

By the late 2000s, around half of Australia's independent cinemas, including many in rural areas, were successfully using e-cinema systems to screen independently distributed films (Castaldi interview, 22 January 2009; Watson 2007: 5). The use of the e-cinema format at rural cinemas began around 2003 following a restructure of the local screen advertising industry, which effectively excluded them from national advertising campaigns. To help offset the loss of this revenue, exhibitors acquired the low-resolution digital systems, which enabled local businesses – now the sole source of advertising revenue for small cinemas – to produce promotional material at a much lower cost than 35mm (Castaldi interview, 22 January 2009; Parkes interview, 26 April 2009). From early 2005, local independent distributors, such as Icon, Hopscotch and Madman, began releasing selected features on e-cinema as well as 35mm format. Since then, around 40 to 50 films have successfully been released in Australia in this manner, including the locally produced titles *Kenny* (Jacobsen 2006), *The Combination* (Field 2009) and *Unfinished Sky* (Duncan 2007), and international titles such as *Slumdog Millionaire* (Boyle 2008), *The Wrestler* (Aronofsky 2008) and *Easy Virtue* (Elliott 2008) (Parkes interview, 26 April 2009).

This kind of distribution was able to flourish partly because these films fall within genres that are considered to be at relatively low risk of piracy (e-cinema systems offer no options for data encryption). The opportunities it created for Australian films were particularly significant. While rural exhibitors reported that they were interested in screening local movies, their inability to get a print within a reasonable timeframe often meant they were not

being screened. These concerns are borne out by Screen Australia data showing that from 2005 to 2009, 40 per cent of local films were released with just nineteen prints or fewer (Screen Australia 2009). Films like *Kenny* (Jacobsen 2006), released in both 35mm and e-cinema format, have been able to capitalise on their early availability. Owner of The Picture Show Man Cinema in Merimbula, Denis Parkes, believes that being able to start his season of *Kenny* at the same time as metropolitan locations contributed to its outstanding success at his theatre, where the film ran for thirteen weeks. For small cinemas, the attraction of e-cinema as a projection format lies in its significantly cheaper cost and its respectable technical quality. But with the DCI Specification now firmly established, e-cinema looks set to be phased out over the next few years.

Piracy

The unauthorised copying and distribution of film material is a global problem. With perhaps the most at stake, the major Hollywood studios have become vigilant almost to the point of paranoia about trying to prevent the illegal circulation and trade of their intellectual property. In Australia, cinema owners interviewed for this study gave examples of various strategies designed to prevent piracy, particularly on blockbuster releases. These include the placement of security guards with night vision goggles in screenings to prevent camcording, as occurred with the film *Australia* (Luhmann 2008), and the practice of not delivering the final reel of the film print until a few hours before the premiere (Meggs interview, 13 July 2009). Unquestionably, one of the attractions of digital cinema conversion for the studios is the additional security measures that can be built into the technology.

Some reports suggest there is a compelling economic basis for the studios' concern. The Motion Picture Distributors Association estimates more than \$3 billion in box office revenues is lost as a result of piracy (De Vany and Walls 2007: 291). In the UK, copyright theft has been reported to cost the film and television industries in excess of £500 million (Mediatique 2009), while in Australia recent research puts the figure at \$575 million (AFACT 2011). Some debate exists about the veracity of these figures. Of particular concern is whether a person viewing pirated material would, in its absence, have purchased a cinema ticket and/or bought or hired a legitimate copy of the film on DVD or via a legal download. Statistics-

based research by economists such as De Vany and Walls (2007) suggests the studios are right to be worried. They modelled the impact of piracy on the box office performance of an unspecified wide-release Hollywood film. Their results claimed to show ‘unambiguously that Internet piracy diminished [the] box-office revenues’ (2007: 291). However, other scholars, including Toby Miller (2007: 3), argue that piracy is not the scourge it is often made out to be. Miller maintains it can help film producers to reach previously untouched viewers, and comes with the advantage of being cheaper than conventional publicity.

The purpose of raising the issue of piracy here is not to debate the issue *per se*, but to highlight that it is not solely a metropolitan phenomenon. It was raised as a concern by almost all of the rural cinema owners and managers interviewed for this study, but has perhaps the greatest impact on small commercial operators. The Australian Federation Against Copyright Theft (AFACT) estimates that one-third of Australian adults have participated in some form of movie theft, either downloading or streaming films via the internet, or buying or borrowing counterfeit material on DVD (AFACT 2011). In rural areas, the use of online sources is less common because access to fast internet-delivery formats such as ADSL and cable can be limited and large data packages for household are expensive. Instead, small cinema owners in Australia report that pirated material circulates most commonly via DVDs, and can have a noticeable impact on box office revenues.

In most cases, illegal DVDs are acquired via professional counterfeiting operations and sold through informal networks in places like pubs and schools, or brought back from overseas holidays. Blockbuster titles tend to be the most popular, but anti-piracy raids in Australia demonstrate that a very wide range of material is copied for illegal sale. Like legitimately purchased DVDs, pirated versions may be loaned or watched in a group, which increases their audience reach beyond the initial purchaser. The issues for small operators in particular is the fact they often have to wait until well after a movie’s national release to get a print. This adds to the length of time pirated material is able to circulate, and increases its potential to usurp ticket sales at the cinema later on. In some cases, copyright breaches have been less malevolent – such as in the case of the teacher at a school in Nowra who was discovered to have screened an unauthorised copy of the film *Finding Nemo* (Stanton and Unkrich 2003), reportedly bought overseas, to students a week before its official release in Australia. While no harm may have been intended, according to Denis Parkes, owner of the nearby Picture

Show Man Cinema in Merimbula, the local cinema believed it had a detrimental effect on ticket sales (Parkes interview, 26 April 2009).

In accordance with Griffith University ethics protocols, cinema audiences interviewed for this study were not asked about their participation (or not) in film piracy because of its status as an illegal activity. No participants inadvertently volunteered instances of where they had bought or watched pirated material, although the size of this sample is so small it cannot be taken as being representative of the wider movie viewing community. It may also be significant that the majority of people interviewed were aged over 40. In broad terms, this age group is considered to be the least interested in accessing and watching pirated content. As Denis Parkes explained, this audience is ‘looking for the big screen experience. In contrast the young male audience just want the “t-shirt” [to have seen the film]. They don’t really care so much about seeing it at the cinema.’ (Parkes interview 26 April 2009)

In Focus

The In Focus section of this chapter centres on two movie theatres in Australia: The Picture Show Man Cinema at Merimbula and The First Avenue Cinema at Sawtell, both in New South Wales. These venues are broadly representative of the variety that exists within this tier of the cinema model. The Picture Show Man is a modern and relatively prosperous twin-screen complex, while The First Avenue Cinema is an older-style single-screen venue whose ongoing financial position is more uncertain. The case studies extend the preceding discussion by examining the impact of issues such as digital cinema and access to films at a micro-level. This section also highlights the importance of adaptability and innovation as key strategies for economic survival in marginal conditions. In different ways, the Merimbula and Sawtell cinemas both demonstrate how their responsiveness to local conditions enables them to remain in business, albeit with varying degrees of success. The case studies also illustrate how their corporate independence has given them the necessary scope to do so.

The Picture Show Man Cinema, Merimbula, New South Wales, Australia

The Picture Show Man Cinema is located in Merimbula, a small town on the Far South Coast of New South Wales with a population of just under 4,000 (ABS 2006). It is the only cinema, commercial or otherwise, currently operating in what is a sizable geographic area. The business was established in 1993 by its present owner, Denis Parkes, and has always been independently operated. Initially, The Picture Show Man operated as a single-screen venue in a large rented space at the back of one of the town's small shopping arcades. By 1995 it had proved so successful that Mr Parkes embarked on the construction of the current, purpose-built, modern, twin-screen complex on a nearby town centre site. The new cinema opened in 1997 (Parkes interview, 26 April 2009).

Dubbed by the local council as the district's 'social capital', Merimbula is a prime location for the Far South Coast region's cinema (Bega Valley Shire Council 2010). The Picture Show Man is located in the centre of town. It is close to a number of cafes and restaurants, retail shops and clubs/pubs. As one local resident explained, 'Merimbula is really the only place in the local area where you can go out. There's very little in terms of entertainment and restaurant options in other places like Bega which is especially dead at night, and of course there's no other cinema either.' (Merimbula resident, female, early sixties) Merimbula is also a very popular tourist destination and, like the Birch Carroll and Coyle Cinema in Coffs Harbour, The Picture Show Man relies heavily on large numbers of holiday-makers to supplement local admissions.

The Picture Show Man Cinema has a contemporary, comfortable interior, and modern projection and sound systems. It provides a high-quality cinema experience, albeit on a smaller scale than found in most metropolitan locations. The cinema has a seating capacity of 320 – 185 seats in the largest auditorium and 135 in the smaller. At the time of my visit in April 2009, films were being shown predominantly on 35mm. The cinema also had an e-cinema system, which was used to screen local advertising and some independently released films. By late 2010, the complex had converted both screens to DCI digital projection, which upgraded presentation quality and added 3D to the cinema's range of offerings (Parkes interview, 26 April 2009).

As the only cinema operating in the Far South Coast region, The Picture Show Man draws its regular patrons from a relatively wide geographic area. The cinema caters to several distinct and diverse audience groups, which vary according to age and time of year. Outside school holiday periods, the cinema is sustained by a regular group of older residents (aged 55 and over) who attend during the week and a working adult audience (25–40 years) who attend mostly at weekends. During school holiday periods, school-aged children and families tend to dominate, although the cinema also continues to program a small selection of films to keep in touch with its regular older audience at these times. While the program is generally diverse, horror and non-English language films are rarely screened because they do not attract audiences in sufficiently high numbers. The exceptions are foreign language titles that have been well reviewed by film critics and have a high media profile, such as *As It Is in Heaven* (Pollak 2004), which had a very successful season at the cinema. Mr Parkes reports that Australian films often perform well and are therefore also screened regularly, particularly when they have been available in the e-cinema format (Parkes interview, 26 April 2009).

With only two screens, the range of films available at the cinema is inevitably limited in comparison with larger multi-screen cinemas. The cinema is generally able to screen major releases on or around the date of their metropolitan premieres. Distributors' willingness to supply a relatively small cinema with first-release prints is a reflection of its ability to deliver relatively high returns per screen. However, The Picture Show Man can wait considerable periods of time for more specialised films – up to eight to twelve weeks in some cases, depending on the availability of prints and the demand for a particular title. This problem has partly been alleviated by the e-cinema system, which allowed the cinema to screen selected independent films at the same time as their metropolitan release. The more recent installation of a DCI system has now significantly widened the scope of films the cinema can receive in digital format.

Mr Parkes is an innovative and dynamic businessman, and this is evident across numerous aspects of the cinema's operations. Before opening a temporary theatre in 1993, he spent considerable time researching factors such as local demographics, level of tourism and the distances people from outlying towns would be prepared to travel. He also took into account the history of other cinema ventures in the region and the reasons they had failed to survive. This helped him to design a film venue that would attract a core local audience, but one that

would also be in a position to capitalise on the regular influx of tourists (Parkes interview, 26 April 2009; Herman 2000: 94). In 2008, the cinema introduced a loyalty club, which at the time of our interview had around 350 members actively using their membership cards. The scheme had an almost 100 per cent renewal in memberships after its first year, and is still going strong. The cinema's history is Mr Parkes' success. The venue's ongoing prosperity has allowed it to maintain a high-quality experience and to keep pace with technological innovations such as e-cinema and later DCI digital projection.

Mr Parkes' personal commitment and enthusiasm to the cinema and its patrons were clear in our interview, which he concluded with the following comment:



Image 5: The Picture Show Man Cinema, Merimbula, April 2009



Image 6: Candy Bar, The Picture Show Man Cinema, Merimbula, April 2009

The public love coming in to the cinema and talking to us about films. When I am in-house I love to be in the ticket box because you interact with and talk to the patrons. The country cinema is much more personal – not just for the owner but for all the staff. Even for the young students that work here, their school mates get a buzz when they come in and get served by them. (Parkes interview 26 April 2009)

Audience interviews and written surveys indicate that Mr Parkes' exuberance and attention to detail are noticed and appreciated by local residents, as illustrated in the following comments:

We are lucky to have such a well-run and pleasant venue for viewing films.
(Merimbula resident, female, over 65 years)

Nice people work there. (Merimbula resident, female, 56–65 years)

Staff are always friendly and courteous. (Merimbula resident, female, 46–55 years)

The cinema is very comfortable, clean, staff are very friendly. It's one of the most important venues in this area. (Merimbula resident, female, 56–65 years)

There were numerous other positive comments like this about the friendly, welcoming atmosphere at the cinema and its value to the community.

First Avenue Cinema, Sawtell, New South Wales, Australia

The First Avenue Cinema is located in Sawtell, a mid-size rural town on the New South Wales Mid-North Coast with a population of 15,000 (ABS 2006). The cinema was established as a simple timber and corrugated iron building in 1929. It was purchased by Alan and Doris Brissett in 1942 and has remained in Brissett family ownership ever since. In 1955, the cinema was severely damaged by a mini-cyclone and was rebuilt in its present triple-brick configuration and reopened in 1957. The building is now listed on the New South Wales National Trust Register. In the early 1980s, the cinema was leased to a business partnership which undertook some major refurbishments. This work included upgrades to the projection, sound and seating, and the repair of the building's original Art Deco features. The cinema had a difficult time in the period after the arrival of home video, and closed temporarily in the mid-1990s. Since its reopening, it has been managed by Col Brissett, the grandson of Alan and Doris. Col's brother John is also works in the business (Brissett interview, 31 July 2009; First Avenue Cinema 2010; Thorne et al. 1996: 429).

The First Avenue Cinema is a single-screen venue and has a seating capacity of just over 400. Its Art Deco design is attractive but modest. The foyer is reasonably large, and there are a few couches and chairs where patrons can sit before film sessions commence. There is a mural on one wall of the classic scene from *King Kong* atop the Empire State Building, painted by a local student. Tickets and candy bar items are purchased from the same counter. Other quirks include the outside toilets, which are located outside the cinema and are accessed via a laneway to the back of the building. Both Col and John Brissett regularly work behind the ticket counter, and there are other personal touches such as the choc-top ice creams that are made onsite. The cinema also employs several part-time staff, including a projectionist.

The quality of the image and sound presentation at the cinema is generally good, although towards the back of the auditorium the sound is often not so clear and sometimes the whirring of the 35mm projector, which sits in the projection box directly behind, is audible. Scratches on film image are also regularly noticeable – a direct result of the cinema having access only to well-used prints. All films are screened on 35mm and advertising is shown on 35mm still slides. The cinema does not have digital screening capabilities, but it has hired a high-quality DVD projector on several occasions. For example, for the film *As It Is in Heaven* (Pollak 2004), Mr Brissett was aware of strong local interest in the movie, but found it impossible to get a print. Eventually he reached a compromise with the distributor, which allowed him to screen it on DVD. The film was a success, generating over 2000 admissions during its four-week season at the cinema (Brissett interview, 31 July 2009). Most of the films screened at Sawtell are second releases, with the exception of children's school holiday titles, which are usually accessible at times in line with their metropolitan premieres (Brissett interview, 31 July 2011).

The First Avenue Cinema is located within Sawtell's very picturesque main street. It features a divided road with a large garden and lawn area in the centre that is dominated by several very large Moreton Bay fig trees. The town also has a very attractive, undeveloped beach positioned only a block from the town centre. Unlike The Picture Show Man Cinema, which is located within a relatively isolated region, Sawtell is situated quite close to the regional city of Coffs Harbour. The latter is approximately 15 kilometres away – a drive of about fifteen minutes – and its Birch Carroll and Coyle five-screen multiplex was examined in the previous chapter. Coffs Harbour is a major administrative centre housing the local council offices, along with a variety of federal and state departments. It also has a major hospital, regional airport, two large shopping precincts, a number of schools, a TAFE college and a satellite campus of Southern Cross University. Proximity to this larger town ensures that Sawtell residents are relatively well catered for across areas such as education, health and telecommunications in comparison to towns of a similar size in more isolated locations. With its range of facilities and beautiful beaches, Sawtell – along with the Mid-North Coast area more generally – has become a very popular destination for both holiday-makers and retirees. These two groups account for a major proportion of The First Avenue Cinema's revenue.

The Brissetts have strategically positioned their cinema as an art-house or specialist theatre. When the Birch Carroll and Coyle Cinema opened nearby, Mr Brissett explained that it became apparent very quickly that The First Avenue Cinema had to differentiate itself quickly or go under:

There was no point in us trying to compete with Birch Carroll and Coyle. That's where the teenagers want to go, they want their McDonald's and that whole experience. The young kids are their audience. Here we have created a different type of audience. (Brissett interview, 31 July 2009)

The Sawtell cinema has an older, more selective film audience that keeps the cinema going throughout most of the year. However, it also relies heavily on school holiday crowds, in particular families and primary school-aged children, to generate strong admissions that tide it over in quieter periods. The cinema draws in both tourists and locals attracted by its convenient location, its historical ambience and its competitive ticket pricing, which deliberately undercuts the nearby Birch Carroll and Coyle cinema by several dollars. It also sells books of five tickets at a generous discount. Like Trevor Wicks in the UK, Mr Brissett recognises how the price of admission can add up for families and pensioners. Offering a cheaper alternative helps him to win customers (Brissett interview, 31 July 2011).



Image 7: First Avenue Cinema, Sawtell, January 2011



Image 8: Ticket Counter and Candy Bar, First Avenue Cinema, Sawtell, January 2011



Image 9: First Avenue (main street), Sawtell, January 2011

Maintaining a balance between mainstream and specialised films – particularly in school holiday periods – is an issue. Mr Brissett is generally bound by strict contractual conditions on school holiday films, which require him to screen them two or three times per day. He generally takes two titles and runs them back to back throughout the day, but the downside is that this leaves little time to show anything else. As a compromise, the cinema generally screens a more adult-oriented film at a session starting at around 8.30 or 9.00 p.m., but Mr Brissett acknowledges that this timing is sometimes too late for his regular patrons (Brissett interview, 31 July 2009).

Conclusion

The Merimbula and Sawtell micro-studies demonstrate that location has a major influence on the way small exhibitors operate. Geography and its inherent constraints impact across several core areas of cinema functionality, including what films are screened and when, what prices are charged for admission, how the impact of piracy might be felt and whether there is access to screen advertising revenue and investment capital. As both Denis Parks and Col Brissett

illustrate, flexibility, ingenuity and a good understanding of the local market are essential to economic survival. Independent ownership gives these cinemas the scope to be creative. Their marginal locations make the utilisation of this freedom a necessity.

This chapter has established the distinctive structure and characteristics of the second tier of the cinema model, Small Commercial Cinemas. In doing so, it extends the first research question addressed in the Introduction concerning the circumstances in which films are screened to rural audiences. The discussion also highlights how the wider economic and social issues in small towns – such as geographic isolation and low incomes – influence operators to a greater extent than larger enterprises. These findings further underscore the importance of the local in assessing the impact of national or global trends and events. The issues around digital cinema, for example, show that while the conversion may be unfolding in a relatively straightforward way for major exhibitors, it is a very different story for small operators. Their exclusion so far from access to subsidies dramatically raises the stakes of the transition. It shifts it from a largely behind-the-scenes event to one that has implications for the continued availability of cinema in many rural places.

The historical and critical analysis sections of the chapter demonstrate patterns of commonality and continuity between small rural cinemas in the early twentieth century and contemporary operations. This analysis suggests that the imperatives of rural geographies may extend across time and place, and may be just as significant as the different national contexts in which cinemas in these three countries operate. Neglect of the rural as a site of critical investigation and the lack of progress beyond micro-level studies have both contributed to failures in recognising these connections. This element of the discussion addresses the latter two areas for investigation raised in the Introduction regarding the divergence of rural film experiences and the conceptual implications of such critical disregard.

In the next chapter, we depart from exhibition in for-profit contexts to focus on cinema theatres subsidised by organisations such as local councils, regional arts and cultural organisations, and state and national screen agencies. We explore the rationale and impetus for cinema in situations where there is little prospect of commercial gain, and find the desire for improving rural life and enhancing social cohesion to be important driving forces.

Chapter 3

Subsidised Cinemas

Introduction

Subsidised Cinemas constitute the third tier of the cinema model presented in this thesis. It is at this juncture in the typology that we depart from exhibition activity conducted primarily for the purpose of commercial gain. As demonstrated in previous chapters, the survival of Large and Small Commercial Cinemas depends on their ability to maintain financial self-sufficiency. These imperatives do not necessarily reduce exhibitors to single-minded, merciless entrepreneurs, but they are crucial to understanding the factors that drive these businesses. In contrast, Subsidised Cinemas are distinguished by their reliance on public funding to sustain their day-to-day operations. This funding can take various forms, including annual grants and the underwriting of minimum guarantees. While this can ease the profit-making burden on the venue, it does not mean the operation is entirely without a commercial focus. Most would fold without a regular audience to bring in supplementary income and provide assurance to the public funding partners that their money is being well spent.

Subsidised Cinemas typically bring access to film screenings in towns that are unable to support a commercial enterprise, due to their small populations, depressed economic circumstances or geographic isolation, or sometimes all three. Within these contexts, public bodies, such as local councils, state and national screen agencies, arts and cultural organisations and rural economic development groups, sometimes provide financial assistance to help fill the gaps in the film landscape. The rationale for this intervention has been underpinned by a variety of pretexts. These have ranged from straightforward attempts to tackle cinematic/cultural deprivation and the preservation of architecturally significant film theatres to less precise aims centred on improving social and financial well-being in disadvantaged rural towns.

This chapter begins by looking at the history of government invention in cinema in Australia and the UK from its early beginnings in the 1950s until the present day. The next section considers how community interest and public-funding for cinema have been influenced by

wider political events, media discourses and the declining quality of life, and how these have been understood within critical studies. Examined in particular detail is the range of regional cinema initiatives established in New South Wales in the late 1990s and the resurgence in council-owned cinemas that these programs encouraged. The chapter continues by looking in detail at the distinguishing characteristics of Subsidised Cinema and the liberatory capacities of lower-end digital technologies for this type of exhibition. The 'In Focus' section looks at venues in Australia and the UK: The Roxy, Bingara (New South Wales, Australia) and the Regal Theatre, Stowmarket (Suffolk, UK). These micro-studies illustrate the aesthetic range of cinemas in this category, and examine the political, economic and cultural pretexts for their existence. Several other Subsidised Cinemas were visited as part of this study, including The Civic Theatre, Gunnedah in Australia and Cinema City, Norwich, Aldeburgh Cinema and The Maltings Theatre and Cinema, Berwick-Upon-Tweed in the UK. Information collected from observations and interviews at these sites also informs this chapter.

History of Subsidised Cinema

Prior to the downturn in cinema attendance that began in the 1950s, cinema exhibition prospered as a self-sufficient and relatively vibrant sector of both the Australian and UK film industries. During the first half of the twentieth century, huge sums were invested in cinematic infrastructure (buildings and projection technologies), and a range of very profitable and powerful film conglomerates emerged. However, the massive decline in admissions in the period after World War II changed the situation dramatically. While the industry previously had weathered the adverse affects of the Great Depression and World War II, the post 1950s decline was different. The fall in ticket sales was huge, and figures continued trending downwards for several decades. This influenced not only the centrally important market of the United States, but also places like Australia and the UK.

Between the 1950s and 1980s, large numbers of cinemas closed their doors. In Australia, the number of theatres dropped by over 50 per cent, falling from 1600 in 1947 to 702 by 1984 (*Film Weekly* 1946–47: 106, Screen Australia 2011e). In the UK, the decline was even more dramatic. In 1941 there were 4,415 cinemas; by 1969 this had fallen to 1,559; and in 1984 the figure stood at a paltry 660 (Hanson 2007a: 61, 122). These closures saw many big CBD

buildings boarded up. The resultant decline in the flow of people changed the social dynamic of many central city areas (Jones 2003: 35–9). At the same time, Hanson notes that in the UK there was a failure by exhibitors to keep up with the increased movement of the population into the suburbs (2007a: 94–8).

In the cities, former cinemas became prime sites for redevelopment. In metropolitan locations, where land can be a valuable commodity, many old theatres were demolished to make way for new office buildings, hotels, apartments and shops (Thorne et al. 1996). This also occurred in rural towns. For example, in 1972 the original Civic Theatre in Gunnedah in North-West New South Wales was razed to make way for a Coles supermarket (*Namoi Valley Independent* 2001a). In other cases, small town cinemas were sold off and the building utilised for other purposes. For example, in Bingara in North-West New South Wales the Roxy Theatre was bought by a local tradesman who repaired electrical goods. He converted the front area of the cinema into a shop and used the auditorium – which he made larger by removing most of the seats – as a storage space for items awaiting repair (McNaughton interview, 22 September 2009). Similarly, in the nearby town of Barraba the theatre was acquired by the proprietors of the local newspaper. They used the foyer area as offices and the auditorium – again minus its seats – to house the printing press.

Former cinemas were also put to diverse use in the UK, although the emphasis there tended to centre on substituting cinema for other forms of public entertainment – dance venues, ten-pin bowling alleys and bingo halls were all popular options. Bingo tended to be the most profitable, and has been more enduring (2007a: 117–18). During my fieldwork in the UK, I found a number of bingo parlours still operating from what clearly were old theatres, including the Mecca Bingo Hall at Great Yarmouth pictured below. However, for some theatres the conversion to bingo hall was only temporary. For example, the heritage theatres in East Dereham and Fakenham, now owned by the Norfolk-based Hollywood Cinemas group, were both used for bingo in the 1970s but now show films again (Wicks interview, 29 March 2011).

During the period of significant industrial and architectural change that occurred from the 1950s to the 1980s, some communities reacted particularly strongly to the threatened loss and/or destruction of their cinemas. As Janna Jones (2003) explains in her study of the

restoration of five cinemas in the southern United States, these were places to which people often felt very attached:



Image 10: Mecca Bingo, Great Yarmouth, March 2011

While it is true that perhaps a bank or a courthouse might have been equally or more architecturally significant ... the movie palace has more emotional appeal and cultural value to the general public. Thousands upon thousands of people had regularly frequented them in the past, and the memory of their social interactions, the pleasure of moviegoing, and the fantastic designs and architecture made them care about keeping these theatres safe from destruction. (2003: 113)

While many of the cinema buildings in rural Australia and the UK were far more modest than those studied by Jones, the emotional reactions they provoked were nevertheless quite similar. During the 1960s and 1970s, a number of community groups were successful in convincing their local councils to intervene in order to preserve their town's cinema. The Majestic Theatre in the rural town of Malanda in North Queensland and the Chelsea Cinema in

suburban Adelaide, South Australia are both examples of cinemas that came into public ownership under these circumstances (Marks interview, 18 May 2010; Majestic Theatre 2010). In the UK, the Stowmarket Town Council stepped in to buy the local Regal Theatre when it faced closure in 1972 (Marsh interview, 13 November 2011). In each of these cases, council action ensured both preservation of the building and the continuation of its use as a cinema. While it was not a widespread practice for councils to buy cinemas, their involvement around this time was nevertheless significant, particularly in the UK. In 1976, an inquiry conducted by Lord Redcliffe-Maud, titled *Support for the Arts in England and Wales*, suggested there were as many as 59 local councils involved in providing film screenings for their constituents (Porter 2010: 67).

The acquisition of film theatres by local governments in the 1960s and 1970s represented the first significant foray into cinema provision by publicly funded organisations. Involvement by other public organisations would soon follow, although it would always be on a fairly small scale compared with the government investments made in film production. This next wave of intervention began in the UK with the first coordinated program to support exhibition outside the major cities launched by the British Film Institute (BFI).

The BFI's Regional Film Theatres program was launched in the late 1960s. It was designed to support screenings of alternative films in regional cities and rural locations. Non-metropolitan cinemas in the network included Aldeburgh in the county of Suffolk and King's Lynn in Norfolk. Regional Film Theatre enterprises were established in a wide range of venues, including public libraries, civic halls, university buildings, youth and educational centres, and former commercial cinemas. The BFI required that its funds be matched by grants from local area organisations, but also provided deficit guarantees in some instances. In theory, the films programming was to be done by the local venues in consultation with the BFI. However, tensions reportedly soon arose over the BFI's tendency to dictate rather than consult (Porter 2010; Selfe 2007). To assist towns deemed too small for a Regional Film Theatre, the BFI set up the short-lived Aided Film Societies program. This allowed film societies – which normally were permitted to admit only members to screenings – to hold events a few times per year that were open to the public (BFI 1970: 17).

By 1970, there were 36 sites in the Regional Film Theatre network, but the scheme ran into trouble shortly afterwards. It became embroiled in a wider crisis that engulfed the BFI, and there were problems within the program itself. Vincent Porter (2010) argues the BFI rolled the scheme out too quickly and created problems for itself with local operators by attempting to be too prescriptive over the selection of films. Further, he contends that the BFI also failed to understand the ‘precarious economies of exhibiting and distributing specialist films’ (2010: 59). While the scheme survived until 2003, the upheavals of the early 1970s meant that it did not expand any further into rural areas. Instead, efforts were concentrated on consolidation in second-tier cities such as Brighton, Norwich and Nottingham (Hanson 2007a: 184–5; Nowell-Smith 2006: 457).

While the UK government has since avoided direct involvement in running rural cinemas, it has expanded its support in other ways. Through grants provided principally by the Arts Council and various regional arts and culture initiatives, rural communities have been able to access funds to assist with the cost of running film venues. In many cases, these have been matched by grants from local councils. Organisations such as MEDIA provide a further source of public funding for cinemas through incentives aimed at encouraging the screening of European films (MEDIA 2007; Martin interview, 24 March 2011). However, in order to be able to access these funding mechanisms, cinemas must be held in public ownership and demonstrate direct benefits to the community from their activities. With the support of these various sources, there is now an active network of subsidised film venues in the UK incorporated as charitable trusts, which run sizable screen and arts education programs alongside their regular film screening events.

There has been considerably less subsidised cinema activity in Australia, and this is attributable largely to the fact that there is less available funding. There has been no scheme equivalent to the BFI Regional Film Theatres initiative. While the Australian Film Institute did operate a small group of cinemas for a short period, these were all in metropolitan locations, such as the Chauvel in Sydney (Chauvel Cinema 2011). Domestic film agencies – both state and federal – have tended to have little involvement in exhibition other than some funding for distribution costs – principally prints, and advertising and marketing. The exception is in New South Wales, where the state government funded several programs for

rural cinema in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As a result, this state has the highest concentration of Subsidised Cinemas in Australia.

New South Wales state government initiatives have included a \$1 million infrastructure fund to support the establishment and expansion of local government-owned cultural venues, including places to screen films (Premier of New South Wales 1998a). For almost 10 years, the government also funded the Regional Cinema Program, an advisory service for councils and local community groups attempting to establish grassroots cinema enterprises. The program employed a dedicated information officer and produced a range of written materials including *The Regional Cinema Handbook* (Herman 2000), *The Distribution Guide* (Rhys-Jones 2002) and numerous fact sheets. It also organised a number of ‘Flicks in the Sticks’ conferences in rural towns, which provided another means of encouraging and disseminating information to interested councils and community groups. Unlike the regional audience outreach project, Big Screen,¹⁷ which was established at around the same time, the Regional Cinema Program had no specific curatorial priorities. It was concerned only with supporting the development of exhibition infrastructure, and left the job of film programming solely to local communities.

Data suggests that this period of concentrated effort in New South Wales did help stimulate sub-commercial exhibition activity. In 2004, there were reportedly 40 council and volunteer-run cinemas operating in rural areas of the state, 15 of which were attributable directly to the government’s initiatives (NSWFTO 2004). A survey of council-owned venues undertaken several years later by Ross Thorne identified 18 cinemas, 12 of which had been launched since 1998 (Thorne 2009e).

The programs introduced in New South Wales had bipartisan political support. Their rhetoric drew heavily on the discourse of rural disadvantage and inequality, as statements by Bob Carr, the State Premier at the time, indicate:

¹⁷ ‘Big Screen’ was established in 2001 as a one-off project under the Centenary of Federation celebrations to bring curated programs of Australian films to people living in rural areas. The federal government later committed to funding it on a continuing basis. This program is discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

People in the bush and in regional centres deserve the same cultural opportunities as those living in the city. My Government is committed to ensuring they get their fair share. (Premier of New South Wales 1998b)

Film-making is booming in New South Wales and we want to make sure that people in country towns share in that growth by supporting a renewed interest in cinema culture. (Premier of New South Wales 1998c)

While this is perhaps easily dismissed as political spin, Carr did demonstrate a degree of genuine interest in rural cinemas by travelling to the isolated town of Bingara (540 kilometres from the state capital, Sydney) in 2004 to attend the opening night celebrations of the restored Roxy Theatre and cinema (McNaughton interview, 22 September 2009).

Following this survey of the historical contexts of rural cinema assistance, I turn now to consider how these developments have been theorised by cinema scholars. As an integral part of understanding the conceptualisation of these event, the following section also looks at the wider political and economic environments that created and now sustain the subsidisation of exhibition activity.

Critical Contexts: The Politics of Government Intervention

The introduction of public funding to support film exhibition from the late 1960s onwards marked an important shift in attitudes towards the role of the state in the supply of cinema services in Australia and the UK. While governments had intervened in the exhibition industry in the past, their efforts were centred largely on trying to curb the economic and cultural hegemony of Hollywood rather than addressing issues to do with access.¹⁸ But over the past few decades several important events have contributed to an expansion of their policy remit. First, in the decades after World War II the socio-economic conditions in rural areas of Australia and the UK began to worsen significantly. This downward cycle was connected principally with broader trends to do with the centralisation of industry and the increasing

¹⁸ These included efforts to restrict the domination of Hollywood films on cinema screens by introducing quotas for domestic productions, and to address the lack of competition within the industry by reducing the vertical integration of the major films studios (e.g. see AFC 2005; Gomery 1992: 83; Hanson 2007a: 45–7, 69–71).

mechanisation of agriculture. However, the cinema closures that took place throughout this period also played a part in the declining vibrancy of many small towns. The second major shift to occur was the acceptance within government that the state needed to play a role in supporting and sustaining rural communities. Again, this development was not connected directly or solely with cinema. However, access to culture has become an important part of the strategies that were subsequently devised to encourage small town rejuvenation (Herbert-Cheshire 2000; Kenyon and Black 2001).

Reflecting a similar mood of rural crisis that was developing in the UK in the late 1960s, the Council for the Preservation of Rural England shed the name it had used since 1926 and replaced it with the more assertive Council for the *Protection* of Rural England (emphasis mine). Later, as the organisation became more vocal in its response to what it perceived to be the growing seriousness of non-metropolitan disadvantage, the name was changed to its current Campaign to Protect Rural England (Museum of English Rural Life 2011). Around this time, increasing agitation about the rural situation also saw a range of publicly funded organisations – including the BFI – come under increasing pressure to broaden their activities beyond the city limits of London. The Regional Film Theatres scheme was one such response to these issues – designed to disseminate film culture throughout the country and dispel ‘the myth of the intellectual superiority of the capital’ (BFI 1970: 7). At the same time in Australia, rural communities were also receiving support from various agricultural, social and regional development initiatives (Tonts 1998). However, the nation’s first screen agency, the Australian Film Development Corporation (AFDC), was not established until 1970. It would take another decade for national film policy to turn its attention beyond the main cities of Sydney and Melbourne in any substantive way (AFC 2005).

The first wave of sustained government intervention in rural life in Australia and the UK ran from the 1960s until the late 1980s, although such intervention took different forms in each location. During this period, support programs across areas such as health, education and employment tended to be devised and delivered in a highly centralised manner. They have been viewed as being bestowed on rural communities rather than developed with them. The tensions that often resulted from this approach are illustrated in the difficulties the BFI experienced when it tried to impose its ideas about programming on to the cinemas in its Regional Film Theatres circuit (Porter 2010: 59). This was also the period where some local

councils were acquiring film theatres outright and taking on sole responsibility for their ongoing management, either directly or through a lessee. In contrast, later incarnations of local government interventions have been characterised by far greater involvement of residents and a reluctance to take on full responsibility for day-to-day management.

The second wave of rural support programs emerged in the 1990s. These were distinguished by their emphasis on local community partnerships and participation, rather than centralised direction. These new initiatives stemmed from a major shift in government policy, which stressed the importance of self-help and the empowerment of towns from within. Some commentators have interpreted this as a calculated move to cut back on government expenditure. However, as Herbert-Cheshire (2000: 205) points out, the fragmented way in which rural assistance is delivered makes it difficult to collate overall figures, so it is hard to be definitive about the issue. Funding implications aside, this new approach began to permeate a range of organisations engaged in rural service delivery, including the Regional Cinema Program set up in New South Wales. Its newly appointed Regional Cinema Officer, Brendan Smith, wrote in 2001: 'Central to the [NSW]FTO's policy for regional cinema redevelopment is the concept that local communities retain responsibility and ownership of the cinema activities in their district' (Smith 2001a: 51).

Despite the obvious relevance of rural cultural policy to cinema studies, developments in this field, and the interconnected emergence of Subsidised Cinemas, have to date elicited little interest from scholars. In economic terms, Subsidised Cinemas account for a relatively small proportion of cinema-going activity in Australia and the UK, and this has probably contributed to the lack of interest. However, their role in bringing film-viewing opportunities to audiences in marginalised locations, and the distinctive nature of the public policies that have underpinned their establishment, are important for several reasons. First, they form an integral part of the contemporary grassroots cinema landscape, and further our understanding of the meaning and purpose of exhibition activities that occur outside the mainstream. Second, they mark out the boundaries of commercial enterprise and provide an instructive case study of the interplay that exists between intervention and free-market practice. The remainder of this section surveys the themes that have emerged from the small body of research that has occurred in this field to date, and highlights the need for further investigations.

Research by Karen Crowe, undertaken as part of her PhD in progress, represents one of the few systematic attempts to understand contemporary Subsidised Cinema activity in Australia. Based around four case studies, Crowe's work examines the political contexts for the establishment of local council/community film theatre partnerships in rural New South Wales in the late 1990s and early 2000s. It also examines the rationale for the state's Regional Cinema Program, which was launched around the same time (Crowe 2005, 2007). Central to the policy discourses underpinning the initiatives examined in Crowe's study has been the claim that by promoting social connectivity, cinema enhances community cohesiveness and well-being. Responding in part to the desire by governments to see local communities implement their own revival strategies, it is on this basis that funding is most often sought and justified. Drawing on definitional parameters that have emerged from the field of social studies, Crowe dissects these claims around the contours of 'community' devised by scholars such as McMillan and Chavis (1986). On this basis, she argues, assertions about the wider benefits of publicly funded cinema have been strategically deployed to exaggerate 'the relevance of cinema-going to the community in order to explain and elicit public support for a traditionally commercial activity' (2007: 391).

Given the ever-increasing competition for grants and the desire to be able to point to material outcomes from cultural funding, these are legitimate concerns. The deployment of these discourses by rural communities as a way of recycling and validating government policy is another relevant consideration, although one that is not explored by Crowe. In making claims about the 'community' benefits of cinema to their local area, grassroots supporters are in effect recycling the dominant language and concepts of the public policy agenda. This can enhance their chances of receiving funding, but it also serves a self-fulfilling purpose when it is reflected back to government: it encourages policy-makers to believe their programs might actually be achieving their stated purpose.

There is another important issue that has not been given adequate contemplation. While claims regarding improvements to social cohesiveness and well-being may be utilised in a manner that is deliberate and calculated, this does not necessarily mean they are without merit. As Herbert-Cheshire (2000: 211) observes, 'in many cases, community development is more successful when it is initiated by the community itself – provided, of course, that it is

supported by adequate levels of government assistance'. The firm belief of the Subsidised Cinema organisers and volunteers I interviewed in the course of this study was that their activities *did* bring a tangible benefit to their local areas. However, most were pragmatic about the fact they were not able to engage or involve local residents as a whole 'community'. Similar claims are outlined other sources, such as profiles written for newspapers and magazines (e.g. Cochrane 2003; Maddox 2000; Metcalfe 2003), and in academic papers (e.g. Milner 2007). While these people are clearly highly invested in these enterprises, their testimonies should not summarily be discounted on this basis, as Lisa Milner's (2007) account of her involvement in the Bowraville Theatre illustrates.

Milner project-managed the theatre's restoration in the early 2000s and remains involved as volunteer, helping to organise bi-monthly screens. Milner is also a professional academic researcher and has worked for over five years as a lecturer at Southern Cross University. Her paper on the Bowraville Theatre provides a valuable and measured case study of the impact of a Subsidised Cinema enterprise on a small, very socio-economically disadvantaged town. Bowraville is located in the Mid-North Coast region of New South Wales, and in the last Census recorded a local unemployment figure four times higher than the national average (20 per cent compared with 5 per cent nationally). For those with jobs, the situation was not a great deal better, with average weekly incomes over 40 per cent below those of the nation as a whole (ABS 2006). Against this backdrop, Milner directly experienced how the theatre's renovation successfully engaged and inspired many local residents. Through the cooperative work of its volunteer committees and the opportunities created for personal interaction, the cinema helped to improve social cohesion and promote a more positive attachment to place:

What we are seeing here [Bowraville] is engagement that valorizes the local in a cultural sense. Identity is now constructed in the acts of local consumption – going to the theatre for entertainment rather than the multiplex – and in the acts of local cultural creation – with the [volunteer] committees. (2007:11)

However, while Milner emphasises many positive outcomes from the theatre, her analysis is not naively idealistic. She draws attention to the town's substantial Indigenous population, many of whom remain deeply affected by the cinema's bitter history of racial segregation and as a result have been alienated by the project. Despite considerable efforts to encourage local

Aboriginal residents to reconnect with the venue over the past decade, Milner notes that even now they rarely attend screenings (2007: 12–13; personal communication, 28 October 2010).

With a less theoretical focus, Ross Thorne (see 2006, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d) has assembled a significant body of research on local government- owned cinemas in New South Wales. Produced principally as a series of audio-visual resources, Thorne's documentaries chart the histories of numerous film theatres, and include interviews with key participants such as managers, volunteers, local councillors and audiences. These DVDs highlight the political and administrative processes of local government, and the passion and resourcefulness of the local residents who are often integral to the success of these projects. Thorne's productions cover several sites that I visited in the course of this study, including Bingara, Bowraville and Gunnedah, and provided a valuable comparative resource in the data-collection and data-analysis phases of this research.

In the UK, critical research into subsidised cinema activity has been even sparser than in Australia. This is a little surprising given that it constitutes a more vibrant and economically relevant sub-sector of the exhibition industry. It is also a curious omission in a country where cultural funding has been widely deployed as part of numerous local economic regeneration strategies. This absence of scholarly work can be understood within a broader absence of research on rural cinema in the UK at any level. A second possible issue relates to the way in which this type of cinema is understood in the UK. During the interviews I conducted there with managers of publicly funded theatres and with other film scholars, there was a distinct resistance to my classification of these cinemas as 'subsidised'. Instead, I was typically informed that they were 'commercial'. This perception appeared to centre on the fact that the venues in question¹⁹ relied on ticket sales to support the mainstream part of their businesses, just like regular cinemas. The government grants were earmarked to support film education and training activities, which were seen as separate functions. After some discussion of these points, each of my informants conceded that it would be difficult to sustain their enterprises without the public funding they receive. However, the sense of discomfort that arose from my attempts to demarcate publicly-funded cinemas from dedicated commercial operations is of

¹⁹ Cinema City in Norwich, The Maltings Theatre in Berwick and The Phoenix in Leicester.

interest here, and goes some way towards explaining why these types of cinema may not have been isolated in this manner for study until now.

Some research on the Regional Film Theatres scheme has been undertaken, but this has tended to be intertwined within analysis of wider events at the BFI (e.g. Dupin 2006; Nowell-Smith 2006). Work by Vincent Porter (2010) and Melanie Selfe (2007) offers a more detailed analysis of the program. These scholars highlight the tensions that arose between individual cinemas and the BFI over the lack of self-determination and the latter's dictatorial behaviour on the issue of film programming. However, both concentrate largely on events as they occurred in regional cities rather than in specifically rural areas. A more detailed study by Susan Feldman (1980)²⁰ of the Regional Film Theatres is listed as being held by the BFI Library and promised to shed more light on some of these issues. However, on my visit to the library in June 2011, the publication unfortunately could not be located by staff.

Despite the paucity of research on Subsidised Cinemas, the work that has been undertaken to date points to two issues that also emerged as significant concerns in my study. First, they suggest the strong influence of localised conditions in shaping the prospects and characteristics of subsidised enterprises. At the same time, this research draws attention to the interconnections between the economic changes that occurred within the Australian and UK film industries after the 1950s, and the broader contexts of rural policy. As outlined here, both are crucial to understanding the pretexts for government intervention in cinema exhibition and the basis upon which it continues.

In the next section, we examine the characteristics of contemporary Subsidised Cinemas. This is the first detailed attempt to map the terrain of publicly funded exhibition in either Australia or the UK. We examine the day-to-day operations of subsidised film theatres, including the benefits and limitations of public ownership and finance, challenges for film programming and profitability, and the liberating potential of digital technologies.

²⁰ The BFI Library record lists the length of this document as 103 pages, suggesting it may be a thesis of some kind.

About Subsidised Cinemas

Like the Small Commercial Cinemas examined in the previous chapter, Subsidised Cinemas can be highly varied and are strongly influenced by local conditions. In this respect, they are quite distinct from Large Commercial enterprises, many of which must conform to aesthetic and technical standards imposed by remote, centralised bureaucracies. The cinemas in this category are drawn together primarily on the basis of their reliance on ongoing public funding in some form, but share a number of other important commonalities. Specifically, they tend to:

- be single-screen
- be located in smaller towns where there is no commercial cinema nearby²¹
- be held in public ownership, either by local councils (most common in Australia) or a trust (most common in the UK)
- be multi-purpose (used for film screenings and live events)
- rely on volunteer labour in some form, and
- provide screen and/or cultural education and training programs.

With regard to the final point, access to learning programs is a prominent feature of Subsidised Cinemas in the UK, as much of the available grant funding is contingent upon the venue being able to demonstrate a direct and tangible benefit to the local community from their activities. Education programs exist at Australian cinemas, but they are often quite limited in comparison to those in the UK.

There is no comprehensive tracking of Subsidised Cinema numbers in Australia. The MPDAA's theatre listings include some of these theatres, but are not complete. Work by Ross Thorne (2009e) tracing cinemas owned by local councils covers the state of New South Wales only. However, using it as a base and supplementing with information gathered from other

²¹ The only exception located in the course of this study was the council-owned Moncrieff Theatre in Bundaberg, Queensland. The town also has a four-screen commercial cinema owned by Reading. The Moncrieff is a dedicated mixed-use venue (film and live theatre), and the building has heritage significance – both help to underpin the rationale for local council support.

states, it is likely there are around 30 to 40 Subsidised Cinemas across the nation. In the UK, the network of publicly funded film theatres is more substantial, with detailed tracking by the BFI indicating that there are 159 of these venues across the country (Perkins, email communication, 22 August 2011).

Ownership

Subsidised cinemas can be divided into three distinct types according to their ownership/management structures:

1. those owned and operated directly by local councils
2. those owned by local councils, but managed by third party lessees or a committee of local volunteers, and
3. those owned and managed by charitable trusts.

The first two are most common in Australia, while in the UK the trust model is predominant. The detail of these ownership arrangements varies between sites, but it is usual for local councils to be involved in providing some level of funding across all three types of corporate structure.

Under the direct owner/manager approach, the council will normally engage specialist staff to run the cinema. For example, the Hamilton Cinema in Victoria is staffed entirely by employees of the South Grampians Shire Council (Walsh interview, 12 May 2010). At the Roxy, Bingara and the Civic Theatre, Gunnedah (both in New South Wales), a single manager is employed. Their work is supported by volunteers who assist at screenings with jobs such as ushering and ticket selling. Cinema managers are often given a general brief to increase cultural participation, and to ensure that the enterprise covers its costs and ideally returns a profit. However, the latter can be difficult to achieve, particularly in more marginal geographic and economic locations. In a recent newspaper article about the Regal Cinema in Stowmarket, its manager trumpeted the fact that the theatre had returned a profit in 2010–11 after running at a loss since it was acquired by the local council in 1974 (Furness 2011).

Under the second ownership/indirect management approach, a council-owned venue may be leased to a private operator or placed in the hands of a local volunteer committee. Such arrangements help to reduce the financial risks for the council, and may even bring in some income in the form of rent. However, councils are still typically required to make some financial concessions to support the venture. For example, the private operators of the Majestic Theatre in Malanda, Queensland depend on the Tablelands Regional Council to discount the rent in order to keep the operation viable (Rayner interview, 17 May 2010). At the Montreal Community Theatre, Tumut and Southern Cross Cinema, Young (both in New South Wales), local councils provide insurance cover and assist with corporate governance, although the majority of the day-to-day work is undertaken by residents in unpaid roles.

The third ownership model for Subsidised Cinemas is a charitable trust. The vast majority of cinemas in the UK use this structure, but it is not common in Australia. In the UK, film theatres owned by trusts are typically managed by a volunteer board, which employs staff to handle the day-to-day operations. The local councils are usually significant funding partners in these enterprises, often providing an annual allocation towards the venue's running costs, and occasional one-off capital grants. The other major source of public finance in the UK is the Arts Council, a national body that provides regular funding to a range of cultural organisations and venues (Arts Council 2011). For example, The Maltings Theatre and Arts Centre in Berwick-Upon-Tweed receives around £117,000 in support from the Berwick Borough Council each year plus a regular £45,000 grant from the Arts Council (The Maltings 2010: 34–6). Additional income is generated from ticket sales for film screenings and live events. In return for their public funding, trust-owned cinemas are generally required to show a varied program of films and run audience education and outreach activities, like film appreciation courses, discussion groups and screenings of film classics introduced by a guest speaker. These activities can also extend beyond film, as they do at The Maltings, where the community program includes dance and drama education.

On the one hand, the involvement by local government in the provision of cinema is at odds with the overall commercial focus of the film industry. However, it is not quite so out of context when considered against the broader function of councils to supply recreational and cultural facilities for their residents. These include resources such as swimming pools, sports grounds, parks, libraries, performing arts centres and art galleries. While cinemas sit

comfortably within this remit, allocating funding for film enterprises is not always a straightforward proposition. Public demand for expenditure on arguably more immediate and fundamental needs, such as safer roads, better water supplies, youth and aged care services, and drought relief, can make it harder to justify expenditure on cultural activities with less tangible benefits. For example, in the mid-2000s the Barraba Council in North-West New South Wales declined to support the purchase and refurbish the town's 1920s heritage cinema. The plan proposed combining the local funds with grants from federal agencies and other fundraising. However, it was not perceived as having the widespread backing of residents, who were more concerned about the very poor quality of the local water supply (Sharpe interview, 15 August 2009).

Locations

Subsidised Cinemas are housed in diverse range of venues, from purpose-built film theatres to converted public halls. For reasons of cost, many of the ventures that have been established in recent decades have utilised existing buildings. While these may require some modification or restoration work, this generally can be achieved at a much lower cost than the construction of an entirely new venue. For example, the refurbishment of a disused hall to create the Southern Cross Cinema in Young was completed for \$600,000, while the renovation of the ornate Roxy in Bingara cost \$580,000 (NSW Legislative Council 2005; Premier of New South Wales 1998b). In contrast, the budget for new theatres built in Gunnedah and Narrabri ran into the millions – \$2 million and \$6.6 million respectively (*Namoi Valley Independent* 2001b: 1; Narrabri.net 2010). Both these latter projects were funded with unusually large (for cinema projects) infrastructure grants from federal and state governments.

A significant number of publicly funded cinemas are located within historically significant rural buildings, particularly in Australia. Examples include the impressive Roxy Theatre in Bingara, which is described by heritage assessors as a 'rare surviving example of a 1930s country Art Deco picture theatre' (Thorne et al. 1996: 255). Similarly, the council-owned Royal Theatre in Quirindi is one of only three indoor-outdoor cinemas left in New South Wales (Grennan 2010: 15). The revitalisation of old or disused buildings adds a further dimension to the function and benefit of Subsidised Cinemas. It can enhance the nostalgic element of the cinema-going experience, a phenomenon that is explored further in Chapter 6. More broadly, the restoration of a historic building can also boost the overall look of the town

and help to generate economic activity. As a local shop owner in Bingara explained, the reopening of the grand Roxy Theatre created a range of benefits:

The Roxy's renovation has been a marvellous thing for this town and has enabled people to see films and live theatre at its best ... It has had a big impact on local trade. People come from all over just to go to this theatre. Often for live shows people stay overnight and the pub has built a new motel out the back for them. People coming into the town browse in the shops or buy coffees or meals ... You can really notice the difference [since the Roxy reopened].
(Bingara resident, female, late sixties)

The manager of the Roxy, Sandy McNaughton, similarly reports that for live shows in particular, audiences will travel considerable distances just to see them at the theatre. This is despite the fact another less glamorous venue may be hosting the same show nearer to them (McNaughton interview, 22 September 2009). Similarly, the current lessees of The Majestic Theatre in Malanda, Charmaine and Bernie Rayner, report that the historic cinema is a significant drawcard for tourists (Rayner interview, 17 May 2010).

Architectural preservation can be an important part of the rationale for a Subsidised Cinema project. However, addressing issues, such as the lack of cultural access and more general socio-economic disadvantage, tend to be more prominently articulated by those involved with these ventures. This relates in part to the realities of everyday life in rural areas – specifically that problems in getting access to film and wider issues of social dislocation and poverty do have a material impact. It is also connected with wider concerns about rural life within political and public discourses outlined earlier in this chapter. In this regard, the situation of historic Subsidised Cinemas in Australia and the UK are quite different from those detailed by Janna Jones in her study of six restored film theatres in cities in the Southern United States (2003). Jones observes that the refurbishment of these theatres was closely connected with the desire to safeguard the cultural heritage of their cities and revitalise inner-city areas (2003: 113–15). However, unlike the heritage cinemas in Jones' study, most rural Subsidised Cinemas have not been reborn as places of cinema-going distinction. Instead, they tend heavily towards the mainstream, where issues of functionality and broad accessibility are the paramount concerns.

Film Programming and Other Events

The majority of Subsidised Cinemas in rural Australia and the UK are single-screen venues. This imposes some limitations on the venue's programming options in a commercial environment that is geared to the high turnover of titles possible in large multi-screen complexes. However, this tends to be a less critical issue for Subsidised Cinemas than it is for the Small Commercial Cinemas examined in the previous chapter. This is because most operate a scaled-down program that does not attempt to utilise the theatre's full screening capacity. Larger enterprises, like The Maltings Theatre and Cinema in Berwick and The Crossings Theatre in Narrabri, screen films daily; however, this generally is limited to only one or two sessions (The Crossings Theatre 2011; The Maltings Theatre and Cinema 2011). Slightly smaller theatres, such as the Civic Theatre, Gunnedah and The Majestic Theatre, Malanda, run a program that centres around the weekends (Friday to Sunday) (Wilson interview, 13 August 2009; Rayner interview, 17 May 2010). In more marginal locations, such as the Roxy, Bingara and the Bowraville Theatres, films may be shown as infrequently as once a month (McNaughton interview, 22 September 2009; Milner, personal communication 2010).

In general, Subsidised Cinemas tend to cater primarily to two distinct audience groups: older patrons (aged 50 and over) and families with school-aged children. Venue managers interviewed for this study reported that patrons tend to have mainstream, conservative tastes, particularly in smaller towns. They consequently steer the programming choices towards the middle ground, avoiding films with excessive violence and sexual content as well as foreign-language films. Safe bets include films like *Australia* (Luhmann 2008), *Duplicity* (Gilroy 2009), *Marley and Me* (Frankel 2008) and *Quantum of Solace* (Forster 2008). Researcher Roy Stafford, who is involved in the BFI's Rural Cinema Pilot Scheme in the UK, has observed a similar connection between the size of the community and its filmic tastes. Specifically, he has witnessed that rising conservatism is generally directly linked to areas of small and/or isolated populations (personal communication, 12 November 2011).

However, special interests are not ignored entirely. Some cinemas supplement their mainstream line-ups with sessions for particular groups within the community. At the Roxy, popular musicals from the 1950s are screened once a month on a Wednesday afternoon for

the town's elderly residents (70 years plus) (McNaughton interview, 22 September 2009). Similarly, The Civic presents a regular mid-week program of art documentaries, which is targeted at people from the local creative arts community. They also periodically run all-night movie marathons for local teenagers (Wilson interview, 13 August 2009).

Subsidised theatres book films directly through distributors in much the same way as commercial operators. Movies generally are supplied on standard commercial terms, although most distributors provide some concessions as to the frequency and timing of screenings, which takes into account the cinema's limited screening schedule. With relatively small audiences and low box office earnings, it is almost impossible for many Subsidised Cinemas to negotiate access to first-release prints. However, like the Small Commercial Cinemas discussed in the previous chapter, some larger operators are able to book new children's releases in school holiday periods.

Almost all the Subsidised Cinemas located in this study combine their film-screening activities with live events, such as plays and music performances staged by both local and national touring groups. Some also offer themselves as venues for events such as school awards nights, community meetings, conferences, art and craft exhibitions, and even wedding ceremonies. These events can extend the relevance and value of the venue to the local community. Theatre managers report that live shows in particular attract an audience that is quite distinct and separate from the regular film crowd. As the next section explains, this multi-use approach often also provides a vital source of income.

Profitability

As we have seen, the investment of public funds in cinema enterprises is underpinned by a range of economic and political factors. Central to these contributions is the belief that these venues are *dependent* on this finance, and could not survive as stand-alone enterprises without it. Government cut-backs and changes to policy are therefore of serious concern to most Subsidised Cinemas. In the UK, the recent economic downturn has impacted on this sector in various ways. Major cutbacks to arts funding, which were due to come online in 2012, will put greater pressure on what is already a limited pool of financial resources (Higgins 2011). Reductions in funding for local government more broadly have seen some councils move to divest themselves of their cultural assets. The Falkirk Council in Scotland, for example,

recently announced that it would transfer a range of cultural and leisure facilities to a charitable trust, including its Hippodrome Cinema. The council estimates the move will save just under £1 million per year on non-domestic rates and VAT. The new trust will also have the opportunity to access government grants – albeit shrinking in size – not currently open to the Council (Falkirk Council 2011).

For most subsidised venues, the capacity to supplement income from grants with respectable earnings from ticket sales and ancillaries, like candy bars, coffee shops and bars, is also crucial to staying afloat. Evidence that local residents are using a venue also helps maintain their case for ongoing public support. For quite a lot of subsidised theatres, income from live shows is far more lucrative than ticket sales for films. At the Roxy in Bingara, stage shows are the main source of income, as manager Sandy McNaughton explained:

If we fill the floor for a live show we can accommodate 400 people who are paying \$25–40 each for their tickets. With film screenings 50 is a good audience for us, but the average is more like 20 and these people are only paying between \$7–10 for their tickets. Live shows are more expensive for us to put on but we earn a lot more from them ... We continue to screen films at the Roxy because historically it is a cinema but we make most of our money elsewhere. (McNaughton interview, 22 September 2009)

The situation at The Maltings Theatre in Berwick-Upon-Tweed is similar. In 2009–10, revenue from film tickets represented only 8 per cent of turnover, while 34 per cent was generated by stage plays and music concerts (The Maltings 2010: 38).

Digital Projection and Subsidised Cinemas

As the previous two chapters have emphasised, the transition from 35mm to digital film projection has distinctive economic implications for both Large and Small Commercial Cinemas. It has different ramifications again for cinemas that are supported by public subsidies, many of which operate in marginal, sub-commercial environments. Across publicly funded cinemas in Australia, there has been little take up of the high-end DCI projection systems endorsed by the Hollywood studios. While the cost of this equipment continues to

run into several hundreds of thousand dollars, it is likely to remain that way for the foreseeable future. However, at the lower end of the technology spectrum, the situation is quite different. Several new possibilities have been opened up by the development of cost-effective, commercial-quality systems for projecting films on DVD. These have become especially popular with cinemas in Australia, as well as some in the UK.

DVD-based projection systems offer several practical advantages over traditional 35mm or 16mm formats. They are generally much more straightforward to operate, and the training and operational requirements are minimal when compared with the complexity of preparing and screening a movie on film. For small enterprises, particularly those based in more remote areas, being dependent on the services of a trained film projectionist can create some significant operational constraints. It is not uncommon for only handful of local residents to have the necessary skills to use a film projector. Having to call on these same individuals – many of whom are volunteers – each time the cinema wants to put on a movie can limit the programming options. In addition, if the projectionist gets sick or goes on holiday, there is a real risk that the show may not be able to go on. For example, in Bowraville only two locals are able to run the 35mm projector, and this is one reason why films are screened so infrequently (usually only once or twice a month). One of the cinema's leading volunteers, Lisa Milner, says there have been several concerted attempts to recruit and train additional operators over the past few years, but these have so far been unsuccessful (Milner, personal communication, 28 October 2010).

The alternative option of placing a DVD in a media player and pressing a button is infinitely simpler – providing, of course, that there are no technical malfunctions. There are some inevitable compromises in image and sound quality when compared with DCI or 35mm print in a pristine state. But given that many 35mm prints are often quite degraded (from repeated use) by the time they reach small cinemas, DVD has actually helped some venues to improve the quality of their presentations. During the course of this study, I watched five movies screened on DVD, all in different locations. On each occasion I found this format gave a highly satisfactory viewing experience, where I was able to become immersed in the film and was not distracted by the technical functioning of the equipment. A further advantage of using DVDs is that they are far less costly to ship than cans of film. While these savings are not

huge in dollar terms, reducing costs by \$50–100 per screening can make a significant difference to the bottom line for a marginal enterprise.

The portability of DVD projection systems offers another potential benefit for small operators. Mobile screening equipment is relatively cheap to purchase, robust, and easy to transport and set up. This element of DVD functionality has been utilised more by Community and Improvised Cinemas, which are examined in more detail in the following chapters. However, they have also been put to effective use by some Subsidised Cinemas. The Civic Theatre in Gunnedah, for example, now delivers a monthly program of film screenings to remote towns within the region using a portable DVD projection unit. This program was set up in the early 2000s to extend the reach of the cinema beyond its Gunnedah base. It directly targeted towns that were at the time in the grip of severe drought, and where there were heightened concerns about depression and the risk of suicides. The Civic's manager and mastermind of the scheme, Susan Wilson, believes these events create important opportunities for small communities to come together for a positive social event. She contends that without these prompts, 'what tends to happen ... in this district, is that people are a long way from anything, so they keep to themselves and they get very depressed. This is a good way of providing something for people to go to.' (Metcalf 2003: 76; Wilson interview 13 August 2009)

However, the use of DVD is not without its drawbacks. The most significant of these are the extended delays in getting access to films, which in many cases are even longer than the usual wait for 35mm prints. This is due primarily to distributor concerns about piracy – specifically the ease with which an unencrypted DVD can be copied. As a result, films are not usually supplied on disc until very late in their theatrical run, or for many blockbuster releases not until after the retail DVD release. These delays are not as problematic for Subsidised Cinemas as they might be for a dedicated commercial operator. Particularly in more isolated locations, managers report that their main audiences – seniors and families – are generally not deterred by the lack of currency of the films on offer. However, most concede it is a problem for titles aimed at the teens and young adult market, where the audience is less inclined to wait and much more likely to consume pirated content (McNaughton interview, 22 September 2009; Wilson interview, 13 August 2009).

The Subsidised Cinemas I encountered in the UK suggest that the use of DVD projection in rural Subsidised Cinemas is not as widespread as in Australia. The majority of venues continue to use 35mm, while a small number have DCI systems. A number of the latter were funded under the UK Film Council's Digital Screen Network program, including the Aldeburgh Cinema in Suffolk (UKFC 2011f). This equipment has reportedly helped ease some of the issues associated with obtaining access to films. However, for cinemas this new technology came with the condition that it would be used to increase screenings of non-mainstream films. These are often not as profitable as mainstream releases, and for theatres operating on small margins can be difficult to run on a regular basis. On the positive side, the DCI equipment has allowed cinemas to diversify their offerings by screening simulcasts of live opera and theatre events, including seasons from the New York Metropolitan Opera and the UK National Theatre (Aldeburgh Cinema 2011).

The relatively high cost of DCI projection systems and low levels of profitability at Subsidised Cinemas mean this technology has really only entered the margins of this area of exhibition activity. It is precisely for these reasons that the use of DVD-based systems has begun to flourish, particularly in Australia. While DVD has its limitations, these low-end options demonstrate the digital film transition is more complex than the simple delineation between DCI and 35mm. It also highlights where some of the true liberatory capacities of digital technology may lie.

In Focus

This section profiles two Subsidised Cinemas – The Roxy in Bingara (Australia) and the Regal Theatre in Stowmarket (UK). These theatres illustrate the defining characteristics of publicly funded film exhibition, and explore how wider economic, political and community concerns can shape individual cinema operations.

The first micro-study centres on The Roxy, a grand picture palace that was restored and reopened to the public in 2004 with the assistance of the New South Wales state government as part of its rural cultural initiatives. While the local council employs a full-time manager for the venue, The Roxy also relies heavily on the participation of local residents who fulfil various volunteer roles at the cinema.

The second study focuses on the Regal Theatre, located in the town of Stowmarket in mid-Suffolk, which has been in public ownership since the early 1970s. The cinema has a colourful history – it has been through some tough economic times, seen several major renovations and only narrowly avoided being destroyed by fire in 2009. Despite the recent proliferation of multiplexes in the surrounding area, the cinema is enjoying strong local support and a resurgence in its relevance to the residents of the Stowmarket community.

The Roxy, Bingara, New South Wales, Australia

The impressive Roxy Theatre is located in Bingara, a relatively small and isolated town in North-West New South Wales with a population of around 1200 (ABS 2006). The highly ornate cinema was built in 1936 by three local Greek businessmen. It survived as a film venue for only 20 years until 1958 when, like many cinemas, it closed due to declining patronage. As outlined in the history section of this chapter, the foyer areas of The Roxy were converted into shops and the auditorium became a storage area. In 1998, The Roxy was one of the first venues to receive a grant under the regional cinema initiatives introduced by the New South Wales state government (Premier of New South Wales 1998b). The initial grant of \$100,000 allowed the local council to purchase the building from its private owner and begin the \$580,000 restoration project. The Roxy was reopened as a multi-purpose, single-screen cinema, performing arts venue and function centre in May 2004.

Bingara is a tidy, pleasant town to be in, despite its small size. There are a number of well-maintained historic buildings and garden areas in its main street, which contributes to its agreeable atmosphere. It has a small but fairly bustling retail sector that is helped along in part by the town's isolation. The nearest major settlement is Inverell (population 15,000: ABS 2006), which is just over an hour's drive away. The inconvenience of this distance and the rising cost of petrol provide major incentives for residents to shop locally.

In statistical terms, Bingara is considered to be a relatively disadvantaged rural area. Data from the last Census revealed unemployment to be at around twice the national average – 10 per cent compared with 5 per cent for the rest of Australia. Average incomes are also well below (40 per cent lower than) the nationwide figure. There is a significant over-representation of older residents. Half the town's population are aged over 55, which is nearly twice the national

average of 23 per cent, while the proportion of younger people (aged 25–54) is low. These factors all have an impact on The Roxy's day-to-day operations.

Since its reopening, The Roxy has been managed by Sandy McNaughton, who was recruited from outside the local area. Ms McNaughton is a full-time employee of the Gwydir Shire Council, which owns the cinema, and is the only salaried member of staff. All other jobs are performed by volunteers, including projection, ushering, ticket selling and lighting (for live shows). In a town with a population of only 1200, maintaining a healthy group of volunteers is an ongoing challenge. Perhaps not surprisingly, it is local retirees who form the core of The Roxy's unpaid staff (McNaughton interview, 22 September 2009).

The Roxy's film program caters to two main audience groups: seniors and families. During school holidays, the cinema runs a program of mainstream PG and G rated films designed to appeal to younger children (under 14) and their carers. Once children reach their mid-teens, there is a marked drop in their attendance, although special events can be the exception. During my visit to Bingara, the cinema was promoting a screening of *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (Hogan 2009), a local fundraising event offering drinks and food, a raffle, lucky door prizes and awards for the smallest, largest and most unique handbag. In a subsequent telephone conversation, Ms McNaughton reported that the event had been a great success, attracting 160 people, most of them aged under 35.

However, efforts to engage young adult audiences on a more consistent basis have to date been largely unsuccessful. This is due in part simply to the lack of young people living in the town. Residents aged between 15 and 24 years make up only 7 per cent of the population, half the national average of 14 per cent, and equating to a potential audience of just 84 (based on the total population of 1200). Ms McNaughton believes that delays in getting films, which is an unavoidable downside of their decision to use DVD as the cinema's main projection format, is another important issue. By the time The Roxy is able to get a major release, like a *Harry Potter* or *Transformers* film, it is often already available for retail purchase or hire, and the audience is gone. Ms McNaughton also reported that piracy (mostly via illegal DVDs) was a significant problem.



Image 11: The Roxy, Bingara, August 2009



Image 12: Auditorium interior, The Roxy, Bingara, August 2009

The Roxy runs a popular monthly morning tea and film event targeted at seniors. These attract people from within the town, but also from further afield – such as members of the War Widows Club from Narrabri, who regularly travel by bus to attend screenings. Ms McNaughton finds that members of The Roxy’s seniors audience are highly conservative. They have a distinct preference for the morality and modesty that characterised films produced in the 1940s and 1950s. A screening of *Elizabeth* (Kapur 1998) during Seniors Week sparked considerable controversy and some outrage among those in attendance because of the liaison between Elizabeth I and Walter Raleigh that is hinted at in the movie. As a result, Ms McNaughton now tends to screen mostly classics, interspersed with some very sedate contemporary films such as *Ladies in Lavender* (Dance 2004).

The Bingara residents to whom I spoke were overwhelming positive about the impact of The Roxy on the town. However, these discussions also revealed that attitudes towards the theatre had not always been so warm. Initially, there was considerable resistance to the council’s support for The Roxy’s restoration. These opposing interests argued that improving local roads and the town’s water supply should have taken priority. There were also concerns that The Roxy would become an exclusive ‘arty’ venue, and therefore would ‘not be for everybody’ (Bingara resident, female, late sixties). According to locals, the success of the cinema and the economic benefits it has brought to the town have softened many of these attitudes, as the following comments indicate:

It’s the best thing that’s ever happened to have a cinema back here in Bingara.
(Bingara resident, male, mid-sixties)

The Roxy is an icon of the north west and [its restoration] has enabled people to see first class cinema and live theatre at its best. (Bingara resident, female, late sixties)

The cinema here is terrific and it has been great for the town that it reopened.
(Bingara resident, female, mid-forties)

Despite the shift that has occurred in local attitudes, it is reasonable to assume that some level of disaffection may remain. However, I did not encounter any of it first hand.

The Regal Theatre, Stowmarket, Suffolk, UK

The Regal Theatre is located in Stowmarket, a mid-sized rural town in the central area of the county of Suffolk, with a population of just over 15,000 at the last UK Census (Office of National Statistics 2001).²² Stowmarket is on the main train line connecting it to London, Ipswich and Norwich. Agriculture is the main local industry, but employs fewer people than in the past. Significant numbers of residents now commute to jobs in the nearby bigger cities.

The settlement of Stowmarket dates back to the Medieval period, and it has a long history as a farming and market centre. The building of a canal in 1793 opened a route to the docks at Ipswich, and from there the settlement began to grow significantly. The canal was replaced by a rail link in the 1840s, but agriculture – in particular malt production – continued to be the mainstay of the community. Today Stowmarket is a modest town – it is neither run down nor overtly prosperous. The Regal’s architecture and ambience reflect the unassuming but solid personality of the town. The theatre is functional, clean and pleasant, but does not have any of the grand features of picture palaces like Bingara’s The Roxy (Stowmarket Town Council 2012a).

The Regal Theatre is positioned adjacent to the main town centre, which mostly consists of small, older-style shops facing on to a cobblestone street. Like The Roxy in Bingara, the cinema was built in 1936, on a vacant meadow that previously had been used for travelling fairs and circuses. The site had also been home to mobile silent movie screenings in large tents during the early Edwardian period, but this practice was outlawed in 1909 following a number of fatal fires at similar venues around the UK. The highly flammable cellulose nitrate film, combined with limelight illumination and the combustibility of the tent, made these temporary set-ups a serious safety hazard (Marsh interview, 13 November 2011).

The Regal continued to operate successfully as a single-screen venue until the downturn of the 1950s and 1960s. By 1972, the venue was run-down and facing closure. Community concern about the loss of the cinema and its heritage significance prompted the Stowmarket Town Council to acquire the building outright. The council then embarked on a major refurbishment of the theatre, which included extending the stage to improve its functionality

²² A more recent national Census was conducted in the UK in April 2011, but the results were not available for inclusion here.

for live shows. The Regal had some good years, but by the mid-2000s was struggling again as a result of competition from nearby multiplex cinemas in Ipswich and Bury St Edmonds (both just 12 miles away). By 2005, admissions had fallen to just 8000 per year and the council hired a consultancy firm to advise it on how to turn the situation around. The recommendations included upgrades to the sound system and the cinema's interior. In 2007, with help from the Arts Council and Mid-Suffolk District Council, the theatre received an overhaul that saw the installation of new seats and curtains, and new paint throughout.

However, in September 2009 disaster struck when this good work was undone by an arsonist. The building was saved, but sustained serious damage in the fire. After six months of intensive repair work, the Regal reopened on 3 March 2010 (Marsh interview, 13 November 2011).

Also in 2010, the Stowmarket Town Council appointed a new manager, David Marsh, to run the venue. Marsh is a full-time employee of the municipal body and has helped guide the cinema into a period of renaissance. In 2010–11, the venue achieved a record 42,000 admissions (for film and live shows) and made a profit for the first time since it was acquired by the council in the 1970s. As Marsh explained, 'this result showed that the Regal is really relevant to the people of Stowmarket once more' (Marsh interview, 13 November 2011).

Marsh's approach to the revitalisation of the theatre has centred on two key strategies. First, he has positioned the cinema as a venue catering to residents not using the nearby multiplexes – families with younger children for whom the cost is prohibitive and older residents who do not want to travel. The Regal offers a special family package that covers admission for two adults and up to three children, a large popcorn, sweets and drinks for just £25. Marsh estimates that at the Ipswich and Bury St Edmonds multi-screen cinemas, this outing would cost in excess of £40.

The second key strategy has been to make greater use of the multi-purpose functionality of the venue, and this has worked particularly effectively for the Regal.



Image 13: The Regal Theatre, Stowmarket, November 2011



Image 14: Candy bar and ticket counter, The Regal Theatre, Stowmarket, November 2011



Image 15: Stowmarket town centre, November 2011

Some of its most successful and regular live events are country music concerts, and the theatre has become something of a cult venue for fans of this music genre. Marsh explains the status of the theatre for country music has grown to the extent that he has been able to book some quite big names to perform there. These concerts are held on Monday evenings when films would not typically have been shown, and attract audiences from a very wide geographic area. Like live shows at The Roxy, patrons are paying substantially more than the price of a cinema ticket for these events, and the high regard for the venue means they generally draw strong crowds.

In terms of film programming, The Regal stays within the mainstream, with titles targeted to its key family and older audience demographics. It usually screens three to four films each week. While the cinema generates box office receipts that are high enough to secure access to prints in line with their metropolitan premiere, it generally does not elect to do so. To take a film immediately upon its release would come with the contractual requirement for the cinema to screen it two to three times per day for several weeks. With a single screen, a varied

audience to cater for and live events to fit in, these conditions are simply not practical for The Regal. Instead, it typically takes films in their third and fourth week of release, which allows the cinema far greater flexibility with regard to its programming. Marsh said he finds this does not unduly deter the cinema's core audience. At the time of my visit in 2011, the cinema was still using 35mm projection, but Marsh discussed plans to convert to a DCI-compliant system in the following year. The Regal is part of Digital Funding Partnership (UK) and was able to secure its required £20,000 cash up-front payment from the Stowmarket Town Council. The balance of the cost of the equipment will be covered by VPFs payments from the Hollywood studios under a deal negotiated by the DFP (Marsh interview, 13 November 2011). Since my visit, a news item on the council's website on 17 January 2012 announced that the new digital projector has been installed, and that it has both 2D and 3D capabilities (Stowmarket Town Council 2012b).

Conclusion

Both The Roxy and the Regal Theatre clearly demonstrate that exhibition activity in rural Australia and the UK does not cease when the limits of profitability are reached. These enterprises exist in response to audience demand. However, they also depend on the willingness of the government in various guises and at different levels to assume and maintain an ongoing role in the supply of cinema services. Looking at the way these types of cinema operate, we add another distinctive layer to the analysis of the 'how, when and where' films are screened to rural audiences. But we also see where local *and* national forces – both from within and outside the film industry – intersect and shape cinema in very significant ways. Crucially, the relationship between these micro and macro forces is more pronounced than we saw with the Small Commercial Cinemas examined in the previous chapter.

On the one hand, Subsidised Cinemas are part of the commercial exhibition industry. They are dependent on the outputs of Hollywood and utilise the technological innovations developed by global corporations, such as DCI and DVD projection. Further, they generate income that in turn forms part of the national box office, a statistic upon which the health and prosperity of the Australian and UK film industries are often assessed. These cinemas are also intimately bound up in the wider economic and public policy developments that have

occurred in both nations over the past 50 years. These have established the foundations for a greater role for government in everyday life. Concurrently, public expectations have risen over the role of government in safeguarding quality of life and providing access not just to health care and education but to culture and leisure activities as well. For policy-makers and other rural promoters, Subsidised Cinemas are not just for entertainment; they are also there to deliver public good. However, as the case studies illustrate, cinemas conform to fit and serve the towns in which they are located. These considerations are integral to shaping factors such as the scope and scale of operations, aesthetics, audiences and programming.

While Subsidised Cinemas clearly fulfil certain policy aims and contribute to discourses of social and cultural improvement, whether they actually add to the cohesion of communities on a broad scale is harder to ascertain. In Bingara, there was resistance to the cinema redevelopment at first, but the contribution it has since made to increasing visitors and enhancing business activity appears to have won many residents over. The Regal Theatre has been a fact of life for so long in Stowmarket that it was clear people had given little thought to not having it. However, the manager reported that first the fire that nearly destroyed the cinema and then the return to profit had galvanised increased community interest and support in the form of attendance. While these examples suggest that Subsidised Cinemas can have a very positive impact on local life, they also make it clear that these are not venues that everybody uses. At both The Roxy and The Regal, young adults are notably absent, preferring either the modernity of the nearby multiplexes or to watch films on DVD. The benefit they derive from the expenditure of public money on a local film theatre is quite rightly to be questioned. The role and capacity of cinema in promoting social interaction and community cohesion are explored further in the next chapter, which looks at the workings of volunteer-run film ventures.

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Chapter 4

Community Cinemas

Introduction

This chapter looks at film exhibition facilitated by community collectives. Like Subsidised Cinemas, these types of enterprise are generally found in smaller towns where the needs of local residents are not met by commercial operators – either because there are not enough people to support a for-profit enterprise or because the film program offered by the local for-profit cinema fails to satisfy residents. However, unlike the Subsidised Cinemas, Community Cinemas do not have the benefit of ongoing financial support from larger public sector organisations, such as local councils, or federal arts and culture bodies. While they may be successful in securing one-off grants, this funding is generally not of a regular or dependable nature.

Community Cinemas are distinguished by their cooperative management structures, dependence on a volunteer workforce and their not-for-profit orientation. They can be subdivided into two categories: formally constituted film societies and cooperative associations. The key difference between the two is that film societies typically operate as closed, member-only groups, while other Community Cinemas are open to the general public. These distinctions have implications for the negotiation of distribution and film hire terms, and also sometimes influence the types of movies that are programmed. However, they do not give rise to a level of disparity that would justify separate categorisation within the cinema model. This view correlates with the classification adopted by the British Federation of Film Societies (BFFS), which defines a Community Cinema as:

Any volunteer-led and non-profit-making organisation that shows films in its local area. This includes: film societies and clubs in communities and neighbourhoods, schools, colleges and universities; screenings in village halls, arts centres, cinemas, youth and community centres; mobile cinemas; and local film festivals. (BFFS 2010: 1)

This chapter begins by examining the history of grassroots cinema in Australia and the UK. It charts the early beginnings of community cinema from the first film society in London in the mid-1920s to its rapid growth in the post-World War II period. The background to the more recent surge in independent community-run enterprises is also explored. The following section explores the implications of the scholarly neglect of volunteer-led cinemas as a site of critical inquiry. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to exploring the characteristics of contemporary Community Cinemas in Australia and the UK – the circumstances under which they are established, and the factors that influence how (and whether) they survive and prosper. The discussion also looks at the role of digital technologies, specifically DVD projection, in injecting new energy into cooperative-based film activity. The ‘In Focus’ section profiles an enterprise in Blyth, a very small town in the Clare Valley region of South Australia, while the second case study looks at a public assistance program known as Village Screen, rather than a single cinema. Village Screen is administered by Creative Arts East to promote and support volunteer-led film groups throughout rural Norfolk and Suffolk.

The History of Grassroots Film Exhibition

Film Societies

The history of community-run film exhibition can be traced back to 1925, when the first film society was established in London. Known simply as the London Film Society, this venture emerged from an alternative film culture scene that was gaining momentum in the city at the time. Scott MacDonald (1997: 7) notes that from the outset, the London Film Society offered access to a wide range of innovative, non-mainstream content, such as avant-garde films, scientific and other types of documentaries, and classic shorts and features, and that these were eagerly embraced by its specialist audience. Over the next few years, formally constituted film groups were established in a number of other UK cities, including Cambridge, Edinburgh, Manchester and Oxford. The movement was given a further boost in 1937 when the British Federation of Film Societies (BFFS) was formed as an umbrella organisation for this growing area of screen activity (BFFS 2011a; Hanson 2007a: 49–50).

In Australia, film societies did not appear in significant numbers until the 1940s (Cunningham and Routt 1989: 182; Moran 1995: 126). The local equivalent of the BFFS, the Australian

Council of Film Societies (ACOFS), was formed in 1949 (ACOFS 2011). Like their UK counterparts, early societies in Australia were driven by members with a shared interest in specialised and art cinema, and were concentrated in city locations, principally Sydney and Melbourne (Film Festivals Australia 2011). However, due to difficulties in gaining access to features and shorts, these early groups were forced to screen large numbers of documentaries (Moran 1983: 87). Cunningham and Routt (1989: 183) argue that these non-fiction films were useful for filling content gaps, but that they also helped promote appreciation of film as an art form and highlighted its educative potential among society members.

The decades that followed World War II were something of a golden age for film societies. Cunningham and Routt (1989: 182) contend that in the 1950s, ‘interest in and appreciation of film began to grow exponentially, as it were, not only in Australia but all over the world’. This was reflected in increased activity by film societies, but also film festivals. For example, the now pre-eminent Australian events in Sydney and Melbourne were both launched in the 1950s (Film Festivals Australia 2011).

Around this time, cinephiles wishing to by-pass the limitations of the commercial mainstream were given another major boost. Technical advancements in 16mm made during the war had produced a quality format that provided a viable and cheaper alternative to 35mm. As a shooting gauge, it became favoured by specialised and experimental filmmakers. As a projection format, it was also more economical, and became popular with film societies, public libraries, colleges and universities (BFFS 2011a). The BFFS directly attributes the innovations in 16mm to a dramatic increase in memberships in the post-World War II period, when the number of film societies doubled from around 250 in the 1950s to almost 500 by the 1960s (BFFS 2011a).

The 16mm format, and also Super 8, were important in facilitating a DIY approach to film production and exhibition that flourished in the post World War II period. As well as supporting film society activities, they were also used to run private, ad hoc screenings in a range of locations, including pubs, old halls and homes. However, the popularity of these alternative formats began to wane in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with the advent of home video – a cheaper and easy-to-use medium better suited to private viewing. However, while home video was certainly more convenient, data suggest that film society activity and

attendances had begun to wane before its introduction. This may have been connected with the overall decline in movie-going in the general population or the rise in cable, satellite and ethnic television broadcasting that made art-house cinema more accessible. However, these links are yet to be investigated in any systematic way. Over the past decade or so, grassroots cinema has begun to reassert itself again. Interestingly, this has come at a time when it has never been easier to watch a very broad variety of films outside the cinema via formats such as DVD, Blu-ray, television broadcast (both pay and free-to-air) and the internet.

Film societies initially were a metropolitan phenomenon, and many contemporary groups continue to serve city-based memberships. However, film societies have also been a successful model for community-initiated cinema in rural areas, where they have arisen in response to two main issues. First, they have brought screenings of art cinema and foreign films to audiences under-served by local commercial operators. For example, the Dubbo Film Society in New South Wales was established in 1989 by a group of doctors who moved to the area from Sydney and found no local outlet to pursue their interest in specialised films. While the town has a commercial cinema, its program was (and continues to be) focused principally on mainstream Hollywood movies. The film society was formed in direct response to this gap in the market. The lack of interest in alternative content on the part of the current commercial operator, Reading, is indicated by the fact that it happily hires an auditorium to the film society for its events (Clayton interview, 14 September 2010; Dubbo Film Society 2009).

The second situation in which rural film societies have arisen is in locations without any local cinema facilities. In these circumstances, groups have been more likely to incorporate a wider range of mainstream films into their programs. For example, the Maleny Film Society in Queensland screens a mixed program of Hollywood and independent films. Formed in the late 1980s, the group caters to residents who live nearly an hour's drive away from the nearest commercial alternatives in Maroochydore or Noosa Heads (Begun interview, 28 September 2010). A number of film societies exist in similar circumstances in the UK, including the Chester Film Society in north-west England, and the Topsham Film Society in Devon (Chester Film Society 2011; Topsham Film Society 2011).

Other Community Cinema Cooperatives

Community-facilitated screenings have also prospered in rural areas outside the formalised structures of film societies. Unlike many film societies, these ventures have tended not to be preoccupied in their programming with the artistic quality of film and related distinctions between high and low cinema culture. These kinds of enterprises can be traced back to the 1950s through Kate Bowles' (2011) research on the community cinema in the small town of Bemboka. However, further analysis of this type of cinema activity is hampered by the lack of archival records and other critical research. None of the ad hoc Community Cinema ventures located in this study dated back further than the mid-1980s. However, the fact that none could be located dating from the 1960s and 1970s should not necessarily be interpreted as proof of their non-existence or irrelevance. As subsequent sections of this chapter will demonstrate, community film groups can be highly unstable and difficult to sustain over the longer term. Their reliance on volunteer labour, and a lack of external funding and other institutional support, are major contributors to this volatility.

Contemporary Community Cinema Activity

Data from surveys conducted by the BFFS in the UK and anecdotal evidence gathered in Australia suggest that the numbers of Community Cinemas – both film societies and non-aligned enterprises – have increased significantly over the past two decades. Results from the most recent BFFS Community Exhibitor Survey revealed that the majority of responding organisations (59 per cent) had been formed since 2000.²³ No comparable tracking of volunteer cinemas is undertaken in Australia. However, interviews with the former managers of the New South Wales Regional Cinema Program, together with information obtained from the archived records of the scheme (correspondence and detailed field trip reports), provide an indication of increased activity in New South Wales and beyond over the same period (Cruickshank interview, 2 October 2008; Smith interview, 18 December 2008).

Three key factors are relevant to understanding this renaissance in Community Cinema activity: rural policy, rural socio-economic conditions and technological change. In terms of

²³ The results of the survey published in the BFI's *Statistical Yearbook 2011* did not specify how many cinemas in total responded to the BFFS survey. Data provided for audiences suggest the enterprises that did return the survey accounted for 58 per cent of total estimated admissions for community cinemas that year (BFI 2011: 95–7).

policy, the recent growth in volunteer cinema numbers coincides with the rise of the self-help strategies for rural development and sustainability identified in the previous chapter.

Community-led exhibition has come to embody many of the ideals of local responsibility and empowerment espoused by policy-makers and other rural advocates (Herbert-Cheshire 2000: 203; Kenyon and Black 2001). The goals of self-sufficiency have underpinned a range of targeted development schemes. These include the Regional Cinema Program in New South Wales, and Village Screen in eastern England, both of which were focused on facilitation and education rather than direct outside intervention. Under these programs, individual communities are encouraged to develop their own vision and take responsibility for the administration and management of their cinema. Brendan Smith, a former manager of the Regional Cinema Program, explained that his scheme was ‘fundamentally concerned with supporting the development of specific and self-determined projects based on the needs of individual communities’ (quoted in Metcalfe 2003: 75).

The rise of Community Cinemas must also be contextualised against localised rural conditions. As outlined in the Introduction and the previous chapter, quality of life has declined markedly in many small Australian and UK towns over recent decades. Rising levels of unemployment and a deterioration in the accessibility and adequacy of key services have given rise to a range of social and economic problems. In some cases, these issues are believed to have affected the emotional well-being and health of local residents. The formation of volunteer cinemas in these circumstances is often framed as a direct and positive response to these adverse situations.

One of the most forthright examples of this in action centred on the film group formed in 1998 in Nundle, a very small, depressed town in the Northern Tablelands region of New South Wales. The driving force behind the venture was the local district nurse, Sue Denison, who adopted a broad approach to her responsibility for community health. At the time, she was concerned about the widespread feelings of hopelessness among residents who were struggling with high unemployment, low incomes and the prospect of further job losses as a result of the impending amalgamation of the shire council. Denison was also worried about the desperate lack of social activities for local teenagers and the isolation of the elderly. As she explained, a cinema had the potential to lift everyone’s spirits. ‘You can’t stop what’s going on – amalgamation, job losses, a lot of the problems that rural people are faced with.

But you can reverse people's attitudes by giving them hope and direction for a better life.' (quoted in Maddox 2000: 6) By the early 2000s, the Nundle Cinema had become an example and source of inspiration for other rural communities. Denison and other key organisers spoke several times at promotional forums organised by the New South Wales Regional Cinema Program, and they were profiled in national newspapers and on television (Maddox 2000, Smith interview 18 December 2008).²⁴ However, more recently the venture has lost its momentum. Denison has moved on to a job in another town, and regular screenings are no longer being held in Nundle (Burns 2010). This rather sad end to the story underscores the vulnerability of volunteer enterprises.

While government policy, together with social and economic change, has certainly been important, possibly the most significant factor in the rise in Community Cinema activity has been the development of DVD-based projection technologies. The relatively low cost of the equipment has significantly lowered the barrier to entry for a number of volunteer cinemas by reducing their start-up expenditure requirements. The user-friendly configuration of DVD systems has also helped small enterprises by reducing the level of technical expertise required. Brian Guthrie, a Suffolk resident who has been involved in community cinema in various forms for over 20 years, estimates that the number of volunteer groups has increased fourfold in the county since DVD projection became widely available (interview, 29 April 2011). Annual surveys by the BFFS indicate DVD usage is high throughout Community Cinemas in the UK. In 2009–10, almost all the organisations that responded to the questionnaire (95 per cent) indicated that they used DVD for some or all of their screenings (BFI 2012a: 96). In Australia, I found a high incidence of DVD usage in community enterprises, particularly those established in the past ten years.

Critical Contexts: The Neglect of Grassroots Cinema

As this thesis has already outlined, one of the most significant shifts to have taken place in cinema scholarship over the past decade or so has been the interest that has developed in aspects of the movie-going experience that lie beyond the screen and outside the theatre

²⁴ Sue Denison was interviewed for ABC Television's *Coast to Coast* program. The National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) holds a copy of the interview but the tape is not dated. NFSA staff estimate the interview went to air in late 2000.

(Waller 2003–04: 13). Getting past analysis of textual content and its reception, researchers increasingly are becoming engaged with the institutional and geographic frameworks that control the film-viewing experience and the wider socio-cultural situation of the audience. However, this turn in critical studies is yet to give sustained attention to the role of Community Cinemas in facilitating a distinctive form of public film consumption.

This situation gives rise to a rather interesting paradox in relation to the study of art cinema and other types of specialised films. While textual and reception analyses have tended to prioritise the investigation of these kinds of movies, they have been content to remain largely uninformed about the contexts in which they are viewed, particularly with regard to the rural setting. Researchers such as Janna Jones (2001), Melanie Self (2007) and Ailsa Hollinshead (2011) have highlighted the importance of cultural distinction in the public consumption of alternative films in metropolitan settings. They show how engagement with a perceived ‘high’ cultural product can determine the type of audience that seeks it out – or not, in the case of Hollinshead’s work. However, across each of these projects the focus has been on specialised film viewing in commercial cinemas rather than volunteer-led societies and community groups. As Cunningham and Routt lamented in the late 1980s, the history of film societies and other volunteer cinemas in Australia and the UK is largely unwritten, and this remains so today (Cunningham and Routt 1989: 182–3). Yet, as these scholars have argued, grassroots cinemas have been an important part of the overall development of twentieth-century film culture. In Australia, they argue, this has had consequences that extend well beyond viewing enjoyment and intellectual enrichment:

following the Second World War the interest in and appreciation of film began to grow exponentially, as it were, not only in Australia but all over the world ... Its effect should not be minimised: the ‘mind set’ created by post-war Australian film culture was undoubtedly the single factor most responsible for the renaissance of production in the seventies. (1989: 182)

There are further reasons why the study of Community Cinemas matters. As the previous section emphasised, two of most significant periods for volunteer-run film enterprises (the 1950s–60s and the present) have seen circumstances that seemingly run counter to broader or mainstream trends. In the 1950s and 1960s, film societies flourished while commercial attendances plummeted and cinemas closed across Australia and the UK. In the current

context, Community Cinemas have again been growing, despite that fact it has never been easier to watch films outside the cinema, thereby avoiding the additional and often demanding work of organising public screenings. These trends are at least partly attributable to the development of projection equipment (16mm and later DVD/Blu-Ray) that is relatively inexpensive and practical to use, but at the same time produces a reasonable-quality image and sound. However, as the following section goes on to explain, volunteer-led cinema activity cannot be understood solely in terms of the opportunities created by advancements in technology. The discussion highlights the distinctive meanings that are sought out and created through shared rather than individual film viewing experiences, and explores the attendant social and cultural awareness and responsibilities of Community Cinema organisers and audiences.

About Community Cinemas

Film screenings facilitated by community groups are connected by three key characteristics: collective ownership, not-for-profit operational status and dependence on a volunteer workforce. As has been outlined, dissatisfaction over the absence or inadequacy of local cinema facilities generally provides the prerequisite for the establishment of community-led venture – it creates the desire. However, translating these feelings into a functioning enterprise pivots on access to three crucial additional elements: start-up capital, a suitable venue in which to conduct screenings and a group of diligent and enthusiastic volunteers.

The case of a failed venture in Muswellbrook, New South Wales demonstrates the importance and interconnection of these components. In the early 2000s, the local Regional Arts Development Officer, Andrew Parker, set out to establish a volunteer cinema in the town. To begin with, he organised some one-off screenings, which were well attended. These test-runs also confirmed the suitability of the local Memorial Hall as a film venue. Encouraged by the success of these events and the presence of a thriving community venture in the nearby town of Dungog, Parker proceeded with his plan for a permanent community cinema. He distributed a survey to local residents, and from it recruited 25 volunteers who indicated they would be prepared to assist with the project. However, when the preparatory work began in

earnest, almost all the would-be helpers fell away and the initiative collapsed (Smith 2001b: 7).

No official data exists on the level of Community Cinema activity in Australia – rural or metropolitan. Extrapolating from a range of incomplete industry sources, it is estimated the current number of enterprises lies between 60 and 100. In 2005, the Regional Cinema Program in New South Wales counted 47 non-commercial cinemas in the state. These included enterprises operated by independent community organisations, film societies and some Subsidised Cinemas run by local councils (Cruickshank 2005: 3). A register of Affiliated Film Societies dated August 2006, obtained from the National Film and Sound Archive website, lists 59 film groups located in rural areas around the country (NFSA 2006). A more recent but less comprehensive list of ACOFS-affiliated groups covering four states²⁵ revealed 33 rural film societies and community cinemas among its members (ACOFS 2010).

In contrast, the tracking of community cinema in the UK is quite detailed. Since 2006–07, the BFFS has conducted an annual survey of film societies and other community cinema enterprises in both metropolitan and rural areas. It collects information about the number and type of films screened, admissions figures, ticket prices and venue characteristics. The results are published each year in the BFI's *Statistical Yearbook*. In 2009–10, the BFFS estimated that there were 900 community cinema providers across the country, generating 375,000 admissions (BFFS 2010: 1; BFI 2012a: 96). These figures suggest that Community Cinema activity in the UK is far more significant than it is in Australia. Almost half (43 per cent) of the film societies and other community cinemas surveyed by the BFFS were located in rural areas, including 17 per cent in remote areas. This suggests an overall number of around 387 non-metropolitan venues in the UK. Remote in the context of the BFFS report was defined as more than 10 miles from the nearest settlement. While this would not be considered remote in Australia, these distances are nonetheless significant within the UK landscape.

²⁵ Independent state film society federations make up the direct members of ACOFS. Individual film societies join their respective state federations. Not all state federations are members of ACOFS (only Victoria, New South Wales, Western Australia and Tasmania) (ACOFS 2011).

Ownership and Getting Started

Community Cinemas operate under a range of not-for-profit structures that include incorporated associations, arts councils and charitable trusts. They are usually managed by a committee of volunteers elected by the group's members. Additional unpaid help generally is enlisted at screenings to perform roles such as projection, ushering, ticket selling, serving food and drinks, and tidying up afterwards. The participation of volunteers keeps overheads low, and this is usually vital to ensuring the operation as a whole remains economically viable.

For communities setting out to establish a local film enterprise, there are a range of resources available. Both ACOFS and the BFFS publish guides and fact sheets that provide information about projection, fundraising, audience development and distribution (ACOFS 2011; BFFS 2011b). Similar information was also circulated by the Regional Cinema Program during its period of operation, but had the benefit of a specifically rural focus (e.g. Herman 2000; Rhys-Jones 2002). Extending its facilitation work, the BFFS also runs an annual conference for community cinemas that allows groups to meet and learn from each other's experiences. The Regional Cinema Program hosted similar forums, which it called 'Flicks in the Sticks'.

Operating under systems of cooperative work and management can be productive and rewarding for those involved. However, these enterprises tend to be at greater risk of destabilisation than more formalised or corporatised structures. For example, ongoing disagreements and/or personality rifts within committees can reduce their capacity to function effectively as decision-making bodies. A further issue with this model of cinema is that the workforce as a whole is engaged on an informal and unpaid basis, which makes it unstable. It is open to disruption as the result of events like personal burnout, illness, changes in paid work circumstances and deaths. Those who leave the enterprise cannot necessarily be replaced in the same way as a person that performs a more clearly defined, paid job.

Understanding what motivates people to devote their time to the running of a Community Cinema enterprise is complex. It is shaped in part by the particular characteristics and needs of their town, but also by personal factors like individual personalities, age and life experiences. Among the volunteers interviewed for this study, there were two principal

reasons advanced to explain the importance of their cinema ventures to the local town and why they were motivated to get involved. First, their community enterprises addressed the inconvenience of not having local access to film – either to specialised content or to any film at all. Second, by encouraging social interaction through cinema-going, they believed that they (as a group) were helping to reduce the negative impacts of rural isolation and economic disadvantage. The latter motive is illustrated in the following selection of quotes.

[Dubbo Film Society] Our film screenings are an important social outing for a lot of our members. Quite a few of the members are seniors and they really look forward to the social side of things. (Clayton interview, 14 September 2010)

[Blyth Cinema] The community activity – both organising and coming along to events – that goes on around this cinema really helps to keep local people going. (Roberts interview 9 February 2010)

[Nundle Cinema] A good crowd at an evening adult screening is 30 and we get a lot of teenagers and older people attending at concession rates which can't be seen as a negative because it brings the community together. (Gary Cashman, Nundle Arts Council, quoted in Dixon 1999: 26)

More specific benefits of community cinemas cited by interview participants included: the creation of a space for teenagers to socialise legitimately (thereby discouraging a range of anti-social behaviours, including under-age binge drinking and vandalism); improving mental and physical health; enhancing the general sense of belonging in the town; and easing the loneliness and social disconnection experienced by seniors (Begun interview, 28 September 2010; Clayton interview, 14 September 2010; Heron and Phillips interview, 26 March 2011; Roberts interview, 9 February 2010; Saunders interview, 11 April 2011). Interviews with audiences and local residents not involved as volunteers indicate Community Cinemas are perceived as achieving some of these goals within the wider community. This is explored further in Chapter 6.

For some volunteers, there is also a highly personal dimension to their involvement. For example, in an interview in 2000 with journalist Gary Maddox, Sue Denison revealed that her desire to help teenagers through the Nundle Cinema stemmed in part from the circumstances

of her recent recovery from a major illness – Denison’s life had been saved by a liver transplant from a 19-year-old donor (Maddox 2000: 6). Similarly, Hugh Packard from the Montreal Community Cinema in Tumut reported that one of his primary motivations for getting involved in the enterprise was to create a safe space where his teenage children and their friends could hang out (Thorne 2006).

The energetic and inspirational people that lead rural Community Cinemas are often vital to their success. These advocates typically invest huge amounts of their own time in the venture, but also often play an important role in encouraging other local residents to participate. Janna Jones’ (2003) study of the revitalisation of movie palaces in the United States highlights the importance of individuals to community-led ventures. In particular, she notes that: ‘People don’t give money to buildings; they give money to people.’ (2003: 118) However, on the downside, people with strong personalities or convictions can also be divisive. This can affect perceptions about the attractiveness of the cinema as a social space. For example, where leading advocates of a cinema are perceived by local residents to be overly ‘cultured’ or ‘superior’, the cinema itself may be similarly seen as elitist. This problem was experienced at The Roxy in Bingara, as one of the volunteers involved in the restoration explained:

A lot of people said to me in the early days ‘I don’t know why you are bothering with the old cinema’ and some were very unhappy that the council was giving money to it when they should have been fixing the water [supply] and the roads. They thought the cinema was going to be too arty and that it wasn’t something everyone in the town would benefit from. (Bingara resident, female, late sixties)

Snippets of other stories about individuals falling out over the management of their cinema enterprises were aired in other interviews conducted as part of this study. I was also able to observe the destabilising impact of these kinds of tensions at first hand during my involvement with the Friends of the Sawtell Cinema committee in 2009–10. In that instance, the issue was resolved by decisions of most of the committee not to stand for re-election in the following year. In other cases, tensions had led to local residents ceasing to patronise the local cinema or resigning from organisational committees. However, accounts of such events usually were conveyed somewhat reluctantly by interview participants, most of whom were still involved in the enterprise. This hesitancy was probably at least partly attributable to the

fact that to go into these stories in any detail risked detracting from the overall picture of harmony and inclusiveness that most were keen to convey.

Locations

Community Cinema screenings occur in a wide range of spaces, encompassing village and school halls, multi-purpose performing arts centres, university lecture theatres, leisure centres, museums and commercial cinemas. The latter may seem slightly incongruous, but can be highly useful for film societies interested in broadening the type of movies screened in their local area beyond standard mainstream releases. In Australia, the Dubbo and Taree Film Societies have ongoing arrangements with their local cinema operators to hire auditoriums for their art-house movie events. However, they are usually relegated to periods that are quiet from a commercial perspective, such as Sunday evenings. Under these agreements, the societies are responsible for hiring the films and selling tickets or memberships, while the cinema handles all practical matters to do with screening the film.

Data from the BFFS survey suggest that most Community Cinemas in the UK (79 per cent) use a regular, single venue for their activities (BFI 2012a: 96). The vast majority of enterprises I encountered in Australia did the same. In broader geographic terms, Community Cinemas tend to operate in isolated locations where populations are relatively small. Combined with their focus facilitating social engagement and freedom from commercial limitations, these factors have a major impact on the way in which these enterprises operate. While it can contribute to instability, it can also be liberating, as former Regional Cinema Program manager Brendan Smith explains:

Volunteer cinemas that are less constrained by many of the financial imperatives which drive (and often close) commercial operations can operate more flexibly, providing residents with access to the movies and so much more. As has been seen in Nundle they are sustainable for small populations and their benefits extend beyond entertainment and social interaction to incorporate cultural development, address health and community well-being, and target specific disadvantaged populations. (Smith 2001a: 51–2)

Like the volunteers interviewed as part of this study, Smith suggests that being part of the audience at a Community Cinema can be important for reasons other than just watching a film. However, while the simple act of gathering in a public space can help draw people together, creating a place of genuine community enrichment often requires additional care and consideration. As Megan Dixon, one of the volunteers at the Nundle Cinema, emphasised in her address to the Regional Cinema Program's 'Flicks in the Sticks' conference in 2000:

I must stress the [importance of] intervals. In the city even though you may go to the movies with a friend or two, any interaction is largely confined to your small group. You don't want to talk to the person in front or beyond you unless it's to say 'keep the noise down'. In the country without interval you feel ripped off. It's a chance to catch up, sometimes to see people you don't otherwise get to see, and even those you see often. (Dixon 2000: 3)

At Nundle, the committee took their outreach activities a step further by formalising the position of a 'Welcoming Officer', to ensure new patrons had a pleasant social experience and to encourage them to return. As Megan Dixon explained:

If there's a new face at the pictures, the Welcoming Officer makes an effort to help them feel comfortable, offers them tea or coffee at interval and shows them where the biscuits are. This makes them feel welcome and more likely to tell others about it and come again. (Dixon 2000: 2–3)

Sharing food and drinks is very a common way for Community Cinemas to enhance the quality and quantity of social interaction at their events. For example, at screenings run by the Maleny Film Society, patrons have the option of buying a meal at the cinema before the film, which is consumed at communal tables. They are also able to purchase other refreshments, such as drinks and tea/coffee, beforehand and at interval. Similarly, at Dubbo Film Society functions members are provided with a light meal – rolls from the Subway restaurant chain and tea and coffee – and the opportunity to interact during the break between the first and second film.

Film Programming

Most Community Cinemas screen films on a regular but infrequent basis. Monthly and bi-monthly screenings were most common among the cinemas examined in this study. However, some larger enterprises are able to run events more often, such as in Maleny where movies are shown fortnightly. The types of films screened can vary significantly according to the interests of the group. Film society members are often drawn to art-house cinema and foreign-language titles. For groups operating in close proximity to a commercial cinema, there can be more latitude for specialisation because the mainstream audience is already catered for. However, in more isolated situations, community-run cinemas tend to aim for broader appeal and program accordingly. The emphasis is usually on mainstream releases that do not contain excessive sexual content or violence. For example, at Nundle the committee selected *The Full Monty* (Cattaneo 1997) for its first screening ‘because a lot of people wanted to see it and they had small kids, they had no other alternative but to bring the kids and bed them down on the floor’ (Sue Denison, quoted in Metcalfe 2003: 75).

Most Community Cinemas are not able to access films until after their retail DVD release, regardless of whether they are screening on DVD or 35mm. While these delays are sometimes frustrating, they do have an upside. Having to wait until later to book their films, community groups are able to select from releases with a proven track record of success, thereby avoiding box office flops. While volunteers stress that the social aspects of attendance are important to patrons, they also concede that the reputation of the film and how well it has been promoted can have a major impact on audience numbers. Big celebrations like weddings or 21st birthdays can also influence the level of attendance (Lancaster interview, 31 March 2009). The weather can also be critical. During the first year of its operation, the Nundle Cinema almost closed its doors after a disastrous winter season. Megan Dixon notes that the committee learnt that locals ‘don’t want to come out when it’s really cold’ and from then on the group scaled back its events at that time of year (2000: 1–2).

Profitability

While they are not strictly commercial, community ventures nonetheless need to attract audiences in order to survive. They are not necessarily driven by the need to realise profits, but patronage is crucial. It ensures that operating costs are covered and enables volunteers to

feel their long hours of unpaid toil are justified and appreciated by the wider population. If and when excess proceeds are generated, they typically are reinvested in the enterprise – for example, to upgrade projection equipment or kitchen facilities. They are sometimes also used to support other local cultural activities. Two successful community groups in Australia, the Dubbo Film Society and the Glen Innes Chapel Theatre, help fund shorts festivals for local filmmakers – ‘In the Bin’ and ‘Don’t Waste the Popcorn’ respectively (Clayton interview, 14 September 2010; Glen Innes Arts Council 2010).

Often, the most significant financial hurdle faced by Community Cinema groups is raising the start-up capital for their venture. The amount required can vary considerably depending on the town’s existing resources (venues and screening equipment) and the intended scope of the enterprise. For example, the Nundle Cinema was established with a cash grant of just \$500 from the Arts Council of New South Wales, together with donations from the nearby University of New England (two screens) and the New England Area Health Service (three second-hand 16mm projectors) (Dixon 1999: 26). In contrast, the Margaret River Cinema spent \$60,000 on its set-up, which included provision for the purchase of high-end DVD projection and digital sound equipment. This was funded by no-interest loans from local residents in \$5000 parcels and topped up with a \$12,000 one-off grant from the local council (Smith 2003: 1). One-off grants from arts and cultural organisations have helped other groups to either establish or consolidate their activities. For example, the Glen Innes Chapel Theatre recently received government funding totalling \$130,000 for the installation of a digital projector and to undertake major repairs to the theatre’s roof (New South Wales Arts 2011; Torbay 2011).

Film rental is generally the most significant operating cost for Community Cinemas. Movies are accessed primarily from commercial distributors but groups also have access to the concessional non-theatrical lending schemes operated by the BFI in the UK and the National Film and Sound Archive in Australia. Australian cinemas report that film hire typically costs between \$150 and \$300 per title plus freight. Costs are similar in the UK, although cheaper deals (£25–40) are available through specialist DVD distributor Dorset Moviola (Village Screen 2010: 14–17). Due to the high cost of leasing or owning a venue outright, many groups hire the space on a per event basis, which keeps their cost base fairly low. One-off charges for the hire of a hall can range from around \$50–200 (£25–150 in the UK), while a

cinema is usually slightly more, around \$400–600 (£100–250). For reasons related to their small audience catchments (and equally applicable to the Small Commercial and Subsidised Cinemas examined in previous chapters), admissions at Community Cinemas tend to be low and uncertain. Film societies are able to mitigate some of this risk through their membership structures. Rather than charging on a per film basis, societies ask members to commit to the annual program via payment of a membership fee. This typically covers admission to all films and sometimes also the refreshments served at interval. One advantage of this system is that moneys are collected at the beginning of the year, providing a clear indication of the group's budget for the period ahead and reducing the risk of running into deficit.

Digital Projection and Community Cinemas

Community Cinemas utilise a range of screening formats from 35mm and 16mm through to DVD. As earlier discussion has highlighted, for reasons of cost and operational efficiency DVD is becoming an increasingly popular choice. The benefits and limitations of DVD for volunteer groups largely mirror those outlined for Subsidised Cinemas in the previous chapter. However, variations in the approach to film distribution in this format highlight some issues that are unique to volunteer-run cinemas.

In Australia, Community Cinemas access films in much the same way as publicly funded venues – that is, they negotiate with individual distributors for films on commercial terms, albeit usually on some kind of concessional basis. Generally it is only incorporated film societies that are eligible to access films on more advantageous non-theatrical distribution terms from companies such as Amalgamated Movies and Roadshow Non-Theatrical. Film societies are regarded as being non-theatrical because their membership schemes mean they technically are closed to the general public, although paying guests are sometimes permitted at screenings. Independent community groups, on the other hand, are usually considered 'commercial' because admission fees are charged and attendance is unrestricted.

In the UK, the supply of films to community cinemas in DVD formats is less restrictive. The same waiting periods apply, but specialist companies such as Filmbank and Dorset Moviola are able to provide centralised booking services for both film societies and non-aligned community groups. They access films from a range of commercial distributors and organise

them into an easy-to-use catalogue format that streamlines the task of selecting films for volunteer committees. Dorset Moviola, which is a cooperative exhibition and distribution enterprise, is widely used by community cinemas in Norfolk and Suffolk (Morelli interview, 18 May 2011). Across the UK, Moviola books films for a network of over 150 venues, which gives them additional negotiating power with distributors. For example, in 2008 it was the only organisation outside of mainstream cinemas permitted to distribute the hit film *Mamma Mia!* (Lloyd 2008; Dorset Moviola 2011).

The use of DCI digital projection at Community Cinemas is currently uncommon, largely because its cost is prohibitive. For most, winning a substantial grant or donation represents the only way they could hope to fund such a major acquisition. The Mansfield Armchair Cinema in Victoria was one of the first community-run cinemas to install DCI equipment, which was funded by contributions from several generous local residents (Mansfield Armchair Cinema 2011). More recently, in early 2011 the Chapel Theatre in Glen Innes installed a 3D DCI system paid for by major state government grants (New South Wales Arts 2011; Torbay 2011). Both the Mansfield and Glen Innes cinemas promote the fact that this equipment has allowed them to access new releases much earlier than would otherwise be possible with 35mm or DVD. The option of 3D on some releases also adds some excitement by allowing these communities to bring a part of the high-end metropolitan cinema experience to a rural audience. But the cost of DCI continues to place it out of the reach of most community enterprises.

In Focus

In the spotlight in this final section of the chapter are Community Cinemas from both Australia and the UK. The first case study centres on the Blyth Cinema in South Australia, while the second, focused on the UK, departs slightly from the pattern of looking at a single cinema. Instead, it profiles Village Screen, an initiative aimed at encouraging and supporting volunteer-based film activity around rural Norfolk. This provides an effective means of drawing together findings from several field trips made during my research visit to the UK. This work included visiting and attending screenings at two community cinemas operating under the auspices of this program (at North Creake and Wells-next-the-Sea), interviews with

Village Screen staff and the experience of attending a Film Promoters Event run by Village Screen for prospective new cinema groups.

The Blyth Cinema case study examines the situation of a film enterprise established and successfully maintained with almost no outside assistance. Village Screen, on the other hand, highlights an approach to strategic intervention and facilitation that is well suited to its particular localised setting. Both examples illustrate the importance of the four key factors outlined above that underpin the realisation of a Community Cinema enterprise: cinematic deprivation; the availability of start up capital; the presence of a suitable venue; and access to an enthusiastic and creative volunteer workforce.

Blyth Cinema, Blyth, South Australia

The Blyth Cinema is located in the town of Blyth, a very small settlement in the Clare Valley, a highly regarded wine-growing region of South Australia. At the last Census, the town had a population of just 306 (ABS 2006). Not surprisingly, Blyth is a fairly quiet place that supports a fairly limited range of services. The local retail sector is centred around just a few shops that include a general store, post office, hairdresser, art gallery/studio and pub. The closest substantial town is Clare, which is 12 kilometres away and has a population of 3000 (ABS 2006). Clare's local services include a chain-owned supermarket (Woolworths) and a video store. From Blyth, it is over 100 kilometres to the nearest commercial cinema – there is an older style twin-screen venue in Gawler to the north and a variety of multiplex and independent cinemas in the capital city of Adelaide to the south. Not surprisingly, before the community screenings started in Blyth, going to the movies was an infrequent event for most residents in the Clare Valley region.

The Blyth Cinema has operated as a community enterprise since it opened in 2005. The venture is based in a converted Masonic Lodge hall, which is used exclusively by the local film group. The building is leased for a nominal fee from its private owner, Ian Roberts, a Blyth resident who operates the art gallery/studio in the town. Mr Roberts was also the key driving forces behind the establishment of the cinema and continues to have a leading role in its ongoing operations. In addition to providing the community with the film venue, Mr Roberts also generously funded all the start-up costs, including remodelling of the hall and the purchase of the projection and sound equipment. Collectively, these contributions are

estimated to have been worth around \$180,000 (Roberts 2009: 6). Mr Roberts explains how his enthusiasm for the initiative was sparked initially:

In common with most Australian towns our size, we have lost just about every service in the past 30 years, culminating in the closure of our fantastic little hospital in 1992. In hindsight, we went into a period of mourning as that facility had been so important in so many ways to the health of our community. In 2000, we came out of that time with a determination to restore confidence, held meetings to set goals and got on with the job of doing ... At about the same time, I went to a cinema in Adelaide and watched *Master and Commander* [Weir 2003]. I guess it would be fair to say I was blown away by the sound effects in that movie – I'd only been to about five indoor movies previously ... That Adelaide experience had me questioning why we couldn't have access to the same quality in my region. (Roberts 2009: 2)

Shortly afterwards, Mr Roberts organised a public meeting to ascertain the level of public interest in a community cinema. His idea was met with a keen response. Soon he and about 30 other volunteers began work on a business plan and the physical work of reconfiguring the then disused hall for its new purpose.

Six years on, the Blyth Cinema is still going strong. It attracts patrons from throughout the region, but draws most of its audience from the nearby town of Clare. The cinema screens films over several sessions every weekend and runs a mid-week film club screening once a month. Admission figures average around 20–30 people per session, usually comfortably covering the overall minimum 40 patrons per week required to break even. The audience typically comprises mature patrons (aged 40 and over). In school holidays, screenings of G and PG rated family films are popular with children up to their mid-teens and their families.

Additional revenue is generated by hiring the cinema as a venue for private screenings. The Clare Valley is a popular weekend getaway destination for people from Adelaide. A range of social groups, such as Probus and vintage car clubs, organise regular trips to the area and will often book the cinema exclusively for their evening's entertainment (Roberts interview, 9 February 2010). This reveals a small nostalgic trend in cinema-going whereby audiences are actively opting out of the mainstream experience, albeit only temporarily. It also highlights

the importance of the shared aspects of film viewing. Mr Roberts reports the audiences from Adelaide enjoy the quirky and non-commercial setting of the Blyth Cinema, but at the same time are impressed with the quality of the film presentation. Evidence of a similar, but small, counter movement away from commercial cinemas in favour of community venues also emerged from fieldwork conducted in the UK, which is detailed further below.

The cinema uses DVD as its sole projection format. Mr Roberts explained that it was favoured by the organising committee for several reasons:

It costs a lot less in freight – DVD meant pretty much anyone can handle projection duties, we didn't have to build a projection room, and it broadened the range of uses for which the facility could be used. (Roberts 2009: 3)

However, like the Subsidised Cinemas examined the previous chapter, opting to use DVD generally means Blyth does not receive its films until after they are available in retail shops and video stores. Mr Roberts says piracy is a major issue, and this further undermines the cinema's young adult audience. On this upside, the delays allow the committee at Blyth to choose from films with demonstrated box office success. The program is dedicated predominantly to mainstream, recent releases, and movies with controversial violence or sexual content are avoided. The exception is the monthly movie club, which self-selects a lot of 1950s and 1960s classics. One of the cinema's most successful titles to date has been *The World's Fastest Indian* (Donaldson 2005), which attracted 600 patrons over seven sessions (Roberts interview, 9 February 2010).

Films are booked on an individual basis through commercial distributors, although the cinema is usually able to negotiate concessional arrangements. For example, with certain distributors the cinema pays a minimum hire fee of between \$120 and \$160, but does not start paying a percentage share of gross takings until ticket sales have reached a minimum threshold of \$350. This provides the cinema with an opportunity to recoup its costs before the extra charges become applicable (Roberts interview, 9 February 2010).



Image 16: Blyth Cinema, Blyth, April 2010



Image 17: Foyer of Blyth Cinema, Blyth, April 2010

The Blyth cinema committee has initiated a number of community outreach and training activities, although it is under no external obligation to do so because it does not rely on public funding. The cinema gives local teenagers the opportunity to work behind the candy bar and ticket counter in order to gain skills that might later lead to employment. As Mr Roberts explained: ‘Working on the candy bar is an excellent introduction for them [teenagers] in handling money and people, and we are thrilled when they move on to part-time jobs in Clare.’ (Roberts 2009: 3) The cinema has also run film festivals that have given local filmmakers opportunities to showcase their work and participate in training events.

Village Screen, Creative Arts East, Wymondham, Norfolk

Village Screen is a publicly funded program that promotes and supports community film screenings in rural Norfolk. The scheme is administered by Creative Arts East, an arts charity that supports a range of cultural activities across the counties of Norfolk and Suffolk from its rural head office in Wymondham (about 20 minutes’ drive from Norwich). Creative Arts East is funded predominantly by local councils, but also Screen East and UK Lotteries. The Village Screen initiative was launched in 2005, the same year the Blyth Cinema opened its doors. Six years later, it supports a sizable network of 39 community groups. The role of Village Screen’s Development Officer, Alice Morelli, is to assist and advise existing enterprises and continue to attract new participants. As part of this work, Ms Morelli regularly runs information evenings for prospective groups, such as the Film Promoters Event I attended in the village of Castle Acre in May 2011. As part of my fieldwork, I was also present at two Village Screen events – *The King’s Speech* (Hooper 2010) at Wells-next-the-Sea and *Shadows in the Sun* (Rocksavage 2009) at North Creake.

The success of Village Screen can be attributed to the fact it addresses three of the four key requirements for community film enterprises: the absence of local cinema facilities; the need for a strong guide/motivator; and the problem of meeting start-up capital requirements. With only a handful of commercial cinemas operating in rural Norfolk, there were many people living in places that did not have access to film screenings before the start of Village Screen. This provided a clear mandate for the establishment of the program.



Image 18: North Creake Village Hall (venue for film screenings), March 2011



*Image 19: Interior The Maltings Theatre, Wells-next-the-Sea following screening of
The King's Speech, April 2011*

With regard to the second requirement, the scheme and its facilitator, Ms Morelli, may be regarded as performing the role that is often undertaken by a local enthusiastic individual, such as Ian Roberts at the Blyth Cinema or Sue Denison in Nundle. Ms Morelli helps generate interest among local residents and then supports communities through the development process and beyond.

As part of this process, Ms Morelli has found that targeting communities with pre-existing volunteer networks can be a particularly successful strategy. There are numerous village halls throughout rural Norfolk and Suffolk managed by volunteer committees and used for a range of purposes from high-school drama performances through to yoga and adult education classes. For example, the hall at North Creake hosts presentations by the local gardening club, historical society and drama group. Each of these groups has its own board, while the hall itself is managed by a separate committee. It was this latter committee that formed a sub-group to establish the cinema in partnership with Ms Morelli. With these kinds of structures and people in place, film groups can often be established relatively quickly. In towns where the enterprise is starting from scratch, the process can take considerably longer. The Gorleston Community Cinema, which operates from the local library, took more than a year to bring to fruition – largely due to the work involved in forming a committee and enlisting the required quorum of volunteers (Morelli interview, 18 May 2011).

The third important factor in the success of Village Screen has stemmed from its capacity to supply community groups with projection and sound equipment, as well as training and advice in its use. This has significantly reduced the amount of start-up capital required for individual cinemas, and made participation in the scheme feasible for a greater number of communities. Village Screen began with two mobile DVD screening units and has recently acquired a third. Communities are trained in how to assemble and operate the equipment, and pay a modest hire fee of £15 plus VAT each time they use it. The relatively compact geography of England makes it feasible to service a relatively large number of enterprises with only three screening kits. The group hiring the equipment is responsible for its return to Creative Arts East or for passing it on to the next venue. With distances of perhaps only 10–20 miles involved, it is not uncommon for the kits to be used in two or three locations over a single weekend. The comparatively large distances between towns in rural Australia would make this type of program difficult to replicate. However, not all groups in the network use

the hired projection kits. By accessing public funding, a number of cinemas have been able to secure grants to purchase their own equipment, including the two groups I visited at North Creake and Wells-next-the-Sea.²⁶



Image 20: Setting up the Village Screen mobile projection unit, Castle Acre, May 2011

Cinemas in the Village Screen network select their own films and have access to non-theatrical distribution through companies, such as Filmbank and Dorset Moviola. For reasons of cost and efficiency, Dorset Moviola tends to be used most frequently. The company produces a seasonal catalogue of upcoming titles dedicated to the kind of mainstream, non-controversial titles favoured by community cinemas. Groups find that selecting from these pre-qualified lists help to simplify the film programming process. Dorset Moviola is usually cheaper than Filmbank, and offers reduced fees to groups that elect to use their own DVDs. Under this arrangement, the cinema groups buy their own DVDs from a retail outlet and

²⁶ North Creake received funding from the Norfolk Community Foundation to purchase equipment including a 4 x 3 metre screen and digital projector. Wells-next-the-Sea received grants from local organisations Wells Lions and Wells Carnival and from national schemes the UK Lotteries and O2 Its Your Community to purchase its screening kit (Heron and Phillips interview, 25 March 2011; Saunders interview, 11 April 2011).

simply make a licence payment to Moviola in order to exhibit it. There are two advantages for cinemas: they get to screen from a disc in mint condition, and they save around £10 on postage and handling (Village Screen 2010: 14–15; Seale interview, 24 May 2011).

Village Screen cinemas tend to appeal primarily to a mature audience, predominantly the over-fifties age group. The typical screening frequency is once a month. Some cinemas elect to close over December and January when it is often bitterly cold and halls can be hard to heat effectively. Members of community cinema committees from North Creake, Tittleshall and Wells-next-the-Sea each find their audience is drawn both from within and from areas beyond their immediate village. Wendy Seale from Tittleshall says ‘incomers’ are very important to their enterprise, and as a result they advertise their events over a relatively wide geographic area. All three groups I spoke to also reported attracting people from larger towns, including some that have local commercial cinemas. In these cases, they find patrons are coming to them seeking a more socially intimate setting, as the following comment by a patron at the Wells cinema indicates:

Oh what joy when last year I discovered Screen-next-the-Sea – the people in Wells not only have a theatre they now have a wonderful community cinema that I have frequented on many occasions. I just adore the intimacy of Screen-next-the-Sea, the introduction just before the film, the trailers, everything about it makes it a very professional and slick operation. It’s a small cinema with a big heart, and it can only get better – it’s a delightful, intimate, friendly, enchanting cinema. (M. Dumont quoted in Saunders 2010)

Several respondents to the written survey I circulated in the town of Fakenham indicated they went regularly to village halls to watch films. This is despite the fact Fakenham has its own commercial cinema, which is housed in an attractive heritage building. The most popular village hall destinations from Fakenham were North Creake (7.3 miles away) and Wells-next-the-Sea (10 miles away).

While the Village Screen cinemas do well in catering to the older rural audience, to date they have not had success in attracting younger patrons. This has included a failure to entice families, which are important for numerous community cinemas in Australia. Wendy Seale from the Tittleshall Community Cinema believes this is connected partly to geography. The

relatively short distances between towns make it feasible for families and young adults to travel to commercial cinemas to see films when they are first released. For these age groups, seeing a film in a local setting is often not as important as seeing it when it is first hits the market (Seale interview, 24 May 2011).

Conclusion

As the Blyth Cinema and the Village Screen initiatives demonstrate, Community Cinemas represent a vital and vibrant area of exhibition activity, particularly in the UK but also in Australia. They are sites of consumption where commercial imperatives are set aside in favour of ideals centred on cultural and social enrichment and community advancement. Cooperative management structures serve to underpin this altruistic focus. As the discussion has emphasised, both people and places are crucial to shaping the feasibility and characteristics of Community Cinema enterprises. The case studies in particular highlight the capacity for innovation and collective action that exists within rural communities, but also reveal the unpredictable role played by fate and good fortune.

This survey of Community Cinema activity represents a first step towards addressing a major gap in exhibition studies. It highlights the scale and significance of contemporary grassroots cinema, which has hitherto gone largely unrecognised and unexplored. In doing so, it has raised issues of pertinence to each of the research questions posed at the outset of this thesis. The chapter extends the ‘how, when and where’ of exhibition by examining the different ways in which screenings occur outside conventional commercial settings. In relation to question of the influence of global trends, the rapid and widespread adoption of DVD projection is instructive. On the one hand, it reveals the liberatory capacity of digital technologies. However, on the other, delays in getting film prints or discs highlight the constraints that exist when operating outside the commercial realm. The issue of accessibility affects not only when cinemas can screen films, but also the demographic composition of their audiences. It is teenagers and young adults who tend to be most disaffected by this problem.

The circumstances of their alienation also address the third question of who and by what means people are excluded from Community Cinema's social collectivity. This chapter highlights some of the more obvious examples of exclusion that can arise from personal conflict and perceived distinctions between high and low culture. But it also demonstrates that industrial frameworks also play a part on determining what kind of social belonging is created at a Community Cinema.

Understanding why particular audiences seek out cinema experiences in community settings is highly complex. Interviews with volunteers suggest that the goal of social enrichment, underpinned by a strong sense of attachment to place, plays a significant role in encouraging donations of time and money to these enterprises. As Chapter 6 will show, patrons at community-run film groups regularly respond in a way that mirrors and validates these aims. This material suggests that for at least some sections of the community, the rhetoric and reality do sometimes intersect.

However, before moving on to looking at cinema-goers in more detail, the next chapter addresses the final and most marginal tier of the cinema model: Improvised Cinemas. These enterprises exist on the economic and geographic frontier of cinema activity. While they are ostensibly commercial in orientation, they often struggle to maintain profitability. They also draw heavily on the kind of innovation and adaptability that helps sustain other sub-commercial Subsidised and Community Cinema ventures.

Chapter 5

Improvised Cinemas

Introduction: Cinema on the Edge

As the preceding discussion has demonstrated, the public exhibition of films in rural Australia and the UK takes place in a wide variety of settings. These range from large, multi-screen cinemas in bigger towns through to less regular screenings facilitated by community groups and small-scale entrepreneurs, which take place in more isolated locations. Mainstream commercial theatres typically offer a variety of films across multiple sessions on a daily basis, and operate on a strictly profit-driven basis. However, in more remote areas there are simply not enough people to sustain this kind of cinematic enterprise. Here, grass-roots initiatives led by local volunteer committees and/or local councils have emerged to help fill the gaps, and have proved highly successful in some locations. But it is not only cooperative, not-for-profit groups that run film screenings in isolated rural places. Privately run, ad hoc initiatives also operate in very small and remote settlements, both in permanent locations and on a mobile/touring basis.

These marginal cinemas exist on the geographic, financial and technical periphery of film exhibition in Australia and the UK. They are found in locations where the economic prospects for full-scale commercial enterprises are virtually non-existent, and generally where no other cinema-going alternative exists in the local area. As remote, makeshift operations, they are often far removed from the scrutiny of city-based film distributors and the high expectations of audiences used to the conveniences and luxury of the modern multiplex. Moreover, these screening ventures typically are run by a single person, rather than a committee or corporation, and thus have a relatively high degree of independence. This is cinema at its most fragile and autonomous. It constitutes a distinctive form of exhibition, which I have termed 'Improvised Cinema'. These types of film screening enterprises constitute the final category of the five-tiered cinema model advanced in this study, and provide the focus for this chapter.

This chapter begins by examining the history of makeshift and ad hoc film exhibition in Australia and the UK as a means of establishing some context for contemporary activity. This brief survey highlights the fact that there has always been an improvised dimension to commercially orientated exhibition, although its significance has shifted over time. The second section explores the relevance of marginal cinemas to contemporary film scholarship. It considers the implications of current gaps in critical knowledge and addresses the importance of taking opportunities to study modern incarnations of cinema in real time. We then turn to examine the idiosyncratic nature of contemporary Improvised Cinemas. After establishing the defining characteristics of this final tier of the cinema model, the discussion moves on to consider the uncommon situation of the rural cinemas that do not fit wholly within any of the categories. Taking on elements of both publicly funded and ad hoc, makeshift exhibition, these are termed ‘Subsidised-Improvised Cinemas’. In focus in the last section are two dedicated Improvised Cinemas operations: The Playhouse Hotel Cinema at Barraba, New South Wales (Australia), and Screen in the Barn at Thrandeston, Suffolk (UK). These micro-studies highlight the elements of unpredictability, economic marginality, adaptation and innovation that define modern improvised exhibition across non-metropolitan Australia and the UK.

History of Improvised Cinema

The history of Improvised Cinema in Australia begins in the 1890s, with the first grainy screenings of motion pictures to the public. During this very early period, no industry existed. There was no infrastructure to support what was then an entirely new form of entertainment. The supply of films was extremely limited and their brief running times meant they were usually shown as part of larger programs of entertainment that would typically also incorporate dance, music or comedy. Movie viewing was at its outset a ‘random, occasional activity’ that occurred in a variety of makeshift settings (Collins 1995: 28).

In the absence of specialised venues for cinema, the first film entrepreneurs used a variety of modified locations and screening arrangements. In the UK, live theatres and music halls were popular sites for early screenings. Tents erected in fairgrounds were another widely utilised option, particularly outside cities. Hanson (2007a: 14) notes that the quality of fairground

shows varied enormously, ranging from ‘little more than tents with hand-cranked projectors’ through to more elaborate constructions. He provides a detailed description of the sophisticated ‘tent’ that was built in the Norfolk town of King’s Lynn in 1897:

It was a canvas-covered arena sixty feet by forty feet with a boarded floor and an elaborately carved front. It could seat forty customers on folding seats and could also cater for prestige clientele with twelve plush front-row seats with arms. The relatively bare interior had a small stage. The paybox and front were gilded and decorated with life-size carved statues and the whole frontage was lit at night by giant electric lamps. Added to this attraction was a large steam organ that boomed out its tune at the start of each performance. (Dennis Sharpe, quoted in Hanson 2007a: 14)

In Australia, films were shown in similar settings, which also incorporated circuses and vaudeville houses. Diane Collins’ early history of exhibition details a range of temporary venues that were used around the country. These included McIntyres Pictures, which operated from a tent in North Sydney, and a cinema in Newcastle, which operated on the site of the former municipal baths where patrons watched films seated in the pit of the former pool (1995: 30–32). Among the first permanent sites for cinema in Australia and the UK were empty shop-fronts, which could be converted relatively cheaply for their new purpose. Unlike the grand picture palaces that would emerge a decade or so later, shop-front cinemas were typically austere, with very basic seating and few decorative features. Collins describes them as ‘rough and ready’. Similarly, Hanson (2007a: 15) notes that the shop-front theatres were ‘often crude and rather inhospitable places, not least because many of the proprietors of these establishments were out to make as much money as possible with the minimum of investment’.

If film exhibition in the cities was marginal, the rural travelling showmen of the early twentieth century embodied cinema in its most extreme form. They operated with very basic projection equipment and a very limited selection of highly unstable nitrate films that they had to transport around the country. These entrepreneurs had to contend with the poor quality of rural roads, and were regularly buffeted by harsh weather conditions, including storms, floods and intense heat (Bowles 2007a; Walker 2007). As Collins (1995: 38) observes, this was ‘cinema at its most personal, primitive, chaotic and chance-ridden’. The emergence of

permanent, purpose-built cinemas from the 1910s onwards encouraged the development of a professional, geographically stable industry, particularly in more densely populated rural areas. However, mobile exhibitors did not disappear entirely. Annual directories published by the trade journal *The Film Weekly* show they continued to operate through the 1930s right up to the early 1970s, when the directory ceases.²⁷ These listings, together with instances of contemporary mobile operations located during this study, clearly demonstrate the continuity of the itinerant dimension of cinema (Bowles 2007a: 87).

The activities of early travelling film exhibitors have been profiled in a number of historical studies. In Australia, these include Kate Bowles' research on cinema-going in Cobargo (2007a) where, after the failure of a local permanent enterprise in the late 1920s, roving movie entrepreneurs brought films intermittently to the town until the 1960s. Similarly, Dylan Walker illustrates how travelling showmen were responsible for sustaining access to film screenings for residents in remote parts of South Australia in the 1930s. Focusing on the settlement of Snowtown and its film entrepreneur Bill Benbow, Walker details how the temporary arrangement benefited both parties. He notes that for the community, the hire of the local hall to Benbow yielded valuable income with a minimum of effort. For Benbow, the deal freed him from the cost of having to maintain a permanent venue. Further, as Walker points out, the inevitable delays in getting access to prints gave Benbow the opportunity to see how a film performed in the city before booking it for his travelling show (Walker 2007: 371). The studies by Bowles and Walker also highlight the ad hoc and improvised nature of these travelling enterprises. Parallel themes emerge in Greg Waller's paper on American itinerant exhibitor Robert Southard, who operated in Kentucky and Arkansas in the 1930s (Bowles 2007a: 88–90; Walker 2007: 354–8; Waller 2003–04: 12–13).

As the film industry continued to develop over the first half of the twentieth century, improvisation became less and less of a feature of mainstream exhibition practice. Investments in real estate and equipment, the professionalisation of the experience and increasing competition underpinned cinema's rapid shift from the periphery to the centre of popular entertainment. However, even while attendances boomed, many isolated and sparsely

²⁷ *The Film Weekly Motion Picture Directory* was published annually between 1936 and 1971. Issues viewed by the author cover no. 3 (1938/39) to no. 33 (1969/70), the range of issues held by the State Library of New South Wales.

populated areas in both Australia and the UK remained outside the parameters of commercial viability. As outlined above, over the decades travelling exhibitors continued to fill these gaps. However, they tended to remain rooted in their primitive beginnings, far removed from the increasing glamour and sophistication of metropolitan cinema-going (Bowles 2007a; Walker 2007; Waller 2003–04).

Modern-day operators like Rural Cinema (2011) and Adrian Lawson's AA Multimedia Presentations (Edwards 2004), both located in Australia, illustrate that mobile exhibition continues to have a place – albeit a small one – within the contemporary film landscape. However, unlike earlier travelling exhibitors, present-day entrepreneurs do not tend to follow regular circuits (see Waller 2003–04; Walker 2007). Instead, they journey out to isolated locations only when booked for specific events. In these cases, it is not uncommon for the community to take primary responsibility for promoting the screening/s and even selling tickets – another shift from the practices outlined in Greg Waller's profile of Robert Southard. Upon arriving in a new location, marketing became a major part of Southard's work, and required him to stay attuned to local events and be alert and responsive to potential competition.

Alongside mobile cinemas, makeshift operations in permanent locations continued to play a role in bringing film to audiences in economically challenging circumstances. Filmmaker Richard Lowenstein provides an account of such an encounter in his essay 'Elvis and the Aborigines' (1995). He recounts his childhood experience of watching *Clambake* (Nadel 1967) with a predominantly Indigenous audience in an unnamed remote Australian town in the late 1960s (1995). His description of the cinema is both vivid and exciting:

[The cinema] structure was a large rectangle of dilapidated corrugated iron ... Where there is usually a roof, there was nothing ... An open door banged loosely next to a cracked box-office window. Off to one side, a faded poster for an Elvis Presley movie peeled off the wall ... Inside the corrugated iron and past the box-office, a pre-war ice chest sat empty of all goodies. Ratty deck chairs were piled up against the painted palms that lined the interior. A square hole cut in the wall above the box-office was the only indication that there was a bio-box. The place looked like it hadn't been used for years.

After nightfall ... the theatre was unrecognisable ... A string of bulbs lit up the top of the four walls, a light illuminated the poster, the owner was in the box-office window selling tickets. Trucks full of exuberant Kooris [Aborigines] from the outlying areas were pulling up out front. It was a wonderland transformed. (Lowenstein 1995: 247)

In more recent times, enterprises like The Playhouse Hotel Cinema at Barraba, New South Wales and the Windmill Cinema at Morawa, Western Australia continue these traditions. While basic in terms of their functionality, these cinemas are capable of drawing exhibitors and audiences together in a rich and unique social and cultural exchange, as Lowenstein (quoted above) so colourfully explains.

Critical Contexts: The Relevance and [In]Visibility of Marginal Cinemas

Over the past decade or so, film scholars have become increasingly interested in understanding how different exhibition contexts help to shape the economic, social and cultural relevance of cinema-going. These concerns are evident in major studies such as Jancovich et al.'s (2003) historical study of cinema in Nottingham, the 'Going to the Show' online project led by Robert Allen (University of North Carolina 2008) and across numerous essays in the recent Maltby et al. (2011) edited collection *Explorations in New Cinema History*. Within this broad conceptual framework, a number of scholars have examined the distinctive ways in which films have been exhibited to and received by non-metropolitan audiences (e.g. Allen 2006; Bowles 2011, 2007; Corbett 2008; Fuller-Seeley 1996). By looking in detail at how commercial and community cinemas have operated in rural areas, this research has made a valuable contribution to expanding critical understandings of film industry practices and audiences. However, important gaps still remain. The marginal situation of ad hoc, entrepreneurial cinema is one such area of activity that has received little attention as a distinctive form of exhibition or consumption.

One notable exception to this has been research focused on the growing number of temporary and unconventional screening spaces occupied by film festivals and other cultural events (e.g. Stevens 2011; De Valeck 2008). These studies provide insights into contemporary developments in non-mainstream, profit-orientated exhibition activity. However, unlike

Improvised Cinemas that operate in rural areas, these alternative film spaces have not arisen in response to situations of cinematic absence or extreme geographic isolation. Rather, they exist primarily to supplement commercial offerings by addressing the specialised film-viewing interests of predominantly metropolitan-based audiences, or by adding value to larger cultural events. While these screenings are sometimes irregular, they are not necessarily makeshift or primitive. They cater to an audience seeking to actively opt out of what is generally a well-resourced mainstream. Most rural improvised cinemas, on the other hand, address the needs of small communities where audiences are more concerned with just getting to watch a film *in any form*. This gives rise to some important operational differences, and further underpins the delineation of rural Improvised Cinemas as a distinctive form of exhibition.

Several factors are relevant to understanding how the neglect of Improvised Cinema, and of the rural more generally, has come about. As the Introduction outlined, geographic inaccessibility and budgetary restrictions have played a part. So too have perceptions about the insignificance of non-metropolitan media practice to progressively focused contemporary studies. Most rural locations could not be further from what Bowles terms the ‘locus of national typicality’ (2011: 311). They are small-scale, economically insignificant and often slow to engage with new trends and technological developments. These factors play an important role in limiting the appeal and immediacy of the rural as a subject for critical investigation.

An additional problem affecting Improvised Cinemas in particular is their inherent lack of visibility. These venues rarely appear on theatre listings compiled by the Motion Picture Distributors Association of Australia, the principal collator of national film industry data. Nor are they listed in the industry contacts bible the *Encore Directory*. The British Federation of Film Society database is more detailed, but still far from comprehensive. As individually run and ostensibly for-profit enterprises, Improvised Cinemas are generally not eligible for government support. As a result, they cannot be found by searching lists of arts and cultural funding grants, where information about community cinemas can regularly be found. Many do not generate the cash flow required to support an active internet presence. Even when a website exists, it can be difficult to find with generalised keyword searches. The task of finding active ad hoc cinemas can, therefore, represent an ad hoc process in itself.

During the course of the three-year study I recently completed on rural cinema in Australia, I was able to find only a handful of Improvised Cinemas. These included examples of both fixed-location (The Playhouse Hotel Cinema, Barraba; the Plaza Theatre, Coonamble; the Windmill Cinema, Morawa; Screen in the Barn, Thrandeston) and mobile operations (Rural Cinema, Western Australia; Adrian Lawson/AA Multimedia Presentations, Victoria; Monmouthshire Mobile Movies, Monmouth). My discovery of these ventures came primarily through word of mouth (conversations with other exhibitors, rural cultural development officers and rural cinema historian Ross Thorne) and some lucky internet searches. Due to the problems just outlined, it is very difficult to estimate the number of Improvised Cinemas currently operating across rural Australia and the UK. It is unlikely that my unsystematic methods could have uncovered all of the venues of this type in existence. However, at the same time it is reasonable to assume that the total is not vast, and that collectively Improvised Cinemas account for a negligible proportion of their respective national box office totals. Accepting these facts raises two important questions: Why should film researchers be concerned with such a peripheral area of cinematic activity? And how does research into non-mainstream cinema activity contribute to critical studies more broadly?

At an empirical level, investigations into marginal cinema activity help to increase our understanding of the breadth and diversity of film-exhibition practice. As Bowles and Fuller-Seeley argue, such is the paucity of existing research on rural cinema that any well-researched material that contributes to expanding its critiques is significant (Bowles 2011: 311; Fuller-Seeley and Potamianos 2008: 4). However, beyond helping to ‘fill in the blanks’, studies that draw attention to marginal situations also have relevance for broader debates around the issue of who and what is included, and omitted, from the critical research agenda. In line with shifting social, cultural and political conventions, scholarly narratives have become enriched by more pluralistic and inclusive approaches. Within cinema studies, this has seen greater prominence given to previously disregarded groups such as women (Stacey 1994; Kuhn 2002) and ethnic/racial groups such as African-Americans (Allen 2006; Jones 2003) and Greek migrants in Australia (Verhoeven 2007). These more diverse accounts of movie-going have greatly extended the historical record and encouraged scholars to reconsider earlier assumptions about the homogeneity of film exhibition and attendance practices.

At a conceptual level, this research is rooted in the recent interdisciplinary expansion of film studies, a definitive turn labelled by Richard Maltby (2011) as ‘new cinema history’. But it also represents an attempt to take this approach further. The common thread running through much of the new cinema scholarship is a focus on the past as a site of rediscovery and redress. Unavoidably, this means reconstructing accounts of cinematic interactions from sources that are often random and incomplete. For example, had travelling film exhibitor Robert Southard not kept detailed records for his business, and had these not subsequently been archived, Greg Waller (2003–04) acknowledges that this particular part of exhibition history may have been lost entirely. Despite its limitations, this historical work is extremely important. However, it is crucial that while we are looking back, we do not lose sight of what lies in front of us – the chance to investigate cinema in real time. The present offers rich opportunities to observe events, places and people at first hand, interview key protagonists and participate as audiences, as the case study of The Playhouse in this chapter demonstrates. Here we have tremendous scope that is not limited by the inevitable partiality and unpredictability of what survives as the preserved past.

Research on Improvised Cinema also has the potential to add value beyond the realm of critical studies by contributing to important discussions about rural cultural policy planning and program delivery. Non-metropolitan disadvantage and inequality are persistent socio-political issues in both Australia and the UK. Increasingly, cultural participation is seen as an integral component of strategies and programs designed to improve quality of life in rural areas. In recent decades a number of government initiatives directed towards these aims have been launched. These include film development programs such as the Regional Cinema Program administered by the New South Wales Film and Television Office, and improvised screening projects such as the Big Screen film festivals run by the National Film and Sound Archive and the Screen Machine mobile cinema managed by Regional Screen Scotland. Studies that draw attention to cinematic activity taking place both within and outside these programs highlight how marginal film enterprises function, and where their vulnerabilities, limitations and potential lie. This information can be useful for determining where, and in what form, intervention and assistance might be most usefully directed.

About Improvised Cinemas

Improvised Cinemas are fascinating because they provide us with a window into commercially orientated cinema at its most isolated, unconventional and independent. These enterprises exist in response to situations of cinematic deprivation. They cater to small and/or infrequent audiences, and hence tend to generate relatively low turnovers. The highly varied, and often eclectic, characteristics of Improvised Cinemas are strongly influenced by local conditions, rather than wider national or global industry trends. In these contexts, current pressing issues such as the shift from 35mm to DCI digital projection, the threat of the seemingly ever-diminishing theatrical/DVD window, the economic impact of piracy and the obsession with opening weekend box office returns are very distant concerns. Instead, factors such as local histories, geography, economic conditions, demographic profiles, access to infrastructure, and levels of community cohesion and engagement are crucial in shaping the prospects and concerns of improvised film operations. Other micro-considerations, such as the weather, avoiding clashes with 21st birthdays or wedding parties, and being a good local citizen and ‘fitting in’ socially with the community, are also relevant to understanding why these enterprises work (or do not work). These factors determine where screenings take place, whether entrepreneurs elect to follow a fixed location or mobile operational model, what kinds of films are shown, and who comes along to see them.

The relationship between Improvised Cinemas and the mainstream commercial industry is both tightly interwoven and disconnected. There can be no periphery without a centre. The mainstream commercial industry produces the content upon which all exhibitors rely, including improvised operators. It also controls and regulates how this material is circulated. The informal and irregular nature of Improvised Cinemas, on the one hand, can be theorised as a potential threat to the hegemonic centre of the industry – with the latter being concerned with the strict enforcement of film hire terms, hierarchical circulation of film prints and protection of intellectual property, which inevitably begin to break down on the margins. However, the economic and geographic insignificance of most Improvised Cinemas means their sometimes unconventional approaches to exhibition are rarely perceived as a serious concern for industry conglomerates. Rather, in this instance the centre and periphery coexist along what may be considered parallel trajectories.

Ownership

The key point of differentiation between Improvised and other forms of marginal cinemas is their private ownership. The personal backgrounds of individual entrepreneurs are also central to determining the possibilities of rural ad hoc exhibition. Arbitrary factors such as whether or not a person happens to live in a certain place at a particular time, and has the financial resources to start a cinema, are crucially important. This randomness also adds to the unpredictability and volatility of Improvised Cinema operations. For example, Adrian Lawson, who ran a mobile cinema in rural Victoria in the mid-2000s, began exhibiting films after former careers as a teacher and truck driver. While recovering from a heart attack, Lawson devised an idea for a mobile cinema. After completing some business training with the national employment and welfare agency Centrelink, Lawson purchased a \$45,000 projection kit with his savings. His modest successes were detailed in an article that appeared in *The Age* newspaper in 2004 (Edwards 2004). However, with Lawson's business name now deregistered and no online presence, it appears he is no longer running movie shows.²⁸

Given the level of commitment required, and the unlikely prospect of making substantial profits, the capacity for operator burnout is high. In the absence of financial reward, what motivates and sustains marginal film entrepreneurs often becomes driven by emotion, rather than economic rationalism. For Adrian Lawson, the investment of his life savings in a mobile projection kit might have been considered a highly risky strategy, and one that sadly may not have paid off. For Andrew Sharpe, the owner of The Playhouse Hotel Cinema, his personal investment incorporates a sense of social responsibility towards the town's younger residents, as he explained during our interview:

The local kids really dependent on this place [the cinema]. There's nowhere else here for them to go, no youth centre, nothing like that. The cinema has become the kind of unofficial youth club of the district ... I do worry about what the local kids would do without the cinema if I wasn't able to keep it going. I suppose that is one of the reasons I do keep on with it, because after two years I'm still not making a profit. (Sharpe interview, 15 August 2009)

²⁸

Lawson's company AA Multimedia Presentations is listed as a deregistered business name on the Australian Securities and Investments Commission website (www.asic.gov.au) as at 7 October 2011.

In the UK, Brian and Sarah Guthrie, who run Screen in the Barn at Thrandeston, Suffolk, came to their enterprise via a similarly indirect and haphazard route. Unhappy with their life in London in the 1970s, the Guthries opted out by moving to rural Suffolk. In the mid-1990s, when a nearby art college was getting rid of its two 16mm projectors, they seized on the opportunity to acquire the equipment. After some minor modifications to their barn, which included the installation of a mezzanine level to house the projectors, Screen in the Barn was born. Despite the very rustic aesthetic of the barn, and the limited and specialised art cinema films that are screened, the venture has prospered. At the time of my visit in April 2011, Screen in the Barn was in its eighteenth year of operation (Guthrie interview, 29 April 2011; Screen in the Barn 2011).

Locations and Cinematic Spaces

Improvised Cinemas typically lack the kind of aesthetic polish and corporatisation found at most commercial theatres, and this is largely a function of their economic marginality. There are no slick computerised ticketing systems or the option of pre-booking online, no large comfortable seats or oversize screens, and the ubiquitous super-sized candy bar options are noticeably absent. Instead, audiences might find stacking chairs of varying vintages and comfort, small screens made of improvised materials such as painted plywood or thick curtain-lining fabric, temperamental heating and air conditioning arrangements, and makeshift or BYO snack arrangements. Depending on the location, films may be screened weekly through to as infrequently as monthly or bi-monthly. For communities relying on mobile operators, the opportunity to see a film might come only a few times a year.

In contrast to the bevy of staff at most multi-screen venues, Improvised Cinemas are often run by a single person (usually the owner), who sells tickets and snack food items, and screens the film. Low turnovers mean there is rarely enough money to hire additional helpers. While interaction with a single, regular person can add to the personal warmth of the experience, it also has some impact on the consistency of service that can be provided. For example, if it is a busy night and there is a long queue for tickets, this may delay the owner's shift into the projection box and push the commencement of the film out past its scheduled start time. At other times, where attention is required in the projection box, the front of house may be left temporarily unattended, inconveniencing patrons seeking late admission or to purchase last-

minute candy bar items. However, the operators to whom I spoke contend audiences adjust their expectations accordingly and generally do not display irritation at such delays.

Improvised Cinemas operate in both fixed locations and on a mobile basis. Most enterprises confine themselves to one or other of these options. However, in some cases entrepreneurs will do both. Brian and Sarah Guthrie, for example, operate both Screen in the Barn from their home and a mobile service, known as Screen in the Van, which takes films to other villages in the local area (Screen in the Barn 2011). Operators with a permanent base utilise a diverse range of screening spaces. Most tend to be adapted rather than purpose-built film venues, and to make use of pre-existing resources available in the local area. Places like local halls and club function rooms are popular because they generally come equipped with seating and sometimes even a screen. The ability to hire such venues on a one-night-only basis also helps to keep overheads low. In other cases, improvised operators have made use of their own assets, such as the Guthries and the barn at their home in Thrandeston, and Andrew Sharpe and his converted hotel in Barraba.

Mobile and temporary screenings are becoming increasingly popular across Australia and the UK, where they have been utilised to great effect by film festivals and other cultural events. For example, the Festival of Sail in the regional town of Coffs Harbour, which celebrates the conclusion of a major yacht race in January each year, offers free outdoor film screenings as part of its program. Other contemporary movie events held in quirky places, such as woolsheds and on car ferries, further add to the growing diversity of exhibition occurring at the fringes of the modern screen landscape (Stevens 2011; BBC News 2008). However, such events tend to target audiences that are well serviced by commercial cinemas.

Film Programming

Improvised Cinemas typically run a program of older films. Their relatively low box office returns mean they are rarely, if ever, considered by distributors for new releases. Most operators to whom I spoke reported that concentrating their efforts on titles that are at least six months out from their initial launch is far more productive than haggling unsuccessfully for more recent material. The types of films selected are influenced by the nature of the improvised enterprise and its audience. At The Playhouse Hotel Cinema at Barraba, where several movies are shown every weekend, selections are tailored to particular groups of

patrons (teenagers, 60+ audience and so on). The imperatives are slightly different for cinemas that run films less frequently, and mobile operators who might visit a town only once or twice a year. These operators generally look to engage the widest possible audience for their events, and therefore tend to steer away from anything too specialised or controversial. Monmouth Mobile Movies in the UK screens a fairly mainstream program that is tailored its predominantly older audience, incorporating films like *Hanna*, *Bridesmaids* and *Mao's Last Dancer* (Monmouthshire Mobile Movies 2011). Communities engaging the services of West Australian mobile operator Rural Cinema can select their own films within the limits outlined above. The program from late 2011 reflects a strong emphasis on family-friendly titles, and the interests of their clients, which include schools and road safety groups. Titles featured included *Gnomeo and Juliet* (Asbury 2011), *Cars 2* (Lasseter and Lewis 2011) and *Mr Popper's Penguins* (Waters 2011) (Rural Cinema 2011).

DVD projection is used widely by Improvised Cinemas. Its low cost and user-friendly configuration is attractive to ad hoc operators, much as it is for the Subsidised and Community venues discussed in preceding chapters. Some operators, including Rural Cinema and Screen in the Barn, continue to use 35mm and 16mm, although use of the latter tends to be limited. It is, for example, over a decade since new releases have been made available on 16mm in the UK, and as a result this format really remains viable only for screening film classics.

Profitability

Admissions at Improvised Cinemas tend to be very low by commercial standards. A single session might attract as few as three or four people, while a crowd of 30 or more might be considered a major success. While a one-off event might attract a crowd of several hundred, it is almost impossible to sustain week after week in a very small town. This has a direct impact on profitability, and entrepreneurs regularly report having to absorb losses from their screening activities. In some cases, such as at The Playhouse Hotel Cinema (examined in more detail below), operating deficits can be an ongoing issue. In these situations, the enterprises and their operators are sustained only by income from other sources, such as wages from employment elsewhere or from another business.

Another issue that improvised operators have to take seriously is the depressed economic conditions that are often encountered in very small and remote towns. With many residents living on incomes that are well below the national average, local discretionary spending capacities are inevitably reduced. To position themselves as affordable, and therefore accessible, Improvised Cinemas need to keep their ticket prices as low as possible. The level of discounting varies across different locations, but is similar to that found at Community and some Subsidised Cinemas. In Australia, adult patrons can expect to pay around \$8–10 for admission, while in the UK it is usually around £3–4.

Mobile Improvised Cinemas operate under similar imperatives. They have the slight advantage of not having to rely on any one town for their entirety of their income. However, maintaining an active network of destinations often involves considerable time and effort. Operators need to sustain relationships with multiple clients, and new promotions and patrons are required in each location. Further, visiting towns on an infrequent basis can make it more difficult to establish a cinema-going habit among the local population. On the upside, though, this can add to the sense of ‘event’ that surrounds a screening, and this can help drive admissions.

Subsidised-Improvised Cinemas

The cinematic model that underpins this thesis provide an effective means of organising and analysing the different types of film screening situations that exist in rural Australia and the UK. While, as preceding chapters have established, it is able to account for the vast majority of exhibition activity, there are some isolated situations that do not fit wholly within a single grouping. Specifically, there are a small number of film enterprises that exist between the Subsidised and Improvised categories. They possess some key defining characteristics of both, but not to a degree sufficient to clearly render them as one or the other. These are cinemas that incorporate makeshift and idiosyncratic characteristics, but at the same time are reliant on financial support provided by government and/or charitable organisations.

In Australia, there are a number of rural touring film festivals funded by public bodies, which fall into this indistinct area of exhibition activity. These festivals visit a range of non-

metropolitan locations around the nation, generally working on an annual cycle that sees them run events in selected towns only once in any given year. They make use of a variety of screening spaces, from dedicated cinemas through to local halls, schools and outdoors in sports grounds and parks. In some cases, they bring films to places with no cinema facilities at all. In others, they offer audiences access to specialised content that might not otherwise be screened by their local commercial cinema. Like other improvised operations we have examined in this chapter, these festivals work within and adapt to the economic and geographic limitations of their rural settings. However, they have access to resources and support that are beyond reach of most standard Improvised Cinemas. They have advantages that come from government backing and dedicated team of staff. This also greatly enhances their media profile and capacity to attract audiences.

Established in 2001, Big Screen is one of the largest rural touring programs, visiting over 20 towns around Australia each year. It is funded and managed by the National Film and Sound Archive, and is dedicated solely to screening new and archival Australian films. Big Screen festivals typically run over three days (Friday to Sunday), showing six to eight films; these always include at least one family-friendly movie and often a movie showcasing an Aboriginal filmmaker or featuring an Indigenous cast. Opening night is a major event, with one of the actors or key crew from the selected film in attendance to introduce the film and participate in a Q&A. Guests have included some very high-profile names, including author John Marsden who attended the screening of *Tomorrow When the War Began* (Beattie 2010) at Nambucca Heads in 2010. More recent guests from 2011 include David Wenham, who attended the screening of *Oranges and Sunshine* (Loach 2010) in Broome, and Sigrid Thornton, who appeared at Nanango to discuss her experience of making the Australian classic *The Man from Snowy River* (Miller 1982). Drinks and food are served before opening night screenings, which further adds to the sense of occasion (Cruickshank interview, 2 October 2008; NFSA 2011).

These launch events are a key part of the excitement and experience of the Big Screen festivals. They offer audiences in remote locations both access to the films and contact with people involved in their production. Feedback received by Big Screen staff indicates these events are highly valued by audiences, and enhance the attraction of the festival:



Image 21: Big Screen promotional poster, 2011

Bravo on scoring a visit from John Marsden to Nambucca!! Fantastic night that will be remembered by anyone lucky enough to be there. Many thanks to all concerned.

Thank you to the NFSA for bringing the Big Screen Film Festival to Yamba. Our town is small and we miss out on the majority of cultural events others living in cities take for granted. We deeply value the opportunity to see quality Australian cinema on the big screen with the added bonus of special guests from the film industry ... Please come back again next year as the festival has become one of Yamba's cultural highlights.

(These quotes were collected by the NFSA in an anonymous survey distributed to attendees at the Nambucca Heads and Yamba Big Screen events.)

Having attended several Big Screen festivals during the course of this study, I was able to observe at first hand the thrill and sense of enjoyment created by the presence of actors and filmmakers, and the enthusiasm this helped to generate around the festival as a whole.

Big Screen staff always organise events in conjunction with local partners. These vary between locations, but typically include a mix of commercial cinemas, local councils, community and arts organisations, and Indigenous groups. Screenings are held in conventional cinemas where these are available. However, in towns without such facilities local halls and outdoor settings (parks and sports grounds) are used as alternatives. Further, where projection equipment is not available in the local area, staff will arrange for its hire and transport to the location (Cruickshank interview, North interview 2 October 2008, NFSA 2011).

Alongside the Big Screen program, the NFSA also runs the School Screen and Black Screen initiatives. These provide free screenings for school-age children and their teachers, and of indigenous films respectively. While the locational focus of these schemes is not exclusively rural, they nonetheless visit a wide range of rural towns and sometimes coincide with Big Screen events.

Other similar rural touring events operating in Australia include the Sydney Travelling Film Festival (STFF) and Flickerfest. The STFF was established in 1974, and relies on funding from several public sources, including national and state screen agencies and the New South Wales and Northern Territory governments. It currently visits thirteen towns across New South Wales, Queensland and the Northern Territory each year, although these sites tend not to be quite as remote as those visited by Big Screen. STFF's curatorial focus is broader than Big Screen, incorporating world cinema rather than only locally produced content. Generally, nine films are screened over three days, beginning with one film on a Friday evening. Also like Big Screen, the TFF also hosts an opening night function, which sometimes includes a guest speaker (Lancaster interview, 31 March 2009; STFF 2011). Similarly, Flickerfest, a short film festival held in January at Sydney's Bondi Beach, tours a selection of movies from its main program to rural areas each year. It currently visits 31 locations using a mix of commercial and makeshift screening venues, and coordinates with local partners. For reasons

of cost and efficiency, Flickerfest favours high-quality DVD or hard-drive as its projection format on tour (Renaud email correspondence, 27 April 2011).

In the UK, the Screen Machine enterprise in rural Scotland provides an example of a different type of Subsidised-Improvised Cinema. The Screen Machine is a self-contained theatre, which is transported around the country on a large customised truck, thus neatly solving the issues faced by Australian festivals in sourcing venues and projection equipment. Once the truck arrives on-site, the trailer expands to form an 80-seat cinema complete with its own air conditioning and 3D screening options. Screen Machine is staffed by two driver/operators who set up the auditorium, sell tickets and handle the technical side of screen the film. They are assisted by locally recruited ushers in each location. The enterprise is managed by the film agency, Regional Screen Scotland, and funded by several public and corporate partners, including Creative Scotland, Highlands & Islands Enterprise, the Royal Bank of Scotland and Highland Fuels (Regional Screen Scotland 2011).

Screen Machine currently visits 22 locations throughout the Highlands and Western Islands regions. These towns are selected on the basis of their level of remoteness. Particular consideration is given to their proximity to a commercial cinema, which is usually required to be at least an hour's drive from the town. While the scheme targets marginal places, its managers are also very concerned with covering operating costs. The website explains that Screen Machine needs to sell around 100 tickets over two nights for a particular location to be considered viable. Communities looking to attract the Screen Machine to their town are asked to submit details of how this threshold might be reached. In very marginal areas, local partners are sometimes sought to provide guarantees against potential losses (Regional Screen Scotland 2011).

As this fairly brief survey has highlighted, touring festivals targeting rural audiences lie between Subsidies and Improvised categorisations. On the one hand, they are either wholly or partly dependent on funding provided by public sources. The process of collaboration with external stakeholders gives rise to certain commercial and cultural imperatives not relevant to most independent improvised operators. For example, Screen Machine requires communities to demonstrate that they can cover the cost of screening events, while under the terms of its funding Big Screen is required to maintain a strict curatorial focus on Australian films.

However, at the same time these programs target audiences and locations that are significantly more marginal than those typically engaged by the Subsidised Cinemas examined in Chapter 3. With the exception of some of the STFF sites, almost all visit geographically remote and economically disadvantaged areas. The standard of exhibition facilities can vary greatly in these locations, and managers are experienced in adapting to the needs of particular places, arranging to bring in equipment and setting up temporary screening venues. While these enterprises do not effectively sit within the parameters of any one category of the cinema model, the typology is nonetheless highly useful. The characteristics identified across the different tiers provide a framework through which the operations of these Subsidised-Improved Cinemas can be analysed and accurately positioned within the landscape of contemporary rural exhibition.

In Focus

Returning to the situation of dedicated Improved Cinemas, this final section looks in detail at two enterprises – The Playhouse Hotel Cinema (hereafter The Playhouse) in Barraba (Australia) and Screen in the Barn in Thrandeston (UK). These cinemas exemplify the defining characteristics of this exhibition category. Specifically, they highlight how these ventures adapt to possibilities and limitations of their particular local situations, the kinds of economic dilemmas they face and the importance of a central personality/s with energy, passion and commitment to the project.

My visits to these theatres also illustrate the role that good fortune, rather than empirical method, can play in finding Improved Cinemas. As outlined in the Critical Contexts section above, one reason for the lack of attention received by this kind of cinema is its inherent lack of visibility, as least so far as external university-based researchers are concerned. For example, I first became aware of The Playhouse in late 2008 during a conversation with a regional film officer working at the National Film and Sound Archive. The cinema and Sharpe are also featured in a documentary produced by Ross Thorne titled *Enthusiasts' Passion to Own a Picture Theatre*, shot in 2007 but not released until 2010. Following my conversation in 2008, I made contact with Sharpe and arranged to visit The Playhouse in August 2009 as part of larger tour of cinemas in North-West New South Wales. A similar process occurred with Screen in the Barn: I discovered it after a staff member at the

University of East Anglia mentioned they had heard of someone that screened old movies in their barn near the town of Diss. After some internet searching, I was able to track down Brian and Sarah Guthrie's eclectic but thoroughly delightful enterprise.

The Playhouse Hotel Cinema, Barraba, New South Wales

The Playhouse is located in Barraba, a very small town in North-West New South Wales (population 1161: ABS 2006). The cinema is situated within a boutique hotel development (known as The Playhouse Hotel), which offers accommodation and a restaurant that operates for pre-booked events. Its owner, Andrew Sharpe, purchased the run-down pub, minus its liquor licence, in 2005 and began renovations shortly thereafter. This work has included converting the pub's traditional dormitory-style accommodation into a selection of stylish en suite rooms, as well as the installation of a commercial kitchen and modern dining area. It has also involved the conversion of the former pool table room at the rear of the building into an 80-seat theatre for films and live events. It is used predominantly for the former, with movies screened every weekend over a program that runs from Friday evening to Sunday afternoon.

I spent a weekend as a paying guest at the hotel, and attended a Saturday evening screening of *The Reader* (Daldry 2008). I also assisted with some backstage tasks related to setting up the auditorium for the evening's film screening following its deconstruction for a piano recital held the night before. Over the weekend, I conducted two lengthy interviews with Sharpe, with a number of cinema patrons – a group of three teenage boys (two aged 16 and one 17) and two older local residents (male and female, not a couple) aged in their sixties. I also had more informal conversations with the six women who, along with myself, constituted the audience for *The Reader* on the Saturday evening.

The town of Barraba is relatively isolated and economically depressed. The nearest settlement of any significance size is Tamworth (population 42,500: ABS 2006), which is 90 kilometres away – a two hour-plus round trip by car. Retail facilities in the town are limited and include a small general store, post office, regional credit union and a petrol station on the outskirts of town that also hires a small range of DVDs. There are numerous empty and neglected buildings in the main street, which attest to the town's current economic problems as well as its former glories. The ornate facades and solid brick constructions are a reminder of the fact

that when agriculture and mining were booming in the local area, the town was much bigger and significantly more prosperous than it is today. Quality of life in Barraba has been trending downwards since the early 1980s, when the local asbestos mine closed. While arguably better for health and the environment, this event resulted in the loss of hundreds of local jobs. More recently, the prolonged and severe drought that has affected large areas of New South Wales has further eroded spending and employment opportunities in the town. Many of the jobs in Barraba exist within public support industries, such as schools, aged care and local government administration, and are externally funded. The bleak economic situation is reflected in the modest ticket prices Sharpe sets at The Playhouse, which at the time of my visit were just \$10 for adults and \$6 for children of any age still at school.

The cinema's owner, Andrew Sharpe, is a relatively new resident in Barraba, where he settled just before acquiring the hotel in 2005. Born and raised in Australia (Sydney), he had spent several decades in the United Kingdom forging a career as a stage and television actor. The death of his partner's parents brought them both back to live in the family homestead just outside Barraba. In our interview, Sharpe recalls that it did not take long for his background in theatre to become known around the town. Within a short time, was co-opted on to a local committee attempting to revive the disused local commercial cinema, which had been closed since the mid-1960s. The community-based initiative was ultimately unsuccessful, but to Sharpe it demonstrated the interest of local residents in cinema, as he explained in Thorne's documentary:

The project to renovate Clifton Hall [the former cinema] went nowhere in the end because the council wouldn't support it. But what it did demonstrate was that there was a desire for a place where people could gather, and in particular for somewhere they could see movies. (Thorne 2010).

Not long after the collapse of the Clifton Hall project, one of the licensed hotels in Barraba came up for sale. By virtue of an inheritance received not long before, Sharpe found himself with the necessary capital to buy it. Part of the attraction of the pub was its large pool room, in which Sharpe instantly saw the potential for a theatre. The project enabled him to continue a lifelong passion and contribute to enhancing the cultural life of the town:

Before the cinema opened, the culture in the town revolved around beer, the pub, the club and sport. The arts and cultural aspects of life were just withering away and it really was discouraging people from wanting to live here. (Sharpe interview, 15 August 2009)

The theatre Sharpe built is modest but relatively well equipped. It is regarded by the patrons to whom I spoke as a highly professional set-up. The 80-seat auditorium features raked seating (dating from the 1950s and bought second-hand at auction) and a separate projection booth that houses the DVD projection system. In a theatrical touch, long lengths of black cloth run from the ceiling to the floor to cover the bare brick walls. Having only a limited budget, Sharpe has spent his money strategically. He opted to purchase a good set of surround-sound speakers at the outset, although it is a high-end domestic rather than commercial system. He also invested in a good-quality DVD projector. The cinema screen, which he aims to update later, was home-made from a long length of white curtain-backing material nailed to a length of timber and suspended by wire from hooks in the ceiling. It is held taut at the bottom by wires that loop over large speakers sitting on either side of the screen.

Sharpe typically performs all the front-of-house duties, including selling tickets and snack items from his small candy bar. He also manages all the technical tasks associated with running the film. Getting access to films to fill the program is an ongoing battle. The Playhouse is considered a commercial enterprise, and therefore has to negotiate directly with distributors in much the same way as a full-time commercial operator. However, because Sharpe's returns are low and his screenings infrequent, he struggles to get adequate service and attention. Due to concerns about the ease of illegally duplicating a DVD, most distributors are reluctant to allow their films to be distributed in this format until right to end of theatrical release period, and sometimes not until after the retail DVD release date. Sharpe reports that this paranoia has led in some cases to him being sent low-quality VHS tapes in place of DVDs to screen. Another consequence of showing films so late in their release cycle is that distributors often have no promotional materials to accompany the movie. Instead, Sharpe generally has to make his own advertising from images available on the internet, and has developed an ingenious way of assembling larger posters by printing them in four parts on standard A4-size paper.



Figure 22: The Playhouse Hotel Cinema, August 2009

The PLAYHOUSE HOTEL CINEMA
123 Queen St. Barraba, NSW
6782 1109
www.playhousehotel.com

AUGUST 2009

NOW SERVING AFTERNOON TEA ON SUNDAYS!

FRIDAYS at 7.30
SATURDAYS at 3.30 and at 7.30
SUNDAYS at 1 and at 3.30

Sat 1st	3.30	Inkheart (G)
	7.30	Watchmen (MA 15+)
Sun 2nd	1.00	Easy Virtue (PG)
	3.30	The Reader (MA 15+)
Fri 7th	7.30	Boy in the Striped Pyjamas (M)
Sat 8th	3.30	Boy in the Striped Pyjamas (M)
	7.30	Watchmen (MA 15+)
Sun 9th	1.00	Boy in the Striped Pyjamas (M)
	3.30	Easy Virtue (PG)
Fri 14th	7.30	Roman Rudnysky PIANO RECITAL
Sat 15th	3.30	Race to Witch Mountain (PG)
	7.30	The Reader (MA 15+)
Sun 16th	3.30	WHEELERS AND DEALERS CONCERT...BOOK ON 6782 1109
Fri 21st	7.30	17 Again (G)
Sat 22nd	3.30	17 Again (G)
	7.30	17 Again (G)
Sun 23rd	1.00	The Reader (MA 15+)
	3.30	I've Loved You So Long (M)
Fri 28th	7.30	Race to Witch Mountain (PG)
Sat 29th	3.30	Dean Spanley (G)
	7.30	17 Again (G)
Sun 30th	1.00	Dean Spanley (G)
	3.30	I've Loved You So Long (M)

TICKET PRICES

FULL PRICE \$10.00
 CONCESSIONS* \$8.00
 JUNIORS** \$6.00

*Concessions apply to pensioners, unwaged or uni students.
 **Juniors are school children of all ages. Infants come free.
 Adults tix @ kids prices (\$6) when accompanying children to Saturday afternoon screenings.

Figure 23: The Playhouse Hotel Cinema, program August 2009

The Playhouse screens a range of films for an audience that comprises three distinct groups: teenagers, families and over-40s (predominantly women). The program in Figure 25, from the time of my visit, is indicative of the selection of films that are typically programmed for each of these demographics – *17 Again* (Steers 2009) and *Race to Witch Mountain* (Fickman 2009) through to *Easy Virtue* (Elliot 2008), *I've Loved You So Long* (Claudel 2008) and *The Reader* (Daldry 2008). Sharpe says that many of his older patrons are local residents who do not like the atmosphere of the local pubs, and contends that many of them would not otherwise be socialising outside their homes if it were not for his cinema. This was echoed in the discussions I had with older patrons at the venue. During our interviews, Sharpe commented on the conspicuous domination of women among his adult audience. He speculated that his open homosexuality may be a deterrent to many local men, particularly those who form part of the regular pub crowd.

However, for many of the local teenagers – males and females – the cinema has become a very important social space. It offers them something to do and a place to go in a town that offers very few social alternatives for residents under the legal drinking age of 18. Friday evenings tend to be the main session for the local teenagers. This has become entrenched in local knowledge and social practice to the extent that older patrons generally avoid these sessions entirely. There is a core group of around fifteen to 20 young adults who attend on Friday nights, and this can sometimes be the biggest crowd of the week. The fact the session is dominated exclusively by teens gives Sharpe some latitude in the way he approaches crowd control at these screenings. He has good relationships with local teenagers, and this is evident in the easy rapport he has with the succession of young adults that pass by the hotel's front window during our interviews. On Friday nights, Sharpe allows the teenagers to sit on cushions at floor level at the front of the auditorium, which no doubt facilitates some canoodling. He also permits some level of self-regulation of their behaviour, which he notes tends to be very distracted – texting, talking and constantly going in and out to purchase items at the candy bar. Sharpe reports that for the most part the teenagers successfully set their own limits around these activities, and he rarely has to intervene. However, he adds that their interactions are disturbing enough that they could not be tolerated at times when the composition of the audience was more mixed.

Sharpe's liberal approach has helped imbue the cinema with a sense of independence and freedom for the teenagers who use it on a Friday evening. This has no doubt contributed to their positive embrace of the venue since its opening. The teenage boys I interviewed, who form part of the core Friday night group, were very upbeat in their assessment of the cinema.²⁹ As one explained: 'The cinema here is good and they get all the up-to-date films.' (Barraba resident, male, 16 years) However, it was also clear that the movies were not the only factor driving attendance, as another commented: 'We just turn up, we don't mind what the film is. There's about 15 of us from school that go every Friday night.' (Barraba resident, male, 16 years) The importance of the social aspects of cinema-going were also emphasised in a discussion around how going to the Barraba cinema compared with more convenient and cheaper home-based technologies. All three boys commented that seeing films on the big screen was preferable to watching them at home. As one explained: 'The cinema is heaps better. There's more people and you can be with your friends.' (Barraba resident, male, 17 years)

While The Playhouse is warmly regarded and well supported by its regular patrons, they are small in number. During our interview Sharpe discussed openly the fact that the cinema had struggled to cover its costs since it began, and that he has subsidised its operations with money generated in other areas of the business (accommodation and the restaurant). Hiring a film costs between \$150 and \$250 per title, and a percentage of ticket sales must be paid back to the distributor once break-even threshold has been reached. Films regularly fail to pay for themselves, even when screened over several weekends. However, from the outset Sharpe says he had no illusions about the cinema's profit potential. As he explained in Thorne's documentary just before the cinema opened in 2007:

My business plan showed me that actually it was highly unlikely that a cinema was going to make any kind of money ... there was greater demand in the town for accommodation and for a restaurant. And so I decided to put my money and my attention towards the restaurant and the hotel side of things ... But with my background in theatre my heart was always focusing on this space[the cinema].
(quoted in Thorne 2010)

²⁹ To avoid creating a sense of undue pressure on the teenage participants, the interview was held away from The Playhouse Hotel Cinema in a local park.

When I spoke to Sharpe a year later, it was clear he remained just as enthusiastic despite the economic fragility of the business. It was apparent in our discussions that he derives considerable personal pleasure from presenting movies and live events in the town. As outlined earlier, he articulates a sense of social responsibility – particularly towards the teenagers who come on Friday evenings, who he acknowledges have very few other places to hang out. Sharpe also firmly believes the theatre has improved everyday life for local residents: ‘The theatre has made a noticeable difference in the town. It’s given people an option outside drinking in the pubs and clubs and helped bring some vitality back to the place.’ (Sharpe 15 August 2009)

Screen in the Barn, Thrandeston, Suffolk

Screen in the Barn operates from the home of Brian and Sarah Guthrie in the tiny village of Thrandeston in rural Suffolk. At the last UK Census Thrandeston had a population of just 130. It is a very picturesque settlement set around a triangular green (see Image 26), which is ringed by several historic thatched roofed houses. The village has no shops, schools or other facilities, but is relatively close (3 miles) to the larger town of Diss. The latter has an extensive range of retail services and a direct rail link to London (a trip that takes about an hour and half). The village residents predominantly comprise retirees, although there are some locals who commute to jobs in nearby Diss and Norwich.

Disenchanted with their life in grimy inner-city London, the Guthries moved to Thrandeston in the 1970s to try their hand at self-sufficiency and to home-school their children. Screen in the Barn began in 1994 when the Guthries acquired two 16mm projectors that were being disposed of by nearby Lowestoft Art College. The venue for the film screenings is their nineteenth century ramshackle mud-brick barn (see Image 27). Some modifications have been made to the building, including the construction of a mezzanine level at the rear to house the projectors, some weatherproofing and the installation of wood and gas heaters. The screen is a sheet of plywood, painted white and fixed permanently to the wall at one end.



Image 26: Thrandeston village green, April 2011



Image 27: Screen in the Barn, Thrandeston, April 2011

In contrast to more commercial atmosphere of The Playhouse, the barn is a highly personalised space. Audiences sit amongst the Guthries' collection of books and other unused household items and personal effects. Numerous old film posters decorate the walls. The chairs are mostly the stacking variety – plastic seats on a metal frame. Refreshments on offer consisted of beer that could be purchased for £1 a bottle and popcorn for 20 pence a punnet. On the evening I attended, one couple brought along a bottle of red wine, which they shared around. Without a dedicated bio box, the whirring of the projectors is distinct at first but becomes unnoticeable as the film goes on. Reel changes are not synchronised precisely, and there is usually a break of a few seconds between the end of one and the start of the next. These elements all contribute to the richness and improvised ambience of the space and the experience.

Screen in the Barn shows movies once a month, with a break over the summer. The barn can accommodate up to 40 people, although this would be quite cosy. The screening that I attended attracted just over 20 patrons, who filled the space nicely. The movie we saw was the French classic *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé ou Le vent souffle où il veut* (English title *A Man Escaped*, Bresson 1956). The Guthries were pleased with the turn-out, as the screening coincided with the day of the Royal Wedding (between Catherine Middleton and Prince William) – an event that, as I observed in my travels around Suffolk that day, truly did stop the nation. Tickets are priced at a modest £4, and sales of at least 20 seats are usually required to cover costs.

The cinema sources its films from the BFI, which is now one of the few reliable sources of 16mm prints and also offers competitive hire rates. A committee of friends and regular patrons selects the program, although Brian Guthrie explained that the process of getting the films can be fraught. The BFI does not have a searchable database for its 16mm film collection, so it is a matter of dealing with a BFI staff member who has to check the availability of titles on a manual card system. Further complicating this issue is the fact that the public hire rights to numerous films held in the BFI collection have lapsed. So while the BFI still holds copies, it is no longer permitted to distribute them. Three years ago, Screen in the Barn ran a retrospective of the most successful films they had shown over the previous fifteen years. However, the Guthries found that only four of the fifteen titles identified were still available for loan, and were duly forced to modify their selections. Since the mid-1990s,

very few new films in the UK have been made available in 16mm. As a result, Screen in the Barn tends to focus on cinema classics rather than contemporary titles. There is a strong emphasis on art cinema and foreign language, as demonstrated by the program for 2010–11. Alongside the Bresson film mentioned above, movies screened included *Plein Soleil* (Clément 1960), *Milou en Mai* (Malle 1990), *Fresa Y Chocolate* (Alea and Tabio 1994) and *Raining Stones* (Loach 1993).

The Screen in the Barn audience appears to share the Guthries' passion for non-mainstream cinema. At the conclusion of the screening I attended, there was lengthy discussion about the film – far more sustained and engaged than any other I had observed in the course of this study. The conversation lasted well over half an hour, although by that time the initial group had been whittled down to four or five very committed patrons. As Brian Guthrie commented: 'A high proportion of our audience know a lot about film or want to become filmy ... We find people are attracted to us because they want to watch these kinds of films and many are also drawn by the quaintness of the barn' (interview, 29 April 2011). Very few people from Thrandeston itself attend screenings. Most patrons are drawn from villages and towns further afield, sometimes from as far away as Norwich (23 miles), where the University of East Anglia has a large Film and Television Studies program (Guthries interview, 29 April 2011).

Attendances have been down a little over the past few years. The Guthries attribute this partly to the increase in film society activity in the local area. Brian Guthrie believes the advent of DVD projection has seen the number of film groups increase fourfold over the past five years. The Guthries were involved in the establishment of a group in nearby Diss, which runs a fairly mainstream program and is quite distinct from their home-based venture. Prior to this they used to run some mobile screenings in the local area, marketing themselves as Screen in the Van. However, they have found that with the increase in film society activity, the demand for this service has declined. In any event, the Guthries acknowledge that their audience does tend to be cyclical. As Brian explained: 'People "discover" us and might come every month for six months, then they drop off.' However, he added: 'We do offer something special here – it's an intimate and unique environment to watch films.' (interview, 29 April 2011)

Conclusion

These surveys of the small-scale, eclectic operations of The Playhouse Hotel Cinema and Screen in the Barn offer a counter-narrative to the modernity and rapid pace of technological change that tends to define contemporary urban movie-going. As these enterprises illustrate, Improvised Cinemas fulfil specific purposes in spatially discrete settings that are not always driven primarily to profitability or aesthetics. The Playhouse Hotel Cinema and Screen in the Barn demonstrate the enduring appeal of watching films with an audience in public spaces, and attest to the pleasure and satisfaction that can be gained from staging and attending such events, even in makeshift circumstances. This chapter has also touched on the importance of rural cinemas as positive and inclusive social spaces, particularly for groups like teenagers and women, who can often feel excluded and disconnected from the dominant masculine culture of drinking and sport that overshadows life in many small towns. These issues are examined further in the following chapter.

The personal stories of Andrew Sharpe, and Brian and Sarah Guthrie attest to the complex confluence of events required to establish and maintain an individually run cinema enterprise in very marginal economic and geographic circumstances. This is where Improvised Cinema becomes even more multi-layered. We know that local histories, politics and socio-cultural structures can be important in shaping the unique characteristics of exhibition and attendance at particular times and in particular places. However, the life stories of these entrepreneurs highlight the fact that the role played by individuals can sometimes be just as crucial as any of these factors – both Sharpe and the Guthries are clearly creators, as well as agents or conduits who are responsive and adaptive to their local conditions. The stories of The Playhouse and Screen in the Barn are tightly interwoven with the details of their owners' lives, to the extent that the former simply does not make sense without reference to the latter. This brings to mind the famous quote from Wilson Mizner (1876–1933), who said: 'I've spent several years in Hollywood, and I still think the movie heroes are in the audience.' In the case of The Playhouse, Screen in the Barn and other Improvised Cinemas, we might well consider that the heroes are also behind the projector.

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Chapter 6

Rural Cinema Audiences

Introduction

The preceding chapters have been concerned with the mechanics of film exhibition as an industrial or sub-industrial activity. In this final section, we turn our attention to the audience and the socio-cultural experience of movie-going in non-metropolitan areas. This part of the investigation draws on the 44 interviews conducted with cinema patrons across the case study sites and the feedback received from the written surveys conducted in four locations. One of the more striking findings to emerge from this research is that while the cinema model provides a highly effective means of understanding the rural exhibition industry, data collected from audiences suggest it is not particularly useful for comprehending the meaning of these cinematic encounters for individual cinema-goers. Instead what the investigations revealed was that rural audiences tend to say very similar things about their experiences *regardless* of the type of cinema they attend. Some exceptions were found to exist around multiplexes, but across each of the other cinema types the material that emerged from audience interviews and written surveys was remarkably similar. Thus, rather than being examined alongside the operational and industrial features of each cinema type, analysis of the rural spectator is presented within its own dedicated section. Accordingly, this chapter addresses two principal questions: Why do people go to the movies in non-metropolitan Australia and the UK? And what consequences and affects follow from these cinematic encounters?

Cinema-going can help facilitate participation and a sense of connection with the global communications landscape. This is particularly significant in rural areas, where audiences are geographically isolated from the centres of content creation and many of their on-screen locations and representations (e.g. Fuller 1996; Huggett 2002). But rural movie-going is about much more than simply bringing the world to the bush or the dales. The local, physical environment in which consumption takes place can have a profound influence on its social and cultural meanings, as rural cinema histories have demonstrated (e.g. Allen 2006; Cork and Thorne 2006; Bowles 2007a). Historians have also highlighted the importance of rural

theatres as highly valued civic and commercial institutions within their local communities (Waller 2005; Wilson 2006; Corbett 2008). Audience research conducted as part of this study suggests that these venues continue to function as positive affective spaces around which the residents of small towns can connect and network.

We begin with a brief survey of the industry information available for rural audiences and what these data indicate about their behaviours. The next sections examine the conceptual issues that have emerged from earlier historical studies of rural audiences. This analysis reveals strong similarities in non-metropolitan cinema-going practices among audiences in different locations and timeframes. Moving on to the findings from my fieldwork, the chapter looks at the significance of rural cinemas as local spaces of feeling and of social activity. In doing so, it highlights the role cinemas can have in encouraging local residents to connect more positively with the place in which they live and the people with whom they share it. We explore the integral place of the film within the cinema experience – a factor that is regularly overlooked within studies concerned with film-going practice. Finally, the chapter explores some of the conceptual tensions that exist around attempts to account for the multi-faceted nature of the movie-going experience.

[De]Constructing Industry Perspectives on Rural Film Audiences

Empirical data on rural cinema-going is scarce. This is perhaps not surprising, given what has already been established in the discussion about the critical neglect of the rural and the relative economic insignificance of non-metropolitan cinemas. Public policy-makers and the film industry tend to be the primary collators of such material. However, they tend to be interested predominantly in understanding the box office at the metropolitan and national levels. Few resources have been devoted to trying to understand non-metropolitan audiences, although some data do exist. Figures available in Australia have been the most useful, while data from the UK are much more limited.

Cinema-going statistics in Australia are compiled by the MPDAA and republished by several organisations, including Screen Australia. The MPDAA's records extend back to 1988, when 'country' cinemas (defined as those outside the major capital cities of Sydney, Melbourne,

Brisbane, Perth and Adelaide) accounted for around 16–17 per cent of national box office and admissions. (The MPDAA’s delineations do not quite match the definition of rural from which I have worked in this study – see discussion under Geographic Parameters and Definitional Issues in the Introduction – and I return to this point below.) Since the late 1990s, the share for the MPDAA’s ‘country’ venues has grown to remain at a very consistent 28–29 per cent for the past decade (Screen Australia 2011b). This increase has been due, at least in part, to the burgeoning presence of multiplex cinemas. In order to investigate what these data might reveal on a per capita basis, I combined the city-country breakdowns with corresponding population data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. This relatively simple division showed that in 2009, audiences in the main capital cities went to the cinema 4.9 times, while the average for the rest of Australia (including rural areas) was considerably lower at 3.2 times (ABS 2010; Screen Australia 2011b).

Upon initial reflection, the disparity between city and country admission frequency did seem plausible. I asked a number of the industry professionals who participated in interviews to comment on the data, and none expressed surprise at the statistics. The lower attendance rates could reasonably be attributed to several factors. The restricted and technically sub-standard cinema experience available in many rural areas was considered one possible deterrent to attendance. The barriers of distance, lack of public transport and lower average incomes were also perceived as impacting on the cinema-going capacities and aspirations of rural populations (Castaldi interview, 22 January 2009; Smith interview, 18 December 2008; DeBry interview, 27 March 2009).

At the same time, I was aware of a potential methodological inconsistency in the way the cinema-going averages were calculated – specifically, that they used the total populations living within and outside capital cities. While metropolitan areas are generally well serviced in terms of access to cinema, its availability in rural areas can vary significantly. Large numbers of people live in rural towns where there is no public venue – commercial or otherwise – in which to watch films, and therefore lack the necessary means to attend the cinema with any regularity. Their inclusion in the calculations for frequency of attendance reduces their value in pointing to meaningful trends.

However, by obtaining an itemised list of cinema locations from the MPDAA, the analysis could be taken further. I was able to combine the cinema inventory with Census data to determine which theatres were located in towns with populations less than 125,000 (defined in this study as rural), and was able to isolate them for more detailed analysis (ABS 2006). On this basis, I was able to estimate a figure for the number of people with ‘access’ to cinema outside the main cities. This enabled those without access to be omitted from the average attendance calculations and the results were striking. While the capital city average remained unchanged at 4.9, for the rest of Australia it increased to be almost equal at 4.7. These figures are limited by the generality of their calculation on a national basis, and by their reliance on geographic proximity as the sole determinant of accessibility. Nevertheless, contrary to the indications of the initial figures, they suggest that people in rural areas are no less engaged with or interested in the cinema than those in urban areas. These data form a basis for expanding our thinking about *who* goes to the cinema in rural locations and *why* they go. It suggests that cinema attendance cannot be adequately accounted for by a paradigm that emphasises the superiority of the metropolitan, and the inferiority and lack of desirability of the rural.

Unfortunately, cinema admissions data for the UK are not disaggregated by the BFI or its predecessor the UK Film Council in a way that would facilitate comparison with the Australian figures. The BFI publishes some information for audiences by region, but most areas include both cities and rural settlements. The available figures show that in 2010 the most frequent cinema-goers in the UK resided in London, and that they attended the cinema on average 3.4 times in that year. The average is similar for other areas of the UK. In most regions, people went to the cinema at least 2.5 times per person, although admissions did dip as low as 2.1 in the predominantly rural England–Scotland Border area (BFI 2012b). Without access to an itemised list of cinemas for the UK, it was not possible to undertake analysis similar to that which appears for Australian rural audiences below. However, given the nature of the issues involved, it is possible that if this were achievable, analogous trends might emerge across the two countries.

Critical Contexts: Understanding the Intersections of Films, Friends and Place

The cinema is nothing without its audience. In their absence, there would be little point in producing movies, or in the infrastructures that facilitate their viewing. Yet it is also true that the act of watching is often about much more than the consumption of a particular film. It also links the spectator with the shared, public space of the cinema. These interactions in turn connect participation in the film-going event to a series of broader geographic, economic, cultural and social formations (Maltby 2011). As cinema histories have demonstrated, research framed within this wider environment of viewing has allowed scope for consideration of the factors that shape cinema-going at an individual level, as well as scope for reflection on how these intersect and connect with national and global trends in different geographic locations and across chronological periods.

Scholars such as Robert Allen (2006), Kate Bowles (2007a, 2007b, 2011), Kevin Corbett (2008), Kathryn Fuller-Seeley (1996, 2008) and Gregory Waller (2003–04, 2005) have successfully framed these kinds of interdisciplinary concerns around the distinctive situation of movie-going in rural areas. However, the common thread running through this body of research on rural cinema has been its historical focus – much of it centred on the period before the introduction of television. However, despite the chronological differences in this study, accounts of early cinema-going have helped establish several key conceptual issues that are relevant across multiple time periods and geographic locations. They draw attention to three issues that have particular significance to my investigations: first, this research has demonstrated the rich diversity of situations in which audiences have watched (and not watched) films in public places; second, it has emphasised the importance of wider economic, social, ethnic and cultural networks in shaping the physical characteristics of exhibition and the meaning of individual cinema experiences; and third, it has highlighted the broad range of factors, beyond simply seeing a film, that can influence decisions about attendance and the subsequent place of these events in personal memory.

These three issues have emerged as important thematic concerns from this research carried out with contemporary audiences in rural Australia and the UK. However, what has also been prioritised is the place of the film as a key factor influencing the frequency and timing of attendance. Kathryn Fuller-Seeley and George Potamianos (2008: 3) argue that there should

be space in cinema studies for the ‘examination of reaction to specific films as well as of the practice of moviegoing in which habitual attendance at a theatre or exhibition space outweighed the impact of any particular film shown’. While the concerns Fuller-Seeley and Potamianos identify are both active streams of critical inquiry, they tend to coexist more than they intersect. Accounts of cinema-going focused on its social and geographic situation tend to downplay the significance of what was on the screen, while reception studies concentrates on how audiences read particular texts, despite its recognition of the significance of the viewing context.

Moving outside some of the conceptual confines of these discrete approaches, several scholars have demonstrated the value of research that is more engaged with the inherent duality of cinema-going – an experience shaped both by the film being screened and by the broader contexts in which the act of its consumption takes place. For example, Janet Harbord has illustrated how sites of movie consumption can play a crucial role in shaping the meaning of different film cultures (2002: 39–58); Deb Verhoeven (2007) highlights the importance of both on-screen and off-screen factors in her profile of the successful Greek cinema circuit that operated in Melbourne from the 1940s to 1970s; and Ramon Lobato (2007) has looked at how industrial and cultural imperatives have affected the international distribution and consumption of Nollywood films. The approach of these scholars inspires the following analysis of the diverse and complex cinema experiences articulated by contemporary film audiences in rural Australia and the UK.

Socio-cultural Contexts of Contemporary Rural Cinema-going

The social and cultural frameworks that exist around movie-going are varied and diverse. Cinemas provide places around which friendships and family connections are consolidated and extended, where romances blossom (or fail), and where special occasions are celebrated or remembered. In small towns, attending a public film screening can help alleviate the isolation with which many rural people struggle – particularly those who live and work on outlying farms and who spend much of their time alone. For women, cinemas can provide an opportunity to get together away from the boorish atmosphere of the local pub. For teenagers, an evening at the cinema can represent social freedom, lend a sense of purpose to ‘going out’

and provide a welcome contrast to the aimless and sometimes destructive alternative pastime of hanging around in public parks or streets. Interviews and written surveys conducted as part of this study indicate that many rural cinemas are held in high regard by their patrons, and feature prominently in local social and cultural life. Historical accounts of rural cinema-going suggest that these factors have been a feature of rural film attendance since its very early days (e.g. Allen 2006; Corbett 2008; Bowles 2007a, Waller 2005).

Developing a framework around which to analyse the contemporary and comparative dimensions of rural cinema-going, the following discussion focuses on two interconnected thematic concerns: sociality, and identity and belonging. These concepts are implicit throughout much of the body of historic rural cinema research, and have figured prominently in cinema experiences articulated by members of Australian and UK audiences who participated in this study. These connections indicate significant continuities in the meaning of attendance across different regions and over 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 of these.

Sociality

While sitting in a darkened room with one's 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 myriad 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 and the UK 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. These features of the experience are emphasised by Majestic Cinemas, an independent exhibitor with five sites in rural New South Wales, which describes their theatres as 'places of community enrichment as well as places of business' (Majestic Cinemas 2010). At the Bowraville Theatre (Subsidised Cinema), Lisa Milner (2007: 10) notes that a priority was placed on creating a sense of belonging and personal connection for local residents. As both a

scholar and one of the cinema's leading volunteers, she explains: '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)

For audiences, the quality and quantity of interpersonal interactions that occur around local cinemas are often very important. Confirming the social nature of cinema-going, the vast majority of respondents to the written audience surveys conducted in Australia and the UK indicated they usually watch a movie in the company of another person – 35 per cent with friends, 32 per cent with their partner and 24 per cent with other family members (such as children, grandchildren and siblings). Only 8 per cent said they usually went to the cinema alone. Cinema patrons who participated in interviews indicated that their attendance habits followed a similar pattern. As a woman from Merimbula explained: 'I usually like to go to the cinema with someone else – either my husband or friends. I do sometimes go on my own too, but that's usually only when no one else wants to see the film with me.' (Merimbula resident, female, 56–60 years)

Opportunities for interaction with friends and family can add to the appeal of the cinema, rather than the home, as a venue for watching films. Cinemas can provide forums for conversation before and after the film screening, which can also lead into other activities. Among the respondents to the written survey, 61 per cent indicated that they regularly extended their cinema outing by combining it with another event such as going to a café, pub or restaurant. For some audiences, the social interaction can even take place during the film. For example, Andrew Sharpe, the owner of The Playhouse Hotel Cinema at Barraba, reports that the teenagers who dominate his Friday night screenings tend to talk to each other throughout the film.

The importance of communication with staff and other patrons is further underlined in comments from audiences at The Picture Show Man Cinema in Merimbula (Small Commercial Cinema), such as:

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)

They provide a good service, staff are always friendly and courteous. It's a pleasure going to the movies at Merimbula. (Merimbula resident, female, 46–55 years)

Similarly, at the First Avenue Cinema in Sawtell (Small Commercial Cinema), a regular patron 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-forties)

In the UK, a patron from North Creake (Community Cinema) echoed these views:

We've been coming to all the screenings at the hall here since it started. Quite a few of our friends come and we've met new people too ... It is very good to be to go out somewhere where we don't have to travel too far, especially at night as the roads aren't great around here. We can walk to the hall from our house so it's very convenient. (North Creake resident, female, mid-sixties)

Historical studies of rural audiences have highlighted similar themes. Kevin Corbett's research in the United States indicates that cinemas are often 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 the 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 contemporary rural cinema-going

highlighted above, these historical studies suggest that cohesive social contexts have been an important part of the non-metropolitan film experience over a long period.

Anti-sociality?

These accounts of the intimate and personalised nature of rural cinema-going offer a rather stark contrast to the superficial sociality that Phil Hubbard found characterised the modern multiplex experience in Leicester (2003: 262–4). 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. Hubbard contends the predictable and sanitised nature of the multiplex experience is central to understanding its appeal (2003: 269–70). Multi-screen cinemas make it possible for people to move seamlessly from their homes to underground parks and into cinema auditoriums without having to actually engage materially with the outside world or the unsavoury people who move about within it. As Chapter 1 highlighted, the emergence of the multiplex style of film exhibition has been linked closely with shifts in the retail sector – specifically the shift from city centre streetscapes to suburban shopping malls. Extending Hubbard’s concerns into this more general arena, Martin Voyce (2006) has argued the privatised public spaces of the mall reduce and control diversity in an effort to enhance perceptions of personal safety, and thereby encourage consumption.

These off-screen developments have been linked directly to an erosion of the social and cultural value of cinema-going (see Milner 2007: 10). Similarly, Douglas Gomery (1992: 100–2) argues that the transformation of foyer areas from meeting places to sales spaces – for candy bar items, video games and upcoming movies – has diminished the quality and quantity of interpersonal interaction. The domination of mainstream Hollywood films at multiplex venues has been another cause for cultural concern, and has been seen as a major contributing factor in the denigration of the quality and value of the popular movie-going experience (Barker and Brooks 1998: 197; Jancovich et al. 2003: 183). Such arguments have tended to cast multiplex attendance as an impersonal and soulless experience, one that has been equated

with the banality of shopping at a discount department store or buying dinner from a fast food outlet (see Gomery 1992: 101; Jancovich et al. 2003: 197–8, 203–7).

Audiences interviewed for this study at rural multiplexes in Australia and the UK articulated some distinctive ideas and emotions about their cinema-going experience when compared with those from smaller rural cinemas. However, their comments did not reflect the arguments advanced by Hubbard, Voyce and others above. It was clear that multiplex patrons were generally less emotionally invested in the space or the staff at their local cinemas, as indicated by almost a complete absence of discussion about these aspects of the experience. Venues were positively regarded, but this tended to centre more around their functionality rather than deeper personal attachments, as patrons of the Birch Carroll and Coyle cinema in Coffs Harbour indicate:

Having the cinema here is very good. There's usually a few films to interest people of my age and it is always clean and comfortable. They give good pensioner discounts too. (Coffs Harbour resident, female, late sixties)

I don't go to the cinema a lot but when there's something I really want to see at the cinema and not wait for the DVD, I do go there. It does get very busy though and I try to avoid times when there's lots of kids as they can be very disruptive. I don't begrudge them too much though because it is good they have something to do. There's a lot of youth crime around here so anything that gets the kids off the streets is good. (Coffs Harbour resident, female, early forties)

Films are seen as a key factor influencing admissions at multiplex venues. More specifically, it is blockbusters that are regarded as being crucial to attracting patrons in significant numbers (see Hubbard 2002: 1239, O'Regan 1996: 111). While profits suggest that this has been an effective strategy, it is also important to note that most people – even at a multiplex – are not coming through the door on their own. This in itself indicates that spectators are at the very least regularly engaging in a range of interpersonal communications in order to make decisions about the timing of their cinema visit and the film they are going to see, as well as interacting when they are actually at the cinema, as one patron from Coffs Harbour explained:

The cinema is good place for an easy night out. You can see a film and there's a few places nearby where you can get something to eat or drinks. I have little kids and it's [going to the cinema] a good way to keep in touch with my friends without ending up having a really big night out. (Coffs Harbour resident, female, early thirties)

My fieldwork with multiplex audiences was relatively limited, and certainly not extensive enough to be considered as a stand-alone study. However, my investigations point to the significance of two issues that would benefit from further research. First, they suggest that multiplex patrons lack the same sense of close attachment to their local cinemas that is routinely expressed by cinema-goers from smaller towns. Second, they indicate that it is far from conclusive that the sociality practised by multiplex spectators is superficial or without wider significance.

Identity and Belonging

Turning to the role of cinema in creating a broader sense of belonging, the findings of this study suggest that there can be strong connections between cinemas and positive articulations of local identity. These are feelings that no doubt have their origin in the nature of the rich sociality outlined above. Decades of decline have eroded the quality of life in many Australian rural towns significantly, and given rise to increasing levels of economic disadvantage and social dislocation (Productivity Commission 2009; Australian Human Rights Commission 1999). In small towns particularly, 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.' (Merimbula resident, female, 46–55 years, capitalization in original text)

Strong emotional attachments to the cinema are nurtured and developed through attendance, but this may in turn also help to 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 that they will actively support it in order to ensure its survival and derive a sense of satisfaction from these acts. As one Merimbula resident

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. 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 as 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 sixties)

The whole character of the main street would change if we lost the cinema. (Sawtell resident, male, mid-sixties)

Similarly, in the UK a Fakenham resident explained:

I am really grateful that there is a cinema in Fakenham as without it I would rarely be able to go to the cinema. It makes a big difference to living here, you don’t feel so cut off. (Fakenham resident, female, 26–40 years)

Some small-town cinema patrons also articulated a sense of belonging on a more personal scale, indicating that these were places where they felt physically comfortable and safe. A number of respondents to the written survey distributed in Merimbula highlighted this as a positive attribute of their local cinema:

They try to keep it clean. Staff are always friendly and courteous. They take action when someone is being disruptive – i.e. call the police.

LOVE IT! A friendly environment, affordable with lots of session times that change. Clean! Some city cinemas are pigsties and have no discipline once the movie starts. A smaller venue usually curtails unruly behaviour. (Merimbula resident, female, 56–65 years)

It is a comfortable cinema to go to and has space for people with special needs to sit and watch a movie. (Merimbula resident, female, 46–55 years)

For other audiences, the perception of inclusion and satisfaction was expressed in contrast to feelings of dislocation experienced at other cinemas. A regular patron at the community-operated cinema in Bowraville, for example, discussed her experiences in precisely these terms. While a very regular attendee at Bowraville screenings, this older woman explained that she also sometimes went to other venues. Most recently, she had a Big Screen event at Nambucca Heads, a commercial three-screen cinema located about 20 minutes' drive from the town. But she had mixed views about the encounter:

The films were good, there was only one with Eric Bana in it I didn't like too much. But it didn't feel right going there [pause] ...

At this point, I had I expected the woman to reveal some anxiety about being disloyal to her local theatre, but instead she said:

you know, there wasn't anybody you knew there. Not like here [Bowraville] where you come and see quite a few [people] that you know. (Bowraville resident, female, late sixties)

Echoing very similar sentiments to those outlined in this section, a rural cinema-goer quoted in an article that recently appeared in the *New York Times* described her local rural cinema as 'kind of the heart and soul of our town' (Leigh Brown 2010). Likewise, Corbett concluded from his US based research that rural cinemas were often 'central to the identity of the town' and its lifestyle (2008: 244–6). Other studies of early movie-going have drawn attention to how rural cinema operators openly cultivate 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 in Cobargo offers an interesting contrast to these narratives. She concludes that the failure of its local operator to get involved more widely in town affairs meant the cinema never became centrally important to residents, although 'they lent it just enough support for it to keep going' (2007b: 253). Both these historical accounts and those of 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 can be reinforced through attendance.

The audience narrative articulated by participants in this study was overwhelmingly positive. While some of the written surveys indicated indifference to the local cinema in question, the fact that they were completed and returned at all means they cannot be discounted as entirely passive or disinterested responses. What was notable by its absence was negativity, and this creates great difficulty in imagining or speculating what kind of a counter-narrative might exist with respect to the claims I have set out above. However, the lack of negativity recorded should not of itself form a basis for becoming too idealistic about the inclusivity and pleasure of the cinema. Opportunities to engage with the medium have always been unequal. As Allen (2006), Jones (2003: 40–79) and Milner (2007) remind us, race has been an issue in cinema-going – specifically, African Americans in the United States and Aborigines in Australia have systematically been segregated and excluded from public film theatres. In contemporary context, the multiplex may be understood as another type of social filter, keeping out the poor and other undesirable sections of the population with its high ticket prices and lack of public transport. As other parts of this thesis have highlighted, public funding for cinema enterprises has also exposed fault-lines within certain rural communities – for example, in Bingara, where residents were disenchanted by the money being spent by the council on restoring The Roxy theatre while more immediate concerns like the poor quality of the roads and local water supply remained unresolved.

The Meaning of the Film

Finally, this section turns to the place of the film within the overall cinema experience – a factor that has tended to be downplayed within studies focused on exploring the broader geographies of film-going. Historical research has demonstrated that the details of particular films are often difficult for audiences to recall after the viewing event. This has given scholars cause to question the extent to which screen content matters within the context of the cinematic encounter (e.g. Allen 2006: 58–60; Jones 2003: 234–5; Kuhn 2002: 253; Maltby 2011: 9–11). While these studies establish that films are often peripheral to memories of screening events, they have tended to give limited consideration to the way in which movies

might have been significant in other ways. Reception studies, on the other hand, have emphasised the connections between screen content and viewing contexts, but remain concerned primarily with how these interconnections influence the way in which specific texts are used and understood by audiences. Complicating these somewhat artificial delineations, present-day accounts of movie-going in rural Australia and the UK gathered as part of this study indicate that both film content *and* the richness of the social encounter play a key role in drawing audiences to the cinema.

In metropolitan areas, where multiplexes dominate the exhibition landscape, the breadth and quality of the films and the exclusivity of the cinema release window are considered crucial factors in attracting patrons. These features are emphasised in popular 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). Scholars including O’Regan (1996: 111), Athique and Hill (2007) and Hanson (2007a: 177–82) have drawn similar connections between content and attendance at multiplexes.

In rural contexts, the Large Commercial Cinema owners and managers interviewed for this study consistently emphasised the importance of screen content to admissions. At the five-screen Birch Carroll and Coyle complex in Coffs Harbour, manager Sue Mahoney indicated this was particularly significant for the complex’s youth audience:

The young adult market is very product driven because they’ve got so many other entertainment options – they can download it, watch a DVD at a friend’s house, go to a pub or club or party. Whereas for the older market and the families it is very much a case of we want to go to the movies and then they look for something to see ... An interesting example of that for us is Friday nights, which are either dead or massive and it depends entirely on having product that appeals to the young adult market. *2012* [Emmerich 2009] did quite well recently and with films like that we will get big Friday nights. If there’s not product out for that market then Friday nights will be much quieter,

still reasonable admissions but not huge. (Mahoney interview, 3 December 2009)

Strong links between ticket sales and films were also highlighted at smaller and more isolated cinemas. While the preceding discussion has demonstrated that the social contexts of attendance at these cinemas is often highly significant, film content was also revealed to be important. As the owner of twin-screen Picture Show Man Cinema in Merimbula explained:

It is really important we have that smorgasbord of different films going all the time. Even in school holidays we need to have something in there that will screen at 10.00 a.m. for my regular seniors patrons. (Parkes interview, 26 April 2009)

The proprietor of the Hollywood Cinemas group, which operates small cinemas in rural Norfolk and Suffolk, similarly observed:

I don't compete with the multiplexes. We are in a different market entirely. We focus on families and we price ourselves to be attractive to that market. But the product has to be good too. Sometimes of course it's not, and you really see it in the [lower] box office when you are running a poor quality film. (Wicks interview, 29 March 2011)

Further, the manager of the Civic Theatre, a Subsidised Cinema at Gunnedah in North-West New South Wales, commented with regard to attendance that 'the films affect things more than anything' (Wilson interview, 13 August 2009).

These assertions correlate with information gathered from audiences in the written surveys. In the questionnaire, respondents were asked about why they chose to go to the cinema. They were offered six possible reasons and asked to separately rate the importance of each one on a scale from 'very important' through 'fairly important' and 'not very important' to 'not at all important'. The results are presented below in descending order:

Question

Below is a list of reasons often given for why people go to the cinema. Please indicate how important each of these are to *you* when deciding to go to your local cinema.

Results

	Very important (%)
To see a particular film	77
Socialise with family or friends	30
Support the local community	21
Special offers (e.g. discount tickets/movie/meal deals)	14
Celebrate a special occasion (e.g. birthday)	8
Nothing else to do	2

‘To see a particular film’ was overwhelmingly nominated as the most important factor influencing attendance, regarded as ‘very important’ by 77 per cent of respondents. This was followed by ‘socialising with family or friends’, which was rated as ‘very important’ by only 30 per cent, although it did rate more highly in the next category down ‘important’.³⁰

While the results of the written surveys emphatically connected films with attendance, this was less clear in the audience interviews. Despite the fact that almost all the participants were above average in terms of their frequency of attendance,³¹ some hardly mentioned the films at all, even when prompted. During the interviews, each person was asked to recall some of the films they had most enjoyed seeing at their local cinema. This often brought about a significant pause in the conversation as they struggled to recall titles. In contrast, information about their social experiences at the cinema and its place in town life often flowed much more easily. Interviews with film audiences from the 1930s and 1940s conducted by Janna Jones (2003: 234–5) and Annette Kuhn (2002: 253) in the United States and United Kingdom respectively reveal a similar vagueness around films. Yet, as both Jones and Kuhn note, their participants were often able to remember other aspects of their cinema experiences in great detail – for example, the cinema’s decor, where they sat, who they went with and what they wore. Kuhn was led to conclude that: ‘For the majority, going to the pictures is remembered

³⁰ ‘Socialising with family or friends’ was rated as ‘fairly important’ by 44 per cent of the survey respondents.

³¹ The majority of interview participants stated that they went to their local cinema at least once a month. This equates to an average of 10-12 visits per year, well above the Australian national average of four visits per year (see Screen Australia, ‘Top 10 countries ranked by number of cinema admissions per capita, 2004–2008’, <http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/gtp/acompadmitper.html>).

as being less about the films and stars than about daily and weekly routines, neighbourhood comings and goings and organizing spare time.’ (2002: 100) However, sitting alongside these accounts are studies by Fuller (1996) and Huggett (2002) that detail the place of movie fan culture in rural life during the first half of the twentieth century. In a similar vein, this study indicates that what is on the screen occupies more than a passing or temporary interest for many cinema-goers.

Conflicts and Connections: Films and Socialising

With regard to contemporary rural Australia, what is to be made of the seemingly conflicting accounts of film-going given by audiences? Which emphasis – the film or the cinema’s sociality – more accurately reflects what is significant about the experience of watching a film in a public setting? Historical studies carry the implicit suggestion that if films were sufficiently important, audiences would remember more about them. However, as Kuhn argues, film texts are often not useful for the purpose of recounting narratives of life events, which tend to figure prominently in memories of cinema-going (1995: 166). In a similar vein, Richard Maltby asserts that films ‘do not seek out landmark status for themselves but are designed to fade back into the overall field of our cultural experiences’ (2011: 11). While a single film might capture our attention for two hours, the connection with the person with whom we see it may last decades, over which time the relationship may continue to be developed and reinforced. When asked to reflect on their cinema experiences, it is perhaps not surprising that for audiences these aspects of attendance take precedence over memories of individual movies. However, while we may never be able to adequately reconstruct the place of the film from oral history, it does not necessarily follow that movies were not important at the times they were viewed. The views of cinema owners and managers interviewed for this study consistently suggest that they are. Part of the value of conducting research with contemporary audiences may lie in its capacity to more clearly highlight the multi-faceted nature of the cinema-going experience – something that can increasingly be obscured with the passing of time.

Regarding the differences between the written surveys and interviews, it is also appropriate to consider whether differences in information-gathering techniques may account for some of the apparent inconsistencies. As Kuhn points out, constructing an interpretive framework around

raw ethnographic material relies on the researcher making sense of not only *what* is said but also *how* it is said (2002: 9, emphasis mine). Written surveys can encourage more perfunctory responses, while in oral interviews participants may be inclined to give their answers more careful consideration. Some qualitative elements, such as hesitations in giving answers to questions, are obvious in an interview setting but almost impossible to measure in a questionnaire that is completed in private. While each methodological approach has its strengths and limitations, it does not necessarily follow that responses elicited from one source are more valid than those from another. Prioritising material from both perspectives, however, offers an alternative and potentially constructive way forward. It creates space for a more thoughtful consideration of the film within the cinema experience, but one that is not predicated on delineating it from the wider social and economic contexts of its consumption. In this way, it is possible to understand how the social aspects of cinema-going can have a major role in shaping the nature of the experience, but that decisions about attendance can still pivot around what is screening. For example, the woman from Bowraville quoted above was drawn away from her local town by the special films on offer at another cinema, although for social reasons it was an experience she did not ultimately find fulfilling.

The often-complex interactions between sociality and content were articulated simply but with great clarity by a young woman I interviewed at The Roxy in Bingara:

Now we've got a cinema here and they show recent, up-to-date movies, it's great. I love it. You come here and you bring your friends out and have a night out. It's great fun ... If I see a movie is coming up I talk to my friends about it and if they all want to see it too then we come along. (Bingara resident, female, mid-twenties)

It is probably unlikely that agreement from *all* her friends is a necessary prerequisite, but the statement nevertheless highlights the inherent multiplicity of cinema-going. This woman's statements indicate that while the chance to see a recent film might provide the initial attraction, her friends constitute the social framework that completes the evening out. On the other hand, she also suggests that the desire to socialise locally is an important motivation, something that has been conveniently facilitated by the reopening of the cinema and its appealing films. Articulating a similarly layered account of moving-going, a regular patron at the First Avenue Cinema in Sawtell told me:

When I lived in Melbourne I went to the cinema for the same reasons as most people – for entertainment and relaxation; for enlightenment or to be challenged; or on a date. Now that I have moved to Sawtell I still go to the local cinema for the same reasons but with one very important additional reason – to meet and see other people from around town. (Sawtell resident, female, early sixties)

Conclusion

The accounts of cinema experiences given by audiences in rural Australia and the UK demonstrate what a number of studies have previously argued: that the act of going to the movies is shaped by a wide variety of both on-screen and off-screen factors. Cinemas provide local residents with access to an enjoyable and globally popular leisure activity. They can also foster a sense of social connection and local belonging, particularly in more isolated and economically disadvantaged communities. While these aspects of cinema attendance are often deeply felt and articulated with great conviction, audiences also demonstrate that the film also remains a central feature of their experiences. This can influence decisions about attendance and help shape the appeal of the cinema as a favoured site for film consumption.

Historical studies focused on the broader social, economic, geographical and ethnic networks against which cinema attendance is set have greatly enriched critical understanding of the meaning of movie-going. However, film attendance is a practice determined not only in the wider aspects of everyday life; it is also a highly personalised practice that is intimately shaped by individual agency – the continuity and discontinuity of personal filmic tastes, friendships, mood, age and so on. Robert Allen argues that ‘the heterogeneity and open-endedness of the experience of cinema require an open-ended and open-source historiography’ (Allen 2011: 86). I suggest that this is equally applicable to contemporary studies. Examining how rural audiences in Australia and the UK negotiate the respective roles of films and friends at the cinema opens up a way of not only imagining how movie-going can vary between places, but how it can mean different things to different people within the same geographic and social clusters. These shifting, and sometimes conflicting, meanings highlight the potential limitations of working from fixed critical perspectives, such as reception studies. Further, they demonstrate that engaging with the empirical and conceptual multiplicities of cinema attendance, encapsulated here under the headings ‘sociality’,

'identity' and 'film', can open a productive middle ground – one that may be key to writing a more holistic and satisfying account of what cinema-going means in Australia, the UK and beyond.

Conclusion

Summary

This study has mapped the contemporary film exhibition landscape in rural Australia and the UK. In doing so, it has advanced a new system for the categorisation of rural cinemas that delineates between venues according to three key characteristics: size, commerciality and management structure. The chapter-by-chapter analysis of the five distinctive tiers of the model confirms the value of this typology as a descriptive tool. It has also proved to be a highly effective means of highlighting the multi-layers and often-complex nature of current industry trends and issues. More specifically, it has demonstrated that issues to do with film hire terms and accessibility, the transition to digital projection, the wide impact of piracy and the geographic and demographic constraints on profitability mean different things for different cinemas.

As an approach to comparative analysis, the cinematic model also provides a productive frame of reference for evaluating the connections and disparities that exist between rural exhibitors in Australia and the UK. The categories were developed initially from the Australian component of the research. One of the aims of the fieldwork in the UK was to test their relevance and applicability in another setting. While the two countries share the same language as well as numerous other cultural similarities, they also have some major geographic and demographic differences – factors that are directly relevant to understanding the economics and scale of cinema operation. However, despite these disparities, strong similarities between the two nations emerged. Filtered through the lens of the cinema model, numerous parallels were revealed in the way rural film exhibition is dispersed and organised across Australia and the UK. As Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate, the most significant areas of divergence exist around Subsidised and Community Cinemas. In the UK, a bigger pool of arts and culture funding, which is in turn connected with having a larger national population, contributes to significantly more activity. The compact geography of the UK also makes it easier for rural audiences to supplement their small-scale local film-going with visits to the multiplex to see blockbusters and other titles not likely to reach outlying areas for several months. However, as Chapter 6 demonstrates, despite its technical and aesthetic drawbacks,

the local experience and availability of cinema in a local setting are often highly valued in social and cultural terms.

While population density and geographic remoteness do not play a strong role in differentiating Australian and UK rural cinemas from one another on a national scale, they are crucial in shaping their prospects and characteristics at a more localised level. These factors dictate the type of cinema a town or local region can support, and impose clear distinctions around the requirements for commercial and sub-commercial enterprises. The limited presence of major cinema companies in rural areas reflects the economic imperatives of large-scale, multi-screen exhibition towards which they have become exclusively geared. These enterprises depend on access to a large audience catchment, and therefore concentrate their efforts in major towns that can deliver the necessary number of customers.

The prospects for profitability on a commercial scale decline rapidly once the potential audience catchment falls below 30,000. At this point, a marked decline in chain cinema investment is evident, and there are changes to the modernity of cinema design and aesthetics. Within these more marginal spaces, there is scope for smaller, independent operators to play a role in the provision of cinema, and to carve out successful, albeit often modest, film exhibition businesses. Operating outside constraints of highly regulated corporate structures, Small Commercial operators have the flexibility to adjust their business models to fit the imperatives of single- or twin-screen operation. As the audience comments in Chapter 6 illustrate, rather than becoming disenchanted with their shortcomings, patrons often willingly and happily embrace cinema-going in these smaller-scale venues. However, while they operate on a for-profit basis, Small Commercial Cinemas often struggle to maintain financial security. Their small size means that many are likely to have problems around the digital transition. They do not have the operational scale that would allow them either to participate in the VPF scheme or to by-pass it entirely and pay for their own digital projection systems. It also gives rise to issues around timely access to films, and leaves small cinemas more open to the adverse impacts of piracy.

In the case of sub-commercial cinemas, the parameters are framed foremost by the small populations that delineate the boundaries between for-profit and not-for-profit cinema. Thereafter, the prospects for cooperative and subsidised enterprises are less predictable.

While there are a significant number of non-commercial enterprises across Australia and the UK, there are also many other places that theoretically could support such a cinema but for various reasons do not. As the discussion highlighted, the success of Community, Improved and Subsidised Cinemas is determined by myriad of factors – the policies and financial capacities of local councils, the mood of their constituents, recent community events, the composition of the local population and the level of government assistance. While these factors can contribute to instability and financial insecurity, they also have the capacity to liberate enterprises from some commercial constraints. For example, the wide adoption of DVD as a projection format demonstrates that digital technologies are not equal, and that not all of them pose a threat for sub-commercial cinemas.

With respect to audiences, this study has demonstrated that while the business practices and aesthetics of the cinema experience vary considerably between different locations, the relationship and responses of patrons to the venues can be remarkably consistent. Some differentiation was noted between rural multiplex spectators and other non-metropolitan audiences, but this was the only area of significant divergence. The audience comments detailed in Chapter 6 illustrated that views about the social and cultural value of cinema-going in small places varied little between Small Commercial and Community enterprises. This is despite the fact they occupy very different ends of the spectrum from an industry perspective. The second key theme to emerge from the audience research was the importance of the film as an integral part of the cinema experience. It is argued that, rather than constituting a factor that sits alongside going to the cinema as a social event as an ‘either or’ proposition, films and friends are interconnected in often complex and nuanced ways.

The survival and growth of rural cinema attests to the lure and longevity of the big screen, showing that despite the emergence of a range of more convenient and less costly ways of seeing films (television broadcast, VDV/Blu-ray, internet and so on), audiences continue to seek out the more traditional apparatus of the movie theatre and its attendant social spectacle. In the case of non-commercial cinemas, these spectators will often go to great lengths – through fund-raising and volunteer activity – to ensure access to films in this format.

Value of This Study to the Film Industry

Questions about the value of these findings beyond the field of academic research are particularly pertinent to this study, which has been funded and conducted in partnership with two film industry organisations the National Film and Sound Archive and Screen Australia. My contention is that the findings from this study do point to issues of relevance for these agencies and others interested in supporting film exhibition and cultural access for rural populations.

The cinema model provides a wide-ranging survey of current screening activity, and highlights the specific operational demands and pressures faced by different types of exhibitors. This provides a much clearer picture than previously existed with regard to how current trends and issues are impacting on different exhibitors. It also indicates where government intervention, if required or desired, might be most productively directed. For example, in the case of the digital transition this research has drawn attention to the fact it has very different implications for different types of cinemas, and that it is Small Commercial Cinemas that are most likely to require some external assistance in order to be able to survive the conversion.

The information gathered regarding the social and cultural impact of cinema-going and the positive role it can play in enhancing the vibrancy and attractiveness of rural communities is also of value to the industry, and to rural policy-makers more broadly. It builds on what hitherto have largely been anecdotal claims about the benefits of cinema. This research helps to situate these claims within a more empirical framework, thereby enhancing their impact and credibility, as well as their usefulness in supporting policy submissions and proposals for increased funding support.

Further Research

The cinema model advanced in this thesis shows that there are broad and relatively consistent patterns that shape how cinemas operate, where they are likely to be found, what kinds of operations they are likely to be, and how people might relate to these spaces and the film experiences they have in them. These are more divergent and nuanced than simply multiplex vs everything else. This study reveals there is significant and distinct screening activity occurring across a wide range of rural spaces. However, this typology might also be applied to cinemas that lie beyond rural locations. Through the addition of categories to account for

the metropolitan – multiplex, independents/art-house and the burgeoning film festivals sector – the model could provide a productive framework for a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary exhibition activity and the continued relevance of cinema-going within the wider and increasingly diverse media landscape.

At a conceptual level, this study contributes to debates around patterns of media use, particularly the concept of convergence, and the coexistence and reconfiguration of new and old audiovisual technologies expounded by Henry Jenkins (2006). The findings of this study suggest that convenience, cost and personal freedom are not the primary factors shaping consumption – or at least not so far as film is concerned. The resurgence of cinema since the 1980s in both rural and metropolitan locations indicates that, rather than turning away from old formats in favour of newer ones (like DVD and pay TV), the current multi-screen landscape may in fact be giving rise to *more* consumption across the board. Audiences are watching films and other audiovisual products in cinemas, but also on television and DVD, and accessing more content than ever before via the internet. It is a highly relevant but rarely discussed fact that the multiplex boom coincided almost exactly with the rise of home video. Clearly, these two developments did not cannibalise one other. Likewise, the more recent rapid growth in the DVD rental and retail sector has done little to dent the popularity of cinema-going. Similarly, Jenkins (2006: 14) suggests that new technologies are tending to coalesce with older format more than they are displacing them. While contending there is still a place for ‘old’ media, he also acknowledges that innovation means their functions and status may change. In these contexts, continued predictions about the demise of the cinema are surely too short-sighted.

Over ten years ago Tom O’Regan cautioned that it was still too early to tell what the long-term future of the cinema might be (2000). It is arguably no clearer now than it was at the time O’Regan wrote his essay. What is apparent, however, is that new formats are not entirely displacing the old. People still go to the cinema to see films - not as many as in the 1930s and 1940s - but nevertheless still in significant numbers. It is, therefore, perhaps time to let go of the notion of an impending cinematic apocalypse. As scholars, our questions might usefully be redirected to investigations focused on how and why people are consuming film across different formats, and the part this plays in shaping our modern society of media-savvy consumers.

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Appendix A

Cinema Case Study Sites

Primary Cinema Case Study Sites

Large Commercial Cinemas

Birch Carroll and Coyle, Coffs Harbour, New South Wales
Event Cinema, Robina, Queensland
Regal Multiplex, Cromer, Norfolk

Small Commercial Cinemas

The Picture Show Man Cinema, Merimbula, New South Wales
First Avenue Cinema, Sawtell, New South Wales
Hollywood Cinemas, Fakenham, Norfolk

Subsidised Cinemas

The Roxy, Bingara, New South Wales
The Civic Theatre, Gunnedah, New South Wales
The Regal Theatre, Stowmarket, Suffolk

Community Cinemas

Blyth Cinema, South Australia
Screen-next-the-Sea, Wells-next-the-Sea, Norfolk
Cinema in the Creakes, North Creake, Norfolk

Improvised Cinemas

The Playhouse Hotel Cinema, Barraba New South Wales
Cinema in the Barn, Thrandeston, Suffolk
Big Screen, National Film and Sound Archive

Secondary Cinema Case Study Sites

In addition to the primary case study sites listed above, a number of other rural cinemas were visited and studied during the course of this study. Those marked with an asterisk denote locations where a film screening was attended as part of these secondary investigations.

Australia

Belgrave Twin Cinema, Armidale, New South Wales

*Bowraville Theatre, Bowraville, New South Wales

*Dendy, Byron Bay, New South Wales

Forum 6 Cinemas, Tamworth, New South Wales

Kinema, Narooma, New South Wales

*Majestic Cinemas, Nambucca Heads, New South Wales

Mallacoota Cinema, Victoria

The Plaza Theatre, Laurieton, New South Wales

*Saratton Theatre, Grafton, New South Wales

Savoy Theatre, Cooma, New South Wales

Wallis Cinema, Mount Barker, South Australia

UK

Aldeburgh Cinema, Suffolk

Bodham Village Hall Film Club, Bodham, Norfolk

*Cinema City Norwich, Norfolk

Empire Cinemas, Sunderland, Tyne and Wear

Hollywood Cinemas, East Dereham, Norfolk

*Hollywood Cinemas, Great Yarmouth, Norfolk

Hollywood Cinemas, Norwich, Norfolk

Little Theatre, Sheringham, Norfolk

*North Creak Community Cinema, Norfolk

*The Maltings Theatre and Cinema, Berwick Upon Tweed, Northumberland

Odeon, Norwich, Norfolk

Odeon, Worcester, Worcestershire

Vue Cinemas, Norwich, Norfolk

Appendix B

Industry Interviews

Cinema Owners and Managers: Australia (16)

Jessica Begun

President, Maleny Film Society, Maleny, Queensland

Col Brissett

Manager, First Avenue Cinemas, Sawtell, New South Wales

Steve Clayton

Secretary, Dubbo Film Society, Dubbo, New South Wales

Kieren Dell

Managing Director, Majestic Cinemas (sites in Port Macquarie, Singleton, Nambucca Heads, The Entrance and Inverell)

President of Independent Cinemas Association of Australia

Sue Mahoney

Manager, Birch Carroll and Coyle Cinema, Coffs Harbour

Chris Marks

Manager Community Relations, Burnside Council, South Australia (owns The Chelsea Cinema)

Sandy McNaughton

Manager, The Roxy Theatre, Bingara, New South Wales

Steve Meggs

Manager, Cineplex Cinemas – Victoria Point, Brisbane

Former manager of cinemas in Mount Gambier (SA) and Dubbo (NSW)

Lisa Milner

Project Manager, Bowraville Cinema restoration project and Committee Member

Denis Parkes

Managing Director, The Picture Show Man Cinema, Merimbula

Andrew Pike

CEO Ronin Films

Owner of the former Electric Shadows Cinema in Canberra and film distributor

Charmaine Rayner

Manager, The Majestic Theatre, Malanda, Queensland

Ian Roberts

Manager, Blyth Community Cinema, Blyth, South Australia

Andrew Sharpe

Owner and Manager, The Playhouse Hotel Cinema, Barraba, New South Wales

Ken Walsh

Manager, Hamilton Cinema, Hamilton, Victoria

Susan Wilson

Cultural Development Officer and Cinema Manager, Civic Theatre, Gunnedah, New South Wales

Cinema Owners and Managers: UK (9)

Brian and Sarah Guthrie

Managers, Cinema in the Barn, Thrandeston, Suffolk

Paul Heron and Peter Phillips

President and Secretary respectively, Cinema in the Creakes, North Creake, Norfolk

Tim Love

General Manager, Merlin Cinemas (owners of Regal Multiplex in Cromer, Norfolk)

Guy Martin

Education Manager, Cinema City, Norwich, Norfolk

David Marsh

Manager, Regal Theatre, Stowmarket, Suffolk

David Saunders

President, Screen-next-the-Sea, Wells-next-the-Sea, Norfolk

Wendy Seale

President, Tittleshall Village Hall Cinema, Norfolk

Anna Stubbings
Education Officer, Cinema City, Norwich, Norfolk

Trevor Wicks
CEO, Hollywood Cinemas (sites in Dereham, Fakenham, Great Yarmouth, Lowestoft and Norwich)

Other Industry Professionals: Australia (12)

Peter Castaldi
Film Distributor, Australian Film Syndicate
Former manager of Big Screen (rural film touring program) and film critic

Jane Cruickshank
Manager, National Programs, National Film and Sound Archive
Former manager of New South Wales Regional Cinemas program

Janine De Bry
Sales Coordinator, Hopscotch Films (film distributor)

Christina Hyde
Manager, Screenlinks, Mid-North Coast and Armidale Regions, New South Wales

David Kilderry
Cinema historian and founder of *Drive-ins Downunder* (<http://www.drive-insdownunder.com.au>)
Former cinema and drive-in manager for over 30 years

Gayle Lake
Manager, Regional Digital Screen Network, Screen Australia

Sarah Lancaster
Manager, Sydney Travelling Film Festival (tours the Sydney Film Festival in rural areas)

Jacqui North
Manager, Big Screen (rural film touring program), National Film and Sound Archive

Martin Renaud
Operations Manager, Flickerfest

Mark Sarfaty
Chief Executive Officer, Independent Cinemas Association of Australia

Brendan Smith
Coordinator – Education and Touring Programs, National Film and Sound Archive

Ross Thorne
Rural cinema historian and retired Professor of Architecture at the University of Sydney

Other Industry Professionals: UK (5)

Natalie Jode
Executive Officer, Creative Arts East, Norfolk

Alice Morelli
Village Screen Development Officer, Creative Arts East, Norfolk

Sean Perkins
Head of Research and Statistics Unit, British Film Institute

Steve Perrin
Chief Executive, Digital Funding Partnership (UK)

Alex Stolz
Manager Innovation in Distribution and Exhibition, British Film Institute

Appendix C

Cinema-Going Questionnaire

1: How long have you lived in the [name of town/local area]?

5 years or less 6-10 years 11-20 years 20 or more

2: How often do you go to see a movie at [name of town/local area] cinema?

Once a week 2-3 times per year
Once a month Once a year or less

If you rarely or never go to the cinema, you can skip the next few questions and go straight to Question 8.

3. Where do you usually go to the cinema?³²

Fakenham Wells-next-the Sea
Norwich Other places (please specify)

4: Who do you usually go to the cinema with?

Family Friends
Partner or husband/wife Alone

5: Below is a list of reasons often given for why people go to the cinema. Please indicate how important each of these are to you when deciding to go to the cinema?

	Very important	Fairly important	Not very important	Not at all important
To see a particular film	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Socialise with family or friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Socialise in a local setting	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Support the local community	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Nothing else to do	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

³² This question was included only in the UK surveys. The relatively close geographic proximity of cinemas in the North Norfolk region meant it was possible for residents to be regularly attending more than one, or to be regularly attending a cinema located outside their place of residence.

6: What sort of films do you usually like to see at the cinema?

(please select more than one if applicable)

- | | | | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|---|--------------------------|
| Blockbuster/Hollywood films | <input type="checkbox"/> | Australian or British films ³³ | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Family films | <input type="checkbox"/> | Art-house | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Romantic comedies | <input type="checkbox"/> | Other (please specify) _____ | |

7: Below is a list of reasons commonly given for why people think cinemas are important to rural communities. Please indicate how important you think these are for [name of town/local area]?

	Very important	Fairly important	Not very important	Not at all important
Provides a place to meet friends and socialise	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Good for local economy and/or tourism	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Helps build community spirit	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Affordable entertainment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Provides a safe place for going out	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

8: Below is a list of reasons commonly given for why people don't go to the cinema. If you rarely or never go to cinema, can you please indicate whether any of these reasons are important to you?

	Very important	Fairly important	Not a very important	Not at all important
Not interested in the films that are shown	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Session times not convenient	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Transport is difficult	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Too expensive	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please provide details)				

This final section has some general questions that will greatly assist the research team with the interpretation of the survey results.

9: Are you male or female?

- Male Female

³³ For Australian surveys the question posed was 'Australian films' and for UK surveys the option offered was 'British films'

10: Could you please indicate which age group you are in?

- 16-25 years 41-55 years 65 years and over
26-40 years 55-64 years

11: Is there anything else you would like tell us about your cinema experiences at [name of town/local area] cinema? Please use space below.

THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS SURVEY

Please return your completed survey in the reply-paid envelope provided

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Appendix D

Cinema-Going Survey Results

A total of 570 written surveys (in the format that appears at Appendix C) were distributed in selected rural towns in Australia and the United Kingdom (220 in Merimbula, 150 in Sawtell, 100 in Fakenham and 100 in Wells-next-the-Sea). The surveys were distributed by letterbox drop and a reply-paid envelope was supplied with the questionnaire which, due to its cost, limited the feasibility of distributing a survey at every case study site. Responses received totalled 136 responses were received from Australia (Merimbula and Sawtell) and 75 from the UK (Fakenham and Wells-next-the-Sea), equating to an overall return rate of 37 per cent.

A tabulated summary of the results of these surveys follows:

Table 1: Gender

	Female	Male	Total	<i>Did not specify</i>
Australia	110	24	134	2
UK	28	48	76	1
Total respondents	138	72	210	3
as %	66%	34%	100%	

Table 2: Age group

	16-25	26-40	41-55	55-64	65+	Total	<i>Did not specify</i>
Australia	0	0	34	47	50	131	5
UK	1	9	16	23	26	75	0
Total respondents	1	9	50	70	76	206	
as %	0.5%	4%	24%	34%	37%	100%	

Table 3**Question: How long have you lived in the local area?**

	5 years or less	6-10 years	11-20 years	20 years or more	Total
Australia	26	26	34	50	136
UK	9	4	12	50	75
Total respondents	35	30	46	100	211
as %	17%	14%	22%	47%	100%

Table 4:**Question: How often do you go to the local cinema?**

	Once a week	Once a month	2-3 times per year	Once a year or less	Total	Did not respond to question
Australia	16	69	12	38	135	1
UK	0	10	34	31	75	0
Total respondents	16	79	46	69	210	1
as %	8%	38%	22%	33%	100%	

Table 5**Question: Where do you usually go to the cinema? (question appeared only in UK survey)**

	Fakenham	Norwich	Wells-next-the-Sea	Other*	Total	Did not respond to question
UK respondents	46	11	5	8	75	5
as %						

* 'Other' locations nominated included Cromer, North Creake and Walsingham

Table 6**Question: Who do you usually go to the cinema with?**

	Family	Partner, husband/wife	Friends	Alone	Total	Did not respond to question
Australia	31	34	49	15	129	7
UK	17	27	22	3	69	6
Total respondents	48	61	71	18	198	13
as %	24%	31%	36%	9%	100%	

Table 7

Question: Below is a list of reasons often given why people go the cinema. Please indicate how important each of these are to you when deciding to go to the cinema?

Note: Not all respondents responded to each option

a. To see a particular film

	very important	fairly important	not very important	not at all important	Total	<i>Did not respond to question</i>
Australia	95	26	2	0	123	13
UK	36	13	1	0	50	25
Total respondents	131	39	3	0	173	
as %	76%	23%	2%	0%	100%	

b. Socialise with family or friends

	very important	fairly important	not very important	not at all important	Total	<i>Did not respond to question</i>
Australia	34	50	15	14	113	23
UK	8	18	8	6	40	35
Total respondents	42	68	23	20	153	
as %	27%	44%	15%	13%	100%	

c. Support the local community

	very important	fairly important	not very important	not at all important	Total	<i>Did not respond to question</i>
Australia	23	54	21	10	108	28
UK	13	19	8	3	43	32
Total respondents	36	73	29	13	151	
as %	24%	48%	19%	9%	100%	

d. Nothing else to do

	very important	fairly important	not very important	not at all important	Total	<i>Did not respond to question</i>
Australia	2	11	28	68	109	27
UK	1	5	6	22	34	41
Total respondents	3	16	34	90	143	
as %	2%	11%	24%	63%	100%	

Table 8**Question: What sort of films do you usually like to see at the cinema?****Note: Some respondents nominated more than one option**

	Blockbuster or Hollywood films	Family films	Romantic comedies	Art-house	Australian films*	British films*
Australia as % of respondents (136)	122 90%	85 63%	108 79%	35 26%	120 88%	
UK as % of UK responses (75)	35 47%	23 31%	23 31%	3 4%		26 35%

* In order to understand preferences for local cinemas, respondents in Australia were asked about Australian films, while those in the UK were asked about British films

** Exceeds total number of returned surveys because respondents were able to nominate a preference for more than one type of film

Table 9

Question: Below is a list of reasons commonly given for why people think cinemas are important to rural communities. Please indicate how important you think these are for your local area?

Note: some respondents nominated more than one option**a. Provides a place to meet friends and socialise**

	very important	fairly important	not very important	not at all important	Total	Did not respond to question
Australia	54	48	9	1	112	24
UK	17	17	10	1	45	30
Total respondents as %	71 45%	65 41%	19 12%	2 1%	157 100%	

b. Good for local economy and/or tourism

	very important	fairly important	not very important	not at all important	Total	Did not respond to question
Australia	78	28	3	3	112	24
UK	25	18	4	0	47	28
Total respondents as %	103 65%	46 29%	7 4%	3 2%	159 100%	

c. Helps build community spirit

	very important	fairly important	not very important	not at all important	Total	<i>Did not respond to question</i>
Australia	35	40	26	2	103	33
UK	20	19	6	0	45	30
Total respondents	55	59	32	2	148	
as %	37%	40%	22%	1%	100%	

d. Affordable entertainment

	very important	fairly important	not very important	not at all important	Total	<i>Did not respond to question</i>
Australia	77	39	4	0	120	16
UK	26	21	2	0	49	26
Total respondents	103	60	6	0	169	
as %	61%	36%	4%	0%	100%	

e. Provides a safe place for going out

	very important	fairly important	not very important	not at all important	Total	<i>Did not respond to question</i>
Australia	76	30	10	5	121	15
UK	23	20	2	1	46	29
Total respondents	99	50	12	6	167	
as %	59%	30%	7%	4%	100%	

Table 10

Question: Below is a list of reasons commonly given for why people don't go to the cinema. If you rarely or never go to the cinema, can you please indicate whether any of these reasons are important to you?

Note: some respondents nominated more than one option

a. Not interested in the films that are shown

	very important	fairly important	not very important	not at all important	Total	<i>Did not respond to question</i>
Australia	19	17	7	5	48	88
UK	13	10	3	3	29	46
Total respondents	32	27	10	8	77	
as %	42%	35%	13%	10%	100%	

b. Session times not convenient

	very important	fairly important	not very important	not at all important	Total	<i>Did not respond to question</i>
Australia	5	12	12	6	35	101
UK	6	8	6	6	26	49
Total respondents	11	20	18	12	61	
as %	18%	33%	30%	20%	100%	

c. Transport is difficult

	very important	fairly important	not very important	not at all important	Total	<i>Did not respond to question</i>
Australia	5	4	9	19	37	99
UK	6	7	5	11	29	46
Total respondents	11	11	14	30	66	
as %	17%	17%	21%	45%	100%	

d. Too expensive

	very important	fairly important	not very important	not at all important	Total	<i>Did not respond to question</i>
Australia	5	11	9	14	39	97
UK	12	11	3	3	29	46
Total respondents	17	22	12	17	68	
as %	25%	32%	18%	25%	100%	

e. Other

Australia

Not a movie-goer. I preferred the older movies with a genuine storyline.

All excuses – if you like movies enough you'd go.

No knowledge of what film is about!

We still work full time and spare time is scarce. Will view films at the cinema when full time work ends and we have more time. We have missed many films we would have attended.

Not suitable for my 10-year-old daughter

Advent of the talkies spoilt the pictures

I find the sound system becomes too loud for me during the films

UK

Work too much

Watch too many films on TV as it is

Never have enough time

I am 6' 5" no leg room

Disabled – not sufficient mobility

Sound too loud

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