

Single-Screen Cinemas are History! The counter-trend resuscitation of historic picture theatres in regional NSW

“Historic cinemas” are sometimes also referred to as “classic movie theatres” or “traditional picture theatres” They are the remaining examples of the venues that housed cinema during its original heyday in the first half of the twentieth century. Influenced by developments in the United States, the construction of permanent, purpose-built, single-screen cinemas began in Australia from about 1910, boomed through the 1920s era of the picture palace, and continued into the 1930s period of modernisation (Thorne 1976; Gomery 1992; Thorne, Tod et al. 1997; English Heritage 1999). This expansion began in urban areas, but quickly spread into the suburbs and beyond into regional areas, with even small towns sustaining more than one cinema simultaneously. However, in the post-war period audiences began to decline, and the majority of these cinemas closed throughout the 1950s and 1960s, whereafter some sat empty or were put to adaptive re-use, and many were demolished. While only a few remain in urban centres like Sydney, due to lesser development pressures many more regional examples survive. The majority of these are from the 1920s and 1930s (Thorne 1976), the era which constitutes the most significant period in terms of industry expansion and associated prosperity until the introduction of the multiplex in the mid-1980s.

The emergence of multiplex venues also heralded a period of industry expansion in terms of both screen construction and associated consumer demand, which evolved and intensified in scope and design through the 1990s (Acland 2003). To demonstrate through local industry statistics, at the end of 1988 there were 712 screens operating in Australia, and by the end of 2002 this number had risen to 1872 – representing an increase of 163% (AFC 2003). During this period attendance figures experienced a corresponding rise – a static result from 2001 to 2002 being only the second time admissions did not rise in 15 years (George 2003). I contend that these two periods of expansion, the 1920s -1930s and the 1980s - 1990s, are significant enough in themselves and in contrast to the preceding and intervening periods to be respectively considered the ‘first wave’ and ‘second wave’ in the history of cinema construction and exhibition.

Commentators and industry statistics indicate that we have reached the end of this second wave of cinema expansion in Australia, claiming “major exhibitors ... don’t believe there are any locations left with populations big enough to sustain a new development” (George 2003, p 4). It therefore seems timely to assess the impact of this expansion on the ownership and spread of the market, and to indicate how developments of the second wave differ from, and have affected the exhibition practices and patterns which were established during the first.

The first major difference between the first and second waves of cinema expansion concerns ownership. The first wave emerged very early in the history of theatrical film exhibition, before the industry had had a chance to consolidate. Although small circuits quickly developed, the majority of cinemas established in this early period were independently owned and run. By contrast, Australian screen ownership is currently dominated by three major chains - Hoyts, Greater Union and Village - who have captured 70% of the market share with only 50% of the country’s screens (Jones 1999).

Market monopolisation by these three companies is compounded by ownership links between them and with some of the major distributors (Jones 1999; George 2003). These complex cross-ownership arrangements linking major exhibitors and distributors, have raised concerns that collusion between associated companies negatively impacts on the competitive ability of independent cinema exhibitors. These concerns have been raised by independent operators and considered by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC). However, the ACCC have only been able to recommend a voluntary code of conduct, and are not in a position to enforce its implementation (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission 1996).

In addition, the multiplication of screens and therefore possible sessions in the multiplex has transformed distribution practice. In the past, most exhibitors had long-standing exclusive agreements with particular distributors and their fortunes were therefore linked to the appeal of that distributor’s output (Jones 1999). With enough screens to take output from all distributors the emergence of the multiplex has broken

down that alignment and enabled the implementation of new distribution practices. New practices attach case-by-case negotiated requirements to print hire in terms of run-length, screening frequency, and box-office share. In a bid for screen monopoly, it is common for distributors to require that a film be shown six to eight times a day often for six to eight weeks. Shifting demands for box office share by distributors commonly range from 60% in the best attended early weeks of a screening period, to 25% in the latter weeks (George 2003).

Each of these transformations in industry structure and practice – venue design, ownership concentration, developments in the exhibitor-distributor relationship and distribution practice – has impacted favourably for multiplex and large-circuit exhibitors, and created difficulties for single-screen and independent operations. In a catch 22 situation the multiplex formula is made more commercially viable, and as they take a percentage of box-office revenue, distributors prefer their limited number of prints to go to the most profitable outlets.

In 1986 the establishment of the Cinema Owners Association of Australia (Cinema Owners Association of Australia 2003) created a consortium of independent exhibitors in an attempt to redress the imbalance and lobby collectively for fairer arrangements with distributors, but they have had little success. Without the benefit of cross-ownership links, and with the additional problem of minimum screen space facing single-screen cinemas, small independents have difficulty meeting distributor demands and this combined with a lower market share, places them in a weak negotiating position.

As a result, statistics show that many smaller cinemas have converted to multi-screen complexes or ceased operation in the past decade. The number of businesses with an annual income of less than \$1 million decreased from 162 in 1994, to 99 in 2000, further compounding the concentration of ownership in the industry (George 2003), and shifting cinema-going more and more toward the multiplex experience.

The other recent and major shift in patterns of cinema consumption in Australia concerns location. The majority of construction during the second wave of expansion has occurred in the suburbs: the proportion of screens in suburban locations went

from 23% in 1985 to 53% in 2003. Conversely, in the same period the proportion of screens in country areas decreased from 54% to 39% (AFC 2003). This shift relates directly to the population density required to sustain the newly preferred model of multiplex operation. So whereas the first wave of expansion saw cinema exhibition move beyond urban locations into regional areas, the second wave has resulted in a resumed concentration of cinemas in highly populated areas, resulting in a proportionately poorer level of access to cinema in regional areas.

Having established recent national cinema trends, I would now like to focus on regional NSW, and to introduce some of the claims and activities which have emerged in response to, or in defiance of, those wider industry trends. The NSW Ministry for the Arts classifies the larger regional areas of Wollongong and Newcastle as “metropolitan,” and as these areas are well-serviced by commercial cinemas, for the purposes of this paper I have chosen to adopt those guidelines. Beyond this, multi-screen commercial cinemas, in other words not multiplex, having fewer than 5-6 screens, operate in large regional centres of the size of Wagga Wagga and Tamworth, and some smaller towns like Nambucca Heads and Ulladulla have commercial twin-screens. Single-screen commercial cinemas still in operate in towns like Broken Hill, Mudgee and Scone. However, often, in the case of Scone for example, these cinemas screen only a few sessions per week and are probably more of a hobby for their operators than a viable commercial enterprise. Beyond these examples extensive areas of regional NSW are without a theatrical commercial cinema service.

Although the expansion in screens associated with the second wave has not penetrated these regional areas, the associated rise in the demand for theatrical cinema exhibition has. There are clear indications that access to cinemagoing is something which people in regional NSW desire. Numerous examples of local initiatives demonstrate that in the absence of commercial cinemagoing options, local people, often in collaboration with local councils, are prepared to commit significant amounts of time, energy and resources to the establishment and operation of a regular screening in a theatrical setting.

In Narrabri and Gunnedah, Shire Councils have purpose-built new cinemas. In Tenterfield, the historic school of arts has been converted to an arts centre,

incorporating a library, gallery, and a new cinema. In Young, the School of Arts has been modified for film screenings. There are reports of other examples in Tibooburra, Brewarrina, Coonamble, Gulargambone, Bellingen, Coonabarabran and Culcairn (Cochrane 2003).

Within the context of this broader revival of theatrical cinema in regional NSW, activity is also occurring in restored historic cinemas. In Bingara, an hour and a half north of Tamworth, the 1936 'Roxy' fell into the hands of the Gwydir Shire Council through non-payment of rates, and the theatre was re-opened in 2004 after extensive restoration work. In Bowraville, the 'Bowra Theatre' has been restored and reopened by the Bowraville Arts Council, formed specifically for this purpose. Other restored historic cinemas include: the 'Roxy' at Leeton (the oldest community cinema in NSW and therefore the only example here which was established prior to 1994); the 'Montreal' in Tumut; the 'Crystal Theatre' in Portland; the 'Prince of Wales Opera House' in Gulgong; and the 'James Theatre' in Dungog. Further examples exist of historic cinemas for which restoration campaigns are being run or which are already in the process of restoration. They include the 'Liberty Theatre' in Yass, the 'Altheneum' at Junee and the 'Theatre Royal' in Balranald.

Each case is place-specific, varied and localised, depending on the prevailing conditions, the skills and resources in the area, and the preparedness of the local people and the local Council authority to become involved. Common to all of these examples, however, is that a high proportion are not-for-profit, voluntarily managed and staffed, and significantly, self-proclaimed "community" cinema. What also sets them apart from the old film society model, is that the level of infrastructure required involves a substantial amount of assistance and funding, and since 1998, this has been target provided in many cases by the NSW state government. I would argue that the scale of this activity, in combination with the amount of attention and support it is receiving, constitutes a counter-trend to the wider industry trends previously established which favour multiplex exhibition in suburban locations.

In 1996 a report was prepared by the Regional Arts Development Officer (RADO) for the North West region of NSW, outlining an argument for the re-establishment of cinema in regional NSW. In this report Jack Ritchie made a clear link between the

demand for access to cinema by people in regional towns out of range of a commercial operator, the possibilities for re-establishing cinema in these places and the potential to revive the many under-utilised historic cinemas which remain from the 1920s and 1930s. In response, the Local Government and Shires Association (LGSA) of NSW conducted a survey which confirmed “that while cinema was one of the most desired entertainment activities, over 50% of towns in NSW had limited or no access to cinema or film activities” (Smith 2001, p 50).

As a result, in 1998, a regional cinema working party was formed with representatives from the NSW Ministry for the Arts, Regional Arts NSW, the New South Wales Film and Television Office (FTO) and the LGSA to examine the issue of the re-introduction of cinema into regional areas. An early focus on the development and circulation of information and resources to encourage and facilitate local cinema initiatives led to the creation of a regional cinema officer post at the FTO in 2001 to develop and deliver the regional cinema program (New South Wales Film and Television Office 2004). Many regional cinema projects have received crucial financial support from the NSW Ministry for the Arts Capital Infrastructure Program (NSW Ministry for the Arts 2003). With this and local government support, projects can also be eligible for federal funding through programs focussed on regional development.

This has introduced an extraordinary situation, in which almost the only aspect of the national film industry, that is exhibition, which has not traditionally enjoyed support from government, is beginning to benefit from some combination of local, State and Federal funding in regional areas where commercial cinema operators will not go. A realm which has traditionally been left to industry and market forces has been adopted, at least to some degree, as a responsibility of the state.

But why do people desire access to cinemagoing? Why does the state government support it? What can cinemagoing do for people? In the discourses surrounding the re-establishment of cinema in regional NSW, claims are made for the material and ideological functions of cinemagoing in relation to “community,” correlating access to a cinema with positive consequences for “community,” and the absence of a cinema with its opposite.

The NSW Film and Television Office website (18 November 2004) states that the lack of access to cinema in regional towns “was believed to have a serious impact on the social, economic and quality of life aspects of those regional communities.” Within these discourses the needs of regional communities are often contextualised by broader social and economic challenges such as loss of traditional industries and public services. In a 2001 article the Regional Cinema Officer stated that: the “rural economic downturn has impacted on the social wellbeing of small communities, witnessing high instances of unemployment, depression and juvenile crime” (Smith 2001, p 50). Elsewhere, the new ‘Civic Theatre’ in Gunnedah was reported to be “important to the drought-hit community’s morale” (Cochrane 2003, p 12).

Claims made for the benefit of cinema to “communities” include entertainment, social interaction, economic benefits, skills development for youth, and, according to the FTO, “a focus for community development and community health and wellbeing” (18 November 2004). One of the favoured examples of regional cinema activity is Nundle, where cinema activity was initiated by the local Area Health Nurse who acquired a 16mm projector from the Area Health Service and began to hold monthly screenings in the local hall. The Regional Cinema Officer declared that this project provided “a significant focus for rebuilding community spirit” and “most importantly ... established for the first time a link between cinema and community health” (Smith 2001, p 51).

Interestingly, the term “community” is often used unnecessarily, and when other terms, such as “local” or “voluntary” would be more accurate. Furthermore the term is used not just by the policymakers, but by various people involved with regional cinema activity. The Ritchie report claimed that cinema activities enrich the community (Ritchie 1996). Preservation campaigners use it to help create a case for retention of cinemas. The Cinema Owners Association of Australia make a link between the role of cinemas and the “community,” claiming to be “maintaining the role of Independent Cinemas in today’s Australian Community” (2003). Cinema restoration committees and subsequent management committees often use it to address themselves, for example the volunteer-run cinema in Tumut is officially called the “Montreal Community Cinema.” It is mutually expedient for all of these

groups to give the term “community” currency in regional cinema discourses, as it is then available to them all to favourably represent their activities, and strategically useful when lobbying for policy or economic support.

These positive stories appear to be finding a receptive audience, and regional cinema projects have recently achieved recognition and reward. The Roxy at Bingara and the Tenterfield Arts Centre have recently received local government awards, and in November 2004 the Regional Cinema Program received a NSW Premier’s Public Sector Award - Bronze in the “Services to Rural NSW” category, over projects from the Ambulance Service of NSW, the Far West Area Health Service and WorkCover NSW (New South Wales Film and Television Office 2004). The equivalence of the establishment of cinema to the work of these health-based agencies is significant.

The obvious problem is that the use of the term “community” indicates a claim to inclusiveness and representativeness, while it will surely create a sense of inclusion for some, and just as surely, a sense of indifference, or exclusion for others. For this reason, the next stage of this research will involve fieldwork in four of these communities, the purpose of which is to explore with people both involved with these projects and also those observing their efforts, the complicated set of social experiences which rural cinemagoing has always represented.

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