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A Cultural History of Cinema-going in the Illawarra (1900-50)

Volume I

Please see print copy for photo

Audience members at the Whiteway Theatre, Port Kembla on 13 May 1950 watching *Ma and Pa Kettle Go to Town* (1950)

Courtesy of Wollongong City Library *Illawarra Images*

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

NANCY HUGGETT, BA (HONS)

COMMUNICATION AND CULTURAL STUDIES

FACULTY OF ARTS

2002

C E R T I F I C A T I O N

I, Nancy Elizabeth Huggett, declare this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Arts, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Nancy Huggett

17 December 2002

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores a cultural history of cinema-going in the Illawarra region of New South Wales over the first half of the twentieth century through oral history interviews with cinema-goers of the period.

The research was originally intended to explore the Australian cinema industry from a regional perspective. However, while the interviews contained fascinating details and stories of cinema-going in this period, they did not fit seamlessly into existing academic discussions about cinema which often focus on film texts and national cinema industries. Therefore, as well as considering how the oral histories I collected contributed to pre-existing academic discourses about the cinema industry and national screen content, I have also explored other discourses that are articulated in audience narratives.

Through exploring the debates in cultural studies about audience research and the work of the Popular Memory Group and other critical oral historians, I critically evaluate the oral history narratives as well as the methodology of oral history itself. I look at the intersection of oral history practice with cultural studies in order to highlight issues of representation and power and to celebrate the way that differences between written and oral histories can foreground processes of meaning-making.

My contention in this thesis is that cinema-going is a strategy of mediation through which people make sense of themselves, their lives and their relationships with others. I test this theory by considering cinema-going in relation to a series of identifications: national identity, local identity, personal identity and political identity (age being one strategic location from which older individuals can draw on age-related discourses and experiences to achieve particular narrative ends).

In conclusion I argue that any cultural history of cinema-going is a mediated history which is constructed within a matrix of meaning-making strategies. It is created through audience members' narratives of cinema-going which re-configure memories in accordance with particular discourses of significance either in the narrated past or in the narrating present. The researcher, who tells the story with reference to specific research priorities and current academic discourses, further mediates such a history. Therefore, as well as setting out *a* cultural history of cinema-going in the Illawarra for debate and further research, the emphasis on *mediation* is intended to encourage reflection on the creation of history as a complex, collaborative and political process which creates one story as it silences others.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank my supervisors, Kate Bowles and Graham Barwell, for their wisdom, advice, encouragement and friendship over the past seven years. Their supervision experience and subject knowledge have been generously given over many a Thai meal and they have continued to support and encourage me while I was living overseas and while I was on maternity leave. Especially, I would like to thank Kate for seeing a place for this research within the teaching curriculum at Wollongong. I look forward to our future collaborations.

My thanks go to Bob Parkinson for his words of advice at the start of this project and for his detailed and invaluable research into Illawarra cinemas published in the book *Guaffered Velour*.

I would also like to thank the Illawarra Retirement Trust at Woonona for generously allowing me to undertake the first set of oral history interviews. I am particularly in the debt of the Trust's administration staff who helped me to track down former residents and their families some years after the interviews in order to provide interview tapes and transcripts and to gain written consent for the use of the interviews.

I couldn't have completed this thesis without the support of my friends and family. In particular, I would like to thank my parents for taking my daughter, Nina, out in her pushchair in the rain so that I could get some writing done and to Dad, Pete and Emma for reading and commenting on my thesis drafts. My greatest supporter has been my husband Shane whom I thank for his faith in my ability to see the project through to the end and for his patience, love and understanding (and childcare and catering services!)

My greatest debt, however, is to the men and women who agreed and volunteered to be interviewed about cinema-going for this project. Their fascinating, humourous and touching narratives taught me to think about and rethink my subject matter and without their generosity, kindness and, in many cases, friendship, this thesis would neither have been possible or half as interesting.