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A cultural history of cinema-going in the Illawarra (1900-1950)

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

Volume I

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

CERTIFICATION

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.

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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!)

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