

FROM BOARDROOM TO BIJOU: EXPLORING CINEMA DISTRIBUTION & EXHIBITION

PART 2: EXHIBITION INTRODUCTION

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*They put a parking lot on the piece of land,
Where the supermarket used to stand.
Before that they put up a bowling alley,
On the site that used to be the local Palais... (Davies)*

When The Kinks released this song, *Come Dancing*, in 1982, the succession of ever-more bland buildings on plots of land that used to boast theaters and cinemas had become an all-too-common sight in the UK. Three years later, Britain's first multiplex cinema, the Point, rose out of a flat expanse of land in Milton Keynes; but a mere twenty-six years after that, this historic, cinematic landmark is also under threat of demolition. It's a familiar tale to those who recall the demolition, in 1963, of the Fox, San Francisco—the opulent, 4,600-seat “last word in movie theaters”—just 34 years after its opening night.¹

Whether it be the Electric Palaces and Picture Playhouses that nurtured the infant art form; or the Regals and Roxies where the greats of its “Golden Age” were revealed to the grateful masses; or the AMCs and UCIs, on the front line in the fight against the rise of VHS and DVD, the traditional fabric of cinema exhibition is gradually succumbing to the wrecking ball. All the more reason to save, record and celebrate what's left.

This issue of *Post Script* is not about movies, but rather the showing of movies. It is the second part of a double-bill, *From Boardroom to Bijou*, the first of which (30.2) casts light on areas of cinema distribution. The contributors to the current volume ex-

plore a cross-section of the exhibition end of the American and British movie industries: from the late 19th century—when cinema buildings did not yet exist, to the early 21st century and into the future—when cinema buildings may no longer exist.

Academic cinema scholarship has recently increased its interest in elements of the movie industry which fall outside the films themselves and the people who make them. This may owe something to a drift away from grand screen theory towards more historical approaches. And so the pervasive “why?” of academic discourse is gradually making more room for the “whats,” “whos,” “whens” and “hows” that have always sustained the study of cinema buildings, projection techniques and the showmanship of exhibition.

As I noted in Part 1, historical approaches have always underpinned the work of enthusiasts, dedicated to the preservation of cinema's exhibition legacy. And this work has been essential, not least because the Studios, which contributed so much to the history of cinema, no longer have any interest in the buildings in which much of that history was written. In commercial cinema terms, they are simply not financially viable.

If we ever had any doubts that money dominates the movie industry, we need only

regard the work of Kevin Brownlow, who, from the 1960s, has fought to preserve and protect silent movies from studios which have neglected, and sometimes willfully destroyed, their own screen legacy. Accepting his 2010 honorary award from the Governors of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Brownlow laments the loss of 73% of all silent films. He adds, "I was told, when I started this business, that silent films were a complete waste of time," (Brownlow) meaning that even the movies themselves were deemed largely to have no commercial value.

Since the arrival of home video, the Studios have of course gained a clearer understanding of the value of their back catalogues, but even so, commercial considerations still hamper the historian, as Brownlow points out to his Hollywood audience:

Now, it is amazing what's turning up, and if you would only relax your copyright laws where silent films are concerned, you would see an awful lot more suddenly appear. That has been one of the worst chains on this whole affair of ours to rescue the past of the cinema.

Brownlow's noble battle continues, supported by his considerable reputation, commercial viability and, now, the weight of his Oscar.

Advocates of cinema infrastructures also have worthy champions, but they struggle on with little hope that the industry will see similar commercial value in this part of its legacy. There is clearly scope for the flagship, showcase cinemas of Hollywood Boulevard, and the photogenic film locations of Broadway, Los Angeles, but the battle for most historic-cinema operators is to raise enough funds and awareness to sustain, maintain, and possibly to restore and refurbish, their ailing theatres. This they must do through a mixture of live performance and the re-awakening of an appreciation for a classic cinema-going experience. They personify the optimistic sentiment reflected in

a tagline used by the popular movie theater database, *Cinema Treasures*, "because you're tired of watching movies on your laptop."²

Without the support of the film industry, approaches to legacy conservation will continue to be patchy—a notion that was driven home to me on a recent trip to San Antonio, TX. Fifty-six of the estimated seventy-eight cinemas that once served America's 7th largest city have gone. Downtown, the Texas (1926) was reduced to a mere façade in 1983 for a new bank that has since gone bust.³ The Moderne-style Alameda, opened in 1949 for the city's considerable Hispanic community—and among the last of the great picture palaces—is dark. The Aztec (1924), whose historic significance is celebrated in its advertising literature, is ironically not open for viewing. Only the Majestic remains willing and able to celebrate the impressive cinema legacy of an historic city.⁴

In an age of on-demand movie-streaming, it may be tempting to shrug at these losses and decry the value of dusty old theatres, but consider this: the legacy of the Majestic is not just a beautifully restored and maintained example of a John Eberson atmospheric cinema. Its significance goes deeper than that.

My tour of this 1929 building included the currently unused, "segregated gallery," a reminder of the Jim Crow laws, hidden away at the topmost point of the auditorium—in the "Gods." It's difficult to describe the emotions engendered by this space—once crammed five times daily with 400 non-white patrons, who had used their separate entrance at the side of the theatre and mounted the 250 steps of their isolated stair-well, to peer down at the white heads and the stage and screen hundreds of feet away. One can't help but feel a sense of injustice, and the weight of a shameful period of American history. You don't get this from a book of photographs.

Trek a little further and you're in the roof, above the suspended plaster shell of this atmospheric cinema. Here the structure of this building reveals itself in brick, steel,

and a suspended plaster dome. Duck-boards across the plaster allow service-access to the bulbs that stand in for twinkling stars in the “sky” below. Here we really are the “Gods.”

All of this first-hand experience is lost when a theatre, like the Aztec, refuses to open its doors to the visitor. Like Queen Victoria’s wedding dress, hidden in the cellars of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, for fear that exposure will destroy the delicate silk in 50 years rather than 100; like the Chauvet Caves of Southern France, filmed by Werner Herzog for *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010), but now sealed up for fear that their Paleolithic art treasures will be lost, hidden and forbidden theatres may as well not exist. And if the Studios are not prepared to save them and explore their historic significance, then perhaps there is a practical role here for the Academy.

EXHIBITION: CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT FOR THE PRODUCT

Many practical considerations are discussed in this *Post Script* issue by Richard Gray of the Cinema Theatre Association (CTA), a British body devoted to the preservation of UK cinemas. Indeed, the CTA has seen recent success in its bid to return 307 Regent Street, London to cinema use. This is of unique historic significance—as the location of the first showing of a Lumière film in Britain, in 1896 (see Branscome).

In his realistic appraisal of the trials of conservation, Richard also highlights the importance of acknowledging alternative uses to keep traditional cinema buildings viable, most notably as churches and bingo halls. The discussion in “In Conversation with Richard Gray...” inevitably moves towards the subject of digital media, which Richard embraces so long as its service is to the “big screen;” but this, of course, is not guaranteed.

As current academic trends show, practical considerations have been focused not onto picture palace preservation, but rather onto modern modes of presentation. The

resulting renaissance of “Reception Studies” is not surprising when we consider that we live in the astonishingly fast-moving age of the pocket movie, a contemporary revolution in which personal films can be created at whim and uploaded to the internet in seconds; when a Studio-made feature can be downloaded and viewed on cell phones in our pockets.

Old cinema buildings have become mere protagonists in the rise of another recent strand of academic focus—what we might call “Reminiscence Studies.” An example of this is Glasgow Film’s “Cinema City” project, a web database of the city’s historic cinemas, accompanied by images and “cinema memories” uploaded by visitors to the website.⁵ It is a slick and impressive resource that plays to current film-historiographical attempts to approach what Maria Velez-Serna in this *Post Script* issue refers to as “understanding cinema-going in localized terms—as part of the fabric of everyday life.” (25).

I have already hinted at a case for these tales of personal cinema-going in recollections of my visit to the Majestic, and Jim Hawkins demonstrates the clear value of diverse experiences in his entertaining Foreword to this issue; however, it might also be argued that collections of cinema-going reminiscences are a cheaper, easier alternative to the tough task of saving cinemas. This is particularly pertinent when memories are shared of buildings that still exist, but are dark—like the impressive 2,800-seat Glasgow Odeon, whose interior is now under threat of demolition.⁶ Published memories of threatened venues may indeed help to save them, but one can’t help seeing the irony of stories of old cinemas mediated through the small-screen digital media that are contributing to the erosion of the cinema experience that inspired those stories.

Time and technology march on, as they always have in cinema. But at the beginning of the digital-technology revolution, movies seem already to be shifting back towards the days when production, distribution, exhibition and reception were so much

closer together. In her essay, "Mapping Film Exhibition in Scotland Before Permanent Cinemas," Maria Velez-Serna highlights the importance of entrepreneurs to early Scottish film production and distribution, and eventually to the development of exhibition venues and chains. Her paper gives rise to a tantalizing parallel that I suggest is ripe for study: just as Maria's paper maps film exhibition and reception before permanent cinemas, the Glasgow Film website maps film exhibition and reception after permanent cinemas. Is this an old paradigm for the new digital revolution?

In the wake of the TV revolution, cinema sold itself as the "big screen entertainment" through technological developments like CinemaScope and VistaVision, and gimmicks like Cinerama and, latterly, IMAX. Despite this, the really big screen experience has long been losing ground to splits and multiplexes, DVD and download. Whilst there may seem little merit in downloading Harry Potter—or any movie for that matter—to a smart phone, there's no denying that many people do; it is an increasingly popular method of movie reception. Why? Perhaps for its convenience. Perhaps it's just the lure of the new, which might explain the seeming disconnect between these smaller and smaller screen experiences and the desire to have larger and larger television screen in our "home cinemas."

Perhaps it's not about size at all. Since the advent of the home video, successive generations have gradually traded screen size for a notion of control, sustained by studios peddling the idea that we could all "own" a copy of the movie. In the mad scramble to make films available to ever more platforms or modes of exhibition, the cinema industry is doing what it has always aimed to do—optimize revenue.

The cinema building has lost its supremacy; it ruled only for as long as it fulfilled a commercial function—under the guise of a social need. Its development was manipulated, circumscribed by its function as money-making machine, as William Fox explains, speaking in 1927 about his experi-

ences as an exhibitor from 1903:

Under the law, the maximum number of chairs at that time was two hundred and ninety-nine. The minute you had more than two hundred and ninety-nine seats, you were obliged to build under certain fire regulations and you had to have a modern, fire-proof building. We kept investing our money into these two hundred and ninety-nine seat theatres until one day they passed a law permitting us to seat six hundred people in a building that was semi-fire-proof. The day after that law was passed these theatres were obsolete and we could not use them anymore. Later we built theatres seating a thousand or fifteen hundred people. Roxy has made obsolete a lot of theatres even larger than the thousand and fifteen hundred types (Allvine 104).

Large theatres grew out of the imperative to amortize costs: to make as much money as possible out of each film print. A 4,000-seat auditorium combined with a lobby space large enough to house a further 4,000 could cycle audiences factory-fashion through many programs a day.

In his essay, "Super Cinemas in the Suburbs: Clifton Cinemas and the Difficulties of Independent Exhibition 1934-1966," Alex Rock shows that it wasn't long before the exhibition methods pioneered by Fox and developed by the likes of Sam "Roxy" Rothafel were making their way out of America to colonize the rest of the world. Even in the small, British regional Clifton cinema chain, the focus was on the grand "Super Cinema." But Alex's essay also strikes a note of caution: it reveals the dangers of over-stretch, and the resultant perils faced by Sidney Clift and Leon Salberg in their attempts to push the Clifton chain into UK cinema's major league.

It is safer, perhaps, to find a niche to work within. This was the experience of Tony Tenser and Michael Klinger, founders of the British, independent Compton Cinema

company. In his essay, "Independent Cinema Exhibition in 1960s Britain: Compton Cinema," Michael Ahmed exposes a sometimes seedy world of private screenings, bizarre B-movies and managed exploitation—all in the pursuit of alternatives to mainstream exhibition in Britain.

A 1960s American alternative to the mainstream exhibition spaces of the Fox/Roxy era is explored in Christofer Meissner's essay, "'A Revolutionary Concept in Screen Entertainment': The Emergence of the Twin Movie Theatre, 1962-1964." Here, Christofer charts the rise of the twin theatre, making a good case for its role as a stepping stone from grand single-screen houses to multiplexes, and its importance, as exhibitors attempted to keep cinemas viable following the break-up of the Studio-based vertical integration model.

Another consequence of the need to downsize was the splitting of large houses into small screens, an effect of which is shown in the Southampton Odeon data analyzed in Sian Barber's essay "Beyond Sex, Bond and *Star Wars*?: Exhibition Data from the Southampton Odeon 1972-1980." This is evidence of William Fox's policy in reverse. As cinema audiences tailed off, the financial prerogative turned away from making sure that every potential patron had a seat to a policy that every seat would have a potential patron.

The key to all this change is, of course, choice. When all that the local Bijou offered was one double-bill, this is what we went to see. Twins, splits, multiplexes, VHS, Pay-per-view and download present ever-increasing choice to the consumer. In the days of Fox, one film would play to ever-expanding audiences; today, an expanded catalogue plays to audiences as small as one. Our facetious response then to André Bazin's classic question "What is Cinema?" might well be, "I am." Cinema has increasingly been about selling me what I want.

Meeting the needs of a diverse modern audience is discussed in Charlotte Crofts' contribution to this issue, "Digital Projections: An Interview with Bill Kinder, Direc-

tor of Editorial and Post Production, Pixar." Here, in his frank and interesting responses to Charlotte's questions, Bill reveals Pixar's healthy approach to the current cinema dilemma. Whilst the company acknowledges the increasing prevalence of iPods, cell phones and micro projectors, Bill is in no doubt about the importance of the big-screen, social experience: "I'm so passionate about the presentation of films in a cinema" (25). Ironically then, the cinema as a special place appears to have a safe future with a company better positioned than most to take advantage of a migration to digital platforms.

Part 2 of *From Boardroom To Bijou: Exploring Cinema Distribution & Exhibition* was originally formulated on the notion of creating an environment to bring the market to: "build it and they will come." However, in the current environment, this seems too restrictive and wholly inadequate. Instead, the ever-changing face of cinema exhibition invites the somewhat more contorted, "make it available and they will consume it."

This commercial imperative is apparent even in the annotated bibliography that rounds out this volume. Tim Hatcher's selection, which encompasses subjects covered in both parts of this double-bill, offers a cross-section of approaches to cinema presentation from around the world: from art houses to dream palaces. It includes a title from 1927 by John Barry and Epes Sargent, which has what I, perhaps naïvely, considered to be a peculiarly modern theme: merchandising. In truth, though, manipulating the message has never been far from business of cinema exhibition.

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Notes

¹See: <<http://www.historigraphics.com/fox>>.

²<<http://www.cinematreasures.org>>.

³See: <<http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/3161>>.

⁴See: <<http://www.majesticempire.com/index.php>>.

⁵See: <http://www.glasgowfilm.org/cinema_city/interactive_map/cinema_memories>.

⁶See: <<http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/5781>>.

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