

'All the evidence is that Cobargo is slipping': An ecological approach to rural cinema-going

- Kate Bowles

In an ecological system, rather like in an organism, not only does every part affect the whole, but the whole is also expressed in every part. Which is to say that, with the possible exception of those cases where one culture forcefully imposes itself upon a completely foreign culture, the new artifacts, processes, ideas, and habits of thought that arise already bear within themselves, however creatively, the 'drift' of what has gone before. They are expressions of the whole before they are modifiers of the whole.

Stephen L. Talbott¹

Lived history is never as the bird flies. Lived history is walked across a landscape, a terrain of time and social life, full of complications.

Edward L. Ayers²

Although we are used to thinking of cinema in terms of 'pictures that move', film history has always meant by this the movement of film through the camera and projector, and the appearance of movement on the screen. Until recently, historians have paid less attention to the ways in which film prints move around their territories of distribution, and the implications of this in terms of the social mobilisation of particular audiences to view them. Histories of early cinema-going acknowledge a period characterised by *travelling* showmen or *itinerant* exhibitors, but imply that this mobility was transformed into stasis by the appearance of *fixed* or *permanent* venues. Another way of looking at this, however, is to suggest that until the appearance of digital distribution, cinema has always had an itinerant dimension. By this I mean that the chief operational challenge of the cinema business has been to match the physical distribution of product with the means of

audience attendance at a singular event at a specified location and time. In fact, it is this practical capacity to travel which was recognised as among the defining conditions of cinema's social impact by the authors of the Production Code:

The motion picture, because of its importance as an entertainment and because of the trust placed in it by the peoples of the world, has special MORAL OBLIGATIONS. . . . By reason of the mobility of a film and the ease of picture distribution, and because of the possibility of duplicating positives in large quantities, this art *reaches places* unpenetrated by other forms of art.³ [emphasis original]

Among those places which in 1930 might have seemed a challenge to penetrate, the Australian market for motion picture product would surely have stood out due to its physical size, diversity and remoteness. Even if major cities such as Sydney, Melbourne and some regional capitals might be imagined as having some degree of artistic experience, and had demonstrated the capacity to sustain an orderly distribution sector, the experiences of cinema's entrepreneurs in rural Australia contradict the presentation of picture distribution as easy. The multiple logistical challenges of ensuring that film prints of reasonable quality reached audiences by the advertised weekly screening time, and that those audiences were moreover able to travel the same routes to attend, suggest that we need to ask different questions of the history of rural cinema-going than we might in urban areas. Here it is my aim to imagine what kind of enquiry into cinema's presence in rural life would include not only conventional sources such as picture show

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licenses, records of motion pictures screened, and the nature of their promotion, but would try to explore the relationship between these and the local history of roads, railways, lunar timetables, and flooding. What models exist which might allow us to situate cinema not only within its social context, but also to understand the strongly geographic underpinning for those social formations, without lapsing into environmental determinism?

Modernity and ecology: the case of Cobargo

Cobargo is an Australian rural locality on the highway connecting Sydney to the far south coast of New South Wales. It lies 240 miles south of Sydney, and 25 miles north of the regional town of Bega, connecting the north-south highway to the small coastal shipping port of Bermagui.⁴ In the 2001 census, the population of Cobargo was recorded as 403, with the percentage of Australian born, Anglican and elderly all slightly above the national average.⁵ As these figures suggest, the original patterns of settlement are still in place. Early twentieth-century parish maps describe landholdings and a set of social relationships still largely intact; the names on the properties are still the names in the local phone book. In 1891, Cobargo had a population of 346, which grew over the next twenty years, peaking at 610 in 1911. But even before the impact of the Depression was felt in rural Australia, Cobargo had begun to decline,



• The Cobargo school of Arts is the single storey weatherboard on the righthand side of the road.

and by 1933 it had fallen back to 390. Nevertheless, in 1936, Cobargo was optimistically declared an Urban Area, and an Urban Area Committee was appointed. In terms of local governance, Cobargo was at the margins of the then Mumbulla Shire, closer to the southern border of the Eurobodalla Shire, and was relatively poorly served in terms of infrastructure. Despite the persistent lobbying of the Urban Area Committee, for example, mains electricity and town street lighting, were not supplied until 1946.⁶

Cobargo is not an obvious case study in cinema-going history. Its small population means that a purpose-built picture theatre was never part of Cobargo's experience of twentieth-century modernity. Oral histories collected in the region tell us that for many farming families, cinema-going was an irregular rather than routine cultural experience. Nevertheless, movies were screened there from the 1920s to the mid 1960s by a succession of entrepreneurs, each with different motivations. Examining a brief but critical moment in the history of this intermittent series of marginal commercial ventures offers us an opportunity to test the reconceptualisation of cinema-going as an ecological practice – that is, to consider it in the terms laid out by Charles O. Frake in 1962, when he described cultural ecology, then emerging as a subfield of American anthropology, as 'the study of the role of culture as a dynamic component of any ecosystem of which man is a part'.⁷ This approach to anthropology, as is clear from the title of its foundational text, J. H. Steward's 1955 *Theory of Culture Change: The Methodology of Multilinear Evolution*, focused on better understanding the interaction between humans and the natural and cultivated environment as a means to appreciating evolutionary change. In the 1950s it stood slightly apart from the science of social relationships, which is the more obvious precedent for contemporary ethnographies of media use in community settings. But as Frake argued, this separation was false, given that in each case 'the net is woven of cultural threads,' and 'the two networks are, of course, interconnected at many points.'⁸ What concerned

Frake was the way in which the cultural perception of physical environment formed part of the everyday grammar of a given cultural context which it is the ethnographer's task to understand.

As might be expected, cultural ecology's primary focus has continued to be on human interaction with environment in areas of interest to biological science and anthropology, and its definition of culture has not automatically extended to include the kinds of culture which concern cinema history. However, the subsequent application of the ecological paradigm to media in the 1970s ('media ecology'), as well as more recently emerging definitions of communicative ecologies, suggest that media scholars continue to find this a fruitful metaphor, in the ongoing effort to describe how and why human behaviour changes over time. In these formulations, the dialectical interplay between user and media environment is envisioned as complex and mutual, rather than as deterministic; and the scope of the enquiry is broader. It is no surprise to find the figure of Marshall McLuhan standing behind media ecology, where communications and entertainment media themselves substitute for the presence of a literal geography. This more abstract formulation of the ecosystem is taken up in conceptualizations of communicative ecology, premised on the idea that communication constructs an triple layered environment consisting of social, technological and discursive interactions between agents who at any time are multiply engaged with each other, using diverse



• Dignam's Creek truss bridge, finished in 1893, superseded earlier bridges in the Cobargo county.

means of communication, and engaging with and generating the ideas in circulation in their community. Such an ecological model can be applied to 'communities of practice', such as internet users, whose formation is not based on shared physical locality, and is of clear benefit to researchers of contemporary media use. However, this expanded capacity is at the cost of some of the straightforward physicality of the earlier anthropological models – the singular and yet banal territoriality of historical cultural practice is simply an assumption embedded in the process of locally situated ethnography.⁹

The question for cinema history is therefore whether we can recuperate some of the literality of cultural ecology by re-introducing physical data from the terrain within which culture is constructed, while at the same time recognizing the importance of the later dialectical models, and in particular the triple layering of the discursive, the social and the technological? This approach does not require Cobargo to have sustained a significant cinema in order for the cinema-going history of Cobargo to be significant. Rather, it enables us to ask of Cobargo as of any place: what kinds of cinema-going experiences were available to people living in this place at a particular time, and what other local ecosystemic factors (including those we might define as physical, cultural, social or political) contributed to the significance of those experiences, both at the time and as they are now re-produced as memory narratives?

The Cobargo School of Arts, which housed the Cobargo Pictures, is a weatherboard structure built in 1887. As Richard Waterhouse points out in his history of Australian country life, the rural School of Arts stood

at the heart of the movement for rational recreation in the Bush. . . . They served as venues for lectures on such diverse subjects as chemistry, geology and the 'poetry of patriotism'. Most contained libraries and reading rooms, some with holdings of several thousand volumes.¹⁰

What Waterhouse does not go on to say is that by the 1920s, Schools of Arts were among the

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most common picture show venues in country areas that were not large enough to sustain a purpose-built theatre, and that for many rural Australians the experience of going to the pictures had little to do with glamour or escapism, but was rather a matter of getting along to the local hall and sitting through the program on a hard wooden bench, while a familiar figure played accompaniment on the hall piano.

In Cobargo, the decision had been made to locate the School of Arts along the Cobargo-Bermagui road, rather than the highway to Sydney. In the 1880s, this was the more significant of the two roads that intersected in the town. As the nearest the railway came was to Nimmitabel, some 60 miles away, then for most of Cobargo's history since its settlement in 1820, major commerce into the region occurred by sea and road. Historian William A. Bayley concurred with town sentiment regarding the commercial opportunities presented by the potential crossroads at Cobargo when he wrote that:

From north to south Princes Highway proclaimed in 1920 passes through the town. The produce of the western hinterland of Yourie [sic] flows through to the port of Bermagui in the east. As early as 1876 Cobargo was recognised as the cross roads for the Road from Cooma to Bermagui . . . When the time comes for the construction of that highway the Cobargo of the future will stand at a great cross roads – an imposing town of consequence on the Far South Coast.¹¹

The movement of people and goods around the far south coast occurred with a good deal of fortitude and resourcefulness, using tracks and ways that adjusted continuously to the volatility of the flood-prone river and creek systems.

As architectural historian Ross Thorne writes:

I remind the reader that country roads and road vehicles up until the 1930s were fairly primitive. If one goes back to the late 1920s, motor trucks were still being advertised in newspapers with solid, hard rubber tyres. Broken axles, burnt-out clutches, and broken leaf springs were always a problem.¹²

This was the formative ecology of the Cobargo picture show. Itinerant showmen travelling the

region showed moving pictures at the School of Arts in the early 1920s, but the first permanent picture show license seems to have been held by the School of Arts management committee itself. The committee purchased the plant using community funds sometime in 1926, and commenced weekly screenings in early 1927. By 1931, however, the enterprise was considered a commercial failure, and there was some rapid renegotiation with Sydney-based distributors to enable the committee to break the contract, and sublet the premises to a travelling show once more. After the end of the Second World War, the license was held for many years by local identity Mr Allan Jamieson, who travelled between the neighbouring towns of Cobargo, Bemboka, Candelo and Wolumla, among others, and was one of the last listed itinerant shows in New South Wales, still in operation in the early 1960s.

Risky business: the precarious nature of a rural picture show

The issue which concerns me here is the apparent failure of the School of Arts Committee enterprise, which began with such acclaim in 1927, and which finally conceded defeat after four difficult years in 1931. Its launch followed a period of expansion for Australian cinema exhibition, with taxable admissions increasing from 68 million in 1921 to 110 million in 1927.¹³ Even before the arrival of the talkies in Sydney and Melbourne in 1928 (which saw taxable admissions increase nationally to an estimated 187 million), it was clear that cinema-going was not a passing novelty or fad. However, I am not convinced that it was entirely the cost of upgrading to sound that caused the School of Arts operation to fail, although this is a tempting explanation. Admittedly, in comparison with some of the grander buildings in nearby towns, the Cobargo School of Arts was a modest structure unlikely to give a substantial return on further investment, given its necessarily limited architecture. But the risk lay not in meeting the cost of conversion so much as in the prospect of recovering those costs. In line with Bemboka and



• Cobargo's vulnerability to flooding is due to the junction of these creeks at the centre of the town.

Candelo, the other two regional localities of similar size, Cobargo was experiencing population drift *before* the significant exodus of the early Depression years. In fact, it seems likely that these three small localities all lost population to Bega itself, which continued to grow during the Depression, partly because of the concentration of services there, including for the very poor. Upgrading a cinema business at this time would only have made sense had that business proved itself already to be successful within its local market, and as we shall see, this had not been the case.

However, it is also not necessarily sufficient to suggest that Cobargo's silent picture show was run out of business by the establishment of the talkies in Bega, where the Lyric Theatre was the first in the region to screen talking pictures in April 1931.¹⁴ While the Lyric, and later the Kings Theatre (built in 1935), clearly offered a superior cinema-going experience, it was not one which was readily available to the residents of outlying villages. Car ownership was still not common, although there were four or five local cars for hire. Oral histories reveal that many of the younger people whom the School of Arts Committee might have hoped to attract were restricted in their travel options. Dairy farmer Ray Sawtell, for example, recalls that there was no public transport in the district even during the Second World War, 'so pushbikes were our way of life.'¹⁵ Similarly, Beryl Schafer remembers that young people from Yowrie were picked up by the local creamery truck, which acted as a defacto

taxi service on behalf of the Cobargo picture show.¹⁶ For many farming families, even the monthly trip to Bega for supplies was not necessarily an opportunity to take in a movie. As Colin Turbet, a former resident of Wyndham, remembers:

In the earliest part – my earliest remembering – either mum or dad would drive a horse and sulky or I'd sit up beside them. And we'd come to Bega one day and there would be a certain amount of shopping done and we'd stay the night and go home the next day. . . . there was no going to the pictures.¹⁷

The purpose built theatres of Bega therefore did not act as direct competition to the village picture shows in the way we might expect, at least until the spread of car ownership in the early 1950s. Rather, there was a long period of co-existence between itinerant shows in outlying village venues not designed for cinema exhibition, and the more glamorous theatres in town. In fact, as the later co-existence of television and cinema would show, in contrast to the national trend, this capacity to sustain within the region a diversity of media forms – which should rather have replaced one another in quick and orderly succession – is one of the key features of the region's ecology of media consumption.

If neither the pace of technical change nor regional competition fully account for the problems faced by the Cobargo School of Arts committee in their efforts to run a successful picture show, what other elements in this early cinema-going ecology might have meant that cinema-going remained such a marginal activity? To recall Charles O. Frake, what were the local perceptions of risk and benefit which would have shaped everyday decision-making, particularly in terms of travel?

Firstly, in a relatively remote rural area, we must start to take seriously the importance of moonlight in travelling around the district after dark. The annual planning of balls and other similar social events took account of the lunar calendar, and as Ray Sawtell recalls, moonlight was also a significant consideration for the many potential cinemagoers who lived beyond the

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main streets of the town: 'We didn't go every week – some weeks we didn't go. . . . And in the winter time I don't think we went as often. The full moon was a good opportunity. We did have lights on the bike, but not like today.'¹⁸ Secondly, the far south coast is a network of valleys, rivers and creeks, and its social history is marked by flooding, and drownings caused by attempts to cross swollen creeks.¹⁹ Repeated washout of the wooden bridges across the many creeks would often have made it difficult both for the film cans to make it to their destination, and for the audience to have joined them there. Persuading townsfolk out along unsealed and unlit roads in the rain to see a film of uncertain print quality in an unheated hall on an uncomfortable wooden bench was the challenge faced by any rural business reliant on after-dark patronage. It would have been similarly difficult to cultivate a habit of regular attendance among farm families who would have had to travel from outlying properties, often without the benefit of a full moon to make the road journey safer, and at the possible cost of getting caught by the weather and not making it home afterwards.

Nevertheless, the School of Arts committee who had taken on the running of a picture show, well outside their area of expertise, needed to find the discursive instruments to achieve this cultivation of the picture-going habit in their local community if their business was to become the source of funds they had intended it to be. The promotional discourses used in this case expose the dialectic between ecosystemic context and cultural decision-making, even if that evidence lies in what goes unsaid: the open secrets that discourse places under erasure. At this point I want to focus specifically on a series of events in the first half of 1928 which call upon the related discourses of self-sufficiency and mutuality within the town community which arise as a response to geographic isolation. If we add this discursive layer to the physical features of terrain and climate which made cinema-going difficult for Cobargo residents, we can see that the committee's strategy was to try to reposition the decision about attending the Friday night show within a more complex set of decisions

about participation in a culture of mutuality and community. Pitched against this strategy, very clearly, was the weather.

At the beginning of 1928 we find a number of influential businesses and community organizations clustered within sight of one another and the would-be crossroads at which Cobargo stood: a neighbourhood either of concentrated risk or concentrated prosperity. At the heart of this neighbourhood was the office of the *Cobargo Chronicle*, founded in 1899. *The Chronicle* regarded itself as a regional newspaper, not simply a paper for Cobargo itself. It was distributed on Fridays, just in time to summon its readers to the weekly picture show, which was also on Friday following an unsuccessful attempt at the beginning of the year to change the weekly picture night to Saturday. The editor since 1913, Vic Henry, was a member of the School of Arts committee up the road, as was Mr Benny the butcher, whose shop on the Princes Highway was within sight of both. Just up the street from Benny's Butcher, the local Strats Café had seen an expansion of its business from the picture show trade looking for refreshment at interval, and so was equally invested in its success. With not only the financing of the School of Arts on his mind, but also the general prosperity of the town literally in view, Vic Henry's substantial editorialising on behalf of both his paper and the picture show is unsurprising.

It [*The Cobargo Chronicle*] is your home paper and no other paper can fill its place in the home, simply because it gives you "the local news".

THE PICTURES are now commencing their second year and are proving increasingly attractive. They are different to travelling shows because the Theatre and plant are your own, associated with one of your public institutions, and keep your money in your own town.²⁰

On the back page of the same edition, his proselytising became even more explicit:

Here is a good new year resolution: – Shop in your own town. If you are a businessman, every penny you spend out of town that can reasonably be spent in it militates against the prosperity of your own business. If you are

a property man, every 1d you spend out of town that can be reasonably spent in it detracts from the value of your property. If you are an employee, every penny you spend out of your own town tends to undermine the continuity of your own employment. If each one of you is patriotic to your hometown, supporting it and its concerns, you will have a better town to live in, and be repaid tenfold.²¹

The first initiative by the committee was a short season of three premiere engagements for which the adult audience would pay a slightly higher price. At this stage there was no hint as to why this particular strategy was being adopted. However, in February it was announced that shortly after commencement the prestige program had 'miscarried', and that the 'regular high class programmes' would resume instead, with warm endorsement of the quality of the existing picture show quickly brought in from outside sources. In fact, the trope of the passing Sydney traveller pausing to commend a Cobargo operation is one which Vic Henry was to use more than once, concerning a number of different businesses, in this period:

The programme of pictures shown at Cobargo Theatre on Friday night was of a high order and both the high class photoplays and the operating could not be excelled by the best city picture theatres, that was the opinion of several patrons of the movies from Sydney. . . . The public of Cobargo are realising that in their own picture theatre they are provided with an entertainment equal to the best the city has to offer.²²

At the end of February, we find the first clue as to the town's open secret: the picture show business, troubled throughout the summer period by bad weather, was not the success its advertising had claimed. The previous week the show had received the following advertising boost with the heading 'ALL WEATHER PICTURES – Wet or dry, hot or cold, rain, hail or shine. Cobargo Theatre never Disappoints Patrons.' Nevertheless, as Vic Henry glumly reported:

Cobargo Picture Theatre seems to be a rainmaker. Last Friday night's was the fifth program which had struck wet weather conditions. The management has made it a rigid rule that the pictures are to be screened every

Friday night, *regardless of the weather and no matter how small the house.*²³ [emphasis mine]

The following week he noted with relief that the weather had improved, as had attendance, but perhaps in hope of encouraging an indignant response, also chose to carry a small story about country life from *The Bulletin*, which included the following candid description of rural movie-going:

Country towns are not attractive to young people because they are not made attractive. There are the pictures, of course, but they are invariably shown in a dingy hall, ill lighted, and to the accompaniment of music from a cracked piano or a jangling pianola.²⁴

In contrast to this, he continued his weekly reporting on the success of the new picture show in coastal Narooma, evidently considered far enough away not to be a rival, but rather to function as a source of inspiration for Cobargo's less willing patrons.

In March, heavy rain returned, now making news throughout the district. The School of Arts committee was focused on two ongoing fundraising campaigns: the screening of two silent movies on the opening night of the Agricultural Show at the beginning of March, and an Ugly Man Competition. This was a popular form of fundraiser, a spoof political campaign in which five prominent Cobargo businessmen (including Vic Henry himself) would travel throughout the district to benefit balls and dances in surrounding villages, securing donations and votes, with their weekly progress reported at the Friday night picture show by means of specially prepared lantern slides. It became clearer that the School of Arts was in some kind of financial difficulty. As Vic Henry had written when both proposals were first put forward in February: 'The ownership of all School of Arts properties is vested in the public, that is, the whole community, and there is no reason to suppose that the people will not help when concerted action is organised.'²⁵

At the end of March, as the expanding coverage of the Ugly Man Competition threatened to take over the entire news section

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of the paper, the following poem was published, candidly revealing the extent and nature of the problem: that the picture show had taken the School of Arts into debt, and the persistent bad weather had worsened their plight:

Our School of Arts committee
Had funds to spare, you know,
Being business men and thrifty
They bought a picture show.

Our seasons turned out badly
And cash was very scant,
Our townsmen all thought sadly
Of the big debt on the plant.

So they put their heads together
And thought they'd find a plan
To "pay" in spite of weather
And find an Ugly Man.

Five of our men are claiming
To have the Ugliest Face
And every man is aiming
To come first in the race.

Promoters are all trying
To seize their utmost chance,
Tickets you are buying
And dance & dance & dance.

Tom, Ambie, Dad and Vic,
They all are running well;
But George is hard to lick –
He's canvassing like hell.

Let your energy not be lacking,
But Hinkle while you can;
don't let the man you're backing
Be among 'The also Ran'.²⁶

In the ensuing weeks, the Ugly Man Competition continued to grow almost unbelievably, until at the end of April it was announced that the competition had raised £533 and the winning Ugly Man had been chosen.²⁷ The following week, Vic Henry reported that this was sufficient to discharge the School of Arts' considerable debts: both the bank debt of £150 and some £250 outstanding on the picture plant. In the same edition, the advertising for the pictures now included this message:

Your Theatre is now free of debt, and so is your School of Arts. Constant and steady support of the Pictures will maintain not alone a splendid educational entertainment week by week, but will also keep your town level with other progressive towns which are endeavouring to cater for public amusement at a cheap rate.²⁸

But we now know that despite this effort to salvage the situation, the School of Arts committee could not sustain a viable picture show in Cobargo and was obliged to abandon its venture in 1931. As an apparent letter to the editor, signed 'Townsmen', put it:

The race club dead, the pictures dead, football apparently dead, and no wicket for cricket – what have we left? The fate of the pictures only bears out what Mr. Kennelly said over a year ago, 'The people don't want pictures' . . . There are lots of households in the town who are never represented at the pictures. Those who live outside the town were fairly regular in their support. All the evidence is that Cobargo is slipping.²⁹

This is an account of systemic cultural decline in the early years of the rural Depression, charting Cobargo's apparently multiple failure to keep up with the pace of modern life, and to sustain the key institutions of a rural community during difficult times. Nevertheless, it does not in itself explain *why* the pictures weren't wanted, and this is the challenge that film history now confronts. What I have argued here is that by taking a wider approach than an inventory of the movies that were screened each week, fostering the usual speculation about their possible cultural appeal in content or quality terms, we can start to see more clearly the ways in which local picture-going opportunities are consistently shaped by geography – in this case, the geography of rural isolation. And as this snapshot of the difficulties faced by operators in the high rainfall year of 1928 has shown, neither the discourses of self-sufficiency nor mutuality were sufficient to herd the townfolk back towards the picture show, even to support a prime community organization.³⁰

Conclusion

Precisely because culturally adaptive behaviour is not predictable, each cultural location will generate its own data and particular forms, which offer a caution to totalizing histories of mass social and political formations, even those with such dominant effects as consumerism or globalization. As Robert C. Allen has recently argued,

The local places of moviegoing, then, need to be represented not as autonomous, neutral, static places that contain audiences and movies, and that then can be “compared” to other such places somewhere else, but as internally heterogeneous nodal points in a social, economic, and cultural cartography of cinema. . . . Conceiving of the space of cinema not as a set of geographically dispersed sites but cultural, social and economic networks encourages film scholars to trace both the continuities and the discontinuities involved in the experience of cinema.³¹

I take Allen to be suggesting here that we need to do more than nod in the direction of the geographical background against which cultural decision-making is set. Rather, we need to develop a methodological practice which combines evidence and ideas from many different sources in order to more fully appreciate the social complexity of the decision to be ‘represented at the pictures’ at a specific place – or not. The historically shifting continuities in the dialectic between cultural practice and ecosystemic context may also help us to understand how cinema-going practices might vary among apparently similar social populations, for example. Further, since an ecological approach implies a strong acknowledgement of the embodied nature of cultural experience, then it is able to encompass reflection on the social relationships between cinema-goers in the hall, including on those occasions where both techniques and habits of segregation were in place. And finally, in work with the memory narratives of older members of the community who are still living in the same district where their family history was shaped, the double embodiment of memory means that the

hardships or pleasures of the past are always recalled through the organising filters of hardships and pleasures differently embodied within the same landscapes in the present, offering us a valuable opportunity to share in their appreciation of the ways in which those ecologies change over time.

Notes

- 1 Stephen L. Talbott, ‘Media Ecology: Taking Account of the Knower’ *Media Ecology*. Paper presented to the 1996 annual conference of the New York Speech Communication Association conference.
- 2 Edward L. Ayers and William G. Thomas, III ‘Time, Space and History’, webcast presentation, EDUCAUSE Annual Conference 2006, (ID: EDU06056), available at <http://www.educause.edu/LibraryDetailPage/666?ID=EDU06056>.
- 3 The Motion Picture Production Code, 1930, in John Belton, ed., *Movies and Mass Culture*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), p. 143.
- 4 As one current tourism promotion concedes, ‘For most of the twentieth century the town has been in decline as transportation has made the larger centres more accessible.’ Source: ‘Walkabout: Australian Travel Guide’, published online by Fairfax Digital, <http://walkabout.com.au/locations/NSWCobargo.shtml>, accessed 15 December 2006.
- 5 Statistics for Cobargo Locality are taken from the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001 Census data; this will be updated in 2007 with 2006 census data; 2001 data is available online <http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/d3310114.nsf/Home/census>, accessed 24 November 2006.
- 6 I am grateful to Mrs May Blacka of Cobargo, for allowing me access to the original Urban Area Committee minute books where the history of this long campaign is meticulously minuted.
- 7 Charles O. Frake, ‘Cultural Ecology and Ethnography,’ *American Anthropologist*, 6:1, part 1, February 1962, pp. 53–9.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- 9 Jo Tacchi, Don Slater and Greg Hearn, *Ethnographic Action Research: a User’s Handbook Developed to Innovate and Research ICT Applications for Poverty Eradication*, New Delhi: UNESCO Regional Bureau for Communication and Information, 2003.
- 10 Richard Waterhouse, *The Vision Splendid: A Social and Cultural History of Rural Australia*, Curtin University Books, 2005, p. 157.
- 11 William A. Bayley, ‘A History of Cobargo’, unpublished, n.d. but probably around 1940–2. Bayley wrote a number of historical essays on New South Wales towns in which he worked. For access to his handwritten and unpublished essay on

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- Cobargo, I am grateful to Sandra Florance and the Bega Pioneers' Museum, where this manuscript is held.
- 12 Ross Thorne, 'Distributing Popular Culture by Rail: the Case of the Decade of the 1950s in New South Wales', paper presented at the National Railway Heritage Conference, Tamworth NSW, September 2005.
 - 13 Note that these are conservative figures based on the admissions recorded by exhibitors as attracting the entertainment ticket tax which had been in place since 1919. These figures therefore do not include admissions where the ticket price was below the (variable) threshold for this tax, and for this reason are particularly likely to under-represent rural admissions. For further information, see 'Cinema Admissions 1901–1932', *Get The Picture*, published online by the Australian Film Commission, at <http://www.afc.gov.au/gtp/wchist190132.html>
 - 14 *The Cobargo Chronicle*, 2 April 1931; as *The Chronicle* in this period was a simple four side broadsheet, specific page numbers are not given
 - 15 Ray Sawtell, interview with Nancy Huggett and Kate Bowles, 6 November 2006
 - 16 Beryl Schafer, OAM, FM, interview with Huggett and Bowles, 7 December 2006
 - 17 Colin Turbet, interview with Huggett and Bowles, 10 August 2006
 - 18 Ray Sawtell, interview with Huggett and Bowles, 6 November 2006
 - 19 See for example the two page timeline 'Some Significant Events in Cobargo', *100 Years in Cobargo 1882–1982*, a pamphlet published by the Manchester Unity Independent Order of Oddfellows to celebrate the history of the Loyal Cobargo Lodge. In this brief history of all the town's major institutional developments, flooding rain is repeatedly mentioned as a newsworthy incident.
 - 20 *The Cobargo Chronicle*, 27 January 1928.
 - 21 Ibid.
 - 22 *The Cobargo Chronicle*, 10 February 1928.
 - 23 *The Cobargo Chronicle*, 24 February 1928.
 - 24 *The Cobargo Chronicle*, 2 March 1928.
 - 25 *The Cobargo Chronicle*, 17 February 1928.
 - 26 *The Cobargo Chronicle*, 23 March 1928.
 - 27 *The Cobargo Chronicle*, 27 April 1928
 - 28 *The Cobargo Chronicle*, 4 May 1928.
 - 29 *The Cobargo Chronicle*, 2 April 1931. I am grateful to Veronica Coen for bringing this letter to my attention, in her research paper 'Early Cinema at Quaama and Cobargo Schools of Arts: A Preliminary Analysis of Film Selection, Distribution, Viewing Patterns and Community Cultural Themes', available online at <http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/research/2005–2006ss/index.html>
 - 30 Rainfall data collected by the CSIRO shows that Bega and outlying towns experienced flooding with damage to roads and bridges in 1913, 1914, 1919, 1922, 1925, 1928, 1934 (repeatedly through the year), 1942, 1943, 1944, 1948, 1950, 1952, 1956, 1959, 1966, 1971, 1975, 1976, 1992. See Anthony Scott, 'History of land use in the Murrumbidgee/Dry River catchment, NSW South Coast', CSIRO Land and Water Technical Report 54/99, (Canberra, 1999).
 - 31 Robert C. Allen, 'The Place of Space in Film Historiography', special issue 'Cinema in Context', *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis*, no. 9, 2006, pp. 24, 26.