AusCinemas Presentation

ABSTRACT: As part of our current ARC project "Mapping the Movies", Dr. Mike Walsh and I are developing, a geodatabase of Australian cinemas, covering the period from 1948 to 1971 and based on a consistent dataset found in the trade journal Film Weekly, providing basic information on the ownership, location and capacity of approximately 4,000 venues.

A principal purpose of the database is to provide an opportunity for crowdsourcing information about the venues from other material available on the Web and from the interested public. We expect to engage the interest of organisations devoted to the history and preservation of cinemas, and of school teachers developing local history projects under the national curriculum. The information gathered will include details of screening programs, photographs and digitised newspaper reports.

Funded by an eReasearchSA Summer Scholarship, we are developing a set of templates for collection of crowdsourcing data and extend the website to manage and use the additional information.

A broader aim of the project is to develop a generic open source geodatabase for use by digital humanities researchers who want to map relatively small scale datasets. The system is focused around a database structure that supports the definition of objects with metadata, allowing additional objects to be added to the system without the need to significantly change the underlying database structure. The system is focused on easy implementation and management, needing high-level IT skills for only brief periods in the establishment of a project, to define objects in the database and in the programming code, and customise the user interface to meet their specific needs.

The paper will describe the evolution of the research project, and demonstrate the website.

[Slide 1: Opening screen]
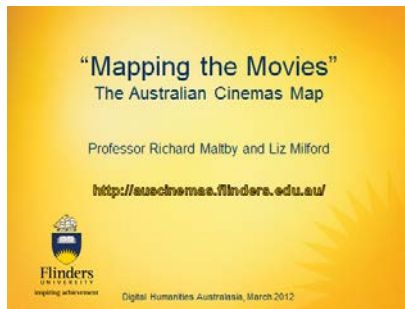
This project forms part of the output for an ARC Discovery project involving Deb Verhoeven, Mike Walsh, Kate Bowles, Colin Arrowsmith and Jill Matthews, called *Mapping the Movies: the Changing Nature of Australia's Cinema Circuits and their Audiences.*

This project was a continuation of a previous Discovery project, *Regional Markets and Local Audiences: Case Studies in Australian Cinema Consumption, 1928–1980.* Both projects are contributions to an emerging international trend in research into cinema history, that has shifted its focus away from the content of films to consider their circulation and consumption, and to examine the cinema as a site of social and cultural exchange. This shared effort has engaged contributors from different points on the disciplinary compass, including history, geography, cultural studies, economics, sociology and anthropology, as well as film and media studies. Their projects have examined the commercial activities of film distribution and exhibition, the legal and political discourses that craft cinema's profile in public life, and the social and cultural histories of specific cinema audiences. Many of their projects have been collaborative, facilitated by computational analysis and the opportunities for quantitative research offered by databases and Geographical Information Systems, which allow for the compilation of new information about the history of cinema exhibition and reception in ways that would previously have been too labour intensive to undertake. Having achieved critical mass and methodological maturity, this body of work has now developed a distinct identity, to which we have given the name 'the new cinema history'.

In calling this work cinema history, we are deliberately distinguishing it from a film history that has been predominantly constructed as a history of production, producers, authorship and individual films most commonly understood as texts, and

that has been predominantly evaluative, classificatory or curatorial in its remit. Methodologically, this practice of film history has often struggled to place films into a wider historical context; its most common approach has been to treat films as involuntary testimony, bearing unconscious material witness to the *mentalité* or *zeitgeist* of the period of their production. The idea that films, along with other forms of mass or popular culture, are 'eloquent social documents' reflecting the flow of contemporary history has been an implicit assumption of much writing about cinema, but explanations of how 'the film-making process taps some reservoir of cultural meaning' have remained relatively unformulated and untheorised, little advanced from Siegfried Kracauer's proposal in 1947 that some movies, or some 'pictorial or narrative motifs' reiterated in them, might be understood as 'deep layers of collective mentality which extend more or less below the dimensions of consciousness'. Versions of this proposition have encouraged historians to treat films as historically symptomatic and to examine the 'unconscious' of a filmic text to reveal the biases, tastes or secret fears of the cultural moment in which it was produced.

Instinctively reaching for metaphor and allusion as clues, this mode of analysis turns the movies themselves into proxies for the missing historical audience, in the expectation that an interpretation of film content will reveal something about the cultural conditions that produced it and attracted audiences to it. Such analyses pay little attention to their actual modes of circulation at any time, and risk ascribing to individual films a representational significance that may be disproportionate to their capacity for historical agency.

This symptomatic film history has also largely been written without acknowledging the transitory nature of any individual film's exhibition history. Motion picture industries require audiences to cultivate the habit of cinemagoing as a regular and frequent social activity. From very early in their industrial history, motion pictures were understood to be consumables, viewed once, disposed of and replaced by a substitute providing a comparable experience. The routine change of programme was a critical element in the construction of the social habit of attendance, ensuring that any individual movie was likely to be part of a movie theatre audience's experience of cinema for three days or less, with little opportunity to leave a lasting impression before it disappeared indefinitely. Sustaining the habit of viewing required

a constant traffic in film prints, ensuring that the evanescent images on the screen formed the most transient and expendable element of the experience of cinema.

Oral histories with cinema audience members consistently tell us that the local rhythms of motion picture circulation and the qualities of the experience of cinema attendance were place-specific and shaped by the continuities of life in the family, the workplace, the neighbourhood and community. Stories that cinemagoers recall return repeatedly to the patterns and highlights of everyday life, its relationships, pressures and resolutions. Only the occasional motion picture proves to be as memorable, and it is as likely to be memorable in its fragments as in its totality.

New cinema history takes these facts as its premise, and focuses its attention on the questions that surround the social history of the experience of cinema rather than the histories of its ephemeral products. By doing so, it becomes possible to engage scholars from more diverse disciplinary backgrounds in this emerging field. Cinema has become a matter of historical interest to researchers who have not been schooled in the professional orthodoxy that the proper business of film studies is the study of films. From the perspective of historical geography, social history, economics, anthropology or population studies, the observation that cinemas are sites of social and cultural significance has as much to do with the patterns of employment, urban development, transport systems and leisure practices that shape cinema's global diffusion, as it does with what happens in the evanescent encounter between an individual audience member and a film print. New cinema history uses quantitative information, articulated through the apparatus of databases, spatial analysis and geovisualisation, to advance a range of hypotheses about the relationship of cinemas to social groupings in the expectation that these hypotheses must be tested by other, qualitative means.

[Slide 2 Adelaide]
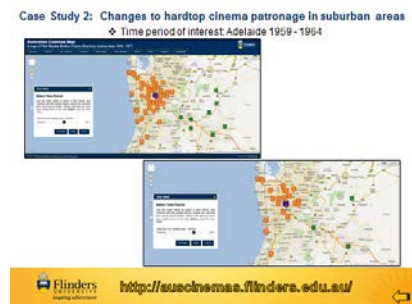
The Mapping the Movies project has begun an investigation into the significance of Australian cinemas as sites of social and economic activity, focusing on the period from 1950 to 1970. This period covers a major change in the number, nature and geographic distribution of cinemas in Australia, and on reason for focusing on it is because there is a conventional explanation for those changes in the appearance of television as a functional alternative to cinema. From the perspective that I've outlined, we want to ask questions about the persuasiveness of that explanation, and to consider a range of other factors that might have contributed to the relative decline in cinema attendance over the period.

The long-term aim is to combine archival, social and spatial data with oral histories to construct a GIS database of cinema venues and their neighbourhoods, creating maps of distribution practices and audience movements in order to analyse the responsiveness of cinemas and their audiences to social and cultural change. Of course, this has turned out to be a far more ambitious agenda than one grant can achieve, and the part of the project that I want to discuss today might be considered an initial enabling device for the larger project. In one sense, the project is also an attempt to address an issue raised by Alan Liu in his keynote address, in the historical parallel to the debate over close and distant reading, which is in the relationship between microhistories and larger scale social or cultural history: how many microhistories do you need to make a general historical statement? At one level, the cinema history we are discussing describes a highly localised activity, involving individual sites and the individuals attached to them. But these individuals were also part of a globally-organised supply chain, the profitability of which was dependent on the predictability of their behaviour.

[Slide 3: Film Weekly records]

The primary information source for our initial dataset comes from the annual trade publication, the *Film Weekly Yearbook*, which contains a listing of cinema exhibition venues in Australia, with minimal information about their location, seating capacity and ownership.

[Slide 4: Record extraction into a simple exportable excel database file]

We have extracted the information initially into a series of spreadsheets, geocoded each of the venues, and generated a map based on Google Maps technology.

[Slide 5: Website frontend based on Google Maps technology]

It's worth saying two things about the underlying data at this point, just to highlight what I think is an instance of a wider debate. This project uses the *Film Weekly* data as a consistent dataset; this is industry-sourced data, which existed for industry use. Its virtues are its volume, its national coverage, and its consistency. What we also

know about it, from the other research in our project, is that its data is not always accurate. It doesn't, for example, capture the closure data of cinemas with any accuracy – closure is simply recorded by a cinema's absence from the list in a given year. Within the project, we have had long discussions about how to use this data, and whether to integrate it with the project's main database, CAARP, which has retained a higher level of exactitude, and a much greater level of detail in the data we've stored in it, but does so for smaller areas and narrower periods of time. Our solution has been to maintain a separation between the two datasets, but to allow the Auscinemas site to access CAARP data, and for CAARP to have the capacity to ingest AusCinemas data when we're sure of its reliability.

This also, of course, means that Auscinemas will grow from its base data, and in the process distort the consistency of the original dataset. This is an inevitable consequence of the research, and of the crowdsourcing aspect of our project, with which we hope to generate a collection of microhistories which will correct, amplify and complicate the picture we can create from the existing data.

A quick your of what the site does.

[Slide 6: More Website frontend screenshots]

Venue data is linked to a set of markers, which represent *Locality Type* and *Cinema Type.* Clicking on a marker opens an **Information Window** which displays all available Film Weekly data and additional linked resources. (We must get prettier icons!)

[Slide 7: Website features: Browse, Search, Time slider and Contribute]

You can search or browse the data, and select a set of venues to display. You can then examine what happens to that set of venues over time by using the Time Slider, either manually or as an automation.

[Slide 8: Brisbane]
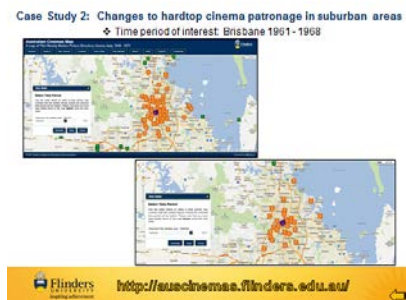
[Slide 9: Contribute form]

The crucial bit of all this for the development of the project is the Contribute form, which is how we plan to gather crowdsourced information from the general public, from local historical societies and cinema preservation groups, and potentially from school local history projects. I suspect that we have some lessons to learn from the papers yesterday by Donelle McKinley and Mia Ridge in the session on successful crowdsourcing, but this is our current version.

The aim is to collect images, stories, clippings, personal histories, information about screenings, and more generally accounts of the role and function of the cinema in the community, which will augment the work that we will do with students in harvesting information from Trove, Picture Australia and elsewhere.

This is also likely to take us outside the boundaries of our initial period of 1948-71, and this will involve a number of revisions and reiterations of the site. We also have a range of questions to develop as the project grows beyond its current users:

One of our original intentions was to develop the geodatabase as a generic piece of software for use by digital humanities researchers who want to map relatively small scale datasets. The system is focused around a database structure that supports the definition of objects with metadata, allowing additional objects to be added to the system without the need to significantly change the underlying database structure. The system is focused on easy implementation and management, needing high-level IT skills for only brief periods in the establishment of a project, to define objects in the database and in the programming code, and customise the user interface to meet their specific needs.

❖ What do other researchers want to use the site for, and how do we make the site more useful to a broader range of users, at a variety of levels of use?
❖ How do we get people to contribute? How much further can we simplify and clarify the contribution process?
❖ How closely do we monitor the reliability of contributor-supplied information? How far can we automate input processes to reduce monitoring costs but ensure reliability?
❖ What do we do when the money runs out?
❖ Can this system be picked up by others and readily used or has it become too intertwined with our own data?

[Slide 10: Case Study 1] *[click on coloured horizontal arrows to move to linked slides]*

[Slide 11: Case Study 1] *[slide linked to red arrow on #9, little yellow arrow to go back to #9]*

[Slide 12: Case Study 1] *[slide linked to green arrow on #9, little yellow arrow to go back to #9]*

[Slide 13: Case Study 1] *[slide linked to blue arrow 1 on #9, little yellow arrow to go back to #9]*

[Slide 14: Case Study 1] *[slide linked to blue arrow 2 on #9, little yellow arrow to go back to #9]*

[Slide 15: Case Study 1] *[slide linked to purple arrow on #9, little yellow arrow to go back to #9]*

[Slide 15: Case Study 2] *[click on coloured horizontal arrows to move to linked slides]*

[Slide 16: Case Study 2] *[slide linked to red, green and blue arrows on #15, little yellow arrow to go back to #15]*

[Slide 17: Case Study 2] *[slide linked to dark pink arrow on #15, little yellow arrow to go back to #15]*

[Slide 20: Questions for the Future]