

## **Observation, mediation and intervention: An account of methodological fusion in the study of rural cinema audiences in Australia**

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### **Abstract:**

This article examines the multi-method approach of a recently completed three-year study of contemporary rural cinema audiences in Australia. This was a field-based research project organized around ten non-metropolitan case study sites, and is noteworthy for its combination of different methodological techniques that draw from narrative, ethnographic and anthropological traditions. The discussion reflects upon the conceptual and practical aspects of these different methods and highlights how they complimented and helped inform each another, as well as some of their limitations. In doing so, this survey seeks to demonstrate the relevance and productive capacity of multi-method approaches in the field of audience research. While this by no means represents the only way of doing audience research, multi-method projects nonetheless offer some exciting opportunities to extend our understanding of audience emotions, motivations and behaviour.

### **Introduction**

The consumption of audiovisual content across formats such as cinema, television and mobile devices, has become a ubiquitous and integrated part of modern life. The omnipresence of media underpins the importance of audience research – both in terms of understanding the way in which people make sense of the films and other programs they consume, but also how their viewing activities contribute to shaping the experience of everyday life. While audiences represent a highly fertile and engaging area of inquiry, they also present a challenge for scholars. Studies from across the spectrum of the social sciences, cultural and media studies have demonstrated that behavioural decisions and emotional responses are often driven by a range of nuanced and complex factors. They also make clear that the processes and procedures that scholars use in trying to understand these factors can play a major role in determining the nature of their findings and

conclusions. This underscores the need for researchers to adopt self-conscious and reflective approaches to their methodological practices, particularly in relation to articulating the multi-faceted dimensions of media engagement.

This article examines the multi-method approach of a recently completed three-year study of contemporary rural cinema audiences in Australia. It explores the theoretical underpinnings of these different approaches, the practical ways in which they were combined and implemented, and offers some examples of how the mixture of data elicited directly influenced the study's findings. Three distinct methodological approaches to information gathering and analysis combined in the project:

- Ethnographic - observation of rural cinemas and their wider environments including limited elements of researcher participation;
- Narrative –interviews and written surveys conducted with rural audiences and industry professionals drawing on social science based investigative traditions; and
- Social Anthropology - immersion and extended participation through two-year field placement in a small town with a single-screen heritage cinema.

As this listing indicates this was primarily a field based study organized around ten cinemas in rural Australia. These provided the focus for the majority of the ethnographic and narrative work, and also the site for the anthropological placement.

In terms of the ethnographic work, each of the ten case study sites was visited once<sup>1</sup> during the study in order to survey the cinema and its surrounding social and physical environment. I recorded these observations as written notes and in photographs. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with cinema audiences at each site and a written survey was also distributed in two of the ten locations. In addition to talking directly to audiences, I organized formal discussions with cinema staff as well as national industry professionals including film distributors, officers from government film agencies and rural film festival organizers. A total of 60 interviews were carried out - 32 with cinema-goers, 16 with cinema owners/staff and 12 with other industry professionals. The two-page written survey about local cinema-going practices elicited 136 responses from 370 distributed at two of the case study sites (Merimbula and Sawtell), equating to a response rate of 37 per cent.

The social anthropology component of the research was conducted in Sawtell, a small town on the mid north coast of New South Wales where I lived with my family (partner and primary school aged children) for two years. My term for this work draws on Beattie's conceptualization of this strand of anthropology as interested in applying immersive research techniques to the understanding of social relationships rather than societies as a whole (2006: 149). During my time in Sawtell I was a regular patron of the local film theatre known as the First Avenue Cinema – a modest art-deco style single screen venue built in the mid 1950s. I also worked as a volunteer and executive committee member for a local film

support group known as Friends of the Sawtell Cinema, and made numerous friends and acquaintances in the local area as I went about my life and research there.

The rationale for combining these three different approaches in the study was to enable a wider range of perspectives to be brought to bear in addressing its central questions: How, why and when are films exhibited in rural Australia? Why do people seek out the cinema in rural places? And what social and cultural meanings are connected with these acts of consumption? In particular, can going to the cinema in rural places enhance social cohesion and sense of community - a claim that is regularly made by rural policy-makers. In addressing these questions the aim was to collect a range of factual and interpretative information. I was particularly keen to understand and incorporate into the analysis significant insights into what rural cinema-going means for the people who participate in it (audiences) and facilitate it (exhibitors). This, I believed, was key to more fully representing what modern rural cinema-going was all about - as Beattie argues 'Behaviour can have no social significance apart from what it means to somebody, and unless such 'meanings' are taken into account nothing remotely resembling sociological understanding is possible' (2006: 149). Applying this argument more specifically, rural audience and exhibitor accounts may be regarded as representing some of the centrally important meanings of the activity of rural cinema-going. While they certainly do not embody its only meanings, without significant input from the local audience/exhibitor perspective the answers to the set questions of the project would be inherently flawed.

This article begins with a brief overview of the impetus for the research and how this background helped to shape the direction of the investigation. The second section considers the broad methodological concepts upon which the multi-source research was based and also looks at some of the studies that inspired my approach. The third section looks at the implementation of the methodological approach in more detail, both in terms of the execution of its different elements and how the varied material collected was used to inform interpretation and analysis. The final part of the article examines how the methods helped enhance the breadth and depth of some of the main conclusions arising from the study.

However, before I begin it is relevant to mention briefly that my research was conceived and conducted initially as a project to be undertaken solely in Australia. Grants received in the second year enabled the locations to be expanded to include some sites in the United Kingdom (UK). The comparative research that was conducted over sixteen weeks in the UK directly replicated the field-based investigations carried out in Australia, with the exception of the long term rural placement. While this work was very important to extending the frame of reference of the study, it was Australia that was central to the formative work on the project design and provided the location for the most detailed field work. Information gathering the UK mirrored the Australian work to a large degree as did the results gained from it<sup>2</sup>. It is for these reasons as well as for brevity that Australia forms the primary focus of the article.

## **Background for the Study**

Going to the cinema is the most popular cultural activity that Australians engage in outside the home. Cultural attendance surveys conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) confirm that visits to movie theatres outstrip a range of other venues and events including music performances, live theatre, museums and art galleries. In terms of non-metropolitan engagement, figures from the most recent survey in 2009-10 showed that 61 per cent of people living outside the six state capital cities went to the movies at least once in 2009-10. This was slightly lower than the national average of 67 per cent, but is nonetheless highly significant (ABS 2010). These figures are backed by data collated by the film industry that indicates cinemas located outside the main capital cities account for just over 40 per cent of national screens and around 30 per cent of annual box office revenues (Screen Australia 2012a, 2012b).

However, while cinema-going is popular in rural areas it does not neatly replicate the metropolitan experience. Modern multiplexes are found in larger towns but rarely in places with populations of less than 40,000, and very few specialist or arthouse cinemas are able to survive outside population-dense city areas. Further, in many small towns the population is simply too small to support a commercial theatre, not even something as modest as a single or twin screen venue. This creates space and opportunity for grassroots enterprises, such as those run by formally constituted film societies and local volunteer committees, which help fill the gaps. While these kinds of groups also prosper in cities, they tend to cater to an audience seeking to opt out of a relatively well-resourced mainstream. Most comparative rural enterprises, on the other hand, address the needs of small communities where residents are more concerned with getting to watch a film *in any form*.

There is significant range and depth to the film exhibition activity taking place in rural Australia, although geographic coverage is by no means comprehensive or evenly spread. Further, the figures quoted above highlight the extent of cinema patronage and its economic value. However, despite the salience of this data and the allure of the cultural diversity that exists beyond the city limits, very little research on contemporary rural film-going exists in Australia or elsewhere. This omission is surprising given the emphasis over the past decade or so in understanding movie viewing as a practice that is closely intertwined and profoundly influenced by the social and spatial experiences of audiences. Scholars such as Robert Allen (2006, 2011), Douglas Gomery (1992), Kathy Fuller-Seeley (1996, 2008), Mark Jancovich et. al. (2003) and others, have shown that cinema-going can be about much more than simply watching movies. This work has demonstrated that whatever its ostensible occasion or genre, a film on show is unavoidably anchored in time and place. As an engagement with a cultural text, it merges the recorded images and sounds of on-screen spaces (enveloping places, objects and social beings) with a variety of off-screen flows (containing their own places, things and people). As a site of consumption, going to the cinema represents an act of engagement with a public space – an event that is itself embedded in larger geographies of commodity exchange, civic interaction and interpersonal

communication. One of the aims of this study was to understand more about how these elements of the film experience enmesh and interrelate to one another in rural settings.

### **Approaching the Concept of Multi-Method Research**

In order to adequately address my research questions, the methodological framework for the study needed to facilitate two things – first to collect information directly from audiences about their cinema-going habits and thoughts, and second to observe and analyze for myself audience behaviours by engaging with the environments in which these cinema-going activities took place. This would allow me to understand the views of rural audiences and exhibitors, and also assess and scrutinize the subject by drawing on my own critical judgements and the theorizations of other scholars. In doing so, this would give rise to a more multi-dimensional account of ‘both what people do and what they think about what they do’ (Beattie 2006: 149). However, it would require a more intimate association with and learning about the subject under investigation than could be achieved solely by using the kind of social science-style surveys often favoured in audience research. Combining this style of data gathering with something else offered a potentially productive way forward. I was encouraged by other cinema studies that had effectively combined various elements of surveys and interviews with ethnography and social anthropology as a means of enriching their findings (see for example Hubbard 2002, 2003, Jancovich et. al. 2003, Jones 2003, McKee et.al. 2008). These demonstrated that data gathered by different methods could effectively be brought together to enrich or extend analysis of particular issues. I give two examples here to illustrate my point. These studies incorporate elements of audience research, although may not be regarded as audience studies per se.

In the early 2000s, Janna Jones conducted extensive research on the restoration of picture palaces in the southern United States (2003). While positioning her book primarily as an analysis of historic preservation, Jones highlights the value looking at the subject from a number of viewpoints. She argued that critiques of preservation had been limited by their tendency to see it as a commodity, something that strips away any ‘real’ sense of the past. In her view this rather narrow approach was not capable of adequately representing its meaning:

The problem with such an approach is that preservation is ... an illusion, and by merely observing the surfaces, we cannot understand how and why the illusion is created and how it is sustained. To provide more than a surface interpretation, the book details and interprets theater archival materials, hours of conversations with preservationists [theater administrators, employees, volunteers and audiences], and the twentieth century history of downtown districts where the theaters are located. This broader scope leads us to a better understanding of the various political, cultural, and aesthetic struggles preservationists face and what happens to the past when it is redesigned for use in the present. (2003: 9)

What is not mentioned in this quote but explained elsewhere is that Jones based her book around six cinemas, which she used as case studies. Jones visited each of these sites at least once to conduct interviews and archival research. However, she also spent time observing and analyzing the physical spaces of the movie theatres and the districts in which they were located and this also informed her analysis (2003: 8). Jones' account is innovative and meticulous, and illustrates how multiple methods can be combined in order to construct a more comprehensive account of the subject under investigation. This work also highlights the myriad of socio-cultural factors that come into play around the practice of cinema-going, and how difficult these can be to understand without reference to each other.

In a different but nonetheless similarly effective way Phil Hubbard (2002, 2003) combined ethnographic and survey techniques in his study of multiplex audiences in the UK city of Leicester. More specifically, Hubbard combined observations of multiplex interiors and their wider environments with data gathered from written questionnaires and follow-up interviews. Beginning his analysis by discussing the spatial distribution and aesthetic design of multiplexes, Hubbard highlights the limitations of this relatively narrow approach to understanding the practice of contemporary cinema-going. Accounting the popularity of the multiplex, he argued, rests upon not only appreciating the dynamics of its geographies and economic imperatives but also understanding the 'forms of sociality played out in these spaces' (2002: 1253). Hubbard highlights that in addition to films and location, the dependability and predictability of the multiplex experience are some of its key appeals, something he terms an exercise in 'risking the riskless'. By bringing a broader range of factors into consideration this work has enriched our notions of what drives multiplex admissions and the kinds of social and cultural encounters people have within them.

Of course multi-method research is not new. Social scientists have been utilizing different data gathering and analytical techniques within single studies for decades. Over this time there have been various attempts to quantify and describe (and/or prescribe) the process. The amalgamation of materials collected via different methodological approaches is most often described as 'triangulation'. The theories that underpin triangulation can be traced back to scholars Campbell and Fiske who were one of the early advocates of multi-method research in the social sciences as a means of enhancing validity (1959). Specifically they suggested that by broadening and mixing approaches, the variances that inevitability occurred when relying on only one data source alone could be mitigated. The contention was this would lead to more authoritative explanations of the particular phenomenon under investigation. These assertions were later extended by theorists such as Webb et.al. (1966) and Denzin (1970). However, by the late 1970s researchers had become more circumspect in their claims regarding the power of triangulation. Jick's essay on the practical applications of this methodology points to the difficulties of arriving at fixed or intrinsic meanings. He highlights the wide scope for variation that exists around the role of the researcher, suggesting that:

Overall, the triangulating investigator is left to search for a logical pattern in mixed-method results. His or her claim to validity rests on a judgment ... While

one can rely on certain scientific conventions (eg. scaling, control groups, etc.) for maximizing the credibility of one's findings, the researcher using triangulation is like to rely more still on a "feel" of the situation. This intuition and firsthand knowledge drawn from the multiple vantage points is centrally reflected in the interpretation process. (1979: 608)

Similarly, contemporary scholars are more likely to see triangulation as a fluid framework, something that is capable of giving rise to a more considered, multi-faceted version of events rather than one that is definitive or absolute. Wendy Olsen (2004) and Kim Schrøder et.al. (2003: 356-360), for example, suggest that while methodological pluralism can enhance the breadth and depth of research findings it does not necessarily give rise to a complete and unqualified set of conclusions.

One of the more interesting concerns interwoven through the debates on triangulation has addressed the role of the investigator. As claims regarding the capacity of triangulation to deliver precision have weakened, there has been a growing appreciation of the significant influence exerted by the researcher. That we accept that the background and experiences of researchers shape the conduct and analysis of their work seems in one sense a very basic point. However, it is relevant to mention here because it underscores why it is difficult to conduct multi-method research in accordance with a fixed formula or approach. It is a process that is integrally shaped by judgments made by the investigator and the nature of the questions being asked. While this is arguably true of all research, with multi-method research there exists the possibility (and benefit) that the conclusions derived from these judgments will be more broadly and/or more richly informed.

### **Multi-Method Research in Practice**

Turning more specifically to my study, this section examines its key methodological approaches - ethnographic, narrative and social anthropology.

#### ***Ethnographic Approach***

Much of the ethnographic work conducted during my visits to the ten case study cinemas conforms to the approach described by Denzin as 'observer as participant' (1970: 193-194). This particular method of research is characterized by relatively brief contact with the subject and structured or formalized setting for respondent interaction. I spent a short period of time at each case study location (usually between two to four days) and went to most places only once during the course of the project. During these visits I stayed overnight in a local hotel, used the town's shops and restaurants, and spent time exploring the Central Business District and residential areas as well as the surrounding countryside. I also attempted to engage the people I came into contact with (such as hotel or shop owners) in general conversation about the town and the cinema and read local newspapers.<sup>3</sup> All this helped provide a sense of mood of the town, the level of prosperity, retail activity and general bustle, and provided an

opportunity to assess the entertainment options beyond the local cinema. All this helped me to understand the place of the cinema within its wider local environment. This work complemented the observations conducted within the cinemas themselves, which typically involved a tour of the venue (front and back of house) and attending at least one film screening. This work was documented as written notes, usually completed in the evenings during the site visit, and visually through the taking of photographs. The aim overall was to try to take in as much as possible, but within the time available these impressions were inevitably partial and relatively brief.

Nevertheless, the value of being able to physically visit and observe the case study cinemas was illustrated particularly strongly at The Roxy in Bingara, a small and relatively remote town in northwest New South Wales. In statistical terms, Bingara is considered a relatively disadvantaged area with low household incomes and higher than average unemployment. On my visit to the town in 2009 I found Bingara a small and fairly basic town but a very pleasant place, with a number of well-maintained buildings and small garden beds lining the main street. However, towering over all this was The Roxy, the town's recently restored cinema and live performance venue, which is owned and managed by the local council. The Roxy was built in 1936 and little expense was spared at the time in its design and construction. It is a testament to the town's more affluent past, although its opulence is in many ways out of step with the present-day realities of life there.

Being able to see the cinema and to appreciate how it sat within its wider socio-geographic environment was very important in understanding some of the responses of the local residents. One interesting issue that was raised in all the interviews was that at the beginning of the cinema restoration project there were some serious opposition to it, which centred on concerns about the cost. Some residents were very unhappy about money being diverted away from what they perceived as being more needy projects, such as fixing roads, the water supply and improving aged care. Emotions reportedly ran high over the issue and I had the sense resistance to the cinema was much more intense than I had encountered at other comparable sites. These attitudes seemed quite understandable when considered against the local backdrop. But they gained additional potency for me after actually seeing the cinema building - it is huge, highly ornate and out of proportion with everything else in the town. Panic over what it might cost to restore seemed very reasonable in the context of the size and scale of the cinema in question. Understanding this helped me account for the intensity of reactions over the issue of its rebirth.

Happily the concerns of local residents have not persisted. Since its reopening in 2004 The Roxy has received considerable recognition and achieved modest economic success. Attitudes towards the building have shifted from trepidation to immense pride, again in a way that was more passionate than I encountered at other cinemas. And again contributing to this was the physicality of the building – its restored grandeur and glamour juxtaposed with a more austere wider surrounding, which has a role to play in encouraging additional dimensions to emotional investment in the venue. Without seeing The Roxy for myself I would almost certainly have downplayed the fervour and enthusiasm my interview participants expressed for



their cinema. While I did not necessarily accept their accounts on face value, being able to contextualize them with my personal experience of the site meant I gave them more balanced, and importantly more appropriate, consideration. This was crucial to constructing a more nuanced account of what going to the cinema meant in the town of Bingara.

### ***Narrative Approach***

The study's narrative methods drew heavily on the traditions of social science inquiry. Through interviews and written surveys I sought to engage rural people in a dialogue about their cinema-going habits and preferences, and encourage them to reflect on and articulate the significance of their experiences. I also held formal discussions with cinema staff at the case study sites as well as film distributors, government film agencies and rural film festival organizers. This helped me to gather different perspectives on audience behaviours and to amass information about the workings of the rural exhibition industry more generally.

Turning first to the interviews, between two and five were conducted in each case study location. This was a very small sample in the context of the cinema's overall audience but reflected the practicalities of recruiting participants as well as the constraints of time given my budget would stretch only to staying in towns a few days. At some of the case study sites I had local connections that I used to enlist interviewees. In other places, cinema owners assisted by providing names and contact details of willing participants. These people were usually very frequent patrons and heavily invested in the activity of film-going and in the narrative of the theatre being a positive influence on their town. This was an unavoidable consequence of the way in which they were recruited, but was balanced out to some degree by the respondents I was able to engage independently and the written survey which was delivered more broadly to local residents by household mail-box drop rather than at the cinema.

Written surveys were distributed in two cinema case study locations (Sawtell and Merimbula). The two-page questionnaires were distributed by letter-box drop to local households in each town and contained a mix of multiple choice and open-ended questions about the local cinema and the respondent's movie-going routines. In order to preserve comparability I did not alter the survey between its distribution in the two towns, which occurred several months apart. However, I had earlier recruited a representative test group that had greatly assisted me in refining the survey format. Delivering the questionnaires to homes (rather than an exit-type poll at cinemas) was designed to reach a wider pool of local residents, though in overall terms it was still quite small. This also enabled more detailed questions to be put to residents and more time for them to consider their responses. I personally placed the surveys in household mailboxes and in doing so was able to see and record (through notes and photographs) the streets and homes in these areas, which complemented my other ethnographic and anthropological work. I was also able to ensure the questionnaires were circulated across a range of lower income and more affluent areas.

One of the aims of the survey was to engage local residents who did not use their local cinema regularly, or might have ambivalent or negative views about it. This related to

questions I had about what role cinemas might play in enhancing sense of community or social belonging in rural towns and for whom. The survey proved relatively successful in eliciting responses from infrequent cinema-goers with 33 per cent of returns indicating they visited once a year or less. Interestingly the vast majority of these were extremely positive about the value of the local cinema to their town. The fact these people bothered to return the form suggests they were not entirely indifferent to the cinema. But this did not satisfactorily address the question as to why would they care about something they rarely, if ever, used.

Thinking about these responses in the context of my ethnographic and anthropological observations I was able to formulate some possible explanations. The cinemas in Merimbula and Sawtell both occupy very significant areas of real estate within the main streets of their respective towns. There is a good deal of socializing that flows not only within these venues but also spills out and mingles with the streetscape and into surrounding shops and cafes. Their main street positions meant that these cinemas are buildings that people pass routinely when accessing other shops and services in the CBD - this sits in contrast to multiplexes which are usually positioned in dead-end corners of shopping malls that are not passed on your way to anywhere. In both Merimbula and Sawtell film posters, signs out on the street, lights and the unmistakable smell of commercially-made popcorn all alert passers-by to the activity going on within. With the benefit of first-hand experience and observation it was possible to understand how residents might come to appreciate the dynamism of these venues and attach value to them without actually personally being part of the audience.

### ***Social Anthropology Approach***

Intertwined with my ethnographic and narrative work was a third methodological approach, which I have termed social anthropology. This took the form of a full time placement in Sawtell (one of the case study sites) where I lived for a period of just over two years. I attended the local movie theatre, the First Avenue Cinema, on a regular basis seeing 26 films over the period. I became friendly with the owner and we would talk if we met on the street as well as often having lengthy chats inside the cinema when I went to see films. I served on the committee of a volunteer group, known as the Friends of the Sawtell Cinema (FOSC), which was established shortly after my arrival to support the cinema during a period of financial difficulty. The group coordinated a program of special monthly screenings that featured pre-film food and drinks as well as guest speakers and dress-up/theme evenings. In addition to hosting enjoyable social evenings the group also aimed to encourage local residents to attend the cinema more regularly. Profits from these events were used to support the cinema by funding some advertising activities and small capital purchases. Beyond the cinema, I made friends and struck up a range of acquaintances in the town. A number of these originated from my involvement in the FOSC group, but most were from the parent community where my children attended school. I kept a written record of my activities, thoughts and observations in a diary and took numerous photographs.

The placement in Sawtell provided the opportunity to observe and participate in the activity of rural cinema-going over an extended period. This yielded a significant volume of material and helped extend the ethnographic and narrative work undertaken in other rural towns. I was aware that at other sites my visits attracted some interest and I was marked by some locals as the 'out of town researcher come to ask us about our cinema'. In some places people were obviously very keen to ensure I went away with a positive impression and I was concerned to what extent this might be skewing my results. I was able to avoid some of this positivism in Sawtell and found that after while locals tended to forget about my research and talk more casually and openly to me about the cinema.

In terms of calibrating the material gathered in Sawtell I was careful to ensure that self-reflection was ongoing part of my research practice. In practical terms the diary I kept was very useful for this task, providing a place to record data and observations as well as my reactions and evolving interpretations. I approached the placement hoping to be able to insert myself into the community with a minimum of disturbance. I wanted to observe and participate in the situation as authentically as possible – not to alter it significantly by my entry into it. In this way the intention was that audiences would be able to speak and act without being overtly self-conscious (Schrøder et.al. 2003: 50). To a large extent I was able to achieve this as I was simply one person coming into a community of several thousand. But my impact was not entirely neutral either.

In accordance with my ethics protocols, when I spoke to local residents I was required to make them aware of my professional interest in the cinema, even in relatively casual encounters. There were times when this influenced the conversation by making it more formal and slightly stilted. Further, I brought considerable experience to my role on the FOSC Committee, both from my research and earlier career in the film industry. This set me apart from the other members of the Committee who were mainly retirees from non-film backgrounds such as accountancy, school teaching and housewives. I was aware at times that my views were given disproportionate weight by the other Committee members and not always on matters directly related to my professional knowledge. In these ways I changed what happened, but ultimately only marginally. These interventions were not substantive enough to compromise the integrity of the anthropological work as a whole. For example, the FOSC Committee would still have been formed and run events at the cinema without my involvement, though these may have been slightly different. In talking to patrons about their cinema-going I did not see evidence that our conversations caused them use the cinema differently, although in some cases I was aware I had made them think about it differently as being a communal space.

The placement in Sawtell did not reveal any startling contradictions with the material I was collecting elsewhere, which was also pointing to the importance of sociality and cultural engagement at rural cinemas. My time there was nonetheless extremely valuable in two respects. First it gave me greater confidence that the themes emerging from material I was collecting at other case study sites, which I could visit only relatively briefly, were not overly distorted or misleading. This instilled more confidence into the assertion of the key findings

from the study. Second, it highlighted the lack of meaning for rural cinema-goers in drawing comparisons with the metropolitan. While I had initially favoured this kind of analytical lens, my time in Sawtell particularly underlined that this was not the way in which rural people thought about or understood their cinema-going. They were more like to be focused on their town and its immediate region as points of reference. For example, very rarely were comparisons drawn between their frumpy local cinemas and the shiny modernity of those in metropolitan locations. Much more often it was between their cinema and the one an hours' drive down the road. The city-country opposition was not prominent in terms of how rural cinema-goers articulated their experiences and, as a result, did not ultimately have a major influence on the framing of the study's findings.

### **Research Findings and the Explanatory Capacities of Multi-Method Research**

This final section gives two further examples of the impact of the study's multi-method techniques by reflecting on two of the important conclusions from the project and how these were shaped specifically by its pluralistic approach.

One of the central concerns of the study was to understand more about how the different elements of the film experience interconnect. In this regard the investigation focused on cinema-going's social dimensions as well as its ostensible centerpiece, the film. Reception studies make clear that films are important to audiences, while scholarship emerging from new cinema histories (see Maltby et.al. 2011) illustrate film-going is significant for a range of social, cultural, geographic and economic reasons. My results suggested each is telling only part of the story. Responses to my written surveys indicated that films are crucial to decisions about attendance with 77 per cent indicating what was showing was 'very important'. As I have discussed elsewhere (Aveyard 2011), this emphasis on the film was less clear in the interviews. However, it is relevant to note that comments and reflections on particular movies were interspersed in a naturalistic and unconscious manner throughout discussions about friendships and the welcoming atmosphere of their local cinema. Further my experiences attending the First Avenue Cinema in Sawtell underscored the fluidity of these factors. On some occasions I accompanied friends to see films I would not personally have chosen to watch primarily to participate in an evening out. Sometimes I ended up enjoying the movie and at other times found it more of an endurance test. Conversely there were times I went along especially to see a certain title and would happily do so on my own if no interested companions could be found. Had I not conducted the written surveys alongside the interviews or had the benefit of my observational and immersive experiences, I would likely have been drawn to conclusions about the over-riding importance of sociality in cinema-going. I would have lacked a framework in particular for dissecting the survey results and may have been inclined toward prioritizing what I had been told in the belief this offered a more detailed and therefore more authentic account.

Turning to the second example, the effectiveness of the multi-method approach is further illustrated with regard to questions about the enduring place of the cinema within the modern media landscape. On the one hand, arguments advanced by Robert Allen (2011), Laura

Mulvey (2006: 18) and others point to the death of cinema in the digital age. Taking this further Scott Campbell and Yong Jin Park contend that Western cultures are becoming 'personal communication societies' based around portable, individualized screens replacing shared viewing and interactive spaces (Campbell and Park 2008). Conversely scholars like Henry Jenkins (2006) argue established forms of media can still have a place within the new, but their function and status may change (2006: 14). This is certainly true in terms of the cinema. People still go to movie theatres to see films - not as many as in the 1930s and 1940s, but nevertheless still in significant numbers. They also watch films at home that they receive via internet download, DVD and television broadcast as well as on personal devices like iPads and iPods. What all this suggests is that patterns of film viewing are determined by more than just convenience or cost.

My findings concerning the socio-cultural meanings of rural cinema-going were able to offer some insights into the issue of what else watching a film in the movie theatre might be about and what continues to draw audiences to it. As discussed above I advocate the sometimes neglected role of the film. But my research also demonstrated that familiarity, friendly social interaction and a sense of belonging are other important aspects of what is sought out and valued by cinema-goers. These conclusions were directly informed by the richness of the material gathered via the multi-method approach. The narrative component of the methodology was very effective in revealing the importance of sociality, so that even using this method alone these issues would have been likely to have clearly emerged. However, with the opportunity of contextualizing this material with ethnographic and anthropological observations and participation I was able to add a much more nuanced dimension to the analysis. As explained above in the case of The Roxy at Bingara, appreciating the scale of the building helped account for the strong emotions associated with it.

In other places being able to comprehend the isolation and the striking lack of alternative places around which people could congregate, enabled me to more fully comprehend how disproportionately important (in metropolitan terms) a cinema could become in a rural town. At the outset of the study I had been interested in arguments advanced by Karen Crowe (2007), that the claims regarding the community building capacities of rural cinemas had been overstated. Drawing on the definitional parameters devised by McMillan and Chavis (1986), Crowe contends the wider benefits of publicly funded cinema have been strategically deployed to exaggerate 'the relevance of cinema-going to the community in order to explain and elicit public support for a traditionally commercial activity' (2007: 391). However, I found this argument sat uncomfortably alongside the strident and passionate claims of those actually involved in rural cinema enterprises as audiences and exhibitors, and the enjoyment and vitality that I could observe and experience for myself. This encouraged me to interpret the very enthusiastic comments about the social value of small town movie theatres in a more considered manner. This, in turn, gave rise to my conclusion that while claims regarding improvements to social cohesiveness and well-being may be utilized in a manner that is deliberate and calculated, it

does not necessarily follow they do not have genuine merit. This was one example of how in combination the methods were able to underpin a more detailed account what rural cinemas means *in* rural communities.

### **Conclusion**

This reflection on the mixed methods used in my study of rural cinema audiences has sought to demonstrate the relevance and appropriateness of this approach to the subject under investigation. The use of the various information gathering and analytical tools – ethnographic, narrative and anthropological – highlights the productive potential of pluralistic approaches to research. It suggests that coming at research questions from different but related angles can widen the range of perspectives that can be brought to bear in analyzing and accounting for the phenomenon under investigation. In my case, the key benefit of adopting a multi-method approach was that it allowed me to better understand and represent rural cinema-going in the context in which it occurs. The significance of this lies in the fact that this is the context in which these experiences have *meaning* for the people who participate in them, and needs to have a prominent position in any narrative seeking to understand them. My ethnographic and anthropological work together with the interviews and written surveys allowed me to move beyond being simply an outsider looking in. It enabled me to access something from the inside and reflect this back as well. Through the process of drawing upon a more extensive range of source material, the study was able to offer a more inclusive and satisfying account of the cultural and social meanings of the modern rural cinema experience.

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### Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> I was able to visit one case study site (Merimbula) on three occasions.

<sup>2</sup> Five cinema case studies were conducted in the UK in the counties of Norfolk and Suffolk. A total of 26 interviews were conducted – 12 with cinema-goers, 9 with cinema staff and 5 with other industry professionals. A total of 200 written surveys were distributed yielding 75 responses (38 per cent return rate).

<sup>3</sup> In accordance with the ethical protocols governing my research it was made clear to the participants in these more casual conversations that my visit to the town was for the purpose of conducting research on local cinema-going practices.