

Investigation of Cinema-Going Behaviour in British Columbia, The Background to Cinema, British Columbia: A People's History

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The premise for my CURA book project had its genesis, I suppose, in my personal movie memories that have accumulated over the years. In conducting research for this project it became clear that I was not alone in using film memories as a means of charting life long experiences—films and cinemas served as important historical and emotional reference points. This conference paper serves as the basis for my presentation at the CURA conference in May, 2009 at North Island College in Comox. British Columbia.

So where does it all begin, you might ask, this film adventure that captures the movie memories of British Columbians? For me, it is as if it were yesterday. Nineteen fifty-eight and a spring Friday evening at the Paramount Cinema in Lethbridge, Alberta—I was fourteen and the film was *The Vikings* with the most unlikely of Vikings (Tony Curtis and Kirk Douglas). Curtis' last medieval epic was *The Black Shield of Falworth* (1954) where he uttered that famous line in fine Brooklynesque fashion “yonda is the castle of my fodda.” That is a film and a line easily forgotten.

But *The Vikings* is perhaps why I am writing this book, because there is a scene in the film with stirring music that is not so easily forgotten, at least for me—a Viking ship on its way up a fjord and in the background an energizing film score by Mario Nascimbene. I must watch that film once a month just for the music. When I think of that film I also think of the Paramount and the then-small-city atmosphere of Lethbridge, Alberta—it is hard to separate the two. Had it not been for that film, I doubt that my love of films and teaching film history would have been realized. But those types of movie memories exist for others too, and that is what my book is primarily about.

Annette Kuhn, in her oral history of filmgoers during the 1930s, indicates that their cinematic experiences were profoundly and deeply felt. So much so that for many film patrons, they became life long emotional attachments. While many lifetime occurrences may have been erased from one's psyche, certain movies and cinemas seemed to remind or resonate with a particular period or moment in a person's life. The memories of cinema-goers in this book certainly reflect Kuhn's observation. For older generations, those memories of the golden years

linger on in visits to the neighbourhood cinema and the Saturday afternoon matinee, going to the drive-in in the trunk of a 1956 Chevrolet, or having a root beer at the local A&W after the evening's show. Contemporary movie buffs, on the other hand, might think of film in reel-life terms. Kamloops, for example, is not only a place for movie-watching; it has become a place for movie-making.

Three major threads sustain my research and the stories about films in *Cinema British Columbia*. The first has a historical flavor and forms the book's primary narrative which enables readers to see how the community cinema played an important role in the lives of its citizens. The stories told by these cinema-goers tell us that rituals associated with going to the movies not only enriched the quality of their lives but also served as an archive of life experiences that were triggered by memories of being part of their local cinema.

The second theme is one of a common cinematic community lexicon. Although the cinema stories in my book are the product of far reaching places and various communities in British Columbia, the stories all seem to share a similar language. Whether one was watching *Double Indemnity* (1944) in Prince George or *Gone with the Wind* (1939) in Victoria, memories of those cinema visits recall the same rituals—the smell of popcorn, the grandeur of the theatres themselves, and being guided to one's seat by an usher or usherette.

The final seam within this story is not about movie watching it is about movie making and how some British Columbia communities have become the location for movie production. The dreams of making movies in British Columbia has historical resonance as well, one that can be traced to the movie aspirations of Lloyd Champlain and his establishment of a small community called, believe it or not, Cinema B.C in the 1920s. His story is one that may provide both inspiration and caution for contemporary filmmakers about creating a "Hollywood North" in British Columbia.

These stories within the larger cinematic fabric of my book will help us see how the community cinema serves an important cultural and economic link within the community and how in some fashion or another touched the lives of its residents.

These anecdotes that will form the foundation or structure of my monograph have one common basis—they are memories, current and past, of cinema-related experiences that residents have cherished in small cities and communities in British Columbia. For some they are recollections, happy memories of times past, some imported from the locales of their youth, while for others they are hopefully prophetic glimpses of a cinematic future. But they all speak to one important thing—movies—whether watching them or being in them, have created lasting memories or impressions in their lives.

The stories that will make up much of this book have had a strong emotional, intellectual, and historical resonance with their authors. There is a tendency at times for academics to write about their subjects in a somewhat verbose style, but the enthusiasm generated by the book's story-tellers will most certainly negate that tendency here. Embedded in much of what I have said is a strong undercurrent of emotion and sentimentality that has been triggered by movie memories. We have all succumbed to movie popcorn and the rich smell of butter. For me (I still use it to open my first film lectures of the term) it is the Twentieth-century-Fox fanfare or the emotion that is ushered in with the phrase "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far, away." These are magical movie moments that have, as I said earlier, become a kind of cinematic reference point reminding us of the special association that we have with a certain time and place.

The inspiration for this book, outside the fact that little has been written about the cinema-going memories of Canadians, came, in part, from a fictional story that was serialized in the 1930 August-October editions of the *Saturday Evening Post*. The *Post* story by Margaret

Weymouth Jackson uses the mythical tale of the local cinema in the small Indiana town of Hilltown to convey how the local cinema served as a cultural beacon for the community. The Lllamarada, as the theatre was called, became a time capsule of community memories. And while the story is fiction it does resonate in some ways with smaller cities in the British Columbia Interior and on Vancouver Island, particularly from a geographical and cultural perspective.

Why might Jackson's story be a useful reference point for this study? Gregory Waller in *Imagining and Promoting the Small-Town Theater* mentions "The two hundred-seat Lllamarada Theater in Hilltown, Indiana, unquestionably stands as one of the most well-documented small-town movie theaters of the early 1930s. Owned and operated by a locally born and raised man who had been exhibiting films in Hilltown since the nickelodeon era, the state-of-the-art Lllamarada was built in 1930 and managed to remain solvent throughout the Depression and independent despite the efforts of regional theater chains to dominate exhibition in the Midwest. From existing records, we know a good deal about the size and makeup of the Lllamarada's staff, the managerial and programming policies of its owner-operator, and, most important, its audience and its place in Hilltown as "an institution, an important part of the community" (Waller 3).

That in it self would be enough to provide the historical and cultural framework for examining the small town cinema in British Columbia. But Waller also provides an interesting caveat to the Lllamarada: "The problem—or at least the apparent problem—is that the Lllamarada Theater and Hilltown, Indiana, are fictional constructs...That the stories are fiction does not negate their historical value—or, for that matter, that of the many other movie-related works of fiction published in the *Post* during this period. In fact, the Lllamarada stories are an important, overlooked resource, which, when read in the context of the motion picture trade press, can help us analyze the small-town theater as concrete practice, business strategy, and culturally resonant myth" (Waller 3).

Jackson's story of the Lllamarada Theatre might serve as a helpful orientation to my examination of small community cinemas, as it provides an opportunity to analyze the small town theatre both as a business practice and as a cultural cornerstone of the smaller community. Jackson's insights, while filtered through her imaginary gaze, seem to resonate with a city such as Kamloops and other smaller centres. A description of her mythical 1930 community begins with, "Hilltown is...nestled between green hills and a shining river, with the limestone mill and quarry lying on the outer edge of it...it was a place of its own, a little apart from the world" (Waller 5). While Kamloops residents might see those green hills in somewhat more muted tones, the limestone mill and river could easily be transposed to the Thompson River and the Kamloops Lumber mill.

We also need to keep in mind that while Jackson's Hilltown cinema is fictional, the manner in which she describes the cinema, its patrons, and its owner resonates in a very real way with the players you will meet in my cinematic story—people such as Gerry Sellers, Vernon cinema manager, and cinema-goers Barb Kelly and Jean Huntly, who seem to use the same cinema language to describe their experiences. Waller observes: "{Jackson's} story...foregrounds the new organist (and his much-appreciated instrument), while another is set almost entirely in the projection booth and lays out not only the projectionist's serious work but also the intricacies of the Lllamarada's sophisticated sound system. Both the musician and the projectionist-electrician are from Hilltown, as are the two perky usherettes in scarlet satin skirts and gold-brocaded jackets, as well as all the other members of this workplace family, young and old, male and female. No matter what motion pictures fill the Lllamarada's screen, the theater is a local enterprise, emblematic of a certain faith in the Depression-proof saving grace of small-town small business,

which here requires no urban intervention in the form of technical, aesthetic, or financial expertise" (Waller 6).

From a business perspective Jackson's fictional theatre seems to parallel a number of small town British Columbia cinema owners and managers. Waller comments about the Lllamarada: "Presiding over the Lllamarada with benign paternalism is white-haired Mr. McLaughlin, who has built his exhibition business from the ground up, plowing any profits back into the theater. His decency, kindness, and concern for his employees and for the community at large are demonstrated in each story, although we never see him participating in civic activities or opening the Lllamarada for charity or public-service events. It is enough, Jackson implies, that McLaughlin knows and plays fair with his customers—that earns him and his employees a modest living and makes him ethically unimpeachable. 'Know[ing] the town' is McLaughlin's key to success, the result of years spent 'studying, wooing and winning Hilltown.' He buys the right films and arranges weekly schedules so as to "catch" the many different audiences that comprise the town and its environs" (Waller 6). Might this description fit one of Vernon's cinema managers?

Hilltown's theatre would serve the community in a number of ways. This relatively new art form was a window to the outside world for film-goers. Newsreels and selected short features brought exotic and far-away places to the community. As Joan Lyons observed about the cinema in Salmon Arm during the war years, "The [film] broadcasts at the beginning of each movie, particularly during the war, were scary. We all knew people who were fighting over there, but didn't really have a clear concept of what was really happening, we just knew it wasn't good." Feature films also enabled Hollywood's "dream merchants" to recreate and invent the world for audiences in frontier films such as *Dodge City* (1939) or muster up the age of chivalry in *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938). The Lllamarada was a meeting place socially, but it was also a venue of the imagination, far removed from the glitz and glamour and so-called sophistication of the larger urban centres.

Jackson's story created a film-going culture where the difference between the metropolis and small town theatres was found in the down-to earth-demeanour of its audience—no "city slickers" here. The theatre's sense of identity was best measured, perhaps, in the relationship between owner and patrons: "promoted and, therefore, defined in terms of 'the good of the community'" (Waller 16). The cinema in Hilltown became a catalyst for certain community behaviours. People came because there was a sense of belonging. That sense of belonging, as we will discover later, came with a sense of ritual associated with going to the movies—the route you took to get to the cinema, the people you associated with, all in all, they were part of a routine that years later would be recalled with warm memories.

This sense of place as we call it has changed considerably since young theatre-goers were emulating their favourite screen stars in the 1940s. In fact, the entire movie industry has changed, in part, because the delivery of films to the public has changed and the competition for the entertainment dollar is so much more competitive. That is why the focus of this work will have a more historical flavour—it will provide us with glimpses of the social and personal intimacies that the local movie-house provided for us and to the perception of life it created for smaller urban communities.

As the preceding comments suggest, the cinema in the small community served as the centre of civic life. But some film observers have argued that the contemporary cinema has lost its lustre, that watching movies at home is just like going to the Cineplex: why go to the theatre when you have a sophisticated entertainment centre in your own home? But going to the movies is special, a form of participation or spectatorship that differs significantly from the passive form

associated with “living room movies.” Susan Sontag bemoans this passing ritual: “For cinephiles, the movies encapsulated everything. Cinema was both the book of art and the book of life...it was from a weekly visit to the cinema that you learned (or tried to learn) how to walk, to smoke, to kiss, to fight, to grieve.” Mistakenly, however, she laments the demise of the cinema noting, “No amount of mourning will revive the vanished rituals—erotic, ruminative—of the darkened theatre.”

As our story unfolds, the memories of film-goers past and present will serve as an ethnographic and cultural link between yesterday and today. In small cities and towns across North America, the local theatre became the focal point of the community. The rituals associated with going to the cinema were both localized and foreign. New Canadians would bring fresh ideas and old memories about the theatre from their native lands—a legacy that in some ways would influence the evolution of local film societies. Those experiences would be integrated with the more localized cinematic institutions. Who can forget, for example, the theatre-usher in bell-hop-like uniform and white gloves guiding people to their seats? And what of the local drive-in theatres of the late 1940s and early 1950s, which served as a portal from adolescence to early adulthood? For others this experience would be as cinema owners or as contributors to the local film industry. By creating a feeling of verisimilitude, readers will be able to connect with cinema-related stories that fashion for us an evening, a decade, and even a day in the life of the local movie-house.

A common thread emerges as we engage these cinematic memories—there appears to be a universal cinema language that people use. Older movie patrons speak about the ornate designs and atmosphere of the theatres—their almost cathedral-like splendour and spiritual intimacy. The refurbished Orpheum theatre in Vancouver is a throwback to those more ornate movie palaces. The Orpheum had opened its door back in 1927 and although its outer façade might have looked somewhat deceiving, it quickly earned the reputation as Vancouver’s cinematic palace. By the 1950s, its neon marquee dominated along Granville Street, the city’s main drag. Many film goers in our story recall the neon marquees as beacons leading them into another world

On another level, seeing Jennifer Lopez or Robert Redford on Main Street Kamloops may give you a brief rush but I am not sure that making movies in a particular community or region is what ultimately provides or enhances community cinematic pleasure. Being part of a movie audience or talking about a film seen at a movie festival are community activities that seem to resonate with people. Such memories and opinions are what really connect us to the movies. They are found in particular images and speech-ways that make up the film’s message—they make us laugh, smile and cry. That is why they remain a part of us years later—they are indeed part of our own cinematic archives, visual images that remind of key moments in our lives!

The Patricia Cinema in Powell River might be seen as a testament to these notions. One of the longest serving theatres in Canada, its website reminds us what the role of a movie theatre was in a smaller community.

In their essay *Pulp, Paper and People* (1988) Karen Southern and Peggy Bird mention “Powell River had its own silent theatre...where Stan Meade tinkled the ivories, and Bobby Scanlon opened the side door to the children without dimes. He was a well loved manager who controlled the rambunctious teenagers with kindness, and winked at the lovers who sat beneath the balcony.” Similar recollections of such cinematic “rites of passage” help make up this story about movie memories in British Columbia.

My book, therefore, provides us with an opportunity to reminisce about the cinema culture of smaller cities and communities in British Columbia. As film-goers share their memories

and experiences as part of this narrative it will become clear that movies and the cinema became a form of ritualistic behaviour—going to a Friday evening double-feature or hauling the family to a Saturday afternoon matinee. In short, it became a meaningful social and emotional reference point. Recalling a favourite film at the theatre harkens us back to a humid summer’s evening, a meandering walk home along the river, or stopping for a malt along main street. My book, therefore, will explore the small city cinematic culture through the voices and events of the people who have lived and shared its experiences.

Works Cited

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