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Movie-going in New Zealand, 1950-1980

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Abstract

While historical film audience research has flourished internationally since the 1980s, New Zealand's historical movie-going audiences have largely been ignored. This thesis seeks to increase our understanding of this once phenomenally popular pastime by investigating the movie-going habits of New Zealanders during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Using a multi-methodological approach, I draw on 600 survey responses, official statistics and reports, and archival material to ascertain changes in movie attendance and preference over these three decades, and the reasons for those changes. The examination of film exhibition and its practices is key to the investigation.

These decades were ones of significant societal change, not least because of the introduction of television in the 1960s, which saw a rapid decrease in the number of movie-goers and led to a change in movie-going culture from 'going to the pictures' to 'going to a picture'. Movie-going ceased to be a habit for many New Zealanders and instead became more of an event, assisted by a change in Hollywood production from hundreds of movies a year, to a few 'blockbuster' event-status films. The 1960s also saw a continuation of the high marriage and birth rates of the 1950s, and television fitted this period of domesticity. Hollywood increasingly focused on making films for young adult audiences, which further assisted in reducing audience sizes in New Zealand as some of the more popular genres with audiences here, such as the Broadway-inspired musical, were no longer being made. Another potential audience, children, were also neglected as films became increasing 'adult' in content, and were censored accordingly. Exhibitors were required to work hard to source appropriate material for children, many of who, given the late arrival of television here, and the even longer wait for transmission at child-friendly viewing times, still relied on the movies for entertainment. A further barrier to retaining audiences was the ever-increasing cost of admission tickets. By the end of the 1970s, these factors had coalesced to see New Zealand audiences at an all-time low, and the cinema business in New Zealand facing a most uncertain future.

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Table of Contents

| | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| Abstract | i |
| Acknowledgements | ii |
| Table of Contents | iii |
| List of Tables | iv |
| List of Figures | vi |
| Introduction | 1 |
| Literature Review | 12 |
| Chapter One: 1950s | 32 |
| How Popular Were the Movies in New Zealand in the 1950s?..... | 32 |
| The 1950s Audience..... | 40 |
| The Attraction of the Movies..... | 55 |
| Barriers to Movie Attendance..... | 61 |
| What Films Were Popular and Why? | 72 |
| Conclusion..... | 106 |
| Chapter Two: 1960s | 109 |
| How Popular Were the Movies in New Zealand in the 1960s?..... | 109 |
| Television..... | 113 |
| Combating Declining Audiences..... | 127 |
| The 1960s Audience | 133 |
| The Attraction of the Movies | 154 |
| Barriers to Movie Attendance | 157 |
| What Films Were Popular and Why? | 166 |
| Conclusion..... | 195 |
| Chapter Three: 1970s | 198 |
| How Popular Were the Movies in New Zealand in the 1970s?..... | 198 |
| Television..... | 206 |
| The 1970s Audience | 209 |
| The Attraction of Going to the Movies..... | 220 |
| Barriers to Movie Attendance | 228 |
| What Films Were Popular and Why? | 237 |
| Conclusion | 260 |
| Conclusion | 263 |
| Appendix | 283 |
| Bibliography | 291 |

List of Tables

| Chapter One, 1950s | | Page |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| Table 1.1 | General cinema statistics, 1950-1959 | 32 |
| Table 1.2 | Admissions per head of population | 33 |
| Table 1.3 | Theatre days of operation | 33 |
| Table 1.4 | Theatre seating capacity | 34 |
| Table 1.5 | Number of licences granted | 34 |
| Table 1.6 | Survey respondents' frequency of attendance | 39 |
| Table 1.7 | Survey respondents' frequency of attendance according to gender | 42 |
| Table 1.8 | Who survey respondents usually went to the movies with | 50 |
| Table 1.9 | Born in 1920s and 1930s: Who respondents went to the movies with | 61 |
| Table 1.10 | Price of admission, 1950s | 63 |
| Table 1.11 | Price of admission and average nominal weekly wage | 63 |
| Table 1.12 | Parental control | 66 |
| Table 1.13 | Factors determining choice of film | 73 |
| Table 1.14 | Kerridge-Odeon's top ten films, 1950-1952 | 74 |
| Table 1.15 | Comparison of popularity of musicals, 1950-1953 | 76 |
| Table 1.16 | Comparison of popularity of comedies, 1950-1953 | 79 |
| Table 1.17 | Kerridge-Odeon's top films, according to seats sold, 1955-6 | 82 |
| Table 1.18 | Westerns as a proportion of all features produced by the U.S. | 84 |
| Table 1.19 | Origin of 35mm feature films seen by the Censor, 1950s | 101 |
| Table 1.20 | State Theatre, Petone: Exhibition of US and UK films | 102 |
| Table 1.21 | State Theatre, Petone: Most screened films of 1950s | 102 |
| Table 1.22 | Octagon Theatre, Dunedin: Exhibition of US and UK films | 103 |
| Chapter Two, 1960s | | |
| Table 2.1 | General cinema statistics, 1960-1969 | 109 |
| Table 2.2 | Theatre seating capacity | 111 |
| Table 2.3 | Theatre days of operation | 111 |
| Table 2.4 | Number of licences granted | 112 |
| Table 2.5 | Admissions per head of population | 112 |
| Table 2.6 | Survey respondents' frequency of attendance | 113 |
| Table 2.7 | Television licences, 1960s | 116 |
| Table 2.8 | Cinema attendance at four largest cities, 1958-1969 | 116 |
| Table 2.9 | TV licences and movie attendance, New Plymouth/Taranaki, 1960-1969 | 117 |
| Table 2.10 | Impact of TV on movie-going, for those going most frequently in the 1960s | 120 |
| Table 2.11 | Impact of TV on movie-going, according to age | 121 |
| Table 2.12 | Decrease in admission receipts for some Auckland theatres, early 1960s | 124 |
| Table 2.13 | Christchurch Cinemas, 1963 | 126 |
| Table 2.14 | Tivoli theatre financials, 1961-1963 | 127 |
| Table 2.15 | Classification of feature films in New Zealand, 1960s | 134 |
| Table 2.16 | Number of 'foreign' feature films imported into NZ, 1950-1969 | 134 |
| Table 2.17 | Analysis of feature film (35mm) excisions 1960 | 135 |
| Table 2.18 | Analysis of feature film (35mm) excisions 1969 | 135 |

| | | |
|------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Table 2.19 | Number of feature films banned in New Zealand, 1960s | 136 |
| Table 2.20 | Price of admission and nominal average weekly wage, 1960s | 157 |
| Table 2.21 | Factors determining choice of film for those going most frequently in the 1960s | 167 |
| Table 2.22 | Favourite genres of those going most frequently in the 1960s | 167 |
| Table 2.23 | Favourite genres of those going most frequently in the 1960s, by gender | 168 |
| Table 2.24 | Predominance of westerns at Petone State Theatre, January 1961 | 188 |
| Table 2.25 | Origin of feature films (35mm) seen by the Censor, 1960s | 193 |

Chapter Three, 1970s

| | | |
|------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Table 3.1 | General cinema statistics, 1969-1981 | 199 |
| Table 3.2 | Survey respondents' frequency of attendance | 199 |
| Table 3.3 | Theatre seating capacity | 201 |
| Table 3.4 | Number of television licences and colour sets, 1970s. | 207 |
| Table 3.5 | Impact of television on movie-going, for those going most frequently in the 1970s | 207 |
| Table 3.6 | Analysis of feature film (35mm) excisions, 1970 | 214 |
| Table 3.7 | Analysis of feature film (35mm) excisions, 1979 | 214 |
| Table 3.8 | G-certificate and restricted films, 1950-1980 | 215 |
| Table 3.9 | Who survey respondents usually went to the movies with | 220 |
| Table 3.10 | Price of admission and average nominal weekly wage, 1970s | 232 |
| Table 3.11 | Admission prices for Odeon and Westend theatres, Auckland, 1971 | 233 |
| Table 3.12 | Percentage of population in urban and rural areas | 233 |
| Table 3.13 | Number of births and marriages, 1970s | 236 |
| Table 3.14 | Factors determining choice of film for those going most frequently in the 1970s | 240 |
| Table 3.15 | Favourite genres of survey respondents going most frequently in the 1970s | 241 |
| Table 3.16 | Favourite genres of survey respondents going movies most frequently in the 1970s, by gender | 242 |
| Table 3.17 | Top ten favourite films of survey respondents going most frequently in the 1970s | 244 |
| Table 3.18 | Most screened films, Odeon Theatre, Rotorua, by year, 1970s | 245 |
| Table 3.19 | Most screened films, Odeon Theatre, Napier, by year, 1970-1977 | 245 |
| Table 3.20 | Most screened films, Regent Theatre, Palmerston North, 1970-1976 | 246 |
| Table 3.21 | Most popular films, State Theatre, Timaru, 1977- 1979 | 247 |
| Table 3.22 | Most screened films, Civic Theatre, Auckland, 1970s (excluding 1975 and 1978) | 248 |
| Table 3.23 | British or American Preference | 259 |

List of Figures

Introduction

| | | |
|----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|
| Figure 1 | Takings summary for Ashburton and Auckland Theatres, first week of December, 1950 | 5 |
| Figure 2 | Telegram showing code used for communicating revenue | 5 |
| Figure 3 | Entries from Exhibitors' Record Book, Cinerama Theatre, Wellington | 7 |

Literature Review

| | | |
|----------|----------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Figure 4 | Western iconography in New Zealand child's 'dressing up', 1965 | 16 |
|----------|----------------------------------------------------------------|----|

Chapter One: 1950s

| | | |
|------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Figure 1.1 | Advertisement in <i>Manawatū Times</i> , July 19, 1950, p. 9 | 89 |
| Figure 1.2 | Programme of short travelogues combined to make <i>New Zealand in Colour</i> | 94 |

Chapter Two: 1960s

| | | |
|------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Figure 2.1 | Kerridge-Odeon advertising campaign, March 1960. | 145 |
| Figure 2.2 | <i>Better Homes and Gardens</i> (US), November 1951, p. 218 | 146 |

Chapter Three: 1970s

| | | |
|------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Figure 3.1 | Cartoon in <i>New Zealand Listener</i> , June 22, 1970, p. 46. | 209 |
| Figure 3.2 | Poem in <i>The Patea Mail</i> , June 14, 1978, p. 9. | 209 |
| Figure 3.3 | Cartoon in <i>New Zealand Listener</i> , April 12, 1971, p. 13. | 212 |