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The Cultural Topography of Rural Cinema-Going in the Post-War Highlands and Islands of Scotland

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This essay offers a historical view of cinema-going in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. The Highlands and Islands Film Guild was formed in 1946 to deliver mobile film shows to areas that did not enjoy access to a cinema, to improve facilities, and to combat the depopulation of rural communities. It provided many young people with their first experience of film through shows delivered by operators who travelled to remote communities to exhibit film programmes in spaces not designed for this purpose. The improvised settings and the topography of the Highlands and Islands inform how the population experienced and remember the film shows. The cultural and historical significance of the Film Guild is confirmed by its successor, the Screen Machine, which provides isolated rural communities with a digital cinema experience. This popular form of cinema-going has profited from EU funding and underlines Scotland's and the EU's investments in civic provisions to remote areas in Europe such as the Highlands and Islands of Scotland.

Keywords: Film exhibition, rural cinema-going, Scottish communal identity, Highlands and Islands, European Union, England, cultural topography

The Scottish have a long tradition of going to the cinema. Trevor Griffiths remarks in *The Cinema and Cinema-Going in Scotland, 1896-1950* that "at a time, in 1950-1, when the British were the most inveterate cinema-goers in the world, visiting picture houses on average twenty-eight times a year, the average Scot went thirty-six times" (1). Cinema-going was

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made possible across the whole country and "[n]o community appeared truly complete without its own means of accessing the movies" (Caughie et al. 3-4). The cinema experience was and still is a fundamental part of Scottish communal life: in January 2020, the Highlands village of Cromarty, population 700, opened "[o]ne of the smallest cinemas in the UK" – it seats thirty-five people – a project that was primarily "made possible by EU and Creative Scotland funding" (BBC).

Not every community in Scotland has been lucky enough to receive its own fixed exhibition space but Scotland has been highly innovative in bringing the cinema experience to its remotest areas. This essay offers a historical insight into the tradition of rural cinema-going in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland after the Second World War. Oral history and archival research reveals how the specificities of the rural cinema-going experience and its exhibition practices contribute to the cultural topography of the Highlands and Islands as well as a sense of communal identity.

The Highlands and Islands Film Guild was formed in 1946 to deliver mobile film shows to areas that did not enjoy access to a cinema. These events required much effort from operators in transporting equipment to the remotest areas and the collaboration of community members to transform their village halls into temporary exhibition spaces. Today its successor, the Screen Machine, a fully-equipped "80-seat, air conditioned mobile digital cinema" (Regional Screen Scotland; see Figure 3), offers these communities a more modern and relaxed cinema experience.

The Screen Machine is run by Regional Screen Scotland – the institution dedicated to supporting community film exhibition for rural communities – and has profited from EU funding in the past, such as for the "North by Northwest – Films on the Fringe" project from 2014 (Creative Europe Desk UK). This cross-country collaboration between Ireland, Scotland, Iceland, Finland, and Norway served to "bring European Independent cinema to some of the remotest regions in North Western Europe" (Galway Film Centre, "North"). The manager of Ireland's mobile cinema (Cinemobile), Noreen Collins, described the necessity and uniqueness of the project as follows at the time:

> Each of the participating cinemas comes from countries with similar territory-types, geographically placed on the edge of Europe; each has a strong pride in the regions we are trying to reach and an understanding and knowledge of their demography. [...] The travelling nature of the venues gives the project an individuality and quirkiness that few other cinema projects in Europe have. (Galway Film Centre, "North")

Hence, the project enriched the cultural life of remote areas in Northern Europe, as well as encouraged a cultural exchange between these regions, strengthening a sense of European identity by highlighting what these regions have in common.[1]

The EU has played a significant role in improving the quality of life in remote regions such as the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Neal Ascherson points out that

> Scotland is in many ways more closely linked to the EU than England has been, not least by the needs of its more dramatic geography. European funds helped to modernize and extend its difficult transport infrastructure, to maintain remote areas and communities and preserve the marginal agriculture of crofting and hill farming. (72)

Regional Screen Scotland announced in 2018 that it had secured funding through Creative Scotland until March 2021 (Jennings), but it remains to be seen how well the creative industry can sustain its programmes after Brexit.[2] The Highlands and Islands Film Guild and Regional Screen Scotland were/are major institutions in improving the cultural life and connectivity of the marginalized Scottish areas. Especially in areas where the visit of the Screen Machine constitutes a significant highlight as it belongs to one of very few cultural events in the respective communities. Hence, the following historical account of Scottish cinema-going in its scarcely populated regions illustrates why it is crucial that these regions not be forgotten after the UK has left the EU.[3]

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[1] These regions not only share a cultural tradition of rural cinema-going but also a need to mitigate the effects of depopulation (see for instance Jernudd; Hjort and Lindqvist). Hence, these regions are dependent on migration and "[i]n a major contrast to England, immigration from Europe (Poland especially) has been deliberately encouraged by Scottish governments in order to balance an ageing population and correct Scotland's lamentable deficit in small service enterprises" (Ascherson 72).

[2] Sadly, Regional Screen Scotland's Irish equivalent, Cinemobile, was forced to stop serving its communities in July 2016 due to a lack of funding (Galway Film Centre, "Sad News").

[3] This essay is part of the research project *The Major Minor Cinema: The Highlands and Islands Film Guild (1946-71)* funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK and carried out by a team from the Universities of Glasgow and Stirling. The project also invited creative writing to recognize the oral storytelling tradition that characterizes the recollection of the Film Guild and the cultural history of the area (Neely and Paul). The research is part of a recent turn in screen studies that, as Annette Kuhn observed, "seems increasingly to comprise a concatenation of sub disciplines, in which a focus on the historical, the local and the specific flourishes and any ambitions to create a totalizing theory are eschewed" (5). Part of this focus on the local sees a growing body

The Highlands and Islands Film Guild

The Highlands and Islands Film Guild was a non-commercial institution that delivered film shows on 16mm film to isolated communities in the crofting counties – an area in the north of Scotland where crofters would hold a small agricultural unit growing crops and rearing cattle – who did not enjoy easy access to permanent cinemas. The impetus for setting up the Film Guild as a civic necessity that would help improve cultural facilities and combat the long-standing problem of depopulation came from the Second World War when teachers implemented a mobile cinema scheme for evacuees who had been moved out of the cities to the safety of rural communities further north. This initiative spawned in Scotland was succeeded at a UK level by the more openly propagandist Ministry of Information (MOI) mobile cinema scheme. The MOI programmes consisted of mainly but not exclusively non-fiction films that had a specific message about how to support the war effort across the spheres of public and domestic life. More overtly propagandist films such as *London Can Take It!* (1940) documented the experience of the Blitz from the point of view of the people of London.

For the Highland and Island communities the provision of access to the visual medium of film had a significance beyond the wartime context, and education policy makers argued that it should be continued and developed for post-war audiences (The National Archives; Harding).[4] This appetite for mobile film shows also encouraged the Scottish Agricultural Organisation Society, which was primarily concerned about depopulation, to continue to provide mobile film shows for remote areas (The National Archives). The development of the scheme culminated in the formation of the Highlands and Islands Film Guild in 1946 and a group of mobile units with operators to deliver film shows to the crofting counties (Hunter).[5]

One of the research questions that the project, on which this essay is based, sought to address concerned the impact of the mobile cinema

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of historical work that does not treat cinema as an exclusively urban form (Thissen and Zimmermann; Aveyard; Treveri Gennari et al.).

[4] The Film Guild was funded by a combination of the Scottish Education Department and the Education Authorities of the areas that wanted the institution to deliver film shows to their counties and could draw on the spaces necessary to accommodate the film shows and the prospective community audiences.

[5] At the height of its growth in the early 1950s the Film Guild ran fifteen mobile units that extended to the Shetland Isles in the north, the Outer Hebrides to the west and the Highland crofting counties between these areas.

upon the Highland and Island area, an area that was not uniformly covered by unifying media such as radio and television, and asked how surviving employees and members of the audience remembered it. Due to the effort that went into exhibiting the film shows in non-theatrical spaces, it is often these spaces and their environments that are integral to the memories of the audience and operators employed by the institution and less the actual films that were screened. The spatial and geographical challenges that the communities and operators faced had to be overcome collectively, a struggle that further strengthened a sense of community and solidarity.

The commitment of the Film Guild to reaching remote communities was made possible by a non-commercial and co-operative ethos where the well-attended shows in more populated areas contributed to covering the costs of the less well attended shows in thinly populated areas. This principle enabled the institution to deliver an experience of cinema to areas where the medium had not existed before such as the northern and western islands of Yell and Unst in the Shetland Islands or Lewis and Harris in the Outer Hebrides. A report published in 1950 states that the landmass occupied by the Highlands and Islands is 47% of the land surface of Scotland but contained less than 6% of the population (Scottish Home Department). Between 1950 and 1965, over half a million people left Scotland, roughly divided between those who moved overseas and those who settled in England (Devine 33). The extent of the space occupied by a decreasing number of people exposes the degree to which the Highlands and Islands were geographically marginalized in relation to the rest of Scotland and the rest of the UK. Viewed against this background, the Film Guild was a small cinema serving a large but underpopulated proportion of the landmass of the British Isles.

The Film Guild extended the geography of access to cinema-going in Britain through the mobility and versatility of the 16mm apparatus, and its vans and operators. It was referenced as an example of good practice in the 1949 UNESCO report concerning the *Use of Mobile Cinema and Radio Vans in Fundamental Education* (Goode, "UNESCO"). The use of the smaller gauge of 16mm expanded significantly in the UK during the Second World War, and the formation of the Highlands and Islands Film Guild, soon after the end of the war, occurred as the rest of the UK's mobile cinema was provided by an expansion of commercial operators looking to cater to more densely populated rural areas. The distribution of population meant that there was no equivalent to the Film Guild in the rest of the UK, which makes this institution deserving of a greater presence in the history of British cinema (Griffiths).

The purpose of the Film Guild to improve facilities for isolated communities through selective film programmes addressing a family audience, and the educational film shows that it also offered to schools in the daytime, gave the institution a legitimacy that the commercial cinema of the towns and cities did not have.[6] This legitimacy was bolstered by the spaces where the film shows were held; the village halls and similar exhibition spaces were a valued constituent of the social and cultural topography of the rural communities that had them. The combined efforts of the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) and the Carnegie UK Trust had facilitated loans and grants for the construction of more halls since the 1920s, but by the middle of the 1940s coverage was still far from comprehensive in the Highlands and Islands. Given this relative scarcity and social value, what the halls lacked in the iconography of cinema they compensated for in civic purpose and utility.

Jeremy Burchard argues that the village hall was the first secular and non-denominational public building in the post-medieval history of many villages (213). The transition of the hall from religious to secular space did not secure the approval of everyone in rural communities. Certainly in parts of the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides off the north-west coast of Scotland there was concerted opposition to the construction of new village halls. As early as 1946 the prospect of a new village hall and the activities that it would provide a space for, compelled some representatives of the Free Presbyterian Church to summon the authority of their faith to speak out in strong terms:

> Mr Macdonald remarked that the Trustees were proposing to lay out a site for a "dance hall" but he in the name of the whole of North Tolsta ratepayers was protesting against the scheme "for the reason that it won't be wholly used for dancing, but it will be used as orgy, and it will have a bad effect on the rising generation of this locality." (*Stornoway Gazette* 3)

The young people of the island were not put off by this type of pronouncement and registered their desire for more of the facilities that

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[6] The feature films shown by the Film Guild tended to be provided by Hollywood and British production rather than the approved and growing body of European Art Cinema that was encouraged by specialist film societies in towns and cities. References to the rest of Europe and the wider world came mostly from newsreels and British films about the Second World War such as *The Cruel Sea* (1953) and *The Dambusters* (1955). One exception was a film about the northerly Shetland islands and their proximity to Norway that was the subject of *Shetlandsgjengen or Suicide Mission* (1954) that depicted the clandestine efforts of a special operation that transported agents between Shetland and occupied Norway during the Second World War (Goode, "Island Geographies").

Labour government policy deemed to be necessary for post-war renewal and improved leisure. The dialogue that took place on the Isle of Lewis confirms that there was some opposition to the prospect of a shift from communities mostly gathering in church, and from an ecclesiastical to a more secular topography; that would be confirmed by the emergence of the village halls and equivalent spaces in rural communities.

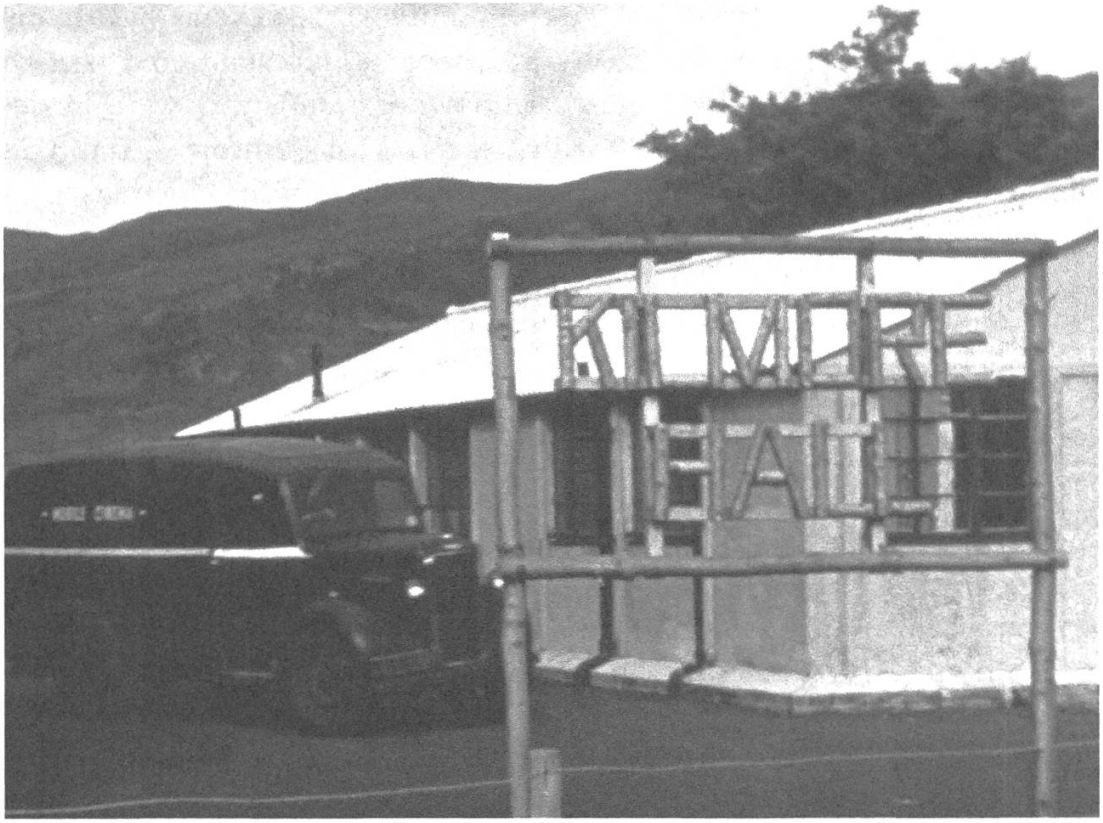

Fig. 1. c/o National Library of Scotland

This image of a Film Guild van arriving at a hall in the village of Kilmore in the west Highland county of Argyll demonstrates the functional, rustic construction and vernacular style of a village hall. Our findings reveal that although cinema audiences are usually fully immersed in the stories projected onto the screen, the halls where the films were exhibited and experienced significantly informed how the mobile film shows were remembered. Former relief operator Colin described the halls as

> very utilitarian, you could say dog-eared would probably be the correct description. The one in Shetland, in Yell, there was no heating or electric or anything else, it was just a tin roof, tin walls, two or three windows on the

> sides and a door. And there was no hot water, you took your own refreshment or whatever you needed to have. (Personal interview, 8 April 2019)

The basic rustic structure was more common than the elaborate stone structures of town halls, though the lack of comfort did not, in the early period of the service, deter the willing attendees or detract from the visiting attraction of the cinema. The prospect of the cinema visiting their area carried a strong appeal for the communities. However, towards the end of the 1950s, when the shows had become an established part of the culture of the Highlands and Islands and attendances were in decline, there is evidence to suggest that the lack of comfort in the halls did become more of a factor in the decision to attend the cinema shows (National Records of Scotland).

The halls were an important space in the cultural topography of rural communities. They were also used for activities that ranged from badminton and whist drives to meetings of community groups like the Scottish Women's Rural Institute. The multipurpose space of the halls suited the various uses that communities required of them. This was particularly true of the film show because the hall had to be transformed into a makeshift cinema. The preparation of the exhibition space created the opportunity for youngsters in the community to contribute to the assembly of an improvised cinema, and this with a greater degree of involvement and collaboration than was given by the conventional cinemas of towns and cities. The effort of having to improvise a cinema in spaces not constructed specifically for the purpose meant that the location was remembered with accurate detail and the common endeavour strengthened familial and communal ties with the institution. The annual reports of the Film Guild acknowledged the reliance on voluntary effort required by the operators to put on the shows (National Records of Scotland). Kathleen and Marion, the daughters of the operator Roddie Urquhart, remember helping him to set up the hall in Skeabost on the Isle of Skye:

> What I remember about Skeabost Hall in particular is going there and Dad would have to unlock it, then we would have to lay out the chairs, so we would have 20 or 30 chairs on that side and a gap, and the projectors would be in the middle at the gap, and then there'd be another set of chairs on this side. He took the money and everything, didn't he, I remember there being a table and a chair. (Personal interview, 12 November 2016)

Iain recalls the excitement he felt from contributing to the assembly of the cinema when the Film Guild visited his district of Point on the Isle of Lewis:

> And he [the operator] used to come every fortnight and we used to set up the hall, you had benches and chairs, you put them out and there was a stage in the hall as well. We used to put the screen, roll up the screen on the stage and the van came, roll up the gear and setting up the tripods and bringing their projectors on, and the spools. It was a big, big highlight for us you know, that was like massive for us. Like probably going to the Royal Albert Hall today, you know [laughs]. (Personal interview, 15 November 2016)

The opportunity to assist directly in the preparation of the space for the film show was clearly valued and contributed to a more open and intimate form of cinema in areas where permanent commercial cinema buildings were absent. Furthermore, members of a communal audience were much less anonymous to one another than those of an urban cinema audience. Inside the improvised exhibition arenas of the halls, the audience shared the space with the operator and the film apparatus, so that beyond seeing a film show, they also saw and heard it being projected by the operator who had arrived in their locality for the day of the show. This created a viewing environment where youngsters in the audience were recognized by their local peers and less likely to misbehave. Seating was not stepped but equally positioned at ground level, an arrangement that called for more considerate behaviour during the show. These conditions created an architecture of reception and cinema experience that contrasts with dominant understandings of cinema, but which for these rural audiences was still their cinema, and their means of going to the pictures. This combination of intimacy, community, and access to an experience of cinema that was shared across the Highlands and Islands was central to the recollection of the Film Guild, and often audiences remember the prospect of going to the film shows more than the actual films.[7]

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[7] This investment in an institution that was providing a cultural service for rural communities can be contrasted with one of the recurring myths in films and literary fiction about the Highlands and Islands. The Kailyard tradition typically represents the sentimental idealization of village life and is described by Duncan Petrie as "the abdication of any engagement with the realities of the modern world" (3). The work of the Film Guild delivered a small part of the modern world to the Highlands and Islands and offers both a corrective to the myth, and a means of securing ongoing political support and legitimacy for a civic Scotland.

The operators personified the cinema delivered by the Film Guild and they represented the public face of the institution, occupying a mediating role between the community audiences located across the Highlands and Islands, and the central institution located farther south. There was an expectation that the operators' role would become extensive, and the relationships they cultivated with the communities were important to the standing of the Film Guild: "[T]he men who now are driver-projectionists may once have been bus-drivers, crofters, fishermen or bartenders, but one and all they are now film ambassadors, friends and confidantes of the people and general factotums" (Morris 30). Their work and travel across the Highlands and Islands connected remote areas not only physically but also culturally by turning rural cinema-going into a cross-regional, if not national, experience.

Part of the task of building relationships with isolated communities and meeting their expectations and anticipation of the mobile cinema's visit was predicated on the completion of the journeys undertaken by the operators in their vans. The landscape of the Highlands and Islands, the rudimentary road and sea transport infrastructure, plus winter weather, increased the pressure on the operators to reach the destinations of the shows allocated to their unit.

Fig. 2. Shetland Isles c/o Billy Williamson. During the height of the Film Guild's popularity in the 1950s the operator for the northern Shetland Isles had to transport equipment to islands such as Unst and Fetlar separately, and rely

on local helpers and transport to ensure that he reached his destination in time for the show. The next day he would have to make the same journey with the equipment in reverse back to his van.

The Film Guild vans driven by the operators signified a visiting attraction that would arrive in communities regularly and reliably. The vans were a combination of newly purchased vehicles and older ones inherited from the Ministry of Information; they represented solidity and reliability over comfort and speed, with operators also taking responsibility for their maintenance. People belonging to crofting communities did not necessarily live close to one another within a village, but were more widely scattered and therefore isolated across the landmass of the Highlands and Islands. Assisting these attendees became part of the operator's work, with the van functioning as a form of communal transport for the audience as well as the cinema equipment. Allan recalls being picked up by the operator during his childhood on the Isle of Skye:

> As we got a little bit older and we were entrusted to go to the Film Guild, or the "pictures" as we called them, on our own. Roddie would come along with this little Bedford van with the lettering on the side, *Highlands and Islands Film Guild* and it was absolutely packed with the equipment, he had two projectors and the film, the screen, all the bits and pieces, and he would stop and give us a lift. He would squeeze in three or four of us and in return we would then help offload stuff from the van into the hall and at the end of the evening we would reverse that process and Roddie would give us a lift back. (Personal interview, 24 August 2018)

Access to transport was one of a number of pressing issues, exacerbated by the geography of the area and a relatively meagre public transport service. Interviewees recall how seeing the Film Guild van parked in their areas confirmed that the mobile cinema and its operator had arrived to deliver a film show for them. This recognition affirmed their valued contribution to the cultural and social life of the community and its topography.

The operator's van transported the equipment required for the projection of the films but did not always contain the film reels. At certain points of the schedule the films had to be transported from the renters in London, or from other units in the Highlands and Islands, to the location of the next show. Ensuring that the films were where they were required at the right time required meticulous planning and organization from the centre. The films and the operators usually arrived at their des-

tination on time, enabling the Film Guild to become a reliable and integral part of cultural life in the post-war Highlands and Islands, as they were able to overcome the handicaps presented by the terrain and its seasonal conditions.

The geography and physical topography of the area with its particular climate and environment regularly encroached on the cinema and how it was exhibited, experienced, and remembered. One of the most explicit examples of this is provided by the first secretary of the Film Guild, who narrates the actions taken by the community to ensure that the community of Eshaness, an exposed headland located on the west coast of the Shetland mainland, were able to receive their operator:

> Eshaness, craggy and isolated provides a rather special example of its appreciation. The hall there stands in the middle of what is almost a peat bog and there was no access road. The problem was a simple one – no road, no films. That was a challenge and the Shetlanders love a challenge: a common saying among these descendants of the hardy Vikings is "Say du nawthin," but that does not mean they do nothing. The men set to, carted stones and rubble, dumped it into the old track and so made their road, whilst the women, equally anxious and willing, forgot their knitting and attended to the refreshments. In a day and a night the job was done and George Horne, the Guild's first operator, drove his van up for the show. (Morris 30)

The narrative retelling of this intervention by the local community is typical of the stories that recollections of the Film Guild institution yield, albeit in this case with a very stereotypical account of gender roles. The oral tradition of the Highlands ensures that these types of memory are passed on to the following generations (Goode, "The Place of Rural Exhibition").

The ability of the communities to act collectively and voluntarily to ensure that the film shows were delivered to locations where cinema had not existed before was key to their early success and the longevity of the institution. The Film Guild benefited from the improvisational skills of local citizens who used local materials to furnish the halls. Examples of these enhancements include an operator making bespoke wooden boxes to hold admission money, the local community making cushions to make seating more comfortable, appropriating blankets left over from the war to use as blackout material, and taking oven-heated bricks wrapped in paper into the hall on winter nights to help keep warm – contributions that Philip Alperson described as spontaneous achievement within the constraints of the possible (274). These small

investments in supporting and enhancing the cinema-going experience resulted from post-war austerity and geographical marginality.

The Film Guild reached the apex of its growth in the early 1950s, and although audiences did decline throughout this decade, the social functions of the institution had deepened since its formation. This enabled the management to maintain the argument for their contribution to the sustainability of small rural communities throughout the 1960s, when attendances dropped, and the necessity of the film shows were called into question by the funders. Its primary funder, the Scottish Education Department, assumed that the film shows had been replaced by television – a view that was fiercely contested by the Film Guild and educational studies (Blackburn). Despite this resistance and due to the end of post-war regeneration that came with the election of Conservative governments between 1951 and 1964 and the changes to leisure habits that emerged throughout the 1960s, the Film Guild declined until it was finally wound up in 1971.

The social qualities of accessibility and personification in tandem with the specificities of film exhibition in non-theatrical spaces, where geography and local material culture became intertwined with its operation, turned this cinema into a far more embodied experience that went beyond simply immersing oneself mentally in the stories projected onto the screen. These community spaces were located in places that were on the margin, and where regular cinema-going was not expected to be possible. The act of delivering film shows to these areas and their expectant audiences represents what Rob Shields has described as alternative geographies of modernity that enabled a distinctive experience of cinema that has, for a long time, been absent from its historical and theoretical configuration. The Film Guild made a significant contribution to the reach of British post-war cinema-going experience. Viewed in relation to the rest of British cinema exhibition, this was an exceptional cinema that depended on the financial support of the government and had no equivalent of the same scale showing films on a not-for-profit basis, for entertainment and education. Indeed, the Film Guild and the mobile cinema provided by its wartime precursor the MOI created an expectation amongst isolated communities that they should be able to see films in their areas. The historical impact of the Film Guild and its cultural legacy is evident in the resumption of organized provision of a cinema-going experience for the remote communities of the Highlands and Islands in the 1990s.

The Screen Machine

In 1998 a new version of mobile cinema was unveiled in the form of the Screen Machine, a purpose-built cinema vehicle that promised to deliver the latest films on 35mm to rural areas of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. The idea of a wholly self-contained mobile cinema that removed the need for spaces that could accommodate a film show originated in France. A partnership of Highlands and Islands Enterprise, the Scottish Film Council and the then Highland Regional Council was formed to adapt and transfer the Cinemobile model from France. The consortium agreed to commission a Highland equivalent of the Cinemobile, financially supported by the National Lottery Fund. A body called HI-Arts was formed to take forward the commissioning process that would eventually lead to the launch of the Screen Machine (Livingston).

Fig. 3. The Screen Machine in Dornie with Eilean Donan Castle in the background c/o Regional Screen Scotland, David Redshaw

The Screen Machine is popular and has become well established in the Highlands and Islands. Its two (soon to become three) vehicles are now equipped with digital projection facilities and provide a genuinely

theatrical cinema experience to rural communities that stands up to the offerings of the modern multiplex cinema and can even surpass the experience of watching television comfortably at home. It does not offer a commercial proposition for exhibiting films though it must be seen to be developing its potential audience as part of its remit. Like the Highlands and Islands Film Guild, it is borne out of the specific needs of the Highlands and Island communities who do not enjoy easy access to permanent cinemas. There is a growing community cinema sector in England and Wales providing a static and more intimate alternative to the multiplex cinema experience to rural areas, but there is no equivalent to the Screen Machine.

The size of the Screen Machine vehicles means that they cannot reach all of the Highlands and Islands, but there is a growing community cinema sector supported by Regional Screen Scotland that works to address this requirement. The popularity of the Screen Machine service with its latest feature films has not diminished with the increased use of streaming platforms, and this distinctive and communal mode of cinema-going experience remains a vital part of Scotland's cultural provision and cultural identity.

European Connections and Scottish Identity

The policy that supports the broadening of access to cinema in Scotland takes account of comparative contexts from the Continent that seek to ensure that access to a film experience is maximized and geographically equitable rather than left to the market and the size of the potential audience (Česálková). A recent report cited

> Norway as having a fantastic model of regional cinemas, with local people owning parts of community cinemas. People there are very well served, as they are in most of the Scandic countries, which have good models that give people access to films, including films from their own country. (Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Relations Committee 88)

The remote areas of Europe, such as Norway and Scotland, require sustained financial subsidy in the face of depopulation and limited opportunities. This has been termed "the Highland problem" in Scotland by historians of the area and there has been no shortage of enquiries by various types of government committees appointed to recommend po-

tential solutions (Hunter; Burnett 109).[8] The initiatives that gave rise to the Screen Machine and its post-war predecessor are notable because they yielded tangible interventions with outcomes that genuinely improved the cultural life of the Highlands and Island communities and have, as mentioned above, also enjoyed support from the EU.

The EU has shown an understanding for marginalized areas in Europe and has also recognized the necessity to support the Scottish transportation system, agriculture, and culture (Ascherson 72). Furthermore, Gerry Hassan highlights how civic memory continues to be important to how Scotland sees itself and its increasing political difference to England (*Independence of the Scottish Mind*). Scotland can therefore be considered as stuck between a disunion with the EU that it regrets and a union with the UK it only half-heartily embraces.

England has shifted to the political right, helped by a first-past-the-post electoral system, and, in the wake of the vote for Brexit, has employed a more openly xenophobic and nationalist discourse. In contrast, Scotland's acceptance of, and requirement for, incoming migrants coupled with its refusal to see European Union institutions as an ontological threat to national sovereignty, mean that the distance between Scotland and the England represented by the current Conservative government and its allies has rarely been greater.[9] For Scotland the appetite for nationalism is derived less from an idea of blood and soil than from a claim to greater self-determination and a more socially progressive and open citizenship (Boyd; Hassan, *Independence of the Scottish Mind*). This difference is underlined by Nathalie Duclos, who has observed that whereas

> the phrases "the Scottish people" and "the people of Scotland" used to be interchangeable for the party, the latter phrase is now always preferred. It is argued that this is in keeping with the SNP's [Scottish National Party's] perception of Scottish citizenship as one that is based on residence, rather than

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[8] The consultations with representatives of educational, social, and cultural institutions prior to the formation of the Film Guild underlined how important the attraction of cinema was to the area. One official stated that cinema was more important than electricity which would be arriving in the coming years through the hydro-electric scheme (National Archives). Access to cinemas was a cultural facility that was widely available in the towns and cities of Scotland and was viewed as a major improvement in remote communities, especially valued by the younger population.

[9] From the more than 20,000 students from across Europe who come to study in Scotland each year, to the 500 million bottles of whisky it exports throughout the EU, Scotland has had a long history of intellectual, cultural, literary, scientific, and economic contributions to Europe ("Scotland around the World").

> origins or ancestry, as well as with its claims to support a "civic" form of nationalism. (1-2)

The collective and historical agency of *the people* is important to the construction of the nation by the SNP and the sense of a movement towards a point of achieved self-determination and sovereignty (Hassan, "Scotland's Democratic Moment"). With the unionist meaning of Britishness under increasing pressure, the EU referendum campaign and subsequent debate demonstrated the propensity of Conservative governments to look backwards and inwards to the Second World War rather than forward to a renewed and cohesive Britain. England was giving clear signs that some of the electorate were uneasy with levels of immigration and the freedom of movement that underpins the meaning of Europe for many of its people and institutions. Scotland, in contrast, actively articulates a relationship with fellow European countries that does not undermine national sovereignty, but is considered a necessary part of it and essential to its future.

Projects such as the provision of rural cinema-going highlight Scotland's investments to improve communal life and culture and fight depopulation, as well as its similarities with other marginalized areas in Europe. David McCrone observes that "Scottish interest in Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Iceland can be explained by; their 'northern' position in relation to central Europe and the European Union; and their small populations and centre-left political dispensations" (209). These affinities between northern Europe and the history and cultural topography of Scotland reveal a relationship aligned with European cinema culture and policy.

This is a Scotland where the Scottish National Party has replaced the British Labour Party as the majority party, often constructed as more progressive and increasingly at odds with a British identity dominated by English, anti-European conservatism. While England remains locked on its current political course with left liberal alternatives unable to make a convincing impact, Scotland remains an exception to the conservative and imperial exceptionalism of England and Britain.

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