

The Medium of Modernity: the impact of the Highlands and Islands Film Guild c1945-1975

A colloquium based on the AHRC project conducted 2016-19 at the Universities of Glasgow and Stirling



**University
of Glasgow**



**UNIVERSITY OF
STIRLING**



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

Date: Friday 14th June 2019 10am-4pm

Location: Kelvin Hall Lecture Theatre, Glasgow

Programme of Events

09.45-10.00 Coffee

10.00-10.15 Welcome by Ian Goode, PI on the AHRC Project

10.15 -11.15 **Callum Brown and Ealasaid Munro ‘Life-changing screen: Jim Hunter’s well-spent Highland youth at the Film Guild shows’**

Jim Hunter, Emeritus Professor of History at the University of the Highlands and Islands, former director of the Scottish Crofters’ Union, and chairman of Highlands and Islands Enterprise, was impacted very significantly by the touring film shows of the Highland and Island Film Guild. In an impressive, impassioned and frank interview with Brown and Munro, he explained how the films, the film-showings and the community congregating at the events left a major imprint upon him, providing both a sense of the world beyond his community near Ballachulish, and a sharper perception of the small and isolated community in which he was growing up. This article will provide both an abridged version of the interview and an analysis of what it presents to the researcher.

11.15-11.45 Tea break

11.45-12.30 **Ian Goode, ‘The unsatisfactory medium: the transition from mobile cinema to television in the post-war Highlands and Islands’**

Becky Conekin et al. identify the Queen’s Coronation and its mediation by television in 1953 as the defining moment in British modernity after the Second World War (Conekin, Mort, Waters 1999). The population of the Highlands and Islands mostly watched this event not on television, but on 16mm film, via the mobile cinema shows provided by the Highlands and Islands Film Guild. The primary reason for film anticipating and assuming some of the audio-visual functions of television was that the geography of the Highlands and Islands did not readily accommodate television broadcasting. As a result television arrived unevenly and slowly to the Highlands and Islands. The decline in cinema attendance throughout Britain during the 1950s tends to be attributed to the presence of the new medium of television in the home. This argument elides the experience of the communities of the Highlands and Islands who were subject to significantly different circumstances that have not received substantial scholarly attention. This paper traces the problematic journey and reception of television into the Highlands and Islands and the uncertainty over actual accessibility and quality of reception on the ground. It argues that whilst the Scottish Education Department who funded the non-commercial mobile cinema service and wanted to assume that it had been succeeded by television, the inherent problems of delivering broadcast television to the area enabled the more communal, educative,

legitimate and reliable cinema to prevail through the 1960s. This asynchronous relationship has implications for narratives of British modernity, and compels us to recognise their often invisible geography. Drawing on archival sources, oral history interviews and existing histories of British media, this paper will present an account of the Highland experience of a transition that has typically been aligned with an urban perspective.

- 12.30-13.30** Lunch – (during lunch there will be time to view a small exhibit; two films related to the Film Guild; and details will be given for the website)
- 13.30-14.15** **Sarah Neely, ‘Looking at the bigger picture: cinema memory and the history of the Highlands and Islands Film Guild as narrated through oral history interviews and its surrounding metadata’**
- This paper draws from existing work relating to the creative writing strand of the Major Minor Cinema project, which was inspired by the surprising discovery of project’s pilot study that some cinema-goers from the period of research had been inspired to write poems or stories in response to their experience of going to the Film Guild screenings. Through a consideration of the project’s oral history interviews, alongside oral history metadata, including letters, stories, poems, drawings and other written accounts, as well as self-published memoirs and local historical publications, the paper will consider the ways in which cinema memory (as a very particular form of cultural memory) is narrativised, offering its own unique inflection to the ways in which stories are told.
- 14.15-15.00** **Callum Brown, Ealasaid Munro, ‘The Curse: Film and the churches in the Western Isles’**
- The Playhouse Cinema in Stornoway closed in 1977, due - according to local mythology - an Old Testament curse being placed upon it by a minister of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. With evidence also on the reception of the touring Film Guild shows to other parts of Lewis, this paper uses the Playhouse case to explore the way in which in the Western Isles the capacity for increased conservatism towards modern media grew rather than diminished in the 1960s and 1970s.
- 15.00-15.15** Tea Break
- 15.15-16.00** John Caughie – Rapporteur’s comments on the project and the papers (c.10 minutes), followed by general questions and discussion
- Poem: *A Village in Strath* (Roderick MacLeod)
- 16.00** END