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‘We shall really have to do something about your equipment’: The Projectionist’s Negotiation of Obsolescence in *The Smallest Show on Earth* and *Coming Up Roses*

Claire Jesson

Abstract:

This article analyses two British film comedies, *The Smallest Show on Earth* (1957) and the Welsh-language film *Coming Up Roses* (*Rhosyn a Rhith*) (1986), both of which feature projectionists as significant characters. It focuses on the implications of the projectionist as a hero within the narratives, on his portrayal and on the dramatisation of his labour. I examine the paradox of his inhabiting a central narrative role when his professional one requires his isolation and invisibility, when his own attention is funnelled towards the on-screen diegesis he is concerned to project and, moreover, when his obsolescence is mandated by cinema closure. The films’ promotion of exhibition itself as object and comedic spectacle is interrogated. Within this, I attend closely to diegetic films: to how the fictive screen relates to the wider text and to how it figures or expresses its concerns and enlarges its meanings. A related area of enquiry is how institutions of cinema mirror and ‘project’ wider social issues and how cinema shapes, and is shaped by, its audiences. How does the restoration of the projectionist’s libido, and his rehabilitation through marriage, relate to cinema’s place within social, cultural and political life?

Keywords: cinema-going; *Coming Up Roses*; exhibition; fleapit; projectionist; *The Smallest Show on Earth*; Wales and cinema; Welsh-language film.

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Introduction

There have been two theatrically released British films set in and around cinemas which feature projectionists as central protagonists: *The Smallest Show on Earth* (1957) and *Coming Up Roses* (*Rhosyn a Rhith*) (1986).¹ Both are comedies and adopt the ‘typical Ealing comedy plot’ in which a small operation is pitted against a much larger rival (Barr 1993: 5). Indeed, several former Ealing regulars are responsible for *Smallest* including producer Michael Relph and director Basil Dearden (Burton and O’Sullivan 2013: 23). Charles Barr comments that the film is the nearest one comes to replicating Ealing comedy beyond the studio (1993: 165). Interestingly, *Roses*’s director, Stephen Bayly, screened *Smallest* during production in the disused cinema in Aberdare where *Roses* is set (Quince 1986: 177). Aside from being alike in terms of narrative and theme, they prominently feature characters facing the end of a professional lifetime in the projection box due to the imminent closure of their cinemas.

This article investigates the characterisation and deployment of the projectionist-protagonist. It explores his meanings within the picture house and beyond, and the implications of his occupying a central narrative space when his professional role requires invisibility. The films’ promotion of exhibition itself as object and spectacle is interrogated. Within this, I also attend closely to the diegetic films selected and portrayed: to how the fictive screen relates to the wider text and to how it figures or expresses its concerns and enlarges its meanings. Exploring the projectionist’s situation within institutions of cinema (its screening spaces, projection and viewing practices), I investigate how he, and they, mirror and ‘project’ wider social issues. I also look at how the restoration of the projectionist’s libido is a step towards cinema’s recuperation as a site of courtship, and how this helps the films to mount an argument around its communal importance. The two comedies also stake out cinema’s territory within civic space and foreground the implications of its retreat therefrom.

Married to machinery: *The Smallest Show on Earth*

The Smallest Show on Earth relates the story of a young, middle-class couple, Matt (Bill Travers) and Jean Spenser (Virginia McKenna), who inherit a so-called fleapit (the Bijou Kinema) cinema along with the three eccentrics who work there, including projectionist Mr Quill (Peter Sellers). Quill is frequently out of sympathy with his projection equipment. The antiquated machinery about which he vociferously

complains appears to behave in an antagonistic fashion.² Matt, who attempts to take control of it when Quill goes missing, is similarly spited. On first entering the projection box, Matt's enquiry as to whether the projectors work is answered by a lamp house shedding one of its sides in comical negation, and in response to his light touch. The machinery's treachery is also in evidence when the lever that operates the house lights administers painful shocks to Quill and to Matt in turn.

Quill battles not only with the equipment but also to mitigate the effects of the Bijou's location by the railway line, which means the outside world repeatedly intrudes and disrupts screenings. When trains thunder by and cause the whole cinema to quake, he mounts the projector's lamp house in the vain effort to still it and stop the picture jumping. His ineffectual wrestling with the projector typifies the generally querulous nature of relationships within the Bijou, particularly evidenced by both his and ticket clerk Mrs Fazackalee's (Margaret Rutherford) attempts to enlist Matt in saying 'rude and unpleasant' things to the other. The theatre's stubborn, antagonistic stance towards the outside world is equally problematic. The Wild West Quill brings to the screen, in the form of 'desert pictures', is reflective of the Bijou's dispute with Hardcastle (Francis De Wolff), the manager of a rival cinema, the Grand. It also echoes the way the Bijou operates outside of the law, with its patrons often paying their entrance in kind (with meat and groceries) and thereby allowing the establishment to avoid entertainment tax. Quill is therefore at the centre of a conflict-fuelled atmosphere characterised not only by the hostilities between himself and Fazackalee but also by a screen dedicated to ongoing wars between cowboys and Indians; by uncooperative machinery; by troublesome trains and by an uncouth, rowdy audience primed to join the fray by shouting and lobbing missiles at the screen when things go wrong. Quill is, in a negative sense, an intradiegetic 'author'; the perpetrator of an accidental iconoclasm which means no film is presented smoothly or uneventfully. His stuttering projection makes the screen a revelatory and expressive window on his own struggle to control his alcoholism, on the Bijou's internal and external strife, and on a wider exhibition industry 'hit', as Hardcastle says, by TV. Problems and breakdowns narrativise the projectionist's labour and require him to perform cinema-specific acts of heroism. This, in turn, characterises exhibition as a diegesis: as comedic, melodramatic or action-packed. Indeed, *Smallest* made an especially strong appeal to the trade press (quoted in Chapman 1997: 200) who saw it as 'Hilarious comment on the plight of the small exhibitor' and observed: 'It never did any

harm for an industry to laugh at its own troubles, and here is a picture which is . . . calculated to encourage sympathy among audiences for the plight of the little men of the business.'

Quill's projection problems have the effect of implicitly protesting against the pictures he and his equipment are compelled to run. Yet, despite the mayhem over which he presides, he is revealed to be deeply concerned with aesthetics. It is telling that no malfunction on the part of his normally temperamental projectors disturbs the peaceful screening of the silent film he shows after hours. Indeed, *Comin' Thro the Rye* (1923) yields a rare moment of pathos. He informs Matt and Jean, who stumble upon the ad hoc show upon returning from an evening out, that it represents the resurrection of a former custom; that 'it feels like old times once more'. Fazackalee's wistful, melancholy piano melody, the emotional leave-taking in bucolic surroundings of the on-screen lovers and the entranced gazes of Quill and Old Tom (Bernard Miles), the commissionaire, as they watch, reinvoke cinema's heyday. The equipment is seemingly appeased by its running of a film made closer to its own era, the images of which grace the screen and command a more contemplative stance than the Westerns. The scene reveals Quill's eye for beauty and his passionate, feeling nature, and is the only point at which any diegetic film is appreciated in itself rather than for its box-office potential or as a refreshment-selling vehicle.

In the face of the Bijou's sale to Hardcastle, Quill's rehabilitation occurs with marriage to Fazackalee. This exchange of his occupation for retirement and romantic partnership suggests that the projectionist's professional engagement has been as onerous as conjugal union. Certainly, his interdependent yet volatile relationship with his projection equipment, and the fact that he is referred to as the only one 'who could possibly understand it', bears some semblance to a marriage, particularly one hardened over time to resentful tolerance. The unusual spelling of 'Fazackalee' also has resonance in this regard as it seems likely the projectors used in *Smallest* were produced by Leeds-based manufacturer, Kalee. The 'Fazackalee' appellation's allusion to the projectors' provenance intimates that, like them, she is an indispensable yet highly troublesome fixture in Quill's life. Secondly, it prefigures the way that, as she and Quill move towards retirement, she will displace the machines. The rehabilitation represented by marriage also reflects the fact that, throughout the film, Quill's refrain about the state of '[his] equipment' extends its faulty condition, via double entendre and the possessive pronoun, to himself. Thus he makes himself the butt of a joke alluding to sexual dysfunction for which marriage might represent some sort of resolution. The marriage,

which occurs at the same time as Hardcastle's purchase of the Bijou, is also symbolic of the old order – typified by 'the old rascal' Great Uncle Simon, the ancestor from which Matt inherits the Bijou – submitting to a legitimisation of both professional and private affairs. Ironically this is achieved through arson, with Old Tom's burning down of the Grand constituting the last hurrah of the Bijou's lawless past.

Exhibition as turf war

That the desert pictures shown at the Bijou are generic and formulaic would tend to militate against their being perceived as otherwise significant. In this section I argue that they are more than simple occasions for Quill's comedic efforts to tame his machinery, and are instructive regarding how the Bijou is positioned in local space.

During the Bijou's inaugural screening under the couple's management, which is slow to attract passing trade, Matt and Jean greet Fazackalee by disconsolately uttering 'ug' and 'how' in the clichéd manner of the native Americans and cowboys portrayed in the picture with which they re-open. Their mimicking stereotypical Indian salutations is a sarcastic expression of their disappointment in both the film and its attendance. Throughout *Smallest*, the on-screen antipathy between warring camps perpetuated in film after film mirrors the victories and setbacks in the couple's battle with Hardcastle, who seeks to acquire the Bijou and plans to turn it into a car park for the use of the Grand's patrons. Their obstruction of this is an important iteration of the narratively inscribed David-and-Goliath, Ealing-esque structure that pits the small, independent exhibitor against its larger and wealthier rival. Apart from the couple's ironic re-enactment of the greeting previously mentioned, there are several ways the diegetic Westerns position the Bijou on the Indian side.

As hinted at above, transportation plays a part in presenting Sloughborough, the town that accommodates the rival cinemas, as a Wild West. The railway is key; ushering the couple to the town, imposing itself upon the Bijou throughout and spiriting the protagonists away to Samarkand at the last. As the couple's solicitor (Leslie Phillips) gives them a tour of the Bijou he briefly mentions that the theatre pre-dates the railway. The swathe the railway has cut through the Bijou's immediate environs suggests that the cinema continues to pay for past recalcitrance in remaining hard by the transportational interloper. In other words, the notional car park to which it is under pressure to give way has a precedent in the railway that didn't remove it from the landscape previously. Amusingly,

Quill and Matt, who are compelled to mount projectors in the effort to quell their trembling as the neighbouring trains roll by, become counterparts to the on-screen riders. Though both cowboy and Indian factions transport themselves on horseback, the railway is decidedly more problematic for the latter, as it is for the Bijou. In fact, a scene from the first desert picture shown at the Bijou depicts an Indian deliberately standing on the track in order to obstruct the train. And is it merely fortuitous that the lamp houses of Quill's projectors are shaped like the covered wagons that belong to the iconography of the Wild West? During the screening in which Matt takes over in the projection box from a drunkenly absent Quill, with disastrous results, a pair of women discuss abandoning the cinema and catching the train to the pub. The Bijou's patrons fully embrace the railway and don't have cars. However, they will have to relinquish their cinema so that the Grand's driving audience can be better accommodated.

Several projection-related capers reinforce the point that the Bijou's troubled coexistence with the railway is another ongoing source of physical and mental stress for Quill. Yet the audience enjoy the disturbance created by outside trains as if they were special effects in service of the portrayal of their on-screen counterparts. In such an environment as the Bijou, and with such poor films constituting its programme, the kind of professional presentation provided at the Grand, which Quill strives in vain to emulate, would seemingly cast pearls before swine. As Dave Rolinson tersely states, the Bijou is 'an outdated purveyor of lowest-common-denominator entertainment' (2003: 88). The resultant ambiguity towards the audience inherent in such a portrayal is taken up by Christine Geraghty in her discussion of the way *Smallest* reflects the concerns of 1950s' exhibitors about changing audience trends when she remarks that 'the point of the film is that this version of cinema is not just unsustainable but may also be undesirable ... the cinema crowd has the characteristics of the mob' (2000: 19). Quill's continual attempts to wrest a smooth-running, professional screening out of the machinery characterise him as aspirational, but no one sees his pain and he is doomed to have his efforts go unnoticed until his disappearance makes him visible again. It is a central irony of the film that Quill is the most adversely affected by poor projection and the staunchest defender of the good picture.

The desert pictures illuminate the way in which *Smallest* 'maps' or 'projects' exhibition as turf warfare. The Bijou is, first and foremost, property. Before Great Uncle Simon's legacy takes a specific theatrical shape, it is mooted, cryptically, as his estate. The dispute between the

couple and Hardcastle over its value somewhat overshadows a more immediate issue: that Simon's dying intestate raises a question as to the Bijou's rightful ownership from the start. Matt insists on claiming his inheritance but his growing acquaintance with the staff eventually persuades him that it belongs, properly and morally, to them. They emerge victorious through sheer staying power. Quill's tenancy of the projection box is especially crucial to the fight. The immediate calamity of his drinking is that it removes him and makes him suddenly highly visible, particularly when Matt's projection creates an on-screen 'riot' of comical failures in which he screens the leader, runs reels backwards, upside down, too fast or with asynchronous dialogue. In making himself conspicuous in this way, Quill passively presses the issue of his inability to cope with his equipment.

The battles raging in *Smallest* portray exhibition as the film industry's 'front line'; the first to register the effects of post-war modernisation, changes in leisure culture, social life and the advance of the consumer society. Likewise, Quill, as the one who performs the most cinema-specific form of labour, is in the vanguard of a turf war between local exhibitors. Certainly, he is quickly identified as the target when Hardcastle and his cabal plot against their rivals. As Sloughborough's second-tier independent cinema, which shows B-pictures and caters to a working-class, low-income audience of children, teens, teddy boys, farmers and maiden aunts, the Bijou receives the newsreel after the Grand has shown it. This indicator of the smaller cinema's relative marginality is also the mechanism by which Hardcastle ensures whisky is delivered to Quill's projection box. While Hardcastle and his cronies plan this, they start to look enviously at their rivals' filmic 'territory' and one of them complains that: 'In my opinion we'd do ourselves a bit of good if we showed a few desert pictures instead of all this kick-in-the-belly, dump-'em-over-the-waterfront stuff'.

There is an allusion to another kind of turf war within the Bijou itself, where American films dominate the programme. That cowboys commandeer the screen portends ill, even if it is a temporarily successful strategy in the war against Hardcastle. Quill's running *Comin' Thro the Rye* sees the sole instance of a British production screened, and we might also ascribe, anthropomorphically, the aforementioned cooperation of the British-manufactured Kalee projectors to patriotism. It is fitting that the section of *Comin' Thro the Rye* shown within *Smallest* depicts land, not only in its touching scene of lovers parting in a field of rye, but also in the inter-title referencing the crop's harvest. The film title's citation of a poem by Robert

Burns links it to vernacular dialects and traditions, particularly oral, performative or ritualistic ones. Quill's screening is an interval taken in celebration of historical British cinematic and artistic institutions. The scene sees Hollywood banished and Britain momentarily regaining some cinematic 'territory': that of the screen. Quill is the principal architect of this ephemeral British 're-occupation'.

Married to machinery: *Coming Up Roses*

Coming Up Roses was commissioned for television by Welsh fourth channel S4C. Its dialogue is almost entirely Welsh, apart from one or two brief scenes that incorporate English characters.³ As Steve Blandford observes, S4C's establishment in the early 1980s is 'often cited as one of the few times that Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government capitulated to popular pressure' (2007: 87) and therefore its language does, in itself, characterise *Roses* as a work of political opposition. *Roses* also represents a landmark for Welsh-language film, attracting cinema distribution at film festivals and opening in the West End.⁴ It was a TV movie for which S4C initially had no aspirations regarding theatrical release. It was filmed on 16mm stock and blown up to 35mm afterwards for its unexpected big-screen outings. Almost thirty years on from *Smallest*, *Roses*, which was in development during the 1984–5 miners' strike, portrays the closure of a Welsh town's only remaining cinema, the Rex, which is a picture palace approximating the size of Hardcastle's establishment in *Smallest*. Eventually, Mona (Iola Gregory), the ice cream vendor, who, like projectionist Trevor (Dafydd Hywel), has been made redundant, stumbles upon a way to make money that involves exploiting the abandoned picture palace: the mass cultivation of mushrooms in its vast, dark auditorium.

Trevor is introduced in the projection box when required to effect the speedy repair of *Konga* (1961), a British-American science-fiction co-production that breaks partway through its screening. It snaps even as the representatives of the Rex's parent company are in manager Mr Davies' (W. J. Phillips) office imparting their decision to close the cinema. The buckling of the film image is an intuitive sympathetic gesture (or perhaps one of solidarity) from one beast – the great ape Konga – to its host, the Rex or 'king'. Trevor's deft 'rescue' of *Konga*, and his amelioration of its stoppage by summoning Mona to the auditorium with her tray of ices, is juxtaposed with a scene in which Davies tries to engage the sympathies of the visiting representatives by arguing that Trevor 'came to us straight from school. He's known no other work outside these walls. It's his whole life.' Trevor himself

reiterates similar sentiments about how closely his professional role relates to his identity. He insists that he's a 'qualified projectionist. That's my job.' He lodges above a café directly opposite the Rex, which reinforces the sense of its closure spelling personal annihilation. The presence of Trevor's sons at *Konga's* screening weaves his divorce into the narrative, and his living alone in the Rex's proximity hints that he, too, is 'married' to his work. Redundancy replicates and compounds the family break-up already sustained.

A changing set of economic and social realities forces Trevor to recognise the diminished worth of his skills. Davies confronts him with this when he says, 'The days of the professional projectionist are over. With lock-on assemblage why should they pay for a professional? A little girl could work the thing and lick a lollipop at the same time.' (It seems reasonable to deduce that Davies refers to long-play projection set-ups, such as towers or platters, which are less onerous for the projectionist than the two-projector changeover system in evidence at the Rex.) A visual link is made between the closure of the Rex and that of the local collieries when, after Trevor has unsuccessfully pursued a projectionist's job at a Merthyr Tydfil cinema, he drives past a pit where a notice of closure is being erected as a police officer looks on. Like the newly unemployed miners, Trevor faces the end of the notion of the job for life. Institutions once thought permanent and defining – coal mining, the cinema and employment itself – are unstable.

Trevor's acceptance of a caretaker/security job, in order to be on the spot if the Rex reopens and requires a projectionist, entails his wearing a uniform. This rubs salt in the wound of his loss by externalising his altered state and status: outside of the Rex – even in front of his landlord – he conceals it with an overcoat or blanket. Trevor forfeits his projectionist's right to invisibility and is compelled to assume a front-of-house, representative role. The uniform, which is adorned with gold braiding, transforms him into a corrupted commissioner. Whereas the commissioner's duties include welcoming people through the doors (although from what one gleans about commissioners there was also a certain amount of crowd control involved), Trevor's job is to keep them out. The commissioner role had already passed into history by the 1980s. Its disappearance is part of a longer trajectory that culminates in the projectionist's extinction. One suspects that a source of Trevor's hatred of the uniform is that it visually aligns him with the police and their representation of unsympathetic government, particularly evident in their deployment during the very recent miners' strike. Eventually Trevor's disillusionment is such that he himself refuses to recognise the authority conferred by his uniform. Instead, he

throws the auditorium open to a rock band who need rehearsal space, and to a group of older women who use the Rex as a venue for outings, as an alternative to watching TV in their residential care homes, and whose request for 'interval music' is answered by the band. Under Trevor's custodianship, the Rex continues as a venue for the gathering of the otherwise dispossessed and marginalised. He clandestinely puts it in public hands or 'ownership' so that it exceeds the social function traditionally performed by a cinema.

Like Quill's, Trevor's aesthetic appreciation emerges as an important and defining quality. Although he and Mona revitalise the Rex as a mushroom farm and venue for community activities, he is sensitive to the beauty and value of its interior. During one of his idle spells in the projection box he creates a spectacular *son et lumière* show in which he lights up different parts of the auditorium in different combinations of colours. This spotlights the auditorium's adornments, temporarily illuminating the art deco architectural features that are otherwise shrouded in darkness. He accompanies the lights with stage-show fanfare music, as if showing the space off. In another set-piece of this kind, Trevor plays a recording of Rosalind Russell's rendition of 'Everything's Coming Up Roses' from the film musical *Gypsy* (1962) as Mona dusts the stage. She responds to his shining a light on her by miming to the track and gradually unleashing the kind of 'impromptu' dance performance that characterises the musical. The Rex's scarlet curtains provide the backdrop as Trevor looks on, smitten, through the projection box's viewing port. The final shot of the dance number holds Mona in medium close-up as if through a soft-focus lens and in diffuse lighting. Suddenly her duster is a bouquet, her make-up is stronger and her hair set in 1940s' 'victory rolls' and set off with earrings. In other words, his vision, and his attraction to her, recreates her as a glamorous Hollywood star from the golden era. Yet the camera holds on his face, too, which is bathed in reflected light as he is transfixed by her. His performance of his feelings present and commend him to us as a romantic hero, despite his otherwise cutting a rather unprepossessing figure and being characterised as a hapless soul.

Trevor's falling in love with Mona is, as with Quill, a path to redemption. The audience that attends *Konga* at the beginning of the film is constituted mainly of pensioners and young boys. The auditorium is therefore characterised as a sex-free zone. The clean-up operation that aims to make the Rex appeal to buyers as a cinema once more, and which engages Trevor and Mona in shared endeavours, reclaims it as a courtship site. In *Smallest*, Quill's voluntary projection

of *Comin' Thro the Rye* similarly asserts both his cinephilia and his romantic side. In *Roses*, too, Trevor's interventions from the projection box re-inject sex, glamour and romance to the space. Mona returns the compliment by comparing him, in his taciturnity, to Marlon Brando. The cinema setting complicates the portrait of Trevor's projectionist. On the one hand, projection seems to have served him ill in terms of his employment or earning prospects beyond the box. Yet within the Rex he is its answer to Brando.

Cinema as a prime site

Cinema's relationship to territory is as prominent a theme in *Roses* as it is in *Smallest*, despite the absence of turf wars between theatres. Indeed, far from being rivals, theatres in *Roses* are united in a common fate filled with pathos. The parade of derelict picture houses forming the film's opening titles points to their widespread abandonment. In terms of the Rex's loss, *Roses's* protagonists fight two battles which are somewhat conflated. Firstly, they work hard to mitigate the damage done by vandals in order to persuade visiting prospective buyers to run it as a cinema once again. The local council's subsequent permission for it to be turned into a car park renders these efforts futile. This coincides with cinema manager Davies becoming ill and the commencement of a second struggle: to raise the £700 needed for his headstone before he dies. *Roses's* final shot indicates victory in the latter battle when the camera tracks back and reveals the grave in all its glory: fashioned like a cinema screen, flanked by curtains with 'the end' emblazoned across it, in commemoration of the Rex's manager and of cinema itself. Since the fate of the Rex remains uncertain at the end of *Roses*, the headstone may become its last vestige. Thus the mobilisation to save the cinema lapses into a race against time to erect a monument to it, and re-locates it from the centre of town to the much contracted space of a cemetery plot. The Rex itself is last seen crammed full of street and traffic signage, suggesting that the council – who raise hopes with a last-minute U-turn on their demolition plan – has requisitioned it as a warehouse for their highways department. It is an irony that one of the town's landmarks is subsequently used to house the by-products of traffic's encroachment, a pressure which is also, presumably, at the root of the shelved car-park plan.

News of the Rex's closure is deeply troubling to Trevor's landlord, who explains that he bought the café where they both lodge on the basis that it occupied a 'prime site'. This English formulation, uttered ad nauseam by the anxiously complaining landlord, stands out

within the Welsh dialogue as *officialese* that worked its magic at the time of purchase but is now proving a questionable or meaningless designation. The Rex's very occupation of a so-called prime site is no doubt a factor that makes it vulnerable to being sold, while such a sale surely deprives the site of something that helped define its value in the first place. The cinema's expulsion from the civic centre reflects a declining recognition of it as one of the institutions requisite to a town's identity. It is Mona who questions this in appalled tones when she demands to know 'what are they going to close next – the town hall?'

If the Rex has a local rival it assumes the shape of the Valley Video shop, which, like Trevor's lodgings, is located across the road on the same 'prime site'. The camera lingers poignantly on it so that we register its presence and the film's fingering of a culprit. However, VCR ownership is placed on a similarly precarious footing as cinema-going. Trevor arrives at his former family home in time to witness the VCR belonging to his ex-wife and her new partner, Dave, being taken back into the custody of Radio Rentals, in whose van it is placed. Dave, we infer, is suffering his goods to be seized as he can no longer afford them due to unemployment. He wryly links the popularity of the VCR and the decline in cinema-going when he observes to Trevor, 'less video, more business for the Rex'. On a subsequent visit, Trevor discovers the couch being repossessed and Dave comments that only the TV remains. The removal of the sofa represents the dismantling of the home 'cinema' the VCR makes possible.

The seizure of the VCR shows that the erosion of film culture extends beyond theatrical exhibition. The Rex's closure is similarly staged as a 'repossession' when mute representatives of the company which owns it visit and shut it down instantly. The choice of diegetic film for the Rex's final screening, *Konga*, is key to the social and political significance of the cinema's loss. Selected scenes show the eponymous ape on the rampage. Konga's destruction of a laboratory is echoed when hooligans wreak havoc in the Rex's vacant auditorium. The graffiti they spray on the wall, 'this town is officially dead', is an angry political statement. Davies, while on his way to see Trevor in the projection box, watches Konga's defeat as he is felled by troops at the Palace of Westminster at the foot of Big Ben. Close-ups on Davies suggest he sadly identifies the state-sanctioned extermination of the beast with the fate of the Rex. The slaying's appearance in *Roses*, which alludes more than once to the devastation created by the closure of pits in south Wales, transfigures it into a metaphor both for the effects of Thatcher's policies and for the force deployed by the government in containing

its riotous enemies. *Konga* is an important expressive site: for screening an ire the characters themselves rarely display and implicating the government of the day.

Following the loss of coal mining, the mushroom farm initiative represents another way in which local land and environmental conditions might be exploited. Moreover, it introduces mining paraphernalia – helmets and lamps – to the auditorium. In doing so it draws an explicit parallel between pit closures and the decline of cinema-going, and shows how the remains of each might be repurposed. As increasing numbers of the protagonists' acquaintances become involved in growing mushrooms, the auditorium becomes a 'mine' of sorts, and their operation eventually 'employs' a legion of locals. Scenes in which characters request a financial stake, and one in particular in which Trevor calls a meeting in order to reach a consensus about whether they should take a dividend from sales or purchase pesticides instead, clarify its cooperative entity. As one, the group favours longer-term investment over short-term gain. To this extent, the townspeople's collective action is carefully distinguished from the dealings of the Rex's parent company and those of its prospective buyers, a visiting English party overheard referring to its 'site value' and what its art deco features might fetch 'piecemeal'. In adopting a democratic mode of doing business, it subverts and comments on the way wider prevailing conditions favour 'Raiders', which is the title of the film advertised on the Rex's marquee as 'coming soon'. In other words, under Trevor's management, the auditorium begins to occupy a political space that perhaps replaces or renews what was once the domain of the recently closed coal pits. It makes the argument for cinema as a means of asserting resistance and identity.

Conclusion

As Quill and Trevor illustrate, the projectionist bears a significant burden in the form of the machinery that enslaves and punishes him. It defines who he is and takes over his very identity. Its delinquency is his only occasion for public exposure. Film breakdown, which is the most frequent method of dramatising his labour, gives his heroism a problematic character. He is a figure created and beset by crisis. Moreover, the projectionist's premature retirement or redundancy indefinitely postpones any recognition or reward for his personal sacrifices. In the case of Trevor, his championing an underdog, in the shape of the Rex, sublimates his own desire for love. Similarly,

his appreciation of the Rex's beauty, and that of Mona, ameliorates his own invisibility and the fact that the qualified projectionist status upon which he has staked his sense of self means very little beyond his projection box. On the other hand, as I have argued, failures on the part of machine and projectionist alike betray his latent resistance: to the filmic fare on offer, to his confinement to the box or to his complaints being ignored and his voice unheard.

The screen becomes a site where various crises are writ large as well as an interface where local context acts upon the diegetic film and extends its significance, where, for example, the south Wales location of the auditorium reframes *Konga* as expressive of local anger at Thatcher's policies, which is a meaning it is unlikely to bear elsewhere. The projectionist's and the projectors' interventions, such as *Konga's* breakdown or the effects of passing trains on a Western, make him instrumental in allowing projection to produce spontaneous 'commentary'. In this sense, the projectionist emerges as a species of local bard.

The readiness of a female counterpart – a fellow victim or comrade-in-arms – to 're-home' the projectionist furnishes him with a soft landing in anticipation of, or in the aftermath of, his 'divorce' from the box and its machinery. In Trevor's case, his courtship of Mona within the Rex is his first step towards socialisation and allows him to see the socially cohesive potential of the cinema. Eventually, the mushroom farm entails his occupation of the auditorium instead of the box. The move posits a radical mission for cinema: as a site of community galvanisation, regeneration and unity.

The comedies make a Cinderella of the projectionist in finally rewarding him for his labour and rescuing him from servitude and obscurity through marriage. In the service of narrative resolution, these happy endings remediate – and somewhat obfuscate – the probable unhappy fates of the cinemas slated to disappear forever from the landscape.

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Notes

1. There is a third, straight-to-video British film which fits this bill, *The Last Showing* (2014). Making its home-entertainment debut a week after its premiere at London's FrightFest festival in August 2014, it is a low-budget thriller starring Robert Englund (of *Nightmare on Elm Street* fame) as a projectionist who deals with the trauma of the switch from celluloid to digital projection by trapping a young couple in the

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multiplex cinema where he is employed and forcing them to act in a horror movie of his devising.

2. *Smallest* supports Quill's complaints about the projectors. We can hazard that the pair with which he battles date back to the era in which silent cinema was giving way to sound since their shutter blades are positioned in front of the lens. Such a placement was more common in early projectors: 'By the early 1930s, the majority of projector designs positioned the shutter between the mechanism and the light source' (Enticknap 2005: 139, fig. 5.3).
3. I refer to *Roses's* English subtitles when quoting dialogue and have used an off-air recording of the film broadcast on Channel 4 on 17 September 1988. It was the first of a three-part season of Welsh features. All had been commissioned by S4C as TV movies and included Peter Jefferies' *Child of Love* (1988) and another film by Bayly, *The Works* (1984), made immediately before *Roses*.
4. Dave Berry has neatly summarised most of the firsts *Roses* achieved for Welsh-language film (1994: 329).

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