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Books, Films, and Phonographs: Australian Interwar Magazines and the Intermediation of Historical New Media

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Books, Films, and Phonographs: Australian Interwar Magazines and the Intermediation of Historical New Media

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ABSTRACT

Using two of Australia's most prominent quality culture and leisure magazines of the 1920s and 1930s, *BP* and *Home*, this article turns to the periodical print culture of the Antipodes to examine the theme of this issue: 'what was popular' in the periodical press in the interwar period. These titles are offered as case studies of the way in which certain kinds of magazines — which reviewed other forms of culture and media offerings from books to films, theatre, and phonographs — are inherently intermedial forms. Moreover, it advances the idea that cultural values were remarkably unstable in Australia in the interwar years when historical new media, as well as Australian and American literature, were increasingly acceptable cultural pursuits.

KEYWORDS

interwar, media, culture, magazines, taste, intermediality, middlebrow, Australia

Film is a great and growing power. It not only amuses and entertains us — today we are receiving much of our general education through this medium, unconsciously, perhaps, but it will not be long before cinema will be recognised as an essential means of education and its possibilities officially exploited to augment the present methods of instruction in schools. Originally a plaything, it is becoming a tool for the advancement of knowledge.¹²

Early-twentieth-century magazines, often spectacularly visual, were highly stylized collage-like hybrids of graphic and text-based forms, drawing on, combining, and responding to other modern media formats, many of which were undergoing generic instability as they developed and emerged to claim the attention of increasingly discerning cultural consumers within newly segmented markets. As sites of cultural sociability, these magazines energetically participated in the new, exciting, and volatile media scene as they both observed and constructed varying and shifting stances toward media and cultural value. In this way, these periodicals operated in the capacity that Debra Rae Cohen has identified as ‘intermedial’ technology, ‘embedded within the broader media field’ of emerging historical new media.³ In the interwar period, cinema, theatre, phonographs, radio, and books converged in their pages — across advertisements, illustrations, photographs, and reviews — shaping and reflecting changing cultural attitudes.

In articles and editorials, these publications bore witness, as Patrick Buckridge and Elaine Morecroft have noted in their study of Australian reading in the interwar period, to anxieties about the ‘potentially destructive’ cultural influences of cinema and radio.⁴ But as the epigraph to this article from the Australian interwar periodical *BP Magazine* suggests, these magazines also reveal a growing acceptance of new forms of entertainment. At the interstices of culture and leisure, quality magazines held in the balance tensions between art and consumerism that were negotiated not only as various media values were in flux, but also as the middlebrow took hold of the intermediary cultural space between high and popular culture. In Australia, middlebrow culture and leisure magazines of the interwar period also witnessed and co-constructed an environment in which Australian literature and publishing began to gain cultural and institutional support.

This article explores the ways in which the Australian interwar periodical *Home* (1920–42) and its closest competitor *BP Magazine* (1928–42) responded to changing ideas about media forms, cultural value, and the emerging national and international culture and leisure scene. It does so by attending to the presence or absence of various sorts of features and reviews in these publications, and by examining the attitudes they took toward different kinds of cultural production. It focuses on how they registered and sorted what was popular in the interwar period — documenting a growing acceptance of new media forms while also separating emerging categories of books, cinema, and music into distinct cultural streams that aligned with their differentiating readerships.

- 1 I would like to acknowledge the intellectual contributions of my valued colleagues Sarah Galletly and Susann Liebich in the authorship of his article, which draws upon material in our co-authored book, *The Transported Imagination: Australian Interwar Magazines and the Geographical Imaginaries of Colonial Modernity* (New York: Cambria, 2018).
- 2 ‘The World of Make-Believe: Film Magic’, *BP Magazine*, 1.2 (March 1929), 73, 75, 81 (p. 73).
- 3 Debra Rae Cohen, ‘Strange Collisions: Keywords Toward an Intermedial Periodical Studies’, *ESC*, 41.1 (2015), 93–104 (p. 93).
- 4 Patrick Buckridge and Eleanor Morecroft, ‘Australia’s World Literature: Constructing Australia’s Global Reading Relations in the Interwar Period’, in *Scenes of Reading: Is Australian Literature a World Literature*, ed. by Robert Dixon and Brigid Rooney (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2013), pp. 47–59 (p. 49).

Periodicals such as these, as David Carter has explained, were integral to addressing and finding readerships in Australia for the middlebrow, that ‘broad domain of culture that is neither auratically high nor happily popular — the vast middle where high cultural values are folded into the commodity form of quality entertainment or discerning lifestyle choices’.⁵ Taking a serious interest in books, culture, good taste, and entertainment, they were key sites that also witnessed and co-constructed what Carter identifies as ‘a culture in transition, divided into new shapes’ by ‘the tensions’ of ‘divergent, modernising forces’.⁶ Since the advertising industry experienced ‘phenomenal growth’ in interwar Australia after it had developed relatively late in comparison to its overseas counterparts, these divergent forces included intensified consumerism as well as new production models.⁷ Quality magazines targeting affluent consumers, or those who wished to become so, overflowed with promotional text, design, and images approaching the highest standards of commercial art.

As Richard Ohmann has observed of a group of similarly modish magazines that emerged somewhat earlier in the USA, this class of periodicals were ‘a hybrid. They offered their contents as surrounded by the aura of elite culture, yet simultaneously proclaimed their commodity status.’⁸ Moreover, as Faye Hammill and Michelle Smith have explained in their study of Canadian periodicals of a shared class, these magazines operated in ‘a space where high and popular culture meet, and where art encounters consumerism’.⁹ These magazines were vehicles that directed readers through a remarkable period of modernization and internationalization, and witnessed unprecedented levels of economic, cultural, and technological volatility. Rapid developments in media, communications, and technologies after the first world war meant that even more than ever before, Australia was not, as Jill Julius Matthews has pointed out, ‘the last station on the line, a backwater ten years behind Europe and America’.¹⁰ Given these extraordinary dynamics, interwar middlebrow culture and leisure magazines from localized sites like Australia may yield particularly revealing insights into their responses to competing media forms, cultural institutions, and cultural value during a period of concentrated and penetrating cultural and media change occurring around the world.

It is impressive that *Home* and *BP Magazine* managed to flourish in this narrow and highly competitive national market. They addressed themselves to a relatively small Australian population of under six million already awash in imported books and magazines of higher production quality than was generally possible to achieve in Australia at that time. In its own words, *Home* was ‘Australia’s deluxe periodical of general interest’, addressing, as Carter has put it, ‘an audience possessed of good taste and the means to purchase it’.¹¹ Initially selling for two shillings and sixpence and for two shillings after 1926, it was a relatively expensive magazine which reached a modest 7,500 readers at its height (compared to 126,000 copies of the mass magazine *Australian Woman’s Mirror*

5 David Carter, ‘The Mystery of the Missing Middlebrow or the C(o)urse of Good Taste’, in *Imagining Australia: Literature and Culture in the New New World*, ed. by Judith Ryan and Chris Wallace-Crab (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 173–201 (p. 174).

6 David Carter, ‘Modernising Anglocentrism: Desiderata and Literary Time’, in *Republics of Letters: Literary Communities in Australia*, ed. by Robert Dixon and Peter Kirkpatrick (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2012), pp. 85–98 (p. 88).

7 Robert Crawford, *But Wait, There’s More...: A History of Australian Advertising, 1900–2000* (Carlton, Victoria: University of Melbourne Press, 2008), p. 59.

8 Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* (London: Verso, 1996), pp. 224–25.

9 Faye Hammill and Michelle Smith, *Magazines, Travel, and Middlebrow Culture Canadian Periodicals in English and French, 1925–1960* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), p. 10.

10 Jill Julius Matthews, *Dance Hall and Picture Palace: Sydney’s Romance with Modernity* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2005), p. 84.

11 Carter, ‘Mystery of the Missing’, p. 183.

sold each month in 1928), but its exclusiveness lent it standing and prestige.¹² Reaching a hundred pages at its peak, it was the creation of Australian design-maverick Sydney Ure Smith (part of Sydney's artiest advertising agency Smith and Julius). Initially launched into a fast-changing post-war world in February 1920 and aimed at both male and female readers, it assumed a more typical monthly women's magazine format following its sale in 1934 to the newspaper conglomerate Fairfax.¹³ An equally expensive upmarket consumer lifestyle publication for aspirational or sophisticated readers, with a cover price at one shilling and sixpence, *BP Magazine* was a similarly swish production of approximately one hundred pages that was able to achieve high production quality due to financial backing by the Burns Philp shipping company. Although its mother company directed its focus on travel, *BP* was no niche or specialist publication; with its superior design standards and inclusion of a broad spectrum of culture and leisure items of general interest, it managed to secure a significant readership. An Australian equivalent of the American title *Sunset*, it was one of few Australian magazines edited by a woman — Dora Payter, whose ebullient editorials and production oversight set the publication's aspirational middlebrow tone. Although *Home* and *BP Magazine* both folded in 1942 due to wartime constraints, they remain remarkable for how they flourished at this time of intensive cultural change, maintaining their high-quality appearance and production values during a period of magazine publishing in Australia characterized by extreme instability.¹⁴

Despite their relatively small circulations in Australia, these magazines were cultural influencers, operating in a shared class of highly respected lushly produced titles often described as 'glossy,' 'smart,' or 'quality'.¹⁵ Not only were the readerships of these particularly attractive publications considerably larger than their circulation numbers, due to library subscriptions and shared copies, but their impact as tastemakers far outstripped their subscription figures. With a mix tailored for its specific readership and remit, each magazine contained a variety of features on fashion, décor, art, society gossip, and cultural news from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, and London, as well as original fiction, photo studies, and reviews. 'Everywhere, the highest quality commercial magazines', Ohmann has pointed out, helped discerning readers and consumers acquire 'the cultural capital that would signify and project their class standing'.¹⁶ In an intensified way, these Australian middlebrow titles navigated for their discerning readers the changing cultural terrain of the interwar years by claiming territory in what has been identified as 'an early form of culture war'.¹⁷ In addition to navigating the new media of the era, these magazines also played a role in directing readers to local and international books, since local publishing was poorly developed in Australia, and Australian literature still lacked broad-scale institutional support.¹⁸ By shaping and responding to reader

12 Nancy Underhill, *Making Australian Art, 1916–49: Sydney Ure Smith, Patron and Publisher* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 200.

13 John Docker, 'Feminism, Modernism, and Orientalism in *The Home* in the 1920s', in *Journalism: Print, Politics and Popular Culture*, ed. by Ann Curthoys and Julianne Schultz (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1999), pp. 117–30 (p. 118).

14 Victoria Kuttainen, Susann Liebich, and Sarah Galletly, *The Transported Imagination: Australian Interwar Magazines and the Geographical Imaginaries of Colonial Modernity* (New York: Cambria, 2018), p. 5.

15 Faye Hammill and Karen Leick, 'Modernism and the Quality Magazines: *Vanity Fair* (1914–36); *American Mercury* (1924–81); *New Yorker* (1925–); *Esquire* (1933–)', in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines: Volume II: North America 1894–1960*, ed. by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 176–96.

16 Ohmann, p. 244.

17 Carter, 'Mystery of Missing', p. 176.

18 Melinda Harvey and Julieanne Lamond, 'Taking the Measure of Gender Disparity in Australian Book Reviewing as a Field, 1985 and 2013', *Australian Humanities Review*, 60 (November 2016) [accessed 28 November 2019] (para. 7 of 39).

attitudes toward emerging forms of cultural production and circulation, these magazines observed and participated in constructing the rapid segmentation of markets and values that was discernible in print culture at this time.

While promising to keep readers abreast of the latest, *Home* was strongly inclined toward erudite and serious culture, which was apparent in advertisements, articles, editorials, and reviews tending toward English and European tastes, while also including some American literature. Although the magazine was willing to review, in addition to ‘books of a more serious character’ some ‘books written for amusement only’, it advertised highbrow books for serious readers.¹⁹ One such advertisement for the ‘Book Lovers’ Library in Melbourne’ emphasized classic literary tastes, promoting ‘Works by Samuel Butler, Carpenter, George Moore, [...] Shaw, Galsworthy [...] etc.’ and ‘Translations of Foreign Authors’, including ‘Doeteivsky [sic], Tolstoi, Tchekov’, as well as “‘The Apple’ a quarterly magazine, devoted to Art and Literature’, ‘The American Bookman’, and ‘The London Mercury’, the latter being billed as ‘a new London literary review’.²⁰ Moreover, literary editor Bertram Stevens was particularly caustic about commercial writers whom he felt had sold out to ‘Mammon’.²¹ Too many authors were finding ‘the lure of popularity too strong’, he opined, and have given over to ‘the publishing machine’ for whom they are now ‘slaves’ to ‘so many thousand words a week’.²² Stevens also regarded emerging media as at odds with literary and cultural values, expressing deep concern for the day when ‘the cinema-plus-gramophone may be raised to the nth power and supersede all other forms of entertainment and instruction’.²³

Further, when reviewers in *Home* did cover bestselling works, they were often at pains to point out that these were of a lesser category, secondary to serious literature, sometimes making surprising choices and statements that reflected the way in which culture, in its era of transmission, is discernibly different than the apparently more settled opinions of retrospective literary histories and historical cultural accounts. For instance, of *Sard Harker* by John Masefield, readers are told that, while it ‘cannot be taken seriously as a novel. It is a tolerable scenario by a very fine writer, who relies on fantastic adventure for his effects’, ‘it is the latest thing by Masefield, and everybody is reading it with enjoyment’.²⁴ An overleaf advertisement promoted ‘A Library of Interest — Miss M Bouffler, Bookstall Hotel Australia’ possessing ‘[a] carefully chosen collection of novels, plays and other literature, to charm the discriminating reader’.²⁵ Further, Colin Cairns noted in a review of Edith Wharton’s *The Glimpses of the Moon* that of the ‘best-selling novels’ it is ‘a light, readable novel’ which ‘will no doubt prove popular with those who delight in the marriage tangles of American society’; notably, the reviewer did not mention Wharton’s earlier success — the critical acclaim of Wharton’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Age of Innocence* — or take this novel seriously at all, perhaps because of its genre as a modern ‘society’ romance or its American setting — or both.²⁶ Relatedly, *Home* emphasized distinction and discrimination in reading tastes, such as when it nominated, for example, even while explicitly pointing out books ‘for Leisure’, ‘[a] book that qualifies for that small select division of literature’ P. C. Wren’s *Beau Geste* — a novel following three brothers into the foreign legion, chronicling the supposed upper-crust English code of honour of bygone times, as an ‘adventure yarn that bears on

19 Bertram Stevens, ‘Among those Present in Book Shops’, *Home*, 1.3 (September 1920), 80, 82 (p. 82).

20 ‘Book Lovers’ Library in Melbourne’, *Home*, 1.3 (September 1920), 82.

21 Bertram Stevens, ‘Among those Present in Bookshops’, *Home*, 1.3 (September 1920), 80.

22 Stevens, ‘Among those Present’, p. 80.

23 Bertram Stevens, ‘Autobiography and Fiction’, *Home*, 1.2 (June 1920), 36.

24 ‘Books Worth Reading’, *Home*, 6.1 (January–February 1925), 2, 4 (p. 2).

25 ‘A Library of Interest’, *Home*, 6.1 (January–February 1925), 4.

26 Colin Cairns, ‘Fiction Etc!’, *Home*, 3.4 (December 1922), 50, 52 (p. 50).

the first half page the indelible hall mark of Style'.²⁷ For the most part, the lure of the popular registered negatively in the magazine, suggesting that it took a conservative and Anglophile approach to the emergence of mass culture and American entertainment.

However, in the decade from 1920 to 1930, when book reviews appeared almost monthly, tastes appear to have changed amongst *Home's* reviewers and readers. While *Home* conveyed a sense of its readers as co-participants in a shared middle-to-upper class Anglosphere, in which the 'big four' of Edwardian letters — Bernard Shaw, G. K. Chesterton, H. G. Wells, and Hilaire Belloc — carried significant cultural currency, a sense emerged that these sorts of writers were becoming out-dated. Literary editor Bertram Stevens complained as early as September 1920 that Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, H. G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, and John Galsworthy had become old-fashioned and tiresome.²⁸ Indeed, a 1925 review section registered a weary acknowledgement of the appeal 'that fat philosopher of Fleet Street' holds for 'that large and ever-growing section of the book-loving public which never misses any of Mr. Chesterton's utterances'.²⁹ Similarly, the reviewer complained 'that it has become almost a national duty for English-speaking people' to follow the work of H. G. Wells, even though his recent output is panned as 'boresome' and 'long-winded'.³⁰ Some American titles by new stylists began to receive praiseworthy reviews. Edna Ferber's *So Big* (through Heinemann, London) was reviewed with enthusiasm in September 1925, as was Sinclair Lewis's *Elmer Gantry* (Jonathan Cape) in November 1927, to name just two.³¹ At the same time, more higher quality Australian books appeared in the review pages, often situating the author alongside international trends: 'This year marks the publication of two Australian books of a very considerable consequence,' the reviewer pronounced in October 1929, 'They are *A House is Built* by M. Barnard Eldershaw and *Coonardoo* by Katherine Susannah Prichard.'³² Of the former, the reviewer observed 'its obvious relation to the Galsworthy tradition', supporting Carter's observation that at least until the mid-1930s, cultural nationalism in Australian writing was not inconsonant with cosmopolitan tastes.³³ Yet this middlebrow magazine was averse to the highbrow modernism emerging from overseas. One *Home* reviewer found the work of Gertrude Stein absurdly impenetrable:

I wish an editorial note had been attached to this story explaining it. The fact that Gertrude Stein's work is included in this collection as well as several other collections of note is almost a guarantee that the thing is not a joke. (Not quite a guarantee. Jokes have been put over on editors before this, notably by a group of cubist poets in America.)³⁴

On the whole, modernist, experimental literature was condemned for being out of touch with *Home's* middlebrow target reader:

27 Jean Curlewis, 'Something to Read! Yes! A Note on Some Book's For December's Leisure', *Home*, 7.12 (December 1926), 30.

28 Stevens, 'Among those Present', 80.

29 'New Books Worth Reading', *Home*, 6.5 (September–October 1925), 12a, 12b (p. 12a).

30 'Book Reviews', *Home*, 8.11 (November 1927), 85.

31 'New Books Worth Reading', *Home*, 6.5 (September–October 1925), 12a; 'Book Reviews', *Home*, 8.11 (November 1927), 85.

32 'Book Reviews', *Home*, 10.10 (October 1929), 22, 102 (p. 22).

33 David Carter, *Always Almost Modern: Australian Print Cultures and Modernity* (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2013), pp. 13–44.

34 Jean Curlewis, 'A Bundle of Books', *Home*, 8.1 (January 1927), 44.

H. G. Wells says of modern business men, 'They seem to be illiterate and Philistine largely because contemporary literature is so exclusively concerned with fantasies and illusions that have no significance for them.' The insufficiency is rather in the literature than in themselves [...] [O]ne's sympathies are with the business man, who, having turned helplessly from Miss Benson being allegoric to Mr de la Mare being supernatural, and from Mr D. H. Lawrence being mystic to Mr Huxley being Mr Huxley, shuts the book and firmly hangs up notice, 'This is my busy day.'³⁵

If classical tastes were becoming old-fashioned, popular new titles and experimental new literature were also problematic in this mid-range aspirational middlebrow magazine.

By 1930, the magazine stopped reviewing English language books altogether, signalling perhaps that the contemporary book scene had become a fraught space by the late interwar period. As suggested by these strongly negative reviews of the work of Stein, Lawrence, or Huxley, *Home* could not recommend to its readers highly experimental modernist highbrow literature. Yet neither could it recommend the classical English literary stylists who were becoming old-fashioned. Nor could it embrace the populist and commercial books it continued to look down upon and gauge its readers' distinctive and erudite tastes against. In the last review, before the regular book review feature was replaced with a more educationalist- and cosmopolitan-focused review of French books by A. R. Chrisholm, Professor of French at the University of Melbourne, the reviewer sought to direct readers away from popular thrillers to a higher quality of reading matter:

In an age when people of moderate intellect read Edgar Wallace unashamedly, and the word 'thriller' appears to have definitely entered the legitimate vocabularies of at least two great nations, it may not be amiss to direct the sensation seeker into that realm where the more dignified stylists operate.³⁶

As this review suggested, the erudite tastes of older loyal readers — and reviewers — seemed increasingly at odds with the emerging popular tastes it could not deign to embrace. Book reviews disappeared altogether by 1931, possibly because the link between cultured and leisured reading became too attenuated for *Home's* established standards of taste.

Around the same time that book reviews began to disappear from *Home*, theatre criticism by Caleb Mortimer began to take precedence. The increased space in the review columns dedicated to theatre, in contrast to the decline in book reviewing in the magazine, may suggest that theatre was regarded as a slightly less fraught form of cultural production by this magazine in this period, or that its audiences (particularly for commercial production) were the broader public sphere, less divided than the book public. Nevertheless, *Home* aspired here also to set an upmarket tone. In one of his earliest reviews, Mortimer announced his intentions to be a serious reviewer of the art form, complaining that the entertainment company of J. C. Williamson Ltd, responsible for bringing many of the touring acts and productions to the Australian commercial theatre, was practically making New York 'a suburb' of Australia.³⁷ Mortimer's reviews consolidated the magazine's taste for European theatre and professionalized review columns by calling for higher critical standards, complaining about Australia's 'antecedent years of [...] critical nonage' and poking fun at undiscerning theatre reviewers who,

35 Jean Curlewis, 'Among the Autumn Leaves', *Home*, 8.5 (May 1927), 11.

36 'Book Reviews', *Home*, 11.8 (August 1930), 2.

37 Caleb Mortimer, 'Melbourne Theatres', *Home*, 8.7 (July 1927), 12.

he felt, lacked discrimination.³⁸ Droll critiques followed: ‘Imbecile as is Melbourne’s dramatic criticism on many occasions, it reached its highest note of ninniness when it recommended *Diplomacy*.³⁹ Mortimer’s views of the public’s tastes were equally scathing:

To what off-day in creative life we owe the thing called *The Letter* I leave to Somerset Maugham to explain to his maker. In its plot and bearing it is melodrama on holiday in a steamy Malayan Jungle [...]. Dion Boucicault, in a suit of white duck and yellow stain, tendering for our notice a midget Chinese blackmailer, with a sweet phantom voice [...] enthralled the masses with his Celestial humility. It was voted high art. But then it was Dion Boucicault.⁴⁰

As a canny theatre manager and businessman, as well as a popular actor in the latter days of his career, Dion Boucicault was by then well-known for bringing commercially viable British drama to Broadway, and Mortimer insinuated here a disdain for Gilbert and Sullivan-style theatre that appeared to capture the same audiences as early cinema. Yet as the public seemed increasingly drawn to these performances, Mortimer found himself in the same quandary as his book-reviewing colleagues. Initially resisting the inclusion of cinema in his purview, his reviews begin to begrudgingly cover film, as if his editor had forced this indignity upon him in an effort by the magazine to keep up with the times:

I have hitherto avoided the Capitol, the talkie cathedral on Swanson Street, but recently having no place on which to rest my tired thoughts, I besought [...] the glasshouse [...]. I have, as I have hinted, dulled my duodenum on some intellectual breakfast foods — among them, I may mention *Camille* in German with an 18-stone *frau* as the sweet tuberculose — but this May West opus was an ambulance matter [...]. When mediocrity is Hollywooded it achieves an imbecility that amounts to genius.⁴¹

In 1926, a tasteful cinema section called ‘Filma’, described as ‘conducted by Vohdah Dexter’ and selecting films ‘[f]or the finicky picture-goer’ began to occasionally appear in the magazine.⁴² Accordingly, other acknowledgements of the growing social acceptability of cinema as a medium emerged in the magazine: ‘But fifteen years ago’ an advertisement for PDC Pictures (the first full-page cinema ad to appear in *Home*) ‘called “a seven days’ wonder” an innovation that would never take hold — laughed at, scoffed at, ridiculed [...]. [Yet] today the screen rises’, promising discriminating readers that their pictures ‘are not “factory made” and that “every story is carefully selected, every cast studied, every producer and director a master of his art’.⁴³ Readers were similarly assured that ‘[r]adio is not a passing craze’ and that ‘it is one of the greatest influences of our civilisation’ with ‘its effects [...] probably as far-reaching as those of the motion picture’.⁴⁴ Even so, the professional theatre critic’s dismissal of cinema was scathing: ‘Nothing so consistently enlarges the Chinese liver and gives a glittering edge to the stylus as the elevation of the talkie to a place in the queue of the Seven Arts’, Mortimer bemoans, noting that

38 Caleb Mortimer, ‘Melbourne Theatres’, *Home*, 9.3 (March 1928), 11; 68, (p. 11); Caleb Mortimer, ‘The New Dramatic Criticism’, *Home*, 10.3 (March 1929), 84.

39 Caleb Mortimer, ‘Melbourne Theatres’, *Home*, 9.7 (July 1928), 10.

40 Caleb Mortimer, ‘Melbourne Theatres’, *Home*, 9.1 (January 1928), 12.

41 Caleb Mortimer, ‘Melbourne Theatres’, *Home*, 15.1 (January 1934), 15, 56 (p. 15).

42 Vohdah Dexter, ‘Filma’, *Home*, 8.6 (June 1927), 24.

43 ‘The New PDC Pictures’, *Home*, 7.12 (December 1926), 53.

44 Charles D. Maclurcan, ‘Radio and Civilization’, *Home*, 8.9 (September 1927), 76.

despite rising technical sophistication, 'the talkie is still the joint produce of Barnum and Bunkum regardless'.⁴⁵ It may be on account of Mortimer's inability to reconcile public tastes with his purist and more elevated cultural standards that the theatre and film reviews ceased by March 1934.

The same pattern followed in phonograph reviews, to which readers of *Home* were treated from 1933 and 1935. When this feature was first introduced, under the heading 'Instructional Articles', reviewer Ronald Soloman lent the reader guidance through the latest orchestral recordings that charm and stimulate the listener's palate with the delights of Europe:

Memories of the film 'The Blue Danube,' are aroused by 'A Night at the Hungaria,' a London restaurant boasting a Tzigane orchestra [...]. A medley of Hungarian and Viennese airs is on one side of the record, whilst on the other, Maxim Turganoff lends an authentic atmosphere with his singing of the refrains of certain Russian gypsy melodies.⁴⁶

But only a year later, contemporary dance songs and jazz inflected the review:

Rulership in the realms of music has lost its true aristocratic flavour. 'Queens of Song,' who held regal sway and inspired enthusiasm tempered with awe as they appeared on platform, tiara crowned and roped with priceless pearls, have been deposed. A new and more democratic dynasty rules [...] in line with Kings and Princes of Rhythm. The founder of the house was Paul Whiteman, known as 'The King of Jazz,' — the latest scion is Cab Calloway, who has been dubbed 'His He-de-highness,' a title founded on the 'Hi-de-ho' gibberish with which he peppers his vocal refrains. Cab is a gentleman of colour from the USA who has just invaded London with his band and is plundering the public's purse.

In this review, which appeared only a month before the phonograph reviews also ceased, Soloman admitted in an aside that he was feeling pressure to review the latest trends, while his preference remained with the classics, which were increasingly being regarded as obsolete: 'Turning from the ephemeral entertainment field with this month's notes are mainly concerned, it is restful', he mildly protested, 'to contemplate some Mozart.'⁴⁷ In January 1936, *Home* became a *Sydney Morning Herald-Fairfax* production streamlined toward house and garden — women's interests — including sections on fashion, features on modern make-up, and tips on contract bridge. Book, film, phonograph, and theatre reviews terminated altogether at this point, and cameos of cinema starlets began to prevail. This pattern of replacing cultural reviews with women's content may suggest not only the change in editorial directives that the magazine's editor and contributors may very well have received, but also the way in which reviewers — as well as editors and publications — were instrumental in cementing the alignment between mass culture and feminization, which scholars such as Andreas Huyssen perceived in the popular and critical discourse of the era.⁴⁸ The reviewing trends in *Home* suggest a segmentation of high and popular culture which this important Australian taste-making culture and leisure magazine — once so instrumental in guiding its readers through the

45 Caleb Mortimer, 'Melbourne Theatres', *Home* 15.2 (February 1934), 64.

46 Ronald Soloman, 'Recent Phonograph Records', *Home*, 14.6 (June 1933), 64.

47 Ronald Soloman, 'Recent Phonograph Records', *Home*, 15.6 (June 1934), 18.

48 Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 44–63.

fast-changing currents of international modernity — could no longer find sure-footing in the domain of the middlebrow.

Similarly setting high standards for reading and reviewing books from Australia and the rest of the world, *BP Magazine* promised in its inaugural 1928 editorial, to ‘cull from the Markets of the World the best in Literature and Art for the interest and entertainment of its readers’.⁴⁹ Yet, in contrast to the erudite tone *Home* attempted to set, and as a point of difference from the disdain *Home* expressed about touring theatre, the readers of *BP* were directed to more demotic tastes, and commercial theatre set the tone for other forms of culture the magazine reviewed. Rather than complaining, as *Home* did, that J. C. Williamson Ltd. was making New York ‘a suburb’ of Australia, readers and reviewers of the travel-based *BP Magazine* seemed to delight that the tour company was bringing the far near.⁵⁰ Reviews of touring productions emphasized the public excitement of visiting international talent who carried ‘the *imprimatur* of London and New York approval’ — according equal cultural authority to productions from England and America.⁵¹ Throughout the 1920s in *BP Magazine*, the drama review section ‘The Stage Door’ glowingly reviewed many of the touring acts in the 1920s, which were discussed in terms of bringing the world to the Australian stage through spectacular overseas settings, stories, and talent, including many from America. For instance: “‘The Five O’ Clock Girl’ [...] is a story of New York’s roof gardens, night clubs and cabaret scenes’; and “‘The Showboat’, [...] the story by the well-known American novelist Edna Ferber, [...] produced on a lavish scale’ brings to Melbourne the ‘adventures of Captain Hawks, his family and friends’ on ‘the Floating Palace Theatre in Mississippi’.⁵² Overseas talent and overseas settings not only brought the far near, and rendered the foreign familiar, but also put Australia on the touring circuit, bringing Australians up-to-date with international sensations, advertising ‘new programs by leading managements that have recently won approval in London and New York’.⁵³

In *BP Magazine*, film was discussed in similar terms, praised for bringing to Australian audiences a glimpse of the wider world, and belonging to a somewhat undifferentiated space of culture and entertainment appealing to a broad spectrum of the public. In the first issue of the magazine, an extended discussion of the film adaptation of Frederick O’Brien’s *White Shadows in the South Seas* declared:

In the thousands of yards of celluloid carried away in these containers is imprisoned the beauty and magic this is Tahiti and the South Seas [...]. In due course, borne on a beam of light, Tahiti, in all its splendour and romance, minus some of its too realistic realism, will be thrown on a silvered sheet so that Mr. and Mrs. Public in every city, town or hamlet that boasts a picture theatre may see it and say — ‘It’s too wonderful to be real.’⁵⁴

There was a pervasive sense in these film reviews that *BP Magazine’s* reader would be most drawn to the attractions of foreign and exotic settings, and impressed by the stupendous amounts of travel that filmmakers had undertaken to bring these delights to the screen. In December 1929’s ‘Screen News’, the magazine announced:

49 Dora Payter, ‘Editorial’, *BP Magazine*, 1.1 (December 1928), 3.

50 Caleb Mortimer, ‘Melbourne Theatres’, *Home*, 8.7 (July 1927), 12.

51 ‘The Stage Door’, *BP Magazine*, 1.2 (March 1929), 62, 63, (p. 63).

52 ‘The Stage Door’, *BP Magazine*, 1.4 (September 1929), 56, 57, (p. 56).

53 ‘The Stage Door’, *BP Magazine*, 2.3 (June-August 1930), 36, 37, (p. 36).

54 ‘When Romance and Realism Meet: Picture Making in the South Seas’, *BP Magazine*, 1.1 (December 1928), 17, 21, 22 (p. 22).

The only news-reel cameraman who has flown around the world has a real story to tell the same world, and he's telling it in pictures. He's a modest, silent young man, and the screen will speak for him as he has made that that possible...

Throughout the world flight of the *Graf Zeppelin* recently completed, Hartman was the only cameraman on board the ship. His exclusive pictures of the first section of the journey from New York to Friedrichshafen have already appeared in M-G-M International News-reel. His succeeding pictures show the journey across Europe and Asia, the history-making conquest of the Siberian wilds, the triumphant landing at Tokio, the crossing of the Pacific, the soul-stirring arrival at Los Angeles and on across the United States to New York, and of course the final graphic chapters of the great flight.⁵⁵

Another example, from a March 1932 review, suggested that *BP Magazine* continue, even as the medium developed beyond the initial era of the 'cinema of attractions', to recommend to its readers films it praised for their provision of access to other, remote worlds.⁵⁶

East of Borneo is the fascinating title of the Universal film which will form the Bridge Opening attraction at the Sydney Lyceum Theatre. The making of the picture involved a journey from Hollywood to Singapore. At this port the company chartered a yacht and cruised round the Malay Archipelago and Borneo for two years. They penetrated 900 miles into the jungle at Borneo [...]⁵⁷

BP Magazine, therefore, with its commitment to 'carrying the torch to travel', unsurprisingly envisaged and presented film, theatre, and even books as windows to the world beyond Australia's shores.⁵⁸

Thus, this approach to new media directed the magazine's taste in books, not as a separate sphere of culture, but as another form of entertainment and instruction. As an inducement, perhaps, to leave the armchair and travel, books were portrayed as portals to other kinds of experience: 'Knowledge gained first-hand is ineffecable [*sic*]. Not from books alone — true friends though they may be — do we gather the finest fruits of our knowledge and experience. Man's best teacher is intercourse.'⁵⁹ This 'intercourse' or 'commerce' seemed to include the more visceral experience rendered by film. In contrast to *Home's* measured aversion toward popular cinema and preference for prestige films for 'finicky picture-goers', readers of *BP Magazine* were recommended books that possessed the quality of films or which came from the pens of writers whose work had already been adapted for the screen.⁶⁰ The novel *Black Roses* by popular playwright and screenwriter Francis Brett Young was lauded as 'wonderfully vivid', and American local colour writer Ruth Suckow's *Cora* was similarly praised as 'intensely interesting from every point of view' with an 'atmosphere [that] is very real and the character drawing excellent' — praised for the same reasons that *BP* admired early films.⁶¹

As with films, books were recommended to *BP Magazine* readers as a way to access foreign worlds, and if they or their authors possessed a relation to film, this

55 'Screen News', *BP Magazine*, 2.1 (December 1929), 38.

56 Tom Gunning, 'Cinema of Attractions', in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. by Thomas Elsaesser (London: British Film Institute, 1990), pp. 58–59 (p. 58).

57 'Screen News', *BP Magazine*, 4.2 (March 1932), 29.

58 Frank Greenop, *History of Magazine Publishing in Australia* (Sydney: Murray Publishing Company, 1947), p. 248.

59 Dora Payter, 'Editorial', *BP Magazine*, 1.2 (March 1929), 5.

60 Vohdah Dexter, 'Filma', *Home*, 8.6 (June 1927), 24.

61 Anita Campbell, 'Books and Reviews', *BP Magazine*, 2.3 (June 1930), 77.

was a winning point, rather than a point of detraction: *Idolators*, for instance, by the Australian writer Dale Collins, who already had two novels adapted for film, was discussed primarily in terms of its setting, '[o]n the lovely island of Banjamatia, in the Malay Archipelago'.⁶² Of note, Collins's talent for embellishing the setting as a backdrop to draw out the 'moods of the actors' was praised in theatrical terms. In the same review column, American novelist Marie Conway Oemler, who was already known for her bestselling novel of 1917 *Slippy McGee*, which had been adapted to film, was praised for her well-drawn characters, who were discussed in dramatic, even cinematic, terms: 'The character drawing is a masterpiece and [...] the other principal actor...strongly drawn.' Similarly, the plot of J. B. Priestley's novel *Angel Pavement*, recommended to readers as 'a well told tale', was discussed theatrically: 'The final curtain drops on the deck of a South American bound steamer.'⁶³ *BP Magazine* rated books with entertainment value and readability higher than those that sought to uphold high artistic standards alone. Even so, it only went so far in its embrace of popular tastes, too: 'Those who consider a novel's first duty is entertainment', readers were told, 'will find *That Was Yesterday* a distinct disappointment.'⁶⁴ This was the case even though in the same review New Zealand author Hector Bolitho's *The Glorious Oyster* was commended as a 'very readable volume'. While *Home* tended to balk at popular, readable novels and preferred books characterised by literary and aesthetic style, *BP* claimed a different segment of the middlebrow; it recommended 'readable' authors whose books were readily adapted to film, whose scenes were vivid and characters dramatic, and whose plots were entertaining.

Despite their points of difference, however, *BP Magazine* tended to agree with reviewers in *Home* that modernist experimentalism could not be recommended to its readers, due to this lack of readability. Anita Campbell preferred the 'easy, flowing style' of the author A. P. Herbert, for example, which, she said, 'comes as a welcome relief after the consciously harsh tempo of many of our contemporaries'.⁶⁵ She recommended Eleanor Mercein (whose 1927 novel was adapted for film) for similar reasons: 'Her English is so lucid, so unaffected that it comes as a delight after some of the modern style of writing.'⁶⁶ In contrast to upscale reviews in *Home* which tended to disdain bestsellers, such titles are quite happily recommended in *BP Magazine*: of Booth Tarkington's *Mary's Neck*, readers are told that '[t]he writer's infallible recipe for concocting a readable story, coupled with his facility for creating farcical situations, makes of this latest effort a story quite up to the standard of his usual best-sellers'.⁶⁷ In an article that would most certainly never have appeared in *Home*, one writer openly embraced books written explicitly for sale to wide audiences since they possessed the ability to capture and maintain the interest of audiences who were shifting their attention to pictures:

Thackeray and Dickens, and Sir Walter Scott, with their works which will last for all time, made but a small competency, but to-day the modern stuff, reeled off yard by yard, so to say, brings the writer of the popular novel into a big credit account with his bankers. There are a few of course who could scorn to approach the subject from the viewpoint of finance, and would spurn the suggestion of producing a 'pot-boiler,' but it is done by those who decide to get a name, like Charles Garvice.

62 Anita Campbell, 'Books and Reviews', *BP Magazine*, 2.4 (September–November 1930), 68.

63 Anita Campbell, 'Books and Reviews', *BP Magazine*, 4.2 (March 1931), 55.

64 Anita Campbell, 'The Bookshelf: A Few Reviews', *BP Magazine*, 2.2 (March–June 1930), 50.

65 Anita Campbell, 'Books and Reviews', *BP Magazine*, 3.1 (December 1930), 56.

66 Anita Campbell, 'Books and Reviews', *BP Magazine*, 4.2 (March 1932), 62.

67 Anita Campbell, 'Books and Reviews', *BP Magazine*, 4.4 (September 1932), 62.

Here the magazine seemed to reveal a begrudging acceptance of changing literary standards and modes of publishing, while acknowledging that fame was the bellwether of reputation in modern literary circles. Perhaps because the magazine knew it had within its readership scions of the plantation class (and their wives)— who were in some cases emerging as the new captains of modern industry— it sympathized with the commercial writer and publisher:

Which position would *you* like to be in? That of the high-brow *scribus* who had produced and published brilliant matter which few will read, or Edgar Wallace who rattled off low-brow detective stories which still sell like hot cakes the world over? I know which of the two the publisher would choose.

And yet the middlebrow magazine still sided with good taste, against ‘too much pandering’ to emerging popular entertainments that passed for arts, even as new forms of media were admittedly lucrative investments:

Perhaps there *is* too much pandering to the low-brow instinct, in these days of jazz and cinema, when the pen has taken the count to the cheap camera. There is no doubt that the pictorial type of newspaper has hit the journalist very hard. He will agree that if any weapon to-day is mightier than the sword it must be the kodak.⁶⁸

Relatedly, whereas *Home* appeared to spurn the idea of publishing as an industry, and only promoted Australian books if they could be rated on par with English ones, *BP Magazine* took pride in the incipient growth of Australian publishing. Around the same time that *Home* ceased publishing book reviews altogether, *BP Magazine* began to play a more serious role in bearing witness to the emergence of middlebrow Australian novelists. Australian novelists had previously appeared undistinguished by their nationality in Anita Campbell’s general reviews, but from June 1932 until March 1937 ‘All the Arts’, a feature signed by ‘Callboy’, singled them out as a special category. This *BP* feature contributed news about Australian literary awards, local literary societies, and new Australian novels of note. Callboy covered almost exclusively non-journalistic, serious writing with an Australian focus, and regularly commented on the important work of building up Australian literature in a newsy way, helping readers to become casually acquainted with it. In contrast to *Home*, which praised serious Australian writing in international terms, *BP Magazine* took a more nationalist approach, perhaps affirming Carter’s notion of the way in which Australian literature began to be drawn, in some quarters, into a sense of ‘nationed modernity’ and ‘middlebrow nationalism’, as an emerging form of cultural capital.⁶⁹

As Margaret Beetham observed in her ground-breaking scholarship on nineteenth-century women’s periodicals, the magazine ‘always points beyond itself — to other numbers of the same periodical, to other words, and to texts which give it meaning, to other periodicals, books or entertainments’ and in particular to ‘book reviews’ and other cultural notices.⁷⁰ In addition to book reviews, ‘other entertainments’ in the rapidly changing ‘unsteady interwar period’ included the emergence of historical

68 Willoughby Turner, ‘Trials and Tribulations of a Budding Literateur’, *BP Magazine*, 7.1 (December 1934), 40.

69 David Carter, ‘Mystery of Missing’, p. 184.

70 Margaret Beetham, ‘Towards a Theory of the Periodical as a Publishing Genre’, in *Investigating Victorian Journalism*, ed. by Laurel Brake, Aled Jones, and Lionel Madden (London: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 19–32 (p. 26).

new media.⁷¹ Readers in interwar Australia were increasingly becoming consumers in a dramatically massifying, international market of rapidly diversifying cultural products. As intermedial forms that helped shape — and responded to — changing attitudes toward not only a range of cultural production, including moving pictures and recorded sound, but also the emergence of international bestsellers, modernist experimentation, and Australian literature, magazines directed readers through cultural and media change. Through middlebrow magazines in particular, new kinds of readers were availing themselves of a cultural capital once thought to be beyond their reach, while others sought to consolidate their sense of cultural prestige amidst a changing cultural and media scene. By providing their readers with the cultural capital that would ‘signify and project their class standing’, middlebrow magazines like *BP* and *Home* directed readers through ‘a space where high and popular culture [met], and where art encounter[ed] consumerism’.⁷²

This study of two similarly-priced middlebrow culture and leisure magazines of Australia has shown how each took a slightly different approach to emerging media and cultural production in an era of rapidly changing tastes and cultural values between the two world wars. In the 1920s, *Home* initially retreated from film, radio, and jazz into the bookish realm of high culture and literature, gradually venturing into reviewing these forms with trepidation as Victorian and Edwardian literature became regarded as old-fashioned. Even so, it still tried to set high standards for theatre and music criticism. As book reviews reacted negatively to bestsellers and new modernist highbrow literature, however, the magazine eventually abandoned book reviews altogether. As it opened its pages to cinema and jazz, this publication finally forfeited serious drama and phonograph reviews as well when it joined the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and its pages began to fill with cameos of starlets. In *Home*, Australian literature was praised when it was vaunted to the level of the world classics, but then largely abandoned when book reviewing ceased. The magazine’s dual commitment to culture and leisure appeared to occupy an increasingly conflicted space during its interwar publication years, eventually giving way to an outlook of leisure-as-entertainment which it resisted for so long in its appeal to higher realms of aesthetic culture.

The *BP Magazine* was more enthusiastic about film and entertainment from its beginning in 1928, recommending to its readers books that were aligned with the values of drama and film — those with vivid scenes and characters that gave readers access to other worlds, transporting them experientially and providing sustained interest as well as entertainment. Perhaps because of the magazine’s commitment to travel and industry, leisure was upheld as a form of culture, and the journal was less averse to commercially inflected forms. In *BP*, as Australian literature became an industry with prizes and literary societies, it was presented to readers as a form of middlebrow nationalism, an emerging form of cultural capital with which aspirational readers would do well to become casually acquainted.

In their intermediation of historical new media, and in sorting through a range of emerging local writing amidst changing tastes for English classics and the new international bestsellers, these Australian interwar magazines directed and shaped increasingly differentiating cultural tastes in a ‘critical hinge period for modern print and other cultural forms’.⁷³ As taste-making magazines, these publications were thus, in and of themselves, vitally important intermedial connectors: technological and

71 Tim Dolin, ‘Fiction and the Reading Public, 1888–1914’, *The Australian Common Reader* (September 2008) [accessed 28 November 2019] (para. 7 of 26).

72 Ohmann, p. 244; Hammill and Smith, p. 10.

73 Carter, *Always Almost*, p. 47.

cultural lynchpins that intersected with other publications and emerging media as they guided readers through a rapidly changing local and international scene. On the one hand, interwar middlebrow Australian culture and leisure magazines might be easily overlooked as rarefied titles that circulated amongst small readerships at the ends of the earth. On the other hand, as bellwethers — as well as barometers — of changing cultural tastes in an intensified volatile media scene during the critical interwar era, these and other similar periodicals might also be regarded as critical tastemakers within the broader media field during an historical era of convergence culture, in which books, film, and music were on the cusp of mass mediation, and culture and leisure were categories undergoing important processes of change and appraisal.

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