As an art form, film has arguably always functioned as a stronghold for memory. Memories are contained in the stories told on screen, and can also be preserved in the experiences of the audience in viewing the film, at a particular time and place. André Bazin theorized cinema’s ability to create a ‘preservation of life by a representation of life’ in his seminal article, ‘The Ontology of the Photographic Image’ in 1960. Bazin argued that the invention of photography facilitated the ability to capture a representation of the world, in a fixed time and space. In his comparison of photography to the more subjective art form of painting, he concluded that ‘photography does not create eternity… it embalms time’ (Bazin and Gray 1960, 8).

Throughout the history of cinema, the viewing experiences of the audience have changed dramatically, from the early nickelodeons, traveling film exhibitors, the grand picture palaces of the Golden Age, to the introduction of drive-in theatres, cineplexes, IMAX screens and the more recent shift to personalized viewing through tablets and smartphones. These vastly different environments are inextricably linked to particular decades of cinema, and for the audiences who participated in these cinematic experiences, are often attached to the memory of viewing specific films.

The environment of a film festival further alters the viewing experience and its relationship to memory. In a festival context, several realms or experiences of memory emerge. These can include the time and space of the film narrative itself, the screening of the film within the context of the festival, the individual experience of
the cinemagoer, and finally, the collective cinematic experience of the audience. The celebratory environment of the film festival specifically enhances this viewing experience, and creates touchstones of experience for audiences through particular programming strategies, retrospectives, themed screenings and special events.

Cinema and memory

The field of cinema and memory studies has grown significantly since the early 2000s, and has been investigated in several key texts. In contrast to Cook, and Sinha and McSweeney, Annette Kuhn’s ‘An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory’ (2002) examines cinema and memory from the perspective of the cinemagoer, rather than the film text. Kuhn’s research focuses on the experiences of cinemagoers from the 1930s and discusses both personal and collective memory. In her analysis of interviews with cinemagoers, Kuhn proposes that memory-talk ‘evokes the lived experience of being in the cinema theatre’ and also indicates ‘the wider and deeper meanings of cinema throughout the informants lives’ (2002, 220). Her focus on the experiences of the audience as fundamental to the creation of cinema memory are central to this research, as it will be argued that both the festival audience and staff contribute to and act as the custodians of ‘festival memory’.

Pierre Nora’s (1989) seminal article, ‘Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire’ influenced much of the existing research on cinema and memory. Specifically, his term ‘lieux de mémoire’ or ‘sites of memory’ offers valuable potential here. Nora explains that:

‘Our interest in lieux de mémoire where memory crystallizes and secretes itself has occurred at a particular historical moment, a turning point where
consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn – but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists (Nora 1989, 7).

Accessing memory can therefore become an act of reclaiming history and its erasures or overlooking of significant historical and cultural sites.

To date, there has been no significant investigation that applies the theoretical study of memory and cinema to film festivals. However, Nora’s explanation of lieux de mémoire can be applied when investigating the demise of an established festival within a climate of constant change. As constructed or curated sites of memory, film festivals are integral to the celebration and preservation of cinema and its history. They have both local significance and global influence.

This paper examines how the Brisbane International Film Festival and it’s home, the Regent Theatre, functioned as crucial ‘sites of memory’ for film culture in Brisbane, Australia. Through an examination of cinema and memory, and specifically Pierre Nora’s (1989) term, ‘lieux de mémoire’, I argue that film festivals operate as (temporary) sites of memory, through the programming and screening of films, engagement with local audiences and promotion of film culture. This specific and unique ‘festival memory’ is inextricably linked to the audience and the venue, and is curated by the festival programmers and staff, who carry a wealth of knowledge (not necessarily recorded), of past festivals, successes and failures. The people involved, the festival staff and audience, act as caretakers of this ‘festival memory’.
‘Festival memory’ therefore encompasses and is developed through the staff’s tacit knowledge of how a specific festival is organized, its history, its current relevance to local audiences and film community, and to the broader national and international film industries. This tacit knowledge includes a deep understanding of the local audience demographics, their ability to attend the festival at a particular time and place, film preferences and past successes and failures. ‘Festival memory’ also incorporates the festival’s unique location in the city. This location (often a particular building or part of a city) then becomes synonymous with the time, space and celebratory experience of the festival itself, and embeds over time in the memories of the festival staff, guests and audience. In the case of BIFF, the Regent Theatre became synonymous with the festival, and particularly with extravagant opening night celebrations. ‘Festival memory’ is therefore also embedded in the festivals significance and connection to the local and national film community, including filmmakers, cast and crew, film students, funding and development agencies and other local events and smaller festivals.

While it is necessary for every film festival to adapt in order to meet the changing demands of audiences and filmmakers, the drastic and ongoing change experienced by BIFF eventually led to the cancellation of the festival. The concept of ‘festival memory’ can be utilized as a valuable methodological tool for examining case studies of other festivals that have changed significantly or ceased to exist, to the detriment of the local audience and film community.

Brisbane International Film Festival
The Brisbane International Film Festival opened in 1992 and was held annually in July/August, attracting more than 350,000 patrons over its 22-year history. As a locally specific festival, BIFF functioned as an ‘audience festival’, with a relatively low budget, no official competition, a focus on targeted programming for local audiences and a reliance on volunteers (Peranson 2008). Although not unique in its approach as a festival, BIFF served a specific function in providing active support for local filmmakers and engaging with the film community.

The impetus for this paper emerged from doctoral research examining the Brisbane International Film Festival as one of three case studies. Over the course of this analysis, the festival underwent significant changes to its location, festival director and other key staff, programming agenda and festival dates. The first of these major changes was introduced in 2010 and implemented so abruptly that I began to consider the implications this would have on the festival, remaining staff and connections with the audience. From 2010 until the final iteration of BIFF in 2013, the role of festival director changed twice, with no explanation regarding the decision made transparent to the general public. The festival’s programming structure and focus shifted with the introduction of each new director. During this time, BIFF’s relevance to the local film community, its connection with established audiences and its role in cultivating local film culture were all severely compromised.

The reasons for the mass departure of the festival staff in 2010 were not made public, but were arguably the result of a political decision to change the focus of Screen Queensland (the state funding body) and the public image of the film festival. Along with the changes in dates and festival staff, BIFF was forced to move from its
primary location at the Regent Theatre and these changes critically impacted the agenda and public image of the festival.

Although BIFF’s overall program was not unique in relation to other comparable Australian festivals, the festivals specific local, cultural context did inform the programming strategy and festival identity. For example, Anne Demy-Gerome’s decision to program An Education for opening night in 2009 indicated her clear understanding of audience expectation that the festival would open with an internationally recognized film. In a controversial programming decision the following year, new director, Richard Moore opened the 2010 festival with the first Australian film in 3D, Cane Toads: The Conquest (2010). This decision did not appeal to the festival’s previously loyal audience, as it showed ignorance or contempt for the audience’s expectation for a red carpet event. The opening night film only filled one cinema, and the festival received several scathing reviews. Despite a shift to more commercially viable programming, Screen Queensland announced that Richard Moore would not return to BIFF in 2013. The final edition of BIFF was directed by Jennie Hughes, whose programming style featured a return to the festival’s previous approach.

The Regent Theatre

BIFF’s primary location since its inception had been at the heritage-listed Regent Theatre in the heart of the city. The Regent Theatre opened to the public in 1929. It was a large and opulent theatre featuring a marble grand staircase, vaulted foyer with Spanish Gothic balconies, ornate plasterwork and intricate paintings.
It quickly became a Brisbane institution, and drew strong audiences until the late 1970s when the theater faced its first closure. Due to financial pressure and an industry-wide shift to modern cineplexes, the main theatre was demolished and four smaller cinemas were built in its place. Despite widespread despair over the destruction of the original theatre, audiences continued to patronize the Regent.

The introduction of the Brisbane International Film Festival in 1992 temporarily sustained the viability of the Regent during the rise in popularity of suburban cineplexes. Gillies observes that ‘the Regent and (BIFF) became synonymous with the celebration of film as an art form and this association continued for 18 years’ (2014, 154). In 2010, it was announced that the Regent Theatre would be closed and the site redeveloped in. Only the heritage-listed foyer was saved.

**The Regent Film Festival**

Perhaps most significantly, the final closure of the Regent Theatre was marked with its own film festival. The festival included a short film competition, which required entrants to visually reference the theatre in some way. Asking filmmakers to create a film set in the physical location of the theatre was an active way of preserving the memory of the Regent, even if those films were only screened once, in a cinema that was about to be destroyed.

The loss of the Regent as the heart of the festival represents perhaps the greatest challenge BIFF had to overcome. While it is unclear whether the closure of the cinema had a direct impact on other changes implemented, it certainly disrupted the Regent as a site that added value and meaning to the festival, particularly for the
audience. For many cinemagoers, the experience of watching a film in a picture palace can become a memory that stays with them for life. Kuhn discusses the significance of memory and location, and argues that for audiences, place and memory are inextricably linked. That places function as, ‘…containers of memory: simply being in a place can trigger or produce memories. Places also situate memories, serving as a ‘mise en scene for remembered events’’ (2002, 16). The Regent Theatre was unequivocally the ‘living heart of memory’ for film culture in Brisbane, as evidenced by the Save-the-Regent campaigns and its place as both the practical and symbolic home of BIFF.

Considering ‘festival memory’

The quiet dissolution of the festival in 2013 and the subsequent emergence of the Brisbane Asia Pacific Film Festival solidified the break with Brisbane’s film community. The new festival, BAPFF, launched in 2014, was publicized as an opportunity to drive ‘long-term social and economic benefits to Brisbane’ through aligning the festival with the Asia Pacific Screen Awards (Bochenski 2014, para 9).

Not unique to BIFF’s situation, the constant push for innovation and change in light of new managerial dictums and financial imperatives has altered the course of many film festivals around the world. Some recent examples include The Edinburgh International Film Festival, which has undergone radical changes including a succession of different directors and a shift in its international profile. Additionally, The Thessaloniki International Film Festival was substantially affected by the Greek economic crisis and an uncertain political climate, which ultimately led to 200 Greek filmmakers boycotting the event in 2009 (Lee 2012, 89). Both of these festivals
continue to exist, but their agenda and international profile were forced to shift in response to changing financial, cultural and political dynamics.

In the case of BIFF, many intangible links between the long-term festival staff who left and the core BIFF audience were (temporarily) broken, as evidenced by the dramatic 80 percent shift in audience demographic reported in 2011, which demonstrates that a significant proportion of BIFF’s previously loyal audience stopped attending. This loss of continuity is immeasurable, particularly as the new direction implemented by Moore only took place for three years, before this agenda was also abolished. In considering the establishment of a ‘site of memory’, Nora explains that ‘The moment of lieux de mémoire occurs at the same time that an immense and intimate fund of memory disappears’ (1989, 11-12). Nora’s ‘fund of memory’ can be understood here as the festival staff and audiences tacit knowledge of the festival, which was torn initially with the closure of the Regent Theatre and the 2009/2010 changeover of the festival and then given little chance to be rebuilt prior to the last iteration of the festival in 2013.

This loss of film culture has been recognized by the local film community, and a new festival has been announced for 2015. The Queensland Film Festival has been designed specifically to appeal to BIFF’s former audience. It remains to be seen whether the Queensland Film Festival will be successful, but the festival’s purpose, location and target audience have been clearly directed toward attempting to reclaim the ‘festival memory’ that was lost with the closure of BIFF.

Conclusion
In the current global film market, driven by change and a constant proliferation of film festivals, why, then, is a consideration of ‘festival memory’ important?

Several facets of ‘festival memory’ emerge in this case study. These include the Brisbane International Film Festival itself, the physical space of the Regent Theatre and its history and function as the home of BIFF, and the Regent Film Festival, a one-off event designed to memorialize the theater before its destruction. The literal and symbolic space of the Regent Theatre and its historical and cultural significance for audiences is inextricably linked to festival memory. As Kuhn argues:

‘Beneath a place as it appears today lie, all still palpably present in memory, layers of its past manifestations; and these can be excavated in memory talk by those who belong to the place. (Kuhn 2002, 20).

While the future of the dormant building site of the Regent Theatre remains unknown, the heritage-listed foyer, currently used as a tourist information center, still provides a physical space for individuals to situate their personal memories, serving as a ‘mise en scene for remembered events’ (Kuhn 2002, 16).

The loss of the Brisbane International Film Festival and the introduction of BAPFF have undoubtedly had an impact on the city’s film community and industry. Film festivals provide audiences with the opportunity to experience a ‘time out of time’, an escape from everyday life (Falassi 1987). The environment of celebration and festivity emerges through a collective agreement to come together, at a particular time and place, to remember, celebrate and discuss. This personal and yet collective
experience is why festival memory is heightened for those who contribute to it, and for those who are custodians of it.

This essay has argued that film festivals serve as (temporary) sites of memory, through the programming and screening of films, engagement with local audiences and promotion of film culture. This case study finds that a distinct ‘festival memory’ is inextricably linked to the festival staff, audience and place. BIFF’s ‘festival memory’ was bound by the reciprocal link between place and event, and was maintained by the staff and audience. When the Regent closed, the true significance of ‘festival memory’ emerged, as it then continued to exist only in the memories of its previous custodians, rather than continuing to exist in a tangible form. This demonstrates Nora’s concept of lieux de mémoire as emerging at a particular moment, ‘a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn’ (1989, 7). The need to reestablish this ‘festival memory’ has now been recognized by some of the local film community, and may be partially restored through new fledgling events such as the Queensland Film Festival.

The purpose of considering ‘festival memory’ then, is not to argue against innovation and change, but to demonstrate that consideration needs to be given to the consequences that occur when an established film festival with local, cultural and historical significance disappears from the festival circuit. The central purpose of a local audience festival such as BIFF is, after all, to foster ‘a distinct sense of identity and community’, through a meaningful engagement with the city, the local and the particular (Stringer 2001, 137). It seems crucial, then, not to hastily relinquish these
important sites of culture and memory, but to consider the ways in which ‘festival memory’ can not just be preserved, but valued and incorporated.

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