

Fig. 2. Cinema Closures in New Zealand 1956-60 and 1960-1962

secondary cities. From 1960 to 1966, these large-town closures comprised:

Major cities:	central	6
	suburban	18
Secondary cities		8

Four of the major central-city closures were of 'chain' cinemas (those belonging to one of the two large combines); two affected independents. The closure of these six central cinemas left 41 cinemas in operation in city centre locations where, clearly, the impact of the television era, in terms of closures, was minimal.

In the suburbs of the major cities, changes were much more drastic. The cinemas there lost a great deal of their audience share to the centrally-located exhibitors, in addition to losses directly due to television. Of the 18 suburban closures, six were in Auckland, eleven in Wellington, and one in Christchurch (no suburban cinemas operated in Dunedin). Of a total of 16 suburban cinemas in Wellington-Hutt in 1960, only five remained by 1967.

In the secondary cities, seven of the eight closures resulted from the consolidation of operations by exhibitors who had previously controlled two or more cinemas in the centres concerned; five closures were of 'chain' cinemas. This reduction in cinema numbers was a natural response to the contraction of demand, and improved the position of the exhibitors' other establishments. The cinemas closed were the 'second-run' or 'action' houses, which were particularly vulnerable to television competition; the first-class cinemas in the centres concerned continue to do good business.

The four closures in towns of 5,000-20,000 inhabitants resemble those in the major cities. In two towns—Taupo and Dannevirke—the process was that of consolidation discussed above; in the other two—Manurewa and Wainuiomata—the closures were effectively suburban.

For centres of 5,000 and over, therefore, the pattern of closures from 1960 on

comprised both a consolidation of operations into central locations, involving the closing of redundant or marginal cinemas, and a general decline of the suburban cinema.

Below the 5,000 population mark, the industry was in decline throughout the period. Consistently over 70 percent of total closures during the decade were in this group, with a particularly high concentration of closures in centres with fewer than 500 residents. The 111 closures in this latter group between 1956 and 1966 resulted in a two-thirds reduction in the number of cinemas in small communities; 64 cinemas remained in operation in centres of less than 500 people in 1966. Since such cinemas tend in any case to be marginal, their heavy casualties were to be expected.

The impact of closures on the small-scale sector is further illustrated by sections B and C of Table II, which show that cinemas seating less than 500 and screening one or two nights weekly have been a clear majority—70 to 80 percent—of closures. The high concentration of closures among cinemas screening one or two days weekly reflects also the fact that closure is generally the culmination of a period of decline, during which screenings are cut back.

Spatial Distribution of Closures

The spatial pattern of closures for the four periods is presented in Figures 2 and 3. For the period 1956 to 1960 closures were widely dispersed, involving mainly the disappearance of the less-successful cinemas in rural, often declining, communities.³ In the larger centres, the chains closed a few of their cinemas, apparently in anticipation of the arrival of television.

Television was established in 1961 and 1962 in the four main centres, but in these first two years of operation its impact on the cinema industry there was mainly on attendances rather than actual closures. The pattern of closures up to 1963 is thus not clearly related to the spread of television; of 37 closures mapped, only 13 were within the area covered by the initial television stations, and not all of these were victims of television—a Wellington cinema, for example, was destroyed by fire. Most of the closures were in scattered rural communities little affected by television, especially in the Waikato and northern Taranaki. These appear to follow the 1950s pattern, and were dominated by the closure of three small-town cinema 'circuits': in Taranaki, a nine-cinema circuit closed; in the Hauraki Plains a three-cinema circuit (reduced from its original eight by closures during the 1950s) was forced out 'by improved communications',⁴ and just north of Dunedin a further three-cinema circuit closed. The decisions of three proprietors to cease screenings thus accounted for fifteen of the closures in this period. (Since the total audiences involved in these closures were small, this large number of closures unconnected with television does not upset the correlation established above between television penetration and falling attendances, although it does indicate that closures are not immediately related to the extent of decline in cinema business.)

The time-lag between the introduction of television and subsequent cinema closures emerges in the map for 1962-64 (Figure 3). In this period there was a large number of closures in the area covered by the Auckland transmitter since 1960, indicating a delay of two or three years before the effects of television in terms of closures became important. Elsewhere, the process appears to have been more rapid; the impact of the Wharite repeater station (opened in 1963) on the south-central North Island was clear by late 1964. Many of the Wellington suburban cinemas also closed at this time. Of 59 closures mapped for the period, 32 were within areas

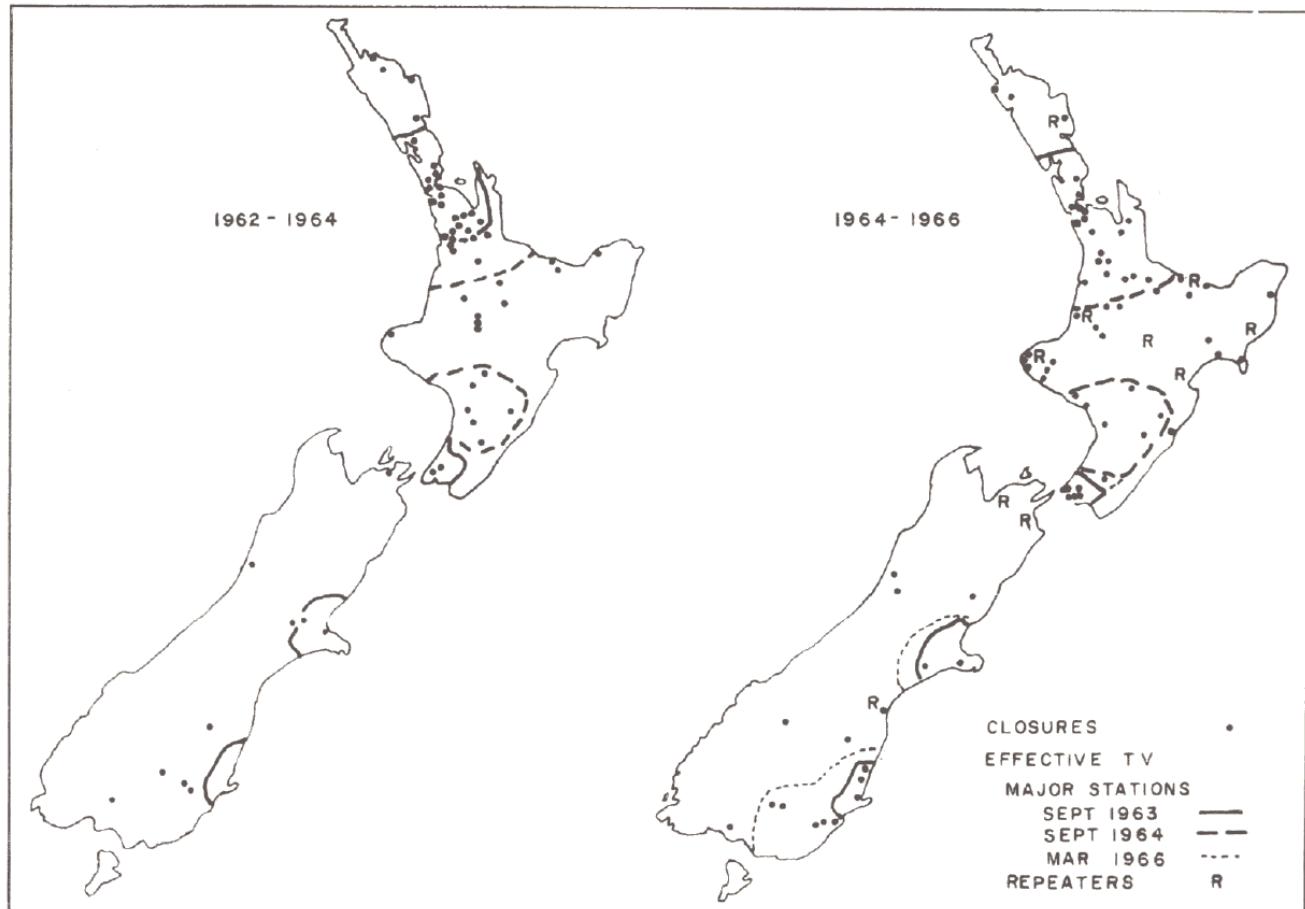


Fig. 3. Cinema Closures in New Zealand 1962-1964 and 1964-66

covered by television since before September 1963, and a further nine were in areas affected by extension of television coverage after that date. Of the eighteen remaining closures, a few were in fringe reception areas, but a number were still clearly not a direct result of television, and presumably reflect the continuing process of small-community decline. The closure of a three-cinema circuit in the King Country and of scattered small cinemas in Southland, Westland, Northland and eastern Bay of Plenty fall in this category. Again, the total audiences, seats and takings involved in this group were relatively insignificant.

For the 1964-66 period, the continuing extension of television coverage brought most of the country within reception range. Of the 74 closures mapped, only seven or eight appear to be out of the range of television by 1966. Since most of the repeater stations opened in 1964, it seems reasonable to suppose that the bulk of the closures were related to the impact of television. In particular, the opening of the Mount Egmont repeater in 1964 resulted in the closure of about a third of all the cinemas in Taranaki during the succeeding two years.

The rate of closures in the Auckland-Waikato area remained high, suggesting that adjustment to television was continued over a considerable time period, as less-favoured cinemas gradually declined, and finally closed. It may be presumed, thus, that the decline in cinema numbers has continued since 1966.

Conclusion

The changes described in the cinema industry are symptomatic of general changes in New Zealand society. The decline of small towns as foci of rural communities has both led to, and been hastened by, the disappearance of some of the institutions which were formerly at the heart of social life. The cinema is perhaps the most

obvious of these, and many rural communities are very conscious of the loss of this centre of communication. 'Saturday night at the movies' meant far more than merely watching a film; it brought the local people together, and helped keep the small town 'alive'. In many towns, indeed, local councils and shopkeepers continue to keep unprofitable cinemas operating, to retain the social magnetism which the weekly picture-show is felt to exert.

The trend in New Zealand, however, is strongly towards centralisation, and the cinema has been caught up in this. The future of cinemas clearly lies in the metropolis, with its wider range of recreational attractions. The industry also has become increasingly dominated by the two nation-wide 'chain' operators, companies which established a firm foothold in city locations in the 1920s and 1930s and are now reaping the benefits of their strong position.

Centralisation has applied equally to the suburbs of the larger urban areas, particularly Wellington, where the centripetal pull of the city centre has been very great. A few suburban cinemas in Auckland have survived by attracting specialised audiences from a wide area.

Television, which tends to keep people at home, has been a major catalytic agent in the disappearance of minor cinemas and the trend to central location. Its arrival marked the end of an era in New Zealand recreational life; but this was an era already on the decline, and television merely combined with already-operating social forces to impose on the cinema industry the major adjustments of recent years.

NOTES

¹Data cited in this paper came from the following sources: population figures from the 1961 Census (Department of Statistics, 1962); figures on cinema numbers, locations and operations from the New Zealand Yearbook (Department of Statistics, annual) and from the lists of licensed exhibitors (Film Licensing Authority, annual).

²The licensing year is from September to August.

³Figures cited in this section are for the beginning of each licensing year in September.

⁴Personal communication from the former proprietor.

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