

# THE HINDU

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## Our tryst with celluloid magic

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A century later: The building which housed Mrs. Klug's Bioscope. Photo: V. Ganesan

Permanent theatres were typically urban landmarks that established cinema as a space of sensual and social experience. As the Madras week celebrations begin in Chennai, Stephen Putnam Hughes tracks down a still surviving historic structure in the city, Mrs. Klug's Bioscope, the first permanent theatre in India to show movies, later to become a national obsession...

There has been a great deal of confusion in popular histories about which was the first cinema theatre in India and when was it established. For many years it was widely reported that the first permanent cinema theatre in India was the Electric Theatre started in Madras by Major Warwick

during 1900. And we are extremely fortunate that the building survives to this day for one and all to appreciate as the Philatelic Bureau of the Mount Road Post Office. The historical role of the Electric Theatre as the first in India has been further solidified by numerous reference works on Indian cinema and can now be found in countless Indian film chronologies that have proliferated online. The Electric Theatre was even commemorated

### **Not the first**

The Department of Posts issued special postal covers as part of the 100th anniversary of cinema in India and to this day there is a plaque commemorating the event mounted on the wall of the surviving building. Unfortunately, this whole story is wrong.

Major Warwick was actually Warwick Major and the Electric Theatre was constructed during 1913. And while the Electric Theatre was a purpose-built cinema theatre in Madras and had a highly successful run over 21 months until the Post Office appropriated the site, it was not the first permanent cinema in India by a long shot. And this points out a big problem in the writing on the history of cinema in India. The basic facts of exhibition history in India have largely gone undocumented. Much of what there is has not been based on solid research and merely perpetuates misinformation on the subject. With all the attention on the big stars, blockbuster films, and pioneering directors of Indian cinema, the history of film exhibition has suffered neglect in much the same way as old cinema theatres have in recent years. Exhibition is particularly important for understanding the success of cinema in India because it provided the necessary material, sensual, spatial and institutional conditions for Indian audiences to engage with the cinema. Especially before TV, video, VCD and DVD, cinema theatres were the primary means around which the sensual and social experience of the cinema in India revolved. Any history of cinema is impossible without reliably knowing how, when, where and to whom exhibition made access to films possible. So in that spirit I would like to tell a different story about the first permanent cinema theatre in Madras.

A woman, who went by the name of Mrs. Klug, was the first to establish a 'permanent' cinema theatre in Madras. At the beginning of April 1911, a "cinematograph theatre" opened on the first floor of No. 16, Popham's Broadway in George Town (just south of Loane Square and opposite Harrison and Co.). This was known as "The Broadway Bioscope" or simply "The Bioscope." This was almost certainly not a purpose-built theatre for film shows, but was an already existing space modified and redecorated for use as a theatre. When the Bioscope first opened there was no mention of its permanent status. However, after a few weeks, Mrs. Klug started to add that the Bioscope had been "opened permanently in Madras" to her advertisements (*Madras Times*, April 17, 1911: 1). By the end of May, she went further to claim that her establishment was the "only permanent bioscope" in Madras (*Madras Times*, May 30, 1911: 1).

### **Habitual practice**

In the end, Mrs. Klug's Bioscope managed a run of six months. In retrospect, this may not seem to merit the status of being celebrated as the first a permanent cinema theatre. However, the permanency of Mrs. Klug's Bioscope should not be judged on the basis of the duration but rather upon how it changed the way that Madras audiences had access to and engaged with film shows. Mrs. Klug offered the city a new kind of exhibition space that established cinema as a landmark

within the urban geography and for the first time allowed film-going to become a habitual practice in Madras.

Unfortunately, we know nothing about who Mrs. Klug was, where she came from or where she went after Madras. However, her time in the city was recorded in some detail by the regular advertisements and coverage in the *Madras Times*, which is the only source that I have been able to find and, perhaps, all that remains from her stay in Madras. However, we know enough to be certain that as a woman film exhibitor, Mrs. Klug was in a unique position within the cinema business in south India. During the early decades of film in Madras Mrs. Klug seems to have been the only woman involved in the trade. She would have been well aware of this unique status in what had been a male dominated field. So when displaying her name prominently in newspaper advertisements as “the sole proprietress”, Mrs. Klug may have been using her standing as a woman and, perhaps, her marital status as well to promote a respectable public image for the establishment.

From the outset, the Bioscope was enthusiastically endorsed on the grounds that Madras was, “so dismally bereft of popular forms of entertainment, the setting up of a permanent bioscope may be welcomed” (*Madras Times*, April 19, 1911: 5). In case anyone had a doubt, the first *Madras Times* review of the Bioscope, entitled “At the Picture Palace”, further elaborated on the definition of a “cinematograph show” as being a place where projected “living pictures” as “a medium of amusement and instruction” for both “children and adults”. In particular the newspaper reviewer felt the need to explain to the Madras public that cinematograph theatres were something very important happening outside of India. The review opened with the following claims: “The possibilities of the cinematograph show have not, as yet, been realised in India. In Great Britain and America, however, tens of thousands have been constructed and they rank at present as the most popular form of entertainment” (*Madras Times*, April 19, 1911: 5). On this account, the opening of Klug's Bioscope put Madras on the map of a sweeping Anglo-American phenomenon that had transformed the cinematograph into being more than a passing fad. The cinema could now lay claim to being its own place, a destination, an urban landmark.

Every evening, a busy crowd, electric tramcars, which passed every five minutes, and a high volume of other traffic surged through Popham's Broadway during the hours when Mrs. Klug's Bioscope offered their shows. She would have sought to make the most of this passing traffic and capture the attention and curiosity of the casual passerby. Klug adopted a policy of continuous show, which was a widely practised exhibition strategy at that time in Europe and North America. Instead of having fixed show times with a scheduled beginning and end, Klug screened films continuously every evening from 6 to 11. In this way Klug would have hoped to attract some of her clientele from the passing crowds and encourage impromptu visits to the film show after work, school or shopping. And more than as a matter of convenience, the continuous show opened a greater possibility for an improvised departure from one's daily routine, a distracting detour on the way home.

Mrs. Klug's Bioscope left Madras for good in October 1911. After having lasted almost six months at the Broadway location providing the longest continuously running cinema entertainment that the city had ever seen, Mrs. Klug's efforts seem to have been quickly forgotten. Yet, somehow, against all odds, the hall that Klug used still survives and appears to have been left largely intact as it would have been in 1911. The Sukrutha Lakshmi Vilasa Sabha (est. 1900), a social recreation club that

originally started with the purpose of promoting amateur theatricals, has occupied the hall since 1944. Though unrecognised and somewhat neglected in an era when most of Madras' oldest cinema theatres have been demolished, Klug's Bioscope lives on as a physical presence that deserves as much attention and preservation as the Electric Theatre.

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