

## Cinema and Childhood: an exercise in cultural memory

Society for Cinema Studies, 10 March 2000

When people talk about their memories, they tell stories, they narrate. The idea of story is often associated with fiction, i.e. something not actual, not 'true', 'made up'. I don't use 'story' in these senses. It's my contention rather that all stories, even conscious 'lies', carry truths of some sort, and that these are readable both in the stories people tell and in the ways they tell them. They are evidence, they contain clues, and they can be mined for cultural and historical insights.

My talk today draws on memory-stories of youthful cinemagoing; and in my talk I shall explore the implications of these stories for an understanding of 'cinema memory' as a particular variant of cultural memory.

The stories are taken from material gathered for an ongoing research project, Cinema Culture in 1930s Britain, in the course of which depth interviews were conducted a few years ago with around 80 mostly volunteer informants living in various parts of Britain about their recollections of 'going to the pictures' in the 1930s. Informants were mostly children or adolescents at this time. [expand--ask]

A certain pattern emerges in the sorts of things informants remember--in the immediate **themes** of their memory-stories, that is: the themes that emerge are in some limited measure shaped by the i/v schedule (though i/vs very open, they usually started off, as a means of getting informants back into the past, with a question on first remembered visit to the cinema):

- a. earliest cinema visit
- b. cinema buildings, cinema programmes
- c. getting in to the cinema
- d. particular films

Although the i/v material doesn't lend itself to quantitative analysis, it is very apparent some of these issues are recollected more regularly and/or at greater length, and/or with greater vividness, than others. More later.

There is a pattern too in how informants organise the narration of their memory-stories--in **discourses** of memory. Throughout the i/vs memory discourse breaks down into three main types:

- i. **anecdotal memory** first person/one-off story, narrator involved in events

**Helen Smeaton, Glasgow**

HS: The first film I ever remember was going to a cinema in Maryhill Road called The Blythswood. And I had pleaded with my parents to let me go, and it must have been about nine and I was told I could go and it was The Four Sons. [Laughs]. And we went, I went to the cinema on my own, and I was allowed to go to the first showing at 2 o'clock. And I went with a friend to the first showing and in these days you just sat right on. There was no change of, no going out. You just went any, in the middle, or any time you walked in if you paid your fare. So at the end of that my friend said [pause; 3 seconds]. 'I have to go, Helen'. And it just, as I say, went on again. I said "I think I'll watch it again". So I sat on and watched it again and I got out, got up to come out and was passing a friend with her parents and she said "Aw, come on, sit beside me. Don't go out, Helen. Just sit with me" [laughs]. So I sat through it again! And as the end of it her parents were going and she said to her parents, "Could I sit through this again?" and they said 'Well, if Helen'll stay' [Laughs]. I sat through the film four times [laughing]. And it was a very sad film. I must have been, if I'd saved my tears, I could probably have swum out of that. And when I got out, my father was waiting, absolutely in a terrible state and didn't know what had happened to me. They'd gone round all my friends and looking for me and the people at the cinema said, oh they couldn't interrupt the show, they'd just have to wait till it came out. And my dad was, he was so glad to see me [laughs] he couldnae make up his mind whether to murder me or welcome me. So, my mum welcomed me home but said "If you EVER do that again, you'll NEVER get back to the cinema again!" [Laughs].

- ii. **individual/repetitive memory** repeated occasions, narrator involved in events ('I often', 'my mother and I used to', etc;

**Beatrice Cooper, Harrow:**

BC: Em, yes. Well we had maids in those days and em [...] they were GOOD girls. And they used to, on their days off, sometimes TAKE me to the cinema.

- iii. **collective or distanced/repetitive memory** ii and iii can shade into one another, but in this case, there is a sense of distance ('they' may be used, or an unspecified 'we')

**Denis Houlston, Manchester**

\*(DH) You know, they were joyous occasions. We went and we came out and we thoroughly enjoyed it. Mind you, with the old silents, we got terrified. As I said the children's matinee was on a Saturday afternoon and we used to go and see these silent films with black and white with the piano playing.

I want now to examine three case studies of memories of childhood cinemagoing--these represent intersections of specific themes and discourses which emerge with particular insistence in informants' accounts, and they centre on the location of cinemas informants recollect going to as children, on ways of getting into the cinema, and on the films themselves.

While these three groups of memory-stories follow, as it were, a journey from home towards and then inside a cinema or cinemas, it is perhaps worth noting that while every informant's account contains elements of at least one of them, all three rarely if ever emerge with equal weight, or indeed at all, in any single account.

- **where**--memories of particular cinemas, their place in local topographies, in relation to home, etc. This references a more general

observation about cinema memory which I have discussed elsewhere: that in their memory stories many informants navigate mental maps of their childhood neighbourhoods; and that they are remarkably keen to place with exactness the locations of 'their' cinemas. This is associated with a spatial and embodied quality to the narration, which inscribes a bodily remembering of walking familiar streets from home to the cinema. While as a rule this tends to be associated with repetitive memory discourse, where informants are recalling their first cinema visits it may be associated with an anecdotal memory.

**Thomas McGoran, Glasgow:**

[...]the FURST time A ever

MIND bein tae a CINEMA was the OLD ANFIELD cinema in the Gallowgate [pronounced Gallagate]. Now, A DOAN'T know if ye KNOW that area.

[...]. But there's a HOTEL down there, it's used as a workin man's CLUB nowadays, ye know. But it used to, it was the BELLGROVE HOTEL. Now, on that SIDE, where the Bellgrove Hotel STOOD, was the old ANFIELD cinema. And that was the FIRST PICTUREHOUSE that A was ever IN. That A can REMEMBER. Ma dad took me tae it.

- **getting in**--virtually every informant has something to say about the cost or the difficulty of getting into the cinema.

**Mary McCusker, Glasgow:**

\*When mum got her wages on a Friday she would splash out and take us to the Astoria on Possil Road, it cost sixpence for adults and threepence for kids. Beside the pictures there was a wee shop that sold homemade sweets. Never since then have I tasted sweets like those. I used to press my face against the window and drool, candy balls, humbugs, macaroon, pink and white tablet, yum!

This passage, which is characterised by repetitive enunciation, exemplifies a topic which arises frequently: getting into the pictures when you have no money. This is part of a wider theme running through many of the informant's stories around 'making do', or 'getting by', associated with stories about subversions of adult rules and getting away with it :

## THE GREAT JAM JAR CONTROVERSY (exp)

### **Phyllis Bennett, Norfolk:**

PB: We used to have a cinema. That was called The Cinema. That all us kids used to queue up to get in there about two o'clock. And if you didn't ave enough money to pay, I think it was a penny or tuppence to get in in them days. [...].

You could take a jam jar or a rabbit skin.

Like Mrs Bennett's account, most, perhaps all, versions of the jamjar story are marked by a distanced version of repetitive enunciation: this varies, but generally speaking there is relatively little concrete detail of where, what and with whom ('all us kids'). Sheds interesting light on the ways in which memory material may be evaluated, and what sorts of evidence (historical? Cultural?) it provides. Are the jamjar stories similar in their discursive structure to urban myths?

- **the films**-- in general, informants are less likely to remember particular films and details from them than to recall other aspects of their early cinemagoing, notably those already discussed. While memories of particular films are rare, those which do come up are without exception anecdotal--they emerge in stories in which the informant/narrator is at the centre of events; and the events concerned always have to do the informant's own response to the film: for example, a number report having had nightmares after seeing horrific scenes in films (interestingly enough, icidentally, the key focus of public concerns during the 1930s about the effects of films on children).

### **Mary McCusker, Glasgow:**

[...] A can remember, eh, this particular film. DR FU MANCHU. An that night A came home an had a nightmare about Dr Fu Manchu. The Chinese, with a big long nail. An my mother vowed, that's the last picture I was ever to see. I was NEVER to get back again. Both of them were up all night wi me wi this nightmare of Dr Fu Manchu. I could see im walkin through, [laughing], the kitchen.

What do these findings from the 1930s Cinema Culture project on the themes and discourses of childhood memories of cinemagoing suggest about cinema memory as a subtype of cultural memory? I have a few tentative suggestions to offer:

- While it is probably not associated exclusively with cinema memory, it is perhaps worth noting the insistence in informants' accounts of their youthful cinemagoing on subversion of adult restrictions, or of the limitations on enjoying yourself imposed by having little money. What, however, are we to make of the oft-recollected example of 'getting by' which is specific to cinema, and which has at the same time entered the common currency of cinema memory with the discursive qualities of the urban myth: the jamjar story?
- More specifically, the insistence on spatiality in cinema memory is interesting; not only in that for many informants memories of cinemagoing have more to do with recollected topographies of childhood neighbourhoods than with particular films; but more significantly in that these familiar spaces are often (re)constructed and negotiated within memory discourse.
- Some accounts link discursive spatiality with embodied practices of memory: these are apparent not only in accounts which discursively re-enact informants' walking of familiar streets to get to a cinema; but also with remembered images from films and responses associated with these usually isolated, disassociated, images.