

Potential Spaces: Cinema Memory as Cultural Memory

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Places and Spaces: Culture, Memory and Identity

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In my talk I shall draw on some findings from an historical/ethnographic study of the reception and consumption of cinema in Britain during the 1930s which I have been conducting since the early 1990s and which has been funded in part by the Economic and Social Research Council.¹ Because this involved, among other things, depth interviews with surviving 1930s cinemagoers, it is also a study of cultural memory.

Today I shall be looking at some of the distinctive features of cinema memory as a subtype of cultural memory as they emerge from this study, and in particular at how place figures in cinema memory. I believe that the issues arising from this particular inductive exercise have wide historical, cultural and conceptual resonances, some of which can perhaps be considered in discussion.

Cinema was a real thrill in those days....Talking about it I can almost feel how I felt. Yeah. Yeah. Mm. It was wonderful.²

The contents and the registers of memory talk are always informed by the contexts of remembering; and for members of the 1930s generation like Beatrice Cooper, life stage is a significant component of the storytelling context. As a generation enters old age, its members will try to fashion meaningful stories from their individual and collective lives, assessing their roles as protagonists in their own life stories and proposing fitting closures to these stories. There is often a sense of urgency in the telling. It feels important, perhaps, that these stories be passed on,

¹ Cinema Culture in 1930s Britain (hereafter CCINTB), ESRC Project R000235385. For details of the inquiry and research methods, see Annette Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002). For a full listing of publications relating to the project, see <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/staff/kuhna/ccintbpublications.htm>

² CCINTB T95-153, Beatrice Cooper, Harrow, 27 November 1995.

put on the record, for future generations; there is a hope, too, that one's story might have some lasting value in the world. Often the stories themselves have an elegaic quality: they are a summing up of a life; they deliver a verdict ('It was wonderful'), a farewell. Elegy can sometimes embody a transcendence of its own, as if a particular life story stretches towards a meaning above and beyond the individuality of its narrator.

Cinema holds a special place in the life stories of the 'movie-made' generation of the 1930s. For a few it even figures in retrospect as a central protagonist, the focus of a quest for meaning in life. For the majority, though, the men and women for whom going to the pictures is remembered as a routine, taken-for-granted part of daily life at one time, memories of cinemagoing are attached above all to memories of the places and the people of youth. These memories are at once pleasurable in the recollection and tinged with feelings of loss. Stories of queues and crowds outside cinemas, of galloping home after watching cowboy films at Saturday matinees, of dancing like Fred Astaire, are testimonies, too, to the losses that come with ageing: loss of the loved ones of childhood and youth; loss of a sense of belonging to a neighbourhood or a peer group; decline of health, energy and physical prowess.

Is there anything distinctive about the memories of those men and women who grew up with cinema in the 1930s? What is the essence of cinema memory for this generation? What might the answers to these questions tell us about the nature of cultural memory? In the many and varied memories that figure in 1930s cinemagoers' testimonies, it seems that recollections of places figure prominently and in quite distinctive ways:

For this generation, going to the pictures was the occasion for the very earliest ventures into the world beyond the home. Close to home, almost an extension of home, and yet not home, 'the pictures' is remembered as both daring and safe. Referencing Freud, Michel de Certeau suggests that the back and forth (*fort/da*) movement and the 'being there' (*Dasein*) which characterise spatial practices re-enact the child's separation from the mother. To translate this

conceit to cinema memory, it might be argued that, for the 1930s generation, cinema constitutes a transitional object.³

This is the conclusion of one of the chapters in my book *An Everyday Magic*. How was it arrived at? Why is it important? And what might it suggest about the distinctive features of cinema memory in particular and cultural memory more generally?

First of all, it is about how place and space figure in certain kinds of memory-stories, and about how memory works through the body, or is embodied. In his phenomenological study of remembering, Edward Casey says that place is important in remembering because 'it serves to situate one's memorial life'⁴ in several possible ways:

- places can act as containers of memory
- places can be *mises en scene* for remembered events
- memory itself is like a place that we revisit.

Therefore memory both *is* a topography and *has* a topography. Note that I am talking here about place and not (the more abstract) space. The idea of place implies attachment, belonging—or its absence. Attachment in turn implies a bodily relationship, or even a merging of boundaries, between body and place.

The insistence of place in the memories of 1930s cinemagoers took me by surprise at first. There is plenty of variation, of course, in how place is evoked, and in how metaphors of place organise people's memory talk.⁵ But emerging from all the variation is an overall sense, above all in accounts of childhood cinemagoing, of a navigation of mental topographies of familiar remembered territory. My feeling is that this highly overdetermined 'topographical memory talk' offers clues to the ways in which cinema memory works as a distinctive form of cultural memory.

³ Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic*, p.36. The de Certeau reference is from his *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

⁴ Edward Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987, pp.183-4. Emphasis in original.

⁵ For details, see Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic*, chapter 2.

One key feature is the prevalence of the discursive 'walking tour' in informants' early cinemagoing memories: a retelling of journeys to the pictures, always made on foot, often with very precise details of street names and landmarks. This is an embodied and kinetic form of memory--a reliving of the experience of moving through space, or rather through a very particular and familiar set of places. For example:

EC: That's the bridge. Well this is the part I lived. I lived just behind here.

Int: Right.

EC: Yeah. This is just part of Collyhurst I lived. And just behind there. This is the railway bridge. A bridge this were the trains used to go under across.

Int: Right.

EC: Like that. Yeah. I lived just at the back. Just down there. Where it's rounded off. There was a sort of em, an entry. And you went down there and I just lived down there. And em [pause; 1 seconds]. See that big building there.

Int: Yeah.

EC: Well as you just went down there, there's like a street there. If you went down there the cinny [pause; 1 second] was next to this building. My em picture house, the cinny, was next to this building.⁶

There are several aspects of this kind of memory talk that make it distinctive:

- the starting place for the memory-journey is usually the family house, the home;
- the journey is on foot;
- the journey is highly goal-directed, its destination being the neighbourhood picture house;
- there is a sense that the same journey is/was frequently and repeatedly made, combined with
- a sense of its ordinariness, everydayness;

⁶ CCINTB T95-38, Ellen Casey, Manchester, 31 May 1995.

- an implicit return home is part of the journey.

Underlying the trope of repeated movement away from home and back again, and of the quotidianness of the journey's topography, is a sense of *fort/da*, a trying out of separation in a psychical, emotional and physical space of belonging, security.⁷ This is why I contend that in 1930s cinemagoers' place-memories, cinema figures as an extension of home.

It is significant, I think, that these memories are always of a particular sort of cinema—the neighbourhood picture house, invariably remembered as modest and accessible ('one on every street corner', as a number of informants put it). This is another aspect of their home-like quality (I shall return to the question of different types of cinema later). It is worth noting, however, that memories of going to the pictures are more pervasive and lengthier in the telling than are memories of being at the pictures. 'Going-to' and 'being-at' memories also differ markedly in both content and timbre. I shall return to this point as well.

When I first noted that cinema constitutes a transitional object for the 1930s generation, this was not a particularly profound thought, nor a very considered conclusion. But I have since seen some discussions of transitional objects and popular culture which suggest that the idea might be worth pursuing. In his book *Fan Cultures*, Matt Hills analyses present-day expressions of fan behaviour as manifestations of the kinds of psychical investments that people make in transitional objects.⁸ Fans' peculiarly passionate engagements with popular cultural objects of various kinds, he argues, bear—albeit to an extreme degree—the hallmarks of the feelings and behaviour commonly attached to transitional objects.

Transitional objects (and, more broadly, transitional phenomena) is a concept developed by D.W. Winnicott, the foremost representative of the British Independent tradition of object-relations theory in psychoanalysis. Transitional objects are the ubiquitous first possessions of infants and young children (a blanket, a teddy, etc)

⁷ Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920). *Pelican Freud Library*, vol. 11. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1984.

⁸ Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures*. London: Routledge, 2002, pp104-13.

that belong at once to the child and to the outside world, occupying an intermediate position between fantasy and reality, the place of imagination. Winnicott famously said: 'No human being is free from the strain of relating outer and inner reality'⁹, and transitional objects and transitional phenomena help us negotiate that relationship.

They inhabit what Winnicott called an 'intermediate zone' between inner psychological reality and the external world, keeping the two separate but related. Importantly, they are precisely material objects, things: they have a physical existence but are pressed into the service of inner reality. They are at once part of the subject and not the subject. Winnicott uses the terms 'transitional space' and 'potential space' to refer to this third area, this intermediate zone inhabited by transitional phenomena. His spatial metaphors are, I think, significant.

Winnicott's earliest writings on transitional objects link them wholly to childhood and developmental issues, in particular with the activity of play, whose defining characteristics he regards as:

- preoccupation, near-withdrawal
- activity is 'outside the individual but not the external world'
- objects/phenomena are drawn from the external world and pressed to an inner reality agenda.

It is clear from some of his later writings, however, that he thinks transitional phenomena have a structural aspect as well: in particular, he explores the relationship between transitional phenomena and how adults experience and relate to culture. For present purposes, I am interested in both developmental and structural aspects.

- Developmental. Winnicott links transitional objects and associated behaviours in infants and young children with processes of separation. For Winnicott, this means separation from the mother, but I would broaden this out to include separation from a mother-associated place-object, the home. In either case, this is part of a process of development of self in distinction from

⁹ D.W. Winnicott (1951). 'Transitional objects and transitional phenomena'. *Through Paediatrics to Psychoanalysis: Collected Papers*. London: Karnac Book, 2002.

the outside world, and serves as a bridge between the familiar and the unfamiliar, thus facilitating the child's acceptance of the new.¹⁰

- Structural. The dynamic equilibrium of inner and outer reality is not confined to the transitional objects of childhood, but continues in adult life. We continue re-enacting play and other transitional processes throughout life in relation with our 'adult' transitional phenomena. These phenomena are identified by Winnicott as culture in general ('there is a direct development from transitional phenomena to playing [...] to cultural experiences'), and art and religion in particular. Cultural experience, he says, is located on 'the potential space between the individual and the environment'. Here the tension lies between living in the everyday, inhabiting ordinary consciousness, and leaving it to enter a zone of 'maximally intense experience'; and a key issue is our management of the transition between the two. Christopher Bollas has talked about the experience of transitional phenomena in adult life in terms (borrowed from Bruce Berenson via Marion Milner) of the aesthetic moment: 'an occasion when time becomes space for the subject. We are stopped, held in reverie, to be released, eventually back into time proper.'¹¹ Others refer to 'the ebb and flow of losing and refinding oneself personally and endlessly in space-time'.¹²

As I have noted, place-memory or topographical memory is pervasive in 1930s cinemagoers' talk. An embodied form of memory discourse, place-memory re-enacts separation and the interaction of inner and outer worlds in terms of the remembered experience of bodily movement through space and to and from particular places--in this instance home and the picture house. In this sense it is the

¹⁰ See also Anni Bergman, 'From mother to the world outside: the use of space during the separation--individuation phase'. In S.A. Grolnick, and L. S. Barkin, eds, *Between Reality and Fantasy: Winnicott's Concepts of Transitional Objects and Phenomena*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc, 1995, pp.147-65.

¹¹ Christopher Bollas, 'The aesthetic moment and the search for transformation'. In P.L. Rudnytsky, ed., (1993). *Transitional Objects and Potential Spaces: Literary Uses of D.W. Winnicott*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, pp.40-49. The quotation is from p.48.

¹² Gilbert Rose, 'The creativity of everyday life'. In Grolnick and Barkin, *Between Reality and Fantasy*, pp.347-62. The quotation is from p.355.

cinema building, the place (as distinct, pace Hills, from objects of fan-worship), that functions as a transitional object in the Winnicottian sense.

But what happens inside the cinema? The remembered walk to this place is a process of enacting and of restating belonging to a place-object that is both outside home and like home: this is the locality, the neighbourhood. What happens inside the cinema is rather different: it is the partially virtual experiencing of other, unfamiliar places. There are in fact two levels involved in the experience/memory of being inside the cinema: being in the cinema building, the auditorium; and 'being in' the world on the screen.

Significantly, informants' memories of these aspects of 'going to the pictures' are relatively few in number. They are also either (a) unanchored in space and/or time (memories of isolated images or scenes from films, for example; usually frightening or funny ones); or are (b) often rueful stories about the speaker's failure to understand or properly negotiate the difference between ordinary space and time and space and time in the cinema (for example, stories of sitting through several performances, losing track of time and getting into trouble with worried parents). Or else they might be (c) narratives about the transition from the everyday world to the world of the cinema and back again.

In all these stories, the experience of being in the cinema is remembered first and foremost as being outside ordinary time and space:

Standing in the street queuing in pleasant anticipation of what the next couple of hours had to offer, as the lights dimmed and the screen lit up away we went transported into a world of fantasy;¹³

It is also remembered as involving an involuntary, passive journey--informants repeatedly talk about being 'transported' or 'carried away':

¹³ CCINTB 95-232-1, Raymond Aspden, Lancashire, to Valentina Bold, n.d. 1995.

It's like being in another world... .And then when I come out, I'm a bit, you know, kind of ooh! A bit, eh, carried away. And, eh, then I come down to earth eventually.¹⁴

A handful of memories of this kind even evoke the epiphany of the aesthetic moment:

Oh it was great! Cause the life, the cinema life then it was everything!¹⁵

The world in the cinema is commonly remembered (to use another turn of phrase that comes up again and again in informants' testimonies) as 'another world'. In memory, this other place emerges as at once radically different from the ordinary and at the same time, like Michel Foucault's heterotopia, embedded in the ordinary, the everyday:

a sort of place that lies outside all places and yet is actually localizable.¹⁶

These tropes of cinema memory--the insistence on place; the conjunction of, and the collision between, everyday places and cinema's places--assume expression in distinctive registers of memory discourse. Most strikingly, perhaps, memories of the earliest visits to the cinema often have about them a quality of the mythic or the legendary. In the recurrence and precision with which the landscapes of early cinemagoing are laid out in memory talk, for instance, or in the often formulaic character of stories about repeated Odyssey-like journeys from home to picture house and (crucially) back again, a collective imagination appears to be at work. These memory-stories, experienced and presented as personal, are tapping into a vein of shared, cultural memory.

¹⁴ CCINTB T95-158, Tessa Amelan, Manchester, 28 May 1995.

¹⁵ CCINTB T94-12, Thomas McGoran, Glasgow, 30 November 1994. For further examples see Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic*, Chapter 9.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, 'Other spaces: the principles of heterotopia', *Lotus*, vol.48-49 (1986), p.12. On the heterotopian qualities of cinema in the 1930s, see Annette Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic*, chapters 6 and 7.

Stories about jam jars substituting for pocket money, about anarchy ruling in the child's domain of the matinee, about vivid nightmarish visions inspired by scenes in films, may well be anchored in a particular time and place for their narrators.¹⁷ And yet in their essentials they have much in common with childhood experiences across the generations. At some level these stories are about the challenges that face every child as it grows up: of becoming a separate person, of testing the waters of the world outside home and family, of coming to terms with the fears and the prohibitions surrounding any venture into the unknown.

¹⁷ For details, see *An Everyday Magic*, chapters 3 and 4.