

## **“In Their Own Words”: Nostalgia, Trivia and Memory in Local Cinema History**

Britain has a strong tradition of local cinema history, particularly as explored by amateur historians and non-academics. While they vary in their modes of address, they share a common emphasis on collating empirical information about exhibition practices within a town or region, in order to create a sense of individual identity. The relationship between a locality and its cinema history is thus constructed as a product of that specific place and community, rather than a non-specific expression of national or global practices. The nature of international film distribution naturally means that local cinema histories are told in the contexts of larger trends, but prominence is always given to the effects they have on localities. Part of the reason for this emphasis on highly localised issues comes from their nature as non-academic pieces of historiography; without the need for express academic rigour, the need for contextualisation is limited largely to providing a basic understanding for the reader. These histories typically speak to locals, or those with specific interest in these geographical spaces, rather than to those with a more general interest in cinema history.

The local cinema historian draws particularly on anecdotal and personal memory, particularly of cinemagoing habits and spaces, both of which benefit from the intimate and particular knowledge of a place that comes from growing up and/or working there. These books benefit from detailed minutiae and broad, colloquial understanding. This paper will discuss some of the characteristics of local cinema histories, as well as discuss the function of memory in creating their meanings.

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These histories vary dramatically in both their scope and content, with different authors choosing to focus more or less on different aspects; however, there are some common elements that can be found in the vast majority. The primary information, with regards to particular cinemas, tends to be the opening and closing dates of the cinemas themselves, often with the first and/or last films shown. In their short article listing some cinemas in Coalville for the *Mercia Bioscope*, John Knight and Jim Marshall's entire entry for one cinema reads, "The Grand in Belvoir Road opened in 1920, closing relatively early, 29<sup>th</sup> June 1940 with *Trapped in the Sky*, starring John Holt. It was later used as a ballroom and is now a disco."<sup>1</sup> The unexamined nature of this sort of presentation style is a relatively common feature for these works; it is rare for there to be much more than the outlining of facts and dates, particularly within publications such as the *Mercia Bioscope*, the quarterly magazine of the Mercia Cinema Society. Entries such as these show the publication to be a forum in which amateur historians may share their own knowledge of individual cinemas.

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The reproduction of ephemera is another dominant feature of these histories, and sets them apart particularly from academic studies. Whilst academic studies might use ephemera to illustrate a wider point, or to serve as a reference for analysis, amateur cinema histories tend to present these reproductions as valuable in and of themselves. One of the longer pieces in the *Mercia Bioscope*, published in issue 20, can attribute its length primarily to an entire reproduction of a cinema's opening ceremony brochure, taking up fourteen pages of a thirty-page magazine, yet there is

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<sup>1</sup> John Knight and Jim Marshall, 'The Cinemas of Coalville', *Mercia Bioscope*, no. 19 (Summer 1985): 5.

no critical examination or analysis of its contents. Instead, its value is as an artefact in itself, rather than as a source for information to elucidate some wider historical or theoretical point. Victor Price's book on Birmingham Cinemas includes a profusion of reproductions, particularly of cinema brochures, programmes and newspaper advertisements (alongside photographs, discussed below).<sup>2</sup> It is notable for its large ratio of pictures to text, with whole pages often given over to particularly vivid contemporary advertising imagery. The informational value of this material is limited, considering the frequent lack of contextual information and the inconsistency of the sampling – some cinemas are primarily represented through posters, some through newspaper adverts, some through brochures, some through combinations of these materials. However, the primacy they are often given in the layout of these books (including relatively short texts like George Clarke's book on Lincoln cinemas<sup>3</sup> or Brian Hornsey's booklet on the Danilo cinema chain<sup>4</sup>, both of which devote around half their pages to images) speaks to their inherent value as images.

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Even more prevalent than ephemeral reproductions is photographic content of all kinds. Most of the photographs in these histories are of the cinemas themselves, and some books even privilege the photographic content over the text.<sup>5</sup> Peter Tuffrey's book on cinemas in West Yorkshire largely consists of photographs from the *Yorkshire Post* archives. The book lists numerous cinemas in West Yorkshire,

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<sup>2</sup> Price, *Birmingham Cinemas*.

<sup>3</sup> Clarke, *The Cinemas of Lincoln*.

<sup>4</sup> Brian Hornsey, *One Man's 1930's Dream: Danilo Cinemas*. (Wakefield: Mercia Cinema Society, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Such as Maryann Gomes, *The Picture House: A Photographic Album of Film and Cinema in Greater Manchester, Lancashire, Cheshire and Merseyside from the Collections of the North West Film Archive* (Manchester: North West Film Archive, 1987); Tuffrey, *West Yorkshire Cinemas and Theatres*.

alongside high-resolution photographs of their buildings, both during and after their operation as cinemas; Tuffrey does not analyse or discuss architectural details, beyond listing names of architects within individual entries. The aesthetic value of each cinema building is seen as self-evident, and the reader is not explicitly guided to features typical or otherwise of cinema architecture.<sup>6</sup>

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The sense of nostalgic melancholy that suffuses his introduction informs much of the historical work of these books. This introductory passage also alludes to the purpose of these books and their intended mode of access. The first sentence begins “To me, it’s slightly upsetting,” which immediately personalises the work that follows, and invites the reader to identify with the author’s (and by extension the wider cinema-nostalgia community’s) appreciation of old cinema buildings, as something atypical and exclusive. The author admits that these buildings have come to be seen as “ugly, disfigured” remnants of the past, but also admits to these buildings “sticking out” to him in a way that they ostensibly don’t to others. These rhetorical devices help to set up the intended audience for this book as a community with a shared interest and worldview; it is no coincidence that local and regional cinema societies are the main publishers of these histories.

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As mentioned, the names of architects responsible for the cinemas’ designs are prevalent within these texts. This serves as a useful data point for other historians, and allows for wider trends to be traced; it also speaks to a general concern that these texts

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<sup>6</sup> Unlike, for example, the coffee-table book Roads Publishing, *Theatres*, 2014 which, despite containing very little captioning and text, frequently refers to specific architectural detail.

have for the listing of personnel for these cinemas. The personal stories of managers, musicians and other staff members of these cinemas informs much of the content of these histories, and is the most common framework for telling the stories of the cinemas, beyond simply listing key dates and information. Peter H. Robinson's book on the Playhouse Cinema in Beverley, West Yorkshire, concerns the life of its co-founder and manager Ernest Symmons just as much as it concerns the history of the cinema; they are considered one and the same through to Symmons's death in 1957.<sup>7</sup> Mortimer Dent, founder of the Danilo cinema circuit, is central to Brian Hornsey's booklet on the chain, entitled *One Man's 1930's Dream*; his short history of the Clifton cinema circuit shares a similar fascination with the life of its founder Sidney Clift.<sup>8</sup>

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The prevalence of personal histories within these books, as distinct from institutional histories of the cinemas, speaks to another purpose that these authors have, as those who would record stories that might otherwise be lost. Bill Parker and Ned Williams, in the introduction to their work on the Kinver Kinema, write, "The community's own historians have investigated a number of things, but, as far as we know, no one has attempted to tell the tale of Kinver's little cinema: The Kinema."<sup>9</sup> The sense of loss, and the desire to maintain something of the legacy of these cinema buildings, and the personnel that staffed them, is a recurring aspect of these histories. Most of these authors attest to having some desire to capture this lost past; indeed, these cinema histories become prevalent during the 1980s, as many of the last extant

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Hammond Robinson, *The Home of Beautiful Pictures: The Story of the Playhouse Cinema, Beverley* (Beverley: Hutton, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> Brian Hornsey, *The Clifton Story: A History of the Clifton Cinemas Circuit*. (Wakefield: Mercia Cinema Society, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Bill Parker and Ned Williams, *The Kinema at Kinver* (Wolverhampton: Uralier Press, 1986).

picture palaces were shutting down and converting to bingo halls and discos, or else being demolished. Those who had grown up during the “classic” cinema days of the Thirties were retiring, perhaps placing these historians in a reflective mood. Richard Ward was spurred on to catalogue the cinemas of Sheffield because, as he writes, “When I retired in 1981, I started to visit [Sheffield] fairly often and was sad to see how many of the fine cinema buildings had vanished.”<sup>10</sup> David Roddis reminisces about visiting the pictures during his youth in the 1930s, writing, “Today’s younger generation [will] never realise just what they’ve missed.”<sup>11</sup>

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The effect is akin to the act of giving testimony in oral history, where value is given to the contributing witnesses directly through the act of recording their memories. In the introduction to an edited collection of reminiscences about life in the West End of Leicester, compiled from entries to a competition, editor Karen Barrow notes, “Some people asked specifically *not* to be considered for the competition, because they had found that writing [their] memories down had been a rewarding enough experience on its own.”<sup>12</sup> Kuhn relates that participants in her oral history study in *An Everyday Magic*, in the first instance, were “keen to be recorded and to offer facts ‘for posterity’, listing cinema names and locations, for instance.”<sup>13</sup> In both cases, the act of recording memories is its own clear motivator, and this can help to explain the profusion of this sort of cinema history.

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Ward, *In Memory of Sheffield’s Cinemas* (Sheffield: Sheffield City Libraries, 1988), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Roddis, *The Thrill of It All*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Karen Barrow, ed., *West End as I Remember It* (Leicester: Leicestershire Libraries and Information Service, 1985), n.p. Emphasis in original.

<sup>13</sup> Annette Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), 243.

This is not to say that these histories are unmediated representations of the past. Kuhn speaks of oral testimony as being a mediated act of memory work; memories are produced “in specific ways in a particular context”, and that “[participants are] staging their memories, performing them.”<sup>14</sup> If anything, the self-reflexivity afforded by the medium in which these memories are presented – as books and articles – allows for the levels of mediation to be further heightened. Barrow writes that the extracts in *West End as I Remember It* are “[not] intended as a social documentary or criticism, but are, quite simply, very enjoyable and readable memories of homes, shops, school and social life in the West End.”<sup>15</sup>

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The context within which these memories are produced is here quite clearly stated, and it can be assumed that several of these histories are intended to be read uncritically, though they are not produced in unbiased or unmotivated contexts. That they emanate from personal lived experiences, and yet are meant to evoke something general about the social history of these spaces, means that the extent to which they are indeed general observations must be questioned. In *Interpreting Films*, Janet Staiger discusses Hugo Münsterberg’s sense that meaning is constructed by the mind through the lens of what that mind considers of interest; in other words, the process by which a general understanding of the world is derived is informed first by preconceived ideas of what is interesting about the world.<sup>16</sup> Whilst Staiger primarily discusses these ideas with regards to audience response to individual film texts, this can easily be extrapolated to encompass all aspects of cinemagoing. Kuhn and Staiger

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>15</sup> Barrow, *West End as I Remember It*, n.p.

<sup>16</sup> Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1992), 55–57.

both variously recognise the importance of the extratextual and the habitual with regards to the meanings constructed around cinema going.

It is worth mentioning here a major tendency for these memory-based studies to focus on cinemagoing as a habitual act, rather than a series of separate interactions with differentiated film texts. Kevin Corbett, writing on regional cinemagoing in America, writes, “For many people, the act of going out to see a movie can be at least as important as the movie itself.”<sup>17</sup> Lies Van de Vijver and Daniel Biltereyst, discussing their study on cinemagoing memories in Ghent in Belgium, mentioned the difficulty in retrieving remembered details about individual films from witnesses, writing “The *cumulative* experience of avid or even occasional cinemagoing habits was generally more easily reconstructed through memory.”<sup>18</sup> The apparent separation – or at least minimised importance – of the film text from the filmgoing experience has more generally resulted in a trend towards audience and reception studies being concerned with patterns of social life, rather than text-driven approaches to the understanding of meaning, as it relates to cinema. When witnesses are asked to recall their memories of the cinema, they tend to speak mainly in the habitual mode, to the point where the films themselves do not necessarily matter. Jackie Stacey recalls finding a cache of hundreds of Mass Observation diaries maintained by individuals during the Second World War, but finding minimal reference to the cinema amongst them.

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<sup>17</sup> Kevin Corbett, ‘Bad Sound and Sticky Floors: An Ethnographic Look at the Symbolic Value of Historic Small-Town Movie Theaters’, in *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing*, ed. Kathryn H. Fuller-Seeley, 2008, 233.

<sup>18</sup> Lies Van de Vijver and Daniel Biltereyst, ‘Cinemagoing as a Conditional Part of Everyday Life’, *Cultural Studies* 27, no. 4 (31 August 2012): 572, doi:10.1080/09502386.2012.720268.

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This is not to entirely minimise the social importance of cinemagoing. The habitual nature of attending the cinema may be just as likely to result in its complete normalisation, which would not necessarily warrant special mention within these sorts of diaries. As an element of the social lives of contemporary audiences, the cinema served a distinct but ordinary function; its cheapness, accessibility and social acceptability allowed it to be a hub for local communities. David Lazell was a former Butlins bingo caller, and in his cinema history *What's On At The Pictures* he writes, "I can report that the general atmosphere of many bingo clubs is much like the Children's Cinema Clubs once held in the same building. Both groups shared a sense of community."<sup>19</sup>

This may go some way to explain the prevalence of the memorial mode of historiography evident in these cinema histories. Whilst the memory work in the aforementioned academic studies is solicited precisely in order for scholars to analyse them, the participants predominantly gain their own value through the remembering process. Stacey also notes that the opportunity to lend personal memories towards historiography constructs contributors as an authority of sorts; of the classic Hollywood actress fans she spoke to, she writes, "The private pleasures of collecting cinema memorabilia and of having film-star expertise is thus given a kind of public importance."<sup>20</sup> It can be recognised that the private knowledge of local cinemas, and the now-impossible experiences had therein are a kind of memorabilia; these memories have a tangible, material value in much the same way as physical

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<sup>19</sup> David Lazell, *What's on at the Pictures?* (Cheltenham: Evergreen, 1995), 227.

<sup>20</sup> Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1994), 69.

memorabilia or classic cinema ephemera. The frequent emphasis on individual experience allows subjects to be absolute authorities on their own subjective experience.

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The book *Cinema in Coalville* is an edited collection of memories, excerpted from taped interviews of residents who remember “in their own words” their cinema going experiences in the mining town of Coalville, in northern Leicestershire.<sup>21</sup> The excerpts are not discussed by any editorial voice, nor is any information provided about the contributors beyond their names and the contents of their remembrances; furthermore, no contextual information about the town or the cinemas is provided, beyond a cursory listing of opening, renaming and closing dates for Coalville’s three cinemas. The pronounced lack of explicit editorial input and the lack of any indications of the questions asked in these interviews, or their criteria for inclusion, potentially highlights the intrinsic value of these memories in creating a sense of the history of Coalville cinema going. It is likely that in doing this, the editors are attempting to circumvent the problems of the power relations between the editorial voice and the voice of the interviewees;<sup>22</sup> alternatively, it could be seen as memory being allowed to stand purely on its own merits, without being used as evidence for anything other than itself. This is echoed in *Seeing in the Dark*, a collection of written testimonies from cinemagoers around the world; by refraining from the analysis of these testimonies, the editors hope to avoid what they see as pitfalls of academic

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<sup>21</sup> Jeanne Carswell and Tracey Roberts, eds., *Cinema in Coalville* (Coalville: Coalville Pub. Co Ltd., 1991).

<sup>22</sup> See Popular Memory Group, ‘Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method’, in *Making Histories: Studies in History-Writing and Politics*, ed. Richard Johnson et al., Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1982), 219–20.

audience research, which “cannot fully capture the individual, subjective experience of filmgoing, since they miss out idiosyncratic detail and the personal dreamworld.”<sup>23</sup>

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The academic concern with the extratextual and the performative nature of oral history, as well as the concern of edited memory collections for memories to be presented without interpretation, speaks to an overall sense that the value of any memory is first created by the witness. The process of remembering involves a level of mediation by the mind in question, ascribing meaning to certain processes and disregarding those that it deems irrelevant; this then becomes material that is revisited and reinterpreted throughout the life of that mind.<sup>24</sup> The overwhelming tendency towards nostalgia within cinema memory work may well represent much of the meaning of cinemagoing as experienced by testifying audiences during the periods in question; but it is just as likely to be a product of other extenuating factors, not least the closing of the cinemas and the resultant rupturing of established psycho-geography. This sense of loss is often a motivating factor in the creation of these memories, particularly as they relate to local cinema histories told in a knowingly nostalgic mode.

This paper was intended to discuss the relationship between the academic and non-academic historiography of cinema and exhibition history. It was also intended to explore the reasons why local cinema histories are written, and the functions they serve as markers of community and identity. As time marches onwards, the ability for scholars to access primary accounts and materials related particularly to early local

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<sup>23</sup> Ian Breakwell and Paul Hammond, eds., *Seeing in the Dark: A Compendium of Cinemagoing* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1990), 8.

<sup>24</sup> Popular Memory Group, ‘Popular Memory’, 223.

cinema history becomes ever more difficult; this paper hopes to argue for the value and potential usage of popular cinema histories as both compendia of esoteric regional historical data, and primary memory works.