

‘Reel to Rattling Reel’: Telling stories about rural cinema-going in Scotland

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Abstract:

As Annette Kuhn explains in relation to her pioneering research on cinema culture in 1930s Britain, ‘*how* people remember is as much a text to be deciphered as *what* they remember’ (2002: 6). This article, drawing from research conducted as part of a three-year AHRC-funded project looking at the history of the Highlands and Islands Film Guild (*The Major Minor Cinema Project: Highlands and Islands Film Guild 1946-71*, University of Glasgow and University of Stirling),¹ will examine the ways in which cinema memories are narrativised. The article will focus in particular on the creative writing strand of the project, which was inspired by the surprising discovery of the project’s pilot study that some cinema-goers from the period of research had been inspired to write poems or stories in response to their experience of going to the Film Guild screenings. Through a consideration of the project’s oral history interviews, alongside correspondence with respondents and other written accounts, including poems, short stories and other forms of creative writing, the article will consider the ways in which cinema memory (as a very particular form of cultural memory) may offer its own unique inflection to the ways in which stories are told.

Keywords: creative writing, creative methodologies, rural cinema, cinema memory, Highlands and Islands Film Guild

Introduction

the projector being aimed at
a whiteish screen on its shoogly stand
was made ready to purr, when,
reel to rattling reel, the story was spun
(Aonghas MacNeacail, ‘remembering which film’ (2018: 125).)

As Annette Kuhn explains in relation to her pioneering research on cinema culture in 1930s Britain, '*how* people remember is as much a text to be deciphered as *what* they remember' (2002: 6). This article, drawing from research conducted as part of a three-year AHRC-funded project looking at the history of the Highlands and Islands Film Guild, will examine the ways in which cinema memories are narrativised. The Highlands and Islands Film Guild was a mobile cinema service established in 1946 and in operation until the 1970s, which served many functions. Primarily, it sought to play a role in addressing issues of depopulation through a general improvement of the cultural and recreational offerings in rural communities. It also served an educational function by working closely with local community associations and educational authorities to develop opportunities for using films as an educational tool in schools. It also aimed to encourage local film production.

The research project's primary aim was to gather oral history testimonies from the areas served by the Film Guild. This article will focus in particular on the creative writing strand of the project, which was inspired by the surprising discovery of the project's pilot study that some cinema-goers from the period of research had been inspired to write poems or stories in response to their experience of going to the Film Guild Screenings. Through a consideration of the project's oral history interviews, alongside correspondence with respondents and other written accounts, including poems, short stories and other forms of creative writing, the article will consider the ways in which cinema memory (as a very particular form of cultural memory) may offer its own unique inflection to the ways in which stories are told.

As part of the project's creative writing strand, a series of creative writing and storytelling workshops were held at various locations throughout the Highlands and Islands in order to stimulate creative responses in relation to the memories of cinema-going in rural communities. Workshops were held at local festivals in locations where the project's fieldwork was simultaneously being undertaken, this included: Inverness Film Festival, Shetland Screenplay, Orkney Storytelling Festival and the Hebridean Celtic (HebCelt) Festival on the Isle of Lewis. The workshops greatly benefitted from the support and generosity of the festivals, for providing the venues for the workshops and for also assisting with the promotion of the workshops within local communities. Each workshop recruited between six to twelve participants, drawn from both the local community and visiting festival-goers, and were led by myself and Nalini Paul, a poet and experienced workshop facilitator.

The creative writing strand of the project also included a creative writing competition on the general theme of memories of cinema going, which was open to writers, writing in English, from around the world. Twenty entries from the competition were selected for inclusion in a final publication, a creative writing anthology on the theme of memories of cinema-going, which also included works by five writers from the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, who were commissioned at the project's start to write creative works responding to their own memories of cinema-going.² Although a great number of the entries selected came from writers from Scotland and indeed the Highlands and Islands, this was likely because the competition was more publicized in these areas, rather than any

reflection on the way the entries were selected. The final book, published by Cranachan, a publisher based in Lewis, contains contributions reflecting a wide-range of cinema going experiences, from distant childhood memories to the very recent, and across different generations and geographical contexts, both urban and rural.

The methodological approach for the project, more suggestive than empirical, was intended to consider the role of the imagination in relation to memory and the cinema-going experience and question the ways in which stories are told within both personal and academic contexts. This aspect of the project, looking at the creative treatment of memory, also aims to offer new ways of thinking about cinema memories, which acknowledge the fallibility of memory, or what Matthew Jones refers to in a recent publication as the 'problems of memory', which he, in short, summarizes as to do with the fact that memories 'are often [only] half-remembered, half-produced amalgamations of past occurrences, both from the time of the memory and from the intervening years, and other types of information' (2017: 399). Jones goes on to quote Annette Kuhn's assertion that memories are no longer seen as providing 'access to, nor as representing, the past as it was' (2017: 400). Instead, the creative writing strand of the project aligns itself with what Kuhn has referred to elsewhere as a kind of 'Memory work [that] undercuts assumptions about the transparency or the authenticity of what is remembered, taking it not as "truth" but as evidence of a particular sort: material for interpretation, to be interrogated, mined, for its meanings and its possibilities. Memory work is a conscious and purposeful staging of memory' (Kuhn, 2000: 186). Thus, a more productive approach considers the ways in which cinema memories are narrativised across a variety of texts and contexts, but also the ways in which cinema memory (as a very particular form of cultural memory) may offer its own unique inflection to the ways in which stories are told (e.g. focusing on '*how*' things are remembered rather than '*what*', as suggested by Kuhn in the quotation which opens this article).

Creative methodologies and their potential for accessing cinema memories

Creative methods have been adopted by a number of media-related research projects. For instance, a number of audience research projects have drawn on a range of methods for encouraging participants to engage and reflect on the topic of research, including diary writing, games, but also creative writing (Kitzinger 2004, Reason 2012). As David Gauntlett's research has posited, creative methods offer a productive way to encourage participants' reflection. Gauntlett argues how the 'process of making a creative visual artefact - as well as the artefact itself (which may be, for example, a video, drawing, collage, or imagined magazine cover) - offers a reflective entry-point into an exploration of individuals' relationships with media culture' (Gauntlett, 2005: 1).

Across the social sciences, there has been a marked increase in experimentation with the methodological approaches used to explore the complexities of lived experience, acknowledging the importance of imagination, embodied experience and emotions in the experience of lived reality. For instance, research at the Morgan Centre for Research into

Everyday Lives at the University of Manchester is distinctive for its embrace of creative methodologies, including the use of observational sketching in social science research and fieldwork (Sue Heath, Lynne Chapman and the Morgan Centre Sketchers 2018). Furthermore, the Centre's creative approaches also extend to the manner in which research findings are articulated. Jennifer Mason's research into the way in which residents of the Calder Valley region of the North of England Pennines experienced the changing weather (or 'lived the weather' according to Mason) culminated in a publication of prose and poetry drawn from the responses of the project's participants. Mason's recent academic monograph, which includes a substantial section analyzing the project's findings, also takes a less formal and more creative approach to structuring the text, employing 'facet methodology', an approach developed by Mason and other colleagues at the University of Manchester. In short, the methodological approach aims to explore 'facets of a problem – rather than attempting (and usually failing) to describe and document all dimensions of the problem in its entirety' (2018: 4).

In her book, *Theories of Social Remembering*, Barbara A. Misztal praises the ability for artists to provide insight on subjects that challenge traditional scientific enquiry. Misztal writes, 'We owe a deeper and more insightful understanding of the workings of memory to creative writing, particularly the novel, which is capable of providing the kind of inward, authentically objective account of the past that enables us to understand it' (2003: 3). Creative methodologies offer far more than simply new ways to present findings; they provide the imaginative flexibility required to fully access memory which, as Annette Kuhn has maintained, is by nature a creative act. As she argues, 'It is impossible to overstate the significance of *narrative* in cultural memory – in the sense of not just the (continuously negotiated) contents of shared/collective memory-stories, but also the activity of recounting or telling memory-stories, in both private and public contexts – in other words, of *performances of memory*' (2010: 1). In this respect, our own project, acknowledging the powerful role storytelling plays in both individual and community identity and memory, seeks to take what is often dismissed in favour of what is perceived as the more serious business of gathering 'facts'. What we found with the creative writing workshops, that we held at various festivals throughout the Highlands and Islands, was that the act of writing creatively sometimes lifted the burden felt by some who struggled to recall specific details. In the absence of the need to recall facts, participants were left free to explore other aspects of the cinema-going experience, often more emotional internalised imaginative aspects which are not often touched on in formal interviews.

As earlier research on cinema audiences has found, memories of cinema-going are often expressed in very particular ways. Annette Kuhn's *Cinema Culture in 1930s Britain* project revealed how cinema memories are often articulated through a particular geographical slant, where emphasis is often on the topographical memory and the journeys to and from the cinema; that recollections of cinema-going can often involve an oscillation between past and present (e.g. how things were and how they are now); that the social aspect of cinema-going is also central to how it is remembered (e.g. who they went with,

who they sat next to, etc.); and, finally, that cinema memories rarely focus on the films themselves (see Kuhn, Biltereyst and Meers, 2017). Instead, cinema memories can often function as what Kuhn refers to as ‘mediated storytelling’ where ‘the past can be referenced through cinematic means’, and ‘the “structure of feeling” of memory or the process of remembering may be performed or enacted cinematically’ (Kuhn 2010: 2). The oral history interviews and creative writing responses arising from our own project formed similar patterns in their own expressions of cinema memory.

Reading through the entries to the project’s creative writing competition, it became apparent that a number of the stories and poems responded to shared cultural memories and tropes associated with going to the cinema, even in cases where the cinema exhibition contexts varied greatly. The creative writing responses often related to the rituals around cinema-going, such as queuing to get into the cinema, the experience of buying drinks and snacks at the concessions stand, the excitement of entering into the imaginative space of cinema, which in some cases included luxurious or at least novel surroundings, and also the various rituals surrounding courting, etc. In this respect, the memories of cinema-going shared seemed to be of a more generic and homogenous nature. However, many of the entries were distinguished by the way in which variations of the cinema-going experience found local expression. For instance, in Roseanne Watt’s poem, ‘Mareel’, her take on the experience of leaving the cinema, an aspect of the cinema-going experience which featured in a number of accounts (across our own project as well as earlier research such as Annette Kuhn’s *Cinema Culture in 1930s Britain* project), the cinema’s location in Shetland provides its own unique inflection of a familiar trope. When Watt and her companion leave a film screening at the Mareel, a seaside arts centre in Shetland’s largest town, Lerwick, they emerge to discover that they had nearly missed ‘the other show’, a spectacular display of the Aurora Borealis taking place just outside the cinema doors (2018: 43). As Watt’s poem attests, the event of going to the cinema is often coloured by local contexts. In this case, Watt’s experience draws comparison between the natural display of the Northern lights and the transformative experience of going to the cinema. The poem opens:

Mind that night in November, the pair of us
bursting from Mareel like late-comers
to the cinema-dark of the evening.
How we nearly missed it, the other show

that night: the aurora, the dancers, unspooling
their reels of green across the sky

In Watt’s poem, the experience of leaving the cinema, an act that is often compared to the experience of waking from a dream and the strange transition back to real world and everyday realities (Barthes, 1986), is inverted in its meaning. Instead of the spell being broken by leaving the cinema, a new spell is cast.

Similarly, another Shetland poet, Christie Williamson, focuses on the unexpected pleasures generated by the collusion of the world of the film with the world in which it is screened. In the case of Williamson's poem, 'Catch', it is the beauty of the Shetland landscape presented on screen (in a programme which included *The Edge of the World* (Michael Powell, 1938) and *Nort Atlantic Drift* (Susan Kemp, 2014), a recent documentary about the Shetland poet, Robert Alan Jamieson), that spills out into the Glasgow streets near the cinema where the films are being shown:

Sauchiehall Street nivvir saa
sic a exotic flock o birds
as saaed an cooried on da Foula cliffs (2018: 45).

In other responses to our writing competition, the cinema is remembered as having served as a vital form of escape, something which Kuhn identified in respondents' accounts in her project as a common way of remembering cinema as a form of escape from 'hard times' (2002: 219). Ruth Howell's account of her own family's involvement in various cinemas in Belfast, in her short story titled 'Electric Palaces', conveys the appeal of cinema's ability to serve as a constant amidst the changing uncertainties of real world contexts. Recalling her own memories of what going to the cinema meant in the Belfast of her youth, she writes how 'even in the worst of times, we dared streets for the cinema, where the narratives still made sense. We queued up in the centre of town, beside the bombed out remains of the Europa Hotel where, high above our heads, the purple curtains flapped raggedly in the rain' (2018: 81). As these examples illustrate, the individual accounts serve as microhistories, which demonstrate both the uniqueness and ubiquity tied to the cinema-going experience in different cultural and geographical contexts.

The remainder of this article will present our findings and focus on the more predominant 'structures of remembering' arising from the creative writing strand of the project. This includes: firstly, the imaginative space provided by the cinema, akin to what Winnicott refers to as 'potential space' (1986), which served as a particular prominent structure of remembering, particularly in narratives focusing on adolescence, and the development from childhood, adolescence to adulthood; secondly, the spatial practices involved in going to the cinema, such as the journey to and from the cinema, as well as the phenomenological aspects of the experience of being in the cinema; and finally, the ways in which some of the creative works recalled aspects of 'prosthetic memory' (Landsberg, 2004) commonly found in oral history accounts of cinema memory, whereby the origins of memories become blurred as individual memories are blended with those of friends and family as well as those from the wider culture.

Structures of remembering: The imaginative space of cinema

The ability for cinema to facilitate a kind of escape from everyday reality through onscreen fantasies is a key part of what makes acts of memory construction of cinema memories play

such a vital role in identity formation. In many interviews, the significant role particular films or film stars are remembered to have played in early childhood or adolescent development, is often a focus of discussion. It's not surprising then that these powerful forms of identification and their potential empowerment for individuals to actively shape their own identity, has also proven a popular feature of the cinema-going experience to explore in creative writing.

In the early film magazine *Photoplay*, there are examples of writers using films and the film stars they identified with as a way to reshape their own identity and to imagine being someone else, being somewhere else. For example, in a 1925 issue of the magazine, a poem by Margaret Boyles, titled 'I'm Good', presents a list of wants (e.g. 'I want to ride a bucking bronco [...] I want to drink and smoke and cuss') all associated with characters in the classic Western, something which she concedes she will never do because of her gender ('I only draw the girlish parts') (1925: 106). A form of 'textual poaching' (Jenkins 1992, de Certeau 1984), the act of creating a new text responding to the pre-existing film has the potential to exhilarate by enabling spectators to actively insert themselves in the picture, creating a bridge between the real and fantasy worlds.

For many of our respondents, the Film Guild screenings were one of the only forms of entertainment. The same could also be said in relation to similar research projects, particularly those focusing on pre-television audiences. In Annette Kuhn's *Cinema Culture in 1930s Britain* project, cinema was often cited as the only entertainment for working class respondents. In relation to the research conducted as part of the Highlands and Islands Film Guild project, respondents often recalled how there was a great deal of anticipation for the Guild screenings. It was before the arrival of television and, although radio often featured as an important focus of the household, many respondents described a general dearth in visual culture at the time. In Shetland, a few respondents made explicit reference to the great impact seeing their first film had on them, particularly because of the limited access to visual culture they had at the time, with many referring to a few treasured household books containing illustrations as one of the few sources of visual culture before the arrival of the Guild screenings. A couple of the respondents also mentioned small picture cards that were given out at church as having a particular appeal, with one respondent claiming it was the only reason she went to church.³

The imaginative space offered by the cinema was something referred to by respondents, but was also something that emerged as a theme in the creative writing workshops and in the work of the commissioned writers. Aonghas MacNeacail, a Gaelic poet from the Island of Skye who had direct memories of the Guild and was one of the writers commissioned to write about their memories of cinema for the project, touches, in his poem, on the elements of fantasy and play which he associates with Guild screenings, something MacNeacail also discussed as important to his memories of the Guild screenings when he was interviewed for the project.

In the interview, MacNeacail describes how

they were essentially in fantasy land [...] you went home having seen the film, you know, with a head full of being the characters and kind of living the life of the characters. If they were engaged in swordplay you probably had a little wooden willow wand or hazel wand or something. You and your pals would engage in a bit of duelling and hope that you didn't whack each other. So there was always an element of play'.⁴

MacNeacail also writes about this memory of the Guild screenings in the poem he wrote for the anthology:

there was some lore about the 45
among the boys, feeding a jacobite ardour
against cold hanoverian, imagined heavy
broadsword against our chosen claymore,
shaped from air and ready for the kill

we performed our acts of valour
in the playground during dinner-break
before the hand-held bell, and
mr headmaster called us back to sit
on benches made of brick disguised
as wood - gnarled presbyterian wood

on which we'd, once a month, sit
watching all those flickering dissonances,
where death was possible without blood, or
excess demonstrations of agony or grief

it wasn't always john wayne,
and it wasn't only john wayne –
jack hawkins (who won the war
five times, on land and sea) spread his
stolid english frame across the screen
and the others, resonant in name and
narrative in face, whether under wide-
brimmed hat or metal helmet, filled our
sorbent minds with strutting dreams

so then, on torchlit journeys home, we
held those galloping reins, charged down
our yelling slopes, prepared to board a

veering ship, drove tanks on roads that led,

we knew, to all that stale old wallpaper we
might pretend was camouflage, but knew
was what surrounded us when homework
could not be postponed, bed beckoning (2018: 126-7).

MacNeacail's poem expresses a number of the tropes which have emerged across a number of interviews, letters and creative writing works from the project: there is an emphasis on the contrasts – of light and darkness, inside and outside, the fantasy of excitement of the action and drama versus the rainy dour reality awaiting them after the screening. Because the Guild screenings MacNaicail attended took place in his school, his poem looks at the ways in which the everyday environment was transformed by the experience, breaking the boundaries between the two very different worlds, school and cinema. Like the poem featured in *Photoplay*, it is the ability for the imaginative space of the cinema to bridge the seemingly disparate cultures, identities, times, and spaces, that excites and empowers the cinema-goer to reimagine themselves and their world around them in different ways.

Structures of Remembering: The Journey

As Barthes highlights in his essay 'Leaving the Movie Theatre', both the journey to and from the movie theatre form part of the reverie of the overall cinematic experience. The 'twilight reverie' of the journey to the cinema, the ritual of traveling 'from street to street, from poster to poster [before] finally burying himself in a dim, anonymous, indifferent cube where that festival of affects known as a film will be presented' (1986: 419). Afterwards, as Barthes describes in reference to his own experience, the cinema-goer leaves the cinema, in a 'sopitive, soft, limp' state, a 'little disjointed [...] coming out of hypnosis' (1986: 418). It is the kind of reverie so powerfully depicted in the poem by Roseanne Watt discussed earlier, where the dream-like sopitive state of the cinema-goer leaving the cinema extends to the outside world encountered when leaving the cinema, which in the case of Watt's poem is the dazzling spectacle of the northern lights outside Mareel, Shetland's arts centre.

Annette Kuhn's research project on cinema-going during the interwar period in Britain also noted the significance of the journey to and from the cinema in many of the project's interviews. Respondents' accounts were often geographically or topographically driven and layered over time, creating the 'palimpsest-like quality of topographical memory' (Kuhn, 2002: 20). Space is also often key to the way in which narratives are constructed: as de Certeau (1984: 115) suggests, 'every story is a travel story – a spatial practice', and in various ways the respondents for our own project also emphasized the centrality of place as, in Kuhn's words, a '*mise en scène* of memory' (2011: 94). For some of the creative writing works produced as part of our project, the focus on the story of the journey to and from the cinema also provides a neat form of three act structure, that is similar to classic

monomyth, 'the hero's journey', popularised by Joseph Campbell (1949) (e.g. starting at home, undertaking a new quest, venturing to uncharted territory, before returning home).

Although, as Kuhn's project found, accounts of the journey to the cinema often proves a significant feature in all recollections of going to the cinema,⁵ the distinctive geography of the Highlands and Islands and the many challenges it posed to those journeying to the cinema, gives the accounts of the Film Guild screenings their own unique inflection. There are accounts of the heroic journeys of the operators through treacherous conditions. Similarly, for some audience members, the journey to the Guild screenings posed a significant challenge. For instance, in a written account, Iain Thornber recalls how the journey to the Guild screenings from the remote croft where he lived involved traversing 'a rough, single track road rising to over 1,000 ft above sea level' which 'was frequently blocked by snow and ice during the winter months'.⁶ Often these tales of pain and endurance serve to illustrate just how much the trip to the Film Guild screenings meant to their audiences: that it may be cold and the journey may be long, but it is worth it. For instance, one account from a local community magazine recalls getting soaked in a downpour on the way home from a Guild screening, but that it was 'well worth it'. The account goes on to relate that she had been accompanied by a friend, who was on holiday. She writes: My companion, on holiday, remarked: 'Well! In Clydebank I wouldn't turn over in bed to go to the pictures, and here I've cycled up hill and down dale for 11 miles in the rain to see them'.⁷ It's not surprising that the dramatic nature of journeying to film screenings in rural Scotland also featured in some of the entries to our creative writing competition. One writer featuring in our anthology, Sandy Marshall, describes memories of staying with family on the Isle of Arran as a child and cycling to visiting cinema screenings in a village six miles away. When they come out of the hall at the end of the evening they are shaken to find that it had now grown dark:

I felt quite abandoned, thinking of my journey home all alone in this darkness. I hastily retrieved my bike, took a deep breath and walked with it on to the road. The bike had no lights, so I had no other option but to go onwards into the darkness (2018: 141).

Ultimately, it is described by them to be an adventure which had been one of the most memorable and exciting events of their childhood.

As Kuhn notes, the act of describing the journey between home and cinema,

provides a narrator with a spatial setting in which imaginatively to place herself or himself, and gives access to a past that may in some sense be reinhabited in the act of narration. It also constructs a spatial metaphor for a developmental, psychical process - that of becoming a subject, a separate individual (2002: 61).

As illustrated by Marshall's story, the journey to and from the cinema plays an important role in the adolescent's assertion of their own independence. The act of recalling the specifics of the journey, as Kuhn describes, allows for the memory to be 'reinhabited'. Elsewhere, Kuhn describes this type of memory story as illustrating 'how memory works through the body, or is embodied' (2013: 54). Here Kuhn draws productively from Edward Casey's understanding of the relationship of memory and place to unpack the phenomenological aspects of cinema memory. In particular Kuhn refers to Casey's notion of place as 'containers of memory' where 'simply being in a place can trigger or produce memories', but also the ways in which place can help to 'situate memories and serve as a "*mise en scene*" for memory' (Kuhn 2002: 6; referencing Casey, 1987: 189, Bergson, 1911 and Bachelard, 1969).

The phenomenological aspects of the cinema going experience, which sometimes feature in interviews, were also fruitful for creative exploration in the creative writing submissions. In facilitating the workshops, Nalini Paul and I also focused one of the exercises on encouraging participants to recall the full sensory experience of going to the cinema – not just the visual spectacle. Participants referred to things like the smell of popcorn or cigarette smoke, the feel of the seats or the ticket stub held in their hands, the taste of sweets, etc. We also encouraged further sensory engagement by bringing in various items of cinema memorabilia, such as ticket stubs, 'jeely jars' (jam jars which were reported to have been accepted as payment for entry in Scottish cinemas in the interwar period), and a disinfectant spray bottle, which some participants recalled being used in their local cinema.⁸ At some of the writing workshops, we also read extracts of letters from individuals who had attended the Film Guild screenings, which contained references to the more phenomenological aspects of the experience, such as the cold hard benches (something both Christine De Luca and Aonghas MacNeacail include mention of in their commissioned works) and how they dressed to cope with the cold conditions of the screenings in halls which had no heating – some brought hot water bottles and one recalled wrapping a brick from the Rayburn in newspaper to bring with them to the cinema. Similar to other works mentioned in this article, the experiences recounted often speak to both the generic and the particular. For instance, while many accounts recall the smell of cigarette smoke, perhaps this is something that is now even more likely to be recalled because of its perceived novelty since smoking is now no longer allowed in cinemas. But in Shetland, this memory of cinema-going that has wide cultural resonances takes on a more local inflection, in an account from one of the Guild's operators, who recalled 'the distinctive aroma of Russian cigarettes, obtained by trading with the Soviet fishing fleet'.⁹

Structures of remembering: in memory of the memories of others

As other oral history research has found, respondents often draw from the memory of others as well as their own: the memories of friends and family, but also the wider culture and more collective forms of memory. Similar to the way respondents in oral history interviews adopt different forms of narration, from first person to third person narration,

writers oscillated between types of address, with some creating very intimate pieces about personal memories and others focusing almost wholly on the collective. For instance, in Marion Fiona Morrison's poem, 'The Corky', the child's experience of Saturday matinee screenings in the Ardgowan Cinema in Glasgow is expressed through the collective, with several lines beginning with the word 'we':

We mastered America.
We swore allegiance to the flag
Held our intestines in at Pearl Harbour,
Spat insults with the best of the Chicago mobsters.
We counted those asdic pings in the North Atlantic
And when the reel guttered to a broken halt
We took to the stage in the Corky
And sang our party pieces
Blinking in the false light of real life
Until the pretend world ran again (2018: 50).

In this example (and in similar usages in many interviews relating to cinema memory), referring to 'we' rather than 'I' is a way of the teller situating themselves back within the collective context of the cinema-going experience. The use of repetition in this poem emphasises the narrator's identification with the collective 'we'. In some cases, respondents may refer to poems or other short stories written by others, to help articulate something about their own memories. For instance, in another example from Kuhn's project, one respondent, Mary McCusker, paused the interview to recite a poem written by a local Glasgow writer, titled 'Saturday Matinee', which she felt reflected her own experience.¹⁰ In this way, creative writing can serve as a way to stimulate in the reader a recollection of their own memories or to embolden them to express a particular point of view.

Perhaps because of the collective nature of cinema, many of the stories and poems sought to embody the memories of others. Kevin MacNeil's short story, 'The Cinema Outside, The Cinema Inside', as its title suggests, offers a glimpse inside the heads of a group of cinema-goers in a cinema in Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis (2018: 24-34). The tension between the collective experience of the cinema, the story unfolding on screen and the multiple subjectivities presented inside the minds of each cinema-goer, serves as the story's key tension, a kind of metaphorical striving for Winnicott's idea of 'potential space', the 'third area' between the inner world and the 'world of shared reality' (Winnicott 1971b: 100).

The act of creative writing can serve as a way for the writer to meaningfully connect with the memories of others. For instance, the act of writing a poem or a short story can serve as a way of connecting with cultural memories which the author may not have personal experience or memories of, but nevertheless, the memory's significance in the

wider culture is still something keenly felt by the author. Some entries drew from the memories of friends or relatives. For instance, the winning entry of our writing competition, Sam Gates' short story, 'Big Dreams in a Wee Place', although written in the first person, draws mostly from his brother's experiences of cinema-going in a small village in rural Ayrshire (2018). In many cases, writers drew from memories with which they had little personal connection, from aspects of collective memory but also sometimes what Alison Landsberg refers to as 'prosthetic memory', a form of memory, which she describes as emerging

at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site such as a movie theatre or museum. In this moment of contact, an experience occurs through which the person sutures himself or herself into a larger history [...] In the process that I am describing, the person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live (2004: 2).

In some respects, it could be said that many of the contributors to the anthology drew from this kind of 'prosthetic memory', in that, for many of the writers, the memories they drew from were not just their own but were drawn from the wider culture, a combination of their personal memories peppered with certain aspects picked up from mainstream culture. For instance, Kay Ritchie, one of the volume's contributors, based her poem *Hogmanay* on the Glen Cinema disaster, a tragic incident which took place on a New Year's Eve matinee screening in 1929, led to the deaths of seventy-one children and subsequently led to significant changes in cinema building regulations. The event is one which is fairly well-known in the wider Scottish culture, having been referenced in numerous television programmes. A commemorative plaque was also installed outside the cinema during its centenary year in 1996. I was made aware of the Glen Cinema disaster through my own research into cinema exhibition in Scotland in the late 1920s and 30s. The event made news in film exhibition trade journals, and continued to be referenced in the years to follow. The subject also comes up in various interviews with cinema-goers from the period. A collection of interviews held by National Library Scotland's Moving Image Archive, many of which were conducted by the archives founder and former head, Janet McBain, include a few interviews with survivors of the disaster.¹¹ Interviews from the *Cinema Culture in 1930s Britain* project also include reference to the disaster, which itself is an acknowledgement of the magnitude of the disaster and its resonances across wider culture. Kay Ritchie's poem, inspired by a museum's display of a pair of shoes that had been worn by one of the victims of the disaster,¹² focuses on the experience from the point-of-view of the child's mother, dressing them for the day out at the cinema. However, instead of adopting the point-of-view of the mother, the poem takes a more speculative position, imagining what the experience must have been like:

Maybe she was scrubbing, polishing away the old,
having dressed him in his Sunday best
sent him to swap jam-jars for tuppence at Galbraith's –
his entrance fee to the matinee
that final day.

The following stanzas all open with a line which begins with the word 'Maybe', imagining with the reader what such a horrible event must have been like, for the mother but also for the child. The poem's imagining of what it must have been like for the mother also becomes a poem about the mother's imagining of what it must have been like for her son. 'Maybe he found a seat or had to stand' opens the second stanza. 'Maybe when they shouted out *FIRE*/he joined the stampede' opens the next. Then a more tentative opening for the final stanza and its horrific revelation of the outcome: 'Or maybe he was already barefoot, limbs/tangled like unwound celluloid' (2018: 98-99).

In many ways, the structure of Ritchie's poem belies the process of empathy which Landsberg describes as foundational to the engagement with prosthetic memory, whereby the observer engages beyond the mere apprehension of history, in a more personal and empathetic way. It could be said that the act of writing about a prosthetic memory is a way of furthering a more imaginative engagement with a prosthetic memory, which enables an exploration of emotional, embodied and felt aspects of the memory. Certainly, in the case of Ritchie's poem, the act of imagining what it must have felt like for both mother and child is explicitly evoked. The poem becomes an act of inhabiting a prosthetic memory and empathising with past individuals and events.

In Ritchie's poem, as in many of the other poems and stories in our anthology, the act of remembering is a key focus, with many writers often drawing attention to their own failed memory. Aonghas MacNeacail's poem, for which an extract features at the opening of this article, titled 'remembering which film' is a good example of this trope: the opening lines ask 'can I remember the first/film I saw exactly?' (2018: 125). Similarly, Christine De Luca's prose piece recalling the Guild screenings in Shetland, interrupts the flow of narrative at one point to question the exact colour of the film operator's van: '(was it black with white lettering on the side, or white with black lettering?)' (2018: 74). Although it is important to acknowledge that the loose brief for the commissioned works and writing competition specifically requested creative writing responses on theme of 'memories of cinema-going', the submissions varied greatly. Nevertheless, it is of some note that the works which were explicit about the fact that the memories were connected to the author were the examples which emphasised the fallibility of memory. That a creative expression of memory should somehow make a feature of its own weaknesses perhaps comes as a bit of a surprise. This is the basic premise Kuhn establishes in her 2010 article, 'that memory is a process, an activity, a construct' and that it is part of a much wider social and cultural network (2010: 1). Lynn Abrams also refers to 'memory stories' as constructions, which are, in effect, creative practices (2016: 54). As Abrams observes, oral historians are attuned to the regularity with

which respondents adopt a particular style of narration for telling their own story: a 'heroic story needs a melodramatic style, a fantastic journey may need a fairytale structure, and so on.' (2016: 114). In some cases, this kind of narrativisation of memory has caused some oral historians to discredit interviews as inauthentic. However, as Richard Wallace argues in his analysis of 'professional recollectors' (a term he borrows from Brian Harrison), there is also a virtue in the scenario in that the respondent is able to tell their story without mediation, entirely their own authorship (2017: 57). In a similar way, the various metadata of oral history research, such as written stories, accounts or long letters drafted by respondents, self-published memoirs, local historical publications, etc. (all of which have featured in *The Major Minor Cinema Project*) can also serve this useful function.

Conclusion

By focusing on the creative treatment of memories, this research aimed to explore the constructed nature of memories, considering the role of cinema in providing an imaginative space within which audiences' creativity could flourish, but also the ways in which creative writing can serve as a stimulus for imagining the way it was. Not how it really was, but how the personal and shared cultural memories might factor into a creative interpretation of how we imagine it to have been.

Many of the 'tropes' to have emerged as a pattern in the creative writing strand of the project can largely be said to be concerned with the relationship to the real world and the fantasy world depicted on screen. This includes accounts of memories of imaginative play and the reenactment of characters or scenes from films, as well as the ways in which the narratives surrounding the journey to and from the cinema are often structured around contrasts, such as real world/fantasy world, work/play, rules/freedom, austerity/luxury, isolation/connection, etc. As illustrated by some of the creative writing contributions referred to in this article, for many of the rural communities for whom the arrival of the Film Guild screenings had introduced the concept of leisure time, the imaginative space of the cinema harbored even more radical potential.

Although this article has presented the overall rationale for the methodological approach alongside some of the initial findings, more work is still to be done with the project's larger dataset, namely the large body of interviews, but also other metadata of the project. Detailed analysis of the way in which narrative is articulated across the interviews and metadata, such as letters, stories, and creative writing, will help to offer a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which cinema memory is narratively structured and framed.

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Notes:

¹ The project is between Glasgow University and the University of Stirling, and is being led by Ian Goode (AHRC project grant AH/N001605/1).

² The writers were commissioned at the very beginning of the project so that their completed works could be used to promote the writing workshops and competition. The selection process focused on contemporary writers from the various workshop locations, considering a variety of factors such as gender, ethnicity, age, style and genre. We were also particularly interested in working with writers who had direct memories of the Film Guild screenings. The writers selected were Alison Miller

(Orkney), Aonghas MacNeacail (Skye), Christine De Luca (Shetland), Kevin MacNeil (Lewis), and Christie Williamson (Shetland).

³ See for instance, Major Minor Cinema Interviews, no. 58 and no. 140.

⁴ Major Minor Cinema Interviews, no. 122.

⁵ A growing body of work around cinema audiences has continued to investigate the significance of the journey and geography more generally, in the recollections of memories of going to the cinema. For instance, see Ercole, P., Treveri Gennari, D. and O'Rawe, C. (2017) 'Mapping cinema memories: Emotional geographies of cinemagoing in Rome in the 1950s' *Memory Studies* 10:1, pp. 63-77.

⁶ Iain Thorber, 'Some notes about the Highlands and Islands Film Guild and social conditions in Sunart and Ardnamurchan between ca1955 and the 1970s', correspondence, Major Minor Cinema Project, 13 November 2016.

⁷ Wendy Wood (n.d.), 'The Cinema', extracts from *The Strontain Magazine*, clipping offered to *The Major Minor Cinema Project* by respondent.

⁸ These items were on loan from Summerhall Museum of Industrial Life, who hold an extensive collection relating to cinema production and exhibition, including cameras, projectors, editing equipment, as well as a large holding of items from Scottish cinemas, from large signs to seating.

⁹ Major Minor Cinema interview, no. 59.

¹⁰ *Cinema Culture in 1930s Britain*, T94-5, Mary McCusker, Glasgow, 22 November 1994.

¹¹ Interview with Andrew Potter conducted by Janet McBain (8/98); Interview with William Porter and James Stirling conducted by Janet McBain (8/35), oral history files, National Library of Scotland's Moving Image Archive.

¹² Glen Cinema Disaster exhibition, http://www.paisleyonline.co.uk/html/glen_cinema.html (accessed 10 February 2019).