

Postcards from the edge: the untidy realities of working with older cinema audiences, distant memories and newsreels

Louise Anderson, Newcastle University, UK

Volume 6, Issue 2 (November 2009)

Abstract

In October 2006 the Arts and Humanities Research Council funded a Collaborative Research project at Newcastle University to investigate audiences' memories of newsreels on Tyneside in the 1940s and 50s. The non-academic organisation in the partnership, the Tyneside Cinema had itself, until 1968, been Newcastle's News Theatre. During the summer of 2007 work began with older people across Newcastle and surrounding districts, collecting their memories in oral history style interviews which, it was hoped, would situate the newsreels within the participants' life-stories and reveal something of the historical newsreel viewing experience itself. However, during the course of the data gathering it became clear that the collected memories provided more questions than answers. Following a period of re-evaluation the research began to cohere around an investigation of the processes of newsreel memory formation itself. This article attempts to outline the progress and challenges of the research process, while considering some of the issues of working with older cinema audiences and their distant memories of the news.

Key Words: real people, older audiences, distant memory, fieldwork, newsreels.

What follows charts the progress of my research project undertaken with older cinema audiences (70+ years) and the analysis of their distant memories of newsreels. To begin with a challenge; to describe what news viewing means or meant is extremely problematic.¹ In his survey of news practices, Stuart Allan regretted the lack of academic research undertaken into news audiences and warned against regarding the 'news audience' as an abstract concept which risks transforming them into a fixed, rigid totality of individuals on the basis of only one aspect of their engagement with the media (Allan 2004: 98). Allan's

acknowledgement of the paucity of research into the news audience, it seems to me, is particularly true of the historical newsreel audience. There have been few dedicated research projects examining this particular audience in any substantive detail.² Further, there is the complicated process of defining exactly who the newsreel audience actually was,³ suffice it to say, the newsreels were shown in virtually every regular cinema and a small number of dedicated news theatres in major towns and cities across England and Scotland.⁴ My research focuses on the period 1939-1955, a period which recorded the highest number of cinema attendances Britain has ever witnessed. From these two facts alone one can get a sense of the size and ubiquity of the newsreel audience. It was anybody and just about everybody!⁵ To qualify this statement, cinema-going in this period was habitual, not for all sections of the population of course, but for a significant percentage it was 'just what you did' in your leisure time.⁶ To add to these challenges and principally in response to the lack of extant archival material the project required asking local older people to recollect in substantive detail a relatively routine, quotidian experience from sixty years ago.⁷ I/they was/were working with the limits of living memory; as I've already indicated some of my participants were extremely old.⁸

What I want to focus on, in this article, is my fieldwork (to use a social sciences' phrase), conducted in two substantive phases between June 2006 and September 2008. I intend here to focus on my method, that is, the specific techniques I used to gather my data (my conversations with older people) and, my methodology, the underlying principles of the research; in the process I will touch briefly on some of the ethical considerations I encountered. I also hope this paper reveals how and why the focus of my research moved inexorably from an investigation of the historical audience to an examination of the processes of cinematic memory itself.

The background to the research

In 2005/6 Newcastle University was awarded an Arts and Humanities Research Council collaborative studentship to investigate audiences' memories of newsreels on Tyneside.⁹ The non-academic partner, the Tyneside Cinema had been a news theatre until February 1968 when it was finally forced to close its doors. The building itself continued as an independent cinema run by the British Film Institute and opening in May 1968 as The Tyneside Film Theatre.¹⁰ In the intervening 30 years or so the fortunes of the Tyneside Film Theatre (latterly Tyneside Cinema) mirrored the various crises that the UK's independent cinema sector as a whole suffered on a fairly regular basis. In 2000 the Tyneside Cinema received Grade II listed building status from English Heritage; followed in 2005 by monies from the Heritage Lottery Fund toward an ambitious plan to renovate and extend the existing building, including the design and installation of a modest interpretative display about the newsreels. My research

into the historic newsreel audience began in October 2006 and formed a small part of this ambitious plan.

From its conception the research project, positioned as it was within the context of a history of the newsreels themselves, blurred the line between memory and history. Initially, it seemed the research would unproblematically re-produce a historically accurate account of the experiences of newsreel audiences. As part of the collaborative partnership it was envisaged my discoveries would form a small part of the interpretative exhibition planned for the renovated Tyneside Cinema building. However, as the project has evolved and my understanding of the issues involved has developed, and it has become clear that exhibitions/displays like the one planned by the cinema form a crucial aspect of the memory making process itself, the research has become an exploration of the process of remembering a unique cinematic form. What I'm admitting here is that it took me quite a long time, or it felt like a long time, to work out what I was actually researching! However, from the outset I was determined to try and establish what made newsreels meaningful for their audiences. However, this word 'meaningful' began to worry me. What does it mean in relation to newsreel viewing? What would a meaningful newsreel viewing experience be, even if it were possible to identify one successfully? What's more, how does one compose a question that explains what you 'mean' without simply answering your own question! And finally would any of this mean anything to my elderly subjects? Perhaps I have overdone the tautological nightmare but you get the point! With very little archival material to work from, to describe what newsreel viewing means or meant 60 years ago is extremely problematic. 'What did the newsreels mean to you?' is a difficult question to answer, and it's the **question** rather than the answer I want to explore below; the process rather than the history.

The status of memory

To use an oral history approach no doubt allows for vital contextualisation of specific material relating to cinema-going experiences however, it also brings with it its own set of significant challenges. Although providing interesting background, I was not actually asking my subjects for their life stories/personal narratives, although sometimes I got this too. I was asking them to recall a relatively routine and previously rather unthought-about/unconsidered experience. The newsreel experience was recalled principally as the recollection of historic events, the actual viewing experience itself was remembered only vaguely. To elicit useful material required some 'digging' on my part as interviewer which in many ways undermined the kind of 'hands-off' approach I had been hoping for. It also put enormous pressure on asking the right questions, and raises doubts about the authenticity of the recollections – particularly with regard to the notion of how significant or otherwise newsreels may have been to the general cinema-going audience. Trying to get an answer to one's, often extremely rarefied, research questions requires trying to elicit specific information. However, in asking particularly direct

questions one raises the expectation on both sides of a particular response. And even beyond this, using the right language to be understood by the particular generational cohort I was attempting to engage with proved to be a surprising challenge; again a tautological, procedural nightmare.

At the beginning of the interview process I was asking very open questions; my opening gambit being the memorable, 'tell me what you remember about the newsreels?' This type of open question may work well for some subjects and some participants however, in numerous cases the response to my question would be 'they were very important/good/informative' followed by silence and frantic nodding on my part.¹¹ In desperation I had to concede to asking quite specific questions in order to get enough information; inevitably in the process raising questions about the authenticity of the memories this type of questioning produces. I should make it clear I am not challenging the veracity of memories, what I am querying is the *possible* issues raised when one asks subjects to recall how important or otherwise a peculiarly specific aspect of their past might be.

In laying bare my methodology I am taking my cue from Jackie Stacey's (1994) and Joke Hermes' (1995) expositions of their research experiences; both of which provided some comfort for me as my research project developed into anything but a seamless narrative. I hope, like Stacey, I am now able to offer with a degree of confidence a, 'retrospective interpretation of the meaning of baffling evidence' (Stacey 1994: 51). As Stacey noted:

investigation of the historical spectator presents the film researcher with a whole series of complex methodological and theoretical questions: what status do audience's accounts of films have; how are these to be found; and which interpretative frameworks might be useful in analysing such accounts? (Stacey 1994:50)¹²

As many researchers have noted there are important questions that need to be addressed about what counts as data – particularly in respect to an audience as undefined as 'the newsreel audience' – and how the data, once captured, should be analysed. Given that my research is based on the principles of historic ethnography, how accurate a picture of the newsreel experience might be remembered in the interviews I conducted? As David Morley observed (1980 and 1986) without having access to direct participant observation:

I am left only with the stories respondents chose to tell me. These stories are, however, themselves both limited by, and indexical of, the cultural and linguistic frames of reference which respondents have available to them, through which to articulate their responses. (Morley 1989:24)

The sources of newsreel memory

As all historical audience research has acknowledged, what audiences tell researchers is shaped by many factors (some of which I want to discuss further) and all are shaped by memory itself, which has increasingly become the focus of my research. As Stacey noted 'this leads to theoretical questions about subjectivity and meaning' (1994: 50). When I asked my elderly participants to talk about their memories of newsreels, what exactly was I going to find out? Would it reveal anything about the newsreel audiences, or about the relationship between audiences and newsreels? What would it reveal about the way in which a particular type of cinematic memory – 'newsreel memory' - is formed? And finally would it begin to suggest ways in which I might begin to unravel the influence on this type of memory of the intervening years, hindsight and repeat viewings of newsreel footage of historic events in other contexts? As Ruth Teer-Tomaselli so eloquently describes it, news memories become 'mosaics of contemporary news programs, print newspapers, as well as subsequent narrative films, historical retrospectives, and discussions among friends, colleagues and family' (2006: 227). News memories inevitably become an amalgam of multiple sources and while one might argue this is the case for any study involving memory (which of course it is) I would maintain newsreel memories present a particular challenge because of the confused, often impossibly entangled sources of these distant memories.

An integral part of studying memory is of course an awareness of both the mythologizing influence of public memory and the specificity of private memories. As I have discovered over the course of my research, newsreel memory is a complex interweaving of public discourse and private narrative that requires careful examination. Of course I can never know the extent to which they (the gathered memories) remain faithful to what actually happened, what audiences really felt. Their status as Stacey remarked is clearly that of,

Retrospective reconstructions of the past in the light of the present and will have been shaped by the popular versions of the 1940s and 1950s which have become cultural currency in the intervening years. (Stacey 1994: 63)

Further, with regard to distant memory work, there is clearly an issue of the gap between the original viewing experience itself and the experience being recollected. If as Stacey writes, 'film history is to engage with ethnographic methods of audience analysis...then memory has to be a central consideration' (1994: 63); and, as I have already indicated, my research has indeed become an examination of the processes of cinema memory formation itself.

Not quite living up to expectations

Despite David Morley's (1989) observations along with those of countless other writers and academics that I *hadn't* read at the outset of my research, I had clear expectations that the material I gathered during the course of my fieldwork would, in some way, produce an account of newsreel viewing as it 'really was' or would reveal some truth about what newsreels meant, some absolute historical truth. However, as Len Ang noted, to regard the

personal accounts of participants as 'direct' and unproblematic reflections' (1985: 11), would be wrong. Further, it would ignore the ways in which 'subjectivities are constituted through ideological discourses' (Stacey 1994: 76). As has become clear throughout the course of my research, memories are formed within the constraints of particular cultural conventions and mythologies about the past and particularly about newsreels. So I found myself using the gathered interview transcripts, letters and emails as texts, as discourses open for interpretation about the process of newsreel memory, rather than an account of the historic newsreel audience itself.¹³ The critical framework within which I am now working has been derived entirely from the gathered material and differs in some important respects from the initial AHRC research proposal which had rather unproblematically intended the research findings to 'recreate' the historical newsreel audience.

I was under the rather misguided illusion that the research would be straightforward — then real people started to get involved! And what's more these weren't just any real people these were real older people!! As I'm sure every social researcher knows in advance or realises very early on in the data gathering process, as I did, one's participants tend not to respond as either you expect or, I'm rather ashamed to say, want them to; after all they are not lay theoreticians.¹⁴ Prior to my request for memories of newsreels and/or news theatres, my elderly participants had, I suspect, never given a moment's thought to the import, meaning or point of the subject of my research. In a fascinating account of her work with readers of women's magazines Joke Hermes wrote,

As academics we are in the business of meaning production and interpretation, while the majority of media users are not: much media use is routine and insignificant, it has no distinct, generalizable meaning.' (Hermes, 1995: 16)

At certain points throughout the interviews it seemed like an awfully 'big ask' to confront elderly participants with detailed questions about their newsreel memories. At times I began to wonder who was actually doing the analysis. The idea of studying cinema, and newsreels in particular, was extremely puzzling to many of my participants. I was asked on numerous occasions what *exactly* the research was for; this question was often swiftly followed by a rather apologetic *well there's not really that much to say about newsreels*. On this point I can only venture that this may have something to do with the particular generation I was working with.¹⁵ Cinema to them was primarily a means of vicarious escape.¹⁶ Even the newsreels for some seemed so remote they may as well have been fiction. Remembering her experience of watching the newsreels one of my participants told me, 'we were working class and this (newsreels) was quite, quite different, outside of my experience.' Of course she is referring to her own experience of living within the often austere conditions of post-war Tyneside.¹⁷ I would also venture that because the substantive content of the newsreels was topical rather than, what one might refer to for want of a better phrase as 'hard news', it demanded for the most part minimal concentration and involvement except on rare momentous occasions. To

really understand newsreel viewing in the context of the regular cinema we must remember the expectation of audiences; that an evening at ‘the pictures’¹⁸ would be enjoyable, provide them with a means of relaxation, and crucially that they would be thoroughly entertained, something the newsreel companies themselves were keenly aware of.¹⁹ Certainly for this generation then, cinema-going and newsreels in particular, seemed like a rather puzzling subject for doctoral research – ‘you’ll be a doctor of *what* exactly?’ I was asked several times. I have the distinct impression a number of my participants were simply indulging me in my rather odd pursuit!

What challenged the process of gathering insightful memories even further was the fact that I was asking participants to recall distant memories, in some cases upwards of sixty years. As a study involving living memory of the hey day of the newsreel (1939-55) this meant that a number of my participants were children or young adults at the time I was asking them to recall.²⁰ Asking these individuals about the news a notoriously boring, frightening, even bewildering subject for children was inevitably fraught with potential problems.²¹ Having confronted this challenge early on in the research process I determined to try and focus my participants’ memories towards the 1950s, rather than the 1940s. However, it very quickly became clear that there were only a handful of newsreel events actually remembered from this later period.²² So, despite the age of some of the participants during the war and immediate post war periods, inevitably perhaps wartime newsreels were remembered most vividly; beyond the immediate post war period the newsreel memories were simply too insubstantial to warrant a focus on this period.²³ My decision later in the data gathering process to approach older, older people (80+) was driven by the need to address (or avoid) the issue of childhood memories.

The really messy bit: the fieldwork or data gathering phase one

My data gathering began with a number of pilot focus groups organised in collaboration with the *Tyneside Cinema*. These groups included individuals and some couples, who shared a common interest in film and regularly attended the cinema’s *Silver Screenings*.²⁴ At one such screening the gathered audience was told about the research project and invited to attend a series of focus groups. What began to emerge, even at this early stage, was the extent to which despite age, class and some slight regional differences, there was considerable similarity between the accounts/memories that participants shared. It was from these apparently shared memories of newsreels that I devised a structure for the oral history type interviews I was planning. The questions I used, often only as prompts, in the subsequent interviews broke down into just five broad areas: family background; leisure and cinema-going; news; newsreels and news theatres; memorable events.

In the late spring of 2007 a number of articles about the research project appeared in the local press and the cinema's own publicity materials. These articles included my first direct appeal for participants with 'newsreel memories' to contact me.²⁵ As a result of the press coverage some thirty individuals from across the region came forward and I embarked on a series of what turned out to be lengthy 'conversational interviews'. Although, as already mentioned, I had originally intended to conduct the interviews according to the principles of oral history,²⁶ I was after all interested to hear participants' life stories and newsreels place within that everyday context, I found in practice I needed to interact more with my participants than simply to listen and nod! It also quickly became clear that participants' apparent reluctance or inability to elaborate on the newsreel viewing experience did require more prompting and explanation from me. Despite the often rather sparse newsreel memories, I frequently found myself during these interviews, in the midst of epic sometimes tragic life stories, or even grand narratives of life in the 1940s. Given that these individuals were often sharing very personal information with me anything other than a dialogue or conversation would have felt very uncomfortable indeed. In some cases it became more of a dialogue than I would have wished and I did allow the conversations to wander somewhat. However, the circumstances dictated my approach and I went with what felt appropriate and comfortable at the time. Almost all the interviews were conducted in the participants' home and the interviews were punctuated by tea and biscuits and being shown pictures of children, grand children and great grand children. I was warmly welcomed into all these elderly people's homes and their lives, I learnt a lot about their, often extremely hard lives, and a little about newsreels.²⁷

The interviews were long, on average 90 minutes of interview was recorded and the transcriptions fill many hundreds of pages. However, as suggested above, if I was to use only the material relating directly to the newsreels I would be using only a small fraction of the gathered material. This fact needs to be stressed at this point, particularly in light of some of the responses I gathered from my second cohort of interviewees the following year, to avoid seeming to suggest that newsreels were of more contemporary importance than they actually were. Ironically, given the validation of academic and/or historic significance by my research, there was an inevitable risk that participants would tailor their memories to meet my academic expectations.²⁸ Although I clearly explained I didn't have any expectations of the kind of memories they might have beyond them actually having some memory of newsreels.²⁹ However, I did have a list of questions tucked under my arm which seemed to suggest that indeed I did have expectations of some kind.

At this mid-point in the field work, I faced something of a dilemma, to take the relatively limited accounts of newsreel viewing as the basis for an argument about the importance of the newsreels would distort the facts; my participants had much more to say about cinema-going in-general, which was talked about with greater enthusiasm and in greater depth by some

than newsreels in particular. 'I suppose we'd better talk about the newsreels now' one woman said after recounting countless happy memories of 'going to the pictures' with her father and brother.

During the interview process it became apparent that I was in fact, researching two distinctly different but intimately linked experiences; that of the newsreel as a cultural phenomenon; and the newsreels as the screening of history. The broadest brushstrokes were used to describe newsreel viewing as a cultural experience, while memories of the filmed events themselves were recounted in much finer, more vivid detail. Perhaps unsurprisingly my subjects remembered the screen images more vividly than the environment within which they encountered them. What this unsurprising revelation highlighted was, that it was the visual impact of moving images that made the newsreels significant. However, what has also become clear, given the repetition of the same memories, is that the mythology of the newsreels and news theatres has had considerable influence on individual memory.³⁰ This is most strikingly revealed in my participants' description of what newsreels were or contained. Participants by and large remembered only the historic or marker events,³¹ what we might describe as flashbulb memories. Very, very few participants actually recalled the newsreels' format of topical features. As David Morley (1989) noted, often the views expressed by audiences are contradictory or simply express or recount a generalised, mythologised view.

The strictly oral history approach I had attempted and failed to follow with regard to the interviews, included a decision to refrain from using any visual prompts (screening archive footage etc.). This, as it happened, turned out to be a rather fortuitous decision as one of the unique features of newsreel memory is what we might refer to as its 'entangledness' or its mosaic-like construction. With very few exceptions it is almost impossible to verify the original source of the remembered newsreel experience. This was something even the participants themselves identified.³² One elderly gentleman admitted, 'I do have images of the Coronation in my mind but I wasn't there so I must have seen images of it but whether it was contemporaneous or much later I'm sorry I can't remember.' Thus the decision not to screen material avoided adding another layer of intricate mosaic. What became a recurring feature of the interviews, as I have already discussed, was the extent to which newsreel memories have been framed by the subsequent re-use of newsreel footage in other contexts.

So much less to say: the need to find appropriate analytical frameworks

By the autumn of 2007 the phone conversations, letters, email and personal interviews prompted by the press call now began to form the substantive basis of my thesis. Interestingly, unlike Jackie Stacey (1994) who found that her respondents recognised themselves as a distinct group with a particular kind of authority I found something rather different.³³ A constant throughout many of the interviews was the participants' anxiety that

they didn't have much to tell me or that what they did have to say would not be 'good enough'. On numerous occasions I had to reassure my participants that in fact I was interested in any information they might be able to provide and that I was equally interested to hear their more general cinema-going memories. This context grew to be more important as 'going to the pictures' was something they all felt they could talk at some length about.³⁴

Given the research material I had consulted before embarking on my data-gathering, I had assumed that the material I gathered would be precise, answer my questions and that there would be vast quantities of it. The reality, as I've already suggested was somewhat different. I had not at that point encountered Joke Hermes research on women's magazine readers (1995), nor did I really appreciate Annette Kuhn's subtle acknowledgement of the problem, 'anecdotal memories of early cinemagoing are few and far between' (Kuhn 2004: 58). About six months after finishing my first cohort of interviews in November 2007 I attended a paper Kuhn presented on *Snow White and its public reception in the 1930s*, I knew exactly what she meant when she said, 'recollection of memories of films in any detail are relatively rare.' I now realise I was really very unprepared for the lack of detail. Comparing her experience to the work of Janice Radway (1978) and Angela McRobbie (1991), Joke Hermes agonised over the fact that her interviewees, the readers of women's magazines, 'have so much less to say' (Hermes 1995: 14) than either of the previous researchers' subjects. As a consequence Hermes determined to examine the practical and textual ways in which women's magazines, and reading women's magazines differed from other popular genres. She concluded that, in comparison to other popular genres, 'women's magazines are read with far less concentration and much more detachment than other popular genres' (Hermes 1995:14). Clearly then, genre specificity is an important determining factor. There was a point in the data gathering process when I realised existing theoretical frameworks for studying cinema memories, a field dominated by fiction films, were not entirely appropriate to a study of a factual form like newsreels; one that has in fact much more in common with tabloid journalism than cinematic fiction. In her research Hermes further cautioned against the unintended consequences of identifying general, everyday media uses with attentive and meaningful reading of specific texts (1995: 15). As a number of my participants had recalled, their newsreel viewing experiences were characterised by boredom and disinterestedness; as children they were much more interested in the cartoons that news theatres screened as part of their programme. My surprise at this apparent lack of detailed memories has, I realise, much to do with my own assumptions that news would always be regarded as meaningful, as worth attending to and I reasoned, memorable.

At the risk of arousing the editors' wrath, audience studies often draw heavily either from fans or 'knowledgeable readers' (Hermes 1995: 15) of a particular star or genre.³⁵ In her wonderful research on female fans of film stars in the 1940s and 50s, Jackie Stacey (1994)

wrote, 'the ability to recollect in such detail might be considered evidence of devotion to favourite stars' (Stacey 1994: 69). While other similar studies have allowed scope for participants to recall their own treasured memories, or moments invested with meaning and significance,³⁶ my research differed significantly from this fan-based approach, I was unable to find anyone who would identify themselves as a 'fan' of newsreels or had what could really be described as treasured memories of them.³⁷ Interestingly a number of my participants could be termed fans of the news theatres, not because of the news but because they offered a place of refuge or rest to busy shoppers and more importantly for children - the cartoons.³⁸

As Hermes described much media use is 'routine and insignificant, it has no distinct, generalizable meaning' (1995: 16). From my research it is clear that newsreels were both a routine part of the cinema-going experience and often insubstantial in their content. However, we might characterise one of the pleasures associated with newsreel viewing as its reassuring character, its oft repeated format, familiar title music and well loved commentators. Stuart Allan has written (2004) about the determined effort by tabloid newspapers to mediate reporting of risks and dangers by engaging in upbeat, patriotic reassurance of their readers. And, just like the tabloid press, the newsreels were reassuring in their reliability and regularity, mediating society's risks and dangers by 'generating a comforting sense of familiarity and predictability' (Allan 2004: 110). Newsreels were indeed an integral part of the cinema-going experience for millions every week, reliably stitching the two halves of a complete cinema programme together. In addition the experience of actually seeing or witnessing the news, with which most viewers would be well aware from newspapers and radio coverage, was remembered as the most important characteristic of the newsreels. The sense of shared experience was also remembered as an important element of newsreel viewing, the 'sense of experiential immediacy' (Allan 2004: 116).

Undoubtedly the pleasures afforded by newsreels were numerous and quite distinct from those described by Stacey, Kuhn and Helen Taylor.³⁹ However, there is a sense in which as some of my participants described them, newsreels simply became another part of the drama, fiction or entertainment and were enjoyed for exactly the same reasons. One 73 year old gentleman told me, 'Oh no you'd never go if you got bored. We thought it was great you know some ships getting sunk or a submarine getting captured you know this sort of thing – oh it was fantastic.' Or another gentleman who recalled, 'I was hooked on aeroplanes and tanks and er, I mean I enjoyed the cartoons but I really did enjoy, I was fascinated by the newsreels.' However for some, the 'pleasure' involved in newsreel viewing was the opportunity it afforded them to take their attention off the screen and on to their companion without missing anything important on screen.⁴⁰ 'They were cuddling when the newsreels came on' said one elderly gentleman.

Any conclusions I might come to regarding newsreel memories has to encompass the recollections of cinema-goers like my oldest participant Rose, who told me categorically and at length, 'I don't ever remember being interested in them'; and those of participants like Henry who said 'they (the newsreels) were major.' I realise I could be accused here of trying to compare two comments with slightly different meanings, Rose didn't dismiss the importance of the newsreels she just admits to her disinterestedness. However, I hope these examples serve in some way to illustrate the range of different responses I gathered. Somewhere between the two extremes are, I suspect, the memories of the majority, memories of historic events witnessed for the first time in the newsreels. What is clear however, is that the interpretation of newsreel memories does require a complex and quite different set of theoretical and interpretative tools.

Back out into the field: phase two of the data gathering

During summer 2008, and following the transcription and initial analysis of the gathered data, I had two major concerns: firstly, the sense that my sample of self-identified participants was not particularly representative of the historic cinema-going population as a whole; and secondly, the fact that a number of my participants were recalling childhood memories. Having reviewed the situation I began the second phase of data gathering in September 2008, working this time with an external partner organisation Age Concern Newcastle.⁴¹ Now, I reassured myself I was not talking to people who, however unconsciously, had presented themselves as vernacular experts in newsreel memories. Age Concern's long established luncheon clubs provided me with ready formed groups of older people and what's more they are older, older people on average 80 + years.

However, working productively with ready-made peer groups of any age, requires having the time for sustained engagement; time that I unfortunately lacked. Arriving into a group in which relationships are already fixed is somewhat problematic. I want to focus briefly on the dynamics of the first group I encountered in this way. Interestingly in this group there was one dominant old lady (Rose, mentioned previously) 'the matriarch' who told me in no uncertain terms that she could not remember the newsreels, she was not interested in them and had never been. This was the first, though not the last, encounter I had in which an elderly lady expressed this view.⁴² Her dominance and negativity, not towards me I hasten to add, but towards the research made it very difficult to manage the group or to move the conversation forward. Ironically, in practical terms it forced me to go back to interview two elderly men from this first group, who did have things to say about newsreels. A similar scenario was repeated in the other Age Concern groups I visited. These groups consisted almost entirely of older ladies who, on the whole, just couldn't see the relevance of what I was doing and had really very little to say about the newsreels. Although like the self-identified group, they had a great deal to say about their wartime experiences or cinema-going in general.⁴³

And yet my engagement with this second cohort and their sometimes rather negative responses I now realise was enormously valuable. Without knowing it these elderly people actually told me a great deal about what a significant number of the cinema-going audience thought of the newsreels; they provide a useful balance to my research. These elderly men and women were all able to talk at length about their youthful cinema going experiences, but newsreels? well, they just did not figure in any significant way. I took the opportunity with these groups to ask them why they thought newsreels, unlike feature films, were forgettable. Their answers seemed to bear out my initial anxiety about the age of my participants, Ted, aged 76 remarked, 'Aye there's not much you can say about the newsreels... Well they were young, they just weren't interested.' Interestingly he appears to be commenting or making an observation about other young people, 'them' and not himself. While Harry, aged 84 suggested the following, 'Possibly because there was a lot of them. It's a lot to store in your memory banks.'

Almost because of the newsreels' familiarity and because, as Harry observed, 'there were a lot of them', newsreel memory is often expressed in the vaguest of terms.⁴⁴ Newsreel viewing is remembered by many as a secondary activity, a precursor to the main activity of the cinematic experience, the main feature (the 'A' picture) or the cartoons. As Nicholas Hiley (1998) pointed out, newsreels were an integral part of the cinema programme and would have been missed if they weren't there but they were not the reason people went to the cinema. And yet newsreel memories are comprised of some of the most historic events of the 20th century. They are, in equal measures, and at different times, both inconsequential and absolutely essential viewing. What has been fascinating about the research to date, is that the process of newsreel memory-making is, in many respects, far more interesting than the history of the newsreels themselves. But, I'll leave the final word on this particular subject to my 94 year old 'matriarch' Rose, who deftly managed to sum up her feelings and those of her fellow lunch-clubbers towards my research; 'Well' she said 'we're sorry we haven't been able to help you. You'll find it pretty general I would think.'

Biographical Note

Louise Anderson is a PhD student at Newcastle University.

Contact Louise: louise.anderson@newcastle.ac.uk

References

- Abrams, Mark (1947), 'Britain Off Duty', in Weidenfeld, A.G. (ed.), *The World Off Duty*, London: Contact Press. pp. xx-3.
- Allan, Stuart (2004), *News Culture* (Second Edition), Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Ang, Ien (1985), *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, London: Methuen.
- Barker, Martin (1998), *Knowing Audiences: 'Judge Dredd' – Its Friends, Fans and Foes*, London: University of Luton Press.
- Bausinger, H. (1984), 'Media, technology and daily life', *Media, Culture and Society*, 6 (4): 343-51.
- Fiske, John (1992), 'The cultural economy of fandom', in Lewis, Lisa A. (ed.), *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, London and New York: Routledge, 30-49.
- Hermes, Joke (1995), *Reading Women's Magazines*, London: Polity Press.
- Hiley, Nicholas (1998), 'Audiences in the Newsreel Period', in Jeavons, Clyde, Jane Mercer and Daniela Kirchner (eds.), "*The Story of the Century!*" *An International Newsfilm Conference*, London: British Universities Film and Video Council, 59-62.
- Kuhn, Annette (2004), *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris.
- Mannheim, Karl (1972), *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, London: Routledge.
- McLaughlin, Thomas (1996), *Street Smarts and Critical Theory: Listening to the Vernacular*, University of Wisconsin Press: Wisconsin.
- McRobbie, Angela (1991), *Feminism and Youth Culture: from 'Jackie' to 'Just Seventeen'*, Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Morley, David (1980), *The Nationwide Audience: Structure and Decoding*, London: British Film Institute.
- Morley, David (1986), *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure*, London: Comedia.

Morley, David (1989), 'Changing paradigms in audience studies' in Seiter, Ellen, Borchers, Hans, Gabrielle Kreutzner and Eva-Maria Warth (eds.), *Remote Control: Television, Audiences and Cultural Power*, London: Routledge, 16-43.

Pronay, Nicholas (1971), 'British newsreels in the 1930s: Audiences and Producers', *History* 56: 188.

Radway, Janice (1978), *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*, Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press.

Stacey, Jackie (1994), *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*, London: Routledge.

Staiger, Janet (1986), 'The Handmaiden of Villainy: methods and problems in studying the historical reception of film', *Wide Angle* 8, 1: 19-28.

Taylor, Helen (1989), *Scarlett's Women: Gone With the Wind and its Female Fans*, London: Virago Press.

Teer-Tomaselli, Ruth (2006), 'Memory and Markers: Collective Memory and Newsworthiness', in Ingrid Volkmer (ed.), *News in Public Memory: An International Study of Media Memories across Generations*, New York: Peter Lang, pp. 225-249.

¹ See Stuart Allan's discussion in his book *News Culture*.

² I do acknowledge the work of Nicholas Pronay but his agenda was somewhat different and he himself admitted there was much more work to be done – work he never completed.

³ The best definition of the various newsreel audiences I have found is outlined by Nicholas Hiley in 'Audiences in the Newsreel Period' in "*The Story of The Century!*": *An International Newsfilm Conference*, eds. Clyde Jeavons, Jane Mercer and Daniela Kirchner. pp. 59-62.

⁴ Newsreels were of course a worldwide phenomenon.

⁵ Stuart Allan's statement about the misleading definition of what we refer to as the 'news audience' and my own observations about the ubiquity of the newsreel audience make the task of definition more problematic.

⁶ As Mark Abrams noted in an article entitled 'Britain Off Duty' written in 1947, the entertainment industries, 'look primarily to the unmarried sons and daughters in working class homes and to the middle class, both young and old, for their patrons' and, as the 'only people with enough spare time on their hands to constitute a leisured class.' p. xx.

⁷ The research focused on the city of Newcastle upon Tyne and surrounding areas.

⁸ My oldest participants were Rose b. 1912 and Osmond b. 1916. My 'youngest' Henry was b. 1948. However, Rose and Henry are rather unrepresentative of the vast majority of the participants the majority of whom were born between c. 1930-39.

⁹ Newcastle's News Theatre was opened in 1937, and was the built by Dixon Scott (Ridley's great uncle). Another two news theatres opened in the city in the same year, The Tatler and The Grainger. The Grainger, perhaps unsurprisingly given the relatively small size of the local population, fell foul of over capacity and was forced to become a repertory cinema later the same year. The Tatler in contrast remained open as a news theatre until 1969. Interestingly my subjects recall The Tatler as more 'frivolous' than the 'proper News Theatre' and with its programme of cartoons it was The Tatler that made a lasting impression on many of my subjects who were children/young adults in the 1940s and 50s.

¹⁰ The Tyneside Film Theatre survives today as the Tyneside Cinema, an independent charitable trust.

¹¹ I must confess I became rather cavalier with my 'oral history' approach. Keeping quiet, in what turned out to be conversations rather than interviews, it turns out is not my forte.

¹² See also Staiger, 1986.

¹³ I had toyed (very briefly) with the idea of simply submitting the transcripts! Alas, as Jackie Stacey points out 'some kind of interpretative framework is inevitable in academic research.' (Stacey 1991: 72).

¹⁴ I presented a version of this paper at the Edinburgh Internal Audiences Conference in Edinburgh, March 2009. I began the presentation by screening an extract from a video one of my participants had made for me, in which, talking to camera, he outlined what the newsreels were. During the question and answer session following the presentation it was noted that in fact here was an example of a vernacular expert or a 'street smart' (McLaughlin, 1996). This particular participant it was noted was clearly presenting himself as the bearer of historical knowledge and outlining his theory of what the newsreels meant. When I returned to look at the rest of the narratives I had collected it became clear that of course my self-selected participants did have knowledge and/or theories to impart. Further, as Thomas McLaughlin noted, some of my elderly theorists displayed a healthy awareness of the contradictions and propaganda of the newsreels. However, I have chosen not to completely rewrite this paper,

because this was not the case with all my participants, particularly my difficult second cohort. Further in this paper I am keen to expose the (very) untidy realities of audience research.

¹⁵ I am using the definition of generation as outlined by Karl Mannheim that is a generation as composed of individuals born within the same historical period and cultural context who are exposed to similar experiences particularly in childhood and adolescence. Thus broadly speaking I am working with a wartime generation.

¹⁶ Of course the cinema programmes of the 1940s were replete with short factual films, documentaries, travelogues and public information films but I would still maintain these were not the main reason audiences went to the cinema.

¹⁷ Many of my participants described their family backgrounds and childhood as extremely impoverished.

¹⁸ Everyone I spoke to referred to going to 'the pictures' rather than the cinema.

¹⁹ I am grateful to Nicolas Pronay for his insights into the nature of newsreel journalism, which he likens to tabloid journalism. In this context one might wonder what might be remembered if one was asked to recall e.g. *The Daily Mail* in 60 years time!

²⁰ My participants in this initial stage ranged in age from 59-91 years.

²¹ Whether in fact the newsreels conveyed what we might describe as news is dealt with briefly throughout this article.

²² The wedding of Princess Elizabeth, the Coronation of Elizabeth II, Conquering Everest and the Suez Crisis.

²³ I am, of course, not suggesting that this should never be done only that given the constraints on time and resources I had at my disposal it was not feasible for me at this time.

²⁴ *Silver Screenings* are regular day-time screenings at Tyneside Cinema for the over 50s.

²⁵ My research formed only a small part of a raft of education and outreach activity the Tyneside cinema had planned as part of the cinema's Heritage Lottery funded *Picture Palace Project*. Although no-one could have foreseen at the time of submitting the original research proposal, the resource of willing local participants was fairly limited and with a number of activities requiring input from the historic audience (including my work) the same patient individuals were recounting their story on numerous occasions for a variety of different projects.

²⁶ I understood oral history interviews as allowing the subject to talk freely and that the interviewer intervened as little as possible, particularly as the interviews were being recorded for archival purposes.

²⁷ It goes without saying, as with any encounter with research subject that relationships with elderly people need careful handling and must be negotiated delicately in a respectful and dignified fashion. Listening to often lonely older people's life stories forges a rather false intimacy and with it an even greater degree of responsibility on the part of the researcher. On a number of occasions people told me they had never told anyone what they had told me (this related as much to the details of their private life as to the newsreels themselves). Frequently it became clear that their families (i.e. their children and grandchildren, even great grandchildren) were not aware of their history. This is both flattering and alarming. I should make it clear that all my participants received written information about my research, all signed a consent form following the interview, all were sent recordings of their interviews and asked to listen to them and contact me with any revisions to their consent.

²⁸ I'm thinking here particularly of my need to understand as far as possible how important or otherwise newsreels actually were and the desire of the participants to potentially elevate the significance of the newsreels.

²⁹ In hindsight the notion that I didn't have any expectations seems rather naïve given the fact I was doing academic research!

³⁰ One of the collaborative elements of the studentship included a close involvement in the interpretative exhibition of newsreels and the cinema building planned for the renovated Tyneside cinema and funded by the HLF. Ironically the very real, very practical limitations of budget, space and time as well as the over-riding objective, to communicate in as clear and straightforward a way as possible to a diverse audience, meant inevitably the mythology surrounding the newsreel is perpetuated here too. While obviously I'm not suggesting that newsreels were culturally insignificant I am suggesting the story is more complicated than we were able to express it in the exhibition. In a limited exhibition space in which subtlety and complexity is negated the newsreel myth lives on. Rather unwittingly I too have contributed to the tangle of newsreel history.

³¹ See Ruth Teer-Tomaselli, p. 228.

³² This it seems to me, is again a wonderful example of one of Thomas McLaughlin's 'vernacular theorists'; that is, someone who is aware of the contradictions and complexities of his/her own memories. This same awareness was particularly apparent when participants spoke about their awareness of newsreel propaganda.

³³ Once again I return to McLaughlin's notion of vernacular theorists. While I would not suggest the self-selected cohort of interviewees would identify themselves as a distinct group they would perhaps agree they have a particular kind of authority, particularly in relation to my perceived level of knowledge about the newsreels. As the interviewer one finds oneself in an interesting position; as one's knowledge and understanding grows with each new encounter

there is the rather odd situation of having to pretend/fain ignorance in order to get interviewees to open up and explain the phenomenon all over again! I would also like to refer back to Allan's definition of the news audience as being a rather problematic one.

³⁴ Interestingly a couple of elderly gentlemen told me they never went to the cinema as it was frowned upon by their parents although the News Theatre was considered suitable for them and their parents' patronage.

³⁵ See Barker (1998), Fiske (1992), Stacey (1994) and Taylor (1989).

³⁶ See particularly Kuhn (2002), *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory*.

³⁷ I am distinguishing here between the newsreels and the events they depicted.

³⁸ News Theatres were open daily from c. 10am to 11pm. I did find one recurring treasured memory which had everything to do with the place and nothing to do with the newsreels. The News Theatre in Newcastle had a café. This was the site of many fond memories.

³⁹ Helen Taylor's book *Scarlett's Women: Gone with the Wind and its Female Fans* was one of the first to examine the phenomenon of cinema's female fans.

⁴⁰ Important in the sense of missing the feature or star they had paid to see.

⁴¹ Age Concern Newcastle (ACN) is an independent charity that aims to improve the quality of life of older people living in the city of Newcastle. ACN is part of the Age Concern Federation.

⁴² Although not dealt with in this paper there were discernable gender differences in terms of participants' interest or otherwise in newsreels within the Age Concern groups.

⁴³ I am extremely reluctant to suggest that there is a gender divide in terms of levels of interest in newsreels and certainly an equal number of men and women came forward in the first cohort of interviews. However, in this older age group it is older women who survive and, on the whole, they appeared to be much less interested in newsreels than their slightly younger counterparts. This maybe of course a result of extreme old age and a good deal of work would need to be done in order to engage these lovely ladies with a project about newsreels.

⁴⁴ As mentioned above newsreels were screened at every cinema and at specialised news theatres until the wide spread use of television in the mid 1950s signalled their demise.