

Liverpool's Rialto: Remembering the Romance

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Abstract

This article focuses on Liverpool's Rialto (1927). It considers the cinema as a site of social memory and in particular as a place associated with experiences which are re-created and re-told within the narratives of family history. Romance, the date, couple-hood, all of these are associated with the space of the cinema, both on and off the screen. Looking at two events associated with specific films which were recounted during interviews with former users of the cinema (Rio Rita 1929 and September Affair 1950) the article discusses the ways in which the on-screen and the off-screen worlds work together in creation of significant moments, moments which are remembered over the longer term and which take on an important role within the narratives of people's personal lives. Making reference, in particular to the work of Halbwachs on social memory the article is concerned to re-think the space of the cinema as a marker of social experience and a fulcrum of collective memory. The longer term fate of the building (abandoned, then destroyed during the Toxteth riots of 1981) gives the context of these memories a particular cast, one which is related to the broader history of the city as a whole and which situates these memories into a space which is of constantly shifting social value.

Key Words: Romance, memory, family memory, cinema, cinema-going, space,

Introduction

This paper is based around a number of interviews which have been conducted with people who were users of Liverpool's Rialto. It draws in particular upon two examples of people's memories, both of which are remembered dates and romantic encounters which took place in the cinema. The analysis is informed by, and to some extent argues with, elements of Maurice Halbwachs' pioneering work on social memory (Halbwachs 1980, 1992). It is also influenced by elements of Erving Goffman's work on social performance (Goffman 1966, 1990). The research is part of a bigger project (towards a PhD) which is concerned with

examining the work of a particular site (which included a cinema) as a locus of social experience and of personal/social memory and the ways in which these are contextualised within the changing social geography of the city. Although there has been some work on the cinema as a social space (Stamp 2000, Boyle 2009) and as site of social memory (Kuhn 2002, Jancovich et al 2003, Stubbings 2003), there is a distinct lack of the kind of in-depth case study (a particular cinema in a particular city) which might allow us examine more closely the ways in which a cinema has worked in relation to people's everyday lives in the longer term. This study attempts to address this gap. The methodology involves an examination of the wide range of material traces left by the site (photographs, posters, newspaper and magazine articles and various published accounts) as well as an analysis of a number of recorded interviews with some of the building's former users (twenty four individuals to date). The ways in which the site has been reconstituted (re-built in an altered form in its original location) and re-created in visual representations in more recent times are also considered within the larger project.

The Rialto, built in the Toxteth area of the city and opened in 1927, combined a state of the art (silent) cinema with a ballroom and a cafe and was flanked by twelve proposed "luxury" shops, six on each side of its triangularly-shaped site. Financed by a group of local entrepreneurs, the site was prominently placed at a key junction on the south side of the city. With its white "marble effect" frontage, its pair of copper domes and its exotic-looking columns and balcony, the building made a powerful statement of intent: this was to be a site of modern luxury, an innovation of which the city as a whole could be proud. The promise made by the exterior of the building was followed up by the deliberately "classy" style of the interior, with its tasteful furnishings and its elaborate lighting schemes and with the inclusion of references such as the painted interior of the cafe with Venetian scenes depicted as if visible from a simulated balcony. Looked at in retrospect, the site seems to embody a Liverpoolian version of the familiar Jazz-Age optimism, a vision of an imagined future: a future shaped around over-lapping patterns of consumption and recreation in which film-going would be an important component, but only a component, of a wider cultural offer. The configuration of the site implies an understanding of the ways in which in which going-out, dressing-up, shopping, dancing and cinema-going itself could work together in an integrated kind of way. This all seems to be strikingly far-sighted and particularly attractive as a subject for study: just how did these different elements combine within the site, how did things work out, or not work out, in practice? What exactly was it that went on in that building?



Rialto Interior circa 1930: Cinema Balcony



Rialto Interior circa 1930: Café

Of course we now know that this template for an emergent culture of modernity did not have a particularly easy ride. The crash of 1929 and the depression of the thirties were followed by the world war, post-war austerity and the steep decline of the city of Liverpool as an economic centre. The Rialto eventually closed in 1964 and was sold off and re-opened as “Swainbank’s”, a large second hand-store selling all kinds of goods, principally items of furniture piled high and jumbled together in the stripped-out cinema and ballroom. The building thus shared the ignominious end of many cinema buildings of the period, although its prominent position and its very visible decay seemed to make it stand for something more. It became a kind of marker for the general decline of the city and of the neighbourhood, a reminder of the closing-off of a particular social-offer symbolised in its configuration, a symbol

of a promise that had been abandoned. Perhaps in line with this the site was eventually burned down and destroyed in the Toxteth Riots of 1981.

The destruction of the building in 1981 met with a very strong reaction locally and it was clear that it was fondly remembered by people who had had contact with it in its earlier years. This was a significant site of social memory. A number of themes began to emerge when I embarked upon a series of interviews with people who had had an involvement with the site. One of these is the theme of class and classiness. People often remembered this as a “classy place”. Another, which is linked to this, is the theme of romance and courtship, something for which the cinemas and dance-halls of the early twentieth century are frequently remembered. These were locations where people of a young age could meet each other and where they inter-acted with the idea of finding a partner and developing a relationship which might become long term: a life-time hetero-sexual partnership involving marriage and all that that involves including the rearing of children and the setting up of a family home. People met up and paired-off in to couples, mainly, but not always in the dance-hall, or couples came together to work through the early stages of their possible couple-hood, mainly, but not always, in the cinema (the space could, as we shall see, be worked either way). When one looks at the way in which the Rialto is remembered it becomes clear that this was for its users, in effect, one of the primary purposes of the site. This was a place where the preliminary stages of long-term partnerships were staged, worked through and, eventually, more firmly established.



For Sale: 1964



The Rialto: After the Riots: 1981

Landmark Memory

Halbwachs in his pioneering work on social memory speaks of the importance of “landmark” memories, memories which stand out as markers and around which other memories and other patterns of signification are configured (Halbwachs, 1992: 175). For Halbwachs certain memories take on a heightened importance because there are rich criss-crossings of social markings embodied in one particular incident. The landmark memory stands out not because of its own immediate significance, particularly, but because its visibility opens up routes to a wider patterning of feeling and experience.

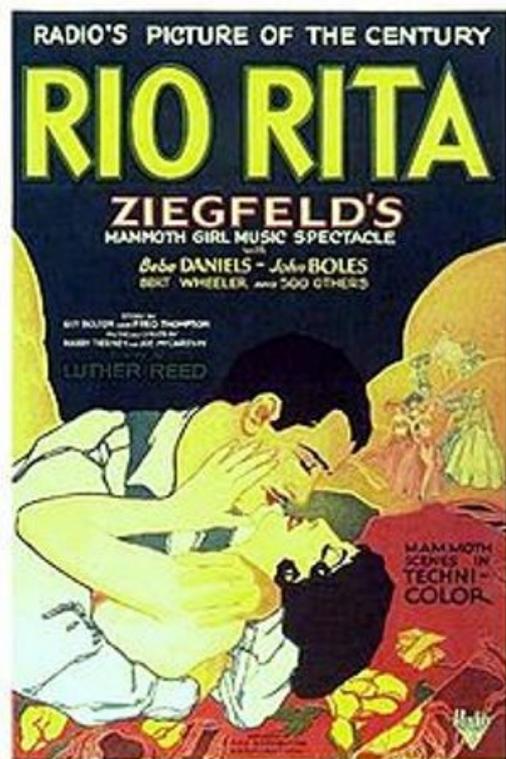
Some of the memories discussed in the interviews seem to take on qualities of a “landmark” memory in Halbwach’s sense of the word. They are ascribed a high level of significance within the over-all pattern of the interview. They are returned to and discussed more than once and are given a high level of priority within the overall performance. When one looks at these more closely it often becomes clear that these moments, quite brief in themselves, have a potency because of their highly-charged, multi-valent quality. For Halbwachs, crucially, this indicates a high level of re-inscription, a re-drawing of the memory along culturally defined lines which has taken place over a long period of time. He argues that a landmark memory is, inevitably, something which has been considerably re-drawn and revised, therefore it’s unreliable evidence. However it is possible to argue against this. It could be that such events are remembered precisely because they were highly culturally charged at the point of their inception, that is when they were an experience, rather than simply a memory. Cultural

inscription doesn't only happen in retrospect. This may be particularly true of memories which are set in an already highly culturally-charged locale such as a cinema, or, in our specific case, the Rialto cinema.

It is possible to assess this further by looking more closely at sections from two particular interviews which, it could be argued, contain significant landmark memories and which share a similar theme. They are interesting to compare because one is a kind of second-hand memory, about the apparently chance, but heavily culturally-laden meeting of a couple inside the cinema. It is recounted by two of their children. The second, a first-hand memory, involves a couple's first visit to the cinema. This is recalled by the surviving female member of the partnership. Both of these examples take on the quality of a miniature in which, as Susan Stewart has commented, we see:

a world clearly limited in space but frozen and thereby both particularised in that the miniature concentrates upon the single instance and not upon the abstract rule, but generalised in that that instance comes to transcend, to stand for a spectrum of other instances (Stewart: 48).

In each case the brief memory becomes an image, a miniature of a life-times' relationship. Both of these images are framed by their locale: the Rialto.



Poster for *Rio Rita* (1929): a romantic kiss in a romantic locale

A Family Memory: Rio Rita

A number of the interviews were with members of extended families from the Toxteth area of Liverpool. It is fortunate, also, for our purposes that one of the interviews was with two sisters, Rita Jones (b. 1935) and Lucy Davies (b. 1940) (names anonymised), who grew up in the neighbourhood of the Rialto and who visited the cinema with their parents on a regular basis during their childhood years. In retrospect, the whole tenor of this interview was in the nature of a series of interwoven family memories and it is clear that the site had a significance for this family which made it a kind of anchor for memory which gave it a general level of importance within the shared past of the family group. Both sisters moved away from the area with their parents to the Wirral in the 1950s and have never been back even for a visit.

The site has assumed a particular role in the narrative of their family's history because it is associated with an event of crucial importance to the sisters: their mother and father actually met each other within the cinema itself. The manner of this meeting and the way in which it was recalled and commemorated within the family make it clear that this had become a shared family memory. This first stage of their parents' courtship was elaborated in brief but highly significant detail and re-told in ways that say something about both how the site was worked by its young visitors as well as about how it has been remembered in retrospect within this particular family group. Obviously neither Lucy nor Rita were witness to the event of their parents' initial meeting, yet the way that it was described in the interview was in the animated manner of an event that had actually been observed and witnessed by them. It is clear that this was a story that had been re-told and re-called frequently within the family to the point where it had become a crucial part of the collective memory shared by the group. Something of the importance of this is conveyed in the significance of the details of the narration, every piece of which seems to have its own particular level of added ramifications and implications. These elements carry us way beyond the immediate event that is being described.

The immediate pre-amble to their telling of this story needs some attention before we look more closely at the main line of their narrative. This brief account of the mother's working life is significant in the way that it frames what was to follow. The mother worked in a pawn-broker's. She, Rita explained "worked to all hours on a Saturday night and...Nan had a bowl of water ready for her feet because..." [she was footsore after hours of standing]. Lucy commented that she "Kept falling asleep even" (Interview 11:30). The mother had to use candles to "look for numbers on the bundles" because there were no electric lights in the store and these candles "might have set fire to the place" (Interview 11:30). This framing narrative also includes the information that "She started [with] her wages at seven and six and she left earning twenty shillings a week". In contrast to this the owner of the pawn-brokers lived in Calderstones (perhaps the most expensive district in Liverpool) "in a gorgeous house" (Interview 11:30)

This introduction to the story gives the description of the main event some of its narrative shape. The mother's early life is recalled with a sense of her heroism and also with a sense of exploitation and injustice : (he lived) "in a gorgeous house". In contrast to this, or perhaps consequential upon it, there is the notion of the seized moment of leisure associated with a trip to the cinema. In an unjust world, momentary and short-lived pleasures are all that are available to the majority of people.

Wednesday was their mother's regular half day off. She used to go with her friend Sissy Burns on these half days to the Rialto cinema, and this involved a process of "dressing up" in their best clothes. This particular day Sissy "took ill" and couldn't go so their mother decided, "with the fur and the hat" that she would go on her own.

The dialogue unfolds like this:

Rita: "...she decided with the fur and the hat.."

Lucy: "It was a coat with a fur thing"

Rita: "That she would go on her own then to see Rio Rita on a Wednesday afternoon"

Lucy: "Very daring"

Rita: " Yeah and my dad was with another chap."

Lucy: "Behind her"

Rita: "And he was a right little scouser my dad"

Lucy: "He was like James Cagney"

Rita: "Oh he thought he was. Oh yes, very much so. He was supposed to have told his mate to get lost"

Lucy: "Cos he spotted my mum"

Rita: "Because he was going to see my mum, he sat by my mum, I can't imagine..."

Lucy: "Me mum was a Sunday School teacher then, proper prim and proper"

Rita: "...And he said 'Can I see you home?'. And that's how me mum and dad met at the Rialto. And the film was Rio Rita so of course I got the name Rita you see".

(Interview: 11:30-31)

The detail in the account is made all the more striking by the fact that the sisters describe most of the detail of the event as if it had been witnessed by them on the day (with the proviso "I can't imagine" drawing a veil over a particular moment). It is as if the re-inscription of the memory that has taken place within the family group has made it possible for them to feel included within the event itself.

The reasons for the way that this memory stands out need to be teased out. For Halbwachs collective memory, of which family memory is a prime example, involves a strong element of story-telling with the regular narration of recalled events taking place within a group over a

period of time so that a common version of events is arrived at. The group bears a kind of collective witness to something which they share in their history and which gives them a sense of their identity, a common back story of sorts. In the process of re-inscription there is an element of up-dating, of a linking of past and present and there is also an acceptance that the collectively-arrived at version of the story is the truth for the group although in reality the re-inscription of events necessarily involves an element of dramatic license with the semi-fictionalising and pointing up of events. One says this not to cast doubt on the veracity of the events described in the account above but more to account for some of the features of the narration, particularly the first hand, eye-witness viewpoint which, crucially, forms the backbone of the story. Other features of this account seem to demonstrate the importance of the event as a landmark memory for the family. Halbwachs doesn't in fact give a clear example of what he means by a landmark memory but a closer examination of the detail of this particular narrative gives a good illustration of what might be involved.

Once ready for the afternoon/evening out, the mother was not willing to forgo the pleasure of the occasion simply because of the incapacity of her friend. The process of dressing up for the cinema visit is important here. People often dressed up to visit the Rialto, and mention of this gives a link to an important theme. Dressing up asserts a certain level of status congruent with the visual clues offered up by the configuration of the building. It could be argued that what is being described here is the audience using the site as an arena for their own type of performance. They are stylising their appearance during their visits to conform with the "classy" ambience of the site. There is a pleasurable "match" at work here which allows the group to feel comfortable within the building and also to be clearly and visibly at leisure. The detail of this is important within this particular memory. A "fur and a hat" were signifiers of a certain level of social class, the upper-class of the day. It could be argued, then, that these were adopted as a sign of a sense of interiorised status. They display a sense of self-worth which can be "performed" in the mother's leisure time in a way which contradicts the day to day experience of her actual working life. This is an "I'm as good as you" gesture performed within the arena of the cinema. The preciousness of these moments can be gauged by the fact that she did not want to forgo them even though this meant attending the cinema on her own. One wonders if it was the presence of this "dressed up" figure sitting alone in the cinema that aroused the curiosity of the young lad sitting behind her. The narrative implies that this is likely.

The dressing up seems to relate to a sense of self-worth in general but the narrative goes beyond this. There is a level of personal assertiveness at work in the story which seems to match up with a notion of a kind of shared family character. This is a further line of association within the web of connections which intersect in this crucial moment. The mother's decision to visit the cinema on her own was recalled as "Very daring" while the father's assertiveness

in approaching this solitary figure, and telling his mate to “get lost” is configured as similarly bold.

The father’s characterisation as “a right little scouser”, “like James Cagney” is also very telling and brings along its own associations to add to the levels of meaning within the tale. Cagney’s pugnacious Irish-Americanism had a very strong appeal for British working-class audiences within this period (see Stead Ch 3). The forthright individualism of Cagney’s gangster persona with his street-wise ways, his quick-witted wise-cracks and his strong personal charisma, a combination, frequently of hero and villain, (see Munby) had a strong appeal for working class audiences in the period. The “scouser” has emerged in twentieth century iconography as an ambiguous combination of villain, joker and cultural-hero. Within these brief descriptors some powerful tropes are being brought to bear. The father’s self-identification with Cagney “he thought he was...very much so” is another theme which obviously weaves through the life of the family and the citation of the star’s name is indicative of the power of the cinema in creating imaginative templates for audiences to work with. It is not necessarily the case that members of the audience were imitating Cagney. It could be argued that the considerable appeal of Cagney’s on-screen persona was that it drew upon recognisable characteristics that members of the audience already shared. They recognised themselves on screen, after all immigrant Irish working-class life and culture in either the early twentieth century New York of Cagney’s childhood or early twentieth century Liverpool ran along parallel lines. It is significant here that the screening of *Rio Rita* (released in 1929) may well have been prior to the first appearance of Cagney’s breakthrough film *Public Enemy* (1931) so the connection with the Cagney persona, linked to the story, may well be a case of post-inscription. Either way the dates are close.

Another aspect of the scene is the one which is hinted at by the description of the mother as “...a Sunday School teacher then, proper prim and proper wasn’t she?” (Lucy to Rita). The prim but secretly assertive female (somehow doubly defined by the repetitive “proper prim and proper”) is approached by the bluff, over-confident and (perhaps) slightly more down-to-earth and more obviously boldly assertive youth. It’s highly reminiscent of a scene drawn from popular Romantic fiction. There is a narrative of hard-working respectability meets romance at work here, of a meeting of contrasting but somehow complementary personalities, the Sunday School Teacher and the Gangster. It’s a scene of romantic paradox made all the more theatrical by the fact that it takes place in the stalls of a cinema with, presumably, another romantic narrative unfolding on screen. The whole recurring trope of respectability meets boldness is worked out almost endlessly in the canon of romantic fiction. The bold young man meets his match in the apparently prim and proper (but also secretly bold and “very daring”) young woman. These roles are frequently replicated within the fictional form and this has probably had some effect on the casting of this family memory. This may not

merely be a process of a family re-writing its history in the light of culturally-acquired templates (as a reading of Halbwachs may suggest), although there are probably elements of this at work here. It is more likely that culturally-embedded youths (male and female) may have been working with those pre-existing codes at the point of contact as it were, particularly given the theatricality and drama-inducing potential of the setting. The couple were, in other words playing the game of courtship within the parameters that were made available within the contemporary culture of the time, parameters which were absorbed and played out in a semi-theatrical way.

The event of the parents' meeting, while briefly described on the occasion of the interview has many obvious resonances and conveys the sense of a powerfully inscribed collective family memory at work. It was the part of the interview that stood out as one of the most striking, and multi-layered within the narrative. If there are landmark memories then this is clearly one. It was commemorated in the form both of subsequent "dressed up in Sunday best" visits to the site (regular events in the sisters' childhood) and even in the naming of the first child, Rita, after the movie that was on the screen on that particular day. While there are the hallmarks of a foundational story for the family (a collective memory in Halbwachs' sense) at work here it could be argued that the most significant elements of the tale were already in play in the circumstances of that first meeting, the result not of re-inscription but an illustration of the way in which, in a setting like the Rialto, highly culturally inscribed behaviours can be played out. It shows how the context of the building allows the construction of significant moments, moments which become powerful memories in people's emotional and imaginative lives, memories which are so powerful in fact that they are passed on to subsequent generations.



Poster for *September Affair* 1950: Another romantic kiss in a romantic locale

September Song

The second example to be looked at here is rather different from Rita and Lucy's story. This memory is more personal but it nevertheless has the qualities of a foundational memory for the couple involved. In this case the brevity of life, the passing of time and the lasting significance of the romantic moment are closely and very visibly embedded within the structure of the narrative. The narrative revolves around the memory of a particular film seen in the Rialto and the Kurt Weill song used as its theme tune. The significance of all of this was recounted by Alison Smith.

Alison Smith was one of the users of the site that visited both the cinema and the ballroom but one of her most significant memories of the Rialto, mentioned very early on in the interview and discussed with some emphasis was that this was a site that was remembered in a very specific way, one that was tied to her own courtship:

What I can recall about the cinema is that I started courting a boy and eventually I married him and that was one of the first dates he took me on was to the Rialto, and it was a film called *September Song*, and the music was 'It's a long time from May to December and the days grow short when you reach September'. Well that was our song you know, because, what, [it was] just before I was seventeen. (Interview 15:1)

The title of the film has been misremembered. The film was probably *September Affair* (1950) starring Joseph Cotton and Joan Fontaine. It's significant that it is the title of the song that provided the film's theme that is remembered rather than the film's actual title. As Annette Kuhn has shown people seldom remember individual films when asked about their cinema going memories (Kuhn 2002) and when they do it is usually a fragment of the plot, a particular scene or, as in this case, the soundtrack of the film that is recalled. The actual narrative lines of the films are often forgotten altogether. The song is the thing that is remembered here. It is featured throughout the film and is a significant factor in its over-all effect.

From the account it is clear that this was a very young couple. Alison's memory of the visit to the cinema is linked with her memory of the time she first met her future husband:

[it was] just before I was seventeen, we met in a youth club and I can still remember the outfit he wore and that's soft isn't it? Things like that. It was a sports jacket and it was a beige, a brown colour, and like flecky white pieces in it and we went to see that [*September Affair*]. We went in the cheap seats that was right in the front, that's the first time I can recall [going to the Rialto]. (Interview 15:1)

She exclaimed, a little later on, when looking at a photograph of the cinema's interior:

Oh God yeah, there's the seats, yeah. I used to sit down at the front (laughing). God I can remember going to see that film as if it were yesterday September Song but do you know what I can't remember who was in it. I can remember going, that was the

only one film that has stuck in my memory, it's funny isn't it? Whether it was because I was going, and I eventually married him, you don't know do you if that's why it's stuck in your memory like that. (Interview 15:8).

The narrative line of this film seems to make it a particularly unlikely candidate to be remembered as an emblem of the beginnings of a life-time commitment. The narrative is of the brief encounter type typical of wartime or post-war movies but it is transmuted by a somewhat unlikely plot twist that gives the film a strange atmosphere throughout. According to Bordwell, Thompson and Staiger in *Classical Hollywood Cinema* (1987) and others, Hollywood films, generally share a common plot line. This three part sequence involves a central character (usually male) who reaches a crisis point in his life in which both his personal life and his public role are in disarray. A chance encounter with another character (female) results in a romantic entanglement and a sequence of events that eventually end with her, in some way helping him to sort out the issues that have been bothering him in his public role while also sorting out his personal life in a romantic union. The films become a celebration of couple hood and conclude, generally with that romantic moment that also symbolises a new beginning: the kiss. *September Affair* plays very much against this stereotype, while sharing some of its features.

In this film a rich middle-aged American businessman (played by Joseph Cotton), is in a situation of some personal crisis. He is estranged from his wife who also happens to be the owner of the firm that he works for. To escape his situation he makes a visit to Italy. At the opening of the film he is planning to return home with the situation still unresolved. A curiously lonely and isolated figure he bumps into another expatriate American (played by Joan Fontaine) in a couple of fortuitous encounters. He then finds himself on the plane back to the States sitting next to her and also finds out that she is an up and coming concert pianist; they strike up a friendship. The plane breaks down shortly after take off and on a brief stopover while it is being repaired the couple agree to make a visit to see Pompeii, a place that neither of them have seen. A highly charged romantic atmosphere ensues in this brief period together, and the couple share a meal overlooking the sea. When they return to the airport they are just in time to see that they have missed the plane. This gives them some more precious moments together, although they go off to sleep in separate hotels agreeing to catch the next plane back to the States in the morning. When they find, the next day, that the plane that they were on has crashed in the sea and that they are listed amongst the dead they decide to maintain the charade and they set up life together. They rent a beautifully placed and luxuriously ornate villa. At first all goes well, and the film makes much of the romantic possibilities of the locale but the memories of the couple's past lives begin to haunt their time together. As the Joseph Cotton character says at one point "we are our own ghosts". In the end they are unable to maintain the relationship and the film concludes with the couple separating and returning, somewhat chastened, to the possibilities of their future careers.

The break up of the couple is partly ascribed to the intrusion of the memory of their past lives, particularly for the Joseph Cotton character. It is also the case, however that the pressures (and rewards) of their former lives begin to obtrude, in to their situation. The characters become unhappy with a life of continuous romance. As an engineer the Joseph Cotton character gets drawn into making plans for a huge project of irrigation and reconstruction in the locale that had provided their hideaway, a project that he cannot complete unless he takes up his former associations. Joan Fontaine's character realises that she is sacrificing her possible big break, a major concert in the United States. When their deception is uncovered it is clear that both of the main characters will be returning to influential and highly-regarded careers. In a reverse of the usual Hollywood plot line it was the romantic entanglement that was preventing and not assisting them in achieving fulfilment in their public roles.

On the surface this seems a very curious choice of film to remember in such an emblematic way. The tale seems to be about the brevity of the romantic moment and the impossibility of maintaining a romantic relationship in the longer term as well as being, more directly, about the corrosive effect of difficult memories and the discomfort that follows transgression. On the surface it's a very moral tale. However the film's celebration of its setting (the dramatic Italianate landscape) and its lush musical score (with a lavish use of Rachmaninov) seems to give it a very different feel, the melancholy ending is somehow defied by the lingering memory of a dramatic, but ultimately tragically unrealisable ideal. It's bleak, but perhaps not in a bad way! The over-riding feeling of the film is one of romantic melancholy, yet the film ends, somehow on a vaguely upbeat note. Both of the main characters move on to a future involvement in the bigger world with their romantic moment embalmed, in the past and tied to the specifics of its romantic locale.

For Alison, the memory of the film seem to have been somewhat transmuted, perhaps by the circumstances of its viewing as well as the general effect of the *mise-en-scene*. It has come to stand for the power of romance and for romantic love in general, perhaps even for the nature of the romantic moment itself: the impossible paradox of a moment that lasts, somehow, for an eternity. Given the circumstances of its telling it could also be said to have become the signifier for the fleeting nature of even a life-time's relationship.

One of the reasons for the film's considerable impact may have been the curious correspondence between the ornate interiors and landscapes featured in the film and the ornamentation and design of the Rialto itself. The Italianate features of the Rialto Café and its marble steps and white columns are echoed throughout the film in scene after scene. Watching that film in the Rialto must have felt, in some curious way like *being* in the film. Having said that, the choice of the film as a significant memory for such a young couple

seems somewhat surprising. The film is not about youth, it's about the problems and difficulties of middle age, it perhaps speaks of a time when youth culture had yet to define itself (1950s) as something separate from the mainstream. It is also, perhaps, indicative of a post-war mood, of a sense that the times of excitement and change are now over and that it's time to get on with the job. This renewed sense of normality, as well as a sense of purposefulness about making a living is configured for both sexes. In either case, though, romance is to be sacrificed. This is of a piece with other aspects of the memory, in which the period of cinema-going is tied to the courtship phase of a relationship, a phase which is short lived and which is set within a context of briefly repressed and relatively harsh economic realities.

The lyrics of "our song" seem to be particularly poignant and particularly significant. By the time of *September Affair* they had already become regarded as a "standard" number. It first appeared in the film *Knickerbocker Glory* (1936) and has been recorded by artists as diverse as Sarah Vaughan, Jimmy Durante, Frank Sinatra, Willy Nelson, Brian Ferry and Nick Cave. The lyrics are often utilised only in part but it is worth quoting them in full here:

*When I was a young man, courting in the girls,
I played me a waiting game.
If a maid refused me with tossin' curls,
I let the old earth take a couple of whirls.
While I apply her with tears in lieu of pearls.
And as time came around, she came my way,
And as time came around, she came.*

*Oh it's a long, long while, from May to December
But the days grow short, when you reach September.
When the autumn weather, turns the leaves to flame,
One hasn't got time, for the waiting game.*

*Oh, the days, dwindle down, to a precious few.
September. November.
And these few precious days, I'll spend with you.
These precious days, I'll spend with you.*

*Oh, the days dwindle down, to a precious few.
September. November.
And these few precious days, I'll spend with you.
These precious days, I'll spend with you (Kurt Weill)*

Given the preamble this seems a strange choice of a song for “our song” but many of the recorded versions of the lyric omit the first section entirely. Even with the omission of the reference to a rather dubious past implied in the first section this is still a somewhat melancholy refrain to be adopted by such a young couple.

Subsequent visits to the Rialto for the couple included trips to the dance hall. Alison’s reaction to the first sight of the Rialto’s ballroom was recalled, as with other correspondents, with something like a sharp intake of breath.

They would go to the cinema:

“ if there was something on in the cinema that, you know, you’d want to see but the ballroom was a Saturday night...and if we had the money (laughing) we could go. If we didn’t we couldn’t go. But I can always remember the ball [room]...you know the first time. Oh my God, you know how big you are, you are going to a thing...”

(Interview 15:2).

The shift from the cinema to ballroom, is significant, marking the movement of the couple into a more public sphere, it’s linked with growing up: “you know how big you are”.

The memory of these special moments is also linked, for Alison, with an acute awareness that they had to be paid for in a very immediate way: “if we had the money...we could go. If we didn’t we couldn’t go”. Her first visit to the cinema was to see a film that impressed, and the memory of the film stayed with her, but this was viewed, as she recalled, “from the cheap seats right in the front”. The economics of the situation are woven in to the pattern of the memory and an awareness of this side of life is a trope that runs right through the interview. It could be argued that it’s an important feature of the landmark, as in *September Affair*, one might have one’s brief romantic moment, but economic reality maintains its haunting presence. At another point in the interview Alison recalled that “if we didn’t have the money we would have to walk home, you know walk from there and that” (Interview 15:5) and also that they went to dance “mostly at weekends, you know when you got paid on a Friday (laughing)” (Interview 15:6). When she was asked when she stopped going to the Rialto, Alison made a calculation:

Alison: “Oh my gosh...I got married when I was 20 so about 17, 18...I would reckon I went for a good two or three years”

Glen: “But when you got married you stopped going?”

Alison: “God, yeah, that was it! (laughing) Well I got married in the May and my husband had to go and do his National Service in the August ...so you were just on your own for two years, you perhaps might, if [he] could hitch-hike, [he] would come home for a weekend [but] only if he could hitch-hike because he didn’t have the fare.”

Glen: “So you just stopped like that?”

Alison: "So you stopped, yep that's it 'You're married now' and that's your lot."
(Interview 15:8)

This is a dramatic example of something which often cropped up in the interviews, the sense of closure which is reached once a couple get married and settle down. The financial constrictions, mentioned throughout the interview close in ever more tightly "he would come home for a weekend only if he could hitch hike because he didn't have the fare." This links back, somehow, to theme of *September Song*:

Oh, the days dwindle down, to a precious few.

September. November.

And these few precious days, I'll spend with you.

These precious days, I'll spend with you

The notion of the romantic partnership as an ending rather than a beginning is somehow encapsulated in this theme. The courtship is over and one's "precious few" days (in fact the remainder of one's life) will be spent together, these days are, however to be spent in a different locale, a place other than the site of romance. As in the film *Autumn Story* the pressures (and rewards) of the everyday take over. The visits to the cinema and the dance-hall at the Rialto are curtailed, and the site becomes forever associated with the period of courtship. However, unlike in the film, the couple do stay together. The fact that at the time that this story was recounted Alison was a widow and the "boy" of her narrative had already been dead for almost ten years makes the association all the more poignant. The awareness of the brevity of the romantic moment could be said to stand here for an awareness of the brevity of life itself and this memory, Alison's first memory of the Rialto, recalled as *September Song* becomes a marker of profound significance.

Conclusion

Alison's comment that "that was your lot" seems brutal and abrupt but this seems to have been the general pattern. Some couples returned to the Rialto in their later years but for most people the link with the site was effectively broken once they had met a permanent partner and made a commitment to them. This was often coupled with a move away from the area: while the suburbs of Liverpool expanded the centre of the city declined. The memory of the building thus becomes sealed-off, the contact with it was within a relatively brief time frame and it is associated with the period in their lives during which they had experienced a relative freedom of action, a freedom which was, however almost inevitably constrained by the process of partnership formation. The association of the building with this formative period in people's lives makes it feature as a landmark in their memories. The physical site thus becomes a kind of a mental marker and one which has a peculiar valence, something that was particularly enhanced when the building was abandoned, re-modeled, and eventually destroyed.

It's important to recognize the interplay between the cultural offer that was embodied in the site and the way in which this was intertwined with people's own actions, their social performances, within the site. For Goffman any social situation inevitably involves an element of performance. The staging provided by a building like the Rialto both accentuates and helps to shape this. It also links people's interactions to the frame of reference provided on the cinema screen. The formative nature of both of the encounters described here makes them particularly memorable. Whether this is the result of cultural re-inscription, as a reading of Halbwachs would indicate, or whether the events were already heavily culturally inscribed is almost immaterial. For present purposes, what is important about these accounts is the crucial part that cinema-going has played in people's emotional and imaginative lives. These memories stand out because of the way that they create an intersection between the text (the films), the spatial context (the building) and the occasion (the romantic moment): these gel together in a way that place the memory in a very distinctive way. The locale is crucial. The space helps to fix (map) the memory, and it takes on a resonance which has an important and long-term significance for each of the couples (and the families) involved. This helps to explain something about the haunted nature of the site in its later years and also the nature of people's reactions to the Rialto's eventual decline, abandonment and destruction. For some people, including those interviewed here, this was a devastating and rather shocking experience. The disappearance of what had become an important site of memory was a disturbing and upsetting event. This was despite the fact that, for them, in the most practical sense the building had probably already done its job. In a way, though, the building still has work to do. While the Rialto itself may have gone, the space which it once occupied remains visible within its former location and the streets around the site trace, for those with memories associated with the building, a route to the memory of what once was.



September Affair: the couple meet



September Affair: the couple part – “That’s your lot”

Biographical Note

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Interviews

Interview 11 recorded 18/7/07

Interview 15 recorded 14/8/07

Photographs

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