

From the periphery: Voices from the New Towns

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Abstract:

My research into practice with fragmented local archives took place in real and metaphorical borders/ hinterlands on the geographical edges of London and was concerned with how audience engagement with archive film demonstrates cultural value for public history and identity. The audience study undertaken bridged the divide between scholarly and professional engagement as they were informed by my own practice during a long career in the film archive sector, as a lecturer and practitioner.

This article focuses on my findings from the 'New Towns, Our Town: Stories on Screen' project, run by the Independent Cinema Office from October 2018-October 2019. My involvement in the project was an enhancement to my research into audience reception and engagement. Through screenings and training sessions with volunteers in four New Towns on the periphery of London – Hemel Hempstead, Crawley, Stevenage and Harlow – I interrogated creative ways of using local archive film with community audiences. This included exploring issues of accessibility, identity and audience perceptions/expectations and how to discover local microhistories through archive film. Part of the article will take the form of a case study of audience reception in one of the New Towns, Stevenage. The case study explores Stevenage through two local films with emphasis on radical interventions and innovative audience and reception work.

Keywords: historical and contemporary perspectives; under-represented geographical regions; audience reception; methodologies of research.

Introduction

The flickering grainy images of archive film illuminate our pasts. Sometimes the images are in black and white, sometimes in colour. Sometimes there is music, commentary, voice overs

and sometimes silence, either intentional (because the film is silent) or accidental (because any sound may be lost or not available). Archive film footage, particularly non-fiction footage, can be called an incomplete object and a stubbornly resistant text as it may have no provenance, no genre and no narrative and is often fragmentary, without explanatory intertitles or soundtrack. This film material therefore relies for its discovery and accessibility on what Russell (2004) describes as ‘a complex interaction of individual and institutional behaviour with sheer luck’ (p. 13). This film material can be considered an embodiment of truth at ten or twenty-four frames per second. So, what challenges exist in gaining access to it and engaging with it to gain insights into public history?

While there is much scholarly literature on issues around archives in general, within that discourse film archives themselves are largely under-documented. Moving images archives appear to sit outside a traditional archival discourse as noted by Shand (2014), Roberts (2010) and Christie (2015) and their use for public history practice remains under-scrutinised. The audience study described here explore the possibilities of creative practice and radical intervention with archive film and have allowed for a plethora of community voices to create a narrative involving identity, public history and memory.

This article focuses on my findings from the ‘New Towns, Our Town: Stories on Screen’ project run by the Independent Cinema Office (ICO), London, from October 2018-October 2019. My role in this project involved working with volunteers in the use of archive film as a tool for reminiscence so that they could then assist with community screenings and record oral history testimonies from New Town residents. The initial training involved volunteers in an exploration of their own personal memories and histories. I also explored issues of audience perceptions and expectations and how to discover local microhistories. The audience study took place in four New Towns around London – Harlow, Hemel Hempstead, Crawley and Stevenage. In terms of distance from central London, they are, respectively, 21 miles, 25 miles, 31 miles and 33 miles away. These locations are thus places on the periphery of a major urban area where boundaries are significant, especially in terms of the relationship between the city, the suburbs and areas beyond the suburban. They embody the idea of the ‘village imaginary set against a background of complex interdependencies between town and country’ (Miles & Ebrey, 2017 p. 59). Miles and Gibson (2016) stress the importance of place in everyday participation as a situated process. In their discussion of the findings of the AHRC project ‘Understanding Everyday Participation – Articulating Cultural Value’ they note in particular the importance of place in participation and access. This relates to aspects of my research that were concerned with the everyday as encapsulated through memory, public history and place.

In this article I discuss the methodologies informing my research and then give some background and context to the creation of the four New Towns and the aims of the ‘Stories on Screen’ project. I then present a case study exploring audience reception in Stevenage, designated as the UK’s first New Town in 1946. This case study focuses on two local films with emphasis on innovative audience and reception work.

Methodologies of research

I argue for the value of archive film in the creation of affective experiences of cultural and personal memory and I turn to the audience to create a space for non-professional voices, views and opinions through engagement with local archive film. These voices from the audience, revealed through screenings and workshops, expand arguments about value and access in the film archive sector through audience contribution of contextual material. During my career and my research, I facilitated training sessions for participants including film sector education workers, archivists and volunteers. This training invariably involved how to use archive film footage with community groups in terms of running screenings and facilitating memory work.

Aspects of reception theory underpinned this research with audiences, providing me with starting points to plan and negotiate community events where my focus was on audience expectations and behaviour. The definition of the audience in the Oxford English Dictionary is 'the persons within hearing' and in terms of film and archive film, I expand this to also mean 'the persons within seeing'. With this definition in mind I considered where this involves a relationship between performer and audience. The spaces where archive film engagement can most usually take place include cinemas, private houses and online. My audience study took place in community venues. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) define various forms of the audience in terms of participation, and their definition of the 'simple audience' was most relevant here. 'Simple audiences' attend concerts, plays and films in public and 'take part in a social contract where they do not participate except in certain ways which may include applauding or buying a ticket. The latter promises a seat to passively watch the action' (p.51). Audiences attending archive film programmes in community venues may be considered as 'being in public'. What I have noted both in my previous practice and my audience study is that archive film audiences have expectations as to what behaviour is acceptable. Audiences appear to expect to be quiet and passive and watch even silent films in total silence. Later in the article I describe interventions I undertook at training sessions which interrogated such behaviour and explored whether changing behaviour might change responses to the film material. This included not watching films in silence and using the film material as a jump off point for brainstorming ideas and plans for future working.

Since the audience study in this article was carried out in community settings I was aware of challenges in establishing a common understanding of terms employed in this area. Definitions of what a 'community' might be are especially complex and fluid and may focus on locality, ideas of shared beliefs or shared values. Some terms and definitions commonly used for this type of work might include: local history group; oral history project; community history project; and community memory project. Flinn's definition of community archives is 'the grassroots activities of documenting, recording and exploring community heritage in which community participation, control and ownership is essential' (2007 p.153). Audio-visual

material such as that used within this research is often part of the content of community archives and Flinn goes on to suggest that photographs, film and oral material contribute to 'bringing to life individuals and communities that otherwise lie rather lifeless or without colour in the paper record' (p.153).

There is little specific discourse on moving image archives and public history practice. This foregrounds a need to ask crucial questions about archive film and home movies which include their historiographic significance. How does this film material function as a counterpoise to public history and how might it construct historical knowledge? Zimmerman (2008) suggests that a movement towards a different formation of 'film history from below' (p.2) would 'permit us to see the unseen to deconstruct and then reconstruct the human through the ephemeral and the microhistorical' (p.2). The nature of amateur film and home movies has inevitably impacted my work with audiences, as, similarly, the archive film material often has no corpus of contextual information available. Zimmerman (2008) suggests that 'home movies constitute an imaginary archive that is never completed, always fragmentary, vast, infinite' (p.18). This imaginary archive is 'transnational in character' (p. 18) and links nations, communities, identities and families (p.18). Thus, similarly to home movies, local archive film can be envisioned as a cinema of recovery and discovery.

Microhistorical theory and practice proved a useful tool for working with audiences, although the project was not about the microhistory of the sites of exhibition but rather about the way film prompts activity such as memory work in specific local areas. The audience study in the four New Towns opened up a potential space to consider investment in archives which document the history and experience of individuals and community groups. I used Szijarto's (2002) definition of microhistory as 'the intensive historical investigation of a small area' (p.209). He makes four arguments for the use of the micro-historical approach. These are: it is appealing to the general public; it is realistic; it conveys personal experience; and the lines branching out from it reach very far (p. 209). I would add that this is also a way to give space and privilege to the voices of the audience so they can articulate the value of what they have seen and experienced. Szijarto also suggests that microhistory places lived experience at its centre (p. 212). Similarly, Lury (2014) points out that 'amateur film has narrative and symbolic potency - a historic potency' (p.110) and that this material can conceptualise microhistories suggesting 'an amateur film can reflect an unusual proximity to the actual events and people it pictures' (p.115).

New Towns

The New Towns movement in the UK sought to provide living space and new beginnings for Londoners who had lost their homes in World War 2. It reflected the need for rebuilding after six years of war. In the 76 years since the first New Towns Act was passed by the UK post-war government, the towns it created have been both praised as modern day utopias and dismissed as failed social experiments. The New Towns movement still remains one of South

East England's most significant shared stories and at the time of its inception post-World War 2 it generated considerable interest with progress being captured on film. Consequently, there exists a large but rarely seen collection of local archive film in regional film archives and other locations. Featuring glimpses of the original rural landscapes before they were transformed for new arrivals from a London, devastated by the Blitz, these rare archive films shed light on the experiences of the towns' early pioneers as well as those of subsequent generations. Promotional films by the Development Corporations that oversaw the construction of the towns, television documentaries from the UK and beyond as well as amateur footage from residents themselves reveal how these towns have been continually reshaped in and by the public imagination.

Since the history of the New Towns movement and particularly the archive film that records this history is under-documented and had been neglected in the decades since the movement's inception, the 'Stories on Screen' project sought to increase access to film material, to explore the social history and heritage of these towns and to allow modern-day residents to reclaim, celebrate and contribute to this heritage. The project aimed to showcase archive film footage of the towns which had been underused in previous heritage projects and to use this material to explore the shared experiences and memories of residents.

The audience in the New Towns was made up of volunteers for the training sessions who were self-selecting and were equally divided between men and women. There were a number of older people who had retired from paid work but also some younger students who had recently graduated and hoped to gain employment through volunteering. Eight volunteers in each New Town were recruited and I was asked to run a training day in every location on the topic 'Using archive film as a reminiscence tool'. This linked closely to my previous practice with archive film and my earlier work on the 'Screening Our Memories' project in 2011. For that project I had created and delivered training courses for care sector workers as well as film industry and education workers on using archive film as a tool for reminiscence.

The volunteers in the New Towns project would later take on data collection and community engagement, so an important consideration was how might initial audience members later become trainers and transmit values associated with the archive, preservation and access. I needed within the context of my project to interrogate why people had chosen to have these experiences and what their commitment and participation might mean for them in terms of locality, identity and microhistory of their 'place'. A crucial part of the study was the aim to give space and privilege to the voices of the audience (though this would always be through an interpretive lens) in the form of discussions and evaluations where they might be able to articulate the value of what they had seen and experienced. This audience work signalled a potential to move beyond the instrumental 'metrics' (such as numbers of attendees) often used to satisfy outreach film project outcomes.

Access to film material was an issue for the New Town audience study both in planning and delivery. Working with archive film, particularly rare and fragmented material, always creates challenges for practitioners. Enabling access can be expensive in terms of staffing, budgets

and equipment, and issues around technological mediation affect the planning and delivery of events. Working with archive film material outside of a cinema setting and with little equipment available demands ingenuity and always needs careful planning. Without this, and if you are unable to screen material, the *raison d'être* for doing the work vanishes and there is no useful substitute.

In the New Towns study I had little control over some aspects because the project was being organised and run by the ICO. This included selection of film material, venues and the general remit of the training. I was, however, able to design the training days and materials using previous models of practice from my career and experience, which enabled exploration of my ideas on how to innovate/challenge that practice as well as further examination of constraints and barriers to successful outcomes. The New Towns project had certain access issues which were not my direct concern though they affected how it was possible to work with the archive material. I understood from the ICO project manager that difficult negotiations with regional film archives led to a restriction on the amount of New Towns material available and it was often only fragments of already fragmented footage. Under those circumstances, contextualisation for trainees often proved difficult despite their local knowledge.

Case Study: Welcome to Stevenage



Fig 1.: Frame grab from 'Stevenage: the 1st New Town' 1971

What did it feel like to live in Stevenage, the UK's first New Town? Two local films provide us with different views. *Stevenage: the 1st New Town* (1971) is a promotional film made by the Stevenage Development Corporation. It is a celebratory and optimistic look at life in the town which served the aims of the organisation to attract more residents. The film stresses the joys of life away from the 'bustle and overcrowding' of London, emphasising 'a dream of a better future'. The frame grab (Fig. 1) offers an idyllic view of trees, flowers and a lake where a lone figure wanders away from the crowds and noise, rather than showing the busy roads and large concrete buildings that were actually part of the town. Through montage the film shows us work, education and social life while vox pops from residents, including children, extol the virtues of Stevenage – 'a wonderful place'; 'clean and safe'; 'modern, up to date'; 'the kids

are off the streets'. One resident suggests 'I've no complaints' but another says 'I don't want to spend my whole life in Stevenage'.

Stevenage Comes of Age (1967) tells another story through the eyes of two young residents. In this short documentary, made by Anglia TV to mark the 21st anniversary of the designation of the New Town, we follow Russell and David, both aged 21 at the time, as they walk around the town giving their views as voice overs. Russell came to the town aged 7 and describes his nostalgic memories of a childhood where he had the freedom to roam about fields and woods. He shares his resentment at the increased building of houses, which he calls 'small boxes', and says there is no community feeling in the town and 'all efforts to bring people together have failed'. David, who came to the town aged 9 and who has similar childhood memories of 'watching wild birds and picking wild flowers', expresses his disappointment in the 'soulless' building of houses, covering fields with concrete. He nevertheless admits his parents were pleased to start a new life in the town, away from what the introductory voiceover in the film describes as the 'overcrowding of London'.

There were eight volunteers for training in Stevenage and the main resource was a toolkit I had co-written as part of the 'Screening Our Memories' project in 2011. The toolkit is a practical guide to working with archive film and reminiscence and consists of background to theoretical issues around reminiscence and ten exercises and session plans for working with clients and groups. The toolkit's aim was to foreground reminiscence as a formal activity and to encourage trainees to use the concept of active watching to work with archive film material. I had developed the idea of active watching from the theory of active listening which can be defined as 'an intent to listen for meaning'. Active watching can, by extension, then be defined as 'an intent to watch for meaning' and involves the participant focusing intently on the content of archive film material to consider ways of using it with groups or clients. Trainees were encouraged to look at film in as open-minded and flexible a manner as possible and to focus on emerging themes that could work with groups.

We had four Stevenage films to work with on the day, including the ones described above, and none of the volunteers had seen the films before. They were excited about the work they were undertaking. The training sessions were experiential and participants were encouraged not to watch the films in silence or passively but to give opinions and ideas. They were enthusiastic about the group work where we thought about locality and history as seen through the films and they also joined in discussions about their personal reactions to the material as well as the memories that might be evoked. Group exercises were structured and involved close analysis of the film material through active watching, brainstorming themes gleaned from the films, discussion of what is meant when we say 'archive film' and 'reminiscence', thinking about memory and identity and planning and practising a reminiscence exercise that they could then deliver with future audiences.

An example of a training activity was the group exercise 'What is reminiscence?' The group was asked to consider 2 questions: "What is reminiscence?" and "What might the benefits of reminiscence be?" The group then brainstormed their answers, wrote them down on flip

charts and I (as facilitator) led a group discussion. Some examples of ideas that arose from this short exercise were: 'nostalgia'; 'it gives you a good feeling'; 'it has positive connotations'. We were able in group discussion to interrogate what reminiscence work might consist of, how it is embedded in the everyday, how it may be banal but may also not always be comfortable.

One unexpected result of the training at Stevenage, which emerged through the audience reaction, was the role of the soundscape in archive film in allowing the emergence of audience voices. Theory and practice around archive film has emphasised a dominant ocular-centric focus with visual images and content foregrounded. However, the films I screened at Stevenage contained commentary, vox pops, ambient sound, diegetic music and found sound dubbed on to provide atmosphere. In *Stevenage: the 1st New Town (1971)* this created a collage of voices, images and music which echoed Thompson's (2004) definition of soundscape as 'an auditory or aural landscape' and Cavalcanti's suggestion that the socially realist documentary film should combine three elements - speech, music and effects, meaning here the noises of everyday life (Mansell 2017 p. 137). Sound has an intimate connection to contexts of time and place, with soundscape usually theorised as strongly geographic. Mansell (2017) discusses the 'sonic communitarianism built around the shared rhythms of national life' (p.134) and, in the case of Stevenage, built around life in a specific community.

Watching and listening to the films of their locality created a space for the authentic 21st century voices of Stevenage residents to emerge. Some reactions and responses to films of Stevenage life, quoted from group discussion in the training sessions, create a sense of the current voices of Stevenage: 'film is the picture you frame in your mind'; 'helps you to relive experiences and put them in context according to your personal perspective'; 'a common narrative - common memories; 'the good old days - rose tinted glasses?'; 'continuity from then to now'; 'reminiscence=remember'. One theme that emerged for volunteers through exploration of the films was town planning and gender – the personal experience of living and working in a top-down planned community, such as Stevenage especially, as one female volunteer remarked, 'the planners were all men!'. And, indeed, one of the Stevenage films showed a town planning meeting and all of the participants were male.

Gold & Ward in Clarke (1997) discuss town planning in the UK post-WW2 as 'visionary - providing physical and social health' (p. 69) and argue that town planners were heroes 'able to work magic for society' (p. 77). The Stevenage films stress the town's cleanliness and space but by 2018, volunteers noted many changes that had rendered the town less appealing, including the growth of housing and increased traffic. Another theme that emerged was 'leaving and coming back' coupled with the idea of 'retention', meaning here how to get young people to stay in the town. The volunteers had a strong emotional attachment to their 'place', which they articulated in different ways: 'I love Stevenage (even though I know its faults); 'I'm a Stevenage lad (even though I've moved away)'; one group called their reminiscence exercise 'Stevenage Pride'. Through images and sounds of everyday life giving

proximity to reality and through voices of the everyday, it was possible to begin to discover a plethora of small details and begin to create a sense of history and identity for Stevenage which would spread beyond the initially small workshop group.

Conclusion

Local archive film provides an opportunity for people to investigate their heritage and engage with their own history through images and sounds that create nostalgia and evoke memories. This study interrogated the role and concept of the audience, their expectations and behaviour but also their obligations while participating in free events. The audience were self-selected members of the public who had chosen to participate and who would later take on a different role themselves, namely, data collection and community engagement. While there were some similarities in responses to the film material and group exercises in all four New Towns, it was notable that in Stevenage there seemed to be a stronger sense of place and pride in the town, as described in the case study.

Zimmerman's approach makes film material visible by placing it at the centre of discourse. Her work makes a plea that amateur and archive film's position in historical, technological, economic and cultural discourse must be clarified (Zimmerman, 1995). She asserts that 'to study amateur film means detouring from the analysis of textuality into the power relations of discursive contexts' (p.x). This means moving away from preservation and restoration to a more complex and messy terrain where, as Zimmerman suggests, the fragmentary nature of amateur film and home movies is 'an imaginary archive that is never completed, always fragmentary, vast, infinite' (p.18). Archive film is similarly an active, constantly changing historiographic practice and this research into how this material plays a role in public history engagement illuminates that practice at a particular moment in time and place.

The findings of the study give evidence of how the ebb and flow of history through the everyday and mundane can illuminate public history and value through aiding identity formation and memory work. I asked volunteers to write down thoughts on the value of local archive film and individual ideas that emerged were: 'It reminds us of our history and how we used to live.'; 'What our values were in the past'; 'A record of our past. History in the making.'; 'May have implications in the future which were not known at [the] time [the material was] filmed.'; 'Record of life, fashion, buildings which no longer exist.' The same audience members responded to the question 'What would happen if we never saw it?' by expressing a sense of loss: 'We would lose an interpretation of history'; 'We would never know what life was like'; 'We would be less well informed. We'd be the poorer'.

Biographical note:

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