

## The Place of Film in Cinema Memory

Silvia Dibeltulo

*Oxford Brookes University, UK*

Daniela Treveri Gennari

*Oxford Brookes University, UK*

### Abstract

Recent academic debates within New Cinema History have highlighted a tendency to overlook the role played by the film in historical studies of cinema and its audiences (Aveyard, 2011; Biltereyst, 2018). This article aims to address this gap by moving towards a more film-centric analysis of the cinema-going experience and investigating the place of film in cinema memory. We draw from and expand previous work on cinema memory and focus on the intersection between individual and collective engagement with and reception of films. The focus of our analysis is the oral history (over 1000 questionnaires and 160 video-interviews) collected in the *Italian Cinema Audiences* (2013-2016) project, which provides the first study of cinema audiences in Italy in the 1950s by analysing film-goers' memories and contextualizing them with box-office figures and film industry data. This project puts audiences at the centre of the cinema-going experience and aims to explore the importance of film in everyday life. In this article, we investigate *what* is remembered about films and *how* films are discussed by audiences who used to go to the cinema in post-war Italy, a time in which films were one of the most widely consumed and popular cultural products. By examining *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939) – our respondents' most mentioned film – as a case study, we aim to formulate a new taxonomy of film memory that reflects content, modality of recollection, and function of memories of films in order to re-examine the place of film in cinema memory.

**Keywords:** audiences, cinema, memory, film memory, taxonomy, *Gone with the Wind*

## Introduction

Recent academic debates within the field of New Cinema History and beyond have highlighted a tendency to overlook the role played by the film in historical studies of cinema and its audiences (Aveyard, 2011; Biltereyst, 2018; Hanchard *et al.*, 2020). At the same time, within Memory Studies, the place of film(s) ‘remains a significant challenge’ and an area of enquiry that needs further investigation (Kuhn, Biltereyst and Meers, 2017, p. 10). In this article we aim to address this gap by moving towards a more film-centric analysis of the cinema-going experience and investigating the place of film in cinema memory. We will draw from and expand previous work on cinema memory (for example Kuhn’s typologies of cinema memories [2011]) and focus on the intersection between individual and collective engagement with and reception of films. Specifically, we will analyse the memories of films that have emerged from the oral history collected in the *Italian Cinema Audiences* (2013-2016) project which provides the first study of cinema audiences in Italy in the 1950s by analysing film-goers’ memories and contextualising them with box-office figures and film industry data. This project puts audiences at the centre of the cinema-going experience and aims to explore the importance of film and cinema-going in everyday life. Here, we will investigate what is remembered about films and how films are discussed by audiences who used to go to the cinema in post-war Italy, a time in which film was one of the most widely consumed and popular cultural products. Our aim is to formulate a new taxonomy of film memory that reflects content, modality of recollection, and function of memories of films in order to re-examine the place of film in cinema memory. We will test our taxonomy on memories of *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), our participants’ most mentioned film.

Over the past decades the multidisciplinary field of Memory Studies has intersected with that of Film Studies, with a number of scholars attempting to define cinematic memory and to unravel the relationship between memory and films. In his book *The Remembered Film*, Burgin (2004, p. 16) defines the remembered “‘sequence-image’” [...] as ‘uniting ‘someone’, ‘somewhere’ and ‘something’, without specifying who, where and what.’ He reports that he ‘can recall nothing else of this film – no other sequence, no plot, no names of characters or actors, and no title. How can I be sure the memory is from a film? I just know that it is’ (ibid.). Furthermore, Burgin hints at the ways in which this type of memory is remembered, as well as its significance:

The elements that constitute the sequence-image, mainly perceptions and recollections, emerge successively but not teleologically. The order in which they appear is insignificant (as in a rebus) and they present a configuration – ‘lexical, sporadic’ – that is more ‘object’ than narrative. What distinguishes the elements of such a configuration from their evanescent neighbours is that they seem somehow more ‘brilliant’. In a psychoanalytic perspective this suggests that they have been

attracted into the orbit of unconscious signifiers, and that it is from the displaced affect associated with the latter that the former derive their intensity. Nevertheless, for all that unconscious fantasy may have a role in its production, the sequence-image as such is neither daydream nor delusion. It is a fact – a transitory state of percepts of a ‘present moment’ seized in their association with past affects and meanings. (ibid., p. 21)

Burgen’s evocative description focuses on a specific type of memories, i.e. fragmentary recollections of ‘objects’ that resurface in the present, but are not bound together by a narrative.

In her seminal work on cinema-going memories and British audiences, Kuhn (2002) develops a broader definition of film memory. Kuhn’s concept is more extensive than Burgen’s sequence-image and includes the relationship between film, its consumption, and its significance within a specific moment of the audience’s lives. In her chapter ‘What to do with Cinema Memory?’ Kuhn (2011) articulates her findings and defines a wider range of film memories. These memories are divided into three types: 1. Type A: Remembered scenes, almost like a still image, whose visual quality is almost dreamlike (2011, p. 87) and, as Kuhn herself states, perhaps ‘the closest of the three modes to the “remembered film” in Burgen’s sense’ (ibid.); 2. Type B: Situated memories of films, which are films and scenes remembered within a context of events in the subject’s own life and vary ‘considerably across different instances’ (ibid., p. 90); 3. Type C: Memories of cinema-going, which are memories that do not involve films at all (ibid., p. 93). Although these are, according to Kuhn, the majority of cinema memories, as they have ‘revolved far more around the social act of cinema-going than around the films they saw’ (ibid., p. 85), they are not strictly relevant to the context of this article and to our broader discussion. Kuhn describes the attributes and features of each type of these memories, offering a solid framework to use when analysing memories of cinema-going and films in particular. Kuhn’s work has been at the heart of Radstone’s contribution to academic debates around memories of films. In fact, Radstone’s work is particularly relevant with regard to the function of cinema memory. Reflecting on Kuhn’s and Burgen’s work, Radstone (2010, p. 336) proposes a new category, called ‘cinema/memory’. She observes:

By exploring the world of cinema/memory, this strand of film theory dissolves conceptual boundaries between the inside and the outside, the personal and the social, the individual and the cultural, and the true and the false. Burgen’s and Kuhn’s explorations both take the form of what Kuhn has elsewhere called “memory work”—a practice that uses critical analysis of one’s own memories to produce deeper understandings of identity’s complex relation to culture and the media.

Radstone's focus on the intersection of the individual and the collective experience also resonates with similar theoretical approaches to memory (suffice it to mention the work of Halbwachs [1992] and Rigney [2016] that we have employed elsewhere [Treveri Gennari and Dibeltulo, 2017; Treveri Gennari *et al.*, 2019; Treveri Gennari *et al.*, 2021]) in the analysis of cinema-going experiences in post-war Italy. As we shall discuss in more detail below, Radstone's approach is particularly relevant to our formulation of the autobiographical function of film memory. At the same time, in this regard, our theoretical framework draws from studies on memory and its autobiographical nature within the field of psychology.

## Methodology

Our analysis is based on data collected during the AHRC-funded *Italian Cinema Audiences* research project. This collaborative project was conducted by researchers at Oxford Brookes University, the University of Bristol, and the University of Exeter. It aimed at investigating the memories of Italian cinema-goers of the 1950s and examining the importance of the cinematic experience in post-war Italian society and culture. In the first phase of the project, over 1000 participants aged over sixty-five, chosen from eight provincial and eight urban locations<sup>1</sup>, responded to a structured questionnaire which included both multiple-choice and open-ended questions. Our sample was recruited through both random and snowball sampling and was divided almost equally between men and women, respondents living in urban and provincial/rural areas (in the 1950s) and included a comprehensive range of social backgrounds. Importantly, questions related to memories of film in the questionnaire were open and during the video-interview the interviewer did not suggest any specific direction to take when answering. Moreover, there was no interaction between the researchers and the participants, as questionnaires were completed individually without any assistance, in order to avoid any possible pressure or probing on the part of the researchers. In order to explore what participants remember of the films they watched, and how those memories were expressed, we included the following sets of questions in the questionnaire: 1. What film has left the most vivid impression in your memory? Why?; 2. For what film did you cry? Why?. The decision to include the question on crying for a specific film was inspired by the work conducted by Harper and Porter (1996) on British cinema and its audiences in the 1950s.

In the second stage of our study, half-hour topical in-depth video-interviews with 160 Italians sampled from the same eight cities and provincial/rural areas were conducted. The oral history data<sup>2</sup> was then complemented by box-office takings, programming and

---

<sup>1</sup> The cities of Bari, Rome, Turin, Milan, Palermo, Naples, Cagliari, and Florence were selected from the sixteen urban centres used by AGIS (the Italian National Exhibitors Association) to monitor box-office intake in the chosen period. These urban locations were complemented by provincial locations in Puglia, Lazio, Piedmont, Lombardy, Sicily, Campania, Sardinia, and Tuscany.

<sup>2</sup> The way in which oral history data is referenced in this article reflects the different way in which it was coded in the project. Questionnaires were anonymous and therefore given a unique identifier, with the first letter indicating the initial of the location (see note one for details on the eight locations), the second letter indicating city/province, and the numbers indicating the order in which the questionnaire for each location was processed.

exhibition data, archival material, and relevant press material from the period, adapting Barker and Mathijs' (2008) audience project framework<sup>3</sup>. In the semi-structured interviews, questions on favourite films and memories of films were asked, but no prompts were given to suggest any specific film titles, or to trigger specific memories of favourite films. If a film was mentioned by the interviewee, follow-up questions were asked.

In the analytical phase of the project, we created a data-driven coding book. The codebook was initially developed through 'repeated examination of raw data' (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall and McCulloch, 2011, p. 138) provided by questionnaire responses. Subsequently, the codebook was adjusted to reflect the further thematic areas that emerged in the video-interviews (in relation to memories of films, this included film titles and nationalities other than Italian or American). Questionnaires and video-interviews were coded using NVivo, a software for the analysis of qualitative and mixed-methods data. In addition, short written portraits were created for each participant in order to identify how the self is constructed in respondents' narratives, as well as the correlation between autobiographical elements and the ways in which memories are narrated<sup>4</sup>.

In NVivo the thematic node called 'Memory of Film' was created. As this node presented a complex series of themes, we decided to develop some specific sub-themes, which – once again created by the repeated examination of the raw data – broadly indicated what respondents remembered about films: 1. Plots; 2. Scenes; 3. Technical Aspects; 4. Performance and Characters; 5. Film industry; 6. Directors; 7. Titles 8. Other Nationalities: Film Nationalities other than Italian and American. Analysis of all the thematic areas identified in the coding book was complemented by the examination of the modalities of expression. This was particularly important in the case of the video-interviews, which we have decided not to transcribe, in order to prevent the inevitable loss of oral and visual components (body language, facial expression, tonality) that the transcription process entails. In this way, our analytical approach acknowledges the significance of embodied elements of memory and recollection, following Friedman's (2014, p. 291) claim that 'embodied channels of communication are a significant part of the performance of the oral history interview.' At the same time, our approach positions itself within the ever-growing area of visual methodologies within the humanities and social sciences, which has become increasingly 'central to qualitative research practice' (Pink, 2012, p. 3). In order to analyse the modalities of expression, in NVivo we created a node called 'Modalities', which included the following sub-themes: 1. Body language; 2. Gender or class talk; 3. Meta-interview discourse; 4. Type of language; 5. Verbal delivery. The presence of these sub-nodes helped us identify patterns in the modality in which our respondents remembered films and several

---

The video-interviews were not anonymous (the participant's name and date of birth appear at the beginning of each video-recording). Both datasets can be accessed at <https://www.cinericordi.it/>.

<sup>3</sup> Our study has also been inspired by Daniel Biltereyst and Philippe Meers' The 'Enlightened' City research project (<http://www.cims.ugent.be/research/past-research-projects/-enlightened-city>). See: Biltereyst *et al.*, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> These include details on the general background of the interviewee, key concepts and key experiences linked to cinema-going, as well as modalities of delivery and non-verbal communication. We would like to thank the late Martin Barker (a member of the *Italian Cinema Audiences Advisory Board*) for suggesting this analytical tool.

were the instances where these specific sub-nodes were used to fully comprehend the process of cinema-going memories (see Treveri Gennari *et al.*, 2021 for examples of that).

## **A new taxonomy of film memory**

As mentioned above, a number of studies in the past few decades have turned their attention to the place of film within broader experiences of cinema-going. These works suggest that research needs to address the relationships that audiences have with film, including how they might interpret or remember them. Within the context of these debates, in this article we aim to formulate a new taxonomy of film memory that reflects content, modality of recollection, and function of memories of films in order to re-examine the place of film in cinema memory.

### **1. Content**

In this section, and the following, we have refined and developed the nodes and sub-themes employed in the analytical phase of the *Italian Cinema Audiences* project. The category of content reflects what participants remember about films and includes the following:

1. Scenes
2. Plot
3. Film Title
4. Technical Aspects
5. Actors' Names and Performance
6. Film Characters
7. Film industry
8. Directors
9. Nationality
10. Genre

In our participants' responses to the question about the most vivid memory of a film we have found several cases of what Kuhn defines as type A film memories – similar to Burgin's sequence/images. For example, Giuseppina Lo Presti (b. 1943, Bari, Female), refers to a film by saying 'the very famous one where she's leaning against the tree and they say goodbye and leave. I can't remember... as a title I can't help much.' However, we have also found other types of film memories as strong in their descriptions as Kuhn's Type A memories. It is important to clarify that when we talk about content here we do not mean film content, but rather the object of memories relative to films. These include predominantly references to several elements of the film as an audiovisual text (such as memories of plots, scenes, technical aspects and innovations, and performance and characters), which are remembered very vividly by our audiences. But, to a lesser extent, we

also found mentions of contextual elements, such as nationality, references to the industry, and directors.

These elements are an addition to and expansion of Kuhn's (2011, p. 88) type A memories which are, according to Kuhn, 'characteristically very brief' and 'recalled in isolation from the film plot', marked by 'strong emotions or bodily sensations' (ibid., p. 89), as well as a 'fragmentary and non-narrative quality' (ibid.). While the recollections of some of our participants are manifested in this dream-like static image way, others are expressed in a narrative manner and include complex articulation of plots, sequences, and, in some instances, thematic and aesthetic analysis or evaluations of the film. This is shown clearly in the following examples: 'several films made me cry, *The Road* [Federico Fellini, 1954] above all. I was touched by the entire story, but when Zampanò, an uncouth grouchy and emotionless street entertainer, learns of Gelsomina's death, bursts into tears, thus letting his vulnerability emerge' (CP0010, Female); '*Bicycle Thieves* [Vittorio De Sica, 1948] [...] is a faithful representation of how honest people, who are often brought to the point of exasperation, are unable to commit bad deeds, and if they commit them, they pay the price for everyone else' (CC0051, Male).

## **2. Modality**

Modality is the second category in our taxonomy of film memory and emerges from the thematic code described above that we have used to analyse verbal and non-verbal expressions of remembering. Here our analytical approach draws from Kuhn's notion of 'performances of memory':

It is impossible to overstate the significance of narrative in cultural memory – in the sense not just of the (continuously negotiated) contents of shared/collective memory-stories, but also of the activity of recounting or telling memory-stories, in both private and public contexts – in other words, of performances of memory. (Kuhn, 2010, p. 298)

Our category of modality of expression includes the following elements:

- a. Language<sup>5</sup>
- b. Register
- c. Vocabulary
- d. Gestures
- e. Body language
- f. Tone of voice
- g. Pauses and repetitions

---

<sup>5</sup> This includes elements such as standard Italian, dialect, and regional expressions.



The modalities in which respondents express their memories of films may vary according to gender, age, class, and geographical location. For example, our female participants tend to explicitly refer to bursts of emotion (including crying) when discussing memories of specific films, while male participants refrain from doing so, thus clearly confirming a gendered engagement with the film, as well as gendered modes of recollection (see Fivush *et al.*, 2011, p. 328).

Modalities of recollection are crucial for a better understanding of our audiences' engagement with and reception of films, as well as the ways in which past experiences are reconstructed in the present. When participants remember films more vividly and with more details (including title), their recollections tend to refer to a strong, but not always well-defined emotional reaction – the verbs more commonly used are 'to be involved', 'to be moved', 'to be excited.' Moreover, this emotional attachment to the film is evident through nonverbal expression. For example, remembering his appreciation for western films – above all *Unconquered* (Cecille B. DeMille, 1947) – as a boy, Sergio Arani (b. 1937, Cagliari, Male) switches his narration from a neutral, matter-of-fact reporting of events, to a re-enactment of the excitement felt by young film-viewers during a scene in which the cavalry comes to the rescue of a fort assaulted by 'the Indians'. While describing this 'jubilation in the cinema', he smiles, gesticulates heavily, and, as he speaks up, he reproduces the sound made by the audience who cheered at the arrival of the cavalry, thus indicating active participation in the film's action. (Figure 1)



*Figure 1. Sergio recalls watching western films.*

There are several examples of embodied memory, which is articulated through memories of not only crying over a particular scene, but also re-enacting characters' gestures. This confirms the film's ability to stand in for experience by re-creating affect; as Bennett (2003, p. 27) writes, 'if emotions are not retrievable from memory, they are revivable, hence we



don't remember grief or ecstasy, but by recalling a situation that produces those sensations we can produce a new bout of emotion.'

Participants' use of the present tense is another example of modality of recollection which provides an insight into the relationship between our audiences and their favourite films. For instance a respondent recalls: 'A scene from the film *I figli di nessuno* [Raffaello Matarazzo, 1951], the father carrying his dead son, pulled out from the rubble, in his arms, and his mother throwing flowers at him in the convent' (NP0015, Female). In this example, the verbal delivery really stresses the immediacy of the experience conveyed by the film, even at the time of recollection.

### **3. Function**

The third category of our taxonomy, function, is broadly informed by theories stressing the communicative and social aspect of individual remembering and recollection. As Misztal claims (2003, p. 5), 'individual remembering takes place in the social context – it is prompted by social cues, employed for social purposes, ruled and ordered by socially structured norms and patterns.' When referring to cinema memory, Radstone (2010, p. 336) confirms the relationship between the individual and the collective by arguing that 'cinema/memory' is 'situated within the mind, yet positioned between the personal and the cultural.' In this sense, we can argue that film memory functions as a point of entry into wider manifestations of culture and collective dimensions through individual recollections, aligning with the characteristics of autobiographical memories identified by Fivush *et al.* (2011).

In fact, Fivush *et al.* (2011, p. 322) remind us that 'narratives are the process by which we share and create autobiographical memories, and through shared narration we create individual identities'. In relation to this process of identity creation, the authors make a distinction between recurring events – 'events that are experienced on a more or less regular basis and follow the same basic structure each time they occur' (*ibid.*, p. 334) – and self-defining memories – 'typically unique, onetime events, which become personally significant and integral to individuals' understanding of who they are' (*ibid.*, p. 333.). Fivush and colleagues' notion of self-defining memories is similar to Pillemer's (2001, p. 124) concept of personal event memory, defined as follows:

The memory represents a specific event that took place at a particular time and place; it contains a detailed account of the person's own personal circumstances at the time; the memory includes sensory imagery (visual, auditory, olfactory, or tactile); and the rememberer believes that the event actually happened.

Importantly, according to Pillemer, these types of vivid and salient memories have an autobiographical significance, as they 'continue to influence, inspire, direct, and sustain actions and beliefs long after the original occurrence of the momentous events that they represent' (*ibid.*).

The distinction between recurring and specific events in relation to memory work is important for our definition of the function of film memories. In our oral history data, memories of cinema-going habits and rituals, or of watching different film genres, can be defined as recurring events, while memories of a specifically identified film often correspond to single self-defining or personal event memories. Following this framework, we can then claim that the function of narrated film memory is always autobiographical, as it is an act of identity creation. In this act the person recalling/narrating is making sense of their own self (both past and present) by expressing the significance/meaning(s) of their engagement with and reception of the film. This meaning-making process sheds light on the social and cultural frames available to our respondents as they reconstruct their self-image as film-viewers in the past at the present time. A representative example of the autobiographical function is offered by a participant remembering *Rocco and his brothers* (Luchino Visconti, 1960) in this way: 'I would identify in the story [the film] told about the Southern migration and the hardship endured' (BC0060, Male). In his narration, the respondent shows awareness of the particular significance of the film's plot for a film viewer living in Bari, a city in the South of Italy, while also revealing that being a 'Southerner' is a key element of his identity.

The conflation of content, modality and function of film memories constitutes a new framework – inspired by previous research on cinema memory, as discussed above – for the analysis of the role film plays in autobiographical memory. At the same time, it allows for a better understanding of the significance of the film text in the broader experience of cinema-going. In order to test this new taxonomy, in the following section we will apply these three categories to a specific film, which is the most remembered by our audiences: *Gone with the Wind*.

### **Case study: *Gone with the Wind***

Out of the 116 questionnaire respondents who mention the film, twenty-six are men and ninety are women – which corresponds to 15.90% of all female questionnaire respondents and 5.80% of all male questionnaire respondents. Thirty-one out of the 160 interview participants mention the film: nine men and twenty-two women. This indicates a clear trend whereby it is women who remember the film the most. This strong gender-based response is also highlighted by the different generic identification of the film on the part of female and male questionnaire respondents: the film is remembered/preferred by women because of its love story or sentimentalism, while men discuss other elements such as adventure and the war. These findings are not surprising. In fact, they reflect Taylor's (2014, p. 18) claim that the film and the book on which it is based are 'most cherished by women' even if they appeal to both men and women.

However, it is important to note that this film is not an exemplar, but rather an exceptional case, since it was a ‘film event’ when it was first screened in Italy (in 1949), as much as in other countries, but also because it possibly had the longest programming across many Italian cities (as well as being reissued many times over the years), and due to its remediation through television and other forms of popular culture. Being a cult or classic film, it is possible that *Gone with the Wind*’s prevalence in our respondents’ memories is partially a result of its widespread and everlasting popularity. Within the broader context of experiences of cinema-going, specific film memories are quite rare, as what people tend to remember the most are the social aspects of going to the cinema, the venues they frequented, and the film genres they preferred watching. However, we are able to illustrate, through specific examples (both from our questionnaires and video-interviews), what is included in each category of our taxonomy of film memory.

## **Content**

Memories under this category range from technical aspects (e.g., colour and film length) to performance and characters, to plot and scenes (including specific aspects of dialogue), to genre. For example, the film is remembered for ‘the colours, the actors and their performance’ (FC0028, Female), for the ‘history, adventure, feelings, bravery and music’ (FC0045, Male), for ‘the sets, the plot and Clark Gable’s charm’ (PP0019, Female), and because it was ‘long and enthralling’ (FP008, Male). All of these are clear examples of memories of content, which are remembered by our participants in relation to the film.

## **Modality**

Modality is also an element of our taxonomy that emerges in our participants’ memories. A very telling modality of expression – one that recurs in many film memories of our audiences – is the use of the plural form. For example, Alessio Legramante (b. 1929, Rome province, Male) recalls his experience of watching the film in this way: ‘And then there was the event of *Gone with the Wind*... which was a special event because we were used to ninety-minute films. And knowing that it was three hours long, we all set off with sandwiches. I remember there were families that got ready to go with roast chicken.’ In this memory, Alessio’s use of pronouns in the plural form reveals the social and collective dimension of the film-viewing experience, common to other participants in similar projects (Kuhn, 2002, p. 10).

## **Function**

The category of function in our taxonomy is present with several degrees of variation, but still tends to shed light both on collective modes of engagement with and consumption of film in the past, as well as the individual experiences of film viewing. This can present striking differences based on gender, but it also offers a multitude of interpretations and re-framings of the past in the present narration. For example, a male participant, Pietro Biagini (b. 1939, Florence province, Male) focuses on the historical theme in *Gone with the Wind*: 'And I remember we commented for days on end that it was such an important film, so significant, but then it told the story of the war between the Southerners and the Northerners, and of course with wonderful actors.' This participant's memory is key to this relationship between past and present, as it becomes even more apparent when he goes on to say: 'The historical fact. For example, I mentioned *Gone with the Wind* earlier... it's a fundamental moment because we understood, rather, we entered into the American Civil War.' In this example, the participant's memories function as a way to reflect on the strong involvement in the cinematic experience, in the relationship with its plot and the historical context it represented, as well as with the collective sharing of the feelings and thoughts evoked by the film.

Another example is provided by Mario Palmero's (b. 1935, Turin province, Male) recollection of *Gone with the Wind*: 'one of the things that are part of my baggage which I carry along is Scarlett O'Hara's statement in *Gone with the Wind* 'Tomorrow is another day'. And then Tara, her land, that, after all her love affairs, was what kept her tied to her existence...it is the land.' This recollection, implicitly praising Scarlett's strength and determination in the face of adversity, is presented as a life-changing experience that has had a profound impact on the participant to the extent of defining his identity in the present. In this sense, Mario's narration reflects Pillemer's (2001, p. 130) claim that 'memories of momentous events are most valuable when they are attached to a belief system that is forward reaching and motivational.'

Some of the memories offer examples of all three categories of our taxonomy, presenting a very vivid recollection of that experience, its content, modality and a very clear function. Liliana Caico (b. 1934, Bari, Female), for example, describes her viewing of the film in this way: 'I remember watching *Gone with the Wind* at the Oriente, which, at the time, was a huge scandal. The school I went to was run by nuns and I was reprimanded because I went to see this film, well, it was the Fifties. The content was sinful, so it was not allowed. And I was seriously reprimanded! But strangely enough the nuns at the Holy Heart that I used to frequent were quite liberal if I think about it now'. Another example is provided by Maria De Palma (b. 1934, Bari, Female): 'I remember that we did a sort of group expedition, all together, to watch this film [*Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing* (Henry King, 1955)]. The viewing of *Gone with the Wind* was an event too. [...]. We watched *Gone with the Wind* at the Galleria and we brought sandwiches, as it lasted three hours, so it was a sort of picnic and we wanted to enjoy it'.

In terms of content, the responses of these female participants focus vaguely on the plot – i.e., the romantic aspects of the story – and the technical elements, specifically the

film's length. In relation to modality, both interviewees talk about the film in the past tense, thus signalling a sense of detachment from the past film-viewing experience. Also, they use the plural form to indicate collective viewing, which is something revealing that social dimension of the cinematic experience. The autobiographical function is also evident in these two examples. Liliana's recollection demonstrates quite clearly the intersection of collective and individual reception of the film: the film was considered scandalous at collective level – at least in Liliana's religiously-oriented community; at the individual level, she remembers that her own engagement with this content was met with a punishment. After narrating the event, she assumes the role of a commentator now living in the present saying 'it was the Fifties', and even more evidently when she switches the tense to the present – saying 'if I think about it now' – as she comments on the inconsistencies of a conservative religious upbringing. We could also argue that there is an implicit gender element here, in that watching sinful films was not proper for young girls, like her, at the time.

Maria's recollection, with the consistent use of the plural form and the anecdote of bringing sandwiches to the cinema, delineates an image of a past film-goer that experienced the film as an event at collective level. She portrays a communal viewing practice in which film was consumed alongside food – thus arguably betraying the working-class or lower-class nature of this custom. Her final remark on wanting to 'enjoy it' shows a level of awareness, in the present, in relation to the hedonistic element of her past film-viewing; in other words, Maria suggests that, for her, film-viewing was a form of entertainment, as opposed, to education, which is what cinema meant to many other respondents. These two examples are not unique, but certainly rarer in the oral history collected through the *Italian Cinema Audiences* project. They help illustrate the relationship audiences had with films, what traces are left in their memories, and the meaning they still attach to experiences lived almost sixty years earlier.

## Conclusion

The aim of this article is to formulate a new taxonomy of film memory that reflects content, modality of recollection, and the function of memories of films in order to re-examine the place of film in cinema memory. It should be noted that, as our oral history investigation has revealed, it is only a minority of respondents who recall specific film titles, while the majority – unless a question on a specific film is asked – tends to remember the genre of films they preferred to watch. Therefore, researching memories of films within broader studies of cinema-going experiences or film culture is not an effortless endeavour.

While the three elements of our taxonomy are often found in isolation in cinema memories, there are the instances in which they appear in conjunction. We can see this clearly when a questionnaire respondent remembers '*Gone with the Wind*, it was romantic and with clothes we could not have' (RC0004, Female). This quote, even if less articulated than the ones analysed in the previous section, includes all the categories in our taxonomy:

content (plot and costumes), modality (use of the plural and a description of an inner state, as an aspiration in relation to the costumes), and autobiographical function (by revealing the gendered engagement with both aspects of plot, romance, and lavish dresses; at the same time, the participant is positioning her past self as part of a society or generation that was just emerging from the war and still living in poverty, while not being able to afford expensive things).

Our objective is certainly not to undervalue the meaning and significance of other types of cinema memories previously elaborated by scholars within this field of inquiry. Rather, this article intends to address recent calls to re-evaluate the place of film in the field of New Cinema History, as we argue that film memories can perhaps offer a direct link between the specific film as text and the context of the film's fruition. In fact, understood as 'self-defining' memories, as we mentioned earlier, memories of films are a privileged place both in which the self inscribes itself in culture, and in which subjectivity reveals culture's 'master narratives' (see Fivush *et al.*, 2011, pp. 334-336). Ultimately, our taxonomy attempts to 'reconcile' the apparent conflict between the film as text and the wider social, cultural, and economic practices that revolve around its consumption, as well as recollections of film-viewing experiences.

## **Biographical Notes**

**Silvia Dibeltulo** is Senior Lecturer in Communication, Media and Culture at Oxford Brookes University. Previously she worked as a researcher on the AHRC-funded *Italian Cinema Audiences* project. Her work focuses on audience and reception studies, cinema heritage, film genre theory and history, screen representations of ethnic identity, and digital humanities. Recent publications include the co-authored monograph *Italian Cinema Audiences: Histories and Memories of Cinema-going in Post-war Italy* (Bloomsbury, 2021) and article 'It existed indeed...it was all over the papers': memories of film censorship in 1950s Italy' (*Participations*, 2017).

Contact: [sdibeltulo@brookes.ac.uk](mailto:sdibeltulo@brookes.ac.uk)

**Daniela Treveri Gennari** is Professor of Cinema Studies at Oxford Brookes University with a research interest in audiences, popular cinema, film exhibition and programming. After leading the AHRC-funded project *Italian Cinema Audiences* and the BA/Leverhulme funded project *European Cinema Audiences* (with Ghent University and De Montfort University), Daniela is currently leading the AHRC-funded project *European Cinema Audiences: Entangled Histories and Shared Memories*. Amongst her recent publications: the article 'Defining a typology of cinemas across 1950s Europe' (with Lies Van de Vijver and Pierluigi Ercole) *Participations*, Vol.18, Issue 2, November 2021, and the Special Issue "International Film Audiences" (Part 1), (ed. Nedyalkova and Treveri Gennari), *Participations*, Volume 18, Issue 2 (November 2021). Contact: [dtreveri-gennari@brookes.ac.uk](mailto:dtreveri-gennari@brookes.ac.uk)



## References

- Aveyard, K. (2011). 'The Place of Cinema and Film in Contemporary Rural Australia', *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, 8(2), pp. 294-307.
- Biltreyst, D., Lotze, K. and Meers, P. (2012). 'Triangulation in Historical Audience Research: Reflections and Experiences from a Multi-Methodological Research Project on cinema audiences in Flanders', *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, 9(2), pp. 690-715.
- Biltreyst, D. (2018). 'Audience as palimpsest. Mapping historical film audience research.' *Researching Past Cinema Audiences: Archives, Memories and Methods* conference (Aberystwyth University, UK).
- Burgin, V. (2004). *The Remembered Film*. London: Reaktion Books.
- DeCuir-Gunby, J. T., Marshall, P. L., and McCulloch, A. W. (2011). 'Developing and Using a Codebook for the Analysis of Interview data: An Example from a Professional Development Research Project', *Field Methods*, 23 (2), pp. 136-55.
- Fivush, R., Habermas, T., Waters, T.E.A., and Zaman, W. (2011). 'The making of autobiographical memory: Intersections of culture, narratives and identity', *International Journal of Psychology*, 46 (5), pp. 321-345.
- Friedman, J. (2014). 'Oral History, Hermeneutics, and Embodiment', *The Oral History Review*, 41 (2), pp. 290-300.
- Kuhn, A. (2002). *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Kuhn, A. (2010). 'Memory texts and memory work: Performances of memory in and with visual media', *Memory Studies*, 3(4), pp. 298-313.
- Kuhn, A. (2011). 'What to do with Cinema Memory', In Biltreyst, D., Maltby, R. and Meers, P. (eds.) *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 85-97.
- Kuhn, A., Biltreyst, D., and Meers, P. (2017). 'Memories of cinemagoing and film experience: An introduction', *Memory Studies*, 10(1), pp. 3-16.

- Halbwachs, M. (1992). *On Collective Memory*, trans. L. A. Coser, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Hanchard, M., Merrington, P., Wessels, B., Rogers, K., Pidd, M., Yates, S., Forrest, D., Higson, A., Townsend, N., Smits, R. (2020). 'Developing a computational ontology to understand the relational aspects of audience formation', *Emerald Open Res*, 2(5) (<https://doi.org/10.35241/emeraldopenres.13465.1>).
- Harper, S., and Porter, V. (1996). 'Moved to tears: weeping in the cinema in postwar Britain', *Screen*, 37(2), pp. 152-173.
- Misztal, B. A. (2003). *Theories of social remembering*. Maidenhead, Berkshire, England: Open University Press.
- Pillemer, D., (2001). 'Momentous events and the life story', *Review of General psychology*, 5(2), pp. 123-134.
- Pink, S. (2012). 'Advances in Visual Methodology: An Introduction', in S. Pink (ed.) *Advances in Visual Methodology*. London: Sage, pp. 3-16.
- Radstone, S. (2010). 'Cinema and Memory,' In Radstone, S. and Schwarz, B. (eds.) *Memory: histories, theories, debates*. New York: Fordham University Press, pp. 325-342.
- Rigney, A. (2016). 'Cultural Memory Studies: Mediation, narrative and the aesthetic', In Tota, A. L. and Hagen, T. (eds.) *Routledge International Handbook of Memory Studies*. New York: Routledge, pp. 65-76.
- Taylor, H. (2014) [1989]. *Scarlett's Women: Gone with the Wind and its female fans*. London: Virago.
- Treveri Gennari D., and Dibeltulo, S. (2017). 'It existed indeed.....it was all over the papers': memories of film censorship in 1950s Italy', *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, 14 (1), pp. 235-248.
- Treveri Gennari D., Dibeltulo, S., Hipkins, D., and O'Rawe, C. (2019). 'Analysing Memories through Video-Interviews: a Case Study of Post-War Italian Cinema-going', In Biltreyst D., Maltby, R. and Meers, P. (eds.) *The Routledge Companion to New Cinema History*. Routledge: New York, pp. 344-354.

Treveri Gennari, D., O'Rawe, C., Hipkins, D., Dibeltulo, S., and Culhane, S. (2021). *Italian Cinema Audiences: Histories and Memories of Cinema-going in Post-war Italy*. Bloomsbury Academic: New York.