

# "Something To Look Forward To": Memory Work on the Treasured Memories of Cinema Going in Bridgend, South Wales

Helen Richards, University of Nottingham, UK

## Introduction

For a large part of its history the field of film studies has ignored a rather important component of the film industry, its audience. Whilst studies have been completed on film production, distribution exhibition, and the films themselves, academics have continually disregarded the people at which all this was aimed. The discrepancy is currently being rectified with reception studies gaining increased attention and coming to the fore of the discipline. Nevertheless, many years of reception history have been lost, and the sources used to conduct work into the contemporary reception of films and cinema going habits of previous decades are dwindling. Sources that can be used to research past reception include newspapers and magazines, which contain reviews of films and the critical opinions of them at the time. However, if one wants to gain insight into the views of the public, the demographics of the mass audience at which these films were marketed and shown to, and their cinema going habits, then another approach is needed. Unless access to contemporary diaries is available, a project of memory reclamation must be undertaken. Indeed, as Jackie Stacey states, "if film history is to engage with ethnographic methods of audience analysis, as well as detailing cinema attendance statistically, then memory has to be a central consideration" (Stacey, 1994: 63) as "memories provide not only a flavour of cinemas and cinema going, but also a sense of the social context" (O'Brian, 1993: 7). This type of research can take the form of an oral history project where the researcher can interview people, or written work such as questionnaires and letter correspondence.

Memory reclamation has become an important research method within film studies, and several academics have produced book length studies of audience reception and cinema going habits using memory as their primary source. At its most basic, memory reclamation has been presented in such books as *Enter the Dream House* by Margaret O'Brian and Allen Eyles (O'Brian and Eyles, 1993), and Ian Breakwell and Paul Hammond's *Seeing in the Dark* (Breakwell and Hammond, 1990). Both of these works perform an important function in recording people's hitherto undocumented memories to "recreate going to the pictures when film was the great social habit" (O'Brian, 1993: 7), but they neglect the fact that memory is a "text to be deciphered, not a lost reality to be discovered" (Radstone, 2000: 10). Studies that do take this into consideration include Helen Taylor's *Scarlett's Women* (Taylor, 1989) and *Star Gazing* by Jackie Stacey (Stacey, 1994), two works that utilise similar methods for memory reclamation. Both authors wrote to national, female oriented magazines asking women with memories of *Gone With the Wind* in Taylor's case, and of female stars in the 1940s and 1950s for Stacey, to write to them. After receiving letters, and the subsequent questionnaires issued by Stacey, the two academics concentrated on interpreting their respondents' memories, both in the quantitative and psychoanalytic senses.

Perhaps the largest and most ambitious project of memory reclamation has been conducted by Annette Kuhn. The aims of her research project "Cinema Culture in 1930s Britain" were to "advance the notion of 'cinema culture' to describe the totality of the social historical context of popular cinema going, regarding 'going to the pictures' not as an isolated activity but as part of the culture of everyday life" and to "develop the idea of a national cinema culture as distinct from a national cinema" (Kuhn, n.d.). Kuhn utilised a similar approach to garner memories as those developed by Stacey and Taylor, such as publicising her project in specialist publications, interviewing a select number of respondents and sending questionnaires to those remaining. In addition she visited residential homes for Old Age Pensioners and interviewed people who had not originally volunteered information in response to her published letters. These tasks were completed in order to engage in what she terms "memory work," the "conscious and purposeful staging of memory." (Kuhn, n.d.) Kuhn set out four principles for memory work, which "involves an active staging of memory; takes a questioning attitude to the past and its (re)construction through memory; questions the transparency of what is remembered; and takes what is remembered as material for interpretation." (Radstone, 2000: 186) These principles become evident in her article reporting on the questionnaire survey part of her research, where the memory data was compiled and interpreted through the comprehensive framework of "going to the pictures" (Kuhn, 1999: 543), which encompassed all aspects of cinema culture, from cinema going as a leisure activity, to star appreciation.

It is the intention of this article to conduct memory work with regards to cinema going in the South Wales town of Bridgend. In so doing, the aim is to present an alternative form of local history to that presented in "official" sources such as the local newspapers, for as Susannah Radstone notes "memory [is] a rich source for those seeking alternatives to dominant versions of the past" (Radstone, 2000: 54). In addition to providing an alternative history, it is also an attempt to document the memories of a dwindling number of people for whom the cinema was "something to look forward to" before it is too late and their recollections are lost. Kuhn's principles for memory work will be utilised to form a method for this chapter and the process of garnering people's memories will be similar to those used by her, Stacey and Taylor, that of advertising in the press. However, it will differ significantly in its target for memories. These three academics advertised to a specially selected readership for specific incidents and time periods, for instance those who remembered 1940s stars, going to the cinema in the 1930s, and for the latter two academics, a female response especially. All three did so on a national scale. My aim is to provide a local collection of memories, not a national one. The target area is much smaller in order to provide an insight into the importance of cinema going in a local community, much like the recollections of cinema going habits in South London garnered by O'Brian and Eyles. Additionally, it will not be based on a specific gender's memories of films. It is hoped therefore, that a local case study on a selection of people from the Bridgend community will provide a comparison to the national studies conducted by Stacey, Taylor and Kuhn. Their observations made on a national scale will be built upon and become more sharply focussed when dealing with a smaller area of study.

It is important to note here that it is not the intention of this article to explore a "collective" or "popular" memory, but rather to consider "personal" memories about a certain aspect of the popular culture of the period; going to the cinema. Instead of providing the community's collective memory of cinema going, a "constellation" of personal memories from the people of the community will be presented and interpreted (Carrier quoted in Radstone, 2000: 37; see Appendix One). These personal memories will be evoked by a place, or rather four: the Palace, Cinema, Pavilion and Embassy cinemas in Bridgend, and will concern the habit of

cinema going. The value of this piece of work will be in its local focus. It will provide a specific case study of a region and will add to the growing number of local histories of British cinema going habits. It can also be used to compliment those studies conducted by Kuhn and Stacey, offering a local comparison to a national one. Additionally, it will record the previously undocumented memories of the Bridgend participants' cinema going habits.

Bridgend is an area worthy of study, due in equal parts to its location and its seventy eight year history of film exhibition. The town is located in the county of Mid Glamorgan and is virtually equidistant from the two heavily populated Welsh port cities of Cardiff and Swansea, which lie 20 miles on either side. To the town's north are the industrialised Welsh valleys of Ogmore and Garw. Bridgend is a market town and home to a trading estate where manufacturing companies have been the main employers for the last ninety years. Those townspeople not employed on the trading estate may have worked at the coal mines of Maesteg, the steel works at Port Talbot or in agriculture in the nearby Vale of Glamorgan. Only a limited amount of work has been conducted into reception studies in this area; the histories of cinema exhibition in both the major cities of south Wales have been detailed in David Berry's *Wales and Cinema: The First Hundred Years* (Berry, 1994), and research has been carried out by the social historians Bert Hogenkamp (1985) and Stephen Ridgewell (1995, 1997) into the culture of workmen and miner's cinemas in South Wales. The memories collected in this article will therefore contribute to the historical mapping of cinema exhibition and attendance in this part of south Wales.

Bridgend enjoyed a long run of film exhibition, from the itinerant film exhibitors at the town fair in 1900, the opening of its first permanent cinema in 1910, to the closure of the last in 1988, and this provides a wide time scale for the retrieval of memories. From the late thirties to the early 1980s, one company had a monopoly of the town's cinemas, Bridgend Cinemas Limited, owned by Mr George Issacs. Offering an alternative leisure activity to going to the rural community church or pub, Issacs and Bridgend Cinemas Limited are accountable for the majority of the memories of cinema going contained in this article. He provided a town with a population of approximately 15,000 working and middle class people with 2,500 seats in his four cinemas and the opportunity to escape their lives for an evening (figures based on the 1931, 1951 and 1971 Census). Subsequently, this article will also provide insight into the running of an independent film exhibition company, from the memories of those who worked for Bridgend Cinemas Limited.

It would be judicious to pause here to briefly consider the academic opinion of memory work, oral history and memoirs written after the fact, in regards to history. Many historians are sceptical about the quality, relevance, and objectivity of histories based on memory, and indeed even the relationship between history and memory is highly contentious. This distrust of memory by historians seem to stem from the fact that "memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings." (Perks, 1998: 69) That is to say, as people recollect their memories they are giving them new meanings, coloured by the contexts of their lives. Memory can never represent things as how they actually were because it is subject to change over time and events that have happened in the interviewee's life, or even a change in situation such as to whom the person is telling his memories. Another criticism is that oral history and memory have been described as "the telling of a tale" (Perks, 1998: 44) and that they are not as objective as official history sources. However, Dominick La Capra states this can also true of official history which itself is never wholly objective as "facts and fictions are intimately intertwined in any historical account because the documentary record is not a neutral record of data but is itself 'textually processed' by the culture in which it is

produced." (Spigel, 1995: 22) Whilst memories may or may not be influenced by various factors, and may be seen as narratives and *histories*, they do have advantages. Memories can provide a counter history; a history that has not been documented by official sources. It gives a voice to the previously ignored people and "provide[s] a more complete representation of historical experiences than official historiography" (Hoerschelmann, 2001: 88).

Essentially then, memory is extremely problematic. It is a source that must be treated with care. Even though it will never recreate history as it really happened in the Rankean sense (but then neither does official history), it does provide a viable alternative to the history documented in official sources. In this article, the memory texts, in the form of interviews and letters will be used with Kuhn's caution to "treat [them] not as 'truth', but as evidence of a particular source". (Kuhn, n.d.) Additionally, it seems fair to say that when one follows the second and third principle's of Kuhn's memory work when dealing with memory sources, which are to "take a questioning attitude to the past and its (re)construction through memory, [and] question the transparency of what is remembered" (Radstone, 2000: 186), and if one is careful and aware of the material one is handling, then a history constructed through memory is as relevant as one made from studying primary official sources and contemporary diaries.

If Annette Kuhn's principles of memory work form the method of this article, then her notion of cinema going as part of the culture of everyday life in 1930s Britain will be the starting point for the focus. For those people who took part in Kuhn's research, cinema going was an intrinsic part of their lives. It was the act of going to the cinema, the social space it provided, with whom they went and not necessarily the films that encouraged more than 60% of young people in the 1930s to attend the cinema twice weekly (Kuhn, 1999: 535). There are common features between the memories uncovered by Kuhn and myself with regards to these findings, as the memories of the people in Bridgend similarly stress the social importance of the cinema, rather than the films they went to see. However, what becomes apparent after one listens to the interviews and reads the letters from the town's cinema goers, is that whilst going to the pictures was part of everyday life during the period from the early 1930s to the late 60s in Bridgend, it was also a special treat, or a special event for them. It was, as Mrs Marnie Riley wrote "something to look forward to", and a great deal of excitement was generated by the activity of paying a visit to one of the four cinemas in the town.

Indeed, the memories imparted by the Bridgend cinema goers appear to be the "treasured memories" that Jackie Stacey talks about in relation to the responses she received for her book. Stacey writes that treasured memories are those in which people have a "personal investment", which "have been likened to a personal possession that can never be lost [and] can be regularly revisited" (Stacey, 1994: 64) These memories could have originated from what Stacey terms "transformative moments", periods when the person is undergoing changes such as in adolescence, and that they also provide "personal utopias which offer a kind of escape from the constraints of daily life" (Stacey, 1994: 64). The respondents to my letter also hold dear their memories of going to the pictures in Bridgend. Mrs Marnie Riley stated in her letter that "I have many happy memories of the picture houses" and felt that "I must write to you" in order to share them, whilst Mr Claude Nettleship wrote that my mentioning of the venues had "brought back a lot of memories." They obviously enjoyed revisiting and recounting their memories, as their answering of my letter shows. It was clear from many of the memory texts that cinema going did happen at transformative times in the respondents' lives, such as childhood, adolescence, and prior to moving, marrying or joining the armed services. The cinemas also become personal utopias; one man remembered spending more time at the cinema than at school and gave that as an explanation for the bad spelling in his

letter. Another lady remembered going to the Bridgend cinemas when she was a child as a special treat when she visited her grandparents, and stopped going to them after they died. The cinemas in Bridgend were the spaces where these transformative moments took place, and therefore come to the forefront of the memory when it is recalled. They are “emblematic” spaces for the respondents, intertwined with the transformative moments of their lives.

Stacey's final point about the cinema being an escape from daily life bears direct relevance to this project, as it points out the departure of my study from Kuhn's. In her research, Kuhn found going to the pictures was part of every day life in 1930s Britain, and it was too in Bridgend, but here it was also a kind of escape, a treat, something special. As a result, this article will focus on different aspects of people's personal treasured memories of cinema going such as the distinctions between the four cinemas, the entertainment provided there, personal preferences for films and stars, which will be intertwined with the memories of the business from people who worked within them. Throughout this article the idea that the cinema was a special event and a form of escape, that it represented something more than a part of daily life, will be emphasised. A trip to the Embassy, Cinema, Palace or Pavillion gave the rurally based inhabitants of Bridgend a couple of hours away from their lives of working in light industry and living in their “drab, utilitarian” homes to relax and escape into the world of films and the luxurious fittings of the cinemas.

## **Methodology**

To begin the initial stage of this work it was necessary to adhere to Kuhn's first principle of memory work; the active staging of memory. In order to conform to this, a letter was placed in the local free newspapers, the *Bridgend Recorder* and the *Gem*, the regional *South Wales Echo* and the Principality's national newspaper, the *Western Mail* in May 2001 asking people to write or telephone the researcher with their memories of cinema going to the four cinemas in Bridgend. A copy of this letter was also posted on the message board of an internet guide to the town ([www.knowhere.co.uk](http://www.knowhere.co.uk)). A wide selection of respondents was desired from the locality in question so the letter did not specify gender, age, or time requirements. Indeed, this was a conscious decision so as not to limit the number of responses received. Whilst the town does have a seventy eight year history of continuous film exhibition, the period to be studied would be determined more by the received responses and the age of the respondents. Therefore, the proposed time period under study was not as strict as those studied by Kuhn and Stacey, but would range from the earliest memories of the respondents to the latest. The published letter was fairly ambiguous about the subject matter of the memories too, again to generate as many replies as possible. Readers were asked if they remembered going to any of the four cinemas, about the films they saw there, and what the cinemas looked like, inside and out. In addition, there were further questions about the staff who worked there, and on the social space the cinemas provided, such as if they functioned as a place for first dates and 'courting'. As a result of this letter, the internet message board generated three replies, and the newspaper letters garnered seventeen written letters, sixteen telephone calls, and two subsequent extended interviews. Unlike Stacey and Kuhn, no further questionnaires were sent to the respondents (see Appendix Two).

Overall, the response was a little unbalanced gender-wise; out of the thirty six people who contacted the researcher, twenty five were men and only eleven were women. Five of the respondents had formerly worked in the cinemas in Bridgend, most commonly at the

Embassy. A further two were involved in the film business with one running his own distribution company of science fiction films and the other with a son who works for a production company. Another respondent was a definite cinephile who had, in the past, owned his own portable projector and screen, and had often arranged the showing of newsreels for the children of the neighbourhood in his front room, whilst four of the men belonged to the British Film Institute. There was not a large discrepancy within the ages of the respondents, with all those who replied being over fifty years of age. Those who stated their age and birth dates were commonly around seventy, with a few over eighty, and the youngest being fifty years old. Consequently, and because these were also the dates reported by the respondents, the period under study ranges from the early 1930s to the late sixties, with all of the respondents being children, adolescents, or young adults at their time of going to the cinema, again as inferred by their letters and conversation. Thus the time period under study is unintentionally similar to that concentrated on by O'Brian and Eyles, who compiled the memories of cinema going in South London between 1920 and 1960.

In retrospect, to make the project more comprehensive and thorough, the researcher should have asked all of the respondents to state their ages, and in order to further assess the demographics, the occupancies in which they were engaged at the time of their cinema-going heyday, as Stacey and Kuhn did. However, the non-specific nature of my letter with concern to the ages, jobs and memories was motivated in part because of the field under study. As Kuhn, Stacey and Taylor all publicised their projects in the national press, they were virtually guaranteed a large response. My research was based on a smaller area and was advertised only in a local press, and consequently would mean a smaller number of responses. I did not want to exclude people from writing to me or to limit them by imposing restrictions on the time or subject of their memories. Nevertheless, I received far more replies than I expected and as a result was able to draw out common themes and subjects from my correspondents' memories.

The collection of the memories was done with little provocation. Those who replied to me by letter answered some of the questions put forward by my own letter to the newspaper, but also added other memories such as prices and programme details. The telephone interviews took a similar form, with little prompts from the researcher for additional information pertaining to the films seen or special events that had happened at the cinemas. The two extended interviews conducted with Mr John Rawle and Mr Bill Adams were conversational in style, with the researcher 'taking the back seat', letting the interviewees talk at length about their memories with small interjections from myself. Whilst I did not excessively prompt my respondents, it is fair to say that they may have done so themselves. There is evidence, especially in the written memoirs, that a few people had consulted local history books, such as *Bridgend 900* by David Pearce (Pearce, 1993), and Natalie Murphy's archive photographic books *Central Bridgend Around Elder Street* (Murphy, 1996) and *Images of Wales: Bridgend Oldcastle and Newcastle* (Murphy, 2000) to aid their memories, which in turn may have influenced them and their recollections. Indeed, during his extended interview, Mr Adams consulted his copy of *Halliwel's Guide to the Movies* to remember what films he had seen at the cinemas in Bridgend. These books were probably used with the best intentions as prompts, but may have had the inadvertent effect of making some of the people remember false or inaccurate memories, that is to say, remembering what they had not experienced (see Appendix Three). The use of these prompts and the resulting effects brought the second and third principles of Kuhn's memory work into consideration. Due to the use of these prompts, the researcher was forced into taking "a questioning attitude to the past and its (re)construction through memory", and had to "question the transparency of what is

remembered" more immediately. (Kuhn, n.d.) However, the effects were most probably negligible and Kuhn herself used the prompt of a 1930s film annual to help her interviewees along in some interviews for her research project (Maltby, 1999: 137). I do not consider this to have vastly affected the memory reclamation work, although a cautious attitude will be taken over the truthfulness of the memories. After conducting the first phase of memory work, that of garnering memories, and considering them in light of Kuhn's second and third principles, it was possible to advance onto the fourth principle; interpreting memories.

## Findings

The majority of the correspondents remembered having visited all four of the cinemas in Bridgend, or at least three; the Palace, Cinema and Embassy, as the Pavilion closed in 1940. The most common memory people recollected in the interviews and letters was the ranking of the cinemas. There were definite distinctions between the venues in the minds and memories of the respondents, which were distinguished in terms of "the smartest and most comfortable". Out of the thirty six respondents, twenty ranked the cinemas, most often on the levels of comfort. This is similar to the observations recorded by Kuhn. In her research, Kuhn determined that her "respondents frequently drew a distinction between luxurious picture palaces on the one hand and downmarket fleapits on the other" (Kuhn, 1999: 536), thus showing a practice that was at work all over the country was also used by the people of Bridgend.

It is apparent from the memory texts that the townspeople regarded the Embassy as by far a cut above the rest, shortly followed by the Cinema, with the Palace and the Pavilion competing for the bottom of the pile with the latter usually winning before its closure. The way the respondents made the distinctions relied on their perceptions of the comfort and presentation of the cinema buildings, and less on the films exhibited. Nevertheless, the levels of comfort, or perhaps discomfort in the Pavilion and Palace cinemas, did not diminish the fondness of the cinemas in the memories of the people who went there. Indeed, a continuing theme in all of the memory texts is how special the cinemas in Bridgend were as a form of escape physically within the buildings themselves, and mentally, with the fantasy lives shown in the films. People could enjoy coming to the spacious exhibition buildings, which had staircases "five times as wide as the stairs at home", fitted carpets in contrast to the rugs in most houses and festooned curtains to marvel at the wonderful modern appliances and "luxuries you could never imagine" on show in the feature films. Central heating and ice lollies from the kiosk freezer completed the escape from the people of Bridgend's "utilitarian and drab" post war homes and "boring and mundane" jobs in the manufacturing industry.

Until the opening of the Embassy in 1939, the Cinema was the most preferable cinema in Bridgend. Mr John Cavalli described it in his email as being "a cut above the other two theatres" in the town because it "specialised in first run major studio productions and ran its one double feature programme for the entire week." Mr Cavalli was one of the few correspondents who used this method of classification to determine the standards of the picture houses. The majority of the other respondents judged the cinemas on their level of comfort, conforming to Kuhn's observation that a particular cinema, and the comfort it offered was more important than the film to many cinema goers. The possible reason for Mr Cavalli's exception from this more general method is his professed cinephile tendencies. Mr Cavalli belongs to the BFI and his son works for a film production company. Combined,

these forces show that compared to the other respondents, individual films bear greater importance to Mr Cavalli as he had a stated interest in them. This would inevitably emphasise the films he saw in his memory, over the habit of cinema going. However, it was still apparent from his correspondence that Mr Cavalli deeply enjoyed going to see specific films at these venues, and they form treasured memories for him. He clearly enjoyed revisiting his memories and because of his continuing interest in films, exemplified in his BFI membership, his "cinema going past is no foreign country but something continuously reproduced as a vital aspect of daily life in the present." (Maltby, 1999: 136)

It is fair to say that the three other cinemas provoked the strongest reaction amongst the respondents because they were at either ends of the extreme, with the interior levels of comfort varying greatly. These memories conform to the more general method used to distinguish the venues, rather than the films shown. The Pavilion was only remembered by a few people due to its closure in 1940, but prompted a memory that was recounted by all people who mentioned it. The Pavilion was constructed out of corrugated iron, and was described by Mr Alun Lewis as being "ramshackle" and as a "hanger type building" by Mrs Jean Broom, with the only architectural feature of any note being its sloping floor to aid viewing of films and "five [ornamental] elephants on top of the door." The most prevalent memory recalled though was that every time it rained, the resultant noise created by the rain on the Pavilion's roof drowned out the soundtrack of the film, making it impossible to hear the dialogue of the actors upon the screen. Mr William Rees recalled that the Pavilion definitely was "not so hot when the hail stones came down" (see Appendix Four). These memories do not particularly conform to an ideal personal utopia. However, it does show, that whilst conditions were not of the best cinemas in town, the Pavilion did provide a place of escape to the people of Bridgend. Indeed for the less affluent inhabitants, going to the Pavilion could still be a special event where one could escape daily life and immerse oneself in the fantasy world of film, rather than the comforts of the building.

With its closure in 1940, the Pavilion left the unenviable position of being the least desirable cinematic venue to the Palace, which it seems to have fitted into all too comfortably. Variouslly called the "bug house", "bug hutch", and "fleapit", with the most complimentary adjectives given by the respondents being "dingy", "downmarket" and "quite scruffy", the Palace was noticeably at lower end of the market. It specialised in B films, low budget films and children's matinees, but again it was the memories of the experiences of the cinema building that prevailed over the recollections of the films seen. Indeed, like the Pavilion 'rain on the roof' memory, it was the Palace's deficiencies that stuck in the minds of the people who went there. Apparent from the letters and interviews, the problems with going to the Palace were inextricably linked to its nicknames, which referred to bugs and fleas. Mrs Beryl May and Mrs Marnie Riley and their boyfriends shared similar experiences here. Mrs May wrote that after going upstairs to the circle and starting to watch a film, her boyfriend "felt something on his hand, as we both smoked at the time we flicked the lighter on and on his arm there was a beetle of some sort -- I can honestly say we didn't stay there very long". Mrs Riley remembered there "had to be a very good film to want to go there because we always came home with fleas on us" and Mrs Lynne Daniels concurred by writing "one only visited the Palace if desperate." In order to combat this invasion of bugs, Mr Gerard Price recalled usherettes spraying disinfectant over the balcony onto the unsuspecting audience below and a resident cat to catch the mice. An employee of Bridgend Cinemas Limited, the company that owned all four of the cinemas, Mr John Rawle stated in his interview that it was company policy not to turn on the lights in the Palace because it was too grimy to put them on. Similar to the Pavilion and despite the rather poor conditions of the building and the unpleasant

experiences of the audience members, the Palace did have its own regular cinema goers who filled the auditorium. Additionally, the Palace, like the Pavilion before it, was not the epitome of comfort, but it still provided a place of escape. In this way it could have been a personal utopia because it was a different place from work and home for its audience members. It was a place to be alone, or only with the people one wanted to be with, and where one could immerse oneself in the escapism shown on the screen.

Whilst the Palace catered to the lower end of the market and the Cinema was a "middle of the road" venue, the Embassy remained in the memory of the people who went to it as the last word in luxury. Whereas both the Pavilion and the Palace caused the respondents to remember all that was faulty with them, the Embassy evoked memories of how luxurious it was and how much of a special event it had been to go there. The words used by the respondents in regards to the Embassy were the complete opposite of the negative ones to describe the Palace; "plush," "elegant," "classy," "very posh," "opulent" and "upmarket." The Embassy was Bridgend Cinemas' flagship cinema. Indeed, it was not just the people of Bridgend that classified the cinemas, but the company who ran them did so too. Mr Rawle remembered the owner of the Bridgend Cinemas Ltd, Mr George Issacs' policy towards his three remaining cinemas in the late 1950s. He distinguished them by saying the Embassy was for comfort, Cinema for good films, and the Palace was the fleapit with which he did not overly concern himself. Mr Issacs' mandate for the Embassy, to primarily provide comfort, was reflected in the respondents' memories of this cinema. Mrs May recalled that the Embassy was the "most luxurious of the three", with its "carpeted staircase leading to a carpeted lounge with a cloakroom, bucket chairs and tables" before entering the balcony. Mrs Daniels remembered how spacious the auditorium and front of house facilities were at Embassy. The Embassy really did represent a personal utopia into which nearly all the inhabitants of Bridgend could retreat. Its comfort was so far removed from the majority of its patrons' homes that it really was a special event to visit this palace of luxury. With its central heating for the winter and air conditioning for summer, the Embassy provided its audience with temperature control that they did not have in their houses. Indeed, coming from their mostly terraced "two up, two down" houses, which were sparsely decorated with rugs and basic furniture, the opulence of the red velvet curtains and plush fitted carpets of the Embassy was "like something straight out of the movies." Only the wealthiest of Bridgend's inhabitants would have had spacious rooms decorated with fitted carpets, the majority of the townsfolk could not afford, or were not interested in having these furnishings in their houses, as the current trend of home improvement and DIY only developed in the 1970s.

In addition to the level of comfort recalled, respondents also recollected the location and exterior and interior specifics of the buildings. These memories again reflect the national ones discovered by Kuhn. She found that memories of the cinemas themselves were much more prevalent than the films viewed in them (Kuhn, 1999: 539). The buildings that housed the cinemas in Bridgend were immediately identifiable, as their architecture was so different to the surrounding buildings. The Palace, Cinema and Embassy had all been built for cinema exhibition use; a contemporary modern past time and their architecture and décor reflected this. However, whilst the Embassy was an extremely imposing and impressive building due to its stand alone status by the River Ogmore, the other two cinemas were built in the commercial streets of the town, mirroring the national trend for high street and neighbourhood cinemas. The Embassy would have performed the function of the high street cinema in Bridgend, relying on its material comforts and special event (or later on blockbuster) films to attract audiences from the town and further a field, whilst the Cinema and Palace were more neighbourhood cinemas, attracting a steady clientele from the town.

However, as all three cinemas were within five minutes walking distance from each other, location was not a massive determining feature of whether people went to them, instead they selected the cinema they were going to on the basis on what films were showing, and for the majority of correspondents, what the building was like inside. Respondents recollected that the Palace was situated on Derwen Road, near the town's railway station and the Cinema was down a small side street called Cross Street, off Elder Street. Indeed, not only do the respondents remember the locations of the cinemas, but in the Cinema's case there are strong recollections of the buildings surrounding it. The Cinema seems to have been in a rather international area of the town. On one side was a Chinese laundry and on the other, Conti's, an Italian café where many of the audience members of the Cinema would go before or after to drink coffee and listen to the jukebox. Opposite the Cinema was the Wyndham hotel, one of the town's few hotels (see Appendix Five). Common to all the cinemas, in the respondents' minds, were steps that led up to the venues' doors. Both Mr Bill Adams and Mrs Lynne Daniels remember having to go up three or four stone steps and into each of the cinemas through swing doors. Mrs Daniels wrote that the interior of the Cinema was blue in colour, while Mr Adams recalled that there were framed photos of film stars in the foyer. The majority of the respondents remembered there were balconies in each of the three cinemas. The cinema buildings could have represented an architectural personal utopia. The distinctive buildings would have been in sharp contrast to the houses inhabited by the Bridgend cinema goers, which were mostly in rows of terraces. The sheer difference between the two types of buildings endeared the cinema exteriors to the respondents, and have become treasured memories.

The most vivid recollections of the buildings involved the Embassy. The other two cinemas provoked vague recollections, but the memories concerned with the Embassy were still clear in many of the respondents' minds. There are several reasons for this. Although the Embassy closed in 1987, the building is still standing, albeit in a derelict state, and is located in a very busy area of the town, by the inner bypass and near the Tesco superstore. Thus it is still an extremely visible landmark and the respondents probably pass it on a weekly basis, helping them to regularly update their memories of the exterior of the building. A reason for the strong memories for the interior of the Embassy as the epitome of luxury in the 1940s is that it would have been a huge contrast to the audience members' homes, making them remember the details of it more specifically. Fitted carpets, central heating and a freezer in the kiosk were all hitherto unknown in reality by the cinema goers, having only ever seen such luxuries on the screen. The Embassy would have been a personal utopia to many of its patrons, a magical place of escape from their daily lives. Mrs Margaret Hewiett, an usherette at the Embassy during its initial years fondly remembered her wine coloured uniform, which matched the carpet and curtains, trimmed with gold in the auditorium. Mr Adams recalled the same curtains, which opened at the start of films, the soft lighting, the art deco proscenium arch and embossed ceiling. It was, he remembered, "the last word in luxury." Indeed, both Mr John Rawle and Mr Alan Reece, employees at the Embassy during the late fifties and sixties respectively, recall that it was George Issacs' belief that presentation was everything. Every evening, before the curtains lifted and the films started, the projectionists would manoeuvre the nine floodlights in three different colours over the gold leaf on the art deco proscenium to create a light show. However, they also recollected that due to all the art deco cladding, the acoustics within the auditorium were poor. Many respondents remembered with great clarity walking up the Embassy steps, in through the four swing doors with "wonderful chrome elongated door handles," and into the,

good sized foyer with a ticket box situated on the rear wall. Double doors stood each side of the ticket box [leading into the auditorium] and wide stairs lead from the side of the foyer to the very spacious cloakroom and seating area upstairs. Wide stairs took you to the front of the balcony.

The spacious interior decorated with luxury, plush fabrics, and the uniqueness of a cloakroom, complete with attendant would have represented a world so different to the users' daily lives and homes. The curtains, which were recalled by at least four respondents, were a focal point; they represented such luxury to the audience. Going to the Embassy truly would have been a special event as it was such a glamorous place, and the habit has evolved into a treasured memory for those who visited there in the late thirties through to the late sixties.

The cinemas in Bridgend were not just graded by the public on their appearance and the films shown. They were also divided and categorised socially: in the class sense, whom one was going with, and the purpose of the visit in the memories of the respondents. The facilities at the three cinemas were divided by economics and therefore each cinema became available to different types of people. The Palace offered cheap entertainment with the least expensive prices of the three. Mr Rees explained in his letter that the money he used to pay for his ticket at the Palace came from "taking empty beer bottles back to the local pub" and that the cinema provided "plenty of fun [for] not a lot of money." Whilst this venue did offer 'cheap and cheerful' entertainment it also divided the audience along class lines. It would have been frequented most often by the working classes of the town, as Mrs Valerie Morgan wrote "it was not patronised very much by the smart people in the town," illustrating what type of entertainment was available to whom. The prices rose at the cinemas with the level of comfort and quality of films, with the Embassy being the most expensive of the three. The prices at each cinema were not terribly expensive, and allowed a great number of people to partake in the habit.

The Palace offered the cheapest entertainment as Mr B Williams recollected that it cost 2p or 3p to enter on a Saturday afternoon and stay there till 10pm at night, offering good value for money in the early thirties. The Embassy's prices in the fifties and sixties were considerably higher, with seats down the front costing 9d, 1s 9d for the centre and back stalls, and the rise in price correlating to the rise in status and good viewing, with the balcony seats costing 2s 6d. Whilst these prices were low compared to today's and even contemporary standards and made the cinema available to many people, it did exclude others. With the average wage being around five pounds during the early 1960s, paying for a seat a 2s 6d represented one twenty fifth of the weekly salary. Whilst this is a seemingly insignificant amount of money, if a large family went to the cinema the cost would increase and often make the cinema going habit prohibitive. For the less affluent members of the town, going to the cinemas became a special treat. It was not part of their everyday lives because they couldn't afford it. Len (no last name provided) remembered that although it was only three pence to go into the cinemas in the late twenties, his parents couldn't afford for him to go often because he had lots of brothers and sisters, while Mr Kenneth Woodroff had to curtail his bi-weekly visits to the cinemas because he couldn't afford it as his family was growing too.

If one could afford to actually enter one of the three cinemas, then certain parts were available to different people. Mrs Valerie Morgan wrote that children occupied the first four to five rows in the Embassy, as those were the cheapest seats. The balcony seats were prohibitively expensive, and "no one could afford to go upstairs," except on special occasions such as dates. Once inside the cinemas, economic differences became even more apparent

with what appeared on the screen. The American films shown in the cinemas represented a completely different world to that experienced by the small Welsh town's audience members. Mr Alun Lewis recalled that "you saw things on the screen you couldn't have at home, and you didn't know what they were eating." The seemingly everyday electrical items and food used by the Americans on screen, were luxury to the Bridgend cinema goers and became their ideal. The escape from their daily lives and into the cinemas, for a small price, could provide them an entrance into their personal utopias. The event of going to the cinema became a special treat, not only for those who couldn't afford it very often, but also for those who could as they marvelled at the fantastical lives and luxury homes they saw upon the screens.

The purpose of the cinemas as social space and with whom one went was often determined by the entrance prices, and occasionally by what was on show. Many of the earliest memories of the respondents concern the habit of cinema going as being a family activity. The respondents aged seventy and over distinctly remembered that it was their mothers who introduced them to the cinema going habit. Mr Cavalli wrote that his earliest recollection of film going was being taken by his mother to see a silent version of *Ben Hur*, "on one of her twice a week visits to the flea pit cinema." His memories of his mother were that she had been "a lover of the cinema all her long life," who upon moving from the Welsh valleys to Bridgend "increased her film going and endeavoured to visit each of the pictures houses at least once a week", averaging at least three visits per week. Mr Bill Adams had similar recollections. His mother used to escape the toil and grind of daily family life by visiting the cinemas with a friend on a Saturday afternoon, often staying until closing time. As the cheapest form of entertainment available, it was still a special treat for his mother to go. Accompanying his mother and her friend, he remembers, was a large bag of fruit and sweets that they could "munch on" through the performances. Whereas Mr Cavalli's mother would spread her visits to each cinema over the week, Mr Adams' mother would often visit all three in one day, one for the matinee performance, one for the early evening show, and one for the late showing. These recollections of their mothers' cinema going habits correspond with the studies conducted on female audiences, showing there was a large female audience who attended the cinema with great regularity even in this local study. Their children have inherited the habit of cinema going from their mothers. In addition, the importance of their cinema going and their escape of daily life lives on in the treasured memories of their children.

However, although the audience was made up of a large amount of women, it also consisted of other family members. Mrs M Rowland's earliest memories of cinema going concern watching silent westerns with her brother in the Palace in the 1920s. Going to see the first talkie at the Cinema, *Broadway Melody*, was an entire family outing with both of her parents accompanying her. Mrs Lynne Daniels' parents often went with her to the Cinema. Mrs Louise Goldsworthy recalled how she and her parents went on a "special visit" to the Embassy in 1955 to see *Oklahoma!* in Cinemascope. The cinemas, whilst performing as a place of escape for its audience, also provided a place where families could send their children to escape from them. If the Saturday matinee audience was not mothers escaping from their families, it consisted of children packed off by their mothers. Mrs Lynne Daniels recalled that her Saturdays often started with a visit to the Saturday Morning Picture Club at the Embassy, where she enjoyed "good innocent fifties fun" with her friends. She remembers that to begin the proceedings, the young audience used to sing a special song that went "Here we are again, happy as can be, for our club show at the Embassy!"

Indeed Saturday at the cinemas in Bridgend acted as a microcosm of their social functions and changing audience. Saturday morning was for children, the matinees were frequented by a largely female audience, or whole families, whilst the evening showings were used by "courting" couples. As the young audience members grew older, their reasons for visiting the cinema changed somewhat. Continuing to visit the cinemas with their friends, they also started to use the venues as ideal places for dates. The darkness and double seats at the back of the Cinema and Embassy provided chances for "a few cuddles," or perhaps more often, the opportunity for one to "just sit next to your date for ages, the girl frozen with anticipation, the boy wondering whether to dare to put his arm on her shoulder, never mind actually kissing". The balconies of the three cinemas operated as a special treat, as Mr Ross Thomas remembered most men and boys taking their dates to sit there. Again the cinemas functioned as a place of escape, as near to a private space that young couples could be without having their families peering over their every movement.

For one respondent, Mrs Marnie Riley, the Cinema was an especially important place in her treasured memories, as it acted again as a romantic setting. It was at the Cinema that she had her first date with her husband to be in August 1940, who was stationed with the Army at a town ten miles away. After marrying him in November of that year, after three dates all at the Cinema, Mrs Riley did not see her husband again till VE Day in May 1945. Mrs Riley's treasured memory of the social function performed by the cinemas in Bridgend originated from a transformative moment. The Cinema is of special significance in her mind, and she often returns to this treasured memory because it was the place she fell in love with her husband. Indeed the memories recollected by all of the above respondents came at transformative times in their lives, and are fondly revisited in their correspondence. Many of the memories come from childhood, when the respondent could either remember going to the cinema with their mothers and the rest of the family, or as an adolescent or young adult, using the cinema as a social space for dating. Here, the treasured memories of the Bridgend cinemas are constructed through both Stacey's assertions of the cinema as a place of escape from daily lives, and originating at transformative moments of the respondents' lives. Additionally, these recollections again echo those national memories uncovered by Kuhn. In her research project, she discovered that in the 1930s, cinema going "appears to have been less about particular films, or even films in general, than about experiences surrounding the activity of going to the pictures." (Kuhn, 1999: 539) Instead in Bridgend, as on the national scale, going to the cinema was a social activity that generated treasured memories of the experiences that happened there. The cinema buildings, the plush and luxurious interiors, the social and economic divisions between each of the cinemas, and then within them, the social space they provided, and consequently how special it was to go to them are all emphasised in the majority of the people's memories from Bridgend.

Whilst memories of the social functions and experiences of the cinema were given precedent in the recollections of the Bridgend respondents, the films seen were not ignored entirely. The majority of the respondents, whilst not recalling specific films, could remember the typical content of the programmes featured at the three cinemas. Mrs Louise Goldsworthy recollected that the three hour programme at the Cinema contained "news, a small film and then the main film and also some adverts." There was also an interval, during which an usherette sold ice creams to the audience. The ice cream would have been a luxury food to these cinema goers, something they would not have had at home and this is why it has remained an important part of their memories of the cinemas. There was the general programme at all three cinemas, but films were changed at differing times. When the Embassy opened, all three cinemas changed their programmes twice weekly, but the Cinema

and Embassy eventually went on to change their programme only once a week, with the latter having a licence for showing films on a Sunday. Employees of the three cinemas remembered that each cinema had a different and distinct programme and that films did not go from one to another. However, that was not the case for the newsreel. The Cinema and Embassy shared the Pathe, or more often the British Movie Tone newsreel. All three former Bridgend Cinemas Ltd employees who contacted the researcher; John Rawle, Ken Lissamore and Alan Reece, remembered that when each had held the post of third projectionist at the Embassy, it was their job to sprint over to the Cinema with the newsreel immediately after it had finished playing at the Embassy. This would happen twice a night, as there were two complete programmes per night at each cinema. The fact that a large majority of the respondents could not remember specific film demonstrates just how important the act of going to the cinema was, rather than the going to see the films being shown. For the employees of the cinemas who saw so many films as they were projecting them, they have almost all dissolved into one. Instead they remembered the details of working the machines and transferring the films, and did so with great fondness. All of the employees imparted a great sense of satisfaction that they had been employed at the cinemas, and that they had enjoyed their work there. In their memories, it was almost as if they felt glamour of the films and buildings in which they were shown had somehow rubbed off on them. All of them had treasured memories of working for Bridgend Cinemas Ltd.

Two respondents had vivid recollections not of films, but of film studio logos. Mrs Lynne Daniels remembered how nearly every film she saw in the fifties seemed to be preceded by "the big gong being struck by the muscle bound man" of J Arthur Rank. Mr Cavalli, who is of sufficient age to recall the coming of sound to cinema, remembered how frightened he had been as a small boy when the previously silent MGM lion roared for the first time. The studio logos remained in the memories of these two correspondents because they were out of the ordinary. The lion hadn't roared before, and the Rank man was quite exotically masculine compared to the men of Bridgend for Mrs Daniels. Most of the respondents could not remember specific films they saw at the Palace, Cinema or Embassy. Mrs Beryl May wrote "I can't remember many names of the films," even though she had extremely vivid recollections of the interiors of all three cinemas. Similar sentiments were echoed by Mr Derek Richards, who admitted "I'm afraid I have forgotten the names of the films we saw there." Nevertheless, several respondents did recall a few films that they had seen at the Bridgend cinemas. Out of the thirty six respondents, twenty people cited film titles in their correspondence, but there was only one film that was mentioned by a significant number of people. *Key Largo* and *The Sound of Music* were mentioned by two respondents, whilst all other films were mentioned solely by individual responses. Similarly, there was no consensus with regards to film stars. There appears to have been none of the "enduring fandom" (Maltby and Stokes, 1999: 135) that Kuhn discusses, practised by the cinema goers of Bridgend. No correspondents volunteered the information that they belonged to any fan clubs, or if they had read any contemporary film publications, such as *Picturegoer*. The most mentioned stars in the letters and interviews were Jeanette MacDonald, with four people talking about her, Nelson Eddy with three, the Three Stooges (3), Lon Chaney (2), Roy Rogers (2), Humphrey Bogart (2), James Cagney (2) and Abbott and Costello (2). Deana Durbin, Clark Gable, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers were amongst other stars who were only mentioned by individual writers and interviewees. The films and the films stars on show at the cinemas in Bridgend did not provoke treasured memories in the minds of the respondents, unlike those studied by Stacey in *Star Gazing* (Stacey, 1994). Again the reason for this may be, echoing Kuhn's findings, that going to the cinema was primarily about the experience, and not for going to see films.

The only film that provoked vivid memories from a significant amount of respondents was *Gone With The Wind*. Five respondents mentioned the 1939 movie and it left them with treasured memories, just as it did the generations of women studied by Helen Taylor in *Scarlett's Women* (Taylor, 1989). However, what is different about the treasured memories of the Bridgend viewers of *Gone With the Wind* when compared to those concentrated on by Taylor, is that their recollections do not revolve around the film itself, but focus on the process of going to see it. There is no mention by any of the Bridgend respondents of the film's story line, stars, characters, costumes or music, but instead they all remember queuing to get into the cinemas to see it. Mr Bill Adams recalled that when the film first came to Bridgend and the Embassy in the early 1940s, there were huge queues to gain admission. When it came again to the Cinema in 1953, Mrs Valerie Morgan remembered how "the Cinema was packed for a week" and that it caused "queues around the block [because] a whole younger generation had never seen it." Queuing to see the film during this week long showing was Mrs Marnie Riley. She wrote that she and her husband

went early one Saturday morning to see *Gone With The Wind*. The film started at 9 AM, and we were the first ones on the steps of the Cinema at 8 AM. The boss [manager?] was very impressed and he asked us if we had been there all night. He took us inside and gave us the best seats in the house, free of charge. The film was marvellous.

The memories of queuing again emphasise the idea that the practice of going to the cinema was far more important to the audience members than the films they saw. It is remarkable that not one of the respondents mentioned anything about *Gone With The Wind*, but that they all referred to the queues that were formed outside of the cinemas to go and see it. The correspondents preferred to revisit their treasured memories of cinema going, to those of the film. Watching the film, even *Gone With The Wind*, was less special than the act of going to see it.

## **Conclusion**

After completing the four principles of Kuhn's memory work it can be seen that the recollections of the cinema goers in Bridgend are indeed treasured memories. Their memories of going to the Pavilion, Palace, Cinema and Embassy are often revisited and originated, for the most part, at transformative moments in their lives. The cinemas themselves represented personal utopias into which the respondents could escape from their daily lives. The picture houses had special meanings in their lives and were more than just part of the culture of everyday life as Kuhn found in her research. The visits to them were "something to look forward to" as they provided such a contrast to the home lives of their audiences. From the plush red and gold velvet curtains of the Embassy to the tin roof of the Pavilion, each cinema provided a space to leave behind worries, hard work and families. Nevertheless, the results of this project do in some ways echo Kuhn's in finding that it was the experiences of going to the cinema, rather than the films watched there that remain the most vivid in their memories. The experiences of the varying levels of comfort in the theatres, the interiors and exteriors, where one could sit, with whom one went, and the actual processes of going such as queuing to see films are fondly remembered and are emphasised over the memories of actual films by almost all of the respondents from Bridgend. These treasured memories also perform other functions, they provide an alternative history of cinema going in Bridgend. They represent a people's

history, an unofficial history that has been previously ignored. Whilst this article does not profess to detail a true and complete history it has presented the memories of cinema going by the people of Bridgend as "evidence of a particular source". This source may not be completely historically accurate, but it does provide an alternative viewpoint of history, told by the people who lived it. Most importantly, the previously undocumented memories have now been recorded and provide a rich resource with which to study how the cinema going habit was so important to the people of Bridgend, as it was to people all over the United Kingdom.

## Appendices

Appendix One: It is the understanding of the researcher that popular memory refers to a form of memory possessed by a large number of people within a community (but is different to dominant memory, which is often created from official sources like governments). For instance a popular memory of the cinema would be, if considering Kuhn's research, that it was a part of everyday life in the 1930s. The personal memory would be how it was a part of daily life for an individual. In this research project the cinemas do represent a part of popular memory as they "are already invested with collectively established meanings" (Sheffield Hallam University, 2002), but they also form a source for personal memory. They are a "place of memory" (Carrier quoted in Radstone, 2000: 39), and thus "form a support" for popular memory. My research concentrates on the private memories of a public space. A large proportion of the correspondents did relate similar memories about certain events at the cinemas, but they had formulated these by themselves. The respondents did not (to my knowledge) have any contact with each other, nor did they discuss their memories together in order to formulate a collective memory of cinema going in Bridgend. The "constellation" of personal memories accumulated in this project originates from popular memory, but are not a collective memory of going to the cinema. Instead, they are individual case studies, which can be used to form a broader relevance within the popular memory of cinema going.

Appendix Two: The decision the not to send out follow up questionnaire surveys like Stacey and Kuhn was made as the aim of this research project was not to make a quantitative analysis of cinema going habits and demographics. In addition, I felt that enough memories had been garnered by the letters and telephone interviews to complete the project satisfactorily.

Appendix Three: In *Film and Popular Memory* Michel Foucault discusses the relationship between television, film and popular memory. (Foucault, 1989) He believes the visual nature of these mediums greatly influence people's memories of events and of themselves, often changing their perceptions of how things were. He states that television and the cinema are "one way of reprogramming popular memory, so people are shown not what they are, but what they must remember having been." (Foucault, 1989: 123) Whilst the respondents in this project did not use films or television as prompts for their memories, they did use books. The reading of local history books could have influenced their memories in a similar way to that expressed by Foucault. The subsequent memory texts must be questioned as to whether the respondents actually remembered this information themselves, or whether they read about the cinemas and thought they remembered the information but in fact the memories were triggered because they had read them, and they were not their own; they are false memories.

Appendix Four: The memory of the “rain on the roof of the Pavilion” has, in some ways, become a folk tale. Eight people recounted almost exactly the same story. It is indeed a “popular” memory and can be seen to display many features of popular memory, especially as the Pavilion no longer exists. This memory unites the people who used to go there, and consequently is the principle one everyone has of the Pavilion.

Appendix Five: Fourteen respondents mentioned the locations of the cinemas in Bridgend. The majority of those whom referred to the Cinema also cited the Chinese laundry. Reasons for this memory being emphasized in their minds could be that a Chinese laundry would have been quite a novelty in a small, and for the most part, highly indigenous Welsh town. Therefore the laundry and the Cinema would have surfaced in memories because they were so different to the other shops in the town.

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