

Understanding the Cinemagoing Experience in Cultural Life: The Role of Oral History and the Formation of ‘Memories of Pleasure’

Abstract

The new cinema history approach asserts the importance of investigating the historical reception of films. In the past two decades, empirical research on film audiences has significantly developed methodologies and questions related to film and memory. Some of these studies concentrate on a period of time in which cinema was an essential leisure activity for millions, before the arrival of television, multiplexes, videos and home cinema. Combining ethnographic audience study with cultural and cinema history has allowed new insights into the historical reception of films and confirmed the vital role of oral history for a better understanding of cinema audiences. *Italian Cinema Audiences* (2013–2016) – an AHRC-funded inter-institutional research project – sits precisely within this new body of research and responds to the urge of using a bottom-up approach to shed new light on the cultural history of a country in a particular historical moment. This article will make use of the findings of the *Italian Cinema Audiences* research project to explore the role of oral history in the process of understanding cinemagoing as a cultural practice and to better comprehend how this type of research can enrich our understanding of the cinemagoing experience in particular and film cultures more broadly. It will also reflect on the process of remembering what I will define as ‘memories of pleasure’.

KEYWORDS: Cinemagoing; oral history; methodology; individual and collective memories; memories of pleasure

Introduction

Examining cinema as a ‘site of social and cultural exchange’ is at the heart of New Cinema History (NCH), a growing body of research that ‘has shifted its focus away from the content of films to consider their circulation and consumption.’¹ The NCH approach also advocates the significance of empirical research as a key method to scrutinize the space and consumption of

films, which changed over time and place and were neither universally distributed nor exploited in the same way. Acknowledging this diversity in audiences' experiences of cinemagoing implies the necessity to embark on first-hand investigations of spectators, which has only fully emerged over the last two decades to fill a gap in film audience studies. It is a 'history concerned with the conditions of everyday life as they are experienced by ordinary people' and how they relate to their social and cultural contexts.² This cinema history from below³ is closely connected to the history of its audiences, where developed methodologies and questions related to film and memory are crucial.⁴ Combining ethnographic audience study with cultural and cinema history⁵ has allowed new insights into the historical reception of films and confirmed the vital role of oral history for a better understanding of cinemagoers. *Italian Cinema Audiences* (2013–2016) – an AHRC-funded inter-institutional research project⁶ – sits precisely within this new body of research and responds to the urge of using a bottom-up approach to shed new light on the cultural history of a country in a particular historical moment. This article will make use of the findings of the *Italian Cinema Audiences* research project to explore the role of oral history to appreciate cinemagoing as a cultural practice and to better comprehend how this type of research can enrich our understanding of the cinemagoing experience in particular and film cultures more broadly. It will also reflect on the process of remembering what I will define as 'memories of pleasure'.

In the first phase of our study, over 1,000 Italians aged over 65 responded to a structured questionnaire administered to a range of participants chosen from eight provincial and eight urban locations. The sample of our respondents was divided almost equally between men and women, as well as between city and province, and included a comprehensive range of social backgrounds. The project aimed to investigate how cinemagoing figured in people's memories of their daily lives throughout Italy at that time. It also aimed to research material factors in the everyday experience of cinemagoing that had been overlooked by film history. Practices and rituals of cinemagoing were also at the heart of our research. Both the questionnaires and video interviews aimed to explore the relationship between audiences and film genres and stars, as well as with Hollywood or national cinema, how this varied according to gender and location, how Italian cinemagoers selected and watched films, as well as how cinemagoing preferences related to wider social trends and changes in 1950s Italy. Biltereyst, Lotze, and Meers⁷ statement that 'the social practice of cinema-going was a significant social routine, strongly inspired by community identity formation, class and social distinction' can appropriately be applied to Italian audiences.

Memories of cinemagoing were assessed with a questionnaire, which combined a mix of quantitative closed questions and qualitative open-ended ones, aimed at stimulating participants' recall of events and experiences. To begin with, the questionnaires were analysed using pre-set codes identified by the investigators to respond to the research questions or to address the conceptual framework of the project.⁸ However, the coding book was revised when emergent codes (such as 'television', 'work', etcetera) were added, as well as when major codes were broken down into sub-codes and ideas emerging from individual investigators' analysis discussed at team meetings. In this way, the coding book was refined several times in order to fit

the data and capture the richness of the material as much as possible. Moreover, drawing upon Barker and Mathijs' methodological approach,⁹ the questionnaires were used to identify themes and patterns to be further explored in half-hour topical in-depth interviews with 160 Italians sampled from a similar cross section of the population, who represented our starting point from which – as Annette Kuhn states¹⁰ – ‘interpretations arise from the material itself’. Our choice to employ video interviews as a methodological tool in oral history data collection is motivated by the intention of capturing the audience's process of constructing and reconstructing the past in the present, as only the use of video recording grasps, simultaneously, three fundamental aspects of oral history interviews: the content of the interview, all the linguistic features and the particular social situation in which the story is narrated.¹¹ Participants were given a list of topics which would be discussed (first memories of cinemagoing; relationship between cinema and daily life and the role of cinema in the 1950s; special memories of films, actors, genres and any events linked to cinema; film choices; cinema theatres and their atmosphere; role of cinema in the memory of the past), and those thematic areas would be the basis of the questions in a semi-structured interview. In order to examine how participants construct themselves in their narratives, our methodology combined a thematic analysis of the video interviews with a study of the specific ways in which memories are narrated by the respondents. The development of a coding book provided the framework with a way in which to structure and organise the data in several major thematic areas (such as place memory, collective memory, stardom, choices, link to the industry, etc.) used in the analysis of the video interviews. Shaping and structuring those memories has allowed us to scrutinise the experience of film consumption, film choice, film taste and the relationship with the cinematic world outside the theatres, and in so doing, we have added new dimensions to our understanding of Italian cinema audiences. The analysis of the collected data offered a better grasp of the social function that cinema played in engagement with family members, peers and partners. It also shed light on its educational role through opening doors to new worlds and cultures, which, until then, had been unavailable to most Italians. Cinema also offered an opportunity to express a local belonging through a tight connection to neighbourhood cinemas, which in some way represented an extension of audiences' own homes.¹² Italian audiences were loyal cinemagoers, who predominantly attended weekend screenings accompanied by friends and family, mainly in local second-run cinemas. Cinemagoing was part of everyday life, a repeated action chosen according to convenience, time opportunity and location suitability.

However, as this was a project on memory, it was imperative to understand how the memory of events related to cinemagoing was woven into people's personal narrative, bringing attention to the use of audiovisual material both in the process of data collection and in the sharing of the data itself with the participants in public engagement events. The reminiscence process was analysed through specific nodes (official memory, past and present, childhood memory, etcetera) as well as through a detailed investigation of gestures and facial expressions.¹³

If oral history offers new views of our past, at the same time it presents challenges in its reliability, and it is therefore often perceived as more problematic than other sources. However, our project has taken Alessandro Portelli's stand that ‘errors, invention and myths lead us

through and beyond facts to their meaning' and must be taken into account when conducting this type of research.¹⁴ Hence, a specific node on errors and one on idiosyncratic film history have given us the opportunity to gather commonalities in remembering processes, but also in the uniqueness of each participant's memory. Identifying oral history inaccuracy as a strength rather than a weakness puts the researcher in the position of being able to recognise 'the interests of the tellers, and the dreams and desires beneath them.'¹⁵ These interests, dreams and desires are often unknown to the tellers themselves, and the memory recollection process facilitates their rediscovery and resurgence. When referring specifically to our project, what has oral history revealed? I will articulate my argument in two sections, each dealing with a distinct aspect of oral history in relation to cinemagoing practices in particular and film culture more generally. Our video interviews have provided us with insights into both culture and memory. They have, on one hand, confirmed and validated archival data and informed us of unknown viewing practices, providing a fuller understanding of the role cinema played in Italians' cultural life. On the other hand, they have helped us reflect on the process of memory itself, allowing the emergence of what I will define as 'memories of pleasure' – that is, memories closely connected with pleasure and beauty, as well as enrichment and self-esteem, which produce optimistic thoughts and positive feelings during the remembrance. As with any oral history project, our research offers, at the same time, an insight into the Italian cultural past and a better understanding of how creating meaning of that past is articulated through the process of remembering. Interpreting oral history necessarily involves a multifaceted approach that this article employs to connect daily life, cultural experience and cinemagoing with pleasure and memories.

Validating archival data and shedding light on unknown practices

Oral history as 'recovery history' – the procedure of discovering, by interviewing people, historical events unavailable in traditional archives or other historical sources – 'was the dominant trend in oral history practice in the 1970s and 1980s.'¹⁶ Lynn Abrams states, though, that the 'reconstructive agenda' still 'remains a prime motivation' in using oral history.¹⁷ In the *Italian Cinema Audiences* project, there were several instances when using interviews to recover unknown aspects of national and regional film cultures was a major attraction in the data analysis. For instance, when investigating audience memories of the post-war period, our approach allowed an alignment of memories against the programming data, the results of which has revealed answers difficult to articulate without the oral history. In the case study of Rome, oral evidence gathered in our research has confirmed that each cinema run performed a distinctive role in the diffusion of films, attracting different types of spectators to a different type of experience between the centre, the middle-class districts and the periphery.¹⁸ The programming data offered us a pattern whereby films would sometimes change three or more times per week. This rapid circulation needed to be corroborated by the oral history in order to obtain a better insight into a system of distribution which was not only unprecedented but also questionable in its effectiveness. Our interviewees were able to shed light on the way exhibitors accessed films and



Figure 1. Giuseppe Verrì's memories of parish cinema distribution.

how this impacted the actual cinema viewing experience. One Roman spectator, Giuseppe, recalls reels of films being transported from one cinema to another during the course of a screening (see Figure 1):

There was also the story of the film reels, because films were on reels, and usually there were three or four reels, which were sometimes exchanged between cinemas, because the cinemas were near one another, so while one was showing the first half of the film, the other would show the second ... with the same reel. I know because I used to attend the parish hall near my house, and there was a parish cinema there. The little door beside the church [...] was the door to the cinema. And attached to the parish hall there was a courtyard, where we played football, and in the courtyard there was a staircase that gave access to the cinema projection booth, so we saw this back and forth of film reels.¹⁹

Giuseppe's story endorses the complex system of film circulation across a city, like Rome, which by the 1950s already had a very well-developed film exhibition structure with over three hundred cinema theatres and a wide geographical distribution across both the city centre and the peripheries. It also echoes other stories that participants from other parts of the country shared with us, whereby this complex system to ensure that films reached cinemas was not extremely sophisticated, and film reels would travel on trains, bicycles and even donkeys and wheelbarrows. Renato Castellani's film *Due soldi di speranza* (*Two Cents Worth of Hope*, 1952) (Figure 2) enlightens, in a striking scene, the complex structure of film exhibition that Italy had developed at the time, by showing how an exhibitor in Florence – owner of three different cinemas – had his employers rushing from one venue to another and transporting film reels on bicycle to ensure that a screening took place. This procedure was not always successful, and our



Figure 2. Fragment from Renato Castellani's film *Due soldi di speranza* (Two Cents Worth of Hope, 1952).

participants – like the audiences represented in the film – were often forced to see parts of films in the wrong order, providing a unique cinema experience they all remember.

Going back to our oral history, on one hand, Giuseppe's narrative substantiates the programming findings, helping to shed light on the extensive offer of films that Italian audiences had at the time. On the other, it confirms Passerini's conviction that 'the raw material of oral history consists not just in factual statements, but is pre-eminently an expression and representation of culture, and therefore includes not only literal narrations but also the dimensions of memory, ideology and subconscious desires.'²⁰

While the next section will reflect on the dimensions of memory, specifically in relation to desires and pleasures, Giuseppe's description of the parish adds new layers to the understanding of different aspects of post-war Italian culture. This space traditionally associated with religious practices becomes the dedicated venue for entertainment available to a young boy in 1950s Rome, and it also offers him access to film exhibition conventions, which gives him the confidence, seventy years later, to present his memories in a manner that intersects social, cultural and personal spheres.

Participants' memories in the *Italian Cinema Audiences* project often – rather than concentrating on the films, the stars or the scenery of the films – focus on the everyday nature of their sensory experiences. They are very much related to Robert Allen's 'immediate social, sensory, performative context of reception,'²¹ and close to what Roland Barthes refers to in his essay "Leaving the Movie Theater":

[A]nother way of going to the movies [...] by letting oneself be fascinated twice over, by the image and by its surroundings – as if I had two bodies at the same time: a narcissistic body which gazes, lost, into the engulfing mirror [or the screen], and a perverse body, ready to fetishise not the image but precisely what exceeds it: the texture of the sound,

the space, the darkness, the obscure mass of other bodies, the beam of light, entering the theatre and leaving.²²

Barthes describes coming out of the cinema as a process that suggests abandoning the body engagement found in the cinema theatre. This body engagement involves the ‘expansion of sensation from the movie screen to everything that surrounds it.’ From the very first lines of Barthes’ essay, the author introduces his idea of the ‘power of cinema’ as residing ‘not in its capacity to hypnotize us or render us passive, but rather in its ability to transform the sensory experience of the world around us.’²³ This total experience does not stop at the end of the film, but ‘lingers on beyond the end of the projection’, offering the author ‘a cure to his melancholia; it is a healing therapy, a guérissement.’²⁴ Cinema’s potent effect lies in that ‘twice-over fascination’ with the image and its surroundings to which Barthes refers, and Italian audiences unwittingly express this through their memories. Analysis of the interviews conducted across the country shows how, for most of the audiences, ‘the primary relationship with the “cinema” has not been with individual movies-as-artefacts or as texts, but with the social experience of cinema.’²⁵ Therefore, in the process of remembering Barthes’ ‘image and its surroundings’, our participants have certainly selected the surroundings, and what exceeds the image on the screen had a profound impact on them. This social and sensory aspect of the performance is often illustrated by our participants through description of the surrounding context of film consumption that attracted them to the venue, be that theatre location, level of comfort, noise, food or design. None of these aspects of the cinemagoing experience – illustrated in details and providing an added value to the investigation of the events – would be available in film industry records, and they become indispensable in constructing a fuller picture of the experience of going to the cinema in post-war Italy. When our interviewees provide details about parish cinemas’ accessibility, convenience and the opportunity to break free from parental restrictions, they offer information left out of any parish record, and they suggest details not available in any official sources, while also describing how they felt in those specific environments. For instance, Aurelia – much like several other participants – remembers how she was allowed greater independence in the parish cinema:

We would go on our own. The parents would give us a snack on a Sunday, and we would spend all afternoon there. It was a special time. We knew everybody. We all had a sandwich, peanuts, bruscholini and mostaccioli.²⁶ The film was an excuse to spend time with friends from the local parish.

This special atmosphere – of entertainment and comfortable sociality – is shared in the video interviews in many ways: through descriptions of special cinema arrangements, where children were seated at the front row or on the floor closer to the screen; through discussions among friends on all sorts of topics (not necessarily film related); through memories of crying babies, hungry toddlers and nappy changes; through the feeling of being overcrowded in big cinema theatres, or being parked by parents in the cinema for the entire day with dedicated appointments for food supplies; or through special events that took place at the cinema, be they the screening of the death of the Pope or the delivery of presents from Father Christmas.

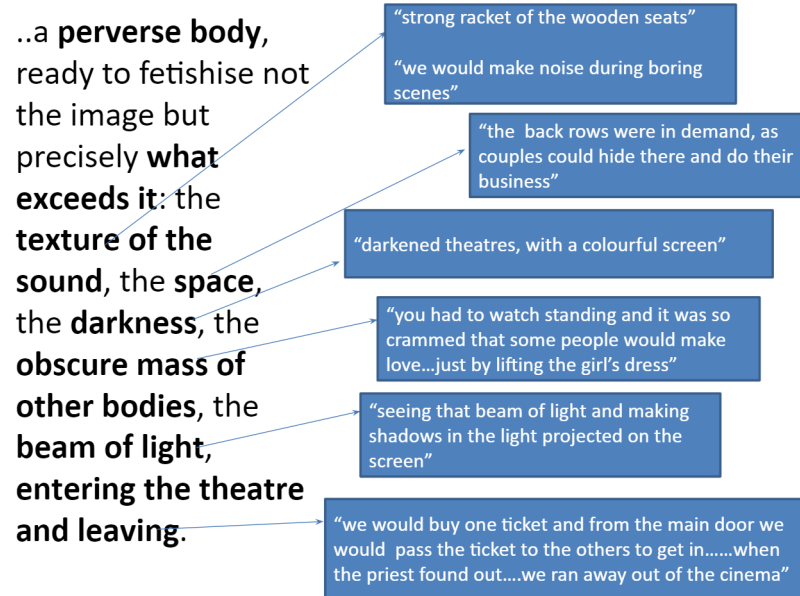


Figure 3. Quotation from Roland Barthes' essay "Leaving the Movie Theater" (1986) in relation to memories of Italian cinema audiences.

Using Roland Barthes' quote against our audiences' memories, one can certainly find in the memories of the audiences several of the aspects to which Barthes refers, as indicated in Figure 3.

As Barthes' describes, participants' memories reflect on what exceeds the image: the texture of the sound expressed, for example, by the slamming of the seats from the male audience while watching a western, by the noise made when a film had a boring scene, as well as by the chatting, or the shouting at the screen in exciting moments; the space, divided into front and back according to the interest in the film, where couples would secure the back seats and where women were not allowed to be on their own. A space that had very distinct characteristics, such as smoke that would be, at times, so dense as to hinder the viewing of the film itself, a smoke that one would inhale even without having their own cigarettes, and that would remain with the audience after the show. A space where one could eat, drink and comment on the film, where one could get in at any time and stay for as long as one wanted. A space where regulations and order were replaced by chaos and improvisation. Participants describe the darkness of the theatre, which enabled physical contact and sexual encounters, while allowing children to fill their eyes with colours from the screen. They reflect on the obscure mass of other crowded bodies, standing and waiting for an empty seat, the beam of light which allowed them to play with shadows, as well as the experience of entering the theatre and leaving.

The neglected senses of touch, smell, and taste are all energised in the cinema theatre (the feeling of the material of the seats, the smell of the carbon burning during the screening, and the taste of the cinema-specific food, such as nuts, bruscolini and mostaccioli) and create emotionally intense and collective sensory experiences which are cemented in the memories of our audiences and reappear on the surface at the first opportunity to dig in, even if the full event is forgotten. They all reflect 'the embodied nature of the close senses of touch, taste, and smell'²⁷

but ultimately the ‘all-encompassing somatic, sensuous and affective involvement in the cinema experience.’²⁸ They are those ‘subliminal histories’ to which Paula Hamilton refers when exploring how senses are remembered and then articulated as memory, which can only be found in an oral history narrative and describe a fuller picture of the experiences that participants lived in the past and reconstruct in the present.²⁹

Discovering in the past the emerging of ‘memories of pleasure’

Following Michael Frisch’s encouragement that memory – ‘personal and historical, individual and generational’ – should be at the centre ‘as the object, not merely the method, of oral history,’³⁰ our research project has aimed at exploring how memories of cinemagoing were constructed in the participants’ testimonies. As ‘memory is now a respected historical source’,³¹ more research has been conducted in the attempt to discover how it is constructed and mediated, and our project has investigated the ways in which the remembered object (the act of cinemagoing, the venue, the film, the star) is mediated through both the passage of time and the oral history performance itself. Moreover, throughout the project, we have organised a series of *Sharing Memories* events. These were public engagement opportunities, where we screened films and clips from our video interviews, offering space and time afterwards for audiences’ recollections of their favourite cinemagoing moments. Moreover, participants were offered the preliminary results of the research, with the chance of responding to the findings. In the *Sharing Memories* events, it became clear that the audiovisual medium had a powerful effect on our participants, whose collective as well as individual memories had been triggered by the viewing of their most memorable films as well as by clips of video interviews where those memories were being articulated. Several participants have emphasised the significance of the visual medium when reconstructing in the present the memories of the past.

While the pictorial turn in oral history is a well-researched area,³² the *Italian Cinema Audiences* project had not planned to engage with this methodological approach – nor with the idea of images (both photos and videos) as conceptual devices. This is due to the fact that our use of images in the *Sharing Memories* events was not meant as a planned technique for triggering memory. The videos we presented were intended purely to showcase the project to new audiences. However, we soon realised that those images had a very compelling effect by functioning as memory elicitation among our participants. Drawing upon this organic experience, the *European Cinema Audiences: Entangled Histories, Shared Memories*³³ research project I am currently leading has a digital archive as a starting point, so that images and videos will be systematically mapped and used to activate audiences’ memories of cinemagoing across several European cities.

Looking back at feedback received in the *Sharing Memories* events, participants’ comments addressed three particular elements: (1) the involuntary nature of memory, (2) its visual texture and (3) its collective dimension.

Reflecting on their reminiscence practices, our participants explained with precision the process of remembering: ‘You think that you have no more memories, but then they seem to

appear as flashes, and it becomes difficult to organise and categorise them' (anonymous); another one replies to the interviewer: 'Your question has produced a memory flash in me' (Enea); while another states 'Now the memory has come to mind' (Enzo); and another affirms that 'something has just come to me, something that had completely disappeared from my mind' (Leandro). These comments reflect what Proust called 'involuntary memory', which 'seems to obliterate the passage of time between the original event and its re-experience in memory.'³⁴ This obliteration is perceived by participants, whose reminiscence process operates in such a way that the events of the past are 'contemporised' through memory,³⁵ revealing the several cultural and social contexts in which participants have grown up and illustrating how memories are shaped by ideologies, social relations and culture over time. Our interviews, in fact, offer much more than simple anecdotes. By recreating the past as it was lived, they communicate the richness of the cinemagoing experience and articulate the context in which it occurred. Our *Sharing Memories* events demonstrated that visual and sensory cues were 'powerful triggering agents' that provoked 'an intricate reconstruction process.'³⁶ Participants' comments elicit the power of viewing to bring back a more nuanced understanding of the lived experience, not just a simple prompt to remember. The idea of a visual memory which is stronger than just memory – as one of the participant's states – reaffirms Harper's concept that 'images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness that do words.'³⁷ Those images are not merely prompting more detailed memories but have 'the potential to enable shared authority between the interviewer and the interviewee.'³⁸ This shared authority gives the interviewee the confidence to build a new collaboration with the researcher. In our case, this process took place in a very unintentional manner, as we simply projected in the *Sharing Memories* events a montage which alternated audiences' recollections with sequences from the most popular films of that time. These short clips gave participants an unexpected self-assurance of the values of their experiences and generated a more equal relationship with the interviewer as well as with other respondents, allowing a connection between 'people who were thinking about similar things so that they could talk to one another'³⁹ and become part of a community forged through cinemagoing.

Moreover, as Seamon affirms, our experience of films has deep parallels with the experience of our own lived pasts, allowing us to see into other worlds – worlds that are worth glimpsing and remembering.⁴⁰ Richard Maltby's idea, for instance, that 'the "America" of the movies has presented itself to its audiences less as a geographical territory than an imaginative one'⁴¹ is confirmed by Italian spectators, who articulate their ability to immerse themselves in unknown landscapes – such as the American prairies or the metropolitan skyscrapers – in which they could project their experiences and dreams: 'We started exploring different worlds, especially for someone like me, who had lived, until then, within four walls.' This narrative modality is also an example of how audiences express their memories, switching constantly between the 'I' and the 'we', highlighting the collective role of memories, which are personal and intimate but also shared and plural. Our participants' comments, in fact, confirm that its inherent audiovisual nature makes cinema a powerful medium in the production and formation of cultural memory in its collective form.

Drawing from Maurice Halbwachs,⁴² our approach to memory as the object of our study takes into account the dual aspects of the act of remembering: individual and collective. Individual narratives are, in fact, investigated both as personal experience and as a manifestation of the collective identity of a specific group. This is also in line with Marita Sturken's warning that 'memories are a larger process of cultural negotiations,'⁴³ which are defined as narratives, can change and are mediated, cultural and personal traces of the past. In this cultural negotiation role, our events have also demonstrated how memories can perform as a 'social connector' among individuals, offering a strong sense of community for the participants in their relationship with culture and cultural contexts. Within this function, memories of cinemagoing have a special quality that is very distinct from other types of memories studied by scholars, such as memories of war and trauma, for instance. The notion of traumatic memory, in fact, is a well-researched area and the privileged object of study by oral history.⁴⁴ In contrast, 'memories of pleasure' do not seem to spur the same academic interest. Happiness and memory are relative newcomers, as they have seldom been studied in tandem. One of the few studies in this area, Laura Hyman's article *Happiness and Memory: Some Sociological Reflections*, suggests that people identify their memories and reflections on the past as sources of happiness in two interrelated ways.⁴⁵ Firstly, people – particularly those of an older generation – make sense of life in the past as happier than that of the present. Secondly, adults of a range of ages understand reminiscing about the past as something from which happiness or pleasure can be gained. Reconnecting with the past can be regarded as a 'technique that people perform on their own minds, in order to enable them to feel happier.'⁴⁶ When asked about their memories of cinemagoing, several respondents used very similar expressions: 'I have found in my memory pleasant moments of my youth'; 'everything that is beautiful must be maintained in time'; 'The pleasure of remembering'; 'Recovering memories helps self-esteem and enrichment'; 'I have dreamt again as I used to do, and dreams help us to carry on living'; 'I have taken off the shelf dormant emotions and moments of pleasure kept hidden'; 'Cinema is entertainment and it is always a beautiful memory that makes you think'; 'It is beautiful to remember beautiful moments.' Pleasure and beauty as well as enrichment and self-esteem are all associated with cinemagoing memories, producing optimistic thoughts and positive feelings. They represent those 'memories of pleasure' to which I have referred at the beginning of the article. I do not intend here to load the term pleasure with ideological connotations in relation to mass culture, as eloquently analysed by Rutsky and Wyatt,⁴⁷ and I also want to hold back from associating memories of pleasure purely and exclusively with the negative feature of nostalgia as 'regret for lost times',⁴⁸ which in the case of our participants does not seem to be a pattern of remembering they display in a consistent manner. On the contrary, while Italian audiences' video interviews commonly use the term nostalgia and openly reflect on their past, their narratives share more traits with what Westerhof et al. describe as 'transmissive reminiscence', as 'telling memories to inform younger generations about one's cultural heritage or personal legacy' rather than 'escapist reminiscence', and as 'positive recollections, expressing nostalgia for the past.' As in our case, the power of the positive recollections seem to partially – or momentarily – obliterate the sadness associated with

a lost past.⁴⁹ Cinemagoing, in fact, seems to project our audiences towards the present, as one of our participants, Angelo, explains:

Memory is always life or renewal of life, a source of reflection (and not only melancholic), but also stimulus to find what was lost, a way to find again a reason for hope, as well as the witness of a past that has been given to us and cannot be lost. A past that can be enriched – once found – with new clothes.

Hopefulness and the past are interconnected, and the yearning ‘for lost places, for places we have once been in yet can no longer re-enter’⁵⁰ is replaced by the awareness of the past’s legacy and its enduring power. Therefore, eliciting these types of memory brings not only pleasure and enhancement, but also helps participants to think about their present and future, giving them self-esteem, and enriching their current and – potentially – their future lives. These results contribute to the conviction that ‘autobiographical memory predicts optimism for the future.’⁵¹

Conclusions

The findings of the *Italian Cinema Audiences* research project have enriched our understanding of cinemagoing experiences in Italy while drawing conclusions which are undoubtedly broadly applicable across different film cultures. The role of oral history within film studies was underestimated until new cinema history scholars started re-focusing attention to ethnographic audience study. Understanding how the memory of events related to cinemagoing was intertwined with people’s personal narratives provides inestimable insights in terms of intangible heritage, cinema history and experiences of film consumption. Our video interviews have contributed to new interpretations of both culture and memory. As well as corroborating archival data, they have informed us of uncharted viewing practices, which no archival record could bring to life. At the same time, they have helped us reflect on the process of memory itself, encouraging new ways of relating to and producing new approaches to memory studies. This article, in fact, considers how participants have reflected on the involuntary nature of memory, its visual texture and its collective dimension when reconstructing in the present the memories of the past. These qualities were described in the video interviews as well as in the *Sharing Memories* events, demonstrating that the audiovisual medium has had a powerful effect on our participants both in the process of data collection and in the sharing of the data itself with others in public engagement activities. Moreover, the memories that mostly emerge from our data collections are memories focussed on the everyday nature of their sensory, somatic and affective involvement in the cinema experience. As Barthes’ describes, participants’ memories reflect on what exceeds the image on the screen, and they explore how the senses are remembered and then articulated as memory. The process of remembering allows the emergence of what I have defined as ‘memories of pleasure’, closely connected with pleasure and beauty as well as enrichment and self-esteem, producing optimistic thoughts and positive feelings during the remembrance process. They bring not only pleasure and enhancement, but also help participants to project themselves

towards the future. While oral history is a vital component of the making of interpretative meaning, as well as a powerful revealing tool when investigating culture in general, ‘memories of pleasure’ in particular re-frame our understanding of the construction of the past. The evidence from this study suggests that these memories, in fact, facilitate the way in which audiences communicate the richness and positive values of their experiences, articulating the context in which they occurred. However, further research is needed to thoroughly explore ‘memories of pleasure’, to establish their characteristics, to fully identify their modality in the oral history data collection process and to find the best way to analyse them for a more sophisticated understanding of cinemagoing in particular and film culture in general.

Notes

1. Richard Maltby, “New Cinema Histories,” in *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies*, ed. Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst and Philippe Meers (London and New York: Routledge 2011), 1.
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Biography

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