

1. INTRODUCTION

As a relatively new academic discipline, film studies has made considerable contributions at a theoretical level to our understanding of a particular set of cultural products and practices. This theoretical sophistication has not, however, been matched by adequate attention to methodology and research procedure. If film studies 'knows' what its objects are, and embodies a consensus as to the kinds of knowledge it seeks about them, methodological strategies deployed to achieve its ends remain on the whole underdeveloped (Stacey, 1993).

In film studies, textual analysis has become established as the methodological protocol or preference. But in the study of cinema (as against, say, the novel) it is virtually impossible to isolate the social/cultural moment of the reception of films from the semiotic moment of their reading as texts: the implied reader/spectator constantly gestures towards the social spectator, the audience (Kuhn, 1984). Historical studies of cinema which concern themselves with questions of reception (e.g. Allen and Gomery, 1985; Staiger, 1992) do draw upon extratextual source materials: but the sources and methods characteristically deployed in this work (analysis of studio publicity materials, film trade publications, and so on) still do not give access to the social audience, as opposed to the audience or spectator implicitly addressed by such intertexts. Moreover, since such studies have concerned themselves almost exclusively with the historical reception of Hollywood films, their emphases and findings--most notably their concern with forms of consumerism--are highly culturally specific. Very little 'ethnohistorical' work has been done on film reception, the cinema audience and cinema culture in Britain, and none at all on 1930s Britain.

By contrast with historical studies of film reception, attention to the social audience is foremost in recent 'ethnographic' reception studies of contemporary media (e.g. Ang, 1985; Hobson, 1982; Morley, 1991; Schlesinger et al, 1992). Such research, however, concerns itself predominantly with television rather than with cinema, and much of it is methodologically rather unsophisticated: for example, this 'new ethnography' in media studies has been largely untouched by conceptual and methodological debates within ethnography proper concerning the discursive nature of, and the power relations embodied within, the discipline's subjects, objects and methodologies (Clifford, 1988; Crapanzano, 1977). As a consequence, with rare exceptions research designs in this area tend--certainly in social scientific terms--to be poorly conceived; while the potential role and effectivity of media texts and their meanings in the reception process remain largely unexplored.

Furthermore, the methodological compartmentalisation of text-based, historical, and ethnographic studies adds to the difficulty of exploring interconnections between texts and meanings and their social, historical and cultural contexts (Kuhn, 1988). As a sociological/historical ethnography of film reception, the proposed project aims to tackle this problem by developing new methodologies for the study at cinema, and in particular for the social and historical study at the medium. It departs significantly from the substantive concerns and the research protocols at current work in both media ethnography and the social history of cinema. Methodologically, the objective is to incorporate into the substance and the process of research both the social audience and the discursive operations of film texts; while substantively, the project's concern is with cinemagoing in Britain at a certain historical moment as one of a range of interconnected social practices.

2. THE PROJECT

The 1930s was the 'age of the dream palace', a period when cinemagoing as a leisure pursuit was more popular in Britain than ever before or since, and the British were among the world's most avid filmgoers. It has been estimated that throughout the decade about 40 per cent of the population

went to the cinema once a week, and a further 25 per cent twice a week or more: at least two thirds of the population were therefore frequent and regular cinemagoers. In 1934, there was an average of 22 cinema visits per year for every man, woman and child in the land (Rowson, 1936). With cinemagoing a key component of the leisure culture of the era, film fan magazines flourished, and a detailed knowledge of films and film stars formed a taken-for-granted cultural competence (Kuhn, forthcoming) - to such a degree that it is no exaggeration to say that the competences of a culture of film fandom were instrumental in the Bildung for an entire generation.

However, while commercial cinema in 1930s Britain is well documented in its industrial and economic aspects (Low, 1979J, and while many features of its social history have been explored (most thoroughly by Richards, 1964), substantial gaps remain. For example, very little empirical research on cinema audiences was carried out at the time (Kuhn, 1994); and aside from some surveys undertaken during the 1940s (Mayer, 1946a; Mayer, 1946b), no investigations of film audiences and film reception - and certainly none which seek to incorporate the voice of the contemporary cinemagoer--have been attempted since. Nor has there been any attempt to look at how films and cinemagoing figured in people's everyday lives, nor at the connections between these activities and broader social and cultural practices and discourses--other leisure and consumption activities, for example, or ideologies of class and gender.

Our knowledge and understanding of the nature of film fan culture in 1930s Britain are extremely limited, therefore. Little reliable information exists on the films and stars popular with British audiences; rather less is known about variations in tastes and preferences within the British audience; and, beyond anecdote and conjecture, virtually nothing of the place and the meaning of cinema in people's day-to-day lives, or how cinema figured in the ordinary cinemagoer's fantasies, aspirations, and constructions of self. The proposed project aims not only to fill gaps in the history of a popular cultural practice; but also to document this moment, before it is too late, from the standpoint of those most closely involved--the cinemagoers and the fans themselves.

3. DATA AND METHODS

The substantive and methodological objectives of the project will be met via a two-pronged research strategy, focussing respectively on archival research and on 'memory work' with surviving cinemagoers of the 1930s, and involving fieldwork conducted both nationally and regionally.

3.i National

Data of various kinds of 1930s British cinema culture will be sought as means of investigations, and using sources, with a national focus:

- 3.i.a The general character of cinema culture throughout Britain will be investigated with reference to contemporary written materials, both published (e.g. fan magazines, women's magazines, newspapers) and unpublished (e.g. Mass-Observation records, fan club materials, unpublished letters to fan magazines);
- 3.i.b Data relating more specifically to the reception of films will be sought in film industry records, published and unpublished; and from contemporary surveys and opinion polls among cinema audiences;
- 3.i.c The relationships between fan culture, reception, and the textual features of films themselves will be investigated through analysis of popular films of the period;
- 3.i.d An investigation of the connections between cinemagoing, cinema culture and everyday life will involve inquiry into ancillary leisure pursuits and popular cultural forms of the 1930s (such as dancing, music hall, popular literature, fashion and beauty).

This predominantly archive-based element of the project is already under way (see Q.16). A survey of the considerable film fan periodical literature of the period has been completed, together with a review of some contemporary film trade publications, and of the entire contemporary audience research literature.

3.ii Regional

Existing research on British national cinema points to significant regional, class and gender variations within an overall national cinema culture. For the proposed project, fieldwork in different parts of Britain will permit in-depth exploration of some of these differences. It is at this more detailed level that the memory work component of fieldwork will be conducted. Locales for this fieldwork will be Glasgow (Europe's cinemagoing capital during the 1930s), and Manchester (representing an English provincial city); together with one London suburb (the new 'dream palaces' of the 1930s were predominantly a suburban phenomenon) and, for purposes of comparison, one rural area in England.

- 3. ii. a Investigation of audiences, reception and cinema culture will be conducted through archival fieldwork in each of the four regional locations, for example, information on cinemas, film exhibition and audiences will be sought in regional film archives (e.g. Scottish Film Archive, North West Film Archive), and in local history collections, local press archives, etc.
- 3. ii. b The nature of 1930s cinema culture and its place in cinemagoers' everyday lives will be investigated in the four regions through memory work with filmgoers of the time: this will involve interviews with individuals; and also reminiscence sessions with oral history and reminiscence groups in local communities. During the first three months of the project, the memory work element of the fieldwork will be piloted in Glasgow, where contacts with local groups and individuals are already established. It is planned to conduct between 15 and 20 individual interviews, and one group reminiscence session in each of the four locations: at this stage the research assistant will spend a total of up to four weeks in each location. There will also be a brief followup visit to each location towards the end of the research period, to report back to, and receive feedback from, respondents.

4. PROBLEMS

- 4.i Archival research in this area is hampered by lack of availability of certain types of source material. Viewing prints of a number of films selected for analysis are not available in Britain, and must in consequence be viewed elsewhere: one visit to the film archive of the US Library of Congress has been planned for this purpose. Unpublished written materials relating to the British film industry range from patchy to non-existent; although contemporary film trade periodicals do offer a useful alternative source of information. During the 1930s, there was very little empirical research, and none at all of a systematic nature, on cinema audiences and their tastes: though the voice of the contemporary cinemagoer may be heard in some degree—if not unmediatedly—in such forums as readers' letters to film magazines.
- 4.ii While the voice of the cinemagoer will be sought also in the memories of surviving cinemagoers of the period, this research strategy is not without its problems:

- 4.ii.a This generation, the youngest among whom are now in their early sixties, is ageing. At this very basic level, there is some urgency in the need simply to set down their memories before it is too late;
- 4.ii.b Important questions of methodology surround the use of oral history material. While hindsight and selective memory will undoubtedly shape the form and content of such material, this does not necessarily compromise it as a source. On the contrary, in fact: memory work in the form of collection and interpretation of oral history materials may be revealing in ways other types of data cannot be: in the kinds of narratives elderly people construct around their own lives, for example; in the sorts of memories accorded 'treasured' status, and so on. Methodological self-reflexivity is built into the project's objectives and research design.

5. OUTPUTS

The outputs of the related project funded by the Carnegie Trust (see Q. 16) suggest that there is a good deal of potential interest, both within and outside the academy, in research in this area. Short-term outputs of the proposed project include:

- papers presented at academic conferences in Britain and overseas; and in academic seminars within and beyond Glasgow;
- articles for academic publications;
- an academic monograph;

and outside the academy:

- informal talks to community groups;
- feedback sessions with respondents in regional locations;
- animation of reminiscence and local history groups and courses in adult education, U3A, etc (which in turn could generate further data);
- screenings of popular 1930s films in local and community venues;

In the longer term, and possibly as part of a new research initiative, outputs might include:

- an international colloquium on film history and historiography;
- an archive which makes material collected for the project available to other researchers in both electronic and paper form (experience suggests that respondents will donate their own collections of cinema memorabilia);
- radio and/or television programmes, animated and/or scripted by the researchers, on 1930s cinema culture.

Relevant Publications:

'Desert Victory and the people's war', Screen, vol. 22, no.2 (1981), pp. 45-68.

Project Proposal (excerpt from ESRC Original Bid for 'Cinema Culture in 1930s Project')

'A moral subject: the VD propaganda feature', in Annette Kuhn, The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), pp. 96-132.

'History of the Cinema', in Pam Cook (ed.), The Cinema Book (London: BFI, 1985), pp. 2-56.

'The Married Love affair', Screen, vol.27, no.2 (1986), pp. 5-21.

Cinema Censorship and Sexuality, 1909-1925 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988).

'Mandy and possibility', Screen, vol.33, no.3 (1992), pp.233-43.

'Researching popular film fan culture in 1930s Britain', in Historical Studies of Film Reception (Oslo: Norwegian Universities Press, forthcoming 1994).

'Cinema culture and femininity in the 1930s', in Christine Gledhill and Gillian Swanson (eds), Nationalising Femininity (Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming 1995).