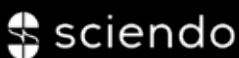


Methodological reflections on the use of memories and oral sources in media-historical research in the Nordic/Baltic region: A case study on cinemagoing in Sweden



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ABSTRACT

In this article, we discuss oral history interviews and memories as a method for media-historical research in the Baltic and Nordic regions from theoretical and practical points of view. We present an overview of relevant theoretical work in film studies (New Cinema History, Oral History, Cultural Memory, Cinema Memory). Furthermore, we demonstrate how we have designed and applied oral history in the Swedish Cinema and Everyday Life project: A study of cinema-going in its peak and decline, financed by the Swedish National Research Council, 2019–2022, and reflect on what we have learned from this example. We also disclose how we adjusted the methodology to comply with the social restrictions enforced due to the COVID19 pandemic.

KEYWORDS: oral history, cinemagoing, cinema memory, cultural memory, everyday life, media history

INTRODUCTION

In her aptly titled article, ‘Textual Obsessions’, Jackie Stacey (1993) asked whether film students at the time were aware of other ways of studying film than doing analysis of a film text. Stacey goes on to argue for the inclusion of audiences as crucial for making valid statements about film experiences. Up until this point, film studies had almost exclusively considered audiences in hypothetical terms as an “implied spectator”, a construction, “interpellated” or “subject-positioned” by the film-as-text and as apparatus (Biltereyst, Meers 2018). Meanwhile, the sister-discipline television studies has demonstrated an enduring tradition of using qualitative approaches in audience research (Maltby 2011). However, written sources and a focus on the content itself seem to endure as materials for historical research on film, television, and other media. Similarly to Stacey, we claim that oral sources are invaluable for insight

into historical experiences in relation to media. In this article, we discuss memory and oral sources as objects of study for media historians in the Baltic and Nordic regions from theoretical and methodological points of view. While we primarily focus on memories of cinemagoing throughout this article, the social and cultural embeddedness of memories can easily be expanded to include other media such as television (see, for example, Höijer 1998) or radio (for example, Franzén 2021).

Throughout the article, we build on the pioneering work of oral historians, who argue for the inclusion of oral accounts as valuable historical sources and whose central aim has been political and “reconstructive”: to give voice to memories that would otherwise be lost or dismissed as ‘ordinary’ (Perks, Thompson 2016). Another key concept is cinema memory, coined by Annette Kuhn (2002, 2021, 2023). Cinema memory is a “distinctive subtype of cultural

memory” (Kuhn 2021: 34), a concept she has distilled from observing “a recurrent and circumscribed body of linked themes and discursive registers” (Kuhn 2023: 20) in her ground-breaking study of memories of cinemagoing in Britain from the 1930s. It is not an exaggeration to say that Kuhn’s study has laid a solid foundation for historical studies on cinema audiences which has expanded into the vibrant research area of New Cinema History, NCH, which has as common denominator all aspects of the social experience of cinema going (see, for example, Biltereyst *et al.* 2012a; Kuhn *et al.* 2017; Meers *et al.* 2018; Stokes *et al.* 2022; Elsaket *et al.* 2023; Treveri Gennari *et al.* 2024). NCH has enhanced and expanded the field of film and media studies as it acknowledges the great diversity of exhibition as well as the under-represented category of audiences (Jancovich *et al.* 2003; Lewis, Smoodin 2007; Maltby *et al.* 2007; Aveyard, Moran 2013; Biltereyst *et al.* 2019; Egan *et al.* 2021). Cultural Studies has been influential here by providing theories and methods to consider the way film-as-texts are embedded in the wider social histories of popular entertainment, consumption, domestic leisure, and the public sphere, as well as in conceptualising audiences as “socially, culturally, and historically located individuals” (Meers *et al.* 2012: 127). The use of oral accounts and other reception data (on circulation and exhibition)¹ engages bottom-up with “actual audiences in their social, historical and cultural context of everyday life” (Van de Vijver 2012: 3).

However, in the Nordic and Baltic contexts, this methodology has not yet been applied in the broader field of media studies. With some exceptions (Höijer 1998; Sjöholm 2003; Pedersen 2009; Jernudd 2010, 2013; Bolin 2016a, 2016b; Van Belle 2019; Arlauskaitė, Kaminskaitė 2021; Kaminskaitė-Jančorienė, Šalaj 2021; Franzén 2021), oral history as method has mostly been used in studies on remembrance of broader cultural processes and events (Kirss 2004; Jõesalu, Kõresaar 2013; Mikonis, Kaminskaitė-Jančorienė 2015; Runcis, Zalkalns 2018; Kõresaar 2018; Strupule 2021).

Our experience in presenting our oral history work in media departments in the above-mentioned regions is that there seems to be a hesitation about doing audience research, and that it would be difficult or unsubstantial. Instead, we believe this method gives a lot more than it takes, and, with this article, we wish to contribute to the advancement of *doing* historical audience interviews in this region, guided by methods developed in oral history, with memories as the main object of study. We will discuss the theoretical implications: the underlying assumptions when choosing to conduct interviews for media-historical research, as well as what can be expected of the knowledge outcome. Furthermore, we share how we have developed the methodology in the research project, *Swedish Cinema and Everyday Life: A study of Cinemagoing in its Peak and Decline* (Filmen i Sverige: En studie om biografens storhetstid och tillbakagång), funded by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet) (2019-2022). One of the aims of the Swedish Cinema and Everyday Life project was to broaden perspectives on the institutional contexts of film consumption and the remembered experience of cinemagoing in its heyday and decline. A secondary goal was to identify whether and how these memories were gendered. Methodological challenges that we encountered will be discussed, some of which were caused by the COVID19 pandemic.

1 Often, interviews are triangulated with other data – such as that based on reception, circulation, programming, or exhibition – to broadly explore the social and cultural dimensions of historical cinema going (Maltby *et al.* 2011; Biltereyst *et al.* 2012b; Meers *et al.* 2012; Van de Vijver, Biltereyst 2013; Kuhn *et al.* 2017). Another feature of NCH are the large data sets that have been collected to facilitate research and encourage comparative work, for example in a European context, those connected to Cinema Context, Cinematic Brno, The London Project, The Enlightened City, Italian Cinema Audiences, Swedish Cinema and Everyday Life, and European Cinema Audiences. Yet another feature of NCH research is the use of digital tools to visualize data and results. See, for example, van Oort *et al.* (2020); Pafort-Overduin *et al.* (2020); from the US, Allen (2010), and Australia, Verhoeven *et al.* (2009).

After a review of the tradition of oral history and the particularity of memories, we move to its applications in cinema studies, using Kuhn's concept of cinema memories. We then apply these concepts in our discussion of the methodology for the Swedish Cinema and Everyday Life project.

ORAL HISTORY AND MEMORIES

The oral history tradition has “trailblazed the importance of memory as an organising concept”, where memory is understood as both cultural narrative and unconscious process, particular in its relation to lived historical experience (Radstone 2000: 10–11). Its goal has from the start been to (re-)inscribe experiences that otherwise would have been lost. For example, oral history interviews with working-class men and women, indigenous peoples, or members of cultural minorities have contributed with that which tends to be missing from other historical sources, such as relationships with people and things, domestic and family life, or the subjective and personal meanings of experiences (Perks, Thompson 2016: xiii).

It would be misguided to believe that oral history can reveal “how it really was” (Anderson 2013: 184–185). An oral history interview is rather an “entry point from the present into the culture of the past” (Abrams, 2010: 16), and always part of wider social and cultural environments that have many layers of meaning. For Alessandro Portelli ([1985] 2005), oral history is a distinct genre because of the dialogical relationships it creates rather than the type of content one obtains: memories entail a dialogue between then and now, but also between interviewer and interviewee (intersubjectivity, cf. Abrams 2010: 54), between the story and history, and between the orality of the source and the writing of the historian (Portelli [1985] 2005: 2).

In oral history, we not only analyse *what* is said but also *how* and *why*. As discussed below, the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee is important, as is “the cultural context within which each participant in the interview and

the encounter itself is situated” (Abrams 2010: 16). In this sense, memories are *performative*: one's subjective position within the world plays a role in the construction and recollection of memories (Portelli [1985] 2005; Rigney 2012: 17–18). Alistair Thomson (2013) suggests that memories are composed in such a way as to construct a version of the past that is “acceptable” in line with one's identity, a version that we believe will gain approval and affirmation in the context of recollecting. The construction of that self and memory is intertwined (Kuhn 2016: 186–189), so the memory produced in the interview “mediates between personal memory and the social world” (Abrams 2010: 7).

It is important to note that this subjectivity is not static, but dependent on the meanings and discourses available to us in a particular culture at a particular point in time. Cultural memory studies have identified this as the first level of remembering: biological memories shaped by sociocultural contexts (Erll 2008: 5). Memories are grounded in the environment where one finds oneself upon retrieval, including larger social and cultural interactions that are part of that environment (Kuhn 2002: 8–9). The concept of *collective* memory, coined by sociologist Maurice Halbwachs ([1950] 1992), is influential at this first level. Individuals use social frameworks when they remember that the individual and the various groups to which he or she is a member are connected.

The second level that cultural memory studies identify is the symbolic order in which groups construct a shared past (Erll 2008: 5). This is an analytical level; memories here are disembodied and part of media and institutions – yet unavoidably actualised by individuals (*ibid*). Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka speak in this respect of mediated *figures of memory*: “fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, observance)” (Assmann, Czaplicka 1995: 129). What interests us in the context of oral history is

how the participant draws upon these discourses to construct their identity through memory (Abrams 2010: 54). Repeated narratives in the participants' stories point to similar repositories of collective or cultural memory (Halbwachs [1950] 1992; Assmann, Czaplicka 1995; Assmann 2010: 121).

At the biological level, the neuroscientific aspect of memory helps us understand what we can expect from memory in its formal sense. For example, a relevant characteristic of remembering is the uneven temporal distribution of memories. We forget things from when we were infants, but we tend to remember more from adolescence and early adulthood. This is called the reminiscence bump (Janssen *et al.* 2007: 756). A reminiscence bump can be used to one's advantage. For example, in our study, we interviewed people in their teens during the period under investigation (1950s and 1960s).

Another given is that memories are subjective and unstable. This is precisely their value in oral history. Statements may be factually 'false', yet they are 'true' to the individual doing the recollection. The validity of memories lies in their capacity to reveal unexplored areas of everyday life and unknown (aspects of) events therein. The subjectivity of memory (and what is forgotten) is its strength: it tells us how the present relates to the past, how a participant defines his or her identity based on memories, how collective memory finds a way into personal narratives, and, insofar as history is seen as the struggle for hegemony, how dominant histories and discourses are produced (Portelli [1979] 2016).

The relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee needs to be carefully considered. Not only does the interviewer hold a position of greater power in her position as a researcher and, therefore, knowledgeable, an "expert". The age, gender, and ethnic identity of the interviewer can also affect the relationship between the researcher and the participant, and in turn, the research project (Lotz 2000; Abrams 2010). Treveri Gennari (2018: 47–48) has explored this relation-

ship and found that by organising a *Sharing Memories*-event during which clips of earlier video interviews were shown, people were strengthened in their own processes of remembrance, while, at the same time, creating a more equal relationship with interviewer and other respondents.²

CINEMA MEMORIES

With the "historical turn" in cinema studies, and a reorientation to develop "accounts of cinema that place the audiences, rather than films, at their centre" (Maltby, Stokes 2007) new kinds of knowledge has been disclosed. Results from Daniela Treveri Gennari's *Italian Cinema Audiences* study, provide examples of knowledge gained by giving a voice to those memories that would otherwise have been lost or dismissed. Treveri Gennari illustrates how oral history interviews complement archival data in historical film studies. One example is recollected experiences of cinema going which exceed the images on the screen (e.g. the experiences of venues, their meaning in social contexts, or activities around cinemagoing). Another, more specific example is how cinemas in Rome developed a complicated system of film distribution that resulted in the rapid circulation of films, inexplicable with programming data alone. Oral history interviews revealed how the same reels were exchanged between cinemas and how audiences saw reels in different orders than intended, adding new layers to our understanding of film viewing and its remembrance (Treveri Gennari 2018: 42–44).

Cinema and media memories are special in that they are pleasurable rather than traumatic or negatively connotated memories, the latter being a more common focus in memory studies (see, for example, Assmann, Conrad 2010). Treveri Gennari (2018: 49) points out how cinema memories are sources of happiness as participants remember cinema going in

2 On using video for ethnographical work, see Preisig *et al.* 2022. *Trading Zones: Camera Work in Artistic and Ethnographic Research*. Berlin: Archive Books. <https://zenodo.org/record/5734213>.

the past as pleasurable but also because of the positive experience involved in the act of reminiscing. Bolin (2016a), focusing on media technologies more generally, finds instead an ambiguity, both pleasure and pain in remembering, where passion “is activated by the nostalgic relationships to past media experiences, the bittersweet remembrances of media habits connected to earlier life phases of one’s own” (250).

In addition to the feelings associated with memories, cinema memories have their own qualities and should therefore be considered a subcategory of cultural memory (Kuhn 2023). Kuhn identifies three forms or modes of cinema memory: remembered scenes or images from films, situated memories of films, and memories of cinemagoing. The three categories of memory are not necessarily separate from one another (Kuhn 2002, 2023).

Cinema memories can also be defined by formal attributes such as impersonal discourse (third person, in which the narrator distances him- or herself completely or takes on an expert role) versus first-person narration that is anecdotal; repetitive discourse, when behaviour is represented as individual yet habitual (“I always went with my mother”) or collective (“we hung around outside”); and comparisons between past and present which reflect memories’ inherent relation to the present (Kuhn 2002: 10). Furthermore, meta-statements might provide hints of what the individual believes is a socially expected answer (Anderson, Jack [1991] 2016), thereby revealing power relations in the interview situation.

Cinema memories tend to be topographical. Kuhn observed the following place-related themes in her study: “recollections of cinemas that lay within walking distance of the informant’s home; an association between proximity and familiarity, particularly apparent in the idea of ‘going to the pictures’ as an extension of home life, comfortable and unthreatening early venture into the public domain; distinctions drawn, in terms of accessibility, between cinemas in the informant’s neighbourhood and those further away, as for example in

city centres (that is, beyond walking distance); and contrasts between topographies past and present” (Kuhn 2002: 17).

Another dimension to consider is how cinema memories are gendered. Female spectatorship was first investigated in the ethnographic studies of Jackie Stacey (1994), who studied female audiences’ relation to film cultures in the 1940s and the 1950s, and Helen Taylor’s work on the female fans of *Gone with the Wind* ([1989] 2014). Kuhn (2002) discerns gender as one of the determining variations in cinema memories of growing up. Men tend to emphasize the use of what they saw in the cinema “as raw material for make-believe and play” while women tend to focus more on adolescence, exploring a wider range of themes in their memories, suggesting a more complex engagement with cinema culture on the part of women (Kuhn 2002: 100–101).

The characteristics of cinema memory are often valid for memories of media use more generally. Certain media can be linked to an expression of generational belonging and nostalgia, where both media technologies and content that are available to youth have been proven to be formative of generational identity (Holmes, Conway 1999). Sharing media with family also creates an intergenerational identity in both past and future directions (Bourdon 2003). Göran Bolin’s research, based on focus group interviews with Swedish and Estonian media users belonging to different generations found that passion and nostalgia are produced in the memories, “first, in relation to old technologies, second, in relation to childhood memories, and, third, at the limits of shared intergenerational experience, that is, at the moment when one realises that one’s own experience of past media forms cannot be shared by younger generations, and especially one’s own children” (2016b: 251).

Given the particularity of cinemagoing and film-viewing experiences, as well as other types of media use, specific questions can be necessary to retrieve information beyond the life stories that oral history usually focuses on. This has

usually meant that, in contrast to common oral history-practice, interviews on cinema memory and historical audiences tend to be semi-structured using topic lists or a list of questions (Kuhn 2002: 244; Van de Vijver 2012; Jernudd 2013; Treveri Gennari 2018; Van Belle 2019). Sometimes, these questionnaires are constructed bottom-up (Stacey 1994). An example is Louise Anderson's study of newsreel memories (2009). Although interested in the place of newsreels in everyday life, the fact that cinema was routine, an everyday event, made it difficult to obtain specific newsreel memories; therefore, the interviews were necessarily more conversational than oral history interviews (Anderson 2009: 187).

In the final section of the article, we elaborate on the methodological design of the research project, *Swedish Cinema and Everyday Life: A study of cinema-going in its peak and decline*. The thoughts and tactics involved in the recruitment and selection of participants for the study as well as the interviews will be disclosed and discussed.

SWEDISH CINEMA AND EVERYDAY LIFE: METHODOLOGY AND REFLECTIONS

One of the primary aims of the project was to investigate cinemagoing in Sweden during its peak in the 1950s and decline in the 1960s. Film professor Leif Furhammar claims in the standard account of Swedish film history (Furhammar 2003) that the arrival of TV was the direct cause of cinema's decline in the early 1960s. He writes, "nothing can rebut the obvious fact that television was the direct and fully sufficient cause of the plummet in cinema attendance and its catastrophic crisis." (2003: 251)³ Questioning the technological

determinism of such a claim yet unwilling to throw the baby out with the bathwater, i.e. acknowledging that the "new" medium of television surely had an impact on yet existed alongside the "old" medium of cinema (Gitelman 2006), the project aimed to problematise and nuance the historical record of this moment in the history of moving image media in Sweden (for the results, see, Jernudd, Van Belle 2024; Van Belle, Jernudd 2023). Oral history seemed to be appropriate to do so.

At the outset, the project has a strong focus on the place and meaning of cinema in "everyday life", in the context of school, work and leisure, family, friends and other social contacts and activities. As mentioned, oral history interviews are especially suitable for gaining insight into everyday life. Our empirical scope is concentrated to the post-industrial region known as Bergslagen, comprising the four counties of Västmanland, Värmland, Dalarna, and Örebro. Bergslagen experienced significant economic and demographic growth during the 1950s and 1960s, marked by the expansion of urban centers across cities, towns, and villages of varying sizes. In contrast, the region also encompasses rural areas characterized by traditional agricultural practices and livelihoods. The choice of investigating historical cinemagoing in this region challenges the Stockholm-centred bias in Swedish film-historical research and expands the traditionally restricted tunnel vision of what counts as "history" and "culture" to include less-known experiences from lives lived in a variety of geographical locations and including considerations of the participants' mobility. How the experiences and memories of cinemagoing are gendered is a nucleus of the study and, in line with previous research, turned out to matter substantially in the recollections of our participants as well. Shortly deviating here from the methodological setup, we found that, on the one hand, the male participants bore testament to a continuity in cinema-going when remembering the pleasures of visiting matinees in their boyhood. On the

3 "Effekten på biografernas besöksfrekvens var omedelbar, konsekvent och brutal. Allteftersom sändarnätet byggdes ut, programtiden tilltog och TV-mottagarna spred sig över landet krympte publiksiffrorna på biograferna. (...) alla vetenskapliga studier av förloppet, geografiskt och tidsmässigt, all statistik över sambanden i deras övergripande effekter och alla vardagsiakttagelser av lokala skeenden var entydiga. Ingenting kunde i längden dölja det uppenbara faktum, att TV var den direkta och fullt tillräckliga orsaken till biografernas publikras och katastrofala kristillstånd."

other hand, the cinema memories of female participants were entangled in a broader and expanding media scape and social life in the memories from the time when the 1950s shifted to the 1960s (Jernudd, Van Belle 2024). Finally, age, class, and ethnicity were considered from the outset to maximise diversity in our sample for the analysis.

Sampling and recruitment

In the process of recruiting participants for the study, the primary criterion for selection was that the interviewee had lived in one of the four counties of Bergslagen as a child, teen, or young adult. With the reminiscence bump in mind, we ideally wanted to recruit people born between 1939 and 1955. Since we actively sought a variety of experiences, we checked our selection of interviewees against the following parameters: age, gender, class background, level of urbanisation, and ethnicity. We aimed for an even distribution between men and women, as well as different class-related backgrounds based on the profession of the parents and the level of education of the participants. Several of the participants spent their childhood in rural or small communities and had non-educated parents with low-income jobs, yet they moved to more urban locations to enrol in higher education or land a white-collar job. This kind of upward social mobility became common during the post-war economic boom and with the advancement of a socially reformistic society. With 'level of urbanisation' we acknowledge differences in the size of the population in the localities in Bergslagen where the participants lived up until they married (and thus became 'adults'). Mining and steel industries made this a particularly expansive region in the 1950s and 60s and one of the strongholds of the workers' movement. This, in turn, is important to the study as local grassroots societies of the workers' movement, as well as the temperance movement managed cinemas in multipurpose venues owned by the local societies of the two movements, upholding a widespread infrastructure for cinema in rural and remote

areas (Jernudd, Lundmark 2020). Both the social and cultural historical conditions of the people in the region in general and the cinemas that would have been available to them were part of our preparatory research ahead of the interviews. Although this kind of information could also have been retrieved from the interviews, prior knowledge of the region proved important for our selection of participants. This is most clear in that, at the time, im/migration to industrial towns was considerable, not only from other parts of Sweden as part of the ongoing urbanisation but also from abroad, from countries such as Finland and Italy. For this reason, we considered it crucial to include participants with immigrant backgrounds.

In this study, we aimed for an even distribution of participants who had lived in agrarian locations with less than 1000 inhabitants, in towns with 1000 to 10.000 inhabitants, in regional centres with more than 10.000 inhabitants and in larger cities.

The first participants in the study were recruited through a collaboration with *Pensionärernas Riksorganisation* (PRO), one of the largest politically independent organisations for retired people in Sweden. We invited PRO members to a recruiting event at a historical cinema site and made an appeal in the organisation's monthly news bulletin. To create a buzz about the project and entice people to participate, we contacted the regional press which published an article about the project, and conducted a follow-up with a weekly column of reader mail cinema memories. Approximately 20 people (half of our sample) were recruited to the project through initial reach-out activities. We secured the other half (approximately 20 people) using snowball sampling (Goodman 1961), meaning that we found more people to interview via the first participants in the project. At the first contact, we asked for background data to secure selection of participants in line with the goals of diversity. At the first contact, we also clarified that the interviews would be recorded on video and that the video

would be posted online on a website with public access.⁴

Interviews

In total, we conducted 40 interviews, half of which took place online on the video-conference platform Zoom due to the COVID19 pandemic which led to restrictions in social contact, especially with elderly people. The interviews were planned as semi-structured in-depth interviews, inspired by the oral history approach of encouraging memory narration to develop in the context of the interviewees' larger life story. We began the interview by asking the participant to share her story of her upbringing, (first) family, what it was like where she lived, and her social and school life, to gradually insert questions more clearly related to cinemagoing, film, and leisure. The questionnaire used was based on earlier projects⁵ and was adjusted to the Swedish context. Thus, we asked specific questions about common conceptions in Sweden. One such conception was that when TV came, cinema died, so we wanted to hear how our participants remembered this and what they thought of it. Another such conception, based on earlier research, is that cinema theatres in the 1960s would have been shabbier, especially outside of the capital Stockholm (Furhammar 2003). We wanted to determine whether our participants had experienced it as such. Finally, given the popularity of film clubs in Sweden in the 1960s, we also enquired about this. Otherwise, we stayed quite close to the protocols used in earlier studies, when possible, which is motivated by the knowledge that they have been successfully tested and that it can facilitate comparisons between studies.

The oral history approach entailed that not all questions were asked in every interview; furthermore, we allowed for the recollections to develop organically rather than in a question-cum-response manner. Questions about the participants' current situations were not explicit in our interview protocol. In retrospect, in the phase of analysing the interviews, we realised the significance of having knowledge about how the participants perceived their current predicament. In some cases, this was volunteered and helped us to assess the performative qualities of the participants' contribution. We recommend that questions about the present and how the participant feels about 'looking back' are inferred toward the end of the interview. Asking about the present situation toward the end of the interview makes chronological sense; however, a stronger reason for waiting until the end with this kind of question is that some people may be uncomfortable talking about their present selves.

In our experience, the choice of place for the interviews was important in establishing trust and contributing to a relaxed and familiar atmosphere, thus counteracting potentially undesired power dynamics. Participants could choose to be interviewed in their own home, in a community hall near their home, or in the home of one of the interviewers. Prior to the interview, we announced that we would bring cake or cookies, and wished to 'fika' before the interview, that is, have an informal chat over coffee and cake. We also had the task of setting up video recording technology before we could begin the interview. The fika, more so when offered in the participant's home, and the business of setting up the technology took some time and gave the opportunity for the interviewer and interviewee to become accustomed to each other and to the situation. The benefits that the home milieu provided for us in the position of interviewers could be enjoyed more often with female participants, as they were more inclined to invite us into their home.

As is appropriate in the oral history approach, we sought to downplay our role

4 All interviews were recorded with video and audio. The National Library of Sweden is a partner in the project, and the interviews, as well as other materials collected, will be posted on a website curated by the library for the benefit of future scholars as well as interested groups or individuals in general.

5 The Italian Cinema Audience project and European Cinema Audience project, both led by Daniela Treveri Gennari.

as experts and establish a relationship that could allow for a conversation guided by a sense of collaboration rather than one guided by a question-and-response pattern. We experienced a difference in how our relationship with the participants developed depending on the gender of the interviewer and the interviewee. We were two women who acted as interviewers; sometimes with both of us present during the interviews, one of us would supervise the video and audio recording and the other would take the role of the interviewer. Though we cannot be certain, our feeling is that our being women and in charge of the study, as well as conducting the interviews, facilitated an emotional connection with some of the participating women. The age difference between the interviewers also influenced the interview situation. Furthermore, while the senior scholar is indigenous to Sweden, a slight foreign accent can be detected in the younger scholar's pronunciation, thereby disclosing the cultural distance in relation to the interviewees. The younger one of us found that she was not easily granted trust and respect in the role as interviewer, when both of us were present in the interview situation. When the younger scholar was interviewing, it happened that the respondents would glance at the older scholar as if asking for confirmation that they were doing well. The nonverbal dynamics in the interview situation cannot be underestimated in this respect. On the other hand, the younger scholar could position herself in relation to the interviewees as less knowledgeable, thereby coming closer to the ideal of empowering the interviewee and confirming their superior level of expertise.

Performing interviews online

The COVID19 pandemic became a full-fledged crisis after half of the interviews were completed. The pandemic created a situation overnight in which the elderly population became completely isolated and confined to their homes. Rather than waiting out the pandemic and not knowing when we would be able to resume face-to-

face meetings with the elderly, we decided to continue the interviews. This could be done by using a computer screen as the interface and the Zoom video-conference software application. Zoom allowed for easy recording of the interviews, although the video quality varied depending on the strength of the interviewee's Internet connection. It should be mentioned that the context of crisis, the elderly population's vulnerability, and the dreadful uncertainty regarding how the pandemic would develop and how society would respond to the developments formed a unique backdrop to the conversations we had with the online participants. Contrary to our expectations, the elderly we contacted, usually through email after being referred by a friend or acquaintance, were inclined to participate and generally did not have problems managing the software (see Bolin *et al.* 2023 to reflect on the methodological and ethical implications of conducting online interviews).

Switching to online oral history interviews had interesting implications which impacted the results. We found that the online interviews were more topic-oriented and focused more on the topic of cinema-going and film culture. The respondents did not expand their discourse into other areas of everyday life as much as they did in the face-to-face interviews. Contrary to what we expected, the interviews performed online were not much shorter in length than the face-to-face interviews; the average online interview was 30 minutes, compared to 39 minutes for face-to-face interviews. It also turned out that the interviews with women were consistently shorter than those with men, both face-to-face and in Zoom.

Furthermore, we found it more difficult to "connect" emotionally in the online interviews, which means it became harder to apprehend emotional and subtle nuances in the memory narration, and it took more effort from us in the role of interviewing to create a sense of trust and to be affirming in our response to the participants' narration. Small talk was inclined to be

strained, not least because online interfaces demand we speak “in strict turns” rather than overlapping dialogue, as is the case in face-to-face situations (cf. Bolin *et al.* 2023). In general, our comprehension of social and emotional atmospheres was less acute. Something intangible in the face-to-face dynamic creates a platform where participants feel they are listened to and have space to elaborate on feelings alongside memories, and we feel these small emotionally charged additions were lost online. On the other hand, the distance between the interviewer and interviewee in the online environment – the interviewee speaking from the safety space and comfort of her home, physically separated from the person interviewing – may have provided a greater sense of personal integrity on the side of the interviewee.

Considering that the personal integrity of participants is crucial for ethnographic research, it is pivotal in oral history practice. The General Data Protection Regulation, applicable in the EU as directly binding, needs to be advised prior to contact with participants, engaging in interviews, and before storing and disseminating research data and results. In our project, we were confronted with ethical questions concerning the knowledge value of participants’ narration, which revealed and involved their own or their family members’ religious and political affiliation. In the public dissemination of results from the project, we include these aspects of discourse only in parts where they appear to have some kind of weight or influence on the memory narration of cinemagoing in everyday life. The participants were anonymised in publications which have processed oral history data from the project.

Coding and results

All the interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded using NVivo. NVivo allowed us to connect the timecodes in the transcription to those in the videos of the interview recordings. This procedure provides access to both text and video in the coding and analysis of the interviews.

Maintaining the “aurality” of the interviews, “the actual voice (orality, in all its meanings), and embodied voices and contexts” (Frisch 2006: 107, quoted in Treveri Gennari *et al.* 2019: 347) by having an audio-visual reproduction to advise in the analysis provides important cues and nuances to how the participant relates to the interviewer and the remembered objects (*ibid*). NVivo significantly facilitated the coding process. An excellent feature of NVivo is the possibility of connecting the transcriptions to pre-identified socioeconomic data (in our case, age, gender, class background, level of urbanisation, and ethnicity), which facilitates cross-reference and structuring of the interview discourse for analysis.

It is important to be aware that organising the transcribed interviews by codes and analysing them as isolated entities opens up the risk that meanings are lost in the focus on details. Working with a body of oral history discourse is a complex process of shifting perspective between the codes in isolation and their contexts, within the individual memory narration, as well as in reference to other kinds of historical knowledge. For example, one of our research questions required a comparison between memories from the 1950s and the 1960s. Initially, we assumed that age would be a decisive parameter for disclosing the differences related to the two time periods. To test this hypothesis, we selected a group of relevant codes and sorted them by birth year for comparison. We chose 1947 as the breaking point of the analysis. As mentioned earlier, the arrival of television has been singled out as influential in shaping changing cinemagoing patterns related to the two time periods. TV sets were quickly disseminated to households in Sweden after regular broadcasting began in 1956 which led us to assume that people born after 1947 were likely to have childhood and teenage memories which would be shaped by living in a household with a television which in turn would be different from those born before 1947. Closer analysis of the selected codes revealed that this kind of organisation of memory data follow-

ing a before- and after-logic, and connected to television as a single defining, historical incident, did not make sense. Several of the codes revealed continuity between the time periods, rather than differences. Further investigation into the differences between the time periods based on the selected codes drawn from the memories showed that gender and location (rural or urban) proved to be more pertinent and meaningful than television or age (Jernudd, Van Belle 2024).

In the coding, we strived to retain narrative sequences using a twofold strategy. First, we decided to code larger blocks of text rather than smaller blocks to avoid fragmentation of transcriptions. Despite this ambition to be inclusive, we often found it necessary in the analysis phase to go back to the individual transcripts to comprehend passages in their larger narrative context: what was said before and after the passage that was coded? What weight does the passage have on the interview as a whole? Second, we used a two-step coding process. Researcher 1 described and summarised the codes. Researcher 2 read and commented on the summaries. Our experience is that it was a great help, being two researchers involved in the interviewing, transcribing, coding, and analysis, facilitating productive cross-checking of the investigation in its separate phases, and an open discussion in which we questioned each other's presumptions which greatly helped in identifying biases as well as overlooked aspects in the analysis.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Using oral history in media studies allows us to investigate hitherto overlooked historical dimensions of media and their surrounding social and cultural embeddedness, as exemplified by cinema memory and the social and cultural dimensions of cinemagoing. Since audiences in the past have largely been ignored, oral history provides tools to uncover and add a new perspective to cinema history. Rather than disclosing objective facts of historical records, this method is particularly useful for investigating what people remember and how this relates to their identity, the intersubjectivity of the interview situation, and the relationship between individual and historical socio-cultural discourses. In our example, the research project *Swedish Cinema and Everyday Life*, the focus has been on the (changing) meaning of cinema in everyday life in the 1950s and 1960s. Memories of cinemagoing during this period were connected to and narrated through broader ideas of family, work, study, and social life, while gender, geography, age, ethnicity, class/religious, and political belonging varied in significance. In this case, the use of oral history has provided a historiography that supplements the standard historical account of Sweden's cinema crisis in the early 1960s. When audiences' memories are brought to the fore, a fresh and more nuanced understanding of historical cinema culture is possible, one that accounts for the multifarious ways in which cinema shapes culture and identity.

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