



Neely, S. (2020) The story of the reel that went for a swim': cinema memory and the history of the Highlands and Islands Film Guild as narrated through oral history interviews and its surrounding metadata. *Northern Scotland*, 11(1), pp. 42-59. (doi: 10.3366/nor.2020.0204)

This is the author's final accepted version.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/212550/>

Deposited on: 20 March 2020

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow
<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

‘The story of the reel that went for a swim’: cinema memory and the history of the Highlands and Islands Film Guild as narrated through oral history interviews and its surrounding metadata

Sarah Neely

‘The story of the reel that went for a swim’ is a story told by a respondent during an interview undertaken for the project on the history of the Highlands and Islands Film Guild. The interview, discussed at length towards the end of this article, is indicative of a distinctive inflection of cinema memories in the Highlands and Islands – both in terms of the memories themselves, but also in how they are expressed. As our findings for the project reveal, various factors of life and culture in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, such as its geography and its traditions of storytelling and oral culture, contribute to particularly distinctive expressions of cinema memory. The focus of this article will be to explore the specific ways in which memories of cinema and the Guild screenings are narrativised – or the way stories are told – within the oral history interviews, but also other types of metadata, such as letters, stories, poems, and other written accounts. As Annette Kuhn explains in relation to her pioneering research on cinema culture in 1930s Britain, ‘*how* people remember is as much a text to be deciphered as *what* they remember’.¹ In this regard, the particular aim here is to understand the cinema screen as a medium of modernity constituting less of a threat to the traditional society of Scotland’s crofting counties, and more of an insertion that reinscribed it.

This article draws from research developed as part of a creative writing strand of the project which was inspired by the surprising discovery of the project’s pilot study that some cinema-goers from the period of research had been inspired to write poems or stories in

response to their experience of going to the Film Guild screenings. As part of the project's creative writing strand, a series of creative writing and storytelling workshops were held at various locations throughout the Highlands and Islands in order to stimulate imaginative responses in relation to the memories of cinema-going in rural communities. Workshops were held at local festivals in locations where the project's fieldwork was simultaneously being undertaken; this included: Inverness Film Festival, Shetland Screenplay, Orkney Storytelling Festival and the Hebridean Celtic (HebCelt) Festival on the Isle of Lewis. The workshops greatly benefitted from the support and generosity of the festivals, for providing the venues for the workshops and for also assisting with the promotion of the workshops within local communities. Each workshop recruited between six to twelve participants, drawn from both the local community and visiting festival-goers, and were led by myself and Nalini Paul, a poet and experienced workshop facilitator.

The creative writing strand of the project also included a creative writing competition on the general theme of memories of cinema going, which was open to writers, writing in English, from around the world. Twenty entries from the competition were selected for inclusion in a final publication, a creative writing anthology² on the theme of memories of cinema-going, which also included works by five writers from the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, who were commissioned at the project's start to write creative works responding to their own memories of cinema-going.³ Although a great number of the entries selected came from writers from Scotland and indeed the Highlands and Islands, this was likely because the competition was more publicized in these areas, rather than any reflection on the way the entries were selected. The final book, published by Cranachan, a publisher based in Lewis, contains contributions reflecting a wide-range of cinema going experiences, from distant childhood memories to the very recent, and across different generations and geographical contexts, both urban and rural.

The methodological approach for the project, more suggestive than empirical, was intended to promote the role of the imagination in relation to memory and the cinema-going experience, and question the ways in which stories are told within both personal and academic contexts. This aspect of the project, looking at the creative treatment of memory, also aimed to offer new ways of thinking about cinema memories which acknowledge the fallibility of memory. Instead, the creative writing strand of the project aligned itself with what Kuhn has referred to as a kind of ‘Memory work [that] undercuts assumptions about the transparency or the authenticity of what is remembered, taking it not as “truth” but as evidence of a particular sort: material for interpretation, to be interrogated, mined, for its meanings and its possibilities. Memory work is a conscious and purposeful staging of memory’.⁴ Thus, a more productive approach considers the ways in which cinema memories are narrativised across a variety of texts and contexts, but also the ways in which cinema memory (as a very particular form of cultural memory) may offer its own unique inflection to the ways in which stories are told - for example, focusing on ‘*how*’ things are remembered rather than ‘*what*’, as suggested by the quote from Kuhn referred to earlier.

The first stage of my academic reflection on this strand of the project resulted in a publication for the journal *Participations* in May 2019,⁵ which was part of a special section of an article on researching past cinema audiences. The article considered the overall rationale and potential for creative writing to serve as a productive research methodology. But while my article for *Participations* largely focused on the commissions and creative writing works selected from the competition, and considered memories of cinema-going from around the UK and beyond, and in contexts both urban and rural, what the focus of this article is to extend my thinking to include a consideration of how stories are told in relation to a wider set of data in relation to cinema memory research, including oral history interviews, but other metadata, such as letters, emails, personal essays, etc. Detailed analysis of the way

in which narrative is articulated across the interviews and metadata will help to offer a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which cinema memory is narratively structured and framed. I will also reflect more specifically on the specificities of cinema-going in rural Scotland, particularly taking into consideration the significance of Scotland's oral history and storytelling traditions in relation to the arrival of cinema to the Highlands and Islands.

When I first started working on this project, I was coming to the end of another project with Laraine Porter at De Montfort University and John Izod, a colleague at the University of Stirling, on British Silent Cinema and the Transition to Sound.⁶ The Stirling arm of the project was focused on the period of transition from silent to sound cinema in Scotland and since it was unlikely we would be able to identify anyone from the period still living who we could interview, we were interested in finding existing oral histories which might contain material relevant to our research. There were some promising discoveries – including interviews in local archives in Shetland and Orkney, each containing a significant collection of oral history interviews, some of which refer to cinema-going from the period.⁷ I was also aware of the archive at Lancaster University relating to the Cinema Culture in 1930s Britain project (CCINTB), which was conducted by Annette Kuhn in the 1990s and resulted in over 200 hours of interviews, only a small amount of which was included Kuhn's book, *Everyday Magic*.⁸ When I consulted the archive, it was a nice surprise to discover the vast array of additional materials, including diaries, memoirs, stories, letters, photographs, and other ephemera. Many were offered as donations to support and enhance the research or simply in order to find a home for the items which respondents feared might be otherwise discarded. For instance, in a letter from one respondent who sent in her personal scrap books containing clippings of film stars from the 1930s, she explains, 'I have no relatives, they will probably be thrown out when I die, so if they are of any interest to you you are very welcome to have them'.⁹

In some cases, the items donated were created at the time corresponding to the respondents' memories – e.g. the 1930s. Items included diaries or mini-essays on the films they had seen, and scrap books such as the one mentioned above. They are often written for personal enjoyment, sometimes as a fan of the cinema, and, although not always entirely unselfconscious, the items help to add a further dimension to an understanding of the experience of cinema-going and the cinema-goer from the period. Other items, such as letters or more contemporary essays or essays which were annotated from the perspective of the present day, offer another layer of narration to the respondents' telling of their story. As with the Highlands and Islands Film Guild project, in some cases, the essays had been written recently, but before knowledge or engagement with the research project; in other cases, the essays were specifically penned as a way of supplementing the oral history interviews. Although these types of sources are sometimes derided for their self-consciously constructed nature, they should be valued for affording the opportunity for respondents to tell their own story, rather than being led by research or researchers' agendas. As Annette Kuhn posits, by its nature the act of 'recounting or telling memory-stories, in both private and public contexts' are '*performances of memory*'.¹⁰ In this sense, all of the data collected by both projects – the oral histories, but also the surrounding metadata, both old and new – must be considered as performances.

Often the act of performance is something the respondent is acutely aware of. Incredibly, in one of the diaries donated to the *CINTB* project, a foreword provided by the respondent reflects on the legitimacy of the various types of registers that might be adopted in the diary form:

The keeping of diaries is an occupation fraught with problems. Should the diary be confined to a simple record of personal events, at the risk of producing a trivial and consequently, boring narrative? Should the diarist endeavour to suppress the personal element, seeking rather to express his views on the contemporary social and political environment, and thereby risk subsequent judgement of his opinions as being unfounded and misguided? Or should he attempt a mixture of these two approaches,

only to be confronted with the difficulty of maintaining a credible balance between them, for there is often little or no relation between most people's daily experiences and public events.¹¹

In many cases, the written accounts provided by respondents also afford the opportunity to provide the kind of details that may not be readily recalled in the moment of the interview, adding in specific details such as dates, names of films, film stars or places, etc.

Drawings and sketches were also sometimes introduced to supplement the written word in some of the writings and/or letters from respondents. Drawings in this sense seem helpful in their ability for respondents to work out the visual and spatial details of memory. For instance, in a letter to Annette Kuhn, from a respondent who lived above the Grand Cinema in Glasgow in the 1930s, when the talking pictures were first introduced, the writer offers an evocative description of listening to her first sound films from her bedroom situated directly above where the projection booth was located: 'I don't know about "going to the movies", but the movies came to me!'

[INSERT ABOUT HERE illustration, Ritz cinema]

This is a particularly distinctive account of early memories of the talking pictures because the respondent's recollection is not of experiencing it as an audience member, but as part of the experience of their everyday home life. It is an example of an early memory of the cinema which is clearly tied to a particular setting. In a similar way to how Kuhn writes of the spatial practices associated with memories surrounding the journey to a cinema, the spatial setting provides the narrator with a way to imaginatively situate their own remembering and to be 'reinhabited in the act of narration'.¹² The drawing, reproduced here, provides a way for the respondent to provide a visual cue for themselves and others for which to anchor their telling of the story.

The Highlands and Islands Film Guild project also received a wide selection of similar metadata, the details of which will be discussed now; however, reflecting the changes in communication since *CCINTB*, the Highlands and Islands Film Guild project received emails rather than letters. The project also benefited from the existence of a number of active community groups on Facebook, which sometimes contributed lively discussions on the subject of the Film Guild and helped to establish further contact with those with memories of the Guild screenings.

From very early on in the Film Guild project, we discussed the accumulation of metadata as part of our research. Although not surprising, considering the digital nature of communication for the project, the collection of physical materials is considerably smaller. Still, over the period of research, respondents also felt compelled to pre-empt or supplement scheduled interviews with their own written accounts. Although this practice could be seen as signalling the ways in which the cinema proved a generative experience for many, inspiring cinema-goers to respond with their own creative responses, the action could also be read as part of the meaning making of memory. While some of the accounts were written shortly after their experiences at the cinema and others were written decades later, they are all still engaged in an act of making sense of the experience of going to the cinema.

The ability to fill in the gaps via additional email exchanges is something that is explicitly remarked upon by some respondents, particularly those no longer living in Scotland. One respondent now resident in Canada remarked how it was ‘lovely to be able to correspond like this - isn’t the internet wonderful!’.¹³ Throughout much of the correspondence, there is also demonstrative evidence of the pleasures associated with remembering the Guild screenings, through the use of exclamations of joy. Christine De Luca, in her commissioned work for the creative writing strand of the project, evokes these kinds of responses in her account of her own memories of the Film Guild screenings in the

public hall the Waas, the village in Shetland she grew up in, in the work's closing words: 'Happy Days!'.¹⁴

The emails also provide evidence of the ways in which the act of remembering was adopted as a collective activity by many respondents. In much correspondence, there is mention of speaking to someone else or giving someone a ring, or telling others about the project, a sibling or a friend, or others in the village. While collective acts of remembering are hardly an unusual feature of memory work and oral history interviews,¹⁵ as this article will later explore, the particular cultural contexts within which the Film Guild screenings took place, including the rich oral and storytelling traditions of the Highlands and Islands, arguably offers its own unique inflection to the ways in which cinema memories are recalled and function within the community - more of which will be discussed later on.

For the most part, the accounts provided by the project's metadata mirrored the accounts of the oral history interviews. Similar to other studies of cinema memories, including *CCITNB*, there is a significant focus on the journey to the cinema. However, in the case of the journeys to the Guild screenings, the challenging geography of the Highlands and Islands often resulted in highly dramatic and suspenseful accounts which rivalled some of the dramas played out on screen. While the journey to from home to cinema often features as a key trope in cinema memories, it is particularly predominant in the memories of the Highlands and Islands Film Guild where mountainous highland landscapes and island or waterside locations primarily or only accessible by boat, made the journey particularly challenging. For instance, in one written account provided by a respondent, they described the challenges presented by the geography of their childhood home, a croft situated north of the Highland village of Strontian, which could only be reached by a single-track road rising over 1000 feet above sea level, and frequently blocked by snow and ice in winter months.

Because the Film Guild was a mobile cinema scheme, accounts of the journey involved in the screening also included the journey of the cinema operators as well as the audience members. In many cases, the operators' treacherous journeys were framed on a heroic scale and in some case the operator is explicitly likened to the characters or heroes of the films themselves. For instance, in Christine De Luca's essay referred to earlier in this article, she describes George Horne, a local operator in Shetland as 'our Gregory Peck: on the cusp of 'dashing' with his trim moustache; straight out of a film.'¹⁶

One respondent from Lewis provided this description of one of the operators in Lewis.

going back to the Film Van, that guy fought through blizzards to come, he was the Pony Express, he was going to get through! And he did! He also made it through- and he must have had some hairy journeys- of course, he'd to cross the Barvas Moor. And that in a blizzard, oh! It would be awful. But he always got through, and back again.

This respondent proved to be particularly eloquent in the way they expressed their memories of the Guild screenings. In their description of their village, they describe it as 'huggin' the Atlantic, with a ribbon road all the way through the middle of it.' Throughout their response, there are many poetic turns of phrases like this. In many ways, it is tempting to be particularly drawn to these kinds of poetic accounts. In fact, some social science research, such as work of Jennifer Mason at the Centre for Everyday Creativity at the University of Manchester, goes even further to present some of their oral history findings as a kind of creative writing.¹⁷ As part of her research into the ways in which residents of the Calder Valley region of the North of England Pennines experienced the weather (or 'lived the weather' according to Mason), she created a publication of prose and poetry created from the responses of the project's participants.¹⁸ While this kind of project is commendable for the way in which it gives due appreciation to the poetic qualities of oral history accounts, I think there is a need to simultaneously be mindful that oral history research often marginalises the

less loquacious and outspoken speakers. As Annette Kuhn has remarked, there is a tendency to favour informants who have the gift of the gab, and to downplay the testimony of the less fluent.¹⁹

For some of our research, we found that the voices which tended to be marginalised were the voices of women. In group interviews especially, this was because men were at the forefront of historical groups and therefore when women were asked to participate they felt they had nothing to add to what was already said. For example, during one of the interviews I conducted, a local historian took me to meet an elder in the village and I interviewed them both for another hour or so. The elder's wife who had kindly provided tea and cakes, sat to the side throughout the interview. Since she was from overseas, I assume this was why she wasn't able to participate. However, after the interview, I discovered that she had indeed attended the Guild screenings as well. When I suggested coming back to do another interview at some point in the future, her response was that there really wasn't anything she could add. Unfortunately, this was not an isolated occurrence.

One woman who participated in one of our writing workshops wrote an outstanding creative work about her memories of the Film Guild screenings, but was particularly uncomfortable about being recorded in interview. She decided initially on participating, and signed the consent forms, but in the end she did not accept to have the interview fully open to the public. It is worth noting that when being interviewed, the respondent asked if their 'dialect was okay'. Certainly, there were tensions that may have been present for many respondents over how to respond in the interviews, using either 'official' or 'unofficial' expression. Both Orkney and Shetland have terms for speaking 'properly' or in standard English: in Shetland it's called 'knapping' and in Orkney the equivalent term is 'chanting'.²⁰ Both terms refer to a way of speaking that would be used in formal situations or with 'outsiders', or when being recorded. The *CCINTB* project also found it necessary to carefully

consider dialect and register, particularly in relation to the fieldwork in Glasgow. Initially it was decided that the interviews should be transcribed phonetically so that they more accurately reflected the respondents' speech; however, not all respondents responded positively to the approach. In fact, one respondent objected saying that it 'sounded bad on tape, even worse on paper', concluding that she was 'all for standard English'.²¹ This concern for 'speaking proper' to academic interviewers, or in the company of local people, may be likely to affect narratives – about cinema as any other topic.

In this respect, it could be argued that the various forms of metadata, including personal essays, creative writing, and general correspondence, are particularly significant in supporting those who may not feel comfortable with formal interviews to give voice to their memories in other ways. Although individually authored essays, letters and written accounts may sometimes be criticised for their constructed nature, these qualities may also be for allowing respondents the opportunity to tell their own story in a structure and language that is determined by them, rather than by the interests of the interviewer or demands of the research project.

These are some initial speculations regarding the value of the various metadata and its potential to supplement the primary data, adding a further dimension to the analysis. The last part of this article will consider the way in which some of these findings might be interpreted in relation to Scotland's storytelling and oral traditions.

Storytelling in cinema has never been confined to the screen. While research into early cinema often characterises early cinematic offerings by their prioritisation of shock and sensation over telling a story, even early forms of what are now referred to as the 'cinema of attractions'²² were shaped by modes of storytelling – and not just on behalf of the filmmakers, but also the exhibitors who shaped programmes through the various forms of presentation adopted. As Andre Gaudreault points out, in early cinema exhibition the film

lecturer 'acted as a narrator or storyteller'²³ whose commentary served to explain 'the narrative line of the film or to fill out what was seen.'²⁴ As Charles Musser writes of the period from 1897 to 1901: 'the exhibitor acted as the principal *cinematic* narrator and his presence was strongly felt in the narratives that he constructed, not only through the selection and arrangement of films and slides but with a lecture and the introduction of music and effects'.²⁵ Furthermore, the film lecturer's narration and commentary also often provided the opportunity to imbue the programme with a more local inflection. For instance, accounts of local film exhibition in rural Scotland reveal that a film lecturer or 'explainer', sometimes positioned behind the screen to explain what was happening or interpret the film, would incorporate local references.²⁶ The disjuncture between the fantasy world on screen and the everyday life within the community, the collision of the global and local, was sometimes referred to by respondents on our project as a thrilling aspect of the cinema-going experience; Christine De Luca's association of her local operator with a Hollywood film star is one example of this. The facility of film exhibition to bring together local and global communities and cultures is something that seemed to play a significant role in the Film Guild screenings. As one respondent from a small crofting community in Shetland described, when the Guild screenings first arrived to their community it was as if they'd 'been found [...] we were on the map.'²⁷

Although it is argued regularly that Scottish culture is a predominantly oral rather than visual one,²⁸ in many respects Scotland's oral culture, and its storytelling traditions in particular, share much in common with the methods of exhibition of early cinema described above, thereby demonstrating a customary conjunction of the two. Furthermore, research into the storytelling in the Western Isles, has explored the ways in which the oral tradition of storytelling in Scotland is also rooted in visual culture. For instance, D. A. MacDonald's 1978 article, which formed part of research conducted within the School of Scottish Studies

at the University of Edinburgh, considered the significance of visual memory in the storytelling process. In his article, MacDonald focuses on a particularly striking account by Donald Alasdair Johnson, interviewed in 1973 at the age of 86. Johnson was an experienced and respected storyteller who attributed his ability to recall long and complex stories in an effortless and flowing manner as down to a technique he explained was simply a matter of describing the story as it appeared before him. It was, as he described, ‘like a film passing in front of you’, ‘as if I were reading it off the wall’.²⁹

Yet in many communities, the arrival of the cinema and other new technologies has been seen as running counter to Scotland’s oral traditions and storytelling traditions. According to the celebrated Orcadian poet, George Mackay Brown, new technologies, such as radio and television, were to blame for a decline in storytelling traditions. In an article published in 1968, he wrote how following the arrival of television families would ‘stay at home in front of their TV sets on winter nights; the old social gatherings with fiddle and ale and story are rapidly fading into the past.’³⁰ It is not just the content that it is criticised but how the content is presented. Brown focuses particular resentment on the failings in the way news was reported and stories were told from outside the community being addressed. Worries over the decline of local culture in the face of mass media has long been a familiar criticism. Arguing her case for the vital role played by fiction, Southern American writer Flannery O’Connor wrote that ‘a people is known, not by its statements or statistics, but by the stories it tells’.³¹ In his novel *Lanark*, Scottish artist and novelist Alasdair Gray also warns of the consequences when a culture is not able to tell its own stories. Set in Gray’s home city of Glasgow, two of the book’s characters, McAlpin and Thaw reflect on their city:

“Glasgow is a magnificent city”, said McAlpin. “Why do we hardly ever feel that?”
 “Because nobody imagines living here” said Thaw.
 McAlpin lit a cigarette and said “If you want to explain that I’ll certainly listen.”
 “Then think of Florence, Paris, London, New York. Nobody visiting them for the first time is a total stranger. Why? Because he’s already visited them in paintings,

novels, history books and films. But if a city hasn't been used by an artist not even the inhabitants live there imaginatively.“

“What is Glasgow to most of us? A house, the place we work, a football park or golf course, some pubs and connecting streets. That's all. No, I'm wrong, there's also the cinema and library, and when our imagination wants to exercise we use these to visit London, Paris, Rome under the Caesars, the American West at the turn of the century, anywhere but here and now. Imaginatively Glasgow exists as a music hall song and a few bad novels. That's all we've given to the world outside. It's all we've given to ourselves.’³²

The Guild screenings, although welcome, were sometimes described as predominantly featuring films of faraway people and places, offering little chance for audiences to see a semblance of themselves or their own community on screen. However, it could be argued that the creative writing and other responses to the Guild screenings functioned as a way of opening up the text and decentering the films' authorship in a way that was more in line with the collaborative nature of the traditions of storytelling. As Valentina Bold writes, ‘storytelling traditions can be described as part of a wider folk narrative which carries with it a sense of possession for both the teller and the audience. It is a narrative which belongs to the people’³³ In this sense, the creation of stories or poems about the experience of going to the Guild screenings, or about the films themselves, provided an opportunity reinscribe the collaborative nature of the transmission process of storytelling.

The nature of the Film Guild cinema screenings as a fairly regular event which brought together a large proportion of the community also lends itself to comparison with the ceilidh, the regular community gatherings which Alexander Carmichael describes as ‘a literary entertainment where stories and tales, poems and ballads, are rehearsed and recited, and songs are sung, conundrums are put, proverbs are quoted, and many other literary matters are related and discussed.’³⁴ Ian Crichton Smith echoes that, with the ceilidh ‘represented the community that joined together in entertainment created from within itself. Stories would be told, songs would be sung.’³⁵ For many of the areas reached by the Highlands and Islands Film Guild, the ceilidh was the predominant source of entertainment before the arrival of the

Guild screenings.³⁶ As our research has supported, the Film Guild screenings also served as a source of inspiration for new creative outputs. Although the primary objective of the Guild screenings was to share its stories told through the films it screened, they also served to inspire written stories, poems and songs, penned by members of the local audiences. Overall, the different types of creative responses and collective modes of storytelling represent the full range of the cinema-going experience, from accounts of individual films that were particularly well-received or significant within the community. The films themselves sometimes sparked a creative response in audiences, providing what Annette Kuhn describes as the ‘rich material for reverie and thought’ from which ‘the “inner world” can feed into the public domain in the form of new cultural productions’.³⁷ Creative responses were also often in relation to the social aspects of cinema-going, focusing on particularly memorable events or people associated with the Guild screenings. In ‘The Village Called Strath’, a poem written by a regular attendee of the Guild shows in Gairloch in the late 1940s, an account of a fairly raucous screening which was interrupted when two police men, arriving just as a naked woman appears on screen, react by removing the projector from the hall and throwing it outside on a fire.³⁸ What is particularly notable about the way the poem tells this story is that it makes direct reference to many local people who were at the screening, referring to them by their names, and therefore making an overt connection with the audience who would have likely listened to the poem. In the same way that savvy cinema managers filmed local topicals in order to entice additional audience members with the possibility of glimpsing themselves on screen, ‘The Village Called Strath’ appeals to its listeners through direct address, bringing them into the narrative of the Guild events.

As Lynn Abrams explains, ‘Clearly not all oral history interviews constitute stories or are told in the storytelling mode [...] Yet many of us have conducted interviews in which the narrator has taken control and has chosen his or her own form to convey meaning which may

include some features of the storytelling mode.’³⁹ The project interviews are also peppered with stories and anecdotes about the experiences of going to the Guild screenings – the social aspects rather than explicitly about the films themselves. For instance, in one respondent’s recollections of the Guild screenings in Shetland, she recalls an incident when cows grazing on her father’s croft were frightened off when they heard the roar of the MGM lion. When she finishes the story she laughs, then responds, ‘absolutely crazy, you know. [...] all these little kind of little stories’.⁴⁰ In many of the projects interviews it is evident that it is these ‘little stories’ about the experience of the Guild screenings – the memorable events and incidents – rather than the ‘bigger picture’ (the film), which are shared and recalled across the community with considerable enjoyment. Sometimes respondents openly admit to the rehearsed nature of the stories that they are telling. For instance, in an email from a respondent relaying the story of a local boy, he is described climbing into the Film Guild van and then accidentally standing on the starter, setting the van in motion across the school playground - something which seems to have earned him a degree of notoriety as well as a belting from the headmaster. The respondent ends with the admission that ‘yes, this wee story has been repeated a few times!!!’⁴¹

As mentioned earlier, in many areas reached by the Film Guild, the operators held an almost legendary status within the community. One of the most referenced operators in our study, Sandy Wylie from Orkney, was mentioned on a number of occasions and in a variety of contexts.⁴²

In one interview featuring two respondents from Orkney, a dramatic story is told of a time when Sandy Wylie’s equipment, including a reel of film, went overboard as he boarded a boat in Kirkwall: ‘the story of the film reel went for a swim’. The interview gives a good example of the performance of memory. At the start, the two respondents discuss the

illustrations they have prepared, including an original drawing of the Earl Sigurd, the boat at the centre of the story.

[INSERT ABOUT HERE illustration, Earl Sigurd]

Although from the start, it is clear that there is one primary narrator for the story, the other respondent plays a key role in prompting the telling of the story, intervening at key points to encourage the narrator or to ask supplementary questions. Early on, he confesses to the interviewees about how the telling of the story ‘has been like weeks in preparation’. He then offers a prompt for the teller of the story: ‘This is your moment! Charge!’ Later, after they have reached the point in the story where the equipment has been lost to the sea and one of the interviewees, locked in suspense, asks if there ‘was no chance of getting it back?’ The second respondent then prompts the development of the story, saying ‘This is where you come in now isn’t it?’ The second respondent’s interventions continue as the story of the teller’s successful rescue of both the film reel and equipment unfolds. It is revealed that Sandy Wylie spent a long night trying to clean and dry the precious reel of film, which eventually he miraculously does. The narrator then ends his tale with a humorous flourish with what is now the title of this article, ‘That was the story of the reel that went for a swim.’⁴³

The account, like some of the others described in this article, reveals the participatory nature of the circulation and performance of these memories of film exhibition in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Through the story’s performance, there is evidence of its rehearsal and the pleasures of its continual retelling within the community, demonstrating how the presence of film showing did not displace but rather built upon and advanced the

storytelling tradition of the region. There is also a sense of the story contributing to local folklore. As the second respondent demonstrates, it is likely that he or indeed other members of the community could also recount the story in full. Like the woman who relayed the story of the local boy accidentally starting up the Film Guild van, the stories become part of the local culture, belonging to all in the same manner as local tradition had done no doubt for centuries. In some cases, this sort of shared memory story is evidence of a kind of transactive memory whereby the telling of the story is often a joint effort involving members of the community calling on each other to validate and explicate on particular aspects of the story.⁴⁴ This kind of transactive memory is also evidenced in the commissioned work by Shetland writer and poet, Christine De Luca. In her essay recalling the Guild screenings at her village hall, she invokes the memory of friends and family: ‘My sister Joy remembers the *Marx Brothers* and being very scared by their antics! Similarly, my friend Iris remembers *The Green Man*, a comedy which rather terrified her as a little girl when, on lifting the lid of a grand piano, a dead body appeared!’⁴⁵ De Luca’s friend, who was interviewed as part of the project, also mentioned De Luca getting in touch when she was working on the commission to ask for help to flesh out some of the details of her memories of the Guild screenings. De Luca’s essay’s explicit reference to the input of others in the formulation of the story she is telling could be viewed as evidence of a lineage to a wider folk culture or it could also be ascribed to what is often the shared and or collective nature of many cinema memory stories.

In many ways, this method is also evident in the work of effective storytellers. For instance, as part of one of the project’s creative writing workshops, hosted by the annual Storytelling Festival in Orkney, , the Orcadian storyteller and director of the festival, Tom Muir, delivered a riveting account of some of the mythic accounts of the operators’ journeys in particularly treacherous weather conditions. However, in addition to the story itself, what was interesting is the way in which Muir drew in his listeners, directly addressing them as

members of the community who may also hold knowledge of the people and events described.

Muir tells the story of Guild operator Sandy Wylie travelling to Sandwick in the 1950s for a screening during a blizzard. After his car is stuck in the snow, he decides ‘the show must go on’ and battles through the snow by foot to the Sandwick Hall. When the ‘diehards’ of the audience make their way to the hall, and the reels are up, Sandy is asked: ‘What’s on the night then, Sandy?’ He responds ‘Well, uh, it’s *Scott of the Antarctic!*’ In addition to the entertaining story of Sandy Wylie, a legendary figure who features prominently in our Orkney interviews, what’s interesting about Tom Muir’s account is how he tells the story, drawing attention to the stories’ provenance, while also connecting the listeners to the story by highlighting the involvement of other members of the local community, such as Archie Bevan a local school teacher and one of the founders of the St Magnus Festival, Orkney’s largest festival, and Bryce ‘you all know Bryce’ Wilson, a local historian. Muir also makes reference to other events of the time, such as the roof collapsing under the weight of the snow at the Highland Park distillery. Again, the approach is one that is in line with Valentina Bold’s descriptions of storytelling traditions and the wider folk narratives’ investment in the collective. As Donald Smith argues, ‘Storytelling stimulates memory through both the visual and verbal imagination, making people both better communicators and better listeners or interpreters. The constant transaction between creative storyteller or story maker and the imaginations of those who receive the stories builds community and may underpin a capacity for shared vision and action. The personal feeds the collective while the storytelling collective nourishes the personal.’⁴⁶

As the experience with Muir’s storytelling as part of our writing workshop reveals, a good storyteller constructs the story in a way that actively involves its listeners. Similarly, the poem discussed earlier, ‘A Village Called Strath’, through its reference to local people and

events is constructed with the community as its imagined reader. It is perhaps telling that, when the poem was sent in, it was accompanied by a short explanation of its meaning, which helped readers from outside of the community decipher many of its particular references and in-jokes. This kind of storytelling could be likened to definitions of ultraminor literature, which rather than existing on the margins or adopting a mode of address aligned with a register existing from outside of the community, adopts a mode of speaking to itself within the community. As Roseanne Watt describes, the ultraminor ‘derives most of its value solely within the local community from which it originates.’⁴⁷

Going back to the reference to the Ceildh and the incorporation of different registers and modes of storytelling within this specific Scottish cultural form, the open form and multifarious form of the Ceildh, like Muir’s approach as a storyteller, eschews an authoritative version of a story and instead offers a way for participants to actively engage in its telling, potentially leading to a wide variety different narratives outcomes depending on the listener’s interpretation.

As Carmichael goes on to describe, the ceilidh involves a variety of ‘narrators, singers and speakers’ all offering their own slightly different way of telling a story, from ‘historian narrating events simply and concisely; another is a historian with a bias, colouring his narrative according to his leanings. One is an inventor building fiction upon fact, mingling his materials, and investing the whole with the charm of novelty and the halo of romance. Another is a reciter of heroic poems and ballads, bringing the different characters before the mind as clearly as the sculptor brings the figure before the eye. One gives the songs of the chief poets, with interesting accounts of the authors, while another, generally a woman, sings the weird airs, beautiful old songs, some of them Arthurian.’ Similarly, Valentina Bold’s description of the folk narrative, also stresses the importance of the malleability of the folk narrative. She writes,

Even though they can be read as autonomous, stories should not simply be separated from their tellers, or creators, whether individuals or community – the transmission process makes them, in effect, joint efforts. As a form, folk narrative is far more adaptable than the fixed literary text; manner of delivery, for instance, can sometimes (if not always) vary in response to storyteller or audience demands, needs or preferences.⁴⁸

What the findings of this project reveal is that, like the experience of the ceilidh or the folk narrative, many audience members of the Guild screenings were adept at negotiating a variety of registers. The films were sometimes received sceptically, with some respondents recalling how, although the films may have been presented as fact, they knew the worlds presented didn't exist in any real terms. Stories were not received as monolithic entities. Instead, perhaps because of the storytelling and ceilidh traditions, audiences of the Guild screenings were inclined to respond with their own stories – whether that be poems, stories, songs, or even through their own amateur film production. In cultures where storytelling – often referred to as a 'living tradition'⁴⁹ - engenders a sense that a story is not fixed or static, but is a mobile entity which is passed on across communities and generations, it hardly seems surprising that responses to storytelling in film might produce a similar response.

Returning back to Kuhn's statement referred to at the start of this paper that *how* people remember is as much a text to be deciphered as *what* they remember', it could be added that the ways in which people are allowed to remember by community tradition can impact on *what* they remember or even *who* is doing the remembering. This article has shown how the nature of the impact of the arrival of film shows, as the first medium of modernity in Highland Scotland, on isolated rural communities with deep-seated local traditions of orality and storytelling, was not one dominated by hostility, culture shock or collapse of local tradition. On the contrary, the film screening was absorbed into community tradition, made part of its tradition, and in the process revivifying the distinctive community culture. Whilst this article has not dealt with radio or television, we should not rush to condemn modernity

without careful listening to local voices, and reflect on how they resounded to new stories joining very old echoes.

¹ A. Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (London, New York: IB Tauris., 2002), p. 6.

² S. Neely and N. Paul (eds), *Reel to Rattling Reel: Stories and Poems About Memories of Cinema-Going* (Stornoway: Cranachan, 2018).

³ The writers were commissioned at the very beginning of the project so that their completed works could be used to promote the writing workshops and competition. The selection process focused on contemporary writers from the various workshop locations, considering a variety of factors such as gender, ethnicity, age, style and genre. We were also particularly interested in working with writers who had direct memories of the Film Guild screenings. The writers selected were Alison Miller (Orkney), Aonghas MacNeacail (Skye), Christine De Luca (Shetland), Kevin MacNeil (Lewis), and Christie Williamson (Shetland).

⁴ A. Kuhn, 'Memory texts and memory work: Performances of memory in and with visual media' *Memory Studies* XX: X (2010), pp. 1-16:6, citing A. Kuhn, 'A Journey through Memory', in S. Radstone (ed.) *Memory and Methodology* (Oxford and New York: Berg), pp. 179–196: 186.

⁵ S. Neely, "'Reel to Rattling Reel": Telling Stories about Rural Cinema-going in Scotland', *Participations* 16: 1 (2019), <http://www.participations.org/Volume%2016/Issue%201/38.pdf>

⁶ *British Silent Cinema and the Transition to Sound*, was an AHRC-funded project led by Laraine Porter at De Montfort University (AHRC Project Grant AH/L013800/1).

⁷ For more detailed analysis of this material, see S. Neely, "'The Skailing of the Picters": the coming of the talkies in small rural townships in Scotland', *The Journal of British Cinema and Television* (forthcoming); S. Neely "'Tantalizing fragments: Scotland's Voice in the Early talkies in Britain and Jenny Gilbertson's *The Rugged Island: A Shetland Lyric* (1934)', *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* 12:2 (2018), 171-195.

⁸ Cinema and Culture in 1930s Britain collection at Lancaster University, <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/library/resources/special-collections/archives/cinema-and-culture/>; A. Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (London, New York: IB Tauris., 2002).

⁹ Cinema and Culture in 1930s Britain collection, Lancaster University Special Collections, ref 95-216-19d.

¹⁰ A. Kuhn, 'Memory texts and memory work: Performances of memory in and with visual media' *Memory Studies* XX: X (2010), pp. 1-16.

¹¹ *My Kind of Thirties* by Norman MacDonald, Cinema and Culture in 1930s Britain collection, Lancaster University Special Collections, ref 92-5.

¹² A. Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (London, New York: IB Tauris, 2002), 61.

-
- ¹³ HIFG, 96, email exchange with Ian Goode, 30 July 2010.
- ¹⁴ HIFG, 1, email exchange with Ian Goode, 5 June 2012: 'Ah those bucket seats.'
- ¹⁵ For instance, see R. Perks and A. Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 2015).
- ¹⁶ C. De Luca, 'The Highland and Islands Film Guild: A Touch of the Exotic: Shetland memories from the mid-1950s', S. Neely and N. Paul (eds.), *Reel to Rattling Reel: Stories and Poems About Memories of Cinema-Going* (Stornoway: Cranachan, 2018), pp. 72-75: 73.
- ¹⁷ See J. Mason, *Affinities: Potent Connections in Personal Life* (Cambridge and Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2018).
- ¹⁸ J. Mason, *Living the Weather: Voices in the Calder Valley* (Manchester: Morgan Centre for Everyday Lives, 2016).
- ¹⁹ Annette Kuhn, in email correspondence with transcriber, 11 Sept 2017: 'The interviewee's somewhat hesitant speech comes across well in your transcript. We might expect him to become more fluent, perhaps, as he gets into stride a bit (which would be a finding in itself if so). There's often a tendency in this sort of research to favour informants who have the gift of the gab, but I feel it's unwise to downplay the testimony of the less fluent.'
- ²⁰ Thanks to the Shetland poet, Roseanne Watt and the Orcadian writer, Alison Miller for drawing my attention to the terms.
- ²¹ Correspondence, Cinema and Culture in 1930s Britain collection at Lancaster University Special Collections, ref 95-51.
- ²² T. Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde', *Wide Angle* 8: 3 & 4 (1986), p. 64.
- ²³ A. Gaudreault, 'Showing and Telling: Image and Word in Early Cinema', in T. Elsaesser (ed.) *Early Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1990), 274-81: 276.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 275.
- ²⁵ C. Musser, 'Rethinking Early Cinema: Cinema of Attractions and Narrativity', in W. Strauven (ed.), *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 389-416: p. 407.
- ²⁶ T. Griffiths, 'Sounding Scottish: Sound Practices and Silent Cinema in Scotland', in: J. Brown & A. Davison (eds.), *The Sound of the Silents in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 72-91.
- ²⁷ HIFG, 106.
- ²⁸ See, for instance, M. Cousins, ' ". . . and now, it's over?" The problem with Scottish cinema', *The Drouth* 20 (2006), pp. 11-14.
- ²⁹ D. A. MacDonald, 'Visual Memory', *Scottish Studies* 22 (1978), 1-26: 17, 19. For the full interview see Donald Alasdair Johnson, track ID 2229, 1973, http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/2229?backURL=/en/searchByPerson%3Fpersonid%3D487%26name%3DDonald%20Alasdair%20Johnson%26page%3DNone%23track_2229 <date accessed 15 August, 2019>
- ³⁰ G. M. Brown, 'The Last Ballad', *The Listener*, 20 June 1968, pp. 800-1.
- ³¹ F. O'Connor, F, 'The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South', *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), pp. 191-209 at p. 192.
- ³² A. Gray, *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* (London: Picador, 1985).
- ³³ V. Bold, 'Folk Narrative', in S. Dunnigan and S. Gilbert (eds.) *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Traditional Literatures* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 29-33.
- ³⁴ A. Carmichael, 'Introduction', *Carmina Gadelica, Vol. 1 & 2: Hymns and Incantations*, 1900.

-
- ³⁵ I. C. Smith, 'Real People in a Real Place', *Towards the Human (selected essays by Iain Crichton Smith)* (Edinburgh: Macdonald Publishers, 1986), pp. 13-70: 21.
- ³⁶ For instance, one respondent in Borerraig describes the Guild screenings arriving in the 50s: 'We had never seen television, we'd ehm. The entertainment we were accustomed to was the traditional ceilidh house; people visiting and telling stories and occasionally singing and so on. . So, this was just extraordinary.' HIFG, 50.
- ³⁷ A. Kuhn, 'The Remembered Film', referencing G. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language and the Cosmos* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960/1971).
- ³⁸ Roddy MacIntyre, 'A Village Called Strath', poem donated to the Major Minor Cinema project.
- ³⁹ L. Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 139.
- ⁴⁰ HIFG, 48.
- ⁴¹ HIFG email exchange, 110.
- ⁴² The shows in Orkney were part of a mostly independent Rural Cinema Scheme and Sandy Wylie was employed by Orkney Education Authority/Council.
- ⁴³ HIFG, 163/204.
- ⁴⁴ D. M. Wegner, 'Transactive Memory: A Contemporary Analysis of the Group Mind', in B. Mullen, G.R. Goethals (eds.), *Theories of Group Behavior* (Springer, New York, NY, 1987).
- ⁴⁵ C. De Luca, 'The Highland and Islands Film Guild: A Touch of the Exotic: Shetland memories from the mid-1950s', S. Neely and N. Paul (eds.), *Reel to Rattling Reel: Stories and Poems About Memories of Cinema-Going* (Stornoway: Cranachan, 2018), pp. 72-75 at p. 74.
- ⁴⁶ D. Smith, *Storytelling Scotland: A Nation in Narrative* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2001), p. 2.
- ⁴⁷ R. Watt, 'Aa my mindin : moving through loss in the poetic literary tradition of Shetland', unpublished PhD thesis (University of Stirling, 2018), https://discoverlibrary.stir.ac.uk/iii/encore/record/C_Rb4343485_Sroseanne%20watt_Orightresult_U_X4?lang=eng&suite=def. In her definition of the ultraminor, quoting Moberg and Damrosch, Roseanne Watt describes 'how departing from Deleuze and Guattari's conception of 'minor literature', where works of literature are written in a major language from a marginal position, the 'ultraminor' occupies a space where literature is produced "within a distinct but small language community, very much based in a specific territory. Far from deterritorialising a hegemonic class or culture, an ultraminor literature may be used to create or bolster the community's territorial integrity." B. R. Moberg and D. Damrosch, 'Introduction: Defining the Ultraminor', *Journal of World Literature* 2: 2 (2017). 135-136.
- ⁴⁸ V. Bold, 'Folk Narrative', In S. Dunnigan and S. Gilbert (eds.) *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Traditional Literatures* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 29-33, p. 31.
- ⁴⁹ M. Bennett, 'Continuing the Living Tradition', in S. Dunnigan and S. Gilbert (eds.) *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Traditional Literatures* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 159 *et seq.*