

Creative Practice with Archive Film: Borders, Peripheries and Localised Microhistories

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Abstract

Archivists, practitioners and curators face particular challenges in working with 'pre-digital' moving image archive material, especially if this material is not part of an 'official' archive, often existing beyond the reach of commercial cultural production. This type of film material overwhelmingly deals in the mundane, prosaic and every day, illuminating lives through home movies, amateur film and other fragmented and incomplete footage. This material can empower people and communities to discover/rediscover individual and communal memory and history. Memories of ordinary life and the mundane are thus preserved outside of 'official records' giving a voice to marginalised groups.

My research into fragmented local archive film has taken place in real and metaphorical borders/hinterlands on the geographical edges of the city, asking the question what is meant when we say this material has cultural value for public history and memory and also what would value mean in this context.

This contribution takes the form of an exploration of the findings of my audience study in four New Towns on the periphery of London, working with volunteers on a project to find creative ways of using fragmented local archive film with community audiences. I will explore issues of accessibility, identity and audience perceptions/expectations and how to discover local microhistories through archive film using one town, Stevenage, as a case study.

Introduction

Engagement with local archive film is a rich opportunity for people to investigate their heritage and history outside of mainstream culture. This engagement often takes place through community projects which exist beyond the margins of commercial markets and in what follows, I will discuss the 'New Towns, Our Town: Stories on Screen' project exploring issues of accessibility, identity and localised microhistory with particular focus on Stevenage, one of the four New Towns involved in the project. This project was part of my ongoing research into practice with fragmented archive film in peripheral spaces/places around London focusing on the relations of the centre to the periphery in urban spaces, in the archive and between the archivist/practitioner and the community.

While there is in general a lack of critical discourse on archive and local film, this research has been informed by Samuel (1994). His view that history 'wells up from the lower depths' (p.4) and his description of 'history from below' (p.20) which includes local history collections as important repositories of history (p.17) was an influential discourse for the research. Lury (2014) suggests 'amateur film has narrative and symbolic potency- a historic potency' (p.110). She references Kracauer (1969) in discussion of the film as artefact (p.113) where this material can conceptualize microhistories suggesting 'an amateur film can reflect an

unusual proximity to the actual events and people it pictures' (p.115). That archive film has narrative potency can be seen in the use of this material for public history where stories unfold on screen. Others argue persuasively against this notion of potency and suggest that this material is best seen only as a tool. They suggest ways for studying this material that in their thinking compensates for what they perceive as low value. For example, Roberts (2010) describes local transport films from Liverpool (and by association, this type of material in general) as 'offering little in the way of interest' (p. 92) beyond use in an evidential discourse and Shand (2014) notes that the perception of this material is that it is substandard due to lack of synchronized sound and no corpus of contextual information available (p.197). My creative practice with archive film, however, seeks to explore film both as a tool for discovering histories and as a valuable aesthetic genre with artistic as well as narrative potency.

In October 2018 I had carried out an audience study in the form of a public screening and workshop in Hillingdon, a borough on the western periphery of London. The second audience study in the New Towns came about through an opportunity to deliver a training programme for the 'New Towns, Our Town- Stories on Screen,' an Independent Cinema Office, London (ICO) archive film project. The ICO had received a substantial Heritage Lottery Grant for this project, which took place in the first four of the UK's New Towns -Stevenage, Crawley, Hemel Hempstead and Harlow. By New Towns here I refer to towns that were built after World War II and that were purposefully planned, developed and built as a remedy to overcrowding and congestion in some instances and to scattered ad hoc settlements in others. The main reason was to decongest larger industrialized cities, rehousing people in freshly built, new and fully planned towns that were completely self-sufficient and provided for the community. In all, twenty seven New Towns were built in the UK after 1946, of which eight were outside London.

The aim of this project was to use rare archive footage to explore the shared experiences of residents, increasing the visibility of the New Town movement and involving screenings, engagement activities and volunteering opportunities. The project aimed to explore the unique social history and heritage of these towns, from the point of view of the New Town pioneers and subsequent generations. I was asked to work on part of the project, training volunteers in the use of archive film as a reminiscence tool. (I had worked for many years training, teaching and researching on film and archive film). A maximum of eight local volunteers from each New Town would be recruited to run community screenings and also to record oral history testimonies from New Town residents; running reminiscence sessions using the film material as a jumping-off point. This project was an example of community investment in archives which document the history and experience of groups. Flinn (2007) notes the expansion of interest and participation in community archives and community history, which he calls the 'grassroots activities of documenting, recording and exploring community heritage'. (p.153). Film is especially useful for bringing to life community histories, showing the minutiae of everyday life in detail at specific points in time. This suggests a type of value and status for this material in creating a repository outside of 'official' archives and enabling an engagement emerging directly from the narratives of people's lived experiences.

Accessibility

Working with archive film, particularly rare and fragmented material, creates certain challenges for practitioners. Access is an important function of archives and the archivist raises some complex issues for moving image archives, as expressed by Prelinger (2007). Prelinger calls access to moving image archives 'a sticky door' (p.114) and also

suggests 'many institutions sequester their holdings behind walls of copyright maximalism, policy or indifference, rendering them inaccessible to many'. (p.114) Enabling access can be expensive in terms of staffing, budgets and equipment and calls into question issues of preservation versus access. Prelinger suggests that 'overzealous application of the precautionary principle' can create 'sequestered collections'. (p.114). The New Towns project had certain access issues which were not my direct concern since I was not the overall project manager but these issues affected how it was possible to work with the archive material. Notable was the fact that difficult negotiations with regional film archives led to a restriction in the amount of New Towns material available', often leaving only fragments of already fragmented footage to work with. Issues of Intellectual Property Rights and rights clearance are always near the top of any agenda for a project of this kind.

The New Town audience study also raised issues of technological mediation. Working with archive film material outside of a cinema setting and with little equipment available demands ingenuity and always needs careful planning. Without this, and if you are unable to screen material, the *raison d'être* for doing the work vanishes and there is no useful substitute. For example, in my Hillingdon study I had received little technical assistance and needed to provide my own equipment. Problems with sound meant silent film was best and I arrived three hours before the public screening in order to set up the screen, laptop and projector and check through all the material. There were no access issues as I had brought rights-cleared film material from the London Screen Study Collection so Prelinger's 'sticky door' did not apply here. Conversely in the New Towns study I had less control over most aspects of the project including selection of film material, venues and the general remit of the training. I was, however, able to design the training days and materials using previous models of practice from my career and experience. This enabled exploration of my ideas on how to innovate/challenge that practice as well as further examination of constraints and barriers to successful outcomes. Working within institutional and financial parameters surrounding archive film screenings and the attendant expectations of funders and funded spaces and audiences remains an ongoing challenge both for research and for practitioners in the sector.

Identity/audience

Identity and locality are often linked and in both Hillingdon and the New Towns project, the institutions and organisations involved assumed the need for, and requested, very local film as a norm for screenings and the choice of films and curation of programmes was not always under my control. An assumption is often made by organisers that the audience relates best to local material and in fact only want to see this type of film. This is a common belief and part of my challenge in the New Towns study was to interrogate whether it was possible to know/find out if this was the case. This project interrogates issues around the value of specifically 'local film' as discussed by Szczelkun (2000) who suggests many images in archive film can be dismissed as having little value once they have left the localised context. Similarly Bottomore (2004) suggests local film is only 'local' if there is considerable overlap between the people appearing in the film and those who watch it or are intended to watch it. The Stevenage volunteers had a special investment in the town and the films and it was difficult in this context to test the hypothesis that this film material would be interesting to audiences not related to Stevenage.

I also wanted to challenge a 'passive' screening model whilst being aware that audiences are not passive even if they seem that way while watching films, since they bring their own prejudices, attitudes and beliefs to all aspects of engagement. The question of audience/participant also signalled a potential to move beyond the instrumental metrics that

satisfy outreach project outcomes and are increasingly a measure of the 'success' of such projects. Audience voices also allowed an exploration of what Miles & Gibson (2016) call 'everyday participation' (p. 151). Discussing the findings of the AHRC project 'Understanding Everyday Participation- Articulating Cultural Value' (UEP), they note in particular the importance of place in participation and access. They note the need to explore cultural participation outside of state cultural support and situated locally in the everyday realm, referencing Taylor (2016) whose interrogation on the cultural participation survey *Taking Part* found that only 8.7% of the UK population was highly engaged with state-supported forms of culture. Miles & Gibson also stress the importance of place in everyday participation as a situated process. Similarly, writing on the UEP project, Ebrey (2016) notes the possibility of a shift in orientation from 'instrumental economic arguments' (p.158) about participation to 'lived experiences, informal economies' (p. 159).

My audience for the New Towns project were volunteers/trainees who would later take on a different role. I needed to think about how might audience members become trainers and transmit values associated with the archive, preservation and access. I also needed to consider ways in which the filmic event frames the relation of people to place, both for trainees and a wider audience. This was a challenge for me as trainer and for them as trainees as was dealing with prejudices, attitudes, beliefs and ideas on their role in the project, some of which addressed issues in my own practice around models of using archive film. This film material has been used widely as a tool for reminiscence with older people and there is a perception that this is a normative practice of presenting this material. Allied to this is a perception that reminiscence is always 'nice' and 'positive'. Some trainees in every venue on the New Towns project held these views. It was a challenge for my practice and my examination of my practice to both deliver the project remit and find ways of addressing these ideas. It is true that there is merit in using archive material for social interaction and to understand it as embedded in the everyday, leading to an understanding that what transpires in community events can be banal and ephemeral, as well as enjoyable for participants. However, this is not the only method of using the material and throughout this project and the research in general I wanted to explore what other uses and innovations might be possible with this material.

Another challenge was around the notion of the 'self-selected' audience. The audience for the screening and workshop in Hillingdon were members of the general public who had chosen to come to a free screening. Workshop participants were also self-selecting and the number of participants was small. Volunteers on the New Towns project were also self-selecting and there was a wide range of age, experience and abilities. It was challenging within the context of both projects to interrogate why people had chosen to have these experiences and what their commitment and participation might mean for them. Some younger volunteers on the New Towns project saw their involvement as a route to possible employment in a situation where paid work was difficult to obtain. Several of these had undergraduate degrees in history and museum studies. In each location there were a number of retired volunteers who had a large amount of local knowledge and were active in their communities. In one location two of these volunteers expressed anxiety that their considerable local knowledge would be ignored or marginalised. This was as a result of being told in an unrelated earlier training programme that they were 'stupid and knew nothing'. As a trainer I found that balancing the needs of disparate groups, validating their differing experiences and training them to fulfil community roles in one day made for some complex challenges. In the case study that follows, I explore these challenges as they manifested in Stevenage, one of the four locations.

Local microhistories – Stevenage

Szijarto (2002) defines microhistory as ‘the intensive historical investigation of a small area’ (p.209) and makes four arguments for the use of the micro-historical approach. These are: it is appealing to the general public; it is realistic; it conveys personal experience; and the lines branching out from it reach very far. (p.209). To this I would add that this is a way to give space and privilege to the voices of the audience so they can articulate the value of what they have seen and experienced. Szijarto also suggests that microhistory places lived experience at the centre (p. 212) and references Levi (1991) who suggests that microhistory is a small-scale investigation or as he puts it ‘Microhistory does not investigate small things but investigates in small’. (p. 213). What follows is a brief exploration of Stevenage through two local films and audience interactions.

What did it feel like to live in Stevenage, the UK’s first New Town? Two films provide us with different views. *Stevenage: the 1st New Town (1971)* is a celebratory and optimistic look at life in the town as viewed by the Stevenage Development Corporation. This organisation wanted to attract residents so stressed the joys of life away from the ‘bustle and overcrowding’ of London emphasising ‘a dream of a better future’. Through montage, the film shows us work, education and social life while vox pops from citizens extoll the virtues of Stevenage – ‘a wonderful place’; ‘clean and safe’; ‘modern, up to date’; ‘the kids are off the streets’. One resident suggests ‘I’ve no complaints’.

Stevenage Comes of Age (1967) tells another story through the eyes of two young residents. In this short documentary made by Anglia TV to mark the 21st anniversary of the designation of the New Town, we follow Russell and David both aged 21 as they walk around the town giving their views as voice overs. Russell came to the town aged 7 and describes his nostalgic memories of a childhood where he had freedom to roam about fields and woods. He shares his resentment at the increased building of houses – ‘small boxes’- and says there is no community feeling in the town and ‘all efforts to bring people together have failed’. David who came to the town aged 9 and who has similar childhood memories of ‘watching wild birds and picking wild flowers’, expresses his disappointment in the ‘soulless’ building of houses, covering fields with concrete. He nevertheless admits his parents were pleased to start a new life in the town, away from what the introductory voiceover describes as the ‘overcrowding of London’.

There were six volunteers in Stevenage and we had four Stevenage films to work with including the two described above. None of the volunteers had seen the films before. They were excited about the work they were undertaking and enjoyed watching the films. They were enthusiastic about the group work where we thought about locality as seen through the films and they also joined in discussions about their personal reactions to the material. Some reactions and responses to the films create a sense of the voices of Stevenage, beginning to discover a microhistory for their town: ‘film is the picture you frame in your mind’; ‘helps you to relive experiences and put them in context according to your personal perspective’; ‘a common narrative- common memories’; ‘the good old days- rose tinted glasses?’; ‘continuity from then to now’; ‘reminiscence=remember’. A theme that emerged for volunteers through exploration of the films was the personal experience of living and working in a top-down planned community such as Stevenage especially, as one female volunteer remarked, ‘the planners were all men!’. The volunteers had a strong emotional attachment to ‘their’ place (Stevenage), though they knew its faults and in some cases lamented changes they felt were negative. Through images of everyday life giving proximity to reality and through voices of the everyday, it was possible to begin to discover a plethora of small details and begin to create a microhistory for Stevenage which would hopefully spread beyond a small group of volunteers.

Conclusion

The audience studies demonstrate how local archive film can be a rich opportunity for people to investigate their heritage and engage with their own history through images and sounds that create nostalgia and evoke memories. These studies also interrogated the role and concept of the audience, their expectations and behaviour but also their obligation while participating in free events. The findings of the studies also give evidence of how the ebb and flow of history through the everyday and mundane can illuminate public history and value through aiding identity formation and memory work. To quote from audience members in Stevenage on their ideas of the value of local archive film: 'It reminds us of our history and how we used to live. What our values were in the past. A record of our past. History in the making. May have implications in the future which were not known at time filmed. Record of life, fashion, buildings which no longer exist.' The same audience responded to the question 'What would happen if we never saw it?' by expressing a sense of loss: 'We would lose an interpretation of history. We would never know what life was like. We would be less well informed. We'd be the poorer'.

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