



Loops and Reels

Narrative disruption in film, fiction, and
cinemagoing history

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the impact of interdisciplinary research – in this case, specifically oral history – on the form and content of a novel, *The Electric* (2020). Reading between oral histories of police family life and mid-20th century cinemagoing allowed for the creation of a complex fictional character (Daisy Seacombe), who was able to resist the apparently oppressive nature of her social circumstances. The idiosyncratic nature of film star fanclubs, and the impact of cinemagoing on the intellectual, romantic, and working lives of women, are also discussed. In terms of form, the disrupted elements of cinemagoing in the period between 1930-70 suggested a narrative arrangement for the novel, which mirrors the remembered life, and the way it is actively pieced together around gaps and omissions. Rolling programmes meant that films were not always seen in order, start to finish. Such disruptions are often seen as wholly negative, but this paper argues that they can provide for a creative engagement with narrative. The paper also investigates the cinema buildings themselves, specifically those in Brighton and Hove, as a site of compressed historical narrative, and as an entry point for the writer of fiction.

Introduction

This paper provides a critical account of the powerful and complex ways in which historical research can influence fiction. In this case, I will describe the impact of cinemagoing history on the content and form of my novel, *The Electric* (2020), which is built around the life and death of its central character, Daisy Seacombe, a wife of a Brighton policeman and film-fan born in the late 1920s. The archival responses of women cinemagoers in mid-century Britain allowed me to build an element of plausible dissent into an historical character who in early drafts seemed passively oppressed. In a formal sense, the fragmented and disrupted way in which films were consumed – due to the ‘rolling programmes’ of the period – also provided a potent metaphorical and structural device for the novel.

The Electric (2020) has a preoccupation with what David Lodge calls, “the construction of the real within the individual’s consciousness,” (2003: 49) but it also highlights the factors that disturb that construction. In cinemagoing history, we read of fantasies and disordered narratives, and the uncanny space of the picture house itself. In the later part of this paper, I will give an account of the compressed historical narratives present in the old cinema buildings of Brighton. All of these elements bring attention to the thin screen between reality and fiction, particularly in the remembered life.

The original inspiration for the character of Daisy came from an oral history article about 1930s police wives. Barbara Weinberger’s (1993) interviews revealed a group of women tethered to their husband’s profession, and I was drawn to descriptions of life on ‘police estates’, or ‘colonies’, where wives entered into social competition, the stakes of which might be their husband’s careers:

In Warwickshire, the Chief Constable would make an annual tour of inspection of police houses, to see that they were being kept up to the mark. Mrs Ellsworthy remembered how he would don a pair of white gloves and run his finger along the skirting board to see if it had been dusted.

(Weinberger 1993: 50)

The wives of policemen were subject to the same organizational structure as their husbands. Indeed, applicants for officer jobs were asked if they felt their wives would be “competent to uphold the standing and dignity of the rank” (Weinberger 1993: 50). Until the 1940s, brides of policemen were required to give up their employment, but often became unpaid labourers for the force.

Life on police estates, as described by Malcolm Young (1984), was oppressive. According to residents, talk on the estates revolved around “the interminable [subject] of who was doing well or who was doing badly” (Young 1984: 76). Those wives living in the communities which their husbands policed, found life just as hard, as shown by these remarks from a city police wife:

I could not leave my house for [the neighbours] shouting abuse at me and if they were near enough they spat on me. When I washed my steps...the children came and urinated on them – they also rubbed excreta on my doormat.

(Finch 1983: 40)

After reading these oral history narratives, it is perhaps unsurprising that early drafts presented Daisy – the police wife protagonist of *The Electric* – as trapped by her circumstances. Initial feedback described her as “a rather passive and reactive woman”, who is “irritating” and somewhat “flat” (Doloughan 2014). In attempting to write about the oppression of women in a particular time and place in English history, I had oppressed my central female character.

However, in researching what began as a minor detail of Daisy’s life – her frequent visits to the cinema – I found a surprising counter-culture with vibrant features of resistance. The history of cinemagoing – which is often an oral history – is full of women who express a critical response to their social and political surroundings. Amongst its many influences on *The Electric*, both formal and in terms of content, this thread of early to mid-twentieth century history gave me a plausible basis for introducing elements of dissent and independence into Daisy’s character.

Cinemagoing of the 1930s and 40s: A Brief Introduction

In 1946, there were 1635 million cinema admissions in Britain (Corrigan 1983: 30). According to Box and Moss (quoted in Stacey 1994: 86), 70% of 1940s cinemagoers were working class, and many of them were women who reported attending up to four times per week.

There were many reasons for the popularity of cinema, but it is important to understand the relative physical luxury of the picture houses of the time. Cinemagoers of the 1940s consistently contrasted the luxury of the cinema with the hardship of their lives. "Sometimes," as one respondent put it, "one went to keep warm if coal was short." (Stacey 1994: 94)

In a post-war Britain where families often had no electricity, refrigerators or cars, the cinema was a cheap route to opulence: "For 1/9d we could enter another world. Oh the luxury of it, the red carpet, the wonderful portraits adorning the walls, the chandeliers hanging in the foyer and the smell!" (Stacey 1994: 95)

On first impression, one might imagine that the cinema was a place for glamour-starved young women to dream. Indeed, "glamour" and "romance" are words which frequently appear in the oral histories of cinemagoing. However, as I soon found out, those women did not watch films passively – they were, in fact, deeply engaged viewers, both politically, and in the co-creation of meaning. Through the retrospective oral histories of Annette Kuhn (2002) and Jackie Stacey (1994), and particularly through J L Mayer's (1948) *British Cinemas and Their Audiences* – in which young women wrote about their cinema experiences at the time – we can draw an illuminating and surprising portrait of Daisy's generation of film fans.

Falling for Stars

Jackie Stacey's (1994) audience study, collected in *Star Gazing*, is built around the remembrances of older women looking back on their cinema-going youth. Many of them speak of an obsessional love for a particular film star – one fan claims she went to see Doris Day in *Calamity Jane* (1953) 88 times. Fan clubs were common, and these organizations produced newsletters, and sometimes received

correspondence from the actors themselves. Interestingly, the fan clubs did not disband after the peak of the star's fame, nor as the fans passed through their adolescence. Consider the words of film fan Pat Robinson, speaking in the 1990s of the longevity of the 'Deanna Durbin Society':

[Durbin] keeps in touch with us. Our meetings and our newsletters bring us all such a great deal of pleasure. I feel it quite extraordinary that Deanna can inspire such devotion, as it is now forty years since she made a film or any kind of public appearance.

(Stacey 1994: 140)

The enduring nature of the devotion already begins to indicate that the relationship between a cinemagoer of that time and a star could have some particular and surprising aspects. I tried to use the sources, here, as a model for the inner life of Daisy. In *The Electric*, Daisy continues a long and affectionate correspondence with an acquaintance in Canada, Paul, for several decades. Originally, I had wondered if that correspondence felt plausible, but, in fact, we can see above that the young film fans of the 1930s and 40s did not give up on the objects of their attention simply because they got older. When Paul continues to write to her, despite the brevity of their meeting during the war, Daisy wonders:

What kind of man...writes to a married woman on another continent, whom he barely knows? It wasn't so outrageous to Daisy, of course. In his obsession, she recognized an element of her own character. When he'd written that he wondered what she was doing every minute of the day, that he designed whole evenings with her, whole holidays, well, hadn't she had the same fantasies about certain film stars? As a girl, Daisy had never thought it ridiculous to imagine herself going around with Deanna Durbin or Bing Crosby. They were human, like her – they just had more make-up. Love was a new thing – it came from Hollywood, and nobody could teach her to settle for less.

(*The Electric*, draft, 2017)

Hollywood may have provided a model for passion and romance, but it was a characteristically enduring passion, and quite an idiosyncratic form of romance.

Hollywood stars provoked a range of feelings in the women who followed them, and whilst these included a romantic “swooning”, that was not the only response, and the nature of the emotions often seem to confuse the respondents themselves. Below, Pat Robinson feels obliged to make reference to her sexuality when describing the many years she devoted to Durbin:

I think that it would be considered a bit of a giggle today, if a large number of women confessed to feeling love for a girl. Nobody seemed to question it then. Just in case: I have been married since 1948! I have two sons and a daughter, one grandchild.

(Stacey 1994: 140)

There’s an anxiety present, over *where to put* these feelings. Indeed, obsessional relationships with movie stars are difficult to categorize, and may be variously interpreted as sexual, Platonic, or aspirational.

The obsessions seem to be divided fairly equally between male and female stars. The women writing in J. L. Mayer’s (1948) *British Cinemas and Their Audiences* contributed their “film-watching biographies” at the time of their peak cinema attendance. They had an awareness that their infatuation with certain stars didn’t quite fit within prescribed notions of desire. One fan, here, speaks of her feelings for Bing Crosby:

I think of him constantly; I wonder what his reactions are to certain news items...I wonder how his wife and kids are...I don’t pass out, but I feel completely limp when I hear him; relaxed and soothed...whether all that is love, I don’t know.

(Mayer 1948: 20)

The language is carefully considered, and reflective. There is a physical sensation, but it is far from the highly stimulated portrayal of the young fans of, say, Elvis Presley. Crosby inspires in her a sense of deep calm, of security. Notice, too, how she mentally inquires after the welfare of his wife and family – there is no sense of identification with, jealousy of, or mean-spiritedness towards the spouse.

At that time, of course, the decision to marry had a huge effect on the direction of a woman’s life. As I

found out in my research into police families, women were often “incorporated” (Finch 1983; Young 1984) into unpaid police work, or forced to move town at short notice. Given the profound weight attached to real-life romantic decisions, perhaps some of the pleasure of star-worship was to be found in what Elizabeth Bowen described as the “inoperative love” of fandom:

The delights of intimacy without the onus,
high points of possession without the strain...
Relationships in real life are made arduous by
their reciprocities; one can too seldom sit back.

(Bowen 1937: 210)

In the relationship between Daisy and Paul, I tried to take a scenario with many of the facets of the star-gazer’s “inoperative love”, but then push it gradually into the “real lives” of the two characters. Methodologically, then, Daisy is the product of a reciprocal process between the creative reading of non-fiction accounts, and the creative writing of a character embedded in a novel. Remarking on this process brings attention to the “levels of reality” in *The Electric*: just as Daisy and Paul’s ‘real’ life is influenced and disrupted by their film-viewing, so my fictional portrayal of them is heavily guided by reading about the lived reality of cinemagoers.

“Scenes Both Bright and Sordid”: Sexuality and Cinemagoing

A look at the responses of the young women in Mayer’s collection of cinemagoing biographies reveals other, deeper elements of the relationship between romance and film-watching. The “inoperative love” of fandom – with its newsletters and fashion influences – can sometimes seem passive – a wholesome admiration. These characteristics perhaps influenced the early drafts of Daisy. But as I explored the history of film attendance, I found that sex and the cinema were bound together in all sorts of complex ways.

It is well-known that the back-row seats of cinemas were armless, in order to facilitate the embraces of young couples. Jean Sheppard, responding to Stacey (1994: 86), said that “most of our courting was done in the pictures. It was the nearest thing to privacy any of us had in those days.”

Mayer’s subjects also reveal the way in which

cinema experiences could free up powerful sexual alternatives. If there is something chaste about the admiration of the Bing Crosby fan, above, there is no such quality present in one young respondent's reaction to a scene in Laurel and Hardy's comic version of *The Bohemian Girl* (1936), in which a gypsy girl is stripped, lashed to a post, and whipped:

That scene stimulated me a great deal and I would enact over and over again in the privacy of my own bedroom any scenes like that... of course I usually altered it so that I was not saved so promptly.

(Mayer 1948: 89)

This brilliant and thinly veiled description of sadomasochistic sexual practice is clearly the work of someone who is conscious of her own desires and sexual psychology. Such open descriptions of sexuality helped me to push Daisy away from more tentative early portrayals.

When we hold these predilections up against the qualities required to be a good police wife – the woman of “good character”, who provides a “clean, comfortable home” (Williams 1914) – we see a possible tension, ripe for exploration in fiction. With this research undertaken, I felt more comfortable in generating Daisy's scenes of dissent. This is evident when reviewing drafts of the novel. Many police wives spoke of the tendency of their husbands to bring interrogation practices into the home, when discussing daily life. A draft from 2014 shows my early attempts to capture this idea of Daisy being “questioned” by her husband:

If he asked her how her day was, then he needed to check that the logic of her movements made sense. “I didn't know the grocer's was open at nine,” he'd say. “When did you see Iris? I thought they were on holiday.” Sometimes he told her to sit down, and she would not feel the shock of the command until she was looking up at his chin.

(*The Electric*, draft, 2014)

As well as the sketched, summarized nature of the writing here, what's noticeable is that Daisy has no dialogue. She does not answer back, and the scene finishes with her unconsciously obeying Robert's command. An interim draft, from 2015, shows

the development of dialogue, but ends with Daisy diffusing the situation by initiating sexual contact (*The Electric*, draft, 2015).

In the final version of the interrogation scene, the end of which is included below, Daisy is much less passive:

“Sit down,” [Robert] said, as he himself rose. Daisy found herself seated, even before she'd registered the command. “Trevor and Iris Hook have gone to Suffolk, to see his family.” “Yes. They were packing when I left. What's your point?” “I am trying to account for your time.” “I'm not one of your villains, Robert. And I have a baby on my arm all day.” “He's not much of an obstacle.” “Is that the nicest thing you can say about your son?” “Don't be smart.” “I can't help being smart,” she said. “What's wrong with you, Robert? What's happened? You never used to be like this.” “Don't say that,” he said, gritting his teeth. “It's unkind. You're supposed to be on my side.” He stared beyond her, and then closed his eyes, but she saw the emotion flooding back into him. He walked away, sidling past the pram, hands in pockets. “Robert?” she called, but he opened the door and stepped out into the gale.

(*The Electric* 2020: 80)

Robert's command remains in this final draft, but there is a greater sense of parity in the dialogue, now. In fact, Daisy turns the interrogation back on Robert, who ends the scene somewhat crestfallen.

I also made Daisy a more active protagonist in the plot. A major strand of the novel follows her reaction as her husband is investigated by Scotland Yard, who believe him to be guilty of corruption. In the early drafts, the investigation breaks down because its leader, Inspector Lyle, takes pity on Daisy. In the final draft, however, it is Daisy who sabotages the investigation, by striking a deal with a key witness.

We can again see, here, how an engagement with sources across different disciplines can have practical implications for the fiction writer. In this case, my imaginative rewrite of Daisy inhabited a gap between two sources.

The Material and Intellectual Influence of Film

From the various testimonies of cinemagoers of the period, we can see the range of subjects they enjoyed in the dark of the auditorium. But there is some evidence, too, of how the voracious consumption of films impacted their lives in both a material and intellectual way.

For example, whilst Hollywood is often credited with having influenced the popular conception of romance, being exposed to the heightened passions of the big screen could often generate a certain amount of comparative dissatisfaction in real life relationships. “I have finished some really very pleasant friendships,” said one woman, “because of this intangible longing for something different; something based, I suppose, on the very early idea of love.” (Mayer 1948: 84)

And this dissatisfaction was not restricted to the romantic sphere. Many of the women who regularly attended the cinema were working class, and it's clear that exposure to the glamour of Hollywood caused restlessness. A 17-year-old typist states that she became “rather dissatisfied with my present existence and the neighbourhood in which I live.” Films, she said, made her “discontented with being poor.” (Mayer 1948: 55)

There is, of course, a more positive way of viewing this – as an awareness of broader horizons. The *concrete* effects that cinema had on the choices of the women who regularly watched films is striking. On several occasions, women wrote of films influencing their material life choices, especially vocationally. One trainee nurse cites *The Lamp Still Burns* (1943) as propelling her towards her career. In fact, that film is credited more than once with awakening an interest in nursing. Also, in Mayer (1948: 84), a 22-year-old clerk says that seeing Tyrone Power in *The Mark of Zorro* (1940) inspired her to learn Spanish, which in turn led to a career in the travel industry. The influence, there, is stark and direct.

Cinemagoing influenced the politics and worldview of the women in Mayer's book, too. The way they wrote about films shows that they considered the medium seriously and critically. One respondent, at only 19 years old, gives a damning verdict on *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (1939),

which, she believes, pandered to gender norms. To foreground Elizabeth I's romantic interests, she says, was “nonsense! Elizabeth loved only herself; she may have liked lovers to satisfy her vanity but she would have sacrificed everything she loved for the throne and power.” (Mayer 1948: 68) This sort of engagement with film – politicized, analytical, and feminist – is far removed from the idea of 1940s cinemagoing as light escapism.

Such a review is extremely helpful to a fiction writer portraying a woman of that era. A writer could easily take the dominant source - in this case *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (1939) - as a guide to marital relationships of the period. Daisy became a more liberated and textured character as a result of this reading.

There is a sense, here, in which Daisy's cinemagoing gives her a consciousness of her predicament. David Foster Wallace (1997) believed that watching serious films “renders us more ‘conscious’”, and that phenomenon is very much present in the writings of the young women in Mayer. A 21-year-old chemist's assistant, who penned long letters after her cinema visits, puts it well, by way of a conclusion: “In my opinion, the world is half asleep,” she writes (Mayer 1948: 80). Films and cinemagoing, were, for me, a way of waking Daisy.

Murkier Mystery – How Cinemagoing shaped The Electric

In the previous section, I showed how the history of cinemagoing allowed me to provide narrative “alternatives” for Daisy, a character whom history might consider to have been oppressed. It provided examples of how cinemagoing women of her generation might have broadened the scope of their lives and resisted the limitations of traditional gender roles. In short, cinemagoing history gave me access to Daisy's interiority. Alongside this, a closer look at the actual experience of going to the cinema throughout the early and middle part of the twentieth century revealed some interesting ways in which cinemagoers dealt with and exploited narrative interference. These disturbances, some of which I will describe in detail throughout the remainder of this paper, include: censorship, mechanical failure, the oddities of the rolling programme, and the intrusion of “real life” into the cinema space. They all contributed to the central concerns of my novel, particularly

the essential question: how can we use narrative to make sense of our lives, when it is often so heavily disrupted?

Out of Order: the Effects of Rolling Programmes

The modern cinemagoer typically buys a ticket for a single screening of one film. They arrive shortly before the feature begins, and – if it is sufficiently entertaining – they leave when it ends. Up until the 1960s, this was not the case. Before then, films were shown on a “rolling programme” – a repeated loop of news reels, short films, and a major feature, rounded off by the national anthem (Stacey 1994). The viewer purchased a ticket for a seat rather than a screening. They turned up whenever they saw fit and left when they liked. Theoretically, they could watch the full programme multiple times on one admittance. If we think back to the Doris Day fan who claimed to have watched *Calamity Jane* (1953) 88 times, we can probably assume that this was possible because she saw the film several times *per daily sitting*. The rolling programme also meant that an audience member might enter the auditorium in the middle of a film, watch the ending first, and then eventually catch up with its opening when the programme rolled around again. This situation led to a radically different way of watching and understanding film narratives.

In his short essay, “A Cinema-goer’s Autobiography”, Italo Calvino (1990: 40) writes with great beauty about his youth in the 1930s, when he attended the cinema “maybe even twice a day.” He gives perhaps the most lucid account of the effects of the rolling programme. His description of the strange joy of narrative disruption deserves to be quoted at length:

Watching the beginning of the film after one had already seen the end offered additional pleasures: that of discovering not the resolution of the film’s mysteries and dramas but their genesis; and that of a confused sense of premonition vis-à-vis the characters. Confused: in precisely the way a clairvoyant’s must be, since the reconstruction of the mangled plot was not always easy, and would be even less so if it happened to be a detective story, where the identification first of the murderer and then of the crime left an even murkier area of mystery in the middle. What’s more, there would sometimes be a bit missing between the beginning and the end, since suddenly

looking at my watch I’d realise I was late and that if I didn’t want to incur my parents’ wrath I’d have to leave before the sequence I’d come in at reappeared on the screen. So that many films were left with a hole in the middle, and even today, after thirty years – what am I saying? – almost forty, when I find myself watching one of those old films – on television for example – I’ll recognise the moment I walked into the cinema, the scenes I watched without understanding, and I’ll retrieve the lost pieces and complete the puzzle as if I’d left it unfinished only the day before.

(Calvino 1990: 40-41)

Daisy herself has this same film experience in *The Electric* when she first meets Paul Landry during a screening of *Casablanca* (1943). She enters the auditorium in time to see the film’s denouement first, and finds it confusing and unremarkable. As the film begins again, she is distracted by Paul interpreting the film into French for his colleague (another disruption). During the quiet middle of the film, Daisy begins to understand the climax, and is emotionally overwhelmed by the cascading realizations she has.

The ending caught up with her halfway through the film. The deepest part of her mind must have made the connection between the events unfolding on screen, and the conclusion she’d seen over an hour earlier. It hit her with force, and she began to cry, quietly.

(*The Electric* 2020: 68)

This portrayal of strange temporal sequencing was what I intended to mimic in the narrative ordering of *The Electric*. In the novel, Daisy’s life is presented in a way which replicates the looped programme, beginning after her death in 1987, and then vaulting back to the 1930s, and the early days of her marriage, in chapter two. After that, the two time frames proceed, in opposite temporal directions, towards the “murkier area of mystery in the middle”, which is her death. The task of piecing the narrative together is undertaken primarily by Daisy’s daughter, Linda, who attempts to reread her late mother’s life by tracking down Paul Landry. Linda learns to read a life in the way Daisy watched films.

Outside Intrusions

Calvino also writes poetically about the difficult spatial duality of the cinema. Just as there are (at least) two time frames for the cinemagoer – the couple of hours in which they sit before the screen, and the (typically compressed, and potentially disrupted) diegetic time of the film – there are also at least two spaces.

When it rained in the film, I would listen hard to hear whether it had started raining outside too, whether I had been surprised by a downpour, having left home without an umbrella: it was the only moment when, while still immersed in that other world, I remembered the world outside; and it made me anxious. Even today, rain in films triggers the same reaction, a sense of anxiety.

(Calvino 1990: 42)

The oral history of cinemagoing is full of such synchronicity and divergence between the space of the cinema, and the space of the film. In *Seeing in the Dark: A Compendium of Cinemagoing* (Breakwell and Hammond 1990), there are many examples. One contributor relates an anecdote in which a bird got into the auditorium during a showing of *The Birds* (1963), where it was duly killed by a screaming woman – a tale which seems a little too “on the nose” for fiction. During war-time, one can imagine the existential adjustments required when fictional war films were preceded by newsreels of actual war events. Indeed, one cinemagoer slips between associations, here:

The Twentieth Century Fox logo always made me think we were about to see a war film, as the searchlights that had woken us in London in the blitz always preceded an air raid.

(Breakwell and Hammond 1990: 60)

On the surface, that seems like a simple comparison, but it is fascinating to look closely at the levels of deferral there: the searchlights of the *logo* remind the viewer of the real searchlights of the blitz, and this triggers the expectation that he will see a *fictional* war film.

Narrative disruption could also be caused by the

perfectly mundane intrusion of real-life, as in this response from a projectionist: “People would ring up and say, ‘Can you get Mrs So-and-So, her baby’s crying and I can’t stop her.’ So you’d write a carbon-backed slide with this message and project it over the film. And then you’d hear scurrying feet in the cinema.” (Breakwell and Hammond 1990: 53) So, domestic realities could intrude, in quite a literal way, into the fantasy, adventure, and romance of the fictional world.

The cinema is a liminal space between fantasy and reality, the conscious and unconscious mind. It’s an uncanny place. Calvino (1990: 44) describes “the colour of the air outside” appearing “discreetly at the threshold” after a film had finished, and how cinemagoers would look at each other uneasily, “as though facing an intrusion equally inconvenient to both.”

The membrane between the cinema, the film, and real life is consistently returned to in cinemagoing history, and it is extremely pertinent to the writer of narrative fiction. When we engage deeply with a fictional narrative form, its shape influences the way we tell the stories of our lives. Some fictional content can slip through alongside the fictional form. The line between fantasy and reality becomes blurred.

In his book *The Remembered Film* (2010), Victor Burgin outlines an oral history project about memory undertaken in Provence, in which sociologists “found an almost universal tendency for personal history to be mixed with recollections of scenes from films... ‘I saw at the cinema’ would become simply, ‘I saw’” (2010: 67). Burgin picks out one striking example:

A woman speaks of her experiences as a child amongst refugees making the hazardous journey from the north of France down to Marseille. She recalls the several occasions when the column of refugees in which she was travelling were strafed by German aircraft. In recounting these memories she invokes a scene from René Clement’s film of 1952, *Jeux Interdits*, in which a small girl in a column of refugees survives an air attack in which her parents are killed. The woman’s speech, however, shifts between the first and third person in such a way that it is unclear whether she is speaking of herself or of the character in the film.

(Burgin 2010: 68)

We can see, in the case above, how fictional film scenes fill the space left by a repressed memory. There is clearly “narrative disruption” here, but the relationship between film, reality, and memory is so convoluted that it’s hard to say which way the disruption runs. It was, in fact, this sort of disruption and convolution that I wanted to explore in my fiction: Daisy seeks the sustenance of film’s fantasy life to resist the difficulties of her domestic situation, and her life eventually resembles the romances she enjoys. When her cinema experience is disrupted by the peculiarities of the rolling programme, she finds joy and liberation in the re-ordering of the story.

Calvino (1990: 45), when writing of the glitzy fantasy of Hollywood film, said that he “never took it as truth, but just as one of the many artificial images possible.” Cinema (and fiction) is not about a moral distinction between the evil untruths of fantasy and the righteousness of reality; it is about providing a space for *alternatives*. It is a chance to have *both*. Cinemagoing gives Daisy – like the real women on whom she is based – ways to resist the iniquities of her domestic life, without abandoning it. Some of those possibilities for cinema-going women were quite tangible – fashion ideas, the motivation to pursue a career or learn a language. Some of them were intellectual – cinema offered an engagement with an often complex cultural form. Some of the possibilities were deeper and more ephemeral – such as the opening up of sexual fantasies and romantic alternatives. Whilst these may seem, on the surface, to have offered less material change, my fictional representation of Daisy suggests that fantasy can often have a very real effect on life choices. Her correspondence with Paul Landry becomes a real and powerful friendship when he moves to England, and she keeps this relationship separate from her domestic life.

The Site of the Picture Palace

Much of the appeal of cinemagoing, for the researcher as well as the respondent, lies in the magnificence of the cinema buildings. In oral histories, one observes a move away from statistical approaches, and towards remembered sensual details, which is just the sort of access that a fiction writer needs. One oral history respondent gives an almost impressionistic description of the Brighton cinemas of her youth:

On Wednesday afternoons, my father’s half day, in the winter, we always went to the pictures. In the Regent, they had budgerigars all alongside in a wire enclosure. We also had tea and toast on a tray, which must have been really dangerous as we had to pass the trays of tea along rows of people.

(Riley, Payne, and Flood 2009: 59),

Pictures and reminiscences from the 1930s and 1940s give a sense of spaces which were suitably ornamented for the production of fantasy.

After authoring two novels rooted very much in the 25-year experience of living in my home county of Derbyshire (Hogan 2008, 2011), *The Electric* is the first literary novel I have written about Brighton and Sussex, where I have lived since 2008. That situation presented many challenges. A fiction writer can’t hope to encapsulate a whole city and its history in one novel. By focusing on the cinemas, I had a way of dividing the space of the city, and its past, into manageable areas.

The rapid demise of cinemagoing as the premier form of popular entertainment naturally led to the closing of many of Brighton and Hove’s cinemas. The years between 1950 and 1958 saw a decline of 641 million cinema attendances in Britain, and the consequent closure of many venues. (Corrigan 1983: 30) In 1946, there were 13 cinemas in Brighton and Hove, but by 1986 only three remained.

Focusing on the sites enabled me to read the history of the city compressed into the buildings themselves. I could trace the history of a cinema from its inception, through its various names and guises, through its modernisation and disrepair, to its closure or repurposing. I could also sometimes see the building today, often in a new form.

For example, the site of the Odeon Kemptown on the corner of St George’s Road and Paston Place was originally owned by the Sassoon family, who kept stables there. In September 1940 the cinema was struck by a bomb from a German plane pursued by Spitfires and attempting to lighten its load in order to hasten the retreat. It was a Saturday afternoon, and the cinema was running its regular “Mickey Mouse Club”. Several children were amongst the dead. The defiant atmosphere of the time meant that the

Odeon was rebuilt within three months. By 1980 it was a bingo hall, and in 1983 became a social welfare centre run by the Bethany Fellowship, before being demolished to make way for flats, as Kemptown became the affluent liberal centre it is now (Riley, Payne, and Flood 2009: 51-53). Narrative time appears compressed; the linear history is embodied – spatialized by the site of the cinema.

The old cinema buildings of Brighton tell a story of how British people spent their leisure time through the eras. The layers of history are visible. Even in the 1940s, sharp-eyed patrons of the Academy Cinema could spot the Moorish designs that harked back to the building's time as a Turkish baths called "The Brighton Hammam" (Riley, Payne and Flood 2009). The Savoy, too, had been a bathhouse, and several of the cinemas became bingo halls when the movie craze passed.

When visiting the old cinema buildings, I found myself struck by the physical clues about their pasts. The Savoy, on which *The Electric Theatre* in my novel is loosely based, still has its seafront entrance. I collected some of the tiles which dropped from its tired façade after a recent storm. The foyer now leads into a casino. On the East Street side, the building is home to a strip club. I was moved to read a former employee's description of the cinema's final years:

It was a lovely old building. It had gone to rot, though. The main ballroom upstairs was still there, but the ceiling had partially collapsed and it was inhabited by pigeons. The huge number one screen had been closed for years, but the beautiful old silk curtains, enormous amounts of fabric, slightly tattered, were still hanging there. I remember thinking what a terrible waste it was.

(Riley, Payne and Flood 2009: 68)

I wanted to convey that sense of compression, simultaneity, and the fetishization of the buildings that I found in the oral histories, in the finale of Daisy and Paul's story. In order to do that, I changed the narrative pace, and the decades leading up to Daisy's death are summarised around the closures:

The West Street Odeon shut in 1973, along with the Regent. Daisy told Paul that one of her first memories was the sight of a German fighter

plane positioned as if crashing into the canopy, as part of the promotion for a Jean Harlow film. She told him about the budgerigars in the foyer and the shining steel teapots, how she'd danced on the sprung-floor of the ballroom upstairs.

That next year, they stood on that same street, an arm's length between them, and watched the Academy pulled apart, layer by layer. The crumbling art deco interior gave way to the Moorish tiles of the old bathhouse.

"Eventually," Paul said, "we're going to have to find something else to do with our time."

"Not until they pull the last one down," Daisy said. "They'll have to drag me out of my seat."

(*The Electric* 2020: 267)

The closure of the cinemas throughout the 60s, 70s and 1980s are a threat to Daisy and Paul's friendship, and to the spirit which made it possible. As well as literally compromising their ability to meet by restricting their choice of safe venues, the closures figuratively mirror the demise of the cinema-inspired 'fantasy' romance that they brought into being.

The Pleasure of Disruption

The closures of Brighton's cinemas throughout the latter half of the twentieth century contribute to a dark chapter in Daisy's life, and pre-empt the unspooling of her relationship with Paul. They cause disruption on a grand and conclusive scale. However, this paper has attempted to show that – in general – narrative disruption is not always an entirely negative element of the reading/viewing experience. Often, we assume that disruption is experienced passively, and causes only frustration. A modern film audience may find it unsatisfactory to miss the beginning of a film, or see it in the wrong order, but for Daisy these disruptions become an opportunity for creative engagement. She – and the women on whom she is based – learned to master the skills required to manipulate and control the disruptions in narrative, in films, in language, in memory, and in real life. The breakdown in narrative allowed her to exercise a certain agency over the stories she consumed, and she then took this power into her own life to resist oppression, and change her story.

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