Embodied memories: understanding post-war Italian film culture through oral history

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“It was a Sunday afternoon and my young sisters wanted to go to the cinema. ‘Ok, then, I will take you’. I said to them. Their friend Vittoria had also decided to join us. Going through the newspaper, I had selected a neighbourhood cinema and a film suitable for children of their age: ‘Singing in the Rain’.

The cinema was the Altieri, which had taken its name from Palazzo Altieri, a noble Roman family, between Piazza del Gesu and Via del Gesu. As the group leader, I went to the box office: ‘Five tickets for the gallery (which was cheaper)’. The lady replied: ‘Five for the balcony’, and without waiting for my response, added ‘they are the same price’. We sat on our seats, when the film was about to begin. It was a beautiful film, with music, dance, and poetry, suitable for everybody.

The lights came on for the interval. On the stage a group of girls appeared. They were no tall, no slim, and semi-naked. They started to dance, turning their back to the audience and showing their bottom. How rude! I really couldn’t believe it. They sang a song to the moon in love, while moving across the stage ungracefully. Whistling and shouting came from the gallery. Only then I realised that they were all men. I wanted to get out but by then the film had already started.

Without saying a word I decided that at the end of the film we would get out quickly to avoid that crowd of men. So we did. On the way back, with a serious tone but full of irony, my younger sister thanked me for the entertainment. ‘I didn’t know that the Altieri had a variety show’, I tried to say but for years we laughed every time we thought about it, despite the fact that at that time I would have slapped myself for the embarrassment.”
1043 Questionnaires
- mix of open and close-ended questions
- statistical, quantitative results

160 Video Interviews
- more in depth questions
- qualitative results
Fondest memories  Favourite stars  Ticket price
Film selection  Types of cinema theatre  Film nationalities
Favourite Genres  Favourite films  Preference of days

Questionnaire
Cinema-going habits:

92% of participants went to the cinema

80% with friends and family

77% in neighbourhood cinemas

Second and third run cinemas are – together with parish cinemas – the most popular ones

Trends and choices
“As theatrical movie-going becomes a thing more remembered than experienced, I think we will be reminded that one of the most striking features of the experience of cinema for a hundred years was its sociality”.

(Robert C. Allen, Reimagining the History of the Experience of Cinema in a Post-Movie-going Age, 2011: 81)
Methodological approach

- Recurrent motifs
- Thematic clusters
- Importance of the video
“by capturing emotional expression, facial and body language, and spatial relations, foreground dimensions of representation that have escaped from the prison house of language”

(Murdock and Pink, 2005: 153).
‘Children should not ideally be subsumed into adult audience models, for they had a distinct cinema culture of their own’.

the way children ‘entered the cinema, behaved during exhibitions and engaged with films after the show’.

[A]nother way of going to the movies [...] by letting oneself be fascinated *twice over*, by the image and by its surroundings – as if I had two bodies at the same time: a narcissistic body which gazes, lost, into the engulfing mirror [or the screen], and a perverse body, ready to fetishise not the image but precisely what exceeds it: the texture of the sound, the space, the darkness, the obscure mass of other bodies, the beam of light, entering the theatre and leaving.

Subject reality
how events were experienced by the respondent

Life reality
how ‘things’ were

Text reality
ways in which events are narrated by the respondents
“We would go on our own, the parents would give us a snack on a Sunday, and we would spend all afternoon there. It was a special time. We knew everybody. We all had a sandwich, peanuts, bruscolini, and mostaccioli. The film was an excuse to spend time with friends from the local parish”.
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“The embodied nature of the close senses of touch, taste, and smell is more evident, and thus they link us to the material world, indeed bringing it close to or into our bodies”.

(Marks Multisensory culture p. 128)
the ‘all-encompassing somatic, sensuous and affective involvement in the cinema experience’ (Kuhn 2002: 147)

Embodied memories: the role of the body in the process of reconstructing in the present the memories of the past.
It provides a fuller understanding of cinema-going in Italians’ cultural life

- Social role
- Educational role
- Life cycle marker
- Contact with the film industry
Conclusions