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# Narrative Modes of Cinemagoing Memories

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***Abstract:*** *This article focuses on the results of my research project on cinemagoing heritage, concluding with the development of a matrix to analyse and categorise cinemagoing memories. What cinemagoing recollections come into the minds of the subjects in retrospect, and in what manner are these memories communicated? I explored the forms of how cinemagoing in the 1930s–1950s is remembered by eyewitnesses today. After seven to eight decades, the social habit of going to the cinema still occupies an important place in the collective memory of elderly people, particularly in rural communities. As my method of survey I chose the narrative video; I then plotted these memories on a map to categorise them.*

> That film, I can really […] that scene!, always when somebody called out, "Ferryman, come over!" / […] Death appears in it. There was / Yes. I don't know the story much anymore / but those pictures! They're burned into my mind. (Haßtenteufel)[1]

Elderly members of the audience retain vivid memories of the cinema in their minds, as this excerpt from an interview with Elfriede Haßtenteufel (born 1927) about the film *Fährmann Maria* (Frank Wisbar, 1936) clearly illustrates. Filmic impressions from her early childhood, to use her metaphor, were burned into her head.

This article focuses on audiences and their accounts of their memories of the cinema, and discusses forms of remembrance of the experience of cinemagoing. It presents excerpts from a study of a rural audience's recollections of the cinema in Saarland, Germany. The subjects of this study were cinemagoers in St. Wendel, northern Saarland, who were adolescents in the 1930s–1950s. The interviewees were chosen to represent, for as much as it was possible, a cross section of the relevant age group born between 1915 and 1940, so as to be able to draw conclusions on the characteristics of this generation's collective memory. The central research questions may be summarised as follows: what memories of the cinema of their youth are brought to mind from a present-day perspective, and in what way do they communicate these memories as narratives?

Memory and recollection constitute an ever-expanding field of study in humanities research. Scholars have examined a broad range of both private and public memories in politics, historiography, art and culture in general. Yet how can we preserve cinemagoing memories and evaluate them? Collecting individual memories of the cinema of the past presents particular methodological problems, because it is difficult to clearly illustrate visual objects within an oral process that takes place in retrospect. The method of narrative interviews facilitates the collection of reminiscences of the cinema situated outside archival sources. The open character of the interview creates the space necessary to develop unscripted narratives for the oral communication of cinema stories. An important element of this methodology is the video documentation of the interview to record nonverbal gestures of memory too. However, an appropriate interdisciplinary method must be found to analyse these narratives. A step-by-step approach from the micro to the macro level is recommended: that is, from the self-contained, individual recounting of a cinema experience all the way to historical, political and social factors influencing the understanding and reception of the

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media in the personal life of the narrator. The question also arises: in what way do the findings contribute to research on collective memories of the cinema?

**On the Characteristics of Cinema Memories**

Remembering poses particular challenges for the interviewees because distant events and experiences must be translated into language. During the course of an interview, self-contained narratives take shape, which help to reconstruct cinema memories. Because the interviewees reconstruct film stories, fictional plots are transformed by the recollection process and are mixed with biographical details. The result could be defined as a fiction of the fiction. In particular, through physical components of the act of narrating, the narrator himself or herself becomes an imaginary film persona. Fictionalisation processes can be traced primarily in deformations of the film recollections, as in the example of one of the interviewees, Marianne Müller (born 1937), who, recollecting the film *Maman Colibri* (Jean Dréville, 1937), delivered a narration in which an actress's black-and-white fingernails turn red:

> And then I saw women with such make-up for the very first time. Anyway, you could see / made-up that way, anyway, painted lips. You could / Of course, it was a black-and-white film, but you could see the red fingernails and everything. Then just / it was all different from what us people were used to seeing, you know?

The effect of interference is quite clear here in the blurring of the film world and the real world.

These narratives, particularly the memories of visual contents and film plots, are almost always incomplete. They can be compared to a detailed mosaic from which only sparse "memory *tesserae*" have remained in the minds of the audience, and which must be narratively reordered and linked to one another. This is true especially of audiovisual memories for, normally, only individual, emotionally laden images or scenes have remained from the films, as in the introductory quotation from Elfriede Haßtenteufel's interview. Linear plots break up; the end of the story can't be recollected. A similar tendency toward fragmentation may be found on the purely auditory level; for example, film soundtracks preserved on records owned by interviewees are remembered with no reference to the film's contents. The upper limit of fragmentation becomes manifest in the failure of speech. This always occurs when the different parts of the mosaic can no longer be connected to one another narratively. Pauses in speech, incomplete sentences but also questions that remain unanswered cause the narrative flow to come to a halt or cease altogether.

In contrast to fragmentation, the conscious selection of the narrative contents represents an active decision by the narrator to narrate only what seems important. Routine plots without extraordinary elements are often not narrativised. In addition, certain contents of the memory are explicitly left out, namely those that do not correspond to the current social consensus or that have a traumatic background. In cinema recollections that include references to Nazism, for instance, tendencies toward justification frequently whitewash the object of the narrative, so that no narrative patterns arise. Emotional memories such as the one reported in an interview by Walter Schmitt (born 1915), regarding the persecution of his father-in-law, prevent a verbalisation of the cinema recollections on the subject of the Nazi era: "My father-in-law. I mean, he was ousted by the Nazis, you know? Wasn't even allowed to remain in the Trier District. Had to disappear, and so on. […] So you can imagine what my attitude is."

**The Matrix of Cinemagoing Memories**

The microanalysis of the individual nuclei of narration in the videotaped interviews clearly shows that recollections of cinema are linked to specific places (see also Kuhn, "An Everyday Magic"). These function as "memory anchors", as we could call them, which grant access to the story across the decades and which preserve the cinema story from being lost. Memory anchors, however, have even wider-ranging functions. Downs and Stea talk of maps that function as mnemonic devices. Spatial concepts serve as a starting point for the configuration of trains of thought. In the studied cinema recollections, these could also be imaginary places, for example remembered places appearing in the films. Moreover, historical places are also not free from processing, for narrative transformations occur here as well. The reimagination of the historical place which exists in its original form only in the recollection of the eyewitnesses creates a new setting in which the stories can be told.

If the spatial memory anchors of the analysed narrative nucleus are placed on a map, it becomes clear that the cinema recollections do not circulate around a homogenous "cinema memory place"; rather, their accumulation points are widely scattered. Cinema stories are associated to completely different places—at home, on the way to the cinema, in the theatre itself, on the screen, etc. Narratives can thus be categorised by abstracting them in a matrix.

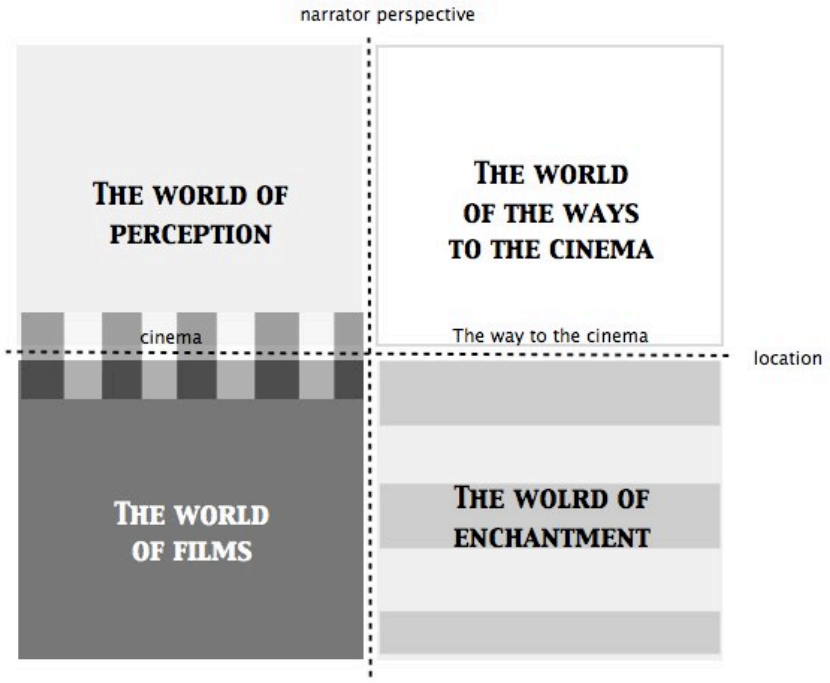



**Figure 1: The matrix of cinemagoing memories.**

When both dimensions, namely location and narrative perspective, have been entered into a matrix, two areas can be distinguished to the left and right of the narrative perspective axis: outside and inside the cinema firstly. But the analysis of the interviews showed that the generated framework has to be extended. The cinema auditorium is to be emphasised as a special place. Both halves are again to be divided horizontally, so that four worlds arise: the world of the way to the cinema, the world of reception, the world of the film, and the world

of the enchantment of the everyday. The characteristics of the four worlds will be illustrated in what follows, with special focus on the relationship between the two dimensions, on typical narrative styles and on pointers to the social framework.

**The World of the Way to the Cinema**

The first world places the narrative perspective in relation to the stations on the way to the cinema. Narratives in this category frequently contain repetitive actions such as in Martin Schmidt's (born 1926) narrative "A Visit to the Fathers from the Catholic Church", for example:

> And we went to St. Wendel and we had thirty pence; the cinema cost twenty-five pence, and back then a roll cost five pence at old man Lerner's Karl. Sunday they were […] You could get a roll back then. So we walked along, and if he hadn't got any, then we went to the padres, and they had coffee. And then there was a prayer and while they were praying we looked around. Did they have sugar cubes? What was on the table? Not a bit [*laughs*]. We were Protestant, after all. But then they just had sugar, not sugar cubes, and so we filled up our bags. (Schmidt, Kraushaar, and Schmidt)

Going to the cinema on Sunday was a routine for him, and even pilfering the sugar from the padres' table represented a recurring action. The interviewee has told the story so often that it has entered the family memory as an anecdote. This world is distinguished by multiple recurrences in the narrative style: both singular and repeated events, told once and many times over. Different repeated episodes within the narrative frequently become linked together.

The story is mostly told from a first-person-plural perspective; after all, the narrative is about the way to the cinema experienced as a group. The "I" is integrated into the generation of the young cinemagoers, and the anchor points in this world show that the stops on the way to the cinema are accorded a much greater meaning than the film that was viewed. The group interacts with the aid of dialogue to construct the plot of the story. Thus the social action of going to the cinema occupies the foreground in this world. "We wanted to be grown-up", as Hilde Schubmehl (born 1926) explains in her narrative:

> I remember it clearly. I went to the cinema once with my two cousins. One of my cousins who was one year older was from Kreuznach. She was staying with my aunt who also had a daughter. She was two years older than me. So the three of us went to the cinema together. I remember we were still young.
>
> After the film was over. What time was it? […] I'm not sure. […] At any rate. We said: "Let's go to a café!" We wanted to be grown ups. So we went to L'île café. Today it is an Asian restaurant. However the oldest cousin said: "I want to go home."
>
> And the older cousin from Kreuznach and myself stayed in the café and had a glass to drink. What was it? Juice? Probably juice. And then we wanted to go home at about 10 pm. And as we arrived at the train station it was winter and it was pitch dark. We arrived at the train station and the train had just left. "Oh God! What should we do now?" We were too afraid to walk back home. It was pitch dark. So we had to wait at the train station. We waited until 11 o'clock then the next train came.
>
> And my cousin who had gone home saw my parents and they asked where we

> were. She should have stayed with us! She was a tattletale and do you know what? When I got home, I got a beating and what a beating! My cousin from Kreuznach, she wanted to spend the night with me but she couldn't. She had to go to my aunt's house. It was so innocent. Nothing happened. We just sat at a table and had something to drink. I wanted to be grown up. And I missed the train and had to stay outside in the cold. It was totally innocent. There was no one else there besides us. And my parents were worried, of course. Anyway I got a beating like a child. That's the way it was. But I didn't die from it.

The stops on the way to and from the cinema as a local framework represented a gradual emancipation from the parents, even if for a limited time only. Stopovers such as train stations become in this respect symbols of a growing mobility and, thus, of independence for the youth of the time.

**The World of Reception**

In the world of reception, the fictional film world and the remembered reality form a complex unit. On the one hand, there is the fascination with the screening technology. In memories of early cinema in particular, the cinema auditorium is reduced to its technical possibilities for projecting images. Walter Schmitt's (born 1915) narrative about the film *Prinzessin Turandot* (Gerhard Lamprecht, 1934) is an example of this, as his perception of the film serves as a starting point to bring projection technology in a tavern hall into his narrative.

> It's this way. The first time, you know, I, like I said, as […] a thirteen/fourteen-year-old I experienced such a cinema performance in a tavern hall, you know. As far as I can remember, it was *Turandot* that was playing. […] I was taken there. […] Uh, the attraction, yes, the technology maybe did interest me a bit, how the guy worked the apparatus back there, brought everything to the front, you know, so, so wonderful on the screen. That was fascinating!, you know, because it was something new.

The film's content eluded his reception even at the time of viewing and has thus found no frame of reference in his mind. On the other hand, a mixture of film world and real world has occurred. An impressive example of this can be seen in Elfriede Haßtenteufel's narrative on *Fährmann Maria*, in which she herself appears as a ferry pilot in a dialogue with Death with the aid of physical narration:

> Death appears in it. There was […] Yes. I don't know the story much anymore / but those pictures! They're burned into my mind. How come? Why, oh why? I don't know. Anyway, then the voice called "Maria! Or […] Ferryman, come over!" The lady's name was Maria in the film, I still remember that! And then she came there and there stands this figure! […] All skin and bone. […] Death [*gestures*] in a black robe, black hood, you know? And then […] [*shakes her head*]. And she got scared, you know? What's that supposed to be? I myself don't know anymore why or how come, but / I can still remember that well. I probably was a bit scared, too, that's why I remember [*assents, saying "hmm"*]. Could be, you know?

The recounting of the effect that the film had on her triggered fearful emotions even at the time of the interview, as seen especially in her gestures and facial expressions. She

reconstructed the key scene by drawing an imaginary rope and envisioning a frightening figure on the other bank. It is precisely these strong, emotion-laden recollections that are normally narrated from a first-person perspective. In this case, the collective recedes into the background, and the individual, singular experience comes to the forefront of the narrator's memory.

With reference to Michel Foucault, Annette Kuhn speaks of a "different place" arising from the joining together of the two worlds, cinema world and everyday world:

> The temporality of cinema in the world conjoins the temporality of *the world in the cinema;* and at the point where the two meet, cinema becomes, in Foucault's sense of the term, a *heterotopia:* "a sort of place that lies outside all places and yet is actually localizable". ("Heterotopia" 109; emphasis original)

The place thus created is perceived as separate from the viewer's own world but also as belonging to it. This paradox generates a hybrid world arising from the time of the viewing (see also Schmidt). In retrospective, interferences offer great scope to supplement the manifest contents, through visualisations and transformations. The recounting of film recollections exhibits frequent fictionalisations in which the remembered image, mostly in the form of a single shot or brief sequence, is supplemented by the narrator's own fictional elements. Again, a good example is Elfriede Haßtenteufel's narrative about *Fährmann Maria*, in which the narrator inserts the cry "Ferryman, come over!" into the film plot, even when this was not to be heard in the film.

As individual as this recollection may be, one can nevertheless assume that many cinemagoers had similarly fearful experiences in their youth. Kuhn comes to comparable results in her study and emphasises that, in early encounters with the medium, the shift between the cinema in the world and the world in cinema was difficult to cope with ("What to Do with Cinema Memory?" 87). As Jan Assmann emphasises, "[i]ndividual in a strict sense are only the perceptions, not the recollections." (37) Consequently, the recollections themselves still have a reference point in the social framework, but from an individual perspective. Implicitly woven into these cinema recollections is the desire of that generation to enter a world that was entirely different from their own world.

The world of reception possesses, especially through the above-described, complex relationship, the function of a point of transit in which recollections from the cinema auditorium and from the film world not only exist in parallel, but also combine in a hybrid form, becoming a new world. When the transition has been completed, the viewer spends a limited time as a "guest" in the world of the film, which will be described in more detail in the following section.

## The World of the Film

In this world, the viewed film stands in the foreground of the recollection. This can be seen in the specific narrative style of the beginning of the account, which generally comprises the film title and a brief description of the film's content. Franz-Josef Denis's (born 1927) recounting of *Der Abtrünnige* (Heinrich Valentin, 1921) offers a good example of the world of films:

> Interviewer: Can you remember any films nevertheless? I think, I remember there was a film about Good Friday.
>
> F.J. Denis [*overlapping*]: Yes! I recall that. That was really something. There was a film, it was called *Der Abtrünnige*, […] It was a story about a clergyman, a Catholic priest who had given up his calling and, don't know why, for some reason, didn't want to have anything to do with it anymore. And then it all started, what he did and how he got himself out of tight spots [*gesture of squirming with his hands*] How he then taught at a university and how he met with students and how […] also theology students, that is, from the seminary, […] sat together one day, I can remember this [!] one scene [*smiles*] and […] That was a film because of the content and the subject that my parents then allowed me to see. That / it was being shown on Good Friday, of all times. That's why it's so in my recollection / because it was really […] let's just say an exceptional situation. Well, it was, I don't know, if you're interested in the film plot [*assenting 'hmm'*] maybe it's still in a dusty archive. I can still recall a scene that was very moving. This bailed-out priest consecrated a whole bottle of wine in a champagne bucket, like it was in church, like in the consecration [*turning his hands*] and he wanted to pass it around in the group and, […] I don't know, who / You'll know about it […] the teaching of the Catholic Church [*emphasizing with hand gestures*] with the consecrated wine that represents the blood of Christ [*emphasizing with hand gestures*], and then one of these young theology students looked at that as a sacrilege and didn't want the others to joke about it somehow. Took the whole bucket and drank it down in one go. Well, that was [*laughs*] quite astounding and a […] a moving scene [*laughs*], I can still remember because it was so unusual [*hand gestures*].

The social act of going to the cinema does not occupy the foreground in Denis's narrative, as allusions to companions or other traces of a collective experience cannot be detected. This is especially true of the embedded narrative. In contrast to the world of reception, the first-person narration moves almost completely to the background here, in as much as the narration is given from the perspective of the film hero, in the third person, and the narrator assumes the role of an observer. Thus, the narrative perspective represents an important, characterising feature of this world. Through the descriptive style of narration, visual metaphors can be found at the level of transit to the world of film rather than within the world itself.

In the world of film, props become a key element of narration and help to fix the storyline in the subject's memory. In the example of Franz-Josef Denis, it is the detail shot of the bucket that marks the high point of the narrative, because its contents were drunk in one go. Frequently, plots are recounted of films that the subject saw again years later on television, thus preserving their memory. Recollections of a film become superimposed through repeated viewings, so that the recollection itself becomes cumulative. In this case, we may speak of a one-time narrative about a repeatedly viewed film whose memory is preserved. The following example, from my interview with Irma Klein (born 1919), is a case in point:

> And then there's Ben Hur, he was a Christian, you know? He fell in love then with / with a non-Christian […] woman, you know. And then he, he then went over to Christianity and how the Emperor, Tiberias [*sic*] was the Emperor, back then, you know, Emperor Tiberias, have I remembered that rightly? No? [*laughs*] Yes. You know he did make that march into Rome, he did. And that Ben Hur, he was up on the

> / on that building, you know, he looked down on the march, and a roof / a tile fell down, you know. And injured somebody. And then he was taken prisoner.

The film *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (Fred Niblo, 1925) has been remade several times and is still shown regularly on television. Recollections of these remakes and repeated viewings overlap like templates in the mind, and a distinct memory of the film *Ben-Hur* adapted through the subject's viewing behaviour comes into being.

**The World of Enchantment**

As opposed to the world of the way to the cinema, the world of enchantment is characterised by hybrid structures for its mix with the everyday world. These arise, however, in a different way from those in the world of reception. In the world of enchantment, the narrator brings remnants of the world of film into a cinema story that occurs in the everyday. Thus, the transition is exactly reversed, that is, it happens from outside the world of film, and somewhat more subtly. The mosaics of the world of film continue to live as ideas in the minds of the viewers, who adapt these ideas to their life worlds. A good example of this concept is provided by Helene Schubmehl (born 1929), who, as a trained seamstress, recreated the fashions of the film stars with the means at her disposal. She brought the radiance of the stars of the world of film into her own world, adapting it according to her possibilities. An additional example of a narrative detail is the use of Nivea cream, through which Marianne Müller (born 1937) felt like a made-up film star and somewhat more grown-up:

> And a bit of Nivea cream smeared onto my face. When you had that, you had a bit of luxury. And then / I hadn't got any. I always went to Hildegard to borrow some. I went to Hildegard with just my bare hands after washing. She always had some. Then I said: "Can I get a bit of Nivea cream?" And then she said: "Yeah." And I always put it on my hands and on my face / [*gesture of smearing cream*]. Everywhere. And then I was really posh. You had / You even smelled a little bit good. There wasn't anything else as perfume. […] And then we'd meet one another and admired the others, what they had on and / You almost knew already because you didn't own many Sunday dresses. Everybody had the same Sunday dress on until they didn't fit anymore. And then you got other things, you know. And they had often already been worn by others. Yeah, and then you beamed with joy and were proud, nicely scented [!], and went to the cinema.

The above excerpt clearly demonstrates how such adaptations of the world of film become the symbol of adolescence. Similarly, acoustic film remnants remain over decades in the memories of the aural witnesses. They play recordings of their favourite songs from films or imitate the dances of the revue stars. In this way, adaptation occurs even on the physical level, in the form of physical narrative. As Kuhn has written: "This exploration thus demonstrates how the production and operation of cinema memory private and public, personal and collective, worlds shade into one another, interweave and work together in a range of different ways" ("What to Do" 96). Kuhn examined this enchantment of the everyday in her study, and took it even further when she spoke of "implants" (91). Film images and sequences are transferred into the viewers' own biography and are thus perceived as their own experiences (Welzer 185). These appropriations do not occur to such a great degree in the narratives of the St. Wendel eyewitnesses. Adaptations remain indeed

fragmentary. Stories in this world are difficult to classify, as the narrative structure exists only in shortened or fragmentary form. In this case, elements of adaptation from the world of film are represented by indicators such as a melody line that the narrator still remembers today: "I play the old recordings. Those old operetta melodies, let's say. Also 'The Land of Smiles' was also such an operetta melody back then" (Klein). The world of enchantment can be localised on the way home from the cinema and, above all, in the narrator's everyday. Thus, in this world the narrator has placed the greater geographical as well as temporal distance between himself/herself and the cinema theatre.

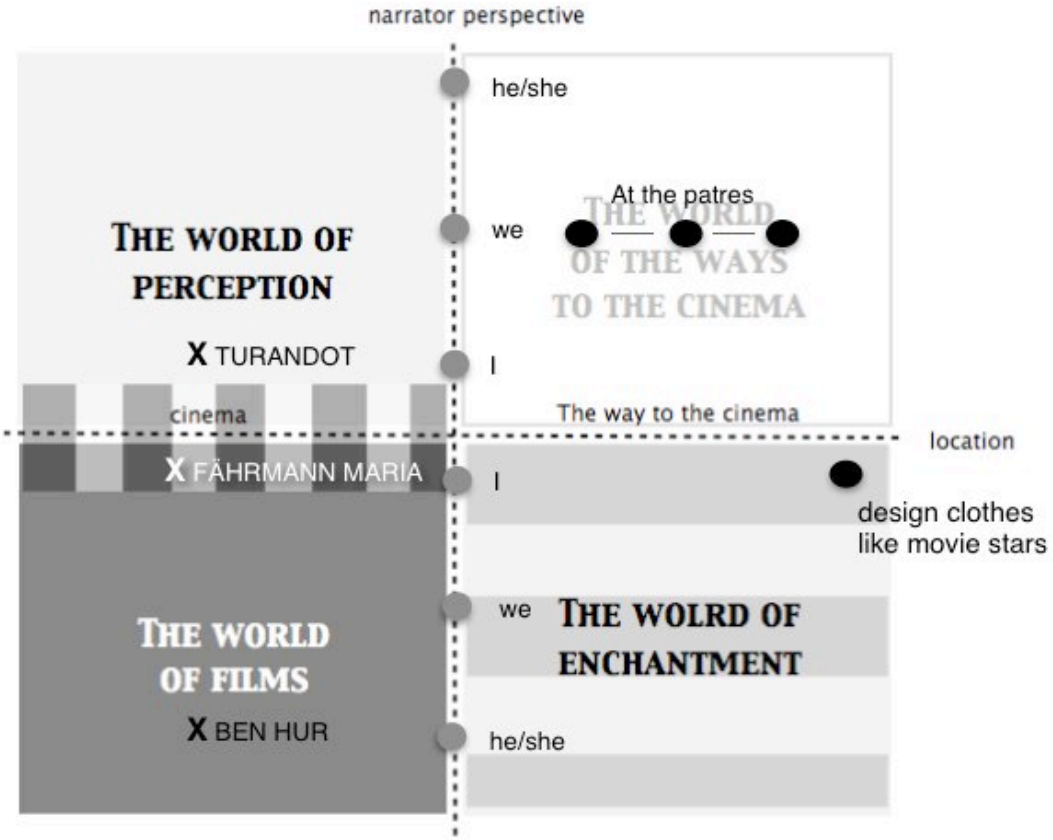



**Figure 2: The matrix filled with cinemagoing memories.**

The testimonies evaluated above can now be entered into the matrix of cinema recollections, so that accumulation points of cinema memories become visible. The examples presented in this article have been classified in the above image. The hybrid spaces as a mix of both worlds—remembered everyday world and fictional film world—have been shaded in the relevant places, although it must be emphasised that the lines between the worlds are fluid. Furthermore, by means of a configuration of the points, features of the narrative accounts can be tagged by marking singular and recurring events with circle and cross symbols, respectively. A number of intersections can be highlighted, especially in the cinemagoing experience, and can be linked to one another with a line. Temporal aspects can thus be integrated into the matrix, for example by means of several worlds "passing" chronologically through a larger narrative unit.

If we elaborate an ideal-type passage through a narrated cinema memory, we can represent the chronological succession of the worlds from one to four as forming a circle: (1)

the players in the story make their way to the cinema, (2) they enter the cinema auditorium and the reception begins, (3) they enter into the world of the film, and (4) they are "enchanted" on the way home.

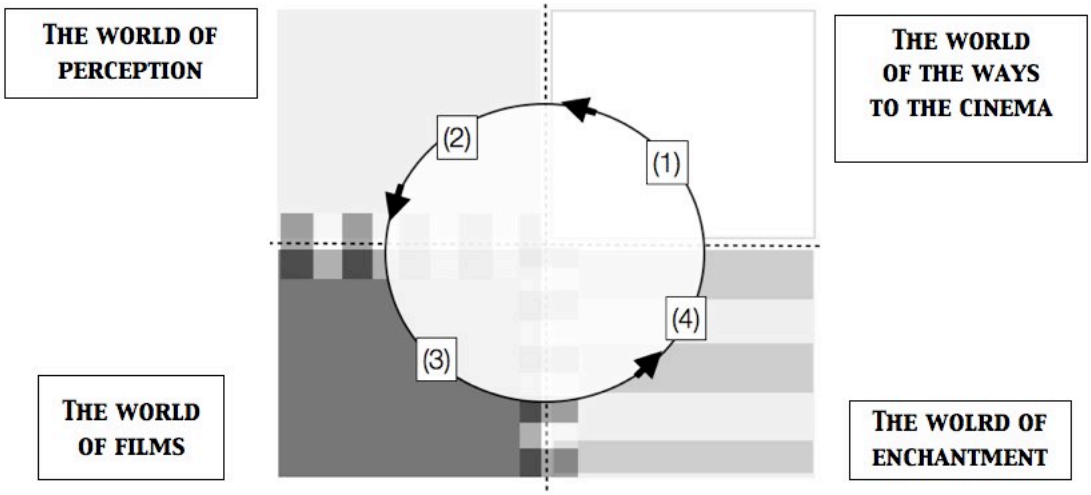



**Figure 3: An ideal-type passage through a narration about cinema memory.**

## The Narratology of Cinemagoing

The Central Theater today (Figure 4). Iron bars block the entry area; the faded neon sign no longer radiates light in the evening; the film posters in the displays recall long-past cinema events. There is nothing to bring to mind the long queues at the evening box office, or the palpitations during the ID checks. The photograph of the Central Theater is emblematic of a forsaken place whose repeated weekly attendance by its audience has long since become history. The audience took home with them memories of a cinema belonging to their youth; they have become part of a generational memory. These recollections testify to the flowering of the cinema in the place where those memories arose, namely, the minds of the appreciative audience.

However, the cinema worlds described in this article are ultimately to be viewed in a historical-political context. It was primarily Nazi ideology and the Second World War that influenced the formation and shaping of these cinema recollections in the geographical location and historical situation of Saarland in the present study. It becomes apparent that the autobiographical cinema memories analysed here contain traces of collective memory. Cinema testimonies frequently reveal group recollections arising from the adopted first-person-plural perspective, in which the viewed film itself becomes a secondary issue. The interviews recorded as part of this project are now part of a cultural memory. A communicative process has given rise to recollections and these come to be mediated through filmed documentation. In their specific audiovisual-biographical form, alongside archival sources such as photographs, press reports and documents, they make a small contribution to the examination of forms of recollection on the part of cinema audiences from the 1930s to the 1950s. But further questions remain unanswered. Gender-specific recollection modes emerge as an exciting field for examination. The time window of this enquiry into cinema reminiscences is, however, on the point of closing. Research is, therefore, still necessary in

order to preserve and evaluate the manifold cinema memories at the threshold of generational change.




**Figure 4: The cinema Central Theater closed its doors in 1996. Photograph by Jessica Forster, 2014.**

**Note**

[1] All interviews videotaped, transcribed and translated by the Author. In the transcriptions, the slash symbol indicates an interrupted sentence, while three suspension dots in square brackets stand for a pause in the speech.

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