

Memory and identity of experiences at the movie theater: narratives about social life at the Cine Theatro Capitólio (Porto Alegre, Brazil)

Memória e identidade de experiências no cinema: narrativas sobre a vida social no Cine Theatro Capitólio (Porto Alegre, Brasil)

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Abstract: Registered a historic site, the Cine Theatro Capitólio was founded in 1928, in Porto Alegre, State of Rio Grande do Sul, in Brazil. Until 1994 the building was a place where people of different ages and backgrounds used to meet to enjoy a good movie or just have a good time together. After some political measures affecting the patrimony area, the community decided to organize a Associação dos Amigos do Cinema Capitólio (AMICA) that called for research work on the oral traditions and experiences in that place, in order to safeguard the social narratives that they represented. Data collection and interview recordings took place between 2006 and 2007. People spoke of their memories at the Capitólio, creating an important register of a social identity which that apparently was not related to films but was rather linked with social contacts. This paper, using theoretical and cultural studies, proposes a reflection about the social memory which mixes itself with the historic site memory. Narratives are about people and a specific building in a community, but the results delineate a research work about the identity of a modern way of socializing which is in a large sense epistemological.

Keywords: History; Memory; Society; Identities; Cinema.

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Resumo: Tombado como patrimônio histórico, o Cine Theatro Capitólio foi criado em 1928, em Porto Alegre, estado do Rio Grande do Sul, no Brasil. Até 1994 o prédio era um local onde pessoas de diferentes idades e origens costumavam se reunir para assistir um bom filme ou simplesmente se divertir. Após algumas medidas políticas que afetaram a área patrimonial, a comunidade decidiu organizar a Associação de Amigos do Cinema Capitólio (AMICA), reivindicando um trabalho de pesquisa sobre as tradições e experiências naquele local, com a finalidade de salvaguardar as narrativas sociais que representavam. A coleta de dados e as gravações das entrevistas ocorreram entre 2006 e 2007. As pessoas falavam de suas memórias no Capitólio, criando um registro importante de uma identidade social que, aparentemente, não estava relacionada a filmes, mas estava mais ligada a contatos sociais. Este trabalho, utilizando estudos teóricos e culturais, propõe uma reflexão sobre a memória social que se mistura com a memória do local histórico. As narrativas são sobre pessoas e uma edificação específica para a comunidade. Os resultados delineiam um trabalho de pesquisa sobre a identidade de uma maneira moderna de socializar que é, em grande sentido, epistemológica.

Palavras-chave: História; Memória; Sociedade; Identidades; Cinema.

This text derives from a research work carried out in the oral history area within a community in Porto Alegre, capital of Rio Grande do Sul, located in the extreme south of Brazil. Research work consists of a set of 15 interviews made between December 2006 and April 2007. Initially, the proposal was characterized as a work to record the memories of people visiting the Cine Theatro Capitólio. The cinema was founded in 1928. The community called for our work to develop a "visual memory of the films" without having in mind that these could be their memories. The cinema, in its traditional form, would serve a purpose that no one had really imagined. The research work was aimed at publishing a book about those memories but was restricted to the creation of sources and oral presentations at academic events (MACHADO JR., 2007; MACHADO JR.; HARRES, 2008).

A scholarship provided by the PNPDI/CAPES Graduate Program in Social Memory and Cultural Heritage of the Federal University of Pelotas has directed a new look towards this research, giving it a new life, this time related to the problematic project *Policies on Public Audiovisual Heritage: epistemologies, histories and*

applicability in MERCOSUR, still in its early stages. Thus, the idea consists of relating the topic of the research project to those found in the memory, bonding interests fairly and developing a broader knowledge not only about the institution but also about life experiences and its cultural products.

Although work was carried in a short period of time using a restricted network of people interviewed, it is our understanding that work on the oral memory of Porto Alegre, linked to the city's characteristic visual elements show that the approach should be resumed to bring a new reflection on the design and the resulting clash of the contents of an oral memory in a visual counterpoint. What differentiates one from another now is their state of composition: orality considers the record of a physical activity that is speech, while the visual traces of mechanical records held by inorganic supports that assist or sometimes subvert mental image (BERGSON, 1999). In this sense, the visual can also be immaterial because it was captured by the retina and stored in individual memory, characterized as organic.

The historical narrative on the Cine Theatro Capitólio has been organized to start from the present days and going back in time until the mid to late 1920s, when the building was inaugurated. It is said that its inauguration was greatly celebrated. One of the interviewees, an elderly person, recalls the occasion mentioning that the owner of the property hired a music group and performed a symbolic handover of the building to the community, whose enjoyment was the main target of the enterprise. The first owner of the establishment was of Italian descent. He was a tailor and invested virtually all his capital in the construction of the movie theater. Later, his business was taken over by concessions, opening new job opportunities for those seeking work and income. The administration occurred primarily at the family level and the hiring of other employees took place only afterwards.

Until the year 1994 Cine Theatro was as a place for watching films only. Before that Porto Alegre formalized a document recognizing the building as a social and cultural interest site Complementary Law 256, promulgated in 1991. This political action was aimed at *tipping* the building at the municipal level. Legal recognition was in consonance with Article 216 of the Brazilian Constitution promulgated in 1988, which cultural heritage. The Organic Law of Porto Alegre states that it would be their responsibility and that it would protect the city's historical and cultural heritage. Only in 2006 in another legislative text, the Capitólio was recognized as a historic heritage.

At that time, the state government of Rio Grande do Sul was responsible for *tipping* it.

Parallel to the value assigned to the site by social groups is the value assigned by the state, featuring symbolic hierarchies that deserve to be examined and have their results compared from the legislative sphere of orality. Is it possible to perceive consonance or dissonance between the arguments of oral reports and legal texts? It should be checked if the policies were characterized by organized social segments, interested in preserving the space or if they are dissonant of the spheres of power. The role of social agents must be highlighted by recognition of their initiative in favor of the building not only because of its aesthetic and economic aspects but also as a place that housed their social experiences, arisen from interviews and sensitive memoirs.

It is a fact that the recognition of social memories should be characterized as well as their historical importance considering the social uses experienced over many years. But such recognition was not considered in the public *tipping* policy. Effectively the *tipping* was carried out by the civil society, by people residing around the Capitólio area. In his book *Critique of Modernity* Sociologist Alain Touraine (1994) talks about the strength of social movements and their important manifestations. Group mobilization resulted in the formation of a Cinema Friends Association, reinforcing their political representation with another organized institution: the RS Cinema Foundation. Together they demanded from the Porto Alegre city government support for preservation and restoration works in the Capitólio. Such work was possible using Federal Brazilian Government funds, especially from Petrobrás (Brazil Oil Company). The idea consisted of changing the place into a cinematheque to keep collections, conducting research work and media exhibits as well as to form a specific audience.

As regards the social role of the cinema, Maria Cecilia Londres Fonseca (2009) in *The process of the heritage* states the importance of studies related to the topic. In the author's words, it is important to consider not only the role of institutional actors but also the direct or indirect participation of society in this construction. In other words, ownership of these political practices is exercised by different social groups. However, the projection by the segment of society interested in the *tipping* process was a different one. From the interviews, one could note that there was a feeling regarding the intention of making it what it once was instead of changing it into

something with a different social function. However, it was a consensus that “it would be better than nothing”. As for the *tipping* process, the State emphasized the building’s historical and architectural. At the interview stage, some people showed difficulty in developing a narrative about their experiences related to the movie theater. But when it came to talking about their lives they could remember some experiences.

Five aspects were taken into consideration in our methodology for organizing the narrative reports of memories collected. These aspects are related to life within the Cine Theatro Capitólio, namely childhood experiences, affective relationships, presence of historical events and personalities, labor relations and impressions on the films shown, the latter having a more poetic feature than the others. It shows memory as a feeling and nostalgia, something pleasant to recall and not at all related to trauma or bad memories (SARLO, 2005). With exception of a few moments of disagreement and misunderstanding, overcome with time, most interviewee reports were filled with pleasant moments.

Based on the contents of the interviews the objective of the research work was achieved satisfactorily and met our main needs in doing this task: to reconstruct the oral memory of certain social groups of the Cine Theatro Capitólio. Surprisingly, we were able to cover the memory of the cinema since its founding. Certainly, the contents of the interviews are varied, considering that interviewees were induced to tell their life stories. They were always anxious to talk about aspects of the films which could make the interview a short one while the intention was to get more information. The time spent in thinking of their personal life was also a time for exercising their memory. In writing this report it was sought to dilute the information in the form of a narrative text so that these differences are diluted or are somehow not perceived as well as to provide space to mention all those who were kind and willing enough to grant their testimony.

Michael Pollak (1992), in the text *Memory and social identity* notes that it is exactly the events experienced individually that form social memory. Even referring to different experiences the center of the narrative followed a common approach and thus the reports present themselves as excellent oral sources for the analysis of the relationship of individualities. The Capitólio became known as "cinema de rua" (street cinema) as opposed to the cinema located in the malls, which is so common in Porto Alegre now. The symbology of a possible return of the Capitólio to its original

function represented the financial inviability, that could be a risk to the process development.

Most memories of the Capitólio refer to people's childhood days. As noted by Brazilian researcher Ecléa Bosi (2003), in *The time of living memory*, childhood memories may have a psychological effect on rejuvenation. The fact of telling past experiences brings one the pleasure of going back to childhood times. It is interesting to see the idea of happiness in the comments of the interviewees when they referred to sweet memories of a time of innocence and fun despite strict parental control. Some interviewees¹ stated that when they were young, they used to take their comic books to the cinema just to compare the written stories to the ones shown on the big screen. They reported to an interesting visual dimension when they declared that they used to buy comic stamps with the images shown on the screen. This is a kind of semiotic reference to the first by the second one. The cinema was also the place to swap comic books during intermission. So, having the chance to see your hero in the movies and still coming out of the cinema with a new magazine to read made a wonderful experience even more delightful.

Other people suggested that the cinema was the place of major social events. It is something important like going to church on Sunday, especially at a time when there was no television in Brazil. Jokingly, a lady said that "it was the week's bathing day" showing how people were concerned about appearance – because people used to go to the cinema not only to see the movie but to observe each other. Experiences at the Cine Theatro Capitólio took into consideration different historical temporalities of projections of objects of consumption, showing a sphere of interest that applies also to sociology or social relationships. Georg Simmel (1986) in his book *Sociology* presents a good choice of study of cinemas as well as privileged places for social acts.

It is not by accident that memories of romance were mentioned in the narratives. The interviewees pointed out that between sessions boys and girls gathered in opposite corners of the cinema and went on staring at each other. Flirtation was discreet, as someone pointed out but enough to be perceived by the opposite sex. The next step was going steady and then the best thing to do was going to the cinema. They sat together, hand in hand. It was impossible to steal a kiss

¹ 17 people were interviewed: Malvina Pianca; Luis Antônio Grazzi; Marisa Grazzi; Marta Regina da Rosa; Antônio Daou; Nilton Franco; Gilda Cozza; Renato Lenz; José Luis Cozza; Jaime Rodrigues; Maria Bocorny; Pedro Martins Alves; Cláudia Damiani Meyer; Leo Centeno; Suzana Legg; e José de Jesus.

because the parents would be sitting in the row right behind, on constant guard for moral's sake and to prevent possible misconduct by the two young people sitting in front. It was mentioned that some marriages happened as a result of love encounters at the cinema. New families were formed whose children would also go to the Capitólio.

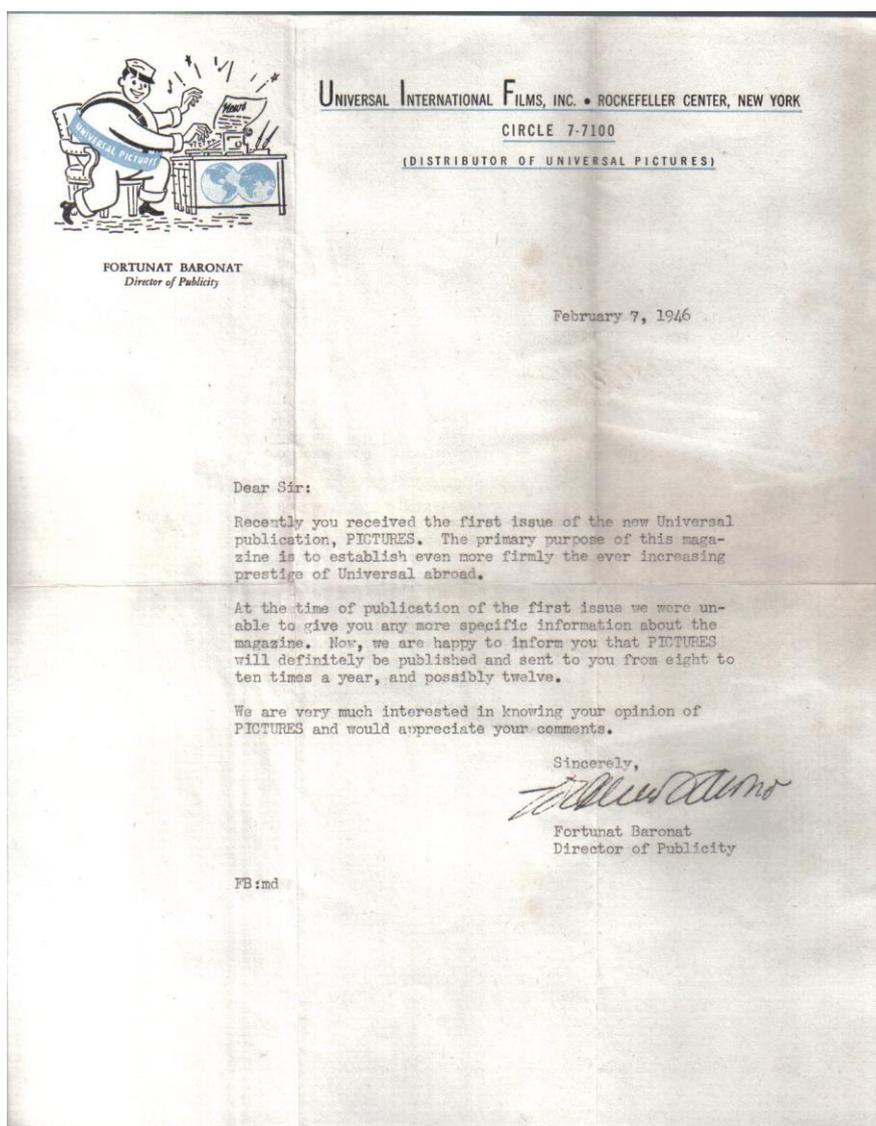
It is interesting to note that just before closing the Capitólio was taken as an X-rated movie theater, revealing a completely different audience than it had other times. Only one interviewee claimed to have attended the place during that period and according to him, it was just to satisfy his curiosity about that kind of film. However, even during the golden years, it was noted that Capitólio did exhibit films for certain age groups. It was obviously a different kind of censorship considering that often the only “shame scene” in the film was that of a kiss, far from what could be an explicit sex scene. Some interviewees declared that in different times of their lives they tried to bypass their ticket so that they could see an X-rated movie and that brought them an unexplainable feeling of being an adult.

Sweet as the taste of childhood were the currants, sodas and candies sold in the cinema lobby. It was mandatory to purchase a product to enjoy while watching the film. However, that brought about another interesting situation where people started buying crates of drinks to resell in the surrounding bars and warehouses to assure a sufficient amount of money to guarantee their weekly cinema tickets and some became somewhat dependant on that practice. Children's movies were shown in the afternoon. Saturday and Sunday sessions were the most preferred. People used to wait on long queues that went around the street corner. Children loved to interact during the film. They made a lot of noise stamping their feet on the floor to “warn” the good guy that the bad guy was about to catch him.

Interviewees tried to minimize any eventual drawbacks when talking about the cinema. The heat of a crowded room on summer days, for example, was considered a minor problem. There have been some curious reports for example about itching caused by the fleas found in the chairs. People talked about the presence of rodents too. But the comfortable armchairs reminded people that the Capitólio was a reference place in the city. Capitólio's glamour was even more noted by competitors when it entered its phase of decadence. That was especially after the installation of air conditioning in many of the city's shopping malls.

It is essential to consider cultural history's assumptions when analyzing the reports offered by the interviewees. According to historian Sandra Jatahy Pesavento (2008) in her text *Cultural history: a contemporary challenge*, it's a method of great importance to appreciate and to analyze possible interpretations of the past, considering the social representations of subjective and sensitive compositions engendered in discursive and imagetic forms. In this case, heritage serves as the memory device to obtain social narratives aiming at the construction of social memory.

Figure 1 – A letter from Universal International Films Inc. sent to the managers of Cine Theatro Capitólio in February 1946. Malvina Pianca Collection.



Social relationships built inside the Cine Theatro Capitólio are not present in the arguments of the law of Porto Alegre or Rio Grande do Sul. It contrasts with the narratives offered by the interviewees – key players to substantiate the process of recognition of the former cinema as a memory constituting space recognized by its social uses in the past, maybe with less value or importance from the historical and aesthetical point of view. Interviewees' nostalgic narratives sometimes assumed an introspective character which led them to reflect on their past, on the way they were building up their own story and how that space can remind them of their identification with the city.

Cinema and society have their own temporalities. At different times individuals found in the cinema the privileged space for social interactions. The presence of the other, of those who were members of the network of relationships of a particular individual (SCHULTZ, 1979) strengthens the development of acts of sociability that find in the cinema a special for it to happen. Besides being a place for fun and leisure, the primary focus of which was to see a film and in this particular case the Cine Theatro Capitólio, it was also a place for socializing, where people were publicly exposed and groups reunited. The act of socializing around a movie theater gained the streets in actions that could precede or follow a film session and took place in bars, cafes and other places for discussions about the film or any other shareable event of everyday experience.

Studies dealing with the films as a research subject, as noted by Robert Rosenstone (2010) in the book *Movies in the history, history in the movies* rarely consider the effects that these films could provide. In fact, the way the message could influence cinematic culture, constituting hybridity, is something that can hardly be perceived even by the fact that some viewers do not remember much about the movies they have seen. The weekly routine of seeing a film somehow causes the film to be forgotten or “unseen” in the interviewee's memory, which brings them to give a more expressive visibility to the memories of personal experiences, making them more present in the contents of their narrative, as we now try to show.

Definition of values, in this case, applied to cultural heritage, is characterized as an unstable concept, and not only when compared to oral legislative texts and documents but also among themselves in verifiable oral reports. The question is always relevant when it comes to selecting objects as cultural objects, buildings, or furniture. It is concerned with the question of which criteria are selected for the

redefinition of what is put on the agenda as a value object. If state and social groups can assign different values to the same property, considering its different uses, why cannot segments of different social classes and of the state itself do? The assignment of values (ZANIN, 2006) is therefore just like the concept of cultural- historical heritage, and perhaps it is possible to say that it tends to be more based on relative judgments than on the theoretical assumptions encoded. The main evidence for this hypothesis is the virtual absence of studies on the values that anchor cultural heritage, which is not the case of the restoration of this heritage about which there is considerable production technique guiding the actions of architects and restorers.

Therefore, the justifications listed by state and social segments to preserve the Cine Theatro Capitólio can be considered historical, based on reasons no less complex than their temporalities, according to the memory and life stories of each witness. The public policies to preserve the cultural property that also deserves to be valued from the speeches of individual memory, characterized by social experience, considering their relationship before certain practices and spaces of collective experience. In the case of the Cine Theatro, registered as a historical site by both municipal and state governments, the public interest is characterized by the collective interest, which comprises a set of individual experiences. We thus have a broader aspect of urban identities characterizing social experiences in the city of Porto Alegre.

It is possible to say that the narrative of life experiences mixes events of a concrete fact that undergo a filter narrative prepared by memory and language (CONSTANTINO, 2004). This filtering of events, a common point analyzed in all interviewees, is characterized by the fact that the vast majority of them do not vividly recall the films seen but they do recall their moments socializing with other people and their experiences in a particular event within the cinema premises. In this sense, despite the power exercised by the visible of film narratives, what remained in the interviewees' minds were those memories related to space and people who shared that space. In other words, when the memory is focused on the movies, it demonstrates that the composition of the visual culture of a society goes beyond the expectations of a particular variety of elements of more space than the actual visual content.

Characterized as identities based on social relationships developed within and around this building was once a movie theater. It was also called the “sidewalk cinema” and never stopped being a privileged site providing visibility and social

interaction among individuals. Finally, I conclude this text remembering a remark made by Brazilian historian Ulpiano Bezerra de Menezes (2003), professor at the University of São Paulo, do not study the historical sources to better know them but rather to obtain from them a greater knowledge of society. I do hope to have accomplished it.

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