



The Major Minor Cinema Project: Creative Writing Workshop Guide

Ideal for individual use or small workshop groups, the short selection of readings and writing exercises contained in this guide are designed to stimulate the imagination and unlock memories of cinema-going.

Creative writing inspired by the cinema

The Major Minor Cinema: Highlands and Islands Film Guild (1946-71) is a three-year AHRC-funded project exploring the impact of cinema on the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Initial findings of the project's pilot study revealed how the film screenings in rural Scotland had inspired some audience members to write creative works in response to their experience.

For example, this short and entertaining poem is from a young child from Orkney, lamenting the Guild programme's interference with his dinner time:

Some may find the programme short
But I think it far too long;
For when I get home it's eleven o'clock
And supper's long since gone!

(Orkney Annual Report, 1948)

In mainstream literature too, Scottish writers have been drawn to the cinema as a source of inspiration. The opening of Inverness-born writer, Ali Smith's novel, *The Accidental* was inspired by her memories of The Playhouse in Inverness, the local cinema she attended as a child. Recalling the sumptuous interiors of the large cinema, which first opened its doors in 1929 and was tragically destroyed in a fire in 1972, the novel begins:

My mother began me one evening in 1968 on a table in the café of the town's only cinema. One short flight of stairs away, up behind the balding red velvet of the Balcony curtain, the usherette was yawning, dandling her off torch, leaning on her elbow above the rustlings and tonguings of the back row and picking at the wood of the partition, flicking little splinters of it at the small-town

heads in the dark. On the screen above them the film was *Poor Cow*, with Terrence Stamp, an actor of such numinousness that my mother, young, chic, slender and imperious, and watching the film for the third time that week, had stood up, letting her seat thud behind her, pushed past the legs of the people in her row and headed up the grubby aisle to the exit, through the curtain and out into the light.

The café was empty except for the boy putting chairs on tables. We're just shutting, he told her. My mother, still blinking from the dark, picked her way down the scuffed red stairs. She took the chair he was holding and put it, still upside down, down on the ground. She stepped out of her shoes. She unbuttoned her coat.

Behind the till the half-submerged oranges in the orange juice machine went round and round on their spikes; the dregs at the bottom of the tank rose and settled, rose and settled. The chairs on the tables stuck their legs into the air; the scatters of cake crumbs underneath waited passive in the carpet of the vacuum cleaner nozzle. Down the grand main stairs leading out on to the street, where my mother would go in a few minutes' time with her nylons rolled in a warm ball in her coat pocket, swinging her shoes in her hand by their strappy backs, Julie Andrews and Christopher Plummer smiled out from behind their frames exactly like they'd still be smiling, faded and glamorous, a decade out of date, at the blaze of light that blackened the staircase five years later when the junior projectionist (cheated out of a job he believed was his; the management had hired a new projectionist from the city when the old projectionist died) gutted the building with a tin of creosote and the end of his cigarette.

The expensive Balcony seats, where smoking was forbidden? Up in smoke. The Stalls with their deep-seated leathery smell? Gone forever. The velvet drapes, the glass bowl chandelier? Blowaway ash, a sprinkling of tiny broken shards of light on the surface of local history. Next day's newspapers were adamant, an accident. The man who owned the cinema claimed the insurance and sold the demolished site to a cash and carry warehouse called, rather unimaginatively, Mackay's Cash and Carry.'

But that night back in 1968 in the nearly closed café the voices were still booming modern love behind the walls. The music was still soaring out of nowhere. Just before the part where the filth get Terence Stamp and put him where he belongs she had fastened her heels behind his back and my father, surprised, had slipped and grunted into her, presenting her with literally millions of possibilities, of which she chose only one.

Hello.

I am Alhambra, named for the place of my conception.
Believe me. Everything is meant.

From my mother: grace under pressure; the uses of mystery; how to get what I want. From my father: how to disappear, how to not exist.

Ali Smith, *The Accidental* (Penguin, 2005), pp. 1-3.

The Orcadian writer and filmmaker, **Margaret Tait**, also draws from early memories of cinema-going in her short story '**Sixteen Frames Per Second**':

The little boy stared and stared at the immense silent hooves on the screen above him, and although he was about dropping with sleep he couldn't take his eyes off them. Beside him, his mother played away resoundingly on the upright piano. He knew the music she was playing as intimately as he knew his mother's own moods and could almost tell by the way she played just what story he would have at bed-time and certainly whether she would be loving and dilatory or brisk and rather distant as she sometimes was.

The mother was entirely taken up in her adult and exacting occupation, and so the little boy was quite alone, related neither to the immense spectres on the screen nor to the jolly crowd out there, all facing the screen and laughing up at it as they followed the pranks of images they knew. He was in between, and could watch either as he chose. Usually he chose to watch the grey abstractions rather than the smelly, laughing coughing humans in rows beyond the balustrade and the pot plants.

One night, though, he had watched a little boy rather younger than himself who sat in the very front row between his handsome young parents. The boy was young to be out for an evening's entertainment, and really it appeared as if he might have been taken along only because the parents wanted to be there and could not leave him at home alone. At first he sat in his own seat, frowning a little at the incomprehensible figures on the screen, and playing at tipping his seat up by changing his posture. This was found very irritating by the lady behind him, who, after a time, put a stop to it, and then the child slumped lower and lower until his father took him on his knee, and there he fell soundly asleep.

The little boy beside the piano watched the other child, who slept on his father's knee unaware of the two conflicting realities present in the theatre, much as he himself felt outside them. All through the picture he looked and looked at the boy comfortably asleep in his father's arms, supported rather as he was supported by his mother's nearness and by the steady beat of the music which she performed so sturdily.

The memory of the sleeping child among the audience did give the little boy beside the piano a dim sort of realisation that out there in that crowd which he heard and smelt but only dimly saw there must be others like himself. But being himself isolated where he was it did not occur to him that he might meet and know those others.

The wild white horse on the screen had broken out of the stockade once again, and went galloping away over the hills quite out of reach of its pursuers. The little boy then watched the giant grey figures of cowboys discussing what they would do next, and their words too appeared in gigantic letters rather too much at a slant from where he sat for him to be able to read them. The cowboys' horses were very beautiful too, but they had just been saddled and were setting out into the hills when a strange flickering took place, and blurred figures rushed vertically up the screen and into nothing. Then they stopped, and there was darkness.

For a moment his mother hesitated, then she went on playing jog-trot music for about a half a minute until the lights went up.

Extract from Margaret Tait, 'Sixteen Frames Per Second', *Lane Furniture: A Book of Stories*, (Margaret Tait, 1959), pp. 11-15

Writing Commissions

As part of the Major Minor Cinema Project, we also commissioned five writers to write new works inspired by their own memories of cinema-going. The commissioned writers included Kevin MacNeil, Alison Miller, Aonghas MacNeacail, Christie Williamson and Christine De Luca.

Although the writers were inspired by many different types of memories of cinema-going, involving both urban and rural contexts, Christine De Luca writes specifically about the Highlands and Islands Film Guild, and her own vivid memories of the Guild, in her poem, **'Shoot oot at da Waas Public Hall: im George Horne, projectionist, Highlands & Islands Film Guild (1946-1971)'**:

Da hall wis sweepit, benches set
for da Highlands an Islands man
at cam wi da montly films. Dey wir
da peerie pictir for wis bairns, sae,
tripenny-bits i wir löfs, we wided
wirsels on ta widden forms, tinkin
twa-bob couldna buy a better ticket.

Oh, we'd seen pictirs afore, trowe viewers
held ta wir een, an a lever ta push doon,
scene eftir scene. But dis wis da rael thing.
Twa muckle wheels a-whirr, stoor catcht
i da beam, da scratcht black flitterin stert,
da sudden soondtrack, da dazzlin pictirs.
We wir stumsed, hül d i da spell.

Half time, an da reel wis changed;
catched quick afore, clickity-click,
hit birlid aff an spooled owre da flör.
Hit wis magic; an whin da cowboys hung
affa der horses, shastin da stagecoach,
an a boy tummelled fae his saet,
we could a swörn he'd been shot.

To learn more about the commissioned pieces and to hear online readings of the commissioned writers reading their works, please visit the Major Minor Cinema website <http://hifilmguild.gla.ac.uk>.

Writing exercises

Writing exercise 1: inside the cinema

- Write about a memory based on an experience at the cinema. Try to remember the first film you ever saw in the cinema; or the most memorable cinema-going experience you can recall. Think about the following:
 - Who you went with
 - Memories of the film itself or about the experience of going to the cinema
 - Sensory details: the feel, smell, sound and look of the place/experience (e.g. snacks, and what they tasted like; brought with you from home, snacks/sweets purchased at the cinema, fish and chips from the local café)
 - General mood of the place/atmosphere
 - Did you experience a sense of belonging/community? Elaborate on why/how?

Discuss/share (in groups) (10 mins)

- Is there one object that stands out in your mind from the experience; what was it? (E.g., the coins you used to pay for your ticket; the ticket itself, held in your hand). Some accounts of Film Guild audiences have focused on the cold conditions of the halls and some people recall bringing a hot-water bottle or a hot brick from the Raeburn oven at home to hold during the screenings.
- Describe the object and try to write about it.
- Connect the object with yourself as the person attending the film. How did it make you feel?
- What emotions did you experience at the cinema on that occasion?

Writing exercise 2: the journey to the cinema:

- How did you get to the cinema? Did you go by car, bus, or boat? Describe the journey itself.
- How often did you make the journey? Was it something you only did on special occasions? Or was it a regular journey?
- Who were you with? How did it make you feel? What was the weather like? What were the temperatures like? Was it light or dark outside?
- Was there a sense of anticipation for the film you were about to see? Did you talk about the film on the journey to or from the cinema? What other things did you talk about?

Further resources

The following resources can be drawn from to provide further stimulus in the creative writing exercises.

Summerlee Museum of Scottish Industrial Life <https://culturenl.co.uk/summerlee/>, located in Coatbridge, holds a vast collection of cinema memorabilia and can provide a cinema memories loan box, containing a wide-variety of cinema-memorabilia, including cinema tickets, posters, fan magazines, usher uniforms, and much, much more. It's a real treasure trove and only costs £20 per hire.

Scottish Cinemas and Theatres Project <http://www.scottishcinemas.org.uk>
Features a comprehensive database of photographic and historical records relating to cinemas in Scotland.

National Library Scotland's Moving Image Archive

<https://www.nls.uk/collections/moving-image-archive>

Holds many of films featuring Scotland's cinemas, many of which can be viewed directly from their website.

