



Elsebeth Jørgensen

Cinemagic Texts

Cinemagic Tour: Scenes From An Imaginary Place

- It started with a photograph.....

When I was invited to do a site-related project at Deveron Arts in Huntly in Scotland, I right away responded to the fact that the town once had a lively cinema culture, which now has almost disappeared. It became a vital part of my long-term research project Cinemagic Tour which led me across Europe to discover the fate of our movie palaces.

With the advent of the final demolition of the Picture House in Huntly, I wanted to initiate thoughts for local inhabitants about collective visual memory and the transformation of urban landscape and social life. To put Huntly on a cinematic map, as lots of these picture houses across the world are being demolished or at best converted into something else. Further I wanted to collect material about the history of the site and search for the former staff from the picture house.

It seemed that I was not the only one who was curious to see how it looks inside the cinema today: As Gordon McTavish, the former film projectionist in Huntly Palace, whom I most fortunately was introduced to quite early in my stay, said to me: "If you ever get in there, I definitely want to go with you. I wonder how it looks today and I still have things in there, which I have not been able to get out. Nobody, for years has been allowed to go in there." In my research Gordon McTavish became an important participant, both concerning collecting information, participation in events and as a storyteller in the project.

Nobody in 20 years has been allowed inside Huntly's crumbling former Picture House in order to take photographs. I wanted to "bring out" images from this hermetically sealed cinema. To let people in Huntly know about the inner secrets of the present building. After negotiations with the Aberdeenshire Council I was allowed to enter and photograph the Picture House alone at my own risk. This happened on the 10th February 2006. This photo session became a kind of street performance with a joiner from the council standing outside the cinema.

On the 22nd February 2006 I was allowed to enter again. While in there, I found a number of fascinating items, which had been left to rot in the old building - likely to be demolished soon. Also I was allowed on this second visit to bring the former projectionist into the cinema to have a last look inside. I realized my project no longer was just about doing photographs. It developed performative and mass media aspects because so many local inhabitants and the newspapers Huntly Express and The Press & Journal followed closely my research about the cinema.

During my research over 4 separate periods spent in Huntly from November 2005 – April 2006, I

found people who once worked in the picture house. They got involved in the project by telling stories and donating material from the cinema. I also arranged cinema evenings with lectures and film screenings in the Stewarts Hall to initiate discussion about the meaning of cinema in relation to Huntly's local life and memory.

At the end I concluded this Huntly leg of my Cinemagic Tour with an in situ exhibition that was held over three Huntly venues, starting Thursday 27th April 2006: - Installation of Huntly Picture House Artefacts and Memorabilia: Exhibition in The Brander Museum, 27th April – 19th August, 2006. - Unveiling of Images Reception: Installation and performative event, The Stewart's Hall. - Outdoor Video projection onto former Huntly Picture House: Gordon Street.

The show opened with an installation of Huntly Picture House Artefacts and Memorabilia at The Brander Museum. In collaboration with Aberdeenshire Heritage I transferred the objects from the former Picture House, so they could be registered and put on display at the local Brander Museum which has now become the custodian of these objects. Here I also presented video-montages and audio recordings from my research in Huntly.

Next there was a reception of unveiling the images from inside the cinema at the town's Stewarts Hall. As a performative event and installation I screened several video-montages and film projections. A pianist performed cinema music. Here there was now a chance to witness what had become of what was once a vibrant part of the community. The project sparked a great deal of interest and fond memories among different generations in Huntly. Many of the elder generation in particular were delighted to see themselves on film when the former projectionist Gordon McTavish screened a film of the 1953 Huntly Gala at the second Cinemagic event on March 23rd. He also performed at the Unveiling of Images Reception with more stories from his years at the cinema in Huntly and screened a 16 mm film.

The final event of the evening turned the old Picture House on Gordon Street inside out. A projection of images from inside the building was screened onto the boarded-up frontage, so that exhibition-goers and passers-by finally saw what lies behind the walls, as if the doors had been opened one last time. "Cinemagic Tour: Scenes from an Imaginary Place" is about the meaning of storytelling, imagination and visual memory in relation to special architectural sites. Collected local archive material is mixed with my own documentation without attempting to represent the history of Huntly within the idea of truth. The focus is more about aspects of the tradition of oral storytelling and constructions of mixed reality. My approach contains both local and global concerns. For me as a travelling artist, the town Huntly with its cinema is a special site, but also a site like anywhere else. As such it is a station in a Cinemagic Tour.

Finally: it is a reflection of people's storytelling what essentially this montage of Huntly's cinematic past became - developed in collaboration with local people but edited and presented from a traveller's point of view. At this very end of my project, I realize that I had no idea it would turn so many "scenes" inside out from the hermetically sealed cinema in Huntly, just by taking photographs. I guess what happened for me, was that an inaccessible cinematic site not only became a multilayered historical site, but also an imaginary place.

Elsebeth Jørgensen 2006

Cinemagic Tour: The Huntly Stop

Claudia Zeiske, Deveron Arts

It is now almost exactly 10 years' ago that Deveron Arts was founded. Still trying to find its purpose, way and vision we commissioned at the time a feasibility study with the prospect to establish an arts centre in Huntly.

One of the consultants' main options was the former Playhouse cinema on Gordon Street.¹ However, the findings were not favourable: 'The building is of steel frame and brickwork infill construction under a steel, timber and asbestos tiled roof. ... it takes up approximately two-thirds of a long narrow site on Gordon Street and is in poor condition. ... we would consider it would be more effective to demolish the building ... '.

The headlines hit the Huntly Express earlier this year that the former Playhouse was finally to be demolished and turned into car-parking. This seemed like a great opportunity for Deveron Arts, now in its 10th year, to look back both at itself, its vision and its development and at the Playhouse cinema, once Huntly's hotspot for people to experience and enjoy what cinematic arts had to offer.

A critic once commented, that Deveron Arts was 'opportunist' - a criticism that was at first not easy to swallow. But thinking about it, we realised that this is what it is all about. To allow contemporary art its full dimension you have to give opportunities a space. You need the right artist at the right time. And so it was with Elsebeth Jørgensen: when she met our former artist in residence and now Chairperson of the Board Eva Merz, the opportunity was ripe. Elsebeth had been researching the culture of change of our cinemas in many places in Europe through her ongoing project Cinemagic Tour. Cinemagic Tour brought her from Denmark, to Finland, to Mecklenburg in Germany and now to Scotland. She discovered cinemas that were turned into churches, others into Bingo Halls, restaurants and shoe-shops, others sadly destroyed by Neo-Nazis or simply neglect. Elsebeth's Cinemagic Tour is a journey across Europe of lost social spaces of former glory, a kind of love letter not just to film enthusiasts, but to the cinema-goer. It is an examination of change not only in Huntly, but wherever else in the world a picture-house has been converted, re-functioned or ruined.

Cinemagic Tour: Huntly Stop – albeit in a kind of inverted form - is to Huntly what Giuseppe Tornatore's Cinema Paradiso is to the village of Giancaldo in Sicily at the extreme other end of Europe some 3000 miles away. A real/reel look at post WWII life set in a small town, but the characters, situations and changes that depict a reality across Europe.

In Giancaldo the young Salvatore DiVita (Tòto) takes on the life-long guidance of the projectionist Alfredo. Tòto spends most of his childhood in the projection room, and through a set of circumstances later becomes the projectionist himself, going on to become a successful film director in Rome. Here in Huntly, the young but already internationally renown artist Elsebeth from Copenhagen, meets the former projectionist Gordon McTavish at a much later stage in his life.

Both Alfredo and Gordon are lifelong movie lovers who call for a title like 'screen veteran'. Both feature a mix of charm and roughness and above all wisdom that is central to the projects. Salvatore and Gordon (at the age of 13) started working around the end of WWII in their respective cinemas in Giancaldo and Huntly. 'At that time only teenagers ran the place, everybody else was in the war' says Gordon 'every night there was one full-length feature film which was shown twice; in between there was a news reel and then a B-movie. The newsreels were about 2 weeks after the event.' Both talk about the hard work every night: 'I worked every day 13 hours, seven days a week' says Gordon 'that changed only in the late fifties when the unions came in, then I got Tuesday night off'.

Both stories are told through extended flash-backs. Salvatore's thoughts when he hears of the death of his childhood friend and guide tell us the history of the Cinema Paradiso, the films that were shown, the laughter and the tears that came with it. Elsebeth in turn collaborates with Gordon in

Huntly on her project by researching the history of the cinemas in the town, digging out films that were once shown and bringing old memories and old friends together through their series of events that were staged in the Stewarts Hall, Huntly's very first cinema at the times of the Laterna Magica. The evening of her last event in particular felt a bit like one of the scenes in the film, when I *pompieri di vigiu* was shown, the crowds, like then in Giancaldo where banging the doors, for us to open. 'Alfredoooo!' they shouted 'We want to get in.... tomorrow you're taking it off!' Here we needed to get a bouncer to hold the hall's door tight. Alfredo at the time solved his problem by screening the film out of the projection room onto the white row of houses facing the piazza. Luckily Elsebeth had the brilliant idea to screen her show-reel of the almost sacred (as nobody but only her had permission to see it) images onto the Playhouse itself.

Salvatore and Gordon tell us about the many films they watched. One of Gordon's best memories was when they showed 'Pygmalion', which featured the first swear words on screen. 'For the words 'not bloody likely', he says 'people flocked to see just that'. Salvatore's highlight in turn was - like for all the people in Giancaldo - when *censure-ship* (by the village priest as the church was the proprietor) ends with a new private patron of the Paradiso and the arrival of Brigitte Bardot.

One of Huntly's most popular films 'Gone with the Wind', was one that also featured on large-scale posters across Sicily. In Huntly it was screened in 1946; 'Queues were everywhere, from Smith the bakers to the Nelson street car park. So we had to put the film on twice and it finished at 3.30 in the morning, which I can tell you got me in trouble with my mum!' Trouble with his mum when he did not get out of the projection room to come home in time was a regular event for Tòto too. Maria, his mum screams at Alfredo one night when her son did not come home all day: Promise you don't let him set foot any more in the movie house. 'The boy is crazy! Crazy! All he talks about is movies and Alfredo! Alfredo and Movies!'

The decline came in the mid-50's when home TV started. From then on Huntly's Picture-house went through a series of changes in the years before its final closure in 1982. What we are left with are the memories and the stories of the former glories told through such projects as Cinema Paradiso and Cinemagic Tour, where the worn out seats and the flaky walls are disappearing in the silver-grey shine of Hollywood, Rome or London. The story in Giancaldo ends with Tòto walking in disbelief through the pigeon-infested former movie house. In Huntly Elsebeth, 20 years after the closure of the Playhouse, is taking pictures of a very similar kind of the equally pigeon-infested place where the light shines through, giving us an inkling of the former glory of those places.

Cinema Paradiso like the Huntly Playhouse has been bought up by the local council. Tòto in the end leaves Cinema Paradiso and watches the final destruction give way to car- parking. Something we are promised is imminent in Huntly right now.

Going back to the feasibility study and the opportunist charge, for us at Deveron Arts the report of course was very disappointing at first. But it was exactly this report, difficulty with the space and the resulting non-viability of an arts centre in Huntly that gave way to what Deveron Arts is today: a group that exploits opportunities, to use the town as a venue, rather than any dedicated building, gallery or arts centre. The lack of a physical space provides us with the opportunity of project space, of inviting artists like Elsebeth to research, to discover, to connect, to discuss, to make things and to make friends.

Both stories give us plenty of opportunity to reflect together with people from all walks of life over what's been lost. Or maybe Alfredo's words are best placed here to consider whether: 'progress always comes too late'.