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Irish Cinema Audiences (1950-1960): Engaging older audiences and sustaining Ireland's cultural heritage

The Irish Cinema Audiences project investigates the history of cinema-going in 1950s Ireland by addressing the urgent need to preserve the memories of cinemagoers of that generation. These oral history testimonies will provide a rich cultural heritage resource for current and future generations. The period from 1950 to 1960 represents a significant moment in Irish cultural history when, prior to the widespread adoption of television, attendance at Irish cinemas peaked with people frequenting the cinema on average 18 times per year. Recent studies have shown that today Irish people attend the cinema on average 3.3 times per year (making us the most frequent cinema-goers in Europe). While viewing habits have undoubtedly undergone significant change with the advent of digital technologies, the stark contrast between these averages gives an indication of the significance of cinema-going as a social activity in 1950s Ireland. The 1950s also marked the opening of Ardmore Studios (1958) and the launch of the Cork Film Festival (1956). Despite the existence of a burgeoning film and cinema-going culture, there has been no systematic research of the cultural, social, and political impact of cinema on national audiences.

Working in collaboration with Age Action Ireland, this project uses questionnaires and video interviews to gather the memories of ordinary cinema-goers over-65. This oral history approach explores cinema-goers' memories of the cinemas they attended, the atmosphere within these spaces, the rituals of cinema-going, their responses to the films shown, and the social and political climate that surrounded the practice of cinema-going. Their memories will form the basis of an online archive where the public can learn about the impact that cinema had on Irish society.

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