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## CINEMA HISTORY AS SOCIAL HISTORY

### Retrospect and prospect

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So long as cinema history remains solipsistically committed to medium-specificity, starting and ending with the film [as text], then the history of entertainment will remain no more than an entertaining diversion occupying the illustrative margins of other histories.

(Maltby, 2006: 85)

This chapter takes up the challenge to redraw the contours of an integrated approach to the history of cinemagoing as a social practice and to demonstrate by example what kind of research questions this entails. In commemoration of the tenth anniversary of Richard Maltby's watershed article "On the Prospect of Writing Cinema History from Below" (2006), I look both forward and back. For good reasons, the new cinema history has become to signify a "shift away from the content of films to consider their circulation and consumption, and to examine the cinema as a site of social and cultural exchange" (Maltby, 2011: 3). But was this shift away from the film text radical enough? Does the new cinema history really open up to a history in the footsteps of E.P. Thompson: a history that restores the agency of ordinary people and situates their everyday (and not-so-everyday) experiences in the context of broader societal processes and transformations? Is it really a "social turn" in film historiography? And last but not least, have we been able to abandon the medium-specific approach of film studies and enhance the relevance of our research for other disciplines?

#### **A (not so) modest proposal**

In his groundbreaking and in many respects foundational article, Maltby (2006) proposed to make a clear-cut distinction between "an aesthetic history of textual relationships" (film history), on the one hand, and on the other hand, "a socio-cultural history of the economic institution of cinema" (cinema history). Maltby (2006: 84) explains:

The history of American cinema is not exclusively the history of its products any more than the history of railroads is the history of locomotives. The development of locomotive design forms part of the history of railroads, but so, far more substantially, do government land policies and patterns of agricultural settlement.

In other words, the history of cinema should include studying the material conditions under which movies were produced, distributed, and consumed. But there was more at stake: a well-justified frustration with the insularity of film studies. What emerged as a key motive behind his “modest proposal” (Maltby’s qualification) was the question “what would it take for cinema history to matter more?” In fact, a year later this question became the title of the revised version of the initial article (Maltby, 2007). The most interesting aspect for me was the bold answer: “for cinema history to matter more, it must engage with the social history of which it is a part” (Maltby, 2006: 85). In theory, then, the new cinema history implied a far more radical break away from the narrowness of traditional film scholarship than merely expanding and enhancing the scope of cinema studies. But that’s not exactly what has happened so far.

A closer look at the current state of the field (conferences, anthologies) shows that the new cinema history has not yet produced a genuine turn toward social history or the corresponding paradigm shift. Despite a strong tendency toward multidisciplinary methods of analysis, most new cinema history publications deal almost exclusively with questions concerning the distribution, exhibition, and consumption of films. Put differently, the centrality of the film as text has been abandoned in favor of a central focus on the movie theater and its audiences. However, the field remains reluctant to abandon the medium-specific approach of film studies and expand its boundaries. Hence, the range of questions that most new cinema history scholars ask is severely restricted and so are the types of answers that they find. In fact, since the 2000s, one can observe a retreat from macrohistorical questions, by which I mean questions which deal with “the study of big structures and large processes within particular world systems” (Tilly, 1984: 74). In the 1990s, the issue of cinema’s relationship to modernity was central to the new film historiography, which developed after the publication of *Film History: Theory and Practice* (Allen and Gomery, 1985) and concentrated on the medium’s emergence and early developments. Such a shared conceptual framework (or a set of concepts) is missing in current new cinema history research. Tellingly, with some rare exceptions, the modernity debate remains restricted to the silent era (e.g. Fuller-Seeley, 2008; Biltereyst, Maltby, and Meers, 2012). Despite their common roots, we can actually witness a growing gap between new cinema historiography and the research agenda of Domitor, the international society for the study of early cinema. In recent years, the latter has reinvented itself by abandoning the centrality of the object of film and film-focused questions to include the study of magic lantern shows, theater, vaudeville, the circus, and other entertainments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is quite remarkable that even such a comparative cross-media approach seems a bridge too far for cinema historians who put audiences at the center of their research because from the perspective of those same audiences, the boundaries between different media and entertainment forms have always been fluid. In fact, these boundaries are becoming increasingly meaningless in the digital age.

### **The micro and the macro**

In my view, the issue is not so much where our research starts and where it ends – with the film, the exhibitor, the movie theater, or the audience – but what kinds of questions we ask in the first place and how we integrate insights from other disciplines into our own analysis. Let me take the example of microhistories of local film exhibition and reception, a format that proliferates within new cinema history. The problem for me is not that these projects are narrowly confined case studies of specific cities, neighborhoods, or movie theaters. With Charles Tilly (1984: 74), “I believe passionately in the value of getting the microhistory right in order to understand the macro history.” There is, however, the danger inherent in local history that it has a tendency to look for ever more empirical data and details, rather

than for larger explanatory frameworks. Such “parochialism” does not help us to see the big picture of cinema’s function in society and make our research relevant for a broader public, academic, and nonacademic. In other words, microstudies of local cinema practices should not obscure the importance of a better understanding of long-term trends and developments across space and time. One way to avoid the latent narrowness of local history is by “asking large questions in small places” (Joyner, 2004: 153). This phrase captures the programmatic ambitions of microhistory at its best. Carlo Ginzburg, the author of *The Cheese and the Worms* (*Il formaggio e i vermi*, 1976), a classic of Italian microhistory, insists on the importance of contextualization and “a constant back-and-forth between micro- and macrohistory, between close-ups and extreme long shots so as to continually thrust back into the discussion the comprehensive vision of the historical process through apparent exceptions and cases of brief duration” (2012: 207). Translated to the practice of cinema historiography, this implies that we have to contextualize our investigations in the field of general history as well as in contingent fields like television history and the history of the press.

Another way to break away from the insularity of the local case study approach is to engage in comparative research (Thissen, 2013; Biltereyst and Meers, 2016). Comparative history combines very well with the idea of microhistory as it encourages us to explore larger questions. Even a small-scale comparison of film culture in two communities helps to move beyond the “village level” and make connections between particular circumstances and developments which may otherwise have seemed marginal or unique. Like microhistory, comparative history entails specific conceptual and methodological challenges. A comparison of apples and oranges is rarely meaningful. As Daniel Biltereyst and Philippe Meers point out, “the key question, of course, is what exactly will be compared and how” (2016: 18). In sharp contrast to film studies, comparative research has a long tradition in the field of social history. Without studying differences and similarities between groups, it would be difficult to say something about patterns of inclusion and exclusion in the social, economic, and cultural domains. Social historians often rely on quantitative methods adapted from the social sciences. We can see a similar trend within new cinema history, where comparative research is first and foremost associated with big data analysis (e.g. Maltby, Biltereyst, and Meers, 2011).

But there is also a qualitative tradition in social history upon which we can build: the community studies of 1980s American historiography. In particular, I like to single out Roy Rosenzweig’s *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870–1920* (1983) and *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* by Kathy Peiss (1986). Both studies exemplify how local histories of leisure can provide building blocks for understanding the emergence of mass culture, the concomitant transformation of working-class life, and cinema’s specific role in this complex process. Rosenzweig and Peiss are able to capture the complexity of sociocultural change precisely because they do not focus on one single medium or recreational activity but compare a range of commercial and noncommercial entertainments, including saloons, amusement parks, movie theaters, dance halls, and Fourth of July celebrations. Like Thompson’s seminal work *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), these community studies seek to reconstruct the workers’ everyday-life experiences and restore working-class agency. By doing so, they break away from more narrowly confined economic and statistical analyses of social change. Similarly, microhistory can be seen as a response to the pitfalls of quantitative history, which from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s dominated historiography. It came out of the growing dissatisfaction with a research model that left little room for the individual, the singular, the local, and everything else that did not fit into “serial history” with its insistence on structure, repetition, and continuity (Ginzburg, 2012).

Ideally, cinema historians combine qualitative and quantitative methods. This was a vital aspect of Maltby's conceptualization of the new cinema historiography along with his proposition to engage with social history. Perhaps, where it went wrong was the brazen ambition of a "*Montaillou* of cinema history" (2006: 91) – a reference to Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's 500+-page multilayered study of everyday life in a small French village in the early fourteenth century, one of the greatest works of French historiography. In retrospect, we can say that this was a mission impossible for a field that was and still is in its infancy. In the remainder of this chapter, I will adopt a minimalist approach to our common mission and demonstrate with a concrete example from my own research how we can move between different levels of analysis.

### **Film culture in the country**

My current research project deals with film culture in France and the Netherlands in the period of postwar reconstruction and the "golden age" of the welfare state (1945–early 1970s). After the initial years of wartime-related scarcity and hardship, life was marked for most people in Western Europe by growing economic prosperity and expanding social benefits, as well as the widespread embrace of mass consumer culture. Tellingly, in French, this era is referred to as *les Trente Glorieuses* – the Glorious Thirty. In particular, I am interested in understanding the place and meaning of the cinema in rural society in these years, which witnessed a profound transformation of everyday life in the countryside through the mechanization of agricultural labor, the building of new schools and factories, better roads, increased mobility, and access to electronic communication technologies – private telephones, radio, and television. How did the cinema fit into this larger process of rural modernization? Both in France and in the Netherlands, the late 1940s and 1950s were the heydays for small-town and rural film exhibition (Dibbets, 1980; Forest, 1995; Thissen, 2016). Why did country people start to go to the movies in much greater numbers after the Liberation than they had done before the Second World War? Where and how did they watch films? What genres and subjects did they prefer and how did their taste compare to that of the metropolitan audiences? How did film exhibitors cater to specific rural demands (if they did at all)? How did going to the movies interact with other forms of sociability? These are bottom-up questions posed from the perspective of the film viewers and their lived experiences of filmgoing.

Conversely, I am also interested in top-down forgeries of cultural identity around mass entertainment and consumer capitalism. How did the public and private cultural institutions of the postwar era seek to shape film consumption? How did regional newspapers write about mass entertainment in general and the movies in particular? And how did these regional discourses relate to welfare state ideals of national homogenization in the cultural and socioeconomic domains? Was there any resistance from the church and other more traditional forces? Research into ideological dimensions of rural cultural politics seems particularly relevant for understanding cinemagoing in postwar France, where the discourse of cinephilia took the form of an almost nationalist cultural discourse, asserting an intimate and unique historical relationship between the French and cinematography.

### **Saint-Benin-des-Bois**

Let me zoom in on a case study from my work on France to exemplify how one can explore on a local-level cinema's contribution to the process of rural modernization and the tensions that went with it. The starting point is a set of two postcards of Saint-Benin-des-Bois, a tiny village in the Nièvre, a profoundly rural area in central France (Figures 10.1 and 10.2).



Figure 10.1 Postcard Saint-Benin-des-Bois, La Place, posted in 1908  
Source: Collection of author.



Figure 10.2 Postcard Saint-Benin-des-Bois, posted in 1963 (publisher logo damaged)  
Source: Collection of author.

The oldest card dates from the early 1900s and the other from the late 1950s. Together they visualize the transformation of everyday life in the village. Despite obvious signs of continuity – the church, the houses with the flower pots in the windows, the unpaved road – the comparison suggests a narrative of growing prosperity and well-being: the arrival of electricity and motorized transportation, housing improvement and the village's integration into the national fabric of mass consumer culture. At the same time, the census data tell us a rather different story, one of rural flight: the local population shrank from 691 in 1901 to 313 in 1962. In an eerie way, this process too is reflected in the second postcard, which shows an empty square. The population decline continued in the second half of the twentieth century. According to the last census, today about 170 people live in Saint-Benin-des-Bois.

Although rarely used by social historians, picture postcards are an extremely rich source of historical evidence to learn about everyday life, not only because of the visual information that they convey but also because of their widespread use as a means of informal communication. Around 1900, postcards rapidly developed into a mass medium. In no other country, they were as popular as in France, which had a huge postcard industry employing around 30,000 people at its peak. Like the cinematograph, the postcard craze was initially very much an urban phenomenon. Hundreds of view cards captured the hustle and bustle of Paris and presented the reader with emblematic images of metropolitan modernity. However, there are also thousands that document the coming of the new age in the countryside: views of factories, railway stations, hotels, newly-built city halls, post offices, (traveling) cinemas, and so on. One can scarcely exaggerate the significance of view cards not only in promoting rural modernity but also in recording the vanishing world of peasant France – a fundamental transformation which sociologist Henri Mendras (1988) describes as the “Second French Revolution.”

What I propose is a close reading of the most recent postcard (Figure 10.2), analyzing in detail what we see in the image and read on the other side and contextualizing this information. The card was produced by the Parisian company Artistic but most likely only sold locally. My particular copy did not leave the *département* of the Nièvre. It was sent on Friday 9 August 1963 from the village of Bona (at 8 kilometers south of Saint-Benin-des-Bois) to Pougues-les-Eaux, a small town about 33 kilometers away. There is no relation between the picture and the message on the back, which discusses a family visit on the coming Sunday, with the children and a grandmother who lives in Nevers. While their relation to Saint-Benin-des-Bois remains unclear, it is likely that both the sender and the receivers were from the Nièvre. When I read the message, I immediately wondered why they did not use the telephone. Were domestic telephones still an exception in the French countryside in those days? The answer to this question required further research. This may seem too far off the central object of cinema historiography, but it is important to understand how the cinema fitted in the broader media landscape as this helps us to define its distinctive role in breaking up rural isolation and bringing “the city” to “the country.” As it turns out, national statistics show that only 15 percent of all French households had a telephone in 1968. With the exception of Paris, where the percentage was 27 percent, it did not make much of a difference whether one lived in a rural or urban community. The percentage of households with private telephone connection ranged between 11 and 13 percent. In the Nièvre, 12 percent of the families could make a phone call at home. So, it is not surprising that postcards and letters were still an everyday communication medium.

Let us look in more detail at the photograph. It shows the square in front of the church with the local café and an Antar gasoline service station. In the background, we can see the fields and the road to the next hamlet. We may assume that the café was the epicenter

of social life in the village – outside the work sphere and the home. It is here that people would go for a drink, perhaps with some food, to buy cigarettes or the newspaper. Above the entrance is written “*café tabac*,” and the double-cone sign on the façade confirms that it is a state-approved tobacco sales point (similar compulsory red signs are still in use today). Using a magnifying loupe, I discovered that the publicity signs are not only for alcohol brands Suze and BYRRH but also for Pax soap. This suggests that the *café tabac* operated as a kind of convenience store. This combination was not unusual in rural France. In addition to the advertisements for consumer goods, there was a big bright yellow and green sign informing that Energol motor oil was sold on the premises.

But what attracted me to the postcard in the first place is the partly washed-away notice on the wooden door on the extreme left of the picture. It is a handbill announcing the screening of the French musical comedy *Boum sur Paris* (1953, Maurice de Canonge). This ephemeral trace of rural film exhibition raises a number of questions about the material conditions in which the movie was viewed. When and where was the screening? Who organized it? Research in local archives and oral history interviews could help us to answer these questions, but let us consider the possibilities on the base of the existing knowledge of film culture in rural France.

### **Ambulant film exhibition**

Considering the size of the population of Saint-Benin-des-Bois and the surrounding villages, we can rule out the possibility that there was a permanent movie theater. The nearest cinemas were situated in Nevers (30 kilometers). To reach audiences in the surrounding countryside, they advertised their programs in the regional newspapers, not by way of handbills. If the screening of *Boum sur Paris* was in the summer, it might have been an open air show on the village’s central square in front of the municipal building, which housed the local administration and the public school. More likely the screening took place in a multifunctional space that belonged to the municipality, the church, or the café restaurant. Behind the wooden doors, there may have been a kind of makeshift auditorium. Since the early days of the cinematograph, ambulant film exhibitors had used ball rooms, parish halls, and other multifunctional venues. After the arrival of permanent movie theaters in cities and towns, such venues remained a stronghold of film exhibition in the countryside in many European countries. As a matter of fact, in France, rural people rarely went to a purpose-built movie theater when they went “*au ciné*” in their neighborhood. It is also possible that the handbill announced a screening somewhere in a village nearby. We know from oral histories that it was not usual in the countryside to walk up or bike several kilometers to see a film (Jones, 2016; Marache, 2016). In the postwar era, more and more French people had access to motorized vehicles. The local gasoline station in Saint-Benin-des-Bois was part of a large national network of nearly 12,000 Antar service points. So, people may have gone by car or moped to see *Boum sur Paris* (1953) in Bona, for instance, which despite also being small, had two large café restaurants as it was situated on the main road from Nevers to Corbigny.

Historians of European cinema have long overlooked the continued importance of ambulant film exhibition beyond the classical era of fairground tent shows. In the standard accounts, ambulant showmen disappear to the margins of commercial film exhibition sector during the 1910s, when more and more permanent movie theaters opened their doors. However, the growing body of work on rural film culture calls for a revision of this dominant narrative (Thissen and Zimmermann, 2016; Thissen, 2017). In the 1950s, hundreds of ambulant showmen were active in France. Each of them had an officially approved route of

localities which they visited each week. Circuits of 150–250 kilometers were not uncommon. The smallest and more remote villages, like Saint-Benin-des-Bois, were served less frequently, once a month or only a few times in the year (which explains why the poster has been washed out by the weather). Social historian Corinne Marache (2016) interviewed a film exhibitor who toured the rural Gironde in the 1940s and 1950s with his projector, sound system, and films. On Mondays, he would pick up a new program in Bordeaux, where all the big distributors had an office. The remainder of the week he was on the road, initially traveling by bike and later by motorcycle. None of the villages and towns he visited on his weekly tour had a permanent cinema. The venues he used were plain halls that frequently lacked basic facilities like heating, a screen, and curtains to darken the room. This lack of comfort did not discourage people, mostly youngsters, from coming. Especially in the winter, when farm work slowed down and there were not so many fairs and festivals, rural people liked to go to the movies. Their time for leisure was still intimately bound up with the rhythms of agriculture. But the winter season had its own problems because bad weather conditions sometimes forced traveling exhibitors to cancel their show (Morenas, 1981; Marache, 2016).

### Cinema history versus film history

Scholars aligned with the new cinema history rarely analyze individual films. In fact, if there is anything that frames the field as “new” within film studies, it is the widespread dismissal of film analysis as a method to understand the relationship between the cinema and the public. The rationale is that cinema’s meaning is for most viewers defined by the social experience of going to the movies, rather than by the individual movies which they watched (Maltby, 2006: 85). However, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, in certain contexts, our understanding of that social meaning can greatly benefit from close readings of particular films. There is no room here for a textual analysis of *Boum sur Paris*, but already its title and story raise interesting questions in respect to the film’s reception by rural audiences (Figure 10.3).

*Boum sur Paris* is not merely situated in the French capital, it features famous Parisian music hall stars like Édith Piaf, Juliette Gréco, Marcel Mouloudji, and Charles Trenet as well as celebrities from the world of cinema and television. We even get a glimpse of Hollywood stars Gregory Peck and Gary Cooper. The film is little more than a collection of songs linked by a flimsy storyline. Two bottles of the new perfume *Boum* have been given away as a prize for a charity raffle at the Moulin Rouge. One is given by mistake as it contains a highly secret new explosive, which has been developed in the perfume laboratory for the ministry of interior affairs (there is obviously a Cold War subtext). A young man and his fiancé try to recover the bottle. In their pursuit, they stop at several fairground attractions and music halls. Clearly, the only function of the narrative is to provide a setting for the cameo appearances of some thirty celebrities, including a dozen performances by famous *chansonniers* and big bands. Thus, the film replicates the format of *36 chandelles*, a popular television variety show with stage performances recorded in Parisian music halls. This much-celebrated program was broadcast on French public television (RTF) twice a month from October 1952 onward and hosted by Jean Nohain, who plays himself in the film as host of the raffle at the Moulin Rouge. In many respects, *Boum sur Paris* was a sequel to the 1951 musical comedy *Paris chante toujours* (*Paris Still Sings*, Pierre Montazel) in which the protagonists follow a television crew that broadcasts a series of live concerts. Both films were cowritten by Roger Féral and Jacques Chabannes, who worked in film as well as television, and the sequel partly featured the same celebrities.



Figures 10.3 Publicity poster for *Boum sur Paris* (1953)

*Boum sur Paris* gave audiences nationwide the opportunity to see the big names of French *variété* in their own neighborhood. Especially for fans of the legendary *chansonniers* of the postwar era, being able to watch their performance must have presented an added value by comparison to listening to the same artist on the radio or gramophone. When *Boum sur Paris* was produced in late 1953, television was not yet available outside Paris and Lille. We do not know when exactly the film was shown in Saint-Benin-des-Bois. French films usually reached the countryside within two years of their release in Paris and other major cities. *Boum sur Paris* came out in February 1954. The oldest posted copy of the postcard dates from 1958. By then, the number of television sets in France had reached one million (22 sets per 1,000 inhabitants), and the RTF had almost full national coverage. Television was becoming a mass medium but not for all French in the same way. Rural people lagged behind in their expenditure on consumer goods because they remained reluctant to buy on credit, and television sets were still very expensive. So even if the film was already a few years old when it came to their neighborhood, part of its appeal for viewers in Saint-Benin-des-Bois remained that they could watch Piaf and other music hall stars.

There is, however, another star in the picture: Paris. The Eiffel Tower takes center stage in the official release posters. One of them also features other touristic icons: the Arc de Triomphe, the Sacré Coeur, the Place Vendôme column, and the obelisk at the Place de la Concorde. This publicity is somewhat misleading because we never get to see any of these monuments in the film, not even the Eiffel tower. Instead, we visit several famous cabarets and music halls and get a tour of the *Kermesse aux étoiles*, a popular Parisian amusement park. Paris is represented as the capital of entertainment and excitement – a highly attractive place to live. This one-sided representation has specific relevance for rural audiences. Twentieth-century France witnessed the mass migration out of rural regions and into urban areas. The figures for Saint-Benin-des-Bois are telling: in the first half of the century, its population declined by more than 50 percent. From a relatively large village (*bourg*) at the center of several hamlets, it was degrading into little more than a hamlet itself. And the exodus continued with the same pace during the “Glorious Thirty.” Against this backdrop, traditional forces in the countryside feared that the cinema encouraged young people in the countryside to leave for the city. Priests, parents, and youth organizations saw the popularity of the movies as a serious threat to the peasant way of life and the persistence of rural society. Already in the mid-1940s, the Catholic agricultural youth movement, for instance, repeatedly condemned the *cinéma citadin* (urban cinema) because its films idealized city life and misrepresented the peasant world as backward and traditional (Leventopoulos, 2016). They saw a connection between mainstream French cinema and the desire of rural youngsters to leave their homes in search for a “better” future. In other words, a part of the audience in Saint-Benin-des-Bois may well have watched *Boum sur Paris* with mixed feelings, enjoying the *chansons* of Piaf and other music hall stars, while at the same time resenting its promotion of metropolitan modernity.

## Conclusion

In line with Maltby’s original proposition, the central argument of this chapter has revolved around the idea that we need to look well beyond the confines of film exhibition and reception in order to better understand the place that the cinema occupied in the lives of its audiences. The experiment I undertook with the two postcards of Saint-Benin-des-Bois was to demonstrate how at a minimal level we can adopt a microanalytical approach to studying local film cultures without overlooking the wider vistas of social and media history. I hope that “Saint-Benin” will inspire other scholars to grapple with broad themes even when they investigate film culture through the prism of a distinctive local community – whether it is a hamlet, village, or city. I took my own inspiration from Italian microhistory, whose most prominent exponents never favored the micro as an article of faith, but always sought to combine micro- and macroscales (the worms *and* the cheese!). In the words of Francesca Trivellato (2011), they “wanted to say something big about history ... to raise big questions about how social and cultural systems emerge and evolve.” In my view, such a commitment to the central concerns of the humanities and social sciences seems a more productive position than defining the essence of the new cinema history in terms of a rejection of film analysis. Hence, I took the opportunity with my small case study to open up alternative ways of thinking about the relation between cinema history and film history and explore the energizing possibility of their integration.

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