

# Distribution – preliminary notes

**Frank Kessler**

*Utrecht University*

---

What is “distribution”? According to Jean Giraud’s invaluable, and indispensable, *Lexique français du cinéma des origines à 1930* there are two meanings of the word, which originally are derived from technical theatre terms, the first one referring to a “detailed listing of the *tableaux* or scenes of a film”, the second being the equivalent of the English word “cast”. But there is also a third definition – which, of course, is the most relevant one with regard to the problems dealt with in the essays collected here:

“In the language of cinema economy: intermediate stage between production and exhibition, or the theatre circuit. Providing exhibitors with prints. Synonym of: *renting*”.<sup>1</sup>

The corresponding activity, “to distribute”, is consequently defined as: “dispatching, placing prints of a film for exhibition purposes”.<sup>2</sup> And a distributor is the one who “is in charge of placing the films produced by a firm in a given geographic area”.<sup>3</sup>

The different definitions that Giraud proposes for distribution as an aspect of the economy of cinema can be used to map a multi-dimensional field of research raising different sets of questions.

First, distribution has a *relay function*, it serves as an “intermediate stage” making sure that an exhibitor receives a steady supply of prints from the various producers. This may actually also be a reason why, up to now, distribution has been a comparatively neglected area, as historians paid much more attention to the two outer ends of the chain: film production, on the one hand, and exhibition – that is: the ways in which films encountered an audience – on the other. So some of the fundamental questions to ask, are the following: What exactly happens between the two outer ends, between production and exhibition? How did this “intermediate stage” emerge? In what ways did that stage have consequences for production practices, but also for what, finally, audiences will see on the screens of movie theatres? How did this intermediate stage become institutionalised? By which means did producers, distributors, and exhibitors communicate with each other?

Second, distribution is about *placing* the films, or rather the prints for exhibition purposes. What factors do come into play here? How did they influence choices that are being made in this area? How were films distributed physically? Which networks did emerge? What economic, political, legal etc. forces had an influence on the circulation of films? Who controlled what, and at which level?

Third, one of the definitions quoted above mentions the specific *geographic areas* in which distribution takes place. So how did distribution networks function locally,

regionally, nationally, and internationally? Were there differences between countries, regions and cities? How were these geographic areas established?

Distribution, in other words, should be understood, in more than one respect, as a key element in the emergence of the institution of cinema. In fact, there isn't really any equivalent for its specific way of functioning in other domains of the cultural industry of that period: in those traditional arts, where one of the defining qualities is the uniqueness of a work, either as an object (a painting, a sculpture) or as a performance (theatre, music, ballet), distribution similar to the way films are distributed is almost per definition excluded. As for works of art that are produced and reproduced in multiple copies (books, etchings, but also gramophone disks), the goal of distribution is to reach a maximum number of buyers. So there are no strategies aiming at the creation of partial monopolies or making choices as to where a copy is to be made available first, as rapidly was the case with regard to film.

Jean Giraud, too, underscores the relative novelty of this phenomenon in the field of the arts. In his entry on “renting” (*location*), which he also gives as a synonym for “distribution”, he remarks the following:

“Fact or action of a producer making films available to exhibitors for rent through specialised agents. In the language of the arts and the performing arts this is a relatively new expression”.<sup>4</sup>

Giraud's comment, in fact, applies to “distribution” as well. This, of course, is due to the fact that the term is part of the “language of cinema economy”, as stated earlier, and not of the vocabulary of aesthetics. Distribution is first and foremost linked to the institutionalisation of cinema as an industry and a business.

One cannot deny, however, that distribution influences production and exhibition, while also depending on them. Distribution, in other words, cannot be isolated from the formal dimension of film. Formats (shorts, feature films, series, serials), the emergence of the star system, narrative modes: all these aspects are of course firmly rooted in film production, but they also concern, and are determined by, strategies, or practices, of distribution and exhibition. When Ivo Blom, in his important study on the Dutch distributor Jean Desmet, describes distribution as a *missing link* between production and exhibition,<sup>5</sup> one could add that even aspects of film form have to be taken into consideration here. Looking at early cinema from the point of view of this “intermediate stage” of distribution could indeed lead to a reconfiguration of our field of study.

The essays collected in this volume provide many new insights into a number of questions. Thus “geographic areas” – local, regional, national – and their borders appear in a new light when considered from the viewpoint of distribution. And at the same time, the various case studies presented here do also invite us to compare the results and to appreciate the complex differences that are so characteristic for an emerging medium which has to fit into a variety of cultural, political, or social contexts.

Distribution playing a major role in the institutionalisation of cinema, related source materials such as distribution catalogues, ads in the trade press and in newspapers, or company records, become telling documents revealing through which channels films came to audiences, but also how exhibitors were helped in addressing their patrons in a certain way, and how spectators were invited and incited to return to the movies.

Still another question, particularly interesting today, concerns the distribution of early films after their commercial career had definitely come to an end. After all, they continue to be seen: screened by archives, recycled by found-footage artists, re-issued in digital formats, on a DVD or as a downloadable file on the Internet.

Undeniably: there is much more to distribution than meets the eye. A neglected subject, a missing link – yes, but also a force structuring the field in which cinema emerged in the late 19th and early 20th century, a multi-dimensional and multi-faceted phenomenon with an impact on production and exhibition, on offer and demand, on film form and film viewing. Local, regional, and national differences shape the ways that prints circulate internationally, distribution strategies determine when and how products made for an international market are exhibited locally, regionally, nationally. Distribution is, as Giraud put it, “the intermediate stage between production and exhibition [...] in charge of placing the films produced by a firm in a given geographic area” – but it also is so much more.

## Notes

1. Giraud, Jean, *Le Lexique français du cinéma des origines à 1930* (Paris: CNRS, 1958): 105. All translations by Frank Kessler. Giraud gives contemporary quotes illustrating each definition. For the first one, the source is from 1909, for the second one from 1923, and for the third one from 1912.
2. *Ibid.*, 104.
3. *Ibid.*, 105.
4. *Ibid.*, 138 (the original text runs as follows: “Fait, ou action, pour un producteur de films, de donner ceux-ci à louage à des exploitants, par l’intermédiaire d’agents spécialisés. Cette acception est assez nouvelle dans la langue des Arts, et dans celle des spectacles.”). Interestingly, in the *lemma* “distribution” in Souriau, Etienne, *Vocabulaire d’esthétique* (Paris: PUF, coll. Quadrige, 1999): 599–600, there is no mention of film distribution.
5. Blom, Ivo, *Jean Desmet and the Early Dutch Film Trade* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003): 25.

Copyright 2007. John Libbey Publishing.  
All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.