

Triangulation in historical audience research: Reflections and experiences from a multi- methodological research project on cinema audiences in Flanders

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Summary:

This article reflects upon a series of historical audience research projects on the social experience of cinema-going and the issue of social distinction. Concentrating on the difficulties related to doing historical media audience research, this article proposes a multi-method perspective around qualitative audience approaches (using oral history inspired ethnographic methods) in combination with methods coming from political economy, socio-geography, and programming analysis. The article first looks at different paradigms and approaches on historical audience research within film studies, with a special focus on oral history. The second part consists of a concrete case study on historical cinema-going audiences in Flanders, Belgium, where we argue that the social practice of cinema-going was a significant social routine, strongly inspired by community identity formation, class and social distinction.

Key words: Historical reception, audience research, film audiences, cinema-going, oral history, new cinema history, political economy, community identity formation, class, social distinction, multi-methodological research.

Introduction

Notwithstanding the continued focus upon audiences within communication and media studies, as well as the strongly developed arsenal of concepts, methodologies and paradigms within media audience research (Schrøder, Drotner, Kline and Murray 2003), it is safe to argue that until recently, research on historical media audiences was a widely underdeveloped domain. Many have argued for the necessity of historical research on audiences (e.g. Jensen 1993), not only for a better understanding of media culture and audiences' experiences in the past. Historical media audience research is also necessary, as Livingstone, Allen and Reiner (2001: 165) claimed, for countering often ahistorical 'assumptions about shared media experiences, about critical viewers, about the appropriation of new meanings into daily lives and dominant social discourses.'

Making historical audiences visible within media and cultural theory, however, has been often perceived as quite problematic, mainly because the object of investigation (i.e. the act or the process of consuming, receiving, making meaning of media) is mostly not materially there, or because contemporary researchers are confronted with the absence of systematic audience research in the past. This scarcity of resources forces researchers to be more creative in exploring often indirect sources for reconstructing historical media consumption and reception. This contribution focuses upon this methodological and heuristic problem of how to capture the historical audience – or how we can investigate past media experiences. What are the difficulties involved in doing this kind of historical audience research? What kind of sources and traces are there to understand historical media experiences? How can we analyse and interpret these sources and traces? What kind of methodologies of data collection, processing and analysis can be used?

This reflexive piece on methods (which refers to specific techniques for the research process from data collection to data analysis and interpretation) and methodologies (referring to the study of methods and dealing with the philosophical assumptions underlying the research process) in relation to the study of historical audiences is very much inspired by recent trends within film studies. Film studies traditionally concentrated on questions of aesthetics, style and ideology behind or within movies. Since the mid-1980s, however, new 'revisionist' film history approaches have opened the way for more empirically based historical research which moves beyond the screen and textual interpretations of films (e.g. Allen and Gomery 1985). This 'new cinema history' explicitly argued for more research on audiences and reception in order to understand cinema as a more complex social phenomenon (Kuhn 2002; Maltby, Biltreyst and Meers 2011; Biltreyst, Maltby and Meers 2012).

This recent shift within film studies has engaged, as Richard Maltby (2011: 3) recently argued, 'contributors from different points on the disciplinary compass, including history, geography, cultural studies, economics, sociology and anthropology, as well as film and media studies' in order to examine the circulation and consumption of films. These efforts to look at cinema as a site of social and cultural exchange encompasses the usage of methods and theoretical underpinnings from disciplines other than those which were

traditionally used within film studies. Within this effort to deal with historical film audiences, various kinds of sources have been explored, such as box-office revenues (e.g. Sedgwick 2011), corporate reports (e.g. Sullivan 2010) and other 'indirect' testimonies on the audience. Other work was based on the traditions of oral history (Perks and Thomson 1998) and other qualitative work on the reconstruction of past media experiences through memory studies (Radstone 2000), while others turned to reception analysis of specific genres (e.g. on crime media, Livingstone, Allen and Reiner 2001), questionnaires or surveys (e.g. Kuhn 2002; Stacey 1994).

Only few historiographical projects on film audiences attempted to combine methodologies, hence raising questions of methodological integration, synergy and interdisciplinarity. This article will reflect upon the difficulties and opportunities related to doing historical film audience research from a multidisciplinary and –methodological perspective. It consists of two parts. After an overview of the different methods and approaches of historical audience research within film studies, we will go into the experiences related to a series of case studies on the history of the social experiences of cinema and cinema-going in two Belgian cities (Ghent and Antwerp).¹ The research design of these projects consisted of three layers: besides structural analyses of the exhibition scene (using methods from political economy and socio-geography) and the supply of movies for audiences (programming analyses), we relied upon oral history approaches (inspired by ethnographic methods and cultural studies). Using this triangulation of methods,² we will argue that the social practice of cinema-going was less inspired by movies, stars and programming strategies, than that it was a significant social routine, strongly inspired by community identity formation, class and social distinction.

Audiences and cinema studies

As a general rule, a more systematic study of audiences is in its infancy. Movie audience research is relatively well developed, even though it too is undeveloped beyond the nickelodeon era. ... The humdrum is less researched than times of dramatic change. Historical research that has been done so far has focused more on moments of innovation – for example, the beginnings of movies in the nickelodeon days or the reactions of people to sound films. On the other hand, we have relatively little on the heyday of movies once movie-going had settled into a widespread habit. These times are difficult to document. ... They are also times when the medium is at its most popular and thus most influential, making what audiences do more important than the times of apparent change. (Butsch 2003: 19-20)

Since Richard Butsch's call for more research into cinema audiences and everyday life, a rich variety of audience studies has emerged.³ In recent years groundbreaking work has been published in various journals and in a series of edited collections with studies on topics like

the early twentieth century film-going experience; the examination of specific film audiences such as children, women, ethnic and other minority groups; cinema memory and fandom; audience reception of specific movies and genres; the relationship between production strategies, their conception of audiences and the actual consumption of movies; the link between audience reception and changes in distribution and exhibition strategies; the interrogation of Hollywood cinema as a cultural resource intimately bound to its richly diverse communities of viewers (e.g. Stokes and Maltby 1999a; 1999b; 2001; 2004; Maltby, Stokes and Allen 2007). While in the United States and in Britain historical film audience studies seem to be an accepted part of the film studies agenda (Waller 1995; Fuller-Seeley 1996; Ross 2002; Kuhn 2002; Abel 2006), a similar move is gradually taking place now in other countries like those on the European continent (e.g. Ligensa and Kreimeier 2009; Biltereyst et al 2011).

The growth of film audience historiography as a subfield has gone hand in hand with an empirical, historical and spatial turn, and it is closely linked to criticism against text-oriented 'high theory' film studies. Advocates of a 'new film historiography' (e.g. Bordwell, Thompson and Staiger 1985; Allen and Gomery 1985) or, more recently, a 'new cinema history' (e.g. Maltby, Biltereyst and Meers 2011; Biltereyst, Maltby and Meers 2012), heavily criticized the dominance of a certain type of methods and concepts (cf. mainly those inspired by psychoanalysis, semiotics and literary theory; see Lapsley and Westlake, 1988/2006) which do not sufficiently take into account contextual issues on production, distribution and reception. Criticizing that 'film history has been written as if films had no audiences', proponents of a new cinema history like Robert C. Allen (1990: 348) reacted against dominant a-historical, text-oriented traditions within film studies. Underlining the need for a film history 'from below', a clear focus emerged on reception studies and other kinds of empirical historical audience studies.

Looking back at this recent stream of empirical studies on the 'real audience' (Stacey 1994: 54), one can only identify this field as a broad perspective with different traditions, concepts and methodologies (Barker 1999: 132). Following Allen (1990: 349-354), who back in 1990 defined a research agenda for film reception research, we can identify four major research areas. In his programmatic overview Allen called for research on exhibition, reception, social composition and discourses, and finally cinema-going as social practice. In this brief overview we will go into some of the most important work in these four different areas, highlighting some of their key methodological choices and problems in their attempts to capture the historical audience.

A first area of scholarly pursuit refers to the history of *film exhibition*. For an investigation of cinema-going, film exhibition studies are considered a necessary step in the direction of film audience research. Most of the work in this respect looks at the structural, economic and institutional context in which film consumption occurs. In his pioneering study *Shared Pleasures*, Douglas Gomery (1992) describes the evolution of film exhibition in the U.S. from the start until the introduction of home video, demonstrating how the advent of television changed the film viewing experience, not only because of the additional

possibilities for watching film, but also because of new promotional strategies. Another kind of sophisticated economically inspired analysis of film exhibition and cinema-going concentrates upon the analysis of box-office revenues of particular or a series of film venues. The work done by John Sedgwick (2000; 2011), for instance, on popular film-going in 1930s Britain combines hard-core quantitative economic analysis with detailed questions on cinema's popularity in specific contexts. Sedgwick developed an arsenal of statistic tools (e.g. POPSTAT Index of Film Popularity) for gauging film popularity based on cinema attendance. Both Gomery's and Sedgwick's powerful analyses pays particular attention to economic and industrial aspects of film screening. However, issues like audience's understanding, memories or meaning of going to the movies are either missing or seen as an effect of industrial strategies (Jancovich et al 2003: 4).

Other work has been done on film exhibition strategies and their attempts to construct or interconnect with cinema-goers. Next to hard economic data, much of this research uses various kinds of historical sources, such as the location of cinemas, corporate reports, distribution and programming overviews. In her historical analysis of the circulation of Greek films for Greek diasporic audiences in Australia, for instance, Deb Verhoeven (2011) stressed the distinctive social function that Greek cinema had for its diasporic community. Other work on everyday film culture also stresses the role of film exhibition. For her analysis of early cinema culture in rural Sweden, Åsa Jernudd (2012: 19) for example used newspaper reports on audiences, as well as other data on film exhibition, programming or advertising in one small rural town (Örebro) demonstrated that the introduction of film and the transition from itinerant to permanent theatres went much smoother than widely assumed.

A second area relates to historical *reception studies*, a field of research which aims at, as Janet Staiger (1992: 57) argued, developing a 'context-activated theory' against 'text-activated'-models from film studies. Staiger's 'historical materialist reception research' (1992, 2000, 2005) aspires to analyze and reconstruct the viewing strategies available to the viewer in a specific historical period through a contextual analysis of public discourses about film. This provides insights into the range of possible readings in specific historical periods. Arguing that contextual factors more than textual ones determine the experience viewers have while watching a movie and how they use these experiences in daily life, research in this field explores sources, such as press reviews, interviews, articles and letters to the editor of film magazines, or reports in the trade press. One of the aims of this research is examine the creation of the horizon of expectations and to analyze the various historical, political and other discourses around particular movies, genres, film directors or cinema at large.

Staiger's pioneering work has had a large following. Most scholars deal with the reception of a single film (see e.g. Shingler 2001 on 'All about Eve' (1950), Davis 2001 on 'Fantasia' (1940), Poe 2001 on 'On the Beach' (1959), Smoodin 1996 on 'Meet John Doe' (1941)). Other research explores wider genres or types of films, such as the industry

discourses on Hollywood's sound film serial in the 1930s (Barefoot 2011) or the reception of Hollywood movies by films British audiences in the 1950s (Porter and Harper 1998).

While historical reception studies clearly focus upon the context and discourses within which audiences are targeted and consume movies, most of this work does not include audience interviews as an important source of information. Among the scholars who integrate actual audience memories and experiences, one might indicate Barbara Klinger, who in 1997 called for a renewed research agenda in the direction of a 'total history of film reception. Klinger's textual and contextual analysis of Douglas Sirk's movies, for instance, emphasized the value of a diachronical approach and applied a wide variety of sources in order to be able to analyze their critical and academic reception (Klinger 1994).

A third major category can be labelled as research looking at the *social composition of the audience*. Concentrating on how cinema has become a part of everyday life, much work on this issue proposes to examine the socio-demographic composition of film audiences. An interesting debate here focused upon early movie audiences and cinema as a public space and issues of inter-racial, inter-gender, mixed ethnic film audiences along with questions on class segregation (e.g. Hansen 1991; Staiger 1992; Allen 2006; Doherty 2007; Knight 2011; Toffell 2011). Much of this work concentrates on the discursive construction of the cinema audience by specific public institutions, organizations or groups (e.g. censors, parents' organizations, religious pressure groups),, and more particularly, of the concern for so-called vulnerable groups like children, immigrants, workers and women (e.g. Uricchio and Pearson 1999; Butsch 2000).

Other researchers turned to industry related sources in order to uncover discourses and strategies developed by producers, distributors and exhibitors in their attempt to target specific audience groups. In his work on the historical composition of local film audiences in India, Stephen Hughes (2011), for instance, indicates how exhibitors could operate a hierarchy of venues catering to different castes, classes and religious groups without explicitly segregating the social space that cinema provided. Other work in this area concentrates on how audiences themselves display discursive constructions of film reception. By analysing 1940s and 1950s letters to the editor in a film journal, S.V. Srivas (2000), for example, shows how male middle and higher class audiences in India construct themselves as a collective: 'the public' or the 'real knowing audience' as opposed to the 'audience in general', which is not entitled to such visibility and public presence in the cinema space itself.

In this area of research on the social composition of the film audience often many more sources and indicators are used, including, for example, poster announcements or photographs showing audiences cueing before or sitting in a cinema, hence visually indicating spatial segregation in film venues (e.g. Gaines 2007). Other indicators of class and race segregation include the attempt to geographically locate film venues in particular city neighborhoods and linking these locations with socio-demographic data (e.g. Biltereyst, Meers and Van de Vijver 2011).

Much work is done on the presence of women in cinemas. In a recent study on female audiences of early German cinema, Andrea Haller (2012) reconstructs the discourses on female cinema-going in Imperial Germany. Using contemporary trade papers, fan and women's magazines, Haller examines how women experienced their movie-going and participated in the actual event of the film show, and how the patriarchal society they belonged to reacted to their participation in this new activity.

The last category analyzes the *event and the experience of 'going to the movies' as a social phenomenon*. This broad area of research includes various methods and indicators in order to come to terms with the practices, experiences and memories of cinema-going within specific contextualized locations. In their attempt to investigate the cinema and the social interactions within this public space, some scholars turned to written or printed sources like film magazines (e.g. Geraghty 2000 on British cinemas in the 1950s). A second group of scholars turns to the re-examination of existing historical studies of audiences. Sue Harper and Vincent Porter (1996), for instance, who were interested in social class and gender as determinants for crying in the cinema, re-examined or reinterpreted the original analyses of the UK 1950 Mass Observation social research. A similar re-examination of existing historical research was done by Jeffrey Richards (1994), who looked at 1930s regional film audiences by turning to the original British Bolton survey. Other studies concentrated on specific cinemas and tried to understand the dynamics and interactions within this public space. One example is the work done by Glen McIver (2009) on Liverpool's Rialto. Using a wide range of materials left by the site, photographs, posters, newspaper and magazine articles and various published accounts as well as interviews with former users of the building, McIver reconstructed the cinema as a site of social memory.

Other work on cinema-going turns to different qualitative methodologies in an attempt to explore the actual audience's experience. This is often accompanied by the use of small research designs and ethnographic approaches on a micro level, ranging from interviews, observations, diaries and all kinds of other written accounts, testimonies or memories. To engage with the role of cinema and people's recollections of it, pioneering scholars used personal letters in newspapers, fan mail written by former cinema visitors (e.g. Jackie Stacey 1994; Helen Taylor 1989), or in-depth interviews (e.g. Annette Kuhn 2002). A key source of inspiration is oral history methodology, also considered as an act of 'writing history from below' (Iggers 2005: 7), along with theories coming from memory studies (Radstone 2000). Stacey's *Star Gazing* (1994) is one of the best known pioneering work in this trend of audience research within star studies. Stacey, who explicitly refers to cultural studies work on television audiences, combines theories of spectatorship in feminist film criticism with empirical work on gender and audiences in cultural studies, including the usage of questionnaires. Other ground-breaking work has been done by Kuhn (e.g. 1999), mainly on the experience of film culture in Great Britain in the 1930s. Using the term 'ethnohistory', Kuhn (2002) forcefully illustrates the strength of ethnographic methodology in order to understand everyday cinema-going experiences.

In line with Kuhn's work, much research on cinema-going is inspired by ethnographic methodologies in the sense of media ethnography, whereby actual audiences are interviewed in various forms, including in-depth interviews, focus groups etc. This kind of work has been done on film consumption or audience's experience of local film culture in specific cities. In the case of Nottingham (Jancovich et al 2003), for instance, this involved interviews as well as the mapping of the cultural geography of cinemas, where each cinema is associated with a specific form of consumption, organized hierarchically. Other work concentrates on specific periods and national contexts, as in the case of Jo Labanyi (2007; see also Paz 2003), who looked at cinema's role as a form of escapism and mediation of everyday life in Spain in 1940s and 1950s. At a time of severe political repression and economic hardship under the Franco dictatorship, watching Hollywood movies introduced consumerist values in anticipation of the regime's later overt adoption of capitalist modernization. In a similar sense, Daniela Treveri-Gennari et al. (2011) looked at Italian cinema audiences in the 1940s and 1950s. Following a model that combines ethnographic audience study with analysis of the films, genres and stars that produced audiences' dominant memories, they re-evaluate the popular reception of film by engaging with cinema-going memories, triangulating box office figures, the popular press and audience interviews.

A specific subgroup here is work focusing upon stars and fandom, asking actual film fans about their film experiences or analyzing other traces of fandom such as letters and other 'ephemera'. One such an example is the work done by Helen Taylor (1989) on female fans of the book and movie *Gone with the Wind* (Fleming 1939). Her analysis is a combination of production analysis, text analysis, historical context and oral histories. She demonstrates the importance of changing historical contexts for the pleasure female fans derive from this popular film. Other work on film fans and their experiences with particular stars, genres, movies or series is or instance done by Réka Buckley (2009 on Claudia Cardinale fans) and Peter Krämer (2009 on Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*).

Film audiences: historiography, oral history and triangulation

The above overview illustrates that across the recent twenty years or so a rich variety of research approaches has emerged on different aspects of the historical film audience. The outline also indicates that each approach in a sense illuminates other facets of, and uses different concepts about, the audience. Next to a view upon film consumers as the outcome of industrial strategies, other audience conceptions were operationalized by perspectives looking at audiences as members of socio-demographically diverse groups, as textually inscribed and discursively constructed spectators, or as complex sense-making individuals. Obviously, this conceptual plurality raises many questions, including those on methodological clarity, criticism and synergy. To what degree, for instance, can these approaches (and their audience concepts) be combined? How do these different levels of empirical evidence converge and integrate? How can cinema's industrial and institutional

history, for instance, be bound together with a socio-cultural history of audiences' experiences?

Notwithstanding the diversity of approaches, one must observe that only few historiographical studies on film audience have attempted to combine diverse methods and methodologies. Since the work done by Stacey and Kuhn one even observes a clear preference for qualitative methodologies coming from the social sciences, most often using small research designs and micro-level ethnographic approaches. In order to engage with the lived experiences of ordinary audiences in their historical context, many researchers are inspired by oral history, an approach coming from historical research and the humanities, often without raising any broader methodological problems related to it. What, for instance, are the pitfalls of investigating the social experience of going to the movies through interviews with people who rely upon their memories of past experiences? How should we select the sample of respondents? How to collect stories and memories? Taking into account the selective and subjective character of memory, how are these stories and memories to be analyzed and interpreted?

Next to methodological questions about the oral history research process, one might raise the problem of integrating this approach into a broader research design. How do micro-historical and personal stories relate to structural histories? What is the relationship between personal experience, collective consciousness and various other kinds of history like structural economic history? How can we reconcile memory and historical generalization? These questions are closely linked to, what Ronald Grele (1998: 42) has called the lack of serious theory building, conceptualization and methodological criticism which is characteristic of oral history at large. According to Grele, one needs to 'begin to discuss what kinds of information we are getting' through interviews, and he warns against the attitude to treat memory as history as it really was. Oral history, he claims, should be seen as a tool rather than as evidence for factual information.

In the following paragraphs, in which we will critically reflect on our own historiographical work on film audience, we adopt this position, namely that oral history is to be seen as a tool rather than as evidence. We will demonstrate the particular strength of an oral history approach within the context of methodological triangulation. Especially when older data resources are missing, triangulation can become a valuable in terms of contextualizing the positioning, construction and disciplining of audiences.

We will reflect upon some key methodological issues related to three research projects on the development of Belgian film exhibition and audience's experience of cinema: (i) the large scale project 'The Enlightened City' (which ran from 2005 until 2008 and which focused on cinema exhibition structures and film consumption patterns in the region of Flanders), (ii) a project on film culture in Ghent, and (iii) a similar one on Antwerp (see endnote 1). These three projects consisted of a similar three-stage research design. The first line covered an extensive inventory of existing and historical cinemas in Flanders, Ghent and Antwerp, focussing upon the geographical distribution and the relations between the commercial and the 'pillarized' circuit (see below). The second line included a diachronic

institutional analysis through research on particular cinemas' programming strategies, with case studies on Antwerp and Ghent. The third line of research used oral history methods as a means to investigate the historical audiences' memories of cinemas and film consumption and on their lived experiences of (film) leisure culture.

In the following analysis we will reflect on methodology and methods, rather than present a full-fledged overview of the key findings of these three projects.⁴ In order to illustrate the usefulness of triangulation, we will use as a test case the issue of class and cinema-going. Somewhat inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's work (1984), we will show how class and social distinction were important issues when it comes to film exhibition, programming, and the audience strategies related to it, as well as to the audience's experiences and memories of cinema(-going). As a theoretical background, we will make use of Bourdieu's work on the connections between the objective socio-economic conditions of class on the one hand, and more subjective, internalized or mental structures producing particular life-styles and cultural tastes on the other.

Exhibition, neighbourhoods, and spaces of distinction

When starting to conceive a broader research design which attempts to write a new kind of film history from below, we were confronted by the fact that questions on exhibition structures, programming strategies and cinema-going behaviour in smaller countries, including Belgium, largely remain open for research. Older international statistical overviews indicated that Belgium had a long history of being a vivid film market with a large number of cinemas (given the small size of the country) and high cinema attendance rates. It remained unclear, however, what this really meant in terms of the different experiences of cinema within particular regions, cities or neighbourhoods. Following Allen's argument on the importance of space, place and sociality as constitutive features of the experience of cinema, we found it crucial to investigate these spatial differences, especially when they indicated forms of segregation.

On a national level, there were some film historical studies, indicating the existence of various film circuits, including commercial cinemas, film clubs and more politicized film venues (e.g. Convents 2000 on Catholic film initiatives). But here again, there was a clear lack of systematic research, especially on the importance of more ideologically oriented film initiatives. The latter refers to the phenomenon that, until the 1970s, Belgian society was strongly characterized by a system of pillarization, or the co-existence, competition or conflicts between blocks or 'pillars' of ideologically more-or-less coherent organizations. This system created a pattern of social segmentation in which different groups had their own networks of schools, hospitals, trade unions and political parties. This process of 'pillarization' overlapped with more traditional class conflicts, and Catholics, liberals, and socialists developed strategies to attract the masses through leisure, recreational activities, newspapers and other media or entertainment facilities as well as in hard political and socio-economic terms. Pillarization was not an exclusively Belgian phenomenon, but the ideological and religious segregation created by pillarization had a more profound impact

across a range of social fields in Belgium than was the case in the Netherlands (see Dibbets 2006, Van Oort 2012).

It is hard to estimate how successful Belgian socialists, liberals and Catholics were in 'guiding' film audiences in their cinema-going practices, particularly among the lower social classes. To begin to address these issues, the *Enlightened City* research project built a longitudinal database of Flemish cinemas and other regular film screening venues, covering the period from the First World War onwards. Compiled from a wide variety of sources (official statistics, industry yearbooks, film programs in newspapers and trade journals, and information in public and private archives), this database contains some 47,500 entries detailing who organized screenings in which venues, where and when, as well as recording any financial, architectural or ideological information that we found on individual venues.

In general, the *Enlightened City* database confirmed the high number and the wide variety of regular film venues operating in Flanders and Brussels until the 1960s (Biltreyst et al. 2007). The database indicated that local film exhibition markets were highly competitive not only in major cities but also in smaller, even rural towns where commercial exhibitors often had to confront pillarized film screenings, mostly dominated by Catholics. From the 1920s until the 1960s, Catholic, socialist and to a smaller extent liberal and Flemish-nationalist exhibitors made up between nineteen and thirty-five percent of all film venues. After the Second World War, the general growth in the number of Flemish cinemas (from 560 film venues in 1946 to 984 in 1957) was accompanied by a slow increase in the number of cinemas in rural areas. Film exhibition was far less influenced by pillarization in the major cities.

Taking Ghent as an example, we found that the local film market was divided between the city centre cinemas with eleven film palaces like the *Capitole* on the one hand, and on the other hand second- and third-run cinemas located in the historical belt of mainly working-class city districts, and those in neighbouring towns or suburbs. Besides the city-centre palaces, where some pillarized cinemas were active (like the Socialist *Vooruit*), there were twelve cinemas located in the poorer districts of the historical belt around the city centre. A third group of film venues was located in the suburbs and the less proletarianized neighbouring towns.

As in most other cities, many of the most successful first-run cinemas like the *Capitol* were close to 'bright light' centres, shopping malls and other recreational facilities, as well as mass transport lines. In purely quantitative terms, however, most film venues were located in poorer people's areas, although these were not insular, homogenous working-class or socialist-oriented environments. The *Capitole* promoted itself as a luxurious cinema for the higher social classes and conducted a strategy of spatial segregation through its differentiated price policy, while the socialist *Vooruit* did almost exactly the opposite by targeting lower social groups. Most major film venues, however, courted patrons from different social classes from around the city, as well as from towns on the outskirts of it. Although there were differences in the film exhibition structures between different cities, the local film exhibition market in Ghent and Antwerp was clearly characterized by different

forms of class segregation: within the major city-centre palaces through price differentiation, as well as by the venues' location in particular neighbourhoods.

Looking back at this first line of research, which brought forward many new insights into the development of the structure and the differences within the Belgian film exhibition scene,⁵ it is clear that we do not consider this exhibition analysis as a form of empirical research on audience's experiences. In line with earlier work on film exhibition strategies, we conceived this line as a necessary first entrance into, and a contextualization of, an attempt to interconnect with cinema-going practices. We acknowledge that other levels and aspects of exhibition research can be explored as, for instance, corporate reports, exhibitors' advertising and other audience maximizing strategies. More interestingly, though, we think that more work needs to be done in linking cinema's locations with more fine-grained maps of demographical variations within cities, regions and countries. In most countries, though, including Belgium, this kind of basic historical demographic data is still missing (or their construction is still in progress), and few reliable data are available on the geographical location in terms of class and other variables.

Programming distinction

The second major research line in our three research projects investigated cinemas' programming strategies from the 1930s until the 1970s. Next to the fact that historical research on shifts in film programming is still a largely uncovered area within film studies, we conceived this line as a necessary complement and a refinement of the first line of research on exhibition. Programming also relates to audiences in the sense that (successful) exhibitors employ strategies and develop their experiences in attracting audiences as consumers. More hypothetically, one might see programming as a skilful exercise of responding to audiences' tastes and desires. Following up on class-related issues of spatial distinction, the question was also what kinds of different movies and genres were offered to audiences and what kind of programming strategies were developed in order to attract consumers.

This second line of research on programming made use of a database capturing the full programming schemes of regular cinemas in Ghent and Antwerp for a sample of ten years (starting from 1932 until 1972). Based on these data we were able to analyze programming strategies at a general level, and also conduct a more detailed analysis of individual cinemas or groups of venues. For Ghent, for instance, in 1952, the database contained information on 1,431 film screenings of 654 different films in 32 cinemas. Looking at programming differences, linked to spatial and class segregation, we identified a hierarchy between cinemas, with city-centre palaces as first-run cinemas, while the pillarized cinemas, especially those in working-class neighbourhoods, received these pictures later on. A clear indication of this hierarchy is provided by the movies' year of production, which shows that city centre cinemas played much more recent movies than those in the districts and suburbs. Nearly three quarters of the pictures screened by the big film venues in the city centre were produced in 1951 or 1952, while neighbourhood cinemas

relied much more on older material. District cinemas, for instance, only had a handful of very recent pictures, while exhibitors in suburbs still played a consistent amount of older film material. In addition, the analysis reinforced *Capitole's* image as a first-run, blockbuster-oriented cinema, screening more musicals and comedies than its lower-class oriented rival *Vooruit*.

Looking at the programming strategies, it becomes clear that film palaces in the city centres competed more heavily for filmgoers coming from different parts of the city and its surroundings. Each sought to foster its identity, and even big chains were well aware that while filmgoers might have selected cinemas on the basis of movies and programming, they also looked for a particular experience, atmosphere and the performance of big screen cinema.

As well as identifying differences in the social geography of cinemas in Ghent, we looked at how cinemas developed various programming strategies in order to attract different types of audiences. One might speculate here about a hierarchy of social and cultural differentiation among cinemas in terms of generic preferences, the average circulation time, or the availability of recent successful or controversial titles. In general, the analysis indicated that smaller neighbourhood and district cinemas operated as second- or even third-run venues, usually scheduling older, but also less controversial material, a pattern we attribute to these venues' more family and community oriented profile. This was also the case for cinemas located in working-class areas. Catholic cinemas in general were more prudish in what they offered their audiences.

Although programming analysis can hardly be seen as an approach focussing upon the empirical audience per se, one can conceive programming as a key intermediary between exhibitors and audiences, in particular as one of the strategies (next to advertising, price strategies, etc.) to attract audiences. In this contribution we only looked at some major differences which underlined tendencies of class differences and segregation along different kinds of cinemas located in specific neighbourhoods.⁶ Again, much more work can be done, including case studies on particular kinds of cinemas like those targeting lower or working class audiences, or vice versa on the programming and advertising strategies developed by first-run city centre palaces in order to investigate tendencies of class-mixing in these venues. More importantly, though, we think, is to confront these strategies with concrete audiences' experiences. How, for instance, did ordinary filmgoers perceive these strategies? How did they experience class distinction and other forms of segregation as an effect of pillarization? How do they describe the different experiences and practices of going to district, neighbourhood or city centre cinemas? In order to answer these questions, we integrated a third line in the research project, using oral history methods.

Cinema-going experiences, memories and distinction

Before turning to some key findings in our research projects, it is useful to go into some of the methodological choices made on the third research line, related to oral history. The oral history component of the *Enlightened City* and both the other research projects explored

the social experience of cinema-going in Flanders from the 1930s to the 1970s. It was based on a wide range of individual, in-depth interviews. The respondents were selected and found in homes for elderly people, within the social circle of acquaintances of the interviewers, or by self-selection (responding to advertisements in local newspapers). As is the case in most qualitative research, we sought as much variation as possible in terms of age, class, sex and ideological points of view, in order to grasp a wide variety of possible routines, ideas and motives concerning cinema-going. The level of film consumption also varied widely within



ILLUSTRATION 1: *The Capitole promoting You'll Never Get Rich (1941, USA), probably at the end of the 1940s (Collection Albert Warie)*

our group of respondents, from avid daily movie-goers to those who hardly ever visited a movie theatre. The individual interviews were conducted in 2005 and 2006 in the respondents' home environment by two researchers and trained undergraduate students

from the universities of Antwerp and Ghent. A total of 389 interviews were conducted, 155 in Antwerp, 61 in Ghent, and 173 in 21 smaller towns and villages. The sample comprised somewhat more women (52.5%) than men. The interviews were semi-structured, whereby the interviewers used thematic spreadsheets to keep the interviews focused, but leaving a large degree of space for the respondents' own stories and spontaneous memories. This was crucial, because many respondents were highly motivated to talk about cinema and had very vivid memories, whereby they often referred to specific moments they remembered. The length of the interviews differed depending on the storytelling capacities of our respondents, with an average length of around one hour per interview. When quoting respondents - who all have given written permission to use their interviews for academic publication - in the following paragraphs, we give their initials, sex, and date of birth. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using Atlas-ti, a software program suitable for qualitative research. At a first level of analysis, we structured the interviews according to the respondents' age group in order to investigate their stories' evolution. At a second level, we reorganized their memories around a selection of themes, such as choice of movie theatre, frequency, companionship, information about specific films and motives for cinema-going.

This third line of the project introduces new research questions (bottom-up, audience experiences), methodologies (interviews, qualitative analysis) and traditions (oral history, cultural studies). We concentrated on statements in which respondents discussed their experiences of class and ideological segregation in the post-war Ghent film scene, in order to examine the multilayered character of cultural and social distinction, and to demonstrate how this analysis of individual experiences and collective cultural practices of going to the movies (in sociological terms of agency) can add new insights to a structural, political economy analysis of cinema's strategies to attract audiences.

A key problem, however, when dealing with oral history methodology, Kuhn (2002) argues, is not so much how to collect stories, histories and memories, but rather how to analyze and interpret them. Researchers have to take into account that memories are highly selective, subjective and distorted by time, which poses problems for interpretation. Memory is an active process of creating meanings. The selective workings of personal and collective memories include strategies of repetition, fragmentation, narration (the will to tell the 'good story'), the use of anecdotes, and the tactics of forgetting, creating or overstressing particular events. The central aim of oral history research on cinema-going is not to objectively recreate or reconstruct the past based upon subjective memories of our respondents, but to look at the recreation of these memories about going to the cinema. In this regard Kuhn used the term "memory text" (2002, 9-12), meaning that the way people remember is as much a text to decipher as the actual memories they talk about. Researchers should take into account the active staging of memory, as well as they should question the transparency of what is remembered.

These considerations have wide-ranging research implications. One is that memories about cinema-going are often clouded by nostalgia, resulting from the disappearance of the

cinema culture the respondents grew up in. As noted by Kuhn, memories about cinema-going are characterized by a strong past/present-trope, in other words, they cannot be understood without taking into account their relationship with the present. Moreover, time as it is remembered by respondents, is not the same as historical time. In her research on cinema-going during the Franco dictatorship Maria Paz (2003: 359) came to quite similar conclusions, stating that her Spanish respondents remembered the Franco years as a rather homogenous period but also as one which greatly coincided with their own life stories. Only when explicitly contrasting different periods in their life, respondents realized the evolutions their cinema-going habits had made through time. We found the same homogenous time interpretation in our own interviews on Flanders (see below). The only major break that our respondents saw, was the transition in the 1980s from classical cinema culture to the new and much less appreciated multiplex cinema culture.

When asked about their experiences of class distinction and segregation in the sphere of cinema, interviewees confirmed that at least ideological segregation was an important distinctive feature, although most respondents tended not to overrate its impact. In the Ghent case, for instance, most interviewees seemed not to be well-informed about the precise ideological profile of specific cinemas. Respondents knew about the *Vooruit* as the place for cinema and leisure within the socialist movement, but, except for the cinemas operating within their own pillar, they were usually unsure about other ideologically-inspired film venues. While recognizing that some audiences were faithful to particular film venues, most respondents strongly questioned the influence of ideological loyalty in relation to cinema and other leisure activities. Interviewees preferred to talk about these cinemas' distinctive profiles in terms of differences in programming styles, degrees of controversy, ethics and audiences' expectations. One male respondent (G.M., born in 1921) recalled:

There were two cinemas which were a bit Catholic, I think. They showed movies where there was nothing to see at all. Certain people went to these venues, I know, also because the Church said they should avoid other cinemas which were associated with the devil. The *Vooruit* was openly socialist and I think the *Scaldis* also. People didn't know this, but there were many socialists in there ... We didn't look at the political orientation of cinemas. We just knew that when you went to a Catholic cinema you didn't have to expect too much.

Acknowledging that cinema was not the most productive place for official politics and other forms of ideological work, the oral histories underlined the fact that these movie houses were basically only lucrative entertainment-driven places. In many socialist and Catholic film venues, ticket prices were kept considerably lower than in first-run cinemas. Next to ticket prices, people also made a distinction between cinemas on the basis of programming differences such as genre, language, origin, pictures' running time, novelty of the program and morality. These differences also influenced their experiences of an hierarchy between first-, second- and third-run cinemas:

There was a difference according to the type of cinema ... In the great cinemas in the centre ... in the Majestic, Eldorado, Capitole, Select, there was a better audience, people from the city. In the neighborhood cinemas you saw a more popular audience. The Agora is an example. They played mostly second- or third-hand films, films that had been previously shown. It was a good opportunity to see them again if they had been missed. There were mostly people from the neighborhood. (P.B., male, 1947)

Class differences, so it turned out, had a clearly material dimension as it was, for instance, reflected in clothing and dress codes:

We practically never went to the big cinemas around the former south station, mainly because these were too expensive. We didn't go to cinemas such as the Century and *Capitole*... People usually dressed up for going to these film theatres. (R.D., male, 1946)

Some respondents referred to class-related distinctions in terms of differences of public decency, behaviour, hygiene and even physical cleanness:

This was slightly better in the city cinema, but in neighborhood cinemas everybody threw everything on the ground. People also brought their sandwiches with them because they were often planning to sit there for three screenings, and they threw it all on the ground. No, it wasn't very clean. (A.A., female, 1944)

Other respondents referred to differences in audience mentality, taste and participation:

There was another mentality, another, I would almost say, level of education of the people who live in the centre. And then if you went to the Brugsepoort or to the Muide, people were really more spontaneous, responding to everything. We were more reserved in our reactions, but in neighborhood cinemas people would react more spontaneously. (C.H., female, 1933)

It is not difficult to interpret these accounts from a Bourdieuan perspective as utterances of distinction, whereby respondents describe their own position in relation to other social groups and their social practices. The oral testimonies underlined the importance of audience composition, when describing cinema-going experiences and the atmosphere in cinemas, not only in terms of objective class differences but even more so from the perspective of concrete lifestyle, behaviour, taste or language. People talked about very different audiences, not in a classical class theory sense, but rather in terms of very specific

class fractions, professions or generations, although they seldom made reference to either gender or ethnicity. In the way they described the social geography of cinema, people often intermingled various levels of audience compositions:

The audience was very diverse ... For example, Tuesday was the day for merchants and independent shop owners. Younger people often went on Fridays ... There was a real class difference between the cinemas. The working class went to the *Vooruit* and the middle and more wealthy classes went to the *Capitol* or *Majestic*. (G.P., male, 1922)

The respondents' mental mapping of cinema was constructed on a multilayered concept of cultural and social distinction, and in part by the aspiration to define and distinguish themselves from other social classes and their daily practices. The experience of cinema-going was also related to geographical stratification and the feeling of belonging to a community or living in a particular district. From this perspective, it is important to recognize that neighbourhood cinemas were not always defined in a pejorative sense. In their accounts of cinemas in the districts and the suburbs, interviewees often associated these cinemas with a sense of community and familiarity:

Mostly the same audience ... People who were used to go there. I knew almost everyone. This was the case in every neighborhood. Everybody in the district went to the same cinema. (G.M., male, 1921)

This analysis, which concentrated on the audience's experiences of cinema as a social practice only from the perspective of class distinction and ideological segregation, underlines the usefulness of oral history methodology. When considering these responses, it remains necessary to take into account historical distance, especially in interpreting critical evaluations of neighbourhood cinemas as areas of poverty, low taste or undisciplined 'bad' public behaviour. Of particular interest are statements which tend to downplay the impact of ideological segregation on cinema-going practices so many decades later. In this context one might speculate about whether the process of 'depillarization' of society, which started in the 1960s and soon affected politicized film exhibition in Belgium, also influenced respondents' replies.

The oral history analysis nevertheless underlines the contrast between the image of the film venues as it was intended (by the pillars) and how it was actually perceived. Film venues that openly targeted a very specific religious or political audience (predominantly Catholic parish halls with a regular film program) were conceived as being at the margin of cinema, or at least of cinema understood as a field of entertainment, leisure and pleasure. The greatest degree of class-mixing took place in the city centre film palaces, respondents argued. Although these cinemas were mostly associated with middle and higher social classes in their public image, promotion and architecture, their differentiated price policies

and programming strategies succeeded in attracting film fans from other classes who aspired to a 'better' film experience. In the respondents' mental mapping of the field of cinema, the *Capitole* clearly provided the most intense cinema experience available to them.

Conclusion and discussion

In this article we have tried to indicate how over the last couple of decades there is a growing interest in the lived experiences of historical film audiences. The relatively new field, which is closely linked to a plea for a new kind of cinema history from below, instigated a lively debate on theories, methods and research practices, and it has given rise to interesting interdisciplinary exchanges. But it equally raises problematic issues on methodology and methods.

In our case study we reported on a series of research projects dealing with historical cinema-going audiences in Belgium. The starting point was that postwar Belgian society was strongly divided along ideological (and religious) lines, and this also deeply influenced leisure, media and other cultural industries. The question was to what degree cinema, as the most popular form of entertainment and leisure, was also characterized by this ideological segregation. Using a three-layered research design, we concentrated on the issue of class segregation in terms of spatial distinction, programming distinction, and the audiences' experiences and cinema-going memories. The overall picture is that the exhibition structure was largely segregated, that film programming showed clear differences, while film audiences highlighted the practice of cinema-going to be a significant social routine, strongly inspired by community identity formation, class and social distinction. The three-layered design made it possible to capture more fully how and where what kind of movies were consumed by what kind of audiences. We are convinced that, applied to the question of the importance of ideology and social class, the analysis of the structure and the location of cinemas would have been insufficient if not supplemented by programming and audience analysis, thus making a strong case for triangulation in historical cinema audience research. Not only did oral history accounts propose interesting corrections or nuances to structural insights (e.g. on the power of the ideological pillars on cinema-going practices), they also brought forward new elements which might help to understand the lived experience of distinction (e.g. the importance of cloths, public decency, behavior or hygiene). We are convinced that, inspired by the idea of the conceptual plurality of the (film) audience, a triangulation of data, theory and methodology not only validates earlier insights, but it can also enrich our knowledge of the meaning and experience of cinema.

When looking at the literature overview as outlined above, it is clear that oral history is at its best when digging into lived experiences of cinema-going. It is less obvious to use it for obtaining basic historical information and fact checking. The researcher is confronted with a different set of problems, when for instance doing interviews with key players of a particular cinema historical setting, as we experienced in the case of the Antwerp exhibition

scene in the postwar era (see Lotze and Meers 2012). Although it is a rather weak source for getting hard facts, it does allow to get a grasp of the human aspect behind the available archival data of a specific organisation or institution.

Some topics of research might appear absent from the interviews, or very difficult to trigger respondents' memories and testimonies. We experienced this as we were looking for the impact of ideology (pillarization, discussed earlier) in our oral history interviews. Although we operationalized the rather abstract concept into questions on specific opinions, attitudes and behavior, at first sight, audiences seemed to downplay the impact of ideology. It seemed as if it was so much part of their world view then, it was rather invisible to them. It was only after careful reconsideration of explicit statements and implicit indications (at the level of interviewing techniques, as well as analyzing the transcripts) that we saw ideology at work. The main question then became: Where does ideology (in our case pillarization) shimmer through? Where do we find the traces of impact this ideological top down forces had on the lived experiences of these respondents?

Other problems can arise when working on specific forms of film that are not mainstream fiction film, as Louise Anderson (2009) experienced. In her study of historical newsreels audiences in Newcastle, UK, she comes to the conclusion that the theoretical frameworks for studying cinema memories, dominated by fiction films are not entirely appropriate to her study of a factual form like newsreels, because as Anderson (p. 187) argued: 'My participants had much more to say about cinema-going in general, which was talked about with great enthusiasm and in greater depth by some than newsreels in particular.' This particular problem for non-fiction news films equally highlights an advantage of working on fiction film memories. Talking about their cinema-going experiences appears to be a pleasant nostalgia-driven exercise, one related to bringing back 'treasured memories.' However it is also one which is mostly not threatening or linked to taboo issues. This is probably the reason why very few oral history projects focus on cinema-going experiences in more controversial places such porn cinemas, which would be a highly problematic issue to have respondents talk about.

One might think of more under-developed fields of enquiry, like research on the experience of cinema in particular spaces (e.g. the highbrow or cinephile film club, the early multiplex), in specific periods (e.g. cinema's decline in the 1960s), the experience of particular genres (e.g. on controversial juvenile delinquency movies) by specific kinds of audiences (e.g. women only screenings). In this context, it is also useful to think about other sources and traces which are available to understand historical media experiences, next to interviews (e.g. analysis of autobiographies, film fan diaries). In this context, Phil Wickham (2010) makes a plea for a more intensive use of 'ephemera' in cinema history, because it is precisely 'in the nexus between text and context, that ephemera can make meaning and provide historical evidence of the place of a film in its world and the lives of those that saw it' (p. 316). He argues that cinema programmes, fan magazines, toys, postcards, sheet music, books, posters, press books all can demonstrate 'the weft and weave of cinematic experience as it was understood without the benefit of hindsight' (p. 317). They offer an

illustration of everyday life 'as a generalised theoretical concept but also of real individual everyday lives' thus giving 'a very acute material rendering of the relationship between producer and consumer' (p. 319). And these bottom-up perspectives on cinema in everyday life, combined with a more structural analysis, provided us with a fresh perspective on (researching) cinema cultures in context.

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Notes:

¹ This article is based on three historical research projects on film exhibition, film audiences and cinema-going: (1) *'The Enlightened City': Screen culture between ideology, economics and experience. A study of the social role of film exhibition and film consumption in Flanders (1895-2004) in interaction with modernity and urbanization* (project funded by the FWO/SRC-Flanders, promoters: Philippe Meers University of Antwerp, Daniel Biltereyst Ghent University and Marnix Beyen University of Antwerp); (2) *Antwerpen Kinemastad. A media historic research on the post-war development of film exhibition and reception in Antwerp (1945-1995) with a special focus on the Rex cinema group* (Antwerp University Research Council BOF, 2009-2013, promoter: Philippe Meers); and (3) *Gent Kinemastad. A multimethodological research project on the history of film exhibition, programming and cinema-going in Ghent and its suburbs (1896-2010) as a case within a comparative New Cinema History perspective* (Ghent U Research Council BOF, 2009-2012, promoter: Daniel Biltereyst).

² On different forms of triangulation, mainly in the field of social sciences and the humanities, see Denzin1989.

³ See also special issues in journals such as *Participations* (November 2011).

⁴ These can be found in e.g. Biltereyst, and Meers 2007; Meers, Biltereyst and Van de Vijver, 2012; Maltby, Biltereyst and Meers, 2011; Biltereyst, Maltby & Meers, 2012.

⁵ More information and results for this research line can be found in: Biltereyst, Meers, Van de Vijver, and Willems, 2010.

⁶ More information and results for this research line can be found in: Biltereyst, Meers and Van de Vijver, 2011.