

Review

Judith Thissen & Clemens Zimmermann (eds.), *Cinema Beyond the City: Small-town and Rural Film Culture in Europe*, London: BFI, 2016. ISBN: 978-1-84457-846-7 (hb). 256pp.

In the grand scheme of film history, and even in the more recent shift into New Cinema History, explorations into the place of the cinema in rural life have often been consigned to the footnotes. There is interesting work by Peter Miskell (2006) on cinema-going in Wales, by Trevor Griffiths' (2012) on cinemas and cinema-going in Scotland up until the 1950s, and there is Melvyn Stokes' and Richard Maltby's (1999) collection on early American cinema culture. However, *Cinema Beyond the City* is the first collection of cinema histories devoted entirely to the towns and villages of the European countryside. This handsomely presented book offers fascinating cases studies which, when placed side-by-side, demonstrate the richness and variety of rural cinema-going experiences from its earliest incarnations to the present day.

Cinema Beyond the City has a coherent structure of fifteen studies divided between four themed sections, with the constituent studies of each section being presented chronologically. The themed sections are titled 'Local Dynamics', 'Regional Patterns', 'Alternative Exhibition Practices' and 'Contemporary Trends in Historical Perspective'. Part one features analyses of cinema-going culture in small towns in Scotland, Germany and at the British seaside. Tim Snelson's analysis of the programming and newspaper presence of cinemas in Great Yarmouth and Gorleston-on-Sea is typical of the collection's overall approach. The author tackles a heretofore academically neglected type of place, being the seaside resort towns which have previously fitted neither the 'everyday' nor the metropolitan concerns of film historians. Exhibition strategies are also examined by John Caughie in his history of small-town cinemas in Scotland with an argument for rural history as consisting of a patchwork of 'petite narratives'. This useful montage-oriented mindset resists the urge to lean on grand narratives that flatten and depersonalize. It has the possibility to explore personal experience and retain what Caughie terms the 'particularity of place'. Such detail would otherwise be lost in sweeping generalisations. Caughie's chapter opens the collection and effectively demonstrates the wealth of sources and detail which a film historian must somehow tame in an effort to venture into these historically undervalued areas. Dörthe Gruttmann's work in this section also rails against such

generalisations with a micro-level analysis of the influence of the Catholic Church on film culture in two German towns. One of the great strengths of this collection's focus on rural cinema culture is how it can explore the role of religious organisations in the shaping of it. By taking as its subjects communities in which religion remained a strong central power well into the twentieth century, and by refusing generalisations on a national level, Gruttman and others in this collection provide a more nuanced and altogether more grounded picture of the relationship between the Church and the cinema. The first section establishes the tone of the collection with these illuminating case studies of each a different nature: Snelson attempts to fill in the blanks with regards to underserved towns; Gruttman looks at an important yet under-examined feature of rural society which has, in the past, had an undeniable influence on cinema culture; and Caughie's methodological question of how to craft a history from the innumerable yet fragmentary sources well sets the scene for the explorations that follow.

The second section, 'Regional Patterns', introduces new sources and modes of investigation, including oral testimony and the use of maps and demographic data. Two chapters in this section that draw on oral testimonies – from Corrine Marache and Matthew Jones – tackle their uses in rather different ways. Whereas Marache's chapter is largely about business practices and exhibition, with only a small section dealing with cinema-goers, Jones's chapter focuses exclusively on the experience of the paying public. Stylistically, the two chapters also take a different approach. Marache combines oral testimony with archival materials, some of which are included for illustration, and writes an interesting history of exhibition and cinema-going which would be lost without the use of oral sources. However, Marache does not directly quote these oral sources. What results is a clear micro-history of her chosen area of Gironde, France, but one which is reliant on the content of the oral testimony and not the voices of the sources. Jones, on the other hand, intersperses his history of rural cinema-going in 1960s Britain with frequent quotations from his interviewees, allowing participants to tell their stories much more in their own words. An important methodological consideration discussed in Jones's chapter, which Marache does not account for, is the role of memory in shaping these testimonies. While these two chapters provide excellent local histories which demonstrate the need for engaging with oral history methods, oral history is something which I would personally have liked to see more of in this collection, if only so as to read more histories concerned with the personal experience of rural cinema-goers. Two chapters which employ mapping techniques and demographic data round out this second section with Thissen's work on the Netherlands dealing again with fascinating religious factors and also looking beyond the cinema to the influence of increasing migrant populations fueled by local farm-labouring opportunities.

A section on 'Alternative Exhibition Practices' follows. It examines travelling cinema along with more agenda-driven exhibition practices, including screenings arranged by food companies and religious youth clubs who sought to use the cinema as a tool of spiritual education and moral instruction. These archival studies cover a broad period and a large geographic spread, ranging from the 1920s right up to the 1980s and taking in aspects of

rural film culture in Switzerland, the Netherlands, France and Germany. There is a risk of some chapters casting too wide a temporal net, a result of the narrow focus of the exhibition practices in question and the practices' lack of previous coverage in film history. However, the chapters in this collection are well-grounded in case studies. Yvonne Zimmermann's history of corporate film exhibitions, for example, spans a course of thirty years, but focuses on a single corporation. Concrete examples are used which shed a light on certain practices and serve as a jumping-off point for further investigations in the same spirit.

The final themed section, titled 'Contemporary Trends in Historical Perspective', presents a case study of a single cinema in semi-rural France, a geographic comparison of rural and urban film exhibition in northern Belgium, a history of community cinemas in the UK, and, finally, a look at contemporary British cinema-going as multiplexes shift back to town centres. The work in this section, especially, is reminiscent of and a great compliment to the study of cinema-going in Nottingham by Mark Jancovich, Lucy Faire and Sarah Stubbings (2003) in *The Place of the Audience*. Karina Aveyard's study of British community cinemas since the 1950s returns to Caughie's problem of how to link micro- and macro-historical perspectives and, in looking at the sociocultural, political and economic influences on community cinemas, she concludes that the two perspectives should be considered complimentary, rather than exclusionary. This final section provides a useful comparison, as discussed in Thissen's introduction which helpfully outlines the collection's aims and situates it in previous histories, between rural and urban cinema cultures.

One of the strengths of this collection is the authors' willingness to place the rural in contrast to the urban and to examine the past and its relation to the present. In the book's introduction, Thissen's introduction makes a good case for why studies of rural film culture are important, but also, in highlighting the wealth of methods used by the collection's authors, she outlines *how* the cinema in such communities can be studied. The collecting together of these studies, some of which use very different methods and frameworks, highlights a number of different aspects of cinema history which can be explored. This includes the cultural, the social and the economic aspects of cinema-going. The variety of methods used here, from mapping and the analysis of financial records to reception studies and the use of discourse analysis, serve to usefully demonstrate how histories are shaped in no small way by the methods of enquiry, showing the kinds of understanding available to different approaches.

It is, of course, inevitable, given the number of methods represented, that proponents of one or another method may feel short-changed, and so it feels with the use of oral testimony. Much of *Cinema Beyond the City* focuses on the exhibitors and those who would use the cinema for their own ends, be they spiritual or monetary, rather than those in the audience. The majority of studies in the collection use methods which establish the material conditions of audiences' experiences, rather than methods, such as oral history, which describe those experiences and their meaning. However, this is still an incredibly valuable historical foray into the European countryside with fascinating considerations of

alternative exhibition practices, the role of religion in the shaping of cinema culture, and other factors which come to the forefront when studies of a wide variety of geographic regions are placed side-by-side. This collection would prove invaluable to anyone interested in the importance of place in the study of cinema's audiences or exhibition history and does a great service to communities previously under-served by historical narratives of the cinema.

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