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‘From Screen to Life’: Film Audiences in Catholic Flanders, a Cinephile Approach

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Abstract

This article explores the overlooked role of Catholic film initiatives in shaping film audiences in Flanders, Belgium. Considering the pillarized organization of Belgian exhibition practices, the emphasis lies on the integration of film culture in Catholic schools as well as in their social movements. Cinephilia is foregrounded as an important phenomenon for ongoing research in film audiences, and therefore the arguments draw on an interview with Eric de Kuyper (born 1942) and Emile Poppe (born 1947), combined with the film critical work of Jos Burvenich (1914-2002) and Dirk Lauwaert (1944-2013), alongside various audience perspectives from popular press, like school bulletins, online blogs and TV shows. These testimonies indicate the specificities of urban and rural film culture in Catholic milieus, emphasizing their shared core as invested in critical film literacy. Finally, these various cinephile accounts on Catholic film initiatives present an episodic overview of shifting tendencies, from a strong American influence in the immediate post-war era to an emphasis on youth and film literacy in the fifties, and an explicitly social orientation from the sixties onwards.

Keywords: Cinephilia, Ciné-clubs and film forums, Catholic film education, Belgian film audiences

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Introduction

The connection between film cultures and Catholicism remains a debated issue: from its liberal impact on post-war film aesthetics and philosophy to conservative practices of censorship, Catholicism either explicitly or implicitly has been considered a driving force in the implementation of cinema in everyday life. Notable film scholars and cinephiles have accessed cinema dispersedly via the Catholic network. Immediately, André Bazin comes to mind, whose film theory, especially his views on the ontology of the photographic image, have sparked debates about alleged Catholic influence (see, for instance, Rosen, 2011; Leventopoulos, 2012; Joret, 2015; Dalle Vacche, 2020). Similarly, Gilles Deleuze (1989: 171) emphasises the influence of Catholicism on postwar cinema, stating that 'There is a Catholic quality to cinema. […] a certain Catholic quality has continued to inspire a great number of authors, and revolutionary passion has passed into third world cinema' (see also Treveri Gennari and Vanelli, 2010). Within this body of research, Belgium is often put forth as a breeding ground for Catholic film culture: as Daniel Biltereyst (2015: 255) writes, 'Belgian Catholics managed to become active in an exceptionally wide range of levels in the local film culture mainly from the 1920s onwards and lasting until the 1960s' (see also Biltereyst, 2007). This precise period from the interbellum until the mid-sixties is characterised in Belgium by the socio-political phenomenon of pillarisation:[1] rather than dividing the social sphere horizontally into different classes (lower, middle, upper), pillarisation implied a vertical organisation of society into pillars relating to religious or political beliefs. This meant that broadcasting companies, political parties, educational institutions as well as hospitals and leisure organisations had clear ideological labels. As such, film culture in Belgium was organised ideologically rather than nationally (Biltereyst, 2015), and while Catholicism was not the only driving force behind the widespread assimilation of film culture in Belgium, it was by far the most influential: from the 1910s onwards, Catholic venues in Flanders far outnumbered (often doubled and even tripled) socialist, liberal, or Flemish-nationalist theatres (Biltereyst, 2015: 262). Yet, in current audience studies on Belgian cinema audiences, specific testimonies on Catholic film culture are remarkably sparse and do not reflect this dominance of Catholic film initiatives in Belgium: their film programming is remembered as outdated and censored, and their film theatres as lacking proper screening conditions (Biltereyst, 2015: 266).

And yet, cinephilia and film criticism have often been understood contingent upon a so-called 'Catholic gaze': from postwar French cinephilia to the worldwide networks of ciné-clubs, Catholicism is known to have stimulated transnational film culture (Leventopoulos, 2012, 2015). In a more provocative manner, Belgian cultural critic, novelist, film scholar and filmmaker Eric de

[1] Pillarisation is said to originate from a Catholic impulse against secularisation and took place from the 1910s into the mid-sixties. While also present in Austria and Switzerland, it is relatively unique to Belgium and the Netherlands. Following progressive secularisation from the sixties onwards, these socio-political pillars diluted, which in Belgium led to a stronger linguistic division between the francophone and Flemish geographic regions. Incidentally, the dissolution of the pillars in Flanders in combination with an increased Flemish identity politics led to the region's first systemic government film funding (on this topic specifically, see Willems [2015]). Pillarisation is often referenced as a significant framework for understanding local cinema culture, especially in comparisons between Belgium and the Netherlands (see Biltereyst et al. [2012, 2019b]; Dibbets, 2006).

Kuyper (cited in Bakkers, 2019: online) claimed that: 'Cinephilia is a Catholic tradition. […] the pope had given his approval: film is not bad. Instantly there were film clubs everywhere. It was a Catholic invention'. This statement points to a blind spot in existing research on cinemagoing in Catholic milieus and invites a study of cinephile accounts on cinemagoing in Belgium specifically, which have so far not been explicitly included in audience reception studies. This article originates from an interview held with De Kuyper in December 2023, complemented with passages on film culture from De Kuyper's autobiographical work, as well as the film critical work of Jos Burvenich and Dirk Lauwaert, interwoven with relevant anecdotes from popular press (e.g., local newspapers and school bulletins, blogs and TV shows). The article concludes with insights coming from a follow-up conversation with Emile Poppe, De Kuyper's longtime collaborator as an actor, filmmaker and friend, whose film memories indicate the importance of film literacy in Catholic social movements, leading to a final discussion on the worldwide impact of this Catholic inspired, film critical gaze. The proposed connection between Belgian film culture and the Catholic film initiatives in this area not only sheds new light on the early history of film education in Belgium but also raises fundamental questions relating to the nature and relevance of cinephilia in historical research on film audiences. Furthermore, the consecutive focus on De Kuyper, Lauwaert and then Poppe reflects both the difference and similarities between the urban and rural context, while also indicating various transnational shifts from a strong American influence on Catholic film programming in the immediate post-war era, an emphasis on film literacy in the fifties, and an explicitly social orientation from the sixties onwards.

The Place of Cinephilia in Audience Research

When it comes to studying film audiences, current research on the history of cinemagoing foregrounds the idea that 'informants' cinemagoing memories may be interpreted as re-enactments of processes of childhood and adolescent attachment, individuation, and separation' (Kuhn, 2011, 2013; Kuhn et al., 2016). Because of cinema's expansive implementation in everyday life, film memories in many cases coincide with adolescent experiences, blending life events with specific film scenes or cinemagoing experiences. Annette Kuhn classified such film memories into three types on a continuum with on the one side the film text itself (type A), and on the opposite end the social act of cinemagoing (type C); in between these two poles, type B memories are film memories 'implanted' into a person's own life story (Kuhn, 2011: 92). From thereon, the aim of integrating oral film histories into audience studies has been to correct an overemphasis on film techniques and/or films themselves (type A) as the driving force of film history. Countering this trend, studies of filmgoing experiences emphasise the anecdotal (type B) and social (type C) memories and thereby aim 'to reconstruct cinema cultures "from below", gathering and drawing on informant-generated source materials – the testimonies of cinemagoers themselves, speaking or writing decades after the events being recalled' (Kuhn et al., 2016: 6). Studying film audiences, then, implies moving away from strictly formalist interpretations of film in favour of understanding film history as 'a way of life (in which people act, talk, play or think "cinematically" – *comme du cinéma* – in everyday life' (Biltereyst et al., 2019a: 2).

Because of their vertical organisation, the so-called pillars – whether they are socialist, Catholic or liberal, in the case of Belgium – are in and of themselves interesting phenomena when it comes to studying the implementation of film in everyday life. The present study indicates that within the Catholic pillar, cinemagoing was remarkably well-integrated, not only as leisure activity, but into their educational system as well as their youth and workers' movements. Furthermore, within Kuhn's categorisation, the phenomenon of cinephilia also gains relevance: with detailed elaborations of individual shots and images, cinephile reflections are simultaneously anecdotal and personal, as well as reflections of larger social, political, or cultural world events. This way, Serge Daney titled his posthumous work a 'ciné-biography': 'the story of his life as a cinephile in relation to a certain history of what he called modern cinema' (Kretzschmar, 2014: online). Similarly, Christian Keathley (2006: 151) concludes *Cinephilia and History, or The Wind in the Trees* with a series of what he terms 'cinephiliac anecdotes': 'the cinephile tells a story about—or a story that embodies—his or her relationship with the cinema, a story that has the effect of knowledge in the generalizable sense about its object, as well as in some personal sense'. In both cases, cinephilia blends personal film experiences with a more general film- and world history, and therefore cinephile accounts are of particular interest when it comes to historicising film audience experiences.

From Brussels to Antwerp: Eric De Kuyper and 'The Issue of Information'

When it comes to film culture in Catholic milieus in Belgium, available testimonies generally emphasise their perceived backwards programming due to censorship or lack of access to newer films, the amateur look and feel of parish screening halls, and the moralist age restrictions imposed by local priests. People remember the film titles as 'second-rate, old and inferior to the ones played at commercial theatres' (Biltereyst, 2015: 266) with their theatres being 'small, dark, uncomfortable and as technically less suitable for movie screenings' (Biltereyst, 2015: 265). In conclusion to a study focusing on the city of Ghent, for example, it is argued that while Catholic programming was a substantial part of film exhibition practices in the city, 'its off-center location, unattractive programming strategies and the audience's pejorative accounts tended to diminish its importance' (Biltereyst et al., 2011: 121). While it is true that Catholic film programs did not categorically include box office hits, and their theatres were generally less equipped with the commercial outlook of the city palaces, the following cinephile perspectives highlight important nuances in this regard. To be more specific, a cinephile gaze is not necessarily a commercial one, and vice versa: while religious censorship certainly played a role in the early stages of their film programming, it is precisely as an alternative to commercialised circuits that Catholic exhibition practices gain relevance. Biltereyst, Lotze and Meers (2012: 707) write about this that

> 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 field of entertainment, leisure and pleasure.

In line with these findings, Catholic initiatives in film education appear invested in countering the predominantly commercial and leisurely consumption of film.

While most cinephile writing gravitates towards the film experience with occasional biographical details, De Kuyper's autobiographical novels interweave film experiences into the fabric of his larger life stories. The interview with the author held in December 2023 was an invitation to elaborate specifically on his earlier statement on the Catholic origins of cinephilia, and dispersedly also sketches concrete situations and experiences in which pillarisation influenced the implementation of film in everyday life. This interwoven nature of film and life experiences exemplifies cinephilia as 'context-activated' rather than text-activated (see, Biltereyst et al., 2012: 694): in the early youth of De Kuyper in Brussels, this is an explicitly Catholic context, whether it concerns this early school going memories, or the years he served as an altar boy. About his first encounter with film at the Institut Jean Baptiste de la Salle, for example, De Kuyper (2023) recounts:

> I was six years old; we're in 1948. It was a small school; it only had a primary school. We still had classes on Saturday mornings, but every Saturday afternoon, which usually was leisure time, there was film. And so, of course you go. […] We watched films from the USIS, the United States Information Service. It was part of the Marshall plan: the Americans gave us films to watch. So, indeed, a lot of short Disney, and all kinds of nonsense: we were happy we didn't have class! But for example, swimming championships in Florida, that sort of thing. […] The school was funded by an American patron, someone who once studied with the friars in Brussels and then moved to the USA and became very rich.

In *De hoed van tante Jeannot*, De Kuyper (2015: 174) describes these American shorts as a 'subcutaneous injection of an *American way of seeing life*, an *American way of seeing*' (original emphasis), despite their seemingly futile content. Besides American images, he writes, the school children were also some of the first to taste Coca-Cola:

> Few kids really liked the drink, but everyone was happy with the rulers and blotting paper that were distributed with it. The men were dressed in green pants and green shirts with green ties and waved with their trophies. They were remarkably friendly and all young, with explicitly brown or light blonde hair. They looked like movie stars, and movie stars in school, who also smile at you, you don't see that every day! (De Kuyper, 2015: 177-178)

While these experiences in primary school involved seemingly insignificant short films, an accidentally uncensored newsreel on Hiroshima and Bergen-Belsen marked his childhood experiences for life. De Kuyper (2015: 177) writes about this scene, characteristically in the third person, that:

> It kept vibrating. It had absorbed into the fabric of his experiences, of his history. It lingered in him like a sensitive nerve that would forever remind him of the shock,

> the injury, the trauma of the indescribable human suffering, nevertheless seen with his own child's eyes. […] It must have been a good school indeed. He is still grateful to the friars for their terrible mistake.

This way, the news reel of the concentration camps functions in De Kuyper's biography as a core memory – Kuhn (2011: 92) would call this an 'implanted' memory – in which a film fragment has simultaneously grasped both the personal imagination and world history.

De Kuyper's early film experiences in Brussels are exemplary of how Catholic film culture was engrained in everyday life. The following, lengthier passage exemplifies this everydayness of film experiences, involving lengthy tram rides, a picky eater, and serving mass in exchange for film tickets:

> After primary school, I went to a Jesuit college in the city center. There, attendance to the morning mass was mandatory, at 8 o'clock I believe it was. Every day, it was always such a drag to go there… And my mother, who was nevertheless very religious, she wasn't too happy about this because she knew: "you have to go there on an empty stomach." Concretely, going there meant: 45 minutes by tram to the Marollen, near the Kapellenkerk. So, my mother asked me: "what do you eat there?" Well… I didn't like anything, so I didn't eat. My mother was always very focused on my lack of appetite, so she said: "I will write a little note that exempts you from morning prayer due to health reasons." And I was freed!
>
> But then I discovered that those very same Jesuits had a monastery attached to the Gesù church, nearby the botanical garden. […] I wanted to go serve Mass there. If you did that, they gave you breakfast served on a little plate. It was a bit closer to home and my mother gave me permission to go. I was one of six altar boys […] and I told my mother: "fantastic breakfast!" So, she was reassured – and I was very happy, because each time you served mass you received a little ticket. With x-number of tickets, you could visit one of the film screenings they organized on Sunday for free. In the afternoon, obviously, and paid for the public. They usually showed "family films", to put it that way. […] It was quite a large hall, it still exists… I always tried to find it again, but it didn't have a clear entrance like movie theatres do, you had to go through an entire wing of the monastery to reach it. (De Kuyper, 2023)

The programming schedules, too, were often linked to the structure of everyday life in specific pillars. Besides Catholic screenings that were never concurrent with Church service, De Kuyper (2023) specifically mentions attending the socialist film club Le Wolu in Brussels, with film screenings on Sunday mornings ('That's a statement!'), which he discovered while taking the tram to visit his brother and attended at the young age of thirteen.

Moving from Brussels to Antwerp at fourteen years old, De Kuyper repeatedly emphasises 'the question of information' in his access to film culture: announcements for film events and film criticism in newspapers and leaflets lying around on the kitchen table, give a sense of

accidental access to film culture. His mother's preference for the French version of a Catholic journal, for example, was crucial to De Kuyper's access to film culture:

> I was lucky with the [newspaper] my mother read, *La libre belgique*, because it had a film column of quite high level – people that worked along the lines of [André] Bazin. My mother also read it: she was very engaged. She was a member of the "Bond der Grote Gezinnen" [The Ligue of Large Families]; [they] had a small journal, and even though she lived in Flanders, my mother preferred the francophone version, *Le Ligueur*. Coincidentally, this little journal had a very good film chronicle as well, written by someone named Franz Weyergans: one of the top-critics, not just any kind, one of the best francophone journalists of the country. (De Kuyper, 2023)

This question of information illustrates a strong entanglement of film culture in everyday life through pillarised newspapers and socio-cultural activities, including film. For De Kuyper specifically, this also meant a dissolution of linguistic divisions and access to francophone film culture within a Flemish context in Antwerp. Quite often, he fell through the linguistic cracks:

> [T]he francophone film league, *Les amis du film*, organized a contest for all Catholic schools of Brussels – perhaps of Belgium, or in any case francophone Belgium. I was attending a Flemish Jesuit college, the Onze Lieve Vrouw college in Antwerp, which might have facilitated my acceptance: it was meant to be a contest between the (francophone) Catholic institutions. They organized such a contest each year, for students in high school. The candidates assembled in the large lecture hall of the Collège Saint-Michel, a Jesuit college in Brussels. (De Kuyper, 2023)

The Salle Saint-Michel was built for the college in 1932 to function as theatre and festivity hall; with around 1400 seats, the art-déco theatre could welcome students and their parents for school celebrations, and it was large enough indeed for nationwide film quizzes as well as film screenings.[2] The specific contest was the *Concours des Jeunesses Cinématographiques* organised in 1957 with the purpose of 'developing at the same time the critical mindset and the ability to express oneself' (Davay, 1995: 122). It was an extensive enterprise for teenagers aged sixteen-nineteen, spending an entire day on location: a first 'blank' morning screening was followed by a written assignment; then, a second but thematically oriented screening of the same film in the afternoon would lead to an additional written essay; and, finally, the ten or so finalists were given seven minutes to present their critique of the film orally, in front of an audience (Davay, 1995: 122).[3] In Antwerp, Jesuits had similarly built a theatre for educational film screenings, as De Kuyper recalls:

[2] The theatre corresponds with the entry 'St Michel (Etterbeek)' in the Cinema Belgica database (Biltereyst et al., n.d.).

[3] The year De Kuyper participates, the film in question is a Hitchcock, *The Wrong Man* (US, 1956): he ends up second, ceding the first place to François Weyergans, 'indeed, the son of Franz: he was a year older than me, and, via his father, he had a huge "background"' (De Kuyper, 2023). François Weyergans would

> Until the end of my high school years, there were the Jesuits on the Frankrijklei; they had built their own film theatre, Elckerlyc, which still exists. It's a very large theatre, and Jos Burvenich gave his Film Forums there. It was organized by the Catholic Film League for all the Catholic schools in the province of Antwerp […]. There was always an introduction by Burvenich, he did *The Seventh Seal*, *La Strada*, *Ivan the Terrible*, Japanese films... always with an introduction and a discussion afterwards.

This format, the introduction with a discussion afterwards, was the standard method of Jos Burvenich (1914-2002), also known as the 'film friar',[4] whose so-called Film Forums had an undeniable impact on film education in the countryside of Flanders. As De Kuyper's experiences are explicitly urban, marked by an abundance of film culture, the situation in the countryside, to which I will turn in the following section, was different. Screening facilities were sometimes fully improvised, emphasising their contrast with the urban commercialised approach: their educational set-up, as I will explain subsequently, was designed to distinguish the commercial act of 'going to the movies' from 'going to a film': a unique approach to film literacy, wagering between auteur theory and reception analysis.

Testimonies from the Film Forums: Jos Burvenich and the adolescent audience

> In my earliest film memories, I am 6 years old. My first film was a Chaplin: *The Immigrant*. The theatre was enormous and full of children, invited by American sailors. There was screeching. I couldn't really laugh along, and I remember how sad I felt for Charlie, who sat there with all his possessions in a small burlap sack while each rolling of the boat makes his food slip out of reach. As a little Antwerpian, born and raised around the port, this was a familiar image to me. How often had I not seen them sit there, the Polish immigrants, on the square near the Steen. (Burvenich, 1977: 9)

continue to work for the *Cahiers du cinéma* and direct a few films, before becoming an acclaimed novelist and member of the Académie française. In *Franz et François* (Weyergans, 1997), he offers a detailed account of the relationship with his father (a very active film critic and passionate organiser of film clubs) as well as a portrait of his cinephile youth.

[4] Burvenich is said to have played an important role in the international recognition of Bergman at the time (see Van Belle, 2019). Burvenich supposedly conducted a 'six-day' interview with the director, after which the two became close friends and worked together. Rumor has it that he co-wrote the scripts for *Through a Glass Darkly* (dir. Ingmar Bergman, SWE, 1961), and *Winter Light* (dir. Ingmar Bergman, SWE, 1963), as well as for *Gertrud* (dir. Carl Dreyer, DNK, 1964) (see De Standaard, 2002).

The impact of the Catholic pillar on film culture is known to have been especially large in rural areas, where commercial circuits were less accessible (Meers et al., 2010). In the Campine region around Antwerp, the Film Forums of Burvenich exemplify this influence in organising an early film education network in several provincial high schools. By focusing on film programing for secondary schools, this section aims to contribute to ongoing discussions on adolescent film memories specifically, as suggested by Kuhn in reference to the '"reminiscence bump", a critical period in individual development between the ages of 5 and 30 when personal and collective memories are laid down' (Kuhn et al., 2016: 12). Considering the unique and widespread integration of film literacy in Catholic education, combined with the high enrolment numbers of this schooling system in Belgium (Buchanan and Conway, 1996), cinema experiences are engrained in adolescent memories of many Antwerpians. Film Forums, with their typical introduction and after-film discussion format, were therefore a fundamental contribution to popular cultural education in Flanders from the fifties onwards.

When it comes to cinemagoing memories and adolescence in Flanders specifically, Jos Burvenich is an important but completely overlooked figure. His views on film as 'life expression' imply the necessity of after-film discussions, which he called 'film forums' and organised specifically for an adolescent audience. In his introduction to *Film als levensexpressie* (*Film as Life Expression*, 1977) he makes a bold statement against common censoring practices: he mentions a series of 'screens' that keep the film, as intended by its author, from its audience. For example, manipulation through advertising, altered titles in the process of translation, trailers, publicity slogans, etc. are all part of what he terms 'advertising routine' that negatively affect the film as art form. 'Worse, however,' he continues,

> are the direct falsifiers of the film itself: those who cut out of caution or to force a film into a particular program. […] And then we haven't even mentioned those who cut into adult films, to make them fit for young viewers. (Burvenich, 1977: 19)

Reminiscent of his own early cinema experience at six years of age, he recalls a large-scale survey on the motivations of the youth for going to the cinema, stating that 'to a large majority, their answer was relatable to the expectation of more insight in life, an expectation to a pre-experience of what life is and what it can offer' (Burvenich, 1977: 9). In his Film Forums, then, Burvenich paid special attention to after-film discussions, which were supposed to stimulate the necessary connection between the film auteur and the lives of the public:

> Unknowingly, every spectator, including the attentive ones, places onto the film a pattern of their personal life experience. They will give to specific gestures, certain scenes, a depth that is not necessarily in correspondence with the importance the filmmaker was giving it. […] [The spectator] will experience this "difference" as their own which enables them to access the core of [a] not so easy film. Even more, they will feel the need afterwards to confront their own experience during the film with the experiences of others who also watched it. (Burvenich, 1977: 22-25)

This way, to Burvenich, auteur cinema 'does not merely involve the public with whatever it visualizes, but it simply cannot do without this public anymore as a contributor on equal level

with the filmmaker" (Burvenich, 1977: 26). Not only does he consider the youth as particularly receptive towards the film experience, but his view on the participation of the audience is a crucial contribution to contemporary research on film audiences. Furthermore, he emphasises in that same introduction the importance of quality film screenings by making a clear distinction between 'going to the movies' and 'going to watch a film' (Burvenich, 1977: 17): a distinction between the movies as pastime versus cinema as cultural phenomenon. This way, we can see in Burvenich's Film Forums an implied cinephile theory on spectatorship taking shape within the Catholic education system. The dispersed reflections on the Film Forums in various local and national popular press testify to the impact of film in youth memories and indicate a tendency in Catholic exhibition practices towards non-commercial and critical, indeed cinephile spectatorship.

These Film Forums were organised from the fifties onwards for all the Catholic schools in the region of Antwerp, and therefore mandatory stuff for a large part of the Flemish school going youth. With weekly screenings at the Elckerlyc-hall, a theatre built in the 1950s for the Jesuit colleges in Antwerp, or at Het Kursaal in Turnhout for schools further away into the Campine countryside, these screenings are engrained in the memories of the people from Antwerp. Several testimonies hint at the specific place of these Film Forums in their coming-of-age. In a talk show on TV (11.09, 'Alleen Elvis Blijft Bestaan', VRT Canvas), for example, Herman van Goethem, historian and rector at Antwerp University, recounts the following scene:

> *Cría cuervos* is a youth memory of the Film Forum, where we watched that film. In my generation, this was boys and girls separated: the girls were seated in the main nave, and the boys on the sides. In *Cría cuervos* there's a scene where the little girl puts on a bra to play mommy. First all the girls started laughing in the middle of the Elckerlyc-hall, only then we all started laughing. That scene always stuck with me… we were so ignorant back then; it was so different that world of separated upbringing (online).

With gender segregation in Catholic schools being more rule than exception well into the twenty-first century, it appears that these Film Forums were unique opportunities for many college-aged boys and girls to share the same space. Another testimony from Antwerp recounts the discussions afterwards as follows:

> Burvenich always ended his introductions with the message that, after the screening, he'd like to have one boy and one girl exchange ideas about the film. […] As if on cue, all the boys from my class turn towards me, and I realized that if I didn't move towards the podium now, I probably lost all my credit in class altogether. I'm asked to sit on Burvenich's right, the girl on the left. For the love of God, I don't remember what his specific question was, but when I got the mic, the only thing I remember was that I must have given a very clever and funny answer. With the pleasant consequence that I caused a burst of laughter, along with a wave of enthusiastic applause from the entire audience (including those "terrifying" girls!!?!!?!!) (Van Hest, 2017: online)

For many students, the cinema becomes a space of potential amorous encounters in an otherwise largely gender segregated social sphere and therefore a setting of their coming of age. In Turnhout, similar situations arose:

> The war had been over for 30 years already, but one afternoon in rows of two, our school marched to the film theatre in small city Turnhout. It was built right above the city swimming pool, so the smell of chlorine and the kids' cheering resounded during the matinees into the theatre. As always, we were rigorously divided in two compartments: the girls from 't Heilig Graf on the left and the boys from Sint-Pieter on the right, with a guardian of public decency on each end of the row. It was the Jesuit Jos Burvenich who was doing the introduction. We were going to watch *Kes* (1969) – according to the film friar a social drama about an outcast boy and his love for a tame kestrel. […] When the lights went out, centuries of human civilization disappeared with one click. On the right, a deafening mating call from hundreds young, male baboons and on the left, ear-piercing screaming from hundreds female grouses in distress. Instead of *Kes* at Het Kursaal in Turnhout, we attended a performance of *The Planet of the Apes* with a soundtrack of yodeling Johnny Weismuller in full vines-flight on his way to Jane. (Janssen, 2011: 22)

At another provincial school nearby, the Sint-Jan Bergmanscollege in West-Malle, the sixties meant a renewed high school curriculum, including a course on 'Film Aesthetics': one of the friars managed to get the oldest classes to attend Burvenich's screenings in Turnhout. As an alumnus recounts, 'it was the first time we were allowed to take part in a mixed group of high school students: we had never seen so many girls together!' (Dupont, n.d.: online). Again, the mixed gendered space is one of the first memories relating to these screenings, followed by a more in-depth appreciation of the films themselves:

> The introduction was done by father Burvenich, a Jesuit. He was very knowledgeable about film and a personal acquaintance of Fellini. The first film he showed us, "bluekes" [amateurs in Flemish] was *Il Tetto*. Afterwards, we saw *La Strada*, *Citizen Kane*, and the very special film *Mon oncle* by Jacques Tati. For that period, these were each very high-quality films. After the screening, there was always a very interesting evaluation of the film by Burvenich (Dupont, n.d.: online).

Soon after these weekly trips to Turnhout, due to an increase in student numbers and a lack of seats in Het Kursaal, the school starts organising their own film forums in Burvenich-style, in an improvised film theatre in the gym/exam-hall. In their course syllabus, they write:

> Why film forums?
> - not to create film critics, but to turn you all into critical spectators;
> - to learn how to analyze a film;
> - to stimulate a correct view on film: not just a story, not just to fight boredom, not just to be entertained;

- to fight the ease with which most filmgoers swallow movies (i.e. to compensate for the lesser influence of film with common sense).

Our purpose: we don't go to the movies, we don't go to the theatre, but to a film. (Dupont, n.d.: online)

This final emphasis on 'going to a film' clearly reiterates Burvenich's views on film literacy as stimulating a non-commercial gaze. In contrast to Het Kursaal, furthermore, the school's screening facilities were quite improvised:

> There was a temporary emergency classroom built with triplex-plates and plastic windows (supported with chicken wire). It served as "gym hall", exam room, but also as "film hall". […] When the celebration/gym hall was finally built, students could watch films in better conditions. But this always meant big practical preparations beforehand: the gym classes had to move. Our gym teacher Jan Uydens had to take his class to the playground, or improvise some sort of theory about sports in another classroom. The hall was emptied, seats were placed, a film screen put down (no need for long white, clean sheets anymore) and the projector placed behind the gym equipment. Film rolls were distributed by different distribution houses and had to be picked up and returned in depots in Antwerp or Turnhout. (Dupont, n.d.: online)

With their emphasis on theatre seating conditions and specific locations, the Film Forums in fact appear to solicit mostly memories relating to 'going to the movies' rather than going 'to a film', as per Burvenich's distinction. While a few titles and occasionally a specific scene are important in these adolescent memories, it is mostly the location and its surroundings – not the smell of popcorn but of chlorine, the screaming kids (from the pool nearby, or in the audience), and very often 'the girls' – that are emphasised. To use Kuhn's terminology, these appear to be mostly 'type C' memories in which 'the essentially *social* act of "going to the pictures" is of far greater consequence than the cultural activity of seeing films' (Kuhn, 2011: 93). Yet this infatuated setting nevertheless sets the stage for a final reflection on these Film Forums from an explicitly cinephile point of view – quite literally, a lover's perspective.

Writing from the Countryside: Dirk Lauwaert and the 'Lover's Problem'

As Film Forums were implemented widely across the province of Antwerp from the fifties onward, they had a considerable impact on integrating film culture amongst baby-boomer adolescents. While these Film Forums were less indicative of De Kuyper's overall film formation,[5]

[5] De Kuyper (2023) says that he 'personally hated the Film Forums of Burvenich, with his introductions and conclusions always being about what *he* was talking about. So moralizing, content-driven…' Because of this experience, he grew to dislike the concept of after-film discussions, but changed his mind much later in life, teaching film at the University of Frankfurt as a visiting scholar in the summer of 1993. De Kuyper wrote about his teaching experiences there in *Te vroeg…te laat… Een liefdesgeschiedenis* [*Too*

they have certainly been influential in the early film experiences of Dirk Lauwaert (1944-2013), a close friend of De Kuyper and a key figure in the history of Belgian film criticism. As a teenager, Lauwaert attends the Sint Jozef college in Turnhout – a provincial city, capital of the Campine region that he considered a place of exile (Meuleman, 2014).[6] The school cautiously stimulates film culture, screening Laurel and Hardy, as well as Charlie Chaplin, *Lassie Come Home* (dir. Fred Wilcox, 1943) etc. Lauwaert is officially too young to attend Burvenich's screenings, but he nevertheless joins his father who strongly supports his son's preference for film. As his biographer Bart Meuleman (2014: 2) recounts:

> At Het Kursaal, the local film theatre, he watches the films about *Sissi* with Romy Schneider – Lauwaert instantly falls in love, he writes her multiple love letters. Audrey Hepburn, in *War and Peace*, also leaves a deep impression. Both actresses originally are the object of a deep and youthful fascination, but they will each in their own way grow into a source of reflection.

This way, Lauwaert's amorous encounter is not with his pubescent peers, but with the stars on screen. In fact, the idea of writing love letters to a Hollywood star translates from adolescent infatuation into a kind of theory on film criticism, or indeed: on cinephilia. 'Emblematic in my history', Lauwaert writes, 'are the historian who didn't bother watching the films he studied, the art historian who never critiqued the work of art, the theoretician who shoves aside the "amateur" as hystericus' (cited in Vogelaar, 1997: online). In another text, which deals specifically with the work of Roland Barthes, he clearly emphasises love, passion and enthusiasm as part and parcel of the film critical process: 'Thinking here inevitably takes the form of a relationship. With [Barthes], intellectual labor is always a labor of love' (Lauwaert, 2023a: 67). This amateur-hystericus becomes to him a film-critical attitude, one which embraces rather than suppresses youthful passion: in an attempt at understanding the film experience, Lauwaert elevates love to mean a kind of theoretical commitment.

Barthes occupies an important position in cinema memory studies and audience research, mostly quoted in his desire to 'leave the movie theatre' (Maltby, 2011; Treveri Gennari, 2018: 44-47). In *The Lover's Discourse* (1977), however, he writes about cinemagoing as follows:

> Coming out of the movie theater, alone, mulling over my "problem," my lover's problem which the film has been unable to make me forget, I utter this strange

early… too late… A love story] (1994), which chronicles his growing infatuation for a student named Jim while teaching on the representation of the male body in film.

[6] At the end of the second World War in 1944, Lauwaert's recently wedded parents travel with their infant to Germany. After the war, they return to Belgium, where his father is condemned for collaboration; after serving his sentence, the family ends up living in Turnhout, as his father finds a job in the nearby located pharmaceutical company, Janssen Pharmaceuticals (later, Johnson and Johnson) (Meuleman, 2014; see also Asselberghs, 2023: 13-32).

> cry: not "make it STOP"! but: "I want to understand (what is happening to me)!" (Barthes, 1977: 59-60)

With Lauwaert's trajectory in mind, this appraisal of the 'lover's problem' may indeed lead to a cinephile theorisation of film. We can then see clearly how the amorous experience of cinemagoing takes precedence over theorisation or purely formal analysis. Lauwaert (2023b: 147) writes:

> Those who love film are faced with opponents who are as obstinate as they are embarrassingly insignificant. Once again, one must fight against moralizing readings. Once again it must be said that the film experience is crucial, that this experience is physical-erotic. Once again it must be said that its support is neither celluloid nor magnetic tape but the social self.

Lauwaert explicitly aligns 'those who love film' to those that acknowledge the 'social self' as the foundation of cinema, in opposition to the film historians or theoreticians who ignore either the experience or the film itself. Following Barthes, the act of falling in love is a subversive state of consciousness in which the lover escapes normativity and thereby love becomes a means toward personal emancipation, understood in critical theory as 'revolutionary love' (Sandoval, 2000: 140-142). In the case of Lauwaert, who never felt at home in the Flemish countryside (Meuleman, 2014: 2), film and critical discourse were an escape from the provincial and, to him, displaced context of Turnhout. This way, his amorous encounters through film were perhaps at their core ways to situate himself outside of that place.

'For cinephiles only': Glauber Rocha and the 'see-judge-act' method

When it comes to the oft-cited 'backwards programming', the film titles referenced in this article are indeed 'family films', as De Kuyper (2023) described them, with a strong emphasis on Hollywood as well as European auteur cinema selected for adolescents in the context of high school education. However, besides the oft-cited quotations 'children not allowed', 'for adults' or 'to avoid', more progressive films were also labelled 'for cinephiles': an illustrative example is Glauber Rocha's *Black God, White Devil* (BRA, 1964), described by the Catholic press at the time as a 'unique, unusual, and rich film', and 'the key to a better understanding of the socially engaged cinema of Latin-America, in particular the Cinema nôvo. For adults' (Biltereyst et al., n.d.). Another film fiche describes the film as a recommended viewing 'but for cinephiles only. Glauber Rocha risks confusing the tired people who only look for easy distraction' (Biltereyst et al., n.d.) The thickness of the film dossier on Rocha at the Catholic Film League archives indicates the extent to which progressive cinema like the Cinema Novo was discussed in Catholic milieus: 'we discussed the issues addressed in the film', Emile Poppe (2023) recalls, 'but it was also aesthetic':

> We usually watched so-called "problem films", and then the question was: how do you integrate those, for example in teaching? There was a list of films that were forbidden: that Rocha for example […] But then it was screened anyway, to enable a conversation. Because those progressive Catholics also realized: prohibiting those doesn't make much sense. So, you had to anticipate, integrate, enable the conversation.

The film discussions Poppe references were not organised for primary or high school education, but for adult teacher training in the context of discussion groups organised by the Catholic Film League:

> my mother is Catholic, so I grew up in that context, and my father comes from a socialist milieu […] but he was a turncoat: in the fifties my father still worked for the tram, that was all socialist block – but then, he started working for the ACV [the Confederation of Christian Trade Unions].

Poppe is only five years younger than De Kuyper, but 'this difference is significant', as they both acknowledge:

> [In the fifties] you start to have discussion groups within the Catholic church, and my parents were part of that. So maybe it was in that context that my father received this invitation […] These discussion groups had existed much longer already: I know for example that my mother was part of the "kajotters". […] By the fifties, and during the sixties this became a major movement, also in education (Poppe, 2023).

The kajotters (from 'KAJ': katholieke arbeidsjeugd, meaning Catholic Youth Workers) were the Flemish version of what became known internationally as the jocist movement: a worldwide network of Catholic youth organised by the Belgian cardinal Joseph Cardijn and often incidentally associated with cinephile moments in film history (Leventopoulos, 2015). The translation of aesthetics into moral judgements is indicative of this movement's particular discussion format, which Cardijn had termed the 'see-judge-act' method (Cardijn, 1914). Developed in the thirties in the context of study-circles organised for the working-class youth, it was designed as an emancipatory method for social action and required participants (often children or women working in Belgian coal mines or textile factories) to first 'see', then 'judge' and finally 'act' on specific aspects of their socio-political condition.[7] The jocist movement along with its method

[7] In the case of Cardijn's study circles, the topics of discussion were often related to the dehumanisation of the workers and their corresponding 'moral ills', such as alcoholism, unsanitary lifestyles, dirty clothes, bullying and initiations ('ontgroeningen') of the youth by the elders, as well as bad education. The three-step method was designed as initiating a process of critical thinking and social action and was implemented in a worldwide network of Catholic Youth movements. Cardijn's method can be seen implicitly informing Latin American movements of decolonisation. For example, the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire has emphasised the importance of the Young Christian Students network in his emancipatory

quickly spread worldwide: for example, Leventopoulos (2017: 168) briefly mentions it in her discussion of interwar film culture in rural France, and as Poppe indicates, it was adopted in Catholic film education workshops in the sixties. Rocha's 'problem film' also serves as a nexus in the method's global reach: the so-called 'cine-acto' of the Third Cinema movement appears to adopt a similar emancipatory approach. As Fernando Solanas explains, 'The film act means an open-ended film; it is essentially a way of learning'. He and Getino conceive this as a three-step process: first, direct engagement with reality through film; second, synthesising and judging the resulting 'data'; and third, making the leap from 'rational knowledge' to 'revolutionary practice' (Solanas and Getino, 1970-1971: 10). In this way, the see-judge-act method is effectively incorporated into revolutionary film aesthetics.

The discussion culture originating from Catholic study circles in Belgium, then, translates into film literacy practices around the ciné-club movements and into revolutionary methods for social change. Poppe's reflections indicate that under the guidance of a 'good film', questions of aesthetics and film literacy remained high on the agenda, while so-called 'problem films' like Rocha's shifted discussions from censorship to the more fundamental social and political significance of film culture itself. The emphasis on discussions, furthermore, is in line with a broader tradition of study circles and ciné-clubs in Catholicism: the label 'for cinephiles only' illustrates both the social engagement as well as the emancipatory methods of such film discussions.

Conclusion: Cinephilia from Screen to Life

It is somewhat paradoxical, but crucial, that none of the testimonies cited throughout this article mention religion or Catholicism as such to be a significant dimension in their film experiences. Within an urban environment, it appears to be an option amongst many, alongside commercial or other ideological ciné-clubs. In the countryside, with fewer options, Catholic programming appears more fundamental in stimulating film culture. What connects all these cinephile testimonies, however, is the integrated nature of the Catholic film initiatives as well as their emphasis on film literacy and education. This article has indicated that, beyond the oft-referenced censorship in Catholic milieus, their film exhibition went hand in hand with an emphasis on film literacy and that this oftentimes stimulated an explicitly non-commercial, cinephile gaze.

In conclusion, to return to De Kuyper's guiding statement: is cinephilia a Catholic invention? Clearly, this question is subjective and rooted in biographical, familial and formative background, and the cinemagoing experiences in this article that highlight this connection are therefore equally context-bound. They represent, however, a blank spot in existing audience research and offer insights into the significant role of Catholicism, specifically in educational contexts and youth movements, in facilitating a cinephile tendency. The cinephile memories of cinemagoing

education practices (Gadotti, 1994: 4): his so-called 'culture circles' are reminiscent of the Cardijn-method, aimed towards similar consciousness-raising practices. On the influences between European and Latin-America, often involving Catholic institutions when it comes to the ciné-club movement specifically, see Navitski (2023: 37-84).

in a Catholic milieu also suggests an emphasis on transformative film experiences: from the adolescents of the Film Forums to the integration of problem films in teacher training workshops, film discussions are set up to enable a translation of film into the everyday life of the spectators. Each time, active audience engagement has been explicitly stimulated as integral to film literacy: this translation 'from screen to life' indicates the importance of the audience in Catholic film culture and, vice versa, the relevance of Catholic film culture to audience studies. This way, going from De Kuyper to Lauwaert and Poppe, we can see their experiences as indicative of a context-oriented approach to cinephilia that acknowledges, first and foremost, the personal and social transformation of the film experience.

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