

*Projekty*

**Lived Experiences of the “Enlightened City” (1925–1975)**

*A Large Scale Oral History Project on Cinema-going  
in Flanders (Belgium)*

*Introduction*

Ever since the start of the film industry, Belgium was widely considered an open and lucrative film market.<sup>1)</sup> Being one of the most industrialized and prosperous countries in Europe before the First World War,<sup>2)</sup> the small kingdom had a vivid film exhibition scene with a high attendance rate as well as a wide range of luxurious and other cinemas. After the Great War, which had, more than in any other country, a devastating impact on social, economic and cultural life, the country largely maintained its liberal film policy. Movies from all major film production centres flew into the country – with a large dominance of American and French titles. Film distributors or exhibitors were not obliged to show their movies to a state or another film censorship board and could distribute their film products freely – leading to a varied offer and a wide choice for audiences.<sup>3)</sup>

This sweltering Belgian film exhibition culture, however, was, until recently, widely under-researched. The historical knowledge of it, in practically all its dimensions (e.g., the number of screens; insights into box office and economic strategies; the geography of cinema in the wider public space; ideological pressures on cinema; film fan cultures), was dramatically low. With the exception of only a few case studies on film exhibition in particular towns or periods,<sup>4)</sup> the development of Belgian cinema culture was still open for research.

To fill in this major gap in the history of Belgian cinema culture, the authors designed a large scale research project “The Enlightened City”,<sup>5)</sup> which focuses on cinema exhibition and film consumption in the region of Flanders.<sup>6)</sup> The realisation of this project consists of three dif-

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- 1) John T r u m p b o u r, *Selling Hollywood to the World: U.S. and European Struggles for Mastery of the Global Film Industry, 1920-1950*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002, s. 213.
  - 2) Gita D e n e c k e r e, Nieuwe geschiedenis van België. In: Els W i t t e e t a l., *Nieuwe Geschiedenis van België I: 1830-1905*. Tiel: Lannoo 2005, s. 460.
  - 3) Liesbet D e p a u w – Daniel B i l t e r e y s t, De kruistocht tegen de slechte cinema: over de aanloop en de start van de Belgische filmkeuring (1911–1929). *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis* 8, 2005, s. 3-26.
  - 4) Guido Convents is one of the few to have studied the film exhibition scene, mainly in the pre-WW1-period. See G. C o n v e n t s, *Van kinoscoop tot café-ciné: De eerste jaren van de film in België 1894-1908*. Leuven: Universitaire Pers Leuven 2000.
  - 5) The research Project The ‘Enlightened’ City: Screen culture between ideology, economics and experience. A study on the social role of film exhibition and film consumption in Flanders (1895-2004) in interaction with modernity and urbanisation (Project funded by the FWO/SRC-Flanders, 2005-7, promoters: Philippe Meers /UA/, Daniel Biltereyst /UGent/, and Marnix Beyen /UA/) is based at the universities of Antwerp (UA) and Gent (UGent).
  - 6) Belgium is a constitutional monarchy that since the 1960s has developed into a federal state, with a highly complex federal system of (geographical) regions (Flanders/Wallonia/Brussels) and (cultural-linguistic) communities (The Flemish Community, The French Community and the German Community). Flanders is the Dutch-speaking region in the northern part of Belgium. Today it has a surface of 13.522 km<sup>2</sup>, a population of 5,9 million (60 per cent of the Belgium population) and a population

ferent parts. The first part covers an extended inventory of existing and historical cinemas in Flanders focussing on the geographical distribution and the relations between the commercial and the “pillarised” circuit. The second phase includes a diachronic institutional analysis through research on cinemas, film exhibition and programming on micro-level, with case studies on Antwerp, Ghent and Mechelen. The third part consists of a historical audience study on the role of cinemas and film consumption and on the lived experiences of (film) leisure culture.

This piece reports on the third part of the project. Oral history was used as the main methodological approach. The results presented here focus on a long period, from 1925 till 1975. Structured around a selection of key-themes related to the social experience of cinema-going, we sketch the different meanings and interpretations of cinema within people’s lives and the conditions that structured their movie-going experiences apart from the specific film(s) they were watching. We also pay attention to the changes throughout the period under investigation. Case-studies come from two major cities in Flanders, Antwerp and Ghent, as well as from 21 villages, in the provinces of Antwerp and Flemish-Brabant.

### *Researching the past through memory*

In order to study the role of film in the everyday lives of historical movie audiences and the evolutions in the social experience of movie-going, we conducted a total of 389 in-depth interviews with viewers. The respondents were found in homes for elderly people (using a snow-ball method), within the social circle of acquaintances of the interviewers or by self-selection (respondents that answered to ads we placed in local newspapers). As is the case in most qualitative research, statistical representativeness was never the objective of this study. Rather we tried to vary as much as possible by 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 our group of respondents; from avid daily movie-goers to respondents that hardly ever visited a movie theatre. In regards to location, we first collected a large sample of stories from towns and villages in the province of Antwerp that can be considered as rural or semi-urbanised. To these results, we added an equally large sample of memories from Antwerp and Ghent.

The interviews were conducted in 2005 and 2006 in the home environment of our respondents by graduate students from the universities of Antwerp and Ghent.<sup>7)</sup> The interviews were semi-structured, as our students only used a thematical spreadsheet to keep the interviews focused, leaving a large degree of space for the respondents’ own stories and spontaneous memories. This was crucial, because many respondents had very vivid memories, not only about the process as a whole, but also about 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.<sup>8)</sup>

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density of 434 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>. Flanders is divided into 5 provinces and currently counts 308 municipalities. Two of them are metropolitan cities (Antwerp and Ghent). Brussels is the bilingual capital city of Belgium (and of Flanders), composed of 19 municipalities and counting over a million inhabitants.

7) The authors wish to thank the students of the University of Antwerp and Ghent University for the interviews they conducted.

8) 155 interviews conducted in Antwerp, 61 interviews in Ghent, 173 respondents in 21 towns and villages.

In all three cases, the interviews were transcribed ad verbatim and analysed, thereby using the soft-ware programme Atlas-ti. On a first level, we structured the interviews according to age group to be able to investigate the evolutions in their stories. This allowed looking for differences between generations. On a second level, we reorganised their memories according to a selection of themes, such as choice of movie theatre, frequency, companionship, information about specific films and motives for cinema-going. Taking into account that the heydays of movie-going within one's life-cycle were situated before the age of 25, the large part of the stories of our respondents focus on the period between 1925 and 1975.<sup>9)</sup>

*The social experience of cinema-going  
 in the cities of Antwerp and Ghent*

Reading the stories of respondents in Antwerp and Ghent, it immediately became clear that different cinemas were linked with different social routines, which were clearly more determining the choice of movie theatre than the actual film that was playing. First of all, both in the Antwerp as in the Ghent case there is the obvious distinction between movie palaces in the centre and neighbourhood cinemas. The film exhibition scene in Antwerp and Ghent, and how it is remembered, is however very closely linked to the unique (cultural) geography of the city. As Kuhn argues that one of the most persistent memories are place-related as "place is extraordinary insistent in memories",<sup>10)</sup> recollecting the cinemas in Antwerp and Ghent is therefore unmistakably connected to the way the cities, their suburbs and inhabitants reside in the mind of our interviewees.

The movie palaces in **Antwerp** were all centred next to each other in the inner city. They are remembered as luxurious, beautiful and comfortable. These cinemas were as much an object of consumption as the films they showed. What they lacked in atmosphere, familiarity and unpredictability, they made up for by comfort, star-packed movies and status. We can reconstruct an almost hierarchical arrangement of the movie palaces in the centre, proving that the status of movie palaces varied widely among them. Although similar in comfort, architecture and location within the city some movie palaces were considered more open and approachable than others.

The large number of neighbourhood theatres in Antwerp was spread across the different districts of the city, that mainly housed poorer blue collar workers. Our interviews show that they were in fact only visited by the people actually living near that cinema. A community spirit was still very much alive in the different districts of the city and our respondents considered neighbourhood theatres as "their" theatres. Just like the movie palaces however, not all neighbourhood cinemas were the same. In the district of Sint-Andries for example, *Zuidpool* was considered to be a large, open neighbourhood cinema for all workmen, *Kinox* was considered to be "the better" of the neighbourhood cinemas, whereas *Peter-Benoît* (a neighbourhood cinema,

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9) Although many respondents talked about this period as if it were one homogeneous period, we acknowledge that this is a broad time span, with many changes within the cinema scene. However, these evolutions (from heyday of movie-going to the decay of audience attendance; from a wide variety of movie theatres to the closure of many neighbourhood theatres) are considered by or respondents as developments within the same film culture, in contrast with the next phase of the cinema scene: the introduction of the multiscreen cinema as a new type of movie theatre, resulting in their minds in a totally new film culture.

10) Anette K u h n, *An Everyday Magic. Cinema and Cultural Memory*. London: I. B.Tauris 2002, s. 17.

but in no way a real sex cinema) was only mentioned in stories about making out with your boy – or girlfriend.

In **the Ghent case**, the distinction between the movie theatres in the city centre and those in the neighbourhoods was present in the overall discourse, but it was less outspoken in personal memories. This has to do with the geography of the film exhibition scene in Ghent. Film exhibition in the city wasn't as centred as it was in other major cities like Antwerp or Brussels. In fact, Ghent had four attractive commercial centres with their own leisure activities, developed throughout the history of the city with the presence of cafés, fairs and train stations. All four sites had their own particular movie theatre(s) and not all of these sites were remembered for the attraction of a movie palace. For Ghent, memories of luxurious movie palaces reside in the recollection of only two theatres, appropriately named the *Capitole* and the *Majestic*. The memories in relation to both theatres were hierarchically ordered: while *Capitole* was remembered for its luxurious interior, huge staff in uniform, massive seating capacity and elaborate decorations, *Majestic* was seen as the “little brother”. Great seating capacity and movie palace extravagance didn't necessarily mean that cinema film theatre would be remembered as such. This was the case for the cinemas *Vooruit* and *Rex*. *Vooruit* was a pillarized cinema – housed in a socialist's People's House – and therefore linked to its audience of workmen. *Rex* became more known for its “quickies”: short thrillers available for waiting train travellers. Cinema *Du Parc*, on the fourth leisure location of Ghent, had a history going back to the early days of cinema and the fancy fairs. From the very beginning of the thirties – when its name changed into *Leopold* to honour the new king of Belgium – this cinema was known as a “dirty sex cinema” where students would dare each other to watch the show.

Memories about the neighbourhood theatres in Ghent were more general than the specific memories of the cinemas in the city centre. Film theatres were remembered because of their neutral interior, lack of extravagant decorations and personnel, and plain seating. The ritual was similar but maybe less formal than that of city centre cinemas.

One of the most persistent memories of cinemas both in Antwerp as in Ghent is the proximity toward the home. Due to economic scarcity and financial burdens that were linked with public transport, closeness to home and the ability to walk to a cinema were important factors to explain the popularity of a cinema.

Neighbourhood cinemas were remembered as cosy, familiar, relaxed and informal; never as very glamorous or comfortable. In Antwerp as Ghent, audiences of the neighbourhood cinemas were met with prejudice and often described as being “uncivilized, loud and vulgar” by people living in the city or only remember frequenting the centre cinemas:

We didn't go to the smaller cinemas. They were always packed and in our eyes a lesser kind of cinema. Because they would be belching, making noises, eating and smoking, and that wasn't for us. That was just too foul, it was the rabble making a party where one should just go see a movie.<sup>11)</sup>

This was even so the other way around, when centre audiences were described through memories as being elite uptown people:

People did speak up during the projection, laughed or shouted something. Very spontaneous reactions. But not in the cinemas in the centre! There everyone was very distinguished and you weren't allowed to show your emotions. It was very different.<sup>12)</sup>

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11) Agnella (1942, Ghent).

12) Yolande (1946; Ghent).

*Cinema-going and the importance  
of the movies in everyday life*

The motives our respondents were describing to explain why they went to the movies and how they experienced watching a movie vary widely, but remain remarkably consistent throughout time. These motives were also very similar to the findings of comparable research in other countries. Going to the movies was remembered as a habit, as part of a weekly routine and as part of the fabric of daily life. It was remembered as an out of the home event as well as an extension of home life, a social event and as the only available form of leisure. And the routine was hardly ever changed because of the programme:

We went to the movies because it was a habit, not really because we wanted to see a specific movie. My mom went, and I went along. We would see something new every week anyhow.<sup>13)</sup>

Many respondents claimed that “there just wasn’t anything else to do”, by which they meant that only cinema as leisure activity had obtained the status of cheap and popular mass-entertainment medium which had the aura of having a wide and heterogeneous audience. Other leisure activities, like dance-halls, bars or opera were aimed at certain segments of the population, but cinema was regarded as being an activity for all ages, sexes and classes.

Adolescents had different reasons why cinema became a place of emancipation. Almost every respondent we interviewed (male or female) pointed out the importance of the cinema space as a site for their beginning romances. Many memories which tell stories of invitations to express a romantic interest involved a “rite de passage” from childhood memories of habitual visits to the neighbourhood cinemas to teenagers courting in the city centre cinemas.

The sense of belonging to a community functions as a final set of motives. Cinema-going in our interviews is remembered as a collective and social experience. Our respondents frequented these cinemas because they felt “in place”. This shared group identity, often referred to as the “atmosphere” of the cinema, worked twofold. Not only did our respondents claim that it was important for them to go to a movie theatre with people they felt connected with, by doing so they strongly distanced themselves from fellow citizens who lived in different neighbourhoods.

*The social experience of cinema-going  
outside the big cities*

Kathryn H. Fuller-Seely states that:

Although urban places have always been privileged, across the twentieth century, the movies were as much part of the popular culture landscape of rural and small town areas as the nation’s largest cities.<sup>14)</sup>

This was especially true for the Flanders’ case our wider research project is researching. One of the most striking features of the cinema scene in Flanders was the wide spread of movie theatres across the region and the high number of movie theatres in very small towns and villages. A first main difference obviously was the lack of choice in the small villages. Many villages only had one or two movie theatres, which played one film a week and were often only a few

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13) Achille (1919).

14) Kathryn Fuller-Seely, *Researching and Writing the History of Moviegoing*. In: K. Fuller-Seely – George Potamianos (eds.), *The Cinema in Non-Metropolitan America from Its Origins to the Multiplex*. Berkeley: University of California Press (forthcoming).

days a week open for business. Most villagers only saw one film a week. Their lower attendance frequency did not mean that cinema was less important for them. It was an activity you could look forward to for an entire week. Everybody used to dress up in their finest clothes to go the cinema. Leisure activities for the entire family were limited, and the one leisure activity that everybody could participate in, was limited to one viewing a week. This made this one night at the cinema especially important. It is however also important to notice that in many villages that had more than one movie theatre, we saw the same positioning and arranging of cinemas in the minds of people according to status and audience.

The lack of choice of theatres also strongly affected the way they handled and looked at the films. Few people posed questions about the films on the programme, they went to the theatre week by week regardless of the film. Moreover, only few respondents were aware of the movie offer in other parts of the country, let alone the success of movies abroad.

In the movie theatres in the villages, the community sense seemed very much alive than in the neighbourhood cinemas. Seats were numbered and many villagers had one fixed day a week to go to the theatre, and one fixed seat in the theatre were they sat every week. It was more than just being within a place where they felt “in place”, it was effectively socialising with the other people in the room. Where in cities most people stayed in their seats and waited for the hostesses to come by with ice lollies, villagers stood up from their places, walked to the bar that was located within most theatres and mingled with the crowd.

#### *Conclusion*

The case-studies presented in this paper were able to reveal some important processes that have proven to be crucial to understand the lived experiences of cinema-going between 1925 and 1975, both in cities as in villages. Both neighbourhood cinemas as movie palaces were not looked at as isolated places. Their status was shaped in the minds of people dependent on the way they looked at the inhabitants residing near the cinema, the way they looked upon the area surrounding the cinema and the historical meanings the actual location had before the cinema was built. This perceived image of the cinema was stronger than the actual geographical location or architectural value of the cinema.

It's apparent that the presence of the audience, whether it was the people from the neighbourhood or the townsfolk, was well remembered. The social routines of cinemas were often bound to the geographic location, and going to the movies was experienced as a social event. The image of the audience was closely linked with the geographical location and the programming of the cinema, but even more with the proximity of the movie theatre toward the home of the respondents.

Regardless of location, cinema-going was an accepted way to pass the time and an inalienable part of everyday life outside work throughout the period under investigation. The movies will always recall feelings of ordinariness combined with the magic on screen and the event surrounding it. It influenced their lives, because it was a vital part of their personal history, often veiled with nostalgia. Our interviewees were not movie-made. They acknowledge the important part movies played in their everyday life, but when the theatres closed or their lifestyle changed, the habits went with them.

With this short description of an oral history project on cinema-going in Flanders, we make a strong case in point for the importance of bottom-up approaches to the history of cinema cultures.

*Philippe Meers, Daniël Biltereyst  
and Lies Van de Vijver*

## Short bios:

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