

New Cinema History in the Low Countries and Beyond: An Introduction



Figure 1. Doorman of a cinema theatre. Campaign to promote the book, the Dutch Publishers' Association, designed by Piet van der Hem, 1921. The caption reads: 'Every time you restrain yourself from spending your money on a few hours of mere amusement you can buy a book that provides years of enjoyment.' Rijksmuseum Amsterdam Collection (Rijksstudio), <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.605549>.

The initial reason for this special issue was the imminent publication of *The Routledge Companion to New Cinema History*, which aims to present a wide range of research that fits within the rubric of New Cinema History.¹ This label brings together film historians who distinguish their work from more text-centred research, as described by Richard Maltby twelve years ago in a programmatic contribution to the *Tijdschrift voor mediageschiedenis* (TMG). This was later expanded on in the introduction to an edited volume entitled *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies*.² That same 2006 TMG issue originated from the ‘Cinema in Context’ conference, organised by the late film historian Karel Dibbets, who passed away in 2017. The conference presented the first results of the research project ‘Cinema, Modern Life and Cultural Identities in the Netherlands, 1895–1940’, which was funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research. Dibbets used the issue to put forward for the first time his ‘pillarisation thesis’, which argued that the absence of ‘pillarised’ cinemas in the Netherlands related to the poor integration of film in the country compared with other countries. This marked the beginning of a debate on this matter.³ His demise and his contributions to the development of Dutch and international film history formed the second reason for the present special issue. In particular, we wondered about the position of Dutch and Flemish research on the history of film within the field of New Cinema History. Gradually, we also started to wonder about the current visibility of this research within the wider field of cultural and socio-historical research in the Netherlands. Judging from Auke van der Woud’s book *De Nieuwe Mens*, published a few years ago, there seems to be a blind spot.⁴ But the recent PhD thesis of Utrecht-based cultural historian Jesper Verhoef, who seems to have given ample attention to the field of research discussed in this special issue, offers a more optimistic picture.⁵

The question concerning the position and visibility of film studies is not new, and not limited to the context of the Low Countries; it has also been raised repeatedly in other countries in recent decades. In the 2006 TMG issue mentioned above, Maltby asks a similar question and advocates dovetailing film studies with approaches inspired by sociology, so that the object of enquiry is behaviour rather than artefacts, and the history of cinema also becomes relevant beyond the circles of film scholars.⁶ His suggestion to move away from aesthetic and film interpretation-based research towards studies of the reception, the social experience, the distribution and the exhibition was not a bolt from the blue. He was expressing a trend – one with a longer history.⁷ This is evidenced by initiatives such as the HoMER network (History of Moviegoing, Exhibition and Reception), which was set up in 2004 and now has some 215 participants. The HoMER network is nomadic: it uses existing organisational structures such as NECS or ECREA or events organised by local research groups as a platform for its yearly gatherings, which are intended for the presentation of research and to facilitate partnerships and joint publications. In addition countless publications in journals and books in which some authors have explicitly or implicitly positioned themselves within New Cinema History, there are also several edited volumes that have been produced directly by the HoMER network.⁸

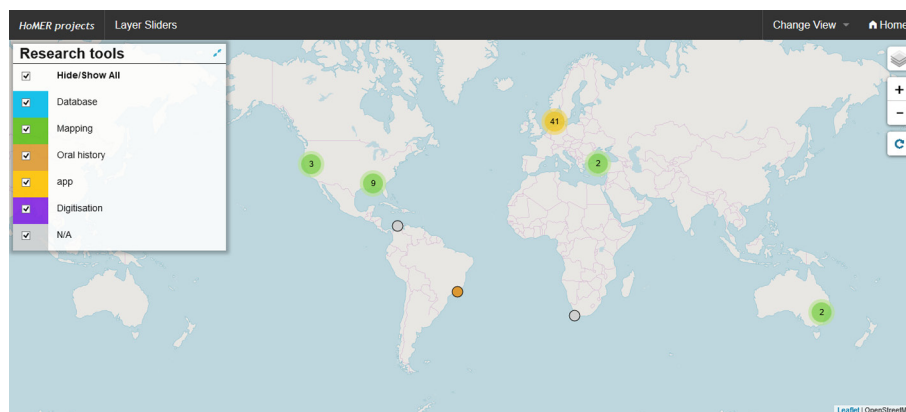


Figure 2. Screenshot from the HoMER website (June 2018), <http://homernetwork.org/dhp-projects/homer-projects-2/>.

What can we say now about the position of the research from the Low Countries in an international perspective and where can we situate the contributions in this issue? The HoMER website features a world map showing which projects the network members are working or have worked on.

The map is not exhaustive and cannot be used to draw definitive conclusions, but it gives an impression of what is happening around the world and what role the Low Countries play in that context. The first thing you see from the map is the European concentration of projects and, in particular, the contribution of the Flemish. An example of this is 'De Verlichte Stad' ('The Illuminated City'), a research project on cinema culture in Flanders between 1895 and 2004 which introduced a triangulation approach that involved combining qualitative and quantitative methods by using research techniques from ethnography, political economics and social geography.⁹ This Flemish approach represents a broadly shared systemisation of the research into cinema cultures, as the Illuminated City project combined three areas of study that still have a strong presence in New Cinema History research: film programming analysis, oral history and a socio-geographic analysis of the cinema landscape. These approaches are also reflected in the contributions in this special issue.

Film programming analysis has played role in many case studies and local cinema histories, but in the last fifteen years there has been a growing awareness that collecting this data systematically provides new opportunities to better understand the preferences of film audiences. Using consistent methods to collect and save this type of information allows not only comparisons to be made, but also a 'sum' of case studies that reveals both a macro- and a micro-level. Setting up a database according to the same principles and searching for similarities in the metadata used were therefore the subject of many meetings from the outset of the HoMER network. The Cinema Context database created by Karel Dibbets was an important example in this process. During the development of the data model for Cinema Context, detailed consultations were held with international partners such as

Joseph Garncarz, who was in the process of developing his own German Early Cinema Database. Dibbets' ideal of transnational collaboration and the facilitation of comparative research has increasingly become a reality in recent years. For example, the Cinema Context data model has been adopted in the international comparative project European Cinema Audiences, which is funded by the British Arts & Humanities Council, and in two Belgian projects that have also chosen Cinema Context as the starting point for organising the datasets.¹⁰

The work of John Sedgwick also contributed to the standardisation and comparability of film programming research. In 2000, he presented the 'POPSTAT method' for calculating the relative popularity of films in the absence of box-office data.¹¹ The contribution of Pafort-Overduin, Sedgwick and Van de Vijver in this issue is an attempt to theorise on audiences' film preferences with the aid of programming data. This article is still a relatively rare example of an international comparative perspective, and the other articles in this special issue reflect the continuing dominance of local case studies within New Cinema History.

Patterns in film programming will only ever tell us part of the story. To gain an understanding of what motivates cinema-goers and of their experiences and backgrounds, various researchers have turned to oral history. A pioneer in this area is Annette Kuhn, whose study on British cinema audiences in the nineteen-thirties revealed an insight that went on to form one of the cornerstones of New Cinema History: in the memories of cinema-goers individual films were completely secondary to the social and physical context of the routine of cinema-going.¹² This finding supported the central argument of New Cinema History practitioners, that studying individual film text tells us little about the significance of cinema-going. For this, we need to learn more about the circumstances within which film consumption takes place. Oral history has gained a permanent place in the arsenal of new cinema historians, which is demonstrated by the fact that – at the very least – oral history plays a supporting role in the research of most of the authors in this special issue.¹³ And it plays the lead role in the work of Daniela Treveri Gennari, who reflects on the results of her research into Italian cinema memories and the methodological insights that this has provided, such as the use of visual input to activate the memory. Oral history can help validate information from other types of sources, but it can also provide new knowledge that would otherwise be lost, such as the wide array of physical and sensory experiences that those interviewed associated with memories of cinema-going. Treveri Gennari indicates that while the practice of oral history is dominated by themes such as war and trauma, interviews on cinema history often generate what the author calls 'memories of pleasure'. According to Treveri Gennari, this can shed new light on how we construct and reconstruct our own histories.

To Judith Thissen and André van der Velden, oral history contributes to our understanding of the social history of cinema-going in yet another way. In their proposal to develop a typology 'of attitudes towards film consumption and related practices' based on the concept of 'milieu', interviews are one of the entry points into discovering those attitudes. Their research focuses on the cinema-going recollections of members of the moderate Reformed Church in the period

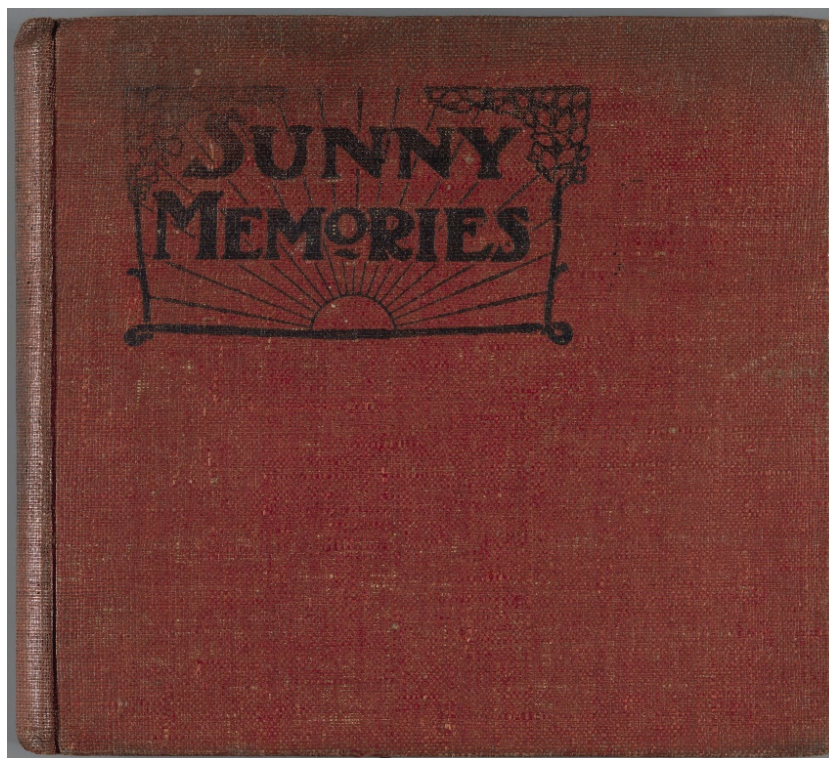


Figure 3. Travel album of a Dutch family with sights of interest in Europe, Egypt and New York. Rijksmuseum Amsterdam Collection (Rijksstudio), <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.252120>.

1945–1960. And the aim is add colour to, supplement and nuance the ‘stories’ that can be found in official reports of church institutions and government bodies. At the same time, the authors suggest focusing on the broader context of cinema going by also investigating how it related to other leisure activities. They advocate a more fundamental broadening of the visual field to encapsulate more than just directly film-related phenomena, as this would enrich New Cinema History with a ‘much more extensive, more diverse and thus also more robust platform for developing and discussing both theoretical and methodological perspectives.’ As such, they are building on criticism expressed at the launch of Cinema Context: that while it might provide context from the perspective of text-oriented film scholars – yielding insight into the entire cultural infrastructure of exhibition and distribution ‘inhabited’ by films – cultural historians would look for context in the social and cultural environments situated in widening concentric circles around the domain (and perhaps also the competence) of traditional film historians.¹⁴

As with oral history and programming analysis, socio-geographic approaches are now also an essential part of New Cinema History. Prominent initial advocates of a spatial turn in the social history of film and cinema were Jeffrey Klenotic, Mark Jancovich and Robert C. Allen.¹⁵ Building on this tradition, Terezia Porubčanská gives examples of the opportunities offered by a geographic approach in her study of the pre-war cinema landscape in Brno, Czech Republic.

She analyses the spatial distribution of cinemas and the circulation patterns of films in combination with map layers showing the tram network and socioeconomic profiles of the city. In doing so, she highlights the considerations confronting historians when visualising such spatial patterns over time: the use of thematic maps makes it possible to interrelate several variables, but displaying too many parameters – such as for example excessive chronological details – can affect map readability.

Kathleen Lotze is also mindful of the spatial dimension in her research on the noticeably late arrival of the multiplex in Antwerp. A socio-geographic history of the deterioration and revitalisation of Antwerp's city centre forms the backdrop for her analysis of industrial history the city's cinemas, more broadly situated in the distribution of this innovation within the national and international cinema industry. This industrial history angle ties in with a modest but constant line of research with long roots in the New Cinema History school.¹⁶ Her contribution also illustrates a temporal shift that is underway in New Cinema History research. The strong emphasis on early silent film in the 1990s was replaced by a focus on the classical period (1920–1960) and beyond. Perhaps, we should set our sights on even more recent history, which due to the abundance of data (both film-related, such as box office information, and non-cinematic data) is a good place to experiment with different statistical approaches and opens opportunities for further collaboration with research activities in the industry itself, as occurred in the Australian Kinomatics Project.¹⁷

We can conclude that the requirements for New Cinema History researchers are considerable. Ideally, they should be well-versed in theories and methods from the film sciences, social sciences, historical sciences, economic sciences and geographic sciences; familiar with geographic information systems (GIS); and master skills such as how to conduct interviews and create databases. The contributions reveal a consensus among the authors about the necessity of a multi-faceted approach to film history – whether it concerns exhibition, distribution, reception or cinema-going – but also that they each choose their own focus areas. At the same time, every article in this issue – even if it has one author – is based on a larger research project or is the product of combined efforts. We believe that collaboration is vital if future film studies really want to understand the relationship between films supply and consumption. It is not enough for us to simply step out of our film cocoon; we also have a responsibility towards our students. The new generation of students are highly experienced when it comes to working in groups and sharing knowledge. Much of the research proposed here can be carried out in small case studies that derive extra meaning when interconnected. The time seems ripe for partnership projects between different educational programmes, also as a means to safeguard the future of the discipline. Something else we need to ask ourselves is what specific knowledge and skills film scholars contribute. And then the film itself gently emerges again – not primarily as an aesthetic object of research but as a storytelling canvas that relates in one way or another to a certain time, a certain social environment and an audience. In that respect, too, it would be good to bring the oral history into the present. We do not need to wait until the film viewing experiences have disappeared into the mist of time. We can ask audience members

now how they relate to what is being screened, what role film consumption plays in their life and how this relates to other types of leisure activities. Is it not high time for long-term research into viewing behaviour, starting in the toddler years, along the lines of the documentary series *Seven Up*?¹⁸ Admittedly, different generations of researchers would need to work on this, but it would help us understand the changing role of film-viewing and how memories of both films and film-viewing transform. And would it not be interesting to do this in a transnational comparative perspective?

Notes

1. Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby and Philippe Meers eds., *The Routledge Companion to New Cinema History* (London: Taylor & Francis Ltd, to be published in 2018).
2. Richard Maltby, "On the Prospect of Writing Cinema History from Below," *Tijdschrift voor mediageschiedenis [Journal for Media History]* 9, no. 2 (2006): 74–96; Richard Maltby, Daniël Biltereyst and Philippe Meers eds., *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).
3. Among others: Judith Thissen and André van der Velden, "Klasse als factor in de Nederlandse filmgeschiedenis. Een eerste verkenning," *Tijdschrift voor mediageschiedenis* 12, no. 1 (2009): 50–72; Jaap Boter and Clara Pafort-Overduin, "Compartmentalisation and its Influence on Film Distribution and Exhibition in the Netherlands, 1934–1936," in *Digital Tools in Media Studies. Analysis and Research. An Overview*, M. Ross, M. Grauer and B. Freisleben eds., *Media Upheavels*, vol. 27 (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009), 55–68; André van der Velden and Judith Thissen, "Spectacles of Conspicuous Consumption: Picture Palaces, War Profiteers and the Social Dynamics of Moviegoing in the Netherlands, 1914–1922," *Film History* 22 (2010): 453–462; Clara Pafort-Overduin, John Sedgwick and Jaap Boter, "Explanations for the Restrained Development of the Dutch Cinema Market in the 1930s," *Enterprise & Society*, 13, no. 3 (2012): 634–671. Thunnis van Oort, "Industrial Organization of Film Exhibitors in the Low Countries: Comparing the Netherlands and Belgium, 1945–1960," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 2016 (online), 13, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2016.1157294>; Julia Noordegraaf, Jolanda Visser, Jaap Boter, Daniël Biltereyst, Philippe Meers, Ivan Kisjes, "(Not) Going to the Movies: a Geospatial Analysis of Cinema Markets in The Netherlands and Flanders (1950–1975)," in *Digital Humanities 2017: Conference Abstracts*, R. Lewis, C. Raynor, D. Forest, M. Sinatra, S. Sinclair eds. (Montreal: McGill University, 2017), 545–547. Dibbets previously addressed the noticeable difference between Dutch and Belgian film culture in Guido Convents and Karel Dibbets, "Verschiedene Welten: Kinokultur in Brüssel und Amsterdam," *Die alte Stadt* 28, no. 3 (2001): 240–246.
4. Auke van der Woud, *De nieuwe mens. De culturele revolutie in Nederland rond 1900* (Amsterdam: Prometheus – Bert Bakker, 2015). See also the review of Thunnis van Oort in this issue.
5. Jesper Verhoef, *Opzien tegen modernisering. Denkbeelden over Amerika en Nederlandse identiteit in het publieke debat over media [Dreading modernisation. Ideas about America and Dutch Identity in the public debate on media]*, 1919–1989 (Delft: Eburon, 2017). See also the review of Huub Wijffes in this issue.
6. Maltby, "On the Prospect," 85. See also Richard Maltby, "How Can Cinema History Matter More?," *Screening the Past* 22 (2007), <http://tlweb.latrobe.edu.au/humanities/screeningthepast/22/board-richard-maltby.html>.
7. The New Cinema History evolved from 'New Film History', which emerged in the 1980s, the standard-bearer of which was the book by Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History. Theory and Practice* (New York: Knopf, 1985). See also: Robert C. Allen, "From Exhibition to Reception: Reflections on the Audience in Film History," *Screen* 31, no. 4 (1990): 347–356.
8. Maltby, Biltereyst and Meers, *Explorations in New Cinema History*; Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes and Robert C. Allen eds., *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007). Daniël Biltereyst, Richard Maltby and Philippe Meers eds., *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity: New Perspectives on European Cinema History* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

9. Daniël Biltreyst, Kathleen Lotze, Philippe Meers, "Triangulation in Historical Audience Research: Reflections and Experiences from a Multimethodological Research Project on Cinema Audiences in Flanders," *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 9, no. 2 (2012): 690–715. The Illuminated City project gave rise to the Cinema City Cultures network, within which the triangulation method is reproduced to give shape to cinema cultures elsewhere in the world. There are now partnerships with Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Spain, the Netherlands and the US. See: <http://www.cinemacitycultures.com/projects.html>.
10. See Harry van Vliet, Karel Dibbets and Henk Gras, "Culture in Context. Contextualization of Cultural Events," in *Digital Tools in Media Studies: Analysis and Research*, M. Ross and M. Grauer eds. (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009) 27–42. European Cinema Audiences (<https://europeancinemaaudiences.org/>); CINECOS (<https://www.ugent.be/ps/communicatiewetenschappen/cims/en/research/cinema-ecosystem.htm>); Film in Occupied Belgium, 1940–1944: World War II Cinema Culture in Context (<https://www.kuleuven.be/onderzoek/portaal/#/projecten/3H180180>).
11. John Sedgwick, *Popular Filmgoing in 1930s Britain. A Choice of Pleasures* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000).
12. Annette Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002); published in the US under the title *Dreaming of Fred and Ginger: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (New York: New York University Press, 2002). See for an evaluation of Kuhn's work in this context: Robert C. Allen, "Relocating American Film History," *Cultural Studies* 20, no. 1 (2016): 48–88, pgs. 58–60, DOI: 10.1080/09502380.500492590.
13. Explicitly in the contributions by Thissen and Van der Velden and Porubčanská and implicitly in the contribution by Lotze, which originates from a research project with an extensive oral history component, see for example Kathleen Lotze, "Citizen Heylen. Growth and prosperity of the Rex group in Antwerp's cinema industry (1950–1975)," *Tijdschrift voor mediageschiedenis* 13, no. 2 (2010): 80–109.
14. Fransje de Jong, Thunnis van Oort, Clara Pafort-Overduin and André van der Velden, "Cinema Context en onderzoek naar sociale netwerken binnen the filmgeschiedschrijving," *Tijdschrift voor mediageschiedenis* 9, no. 2 (2006): 28–45.
15. Example: Jeffrey F. Klenotic, "Like Nickels in a Slot': Children of the American Working Classes at the Neighborhood Movie House," *The Velvet Light Trap* 48 (Fall 2001): 20–33; Mark Jancovich and Lucy Faire, *The place of the Audience. Cultural Geographies of Film Consumption* (London: BFI, 2003); Robert C. Allen, "The Place of Space in Film Historiography," *Tijdschrift voor mediageschiedenis* 9, no. 2 (2006) 15–27.
16. See for example Judith Thissen, "Filmgeschiedenis tussen cultuur en economie," *Tijdschrift voor mediageschiedenis* 13, no. 2 (2010): 4–12.
17. Deb Verhoeven, "Visualising Data in Digital Cinema Studies: More than Just Going through the Motions?" *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 11 (Summer 2016): 92–104. See also <https://kinomatics.com/>.
18. In 1964 Paul Almond (director) and Michael Apted made the documentary *Seven Up!* for the programme World in Action. They interviewed fourteen children from different social backgrounds about their lives, dreams and expectations for the future. Apted took over the direction and re-interviewed the participants every seven years. Eight episodes have now been made, the most recent of which was *56 Up!* In 2012. The series is still produced by Granada Television.

Biography

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