

Writing History through Places, Making Theory through Cases: On the New Cinema History

Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst and Philippe Meers (eds.), *Explorations in New Cinema History. Approaches and Case Studies*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell 2011, 352 pages.

Since the path-breaking mid-1980s interventions of Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, as well as of Thomas Elsaesser, a number of scholars have proposed alternatives to production- and film-centered historiography.¹⁾ Key among these is the New Cinema History, which develops its position by focusing on the social and cultural roles that the commercial institution of cinema has played. Within this epistemological framework, the present volume is based on papers originally discussed at the conference *The Glow in Their Eyes: Global Perspectives on Film Studies* that was held in the Belgium city of Ghent in 2007. Both the conference and the collection of essays derive from the activities of HOMER, an international network of scholars examining the history of moviegoing, exhibition, and reception that was founded in June 2004.

In *Explorations in New Cinema History*, Richard Maltby addresses some of these topics in an extended opening chapter entitled 'New Cinema Histories', which also outlines the challenges that such an approach faces, and its potential to develop new understandings of cinema history.²⁾ The final paragraphs of this piece serve as an intro-

duction to the other seventeen chapters which are organized into four sections. First is "Mapping Cinema Experiences", which, along with Maltby's contribution, includes studies by Robert C. Allen, by Jeffrey Klenotic, and by Annette Kuhn. The second section is subtitled "Distribution, Programming and Audiences", and covers a wide range of topics, from suburban filmgoing in Sydney, Australia, to Hollywood distribution strategies from 1975 to 1985. Section three, "Venues and their Publics", features chapters on exhibition in New York's alternative scene, "black moviegoing", and cinemas of the Greek diaspora in Australia. Lastly, "Cinema, Modernity and the Local" considers filmgoing in small communities. With the exception of Annette Kuhn's somewhat phenomenological analysis of the memories of audiences in 1930s Great Britain, these case studies are on the whole institutional and sociological micro-histories of filmgoing, distribution, and exhibition.³⁾ The analysis takes us to such diverse places as Belgium, Australia, the United States, and South India, and it covers a period of almost 100 years — from the first years of cinema up to the 1980s.

1) See Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History. Theory and Practice* (New York: Knopf, 1985); Thomas Elsaesser, 'The New Film History', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 55, no. 4 (1986), pp. 246–251. For recent publications in this field see also Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby and Philippe Meers (eds.), *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity: New Perspectives on European Cinema History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011)

2) Richard Maltby, 'New Cinema Histories' in Maltby, Biltereyst and Meers, *Explorations in New Cinema History*, pp. 85–98.

3) Annette Kuhn, 'What to do with Cinema Memory?', in *Explorations in New Cinema History*, pp. 3–40.

Given that the New Cinema History is concerned largely with methodological issues, particularly the potential of empirical research and quantitative analysis, it is perhaps unsurprising that such matters are addressed in the first part of the book. Thus, it is here that one finds Klenotic's account of the use of GIS as a tool with which to map the distribution of cinema in Springfield, Massachusetts.⁴⁾ However, questions of methodology resurface in a number of other chapters, such as in an analysis of film reception in Ghent during the postwar years (a chapter that derives from the HOMER-related "Enlightened City Project"). The authors of that particular chapter draw from the work of Pierre Bourdieu in order to consider the ways in which social distinction and class conscience operated among these audiences, thereby offering a rare combination of both top-down and bottom-up approaches. The authors explain that Ghent was deeply divided along religious and political lines, conditions that ensured that the experience of moviegoing was also strongly related to "geographical stratification and the feeling of belonging to a community or living in a particular district."⁵⁾ The chapter entitled "Distribution and Exhibition in The Netherlands, 1934–1936" reveals the vulnerability of the Dutch industry, as well as a strong demand for domestic films.⁶⁾ Robert C. Allen also makes a valuable contribution in his text on the "experience of cinema", where he questions classical cat-

egories such as an "authentic" cinematic experience, and departs from traditional conceptions embedded in "apparatus theory".⁷⁾ Regrettably, a far-reaching discussion of these alternative forms is missing from the remainder of the volume.

Another theme running through the collection is mapping, which is posited as a key tool to offer alternative histories of cinema, ones that consider how temporal and spatial intersections promise to enrich our understandings of distribution, exhibition, and moviegoing. In this regard, Klenotic offers theoretical reflections on the spatial turn in cinema studies⁸⁾ while other chapters that focus on this topic are more empirical in nature: they include Deb Verhoeven's analysis of film distribution in Australia during the 1950s and 1960s within Greek immigrant communities, and John Sedgwick's study of first-run and suburban filmgoing in 1930s Sidney, Australia.⁹⁾

This spatial concern returns albeit in a somewhat different fashion in the last chapters of the book. Paul S. Moore's analysis of regional markets in North America, like Kathryn Fuller-Seeley's investigation of the roles played by movies at the turn of the century in the village of Cooperstown, New York, emphasizes the importance of moviegoing in non-metropolitan areas in the early years of cinema.¹⁰⁾ In this respect, Moore notes that the "modernity" of this activity "had less to do with the perception of urban modernism on

4) Jeffrey Klenotic, 'Putting Cinema History on the Map: Using GIS to Explore the Spatiality of Cinema', in *Explorations in New Cinema History*, pp. 58–84.

5) *Ibid.*, p. 117.

6) Clara Pafort-Overduin, 'Distribution and Exhibition in The Netherlands, 1934–1936', in *Explorations in New Cinema History*, pp. 125–139.

7) Robert C. Allen, 'Reimagining the History of the Experience of Cinema in a Post-Moviegoing Age', in *Explorations in New Cinema History*, pp. 41–57.

8) Klenotic, 'Putting Cinema History on the Map', p. 161.

9) Deb Verhoeven, 'Film Distribution in the Diaspora: Temporality Community and National Cinema'; John Sedgwick, 'Patterns in First-Run and Suburban Filmgoing in Sidney in the mid-1930s', both in, *Explorations in New Cinema History*, pp. 243–260.

10) Paul S. Moore, 'The Social Biograph: Newspapers as Archives of the Regional Mass Market for Movies'; Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, 'Modernity for Small Town Tastes: Movies at the 1907 Cooperstown, New York, Centennial', both in *Explorations in New Cinema History*, pp. 263–279; pp. 280–294.

the screen than it did with an awareness of filmgoing as a practice that embedded its viewers in metropolitan modernity".¹¹⁾

The volume also reflects the necessity to analyze film distribution, exhibition, and reception in a manner that goes beyond simplistic and dualistic approaches, such as Hollywood's cultural and economic domination vs. the fragility of local communities and industries, in favor of approaches that embrace the complex negotiations that characterize such relationships. At the same time, the collection illustrates the advantages and disadvantages of bottom-up approaches to film history: this approach often reveals its capacity to generate reams of data and to posit particular micro-histories of filmgoing and local genealogies, and while some chapters successfully relate these data to complex local networks of power, others sometimes fail to establish connections between their specificities and the general. Although these difficulties are addressed by Maltby in the first pages of the book, and later by different authors in their individual contributions, the volume would nevertheless have benefited from a more systematic reflection on some of its findings.

In sum, this volume not only offers a rich outline of the goals, challenges, and theoretical foundations of the New Cinema History, but also presents a wide range of case studies that demonstrate how this collection of approaches might be employed. It also showcases the extent to which such research may be interdisciplinary in perspective, and how the histories that it promises to generate are likely to emerge in a bottom-up fashion; histories that are at once local and transnational, and which spotlight cinema's status as vehicle for, and a site of, cultural and social exchange. Even if a focus on the empirical particularities of case studies sometimes lacks a broader, more systematic framework, the general impression left by the collection is of an exciting, richly faceted contribution to cinema history, one that is aware of the

methodological challenges it faces, one that develops its analytical potential, and one that opens up new avenues of enquiry.

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11) Moore, 'The Social Biograph', p. 275.