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An Invitation to Conversation: Photographs in Audience Studies of Film and Video



Lies Van de Vijver, Guy Dupont and Roel Vande Winkel, *Gent Filmstad: Cinema's en filmaffiches, 1938-1961* (Antwerpen/ Amsterdam: Houtekiet, 2021), 278 pp., ISBN 978-90-8924-994-4 and **Gyz La Rivière**, *Home Video: Videotheken & Video in Groot-Rotterdam* (Rotterdam: nai010 uitgevers, 2021), 432 pp., ISBN 978-94-6208-663-0.



When first leafing through two recent studies, entitled *Gent Filmstad* and *Home Video*, I noticed so many similarities and subtle differences that I irresistibly felt attracted to do a comparative review of them. The first book addresses the emergence and decline of cinema culture in

Ghent (Belgium), while highlighting its palmy days, the years between 1938 and 1961. The second book deals with the history of video stores in Greater Rotterdam (The Netherlands), with a focus on the booming years of the business between 1980 and 2010. The main unit of analysis in both studies is similar: film audiences in a medium-sized city (Ghent) and video consumers in a slightly larger urban region (Rotterdam). Further, both volumes showcase an abundance of pictures. Ghent's municipal archive holds the largest collection of film posters (more than 9,000) produced in Belgium. This collection more or less defined the main period covered by the study, including, perhaps, its focus on Ghent. Many posters are reproduced and analysed in *Gent Filmstad*, while the contributors also provide an overview of all cinemas in Ghent, many of which are depicted as well. For his study on video stores in Rotterdam, Gyz La Rivière also gathered and reproduced an immense collection of historical photographs. After a short textual intro, he presents selected pictures in a visual essay, structured in a way to guide readers through a video store as if they are clients. After reading the two studies carefully and perusing their wealth of pictures, I was even more convinced of the benefits of reviewing *Gent Filmstad: Cinema's en filmaffiches,*

1938–1961 and Home Video: Videotheken & Video in Groot-Rotterdam in tandem. The two studies mutually reinforce each other by providing productive methodologies for studying historical audiences of film and video in an urban context, while also increasing our understanding of the historical transition from cinema to video.

There are several other interesting correspondences or dissimilarities between the two books under review. Historical audience research of films has become an established branch of research, which is underscored by the fact that the study by Van de Vijver et al. is a collaborative effort by specialised academics and archivists. In contrast, La Rivière indicates that his publication on video stores in Rotterdam, which is fully based on photographs, is the first of its kind. Although his volume is a single-author book, it involved anything but a solitary undertaking. La Rivière mentions the full support of the municipal archive Rotterdam and the Nederlands Fotomuseum. To express his gratitude to all his collaborators, the author needs one full page, with names, in small font, over four columns. Instead of being a detached academic, Gyz La Rivière has been closely connected to the Rotterdam skate, game, video and art scene. Born in 1976, the year when VHS was

introduced, he would rent videos himself for years, while making his living as a VJ (as Gyz), media artist, and documentary- and filmmaker. It does not come as a surprise, then, that the list of references in *Home Video* is fairly short.

As regards to their structure, both books comprise two stylistically different parts, which is intentionally and explicitly mentioned by La Rivière, while this aspect is largely left implicit in *Gent Filmstad*. The four chapters in its first part are dedicated to film culture. Lies Van de Vijver, who is the principal investigator for the city of Ghent in the international research project on European Cinema Audiences: Entangled Histories, Shared Memories (2018–2021), gives an overview of 125 years of cinema in Ghent, focussing on its golden years between 1945 and 1961. After the Second World War, some 35 cinemas offered screenings. Several of them featured exclusive palaces, premiering all major films. Others, mostly outside of the city centre, served more local audiences. These places tended to screen new films slightly later, sold more affordable tickets and would often concentrate on a particular genre. However, the cinemas in residential areas were not necessarily second-rate or less important; some of them managed to add flavour and cohesion to their neighbourhoods.

As the popularity of film increased the size of cinemas would grow accordingly, sometimes seating an audience of several hundreds. However, these places were not always reserved exclusively for film screenings; mixed use remained a practice for long. New film venues were sometimes erected in the backyard of pubs, or owners would even turn part of their home into a place where they screened films. Multiplex cinemas would not arrive until around 1980.

In another chapter, Roel Vande Winkel and Lies Van de Vijver discuss film screenings in Ghent during the Second World War. The German occupation put an end to the “block-booking” system, which forced film operators to book a package of films. The system would never return; screenings of single titles became the norm. Furthermore, the German occupier abruptly put an end to the popularity of French and American movies. The appeal of German stars such as Marika Rökk and Zarah Leander would persist after liberation, however. In the fourth chapter, archivist Guy Dupont discusses the production of Belgian film posters. The chapter offers highly interesting insights, for instance on the introduction of CinemaScope and Vistavision and how this affected some of the film posters which were turned into landscape format. Although the focus on audiences is somewhat

abandoned in this chapter, it contains highly interesting details, particularly through the accompanying photographs (and their captions), such as on the placement of billboards in urban environments. A photograph of a “super-sonor” truck with huge horns (loudspeakers) and show boxes for film posters is another exciting example. The author could have elaborated these historical promotional practices some more, perhaps, because they allow one to trace historical communication practices to audiences in specific urban districts.

The second part of *Gent Filmstad* comprises some 180 pages and provides, rather than a narrative format, thorough descriptions of individual venues, followed by a focus on film posters of different genres and stars. The descriptions of the venues are accompanied by historical photographs and short quotes derived from interviews in the context of the research project (europeancinemaaudiences.org), which highlight memories from the public. However, no background information is given on the interviewees, such as on their year of birth. The cinemas are discussed partly chronologically, following their establishment, and partly according to locality, which I felt to be slightly confusing. Although the accompanying map is certainly helpful, given

today’s array of graphic, geographic and digital tools,¹ the various data and insights could have been conveyed more effectively. Overall, I feel the bits and pieces of information provided in the descriptive list of cinemas would have benefited from a separate chapter, discussing explicitly the interactions between cinemas, localities and their audiences. The same applies to the section discussing genres on the basis of film posters. Specific attention is given throughout the book to piquant films, to which initially youngsters were denied access, a genre which would develop into adult movies or porn. By the 1960s, going to the movies became a less popular pastime. Some cinemas tried to attract new audiences by screening adult movies; others decided to quit. The authors refer to the breakthrough of television as a relevant factor here. But the overall growth of prosperity, the emergence of other leisure activities in combination with increased personal mobility, and a burgeoning youth culture also contributed to a dwindling film culture. In the course of the 1980s, when video recorders became more affordable, video would allow one to watch movies at home, which challenged cinema culture once again, particularly in the genre of adult movies. At the same time, cinema culture pursued innovation as well. Consider, for instance, the

small-scale Ghent's "Internationaal Filmgebeuren", which was introduced in 1974 and which would grow into the "Internationaal Filmfestival van Vlaanderen", now titled "Film Fest Ghent".

Gyz La Rivière's *Home Video: Videotheken & Video in Groot-Rotterdam* shares many characteristics with *Gent Filmstad*, yet differs from it in two main aspects, apart from his focus on video stores. First, he reverses the role of images and text. After a short intro, La Rivière presents a visual essay, consisting of photographs with captions and sometimes a short elucidation. Secondly, the section on video stores is written as an ego document, based in part on La Rivière's own memories. He identifies many people shown in the photographs, for which exact locations and dates are given. Due to the effective structure of his approach, while also avoiding the pitfalls of ego tripping, La Rivière convincingly manages to situate video stores in the urban landscape of Rotterdam and its population. Like *Gent Filmstad*, *Home Video* focuses on consumers. Comparable to many of the cinemas in Ghent, many of the video stores in Rotterdam specifically catered to the neighbourhood in which they were located. As Rotterdam has long been a multicultural port city, some video stores targeted specific groups of immigrants. In these stores, one

could rent selected films from one's home country, but some also offered TV series or broadcasts of football matches from abroad. The many photographs with detailed captions well evoke the city and its diverse population.

In the second part, "Video / I See", La Rivière broadens his unit of analysis to the wider role of video in the city, addressing, among other things, the production of videos, large video walls on buildings, and art works. Given the current ubiquity of video in urban contexts, combined with a structure that is rather impressionist, the visual essay could have had a better focus or sense of direction. Rather paradoxically, La Rivière, active as a media artist in Rotterdam himself, switches in the second part to a third person narrative, to enhance a sense of objectivity. If the author is to be praised for not promoting his own work, some of the strength of the personal memories in the first part is lost in the second part. Individual memories bring in subjective experiences, but they can also give access to shared cultural memory. As long as the researcher does not overgeneralise by accepting the limitations of this type of sources, they can open up a wealth of experiences and insights.

This leads me to ongoing methodological discussions in audience studies and memory studies, for which *Home*

Video as well as *Gent Filmstad* provide interesting input. The interest in New Cinema History has not only revealed new topics, but also deepened methodological reflections on the meaning of place, and the relevance of memories for audience studies. As argued by Jeffrey Klenotic, place should be made pivotal, and he advocates alternative methodologies, complementing efforts aimed at rigorous, comparative approaches.² Daniela Treveri Gennari has argued that historical audience research can benefit from incorporating memories of past experiences,³ which was seconded, among others, by Pierluigi Ercole et al.⁴ Walking down memory lane literally, which means, repeating the stroll from a previous living place to the cinema, can be an innovative methodological option indeed. If using photographs or home movies for triggering memories is a well-known practice, it could be used more frequently and systematically.⁵ It seems likely that La Rivière will have discussed many of the pictures in his study with their owners or collectors, even though he does not say so explicitly. I already mentioned the rather meagre treatment of memories in *Gent Filmstad*. Using historical photographs as an invitation to conversation, I suggest, can enrich the study of audiences, given the persistent changes in most urban environments. Discovering and discussing

continuities and discontinuities, based on personal experiences and in a methodologically controlled way, may well enrich the historical study of audiences – particularly because many different factors in the urban environment can have an impact, even neglected ones. As we have seen, television was among the factors leading to a declining cinema culture. There are only a few pictures in *Gent Filmstad* that show television antennas on roofs. A picture of the exhibition of electric and natural gas appliances in 1957 is a striking and telling exception. La Rivière argues that the popularity of video rentals came to an end not only by download practices, but also by the emergence of satellite dishes.

Home video is often seen as representing a radical rupture with going to the movies. The confrontation of television with cinema culture is most prominent in a picture of the opening of Rotterdam's electronics megastore Correct, in the former Victoria Theater cinema. As the two books under review demonstrate, however, there are striking continuities between video and cinema as well. In Ghent, owners of several cinema locations would transport film reel from one location to another – a practice called “faire la navette” (p. 26) – to reduce costs. La Rivière mentions that some



Figure 1. The exhibition of household appliances running on natural gas and electricity, which in the summer of 1957 took place in the promotional centre of the Ghent Gas- and Electricity utilities near De Zuid, also featured television sets. The public attended in massive numbers. Archive Ghent, MA_ROM_XXVI_EGW_FG_04_015.

customers rented videotapes to circulate them among different family members. Like cinemas, many video stores specialised by adopting a specific genre. Inside the store, the category of genre helped to organise their shelves, while only art house video stores preferred to highlight film maker (authors). The interiors of video stores are in fact reminiscent of the lobbies of cinemas,

displaying stills, posters and cardboard personages. The seats invite one to sit down and chat; La Rivière suggests that the video store served as a meeting place to discuss films. The painted banners (“calicots”), which advertised specific films above the entrances of main cinemas in Ghent, were also used by selected video stores in Rotterdam. In Ghent trucks were used to



Figure 2. In 1972, TV personality Ted de Braak officially opened the new branch of Correct at Bent uizerstraat and Bergweg, located in the former Victoria Theater cinema. photo Ary Groeneveld, 1972 / SAR.

promote films locally, in Rotterdam promotional ads for video stores could be found on buses used for public transport. The transition from cinema to video was a gradual one. As revealed by Van de Vijver et al., many cinemas in Ghent tried to counter the competition of television by screening

adult movies. In Rotterdam, however, one could already rent films on 8 mm and 16 mm (also adult films) before video was available. The store owner involved simply added a new medium format to his existing offerings, as La Rivière notes. All this – and much more – can be learned by reading and carefully

looking at the many images in *Gent Filmstad* and *Home Video*. For connoisseurs these volumes will taste like a sumptuous buffet.

Notes

1. Terézia Porubčanská, "Approaches to Spatial Analysis in a Local Cinema History Research," *TMG Journal for Media History* 21, no. 1 (2018): 54–75. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.18146/2213-7653.2018.338>; Terézia Porubčanská, Philippe Meers, and Daniel Biltereyst, "Moving Pictures in Motion: Methods of Geographical Analysis and Visualisation in Comparative Research on Local Film Exhibition Using a Case Study of Brno and Ghent in 1952," *TMG Journal for Media History* 23, no. 1-2 (2020): 1–39. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.18146/tmg.672>.
2. Jeffrey Klenotic, "Mapping Flat, Deep, and Slow: On the 'spirit of Place' in New Cinema History," *TMG Journal for Media History* 23, no. 1-2 (2020): 1–34. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.18146/tmg.789>.
3. Daniela Treveri Gennari, "Understanding the Cinemagoing Experience in Cultural Life: The Role of Oral History and the Formation of 'Memories of Pleasure'," *TMG Journal for Media History* 21, no. 1 (2018): 39–53. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.18146/2213-7653.2018.337>.
4. Pierluigi Ercole, Lies Van de Vijver, and Daniela Treveri Gennari, "Challenges to Comparative Oral Histories of Cinema Audiences," *TMG Journal for Media History* 23, no. 1-2 (2020): 1–19. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.18146/tmg.586>.
5. Joseph Wachelder, "Belated Screenings of Home Movies: Biographical Storytelling and Generational Referencing," in *Materializing Memories: Dispositifs, Generations, Amateurs*, ed. Susan Aasman, Andreas Fickers and Joseph Wachelder (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 103–120.

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