



NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

14

Cinema in the 'Fog City': Film Exhibition and Sociogeography in Flanders

Daniel Biltereyst and Lies Van de Vijver

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Belgium was considered to be the fifth most highly industrialised nation in the world, enjoying an open, export-driven and expansive economy. Next to its location in between some of the most vibrant economic powers of that time and to the role of Antwerp as a major world harbour, Belgium's high-ranked position in international trade was also due to the exploitation of rubber and all kinds of minerals in its colony, Congo.¹ It was in this effervescent economic-industrial context that cinema was introduced and that it developed into a popular pastime and into a new booming industry. With its population of about 7.5 million, the small kingdom was obviously not considered a huge film market, yet from the interwar years on it was seen as a highly open and lucrative one with a wide range of cinemas and high attendance rates.² By the early 1900s, Brussels had already grown into an international transport pivot and an important film distribution centre, while in the capital and other major cities film theatres prospered.³ After the Great War, which had a devastating impact on Belgium's societal, economic and cultural life, the cinema continued to flourish. As one of the few countries without an adult film censorship system and with no significant film production of its own, movies from all major international film production centres flew into the country, with American and French titles predominating.⁴

With the exception of a few case studies on particular towns or periods, the development of Belgium's film exhibition market is still under researched, especially when it comes to linking cinema to wider social, economic and geographic concerns.⁵ This chapter will use data from some of these studies, including data from a collaborative research project on the history of the Flemish film exhibition scene, the Dutch-language northern part of Belgium.⁶ After looking at some key historical trends in the development of film exhibition in Flanders, one of the most urbanised and densely-settled regions in Europe, this contribution focuses on recent developments in cinema attendance and the geographical distribution of movie theatres in rural, urban and metropolitan areas. We will deal with the question of whether theories of spatial functional hierarchies can be applied to different networks of film exhibition in a region like Flanders, which is often considered in social geography and urban studies as a large urban sprawl or a diffuse 'fog city' (*Nevelstad*).⁷ Exploring questions related to the spatial location of film venues, this chapter raises the question of whether in this compact structure with large urban networks, where the periphery is by definition not urban, the traditional dichotomy of city and country loses its meaning.



NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

BELGIAN FILM EXHIBITION MARKET: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS AND STRUCTURAL CHANGES

International comparative historical data on film exhibition and cinema attendance are scarce and often rather unreliable, but the few existing insights mostly support statements that Flanders has a history of a vivid film exhibition market. This was the case even before the Great War. In 1910, a Dutch film trade journal, *De Kinematograaf*, estimated that Belgium had some 625 cinemas, of which 115 were located in Brussels (for a population of 650,000 inhabitants).⁸ Two years later, there were 650 cinemas.⁹ By this time, film venues had prospered in major cities like Antwerp, Brussels, Ghent and Liège, in minor towns and slowly in less urban areas too. Guido Convents explains that the high number of film venues was not only due to Belgian film entrepreneurs, but was also the result of a thriving existing entertainment culture in which the new medium found a home (such as fairs and variety venues), the unique format of the *café-cinés* and the interest of pillarised society in the new film medium.¹⁰

During the 1920s and 1930s, the number of cinemas continued to grow and remained comparatively high in comparison to international standards. In a 1931 study on the introduction of sound cinema systems, Howard T. Lewis counted some 740 movie theatres in Belgium, which was a much higher figure than in the Netherlands (266) or Switzerland (330), which both had around the same number of inhabitants as Belgium.¹¹ In an academic article on the international film exhibition sector, published in 1938 in an economics journal, Belgium stood out once again for its high rate of cinema attendance. With its 1,100 theatres, the country ranked high on the list with a figure of one seat for every sixteen inhabitants, compared to a provision of one for 21 in France, one for 39 in Germany and one for 48 in the Netherlands. Only the United Kingdom did better with one seat for twelve inhabitants.¹² During the interwar years, the practice of filmgoing developed into the most popular leisure form, not only in urbanised but also in rural towns and villages. The number of film venues reached a peak around 1925 with 1,129 cinemas, followed by a sharp decline to 772 venues at the end of the decade in the context of the economic recession and increased taxation.¹³ In the 1930s, taxes were still considered heavy, according to international standards, but a new fiscal regulation somewhat softened the pressure on the film exhibition market. Although sound technologies took quite long to enter Belgium cinemas, especially movie theatres in more rural areas, the introduction of talking pictures had a positive effect on the market with a growth in the number of cinemas, in suburbs and in small urban towns too, from 984 theatres in 1930 to 1,128 in 1934.¹⁴

A specific explanation for the high number of film venues in Belgium is the importance of the non-commercial sector. In ideological terms, Belgium was a highly segregated country and various societal groups tried to use the film medium to attract people belonging to their respective spheres of influence. From the 1920s on, religious and political organisations of a Catholic, socialist, liberal-conservative and Flemish-nationalist bent started to screen films on a regular basis.¹⁵ In the period between the 1920s and the 1960s, pillarised venues accounted for approximately 25 to 30 per cent of the total number of film outlets. Many of these were located in more rural areas and emerged in reaction to the arrival of commercial cinema. From the late 1950s on, the proportion of pillarised film venues declined heavily and the phenomenon eventually disappeared, primarily as a result of secularisation.¹⁶

NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

In the post-war period and until the pivotal years of 1957–8, cinema remained the most popular form of entertainment and many new cinemas opened. Between 1946 and 1953, there was a staggering 37 per cent rise in film exhibition venues in Flanders and Brussels, and between 1954 and 1957, another 247 new venues were launched. With a total number of 1,585 cinemas for 8 million people, Belgium left bigger countries like Germany, Italy, France and Spain behind.¹⁷ While the number of cinemas continued to increase in the immediate post-war years, cinema attendance stabilised and then began to slowly decrease from the 1950s on. The penetration of television, introduced in October 1953, was only one reason for the drop in attendance. Other reasons included changing leisure patterns (the success of popular music and dance halls and the growing popularity of day trips), increased mobility due to increased car ownership and better transport systems (finalisation of major highways, better public transport) and sociodemographic trends (the baby boom leading to an all-time high in the number of births in 1961). In the 1960s and 1970s these trends were accompanied by wider sociogeographic changes (see below).

Like elsewhere in Europe, cinema attendance decreased quite spectacularly from the late 1950s until the 1990s. In this period, ticket sales on the Belgian market declined from 113.5 to 17.1 million (see Table 14.1).

The pivotal years 1957–8 also marked a continuous decrease in the number of film exhibition venues. In the ten years after 1957, Belgium lost 54 per cent of its film venues. The 1960s marked the end of the era of small, single-screen and family-owned cinemas as the film market was increasingly controlled by bigger networks that could only survive through a strategy of concentration, synergy and market control. In an attempt to reverse the decline in cinema attendance, the major cinema corporations tried to offer more choice. In the 1970s, the former movie palaces in city centres were transformed into multiscreen cinemas. Thus, while there was a steady decline in the number of cinemas, the amount of screens continued to increase.

Table 14.1 Moviegoing in Belgium, Flanders and Brussels (number of tickets, in millions, per year).

	Belgium (tickets in millions)	Flanders (%)	Brussels (%)	Wallonia (%)
1950	113.52	43.6	22.97	33.43
1960	79.56	45.24	24.12	30.64
1970	30.39	41.95	27.48	30.57
1980	19.86	47.94	28.7	23.36
1990	17.1	44.56	30.94	24.5
2000	23.55	48.79	20.34	30.87
2010	21.31	47.97	17.77	34.26
2013	21.76	47.03	17.76	35.2

Source: Data based on admission figures from Belgian film industry yearbooks (1950–2000) and FOD Economy (2010–2013).

NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

At the end of the 1980s and in the 1990s, the downward spiral slowed. A major player in this process was Albert Bert, a relatively small exhibitor operating in the provinces of eastern and western Flanders, who was inspired by the American and British multiplex phenomenon. In 1981, Bert had already opened a 12-screen multiplex in the centre of Ghent (Decascoop). In 1989, he followed this with a much bigger gamble: building the 25-screen Kinopolis complex in Brussels. His concept, which was rather new for the continent, was based on offering a wide choice of mostly American movies aimed at teenagers and young adolescents in cinemas built on the outskirts of a major city. These shopping mall-inspired multiplexes had the advantage of good transport links and parking facilities. The gradual introduction of similar multiplexes in other Belgian cities, as well as in neighbouring countries and other foreign markets, made Bert's Kinopolis Group into an important player on the European market and, in Belgium, it had an almost monopolistic hold.

The investments in multiplex cinemas had an important effect, not only on admission figures which from the 1990s started to increase again to more than 23 million tickets at the turn of the millennium, but also on the structure of the Belgian cinema market, which is now characterised by a high level of concentration with only a few major players. The key companies in this concentrated market are the Kinopolis Group and the French UGC Group. They control the majority of the Belgium film exhibition sector, which consists of 90 cinemas, 476 screens and 104,123 seats (2013 figures). In total around 20 million tickets are sold annually.

CONTEMPORARY FLEMISH CINEMA CULTURE

In the second part of this contribution we will concentrate on some key structural dimensions of the current film market in Flanders and Brussels. As of 2013, there are 303 screens available in 52 cinemas, offering 66,327 seats.¹⁸ Although since this report there has been a downward trend due to the crisis in the market (and some exhibitors went bankrupt or stopped), we will take 2013 as a reference for analysing the dynamics within the Flemish film market, which consists of three major types of film exhibition: a handful of major players, exploiting a circuit of multiplexes, a network of independent commercial cinemas and a small art-house circuit (Table 14.2).

Table 14.2 Film venues by type in Brussels and Flanders (2011).

	Exhibitors	Cities	Screens	Seats
Multiplexes	4	16	221(73%)	51,704(79%)
Independent commercial cinemas	19	18	56(19%)	11,182(17%)
Art-house cinemas	7	6	24(8%)	2,368(4%)
Total	30	30	301	65,254

Sources: Based on data in *Voorbij de vertoning: Analyse van het Vlaams audiovisueel vertoning- en distributieveld* (2011).

NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

The market is dominated by four groups operating multiplex venues in sixteen cities, representing 79 per cent of the seats and 73 per cent of the venues. The biggest operator here is the local branch of the Belgian Kinopolis Group, which has 23 cinema complexes in Europe, representing a total of 317 screens. Kinopolis is active in eleven Belgian cities (110 screen and 29,606 seats) with 27 screens in Brussels, 24 in Antwerp, ten in Hasselt, ten in Kortrijk, twelve in Ghent and eight screens in Ostend, Bruges and Leuven. The second player in terms of seats and screens is the French UGC Group (43 screens and 9,198 seats). The group has three multiplexes, two in Brussels and one in Antwerp. The two other major players, exploiting multiplexes, Ciné-Invest and Utopolis, not only have fewer seats and screens, but operate in smaller cities, most of them with a population of less than 100,000 inhabitants. A major player in the small-town market is the Belgian-owned Ciné-Invest (37 screens and 7,375 seats), which has four multiplexes, mainly in the province of Limburg. The last player is the Utopolis Group (29 screens and 5,525 seats), a Luxembourg chain that owns and operates cinemas in different European countries. They are active in the regional cities of Aarschot (28,969 inhabitants), Lommel (33,636 inhabitants), Turnhout (42,008 inhabitants) and Mechelen (82,602 inhabitants).¹⁹

Next to these four major groups, nineteen other commercial exhibitors operate for-profit cinemas with often less than seven screens, ranging from smaller community cinemas such as De Keizer in Lichtervelde to multiplex venues such as Cityscoop in Roeselare. These independent exhibitors, representing less than one-fifth of the market in screens and seats, mostly operate cinemas in smaller cities like Aalst (82,587 inhabitants), Geraardsbergen (32,852 inhabitants) or Lier (34,497 inhabitants).²⁰ Many of these places have a long history of family-owned cinemas. Their continued existence frequently depends on personal, often nostalgia-driven initiatives by local exhibitors, like the Cinema Albert in Dendermonde. It is no surprise that this part of the film market is highly vulnerable. For instance, in 2013, the Vanhakendover family decided to close its six-screen *Cinema Rialto* in Ostend, thus turning Kinopolis into the local monopolist in this coastal city.

The third branch in the market is a small circuit of art-house cinemas, representing only seven exhibitors and 4 per cent of the overall amount of seats. As well as private initiatives like art-house cinemas in student cities like Antwerp (Cartoon's) and Ghent

Table 14.3 Multiplexes in Brussels and Flanders (2011).

	Cities	Screens	Seats
Kinopolis Group	8	110	29,606
UGC	3	45	9,198
Ciné-Invest	4	37	7,375
Utopolis	4	29	5,525
Total	16	221	51,704

Sources: Based on data in *Voorbij de vertoning*, p. 29.



NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION




(Sphinx and Studio Skoop), this circuit includes three subsidised venues in Antwerp (Cinema Zuid), Kortrijk (Buda) and Louvain (ZED). We will come back to the different dynamics of the Flemish film market and to the question of how these operators co-exist, but in order to understand this, it is necessary to look at broader sociogeographic characteristics.

FLANDERS AS ONE METROPOLITAN AREA

In the following analysis, we seek to gain an insight into which parameters determine the location of cinemas as well as consider the variety and internal dynamics in a specific film exhibition market, in this case Flanders. In addition to parameters that include public support programmes (for instance, for art-house cinemas) and private initiatives (like family-owned commercial cinemas), we believe a mixture of economic and sociogeographical parameters should be taken into account. In attempting a more in-depth analysis of film exhibition, we examine factors such as the distribution of film venues in relation to broader geographic and demographic patterns and other markers of the degree of urbanisation versus rurality. Echoing the need for interdisciplinary work in New Cinema History, this chapter aims to confront structural data on film exhibition with concepts and research from social and economic geography, in particular, studies on Flanders.²¹



In order to understand the film exhibition data, we first need to focus upon the overall spatial structure of the northern part of Belgium, one of the most densely populated regions in Europe.²² Geographers and policy-makers tend to look at the Dutch-speaking region of Flanders as one metropolitan area, assuming the bi-lingual (French-Dutch) capital of Brussels, which is geographically located within Flemish borders, to be part of its socioeconomic hemisphere. Located in between other major metropolitan areas in Western Europe, Flanders has a population of 6.4 million (2013). This is slightly less than the Dutch Randstad (7.1 million) and a little more the German Ruhr area (5.3 million).



CONCERNING GEOGRAPHY

Although we realise that urbanisation can take many forms and consists of different components (morphologically, demographically, functionally etc.), we choose to make a geographic analysis purely based upon morphologic elements (i.e. size and population). There are two criteria for categorising the municipalities: the number of inhabitants and the population density. In terms of population density, historically the largest category was the category of localities with a population density of under 200 inhabitants per square kilometre, which we name villages. After World War II, more than half of all municipalities in Flanders fell in this category. The majority of them had a predominantly agrarian profile. The second category of municipalities that we distinguish, are municipalities with a population density of 200 to 600 inhabitants per km², which we defined as small towns. Most municipalities in this category are semi-urbanised, often due to industrial activity (like mining). Throughout the twentieth century, this category



NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

becomes more prevalent as general urbanisation takes place in the Flanders region. The third category includes all municipalities between 600 and 1000 inhabitants per km². Most provincial capitals and market towns with a regional function fall into this category. A fourth and last category is made up of municipalities with a population density higher than 1,000 inhabitants per km² or larger cities. This is the smallest group, but it consists of all the metropolitan municipalities. Ghent, Antwerp, and Brussels Capital Region (Brussels and its suburbs) are the three metropolitan agglomerations within the Flemish provinces. To make a selection of the medium-sized cities, we took the 42 most-densely populated municipalities that the Town and Country Planning of the Flemish District described as cities.²³ We added to this sample seven towns in the Antwerp region and thirteen towns in the Ghent region. Though this selection is in a way tentative as it is based upon the current situation, it holds up well when compared with population figures per town throughout the past century.

In order to make a systematic analysis of the connection between urbanity and movie exhibition throughout the past century, we divided the movie theatres in our database into three categories: cinemas located in one of the three metropolitan areas (over 100,000 inhabitants or a population density higher than 1,000 inhabitants per km²), cinemas situated in medium-sized cities (between 20,000 and 100,000 inhabitants or a population density of between 600 to 1,000 inhabitants per km²) and the remaining category consisting of movie theatres in localities with less than 20,000 inhabitants or a population density lower than 600 inhabitants per km².

CINEMA, URBANITY AND RURALITY

The material we collected on the emergence of movie theatres in Flanders suggests that at least for the first decade of permanent film exhibition, movie theatres were in fact an urban phenomenon. But the question is whether the majority of movie theatres have always been situated in urban areas as is so often assumed. Put differently: was there or was there not a different film culture in more rural areas?

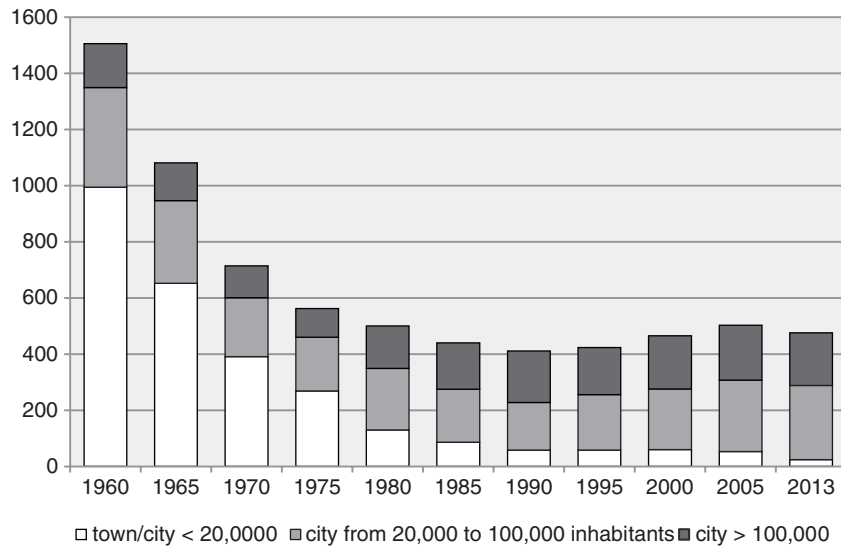
The emergence of permanent cinemas in Flanders took place in geographically determined waves. The Brussels region is by far the most important conglomeration in the area, followed by Antwerp and Ghent. Between 1905 and 1910, movie theatres boomed in urban contexts. This boom began in the three metropolitan cities and then spread to the main provincial cities. Ten years after the first theatres opened in the big cities, the first permanent cinemas appeared in small towns in rural areas. By that time, movie exhibition had already taken a firm grip on urban leisure culture.

A remarkable finding was that between 1920 and 1960, the number of movie theatres in the three largest cities in Flanders did not fluctuate very much. In 1925, there were 177 cinemas active in Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent. This number peaked to around 200 cinemas in the 1950s, with Brussels as frontrunner. Movie theatres continuously opened and closed, but in absolute numbers, the three largest cities in Flanders seem to have reached a saturation point fairly early on, after which the exhibition industry became more of a replacement market than a market targeted at expansion.

As Table 14.4 shows, the rapid decrease in cinemas in the 1960s mainly took place in smaller towns and villages. From 66 per cent of the total number of screens in 1960, it

NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

Table 14.4 Number of screens in three types of locations according to the number of inhabitants (1960–2013).



declined to only 10 per cent in 2005. The number of screens in the urban and metropolitan areas remained more or less stable, yet increased quite drastically statistically: in cities with 20,000 inhabitants or more from 23 per cent in 1960 to 50.5 per cent in 2005; in the three metropolitan areas from 10 per cent to 39 per cent. Whereas cinema and urbanity are often linked together in regard to the early days of movie exhibition, our analysis makes clear that cinema is now again primarily a phenomenon of large urban centres.²⁴

CINEMA, THE 'FOG CITY' AND THE FLEMISH 'DIAMOND'

This large-scale analysis of the geographic spread of film venues and screens poses several problems, however. One is that there are no official and workable standards in historical perspective to differentiate cities from (semi-)urbanised and rural localities. Furthermore, the region of Flanders was initially divided into more than 1,200 different municipalities of unequal size. In 1977, this administrative structure was completely overhauled as Flanders was reorganised into a region with 335 municipalities. So the stabilisation and increased concentration of cinemas in urban areas are partly the result of expanding boundaries. What complicates the matter further is that scientific typologies of Flanders focus primarily on the period from the 1970s onwards when most movie theatres in less urbanised municipalities had already closed.

More important is the question of to what extent the traditional dichotomy of city and country can still be applied to regions like Flanders. The city is no longer a clearly defined entity. In the context of Flanders, its morphological and spatial structure is sometimes referred to as one of urban sprawl or a diffuse 'fog city', *Nevelstad Vlaanderen*, where the periphery is by definition not urban, where large tracts of land have no distinct function, and lay somewhere between city and rurality.²⁵ The idea of the 'fog city' might be considered a critical concept, referring to an isotropic, fluid morphological structure,

NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

where there seems to be a lack of hierarchy by axial direction or centre formation, with much city and little countryside, and with lots of interspaces. For many geographers, urban planners, policy-makers and architects, the 'fog city' represents a nightmare, whereas for others, scarcity of open space is considered to be a challenge for acting within this specific spatial context of a highly urbanised area.

However, the concept of the fog city is not necessarily at odds with notions of functional spatial hierarchies, where the compact city is the centre of human, economic or capital mobility, or of cultural activity. In the Flemish case, policy-makers and geographers have been trying to counteract the prevailing tendencies of urban sprawl, for instance by trying to (re)concentrate housing, economic and other activities in urban areas, urban networks and economic nodal points. The hierarchy in the spatial structure of Flanders is often related to the idea of the 'diamond', or an area with the geometrical shape of a diamond. This is a reference to the most urbanised, industrialised and prosperous area in Belgium. The economic activities in this relatively larger metropolitan area are related to the port of Antwerp and the Brussels area, the conglomeration which dominates the hierarchical system of the entire country in terms of mobility, economic, political and other activities. The Flemish 'diamond' also covers cities like Ghent, Mechelen and Louvain. Turning to the history of film exhibition, the question is to what degree this 'diamond' is reflected in the distribution of film venues, and to what degree film exhibition has been concentrated or not in the 'diamond' and how this may have changed over time.

When looking at the number of cinemas and screens in the five major urban centres inside the 'diamond' area, it is clear that since the multiplex phenomenon of the 1990s film exhibition has been strongly concentrated in these areas. Whereas in the heydays of film exhibition, other parts of Flanders had a major share of cinemas and screens (Table 14.5), this has changed quite dramatically in the 2000s, where the five city centre cinemas in the 'diamond' area count more screens (54.1 per cent) than those located elsewhere (45.9 per cent).

Table 14.5 Number of screens in five major cities inside the 'diamond' (1925–2011).

	1925	1938	1960	1980	2000	2011
Brussels	104	101	39	23	68	77
Antwerp	47	53	48	25	44	48
Ghent	26	25	26	11	22	22
Mechelen	6	6	9	4	12	11
Louvain	8	7	9	6	12	8
Flemish Diamond	191	192	131	69	158	166
%	44.8%	30.7%	15.8%	26.5%	49.5%	54.1%
Rest of Flanders	235	433	700	191	161	141
%	55.2%	69.3%	84.2%	73.5%	50.5%	45.9%

NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

URBAN AREAS, FUNCTIONAL HIERARCHIES AND CINEMA

Another approach to understanding the relationship between sociogeographic and spatial structure and film exhibition concentrates on the notion of urban networks and economic nodal points. Arguing that, although the distinction between urban and rural has come under pressure, hierarchies still exist, geographers recognised that particular urban areas or networks are important in terms of their position in, and functions for, a wider region. In Flanders, major and smaller urban areas operate within city-regions, which in turn are part of even larger urban networks. Figure 14.1 illustrates how this spatial hierarchy can be reduced to five urban networks, the 'diamond' being the biggest with Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent acting as major cities, each of these forming their own, more limited city-region.

This hierarchy in the spatial structure of Flanders can be linked to theories on the role played by these cities as central places for particular functions, providing goods and services to the surrounding region. Central-place theory explains the geography of settlements as part of economic geography, using economics to explain the character of cities and towns in an urban system. The question is, of course, to what degree film exhibition fits into this theory, at least for the Flemish case. The spread of multiplexes in Figure 14.2 reveals an almost perfect match. Kinopolis, the largest player on the Flemish market, decided to operate in both the metropolitan areas and major regional centres. UGC is only active in Brussels and Antwerp, whereas Utopolis and Ciné-Invest focus on the regional cities.

A few independent commercial exhibitors are active in the major cities, but most of them have found a niche market in regional centres and smaller cities, locations left over by the groups that specialise in multiplex exhibition (Figure 14.3). Thus, they play a key role in maintaining the culture of cinemagoing in towns and villages outside the

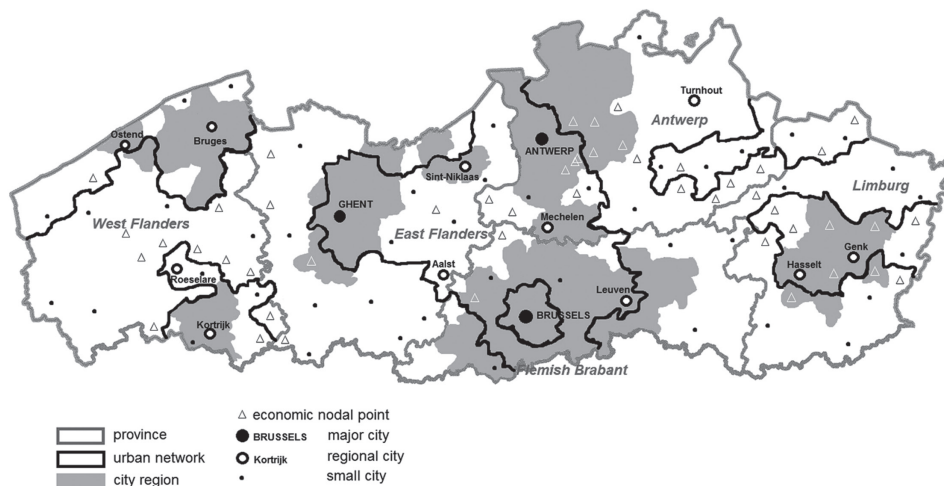


Figure 14.1 Hierarchy in the Flemish spatial structure. Based on Van Nuffel and Saey, 'Commuting, Hierarchy and Networking: The Case of Flanders' (2005), p. 314; and Ruimtelijk Structuurplan Vlaanderen (Brussels: Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap, 1998).

NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

city-regions. In economic terms, this strategy is best defined as one of trying to evade the dominance of the multiplex companies.

A closer look at the geographic distribution of art-house film venues (Figure 14.4) is also revealing because these cinemas tend to have an inverse strategy. Unlike the independent commercial exhibitors, most art-houses are located in the very centre of the major urban networks. This chapter does not aim to engage in a discussion on quality and distinction in film offerings, but it is clear that art-house cinemas and multiplexes tend to co-exist within the same areas and that they are able to co-exist because they show different kinds of movies. Except for Bruges, it is also notable that art house cinemas only flourish in the major student cities. Another distinctive economic feature is that some of these venues are supported by local or regional state subsidies.



Figure 14.2 Spread of multiplexes in the Flemish spatial structure. Based on data from the Flemish Institute for Visual, Audiovisual and Media Art (BAM).



Figure 14.3 Spread of independent commercial cinemas in the Flemish spatial structure. Based on data from the Flemish Institute for Visual, Audiovisual and Media Art (BAM).

NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION



Figure 14.4 Spread of art-house cinemas in the Flemish spatial structure. Based on data from the Flemish Institute for Visual, Audiovisual and Media Art (BAM).

CONCLUSIONS

Inspired by the New Cinema History's ambition for multidisciplinary research, this chapter attempted to use data, concepts and theories imported from outside the Humanities. More precisely, we tried to establish a relation between different kinds of cinema-related data like the geographical distribution, number of theatres and screens on the one hand, with information on demography, population density and other sociogeographical data on the other hand. After an historical overview and a structural analysis of the different circuits of film exhibition in Flanders, we applied different sociogeographical entries on the complex, 'foggy' Flemish spatial structure in order to understand the different locations, interrelations and dynamics in the contemporary film market. In general, it is clear that the analysis confirms the idea of central places since the results underline that cinemas are mainly localised in large cities and urban networks, assuming that particular cities are central places, providing goods and services to the surrounding population. However, different kinds of dynamics were identified, not only between the three main categories (multiplex chains, independent commercial cinemas, art-houses), but also within each category (for instance, between the major multiplex groups).

We know that this contribution is limited to one relatively small region. Flanders is a region with one of the highest population densities in Europe. For future research, it would be interesting to apply the same analytical principles to similar densely settled, highly urbanised regions, or inversely, to regions with a low-population density and urbanisation grade. Sociogeographic factors, however, are not the only parameters for understanding the dynamics in the film market. For instance, parameters which should be elaborated in more detail are public support programmes and the strength of private initiatives. We will also have to relate film exhibition to other societal, cultural and economic functions offered in urban nodal points. As David Morley points out, only by applying a non-media/film-centric position will we be able to fully understand cinema's social and cultural role.²⁶

NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

NOTES

1. Gita Deneckere, 'Nieuwe geschiedenis van België', in Els Witte *et al.* (eds), *Nieuwe Geschiedenis van België I: 1830–1905* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2005), p. 460.
2. John Trumbour, *Selling Hollywood to the World: U.S. and European Struggles for Mastery of the Global Film Industry, 1920–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 213.
3. For transport and distribution of motion-picture reels to the north, see Ivo Blom, *Jean Desmet and the Early Dutch Film Trade* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003), p. 147. On cinema before World War I, see Guido Convents, *Van kinetoscoop tot café-ciné: De eerste jaren van de film in België 1894–1908* (Louvain: Universitaire Pers Leuven, 2000).
4. Liesbet Depauw and Daniel Biltereyst, 'De kruistocht tegen de slechte cinema: over de aanloop en de start van de Belgische filmkeuring (1911–1929)', *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis* vol. 8 (2005), pp. 3–26.
5. Marc Crunelle, *Histoire des Cinémas Bruxellois* (Brussels: Ministère de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale, 2003); Cindy Van Handenhove, 'Antwerpen Kinemastad', MA thesis, Ghent University (2002); Leen Engelen (ed.), *Cinema Leuven. Een studie naar de Belgische filmaffiche aan de hand van de collectie van het Leuvens stadsarchief* (Leuven: Peeters Publishing, 2012); Lies Van de Vijver, 'Gent Kinemastad. Een multimethodisch onderzoek naar de ontwikkeling van de filmexploitatie, filmprogrammering en filmbeleving in de stad Gent en randgemeenten (1896–2010) als case binnen New Cinema History onderzoek', PhD thesis, Ghent University (2011); Michel Bedeur and Paolo Zagaglia, *Cinéma 1896–1993 Verviers* (Andrimont-Dison: Editions Irezumi, 1993); Michel Arnold, *Petite histoire du cinéma à Namur* (Namur: Édico, 1990).
6. The main data come from Ann Overbergh, *Voorbij de Vertoning: Analyse van het Vlaams Audiovisueel Vertonings- en Distributieveld* (Gent: BAM, 2011) and *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*, a research project funded by the FWO-Flanders (2005–7), which was based at the universities of Antwerp and Ghent.
7. See e.g. Paul Vermeulen, 'Countryside in the *Nevelstad*', *Oase: Tijdschrift voor Architectuur* vol. 20 (2002), pp. 103–7.
8. Blom, *Jean Desmet and the Early Dutch Film Trade*, p. 93.
9. It was also in this period that the first substantial taxes on film exhibition were introduced all over the country.
10. Convents, *Van kinetoscoop tot café-ciné*.
11. Howard T. Lewis, *The Motion Picture Industry* (New York: Van Nostrand, 1933), reprinted in: Ian Jarvie, *Hollywood's Overseas Campaign: The North Atlantic Movie Trade, 1920–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 141.
12. Sylvain François, 'Les représentations cinématographiques en Belgique', *Revue des Sciences Economiques* (1938), p. 53; J. Alicoate, *The 1938 Film Year Book* (New York: J. B. Brulatour, 1938), p. 1173. See also Clara Pafort-Overduin, John Sedgwick and Jaap Boter, 'Explanations for the Restrained Development of the Dutch Cinema Market in the 1930s', *Enterprise & Society* vol. 13 (2012), p. 635.
13. John Van Heghe, 'Film als bron voor geschiedschrijving (in België tussen 1920 en 1940)', Master thesis, Ghent University (1978). See also the data for the period between 1924 and 1929 in the Belgian trade journal for the spectacle and leisure industry *Annuaire du Spectacle de la Musique et du Cinéma* (Brussels: Editorial Office).



NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION



14. Van Heghe, *Film als bron*, p. 48.
15. Luc Schokkaert and Rik Stallaerts, *Onder dak. Een eeuw volks- en gildehuizen* (Ghent: Bijdragen Museum van de Vlaams Sociale Strijd, Uitgave Provinciebestuur Oost-Vlaanderen, 1987).
16. Daniel Biltereyst, “I Think Catholics Didn’t Go to the Cinema”: Catholic Film Exhibition Strategies and Cinema-going Experiences in Belgium, 1930s–1960s’, in Daniel Biltereyst and Daniela Treveri Gennari (eds), *Moralizing Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 255–71.
17. Jan-Pieter Everaerts, *Film in België, een permanente revolutie. Inleiding tot een geschiedenis en actualiteit van de filmproductie, -distributie en -exploitatie in België* (Brussels: Mediadoc, 2000).
18. According to FOD Economy.
19. FOD Economy, inhabitants on 1 January 2013.
20. Ibid.
21. Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst and Philippe Meers (eds), *Explorations in New Cinema History* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).
22. Eurostat, *Eurostat Regional Yearbook 2011* (Brussels: EU, 2011), p. 26.
23. This division between urban and rural regions was based upon a study by Van Hecke and Van Der Haegen in 1997 (Hiërarchie van de stedelijke kernen in Vlaanderen, studie opgemaakt in opdracht van AROHM, May 1997).
24. For a more expanded version of this analysis, see Daniel Biltereyst and Philippe Meers, ‘Mapping Film Exhibition in Flanders (1920–1990). A Diachronic Analysis of Cinema Culture Combined with Demographic and Geographic Data’, in Julia Hallam and Les Roberts (eds), *New Spatial Methodologies in Cinema and the Moving Image* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), pp. 80–105.
25. Vermeulen, ‘Countryside in the *Nevelstad*’; N. Van Nuffel and P. Saey, ‘Commuting, Hierarchy, and Networking: The Case of Flanders’, *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* vol. 96 (2005), pp. 313–27.
26. David Morley, ‘For a Materialist, Non-Media-centric Media Studies’, *Television & New Media* vol. 10 (2009), pp. 114–16.