

Call for papers

**Moguls, Go-betweeners and Smugglers:
Film Distributors and their Networks in the Twentieth Century**

Workshop, Université Paris 8 Vincennes – Saint-Denis, 5 April 2023

This workshop, part of the “Community Building at the Cinema” research project, aims at revisiting the history of film importers/exporters and distributors throughout the 20th century by examining the social inscription of their trade. Moguls, go-betweeners and/or smugglers, film traders were main actors in determining the value of films, building film markets, bringing out audiences by giving them (or not) access to the films. Yet, the history of cinema has long ignored the figure of the distributor, too bland to obscure the ethereal figure of the author, too close to the limelight to interest those, less numerous, researching “those wonderful people out there in the dark,” the audience. However, a renewed interest in their role has been observed in recent years, particularly in the wake of the New Cinema History.

The principal challenge is twofold. It is, of course, necessary to avoid a reductive approach limited to the omnipotence of the distributors holding the film industry in their hands and reinforcing unequal exchanges, which was denounced in its time by third-world activists. But it is just as important to reject an exclusively economic approach, which tends to depoliticize the activity of the distributors and obscure the power relations they participated in by apprehending the film industry as an autonomous sector. In opposition to these top-down perspectives, denounced by Ramon Lobato amongst others, this workshop will apprehend the social inscriptions of film importers/exporters and distributors. In line with the “Community Building at the Cinema” project, we are especially interested in the non-Hollywood films trade, which has not received much attention from scholars. Indeed, the study of these exchanges constitute a main historiographical issue as cinema history shifts away of the Eurocentric hemisphere.

This workshop seeks to reconstruct the diversity of networks these businessmen/women used to maintain, how they positioned themselves in relation to their peers, remembering that many distributors also acted as exhibitors and producers. We cannot omit in this perspective the relationship of distributors with authorities. The point here is not to revisit well-studied film policies, but to consider them from the traders’ point of view, by examining the various social, cultural, and even religious resources mobilized by distributors to negotiate with the administration. It is as crucial to understand the relationships those businessmen/women maintained with filmgoers and the place they occupied in community sociability. How did they conceive their audiences, help define genres and, more generally, shape the audiences’ experiences? We are especially interested in exploring the different ways film importers/exporters and distributors inscribed their markets and in questioning their role in defining geopolitical spaces.

Potential topics include (but are not limited to):

1. Distribution and middlemen/women minorities

The workshop will explore the place of ethnic minorities in the distribution market. What was the role of the Chinese, Greek, Indian, Jewish, Lebanese, etc. communities? Where do they stand in comparison to the production and exhibition sector? Did the film trade fit into established practices or did it introduce new business skills? What types of jobs, activities and social relations does the term “distributor” include? The goal is to complexify the often essentialized notion of cultural intermediaries to examine the diversity of their economic activities and practices and, finally, historicize the role of the different minorities investing the distribution business.

2. Games without borders

Which role did importers/exporters and distributors play in the transnational circulation of films? How did they shape or subvert geopolitical spaces and power relations? Which strategies did they play to expand internationally (family capitalism, State support...)? We are not only interested in the legal forms of trade, but we pay particular attention to the smuggling of films. While today audiovisual piracy has captured the attention of researchers, one tends to overlook the importance of the informal flows of film reels in mapping regional markets.

3. Distributors and communal sociability

The capitalist activities of distributors cannot be understood in isolation from a communal sociability. How did their local entrenchment relate to their international networks? Did they see themselves as middlemen/women, members of a cultural, ethnic or social group previously constituted, part of a collective formed around the cinema venue, or rather as figures external to it? Were audiences aware of their existence, and if so, how were they perceived?

Submission guidelines:

This one-day workshop will be held in-person at the University of Paris 8 Vincennes – Saint-Denis on 5 April 2023. The working language of the event is English.

Please submit 300-word proposal with a short bio-bibliography (max. 150 words) by 16 December 2022 to the organisers: morgan.corriou@univ-paris8.fr, caroline.damiens@parisnanterre.fr, melisande.leventopoulos@gmail.com

Selected applicants will be contacted by Mid-January.

« Community building at the cinema: towards a decentred and entangled history of cinema-going » (ArTeC-UPL)

At the crossroads of history, film studies and anthropology, this project intends to shift the focus away from Western Europe and the United States in the study of cinema exhibition and reception. It seeks to engage in transnational and comparative research on a global scale, with a particular focus on the communal identities of cinemagoers in the first 20th century. It aims to examine cinematic intra- and inter-community interactions by concentrating on non-hegemonic media industries. Our intention is to grasp cinema audiences as continuously changing collectives, characterized by a perpetual restructuration and reinvention, shaped by the spectators' cultural, ethnic, national and religious identities.

Moving beyond the tendency to place the urban metropolises of Western modernity at the centre of the histories of cinema-going, the project intends to decentre historical audience studies and “provincialize” well-researched New York and Parisian cinema theatres and audiences. Based on expansive archival surveys, it also aims to develop an international network of researchers. One more purpose is to build up a collection of (mainly non-fiction) reflective films on cinema-going on a global scale, which will be presented to the general public at the Musée du Quai Branly and the École normale supérieure Louis-Lumière.

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