

The Cultura de la Pantalla network: writing new cinema histories across Latin America and Europe

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Part of the Cultura de la Pantalla team and guests at a workshop in Mexico City, September 2016

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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1. THE NETWORK

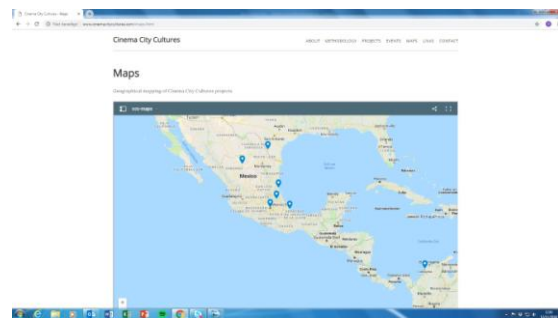
The *Cultura de la Pantalla (CdP)* network consists of an international group of film, media and communication researchers in Latin America (Mexico and Colombia) and Europe (Belgium and Spain) collaborating in a series of multi-method longitudinal studies on urban cinema cultures in the Spanish language world. Together we are writing 'new cinema histories' (Maltby, 2006) across Latin America and Europe with a focus on exhibition, programming and audience experiences. The network connects directly with wider dynamics in the field of cinema history, under the header of 'new cinema history' (see: the conceptual framework). In practice, the teams carry out multidimensional replica studies in their respective cities, with quasi-identical central research questions, research design and methods. The network developed out of a research project *The Enlightened City* on the history of Belgian cinema culture and more specifically the interaction between exhibition, programming and audience experiences¹. This project built the research design that was later replicated by the teams within the network, under coordination of the three initiators, Daniel Biltereyst, José Carlos Lozano and Philippe Meers.

The story goes back to 2008, when Lozano, after listening to a conference presentation on the *Enlightened City* project, contacted Biltereyst and Meers with the proposal to do a replica study of the Belgian project for the Northern Mexican city of Monterrey. Both immediately agreed and the replica in Monterrey started in 2009. The research design, central questions and all research instruments were shared and translated to Spanish. With the help of colleagues from other universities in Monterrey, and a large team of junior and senior students within the framework of the research chair that Lozano held at the TEC, the project was executed successfully. And with the Monterrey study still ongoing, we organized a workshop in 2012 for interested colleagues at TEC Monterrey, explaining the general set-up and the aims of the project, with the invitation to join. And rather to our surprise, what started out as a single city replica study for Monterrey, developed into a network of teams across Mexico and other Spanish language countries. As an outcome of the workshop new replica studies were initiated in several Mexican cities: Mexico City, Torreón, Tampico; in Spain: Barcelona, and in Colombia: Cartagena de Indias. After finishing the project

for Monterrey, Lozano started with a new study in Laredo, Texas, thereby including the US within *Cultura de la Pantalla*. And recently two new Mexican teams joined the group, León in 2017 and Saltillo in 2018².



Cinema City Cultures: screen shot opening page



Cinema City Cultures: screen shot map projects in Mexico and Colombia

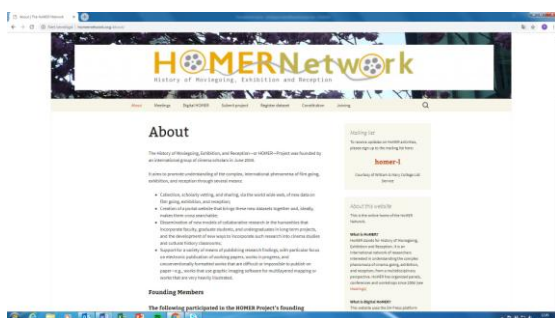
Cultura de la Pantalla is an example of a bottom-up quite informal international research collaboration with little extra funding³. Each team provided its own means for research, often working with bachelors and masters students, involving them in an original research project and allowing them to discover parts of their own city's cinema history.

The network also plays a prominent role in *Cinema City Cultures*, as one of the key aims of the *Cinema City Cultures* network is precisely to foster more work on the history of urban cinematic cultures. The wider context for both *Cultura de la Pantalla* and *Cinema City Cultures* has always been *HoMER*, the *History of Moviegoing, Exhibition and Reception* network, a diverse international group of film researchers forming a driving force behind the renewal of contemporary cinema research, now known as 'new cinema history'. This approach has directly inspired *Cultura de la Pantalla*.

2. THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: NEW CINEMA HISTORY

Over the past fifteen years, film and cinema studies developed from a largely text and film centered approach into a more cultural- and socio-historical approach to cinema. The theoretical and empirical work of scholars like Allen (1990, 2006) and Staiger (1992), among others, have established the grounds for an approach looking both at film exhibition and programming and at the lived experiences of film audiences and the social experience of cinema-going (Maltby, Biltereyst & Meers, 2011; Biltereyst, Maltby & Meers, 2012, 2019). This shift in focus coincided with what Richard Maltby (2007) indicated as the terminological and methodological distinction between film history and cinema history, or ‘the difference between an aesthetic history of textual relations between individuals or individual objects, and the social history of a cultural institution.’

In its assessment of the wider historical conditions of the cinematic experience, this new cinema history involves the usage of several disciplinary approaches, coming from history, cultural geography, demography, ethnography, etc. The approach brought forward clear-cut empirical methodologies from the social sciences to a field hitherto dominated by theoretical, humanities- or text-oriented approaches. This new transdisciplinary and multi-methodological approach, equally embraces an openness towards digitization at various levels, including data collection, processing and analysis (e.g. construction of large-scale databases on historical film exhibition sites, programming, distribution, censorship data; use of computational tools for analysis and presentation like GIS), as well as in terms of data valorization, e.g. building open-access platforms for other researchers and the wider audience.



HoMER website: screen shot opening page

3. THE MODEL

The aim of the CdP projects is to develop a series of multi-method longitudinal studies on cinema culture in cities of the Spanish language world. This entails a diachronical analysis of 1. cinema locations and institutional structures, 2. cinema programming and 3. ethnographic oral history audience research on cinema-going. The ultimate goal of the network is the comparison of these individual replica projects with each other and with the findings of the original project in Belgium. This central aim is operationalised in three research parts, each formulating a specific hypothesis and resulting in a separate database, with large amounts of data to be compared between all cases.

In a first part ‘Mapping cinemas: geographical location and institutional structures’ an institutional analysis is executed of cinemas and sites of film distribution in an urban context. The hypothesis here is that cinemas have occupied central spaces in the urban fabric of provincial and metropolitan cities, developing a symbolic, cultural, economic and social hierarchy ranging from high end picture palaces to low esteemed neighborhood cinemas. Specific research questions then are e.g.: How are sites for film exhibition and distribution situated in an urban context? How do cinemas and other sites of film exhibition interact with the cultural and social networks of a city? This part results in a database containing an extended historical inventory of the film exhibition structure, including the socio-geographical distribution of cinema houses, their characteristics and types of movies shown.

The second part ‘Film programming trends’ starts from the hypothesis that film programming in Latin America and Europe was historically for a large part dominated by American film, except for specific areas (art house cinemas) and or specific periods (e.g. the Golden Age of Mexican cinema). Central questions then are: What are the key data on programming, box office and organization of film exhibition? Classical archival research is hereby combined with interviews with key players of the local cinema scene. For sample years per decade (1932, 1942, 1952, up to 2012) the film programs are inventoried and analyzed. This second part results in a large database containing a detailed description of the movies exhibited during the sample years (type of movies shown, their number of screenings, country of origin, etc.) through the analysis of programming schedules of local movie houses included in local daily newspapers.

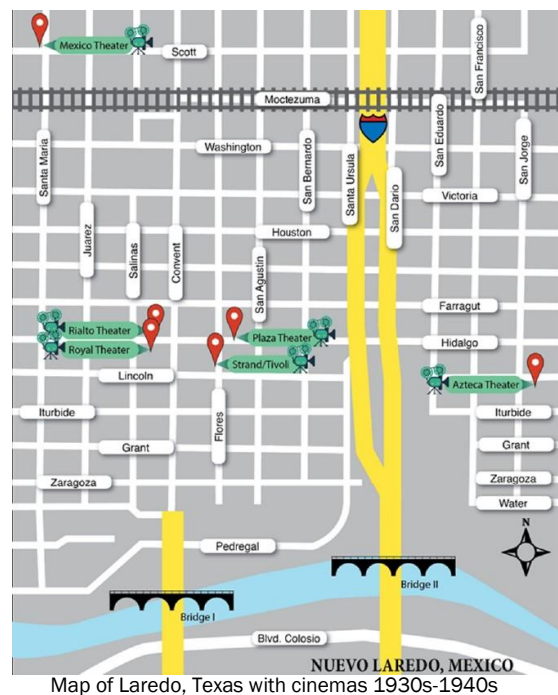
The third part 'Audience and film experiences' shifts the attention from structures, location and programming to consumption and experience of film culture, whereby the central hypothesis is that cinema-going is a social event, highly conditioned by contextual factors. This allows for the construction of a typology of viewers. Different types are interviewed in a qualitative set-up and in depth interviews are executed with a substantial number of respondents (according to age, gender, etc). Research questions are: What are the meanings of film consumption and of sites of film exhibition and distribution? How does the discursive construction of the cinema as space develop historically in interaction with the cultural and social networks in the city? The database for part 3 contains the transcribed and coded interviews. The final phase of the project then consists in combining the three levels of analysis to achieve a nuanced, complex multi-layered view on the landscape of cinema culture for each city and later, over the different cities, regions, countries.

4. CASE STUDIES

Most teams that are currently in advanced stages of the research have published on their results (Lozano, Biltereyst, Frankenberg, Meers e Hinojosa, 2012; Lozano, Biltereyst & Meers, 2017; Repoll, Portillo y Meers, 2014; Chajin y Miranda, 2015; Chong, Ornelas, Solís y Flores, 2016; Luzón y García Fleitas, 2016; Nieto Malpica, Tello Iturbe, Rosas Rodríguez y Biltereyst, 2016, for full list of publications see www.cinemacitycultures.com). Looking at these case studies we find a fascinating mix on all three central dimensions – exhibition, programming and audiences- of particularities due to the geographical, cultural, socio-economic situation of the city studied, while other findings clearly transcend the specific context of each case and align to more international patterns, such as the importance of the movies and cinema-going in everyday life, the social experience of cinema-going etc.. We illustrate briefly with the peculiar case of Laredo, Texas (USA).

In Laredo, a border town with a predominantly Spanish-speaking or bilingual Mexican-American population, the cultural-geographical location plays a crucial role in the historical development of cinema culture (Lozano, 2019). Laredo provides evidence of the flexibility of cinema exhibition and programming in a cultural, linguistic and geographic context significantly

different from the majority of the American market. Using a triangulation of methods involving a mapping of cinemas, an extensive database of films exhibited and oral histories on cinemagoing, Lozano reconstructs the strategies of the Robb and Rowley company, a regional chain that controlled exhibition in the Laredo latino market over a period of more than fifty years. The large exhibition circuit adapted its programming strategies to a particular local market: Lozano reveals the striking absence of any policy segregating Mexicans or Mexican-Americans in the chain's cinemas, despite this being common practice in many Texan and U.S. cities in the first half of the twentieth century.



On the level of cinema memory, this exceptional case offers equally fascinating findings. Exploring the memories of Laredo filmgoers between the ages of 64 and 95 on US and Mexican films we get a nuanced picture of the role of film stars and local venues in cinema-going, against the historical background of a fluid and complex border. In particular, Lozano (2017) demonstrates how residents with strong connections to Mexican heritage negotiate their cultural identities, but are also influenced by the structural characteristics of the American political, economic and educational systems.

5. COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Much of the work done so far in new cinema history is focused on very specific local practices of historical cinema culture and concentrates on film exhibition and audience experiences in particular cities, neighborhoods or venues. Comparison has, however, been on the agenda of new cinema history for a few years now, as comparison is helpful in trying to understand larger trends, factors or conditions explaining differences and similarities in historical cinema cultures. Especially for Latin America, where empirical studies on cinema culture are rather scarce, the need for large scale comparative work is urgent. Testing hypotheses on e.g. Americanization, US influence and the hybridization of media and the collective imaginary benefit from this intercontinental comparison. It can also link up with wider theoretical debates, both in Latin America (e.g. Garcia-Canclini, 1990) and Europe on these issues.

As the *CdP* network covers various projects within Mexico, it offers possibilities for intranational (intercity and interregional) comparison as well as international and intercontinental comparison. And the Belgian project, as one of the pioneering large scale empirical projects of this kind, is very well placed for providing the comparative material, also for the Southern European findings of the Barcelona case study.

Projects that try to compare mostly stumble onto problems of comparing variables and methods. As our projects all work with an identical methodological set-up and toolkit, resulting in identical and fully compatible databases, comparison should be facilitated. But even here we are confronted with problems such as interrogating some of the seemingly obvious temporal and spatial dimensions (Biltrey & Meers, 2016). In a Western European context for instance, a film venue mostly is a fixed building with bricks, stones and a roof, while mobile cinema became rather quickly a marginal phenomenon, and film programmes are announced in mainstream newspapers. In a city like Monterrey, Mexico, night-time mobile and open air screenings, like those referred to as terrazas, were a widely developed phenomenon in the neighbourhoods, underlining the importance of often overlooked conditions like weather or climate, next to issues of class as the terraza cinema experience was mostly reserved to lower-class audiences. These various conditions in terms of class, climatological, material and spatial dimensions not only emphasize the fluidity of the cinema concept, they also influence the availability and use of

sources and research conditions. In the case of Monterrey, terraza screenings for lower social classes were mostly not listed in newspapers or trade journals, and could only be discovered via oral histories.

These issues are a major challenge for the network to focus even more on the comparative aspects of the research: both regional (Northern Mexico), national (Mexico), American (Mexico, Colombia and the US), European (Belgium and Spain) and cross-continental (Mexico, Colombia, Spain and Belgium) comparisons are on the agenda.

6. FUTURE HISTORIES

The various teams are currently working on the case studies each in their own time frame. Many journal articles and book chapters on individual cases have been published (see reference list), others, both on cases and on the comparative dimensions are in press or in preparation (e.g. Lozano, 2019). Meanwhile, researchers can also engage in fruitful conversations with similar work published on Mexico (e.g. Rosas Mantecon, 2017) and other countries such as Brazil (Ferraz, 2017).

In the long term, the aim is to join all databases of each case study together in one central sustainable data depository and subsequently open them up to both the academic community and the wider public via a digital platform. Inspiration for this endeavor can be found in CINECOS, a research infrastructure project developing a 'cinema ecosystem' that consists of an open access platform for sharing, enriching, analyzing and sustaining databases on film history in Belgium⁴. In a later phase and with the necessary funds, this platform might become a model to accommodate the *CdP* databases. Expanding the network to other South-American countries is another ambition for the near future. New teams from Spanish speaking countries are most welcome to join in. And as the network grows, new cinema histories of cities, countries and regions in Latin America and Europe are in the making, helping to reconstruct the fascinating, complex and highly diverse stories of historical cinema cultures in the Spanish language world.

NOTES

¹ The research Project *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* was funded by the Research Foundation-Flanders, (FWO 2005-8). Promoters were Philippe Meers, Daniel Biltereyst and Marnix Beyen.

² The teams in the CdP network and their local coordinators are:

USA | Laredo, Texas: José Carlos Lozano (TAMIU/ITESM).

Mexico | Monterrey: José Carlos Lozano (TAMIU/ITESM), Lorena Frankenberg (Universidad Metropolitana de Monterrey), Lucila Hinojosa (Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León). Ciudad de México: Maricela Portillo Sánchez (Universidad Iberoamericana); Vicente Castellanos Cerda (Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Unidad Cuajimalpa); Jerónimo Repoll (Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Unidad Xochimilco). Tampico and Veracruz: Jorge Nieto Malpica (Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas). Torreón: Blanca Chong (Universidad Autónoma de Coahuila, Torreón). León: Efraín Delgado Rivera and Jaime Miguel González-Chávez (Universidad De La Salle, Bajío). Saltillo: Brenda Azucena and Antonio Corona (Universidad Autónoma de Coahuila, Saltillo)

Colombia | Cartagena de Indias: Maricela Portillo Sánchez (Universidad Iberoamericana), Waydi Miranda Perez (Universidad Iberoamericana, México / Fundación Universitaria Colombo Internacional) and Osiris Chajin (Fundación Universitaria Colombo Internacional, Colombia / Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Argentina).

Spain | Barcelona: Virginia Luzón and Quim Puig (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona).

Belgium | Antwerp and Ghent: Daniel Biltereyst (Ghent University) and Philippe Meers (University of Antwerp).

³ The single overall funding for the network was a grant for bilateral cooperation between the Mexican CONACyT and the Belgian Research Foundation - Flanders (FWO), 2014-2017 for 'Cinema cultures in context. An international comparative study on cinema spaces, film programming and cinema-going experiences in Belgium and Mexico', which allowed the network to organise various international workshops, both in Belgium and in Mexico.

⁴ CINECOS (Cinema Ecosystem) is a research infrastructure project lead by Daniel Biltereyst with a.o. Philippe Meers, funded by the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO, 2018-2021). It aims at developing an open access platform for sharing, enriching, analyzing and sustaining data on film history in Belgium from the 1890s onwards. Integrating 17 existing research datasets covering key aspects of Belgian film history such as production, distribution, exhibition, programming, censorship and reception, the platform aims to improve the understanding and further exploration of cinema as a dominant public entertainment industry and as lived popular culture. CINECOS will provide a robust platform for managing and sustaining this unique dataset, facilitating (inter)national data exchange and comparative research facilitate data driven exploration and analysis using data visualisation, mapping, text-mining and other digital tools.

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