

*Constructing Film Histories: a bottom-up approach*

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National and international films histories are normally told from a high-level viewpoint, drawing upon contemporary governmental enquiries and reports, trade journal reporting, memoirs and biographies. These sources of evidence are vital of course and often arm us with pertinent statistics and personal experience to frame accounts of the emergence and development of film industries. It is an approach based upon authority – the right for a particular institution, group or individual to be heard – and entails the selective presentation of information. However, it is one that misses the rich texture of individual lived experience.

Here, an alternative focus is presented, based upon the countless millions of transactions that took place at the box-office between film exhibitors and consumers. Consider a single transaction in which Film  $X_1$  is screened at Cinema  $Y_1$  for a specified period of time  $t$ , of which there are two parts: first, the corpus of investment and coordination decisions that underpin the supply of Film  $X_1$ , entailing business organisations, capital and labour markets and the means for them to interconnect - markets, prices and command. Film is a commodity. As Karl Marx wrote in the first paragraph of *Capital*: ‘The commodity is, first of all, an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind,... whether they arise, for example, from the stomach, or the imagination, makes no difference.’<sup>1</sup>

The second part entails a consumer making a choice to watch Film  $X_1$  in preference to other films being screened simultaneously in period  $t$  in Cinemas  $Y_2 \dots Y_n$ .<sup>2</sup> This decision might be the consequence of habit. It might also be the consequence of the consumer drawing upon a personal bank of accumulated filmgoing experience to make a judgement such as Film

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<sup>1</sup>Marx, K, (1976) *Capital: Volume 1*, (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth), p. 125. See also Lysandrou, P (2019), *Commodity*, Routledge, London. For an account of commodity characteristics of films see Sedgwick, J, (2000) *Filmgoing in 1930s Britain: A Choice of Pleasures*, Exeter, Exeter University Press

<sup>2</sup>Where  $n$  represents either the number of films in the consumer’s choice set, and/or cinemas within the locality.

$X_1 > X_2 > X_n$ . For discriminating filmgoers, films matter - evidenced by the fact that different films screened at the same cinema attract different size audiences.<sup>3</sup>

From the point of the single transaction, it is possible to develop the analysis. Unless Film  $X_1$  was at the beginning or end of its life cycle, it was on a journey that took it to other audiences in other cinemas in other places. The same is true of all other films. At most cinemas films stopped for only a short time. For instance, in Rome in 1954, of the 114 cinemas that consistently listed film programmes daily in the *L'Unità* newspaper, 75 of them screened three or more films every week.<sup>4</sup> As films made their journey outwards in time and space, those films that were more popular with audiences were circulated more widely and intensively, with the object of making higher revenues for their exhibitors, distributors and producers to share. Thus, in response to audience preferences, films that were most popular were made less scarce than films that were least popular. This seems to be true everywhere and at all times. Indeed, a fundamental difference between cinema and earlier forms of entertainment was that the most popular films (and their stars) could appear simultaneously to audiences in many locations. In this way Gerben Bakker explains how the industrialisation of entertainment overcame the bottleneck problem that had previously limited the capacity of the most popular stars to reach mass audiences.<sup>5</sup>

To capture the journey made by films, details of each stay are required – cinema name, seating capacity, admission prices and dates. The investigation can range in scale from small towns in a province to national territories. The most obvious source of information is the advertisement/listing columns of local/regional newspapers. History emerges as films circulate out in time and place from the centre to the periphery – in general from box-office rich to box-office poor cinemas. Films that are popular appear time and again, allowing them to be ranked by the number of screening days they accumulate. Patterns of distribution and exhibition appear.

The POPSTAT Index of Film Popularity was created not only to capture the flow of films among a stock of cinemas, but to give weights to the cinemas where they were screened on the basis of the revenue they might generate.<sup>6</sup> In this capacity, POPSTAT serves as a proxy

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<sup>3</sup>Jurca, C and Sedgwick, J, (2014) 'The Film's the Thing: Moviegoing in Philadelphia, 1935–36', *Film History*, 26: 58-83. Sedgwick, J, (2006) 'Cinemagoing in Portsmouth during the 1930s', *Cinema Journal* 46: 52-85. For the distinction between discriminating and non-discriminating audiences see Handel, L, (1950) *Hollywood Looks at its Audience*, Urbana, Ill., University of Illinois Press and Sedgwick, J and Pokorny, M, (2010) 'Consumers as risk takers: evidence from the film industry during the 1930s' *Business History* 52: 74–99.

<sup>4</sup>Treveri Gennari, D., and Sedgwick, J. 'Memories in context: the social and economic function of cinema in 1950s Rome', *Film History*, 27, (2015), pp.76-104

<sup>5</sup>Bakker, G (2008) *Entertainment industrialised: the emergence of the international Film Industry, 1890-1940*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

<sup>6</sup>For a recent presentation see Sedgwick, J (2020). 'From POPSTAT to Relpop: a methodological Jour-

for relative box-office. What POPSTAT cannot capture is the difference in the popularity of films appearing at the same cinema.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, actual attendance numbers and/or box office records are preferable, but such records are indeed rare. In the absence of such information, POPSTAT is a substitute tool that opens up a portal into past societies, in that it provides a strong indication of the choices made and tastes revealed by very large numbers of people in societies in which cinema dominated paid-for-leisure activities. Furthermore, the comparison of POSTAT Index scores of films in different localities, allows for the possibility analytically that differences in tastes and preferences exist. Specifically, the RelPOP Index has been developed to do this and works by expressing the POPSTAT Index score of each *ith* film with the median score of the population from which it was derived.<sup>8</sup>

Resting on microfoundations the POPSTAT method contrasts with conventional approaches taken to national film histories.<sup>9</sup> At its centre is the transaction through which a consumer becomes a member of an audience. By recording this action by proxy of a film being screened for a period of time in a particular cinema and aggregating this across a population of cinemas, we learn about the affinities that societies had with particular films and the stars that appeared in them. We learn for instance, that the 1930s Swedish films and stars dominated a fast-growing domestic market: in keeping with Peter Miskell's *International Orientation Index*, the Hollywood films that made the greatest impact in Sweden were those featuring Greta Garbo.<sup>10</sup> Joseph Garnatz uses an astonishing array of sources to quantify how European audiences during the 1930s favoured domestic films when given the opportunity to watch them.<sup>11</sup> Clara Pafort Overduin has shown a similar result in her extensive study of filmgoing in the Netherlands during the mid-1930s.<sup>12</sup> Knowing that ordinary people in very large numbers not only chose filmgoing as a form of recreation but also favoured particular films and stars contributes

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ney in Investigating comparative film popularity', *TMG Journal for Media History* 23 (1-2): 1–9. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.18146/tmg.776>.

<sup>7</sup>Joseph Garnatz has adapted POPSTAT to take account of the day of the week and month of the year.

<sup>8</sup>See Sedgwick, J, Miskell, P, & Nicoli, M, (2019) The market for films in post-war Italy: evidence for both national and regional patterns of taste, *Enterprise & Society*, 20: 199-228; Also see Sedgwick (2020) *ibid*.

<sup>9</sup>Felin, T., Foss, N., Heimeriks, K., & Madsen, T. (2012). Microfoundations of routines and capabilities: Individuals, processes, and structure. *Journal of Management Studies*, 49, 1351–1374.

<sup>10</sup>Miskell, P, (2016) International films and international markets: the globalisation of Hollywood entertainment, C.1921–1951, *Media History*, 22, 2: 174-200. The Swedish observations were quantified in a 1990 report by Leif Furhammar, kindly translated for me by Åsa Jernudd.

<sup>11</sup>Garnatz, J., *Wechselnde Vorlieben: Über die Filmpräferenzen der Europäer, 1896-1939*, Frankfurt am Main, Stoemfeld, (2015)

<sup>12</sup>Pafort-Overduin, C, (2012) *Hollandse films met een Hollands hart. Nationale identiteit en de Jordaanfilms, 1934-1936*, Utrecht, University of Utrecht. See also Sedgwick, J, Pafort-Overduin, C and Boter, J, (2012) Explanations for the restrained development of the Dutch cinema market in the 1930s, *Enterprise and Society*, 13: 634-671.

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to an understanding of the quotidian of everyday life and the part that prevailing culture, for better, or worse, played in this. The methodology proposed in this letter, allows the audience to speak for itself - surely an important voice in any history of popular cinema.

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