
(Not) Going to the movies: a geospatial analysis of cinema markets in The Netherlands and Flanders (1950–1975)

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Introduction

Cinema as a new cultural industry at the dawn of the twentieth century has had a significant impact on the social, cultural and economic infrastructures of modernizing societies. Although cinema from its first emergence was widely adopted, the penetration of cinemas on the exhibition market (number of cinemas, attendance figures) has shown remarkable differences between European countries. Considering the density of cinema theatres and attendance figures as a marker for market penetration, in particular The Netherlands and Belgium stand out: while Belgium abounded in cinemas and film attendance, cinema density and attendance in the Netherlands were traditionally low (Biltreyst and Meers, 2007).

Several scholars have attempted to explain these differences in market penetration, yet no comprehensive, satisfactory explanation has hitherto been found. The low cinema density and attendance in The Netherlands has been explained from the organization of society in various religious and ideological ‘pillars’ (pillarization) that, until at least the 1970s, compartmentalized the social, cultural, economic and political spheres of society but that excluded the cinema market, that operated ‘neutrally’ (Dibbets, 2006). However, in similarly compartmentalized Flanders a pillarized cinema landscape was successfully created (Biltreyst and Meers, 2007). Others have pointed out that class might have been a possible factor (Thissen and Van der Velden, 2009). Finally, the organization and economics of the industry have been identified as influencing the distribution of cinema theatres (Dibbets, 2006; Boter and Pafort-Overduin, 2009).

Central question

In the context of the research project CINEMAPS the authors aim to map cinema markets in the Netherlands and Flanders in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s in a comparative study, combining a geospatial analysis of cinema density in both areas with data on pillarization, class and the organization and economics of industry. By projecting these data on historical maps in QGIS, the geographical distribution of different types of cinemas can be compared with patterns in cinema-going and local governmental policies in both countries. This multi-layered, international map functions as a heuristic tool to identify those areas that are interesting for further, in-depth analysis of the factors that explain the differences in market penetration. As such, the project will provide an answer to the core question of how the development of the cinema, as a specific cultural industry, interrelates with the social and cultural dimensions of modern public life in The Netherlands and Flanders, in particular pillarization, class and organization and economics of the industry. In this short paper we discuss our approach and method and present the first results.

Method

In the past decade, the use of GIS mapping technologies has proven a productive tool for analyzing the geo-spatial dimensions of cinema culture (Horak, 2016). The use of mapping is coherent with recent spatial orientations in film-historical scholarship, which “focuses on cinema as social experience, conditioned by factors such as transportation networks, ethnicity,

and social group as well as cinema architecture, ticket prices, and the changing patterns of work and leisure.” (Hallam and Roberts, 2014: 20) Such a comprehensive, spatial approach can help to understand how cinema was experienced in the past and how cinema-going influenced the construction of social identity.

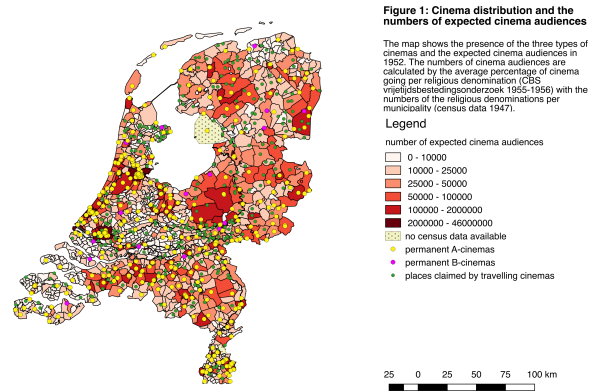
The use of GIS technology allows us to study the interrelation between cinema location and the social and economic dimensions of cinema culture at an unprecedented scale. For the comparative research on The Netherlands and Flanders, we adopt a three-tiered approach. First, we map all the cinemas according to their typologies, distinguishing between permanent theatres, theatres with occasional screenings and travelling cinemas. Second, while acknowledging the fact that cartels such as the Netherlands Cinema Alliance (hereafter: NBB) extended a strong control over the cinema market (Van Oort, 2016), we also include local government data on the map, to acknowledge the influence of pillarized municipal policy on local cinema cultures. Finally, we map (expected) audiences in relation to their political ideology, religious denomination and income or class. In order to account for the limitations of geospatial technologies in explaining complex human cultural interaction (Verhoeven et al., 2009), in the next phase of our research we will use these maps to identify case studies for further, in-depth analysis.

Mapping cinema density in its socio-economic context – first results

The datasets used (census data, data on religious denomination, local election results, the Cinema Context and Verlichte Stad cinema databases) partly had to be digitized, and all of them had to be harmonized. The harmonization processes consists of equaling the granularity of comparison both nationally and internationally (e.g., comparing municipalities and cantons), the classification of categories (typologies of cinemas, political parties, and religious denomination), and solving discrepancies in periodization between the different datasets. For some datasets harmonization models are available (e.g., for religious orientation), for others they need to be created. The data on cinema locations in Flanders are currently being georeferenced and combined with the harmonized census data and other social datasets.

Since the Dutch data were most complete, in the first phase of the project we focused on mapping cinema density in the Netherlands. The map in Figure 1 shows the geographical distribution of Dutch commercial cinemas in relation to the expected cinema attendance. In general, we can conclude that the distribution

of cinemas correlates with the level of expected cinema attendance: many permanent theatres in areas with a high expected attendance, mostly travelling cinemas in areas with a low expected attendance. This is not the case for the area in the middle and East of the country (cities of Apeldoorn and Enschede), which couples high attendance to low cinema density. This invites further research into the particularities of those areas.



Besides the influence of the organization and economics of the industry on the distribution of cinema theatres by the NBB, the local municipal policies were another major influence on cinemas and film screenings. Municipalities issued or refused permits for opening cinemas. Besides, they could prohibit certain film titles by arguing that they presented a threat to local order. Lastly, municipalities could impose (high) local taxes on cinema screenings. In short, this hitherto ignored data provides insights on the influence of pillarization on the distribution of cinemas.



The map in Figure 2 shows a correlation between Protestant municipalities (known for discouraging cinema attendance) and low cinema density, whilst Catholic municipalities show a higher number of cinemas. This suggests that religious orientation did influence cinema market penetration, in spite of the supposed neutralizing role of the NBB.

Conclusions and future work

The first geospatial analysis of Dutch cinema culture yielded a number of preliminary conclusions. First, when identifying the data on Dutch cinema locations, it turned out that previous studies had ignored the large number of commercial cinema screenings in places frequented by travelling cinemas (310 in 1949). Although these cinema screenings constitute only a small percentage of the total cinema attendance (1%), the presence of these travelling cinemas does give rise to revisit the assumption that cinema density in the Netherlands was extremely low. Second, in some areas we see a high level of expected cinema-going, but very few cinema theatres - this can be researched further by combining the analysis with data on income and class of the expected audience, as well as further in-depth case study analysis. Third, the mapping of cin-

ema density in relation to religious orientation questioned the assumption that pillarization was not relevant because of the neutralizing role of the NBB. These findings invite a more fine-grained study of local policies as well as film programming. In the next phase we will extend this study by comparing the Dutch cinema market to the Belgian one and use this comparative research to identify case studies for more in-depth research of local specificities of (not) going to the movies.

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