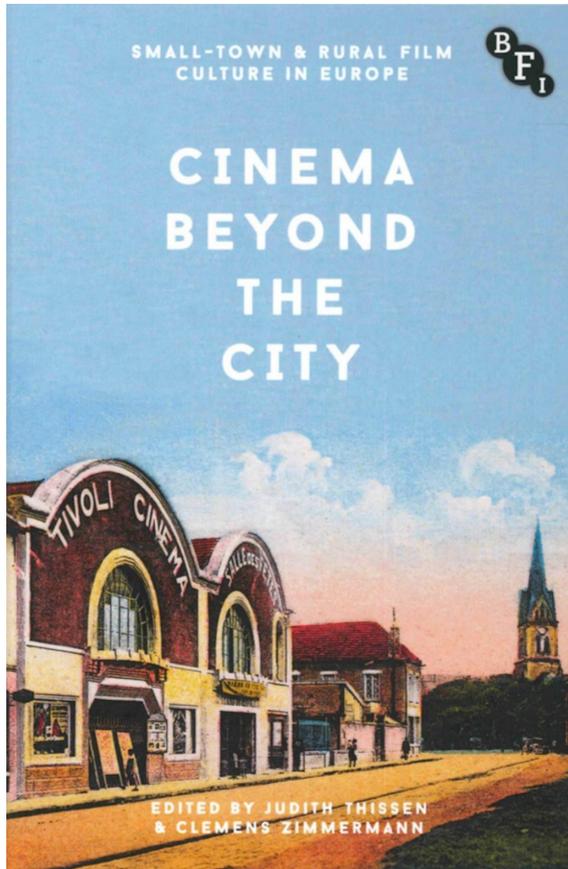


Cinema Beyond the City. Small-Town & Rural Film Culture in Europe



Judith Thissen & Clemens Zimmermann, ed.

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Palgrave, 2016, 256 pp., ca. € 85,- ISBN 9781844578467 (hardcover) and 9781844578481 (e-book).

This collection is an interesting new way of looking at film history and a good example of what Judith Thissen, one of the editors of this volume together with Clemens Zimmermann, calls the 'social turn in film historiography' in her introductory essay. It is a valuable collection of articles on rural cinema going in the United Kingdom, Sweden, Germany, Switzerland, France, Belgium and the Netherlands. Each of

the articles addresses its own contexts and answers its own questions but their main goal is to demonstrate that the rural was, from early on, part of the history of the cinema. The narrow connection between modernity and the city and its corollary, the connection between tradition and countryside, are qualified, but not outright rejected. The collection focusses mainly on the diversity of the rural movie experience.

Thissen situates the volume nicely within 'New Cinema History' and raises important questions like: 'how can we move beyond a patchwork of local stories?' (4) and, on the other hand, how to 'avoid reducing the enormous diversity of cinema audiences and experiences by subsuming them into abstract container categories (...)' (10)? These issues have not been solved in this volume. The book is divided in four parts: 'Local dynamics', 'Regional patterns', 'Alternative exhibition practices', and 'Contemporary trends in historical perspective'. There is no strong connection between the articles in each part. As it is now, it is difficult to obtain a general image of rural cinema. The collection assembles articles of scholars who reflect on what is being done in this field, but it seems that they have not been asked to address specific questions and issues in order to get some more coherence. The articles themselves demonstrate a pleasant, rich and stimulating historical craftsmanship and a mature approach to history. They give testimony of a diverse use of primary sources like (local) newspapers, interviews, periodicals of organisations, and therefore provide new

evidence. Often the comparative method is used to explain what happened. Several common topics do emerge, like the position of the Catholic church to cinema going, or the organisation of non-commercial film exhibitions again by the church, but also by social movements, youth movements, or local community movements. Thus, not only commercial movies were shown at the countryside. On the other hand, several articles pay attention to commercial film exhibitions and to the people involved. A general timeline shows an increase of rural cinemas and film exhibitions in the Interwar years, a flourishing after 1945, and the start of a decline in the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century. This general development is further refined, especially in parts three and four, by pointing to the sustained presence of ambulant cinema in the countryside after 1945, and the changed role of film exhibitions in some rural areas at the end of the century as a manifestation of new rural community life. The volume also shows differences between countries and within countries.

Explaining these developments and differences proves more challenging. The authors mention auto mobility, an increase of leisure time, competition of video and DVD (although these data carriers also allowed the screening of non-commercial film exhibitions by local groups) and general processes like modernisation, secularization, economic growth, suburbanization and re-urbanization, rise of youth culture. Nevertheless, these explanations are presented rather matter-of-factly. This may be

due to the newness of the field, and to its bottom-up approach. It might also be caused by the fact that the rural history of the twentieth century remains a field without strong textbooks and themes. Moreover, rural historians are using objects and interviews as a source, but their favourite sources are the written ones, and it is still rare that they use visual archival materials. Only recently, within rural history, has 'The European Rural History Film Database Association' (ERHFDBA) been established (<https://ruralfilms.eu/>). Judith Thissen is one of its participants, as is Peter Veer, who is writing a PhD-thesis on agricultural information films produced by the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture after the Second World War.

Thissen concludes her introduction by writing: 'With this volume we have shed a different light on European film culture by looking at its dynamics and diversity from the perspective of the periphery. It is our hope that the contributions in this book will stimulate more innovative and comparative approaches to the history of cinema going in Europe and elsewhere, while encouraging other disciplines to discover what might be learned from film historians' (18). This is exactly the strength and value of this volume. It contains well-crafted articles that enrich film history, while also joining rural historians in their endeavour to redeem the countryside from the perception of its backwardness and of being aloof from change.

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