

**Review: Eric Smoodin, *Paris in the Dark: Going to the Movies in the City of Light, 1930-1950***

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**Paris in the Dark: Going to the Movies in the City of Light, 1930-1950**

**By Eric Smoodin**

**Duke University Press, 2020**

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In *Paris in the Dark: Going to the Movies in the City of Light, 1930-1950*, Eric Smoodin embarks upon a journey across Paris' vast urban landscape, introducing the reader to the "ways that movies came and went through the city, the relationships of cinemas to the movies that they showed, to their neighbourhoods, and to their audiences" (1). Reflecting upon these matters across a city "largely unexamined" in film studies (4), Smoodin navigates a turbulent period in Parisian and French history, from the arrival of synchronised sound to cinema, to the political turmoil defining the 1930s and the military defeat and ensuing Nazi Occupation across the first half of the 1940s, all the way through to the post-war industrial and infrastructural rebuild that takes place by 1950. *Paris in the Dark* provides a much-needed re-evaluation of the archaic concept of a "national cinema" revolving around production practices, opting instead for an approach prioritising film exhibition, and reception. As such, Smoodin demonstrates the existence of numerous, and diverse film cultures cohabiting within the French capital in the 1930s and 1940s, showcasing the broader applicability of this efficient methodology towards future considerations of intra-city film cultures nationwide.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout his study, Smoodin relies heavily upon historical information preserved within invaluable archival records of newspapers, magazines, and film tabloids. Amongst these, the surviving issues of the popular film tabloid, *Pour Vous*, testify to the movement of films across Paris' cinematic landscape, yielding detailed recordings of the precise films showing at specific establishments, as well as their exact screening schedules. A good example of Smoodin's assured mastery over his vast and diverse pool of archival materials here is when he successfully pinpoints the precise theatrical establishment frequented by Walter Benjamin for a screening of *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) in the summer of 1938. Operating with a brief extract

from one of Benjamin's private correspondences in which the German philosopher relays the awe-inducing experience of seeing "Katharine Hepburn for the first time", Smoodin sieves through his sizeable heap of archival documents, narrowing the extensive list down to a singular plausible suspect: the Ermitage, on the Champs-Élysées (17).<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, whether catching the latest release at a *cinéma d'exclusivité* like Benjamin does, or frequenting one of the cheaper *cinémas des quartiers*, or heading to one of the city's multifarious ciné-clubs, Smoodin shows that the act of going to the movies ultimately held a central position within the daily lives of the majority of the city's inhabitants. However, Smoodin debates the existence of a monolithic Parisian film culture here. Would a Parisian living in the 9<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement* have seen, or liked, the same films as their neighbour in the 18<sup>th</sup>? Would this individual have even considered venturing beyond the geographical confines of their local neighbourhood for the sole purpose of viewing a particular film showing? In search of answers, Smoodin builds recent trends in film studies whereby scholars have begun considering film audiences' behavioural patterns, and taste preferences, from a focalised, micro scale (38).<sup>3</sup> Through this consideration of the metropolitan area's fragmented "cinematic geography" (61), local film cultures are revealed, as particular movies and film stars seemingly enjoyed singular appeal within certain neighbourhoods over others. As demonstrated at the dawn of the 1930s with the asymmetrical introduction of synchronised sound cinema across the city – for instance, cinemas in the predominantly working-class 20<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement* were not fully equipped with the necessary technology until 1931-32 – Smoodin's innovative lens unveils a class-based map of Paris (24). This map particularly highlights the importance of moviegoing in the daily lives of the city's working-class inhabitants – as showcased through the heavy concentration of cinemas in the city's outskirts - in contrast to wealthier, "elite" areas such as in the 1<sup>st</sup> *arrondissement* in which one would have inevitably failed in their quest to locate any such establishment.

*Paris in the Dark* also extends its consideration of Parisian moviegoing to the city's diverse non-theatrical sites of film exhibition, and reception. This is highlighted through the in-depth analysis of that which Smoodin considers to be the most elaborate network of ciné-clubs of any city in the world at the time (5). These neglected non-theatrical spaces are repositioned at the heart of the city's multiple and diverse film cultures, seemingly "overlapping" rather than appearing in "binary opposition" to the mainstream film culture available through the commercial theatrical circuit (46). A re-assessment of these oftentimes overlooked spaces highlights a transnational circulation of foreign films beyond merely the mainstream Hollywood imports, as ciné-clubs such as *Cercle du Cinéma* showcased British propaganda films in February 1940, the likes of those produced by Humphrey Jennings, and the GPO Film Unit (50).

However, despite the significant degree of attention awarded to the ciné-clubs – spanning from the 1930s to the curious establishment of the corporate *ciné-club Air France* in the late 1940s (145) – one is left slightly dissatisfied with the brevity of the author's allusions to Paris' peripheral non-theatrical film circuit. For instance, Smoodin provides a fleeting mention of the French fascist group, *Croix de Feu's* profound "understanding of motion pictures" which seemingly expanded into the production of its own fascist propaganda films (84). In Chapter 2, discussing Parisian cinema spaces as the historical witnesses of recurring exertions of fascist violence, a contrast would certainly have been welcomed paralleling its theatrical occurrence with any possible violence – of physical, or any other nature – witnessed at non-theatrical film screenings such as those presumably organised to showcase *Croix de Feu's* own fascist films. Nevertheless, the very mention of the French fascist group highlights one of the book's many strengths; namely, its willingness to engage with scholarship emanating from beyond the Anglosphere, as various references to French film scholarship feature prominently throughout the text.<sup>4</sup>

Smoodin's work uncovers a staggering era of Parisian moviegoing whereby cinema patrons could well have been witnessed, or indeed participated in public acts of violence within spaces seemingly devoted, first and foremost, to mass entertainment. Whether at a poorly subtitled screening of *Fox Movietone Folies* (1929) at the then newly repurposed Moulin Rouge, or at a purportedly immoral and anti-Catholic screening of Luis Buñuel's *L'Age d'Or* (1930) at Studio 28, Smoodin draws out a long history of physical violence – usually perpetrated by political factions situated on the Far Right – exerted at various cinematic venues across the city from 1930 to the outbreak of the Second World War. Furthermore, as the Nazis occupied Paris from 1940 to 1944, Parisian cinemas were exploited as symbolic spaces through which the city's fascist occupiers sought to broadcast a sense of normality, whilst pursuing a policy of “great reconciliation [...] under the sign of cinema” (113). Even to such intruders, moviegoing was clearly understood as an important fixture of Parisian everyday life.

Needless to say, Smoodin does not mention any such violence in his account of going to the movies in Paris as a graduate student in the early 1980s. Nevertheless, the historical cinematic landscape revealed throughout the book remained somewhat familiar when compared to his later experience, though this was seemingly no longer the case upon a later visit to Paris in 2015. Indeed, both accounts seem unfamiliar in contrast to my own experience of the city. Growing up in France as a British expatriate, I was fortunate enough to spend the occasional school holiday in Paris in the mid to late 2000s. Inevitably, these outings always seemed to result in a family excursion to the cinema – though this was never limited to any particular establishment. Fortunately, I was not subjected to any outbreaks of fascist violence at my late-night screening of *La Marche de l'Empereur/The March of the Penguins* (2005) at the UGC multi-complex at La Défense. Nor, for that matter, did I encounter any hurling of metal seat-numbering towards the screen at the sight of any deplorable French subtitling during my (nonetheless lively) screening of *Happy Feet* (2006) at the Gaumont Alésia, in the 14<sup>th</sup>

*arrondissement*. As most of the establishments mentioned in *Paris in the Dark* had long since disappeared – replaced by a swarm of multiscreen complexes that significantly reduce the need to venture across the city in search of any particular screening – such a landscape certainly complicates any attempts at distinguishing continuities between the past and the present.

Though the cinematic landscape has indeed evolved with time, moviegoing has prevailed as a key fixture of Parisian everyday life. Old establishments receive much-needed renovation, and further establishments emerge in new areas of the city and its outer periphery. It appears inconceivable that moviegoing should lose its revered status in Parisians' daily lives any time soon – a practice which, despite its temporal fluctuations, seemingly unites the local boisterous 1930s cinemagoer, the American 1980s graduate student, and the British holidaymaker into a form of a cross-generational “kinship” (156).

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Smoodin himself suggests that his methods could be applied to locations such as Algiers

<sup>2</sup> This level of detail stands as a testament to the invaluable and laborious digitisation efforts undertaken by the French *Bibliothèque Nationale* which have provided global online access to innumerable primary documents and will certainly support further research.

<sup>3</sup> For example, see Margaret O'Brien, “The Everyman Cinema, Hampstead: Film, Art and Community in the 1930s.” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 41 (no.3) (2021): 685-704; Guy Barefoot, “The Tudor Cinema, Leicester: A Local Case Study.” In *The Routledge Companion to British Cinema History*, edited by I.Q. Hunter, Laraine Porter, and Justin Smith (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 98-108.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Smoodin extracts the information pertaining to *Croix de Feu* from: Jean-Jacques Meusy, *Écrans Français de l'Entre-Deux Guerres, Volume II: Les Années Sonores et Parlantes* (Paris: Association Française de Recherche sur l'Histoire du Cinéma, 2017).