



The Palgrave Handbook of Comparative New Cinema Histories

Edited by
Daniela Treveri Gennari
Lies Van de Vijver
Pierluigi Ercole

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Daniela Treveri Gennari
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Comparing New Cinema Histories: An Introduction

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and Pierluigi Ercole*

Comparative history, a growing and broadly scholarly debated approach, has evolved over time, presenting diverse methodological and theoretical challenges for historians. From the 1950s and 1960s the comparative method was predominantly carried out “through statistical data analysis on large samples” (Ragin, 1981, p. 102).¹ Since the 1970s a growing body of literature interested in comparative historical methods has further developed, predominantly in the United States and Europe (Kaelble, 2010, p. 33). However, while up until the 1980s in “the majority of comparative studies by European historians were located in social and economic history” (Kocka & Haupt, 2010, pp. 17–18), over the last decades cultural history has started introducing comparative

¹ See also Schmidt-Catran et al. (2019).

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methodologies. This has, however, come not without its difficulties, as scholars have often questioned how to “grasp the construction of meanings and power across diverse cultural contexts” (Butsch & Livingstone, 2014, p. 1).

In her essay titled *Is Comparative History Possible*, historian Philippa Levine discusses advantages and weaknesses of the comparative approach in historical research. Whilst reminding us that “comparative studies are the exceptions rather than the rule, not least because the practice can be quite strenuous” (Levine, 2014, p. 332), she highlights some of the objections moved against the comparative approach. Two, in particular, interest us here.

Firstly, comparative history has been often associated with national histories; hence, it was seen as unable to question “national specificities” (Levine, 2014, p. 333). Nonetheless, comparative history can play a key role in “undoing the dominance of national histories” (Levine, 2014, p. 334), by questioning the “national” as a paradigm in order to reveal key internal and external factors that shaped national borders and their cultural, social, and political histories.

Secondly, Levine points out that the tendency to merge comparative history, transnational, or cross-national history and even world history is based on the mistaken assumption that “comparative history always works cross-nationally” (Levine, 2014, p. 335). Our discussion and understanding of the comparative method need to take into consideration and acknowledge the distinctive, but often complementary, research practices developed by these diverse approaches. For instance, during the last two decades the scholarly discussion about two methods—“comparative history” and “entangled history”—has repeatedly pointed out the relation between the two approaches and their compatibility. Whilst “comparative history deals with similarities and differences between historical units” and it is “analytically ambitious and empirically demanding,” entangled history “deals with transfer, interconnection and mutual influences across boundaries” (Kocka & Haupt, 2010, p. 5). Both approaches share the same methodological challenges and questions. How many units of analysis does the historian need to take into consideration in order to begin to detect signs of reciprocity and influence but also differences and similarities amongst units? When is it more appropriate to expand or reduce the spatial or geographical scope of a study? Based on what criteria do we decide to make a synchronic or a diachronic comparison? What type of sources would be most appropriate for a comparative analysis? What are the different characteristics of the sources that need to be mediated in order to be able to compare them? How do we approach multi-language projects and the consequent issue of semantic distinctions and differences of the same word used in different languages and contexts? How do we take into account the complexity of expressing cultural nuances of one nation, society, or group of people in comparison to another?

Whilst discussing issues and problems of formulating an answer to some of these questions, Levine (2014, p. 343) reminds us that “History is about interactions—between peoples and cultures, between values, between ecologies and environments—and the comparative is one of the key ways in which we make sense of such interactions, by exploring the very ‘between-ness’ at work here.”

As scholars who endeavour to adopt a comparative approach to New Cinema History, Levine's essay reminds us that, in our attempt to investigate the "between-ness" amongst cinema cultures, film industries and exhibition markets and economies, there is a danger of creating hierarchical structures within our analysis. Our approach needs to be a "comparison *of*" instead of a "comparison *to*." In addition, she highlights that the comparative method promotes and thrives on interdisciplinarity. New Cinema Historians are very well rehearsed in adopting multidisciplinary methods and approaches, as a community of researchers; therefore, we are well equipped to further develop the implementation of a comparative aspect to our investigations. The aim of this edited volume is to promote exactly that. It is to promote the adoption of a comparative approach that can start to reveal unexpected characteristics of interactions, convergences, differentiations, and similarities across cultures within the same country, neighbouring regions and far away states, as well as across periods of times within the same geographical location.

As scholars like Levine have clearly highlighted, the comparative approach in historical research presents a variety of challenges but also clear methodological advantages. Firstly, comparative cinema history allows the formulation of a set of questions that would otherwise be difficult to pose. Questions about similarities, differences, transfer, and influences, for instance, become essential within a comparative frame of analysis. Secondly, a historical comparison of cinema cultures, film distribution, or reception allows one to better understand specific case studies whose peculiarities could only be understood if compared to similar individual cases that took place in a different geographical space or time period or cultural setting. Thirdly, whilst on the one hand the comparative method requires a certain level of generalisations, on the other hand it becomes a key tool for testing research hypotheses. For instance, the comparison of national cases of film distribution practices can reveal not only macro aspects of industrial organisation, but also more specific and distinct characteristics of workforce structure and management. Finally, as Kocka and Haupt (2010, p. 18) point out, "comparison can help to de-familiarise the familiar." Comparative cinema history, therefore, engages in a dynamic process of challenging research assumptions and tests the uniqueness of case studies which, within the comparative mode, can be understood as different, similar, or as an alternative to many others. As we highlight briefly below, New Cinema Historians have engaged with, tested, and discussed the comparative approach through a series of large- and small-scale projects and key publications.

Historians engaging with the debate regarding comparative history have highlighted that whilst the approach is often valued and acknowledged by the research community, comparison remains a matter for a minority of scholars. Similarly, New Cinema Historians have over the years called for "comparative local histories" (Maltby, 2006, p. 91) as well as a more systematic comparative approach to the study of cultural, political, and economic aspects of cinema history (Biltereyst & Meers, 2016, p. 13). Since Maltby's appeal for a different approach to cinema history that shifts the attention to a comparative analysis of

local histories, and the consequent invitation from Biltreyst and Meers for a rigorous comparative approach, some scholars have begun concentrating on comparison of cinema practices and film cultures. This has been initially based on local and national internal comparisons (see for example the *Czech Film Culture in Brno (1945–1970)*, *The ‘Enlightened’ City in Belgium*,² *Italian Cinema Audiences*,³ *Cinema Culture in 1930s Britain*,⁴ *Cinema Memories: A People’s Histories of Cinema-Going in 1960s Britain*, and the more recent *Beyond the Multiplex*⁵) where not only local comparison within a city or a region, but also urban vs rural, capital cities vs smaller centres, north vs south or insular vs mainland have provided opportunities for comparative analysis within the same national context. Gradually a wider and more explicitly articulated comparative analysis of cross-national film cultures has started to emerge. The *Cultura de la Pantalla* network—consisting of an international group of film, media, and communication researchers in (Latin) America (Mexico, Colombia, US) and Europe (Belgium, Spain)—had already been working for several years to apply a series of multi-method longitudinal studies on urban cinema cultures across the Spanish language world by conducting replication studies of the *Enlightened City* project. This project has led the way through its overall goal of presenting local, national, regional, and cross-continental comparative studies on historical cinema cultures (Meers et al., 2018, p. 164). A different approach—based on geographical visualisation of film exhibition—is the one employed by Jeffrey Klenotic in *Mapping Movies*.⁶ This project, which pioneered in 2003 with the intention of creating a “space for diverse users to collaborate, exchange data, and interact with multiple information streams in an open-ended way” (Klenotic, 2003), brought the comparative dimension at the forefront of the geographical analysis of film consumption. In fact, while it started exclusively with American data, it has now added projects from several European countries, encouraging a more explicit comparative spatial analysis of its data. Within a European context, the British Academy/Leverhulme-funded *Mapping European Cinema: A Comparative Project on Cinema-going Experiences in the 1950s* (2015) was a timely project seeking to understand cultural connectedness beyond national borders, addressing the gap in comparative research on experiences of cinema-going in 1950s Europe, a time in which cinema was the most popular pastime.⁷ This research re-evaluated the popular reception of film, conducting an ethnographic audience study, while reconstructing the film programming and exhibition structure of the time across cities in the UK, Italy, and Belgium.

While these projects engaged with the comparative dimension in both nuanced and explicit manners, at the same time several publications have

² www.cinemabelgica.be

³ www.italiancinemaaudiences.org

⁴ www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/projects/cmda/

⁵ www.beyondthemultiplex.org/

⁶ www.mappingmovies.com

⁷ See Ercole et al. (2020). For a full list of research projects see <https://homernetwork.org/>

started to adopt a comparative lens in their analysis. Articles and book chapters have surfaced in the last few years addressing both the heterogeneous corpus of cinema data across the world and the different circumstances in which films have been viewed across different geographical areas, times, and cultures. This was the case for some of the articles included in the Special Issue of *TMG Journal for Media History* (2018) *New Cinema History in the Low Countries and Beyond*, where alongside national studies and methodological reflections, individual contributions concentrated on the similarities between the Netherlands and Belgium (van Oort & Pafort-Overduin, 2018) or audiences preferences and popularity in three medium-sized Northern European cities in the mid-1930s (Pafort-Overduin et al., 2018). However, it was finally with the Special Issue of *TMG Journal for Media History* (2020), *Comparative Histories of Moviegoing*, that van Oort and Whitehead brought the attention of comparative analysis within New Cinema History by presenting “a broad array of themes, places, and approaches ranging from a classical systematic comparison between various localities focused on clearly defined units of comparison to more intuitive and loosely defined objects of analysis using a comparative sensibility” as well as “critical reflections on comparative methodology” (van Oort & Whitehead, 2020, p. 7). This collection of essays highlighted how “there certainly has been a growth of interest in comparative histories in the field”, aiming “to take stock of that scholarly activity” (van Oort & Whitehead, 2020, p. 3) but also reflected on the perceived tension between generalisation and microhistories at the heart of the discipline, a discipline with a broad range of themes, methodologies and perspectives. A similar approach was used in the volume *Towards a Comparative Economic History of Cinema (1930–1970)*, where John Sedgwick (2022) worked closely with several scholars to develop an analysis of the economic circumstances in which films were produced, distributed, and exhibited in a very specific time period allowing for comparative analysis across different areas of the world. These are just two examples of research aiming to broaden the discussion on comparative methodologies applied to cinema history and move forward to stimulate further global collaborative projects.

The Palgrave Handbook of Comparative New Cinema Histories stems from the AHRC-funded *European Cinema Audiences. Entangled Histories & Shared Memories*⁸ project, a research which for the very first time explored film cultures in seven different countries across 1950s Europe, through a systematic analysis of their film exhibition, programming, and audience’s memories. Therefore, with such a project, the comparative dimension was at the heart of a research on cinema history which moved beyond the particularism of national cinema study and language differences in order to explore industrial practices and shared memories of cinema-going across seven European cities. It developed new methodologies to investigate these practices (Treveri Gennari et al., 2021) and encouraged collaborations across disciplines to ensure a sound

⁸www.europecinemaaudiences.org

comparative analysis of film consumption, memories, and film circulation. While the analysis will result in a European Cinema Audiences separate monograph, the project's investigators, also, hoped through this volume, to inspire collaborations on comparative projects that could include new localities, new analytical perspectives, and a wider historical spread of the research. *The Palgrave Handbook of Comparative New Cinema Histories* does precisely this. The volume brings together contributions that focus on historical and contemporary, comparative case studies of: film consumption, exhibition strategies, cinema memories, film programming, audiences, distribution networks and international strategies, cinema-going patterns, exhibition characteristics, economic film history, censorship, and, more generally, practices of cinema-going at a global level. What makes this volume distinctive is how a comparative analysis is at the core of each chapter, rather than a thread the reader must unravel across the entire volume. Every contributor has distinctly offered a new focus in their research area by articulating the comparative dimension of their work, and hence by moving away from what has been defined as a more "implicit" form of comparison (Kocka & Haupt, 2010, p. 2). By doing so, the volume also addresses what is for the French historian Michel Espagne (1999) one of the main weaknesses of comparative work: disregarding possible contacts between cultures, while concentrating only on national case studies and their differences. The contributions in this edited handbook, in fact, have found ways to explore and articulate contacts between cultures, the "betweenness" Levine refers to. For instance, film censorship is discussed in an essay that focuses on film cultures in Francoist Spain and in the German Democratic Republic in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In addition, the reception of Indian films by the South Asian Diaspora is investigated through their circulation in Port of Spain, Trinidad, and Durban, South Africa, during the colonial period, whilst issues related to the relationship between nation state building in the early-twentieth-century, cinema-going, communities and languages are discussed in an essay that focuses on Soviet Siberia, colonial Tunisia, and post-Ottoman Greek Macedonia. These are only a few examples of how *The Palgrave Handbook of Comparative New Cinema Histories* aims not only to move beyond the "monocentric" approach and the particularism of national cinema histories. It also finds ways to develop new contacts between areas geographically or culturally distant, but also to find new and diverse film cultures across cities, regions, and countries, as well as time periods and methodologies.

This volume brings together a wide variety of case studies on film historic research, each of them addressing a wide variety of sources, periods, and nations. It is the result of a successful call for chapters that brought together 47 scholars from over 15 different countries working on cinema history. In order to truly expose the global dimension of the comparative approach, this edited collection gives voice to a wide range of countries, historical timeframes, and perspectives, representing not only geographical and historical breadth, but also exhibiting a significant methodological and theoretical diversity. Overall,