

*Entertainment Industrialised: The
Emergence of the International Film
Industry, 1890 -1940*, by Gerben Bakker.

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This book is shelved on the eleventh floor of Glasgow University Library, under class K340, alongside other ‘motion picture industry – History’. It started out, however, as a doctoral thesis in economic history, went on to receive several awards in that discipline, and was published in the Cambridge Studies in Economic History series. This dual position is the key to its importance. Business historians and economists will be drawn to its engagement with competing theories in those fields, using cinema as a test case. For cinema historians, it places a familiar storyline in a new light, and offers bold explanatory models where anecdotal or descriptive approaches have prevailed before. This review adopts the latter point of view.

The relevance to cinema history of anything that exists ‘outside the cinematic text’ is a quietly contentious issue in the discipline (Allen 2006). Scholars might feel defensive about historical-empirical approaches, because they can undermine the boundaries that define the institutional space of film studies. It seems self-evident that the history of media is embedded in cultural, social, and economic history, but why then should film departments engage in historical

research? There is some danger that books like this, ambitious, wide-ranging, and apparently well-funded (by grants film scholars can only dream of), are seen to eliminate the need for all those painstaking monographs with patchy archival sources that constitute most of the cinema history output. But far from being an imperialist incursion, Bakker's book is a welcome contribution that will help cinema historians contextualise their research, bringing it to the attention of social historians and economists.

Entertainment Industrialised covers fifty years of popular entertainment as an economic activity in an expansive panorama that goes beyond previous histories of the industrial organisation of film production or cinema-going. It sees cinema as part of the late 19th-early 20th century entertainment offer, which also included live shows, sports, and drinking. This is studied through a comparative framework with data from the US, France and Britain. Seen on this scale, a particular film (and a particular camera set-up in a particular scene in that film) recedes dramatically into insignificance. That the book has sixty graphs, more than fifty tables, and not a single photograph or film still (save Chaplin on the dustcover) says much about the kind of work it is, and why some sectors of the discipline will not be pleased with it. That is just as well, because the book, as the original thesis, was most likely not written with film scholars in mind. It does not engage in their discussions, and it makes few concessions to them: the prose is austere, and the language is technical, sometimes even mathematical. The book assumes the reader is familiar with economics concepts, equations and methods. For those who are not, some passages of the book can be rather

challenging, but not insurmountable through patience and Wikipedia.

The structure of the book is thematic rather than chronological, and while each section develops a particular argument, they are all deftly interwoven, supporting each other and leaving the reader with the strong sense of having learned and understood. The first part tells of how the entertainment business grew during the 19th century due to a series of social transformations, and how the emerging practice of cinema-going came to displace the cheapest sectors of the performing arts spectrum. Bakker has unearthed some very good sources, in particular an 1889 international survey of household expenditure, and he uses these data to find out how people across different income brackets allotted their budget to leisure activities. Bakker does not, however, address the old dispute over whether cinema was a working-class or a middle-class pursuit. He investigates the differences between patterns of expenditure in live entertainment and cinema in the three countries, and develops a methodology to find out whether these divergences were due mostly to price or to consumer preference (taste). This is a very formalised approach based on the ‘quantity elasticity of substitution’ (p. 143-146). To see ‘taste’ quantified in this manner is refreshing, although the number of assumptions and caveats that Bakker needs to include draws attention to a problem that all historians encounter, but which the younger sub-discipline of film history is starting to address methodically: the reliability of the sources.

Most researchers in this area know that the ambitions of their work are limited by few, incomplete, and inconsistent sources,

which are rarely substantial enough to support statistical analysis. In order to be able to apply the economist's tools, Bakker works with an extraordinary array of documents, using informed guesswork to make them comparable. This resourcefulness is commendable, but it does in some cases beg the question of whether the quantitative approach is the best way to deal with this kind of phenomena.

The second part takes on the emergence of feature films, the development of Hollywood majors and the decline of European film industries. These are all topics that have been studied from an economic perspective before (see, for an early instance, the articles in Kindem 1982), so the new conclusions reveal the theoretical underpinnings of Bakker's approach. Whereas previous studies have for the most part adopted generic neoclassical or Marxist models for analysis, this book follows the work of Joseph Schumpeter. The emphasis is not on the interaction between state and private capital, nor on the ideological co-optation of cinema for capitalist interests, but on the role of entrepreneurship and innovation. This shift brings new aspects to the fore but it is also notoriously less critical of the role of large corporations and the paradigm of unending growth. A case in point is the persuasive explanation of the decline of European national cinemas as a consequence of a 'quality race' (longer, more expensive films) where sunk costs for film production escalated out of European reach. Bakker argues that Europe's attempts to protect its industry were counterproductive, as all they did was fragment the European market. This is a conclusion that owes much to debatable Schumpeterian theories, but which is supported by a body of evidence that makes it compelling.

The third part of the book revisits the historical processes described in the previous two sections, and considers in more detail the consequences of industrialisation in the entertainment market. Chapter 10 is a history of the introduction of ‘scientific’ market research to the film industry which will be of great interest to scholars working on audience studies. But the real breakthrough is hidden away in two paragraphs on page 320, which offer a reformulation of what a film is in economic terms: not a consumer commodity, but an intermediate good. What a cinema sells is not films, but ‘spectator-hours’; a film, used in conjunction with a projector and a hall or booth, is an efficient machine to produce said spectator-hours. This book tells the story of how the manufacturing and distributing processes of a capital good were industrialised, and how the product was used to provide a service to paying customers.

This re-statement provides a route to understanding the whole chain of transactions from raw stock manufacturer to picture palace patron that is more precise than more traditional film-as-commodity analyses. It is a shame that this very useful insight is only explored explicitly in the third part of the book and is barely mentioned in the highly condensed introduction and conclusion sections. This belies the fact that Bakker has derived it from his extensive work on other industries (transport, pharmaceuticals, phonographs), where it is presumably commonplace. It is also an example of the kind of lateral thinking that makes cross-discipline connections so rewarding.

There are some moments in this book where a humanities student will recoil instinctively from the spectre of economicism, shouting ‘it’s not that simple!’ Bakker offers the disclaimer that the book ‘does not endeavour to gain insight into the political, social, or

cultural history of live entertainment and of cinema' (p. 8), which makes matters worse through the assumption that such watertight divisions between areas can be maintained. Willingly or not, the book does provide great insights in many aspects of the history of cinema, not only its economics. It should not be the last word in the matter, but it raises the bar: anyone willing dispute Bakker's narrative of creative destruction through brilliant entrepreneurship will have to come up with an argument at least as solid, lucid, and well-documented.

References

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