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Paris in the Dark: Going to the Movies in the City of Light, 1930–1950.

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In 1947, had you gone to the movies at the Gaumont-Palace, you might have been asked to fill out a questionnaire. As I mentioned in the introduction, this cinema in the eighteenth arrondissement was one of the grandest in all of Europe, and the showpiece of an international empire for its parent company, the Société nouvelle des établissements Gaumont (SNEG). That company, always in and out of financial difficulty, hoped to find out more about the patrons of the Palace, perhaps to have a better sense of the immediate post-war Parisian film marketplace, perhaps to know how best to serve customers at the Palace, or perhaps because this was simply the way companies did business in the late 1940s. The pertinent details about the audience for the Gaumont-Palace were compiled by SNEG in 1948, in the Étude du comportement des spectateurs du Gaumont.

Eight hundred viewers from Paris and the surrounding suburbs participated in the Gaumont project. Answers were itemized by gender (“par sexe”), by age (“par âge”), and by where respondents lived (“par habitat”), in order to get as nuanced a sense as possible of favorite stars and movies, and attitudes about going to the Gaumont-Palace in general. Because of this, we know that 13 percent of female viewers considered Ingrid Bergman their favorite actress, while 10 percent preferred Danielle Darrieux. Around seven out of ten viewers came from Paris, and about one-quarter from the suburban banlieues. Reasonably enough, almost a third of the cinema’s audience lived in the eighteenth arrondissement, the neighborhood that housed the Gaumont. Very few viewers made the trip to the Gaumont from the working-class twentieth
arrondissement at the eastern edge of the city, but there were also relatively few filmgoers at this cinema from the much more well-heeled fifth, sixth, and seventh arrondissements.

There certainly would have been a racialized as well as a classed component of these audiences, especially from the deeply stratified banlieues, typically the home, in just one example, of the Algerian Muslims who moved to the country in such high numbers during the ten years following the war, and which in part led demographers at the time to claim for Paris the status of “city of migrants.” But Gaumont considered the Parisian suburbs only in broad, regional terms. The poll revealed that the most frequent audiences for the Palace from just outside the city came from the north, northeastern, and northwestern banlieues (those nearest the cinema), but it remains a mystery how many, as well as their composition, came from the working-class, heavily immigrant and nonwhite Boulogne-Billancourt, for instance, and how many may have come from the far more affluent and homogenous Neuilly-sur-Seine.

In all cases, and beyond the percentages from each region, the survey really was concerned not so much with the demographics of the suburban audience but rather with how they came to the Gaumont, by bus, by metro, or by train. Once they got there, the poll asked if they would just go to another cinema if the queue at the Gaumont was too long. About 20 percent said they would. Did they prefer American and British films to be subtitled or dubbed? A full 60 percent expressed a preference for dubbing. How much were they willing to pay to see movies? Most respondents thought they might pay as much as 110 francs (around 30 cents in relation to the US dollar). Did they go to the Gaumont during the week, right after work? About half of the respondents answered in the affirmative.

Most of the questions, naturally enough, dealt with reasons for going to the Gaumont-Palace in the first place, and how customers might act once they got there. In 1947, the Gaumont had shown new French films but also a number of American movies that had been produced during the war and were only just coming to France. The preferred films, at least for those who went to the Gaumont, all came from Hollywood, and ranged from solidly middlebrow to unmistakably lowbrow. Gaumont audiences’ favorite film of that year had been the Hemingway adaptation Pour qui sonne le glas (For Whom the Bell Tolls; 1943), followed by William Wyler’s rich social document Les Plus Belles Années de notre vie (The Best Years of Our Lives; 1946) and Esther Williams and Red Skelton in Le Bal des sirènes (Bathing Beauty; 1944), a film of far simpler pleasures. Audiences then cited Casablanca (1942), and only after that a French film, Le Mariage de Ramuntcho (1947).
which may have been rated so favorably because it was the first French feature-length color film.

If the Gaumont-Palace audiences provide any broader indication, tastes had changed over the course of the decade. Of the major films to play there, among the least favored were *Miroir* (1947), with Jean Gabin in only his second French film since spending the war in the United States, and *La Taverne du poisson couronné* (1947), which starred Michel Simon. The apparent shift from two prewar movie icons, Gabin and Simon, to Red Skelton, may well tell us something about changing notions of masculinity in post-Liberation Paris.¹⁴

Just a few years later the French government got into the act, concerned that fewer and fewer people in France were interested in the cinema. The result of all of this worry appeared in 1954, in a fifty-page study of the French film market overseen by economist Paul Degand and published by the Centre nationale de la cinématographie (*CNC*), *L’Étude de marché du cinéma français*. We can find the principle reason for the brochure in the title of chapter 2, “Les Français qui ne vont pas au cinéma.” Degand and the rest of the CNC wanted to find out precisely who these people were “who don’t go to the movies.”²⁵

The French government had formed the *CNC* after the war, as a reconfiguration of COIC, the Comité d’organisation des industries cinématographique, that had been instituted by the Nazis after the French surrender. Like its predecessor, the CNC administered the film industry in France.⁶ The experts at CNC had come to question the motives, desires, and practices of the French film audience, so much so that they believed that a crisis confronted the French cinema during this first decade following the war. The CNC’s analytical tool for examining this crisis would be the poll, as was the case with the Gaumont inquiry, but this would have a national rather than a purely Parisian reach.

The government had assessed the challenges facing the French film industry at least once before. From December 1936 until May 1937 the French Parliament, having created the Groupe du cinématographe, convened fourteen sessions for “a vast inquiry into the actual situation of the film industry in France.” The speakers who came to Parliament included “the principle producers, directors, actors, distributors, and critics,” all those who “interacted with the seventh art.” The hearings and the problems they addressed were significant enough to merit publication in a single volume called *Où va le cinéma français? (Where Is French Cinema Going?)*, and received a significant amount of coverage in the popular press. The testimony from industry executives, eminent filmmakers such as Marcel L’Herbier, and the man who had the last word at the last hearing, Louis Lumière, tended toward the nonscientific and the anecdotal, and Paris often occupied a central position.⁷
There were helpful numbers provided during this inquiry. Around four hundred films per year were released in four thousand French cinemas, about 120 of those movies coming from French companies, with the average French film taking only two weeks to make—with quality sacrificed for speed—and perhaps returning between F800,000 and F1.2 million. Mostly, however, the experts complained, often about the audiences in Paris, the cinemas in Paris, and also about the rest of the country not being Parisian enough. They lamented that some of the best cinemas in Paris—those around the Champs-Élysées—typically refused to play French films, favoring those from the United States and Germany (a charge that was, in fact, true), and scorned the taste of Parisian filmgoers (“Le goût du public!” as one witness, occasional screenwriter Pierre Wolf, exclaimed to the members of Parliament). Of course, the taste of audiences in the provinces seemed to be even worse. They rejected films without the biggest stars, Gaby Morlay and Harry Baur, for example, or, even worse, demanded only those films that starred the great French comic actor and everyman, Fernandel.

The 1954 government inquiry adopted a more scientific tone and methodology. For purposes of the study, the government divided the French public into four economic and social classes: the grande bourgeoisie and industrialists at the top; followed by a middle class of proprietors and functionaries; then a laboring, artisanal, and agricultural class; and finally workers and small pensioners at the bottom. The age ranges were fifteen to twenty-four, twenty-five to thirty-nine, forty to forty-nine, and those aged fifty and older, with children understood to be a significant part of the film audience but typically following the movie tastes of parents or older siblings. Slightly more than half the respondents were women. Region presented the most complicated category, with the government recognizing ten distinct areas, including large spaces such as Alsace-Lorraine and the Mediterranean coast, and those as small as Paris, with the capital nevertheless accounting for almost 12 percent of respondents.

So what, exactly, did the government find out about the French who went to the movies or stayed home? First, the mythically movie-crazy French actually attended the cinema far less frequently than fans in Italy, Germany, or the United Kingdom, going only eight or nine times a year as opposed to a dozen times in Germany and about twenty-five times in the UK. At least in Paris, the music hall, which typically has come down to us as a form of popular entertainment aligned with the period from before World War I, and which often yielded its stars to the cinema (think of Maurice Chevalier), actually had made recent and significant gains in popularity while enthusiasm for the cinema had decreased.
Throughout the country women made up only 45 percent of the movie audience, and the same held true regionally, with men forming the largest part of the audience in Alsace-Lorraine, for instance, as well as in Paris. These men attended in greater numbers even though they were far more susceptible to new media technologies such as television, which itself seemed to appeal more to those who went to the movies frequently rather than less often. For the women who did go, the cinema provided particular pleasures beyond the movies themselves. More often than men, women purchased food and other items at concession stands, and they often imagined a trip to the cinema as a “night out,” when they might “laugh,” “joke,” or “show off clothes and hairdos.” Women tended to enjoy an “entire cinematic spectacle,” which was “something other than a hasty trip into a room to watch a film.”

Only around two-thirds of the French public went to the movies at all, and most of the one-third that did not go had simply given up the habit. Those younger than twenty-five made up the largest audience for movies, and were typically middle class and living in big cities. As a result, cities stood out as the most significant targets of the report, both in terms of governmental approval and the need for development. Paris, of course, was a model. The capital had the most cinemas of any city in France, at 357, and also the most cinema seats, a number of far more value than that of exhibition sites. Paris also seemed to have the most astute fans. Nationally, only those in the upper classes chose their films according to the critics they read in newspapers and magazines. In contrast, that was the norm among Parisian movie viewers across classes. Lower-brow fans in other cities and in the provinces made decisions based on the photos and posters outside the cinemas, word of mouth, or because a film might belong to a favorite genre.

Perhaps surprisingly, Lille and Metz had even more enthusiastic audiences than those in Paris, and they attended their far fewer cinemas even more often than the Parisians. These smaller movie-mad cities seemed to indicate the possible future of cinema in France far more than did Paris. The CNC report understood that the French cinema and the cinema marketplace were national phenomena but of still varying regional significance. The report hoped that understanding the individual spectator, and spectators in places such as Paris but also Lille and Metz, might extend French film to those places (and especially cities) of weak interest, such as Limoges or Nantes. Thus for the CNC, one of the significant problems of the French film market was that it was insufficiently national. There might be differences among filmgoers in Paris, or those in Lille. Most importantly, however, “la psychologie du spectateur” differed dramatically from city to city, and from cities to more rural areas.
project for the French cinema would be to turn the filmgoer in Paris or Lille or Metz into a national film enthusiast, and to move from the individual or the city to the nation.

Just who were the French who disliked the movies, the “lost spectators,” or “les spectateurs perdus” in the words of the report? They came disproportionately from the middle and lower-middle classes, and many of them were between twenty-five and thirty-nine years old. They tended to live on the Mediterranean coast and in the southeast and southwest of France, but also, troublingly, in Paris, the most important market in the country. More often than not they cited a lack of time, the demands of family life, and the cost of attendance as reasons for staying away. These were personal, domestic reasons. But the CNC also imagined France, and the French city, as a sort of Darwinian space of leisure activity. Rather than finding relations and alliances between these activities, and seeing how one might lead to the other, the CNC report understood clearly that the various bars or cafés, or the card game belote or the possibility for playing boules, each constituted a “veritable spectacle” equal to and competing with motion pictures. The cinema existed in a cutthroat marketplace of leisure, and had found it increasingly difficult to hold its own against other forms of relaxation and escape.

All of the science and exactitude, and even the hand-wringing so evident in the 1954 national poll, seem to remove us from looking mostly at Paris, and moving through that city to examine the options for seeing movies there and the changes over time as well as the consistencies in film culture. These were the concerns and interests that motivated this project, and those with which I began this book. I mentioned being a film studies graduate student in Paris from 1980 to 1981; I went to the movies all the time that year, and the opportunities to do so seemed almost limitless. I lived in the fourth arrondissement, something of a ground zero for film viewing because at that time the Cinémathèque française had a screening room there, in the recently opened Centre Georges Pompidou. I kept a log of all the movies I saw that year, but not always where I saw them. I also kept a few mimeographed pages of schedules, which was one of the ways the Cinémathèque distributed its listings back then, so I know that, on January 18, 1981, I walked over to the Centre Pompidou to see René Clair’s 1937 British film Fausses nouvelles (Break the News), which starred Maurice Chevalier, Jack Buchanan, and June Knight. The next day, I went to the Pompidou once again, for Eric Rohmer’s Le Signe du lion (1959).

Of course, I saw movies elsewhere in Paris: at the main Cinémathèque screening space at the Palais de Chaillot in the sixteenth arrondissement,
Figure C.1 The mimeographed schedule, beginning April 29, 1981, for the Cinémathèque française at the Centre Georges Pompidou.
and also at cinemas throughout the city. Mostly I saw reprises of American and European films, at Action Écoles and the Cluny Palace in the fifth arrondissement, at Saint André des Arts and Action Christine in the sixth, at the MacMahon in the seventeenth. I went to only four or five new films that year, three of them within a two-week period in April 1981 when I saw *Fame* (1980), *The Elephant Man* (1980), and *Raging Bull* (1980), the last two, I think, in large, luxurious cinemas on the Champs-Élysées.

In subsequent trips to Paris, I saved at least some complete movie listings. An issue of *Pariscope*, a weekly listing of cultural events in the city, from August 1989 has programs for 129 cinemas. The largest concentration of exhibition sites was in the fifth arrondissement, with fifteen cinemas, and the sixth, with eighteen. By then, the twentieth arrondissement on the eastern edge of the city, which had been so packed with cinemas fifty years before, had only one, the Gambetta on the rue Belgrand. By contrast, cinemas filled the Parisian suburbs in 1989, with more than 150 combined in Seine-et-Marne, Yvelines, Essonne, Hauts-de-Seine, and elsewhere, while during the 1930s and 1940s, at least according to the sketchy information available, audiences from just outside the city often had little choice but to come to Paris to see movies. Even this apparently complete listing from *Pariscope*, however, still leaves so much out, certainly the museums and other institutions that often showed films and, on the other side of the cultural divide, the adult cinemas that still could be found throughout the city.

A quarter century later, in 2015, there were two cinemas in the twentieth, but only 82 in the city. Many of these sites had multiple screens—the Paramount in the ninth arrondissement, the Danton in the sixth, the Gaumont Champs-Élysées in the eighth, and so on—but the shift in the cultural geography of Paris nevertheless had been significant. On a walk through the city in 2015, many of the spaces that had been cinemas twenty-five years before yielded little information about the past. The great Cinéma des Champs-Élysées, for instance, where Brigitte Horney’s *Les Mains libres* premiered in 1940, had become a Mercedes-Benz dealership, and a smartphone store occupies the space of the Ermitage cinema a few blocks away. The Corso-Opéra in the second, a 350-seat cinema that, as I have mentioned, specialized in silent films throughout the 1930s, had turned into a Pizza Pino Italian restaurant, and any number of cinemas seem to have been repurposed into Monoprix stores, the ubiquitous retail spaces in modern Paris. There are also, of course, old cinemas that have been torn down and others that are now just empty, such as the old Novelty-Palace on the avenue Ledru-Rollin in the twelfth arrondissement.
Paris still has cinemas that have been showing movies for eighty years or more: the Balzac in the eighth arrondissement, the Rex in the second, the Hôtel de Ville cinema in the fourth. There are several that have been nothing if not resourceful, changing with the times, with their clientele, or with their ownership. In the sixth arrondissement, there is still the MK2 Parnasse, which opened in 1930 and after a few years moved from showing conventional French and American movies to specializing in Yiddish films to concentrating on newsreels and then moving back to products from France and Hollywood. Along the way, the name has changed from the Studio-Paris to the Studio-Parnasse to the Ce soir-Parnasse to the 14 Juillet Parnasse to the MK2 (with several others undoubtedly in between).

Clearly, Paris is not a cinema ghost town, and, in fact, there have been some extraordinary renovations. The faux-Egyptian-style Louxor cinema in the tenth arrondissement had been one of the most imposing exhibition sites in Paris, from its opening in 1921 through the 1960s, but difficult years followed and the cinema closed in the early 1980s. The city of Paris bought the building in 2003 and began a renovation, and the multiscreen result has been spectacular. In 2016, the Gaumont company, which for so many years operated
so many cinemas in Paris and the rest of France, opened the Fauvettes in the thirteenth arrondissement, on the site of an old music hall, where audiences at the multiscreen location can see restored films. By the end of the Fauvettes’s first year of operation, those films ranged from *L’Atalante* (1934) to *Harry Potter et la chambre des secrets* (*Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*; 2002), and from *Madame de . . .* (1953) to *Bridget Jones's Baby* (2016). The Cinémathèque française also still shows films. While I might miss the intimacy of the old screening room at the Pompidou Center and the slightly run-down opulence of the Cinémathèque space at the Palais de Chaillot, the new location in the thirteenth arrondissement presents viewers with a wonderful architectural space for seeing movies.

I hope this book provides a sense of the astonishing film culture of Paris from the 1930s until around 1950, something that still seemed very much a part of the city when I first visited in 1980, and that might seem largely absent today. But there is continuity as well. I began the first chapter of this book by writing about the seemingly endless—and daylong—possibilities for seeing films in the ninth arrondissement in 1933. On my last trip to Paris in 2015, there were some thirty films playing in the four cinemas in the ninth, and many screens showing them all day. Of course, rather than strolling through the neighborhood going from cinema to cinema, I simply could have stayed in the multiscreen interior space of the Gaumont Opéra cinema on 2 boulevard des Capucines, the site of the old Paramount cinema, watching movies from morning until night. Nevertheless, I could still feel a kinship to that imaginary cinéphile of 1933, starting the day with *Un soir de réveillon* at 9:30 a.m. and ending with *Tire au flanc* at 3:00 the next morning.