

Corona cinephilia: A qualitative audience study on cinephile places, spaces and the impact of COVID-19 on urban cinephilia in the city of Ghent, Belgium

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Abstract:

In 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Belgium was among the world's worst-affected countries in terms of the number of deaths per capita. As a result, a national lockdown was imposed, prohibiting any kinds of social activities as a means to prevent a further spread of the virus. One of the cultural industries most deeply affected by this restriction was cinema. This essay aims to obtain a better understanding of the ways COVID-19 has impacted cinemagoing and the film experiences of young urban cinephiles, particularly reflecting on the shifts in the cinephile's experiences of the places where they consume movies. This contribution is based on a mixed-method approach, consisting of semi-structured online interviews with cinephiles aged twenty-one to thirty in the city of Ghent, Belgium. We start off by discussing three different perspectives on cinephilia's evolution within the academic cinephilia debates. Subsequently, we look into how our cinephile respondents' film and cinema experiences have been impacted by COVID-19 safety measures, focusing on 'quarantine' film consumption habits and experiences in a domestic and online environment. Lastly, we also discuss new forms of cinephilia and technology, community building and experiences.

Keywords: Art house cinema, cinemagoing, cinephilia, community building, COVID-19 pandemic, exhibition place and space, quarantine film consumption, streaming.

Introduction

Current debates on the volatility of cinephilia have been triggered by the continuous changes and disruptions of the audio-visual entertainment industry (Klinger, 2006; De Valck, 2010; Shambu, 2014; Hagener, 2016; Keller, 2020). Where cinemas initially held the exclusive rights to showcase films, they nowadays have to compete with a multitude of screens and platforms. Consequently, these new modes of movie consumption have led scholars to question the meaning and scope of today's cinephilia. The possible substitution of older film technologies and experiences with new ones has led some scholars to perceive this as the death of cinephilia, and others to consider it a rebirth and reconfiguration (Mulvey, 2009; De Valck, 2010; Keller, 2020).

This essay takes a closer look at the aforementioned opposing perspectives on cinephilia's evolution by summarizing and comparing arguments used by different cinephile authors on the matter. Additionally, this essay isn't limited to a top-down theoretical conceptualization, but instead also presents results from a small-scale qualitative audience study on young urban cinephiles' cinemagoing memories and film experiences in the city of Ghent at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. By combining both approaches, namely a literature review and audience research, we provide an insight into urban cinephilia practices in Ghent before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as a simplistic classification of different cinephilia interpretations.

The cinephilia debates

The love for film and cinema experienced by a cinephile goes way beyond casually watching a movie or going to the cinema from time to time (Amad, 2005). Contrary to regular film audiences, cinephiles have an almost obsessive relationship with films and cinema. Watching films, going to the cinema and critically reflecting on this experience is quintessential for cinephiles. The difference between a cinephile and someone who sometimes likes to watch movies might be evident, but another crucial distinction should be made – between the cinephile and the film fan.

Just like cinephiles, film fans also experience an intense feeling of connection with film as a medium, yet Matthew Goodsell (2014) emphasizes that there is still a crucial difference when taking a closer look at the ways both parties engage with their love for film. According to Goodsell, film fans lack the self-reflexive stance that is inherent to the cinephile's film experience. Instead, film fans' obsession is put into practice in an active and creative way by making and consuming film parodies or fan fiction. A more tangible difference between film fans and cinephiles is what Fatima Chinita (2016) describes as the constructed divide of cinephilia's 'high culture' and film fans' 'low culture'. According to Chinita cinephiles are characterized by their knowledge of film classics and film history and the need to watch a copious amount of high quality (arthouse) films. Film fans on the other hand, create a community feeling by delving deeper into the cinematic universes of certain mainstream film franchises, such as Marvel, and by watching these films numerous times. In

general, the division between the cinephile and the film fan seems to be somewhat elitist in nature, which can be explained by applying Bourdieu's conceptualization of 'differentiation through taste' (1979) to cinephilia, as has previously been done by Arenas (2012) and Leveratto (2014). Cinephiles are conceived as possessing a greater cultural capital which allows them to define their love for quality films as 'high culture' and thus distinguish themselves from film fans' 'low culture' appreciation of mainstream films. This divide helps to better understand the difference between a cinephile and other film aficionados, which leads us to discuss the conceptualization of cinephilia in general.

A lot has been written about the history of cinephilia (Biltereyst, 2007; Arenas, 2012; Wild, 2015; Hagener, 2016) and even though older cinephile practices will be addressed, they will not be discussed in depth as the main focus of this essay is today's urban cinephilia. Instead, we will focus on the theoretical definition of what cinephilia entails as a means to operationalize the definition in practice. Scholars often refer to Antoine De Baecque's (2003, p. 11) conceptualization of cinephilia:

La cinéphilie, considérée comme une manière de voir les films, d'en parler, puis de diffuser ce discours, est ainsi devenue pour moi une nécessité, la vraie manière de considérer le cinéma dans son contexte.

Thomas Elsaesser (2005, p. 28) translates it as follows: 'A way of watching films, speaking about them and then diffusing this discourse'. What is striking about this definition, is how it attributes to cinephilia an ontology of its own that is not limited to the minimal act of watching films. In addition to film consumption, the need to talk and write about films is also inherent to the cinephile. Watching films is merely the starting point for cinephilia or as Jenna Ng (2010, p. 147) points out: '[...] It does identify a premise: the ritualistic and dedicated film watching which generates the rest—the film clubs, the magazines, the cross-continental admirations, the genealogies, the politics'.

Although in De Baecque's (2003) definition we find the essence of what cinephilia entails, the ways in which this cinephile essence takes shape is still heavily contested. This is due to the changing context in which cinephilia experiences take place. Technological and economical innovations of the last twenty years have had a great impact on the film industry and consequently also on film consumption and film audiences (Arenas, 2012). These disruptions have led to what Malte Hagener (2016, p. 183) calls a 'third wave of writing on cinephilia'. The changing nature of cinema and film as a medium, as well as changes within the cinephile public have become the main focus of this new research wave. Many of these studies start from the observation that contemporary cinephilia no longer takes on the same forms as it did during the cinephile heyday of the 1960s (Behlil, 2005; Hudson & Zimmermann, 2009; Czach, 2010; Ng, 2010; Jullier & Leveratto, 2012; Keller, 2020). However, while authors from the cinephile purist perspective foresee a bleak future for cinephilia, the technologically optimistic authors are thrilled with the prospect of a democratized cinephile experience. Although this simplistic classification doesn't cover all

the voices in these debates, we consider it a useful tool to gain a better understanding of the main diverging arguments within these cinephilia discussions.

Cinephile purism

The first discourse is what we call *cinephile purism*. This concept was derived from Laura Mulvey's article 'Some Reflections on the Cinephilia Question' (2009, p. 192) where she talks about 'the cinephile as purist' and describes them as cinephiles who dread technological film innovations and hold on to an unchangeable interpretation of 1960s cinephilia. Authors like Susan Sontag (1996) and James Quandt (2009) can be categorized as cinephile purists. In their writings, they mourn the end of cinephilia as they know it, namely French cinephilia's golden era of the 1960s. Driven by nostalgia, despair and anxiety over the end of high-art cinema (Keller, 2020), these authors write about their own cinephile experiences and put these against current film and cinema culture, underlining the inferiority of the latter. This nostalgia is very apparent in Sontag's infamous article 'The Decay of Cinema' (1996). The title itself already exposes Sontag's conviction that cinema and cinephile culture are becoming extinct, and with it a very particular way of watching, understanding, enjoying, and sharing movies. Sontag longs for the exclusive and artistic status avant-garde/arthouse cinema obtained in the 1960s and denounces the fact that its reputation and appeal are eroding due to the increasing commercialization tendency of films and the growing importance of blockbusters. In addition to critiquing the hyper commercialization of the film industry, the disappearing of the 'going to the cinema' experience and cinemas from the 1960s onwards seem to be the overwhelming argument for these purists (Sontag, 1996; Elsaesser, 2005, p. 39; Quandt, 2009, p. 208). According to them, going to the cinema was a ritual for most cinemagoers. The mass entry of televisions and video in households and the countless options of online film consumption today, are innovations they, to a certain extent, lament happening (Sontag, 1996; Quandt, 2009). Sontag (1996, p. 60) even goes as far as saying: 'The experience of "going to the movies" was part of it [the cinephile experience]. To see a great film only on television isn't to have really seen that film'.

While Quandt (2009, p. 208) affirms that there is greater access to films today than forty years ago, he is simultaneously critical of the sheer optimism with which this accessibility is embraced by the public. He argues that digital screenings of classic films like Robert Bresson's will never come near the authentic cinema experience and claims that we have become too tolerant of the ways films should be watched (Quandt, 2009, p. 207). In fact, Quandt (2009) states that more importance should be given to the technical quality of film screenings rather than merely praising the increased film accessibility. This statement goes against film critics like Manohla Dargis (2007) who claim that watching films on smaller screens, like iPods, won't necessarily impact the film experience in a negative way. Like Sontag (1996), Quandt (2009) rejects the idea that, from home, one can experience the film in a similar way as in the cinema. To these authors cinema is seen as an alternative space, a black box equipped with adequate sound and screen technology that block off the outside

world and make it possible to become one with the storyline unfolding on the big screen. It's the only way you can experience the movie the way the director intended to. Considering the authentic and ritualistic value they attribute to the cinema experience, it even makes them question whether younger generations will still have original cinephile experiences. Put differently: in what some have described as a "post-cinematic age" (Keller, 2020, p. 224) cinephilia is not what it used to be and by the cinephile purist's standards everything differing from classic cinephilia will always be somewhat inferior. We could then suggest that the premise for this perspective is the fact that cinephilia was born out of seeing films in the cinema and consequently cannot survive without it.

Technological optimism

At the other end of the debate are what we call the *technologically optimistic cinephiles*, a term derived from the broader technological optimism paradigm as coined by Howard Segal (1994). Unlike cinephile purists, these authors emphasize cinephilia's fluidity and avoid using nostalgic memories as parameters to evaluate the state of today's cinephilia. In fact, technological optimists embrace technological innovations and try to discover new possibilities within an updated version of cinephilia. Whereas cinephile purists aim for a certain artistic elitism, technological optimists like Jenna Ng (2010) and Laurent Jullier and Jean-Marc Levaratto (2012) advocate for a democratization of cinephilia (De Valck & Hagener, 2005, p. 13). They argue that a democratic cinephilia is made possible thanks to an increase of what they call 'cinephile agency' (Jullier & Leveratto, 2012, p. 148). This increase in agency is mainly linked to innovations taking place in two crucial components of the cinephile experience: access to films, on the one hand, and cinephile community building, on the other.

Increased accessibility to films is one of the key features of contemporary cinephilia (Ng, 2010, p. 150; Jullier & Leveratto, 2012, p. 149) and this was made possible by the invention of new domestic film offerings ranging from VHS and DVD to (illegal) torrents. According to Dale Hudson and Patricia Zimmerman (2009, p. 138), these platforms have caused our households to become pivotal places where cinephilia can take place, therefore challenging the idea that cinephile experiences are exclusively possible in cinemas. Bearing in mind the fact that nowadays cinephilia, for some people, may even consist exclusively of film consumption from home (Jullier & Leveratto, 2012, p. 147), technological optimists argue that cinephilia's reconceptualization can no longer be limited to the cinema and, as a result, they reject the medium specificity inherent to purists' definition (De Valck, 2010, p. 138; Jullier & Leveratto, 2012, p. 153). In addition, they also emphasize how this increase of domestic film viewing is, in fact, a positive and democratizing evolution within cinephilia, as cinephiles are now given the opportunity to satisfy their film obsession on their own terms and from the context of their own homes. A decisive conclusion for technological optimists is that cinephilia is deviating from a homogenized experience and that, instead, heterogeneous cinephile micro-stories are emerging (Ng, 2010, p. 150; Arenas, 2012, p. 29; Jullier & Leveratto, 2012, p. 147; Hagener 2016, p. 182). In other words, cinephiles from all

over the world now possess a certain temporal and curatorial agency to create their own unique film experiences, by choosing for themselves which film they want to see, when they want to see it and where they want to see it.

Additionally, cinephiles have also gained agency in terms of community building. Reflecting on and discussing films with peers has always been a crucial social component of cinephilia and this practice used to take place in film clubs or cinemathèques (Behlil, 2005, p. 113, Biltereyst, 2007). Today these places are scarce and are mainly located in cities, thus excluding a vast amount of rural cinephiles from actively participating in these communities (Behlil, 2005). However, by virtue of the Internet, today's cinephiles are able to connect with each other through online film forums, social media and other platforms (Behlil, 2005; Hudson & Zimmerman, 2009). New technologies facilitate a robust sociability among cinephiles (Shambu, 2014). This is a crucial development as it gives solitary cinephiles the choice to participate in a more socially engaged form of film obsession and share their ideas with others (Behlil, 2005, p. 117). This evolution also means that more people outside of metropolitan areas, without access to arthouse cinemas or film clubs, now have a chance to develop an extensive cinephile identity (Behlil, 2005, p. 121). Furthermore, these online communities deviate from the classic local film clubs because now cinephiles can interact with peers from all over the world and exchange film tastes. Therefore, technological optimists renounce the very localized definitions of cinephilia and instead coin the need for a more global interpretation of cinephilia (Hudson & Zimmermann, 2009, p. 135; Collier, 2013, p. 5). The Internet, according to this position, has thus democratized cinephilia by providing accessibility to films and developing a transnational cinephilia where it suffices to create an account on film websites or apps, like IMDb, and share your ideas, or as De Baecque (2003, p. 11) put it 'diffuse certain discourses', to be a part of an international cinephile community and participate in film culture.

Cinephilia 2.0

This article takes on an intermediate position in the two aforementioned discourses and is in favour of a more hybrid cinephilia, also known as cinephilia 2.0 (De Valck & Hagener, 2005). Despite agreeing with Sontag and Quandt's beliefs on the cultural and cinephile importance of cinemas and screening quality in general, it's clear that cinephile purism gives way to an overly essentialist conceptualization of what cinephilia is allowed to be. Marijke De Valck (2005, p.100) denounces the way authors and film critics draw up very demanding criteria which 'the cinephile' should meet, stating: 'How much fun is cinephilia if it restrains the public with professional criteria?'. Sontag declaring cinephilia's decay merely because it doesn't meet the standards of 1960s classic cinephilia, is an unproductive attitude which comes down to: 'this cinephilia or no cinephilia' (De Valck & Hagener, 2005, p. 12). The urge within cinephile purism to install an exclusive aura around cinephilia essentially renders cinephilia some sort of competition where one needs to prove their love for film by ticking every box before they are qualified to call themselves a cinephile (De Valck, 2005, p. 100).

This elitism directly opposes cinephilia's democratization as proposed by technologically optimistic cinephiles. In a perfect world this democratization would be absolute, but in reality this process poses some challenges. Hagener (2016, p. 185) questions the heavily used argument of increased film accessibility by these optimists and instead speaks of a 'myth of availability'. This myth states that the claimed online film accessibility is exaggerated and that in fact a lot of films are still invisible today. By only focusing on the possibilities the Internet has to offer to film culture and neglecting potential complications, technological optimists are potentially heading towards a technological determinism that exclusively glorifies technological progress and fails to critically question it at the same time (Smith & Marx, 1994). Authors like De Valck (2010, p. 138) also stress that there are indeed certain limits to digital film consumption. She argues that merely making classic films available online without providing any backstory doesn't suffice. In addition De Valck also underlines the importance of analogue film experiences and how today's cinephiles should still have access to these older practices. In other words, the conceptualization of cinephilia isn't a black-and-white issue. Online cinephile platforms aren't inferior to offline alternatives, but their differences shouldn't be neglected as both offer different kinds of experiences that can co-exist within a hybrid cinephilia.

Cinephilia has always been difficult to define and even though cinephile practices have changed over the course of time, its essence is still the same: it's an obsessive love for film which translates into watching and reflecting on films, and reading, writing and sharing ideas about films (De Baecque, 2003). According to De Valck and Hagener (2005, p. 14) today's cinephiles do this in a 'videosyncratic' way:

Instead we prefer to complement our revised concept of cinephilia with the notion of "videosyncrasy" because we see today's cinephiles as moving easily between different technologies, platforms, and subject positions in a highly idiosyncratic fashion that nevertheless remains connected and flexible enough to allow for the intersubjective exchange of affect, objects and memories.

'Cinephilia 2.0' is a type of cinephilia that isn't inferior to classic cinephilia, but one that takes on a hybrid identity and is characterized by its participants' heterogenous offline and online experiences (De Valck & Hagener, 2005, p. 20; Jullier & Leveratto, 2012, p. 149). Contemporary cinephiles are characterized by an increased mobility, with the availability of multiple platforms and devices for consuming movies, as well as by an intensified temporal and spatial mobility so that they can watch movies when and where they want (Tryon, 2012). Because of the recency and diversity of the online variants of cinephilia, it is interesting to examine today's turbulent cinema-scape, especially contemporary cinephiles' film experiences.

Methodology

The research for this article consisted of a small-scale case-study on the film and cinephile experiences of young urban cinephiles in the city of Ghent, Belgium. More specifically, we conducted qualitative audience research to uncover cinephiles' online and offline film experiences. We originally started this research with the following research question in mind: 'What role do Ghent's arthouse cinemas play in the film experience and social life of young urban cinephiles and how does this compare to that of multiplexes and online film platforms?'. As this research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, which resulted in a national lockdown and the closure of Belgian cinemas as of March 14th, we needed to reconceive and redirect the original research design of the project. Interviewing cinephiles and physically observing them during various cinephile activities in physical places like cinemas became impossible. On the other hand, the otherwise tragic COVID-19 pandemic offered unexpected opportunities, one of these being that we partly refocused the main research question into: 'How do the COVID-19 restrictions and the accompanying closure of Ghent's arthouse cinemas and multiplex impact the film experience and consumption of Ghent's cinephile youth?'.

The locus of the study is Ghent, a mid-sized city, which takes on a pivotal position in Belgian film and cinephile culture. Thanks to its socioeconomic position as an important urban centre in a prosperous city region in the province of Eastern Flanders, Ghent plays an essential role in the region's economic and cultural activities (Biltereyst & Van de Vijver, 2016, p. 232). This is most clearly reflected in its position as the centre of the wider urban region's transport system, leisure and shopping infrastructure. With a population of nearly 250 000 inhabitants, Ghent is also one of the major student cities in the country with various major arts academies, high schools and with Belgium's second biggest university in terms of the number of students. This unique socio-geographic profile is also clearly translated into the city's cinema-scape as it houses several arthouse cinemas, vibrant film clubs, a 12-screens multiplex and a variety of other film initiatives, like Film Fest Ghent, offering urban cinephiles quite a unique and diverse set of offline film experiences, as opposed to cinephiles living in smaller towns and villages (VAF, 2018).

Based on the literature review and drawing inspiration from the book *Publiek Belicht* by Henk Roose and Hans Waeye (2004), we drew up a protocol with questions that was used for conducting semi-structured in-depth online interviews. The protocol was built around four themes: 1. introductory questions on recent film experiences, 2. questions on art house film experiences, 3. questions on online film platforms, and lastly 4. questions on the interviewee's other cinephile practices. The choice for semi-structured in-depth interviews lies in the fact that this approach assures an openness for new and complex information, while also providing the interviews with a certain structure which ensures the comparability of these different interviews (Mortelmans, 2013). The interviews took place between February and May 2020, and they ranged from thirty to fifty minutes. They were preceded by a short drop-off, which Mortelmans (2013) describes as a written structured questionnaire that serves to gain knowledge on the interviewee's sociodemographic

background. Although the initial intention was to conduct face-to-face interviews, the COVID-19 restrictions made this impossible causing us to opt for online interviews via Skype and Messenger (except for one interview which took place before these restrictions).

The search for respondents took place via social media, where a call for participants was placed on the researcher's Facebook and Instagram accounts and also in the Facebook groups of Ghentian film clubs. This eventually led to a snowball method where interviewed cinephiles supplied us with the names of other suitable interviewees. Via targeted sampling we eventually attracted fourteen respondents between the ages of twenty-one and thirty, of which six were female and eight male.¹ The education level for all fourteen respondents was high, with all of them being either enrolled in university or already possessing a Bachelor's and Master's degree.²

The interviews were transcribed and uploaded to NVivo 12, a software program which helps explore, code and analyse qualitative data. This software made it possible to approach our data in a structured and well-founded way despite the qualitative and interpretive nature of the used method. The coding process consisted of both deductive and inductive codes and was based on the principles of Grounded Theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Mortelmans, 2013) and thematic coding (Gibbs, 2007). The data were coded in four ways:

1. Openly: a general exploration of the data by assigning extensive labels to key portions of the interviews.
2. Axially: reduction of the obtained labels from the open coding by merging similar codes.
3. Thematically: grouping the merged codes based on a thematic code.
4. Selectively: omitting the less relevant thematic codes and performing a relational analysis on the prominent codes.

The results of our analysis cover the following themes: heterogenous modes of film consumption; domestic film experiences; arthouse cinema's social and cinephile importance; and, lastly, online and offline forms of cinephile practices and community building. For each theme, we will discuss experiences pre-COVID-19 and the changes triggered by the COVID-19 restrictions to clearly portray the transformation of our respondents' cinephile experiences.

Results

From heterogeneity to COVID-19 restrictions

A pivotal feature that emerges in academic discussions about contemporary cinephilia is the heterogeneity of cinephiles' film consumption patterns and practices (Arenas, 2012; Hagner, 2016). Indeed, this heterogeneous film behaviour could also be confirmed for the respondents in this qualitative audience study. When asked about their modes of film consumption prior to COVID-19, it became clear that watching films at home was the most

common among their film-viewing practices, followed by film consumption in arthouse cinemas. Twelve respondents explicitly stated that they never or rarely visit the city's multiplex, Kinopolis; only two would go there frequently. As a weekly average under normal circumstances, our respondents would watch one film at the arthouse cinema and three to four films at home. For some, the number of films they would watch at home even rises to seven. However, respondents who had the habit of going to the arthouse cinema more than twice a week, would watch fewer films at home. Despite the dominance of domestic film consumption, when explicitly asked which film experience they preferred, all respondents stated that a visit to the arthouse cinema was the ultimate preferred film experience and a crucial component of their cinephilia.

On March 14th, 2020, all cinemas in Belgium were forced to close their doors as a measure taken due to the rising COVID-19 infections (Cinevox, 2020). In addition, long awaited cinephile film festivals like Courtisane Festival in Ghent, were also cancelled. These measures, which were initially planned to last until April 3rd 2020, eventually remained in force until July 1st, 2020. The interviews for this study, except for one, took place during this first wave of COVID-19. All respondents were at home in quarantine, evidently unable to carry on their weekly arthouse visits. The obvious outcome of these measures was the fact that cinephiles could only see films from home and couldn't visit the movie theatres for an indeterminate time. If heterogeneity is a key feature of contemporary cinephilia, this is most clearly visible in spatial terms: cinephiles' hybrid film experiences were replaced by, or reduced to, exclusively domestic film consumption. The closure of cinemas and other physical places to watch and discuss films had a varying impact on all the interviewed cinephiles, which constituted a major challenge to their pre-COVID-19 heterogenous film consumption.

Multiplex as a 'movie amusement park'

One recurrent item in the interviews was the role played by the local multiplex, the 12-screen Kinopolis. Scholarly discussions on cinephilia often take on a critical view of commercial multiplexes, mainly because of their unchallenging film offerings (e.g. Hagener, 2016, p. 185). This image of the multiplex as the least desirable place for watching films also became apparent through the interviews with our respondents. Several interviewees indicated that they would only prefer Kinopolis when it comes to specific action or science fiction films like *Star Wars* (1977)—a choice based on the multiplex's supposed technically superior infrastructure in terms of sound and projection qualities. This linkage between the venue's technical qualities and genre, however, didn't increase the interviewees' appreciation for the multiplex. Although they argued that sci-fi films like *Star Wars* should be watched in movie theatres like Kinopolis, this was only an exception to the rule as they generally disliked the type of movies which were shown there. Such pictures were often seen as commercial fare or 'bombastic films'.

The cinephiles' overall evaluation of multiplexes was not only negative because the film offerings did not suit them. The overriding reason for disliking multiplexes was the 'commercially oppressive atmosphere' that prevails in these film venues:

In Kinopolis you are forced to pass by their shop, which is a very commercially oppressive atmosphere. And every time I'm there [Kinopolis], I fall for it again and I think 'yes, I'm going to eat some popcorn', but then you pay... what is it... five or six euros... and that is actually a bit of a cat in a bag [Dutch-language expression for a bad bargain] to put it that way. (J.S., 24)³

The majority of our urban cinephiles perceived Kinopolis as a purely commercial enterprise, a sort of 'movie amusement park' (M.F., 22) with which they felt no personal connection. The cinephiles' experience of the multiplex very much differs from what Hubbard (2003) described as the key characteristics of the multiplex cinema going experience, which encompasses choice, bodily comfort and ontological security. The interviewees' spatial experience of the multiplex was linked to a commercial feeling and to an experience which was diametrically opposed to the one of arthouse cinemas:

The arthouse cinema just doesn't have that explicitly commercial feel to it. They don't want to foist all kinds of extras on you. The arthouse experience is maybe a little more authentic than big movie theatres. (T.M., 21)

Streaming platforms and the myth of accessibility

Jullier and Leveratto (2012) argued that domestic film consumption has only increased since digitization and the emergence of the Internet. According to Hagener (2016, p. 186) there are three major models for online film distribution: free (user-generated) platforms, paid subscription platforms/transactional video on demand (VoD) and finally illegal platforms. For our respondents watching movies in a domestic space was already a dominant form of film consumption, even before the COVID-19 pandemic. The most commonly used option was the curated subscription platform Mubi. More than half of the respondents would use or have used Mubi. Mainly the curation was evaluated positively and described as 'adventurous' as they liked the fact that the film offerings consist of arthouse movies, both older and lesser known films. Multiple respondents also pointed out that they especially appreciated Mubi's creative ways of offering information and context on each film:

I think it [Mubi] is a very cool alternative. Also because Mubi publishes long reads about less appreciated filmmakers, but equally about known ones. Or even, how they make videos and visual essays about directors that fascinate me or directors I don't know yet. (K.V., 21)

Thus, De Valck's (2010, p. 138) argument that online film platforms have a responsibility to supply films with a certain context and backstory is confirmed by several of our respondents who perceived this extra information as an added value to their film experience.

Surprisingly, the popular streaming platform Netflix was barely used by our cinephiles and its evaluation was mainly negative, with the biggest points of criticism being the movie offering and the operation of the recommendation algorithms. Several respondents even indicated that they used someone else's account because they did not want to pay for the poor movie offer. Furthermore, more than half of the respondents watched movies using illegal downloads or illegal streaming platforms like Stremio. On their website Stremio is described as 'a modern media centre', it's a program you can install on your device, e.g. your laptop, for free and which grants you admission to install legal and illegal add-ons for films and series. Despite the fact that a large proportion of respondents consumed movies in these kinds of illegal ways, they were very self-conscious about the unethical aspect of their actions. Some respondents even indicated that they used to consume films via these illegal formats, but consciously decided to stop or reduce their illegal film consumption because knowing their consumption was illegal had a negative impact on their film experience. Lastly, six respondents said they still actively used DVDs which they borrowed from the library or bought from flea markets.

Whereas before COVID-19 our respondents' online film consumption used to be simplistic and rarely change (always using the same online film platforms), a crucial consequence of their quarantine was that they now started actively looking for better and more interesting online film initiatives as a means to make their forced domestic consumption more pleasant. In fact, no fewer than eight respondents explicitly stated they had used new online film platforms since the beginning of quarantine:

I also notice now that there are very pleasant streaming offers. Of course, you have Netflix and Mubi and so on, but now I also noticed that other distributors are also making an effort to set up their own streaming concepts.
(S.S., 27)

Growing curiosity about alternative film distribution during the pandemic was indeed noticed by several streaming sites that came up with innovative ideas in response. Mubi for example offered cinephiles support by discounting a three-month subscription to one euro. More interesting was the way Flemish offline film initiatives tried to cope with their forced closure in an online context. Unable to take place in an offline setting, arthouse cinemas like KASKcinema and the Belgian world cinema festival MOOOV put in effort to accommodate the cinephiles' need for more interactive domestic film consumption, by organizing special online film events where they not only showcase arthouse films but also supply these with introductions and other extra activities (UitinVlaanderen, 2021). Our respondents truly appreciated the endeavour put into these alternative online offers, as it gave them the

opportunity to still consume quality arthouse films and undergo a different experience to their normal domestic consumption.

Even though respondents were generally satisfied with the online platforms at their disposal, especially with the extra options during lockdown, more than half of them didn't relate to the unbridled accessibility that technological optimists, such as Jullier and Leveratto (2012), talked about. Hence, accessibility was perceived as finite and respondents seemed to encounter what Hagener (2016, p. 185) called the 'myth of availability'. According to Hagener, access to different film platforms and their diverse film offerings is a requirement for keeping film culture and cinephilia alive. Yet, he is sceptical of the technological optimism that this complete access has been achieved already, a scepticism that is supported in this case-study. Indeed, the myth of complete accessibility is constrained in three areas: financial feasibility, Internet literacy, and technical quality.

The cinephile today has more access to movies than ever before, however, for most of the legal options to view movies you have to pay. So while the movies are at their fingertips, it is simply impossible to subscribe to every platform to access them. Since this financial restriction narrows the access to legal platforms, it leads to a large portion of them seeking movies through illegal means. However, the limitation in the illegal circuit is Internet knowledge. Besides the fact that the online film library, extensive as it may be, still doesn't include every film ever made and some movies remain so obscure that they cannot even be found through illegal channels, or the fact that some people refuse to consume films via illegal platforms, several respondents, like A.S. (30), indicated that they are simply not good at searching for illegal torrents or streams:

Yeah I don't always find it ideal, maybe I'm also not that great at finding the right torrents or the right sites or whatever. You can't find every film. Or maybe you can, but I'm just bad at it...

One of the reasons for the increasing difficulty to find illegal film platforms are the restrictions imposed by search engines like Google who complicate access to these types of sites (Fighting Piracy, n.d.). Hence, these complications, in combination with a lack of technological knowledge, render the search for illegal film platforms rather unpleasant and oftentimes without a successful outcome. Finally, several respondents also complained about the technical quality of online movies. When they finally find the film on an illegal platform, it is often of poor quality which, in turn, degrades the quality of the viewing experience. Thus, just as Quandt (2009) stated, it is not enough to make movies available, for the cinephile a decent film quality is crucial to effectively enjoy the movie.

Cinematic experience at home

In addition to how they get their films, the home infrastructure used to watch films is also a highly debated topic in the cinephilia discussions. It refers to the creation of what Barbara Klinger (2006) called the home film culture, or the multifaceted nature of film consumption

in the domestic space. One notable trend among the cinephiles in this study is what some of them called ‘beaming’. Simply explained, this is the act of watching films at home by projecting the image onto a wall with a digital projector. No fewer than eleven respondents indicated that they mainly watched films in this way or actively planned to buy a digital projector, eventually banning television and laptop screens as a means to watch films. The beamer is used to recreate the immersive cinema experience at home and even though cinephiles were already using it before, it became even more important during quarantine. The motivation for purchasing a projector also grew out of the idea of holding movie nights and thus turning their pre-COVID-19 domestic movie consumption into something social. The importance of surround sound equipment at home was only highlighted by one respondent. In other words, watching films at home is not exclusively about the consumption of film; the cinematic experience is at least as important.

Another notable result was the fact that the ‘destruction of classical cinema’ that Charles Tashiro (1991, p. 16) hoped for, namely the increased control over the temporality of the film experience and cinematic linearity through pausing and rewinding the film, was perceived negatively by the respondents. Whereas Tashiro (1991, p. 12) welcomes the erosion of classic linear cinematic forms, our respondents seem to need these. In a domestic environment, people tend to pause the film more frequently, check their cell phones or get a snack. These are all disruptive factors that prevent the cinephile from being fully immersed in the story and the diegetic world of the movie. Disturbing factors like these are absent in arthouse cinemas or as L.S. (28) argues:

The fact that you are actually hyper-concentrated on one thing during two full hours, I find that something very special. And when I watch films at home with other people and they go to the kitchen to get something, or they are busy on their cell phones..., that’s just really awful. And those kinds of distractions give me a totally different kind of immersion. And the fact that you only have one simple goal in the cinema and that there is literally no room to be busy with anything else, that to me is one of the greatest added values of the cinema experience.

The control and agency that people get at home over their own film experience is often experienced negatively, because it tends to lead to a lack of self-control to keep their focus on the film. Thus, getting rid of the cinema rules and gaining complete control over one’s film experience does not appear to be important for the cinephile in this study. We can also link this to Ng (2010) who argues that the temporality we experience at home or in the cinema are completely different. Whereas time at home is divided into multiple fractions, time at the cinema seems to stand still (Ng, 2010, p. 151). The contrast between the way time and agency are experienced at home or in the cinema would ensure that, since movies today are largely seen at home, the cinema experience becomes something special again

and is more appreciated by the cinephile, who occasionally wants to break free from the complete agency imposed on her/him at home (Ng, 2010, p. 151).

Urban cinephilia and the arthouse cinema

As mentioned in our methodology, special attention was given to the role of the arthouse cinema in our research and for this case-study we can definitely conclude that arthouse cinemas are pivotal components of contemporary urban cinephilia. Prior to the pandemic, ten respondents reported making an arthouse visit on a weekly basis. In fact, half of those same respondents went to the cinema more than twice a week, with the maximum frequency being five times a week. The remaining four respondents would visit the arthouse cinema every two weeks or monthly. In this section we will discuss urban cinephiles' perception of Ghent's arthouse cinemas, their different arthouse experiences and finally the overall meaning and importance they give to arthouse cinemas and the impact of their closing.

Overall, all respondents were satisfied with the opportunities that Ghent offers in terms of arthouse film venues and other offline film initiatives. Nevertheless, respondents were not blazingly enthusiastic regarding the technical infrastructure in Ghent's arthouse cinemas, especially when compared to Kinopolis. Infrastructural issues such as the quality of the screening, the sound or the equipment of the cinema hall, are often referred to as the decisive factors that make the cinema experience more immersive than seeing a film at home (Sontag, 1996; Quandt, 2009). Strikingly, our respondents put their own critique on these infrastructural defects into perspective, stating that although they ideally prefer a better infrastructural quality, they are also aware that arthouse cinemas today have to make do with less money. This causes them to not only downplay the deficiencies and adjust their expectations, but even describe them – with a flavour of nostalgia – as charming or authentic.

As a matter of fact, the majority of the interviewees described arthouse cinemas in terms of cosiness, homeliness and authenticity. Our respondents associated the idea of authenticity and homeliness with arthouse cinemas' small-scale nature and the plain décor of the movie halls. Another important argument for our urban cinephiles to claim this authenticity was the managerial organization behind arthouse cinemas. Half of the respondents explicitly indicated that they felt a special, affective bond with arthouse cinemas because they identified and empathized with the arthouse owners who run these cinemas with a passion for film. This affective connection with arthouse cinemas stands in great contrast to the rigid and commercial atmosphere that they associated with Kinopolis. In a cinema landscape where arthouse film venues don't make great profits, these cinephiles want to support the owners by continuing to visit their arthouse cinemas. Hence, arthouse film exhibitors and their team are conceived as important cultural brokers in the field of cinema in the city.

The arthouse as a connecting space

As David Morley (1992) argued, a visit to the cinema is more than simply seeing a film. The prospect of the visit, sitting in the theatre, and the exit from the arthouse cinema form a larger experience that goes beyond the practical aspect of seeing a film. In addition, the context in which these arthouse visits take place create different kinds of experiences for the cinephile. The presence or absence of friends, relatives and other company is of great influence on these cinema experiences. All fourteen respondents indicated that they frequently visit arthouse cinemas with friends, but twelve respondents would also go to a film screening alone. For as many as eight of them, their solitary visits were equal or even greater than a visit with friends. The respondents who preferred solitary cinema going argued that this was mainly due to the heightened attention and concentration when watching a film by themselves. According to them, this was less possible with friends because of the non-verbal communication that is sought out between them while watching the film, like trying to obtain eye contact with a friend to see if they are thinking the same thing. Furthermore, they found it more pleasant when the movie was over and they left the cinema, to be left alone with their emotions and thoughts triggered by the film, instead of instantly having to discuss it with friends.

An arthouse visit in the company of friends was described as a social activity. In contrast to a solitary visit, the main focus of an accompanied cinema experience shifts from the film, to the social aspect of the visit. Going to the arthouse cinema with friends was experienced as a fun outing by the majority of respondents, mainly because the film viewing is oftentimes followed by having drinks at a bar. In fact, for twelve respondents going to a bar after a screening with friends is an integral part of their cinema experience. They discuss the film for a while, but it especially serves as a starting point for more personal conversations and generally just an enjoyable evening with friends. For these social visits the arthouse cinema serves as a kind of connecting space not solely limited to the screening of films, but rather as a place to share the love for films with cinephile friends and strengthen overall social relationships or as T.M. (21) explains:

I have two friends with whom I always go to the arthouse cinema. It's really kind of a connection between me and those two friends.' (T.M., 21)

However, the social role we attribute to arthouse cinemas should be nuanced. Arthouse cinemas don't serve as a meeting place for unknown cinephiles. Thus, arthouse cinema plays a role in strengthening social relationships that already exist rather than creating new cinephile relationships. Nevertheless, the absence of these social arthouse visits during quarantine seems to underline its importance in young urban cinephiles' social lives even more:

The longer this goes on, the greater that loss becomes. Because it's also a big part of my life and a big part of the time I spend with my friends is in cinemas. So that's a really big change. (D.C., 26)

For many respondents the closing of the arthouse cinemas is partly experienced as a loss of an important part of their social life. This kind of offline sociability as part of their cinephilia, to them is something they can't achieve in an online setting.

Lastly when asked about the overall importance of arthouse cinemas, all respondents answered that they attach a great value to the arthouse cinema as a place where authentic film experiences are still possible. The role of a cinema visit as a form of escapism, as explained in earlier studies like Jackie Stacey's (1994), is still valid today. For urban cinephiles, the arthouse cinema is an environment where all external disturbances are excluded and where they have the opportunity to let go of control and fully immerse themselves in the story and cinematography. Nowadays an arthouse visit is experienced as a form of an escape from the audience's agency. It's a space without the distractions that partially prevent an enjoyable film experience at home. Arthouse cinema's simple equipment and its central focus on the movie arouse in cinephiles a sense of nostalgia for the heyday of cinema. Hence, they agree with the cinephile purists' argument that film experiences in an arthouse cinema feel more authentic than at home or in the larger commercial cinemas.

Complementary cinephilia

It is clear that our respondents' cinephilia is characterized by a heterogeneous and, more importantly, complementary film consumption. Hence, the anxiety of cinephile purists such as Sontag (1996) and Quandt (2009), namely that home consumption would replace the ultimate cinema experience, is unfounded for our respondents. On the contrary, the choice to see a film in the arthouse cinema, multiplex or at home is based on the different needs the urban cinephile experiences. The cinephile chooses, as it were, which form of film consumption suits him or her best. Mark Jancovich et al. (2003) also emphasized that different forms of film consumption produce inherently different film experiences. The choice to see a film at home is primarily based on the myriad of films available in that context. Furthermore, unlike arthouse cinemas, domestic film consumption does not limit cinephiles to certain screening hours, which allows them to see movies at any hour of the day. Nonetheless, the arthouse cinema is still the preferred way to see movies and, although they try to emulate that experience at home, they agreed with Sontag's (1996, p. 60) statement that 'to be kidnapped, you have to be in a movie theater, seated in the dark among anonymous strangers'. Or as respondent B.A. (25) expressed it:

I don't even want to compare those two things [domestic experience and cinema experience]. I really think that those are absolutely different experiences. Watching films on TV to me is more a form of consumption than

going to the cinema. For me, going to the cinema is almost like going to church in a way. In fact, that's my way of going to church.

So it becomes clear that in this study the various forms of domestic consumption and the multiplex experience are not in competition with arthouse cinemas, but are rather complementary alternatives to a cinema visit.

Nevertheless, our young urban cinephiles' heterogeneous film consumption and experiences are currently being challenged. Although the film industry is trying to cope with the current COVID-19 restrictions by offering online alternatives and, in addition, cinephiles are attempting to create new social domestic film experiences, all of our respondents claimed that they missed the real life arthouse experience. More specifically they missed being able to physically sit in the movie theater and experience the movie. An interesting outcome is that only four people claimed to watch more films during quarantine as they now had more time. The other respondents, despite now using new film platforms, didn't consume more films from home than before their quarantine. We can better understand this by the fact that watching films at home and in the arthouse cinema are completely different experiences for our respondents:

Of course I'm very bored by my quarantine because of not being able to go to physical spaces. Cinema for me really is a totally different kind of movie experience. (L.S., 28)

Hence it's not so much about the quantity of films they see, but more about the quality of their film experience. The arthouse visit is their preferred mode of film consumption and watching more films at home now doesn't fill in the absence of this valuable experience. In other words, the domestic experience isn't capable of substituting their arthouse visits. In conclusion, arthouse visits are an indispensable part of urban cinephilia 2.0 and the COVID-19 restrictions have only helped to underline its importance and irreplaceability even more.

Cinephile practices and communities

In addition to their film consumption and cinema experiences, we lastly also questioned our respondents on their broader ways of engaging with film culture. An important outcome was the fact that whereas the 1960s cinephile used to value prestigious film magazines such as *Cahiers du cinéma* or *Positif* to read about film (Arenas, 2012, p. 21), less than half of the urban cinephiles in this study rely on professional reviews. Today, talking, reading and writing about films is not done exclusively through established film institutions like movie magazines or newspapers, but also via a variety of online film websites and applications that have made film discourse more accessible to cinephiles (Jullier & Leveratto, 2012, p. 150; Collier, 2013, p. 27). Half of the respondents indicated that they were actively using the movie application Letterboxd.⁴ Letterboxd is a social network where one can discover, rate,

review and log movies as well as follow other movie lovers and explore their movie tastes. For most respondents, the application had both a personal and a social purpose. On the one hand, Letterboxd was used to obtain an overview of their own movie behaviour. For example, the most frequently performed activity on the application was making movie lists, as well as keeping a log of all the movies one has already seen. On the other hand, Letterboxd also had an, albeit limited, social purpose. The application was mainly used as a network to keep an eye on the movie behaviour of their cinephile friends. They also followed well-known directors or film critics and, to a lesser extent, unknown cinephiles who had the same film taste as them.

In general, the cinephiles in our study were very enthusiastic about Letterboxd. Their use of this movie application was both passive and personal. By this we mean that the respondents did not actively write reviews themselves, but rather used the application as a private, well-organized movie diary and as a source of information to obtain strangers' and friends' movie ratings and read movie reviews/comments. Thus, the platform served not so much as a communication tool, but rather as an informative tool to expand their own movie taste and discover new movies through reviews and ratings from other people. It is thus striking how the cinephiles in this study make more use of amateur reviews than institutional professional reviews. A finding that might be consistent with Pomerance's (2008) contention that cinephile discourse is becoming more subjective. Interestingly, half of the respondents, including people who used Letterboxd, indicated that they found the social aspect of such applications unnecessary. They found it useful to be able to keep track of certain things for themselves, but felt no need to share their own movie behaviour or follow that of strangers, or like K.C. (22) said:

On the other hand, I also find it kind of hard to always share everything online like that. I think sometimes it's just a bit redundant and it takes away the fun.

Further exploring this social aspect of their cinephilia, we also questioned our respondents on their presence in online or offline cinephile communities. In our study eight urban cinephiles were still active members of an offline film club or film organization. This result should be contextualized, as we used a snowball method whereby respondents who were in a film club referred us to other cinephile members. However, as opposed to only two respondents explicitly indicating that they belonged to a community of film lovers in Ghent, the majority stated that they didn't feel part of an offline cinephile community at all. Rather than an overarching cinephile community, the majority of respondents seem to have their own smaller-scale cinephile circle, that is, a few friends with whom they share their passion for films and where films and cinema play an important role in their relationship. Additionally, we can also assert that none of our respondents identified themselves as being part of an online cinephile community. This outcome is in line with Behlil's claim (2005) that urban cinephiles simply have more access to offline film clubs and are more likely to come into contact with other cinephiles in real life, minimizing the need to look for film

communities online. The majority of respondents felt no need to establish an online social network related to their cinephilia. When they did, that network consisted mostly of their own cinephile friends and much less of unknown cinephiles. Furthermore, none of the respondents were active members of particular online film forums or chats. Hence, we can conclude that film websites or applications like Letterboxd aren't used as an extensive community building platform but rather as a translation of their established offline cinephile connections.

During quarantine, these online spaces proved extra useful as a way to maintain their otherwise predominantly offline cinephile friendships. As discussed earlier, the need to diversify their domestic consumption during quarantine was very apparent. Whereas in normal circumstances domestic consumption was interspersed by arthouse visits, they now solely rely on the former which pushes them to create alternative film experiences. Especially the social aspect of their arthouse experience was missed during quarantine. Our respondents tried to make their solitary film experiences more sociable in several ways. In addition to their limited social use of Letterboxd, some respondents also mentioned Netflix Party. Via this platform people can choose a film on Netflix and watch it together while simultaneously chatting with each other. Nevertheless, this platform was barely used considering our respondents' dislike for the film offer on Netflix. Another alternative was partaking in special online film screenings with friends organized by Flemish film initiatives like KASKcinema, and discussing it afterwards on social media. Lastly, some respondents said they would watch films by themselves and afterwards set up a video chat with friends to discuss which film they saw and give each other film recommendations.

Conclusion

This qualitative audience study focused upon a variety of film habits and experiences of today's young urban cinephiles in the city of Ghent and how these are being impacted by the COVID-19 restrictions. First of all, our study underlined contemporary audience's enhanced agency in where, when and how they can watch movies—hence illustrating arguments on their temporal, spatial and platform mobility (Tryon, 2012). Secondly, the study also stressed that a hierarchy exists in selecting or choosing the platform, device or place where to watch movies. Similarly to other audience studies (e.g. Veenstra, Meers & Biltreyst, 2020, 2021) this project reveals that film audiences tend to prefer the big screen. The cinephiles interviewed for this study, in particular, expressed a clear preference for arthouse cinemas. For our urban cinephiles, the arthouse cinema has not been replaced by multiplexes or films on television (as was feared by cinephile purists like Sontag and Quandt), nor by online film platforms. Our respondents hardly ever went to the commercial multiplexes, but did frequently watch films at home. Consistent with the findings of scholars like Jancovich et al. (2003), in our study, domestic movie consumption served needs other than the arthouse experience and, for our respondents, was not a substitute but a complement to their arthouse visit. It allows them to also see other types of films in a cheaper way, as well as to disconnect from the fixed screening hours that sometimes make

it difficult to schedule a visit. The possibility of seeing films at home is therefore, as stated by Jullier and Leveratto (2012), democratizing, because it allows them to see more and different kinds of films outside of the fixed pattern and programming of arthouse cinemas.

Yet, this democratization is not absolute because the urban cinephile still seems to experience constraints online, hence relativizing the myth of unlimited availability. The difficulty of finding illegal streams, the high cost of subscribing to each movie platform, as well as the poor quality of some online movies have a negative impact on the home movie experience. The interviewees found the home experience less enjoyable, partly due to the many external stimuli that distract them from the enjoyment of watching movies. This could, to some extent, be interpreted as an argument whereby the viewer seemingly renounces her/his power to have a strict control over the conditions of how s/he consumes movies. Cinemas' strict rules in how and when movies are screened, however, are not conceived as restrictions or as going against the grain of contemporary audience's mobility and agency. For our cinephiles, going to an arthouse screening is a superior immersive experience in which one surrenders to the spatial and temporal conditions of cinema. From a wider perspective, this also tends to contradict celebratory notions of audience's enhanced agency in today's convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006), where film viewers seem to be able to watch films when, where, how and with whom they want. A key difference between our urban cinephiles and the cinephile purist perspective is the fact that their cinephilia doesn't take on an essentialist form. For the urban cinephile, arthouse cinemas, the multiplex, and domestic film consumption are radically different but also complementary film experiences, each serving a different purpose. Illustrating De Valck and Hagner's (2005, p. 14) idea of 'videosyncrasy', our cinephiles float between different movie options. Their film consumption is not exclusively online, but also not exclusively traditional. It is heterogeneous, complementary and hybrid.

Reflecting on the closure of arthouse cinemas due to COVID-19, this case-study reaffirms the complementarity of the different film places and platforms, as well as the importance of contemporary cinephilia's hybridity. Online film consumption does not replace arthouse cinemas, but complements their deficiencies and vice versa. Since their closure, it became even more clear that offline film experiences in arthouse cinemas, especially social visits, seem to be irreplaceable and are a crucial part of contemporary urban cinephilia. On the other hand, cinephilia 2.0's online film consumption proved to be even more essential during times like these. Although urban cinephiles prefer the arthouse experience, the Internet and the many online film platforms supply them with enough alternatives to partly satisfy their film cravings during a global pandemic. Whereas sixty years ago the classic cinephile would have been without films for months due to healthcare measures, today the cinephile can try to compensate for the lack of arthouse film experiences from home. Hence, urban cinephiles eagerly used the various online film events to turn their solitary film consumption into something social and discovered new film platforms which they had never used before. In fact, via online platforms or film applications like Letterboxd, they had the chance to partly turn their solitary domestic film

experiences into a more social activity and participate in film culture. Although this was only an exploratory small-scale case-study on urban cinephilia during an unprecedented health crisis, we hope to have shown the liveliness, complementarity and hybridity of today's cinephilia. One intriguing question is whether the extraordinary social experience which was/is the COVID-19 pandemic, will have a long-term impact on future film consumption and cinephiles' engagement with movies and cinemas.

Postscript:

After this study, cinemas were able to reopen on the 1st July 2020 but had to close their doors again on 28th October 2020 as a second wave of COVID-19 infections terrorized Belgium. Unfortunately, since then all cinemas have remained closed for six months, leading to great financial losses for the Belgian cinema industry. Whereas larger commercial cinemas, like Kinepolis, state that they can financially survive this pandemic, Belgian arthouse cinemas, like Sphinx Cinema in Ghent, are appealing for financial help to avoid closing down permanently as they run a greater financial risk (Struys, 2021). In the meantime domestic consumption has been the norm for all cinephiles, constraining their original hybrid cinephilia for an undetermined time.

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Notes:

¹ The sample selection was based on three criteria: (1) the participant has a minimum age of eighteen years and a maximum age of thirty years; (2) the participant should have visited one of the three arthouse cinemas (Studio Skoop, Sphinx Cinema and KASKcinema); and (3) the participant is a cinephile living in Ghent. The age criterion was used because of the study's particular focus on young cinephiles, which is, of course, an arbitrary understanding of the term 'young' to demarcate the sample. The criterion of having visited the arthouse cinemas in Ghent is based on the special focus of this study on traditional offline film consumption and its role in today's urban cinephile experiences. And lastly the third criterion is obviously meant to target urban cinephiles, which was done by only selecting cinephiles who lived in Ghent and having a short conversation with them to deduct whether they could be considered cinephiles.

² Our interviewees fall under the category of what Hanchard et al.'s widescale survey on online and offline film consumption in the UK called omnivores, i.e. film consumers who are 'more highly educated; have higher incomes; are younger, live in urban locations and have positive perceptions of other cultural forms' (Hanchard et al., 2019, p. 14).

³ We refer to respondents by using abbreviations and age.

⁴ IMDb was also used to a lesser extent, but for the majority of respondents it appeared to have been replaced by Letterboxd.