



Where Was Early Cinema in the Russian Empire? Rethinking Empire through Film Geography

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Abstract. This article rethinks early cinema in the Russian Empire from a spatial perspective, shifting attention away from St. Petersburg and Moscow toward the Empire's western and southern borderlands. Using the trade journal *Sine-Fono* (1907–1918), it reconstructs cinema activity across several hundred towns and cities and visualises these patterns through cultural-geographical mapping and heatmaps. The analysis demonstrates that early cinema developed most intensively across a broad zone from the Baltic to the Black Sea, challenging capital-centred and nation-centred historiographies and redefining notions of 'centre' and 'periphery' in the history of Imperial Russian cinema.

Keywords: *Russian Empire, film history, imperial Russian cinema, national cinema, Sine-Fono, cultural geography, decolonization.*

Anotacija. Straipsnyje ankstyvojo kino Rusijos imperijoje istorija analizuojama erdviniu požiūriu, dėmesį perkeliama nuo Sankt Peterburgo ir Maskvos prie imperijos vakarinių ir pietinių paribių. Remiantis profesiniu kino leidiniu „Sine-Fono“ (1907–1918), rekonstruojama kino veikla šimtuose miestų ir miestelių, o duomenys vizualizuojami pasitelkiant kultūrinės geografijos metodus. Tyrimas rodo, kad ankstyvasis kinas Rusijos imperijoje intensyviausiai buvo plėtojamas regione nuo Baltijos iki Juodosios jūros, kvestionuojant centro ir periferijos sampratas imperinio kino istorijoje.

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Esminiai žodžiai: *Rusijos imperija, kino istorija, Rusijos imperijos kinas, nacionalinis kinas, „Sine-Fono“, kultūrinė geografija, dekolonizacija.*

As Alison K. Smith has aptly observed, Russian history is often framed by its vast size and the diversity of its geography and environment. This narrative sets the stage—either directly or indirectly—for our understanding of Russia’s historical trajectory and its interactions with neighbouring regions. Smith ultimately argues that when we shift our focus to the diverse peoples inhabiting this expansive space, our perspective changes to consider the complexities of human geography. This shift naturally raises the question: what do we mean by the Russian Empire?¹

Building on this broader inquiry, my paper narrows the focus to a more specific aspect of cultural history, posing the question: What do we mean by the early film culture of the Russian Empire? In which geographical and physical spaces did this culture emerge, flourish, and develop? By exploring these questions, we can gain a deeper understanding of the regional dynamics that shaped the evolution of early cinema in the Empire, challenging traditional narratives and highlighting the significance of the so-called peripheries in cultural production.

Up to this point, the history of cinema in the Russian Empire has predominantly been framed in chronological terms, tracing its development from the first cinema screenings in Nizhny Novgorod in 1896 to its dissolution in 1917², to the establishment of the Bolshevik regime in 1918 (or after the end of the Civil War in 1921³)⁴, the last ‘Russian’ imperial feature films⁵, or to the eventual closure of the last private cinema company in Russia in 1920⁶. This approach has focused more on the temporal sequence of events than on the geographical context in which early cinema developed. Researchers like Semyon Ginsburg⁷ and Venyamin Vishnevsky⁸, those who have explored early cinema on an imperial scale did not concentrate on a single nation or specific location.

¹ SMITH, Alison K. *The Russian Empire, the Russian Nation, and the Problem of the 19th Century. Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 2018, t. 19, Nr. 4, p. 793–811.

² LEYDA, Jay. *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960, p. 13–90.

³ *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896–1939*. Eds. R. Taylor and I. Christie. London: Routledge, 1994, p. 19–52.

⁴ YOUNGBLOOD, Denise J. *The Magic Mirror: Moviemaking in Russia, 1908–1918*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999, p. 3–149.

⁵ *Velikii kinemo: Katalog sokhranivshikhsia igrovykh fil'mov Rossii, 1908–1919*. Eds. V. Ivanova et al. Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2002.

⁶ TSIVIAN, Yuri. *Early Cinema in Russia and Its Cultural Reception*. London: Routledge, 1994, p. x.

⁷ GINZBURG, Semion. *Kinematografiia dorevoliutsionnoi Rossii*. Maskva: Iskusstvo, 1963; reprint, Moscow: Agraf, 2007.

⁸ VISHNEVSKII, Veniamin E. *Dokumental'nye fil'my dorevoliutsionnoi Rossii, 1907–1916: [Spravochnik]*. Moscow: Muzei kino, 1996.

This article proposes a shift from a primarily chronological, capital-centred framework to a spatial analysis of early cinema in the Russian Empire. It aims to reconstruct and analyse the geographical distribution of cinema activity between 1907 and 1914 and to examine what this distribution reveals about the relationship between metropolitan centres and imperial borderlands, particularly in light of national cinema historiographies that have increasingly emphasized geographical distinctions through the identification of the first ‘Estonian’, ‘Latvian’, ‘Lithuanian’, ‘Polish’, or ‘Ukrainian’ screenings, films, studios, and stars. Focusing on these narrower geographical spaces has been crucial to the cultural processes of national spatialization and to the shaping of the identities of emerging cinema cultures, even though many early cinema events unfolded within the broader boundaries of empires⁹. While this scholarship has been crucial for understanding local trajectories of cinema development, it has often sidelined the imperial contexts in which these early cinematic practices initially unfolded, resulting in the imperial dimension of early cinema being frequently overlooked or treated as external to national cinematic heritage in Eastern and Central Europe¹⁰.

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One reason for this ‘neglect,’ and a compelling argument for revisiting the historiography, is that the early cinema of this region – encompassing present-day Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine within Eastern and Central Europe – can be considered fundamentally transnational¹¹. The cinematic history of this region predates the formation of nation-states and is deeply intertwined with the histories of the Russian, German, and Austro-Hungarian empires. In this context, early moving-image entrepreneurs operated as a transborder community, transporting their films and equipment across borders to meet demand wherever it arose.

The article pursues three interrelated objectives. First, it maps cinema-related activity across the empire using data drawn from the trade journal *Sine-Fono* (1907–1918).

⁹ Cf. KAMINSKAITĖ-JANČORIENĖ, Lina. Kas yra „nacionalinis kinas“? Kanonas, transnacionalinis ir ankstyvasis kinas. *Acta Academiae Artium Vilnensis*, 2022, t. 107, p. 225–248; PAŠKAUSKAS, Juozapas. Early Cinema in Lithuania: The Emergence of a Cultural Tradition. *Art History & Criticism*, 2022, t. 18, p. 134–146; KAMINSKAITĖ-JANČORIENĖ, Lina; PAŠKAUSKAS, Juozapas. Local and Global Framework of Early Cinema in Lithuania: Vilnius Cinemas, Programme Formats and Audience. *Images: The International Journal of European Film, Performing Arts and Audiovisual Communication*, 2022, t. 32, Nr. 41. Prieiga per internetą: <https://doi.org/10.14746/i.2022.41.02>

¹⁰ DE KLERK, Nico. The Transport of Audiences: Making Cinema „National“. *Early Cinema and the „National“*. Eds. Richard Abel, Giorgio Bertellini, Rob King. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016, p. 106–107.

¹¹ Cf. *Polish Cinema in a Transnational Context*. Eds. E. Mazierska and M. Goddard. New York: University of Rochester, 2014, p. 3.

Second, it identifies regional clusters and zones of intensified film culture through cultural-geographical mapping and heatmaps. Third, it interprets these spatial patterns in relation to broader processes of urbanisation, industrialisation, tourism, and railway connectivity.

By broadening the scope of early cinema research to include the imperial borderlands, this article contributes to debates on nationalism, transnationalism, and cultural decolonisation in film studies. It argues that early cinema in the Russian Empire should be understood not as a culture emanating from a single metropolitan core, but as a transregional formation shaped by multiple interconnected centres.

Framing the Concept: Insights from the *Sine-Fono* Journal

In this article, I will explore the film landscape of the Russian Empire by focusing on a special section of *Sine-Fono*, one of the leading film magazines of the era. This section featured correspondence and reports on cinema activities in ‘other towns’, ‘theatres’, and ‘provinces’, providing a unique window into the spread of film culture beyond the empire’s major urban centres. *Sine-Fono*, widely regarded as the foremost Russian trade magazine of its time, was published from 1907 to 1918. The bi-monthly journal, based in Moscow, was founded by Samuel Viktorovich Lure (1872–1944), a graduate of Kyiv University¹², who played a crucial role in documenting and shaping the discourse around early cinema in the Russian Empire.

By examining this magazine’s coverage of cinema in the ‘provinces’, we can gain valuable insights into how film culture was experienced and developed across the vast and diverse territories of the empire. This analysis will illuminate the regional dynamics of early cinema, challenging the traditional focus on Moscow and St. Petersburg and highlighting the contributions of less-studied areas to the broader history of Russian and Eastern European cinema.

Sine-Fono content provides valuable insights into the cultural, social, and economic dynamics that shaped the pre-Revolutionary Russian cinematic landscape. Like most of its competitors, *Sine-Fono* primarily targeted professionals in the film industry, serving as a crucial platform for producers and distributors to advertise their latest films. In addition to promoting new releases, the magazine catered to film exhibitors by providing detailed information on exhibition technology, updates on advances in film technology, and coverage of legal matters, including censorship cases and fire-prevention regulations. This specialised focus on the technical and commercial facets of cinema was reflected in the magazine’s relatively modest circulation. By 1913, approximately 1,500 copies were

¹² More about Lure, his biography and his contribution to the magazine in this article: KOVALOVA, Anna. „I shall show you the right path“: Samuil Lur’e and the first Russian film journal *Sine-Fono*. *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema*, 2018, t. 12, Nr. 2, p. 92–113.

being published—roughly equal to the number of movie theatres across the Russian Empire¹³. The journal was not intended for retail sale but was distributed through subscriptions, underscoring its role as a niche resource for the burgeoning film industry.

Despite its specialised focus, *Sine-Fono* sought to capture and reflect all aspects of the growing Russian film culture. To achieve this, the magazine offered its subscribers a broad range of content, including feature articles, interviews, reader correspondence, and even fiction and poetry. For high-profile or otherwise significant events, the magazine often conducted in-depth discussions, providing readers with comprehensive information and analysis of the issues at hand.

One of the magazine's standout features was its section titled 'News from the Cities', which first appeared as early as the third issue of *Sine-Fono*. This section provided a unique window into the early discussions of cinema culture in the western gubernias of the Russian Empire. Contributions to this section often took the form of short essays on film exhibition in regional capitals and smaller towns in the borderlands, offering valuable snapshots of the cinematic landscape beyond the major urban centres of Moscow and St. Petersburg (news from these cities was typically featured under a separate heading).

Sine-Fono devoted a column to cinema beyond the capitals, covering topics such as the opening of new cinemas, theatre conditions—including audience size and cinematic preferences—and the attitudes of local governments. These columns, which span locations from Astrakhan to Kyiv, Odessa to Vilnius, Vitebsk to Vladivostok, Warsaw to Bakhmut, Slavyansk to Riga, and Batumi, will form the primary database for this paper.

While the list of locations covered in the magazine may appear fragmented at first glance, it suggests a need for broader generalisation. This enables us to identify patterns and trends in the early, rapid development of film culture across cities and regions within the Russian Empire. Could it be that early film culture spread more quickly in regions with shared historical, social, or economic characteristics? This question remains open for now, but we will revisit it after presenting the data collected from *Sine-Fono*. By analysing this province-specific section, we can gain a deeper understanding of the geographic reach and character of early film culture in the Russian Empire, thereby challenging traditional narratives that have focused primarily on its major urban centres.

Relying on press sources presents several challenges, one of which is that the interpretation one might propose may not fully align with the editorial policies or the broader socio-political context of the period. The content of the correspondence sections in journals such as *Sine-Fono* largely depended on the activities and initiatives of contributors from various regions. This variability helps explain why certain cities were frequently mentioned in some years and then faded into obscurity in others. For instance, in 1913, Kyiv fell out of the top ten most frequently mentioned cities, despite having been among

¹³ Ibid., p. 100.

the top three in previous years. Conversely, in the same year, other Ukrainian cities, such as Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, Dnipro, and Zaporizhzhia, also ranked among the top five, reflecting a shift in regional activity and perhaps contributor engagement.

This reliance on regional correspondents also helps explain why some major cities, such as Warsaw and Helsinki (then known as Gelsingfors in the Russian Empire), were underrepresented in this Moscow-based journal. The uneven distribution of reports across regions suggests that the prominence of certain cities in the journal's pages was not necessarily indicative of their actual significance in the broader cinematic landscape, but rather reflected the level of engagement among local contributors.

Thus, while the data analysed from such sources provide valuable insights, this approach remains somewhat limited, akin to peering through a keyhole. It offers a glimpse into the cinematic culture of the time, but the picture is inevitably incomplete, shaped by the perspectives and availability of those who contributed to the record.

Mapping the Cinematic Landscape: Analysing *Sine-Fono's* Geographic Coverage in the Russian Empire

The *Sine-Fono* column under study was both vibrant and dynamic, reflecting the rapid expansion of cinema culture across the Russian Empire. When the magazine was launched in 1907, it featured news from 26 locations. By 1908, the number had grown to 87 locations, and by 1909–1910, to 224. The trend continued with 360 locations being covered in 1911–1912, and by 1913, the magazine was reporting on cinema activities from 385 locations. However, as the Russian Empire entered World War I on August 1, 1914, the scope of coverage slightly contracted, with *Sine-Fono* reporting from 230 locations.

Initially, I thought the best approach would be to compile a list of the top 10 or 20 most frequently mentioned cities for each year. For example, between 1909 and 1910, *Sine-Fono's* correspondence predominantly came from cities like Kazan (12 times), Kyiv (11 times), Voronezh and Yelisavetgrad (now Kropyvnytskyi, both 10 times), Vologda (8 times), Baku (7 times), Daugavpils (7 times), Borisoglebsk, Kursk, and Dnipro (each 6 times). Similarly, in 1911–1912, the cities with the most frequent correspondence from cinema enthusiasts were Sarapul (12 times), Riga (10 times), Nizhny Novgorod and Kremenchuk (9 times each), Kazan and Warsaw (8 times each), and Feodosia, Kharkiv, Voronezh, and Vologda (7 times each).

However, after compiling these lists, I realised that this interpretation of the data does not necessarily provide an adequate or accurate representation of early film culture, cinema distribution, or the integration of cinema into everyday life and leisure activities. As I previously mentioned, the frequency of mentions could be heavily influenced by editorial policies or by correspondents' activity. For example, in 1913 and 1914,

Ukrainian cities such as Mykolaiv, Kherson, Dnipro, and Kharkiv dominated the top ten. In contrast, in 1912, with increased coverage from cities such as Warsaw, Baku, Riga, and Russian cities such as Nizhny Novgorod, the order of the top ten shifted significantly.

To better illustrate the concentration of *Sine-Fono* data in specific geographic areas and to capture how this distribution evolved, I have created heat maps¹⁴. These visualisations provide a clearer picture of which regions of the Russian Empire were most frequently represented in *Sine-Fono*'s correspondence, offering valuable insights into the era's cinematic cultural landscape. The brighter areas on these maps (Fig. 1) indicate regions where cinema was discussed more frequently, highlighting key cities and their significance. For instance, in 1907, correspondence was primarily concentrated along a diagonal from Riga to Odesa, demonstrating the early geographic focal points of film culture within the empire.

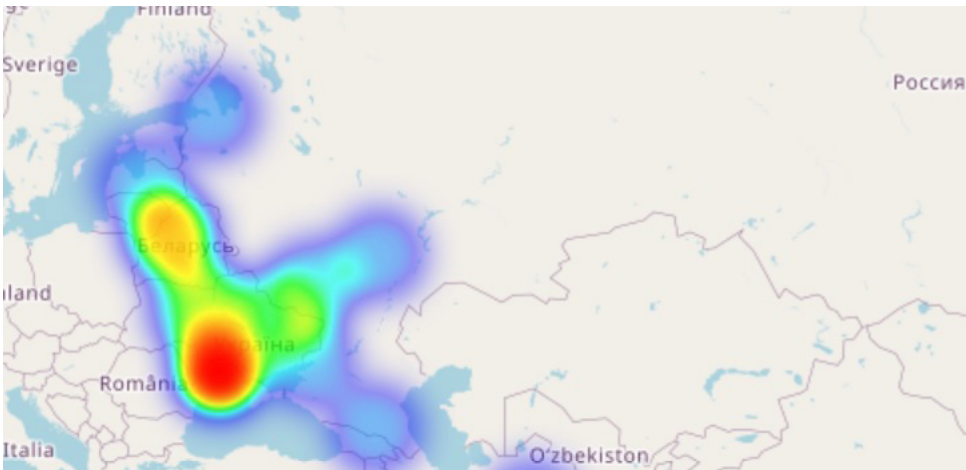


Figure 1. Geographic Distribution of Early Cinema in 1907: Heatmaps Derived from *Sine-Fono* Data

By using this method, we move beyond mere frequency counts and gain a more nuanced understanding of where and how cinema was integrated into the everyday life and leisure activities of various regions. This approach allows us to visualise the spread

¹⁴ A unit of analysis was defined as any discrete notice referring to cinema-related activity in a named locality. Mentions lacking a specific city or referring only to general regional trends were excluded, as were reports from St. Petersburg and Moscow. Each notice was coded by city and year; multiple mentions of the same city within a single year were counted separately, producing frequency data (city X mentioned Y times in year Z). The dataset therefore reflects relative visibility of cinema-related discourse rather than absolute levels of cinema infrastructure. All data were compiled in spreadsheet format and visualized using standard data-visualization software. City coordinates were added to the dataset, and frequency values were used as weights to generate heatmaps. These maps function as heuristic tools for identifying large-scale spatial patterns and clusters, not as precise measurements of cinema provision. The dataset reflects the editorial structure of *Sine-Fono* and the uneven activity of regional correspondents; low frequency or absence of mentions does not necessarily indicate absence of cinema activity. I am grateful to IT specialist Simas Ražinskas for assistance with data visualization.

and influence of early cinema, providing a more comprehensive view of the Russian Empire's cinematic landscape during this formative period.

A similar pattern persisted in 1908 (Fig. 2), with cities in present-day Latvia, Lithuania, and Belarus continuing to dominate the correspondence in *Sine-Fono*. This trend highlights the significant role these regions played in the early development of cinema within the Russian Empire. However, during this period, the territory of today's Ukraine also began to emerge more prominently in cinema-related discussions. *Sine-Fono*'s pages increasingly covered the cinematic landscape in right-bank Ukraine, the Poltava region, and major Black Sea ports, including Odesa and Kherson. These areas became focal points of the expanding film culture, reflecting the growing importance of Ukrainian cities within the empire's broader cinematic network.

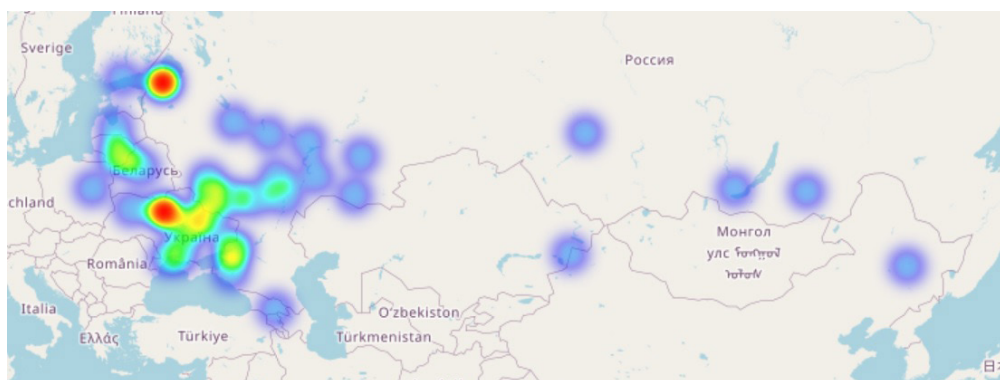


Figure 2. *Geographic Distribution of Early Cinema in 1908: Heatmaps Derived from Sine-Fono Data*

The coverage of these regions underscores the dynamic nature of early cinema's spread, as new areas began to contribute more actively to the evolving film culture. The inclusion of right-bank Ukraine and the bustling ports of Odesa and Kherson in the magazine's correspondence suggests that these areas were not only consuming cinema but also participating in its broader cultural discourse, positioning them as key players in the empire's cinematic development.

In 1909–1910, *Sine-Fono* began to receive an increasing amount of information from regions south of Moscow, with Ukrainian territories once again becoming prominent in the magazine's coverage (Fig. 3). This shift indicates the growing significance of southern Russia and Ukraine as emerging hubs of cinematic activity.

By 1913, this trend had intensified (Fig. 4), with *Sine-Fono* receiving most of its correspondence from Ukrainian territories. The coverage spanned a broad geographical area, stretching from Kharkiv in the north to Mykolaiv in the south, underscoring the region's central role in the early cinema landscape.

This surge in correspondence from Ukrainian cities reflects not only the expansion of cinema but also the emergence of these regions as a cradle of cinematic culture within the Russian Empire. The geographic spread from Kharkiv to Mykolaiv illustrates how

these areas were increasingly contributing to and shaping the broader discourse on film, solidifying their status as key drivers of the empire's cinematic growth and development.

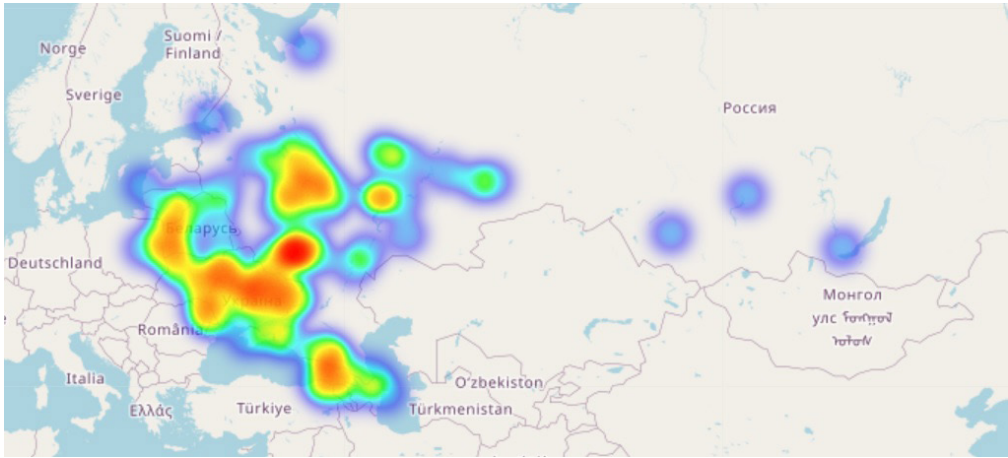


Figure 3. *Geographic Distribution of Early Cinema in 1909–1910: Heatmaps Derived from Sine-Fono Data*



Figure 4. *1913 Early Cinema and the Trans-Siberian Railway: Heatmaps Based on Sine-Fono Data*

By 1913, data reveal a late but significant increase in the availability of information from the cities and regions surrounding Moscow, particularly in the area north of the capital, around Kostroma. This relatively delayed engagement with cinema highlights how the heartland of Russia gradually began to catch up with the burgeoning film culture that had already taken root in other parts of the empire. Additionally, there was a notable rise in cinema news from cities along the Trans-Siberian Railway, one of the most critical transport arteries of the time, as highlighted in this slide. The Trans-Siberian Railway not only facilitated the movement of goods and people but also played a pivotal role in the late but crucial dissemination of cinematic culture across vast distances, connecting remote regions to the film industry.

Despite the increasing visibility of regions around Moscow, the most prominent area on the map remained the territory of present-day Ukraine. Even before this late surge in the central regions, cinema had already established a strong presence in Ukrainian industrial regions, including Donbas and Luhansk, as well as on the Crimean Peninsula. These areas were already becoming key centres for cinema, reflecting broader cultural and economic developments.

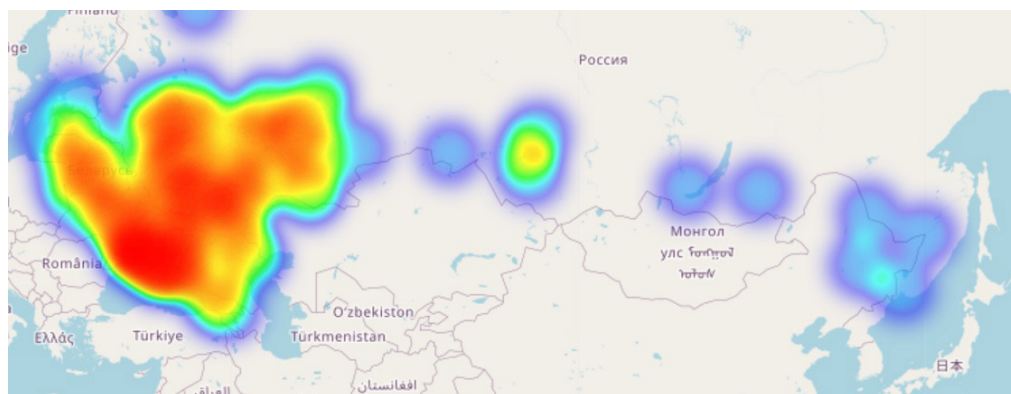


Figure 5. Geographic Distribution of Early Cinema in 1914: Heatmaps Derived from Sine-Fono Data

The emergence of cities like Simferopol, Kerch, and other coastal towns on the cinematic map can likely be attributed to the development of tourism. As urban dwellers from across the empire flocked to these areas for their holidays, they sought modern forms of entertainment, including cinema. The rise of these coastal towns as centres of cinematic activity underscores how tourism and the leisure industry played a significant role in spreading film culture, even as other parts of the empire were beginning to embrace this modern form of entertainment.

Redefining the Centre: The Reasons Behind the Shift

All of the heat maps above illustrate that early film culture in the Russian Empire flourished predominantly in the western provinces. This expansive region stretched from the Baltic Sea in the north to the Black Sea in the south, and from the Gulf of Bothnia in the northwest to the Dniester and Dnieper rivers in the east. Despite the region's vastness, within the cultural context of the Russian Empire, it was commonly dismissed as a 'province' or 'periphery'. This perception is echoed in *Sine-Fono*, where the narrative often downplays the significance of these areas. However, closer examination reveals that early film culture thrived in these so-called peripheral regions.

By analysing the geography of early cinema in Eastern Europe—and thereby repositioning the periphery as a centre of cultural innovation—we can significantly

rethink the relationship between these regions and the traditional centres of power. This re-evaluation allows us to integrate marginalised contexts into existing canons of cinema history, challenging the dominant narratives that have long relegated these regions to the sidelines.

When we delve into *Sine-Fono's* sections on the provinces of the Russian Empire and apply the perspective offered by the authors of *Cinema at the Periphery*—who argue that the periphery should be viewed not merely as a geographic area, but as ‘a mode of practice, a textual strategy, a production infrastructure, and a narrative encoded on the margins of dominant modes of production, distribution, and consumption’¹⁵—it becomes clear that this region cannot be dismissed as a ‘province’. Instead, it emerges as one of the most vital parts of the Russian Empire’s cinematic landscape, serving as a cradle for the development of early film culture.

In repositioning the western provinces from the periphery to the centre, we acknowledge their importance in shaping the broader cinematic narrative of the empire and open the door to a more inclusive understanding of early film history that recognises the contributions of these often-overlooked regions.

It is important to consider why this particular region of the Russian Empire stood out so prominently in the context of early cinema—a question that warrants far more research and detail than the scope of this article permits. The flourishing of early cinema in the western borderlands of the Russian Empire can be attributed, in part, to the region’s unique social structure, which differed significantly from that of the Russian heartland. This distinct social fabric played a crucial role not only in shaping the prominent political and national movements of the time but also in fostering a vibrant and distinctive cultural environment.

Since the 18th century, the Russian Empire has faced considerable challenges in fully integrating this region into the empire and in maintaining social order across its vast and diverse territories. One of the key reasons for this difficulty was the region’s distinct social order, which deviated significantly from the traditional structure of the Old Regime found in Russia. This difference made the western borderlands less amenable to the Russian state’s centralising efforts. It contributed to cultural dynamism, as evidenced by the early adoption and enthusiasm for cinema.

A political interpretation of this phenomenon is also valid, particularly when we examine 1907 data, which show that *Sine-Fono* reported on the film scene primarily from cities such as Minsk, Odessa, Saint Petersburg, Mykolaiv, Zhytomyr, Kharkiv, Riga, and Vilnius—a total of 26 locations. Except for St. Petersburg, the news predominantly came from provinces where nationalist movements had emerged early: the Baltic provinces (notably Riga), the Northwestern Krai (Vilnius, Minsk), the Right-Bank Ukraine (Zhytomyr), and major Ukrainian cities such as Mykolaiv, Odessa, and Kharkiv.

¹⁵ *Cinema at the Periphery*. Eds. D. Iordanova, D. Martin-Jones, and B. Vidal. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010, p. 9.

These regions were not only politically active but also culturally vibrant, and this confluence of political and cultural energy likely contributed to the prominence of early cinema in these areas. The early adoption of cinema in these regions can be seen as a reflection of their broader engagement with modernity and national consciousness, which set them apart from the more traditional and centrally controlled areas of the Russian Empire. In this light, the western borderlands can be viewed as both a cradle and a catalyst for early cinema in the Russian Empire, providing fertile ground for the development of a cinematic culture that would leave a lasting impact on the empire's broader cultural landscape.

Understanding why this particular region of the Russian Empire became so prominent in early cinema requires a deeper exploration beyond the scope of this article. The flourishing of early cinema in the western borderlands of the empire can largely be attributed to the region's unique social structure, which was markedly different from that of the Russian heartland. This distinctive social fabric not only played a pivotal role in the rise of significant political and national movements but also fostered a vibrant and unique cultural environment.

Since the 18th century, the Russian Empire struggled to fully integrate this region and maintain social order across its vast and diverse territories. One of the main challenges stemmed from the region's social order, which significantly diverged from the traditional structures of the Old Regime in Russia¹⁶. This divergence made the western borderlands less receptive to the Russian state's centralising efforts, contributing to cultural dynamism that manifested in various forms, including the early adoption and enthusiasm for cinema.

A political lens further clarifies this phenomenon, particularly when examining data from 1907, which shows that *Sine-Fono* reported extensively on the film scene in cities such as Minsk, Odessa, Saint Petersburg, Mykolaiv, Zhytomyr, Kharkiv, Riga, and Vilnius—a total of 26 locations. Notably, aside from St. Petersburg, most of the news came from provinces where nationalist movements had taken root early: the Baltic provinces (especially Riga), the Northwestern Krai (Vilnius, Minsk), the Right-Bank Ukraine (Zhytomyr), and major Ukrainian cities such as Mykolaiv, Odessa, and Kharkiv.

These regions were not only politically active but also culturally vibrant, with the synergy of political and cultural energy likely contributing to the prominence of early cinema in these areas. The early adoption of cinema in these regions reflects their broader engagement with modernity and national consciousness, setting them apart from the more traditional and centrally controlled parts of the Russian Empire. In this context, the western borderlands emerge as both a cradle and a catalyst for early cinema in the Russian Empire, providing fertile ground for the growth of a cinematic culture that would have a lasting impact on the broader cultural landscape of the empire

¹⁶ THADEN, Edward C. *Russia's Western Borderlands, 1710–1870*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985, p. 232.

Pleasure, attraction, education, and sociality are often cited as the primary reasons audiences were drawn to early cinema. However, as Richard Abel points out, nationalism also played a significant role in this phenomenon. He argues that cinema's impact on spectators was profound for 'the social construction of identity or subjectivity, particularly given a historical context of heightened nationalism and growing mass consumption'.¹⁷ This observation is particularly relevant as film culture became increasingly woven into the social fabric, influencing not only entertainment but also the collective identity of audiences.

As cinema gained traction, local exhibitors began to produce their own films, and the earliest newsreels frequently depicted familiar places and events that resonated deeply with local audiences. These early cinematic works were more than just entertainment; they served as a medium through which communities could see their own lives and surroundings reflected on screen, reinforcing a sense of national and regional identity. For example, the film *In A Lviv Café (W kawiarni lwowskiej)*, director unknown) from 1897, Bolesław Matuszewski's 1898 depictions of everyday life in Warsaw (Bolesław Matuszewski, *Rodzajowe lokalne warszawskie*, 1898), and Kazimierz Proszynski's 1902 footage of Vilnius' Gate of Dawn (*Pod Ostrą Bramą w Wilnie*, Kazimierz Proszynski, 1902) all exemplify how early films were deeply rooted in their local contexts.

These films were not merely passive reflections of their environments; they actively contributed to the cultural discourse of the time, reinforcing local identities and, at times, serving as a counterbalance to the dominant narratives propagated by the central powers. By showcasing everyday scenes from familiar settings, these films enabled audiences to engage with cinema in both personal and communal ways, strengthening the ties between cinema and national consciousness. This intersection of nationalism and cinema illustrates how early film was instrumental in the social construction of identity, making it a powerful tool for both cultural expression and political significance.

While the *Sine-Fono* column under examination was predominantly filled with reports from cities in the so-called western governorates of the Russian Empire until around 1910, one city frequently mentioned in the top ten stands out—not for its association with nationalism or national movements, but for its embodiment of multiculturalism and the role of entertainment in early film culture. This city is Harbin, known today by its Chinese name. During the Russian Empire, Harbin became a key hub on the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER), which linked the Trans-Siberian Railway to Vladivostok on the Pacific Ocean. Within a decade, Harbin transformed from a small village into a bustling city, largely due to the construction of the railway¹⁸.

¹⁷ *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*. Ed. R. Abel. Abingdon: Routledge, 2005, p. 5.

¹⁸ For this reason, it is even called „railway city“, cf. BUCK, David D. *Railway City and National Capital: Two Faces of the Modern in Changchun. Remaking the Chinese City*. Ed. Joseph Esherick. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999, p. 64.

Harbin's rapid growth and strategic importance were tied to its role as a showcase of Russian imperialism in Asia, as highlighted by historians such as James Carter and David Wolff¹⁹. The Chinese Eastern Railway, constructed between 1897 and 1902, was a product of the intense rivalry between the British and Russian empires for dominance in Central Asia during the 'Great Game' period. As a result, Harbin became a melting pot of nationalities, including Germans, Belgians, Austrians, and Englishmen, who provided the necessary machinery and expertise for the railway. The city was also home to a diverse workforce of Poles, Georgians, Armenians, Lithuanians, Estonians, Greeks, Turks, and Mongolians, who were central to the physical construction of the railway.

The multicultural, industrial, and commercial character of Harbin likely explains its frequent appearances in *Sine-Fono*, not only in this particular year but throughout the entire period covered by the study. The Trans-Siberian Railway, as illustrated in Figure 3, played a crucial role in the development of early film culture across the Russian Empire. The smaller rail links throughout the empire were equally significant in connecting cities, regions, and provinces, facilitating the spread of cinema and other cultural phenomena.

The railway network was arguably one of the most critical factors in the industrialisation of Tsarist Russia. Beyond industrialisation, it played a transformative role in social and cultural terms. Count Sergei Witte, who was instrumental in the development of the railway network and later became the empire's first Prime Minister, vividly described the impact of the railroads, likening them to 'a leaven, which creates a cultural fermentation among the population.'²⁰ Witte believed that even if the railway passed through 'an absolutely wild people' along its route, it would quickly elevate them to the level necessary for its operation.

The importance of the railway in fostering cultural connections is further underscored by a frequent *Sine-Fono* correspondent, who wrote about the accessibility—or lack thereof—of cinema in his own city. In a correspondence from Łomża, for instance, the writer explains the absence of cinemas by noting that the city 'is located a considerable distance from the nearest train station, Charvonny Bor [Pol. Czerwonny Bór], on the Privis railroad [Rus. Привис], approximately 14 versts away.'²¹ This example highlights how integral the railway was to the spread of cinema and cultural life in the Russian Empire, with cities well connected by rail lines enjoying greater access to the latest entertainment and technology.

¹⁹ CARTER, James. *Creating a Chinese Harbin: Nationalism in an International City, 1916–1932*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002, p. 11–31; WOLFF, David. *To the Harbin Station: The Liberal Alternative in Russian Manchuria, 1898–1914*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 1–115.

²⁰ WITTE, Sergei. *Konspekt leksii o narodnom i gosudarstvennom khoziaistve, chitannykh ego imperatorskomu vysochestvu velikomu kniazuiu Mikhailu Aleksandrovichu v 1900–1902 gg.* Sankt Peterburg: Tip. AO Brokgauz-Efron, 1912, XV, p. 344.

²¹ LEVITSKII, A. Lomzha. *Sine-Fono*, 1912, Nr. 7, p. 22.

Urbanisation and industrialisation in the Russian Empire were concentrated in regions where the railway network was simultaneously developed, thereby facilitating unprecedented levels of spatial mobility and economic integration. The coal mining industry in the Donets Basin and the iron ore mining operations in southeastern Ukraine emerged as key production hubs during this period. By 1912, these regions accounted for over 50% of the Empire's total output of pig iron and iron ore, and an even larger share of coal—approximately 70%. This surge in industrial activity was closely tied to the expansion of the railway network, which not only fuelled industrial growth but also supported the dissemination of modern cultural practices, including cinema.

The early 20th century marked the heyday of cinema in the Russian Empire, as documented in publications like *Sine-Fono*. Even in less industrialised areas, such as Volyn, correspondents in 1911 predicted the rapid spread of cinema, stating that 'Soon, there will not be a single place in Volyn, whether it has a population of five or five thousand, where the enticing glow of an 'illusion' does not twinkle in the evenings'.²² This statement reflects the pervasive influence of cinema, which was becoming an integral part of everyday life across the Empire.

The data indicate that the development of early cinema in the Russian Empire was concentrated in regions where urbanisation was most pronounced, particularly along the western and southern peripheries of the Empire. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, these areas emerged as hubs of modernity, characterised not only by innovative ideas and ideologies but also by advanced patterns of economic development, social relations, and everyday practices²³. While a comprehensive examination of each region is beyond the scope of this article, it is noteworthy that in what is now present-day Ukraine, the urban population grew from 13% in 1897 to nearly 25% just before the outbreak of the First World War²⁴.

The high degree of urbanisation and industrialisation, coupled with the unique social structures and political configurations of the western governorates of the Russian Empire, provides a strong foundation for understanding why early cinema culture flourished in these regions more than elsewhere in the Empire. The data presented here challenge the dominant narratives within the historiographical canon about the origins of cinema culture in the Russian Empire, prompting a critical reconsideration of the relationship between the centre and the periphery.

Ultimately, this research not only revises established narratives but also enhances our understanding of national film histories and broadens the scope of early cinema's history in Central and Eastern Europe. By bringing attention to the pivotal role of the western and southern peripheries, this study underscores the necessity of integrating

²² Sh. Z. [given name unknown]. Volyn'. *Sine-fono*, 1911, Nr. 12, p. 23.

²³ ZAYARNYUK, Andriy; SEREDA, Ostop. *The Intellectual Foundations of Modern Ukraine: The Nineteenth Century*. London: Routledge, 2022, p. 99.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

these often-overlooked regions into the larger discourse on early cinema. This approach offers a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of the cultural dynamics at play within the Russian Empire during this transformative period, ensuring that the complexities of its cinematic landscape are fully appreciated.

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Ankstyvasis kinas Rusijos imperijoje: mąstant apie imperiją per kino geografiją

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Santrauka

Straipsnyje ankstyvojo kino Rusijos imperijoje istorija analizuojama erdviniu požiūriu, dėmesį perkeliant nuo Sankt Peterburgo ir Maskvos prie regionų, kuriuose ankstyvoji kino kultūra iš tikrųjų formavosi, cirkuliavo ir įsitvirtino kasdienio gyvenimo praktikoje. Remiantis profesiniu kino leidiniu „Sine-Fono“ (1907–1918), rekonstruojami kino veiklos modeliai šimtuose

miestų ir miestelių, o surinkti duomenys vizualizuojami pasitelkiant kultūrinės geografijos metodus ir karščio žemėlapius (angl. *heat maps*).

Tyrimo rezultatai rodo, kad intensyviausiai ankstyvojo kino raida vyko ne imperijos branduolyje – ar teritorijose arčiausiai Rusijos imperijos sostinių, – bet plačioje erdvėje nuo Baltijos regiono iki Juodosios jūros, apimančioje dabartinės Latvijos, Lietuvos, Baltarusijos, Lenkijos ir Ukrainos teritorijas. Šios teritorijos veikė kaip dinamiški kino rodymo, platinimo ir vietinės gamybos mazgai, glaudžiai susiję su urbanizacijos, industrializacijos, turizmo ir geležinkelių plėtros procesais. Straipsnyje teigiama, kad šiuos regionus reikėtų suprasti ne kaip periferinius metropolinės kultūros gavėjus, bet kaip formuojančius ankstyvosios kino kultūros centrus.

Išryškinant ankstyvojo kino transregioninį ir transnacionalinį pobūdį Rytų ir Vidurio Europoje, tyrime kvestionuojamos į tautą orientuotas istoriografijos, siūloma iš naujo apibrėžti „centro“ ir „periferijos“ santykį imperinio Rusijos kino istorijoje. Platesniu požiūriu straipsnyje parodoma, kaip erdvinė ir kultūrinė geografijos perspektyva gali iš esmės pakeisti mūsų supratimą apie ankstyvąjį kiną kaip imperinį, sienas peržengiantį reiškinį ir prisidėti prie vykstančių diskusijų apie kino istoriografijos – ir ypač ankstyvojo kino Rusijos imperijoje – dekolonizavimą.

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