

MULTIPLE WORLDS WITHOUT ENDS: FILM SERIALS IN EUROPE, 1913-1929

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This thesis deals with the production and reception of European film serials in the period 1913-1929. European serials were an important, but temporary phenomenon in the European film industry. The main focus of my research is twofold: on the one hand to find an explanation for the rise and fall of the European serial, and on the other hand to shed light on the importance of the serial in the European film industry. The reception of the American serial in Europe and the European serial in America will play an important part in this. Mostly for this research I will focus on the situation in France and Germany (that supplied many serials) and the Netherlands (that only made one serial); but possibly also Italy and England.

Serials seemed to have played a significant part in rebuilding the French and German film industry during and after the First World War. Because of their serial-format and with the hindsight on bigger budgets, serials were used from 1915 onwards, to compete with the American invasion of features and serials. Compared to the American serials, the European variants were different. The serial format was used in different genres and episodes were longer and functioned as the feature in a film program. Not only were popular adventure serials like Feuillade's *Les Vampires* (1915) or Diamant Berger's *Les Trois Mousquetaires* (1921) released in multiple episodes, but many prestigious artistic productions also used a serial format. There can be some debate if these "artistic" films of usually two to four episodes are really serials or that they are just very long films coincidentally cut into episodes, nevertheless a connection seems to exist. Before a feature version was made of Abel Gance's *J'Accuse* (1919) and *La Roue* (1922), the two films consisted of four parts and *J'Accuse* had been released as a feuilleton; Fritz Lang's two part *Die Nibelungen* (1924) and *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* (1922) had followed *Die Spinnen* (1919-1920) which was intended as a four part serial (and which was re-cut in France into ten weekly episodes); and Joe May's two part *Das Indische Grabmal* (1921) had followed the eight part adventure serial *Die Herrin der Welt* (1920).¹

This thesis aims to explain how and with what results the European serial tried to get back on its feet and give resistance to the American export. I will research how the public, critics and film companies from these continents reacted to the different products; if competition and differences also existed between European serials; and if one can speak of a European serial with a European culture. Because several different film versions of the serial appeared to have existed, I will carefully pay attention to the various cultural modes of production, distribution and reception. For instance, some American Pathé serials were especially adjusted and shortened for distribution in Europe. Or, in the Netherlands there was a practice whereby several episodes (also the already shortened Pathé serials) of American serials were distributed and screened either edited

together or back-to-back in one film program. A complete American fifteen part serial was shown in a period of three to four weeks instead of fifteen weeks. In the Netherlands no American serial was ever released in its original version. This adjustment of American serials also happened in other countries, but it does not seem to have happened to such an extent as in the Netherlands. It is possible that because of the repetition of the sensationalistic narrative, the Dutch critics sooner found the serial objectionable than in other countries, while at the same time the audience grew more rapidly tired of the serials. In the Netherlands the episodes functioned as the main feature in a film program. When after five years the serial craze dropped, the serial had no place to go and episodes could not be used as a filler next to a feature.² On the other side of the Atlantic a similar process of reconstruction was taking place. European serials were either re-edited into one feature or shortened into lesser episodes. While the first option could sometimes work (although the storyline tended to be somewhat confusing), the latter option failed horribly. Episodic features of five reels or more just did not work for the American audience that was used to short two-reel episodes.³ Questions I will deal with during this project are concerned with these various (cultural) modes: with what reasons were European and American serials adjusted for export and how did it reflect a presumed national taste; were there any differences in adjustments; and what does this say about the cultural self-image and the filmic cultural codification of America and Europe?

Apart from the beginning when the serial format was still taking shape, I will also try to map out the fall of the European film serial. Even though the European serial had been reasonably successful in Europe, this success would only last for a little more than ten years. From 1925 onward, the European serial started to disappear from the cinema and was entirely replaced by the feature of one episode. This not only applied to the European serial, the American variant was also in a bad condition. There was only one difference: after World War Two the American serial came back in color and sound, the European serial did not. However, the film serial would never regain the central place in the cinema it once had.

¹ One can also ask if the structure of a serial is different from the structure of the four weekly episodes of Capellani's *Les Misérables* (1912).

² For more information on this topic see also my work: *Serials in Nederland: 1915-1925* (thesis Liberal Arts: Utrecht University, the Netherlands, 1999); and "De Serial in Nederland 1915-1925: de unieke opkomst en ondergang van een aangepaste filmvorm," *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis*, no. 1 (June 2001), pp. 108-128.

³ See also my article in the upcoming publication of the IX International Film Studies Conference, *Film and its Multiples*, Udine, 20-23 March 2002: "Adapting Film Serials: Multiple (Cultural) Models for the Cliffhanger in the Teens and Twenties."