

BREAKING NEW GROUND: JEAN DESMET AND THE EARLY DUTCH FILM TRADE AND CINEMA EXHIBITION (1907-1916)

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Since 1957 the *Netherlands Filmmuseum* has been in possession of the Desmet Collection which contains the estate of the cinema owner and film distributor Jean Desmet (1875-1956). This collection has brought about a fundamental change in the writing of film history through the rediscovery of genres, filmmakers and national cinema cultures along with color in silent films. It gained the museum a reputation in the field of film preservation, notably of early and colored film stock. Just as important, however, is the surplus value represented by the collection of films, publicity material and business archive as a unity of text and context.

The Desmet collection comprises almost nine hundred (mainly foreign) films, a collection of publicity material and a business archive. These three sources form the basis of a reconstruction of Desmet's career: first in the fairground business and subsequently in cinema operation and film distribution. The history of Desmet's career offers not simply an abstract of an individual character and his motivations, but also epitomizes transformations in the world of cinema. Over a period of ten years the world of cinema experienced radical change which Desmet did not simply witness but also helped to bring about. Given the insufficiencies of Dutch film production Desmet became a link between film production abroad and film exhibition in the Netherlands.

Desmet is not only merely representative of the rise of the permanent cinema and the coming of the film distributor. His fortunes also encapsulate a series of structural changes within the culture of permanent cinemas and film distribution. In film distribution these changes involved the introduction of film rental, the beginnings of the long film, the introduction of the monopoly distribution system, organization and periodic transformation of the products on offer. In the business of cinema operation change implied specialization, the creation of fixed theatre venues, hierarchies, selectiveness and expansions of scale. These transformations were not confined to the Netherlands but took place in the rest of Europe. Indeed, they were first set in motion by other European countries. It is thus necessary to situate Desmet in his larger European context. To what extent can we speak of a European film culture and where do the national differences lie?

This investigation engages in detail with three studies which touch upon or accord a central place to film distribution during the period in which Desmet was active as a cinema operator and distributor: Janet Staiger's article "Combination and Litigation: Structures of US Film Distribution, 1896-1917," Kristin Thompson's *Exporting Entertainment* and Corinna Müller's *Frühe deutsche Kinematographie*.¹ Staiger's study shows the full extent to which the coming of the long film affected film distribution in America. Thompson examines the differences between the American and European

film trade during the silent era. Müller discerns five important changes in the German film world in the years before the First World War: the coming of permanent cinemas, the rise of film distribution as a separate branch of business within the industry, the replacement of film purchase by film rental, and the breakthrough of the long film – with the so-called “exclusive” film or monopoly film following closely in its wake. She regards the long film as both the principal motor of change and the solution of an economic crisis in the film industry.

Like Müller, this study of Desmet covers the short period of a decade. This makes it possible to perform a “deep-focus” treatment of the Dutch film trade and cinema operation during a period in which both are passing through great structural change. The investigation assesses the extent to which the changes noted by Müller as crucial for Germany also apply to the Netherlands. The key questions are: what was Desmet’s role in the development of Dutch film culture between 1907 and 1916? This question is central to the present study and in order to answer it Desmet has been situated in the context of structural change. Linked to this core question are two secondary questions. What changes occur in Dutch film distribution in general and in Desmet’s in particular in the years 1907-16? And may an unusual source such as Desmet’s business archive, along with its films and publicity material, be seen to tell a different story about early film distribution, cinema operation and film exhibition than the one that might have been obtained from the more popular sources? Proceeding from here, the study concludes by considering the degree to which the story of Desmet confirms, qualifies or contradicts the picture presented by the previously mentioned authors.

The chapters are arranged partly chronologically but are divided for each period into thematically separate treatments of film purchase (foreign imports), film rental (Dutch clientele), cinema operation and competitive distribution. Thus structural changes, such as the arrival of the long film, are examined within the framework of both sales and competition.

Chapter 1 describes Desmet’s arrival in the world of cinema. In 1907 after running fairground attractions such as a Wheel of Adventure and a helter-skelter which he advertised as a “Canadian toboggan,” he introduced his traveling cinema, The Imperial Bio. A look at Desmet’s programs clearly shows the shifts in the type of films available. Chapter 2 frames Desmet’s traveling cinema years within the transformation of early Dutch film distribution at the hands of Anton Nöggerath (sen. and jun.) and Pathé.

Desmet’s golden years as cinema operator and film distributor were the years 1909-14. His activities during this period are treated in chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6. Chapter 3 is devoted to cinema operation, film exhibition and programming. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 deal with Desmet’s pre-war film distribution and are divided into a chapter on his acquisitions abroad, set against the background of the European distribution network at the beginning of the second decade (ch.4); a chapter on his rentals in the Netherlands (ch.5) and a chapter dealing with his Dutch competitors (ch.6). All three chapters discuss structural changes such as the introduction of the long film, and new trends such as variations in the kinds of film on offer.

The impact of the First World War on Desmet’s distribution and cinema business is treated in chapters 7 and 8. Where chapter 7 centers on Desmet’s purchasing, clientele and competitors, chapter 8 focuses on his film presentations and cinemas. Desmet’s activities as a distributor and cinema operator after 1916 flow over into his new career,

during which he remained still partly active in the film world. Chapter 9 deals with Desmet's "afterlife," his new existence as financier and property owner, and the "after-life" of his films after 1916 until they were incorporated into the Filmmuseum in 1957. The concluding chapter returns to the recurring themes of the chapters, such as the Dutch situation within international perspective; the infrastructure of cultural life; local differences; the issue of sourcing; and Desmet's personality, his career and his thoughts about the world of cinema.

An English-written edition of the PhD thesis, richly illustrated, is forthcoming with Amsterdam University Press

- 1 K. Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment. America in the World Film Market* (London: BFI, 1985); J. Staiger, "Combination and Litigation: Structures of US Film Distribution, 1896-1917," *Cinema Journal*, vol. 23, no. 2 (Winter 1983), pp. 41-71; C. Müller, *Frühe deutsche Kinematographie. Formale, wirtschaftliche und kulturelle Entwicklungen 1907-1912* (Stuttgart-Weimar: J.B. Metzler, 1994).