

PRE-ARCHIVAL PRACTICES. A GENEALOGY OF THE FILM ARCHIVE IN THE NETHERLANDS (1910-1919)

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In the beginning of September 1919, the terrain of the Dutch open-air museum in Arnhem hosted the *Vaderlandsch Volksfeest*, a three-day folkloric festival that offered a stage for regional troupes dressed in traditional costumes, performing their “typicality” in front of a live outdoor audience. Participants included, for example, mid-winterhorn blowers from Twente, Alkmaar cheese carriers and a young couple from the Zuiderzee island of Marken that re-enacted a marriage ceremony for the sake of public display alone. Visitors from the whole country flocked to gaze upon their rural fellow-countrymen, possibly driven by a nostalgic desire to see what was already felt as being lost in the Modern Age: the purity of the countryside and its age-old traditions.¹

Meanwhile, somewhere amidst the buzzing festival terrain, several film operators recorded the festivities, including Willy Mullens, by then a well-known Dutch filmmaker and cinema entrepreneur. The result of this work – a film that simply became known as *Vaderlandsch Historisch Volksfeest* – was generally praised in the contemporary national press for being a “cultural-historical memorial for the countryside.”² Equally acknowledging the film’s great documentary value, the Hague resident and amateur-historian D.S. van Zuiden, seized the moment to make a plea for the institutionalization of a national film archive. By means of a letter sent to the national newspaper *Algemeen Handelsblad*, Van Zuiden foregrounded the archival capabilities of the cinematic medium and proposed a systematic storage of films of “great national value:” “Naturally, it should not include detective novels and the like, but when I urge the desirability of the safeguarding of a film such as the people’s celebrations in Arnhem, no one would object.”³ Van Zuiden was quite right in this respect. His lobby not only met with the general approval of the government – although it took some years before the initiative was structurally subsidized – but the plan also earned the enthusiastic support of most Dutch filmmakers. This meant that the imaginary archive became a reality when the Netherlands Central Film Archive was instituted in 1919. Mullens’ film became its first official acquisition. In the years that followed, the NCF collected a substantial amount of films that still make up an important part of the national heritage of silent non-fiction film today.

In order to legitimize the archive’s existence, Van Zuiden and his fellow founders, including Willy Mullens himself and the head of municipal School Cinema of The Hague, David van Staveren, stressed the pedagogical potential of film:

As the feature film continuously approaches perfection, the question appeared to me whether it would be desirable/beneficial to safeguard contemporary film for posterity, which/who can use it for educational and scientific purposes. It seems desirable to draw the attention of the government towards the sake of the future and start raising a central film archive.⁴

Despite Van Zuiden's explicit mentioning of "the feature film," fiction film was never part of the NCF's agenda. Echoing the suspicious minds of contemporary moral gatekeepers towards the cinema, the legitimizing discourse surrounding the NCF addressed film as a technological device that could capture events endowed with historical value for future generations.⁵ In the eyes of the NCF-propagandists, the inherent indexical nature of the medium made film a superior memory tool.⁶ Stowed within the vaults of the State Archive, the NCF only purchased film negatives, for its primary mission statement was to save film from oblivion. In addition, a plan was designed to set up the archive as a lending institute, distributing film copies for didactic institutions, such as School Cinemas. The safeguarding of film *for film's sake*, however, was only a marginal aspect of the NCF's collection policy. It was not until the *cinéophile* movement of the late 1920s that voices were raised to save fiction film as well. In fact, instead of saving any film heritage whatsoever, the NCF actively constructed one, stimulating Dutch filmmakers to document national events, industry and geography. In keeping with other early archival initiatives of the time, the NCF was the result of an encyclopedic desire.

The Netherlands Central Film Archive is a clear-cut example of the first wave of film archives in the 1910s, yet there is little information available about their intentions and *raison-d'être*.⁷ This is certainly true from a Dutch perspective. In order to analyze the conditions of its possibility, this paper focuses on the pre-history of the Netherlands Central Film Archive and the ideals involved in its institutionalization. Instead of the common sense assumption that *Vaderlandsch Historisch Volksfeest* was the immediate cause of the archive's institutionalization, this paper rejects any notion of a "birth" of the film archive.⁸ Instead, it treats its advent as a slow process, built upon and initiated by intermingling discourses and practices that enabled a sense of film archival legitimacy.

To elaborate this point further, this paper takes as an example the strategic foregrounding of film as a non-commercial, institutional document in order to explain how these *pre-archival practices* offered frameworks for archival thinking. There are several pre-archival practices in the 1910s that merit historical analysis of this aspect, such as municipal School cinemas and the Colonial Institute. I will however single out the case of the Dutch Navy League in order to gain a better understanding of the genealogy of the film archive in the Netherlands.

The case of the Dutch Navy League

Being a voluntary association of politicians, civilians and Navy representatives, the Dutch Navy League (*Onze Vloot*) primarily operated as an instrument of public relations. Although the Navy League was legally set up as a private enterprise, its members were primarily to be found within the higher societal echelons of army officials and politicians. In much the same way as its British, French and German counterparts, its goal was to improve the relationship between the Navy and the nation in response to the alleged non-militaristic and unpatriotic character of the Dutch. Besides this image-building mission statement, the Navy League operated as a pressure group in stimulating a political lobby for better armament and greater expansion of the fleet's size in order to protect the nation and its overseas colonies. Situated within a historical period of ongoing international conflict, there was no shortage of events that strengthened this self-proclaimed necessity.⁹

From the 1910s onwards, the pedagogic potential of the film medium was recognized by the association's management and the Navy League started collecting both foreign and national non-fiction films – mostly *views* of fleet maneuvers or boat types – that were purchased in addition to

the existing collection of lantern-slides and school plates. These instructive, visual media were used to guide lectures on so-called pressing issues in private exhibition settings. For example, foreign images of large battleships were used to illustrate the deplorable state of Dutch naval power, and films of marine maneuvers were supposed to demonstrate the navigational and tactical skill of the Dutch Navy personnel. Shortly after, public film viewings were organized on a regular basis by the many local subdivisions of the association. In February 1912, the Navy League of Haarlem organized a public film screening in a regular cinema. In order to attract as many future members as possible, cinema *De Kroon* was dressed up in a celebrative atmosphere and offered an alternative program on the naval cause. The Haarlem division thus was the first “who *dared* [my emphasis] to show the film, which gives a visual image of our Navy and was purchased and made available by the headquarters, in the cinema.”¹⁰ In response to this pioneering effort of the Haarlem division, other local divisions started organizing their own film exhibitions with similar zeal. While I won’t go into detail about these individual cases, I’ll outline instead how, in addition to the collecting practices of the Navy League, these public manifestations can be regarded as *pre-archival* in several respects.

Firstly, the screening practices of the Navy League contributed to the emancipation of the film medium as an object of serious and valuable knowledge. Shown within the rhetorical format of their screenings, the propagandists of the Navy League highlighted the archival qualities of the film medium, hailing its unique capacity to store movement and its epistemological superiority with regard to other visual media. I argue that these exhibition strategies furthered the discourse of film as a *non-lying medium* and contributed to the awareness of the medium as a propaganda tool. Despite the didactical discourses that surrounded their screenings, the propagandists of the Navy League were primarily interested in the possibilities of the medium in terms of nation-building strategies and policy-making. The main reason why film was considered helpful with regard to the shaping of public opinion *was* its alleged objectivity. It offered, as Martin Loiperdinger has argued with regard to the film screening practices of the German *Flottenverein*, a possibility to witness what the argument of the Navy League was about.¹¹ When, for instance, a view of a Japanese *dreadnought* was shown, one which could easily be compared with the images of the rather marginal Dutch fleet that followed shortly after, it didn’t take much effort to imagine the *Yellow Peril* lingering along the coast of the Dutch East-Indies. Its alleged undeniable character made non-fiction film gain respectability in the eyes of official policymakers, for it could serve their propagandistic purposes. Given the higher political circles that primarily made up the association’s membership, the screening activities of the Navy League took away some of their disdain towards the cinema.

As the 1910s saw the rise of a so-called “Cinema Threat” (*Bioscoopgevaar*) – as the perceived danger of the cinema to public morality was usually addressed – voices were raised to occupy the public sphere of the cinema by strategically distributing “good” films in addition to the censorship activities of local cinema committees. This desire was augmented by the screening activities of the Dutch Navy League, which can be regarded as an early disciplining initiative of the film medium and the social space of the cinema. The propagandists of the Navy League were well aware that cinemas were popular amusement grounds for lower and middle-class audiences, and seemed especially conscious of children’s fascination for film. While their screening activities acknowledged the cinema space as potentially undermining the moral fabric of society, the Navy League equally used its popular appeal to get its message across. By hiring cinemas and offering alternative film programs outside the commercial sphere, the Navy League operated as an active agent in designing a purpose for film that was in a “national interest.”

As soon as the World War I had become reality, the Dutch Ministry of Defense hired Willy

Mullens as the only film operator who was allowed to shoot cinematographic images of army and navy exercises. In the years that followed, Mullens' Film Brigade made several so-called *mobilization films* (*mobilisatiefilms*) that were intended to be shown in public cinemas. Although it is not yet clear to what extent these films found their way into the Dutch cinemas, their release does point out how strategies were designed to counter the threatening aspects of the cinema space. In the same spirit as the Navy League, film was used for the *cultural mobilization* of the Netherlands, seeking for societal approval of armed neutrality politics and catering for a patriotic sentiment.¹² By releasing institutional documents of the armed forces, cinema had been appropriated as an instrument of public relations for the first time in Dutch history. The exceptionality of this event did not go unnoticed by the national press. In an article of *Het nieuws van den dag*, the signing of the contract was hailed as the moment in which the usefulness of film was officially recognized.¹³

The highlight of Mullens' position as head of the Film Brigade was the making of a national propaganda film that featured a two and a half hour compilation of army and navy exercises. This prestigious film was made in close cooperation with several voluntary associations including, of course, the Navy League. *The Army and Navy Film*, as the film was titled, premiered in Mullens' own cinema, the Residentie Bioscoop in The Hague on 9 January 1917. As the *Amsterdammer* of 20 January 1917 made clear, its release was a national event in more than one respect. Not only because it was screened in front of Queen Wilhelmina and numerous officials, but also because "the government and the military authorities had *dared* [my emphasis] to use the popular means of the cinema to let the facts speak to the audience."¹⁴ The *evidentiary function* of the film was a highly dominant trope in the reactions to the film:

*It will give many people a better impression of the capabilities of our army, and maybe this will change those unmotivated feelings of antipathy towards the soldiers, so unmistakably grounded in so many of us, into a sense of approval, now that they have been given the possibility to witness and judge.*¹⁵

The example of the mobilization films and the *Army and Navy Film* also points towards the meaning of propaganda in a more advertorial sense. Willy Mullens was heavily involved within the Navy League's film screening practices as a projectionist and a filmmaker, and he actually shot several films the Navy League collected. It is tempting to conclude that this close collaboration earned him the prestigious post of cameraman in the service of the Army in the first place – although it remains difficult how such social networking actually came into being. The main reason why Mullens offered his humble services to the Navy League is that it would earn him prestige from government, as well as warm contacts with army and navy officials that provided him with the necessary contacts to achieve his further goals. Being a relative small player confronted with ongoing (international) competition on the domestic cinema market, Mullens was forced to find a *niche* in order to save himself from oblivion. He did so by encouraging the hunger for national, non-fictional subjects, stressing their educational, patriotic and propagandistic value and by initiating plans that would promote them as such. One of these plans, naturally, involved the active promotion of the archival idea that would, in return, advertise Mullens' trade. The archival idea for Mullens consisted primarily in the construction of a film heritage.

Finally, a last aspect of the constitution of the archival idea had much to do with the establishment of archival procedures. In contrast to the short-lived commercial life of film, the storage of non-fictional material at least presupposed a service that was not intended to make a profit. These were films that had an educational service and they were collected with a future in mind. While

information about the way the Navy League dealt with conservation problems – supposing they did it – is hard to find, the organization did institute a practical lending system for its regional members and a list of titles was released on a regular basis in the association’s magazine.

With some caution – the number of films collected by the Navy League after all did not reach 20 titles by the end of the 1910s – this could be regarded as a non-commercial catalogue that made the collection accessible. More importantly, the publication of a list of titles was designed to counter the uncontrollable nature of commercial distribution.

Conclusion

Besides the pedagogical, the scientific and the artistic discourses that surrounded the imagination of the film archive in the early 1910s, it should not be forgotten that propaganda activities played a major role in the constitution of the film archive. As the example of the screening and collecting activities of the Navy League makes clear, it was the propagandistic potential of film that shaped the archival idea. Despite the rather dark connotations the word propaganda now bears, it should be made clear the word *propaganda* in the 1910s was understood as an equivalent for “advertisement,” although it was seldom used in relation to the promotion of actual products. Propaganda by means of film was widely practiced in the teens, often functioning as the willful and strategic exploitation of a political or religious agenda. This is what the Navy League used film for: to advertise the nation, thriving on its alleged capacity to picture reality. And in a similar manner, Mullens used the Navy League to enhance the status of his trade, countering moral objections of the cinema and himself providing a “national” market. The *propaganda* activities of both the film trade and the Navy League functioned as an overarching context in which the film archive found solid ground in the Netherlands.

The constitution of the film archive in the Netherlands had less to do with archival and heritage discourses that were somehow inherent to the medium, or a spontaneous happening of events. Seen from a pre-archival perspective, I would argue, the institutionalization of the first film archive of the Netherlands was a consequence of political and commercial strategies that were already present in existing screening and collecting practices, which continued to promote the discourse of film as a “non-lying medium” and contributed to the perceived usefulness of using non-fiction film as an institutional document. A general conclusion that can be deduced from these examples is that the advent of the film archive in the Netherlands was firmly grounded in three separate, yet closely related propagandistic ideals. The first ideal was the growing desirability to civilize the film trade in order to gain respectability in the eyes of the middle and upper classes of a national cinema audience. In addition, the imagined film archive was embraced by Dutch film professionals because of its prestigious connotations, which would allow them to promote their products in times of growing international competition. Finally, it was the recognition of the cinema as a public sphere in its own right that stimulated national authorities in their attempts to discipline cinema culture. As censorship activities were still organized on a local level and the cinema culture as a whole was a new phenomenon largely devoid of political control, the release of institutional documents and the canonizing possibilities of the archive were considered worthwhile from an *official* point of view.¹⁶ A historical analysis of the uses of film as archival object – fueled by a propagandistic desire – might therefore be illuminating in understanding the genealogy of the film archive.

- 1 For more information about the festivities and the folkloric movement in the Netherlands, see Ad de Jong, *Dirigenten van de herinnering. Musealisering en nationalisering van de volkscultuur in Nederland 1815-1940*, SUN, Nijmegen 2001.
- 2 Leeuwarder Courant, 23 May 1919 (my translation).
- 3 My translation. In *Het Algemeen Handelsblad*, 12 September 1919: “Natuurlijk zouden daarin geen detectiveroman en dergelijke worden opgenomen, maar wanneer ik het nut betoog van de bewaaring eener film als die van de Arnheemsche volksfeesten voor het geslacht van over 100 jaar [...], dan zal daarop wel van generlei zijde aanmerking gemaakt worden.”
- 4 My translation. In *Het Algemeen Handelsblad*, 12 September 1919: “Waar de bioscoopfilm hoe langer hoe meer het volmaakte nabij gekomen is, is bij mij de vraag gerezen of het niet wenschelijk is, de film van heden te bewaren voor het nageslacht, dat daaruit leering en wetenschap kan putten en het lijkt mij alleszins gewenscht de aandacht van de regering op dat toekomstbelang te vestigen en er toe over te gaan een centraal filmarchief te stichten.”
- 5 Klaas de Zwaan, *Canonizing Film Heritage in The Netherlands. The Dutch Central Film Archive*, in Pietro Bianchi, Giulio Bursi, Simone Venturini (eds.), *Il canone cinematografico/The Film Canon*, Proceedings of XVII Convegno Internazionale di Studi sul Cinema/International Film Studies Conference (Udine/Gorizia, 15-18 March 2010), Forum, Udine 2011, pp. 429-435.
- 6 It should be noted not every one agreed on this common sense assumption. Advising the government whether or not to subsidize the Netherlands Central Film Archive, the famous Dutch historian Johan Huizinga proved himself notoriously skeptic about film as a historiographical tool. See “Advies inzake het NCF,” 15 February 1920, RANH, archief KNAW, invnr. 186.
- 7 Paula Amad has recently published an excellent treatment on early film archival thinking that starts filling the void. See Paula Amad, *Counter-Archive. Film, the Everyday, and Albert Kahn's Archives de la Planète*, Columbia University Press, New York 2010.
- 8 As for the birth trope and a general history of the NCF, see Bert Hogenkamp, “Het Centraal Nederlandsch Film Archief,” in *Skrien*, no. 137, September-October 1984, pp. 60-62.
- 9 For an extensive overview of the relationship of cinema and the culture of voluntary associations in Wilhelmine Germany, see Wolfgang Fuhrmann, “Locating Early Film Audiences: Voluntary Associations and Colonial Film,” in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2002.
- 10 My translation. In *Onze Vloot*, no. 31, February 1912: “Voortvarend als immer was zij de eerste die het aandurfde om de film, die een aanschouwelijk beeld geeft van onze Marine en de door het hoofdbestuur is aangekocht en verkrijgbaar gesteld, in de bioscoop te vertoonen.” The film mentioned was known as the *Marine-Film*, presumably made by Haghe Film, the production company of Willy Mullens.
- 11 Martin Loiperdinger, “The Beginnings of German Film Propaganda: The Navy League as Traveling Exhibitor, 1901-1907,” in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2002.
- 12 The term cultural mobilization is used, amongst others, by Dutch historian Ismee Tames in her analysis of the neutrality debate in the Netherlands during the World War I. See Ismee Tames, *Oorlog voor onze gedachten. Oorlog, neutraliteit en identiteit in het Nederlands publieke debat 1914-1918*, Hilversum, Verloren 2006.
- 13 “Het nut van de film officieel erkend,” in *Het nieuws van den dag: kleine courant*, 7 August 1914.
- 14 My translation. In *De Amsterdammer*, 20 January 1917.
- 15 My translation. “De film *Leger en Vloot*,” in *Onze Vloot*, 2 February 1917: “Velen zullen er een juistere blik door krijgen op wat onze weermacht kan, en misschien zal daardoor ook menig ongemotiveerd gevoel van antipathie tegen de “soldaterij”, dat bij een groot deel van ons Volk zo onmiskenbaar heeft postgevat, veranderen in waardeering, nu men heeft kunnen zien en oordelen.”
- 16 This paper, as part of the research project “The Nation and Its Other”, could not have been written without the financial support of the Research Institute of History and Culture and the stimulating aid of the members of the Utrecht seminar in Film Studies.