Between 1928 and 1933 the European film industry made the transition from silent to sound film. This study explores this process in the Netherlands. What impact had the international diffusion of the new technology in this country? And what was the contribution from the Netherlands to the international innovation process? The emphasis is not so much on technology as on its reception, the problems it created and the solutions that were developed. This is not just another success story, as chapter 1 explains. The introduction of sound films is seen as an arena where battles were fought over the direction, the speed, the meaning and the control of technology.

The first demonstrations of sound-on-film experiments were given in The Hague in 1927 and 1928. These public presentations were part of a larger plan to interest potential investors in the new technology and its patents. Since 1926, Dutch venture capital supported several research teams in the development of sound film patents in Germany, one of which would emerge as important: the project of Heinrich Küchenmeister. Chapter 2 shows how Dutch capital got involved in the innovation of Europe’s film industry at an early stage. The formation of Küchenmeister’s Internationale Maatschappij voor Sprekende Films NV in 1927 and its relation to a network of banks in Amsterdam would play a major role in subsequent developments.

The importation of American synchronized feature films started the conversion to sound in Europe in the 1928–1929 season. In the Netherlands the initiative came from an innovative local film distributor, L. C. Barnstijn. He organized the first screenings of imported sound films in
March 1929 using loudspeakers and amplifiers from the Philips company. Barnstijn had persuaded Philips to support his sound-on-disk synchronization system, Loetafoon. Philips, in turn, used the Netherlands as its experimental garden. The Philips–Barnstijn combination was quite successful, as chapter 3 shows, selling many installations to Dutch theaters. Although the Dutch exhibition sector had been among the last in Europe to show a talking picture, it was among the first to complete the conversion to sound in 1933.

The diffusion of sound in the theaters is analyzed in more detail in chapter 4. Sound changed not only the film, but also the film’s presentation and its relation to the viewer. Films no longer came to the theater as semi-manufactured products, but instead as finished products. They no longer needed musical accompaniment by a local orchestra, but offered a complete show in themselves. It was the end of the cinema as a multimedia show with live action. Sound effects and music, formerly a part of the viewing context, were incorporated now in the film text.

The confrontation with the Dutch Cinema Act of 1926 is characteristic of this development. The Act distinguished between silent films and their presentation. While the films were supervised by the central government, their screenings were controlled by local governments. However, when the new technology transferred the production of sounds from the theater to the studio, the control of sounds shifted from local to central government. The consequences of this were debated at the highest political levels of government and parliament.

The innovation process was not a passive adoption of new technology. It met with considerable local resistance all over Europe, particularly in the theaters, provoking an international crisis in the film industry. Economic competition was only one factor in this process. The cultural factor proved to be a substantial barrier as well. Dutch audiences did not understand the language of American talking pictures; they turned to German spoken versions as a substitute. It took several years before the techniques of subtitling and dubbing had been mastered; dubbing was never used in the Netherlands after the first experiments with it had been unsuccessful. Some intellectuals warned against foreign language films as a threat to cultural identity. Film critics protested against talking pictures fearing that the primacy of the image would be undermined. Resistance came also from the cinema musicians who lost their jobs in the face of the economic depression.
Chapter 5 continues the Küchenmeister story. Sprekende Films NV was to become one of the major players in the international innovation process. It supported the creation of the Ton-Bild Syndikat AG (Tobis) in August 1928, soon holding a controlling interest. It formed a cartel with the Klangfilm company in March 1929, pooling Europe’s most important sound film patents. Tobis-Klangfilm joined battle with its American competitors, Western Electric in particular, resulting in the Paris agreement of July 1930, a cartel covering the whole world. Sprekende Films NV created film studios in Berlin, Paris and London before the end of 1929, severe competitors of Hollywood and Ufa. The company preferred a multinational identity and favored multilingual film productions in order to overcome language barriers. In fact, Sprekende Films NV became the first film company of European dimensions since the collapse of Pathé in 1915.

While Küchenmeister’s Sprekende Films NV was a success, its parent company, Küchenmeister's Accoustiek NV, was undercut by the Depression. The establishment of Accoustiek NV in May 1929 had caused a sensation at the Amsterdam stock exchange, but after the Wall Street crash it was in decline and in 1932 had to be reorganized. Sprekende Films NV’s name was changed to Internationale Tobis NV (Intertobis). Its shares were sold secretly in 1935 to a German trustee of the Nazi regime, Max Winkler of Cautio GmbH, because the Propaganda Ministry wanted full control of Tobis. Its seat, however, remained in Amsterdam to serve as a front for German film exports in the thirties.

Philips NV had a direct impact on the conversion of the home market, but it played only a minor role in the European changeover, as chapter 6 shows. The company was urged by foreign innovators to participate in an early phase, but it preferred to stay independent. Instead, Philips developed its own series of sound film projectors, a successful product line after 1933. It also designed an electromechanical sound recorder, the Philips-Miller system, used in broadcasting and recording studios since 1937.

The predominance of foreign languages in the cinemas has resulted in the discovery of Dutch film: people came to realize that films in their own language did not exist. This perception has led to a revival of the production of feature films in the Netherlands in 1934. Chapter 7 studies not only the debate about the future of national film production, but also the early sound films themselves, in particular the first industrial
film, **PHILIPS RADIO** (1931) by Joris Ivens and Lou Lichtveld, and the first feature film, **TERRA NOVA** (1932) by Gerard Rutten, a film that never made it to the theaters. Chapter 8 presents a case study of a Roman Catholic film company, Internationale Eidophon NV, founded by B.J. Brenninkmeyer and other wealthy Catholics in Holland. Eidophon tried to establish an international sound film studio with the help of the Dutch bishops and Pope Pius XI. Only two feature films were released, **DAS MEER RUFT** (1933) and **DAS LIED DER SCHWARZEN BERGE** (1933), both produced in Germany.

The critical discourse on sound film is discussed in chapter 9. Scepticism was initially dominant. The only modernist critic to welcome the new means of expression was the writer and composer Lou Lichtveld. Most avant-garde critics saw silence as the essence of cinema. They also fought for film as an autonomous art. They did not understand, however, that the new technology also contributed to the autonomy of the film, making film independent of local screening conditions while shifting control of the sound dimension from the theater owner to the filmmaker. Contemporaries could not solve this paradox. Some kept the values of silent cinema alive in the sound period, remembering with nostalgia the silent era as a lost paradise.