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Summary

Breaking New Ground
Jean Desmet and the early Dutch film trade
and cinema exhibition (1907-1916)

Since 1957 the Netherlands Film Museum has been in possession of the Desmet Collection which contains the estate of the cinema owner and film distributor Jean Desmet (1875-1956). The 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. 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 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, and in contrast to Thompson, 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 and to what extent does the Desmet collection reflect both Desmet's career in the film world and developments in the film world in general during the second decade of the twentieth century? The first question is central to the present study and in order to answer it Desmet has been situated in the context of structural change. The question which follows from the core question is then: what changes occur in Dutch film distribution in general and in Desmet’s in particular in the years 1907-16? The second question includes the issue of the degree to which Desmet's collection in its present form may be considered representative. From there the study moves on to a consideration of the fate of Desmet’s film holdings after they had lost their commercial value, and looks at the way in which they have been preserved and re-screened. This leads to the question of whether an unusual source such as Desmet’s business archive, along with its films and publicity material, may 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 Staiger, Thompson and Müller.

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 travelling cinema, The Imperial Bio. A look at Desmet’s programmes clearly shows the shifts in the type of films available as well as 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 2, 3, 4 and 5. Chapter 2 is devoted to cinema operation, film exhibition and programming. Within the framework of the rise of the permanent cinema venue this chapter deals with Desmet’s first cinemas, the Cinema Parisien in Rotterdam (1909) and its namesake in Amsterdam (1910). The chapter then goes on to describe the coming of cinema classification, as illustrated by the opening of Desmet’s two luxury theatres, the Cinema Palace in Amsterdam (1912) and the Cinema Royal in Rotterdam. The boom in permanent cinemas triggered an enormous demand for films which enabled new film distributors like Desmet to make their début.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 deal with Desmet’s pre-war film distribution and are divided into a chapter on his acquisitionss abroad, set against the background of the European distribution network at the beginning of the second decade (ch.3); a chapter on his rentals in the Netherlands (ch.4) and a chapter dealing with his Dutch competitors (ch.5). 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 chapters identify a division of Desmet’s work into two periods: 1910-12 and 1912-14. In the first period Desmet imported
programmes second-hand from Germany, but with the growing importance of long films he abandoned his first supplier and took up with a new one who could deliver him programmes containing long films on a regular basis. The programme consisting of several short films developed into a programme consisting of one dominant main feature, with a number of short films grouped around it. Publicity and advertising focused on these long films and the featured film became the main item of press reviews. The countries which produced these feature films, Germany and Denmark, and the genres in which they were conceived, notably the melodrama and the thriller, made their breakthrough on the international film scene, in the Netherlands as elsewhere. Asta Nielsen became one of the first film stars. World-wide, the leading production company was Pathé, but its concentration on short films led to a progressive loss of ground to its competitors.

In the second period (1912-14) Desmet proceeded to buy films directly from production companies and their subsidiaries, or from the proprietors of international distribution companies. Film by the metre gave way more and more to film by the title. Brussels and Berlin were the centres of Desmet's operations. Between 1910 and 1912 Desmet was one of the most prominent Dutch distributors, alongside Anton Nögerath jun., Pathé and Johan Gildemeijer. After 1913, however, he was forced to yield ground to new competitors such as Wilhelmina. At the beginning of 1913 the 'quality' picture made its entry in the Netherlands, turning film into an exclusive piece of property, both for the renter and the cinema operator. The higher sums paid by cinema owners and renters for exclusive rights to these movies enabled producers to make more expensive films, build larger sets and promote the star system. This system was linked in turn to certain national cinema industries and genres — the Italian costume spectacles and diva films, for instance, and the German Autorenfilm. A 'twilight zone' existed for some years, in which new systems are to be found existing side by side with older ones. Short films continued to account for between a quarter and a half of a cinema programme throughout the second decade of the century, and were often not 'protected' by the monopoly system against exhibition by competitors. Desmet's story and the source material in his collection seem, in fact, to suggest that this period was in many respects multiform.

The impact of the First World War on Desmet's distribution and cinema business is treated in chapters 6 and 7. Where chapter 6 centres on Desmet's purchasing, clientele and competitors, chapter 7 focuses on his film presentations and cinemas and his new existence as financier and property owner. 1916 marks a clear break in Desmet's buying, so that chapter 6 ends with that year. However, this cut-off date was not so important for Desmet in his role as cinema operator, so that the latter topic has been placed in chapter 7. Here 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. The First World War brought about significant changes such as the inaccessibility of film material and suppliers, growing competition, increased dependence upon production companies and changes in the type of films on offer. Brussels disappeared as a European trade network, and Berlin was reduced to a national network. Business with London was difficult because of the sea blockade, the combatant nations' suspicion of Dutch wartime neutrality, European bureaucracy and the advances of the film trade in New York. The Netherlands were wedged between a country at war (Germany), a country under occupation (Belgium) and the sea. Considerable efforts had to be made to acquire films and equipment since domestic film production was by no means sufficient, even though the war had brought about a growth of production compared with the pre-war period. Distributors resorted to all kinds of strange
devices to obtain European and American films via London, but Desmet’s own contacts were concentrated in Brussels and Berlin rather than London.

The prospects for the European continent brought about the end of Desmet’s activities. The First World War caused the collapse of the French, Danish and Italian film industries, so that it was more or less impossible for him to turn to them. The Americans profited from the war in Europe and the weakened position of its competitors. The United States took over the international film trade during the war and became the biggest producer of films. The Americans were slow to gain a foothold in the Netherlands, possibly due to a lack of interest in a small country with a low sales potential, but perhaps also because of the lack of enthusiasm for American films in the Dutch press.

As far as American cinema is concerned, Desmet was a typical buyer of the films of the Motion Picture Patents Company—the old cartel of Edison and Vitagraph,—and of the output of the multitude of many small film companies characteristic of the American industry before the rise of Hollywood. During the First World War the latter made way for the new American film companies, the future great Hollywood studios, but Desmet baulked at their conditions which would certainly have turned him into their servant. His superior as a distributor of German films was Gildemeijer who in 1917 sold out to Ufa, the mighty new German conglomerate, which swallowed up many of the small firms with whom Desmet had previously done business. For Desmet Germany was finished as a supplier of films.

With the advance of new competitors such as Cinema Palace and Loet Barnstijn, who had no problems in acquiring enough new products, Desmet’s role in the film world of the Netherlands looked increasingly played out. He made one last attempt in 1915. When this failed to produce the desired results, and his suppliers faded from the scene themselves soon afterwards, he did not hesitate to act and switched to an existence in which he was no longer dependent on foreign countries, a fluctuating film market or a war.

The agenda of chapter 8 is no longer set by Desmet and his world, but by his films, his publicity material and his business archive. These were incorporated into the Film Museum in 1957 and together they became one of the museum’s most important collections. Once it had been catalogued, itemized and preserved the collection brought about a fundamental change in the writing of film history through the rediscovery of genres, filmmakers and national cinema cultures along with colour in silent films. It gained the museum a reputation in the field of film preservation, notably of early and coloured 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 concluding part of the investigation returns to the recurring themes of the chapters, such as Desmet’s personality, his career and his thoughts about the world of cinema; the infrastructure of cultural life; local and national differences and the problematic of sourcing. As a person Desmet seems to have been both frugal and generous. Money was his most important motivation but this did not preclude other impulses such as ‘showmanship’. Desmet was a pioneer of the permanent cinema venue and of film distribution, but was also one of the first to get out of the business. This made him a trendsetter and he was better at it than others of his generation. The line of his career rises steeply upwards, from fairground through film trade and cinema operation to real estate. In the eyes of the film business he was perhaps a failure but this is hardly the way he perceived himself. From the vantage point of the present we have to conclude that the cinema of Desmet’s time demanded quite different things from a film than the cinema
audiences of today. Take colour, for example, or attitudes towards titles. Quality of
technical effect was more important than quality of content. Films were praised for reasons
that had very little to do with our aesthetics.

The efficient and ramified infrastructure of the period just before the First World War was
essential to Desmet's film trade. The dismantling of this infrastructure by the First World
War underwrote its strength and indispensability. Modern communications and
transportation encouraged a flourishing European film trade in the years 1910-14, enabling
films from the whole of Europe and the United States to be exported to the Netherlands
without difficulty. Because of this the European film trade fits perfectly into Robertson's
framework for the period around the turn of the century which he calls 'the take-off phase
of global culture'. It is at the same time striking how much the European film world, and
notably Desmet's chain of cinemas, was shaped by family enterprises.

Local as well as inter-national differences show that structural changes cannot be
attributed indiscriminately to whole countries or parts of the world. Müller's analysis is
thus only partly valid for the Netherlands. All the important structural changes took place
in the Netherlands but they came generally later than elsewhere. This was among other
things the case with permanent cinemas and the breakthrough of the long film. The
Netherlands were spared the crisis in the German film world which was resolved first by
the introduction of the long film and then by the exclusive film. Amsterdam never became
an international film centre like Berlin in the years 1910-14. Dutch film production was also
much more smaller than Germany's despite the fact that both were countries in which film
exhibition was particularly well established. With the outbreak of war Berlin closed its
borders to international trade and concentrated on production, while the neutral
Netherlands continued to offer a varied international selection of films, albeit one
consisting of a growing number of German films. In this respect this study does not so
much challenge Müller's thesis as demonstrate that there were still important changes to
follow in the world of cinema after the year (1912) with which her study ends.

As far as the issue of sources is concerned, it is clear from Desmet's correspondence and
rental records that good reviews or intensive advertising campaigns did not always deliver
the desired commercial results. The daily press did not mention flops. The trade journals
might return to them fleetingly years later in comparisons with recent films, but more often
than not they would either damn them with faint praise or say nothing at all. The ideology
of the trade journals was not such as to allow it to enlarge on its own shortcomings as a
profession. So that although a film-historical enquiry based on the trade journals may
provide a good description of the ideology of the professional group (the way in which it
wished to be 'imaged') it does not tell us what happened to a movie at the box office. Here
the business archive is the more reliable source, because it was never intended to be used
as a source of public information. We must certainly approach Desmet's letters to suppliers
and clients with caution, however, and vice versa. Not everyone told the truth in his letters
and, as with the trade journals, ulterior motives can never be ruled out. Desmet's scrawled
marginalia sometimes give us more insight into his real motives than any of the official
letters and accounts.