Notes

Infrastructure, open system and the take-off phase. Jean Desmet as a case for early distribution in the Netherlands

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At the 2004 Domitor conference on distribution, my book Jean Desmet and the Early Dutch Film Trade came up in several papers.1 The idea of film distribution as a missing link, proposed in my introduction, was taken up by several researchers, sometimes even in order to prove the contrary. The book popped up again and again, sometimes seeming an obligatory mentioning (Delendam Carthaginem...), sometimes misquoted. The lack of large competitive business archives and the lack of inventory of the existing ones proved to be two reasons for neglect in the field, but were in themselves not sufficient enough. It is clear that distribution seems to lack the glamour or adventure associated with production or the social studies approach connected with reception, though I tried to indicate in my book that both are there in film distribution. It forces researchers to acknowledge that the money factor is simply an inherent aspect of the film world, whether you like it or not. In any case, it proved that a great need for research on early film distribution exists and that it is a shame that we had to wait until the Summer of 2004 to have such an intense conference on the very subject. Within the following pages, it is impossible to resume the extensive work that went into my book, which was based on a PhD, on years of academic research thus, and I therefore cannot but refer to my publication on Jean Desmet for further reading.

The last machine
One aspect that felt absent in the first days of the conference was the very concrete, material image of the film distribution world which Jean Desmet and the Desmet business archive can give us. Not only a concrete, vivid image of Desmet’s own activities, but also of the world in which he was operating. The Desmet archive permits you to observe the European network of 1910 through the eyes of a film distributor. In Richard Curson Smith’s and Ian Christie’s fascinating Anglo-Dutch television documentary The Last Machine (1995), the train is considered the first machine of the 19th century and cinema the last machine. In my exposé, the link of trains with films is laid out again, through the concept of infrastructure. Thanks to a quickly expanding railway network, a new branch in film business could expand quickly: film distribution. One network enabled another, infrastructure in the literal sense brought about a cultural infrastructure, which was to last until well after the Second World War. Film
culture acquired a form and shape in the first two decades of the twentieth century. New categories such as film distribution and film exhibition entered the language. These sectors expanded and became highly professional. They bargained or engaged in power struggles with each other, as well as with other groups such as the authorities, the general public and the production companies.

Around 1910, Europe knew a very detailed and well-functioning network of railway lines, connecting the various countries and their main cities. On the eve of the First World War, it was very easy to transport films from one country to another, especially in the Northern and Western part of the European continent. Around 1910, cities such as Berlin, Brussels and London developed into centres of film trading where films from all countries, companies and genres could be acquired. The film trade blossomed into an efficient business sector by anticipating the weekly program changes at permanent cinemas. The offices of the various companies tended to be clustered together in the same city districts and were never far from a railway terminal or from the printing business. One of these distribution centres was for instance the Friedrichstrasse in Berlin, near the Bahnhof Friedrichstrasse. Business was transacted in the three business languages of English, French and German, and full advantage was taken of the modern technologies of telephone, telegraph and typewriter.

A small country with little national production such as the Netherlands benefited much from this situation. Most films had to come from other countries such as France, Italy, Denmark, Germany and Britain. When film distribution really started to take shape, that is around 1908–1914 when cinema openings boomed in the Netherlands, many became cinema owners, but just a handful of entrepreneurs stepped into the proverbial niche in the market. One of them was Jean Desmet, who was active as one of the first Dutch distributors around 1910–1914. Desmet had started out as a travelling cinema owner, had opened his first cinema in Rotterdam in 1909, soon to be followed by others, but in contrast to many of his fellow exhibitors he also stepped into the field of importing and renting films (Fig. 1).

Thanks to Desmet's vast business archive, but also thanks to his enormous remaining film stock of about 900 films and his great collection of publicity materials, we nowadays get a very close insight into the early years of Dutch film distribution, and indirectly also into European film distribution. On the details of his distribution, that is: both the international purchase and the (mostly) national rental side of it, I have written extensively over the last years in journals such as KinTop, and the outcome of it all was first my dissertation in 2000 and subsequently my book Jean Desmet and the Early Dutch Film Trade in 2003.

Desmet's story illustrates the international character of cinema around 1910 and the way in which the speed and scale of international forms of communication were laying the foundations of what can be seen as an early form of 'global culture'. Films from all nations could be sent all over the world with few problems. All you needed to do was adapt the dialogue titles to the language of the particular country concerned. It is a development that fits Roland Robertson's description of globalization. Robertson identifies five phases of increasing global concentration and complexity. The third of these phases, which he calls the take-off phase, occupies the period between the 1870s and the mid-1920s. These are years during which globalization begins to accelerate. The word 'accelerate' fits very well to our train metaphor here and indeed many films from Desmet's holdings display fast trains, cars, airplanes or even zeppelins. Desmet himself by the way was fascinated by fast deluxe cars and planes. Some of the most typical signs of the take-off phase are a rapid increase in the number of international companies and agencies, the growth of global forms of communication, the adoption of uniform international time zones, the development of worldwide competition and international prizes, and the development of universal norms of citizenship, law and human identity.

Thanks to this take-off phase, the infrastructure for film distribution was available and distribution could develop at rapid speed, though not without obstacles. As a matter of fact, there are several examples in my book which indicate exceptions to this general pattern. In 1909, Holland accepted a uniform clock-time (Fig. 2). The railways had exerted great pressure to get a similarly uniform time, although the end product still differed both from the rest of Europe and from the time they used in their own system.

The railway had already opted for Greenwich Mean Time in 1892, but at the last minute in 1909, the Dutch authorities settled for local Amsterdam time as the measure. This differed by half an hour from Greenwich Mean Time (which applied in Belgium) and from Central European Time (which applied in Germany). This system remained in operation until the Second World War when the German occupiers made an end to this absurd exceptional clock and henceforth we have Central European Time.

In 1910, the Netherlands too, along with the countries surrounding it, possessed a ramified and smoothly running railway network, with good and fast connections to other countries. Films could either be sent by post or put into the special luggage vans of international trains. There were five trains a day between Amsterdam and Berlin and back, and at least four (or more, if you changed trains) between Brussels and Amsterdam. The trip from Berlin to Amsterdam took eleven hours, and from Brussels-North to Amsterdam, three and a half hours; the latter is not so much longer
From 1910 to 1912, Jean Desmet started his distribution on a sort of second-hand basis. He bought complete programs of one-reelers that had had a run for a few weeks in Western-Germany. When Desmet was busy importing these programs, however, the feature-length film appeared on the European market and quickly urged film distributors to change policies, as soon as it was clear the long film was there to stay. Desmet switched from one German seller to another to obtain henceforth programs with one longer film in it. When in early 1912 his Dutch clients became more demanding, he even dropped his second supplier and switched over to direct purchase. That is, buying from production companies such as the German companies Messter, Eiko and Luna, but also buying from international distributors and resellers such as Louis Aubert in Paris, who sold films by the Italian Cines, the Anglo-American distributor M.P. Sales Agency which sold films by American companies such as Kalem and Lubin, or Nordic films, the German distribution branch of the Danish Nordisk.

All in all, the international film industry had become one huge mechanism parts of which all had to function synchronously to keep it moving. Desmet realized this in good time and made sure that his organization was up to scratch. His position in the film world had improved. By taking his films directly from production companies, and ordering his films by the title – instead of by the meter – he had acquired greater influence on the composition of cinema performances. From now on, he compiled his own programs. Sometimes Desmet went off to view and purchase movies himself, for instance in Berlin, but mostly German and Belgian agents would travel to show the film to local renters. This was common practice in neighbouring countries such as Germany, as Thompson has indicated in *Exporting Entertainment*.

**Müller**

Thompson's study, dating from 1985, marked out the terrain of an investigation of film distribution in Europe, but there was no extensive and detailed treatment of the subject for several years afterwards. The tide turned in 1994, happily for me, I might say, as that was the year I started my PhD on Desmet – with the publication of Cornina Müller's *Frische deutsche Kinematographie. Formale und wirtschaftliche Entwicklung der ersten 1907–12* (Early German Cinematography. Formal, Economic and Cultural Developments 1907–12). The striking feature of this book is Müller's thesis of an alternative periodisation of film history, which abandons the idea of a stylistic transition from a 'cinema of attractions' to a 'cinema of narrative integration' favoured by American film historians, and proposes the more prosaic scenario of a socio-economically determined passage from short to long films. 'It may be helpful', she says, 'to characterize the historical phases of film as determined simply by certain dominant film lengths, and to analyse representational and narrative changes on this basis'. Where the advent of the long feature was for e.g. Janet Staiger just one important force of change in the film world, Müller sees it as the principal agent of transformation. Staiger views the long film as an essentially technological issue, albeit one with economic consequences. For Müller, on the other hand, it is in the first instance an economic 'given' with socio-cultural implications.

Müller points out that cinema chains appeared at an early stage in Germany – there was talk of a 'cinema boom' in 1907 – and were accompanied by industrial concentration. Price wars, ever more frequent changes of program (sometimes thrice weekly) and the second-hand trade were beginning to ruin the whole business. This spiralling devaluation of the market reached a crisis point in 1907–09. The solution turned out to be the long film. The need arose for a specialized business sector capable of guaranteeing weekly or twice-weekly changes of program. The distribution industry
mushroomed into being, and a shift took place from selling to renting. It was only with the coming of these distributors that the renting of individual films got underway in Germany, bringing to an end the era of the autonomous short film.

To make the renting of individual films attractive, a system of sole rights for distributors was devised, under which a distributor could acquire exclusive rights in a given geographical area—a country or a province—for a stated period of time, which might be one or several years. The distributor could then assign part of his rights on a film to a cinema operator, conferring upon him the exclusive right of exhibition within a defined area—usually his own city—for a specified exhibition date, which might be that of a film's very first screening. This is the origin of the film premiere. Rapidly rising prices enabled producers to work with bigger budgets. The growing popularity of these 'sole-rights' or 'monopoly' films owed much to their image of exclusiveness, which the publicity surrounding them carefully cultivated by foregrounding and mythologizing the main actors. The star system was making advances. Names were becoming symbols. The new system justified increased admission prices. It called for luxurious surroundings. Motion-picture theatres were modelled on large dramatic theatres and opera houses. Film began to compete with established culture, seeking to legitimize itself by adapting its visual narrative forms to traditional dramatic structures, by accepting and applying censorship, by opening sumptuous theatres with fashionably dressed front-of-house staff and by getting itself talked about in the quality newspapers.

Comparing Holland with Germany and Belgium

The main outlines of the developments in the Netherlands coincide with those sketched for neighbouring Germany by Corinna Müller. However, there are also noticeable differences between the Dutch and German situations. All the important structural changes that Müller observes in Germany also took place in the Netherlands, although generally at a later date. This applies to the rise of permanent cinemas, the breakthrough of the long film and the introduction of the exclusives. The Netherlands was spared the crisis experienced by the German film world preceding the introduction of long films and exclusives, as the boom in permanent cinemas started later.

In 1910, Germany and the Netherlands were film-exhibiting rather than film-producing countries, which distinguished them from countries such as France and Italy. In Germany, however, there was talk of a rapidly growing film-production industry just before the outbreak of the First World War. In the Netherlands the proportion of Dutch films to the total number of films on offer in cinemas was negligible and would remain so, despite the presence of film companies such as Hollandia. From 1913 onwards, many German films found a ready market in the Netherlands and began to acquire a reputation as films of quality. This was particularly true of the exclusive films, which were often Prestigious literary dramas with well-known actors such as Albert Bassermann, or melodramas featuring early European stars such as Asta Nielsen and Henny Porten.

In 1911-12 with the exclusives, but apart from the Asta Nielsen craze, this development only began to work its way through to the Netherlands in 1913. Before that, the main attraction had been the Danish thrillers, which were sold outright to any buyer. During the First World War, foreign films slowly disappeared from the German 'Kinos', whereas international films remained on offer in the Netherlands. Another big difference was that the Asta Nielsen films were seen in Berlin's position as a major junction of the international film trade. Amsterdam has never enjoyed this position. It became just a national centre of film trade, largely after the establishment of the film exchange in 1916. The war actually stimulated film production in both countries, although Dutch output was on a much more modest scale. The permanent presence of films from abroad undoubtedly had a part in this. In this respect, my own research does not so much challenge Müller's work as indicate the very important changes that took place in cinema after 1912, the point at which her study breaks off.

A comparison with Belgium, the country's other neighbour, also reveals similarities. Belgian production was even more negligible than Dutch production in the second decade of the century and, like the Netherlands, Belgium was a net exhibitor of films with a strongly international orientation. But here too there were differences. To begin with, Belgium had a far more extensive film culture than the Netherlands. The Belgian lead was due partly to the Belgian economic boom. As Guido Convents stated in 1994:

![Fig. 3. Poster for the Asta Nielsen-film Heisses Blut (Deutsche Bioscop, 1911).](image)
This country in the heart of Europe was one of the richest and most densely populated industrial areas on the continent. The volume of imports required by the abundant Belgian cinemas was probably higher than that needed in the Netherlands. Brussels was situated closer to Paris, so that films could be brought in more quickly from the French market. But the Belgians also undoubtedly enjoyed better contacts with the London and Berlin trade, for in the Brussels of around 1912 it was possible to buy or rent the films of from all the most important international production companies. Agencies jointly catering to Belgium and the Netherlands could also be found there sometimes.

In the Summer of 1914, both the railway network and the film distribution network were abruptly ruptured, and for more than four years the Dutch had to obtain their films with great difficulty. The few French films that arrived—though they did—had to come through London which wasn’t easy because of the war at sea and other obstacles. The war probably caused Dutch distributors to shift their focus permanently from Brussels to London and Berlin. Subsequent developments, however, go beyond the scope of this article and of early film distribution.

The above mentioned indicates how useful and essential a transnational comparative approach is to research in early film distribution, in particular concerning cultural and transportional infrastructure, open and closed systems, and setting up an entire new sector of the cinema world.

Notes
1. Ivo Blom, Jean Desmet and the Early Dutch Film Trade (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003).
9. An in-depth analysis of the system of Desmet’s earliest distribution was done by my student Rixt Jonkman. Through her research as an intern at the Filmmuseum, she managed to raise interesting questions about systematic research into—and databases on—early cinema, in her case on early film distribution. See her contribution elsewhere in this volume.