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# Understanding Dutch Film Culture: A Comparative Approach

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***Abstract:*** *In terms of cinema attendance, the Netherlands has always differed from other European countries. During the first decade of permanent film exhibition—a crucial phase in cinema's development as a mass medium—the movies failed to gain a firm foothold in Dutch society. After a discussion of the prevailing explanations for the low provision of cinemas in the Netherlands, this article develops a comparative analytical framework to better assess the regional dynamics at work within Dutch film culture. In particular, it looks at cinemagoing in the industrialised countryside, combining a qualitative examination of the local social and cultural infrastructure with a quantitative analysis of census data. The agro-industrial North Eastern part of Groningen and the mining district in the South of Limburg are singled out because in both regions we witness a very high density of film venues, suggesting metropolitan patterns in cinema attendance.*

*It is doubtful if there is a country in Europe or, in the world, where the moving picture has less of a part in national life than in Holland. (United States Department of Commerce, 1922).*[1]

In terms of cinema attendance and number of movie theatres, the Netherlands has always been outside the mainstream of European film history. In the early twentieth century, when the rapid proliferation of permanent cinemas created a revolution in public entertainment, the Dutch were already lagging behind. By 1914, there were just over two hundred movie theatres in the Netherlands, which is a staggeringly low number for a population of circa six million.[2] In fact, to this day, the number of screens remains lower than in most parts of Western Europe. How can the restrained development of the Dutch cinema market be explained? To what extent was Dutch cinema culture hampered by the forces of pillarisation (*verzuiling*), the vertical segmentation of social life along religious and ideological lines that structured Dutch society well into the postwar period? Did the Dutch middle classes shun the cinema or not? Over the past decades, a growing number of film historians working on the Netherlands have addressed these and other related questions. As a result, we are now beginning to grasp the larger dynamics at work in Dutch film culture. In fact, it may be time to raise another "big question", that is, is the Dutch case indeed so exceptional? Recently, John Sedgwick, Clara Pafort-Overduin and Jaap Boter have suggested that the Dutch experience "differed in scale, but not in type" (Sedgwick et al. 1). My view is that it is too early to answer this question. We first need better to understand the significant geographical differences in cinema attendance within national borders, for instance between big cities, small towns and rural areas. Therefore, I propose a more systematic comparative approach focusing on regional patterns in moviegoing in the Netherlands to assess more precisely in what circumstances the cinema thrived or did not.

This article opens with a brief historical overview of the film exhibition market in the Netherlands, followed by a selective review of the existing literature on the peculiarities of Dutch cinema culture. The insights from the existing historiography provide the context for my analysis of moviegoing in two industrialised rural regions, the so-called peat district (*Veenkoloniën*) in the Protestant province of Groningen in the north and the mining district in the Catholic province of Limburg in the South. Both regions stood out for the high number of film exhibition outlets and cinema seats, suggesting a close resemblance with metropolitan patterns of cinema attendance.

## The Dutch Cinema Market

In the late 1890s, travelling showmen introduced the novelty of the moving pictures to large segments of the Dutch population. They toured the country with their mobile theatres during the fairground season (Spring–Fall), travelling from one fair (*kermis*) to another. During the winter season, some exhibitors would set up a semipermanent show in a concert hall, café-restaurant establishment or public meeting hall, typically in one of the larger provincial towns. Around 1900, moving pictures could also be enjoyed as part of mixed-bill, variety programmes. However, in the Netherlands, vaudeville theatres remained a geographically limited outlet for the new film medium as one only found them in Amsterdam, The Hague and Rotterdam. Moreover, in social terms, these establishments also had a limited reach because vaudeville shows were too expensive for the working classes (Blom 131). By contrast, the fairs attracted a much broader and more mixed public, although primarily coming from the lower echelons of society. Hence, the cinema gained the reputation of a *kermisvermaak* (a fairground entertainment), with negative connotations of lowbrow taste and working-class recreation, which the medium never managed to shed entirely.

Whereas most countries in Western Europe witnessed a boom in the construction of permanent cinemas from 1905 onwards, nothing on the same scale happened in the Netherlands. The first permanent cinema opened in 1906 but, in sharp contrast to neighbouring countries, the spread was very slow (Convents and Dibbets). By January 1908, the total number had only increased to seven permanent venues: Amsterdam (1), Rotterdam (2), The Hague (3) and Utrecht (1). Together these four cities had a population of 1.2 million people. By comparison, Brussels had almost fifty movie theatres for a population of circa 760,000. In the Netherlands, substantial growth of permanent cinemas only began in 1910. Initially, this new type of film exhibition remained a rather volatile and risky business and many newly opened movie theatres closed their doors within a year or two. This is not surprising considering that other "lowbrow sectors" in the entertainment industry were equally underdeveloped, in particular vaudeville and popular melodrama. From 1915 onwards, however, ticket sales for all kinds of commercial entertainment rapidly increased due to a combination of factors, notably a rise in youth wages, an influx of Belgian refugees, and a shortage of coal, which prompted the Dutch to seek entertainment outside their cold homes (van der Velden and Thissen). The growing popularity of moviegoing eventually led to a construction boom of picture palaces, although again on a Dutch scale and geographically restricted to the nation's largest cities.

For the film exhibition business, the increase in cinema attendance in the second half of the 1910s was a welcome change from the earlier years of permanent film exhibition. In retrospect, however, it was only a brief period of high profits. In the summer of 1921, a Dutch trade paper described the state of the film exhibition business as one of "generalized

malaise".[3] At first sight, this seemed to be a cyclical downturn as ticket sales went up again in 1922 and then stabilised at circa 25 million per year to increase again by 20% to 30 million between 1927 and 1930 (Dibbets, "Het bioscoopbedrijf" 245). However, a higher turnover did not necessarily mean a higher net profit. Figures for Amsterdam show that the increase in sales was not evenly distributed among all ranks: the sale of the better seats seemed to have reached saturation point as early as 1922. Put differently, the increase in volume came primarily from ticket sales for the cheaper seats on which exhibitors made less money. Demand for more expensive seats increased during the second half of the twenties, when many new cinemas opened their doors. However, during the prolonged economic recession of the 1930s, patrons switched again to cheaper seats (Sedgwick et al. 15).

Attendance not only varied across time periods, depending on changing economic conditions but also in geographical terms. There were very strong regional variations, in particular between the big cities and the rest of the country. During the interwar years, the three largest cities—Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague—accounted for approximately fifty per cent of the total ticket sales, whereas their combined population comprised just under a quarter of the Dutch population (Dibbets, "Het bioscoopbedrijf" 244; Sedgwick et al. 7). This meant that, on average, people living in these three cities went twice as often to the cinema as those in the rest of the country. A comparison of per capita spending on cinema tickets between the Netherlands and the U.K. by Sedgwick et al. revealed that the inhabitants of Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague spent as much on cinemagoing as the average Briton (9 and 16). However, to get the full picture, it is important to examine the extent to which the attendance figures for the main Dutch cities compare with cities of similar size in the U.K. Only such a detailed approach can offer us an insight into national and regional differences and similarities. In other words, we need to differentiate at least between metropolitan, small-town and rural contexts, and, where possible, to take the demographic profile of the potential audience into account.

| | 1930 | 1940 | 1950 | 1960 | 1970 | 1980 | 1990 | 2000 | 2010 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Netherlands | 3.8 | 4.5 | 6.4 | 4.9 | 1.9 | 1.8 | 1.0 | 1.4 | 1.7 |
| Belgium | 8 | 9 | 13.4 | 8.7 | 3.1 | 2.1 | 1.7 | 2.3 | 2.0 |
| U.K. | 20 | 22 | 27.8 | 9.6 | 3.5 | 1.8 | 1.5 | 2.4 | 2.7 |
| France | 7 | 8 | 8.9 | 7.8 | 3.6 | 3.3 | 2.2 | 2.8 | 3.4 |

**Table 1: Yearly cinema attendance per capita, 1930–2010 in selected European countries.**

Nevertheless, the average figures do make clear that the overall cinema attendance in the Netherlands remained much lower than in the U.K. and other countries in Western Europe. With a provision of one seat per 48 inhabitants in the 1930s, "the number of cinemas per capita in the Netherlands was the lowest in the developed world", according to Sedgwick et al. (2). By comparison, they found that in the United Kingdom the ratio was one seat per twelve people and in Belgium one seat per sixteen. The ambivalence of the Dutch towards the cinema resulted in an underdeveloped supply, as entrepreneurs were cautious about investing in new cinemas, especially large-capacity houses. A 1937 report on the Dutch film market by the Central Bureau of Statistics shows that the majority of the movie theatres that were built during the transition to sound cinema had fewer than 500 seats.[4] The limited seating capacity can partly be explained by the fact that many of these movie theatres were located in small towns and rural areas, but the fact that only 3 of the 89 new cinemas had more than a

thousand seats suggests that there was a more structural and widespread problem on the demand side. By contrast, in the U.K., more than half the movie theatres that opened in the early 1930s had a seating capacity of 1,000 or more (Sedgwick et al. 13). In sum, then, we can conclude that during the first decades of permanent film exhibition—a crucial phase in cinema's development as a mass medium—the movies failed to gain a firm foothold in Dutch society.

## Fun or Faith? Pillarisation and the Underdevelopment of Dutch Film Culture

In traditional historiography, the prevalent lack of interest of the Dutch in the movies (and theatrical amusements more generally) is usually explained by stressing the Calvinist nature of mainstream Dutch culture. In an article published in 2006, Karel Dibbets broke with this longstanding cliché of the Calvinistic heritage and presented his own thesis about the restrained development of the Dutch cinema market (Dibbets, "Taboe van Nederlandse Filmcultuur"). In his analysis, he foregrounds the forces of pillarisation; that is, the breakdown of Dutch society into Catholic, Protestant, socialist and liberal pillars. According to Dibbets, the low cinema attendance per capita resulted from the fact that the new film medium did not fit into the existing platforms of public life, which were painstakingly segregated along pillar lines. Each pillar had its own political parties, newspapers, social clubs and schools, for example, but attempts to set up pillar-specific infrastructures for the cinema failed. Dibbets also suggested that the expansion of the cinema was hampered by the Netherlands Cinema Alliance of film distributors and exhibitors (Nederlandse Bioscoop Bond/NBB), which operated more or less as a cartel. For instance, during the recession in the 1930s, the NBB prevented the opening of new cinemas and imposed minimum prices to prevent cutthroat competition (Sedgwick et al. 12). Dibbets's thesis gave the debate about Dutch exceptionalism an important impetus, not least because it made clear that a more fine-tuned analytical framework was needed to fully understand the particularities of Dutch cinema culture, especially its religious, class and spatial dynamics.

From the recent literature, I want to single out the research by Clara Pafort-Overduin, John Sedgwick and Jaap Boter, which combines quantitative and qualitative analysis to understand the forces that shaped film distribution and exhibition in the Netherlands during the 1930s and partly compares the Dutch case with the U.K. (Boter and Pafort; Pafort et al.; Sedgwick et al.). Their research reveals that a complex mixture of institutional, economic and cultural factors led to the low levels of film provision and consumption. In terms of regional dynamics, they demonstrate that in predominantly Protestant regions and towns, the development of film culture was curbed both on the supply and the demand sides. On one hand, local authorities would be inclined to impose restrictive measures upon film exhibitors since the official policies of the Protestant parties were directed towards curtailing cinemagoing. On the other hand, many Protestant citizens avoided cinematic entertainment of their own choice, especially when they belonged to an Orthodox congregation. The Orthodox churches (*Gereformeerden*) preserved the iconoclastic tradition of Dutch Calvinism and strongly opposed pictorial representations as well as theatrical performances and commercial entertainments in general. This pattern persisted well into the postwar period. A survey conducted in Amsterdam in the mid-1950s shows that residents with an Orthodox Protestant background went significantly less often to the movies than more moderate coreligionists (*Hervormden*), Catholics and respondents who were not affiliated with any denomination (Sedgwick et al. 26–7).

Because Protestants and Catholics were geographically clustered, cinema culture varied greatly across the different Dutch provinces (Knippenberg; Boter and Pafort). Two extremes can be highlighted: in the first half of the twentieth century, the overwhelmingly Catholic province of Limburg in the South had the highest density of cinemas, whereas one found hardly any movie theatres in the so-called Dutch Bible Belt, an area that stretches from the northern part of the province of Overijssel in the North-East of the Netherlands to the province of Zeeland in the South-West. Religion also explained local variations within the Protestant parts of the Netherlands. In a preliminary study of film culture in the predominantly Protestant north (see below), I used census data to determine the demographic profile of the potential audience in small towns in Groningen and Friesland. The first results strongly suggest that the cinema flourished in municipalities in which the Protestant population was highly fragmented but the moderate *Hervormden* constituted a small religious majority (25–30%) and formed political alliances with the Liberals. In these denominationally heterogeneous towns, the municipal authorities would not seek control over commercial entertainment on the basis of religious identity and moral concerns. On the other hand, when the orthodox Protestant minority—often a cluster of several smaller Orthodox congregations—was large enough to determine municipal politics, this had a negative impact upon the film exhibition business.

**Beyond Pillarisation: Class**

The historiography of Dutch society in the early twentieth century tends to focus on the impact of pillarisation. Class has been relatively under-researched as a deciding factor in everyday life, shaping sociocultural practices. Taking up the bourgeoisification debate, which defined much of the historiography on early American cinema, André van der Velden and I proposed to take class more seriously in the research on early Dutch cinema culture (Thissen and Van der Velden; Thissen et al.).

First, it should be noted that in the Netherlands the class issue can only be understood in relation to the compartmentalisation of Dutch society. From the perspective of class struggle, pillarisation was first and foremost a top-down hegemonic process imposed by the nation's bourgeois elite with the aim of structuring public life along mutually exclusive religious and ideological lines. Only the socialist pillar rallied its members on the basis of a common class interest. The other pillars were, so to speak, "vertically integrated" in socioeconomic terms. Catholic and Protestant leaders in particular sought to conceal class differences within their respective pillars, rallying their constituencies around a shared religious identity. Whereas the political and cultural elite maintained close and friendly contact, the lower classes were encouraged to organise their social lives exclusively within the pillar and keep apart from people who belonged to other pillars, thus reducing working-class agency outside the confines of the pillar (Lijphart). For instance, Catholic workers were prohibited from voting for the social democrats or joining socialist unions under the penalty of excommunication. Instead they were encouraged to become members of Catholic workmen's organisations (Van den Oord; Van Kolck).

A remarkable outcome of this Dutch version of bourgeois hegemony is the lack of a self-assured working-class popular culture and public sphere (in sharp contrast to England, for instance). The middle-class culture of domesticity and ensuing notions of respectability were deep-rooted in all strata of Dutch society, including the lower classes (Schuurman; Kloek). During the nineteenth century, the principles and practices of domesticity had developed into

a national ideology, largely blocking the revolution in commercial entertainment that took place elsewhere in Europe and that paved the way for the rise of the cinema as a mass medium. Dutch families typically spent their evenings in the domestic sphere, sitting around the stove. The "hearth" was the physical and ideological centre of the home. If the Dutch went out, it was primarily to visit relatives or friends or to participate in noncommercial, semiprivate entertainments such as amateur singing clubs, poetry societies and debating clubs. As Van der Velden points out:

> The exceptionally positive view on domesticity was accepted and internalized across the social formation, even by those who did not—or did not *primarily*—identify themselves as bourgeois. Modern-day orthodox Protestants, the Roman Catholic emancipation movement, or social-democratic workers and their organizations: whatever the differences and even strong political animosities between them, they shared some common ground in their adherence to the Dutch culture of domesticity—an adherence which they did not hesitate to translate into practical measures when these groups developed into the three most influential forces in Dutch politics and civil society during the early decades of the twentieth century. (261)

Sedgwick et al. (28–29) argue along similar lines that all pillars shared the same middle-class notion of homeliness, which discouraged commercial entertainment outside the home in favour of semiprivate recreations controlled by the pillars.

While there is no doubt that working-class leisure patterns were firmly contained by the hegemonic forces of pillarisation and the middle-class ideology of domesticity, this does not imply that the working-class audience was not a force at work in Dutch cinema culture. On the contrary, our hypothesis is that the working-class imago of the cinema contributed to its underdevelopment. In schematic terms, the argument goes as follows: large segments of the Dutch middle classes stayed away from the cinema or at least did not embrace the new entertainment like their counterparts in other countries because the social experience of the cinema did not conform to the established middle-class norms of respectability.

To test this hypothesis, we investigated the public discourse on picture palaces. It is widely acknowledged among film historians that the emergence of large, luxurious movie theatres played a key role in the bourgeoisification of cinemagoing in most European countries as well as in the United States. However, our research revealed that, in the Netherlands, this was not the case. As discussed elsewhere in more detail (Van der Velden and Thissen), the Dutch picture palaces failed to acquire more than a veneer of middle-class respectability. In the bourgeois press of the late 1910s and early 1920s, the new leisure culture that developed around picture palaces as well as in cabarets, dance halls and restaurants was repeatedly condemned as a symptom of a consumer culture getting out of hand. For instance, when the Tuschinski Theater in Amsterdam opened its doors in 1921, the lavish art-deco building was heavily criticised in the press for its "massive lack of taste".[5] Traditional bourgeois society was said to be falling apart in the face of the widespread democratisation of consumer spending. The most vehement criticisms were reserved for the vulgar and decadent lifestyle of the *nouveau riche* who had made their fortunes during the First World War through speculation and, rather than remaining behind the scenes, liked to show off their newly acquired fortunes in the public realm. These social climbers were not only highly visible in the newly opened picture palaces and other stylish entertainment venues but also helped to finance them. In his memoirs, the journalist Charles Cocheret summarised the prevalent feeling of the upper echelons of Dutch society about this societal transformation as

follows: “luxury was no longer the rightful domain of a small number of privileged people. War profiteers, swindlers, and shady business agents bought castles, manors and aristocratic titles. They built cinemas like cathedrals and harem-like dancing halls” (117).

There is little doubt that the repeated bourgeois bashing of commercial leisure and consumer culture hints at deeper anxieties about changing power relations between the classes. Within a decade, the introduction of the general vote and the rapidly expanding low-brow entertainment business in the context of the First World War had given rise to a new public sphere that potentially challenged the existing political, social and cultural order of Dutch pillarised society. In this context, the picture palaces epitomised at best the wrong kind of bourgeoisification, that is, the emergence of a new vulgar middle-class lifestyle that did not conform to the ideal of middle-class domesticity. Obviously, there may well have been a considerable gap between the bourgeois discourse on the cinema and the actual practice of middle-class audiences. Nonetheless, the fact that in public opinion the picture palaces, and indeed commercial cinema more generally, were relegated to the margins of middle-class respectability did not encourage cinema owners to make further investments in large and luxurious cinema buildings. Moreover, figures provided by the Central Bureau of Statistics in 1939 strongly suggest that the middle class did not attend the cinema as much as the film exhibitors had hoped they would when they built their movie theatres. Based upon a comparison between ticket availability and actual ticket sales in the seven largest cities in the Netherlands, the statistics show that occupancy rates decreased as the price increased. On average, about one third of the seats were occupied, but the contrasts between the different ranks are significant. Whereas 52.7% of the cheapest seats were occupied (seats up to 25 cent), this figure decreases to 20% for the most expensive seats (above 75 cents). In sum, the overcapacity in seats was highest for the best ranks.[6]

In response to our class hypothesis, Sedgwick et al. (33) countered that they did not find systematic evidence that the middle class did not take to cinema the same way in the Netherlands as in other European countries. They concluded on the basis of correlation statistics between the population per cinema seat and the voting outcomes of the 1933 general elections, that the correlation coefficients for the Social Democrats and the Liberals were statistically insignificant. However, considering that for the Catholics as well as the Protestants voting patterns were not determined by their class interest but defined by their religious identity, this comes as no surprise. On the other hand, using the 1939 report by the Central Bureau of Statistics, which shows that the attendance per capita and the average spending on cinemagoing per capita were lower in Rotterdam (the city we singled out in our case study) than in Amsterdam and The Hague, they conclude that “it may be the case that the middle class did not attend the cinema in Rotterdam, but did so in the other two cities, or that the middle class in Rotterdam was a much smaller section of the population” (Sedgwick et al. 33). The latter is indeed the case. In the late nineteenth century, as Rotterdam developed from a merchant town into an industrial port city, the middle and upper classes began to move out of town. As a result, Rotterdam became a working-class city (*werkstad*), which it remains to the present day (Van der Laar). The outward movement of the middle class helps to explain why the statistics for Rotterdam show an even sharper difference in occupancy rates between the cheapest seats (43%) and the most expensive ones (16%). The Hague shows a similar picture, although the best seats sold slightly better than in Rotterdam. In Amsterdam, by contrast, the cheapest seats had an occupancy rate of 61%, while on average 28% of the seats costing 75 cents or more were occupied—both figures are far higher than the average of the 7 largest cities combined. A more detailed examination of the available statistics, including an

analysis of the actual number of seats per rank in each city, may well reveal that Amsterdam rather than Rotterdam was the exception.

## At the Intersection of Class and Religion: Film Culture in the Industrialised Countryside

In an effort to understand how both class and religion shaped patterns of cinemagoing in the Netherlands, I propose to shift the focus of the research agenda to understanding film culture in small towns and the (industrialised) countryside. For my pilot study, I singled out two regions characterised by a large working-class population but with a very different religious make-up: the agro-industrial eastern part of the province of Groningen, a predominantly Protestant region, and the mining district in the Catholic province of Limburg. In both regions the density and distribution of film exhibition outlets in the 1920s and 1930s indicate a level of interest in the cinema that was far above the national average, approaching metropolitan levels.

Before looking at the local film culture, let me first give a succinct description of the region. The eastern part of the province of Groningen was known for sharp social contrasts. A small number of rich farmers and factory owners constituted the local elite, which was known for its liberal political ideals. In a rather un-Calvinist fashion, they showed off their wealth by building large estates in the town centres and alongside the main connecting roads in the area. By contrast, the large working-class population of (day) labourers lived in great if not extreme poverty in small cottages or in row houses especially built for the working classes. Until the early 1900s, most workers were employed on the farms or as peat cutters in the high moors, which had been exploited since the 17$^{th}$ century as a source of cheap fuel (turf). Initially most of the peat was cut by hand, but like farm work, peat cutting was increasingly done by mechanical means in the early twentieth century. As a result, job opportunities declined, but this was partly compensated for by a growing demand for factory workers in the emerging agro-industry (notably sugar beet refineries, strawboard factories, and potato flower factories) and in shipbuilding, which developed along the canals that had been dug to facilitate the large-scale exploitation of peat. The area was predominantly Protestant in religious terms and progressive in political terms, either liberal or socialist depending on class.

Cinema culture in this part of Groningen has been largely ignored by Dutch film historians.[7] The main reason for this is that there were very few regular movie theatres, so it seems at first sight that the region followed the Bible-Belt pattern. But this is not the case. In most municipalities, the policy regarding commercial entertainment was marked by a tolerant "laissez-faire" attitude. The cinema could thrive as long as film exhibitors respected local building codes and fire regulations stipulated to guarantee the physical safety of the public. Consequently, during the 1910s and 1920s a lively film culture developed in towns like Winschoten, Stadskanaal, Musselkanaal and Veendam in multipurpose establishments. These venues typically comprised a café-restaurant-hotel and a large hall with a seating capacity ranging anywhere between 200 and 1000 seats (Figure 1).

In Winschoten, the largest town in the area, the provision of cinema seats was one seat for 14 persons, compared to the national average of one seat for 48 inhabitants. By the 1920s, two venues competed with each other: the Scala Theater, a purpose-built cinema operated by a local chain, and Hotel Dommering (formerly Wisseman), which offered a wide range of entertainments on its premises and included two large halls in addition to a billiard room, a

reading room and a café-restaurant. Its main auditorium had been built in 1899 for theatrical performances but was equipped for film projection as early as 1911 (Figure 2).[8]




**Figure 1: Hotel Dommering, Winschoten, 1958. Source: www.nazatendevries.tk**

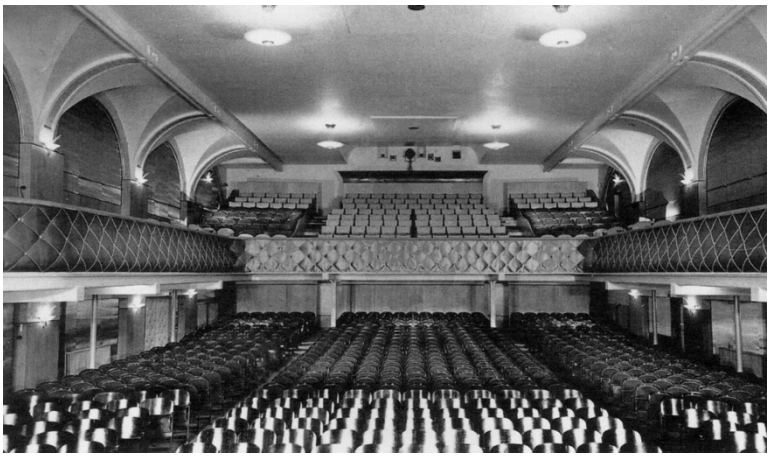


**Figure 2: Hotel Dommering, interior main auditorium, date unknown. Source: www.nazatendevries.tk**

The screenings in these multipurpose buildings were typically organised by independent film exhibitors who sublet and operated the main auditorium commercially like semipermanent theatres on specific days of the week. Initially, they travelled with both their projector and the reels, but by the early sound era, most multipurpose halls had permanent projection booths and only the films circulated between these venues. Screenings were usually held on Friday night, Saturday and Sunday matinee and evening, and in the winter often also on Monday and Wednesday evenings. This interrupted pattern of film exhibition was quite common outside the major cities, not just in the Protestant north but also in the rest of the Netherlands.

If we look at the demographic make-up of the population (1930 census), three factors seem to have positively influenced the business opportunities for film exhibitors and the demand for cinema entertainment in eastern Groningen. First, among the Protestant population, those who belonged to the moderate Reformed Church (*Hervormden*) were in the majority. The rest of the religious landscape was highly fragmented with many very strict

Protestant congregations (for instance, Stadskanaal with 7,000 inhabitants had over 15 Protestant churches), some Catholics, and some Jews. In addition, the census reveals a very high rate of secularisation—more than twice the national average (mostly these were former *Hervormden*) (Knippenberg 230). Second, a considerable part of the working-class population consisted of recent migrants from other parts of the Netherlands. They were less socially bound to the local community and probably therefore less sensitive to pressure from local Church authorities. Finally, voting patterns reflected the socioeconomic profile of the population and the tendency towards secularisation with the social democratic party and the progressive liberals dominating local politics.

That said, in some municipalities in eastern Groningen, we find no motion picture outlets at all, similar to the typical small-town situation in the Protestant Bible Belt. Looking at census data and results of local elections, it appears that the cinema did not play a role in public life when Orthodox Protestants dominated local politics. In such cases, the authorities either refused to give a licence at all or they prohibited Sunday screenings—the best day of the week at the box-office. Since film's commercial viability depended very much on the attitude of the municipal authorities, this may explain why film exhibitors in eastern Groningen did not invest in permanent movie theatres: the outcome of the elections could ruin their business almost overnight. By operating in existing halls and continuing the travelling cinema mode of the early days (except that only the films travelled), they reduced the risk associated with doing business in an area in which a considerable minority of the population was strongly opposed to the film medium.

## The Catholic Mining District

My second example concerns the mining district in the South of Limburg. In this case, I greatly benefit from the extensive research by Thunnis van Oort on this region (notably Van Oort, *Film en het modern leven*). The province of Limburg, where 98% of the inhabitants were Roman Catholic, had the highest density of cinemas in the Netherlands. Considering the popularity of the movies, it is not surprising that the leadership of the Catholic pillar was concerned about the impact of moviegoing and sought to regulate the participation of Catholics strictly, especially among the lower classes, in the emerging film culture. Initially, the ambition of the Catholic elite was to set up a national network of strictly Catholic movie theatres, which would only show the films that were formally approved by the Church. However, attempts to set up such a noncommercial network of Catholic cinemas failed. The main reason was that in the early 1920s this strategy was successfully blocked by the national organisation of cinema owners and film distributors (NBB) by means of a film boycott. Thereafter, the Catholic pillar's strategy regarding film exhibition shifted from full control to a containment of the "moving picture danger" by censorship, taxation and age restrictions. Notwithstanding these hegemonic efforts, Van Oort found that the regulatory response to the cinema varied considerably within the Catholic milieu in Limburg, leading to strong local differences in film diffusion and attendance within this denominationally homogenous province.

In Roermond (17,000 inhabitants), for instance, there was an underprovision of cinema entertainment compared to the average for Limburg as a whole. In the interwar years, the city only had two movie theatres with a combined seating capacity of 1,165. In other words, the population per cinema seat was approximately 14 persons (like in Winschoten)—much better than the national average (48)—but it should be noted that these cinemas did not offer daily

screenings. That Roermond was the seat of the bishop probably helps to explain to a large extent this "poor film culture" for a Catholic city (Van Oort, "Bioscooparmoede"). In sharp contrast, the mining town of Hoensbroek had three cinemas with a total seating of 2,260 (5.7 inhabitants per seat) and all three offered daily screenings. Like in the industrialised eastern Groningen region, the presence of a large working-class population seemed to have fuelled the film exhibition business in the mining district. About 50% of the movie theatres in Limburg were situated in this region. Another striking parallel with the agro-industrial north was that in the mining towns moviegoing was not frustrated by the Church or by the municipality. The local authorities—from the mayor to the priest—took a much more tolerant attitude toward the cinema than in other parts of Limburg and even openly challenged the cautious attitude toward the film medium as propagated by the political leadership of the Catholic pillar. At a local level, they sought to collaborate with film exhibitors rather than frustrate their activities. According to Van Oort, this was because the movies were considered a less harmful pastime than a visit to the saloon or participation in the socialist labour movement (*Film en het moderne leven*, 94–113). Moreover, as in the Groningen peat district, there was a substantial population of recent migrants. In the case of the coal miners in Limburg, the newcomers were in fact in the majority. Hoensbroek was a boom town: its population increased from 1,500 in 1910 to 13,000 in 1925. Not only were its new inhabitants mostly men but many came from across the borders, especially from Germany (Ruhr) and from Silesia, Poland and Italy. Typically the "imported" mine workers shared the Catholic background of the indigenous Hoensbroekers but like the migrant workers in the industrialised Groningen, they probably were less sensitive to pressure from the local clergy. Moreover, the incomes of miners were relatively high, which also made them more independent from local religious authorities as they did not have to rely on Church charity.

## Conclusion

By focusing on the regional dynamics of Dutch film culture, I have sought to determine under what socioeconomic and cultural conditions cinema attendance outside the big cities could approach or even exceed metropolitan levels. In the industrialised Protestant countryside, the cinema thrived in small-town communities that were relatively heterogeneous in denominational make-up and where the local authorities did not seek to regulate commercial entertainment on ideological grounds. Further research is necessary to investigate if in this context, which resembles the experience of "classical" metropolitan modernity, the cinema was more explicitly class-oriented and thus functioned as an alternative to the pillarised public sphere of Dutch society. What we see in the mining district is a specific Catholic version of modernity. Consistent with the Catholic pillar's official policy on the film medium, the cinema was accepted as a commercial entertainment, but its functioning as an alternative public sphere was strictly regulated and contained to ensure that cinemagoing did not undermine the hegemony of the Roman Catholic Church in particular, and the principle of pillarisation more generally. However, on the local level, the Church and other Catholic authorities remained flexible, adapting to local conditions to ensure that religion rather than class remained the primary factor for social bonding among Catholic workers.

The articles in this special issue are committed to new approaches in film and cinema history. With my contribution I hope to have demonstrated the benefits of a comparative approach that moves beyond the microhistorical case study and the advantages of a joint research agenda, structured around a central set of questions. Engagement with other disciplines and collaborative efforts are vital if we are to understand cinema's position in the

cultural and social landscape and its contribution to "national life", even in a country where most people went only rarely to the movies.

## Notes

[1] Market report by George E. Anderson, Consul General in Rotterdam, quoted in *The Film Daily*, 22 April 1922: 3.

[2] Unless otherwise noted, statistics about the Netherlands are based upon information from the Cinema Context Database. This online reference source provides basic information about cinemas, films, people, companies and programmes in the Netherlands. It allows researchers to analyse the available data and to study patterns and networks with film distribution and exhibition (www.cinemacontext.nl).

[3] *Kunst en Amusement*, 25 June 1921.

[4] Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, *Statistiek van het Bioscoopwezen 1937, waarin mede opgenomen gegevens omtrent de filmkeuring* (Den Haag, 1938). See also the 1938 edition of this annual report about the film exhibition business.

[5] Argus, 'Bioscopen... van binnen en van buiten', *De Groene Amsterdammer,* 20 August 1921. See also *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*, 29 October 1921.

[6] Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, *Statistiek van het Bioscoopwezen* 1939, tables 18 and 19.

[7] There is, however, a decent overview compiled by local amateur historian Jan Mooibroek, *Bewegende beelden - witte doeken* (1998). I used this publication for my case study in addition to census data, newspapers and the standard historiography on the region.

[8] Films were shown at Hotel Dommering until 1967 when the main auditorium burned down. The Scala Theater closed in 1991, when its owner opened the Hollywood, a brand-new multi-screen cinema.

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