

## Jean Desmet and the early Dutch film trade

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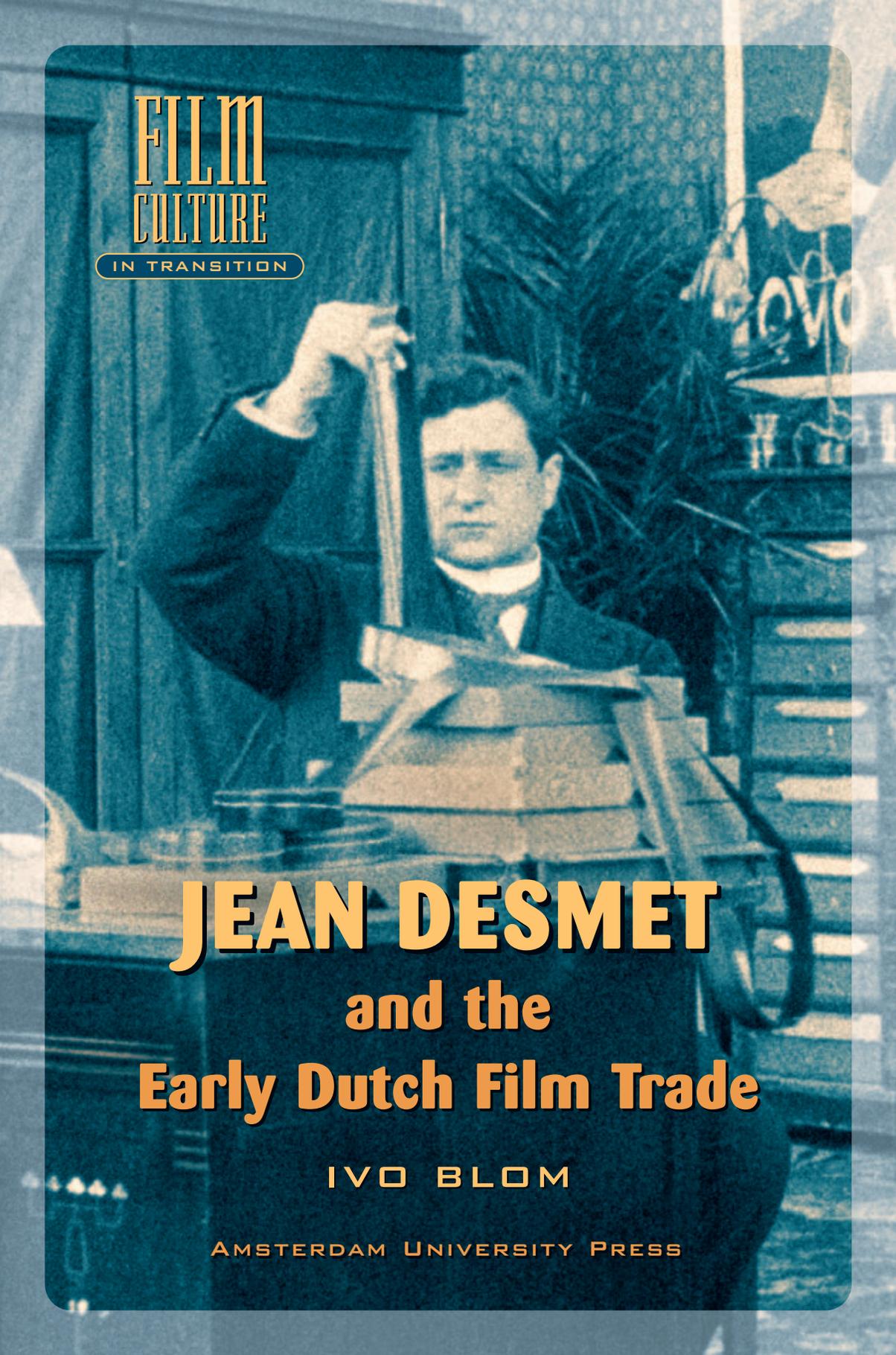
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FILM  
CULTURE

IN TRANSITION

**JEAN DESMET**  
and the  
**Early Dutch Film Trade**

IVO BLOM

AMSTERDAM UNIVERSITY PRESS

## Jean Desmet and the Early Dutch Film Trade



Jean Desmet c.1915

**Jean Desmet  
and the Early Dutch Film Trade**

*Ivo Blom*

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Film history, as every discipline, is somewhat like a gang of vandals. Once a territory has been dug up, the barbarians (in this case ourselves) start looking for another area to ravage. The good thing is that the results of this sudden, violent and creative event were spectacular. Once left alone, the Desmet Collection will probably be able to deliver other ideas and unexpected directions of research we have never thought of. But it will take time, and maybe a little less obsession for discovering the new at any cost.

*Paolo Cherchi Usai to the author, 23 December 1995*



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## Preface

It's fighting a losing battle. Even if I were able to decipher all the handwriting, even if I had a decent amount of Dutch and European history at my fingertips, I would still be looking through the keyhole of an otherwise sealed door, my vision confined to what the impassive keyhole deigned to show or conceal. Each of these letters is a keyhole like this.<sup>1</sup>

Some writers may have to struggle with a lack of source material, but the principal source of this book – the business archive of Jean Desmet – is a wall of written paper. The keyhole metaphor is entirely appropriate, although there are, properly speaking, many keyholes. I looked in on Desmet himself, but also on his customers, suppliers and competitors. Hundreds of different stories, sometimes contradicting each other, yet all revealing the complexity of (film) history. In a Pathé farce called *UN COUP D'OEIL PAR ÉTAGE* (1904), a concierge peeps through the keyholes on each floor of his building and discovers a fire on the top floor. We come upon signs of damage by fire and water in Desmet's business archive as well. In 1938, a fire broke out at the top of the *Cinema Parisien*, his cinema in Amsterdam. Both Desmet's films and his business records were very nearly lost, and this book would never have been written.

My book is a condensed and reworked version of a dissertation, originally written in Dutch, which was awarded a doctorate by the University of Amsterdam in March 2000. The original idea of the study goes back to the end of the 1980s. In 1988 Nelly Voorhuis and I were organising a festival of Italian cinema before 1945 entitled 'Il primo cinema italiano 1905-1945', which marked my introduction to early Italian film, to the *Giornate del Cinema Muto* at Pordenone, Italy, and to the international community of film historians. I became fascinated by the 'mainstream cinema' of the decade 1910-1920. It was only then that I became properly acquainted with the Desmet Collection, and we selected several of Desmet's Italian films for the festival programme. Together with the film historian and festival programmer Paolo Cherchi Usai, I looked at unrestored Desmet films at the Netherlands Film-museum's auxiliary branch in Overveen. It was the first time I had seen nitrate films, with their bright monochrome tinting, or caught the stale odour of decomposing nitrate stock. I soon got used to this smell as it happened, for a month later I joined the archive staff at Overveen, where I spent the next five

years looking at nitrate films. The task of conducting foreign visitors around the museum gave me the opportunity of viewing a large part of the Desmet Collection.

My long contact with the films and my aesthetic fascination with them made me curious about the story behind them. A limited account of Desmet and his world of film had already appeared in articles by Frank van der Maden and myself, but the full tale still remained to be told. The source at my disposal was truly unique: that 'wall of paper' or the Desmet Archive. Together with the films and publicity materials of the Desmet Collection, the archive forms the remains of a career in films. It was a career that lasted just ten years, yet the changes that took place during those particular ten years were enormous. The archive enables us to form a sharp and finely detailed image of both Desmet's career and the world of early cinema by which he was surrounded. Invoices, rental books, account books, sales lists, customs letters and telegrams show both the high level of professionalism of the pioneers of Dutch distribution and the hectic nature of the world within which they were operating. It is above all the correspondence with film companies, foreign middlemen and Dutch cinema owners that reveals the film scene of those years at its most intense. Reading this correspondence, the reader accompanies a cinema operator who watches his theatre going downhill as he struggles to keep going, or a distributive trader who sees his customers abandoning him for competitors with more attractive film offerings. Besides these misfortunes, we can also follow the rise of new cinema exhibitors, traders and film production companies. But most of all, we are absorbing the perspective of the Dutch film distributor. What were Jean Desmet's priorities? What was relevant and what wasn't? What changed for him in that short period of a decade? And what were the tokens of those changes? The Desmet Collection opens onto all kinds of stories: the story of cinemas such as the Amsterdam Cinema Parisien, a Desmet biography, a history of style, a history of representation. My own choice has fallen on the history of a business combined with a history of film, and my introduction will elaborate on this.

Both in the Netherlands and abroad I have received a great deal of help with the preparation of this book and I wish to record my thanks to a large number of people.

For the period during which I was preparing my material for submission as a doctoral dissertation, I would like to express my thanks to the University of Amsterdam, and particularly to Karel Dibbets for his invariably constructive and stimulating comments on the text. Our long and speculative conversations on how and why Desmet and his film world took the particular shape they did greatly helped to clarify Desmet's story. I also wish to thank my two

doctoral supervisors, Professor Thomas Elsaesser and Professor Evert van Uiter; the research school Huizinga Instituut and the staff and assistants of the Department of Film and Television Studies. Three travel bursaries from the Nederlands Instituut voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (NWO), supplemented by financial assistance from the Faculty of Arts, enabled me to make research trips to Berlin, Frankfurt, Koblenz, Brussels, Paris and London. Mustafa Özen made a database of Desmet's acquisitions registers during his period as an intern at the Filmmuseum of which I have made grateful use.

Special thanks are due naturally to the Netherlands Filmmuseum, to its present director Rien Hagen, and to former director Hoos Blotkamp, who gave me the opportunity of embarking on this study. Both encouraged my work and were generous with their help in enabling me to complete and publish it. I would also like to thank the staff who assisted me during the research, especially Rommy Albers for his information on travelling cinemas in the Netherlands and film exhibition in Amsterdam. Thanks to Arja Grandia; to the non-film departmental staff, particularly Jan-Hein Bal, Soeluh van de Berg and Piet Derks; to the staff in Overveen, especially Giovanna Fossati, Mark-Paul Meijer and Ole Schepp; and to the museum's library staff, who prepared videotapes for me and fetched countless boxes from the cellars and vaults. Thanks also to Bastiaan Anink, Don Bierman, Peter Delpout, Daan Hertogs, Paul Kusters, Bregtje Lameris, Frank van der Maden, Henk de Smidt and Peter Westervoorde, all formerly of the museum staff, and to former directors the late Jan de Vaal and Frans Maks. Thanks finally to local and regional archives in Amsterdam, Den Bosch, Leiden and Rotterdam.

The two research seminars organised by the Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies at the University of Utrecht and the Department of Film and Television at the University of Amsterdam were a great source of stimulation. In this setting, I was able to present my work and develop and exchange ideas, especially in the area of early film and film in the Netherlands but also at the more general level of theory and history. William Uricchio, Frank Kessler, Eva Warth and Thomas Elsaesser were particularly exciting discussion leaders, but I also owe much to other members of these seminars. I should also like to thank the University of Utrecht for access to dissertations on local Dutch film history and for digital information on Dutch film journals.

In the Netherlands, I am particularly indebted to Jenny Reynaerts for inspirational discussions of our respective dissertations; to Sabine Lenk for a look at her material on the German film world and the First World War; to Rob Du Mée for his material on Nöggerath father and son; to Bernadine van Royen-Fontaine, and the late Lo Schuring for their reminiscences of 'film-going in the 1910s' and to the late Geoffrey Donaldson for generous access to

his archive. Thanks also to Ansje van Beusekom and the Dutch Union of Cinema Owners and Film Distributors (NFC).

Finally, I have pleasure in acknowledging the tireless and generous support of Jean Desmet's granddaughter, Ilse Hughan. The warmth and openness with which she has received and helped me over the years has made my work that much easier, more pleasurable and more engrossing. Ilse introduced me to descendants of Jean's brother, Theo, and of their sister, Rosine. She placed whole boxes of family archive material at my disposal and regaled me with her own memories of her grandfather, her mother and the Dutch film world.

Film historians and archives in other countries helped me to situate Desmet in an international context. For more than ten years, Paolo Cherchi Usai has impressed upon me the vital importance and value of the Desmet Collection. I would like also to thank Richard Abel for regular discussion of my approach to the material, and for reading and commenting on the chapters of my dissertation; André Gaudreault for his support as former chairman of the Domitor Society; Roland Cosandey for fruitful conversations on film collections, versions of films and film-historical research; Guido Convents for information on Belgium; Aldo Bernardini and Vittorio Martinelli for information on Italy and Italian film; Tony Fletcher for details of the British film trade; Michael Wedel, 'my man in Berlin'; Heide Schlüpmann for reading 'abstracts' and proposals; Martin Loiperdinger for invaluable information and stimulating dialogues; and the organisers of the Giornate del Cinema Muto in Pordenone/Sacile and the Cinema Ritrovato in Bologna.

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Thompson and Corinna Müller for the inspirational challenge of their books to my own and for their readiness to discuss them with me.

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## Abbreviations

AIH	Archive Ilse Hughan, Amsterdam
BA	Bundes-Archiv
B&W	Burgemeester & Wethouders (Mayor and Aldermen = Municipal Executive)
DA	Desmet Archive (Netherlands Film Museum), Amsterdam
GAA	Gemeentearchief (Municipal Archive) Amsterdam
GAD	Gemeentearchief (Municipal Archive) Dordrecht
GADL	Gemeentearchief (Municipal Archive) Delft
GADV	Gemeentearchief (Municipal Archive) Deventer
GAR	Gemeentearchief (Municipal Archive) Rotterdam
GARM	Gemeentearchief (Municipal Archive) Roermond
GAW	Gemeentearchief (Municipal Archive) Wageningen
NAA	Nederlands Audiovisueel Archief (Dutch Audiovisual Archive), Hilversum
NFM	Netherlands Film Museum, Amsterdam
SDB	Stadsarchief (City Archive) Den Bosch
STBC	Streekarchivariaat (Regional Archive) Tiel-Buren-Culemborg

## Unidentified Films

Identified film titles are printed in small capitals with the English release titles in brackets. Asterisks indicate literal translations of titles for which English titles are unavailable. Unidentified Dutch and German release titles are printed in italics with literal English translations in brackets.

## Historical Currencies

Unless otherwise indicated, conversions are based on exchange rates in the year 2000. In 2000, 1 guilder = *c.* 45 eurocents; 1 Belgian franc = *c.* 2.5 eurocents. With the exception of the euro, numbers have been rounded up to the nearest whole. These figures are merely approximate and should be treated with caution. The table indicates the factor by which a given historical sum should be multiplied in order to work out its value in 2000.

	<i>Guilders (f)/ €</i>		<i>French francs (Ffrs.)* / €</i>		<i>Belgian francs (FRS.) / €</i>		<i>German marks (Mk) / €</i>	<i>British pounds (£)</i>	<i>American dollars (\$)</i>
1910	× 20	× 0.9	× 20	× 3.0	–	–	–	× 60	× 18
1912	× 20	× 0.9	× 17	× 2.6	–	–	–	× 59	× 18
1914	× 18	× 0.8	× 17	× 2.6	× 173	× 4.3	–	× 52	× 17
1916	× 15	× 0.7	× 13	× 2.0	–	–	–	× 36	× 16
1918	× 12	× 0.5	× 8	× 1.3	–	–	–	× 24	× 11
1920	× 10	× 0.4	× 5	× 0.7	× 38	× 0.9	–	× 23	× 9

\* The conversion of the French franc is based on 1998 exchange rates; the franc-Euro conversion is based on the 1999 rate. In 1999, 1 French franc = 6,5 eurocents.



# Introduction

In 1986, the Italian diva film entitled *FIOR DI MALE* (*FLOWER OF EVIL\**, Cines 1915) was shown at the Giornate del Cinema Muto in Pordenone. It was a revelation. Paolo Cherchi Usai, the festival's organiser and head curator of film at George Eastman House in Rochester, recalls the event:

It was a declaration of war against the assumption that Italian cinema of the silent period was a known entity. It was the proof that much, much more could be seen and told about it. It was an indictment of the false representation and false consciousness of film history as a crystallized set of periodizations. [...] It was nice to see the variety in the reaction of the audience: from sheer enthusiasm, to dismay for all the time we have lost following the ideology of the 'great work', to the diffidence and the sheer dismissal of those who certainly didn't want to have their theories and prejudices affected by the new evidence.<sup>1</sup>

The established 'canon' of classic films and directors was sent into free fall by the screening of a film which, up to that moment, had simply been ignored by film history. Historians of Italian cinema, who had thought that there were no further surprises in store, were compelled to take another look at both their discipline and its prevailing paradigms.

Nor was this all. Historians and film archivists were also intrigued by the source of the film. For it turned out to be part of a private collection, consisting of almost 900 films, which had made its way into the Netherlands Film Museum in Amsterdam. Besides *FIOR DI MALE*, the Dutch collection contained hundreds of films no longer available in their countries of origin and unseen anywhere since completing their normal period of release. The presentation at Pordenone attracted the attention of European and American curators who came to the Netherlands to identify these films and to select them for festivals and regular exhibition. The films in the Desmet Collection offered an excellent impression of the sheer abundance of films available for ordinary, everyday exhibition in the period between 1907 and 1916.

Festival screenings and retrospectives made an immediate impact, and the Desmet films played an important role in the rewriting of film history. They were of vital importance to dissertations and publications on early German and Italian cinema, forgotten or undervalued film companies such as Vita-

graph and *Éclair*, early non-fiction films, genres such as the early western, and early colour films. The reputation of the Desmet Collection was sealed a year after the showing of *FIOR DI MALE* by the screening of several Vitagraph movies in preserved colour prints. Eileen Bowser, formerly film curator at the New York Museum of Modern Art, remarked:

The first really large showing was at Pordenone in 1987, and luckily I was present for that. It was a great occasion: the quality of the prints was high. This collection of course had a special value because it is from a period when so few films survived, and suddenly gaps began to fill up. It was not until Pordenone that I began to realise what an incredible and wonderful collection the Desmet is.[...] We certainly began to have a new idea of the importance of the Vitagraph production after the Desmet Collection began to become accessible. Only a small number of Vitagraphs were available in the United States prior to that.<sup>2</sup>

*FIOR DI MALE* was a damaging commentary on the obsolescence of the film canon and spearheaded the international discovery of the Desmet Collection. The quality of the print restoration was also praised. It showed that a silent film did not have to be a greying black and white copy, riddled with tram-lines, 'rain' and scratches, and printed on sound-film stock. It could be a composition of luminous and stable images: an artefact alive with colour, whether tinted, dye-toned or coloured in. Colour films were evidently not a rarity. Indeed, it has been estimated that about eighty percent of the films produced in the second decade of the century were colour-processed in one way or another. The archival practice of transferring old nitrate films onto black and white acetate-film stock gave rise to a film history in black and white that bore little resemblance to the form in which the films were shown in their original context. In the words of Peter Delpout, filmmaker and former curator of the Film Museum:

It was not until I got to know the Desmet Collection at the Netherlands Film Museum that I realized just how much colour had been used in silent movies, and also just how much film archives and film historians across the world had ignored this fact. At a recent [1987] festival of silent movies in Pordenone about three hundred movies were screened. Only ten were in colour, of which no fewer than eight appeared by courtesy of the conservation project of the Desmet Collection at the Netherlands Film Museum.<sup>3</sup>

*FIOR DI MALE* was one of the first films to undergo colour restoration at the Film Museum. The Desmet Collection was a credit to the Film Museum's ex-

pertise – in collaboration with Haghefilm Laboratories – in the preservation of deteriorated nitrate and colour films.

Finally, people became aware of the importance of the Desmet Collection as a collection. To quote Cherchi Usai again:

That is, as a corpus, with its own history, life and patterns of making, unmaking, exploitation, survival, rediscovery, and new archival and scholarly use. [...] The films of the Desmet Collection were a healthy reminder that films do not exist in a void, but are ‘made’ constantly, after they are shot, printed and shown.<sup>4</sup>

In this connection, the Swiss film historian Roland Cosandey proposes a distinction between the terms ‘repository’ and ‘collection’. A repository indicates the social origins of a group of objects, but this does not necessarily qualify it as a museum collection. It is only when we recognise a repository of objects as comprising a self-contained whole, with an individual history and a specific context, that it becomes a collection. ‘The point of talking about collections is that we accept that objects have a context and a social history.’<sup>5</sup> On the face of it, the Desmet films all appear to be part of a distribution collec-



Fig. 1. *Fior di male* (Cines 1915)

tion, the stock-in-trade of a Dutch film distributor and cinema owner. The films themselves inform us of this. Unlike the original negative of a film, a distribution copy represents the final assembly of the print: the way it looks after it has been provided with intertitles or passed through tinting or colour-stencilling processes. National or local censorship may also account for variations between copies, along with other editorial interventions. The film-historical community is coming to realise that variant editions of a film have a right to exist, and that these rights should be reflected in the preservation policies of film archives. It is the individual character of the Desmet Collection that makes it a genuine treasure trove. When reviewing Desmet's distribution copies, we get a composite idea of the films people were seeing in Dutch cinemas in the years surrounding the First World War.

## **I. The Story Behind the Collection: A Career and Its Perspectives**

The Desmet Collection was acquired by the Netherlands Film Museum in 1957. It is the professional legacy of the cinema owner and film distributor Jean Desmet (1875-1956) and consists of almost 900 – predominantly foreign – films, a business archive and thousands of posters, stills, programmes and flyers. There is no other collection in Europe containing such a wealth of information about film distribution and cinema operation in the period 1907-16. Furthermore, the film collection contains a large amount of material that is actually nothing less than a representative sample of the commercial stock of its time. These films come mainly from France, the United States, Italy, Germany, Denmark and to a lesser extent Great Britain, Russia, Sweden, Austria, the Netherlands and Belgium. All the popular genres of the time are present in both short and long form: dramas, comedies, variety numbers, travelogues, scientific documentaries, actualities and cinema newsreels. Many of the films are no longer extant in the countries where they were first produced.

In an article entitled 'The System of Collecting', the French postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard suggests that when looking at collections, it is more important to focus on the collector than the collection. 'A given collection is made up of a succession of terms, but the final term must always be the person of the collector.'<sup>6</sup> Object and person are essential to each other. Baudrillard's statement refers to private collectors, who choose their objects for personal pleasure or out of some kind of obsession. It does not quite fit Desmet, whose choices were made for him by the domestic and foreign mar-

kets: he selected from what was available in that market at a given moment in time. His 'collection' reflects what you could go out and see at the cinema. Certain films, production companies and film stars are conspicuously absent, but they are 'monopoly' films that were unavailable to him because others had acquired the exclusive rights to them.

This book is concerned with the story behind the Desmet films, and focuses on Jean Desmet's career as a cinema exhibitor and film distributor, from his beginnings as a travelling showman in 1907 to the point around 1916 when he stopped buying further films. The collection is, after all, the end product of Desmet's film distribution and exhibition, from his early days as a travelling showman to a later period when he was the owner of permanent motion-picture theatres. The availability of the business archive, the publicity collection and the films makes it possible to reconstruct this story in precise detail.

Desmet's career on the fairgrounds and subsequently in distribution and permanent cinema exhibition is followed on the basis of the data contained in the collection. The narrative of his career yields a picture of Desmet's character and enthusiasms, and at the same time clarifies the changes that were taking place in the world of film. Over a period of ten years, this world passed through a radical transformation which Desmet not only witnessed but also helped to bring about. In the absence of domestic film production, Desmet's film distribution was a link between foreign film production and film exhibition in the Netherlands. He was making his way at a time when the cultural infrastructure of film was taking shape, and the new sectors of distribution and permanent cinema were entering the scene. Desmet was a pioneer in both these fields. This study therefore combines Desmet's career with Desmet's historical horizons: it is the history of a business and the history of a film culture. Although it is told mainly at the micro-historical level, it is a story that also opens onto macro-history.

### **Jean Desmet, Entrepreneur and Cinema Pioneer**

Desmet is already a well-known figure in Dutch film historiography, although his image has changed over the decades. In 1961 the Dutch film critic Charles Boost described him as 'a cinepioneer' and 'the Tuschinski of the fair-ground showmen'.<sup>7</sup> Boost's portrayal of Desmet reflects the then prevailing romantic and anecdotal approach to the early years of cinema, which was primarily concerned with the big names. Desmet's was one of those names. Boost describes him as characterised by 'the dour frugality of someone who had known poverty, and by the extravagance of someone who would do anything for the sake of the "show"'.<sup>8</sup>



Fig. 2. Invoice from Maurice Gigan to Jean Desmet

Writing 25 years later, Frank van der Maden, film historian and former curator of the Desmet Collection, describes him as representative of a generation.

After 1908 and the period of Living Photography (Christiaan Slieker) and the film show (Alberts Frères), film came more and more under the control of entrepreneurs, who were interested exclusively in making profits. These were the years that witnessed the consolidation of the change from travelling cinematographs to permanent cinema theatres and the rise of the separate sector of film distribution. [...]. Moral and aesthetic criteria vanished into the background, and played a subordinate role in the operation of businesses. Jean Desmet was a prominent representative of this new class of film exhibitors.<sup>9</sup>

Van der Maden relieves Desmet of his uniqueness and situates him within the development of Dutch film culture against a background of emergent film distribution and fixed cinemas. Within this setting, he sees Desmet as a figure who contributed to the creation of a film-cultural infrastructure.

This study sets out to explore these issues in greater depth. Desmet is not summoned simply as a witness of historical change, bobbing about on the waves of history, but as a resourceful and inventive entrepreneur, who took advantage of its opportunities and bent them to his own ends. He does not simply encapsulate the rise of permanent cinemas and film distributors, but

also exemplifies, in the course taken by his career, a number of structural changes within the culture of permanent cinemas and film distribution. On the distribution side, these changes involved the introduction of distribution itself, the coming of long motion pictures, the advent of the exclusive or monopoly system of distribution, organisational transformations and changes in the type of films on offer. The changes affecting cinema exhibition were the differentiation of cinemas into types and the evolution of a theatre hierarchy, the weeding out of those unable to stay the course, the location of cinemas, and increases in scale and size. These developments were not specific to the Netherlands but affected the rest of Europe as well. Indeed, they were first set in motion by other European countries. It is therefore necessary to set Desmet's career in the context of these pan-European developments.

## 2. Film Distribution as the Missing Link

Not very much has been written on the subject of film distribution in the Netherlands, and this study of Desmet therefore draws extensively on literature relating to distribution in other countries. Was Desmet's development as a film distributor in the Netherlands different from or comparable to that of distributors abroad? In recent years research into early film distribution has improved somewhat, although it is still a mere fraction of the literature on production and reception. A representative example of recent work is Martin Loiperdinger's book *Kino und Schokolade* (1999) on the launching of the Edison Kinetoscope and the Lumière Cinématographe in Germany by the Stollwerck Company:

The question of whether a new invention is going to develop into a new medium is decided by the extent to which it is exploited. Technological systems and business strategies come together here in the form of an offer to supply the market. This offer is subject to considerable modification by the size and character of demand. Only exploitation decides whether the technology of recording and reproducing moving photographic images will become a new medium.<sup>10</sup>

In *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market* (1985) Kristin Thompson discovers a large lacuna in our knowledge of film distribution. 'Film history has concentrated on the production of films (studios, financiers, film-makers) at the expense of exhibition and distribution.'<sup>11</sup> The history of film exhibition has received more attention since the 1980s, but there is still little interest in distribution. 'It too, I believe, can reveal a great deal: it also

suggests what types of film various parts of the world's population could see.<sup>12</sup> Thompson takes the now generally accepted view that the idea of a national cinema needs to be construed more broadly. The distribution of American films, for example, was of vital importance not only for the development of the American film industry, but also for the image of the American, and particularly the so-called classic Hollywood movie: both inside and outside the United States, and for both those who admired and imitated these films and those who resisted their influence.

The film historians of the last fifteen years broadly agree that, within the history of cinema as a cultural institution, distribution cannot be considered in isolation from the other institutions of film culture. The various institutions are reciprocally determining, and tend to succeed each other as key factors within the film culture as a whole. In the period of Jean Desmet's distribution, the control of programming passed from the film exhibitors to the film dealers, who also assumed control of the profiling of motion pictures. In the years following Desmet's time as a film dealer, Dutch distributors were forced to concede much of their power to the large American and German production companies.<sup>13</sup>

Prior to the 1970s, distribution was treated by film literature as an aspect of production. The accent of these studies lay firmly on production. Later on, the situation changes slightly, due to a growing interest in film exhibition, cinema culture and film reception, and distribution is more closely linked to exhibition. Most of the time, however, distribution sits like Cinderella between the other institutions. Exceptions to this norm are the studies by Janet Staiger, Kristin Thompson and Corinna Müller. These three authors all devote generous attention to distribution and offer a sustained account of its relations with production and exhibition.

Scholars working in the field of institutional history agree that the period between 1907 and 1916, when Jean Desmet was most active as a film distributor and exhibitor, was a revolutionary epoch in film history. It marks the transition from the world of the early pioneers to an institutionalised world, of which Hollywood and Babelsberg are the two great symbols. This transition can be clearly noted at all institutional levels (production, distribution, exhibition and reception). The changes do not take place at the same pace in each sector, and there are additional national and local differences.<sup>14</sup> It is, however, at the same time important to avoid a teleological account of the years 1910-20. The emphasis on structural change or transition is not intended to support the kind of interpretation in which film, and the film culture accompanying it, are seen either as the first step on the way to a better world or as the *dernier soupir* of the nineteenth century. Both the movies and the culture within which they were produced and exhibited possess their own distinctive

identities. The Desmet Collection offers us the unique opportunity to explore the transitional epoch and to determine its place in film history.

### **Film Distribution in the United States and France: the Closed Model**

Generally speaking, more research has been completed on early film distribution in the United States than on the situation elsewhere. This is certainly due to the growth of interest there since the 1970s in early film and the institutional context of film.

With regard to Desmet's development, it is noticeable that the fissuring effect of the transition from short films to long features was already being recognised in the USA in the 1980s. In her article 'Combination and Litigation: Structures of US Film Distribution 1896-1917' (1983), Janet Staiger describes the decisive role of the advent of the long film in the demise of the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC), the first vertically integrated American film company.<sup>15</sup> In 1910, the year in which Desmet began to distribute films, the amalgamated companies comprising the MPPC trust in the United States were locked in combat with their opponents, the so-called Independents. Under the tutelage of Thomas Alva Edison, the first of the movie moguls, MPPC was the first large organisational structure within the world of film to bring production and distribution together under one roof. The company was seeking to standardise and institutionalise both the film trade and film programmes, with the ultimate aim of controlling and regulating a hitherto unpredictable and protean market. Staiger reveals positive sides to MPPC that belie its common reputation as the bad guy of the film world. Its opponents actually fought with the same weapons as it did, and also imitated its new methods.

MPPC was one of the first American production organisations to set up its own distribution company, the General Film Company, for the purpose of cutting out the middlemen. It was a step towards vertical integration. The General Film Company bought up the lion's share of the films on sale at the film exchanges that formed part of the local scene at the time. MPPC and GFC introduced film rental to the United States, along with fixed prices to distributors and exhibitors, the classification of cinemas according to size and number of seats, the regularisation of programme changes and the standardisation of the quality and length of film prints, with the short film as the norm.

The MPPC production companies established a strong presence in Europe from 1909 onwards. By 1913, Vitagraph, a member of MPPC, was distributing twice as many of its films in Russia and Europe as in the United States. For various reasons, however, the old trust slowly yielded to the Independents, from whose ranks the large new Hollywood studios (the 'majors') would

emerge. With its fixation on the standardised programme culture of the short film, MPPC was overtaken around 1912 by the rise of the long or 'feature film', and rendered superfluous. The import of long European feature films in the years 1911-14 was another nail in its coffin. Tradition has it that the Independents won out over MPPC because they were faster off the mark than the MPPC companies with the production of long features, which gave them a distinct edge. However, Staiger shows how MPPC was also hollowed out from within by member companies that began to produce their own long films. Unhappy with the distribution practices of General Film, which for a while actually hindered the distribution of long features, they set up their own distribution divisions. Vitagraph, the company that pursued this policy the most energetically, also survived the switch from short to long films the least scathed.<sup>16</sup> 'Licensed and unlicensed firms that stayed with short films were dominated by those companies from both groups that moved to feature filmmaking.'<sup>17</sup> In brief, therefore, the decline of the MPPC was more a matter of competition between supporters and opponents of the long film than a struggle between the trust and the Independents.

Staiger's study is important for Desmet's story because of the significance it attaches to the transition to the long feature and its implications for production and distribution. However, there are drawbacks in applying her analysis to the Netherlands. The situation in the United States in the period 1910-20 differs from the state of affairs in the Netherlands. The lack of domestic film production and the absence of foreign sales offices left Dutch cinema owners and film dealers with comparatively greater power than their American colleagues. Desmet was not a distributor retained by a production company, but an independent distributor. He was also uninvolved in the dispute between MPPC and the Independents, and he took and rented films from both parties. Staiger's analysis also overlooks the influence of the foreign market, particularly the impact of Pathé Frères, the French multinational that was already a cartel before MPPC even existed.<sup>18</sup>

The French model displays many similarities with the MPPC model in the USA, and may indeed have inspired it in important ways. By keeping its production costs low, Pathé was able to scale heights that were previously unknown. The company established the first worldwide distribution network. Between 1902 and 1907 Pathé movies predominated on the French *fêtes foraines* (fairgrounds), and the firm gratefully profited from the nickelodeon boom in the United States. In 1906/7, Pathé set about establishing a monopoly within the French film industry by dividing the company into separate production, exhibition and distribution sectors. Here too, Pathé's game plan was to regulate and standardise the market through the imposition of the short film as the norm. In 1907, Pathé introduced film rental as an alternative

to film sales and henceforward rented complete programmes at a fixed rate. In France, films were disseminated via a close-knit network of regional companies, which were spin-off organisations of the parent company and closely connected with the exhibition circuit. France was split into five distribution areas, which each had their own company. A sixth, the Belge Cinéma, looked after Pathé's interests in Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxemburg. However, Pathé did not have the Netherlands quite so firmly in its grip as it did France.

Just as in the United States, monopolisation actually created its own competition. In France this occurred primarily through the rise of permanent cinemas, the expansion of existing rival companies, the arrival of new production companies on the scene and, a little later, the advent of independent distributors. European film producers opposed Pathé at a conference in 1909, the year MPPC was founded, by trying to create a similar trust through which they could ensure the distribution of their own movies. The attempt failed, however. 'But the powerful European exhibitors succeeded in preventing the establishment of production monopolisation. The failed attempt at monopolisation led to a clash between Pathé and all other film producers, eventually causing Pathé to lose its dominant international position.'<sup>19</sup>

As in the United States, the coming of the long feature film played an important role in this development. Distributors such as Louis Aubert came into prominence by renting long Italian, Danish and American movies. To some extent, the development of film distribution in France, as in the rest of Europe, can be seen as a reaction against the closed Pathé model.<sup>20</sup> However, while distribution was set to become increasingly centralised in France, with four main companies controlling the market, film production was decentralised after 1910 as a result of Pathé's increasing concentration on distribution and exhibition. 'The result was a decentralization of the French cinema industry into a kind of cottage industry structure, which was exactly the reverse of the consolidation and specialization then going on in the American cinema industry.'<sup>21</sup>

### **Film Distribution in Britain and Germany: the Open Model**

The differences between American and French film distribution and distribution in other European countries emerge in Kristin Thompson's *Exporting Entertainment*. Her book compares the situation in Britain with that in the United States: 'In the USA standing orders and exclusive contracts tied theatres to whichever film service – licensed or independent – they chose. This meant that each producer sold about the same number of prints of each

film.<sup>22</sup> In the trade press, particularly outside the USA, the American situation was described as a 'closed market'. It was indeed quite literally closed, for MPPC did its utmost to block not only the films of the Independents but also the import of films from Europe. On the other hand, the British operated an open-market system. 'Producers sold their films to renters, who in turn distributed them to as many theatres as they could. Since there was seldom an exclusive contract with any theatre for a film, that film might be rented to a number of theatres in the same district.'<sup>23</sup> Renters and exhibitors fought among themselves for popular titles, which did not actually play for very long at any one cinema.

But with the open system, nearly twice as many titles came into the market as were needed and there were many renters catering to the theatres. An exhibitor who could not rent the desired film immediately from one renter could either turn to another renter who was willing to buy more prints of the same film or could simply rent a different title.<sup>24</sup>

As long as short films were the mainstay of the films rented, and stars played no significant role, renters had difficulty in differentiating their products. One short film could so easily be replaced by another. The German scene was comparable to the British one. 'An open-market situation existed, as in Britain, but with less centralization. Film companies had representatives in Berlin, but typically the agent would travel to show the film to local renters. They bought the prints outright and rented them to the theatres.'<sup>25</sup> Thompson's picture of the British and German film industries shows clear similarities with the free-market and agency system prevailing in Desmet's Dutch film world, but her summary treatment leaves many questions unanswered. As Aldo Bernardini has indicated in his *Cinema muto italiano*, Italy also operated a system of open distribution.<sup>26</sup>

Thompson gives an impressive account of the changes that took place in the world of film from 1915 onwards, and describes how the First World War affected the film trade in Europe and other countries. The Netherlands appear in her narrative from time to time. The American takeover of the film market occurred around the time of the First World War, and was facilitated not simply by the collapse of European production and distribution in the wake of the hostilities, but also by the new distribution practice of block booking which was to have a significant effect on Desmet's business. Cinemas committed themselves, sometimes a year or two in advance, to films they had not previously previewed and that sometimes had not even been made.<sup>27</sup> The first American company to go over to this system was Essanay in the summer of 1915. The company forced exhibitors to take three reels of its

films a week as a condition for obtaining the popular Chaplin films it was making at the time. According to Thompson, the consequences of this kind of conditional selling for a country like England were disastrous: 'Britain went from being one of the most flexible, open markets in the world to one of the most rigid, closed ones. The system perpetuated the American firms' advantage since it kept the theatres tied to their larger outputs, eliminating open play-dates into which other countries' films might slip.'<sup>28</sup> The Americans began opening their own agencies in various non-European countries where they had previously sold everything through London agents. London was thus demoted from 'world' to European centre of trade in American films. Thompson regards the older situation as an underdeveloped stage of the film industry, and attributes its rapid expansion thereafter to the introduction of the new methods. The European film industry was weakened by the American takeover of the Australian, Asian and South American markets.

As Thompson points out, however, Germany succeeded in stimulating domestic film production through the imposition of import restrictions: 'Germany, which had been such a good customer for American films before the war, took advantage of the elimination of French, Italian and British imports to build up its own industry.'<sup>29</sup> With the exception of the films from the Danish Nordisk company, Germany prohibited all imports of foreign films in the spring of 1916. Germany had important markets in neutral countries such as the Netherlands and Switzerland: 'Germany also exercised a considerable control over the neutral and occupied markets surrounding it. As of 1916, Holland was reportedly using more films from France, Italy, Germany and Denmark than from the USA.'<sup>30</sup> The tide turned only after 1918: 'The Belgian, Dutch and Swiss markets had been largely controlled by German films during the war; the Dutch and Swiss had begun to switch over only in 1918.'<sup>31</sup> Since the beginnings of cinema in 1895, it had taken more than twenty years for the American domination of Dutch cinema screens to become a reality. With the exception of the period of German occupation during the Second World War, this position of domination has remained unchanged.

Thompson's study marked out the terrain of an investigation of film distribution in Europe, but there was to be no more extensive and detailed treatment of the subject for several years afterwards. The tide turned in 1994, however, with the publication of Corinna Müller's *Frühe deutsche Kinematographie. Formale wirtschaftliche und kulturelle Entwicklungen 1907-1912* (Early German Cinematography. Formal, Economic and Cultural Developments 1907-12).<sup>32</sup> 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, therefore, to characterise the historical phases of film as determined simply by certain dominant film lengths, and to analyse representational and narrative changes on this basis.'<sup>33</sup> Ten years on from Staiger's article, an analysis of the rise of film distribution, and the decisive part played in it by the breakthrough of the long film, was completed for Germany. Where the advent of the long feature was for 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 programme (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 1907-9. The solution turned out to be the long film. The need arose for a specialised business sector capable of guaranteeing twice-weekly changes of programme. 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 mythologising 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 legitimise itself by adapting its visual narrative forms to traditional dramatic structures, by accepting and applying censorship, by throwing open sumptuous theatres with fashionably dressed

front-of-house staff and by getting itself talked about in the quality newspapers.

Thompson does not cover this unfolding story of long films, exclusives, early stars and aspirations to legitimacy, so her study requires some amplification. Her work centres on the expansion of American cinema. The Americans did go over to long features, even if somewhat later, and passed through all the changes that came with them, such as the introduction of film stars. However, Thompson does cover the rise of the second-hand trade in England, particularly the Far East. Already the centre of international trade in American films, London became the centre for the sale of second-hand movies as well.<sup>34</sup>

### 3. The Career in Perspective

This book addresses two main questions. I shall be looking first at Desmet's role in the development of Dutch film culture between 1907 and 1916, and the related question of the structural changes taking place in Dutch – and European – film distribution in general, and Jean Desmet's in particular during those years; and secondly at the ways in which the Desmet Collection reflects both Desmet's career in film and key developments in the world of film at large during the second decade of the twentieth century. The first question is central to the investigation, and in dealing with it I have tried to situate Desmet in the context of structural change. The chapters are arranged partly chronologically, but each period opens onto a thematically separate treatment of film acquisition (foreign imports), film sales (Dutch clientele), cinema operation and competition within the distribution business. This also means that structural changes such as the advent of the feature film are treated in the context of both buying and selling.

Desmet's career provides the basis for a sketch of film distribution in the Netherlands over the period in question, using the Desmet Collection as its principal source. Desmet's career in the world of cinema stands central. This history of a business is elaborated and accentuated to show how Desmet's micro-history sheds light on the larger macro-historical connections. At the latter level, we encounter the Netherlands as Desmet's market, field of competition and film-theatre culture, and Europe, notably Germany and Belgium, as his sources of film supply. In consideration of the fact that the Dutch film scene was dominated by foreign films, the places of origin of these films and the ways in which they were acquired are described fully in the text.

Desmet the film distributor is not to be separated from Desmet the cine-

ma owner. Cinema operation is an essential part of the story. Production and reception, however, have been kept in the background. Much has already been published on the subject of production in the early period of cinema. Although the stories of a number of early production companies are still untold, it is now possible to refer to a sufficiently large amount of literature. I have also said very little on the subject of film reception. The subject of film reception in the Netherlands, including the time of Desmet, is central to Ansjé van Beusekom's recent *Kunst en Amusement (Art and Entertainment)*.<sup>35</sup> In this study, however, I am concerned with the perspective of the film renter, so the responses of production companies or international distributors as suppliers, and those of cinema exhibitors as customers, are more to the point. In the way it is used here, therefore, 'reception' means the market responses and reactions of cinema entrepreneurs, and there are plenty of them to be found in the Desmet Archive.

As part of the focus on cinema culture, programming has an important place in this study. The period of Desmet's film distribution was the time of the changeover from a programme consisting of all kinds of short films to one in which a single long film was the principal focus of attraction. This focus was achieved by means of advance press announcements and advertising. The 'main features' were increasingly dominant, and as they grew in length they began to squeeze short films out of the programmes. Films were hierarchised and were no longer generally available to all. These developments in programming were of vital significance to distributors, for the message was that if they wanted to distribute the main features, they would have to abandon their standard fare and set about putting themselves on the map. In this context, I have drawn on Müller's perceptive comments on the importance of the programming methods of variety-theatre culture for the development of German film culture.<sup>36</sup>

The period covered by this book is determined by the central topic of Desmet and the story of his career in the film world. There was no problem about deciding where to begin, for, after a period with other fairground attractions, Desmet entered the world of film in 1907 with *The Imperial Bio*, his travelling cinematograph. The end was more difficult to determine. I finally decided to draw the line at 1916, which was the year in which Desmet embarked on a new career as a property developer, lost two major cinemas and more or less stopped buying films. Despite his new career, however, Desmet found it difficult to say a final farewell to the film world, for he remained bound to it through the tie of cinema ownership right up to his death in 1956.

This study is concerned with interfacing with the project of the sociology of art. It acknowledges the importance of distribution, of which the screening of films is a part, as well as the importance of situating it within a larger

whole. As the Dutch sociologist of art Ton Bevers has remarked: 'Once you start looking at the distribution link you are inevitably led to look at the other links in the chain. A distributor needs to be as well-versed as he possibly can in the processes of production, distribution and sale. For this is, after all, the way in which he will ensure his own continuity.'<sup>37</sup> The sociology of art is concerned less with works of art for their own sake than with 'the form and dynamics of the reciprocal relations between the parties concerned – artists, intermediaries and public – in the production, distribution and reception of art.'<sup>38</sup> This pattern of interaction is also central to this study, although the 'works of art' – the films – occupy a larger space than is usual in the sociology of art. With the exception of actualities, most films were more or less interchangeable in the period of the short film. The arrival of the long film altered all that. For this reason, some of Desmet's most prominent long features are treated in some detail in the following pages. The investigation should therefore be described as a film-historical account with a sociological dimension, rather than the other way round.

Janet Staiger's text is based largely on trade publications such as *The Motion Picture World* and various legal materials. Kristin Thompson bases her study mainly on trade journals such as *The Bioscope*, the Trade Information Bulletins and Daily Consular and Trade Reports of the American Department of Commerce. Corinna Müller also draws her information from German trade-press publications such as *Der Kinematograph*, and to a lesser extent from archival material such as the Messter Archiv at the Bundesarchiv in Koblenz.<sup>39</sup> This account of Desmet and his film world is initially based on a business archive. In fact, an entire historical panorama has been summoned from the archives of a single distributor. This is an unusual approach. Comparable studies of art dealers, for instance, tend to be confined to the story of a single business, without bringing in the whole field of art history. The method employed here certainly produces a one-sided picture, although, as we shall see, it is no more one-sided than a reconstruction based on the trade press. In this sense, the following study is not just a response to Staiger, Thompson and Müller, but also an exploration of other sources and methods of writing the history of film distribution. I have tried to see what might be gained by approaching the Desmet Collection as a source of film history.

The choice of Desmet's business archive as the main source for this book has one important consequence. The announcement of a one-man business history against the background of general film history may naturally arouse expectations of a biography. However, this study is not a classical biography in which the personal motives of the principal subject stand centre-stage, but the story of a career in films: the history of a *homo economicus*. In the pages that follow, we are sometimes able to read between the lines and discern the

whys and wherefores of particular decisions and changes. Certain character traits emerge when Desmet's important decisions are arranged side-by-side. Jean Desmet the person emerges from his own words, from the way others responded to him and from comparisons with his colleagues, clients and suppliers. Yet even after a close look at the archive, Desmet remains a somewhat enigmatic figure, not only because his behaviour sometimes seems inconsistent but also because of his own strict separation of his business from his private life. This is clear enough from the archive, but it was also evident in my interviews with members of the Desmet family. It came as no surprise that his descendants knew next to nothing about his professional life.<sup>40</sup>

My choice of Desmet's business archive as the principal source for this book is not the only reason why it has become the story of a career rather than a biography. For my choice against biography has also been quite deliberate. I have used Desmet's career with the intention of gaining a deeper insight into the development of early film distribution and cinema culture in the Netherlands, thereby enabling comparisons to be made with the rest of Europe.

# **I. La Comète Belge**

## **Jean Desmet's Travelling Cinema, The Imperial Bio (1907-1910)**

Desmet's period as a travelling showman was a transitional phase of just two years. When compared with the twelve years he spent working on the fairgrounds, this is not very long. Compared with his period in film distribution and his time as an operator of permanent cinemas, it is a mere interlude in his career. On the other hand, these are the years that were decisive for Desmet's move to the Dutch film world. They were essential to the rapid development of his career at the beginning of the twentieth century and led directly to his establishment as a permanent cinema owner. In the end, they provided him with the opportunity to expand beyond the fairgrounds and settle into a less risky and more profitable existence. They initiate a development that was to lead him into a flirtation with the film trade that would eventually yield to a passion for property.

### **I. Desmet's Debut in Dutch Film Culture**

One day he was in Friesland talking to a Mr. Slikker. 'Do you know what you should do?' said Slikker. 'You should set up a cinema.' My father just muttered. No one in the Netherlands knew exactly what a cinema was. But it was a new idea, and father was a man who thought ideas were only good if they were new. He went to Belgium and France to take a look at cinema. Two months later he was appearing on the fairgrounds with the Imperial Bio.<sup>1</sup>

A lot has been written by journalists and film historians about Desmet's early years in the Dutch film industry, although not all of this information is reliable. One myth that crops up repeatedly concerns the way Desmet made his entry into the world of film. The anecdote goes back to an interview in 1958 with Desmet's daughter, Jeanne Hughan-Desmet.

When Desmet began his travelling cinema in 1907, he was far from being the first in the business. Travelling cinemas first appeared in the Netherlands shortly after the first showing of the Lumières' films in Amsterdam on 12 March 1896. They quickly became a major fairground attraction. In the year that Desmet began his Imperial Bio, the business was experiencing a boom.

Prestigious operators of travelling cinema shows, such as Alberts Frères and Alex Benner, were making enormous profits. At the fairgrounds in the cities, a first generation of operators, among them people like Christiaan Slieker (the Mr 'Slikker' of the quotation), had been shouldered aside by a new generation prepared to make substantial investments.<sup>2</sup> The booths grew larger and were more comfortable and luxurious. Films were projected on reels, so they did not have to be retrieved from a basket after projection (as was the case with the Lumière films). Electric light replaced dangerous calcium light with its open-gas flame. 'The fairgrounds of our times are powered by steam and electricity. You see it on the carousels, the confectionery stalls and in the splendid cinema theatres [...]. The future of the fairground business belongs to big capital,' wrote the *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad* during the summer fair of 1907.<sup>3</sup> Slieker missed out on all these improvements and priced himself out of the market. He was also unable to compete against the enormous sums offered for fairground sites by his immediate competitors. After 1902, he was confined to working in small towns. In 1907, he gave up his travelling cinema for good.<sup>4</sup> In the light of this, the story that it was Slieker who gave Desmet the idea of setting up a travelling cinema does not seem entirely convincing.<sup>5</sup>

In 1907, more than ten years after the Lumière shows, every Dutchman knew what 'bioscope', 'biograph' or 'cinematograph' meant. By then it had been a fairground attraction for several years. In Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague, films had been shown at variety theatres and music halls since the turn of the century. From as early as 1903, complete film programmes could be seen at the Winter Garden in the Rotterdam Tivoli Complex throughout the year, except for the summer months. The first permanent cinemas appeared during the boom years of travelling cinema. Franz Anton Nöggerath's Bioscope Theater, the first purpose-built permanent cinema, was opened on Reguliersbreestraat in Amsterdam on 7 September 1907.

Desmet's decision to start up a travelling cinema may have been a personal inspiration, but he did not come to it particularly quickly. It also seems unlikely that he went to Belgium and France specially to study the culture of travelling cinema. Between the turn of the century and 1905, he had already appeared regularly at fairs in Belgium with his Wheel of Fortune. The mobile cinema theatre was already an established attraction at these fairs. In addition to this, Desmet toured all the Dutch fairgrounds from around 1900, and there too cinemas were extremely popular.

In the summer of 1907, Jean Desmet introduced the Imperial Bio Grand Cinematograph. Desmet, who up to that point had toured the fairs with his Wheel of Fortune and his 'Canadian Toboggan', a gigantic helter-skelter, could see for himself that cinema was a lucrative business. He also realised that because of the murderous competition, it would be necessary to go to

work on a grand and luxurious scale, and that a varied film programme would be crucial. It was for this reason that he had his helter-skelter booth converted. Typically for those days of free movement across European borders before the First World War, he had the restyling done by the German firm of Gustav Bayerthal from a design by the Belgian Albert de Sonnevile. In addition to an electrically lit box office with an awning, entrance and exit doors, ninety sets of chair upholstery in monogrammed plush mohair (for the best seats), wall coverings in Utrecht velvet and stage curtains, Desmet ordered a 'white projection screen, framed and backed in black'.<sup>6</sup> Bayerthal came to the Netherlands himself to ensure that everything was ready and in place for the Leiden fair in July 1907. The Leiden fair of July 1907 was probably Desmet's first film presentation, although there was no mention of it in the local press.

### **Dutch fairgrounds at the beginning of the twentieth century**

There was no shortage of fairs in the summer of 1907. From May to September there was a fair in progress in pretty well every Dutch city except Amsterdam. The municipality of Amsterdam had banned fairs in 1876 because of the anarchy and excess that accompanied them.<sup>7</sup> Rotterdam too would experience its last official fair in 1908 for the same reason. Desmet's brother was present at this fair with his dance hall (Fig. 3).<sup>8</sup> Leiden was to follow the example of Amsterdam and Rotterdam in 1911.<sup>9</sup> For many people, fairs were events at which they could let themselves go, like the carnivals in the south of the country. Large amounts of money changed hands during the fair. The cafés took enormous sums during fair weeks and the newspapers were constantly filled with reports of police arrests of hopelessly drunk men and women. Fairs were the occasion of quarrels and adultery, and violence was hardly exceptional.

The attitude of many municipal authorities towards the fairs was ambivalent. On the one hand, they saw them as a threat to public order. On the other hand, they brought in a bit of money. Licences for sites for the popular and large attractions such as steam-driven carousels and travelling cinemas were sold by tender. The rental fees certainly came in handy. In 1907, for example, the municipality of Deventer received *f*1,000 in rent for Alex Benner's travelling cinema. Things were even more extreme in Haarlem. In 1907, the cinematograph owner Willem Lohoff offered *f*1,620 for a cinema booth on the Market Square which was topped by an offer of *f*2,257 (*f*45,140 or €20,520 in 2000) from his competitors Alberts Frères.<sup>10</sup> Considering that the average admission price to the travelling cinema at a fair was a mere few cents, this gives some idea of the turnover possible on the fairgrounds, and of the sums



Fig. 3. Ferdinand Desmet's dance hall at the Rotterdam fair, 1908

the generally less well-off were apparently spending there. Municipalities were keen to profit from the cut-throat competition. Wealthy travelling showmen like Benner and the Mullens brothers offered to pay rents several years in advance in order to guarantee themselves sites at the most popular fairs. Offers of this kind were generally disregarded by the municipalities, since leasing by the year was clearly more lucrative. Obtaining a lease for a term of years meant peace of mind and security for the operator and the avoidance of competition for sites. Due to the unpredictability of profits from a fair, however, operators were generally cautious. Not every fair was a guaranteed success, and not every attraction did as well one year as the next.

Leaving to one side the question of whether it had been created by the commercial calculations of the municipalities or by popular demand, there was a great demand for fairs at the beginning of the last century, and this is underlined by the many additional fairs held around the official ones. In Dutch provincial cities such as Groningen, Leiden and Amersfoort, fairs were held once a year, usually in the summer. They generally lasted for a week or ten days. Some cities held fairs several times a year. The fairgrounds of those days were set out quite differently from today. They were not just a place for

attractions such as carousels, shooting galleries, swing boats and doughnut stalls, but also of hippodromes (where you could have a ride on a horse), menageries (containing snakes and various other sinister creatures), performing cats, magic cows, female giants weighing 400 pounds, wrestlers, magicians, panoramas, photography tents and travelling cinemas.

The fair was also an occasion for lavish entertainments such as theatre and music halls. In both the local theatres and the back rooms of cafés, and in specially constructed marquees on the fairgrounds, the plays of Herman Heijermans and French comedies were performed by well-known companies from Amsterdam or Rotterdam, or by theatre groups from the region. Equally popular were the so-called speciality programmes and revues put on by impresarios and variety companies, such as those of Vleugels, Frits van Haarlem and Henri Ter Hall. Finally, there were the cafés that organised special cabaret acts. The newspapers contained daily articles on the theatre and variety programmes and (to a lesser extent) the condition of the fairground site.<sup>11</sup>

The theatrical and variety offerings were on a somewhat smaller scale at the fairs in cities such as Leiden and Amersfoort, but throughout the Netherlands the press focused on the theatre and music hall in its coverage of fairs. The fair itself was not always mentioned, as certain newspapers considered it too trivial. The smaller the town, the greater the chance that the fair would get a mention. In this context, it is interesting to note that the attractions that were written up tended to be those advertised in the paper by the operator. If you did not advertise, you were quietly ignored. This makes it difficult to reconstruct Desmet's activities as a travelling cinema operator, as he did not advertise automatically at every place he visited or in the daily newspapers of every regional town or village. In some cases he evidently found other forms of publicity, such as flyers and posters, sufficient for his needs.<sup>12</sup>

### **The culture of travelling cinema: Alberts Frères and Alex Benner**

Who were Desmet's colleagues, and what kind of a tradition was he stepping into? The Mullens brothers, who called themselves and their attraction 'Alberts Frères' after their father Albert Mullens, were less frugal than Desmet and more vigorously self-promoting.<sup>13</sup> Around 1907, theirs was the most lavish and imposing travelling cinema (Fig. 4). Their tent had an austere classical cinema façade, which made it appear more like a temple than a fairground booth. Between 1905 and 1907, its size increased from 240 to 544 square metres (Slieker's booth, by comparison, was a mere 128 square metres). The length of their shows increased from two to three hours over the same period.<sup>14</sup> The cinema, the programme and the film commentaries (performed by Willy Mullens himself) were intended to create an impression of cultivation. The Mul-



Fig. 4. The Mullens brothers' travelling cinema



Fig. 5. The Mullens brothers with their mother, c. 1900, Willy (left), Albert (right with camera)

lens brothers placed great emphasis on education as well as entertainment. The whole family had to be able to attend their shows. Coarse humour was out.

The Mullens gained a reputation not only for the atmosphere they created, but also for the varied character of their programmes, which included early sound films (the so-called 'talking pictures') as well as coloured films. Electric lights hung on the roof and the front of their booth forming the letters 'Alberts Frères' Talking Cinema'. The talking film was a film combined with gramophone records. For the most part, the latter consisted of operatic arias or popular songs sung by French performers such as Gauthier and Dranem, or of short recitals by stars of the French theatre such as Sarah Bernhardt and Coquelin. The Mullens brothers themselves produced short film comedies and made actualities. They had a mobile dark room in which they developed their own films. Generally, they would film people coming out of the local churches near the fairgrounds and the pictures would be screened in their auditorium a day later, sometimes the same evening.

Between 1905 and 1908, the Mullens, who had already been in business shortly before the turn of the century under names such as Alberts' Electro Talking Cinema and the Alberts' Cineograph, were responsible for a substantial increase in the status of the medium of film and the phenomenon of cinema in the Netherlands and Belgium. At the beginning of the last century, they were the dominant presence at fairgrounds in almost all the large and medium-sized Dutch and Belgian cities. In the years 1906-8, they put on annual open-air performances at the Market Place in Groningen outside the fair season. In cities such as The Hague, Maastricht and Nymegen they were to be seen on the fair every year between 1900 and 1910.<sup>15</sup> They made enormous profits. In 1906 a Haarlem newspaper reported:

Alberts Frères, who have been presenting cinema shows here at the fairground made a small sum of f16,000 during fair week. Deductions include f6,000 for transportation from Belgium of the booth, wagons etc, wages for personnel, food and other expenses, leaving a profit of f10,000.<sup>16</sup>

Willy and Albert Mullens (Fig. 5) were shrewd businessmen. They sidestepped their competitors by getting hold of sites outside the fair season, and by acquiring exclusive rights of film exhibition during these periods from city authorities.<sup>17</sup> With their so-called gala performances, they managed to tempt the urban middle classes into the cinema. The wealthier classes were willing to pay the substantially increased admission prices in exchange for the absence of the poorer classes of filmgoers. Other cinema owners also put on gala or 'elite' performances of this kind.

It was during the period when the Mullens brothers were spending a lot of time in Belgium that a second travelling showman arrived on the scene. Alex Benner came from a genuine fairground background. He was the youngest son of the fairground operator Karel Benner, who had already toured with a cinema around the turn of the century. In 1901, Alex Benner opened a so-called Palais Lumineux or Crystal Palace of Light, which created a visual spectacle from coloured electric lighting. The Palais Lumineux was later converted into a cinema.<sup>18</sup> From around 1904 his travelling cinema could be seen all over the Netherlands, and he clearly filled the number two spot after Alberts Frères. In 1906, 1907, 1908 and 1911, he even managed to grab the site at Den Bosch where Desmet had his operational base. Desmet's network of contacts was unable to do anything about this. Outside the fair season, Benner also put on shows regularly in rented halls. He owed his popularity to his varied and up-to-date programmes and also, like the Mullens, to his sound films. For a while, his cinema was also called 'Benner's Talking Cinema "Noblesse"'.<sup>19</sup> With a frontage of 27 metres and a depth of ten, Benner's booth in 1907 was a little smaller than that of Alberts Frères.<sup>20</sup>

Although the Mullens and Benner were certainly Desmet's most formidable competitors, they must all have been well acquainted with each other in those days. When Desmet's wife died, he heard of the despatch of two wreaths inscribed by fairground operators whose names appear repeatedly in the press of these years. They included Willem Stuvé, H. Wolfs, J. Kunkels, Gerard Richter and Alex Benner. The Mullens also sent Desmet a cable. Furthermore, Desmet showed films by Alberts Frères in his travelling cinema, but more on this subject below.<sup>21</sup>

## 2. *Lutte pour la Vie*: Jean Desmet on the Fairground

Jean Conrad Ferdinand Theodore Desmet was born on 26 August 1875 in Ixelles, now a suburb of Brussels, at 73 Rue du Bourgmestre.<sup>22</sup> He was the eldest son of a poor and numerous family. His father, Maréchal Desmet, the son of a trader from Renaix (Ronse) in Belgium, had settled in Den Bosch. His mother, Petronella, was a woman of humble origins from Oss. Maréchal Desmet had been a cavalry trooper in the Dutch Army, but he left the service when he married in 1874.<sup>23</sup> The family seems to have lived only a short time in Ixelles, for the birth of a second son, Ferdinand, was entered in the register at Den Bosch in 1877. After this the Desmets settled in Leopoldsbuurg just across the Belgian border, where their eldest daughter Rosine was born in 1879. They later moved permanently to Dorpstraat in Den Bosch, where the

other children were born: Ursula (1881), Henriëtte (1883), Mathijs (1886), Theo (1888) and Frederik (1890).<sup>24</sup> With the help of family connections in Gent, Maréchal Desmet started a Flemish cloth business, but it ended in failure.<sup>25</sup> He died in 1893, unemployed and destitute.

When their mother also died a year later, the Desmet children spent some time in an orphanage, except for the eldest son, Jean, who was given the job of providing for his siblings.<sup>26</sup> This task determined the shape of his career for years to come. He would help them to stand on their own feet, either on the fairground or by setting them up in cafés and cinemas. In 1896, he married Catharina Dahrs, a lady from Nymegen whose family was originally German, and started a family of his own.<sup>27</sup> He moved house several times in Den Bosch but continued to live there.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Den Bosch (Fig. 6) was a town whose population had risen so sharply that living conditions had suffered a dramatic deterioration. The population of the old fortress town had climbed from 13,000 in 1814 to 30,000 in 1899. In 1900, almost a fifth of the town's housing supply still consisted of one-room flats, the majority of which were occupied by two or more persons. Two-room flats still made up one-third of the housing stock.<sup>28</sup> The drinking water remained bad until the 1880s. The water from the town's pumps was largely polluted due to contamination of the earth by



Fig. 6. Den Bosch, c. 1900, with De Laat's café 'De Geldersche Wagen' in the background

excrement.<sup>29</sup> Throughout the nineteenth century the area around Den Bosch was regularly subjected to flooding when the rivers rose, and the town itself continued to be affected until the end of the 1880s. It was also regularly visited by epidemics of cholera and smallpox. All of this made Den Bosch one of the unhealthiest places in the Netherlands.<sup>30</sup> The lack of land for building kept rents high. A worker's flat cost between 75 cents and 1 guilder a week, with the average weekly wage for a worker scarcely rising above 5 guilders. Profiteers erected jerry-built blocks of flats, which often lacked sewers and running water. Only the rack-renters did well from the rapid population growth.<sup>31</sup> Owing to poor nutrition, mainly just potatoes, gruel and the cheapest kind of rye bread, many people were permanently malnourished. Food, however, consumed the greater part of people's wages, leaving little over for rent and clothing. It was hardly surprising that people had all kinds of other jobs on the side, such as outwork and small-scale business. Much of the petty street trading of the nineteenth century was basically a front for begging.<sup>32</sup> Yet even the most poverty-stricken were ready to part with their money twice a year during the February carnival or at the September fair. Household possessions, clothes and even houses were pawned to provide a flow of cash for these festivities.

After her husband's death, Desmet's mother had been forced by her circumstances to travel round the fairs peddling chinaware and pottery, and Jean helped her with this. When she died too, he had no choice but to find work on the fairgrounds. Unlike Alex Benner, Desmet did not come from a family that had made its living from the fairgrounds for generations. It became a family business. When Jean Desmet began to travel the fairgrounds, he took other family members with him, besides his own immediate family. His brother-in-law Jan Dekkers and his wife, for example, became his permanent assistants. When they were old enough, Desmet's children, Catharina (1898) and Maréchal (1899), were sent to boarding schools at Huijbergen and Essen in Belgium, and only travelled with their parents during the school holidays.<sup>33</sup> Desmet's eldest brother Ferdinand also took to the fairgrounds, where his attraction was a dance hall. In 1897, he married Maria Herregodts, the offspring of a family of fairground operators in Roermond, where he lived until 1910. His brother Mathijs, who became a baker's assistant, lived with him from 1901 to 1906.<sup>34</sup> He too would later travel around with a dance hall for a time. Their eldest sister Rosine ran a café with an adjoining dance hall on Zandstraat in Rotterdam, one of the seedier districts of the city.

Desmet's wife died at a young age in September 1907 during the Leiden fair. She was just thirty years old.<sup>35</sup> It was around this time, at the fair in Haarlem, that Jean Desmet first met Rika (Hendrika) Klabou, the daughter of a café proprietor on Grote Houtstraat.<sup>36</sup> Rika ran the box office at Desmet's

travelling cinema for at least two years. They married in 1912 and had a daughter, Jeanne.

### Wheel of Fortune

After the period during which he helped his mother – up to 1894 – Jean Desmet appeared at the fair with street organs (Fig. 7). This attraction was presumably supplemented in 1897 by his Wheel of Fortune.<sup>37</sup> The earliest advertisement for this dates from 1901. By that time, Desmet was appearing at the fair in his home town of Den Bosch with his ‘Great Wonder Wheel of Fortune’.<sup>38</sup> He travelled with a booth measuring 15 metres by 4. Once all the tickets had been sold, the crowd would throw darts at the wheel and try to hit the winning numbers.<sup>39</sup> The prizes awarded to the winners included household and luxury articles such as mirrors, paintings, clocks, crockery, vases, tea services, birdcages, bronze pitchers, tea-tables, chairs and stands. At this point Desmet still owned street organs made by the internationally known firms of Gasparini and Gavioli.<sup>40</sup> In those days, the arrival of the fair and its attractions



Fig. 7. Desmet pictured next to one of his street organs

was typically announced by a procession of barrel organs through the streets of the town, and Desmet probably kept his organs for this purpose.

J.C. de Laat, the owner of the hotel-café De Geldersche Wagen on the Market Square in Den Bosch, kept his eye on the homefront for Desmet. In February 1904, De Laat reported, among other 'faits divers' on the Den Bosch 'scène', that this year '100 rix-dollars [f250] have been offered for a cinematograph.'<sup>41</sup> This referred to a bid for a site at the Den Bosch fair by travelling showman Antoon Wegkamp. The 'bioscope' or 'cinematograph', as the travelling cinema was called, had become a profitable business; for the operator himself, certainly, but also for the municipalities who were banking steadily rising rents. For the time being, however, Desmet merely took note of De Laat's hint.

De Laat also hired out Desmet's street organs to third parties. In a sense, Desmet was acting as a distributor here long before he went into film distribution. With his café as his base, De Laat negotiated terms with the fair-ground artistes who wanted to hire Desmet's organs. Another member of Desmet's network was De Laat's acquaintance J.B. Krekel, a journalist who worked on a daily newspaper called *De Gelderlander*. As a journalist, Krekel had access to the dignitaries of several municipalities, which enabled him to act as Desmet's mediator in his pursuit of fairground sites for his Wheel of Fortune. Sites were very much in demand at this time and difficult to obtain.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, Desmet toured the Netherlands and Belgium with the Wheel of Fortune.<sup>43</sup> Between the autumn of 1902 and the summer of 1904, he appeared regularly in Brussels, Gent, Sint Niklaas and Antwerp, sometimes remaining in Belgium for several months with his 'Grande Lotterie Hollandaise'. In the Netherlands he covered the whole country, appearing in large cities such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Nijmegen and Tilburg, as well as in small provincial villages in remote parts of the country.

### **The 'Canadian Toboggan'**

In early July 1905 Desmet's wife, who was in Leeuwarden – probably looking after the Wheel of Fortune at the fairground – was summoned before the Chief Constable and informed that in accordance with article 3 of the Lottery Law of July 1905, this attraction had been banned from fairs.<sup>44</sup> Desmet's site permits for both Leeuwarden and Apeldoorn were cancelled in accordance with the ban.<sup>45</sup> Desmet reacted quickly, and his network came to his aid. On 7 August, De Laat wrote to tell him that 'L. Benner is selling one of those toboggans or helter-skelters as they are called. But your brother has just been here and asks me to tell you that there are probably opportunities for a thing like that in Rotterdam as well as in Tilburg.'<sup>46</sup> Desmet did not hesitate and



Fig. 8. The 'Canadian Toboggan' at the Haarlem fair, 1906

bought the helter-skelter from Laurent Benner, a brother of Alex Benner's. From Alexandre Devos in Ghent, who, according to his letterhead, was a supplier of complete and ready-painted wooden facades for fairground booths, he ordered new flooring for the helter-skelter. From photographs in the Desmet Collection, it appears that the helter-skelter itself had also been made by Devos. Devos travelled up and down to Rotterdam where Desmet was preparing to launch his 'Canadian Toboggan' (Fig. 8).

Meanwhile, Desmet negotiated with other operators for sites for helter-skelters. He bought a site from Tewe at the fairground in Den Bosch and another from Henri Grünkorn in Zaandam, his first port of call after Rotterdam.<sup>47</sup> In the following years, Desmet's helter-skelter appeared in The Hague, Deventer and Haarlem. He regularly went to The Hague in May for

the 'Spring Festival' in the city's zoo. The 'toboggan' was described as the number-one attraction at the 1907 fair in the newspaper *Het Vaderland*:<sup>48</sup>

An ingenious contraption and as simple as the egg of Columbus. It is nothing more than a gantry concealed behind a lavishly decorated facade with a staircase winding round it. From the top two chutes, panelled in cane, zigzag downwards. The fun is the giddy descent. But it's a stiff ascent. You could compare it with letting your capital grow. To reach your aim, you have to clamber up laboriously, step by step. But the descent is an effortless, crazy, thrilling, intoxicating whirl.

For a while, helter-skelters were an extremely popular fairground attraction. With their bulk and height, they towered above the rest of the fair, looking rather like church steeples or, more precisely, lighthouses. For Desmet's helter-skelter was equipped with electric lighting, which stood out above the attractions below, illuminating the entire fairground. Desmet used a steam engine to generate the power required for his lights. In most Dutch towns of those years there was still no central public electricity supply. Urban distribution networks were actually established in the course of Desmet's years as a travelling showman. In so far as it existed before then, electricity was often owned by private concerns and not freely available to all. The fairground operators brought their own power to the fairs, so Desmet actually had electricity before he began his travelling cinema.

Dutch cities were places of darkness in the nineteenth century: 'after nightfall, the city was enveloped in absolute gloom', writes Dutch historian Geert Mak in *Amsterdam. A Brief Life of the City*.<sup>49</sup> The sea of light in which the fair was bathed exerted a magnetic attraction, and the colour of the lights only enhanced its magic. Electricity performed practical tasks such as powering carousels, but it was also important as a crowd-pulling adornment and diversion in its own right. Although the fairgrounds might sometimes do only average business during the day, even at weekends, they would be thronging with visitors when the lights came on in the evening.

### **First film shows combined with the Canadian Toboggan**

Desmet seems to have been planning a travelling cinema from the end of 1906, for on 17 December 1906 he offered f1,130 for a booth with a 'cinematograph' at the fair in Den Bosch. But he was first seen on a fairground with his cinema at the Leiden fair of July 1907.<sup>50</sup>

Desmet was soon back in Leiden for the so-called 'kermesse d'été' or 'summer charity fête' in September of 1907. This time his film projections

were discussed in the press, although the performance itself was no more than a one-off event. In August 1907, he was also in Haarlem, Rotterdam and Alkmaar, though probably only with the helter-skelter. It is unclear whose helter-skelter was used in Alkmaar, but in Haarlem Desmet advertised his fairground attraction exactly as in the previous year when he took it there for the first time.<sup>51</sup> Photographs of the toboggan taken at the Butter Market during the Haarlem fair of August 1906 show that its entrance was an outer wall that would later be the basis of the facade of Desmet's travelling cinema.<sup>52</sup>

Between the Haarlem and Alkmaar fairs Desmet appeared for four days at the penultimate Rotterdam fair from Saturday 17 August to Tuesday 20 August. In his correspondence with the city about payment of local taxes, he claimed that business had been bad for him during the fair and that he had taken only *f*600.<sup>53</sup> One reason for these poor attendances might be that the fair had, in fact, ended on Saturday 17 August, but they were probably due to Desmet's meagre press advertising. He had placed no advertisements in the Rotterdam press, so his attraction was ignored in return.<sup>54</sup> No one knew who he was or what he was about. His attitude contrasted sharply with the Mullens brothers, who often advertised for several days in succession in the press of the cities in which they appeared, and were duly rewarded with plenty of editorial attention. Desmet learned his lesson. From his September 1907 appearance in Leiden onwards, he advertised regularly in the local press, albeit not yet under the name 'Imperial Bio'.

On Thursday 12 September, there was a so-called 'cinema in the clouds' at the Leiden fair. From eleven o'clock in the evening, films were projected for forty-five minutes on a white screen erected behind the helter-skelter. The projector was connected to the current supplying the helter-skelter:

There was no question of clouds, for the sky was beautifully bright and full of stars. Unless the words referred to the clouds of steam billowing from the engine of the Toboggan! They, however, did not remain in existence long enough to be projected upon. The audience was ushered behind and to the side of the tent and there were a lot of people standing on the 'tower' of the Toboggan; highly elevated observers of the exhibition down below.<sup>55</sup>

Nowhere was it mentioned that this film projection was Desmet's work. The advertisements described him only as the operator of the helter-skelter. Given the combination of film projection and toboggan, however, it seems likely that he also organised the film screenings. For a while, Desmet offered both attractions at the fairs. Even later on, when his travelling cinema had become more important, the helter-skelter still regularly appeared at fairs. It was such a money-spinner that he operated it together with his cinema.

When other travelling showmen such as Alberts Frères and Benner beat him in the race for space at the fair, he could sometimes still manage to secure a site for his helter-skelter.<sup>56</sup> Unlike the travelling cinema, which was always very widely publicised, the helter-skelter was hardly ever advertised. This makes it difficult to establish how long Desmet continued with it, or whether it was incidental or essential to his cinematograph operations. It was still there in 1908, next to the Imperial Bio at the Groningen fair, where, according to the press, it was a very popular attraction. 'Towering above the other booths stands the 'Canadian Toboggan', that funny slide, down which young and old valiantly hurl themselves in high-spirited amusement. You see an almost unbroken line of enthusiasts clambering up the narrow spiral staircase before hurtling down at a rare rate of knots.'<sup>57</sup> The toboggan was probably still standing next to the Imperial Bio at the Delft fair in August 1909.<sup>58</sup>

### 3. The Imperial Bio Grand Cinematograph

Frank van der Maden has described Desmet's reasons for changing from the helter-skelter to the travelling cinema: 'The risk of physical injury attached to this kind of fun led a number of local authorities to ban helter-skelters. Thus, Desmet was forced for a second time to give up one profitable attraction and find another.'<sup>59</sup> But perhaps this switch to a more lucrative attraction was deliberate. The sum of f1,130 that Desmet offered for a site on the fairground at Den Bosch towards the end of 1906, and the reports of the huge profits that the Mullens brothers were making at that time, would support this. The capital investment was certainly greater, but the yields were proportionately higher. However, his travelling cinema was not an unqualified success. Desmet was not continuously busy with film screenings during his time as a cinema owner. The Dutch public was possibly enjoying a surfeit of film shows.<sup>60</sup> Both during and outside the fair season, 1907 was a record year for film presentations. The Mullens and Benner were the most popular exhibitors with both the press and the public. They had the largest and most elegant booths, showed the most recent films, produced more of their own material than anyone else and advertised more often and on the grandest scale. They monopolised the big fairs and the auditoria in large cities during the winter months. In this struggle for survival, Desmet had to work hard to establish a niche for himself. Advertising was an absolute must.

It took a little time before Desmet began to place press advertisements for his new fairground attraction. In October 1907, a month after his 'cinema in the sky' at Leiden, he appeared at the fair in Wageningen with both the cine-

ma and the toboggan.<sup>61</sup> This time his show was introduced as 'The Imperial Bio Grand Cinematograph'. From Saturday 12 October, he was at the Bowles Park for the Wageningen 'Public Welfare Festival'. The town of Wageningen was celebrating the hundredth anniversary of its Society of Public Welfare.

Desmet probably used the name the Imperial Bio Grand Cinematograph for the first time in Wageningen. It was not original. In 1902, the Belgian travelling showman Willem F. Krüger bought Henri Grünkorn's travelling cinema and renamed it 'Imperial Bio' in 1903. He toured it successfully in the Netherlands, Belgium and France. In 1907, he actually owned two travelling cinemas and had several other cinema operators working for him. On 29 November 1907 he opened the first cinema in Antwerp on Keijzerlei. Could Desmet possibly have been thinking of Krüger when he christened his own cinema in 1907? He had probably seen Krüger's attraction during one of his frequent visits to Belgium with the wheel of fortune. This may explain why Desmet never took his cinema to Belgium, for Krüger's cinema was still on the road there when Desmet launched his.

In a Europe that was still almost completely dominated by royal dynasties, the predicate 'royal' or 'imperial' in the name of a cinema was considered 'good form' by many owners, both in the Netherlands and abroad. In the Netherlands, Franz Anton Nöggerath's film shows were called 'The Royal Bioscope' after the brand name of the projection equipment he bought from Charles Urban. Carmine Rionzi's cinema was known as 'Rionzi's Emperor Bioscope'. The term 'Grand Cinematograph' was also hardly exclusive. Desmet used it, as did his competitor Willem Lohoff.

It is interesting that, unlike the Mullens and Benner, Desmet did not name his cinema after himself. He seems not to have considered it vital to have his own name associated with his attraction. The name of his cinema was more important than his own. He certainly went in for a little self-glorification by advertising himself as 'L'Empereur du Bioscope', which was a dig at the Mullens brothers, who promoted themselves as 'Les Rois des Bioscopes'. Others too went in for superlatives of this kind. In England, where a lot of travelling cinema owners called themselves 'Captain' or 'Colonel', George Kemp, one of the biggest operators, promoted himself as 'President Kemp'.<sup>62</sup>

Desmet sensed that if he was going to be able to compete with the others, he would have to come up with something special. His first priority here was his cinema booth. The facade was an enormous length of frontage painted with motifs in an art-nouveau style, which had already been used on his helter-skelter. When he ordered a film screen from Bayerthal in the summer of

1907, he had his facade redecorated at the same time. The Belgian Albert de Sonnevile, who had earlier designed the shape and structure of the facade itself, provided the decorations.<sup>63</sup>

The front of the Imperial Bio was 25 metres long, and the marquee behind it was 10.5 metres deep. Assuming that the marquee was the same length as the facade, the floor area would have been more than 260 square metres.<sup>64</sup> Desmet's travelling film theatre was thus twice as big as Slieker's, about the same size as Benner's, but only half the size of the booth of Alberts Frères. Both the interior and exterior of the Imperial Bio attracted the attention of the press, though the interior received more detailed coverage. The *Leidsch Dagblad* described a 'brightly coloured and brilliantly lit booth', referring to the exterior electric lighting that drew the eye towards the box office at the centre of the facade.<sup>65</sup> 'I'm lighting the whole site', wrote Desmet, and this included the floodlighting of the helter-skelter next to the cinema.<sup>66</sup> The lavish scale and stylish art-nouveau design of the facade were hardly noted in the press. Perhaps the design was not so revolutionary for its time; perhaps Dutch audiences were not so taken with Belgian art nouveau. The wooden carving of the



Fig. 9. The Imperial Bio at the Groningen fair, 1908, with Desmet's luxury caravan (far right)

frames is reminiscent of the architecture of Victor Horta and Gustave Strauven.<sup>67</sup> A photograph of the Imperial Bio taken on the Market Square in Groningen in May 1908 shows all the details of the façade (Fig. 9). The cashier – possibly Rika Klabou – can be seen at the centre under the lettering of the Imperial Bio, with Jean Desmet himself to her left, leaning against a post. To the left of the picture, one of the Gasparini organs is visible, and to the right the steam engine that produced the electricity. Bottom-right are hoardings with film posters, and on the far right of the picture is Desmet's caravan. A row of arc lights hangs from the facade. Between the exotic, floral motifs of the frames are paintings of idyllic landscapes and allegorical figures.<sup>68</sup>

In contrast to other cinemas, which made do with an attractive facade, the interior of Desmet's travelling film theatre was opulently appointed, and it was this that most people wrote about. It is sometimes hard to distinguish between editorial enthusiasm and promotional hype in these reviews, and it is not unlikely that Desmet wrote them himself. The slogans from his advertisements were sometimes reproduced word for word and incorporated into the reviews. Other press notices dwelt at length on the booth and the programmes, as well as the projection, music and commentaries. Some criticisms are open to various interpretations, but on the whole, the responses were extremely positive:

Generally speaking, the most attractive feature of these constructions is the exterior; but here the interior is equally splendid. A long, high and therefore airy hall — 'tent' hardly seems a suitable word anymore — with fine velvet walls and even emergency exits; very comfortable chairs and, in the better rows at least, a wooden floor, so you are not sitting on the cobblestones. As for the films, they are the best available: well projected and supplied with good commentaries. The unavoidable intervals [for reel changes, IB] are creditably filled by a pianist and a violinist.<sup>69</sup>

This was printed in the *Amersfoortsche Courant* when Desmet appeared in the city in October 1907. When The Imperial Bio came to Zeist in August/September 1909, the local press wrote:

And now a special word for 'The Imperial Bio', one of the most striking booths on the fairground. We single it out because what director Jean Desmet offers is more worthy of a visit than any of the other things you will find at the fair night after night. This theatre-marquee is indeed 'furnished according to the demands of the times', and in quoting the words of the leaflet we are not just echoing the advertisements, since we have experienced it for ourselves. The interior looks splendid. The oblong hall, with russet velvet drapery as sidewalls, creates a splendid effect. The best seats are upholstered in blue velvet and, although a little less luxurious,

the other seats are good and solid. The biggest difference lies in the location of the seats themselves. Seen from close up, the 'flickers' [a common word for motion pictures at the time, IB] are always tiring on the eye, but the beauty of the living images is appreciably enhanced the further back you are seated.<sup>70</sup>

Desmet did not live in a caravan all the time, but when he was at the fair, he would spend the night in his chic 'lounge car' (Fig. 10). This was not so much a caravan as a work of art, an expensive luxury item, and a considerable status symbol for Desmet. Desmet was already promoting it in 1906, when he was still touring his helter-skelter, but from 1908 he regularly included it in his press advertising.<sup>71</sup> Just like his booth, De Sonnevillle decorated it in the art-nouveau style. The periodical *De Prins* published a picture of the lounge car in its edition of 25 April 1908, which was accompanied by the following description:

We have often seen pictures of the gigantic automobiles and caravans owned by rich Americans and Englishmen. They are equipped with every imaginable luxury and comfort, and it must be wonderful to travel around the world in them. In this edition, we publish a picture of the luxury caravan owned by Mr. Desmet, a cinema owner from Den Bosch. The vehicle is ten metres long, with cut-glass windows mounted in modern mahogany frames. The roof has ventilation windows. The interior consists of a drawing room, sleeping quarters and a bathroom, and everything is equipped for gas and electricity. The whole interior is finished in solid mahogany from designs by Albert De Sonnevillle, who also painted the ceiling. There is even a piano and a library in the drawing room. The whole carriage cost more than 12,000 guilders, and it is bound to attract a lot of interest in the various places visited by the owner with his cinema.<sup>72</sup>

In an advertisement for the Imperial Bio in Groningen a month later, Desmet announced that visitors to the fair were welcome to view the lounge car and referred them to the photograph in *De Prins*.<sup>73</sup> He mentioned with some pride that the vehicle had been exhibited at the World Fair in Liège. In the autumn of 1908 and the following summer in Zeist and Delft, he again included it as one of his attractions. In Zeist, he actually advertised it separately. It could be viewed for ten cents.<sup>74</sup> Considering the amount he paid for it, Desmet must have made quite a lot of money by this time. However, the pennies may have come in handy for paying his bills.<sup>75</sup>



Fig. 10. Interior of Desmet's luxury caravan, with his Bechstein piano (left)

In the years 1907-9, Desmet was a constant presence at the fairs from May to October. During the winter months, he showed films in rented auditoria. These were normally places used for concerts or plays, but they could be rented for film shows too. In his first winter season with the Imperial Bio, Desmet put on December shows in the 'Ober-Bayern' Concert Hall in Sittard and Geenen's Concert Hall in Helmond, and in February and March 1908 he appeared at the concert hall of the Royal Glee Club 'Souvenir des Montagnards' in Tilburg. Despite the actual absence of the cinema booth, he continued to advertise these indoor shows in the press as performances of 'The Imperial Bio'. The name was therefore not necessarily tied to his fairground film booth. In the winter of 1908-09, he again toured the halls with the Imperial Bio, appearing in the upper room of the Café Suisse in Zaandam in November 1908 and in the main auditorium of the Casino Association in Den Bosch in February 1909.<sup>76</sup>

In addition to the concert halls and fairs, the Imperial Bio appeared at the so-called 'kermesses d'été' or 'charity fêtes'. Outside the winter indoor period

and the annual spring or summer season on the fairground, exhibitors seized every opportunity to tour such 'kermesses d'été'. As noted above, Desmet was at the Public Welfare Festival in Wageningen, but he was also to be seen at the festival section of the agricultural fair at Apeldoorn (August 1908) and at the horticultural show at Zeist (August-September). Summer was not only a season for the fairgrounds, but also for all kinds of exhibitions and national festivals. Exhibitions were all the rage, although the Netherlands still lacked permanent buildings for trade fairs and exhibitions. The kermesses d'été were often devoted to charitable causes, but the profits were also used to cover the costs incurred in putting them on. Furthermore, both regionalism and nationalism were nourished by the centenary celebrations of cities, guilds and societies, as well as by events such as quinquennial university festivities. Films of functions of this kind, made by producers such as Alberts Frères, later became popular items on Desmet's programmes. *DELFTSCHE LUSTRUMFEESTEN* (LUSTRUM FESTIVITIES IN DELFT\*, Alberts Frères 1908), a record of the celebrations at the University of Delft in June 1908, appeared regularly at the Imperial Bio between the summers of 1908 and 1909. Desmet's cinematograph and helter-skelter were also featured on their own at the International Fair of Advertising in Arnhem (August 1908).<sup>77</sup>

Desmet was careful to show respect for the environment in which his attraction was set up, which earned him a good reputation with the press and the local establishment, in addition to boosting his clientele. When he put in at Amersfoort, he came up against the extremely active and influential Amersfoort Temperance Committee. The committee had its work cut out dealing with the drink problem, for the *Amersfoortsche Courant* contained regular reports of people who had been run in for drunkenness, particularly when women were involved. The committee praised Desmet for his help at the place of evil:

By agreement with Mr. Desmet, words of wisdom from the Committee Against Alcohol are projected onto the screen during each break between numbers, while the whole house sits waiting expectantly for the treats to come: 'Avoid trouble, don't take a double. Drink's the curse that makes everything worse – and on comes the hearse.' Or 'Women and girls, join together in the fight against alcoholism. You are in a position to exert a good influence.' It is nice to see the audience reading good advice of this kind. Truly, the temperance committee misses no opportunity of promoting the good cause.<sup>78</sup>

Desmet's programmes too were sometimes designed with an eye to their location. *LUSTRUM FESTIVITIES IN DELFT*, for example, was shown at the Delft fair a year after its release, and the screening of *REIS LANGS DE BLOEMBOLLEN-*

VELDEN TE HAARLEM (A TOUR OF THE BULB FIELDS OF HAARLEM\*, Alberts Frères 1909) at the Zeist horticultural show was again hardly coincidental (Colour Plate 1). Films such as DOOPLECHTIGHEID VAN H.K.H. PRINSES JULIANA (THE CHRISTENING OF HER ROYAL HIGHNESS PRINCESS JULIANA\*, Alberts Frères 1909), BEZOEK VAN DEN DUITSCHE KEIZER TE MIDDACHTEN (THE GERMAN KAISER'S VISIT TO MIDDACHTEN\*, Nöggerath 1908) and *Ontvangst van het bestuurbare luchtschip 'Zeppelin III' door Z.M. den Keizer van Duitsland* (Reception for the Airship 'Zeppelin III' by His Majesty The Kaiser of Germany, possibly a Messter production) were all shown at Zeist and undoubtedly went down well at a society event like the horticultural show, which was under the patronage of Emma, the Queen Mother, and the Royal Consort, Prince Hendrik.

Desmet probably never took the Imperial Bio to Belgium. According to the Belgian fairground trade journal, *La Comète belge*, the only Dutch cinema operators to appear in Belgium in the period 1907-10 were Alberts Frères and Carmine Riozzi, whose operating base (Breda) was close to the Belgian border.<sup>79</sup> Nonetheless, Desmet's advertisements always gave Belgium as the location of his head office. At Zeist, for example, he billed himself as 'the director of the world-renowned Cinéma from Brussels'. But superlatives and exaggerations are legion in the world of travelling cinema. When Desmet went to the fair in Groningen in 1908, his advertisements for the Imperial Bio in the *Nieuwe Groninger Courant* and the *Provinciale Groninger Courant* even claimed that he had 'ateliers artistiques' in Brussels and New York.<sup>80</sup> We may safely dismiss this sort of ballyhoo as empty hype. But, as Charles Musser has remarked in connection with the American travelling cinema operator Lyman Howe, such fabrications are actually very revealing. They give an indication of what Desmet considered likely to catch the imagination of a potential audience. They also allow us to watch Desmet fashioning his own autobiographical myth.<sup>81</sup> Musser also notes that 'some people accepted these pronouncements at face value. [...] But many retained a healthy scepticism towards the showman's promotional schemes and myth building.'<sup>82</sup> Desmet could also cover himself by saying that had been born in Brussels and had appeared on the fairground there for years, although this was with the wheel of fortune. The reference to 'New York' may have been a way of drawing attention to the American films on Desmet's programme, but it also reflected a desire for modernity and the exoticism of a world city.

The cinema booth obviously had to be put up and taken down between shows, which usually took a week. Desmet's containers were transported from town to town by rail, but Desmet himself acquired a car in 1907.<sup>83</sup> At the fairground site, the permanent staff was supplemented by hired labourers for loading and unloading and electricians for essential repairs. The convoy con-

sisted of Desmet's luxury caravan, a truck containing the organ, two open and two closed transporters and a mobile canteen. The Dutch railway network, which expanded rapidly in those years, was a vital facility for the touring cinema operators, and would later become even more important to Desmet when he went into film distribution.<sup>84</sup>

In some of the towns visited by the Imperial Bio, Desmet, or members of his family, would later open permanent cinemas, such as the Cinema Parisien, the Cinema Royal, the Gezelligheid (Rotterdam), the Delfia (Delft) and the Amersfoort Film Theater (Amersfoort). In other places on his circuit, he later did good business as a distributor with local cinema owners such as Geenen in Helmond. Strangely enough, in view of his annual visits there in the period 1907-9, Desmet did not establish a cinema in Leiden.

Desmet travelled all over the Netherlands with his cinema. Most of his locations were medium- to large-sized provincial towns with a strong regional character. In some of these places, for instance Tilburg or Groningen, Rotterdam and Amersfoort, he had earlier toured his wheel of fortune and the Canadian Toboggan. Desmet was conspicuously absent from cities like Utrecht and Maastricht, but this was probably due to the presence there of his competitors, notably Benner and Alberts Frères.

In most towns Desmet's visits were one-off affairs, and this was due to the murderous competition between cinema operators. He also visited a number of special fairs organised in connection with anniversaries and exhibitions. These were not annual events, so they did not provide continuity. Furthermore, it appears from the Desmet Archive and municipal archives that, generally speaking, Desmet bid less for his sites than his rivals Benner and Alberts Frères, so in some places he simply missed his chance. Alberts Frères and Benner were able to secure long leases from some of the larger local authorities, which enabled them to eliminate the competition completely.<sup>85</sup> Because of the space they took up, only one travelling cinema was allowed at most of the fairgrounds. But there were exceptions, and two cinemas could occasionally be found at the same fair, sometimes even competing with film shows in rented auditoria or in the early permanent cinemas.<sup>86</sup>

It is not clear when Desmet finally gave up his travelling cinematograph. The Imperial Bio was still touring the Netherlands after the opening of his first permanent cinema, the Cinema Parisien, in Rotterdam on 13 March 1909. The travelling cinema appeared in Leiden in July of that year and later in Delft (August) and Zeist (August to September). It was still operating in October 1910, when it could be seen in Nymegen and Tiel.<sup>87</sup> It is again uncertain whether Desmet was there in person at Nymegen. The person mentioned as the regisseur or front-of-house manager at Nymegen was Nico

Broekema, who usually worked for Desmet's rival Hommerson. But Desmet had also employed such managers in earlier years. In any event, it is clear from his private letters that he was present in Tiel.<sup>88</sup> In 1911, we still find him tendering for sites at fairs in Groningen, Utrecht, Tilburg, Den Bosch and Nymegen, but in the last three of these cities, it was Alex Benner's travelling cinema that was eventually seen at the fair.<sup>89</sup> But this looks very much like a put-up job. Benner probably owed Desmet a lot of money, since Desmet offered *f*500 for the fair in Tilburg, *f*750 for Den Bosch and no less than *f*1,250 for Nymegen. This was still not enough for the Nymegen authorities, and he finally had to pay *f*1,350. Benner, who had become a regular customer of Desmet's distribution business, took all his films and advertising material from Desmet for these three fairs, and shared the printing and film transportation costs.<sup>90</sup>

### **Film and audience at the Imperial Bio**

Although a precise reconstruction of Desmet's film shows is no longer possible, the situation was probably no different in his case than with other mobile cinemas. Three people were always present to make sure the show ran smoothly: the projectionist, the pianist and the 'explicateur' or lecturer. The projectionist screened the film. The pianist provided musical accompaniment for the silent films, emphasizing dramatic moments and generally setting the mood. The explicateur's job was to provide a better understanding of the film, and he appeared as a sort omniscient narrator. But he also imitated the voices of the characters, adding sound to their silent speech. Many explicateurs crafted this job into a true performance, and some of them were very popular with audiences: Willy Mullens, for instance, who performed in his own booth. Benner had a permanent explicateur, the former actor and variety artist Louis Hartlooper, who contributed very much to the attraction and success of the Benner cinema.<sup>91</sup> Desmet never gave these commentaries himself, and did not employ anyone else for the job on a permanent basis. Perhaps because of his introverted personality, he left the task to his own managers or bought in specialists. Local pianists often provided the musical accompaniments. Desmet's shows were thus likely to have been often rather local in character and very different from each other. There was no such thing as a typical Desmet show, unless it was precisely this local flavour.

Twelve years on from the very first film projections, it was still very difficult to keep the image on the screen flicker-free. Not all projectors produced sharp and flicker-free images. There were several reasons for this: the projector speed, the type of shutter used, or the condition of the film perforations.

Jumpy projection would provoke harsh criticism from both the press and the audience. Anyone who came along with a solution was sure of applause from the press. When Desmet appeared at the Helmond fair in 1907, the local paper, *Nieuws van de Week*, noted (in a discussion that appears very much orchestrated by Desmet himself) that 'there's not the trace of a flicker in the pictures, everything is projected life-size and the image on the screen is unusually sharp. So there's absolutely no question of the eye strain that people complained of previously.'<sup>92</sup> Desmet's projection was not always so immaculate, however. In an advertisement in the *Tilburgsche Courant*, after Sunday performances at the Royal Glee Club's hall in Tilburg, Desmet announced that 'regretting the frequent interruptions of last week's programme, which were due to a faulty projector, I am pleased to report that these problems have now all been resolved satisfactorily, and I therefore look forward in all confidence to your future attendance'.<sup>93</sup>

As noted above, a pianist and a violinist accompanied the films shown at Amersfoort in October 1907. Usually, however, there was only piano accompaniment. In May 1908, Desmet advertised a performance in Groningen 'with superb music (Bechstein upright piano)'.<sup>94</sup> He was very proud of this Bechstein, and when he put on a show at the Casino Association in Den Bosch in February, he replaced the piano there with the Bechstein.<sup>95</sup> It has been claimed that the pianist for the Imperial Bio was a Mr Carvallo [also spelled Carvalho] who later became the pianist at Desmet's Cinema Parisien in Amsterdam.<sup>96</sup> There is no firm evidence for this, but there were favourable notices of the music at performances of the Imperial Bio in Zaandam: 'The pianist Lebon deserves praise for his fine playing,' and in an advertisement for the shows in Den Bosch, Desmet introduced his pianist as 'Mr Johan Heerkens from Tilburg'. In Tiel, the programmes were '...embellished by the superb piano music of Mr Izaak Velleman.'<sup>97</sup> Not everybody was smitten by the piano music. The *Streekbode van Zeist, Driebergen en Omstreken* praised the film programme, 'but the monotonous piano accompaniment becomes tedious after a while'.<sup>98</sup>

The explicateur was an equally familiar figure at the travelling cinemas. Desmet already had one in Amersfoort in October 1907.<sup>99</sup> In Sittard, a journalist wrote: 'And then there are the front-of-house manager's explanations, which translate the superb pictures into words for the benefit of the audience. All of this makes for a highly entertaining evening.'<sup>100</sup> This may mean that, in addition to his duties as front-of-house manager, the above-mentioned F. A. Alten also provided the commentary. Desmet's explicateur in Nymegen and Tiel was R. Roodvelt.

His most prominent explicateur was the one engaged for the shows at the May fair in Groningen in 1908. This was the Amsterdam travelling showman

and explicateur Frederik Keijzer. Keijzer had toured the country years before with his so-called 'anti-fairground' presentations. At fair times, Keijzer neatly capitalised on local resistance to the fair by putting on film shows in rented premises, for which he used exactly the same repertoire of Pathé films as the people at the fair. He apparently had few scruples about appearing at Desmet's cinema booth in Groningen. Meanwhile, he had acquired a reputation nationally, and Desmet had his name printed in large letters in his advertisements. 'Enthralling and cultivated commentary by Mr. Frederik Keijzer!! Amsterdam', proclaimed the advertisement in the *Nieuwe Groninger Courant*.<sup>1101</sup> He did not mention that Keijzer had been living in Groningen for years. Film titles were not published in the advertisements. The phenomenon of 'cinema', plus Keijzer's 'show', was considered enough.<sup>102</sup> The press was generous with praise:

Just next to this building [the Hippodrome] stands the colourful and sparkling booth of De Smet's Imperial Bio, where for a modest entrance charge visitors are offered splendid cinematograph films, whose attractions are enhanced by the lucid, absorbing and humorous commentaries of Mr. Keijzer.<sup>103</sup>

Desmet had other ways besides the press of attracting audiences. Barrel-organ processions through the town at the beginning of a fair were also an effective form of advertising. Adopting a practice he would continue in his days as a cinema owner, Desmet also despatched his own publicity vehicle onto the streets, a sort of handcart fitted with a sandwich board for the posters. Otherwise, he merely distributed flyers on the streets and at the fair. Once people had reached the fair, the facade of the cinema with its electric lights acted like a huge advertising hoarding that lured them like moths to a flame. The ears as well as the eyes were seduced by the music of Desmet's organ, which stood by the entrance to the cinema. Not everybody was enchanted by music of this type, as was evident from one reaction during the fair at Zeist. The combination of horticultural show, historical village and fairground attracted such a diverse crowd that there were bound to be one or two disagreements. A gondola trip on lamplit boats, with an appropriate background of guitar and mandolin music, had been arranged for the evening of Monday 30 August. However, the atmosphere turned out to be less idyllic than anticipated:

The mandolin clubs were strumming their tunes in the middle of the square. The refined sounds of the guitars and mandolas were completely inaudible to anybody standing at any distance, for they were drowned by the blast of the machine behind Old Zeist, the hammering at the 'Try Your Strength' stall, the din of the

organ at the cinematograph booth and the roar of voices from the market square and fair.<sup>104</sup>

The seating at Desmet's cinema was divided into three sections. Because of the flickering images, the more expensive seats were, as often still today, those at the back, in a reversal of the order in conventional theatres.<sup>105</sup> F.A. Nöggerath's Bioscope Theater in Amsterdam also had the cheapest seats at the front and the most expensive at the back, and the press in both Zeist and Amsterdam noted this as something both remarkable and 'modern'.<sup>106</sup> Like other cinema operators, Desmet reserved Saturday or Sunday evenings for his so-called 'Elite' or 'Gala Performances'. However, unlike Alberts Frères, Desmet did not raise his prices for these shows. One wonders, therefore, whether he was attracting the same kind of audience mix as Frères. On Wednesday and Sunday afternoons, he often put on shows 'For Children and All the Family', and these matinees were often preceded by intensive advertising. This does not necessarily mean that only children attended these afternoon shows, but the price differences probably did create something of a barrier. Parents who took their children to the evening shows had to pay the full rate for their offspring. If they could pay to get in, children were free to attend any show they pleased in those years. Film censorship and age discrimination did not yet exist. Desmet only once announced a programme specially compiled for his matinees. As an audience segment, Desmet was interested in youngsters and their companions as a bonus to his evening shows. Anticipating parental complaints against the cinema, he portrayed his children's shows as innocent and instructive. The following is taken from an advertisement for a performance in Tilburg in 1908:

Parents! The children's performances at 'The Imperial Bio' strictly exclude anything unsuitable for the eyes or ears of a child. The performances are of an instructive, educational and strictly moral character. Sunday next, among other attractions, the showing of 'Sketch from the life of a teacher'. Send your children to these performances and enjoy the happy look on their faces when they get home.<sup>107</sup>

After 1907, ticket prices fell at the fairs, due probably to excess capacity or competition from other attractions. Another factor was the arrival of the first permanent cinemas, whose lower admission prices were undercutting prices at the travelling cinemas. Prices in the rented halls held their own, but here too there were complaints of excess capacity. When Desmet put on performances in December 1907, the *Limburgse Aankondiger* claimed that they had cost him money:

We could have wished Mr. De Smet greater success, particularly because his cinema must be reckoned one of the best at the moment. But he chose a bad time, and Sittard is not the place for weekly shows costing money, and certainly not when the admission prices are so high.<sup>108</sup>

How much did audiences pay for admission to one of Desmet's shows? In 1908 prices at the regular fairs were 60 cents for the rear stalls, 40 for the centre stalls and 25 for the front stalls. It became a little cheaper in 1909, when these prices were 50, 30 and 20 cents, respectively. Prices for children also fell slightly in 1909, compared to 1907 and 1908. Desmet's performances in hired halls, as well as those at the special fairs, were more expensive than those at the regular fairgrounds. Between 1907 and 1909 they remained at 75 cents for the rear stalls, 50 for the centre, and 30 for the front. Desmet's prices largely matched those of his competitors, both in the halls and at the fair.

There are few figures available for audience sizes at Desmet's booth. Press notices sometimes declared that the hall was bursting at the seams, but now and again they noted that the place might have been better filled. Seating capacities in the halls are equally difficult to estimate. Desmet's booth is known to have been 260 square metres in area. The Desmet Archive reveals that the Frans Rouleau-Berger furniture factory delivered 248 tip-up seats to Desmet, which were first used at the fair in Rotterdam in 1907. This purchase tells us nothing about the total seating capacity, as Desmet could already have had an existing stock of seats. It is equally unclear whether there was also a standing area in his booth, since his advertisements mention only the three categories of stall seating.

Boost gives a figure of 280 seats, but this figure becomes questionable when he writes that around 1907 the Mullens's booth had seating for 800 in a space which, at 544 square metres, was twice the size of Desmet's. In the years before this, the Mullens's booth, at 240 square metres, was about the same size as Desmet's. Desmet himself advertised a seating capacity of 600 at the Groningen fair of May 1908.<sup>109</sup> This seems a little exaggerated. If we bear in mind that he required at least 60 square metres for the projector, the aisles and a minimum distance of 1 metre from the screen, the booth could have accommodated an audience of around 500 people. Desmet's figure of 600 could only have been achieved by cramming a large number of people up against each other or by offering standing room to part of the audience.<sup>110</sup> Desmet described his booth precisely as 'a pleasant distraction for the lingering gaze, but also a place where even on the busiest evenings it is possible to sit comfortably and without being crowded by other people.'<sup>111</sup> Even if Desmet could accommodate 500, he must have had a substantial number of seats at his disposal. Aside from a few exceptions, most Dutch travelling cinemas, as

well as the first permanent cinemas, were on a smaller scale than this.<sup>112</sup> With the possible exception of Alberts Frères's booth, travelling cinemas with 1,000 seats or more, such as those encountered in other countries, were unknown in the Netherlands.<sup>113</sup>

The scale of Desmet's operation when on tour was determined by all kinds of factors, but weather was the most important. Even in summer, the rains of Holland were a terrible thorn in the side of the cinema operators. They could advertise as much as they liked, but they were powerless against the elements, and this was one of the things that made fairground operation an extremely risky way of making a living. A thunderstorm wrecked the opening of both the horticultural show in Zeist and the opening of the historical village of 'Old Seyst'. Showers continued to fall during the days that followed. Wherever Desmet went with his Imperial Bio, the prospect of good weather for the fair was reported almost euphorically in the press.

The social composition of Desmet's audiences can be established only roughly. The audiences in the winter months, the performances in halls and at the 'kermesses d'été' were presumably better off, since admission prices at these venues were higher than at the regular fairs. However, a report in the *Nieuwe Courier* of Roermond suggests that audiences in the rented halls were not always composed of the area's most sensitive souls:

As we have already seen at other performances in this location, the behaviour of the people in the upper circle was again anything but civilised. Things came to such a pass that the police had to be called in.<sup>114</sup>

In view of his reduction of admission prices between 1907 and 1909, particularly prices for children, it seems safe to assume that Desmet tried to pack in as many people as possible at the fairground shows, without bothering too much about who they might be. The reduced admission for children may have been a calculated manoeuvre to get the whole family out to the cinema. On the other hand, the reduced admission prices could also have been due to competition from the earliest permanent cinemas or generally slack times on the fairground. Desmet addressed a broad public that included both the old and the new lower classes (farm labourers, factory workers) and the middle classes of the large cities and smaller towns. The conservative upper classes might have occasionally risked a visit to the cinema at the 'kermesses d'été', such as the one in Zeist. Desmet's negotiations with the anti-alcohol lobby in Amersfoort suggest that the audience there may also have contained elements of the conservative, churchgoing part of the population. On the other hand, Desmet did not purposely avoid risky or sensational films in order to

spare his audience's feelings. In this connection, Charles Musser writes of a 'cinema of desire' when describing the regular programmes of dramas and comedies at the American nickelodeons. He contrasts this with the so-called 'cinema of reassurance' of the American travelling operator Lyman Howe, who did not select films of that kind for inclusion in his shows.<sup>115</sup> Desmet did not apply such strict divisions. In common with his rivals, he blended fiction with non-fiction. Judging by his advertisements and reviews, neither his afternoon nor his evening shows contained films that might have been considered offensive, such as the spicier items from Pathé. Where Musser writes of Howe that, 'like John Philip Sousa, he knitted diverse groups together into a unified audience using patriotism, enthusiasm, and a sense of national destiny', it seems that Desmet, who was of mixed nationality, saw less reason to try to mobilise his audience morally in the manner of Howe.<sup>116</sup> Desmet's rival Mullens, on the other hand, who was very nationalistic, probably did manipulate his audiences like Howe, for he was said to have selected his films with a view to offering them a 'cinema of reassurance'.

### **Films and programming at The Imperial Bio: nationalities, genres and trends**

The Desmet Archive contains no weekly checklists of programmes shown at The Imperial Bio. For information on these films, we have to rely completely on the titles mentioned in the advertisements and discussions in the local press. These newspapers announced foreign films under Dutch titles. Unlike other countries, and in contrast with later years, these were all literal translations of the original foreign titles or translations of the titles used in the countries surrounding the Netherlands (Germany, Belgium and France). PARDONNE GRAND-PÈRE (Pathé 1908), for example, became *Grandfather's Forgiveness*, LA VENGEANCE DU FORGERON (Pathé 1907) became *The Blacksmith's Revenge*. The films can thus be identified by country of origin, production company and year. However, it was not unusual for a competitor to show films under the same, or nearly the same title a year later, or even at the same time, which makes tracking them a little more difficult. *The Ghost*, shown by Desmet in 1909, may refer to the Pathé movie LE SPECTRE (1908), but could also be LE REVENANT (Gaumont 1907-8) or IL FANTASMA (Cines 1909). The identification and reconstruction of the programmes has been made easier by the survival of several films from Desmet's time on the road, on which more below.

The film programmes of the travelling cinema period consisted of a motley collection of genres such as comedy, drama and actuality, with the longest

film never exceeding fifteen minutes in length. Desmet's programmes were no exception to this. A review of his shows in Zaandam in 1908 gives a good picture of the variety of material presented:

And so we take a trip to Norway, calling at Christiania, Bergen and the Norwegian highlands with their superb waterfalls; next we are out at sea watching the cod and haddock fishing; then comes the great review of the fleet off the southern English coast, during which we watch submarines firing torpedoes; we next arrive in the mountains of Corsica; then we are off again to Paris, capital of France. There are some marvellous coloured scenes in the 'Poor Painter' when the painter dreams that he is in a fairytale palace, and then a film of a first-rate short story, in which an out of work and desperate labourer summons all his energy and decency of character to work his way up to the position of deputy manager of a large factory. Among other very entertaining and gripping films are 'A New Style of Assault' and 'The Short-sighted Cyclist'.<sup>117</sup>

Desmet sometimes changed his programme every two days, but this did not necessarily involve a complete change. This was sometimes the case, but more often than not he changed only part of the show, leaving his current hits on the bill. He sometimes stayed at a fair for just two days, but was mostly there for the whole of the fair week. This meant changing the programme two or three times. Some fairs actually went on for ten days, or even longer, and every now and then Desmet would stay on for a couple of days after the official end of the fair. Desmet and other operators must, therefore, have had considerable stocks of film at their disposal. During the winter season indoors, Desmet was not tied to the fair week, and often stayed for just a four-day weekend. In Tilburg, he showed films only on Sundays in a hall for several weeks between February and March 1908. In 1909, he continued for three weeks at Zeist, but this was due to the length of the exhibition where the fair had been set up, and was therefore exceptional.

Unlike the publicity for the programmes of his later permanent cinemas, Desmet's advertisements for the Imperial Bio seldom included an exhaustive list of the films shown. Only a few titles were mentioned in the press during 1907 and 1908, and in 1908 and 1909 there were advertisements in which only a single film would be mentioned. The named film would often be a news actuality, such as the earthquake in Messina or the christening of Princess Juliana. In contrast to the period after 1910, named films did not by any means have to be the longest productions on the programme. News value was more important than length.

The actuality was very important in the years of Desmet's travelling cinema. Real events were very popular, and the subjects shown were always boldly announced in the advertisements, despite their limited length.<sup>118</sup> These were the films that usually received the press coverage. On 22 February 1908, for instance, the advertisements that appeared in the *Tilburgsche Courant* and the *Nieuwe Tilburgsche Courant* were devoted exclusively to the film of the joint funeral of the King and Crown Prince of Portugal, who had been assassinated on 1 February. The French film company Gaumont had filmed the funeral of the victims and released it under the title FUNERAILLES DE S.M LE ROI DON CARLOS II ET DE S.A.R LE DUC DE BRAGANCE (FUNERAL OF H.M. DON CARLOS II AND H.R.H. THE DUKE OF BRAGANZA\*). Desmet somehow managed to procure a copy quickly, for on Saturday 15 February he announced that he would be showing the film on Sunday 16 February, provided it was ready in time.<sup>119</sup> This did not work out since the film arrived too late. But Desmet was able to slip in an extra performance on Saturday 22 February, expressly for the screening of this one film, plus his usual selection of dramas, comedies and 'legendary tableaux'. There is still a copy of this film in the Desmet Collection.<sup>120</sup> FUNERAILLES DE S.M. LE ROI DON CARLOS II ET DE S.A.R. LE DUC DE BRAGANCE shows the arrival of the mourning coaches and the bearing of the coffins into the cathedral, but it also records the obtrusive behaviour of the photographers and cameramen in front of the church. So that in addition to its registration of an official event, the film is also an early documentary about the paparazzi. At the same time, it suggests the shadow side of the lives of the crowned heads of Europe, which were such a notable focus of interest at the film shows on the fairgrounds.

The designation 'up-to-the-minute pictures' in the advertisements for these films must not always be taken literally. The Imperial Bio's first known performance, in Wageningen in October 1907, included among other material the film *Grand Review of the Home Fleet off the Coast of England* (possibly made by Urban).<sup>121</sup> Desmet continued to include this film in his advertisements for quite some time. It was shown in Amsterdam in October 1907, in Sittard and Helmond in December, and then again in Tilburg in February 1908, in Zaan-dam in November and in Den Bosch in February 1909. In July 1909, he showed another film entitled *The Latest Review of the English Fleet on the Thames*, which may well be a film of a British fleet show from that year, but the topicalising adjective 'latest' may also be a trifle deceptive.<sup>122</sup>

The fleet film supposedly included 'sensational views of the sea'. It is difficult to assess the extent to which the programming and promotion of actualities was intended as a way of attracting the interest of the 'better classes' and the serious press. Perhaps Desmet wanted to get across the message that he did not just deal in low farce, but was also fully capable of appealing to

more serious tastes. At the same time, however, the adjective 'sensational' attached to the description of the films is clearly aimed at attracting more than just 'serious' spectators.

Travelling cinema operators used to stress Dutch actualities as 'our own pictures'. This again needs to be approached with caution. Not every exhibitor had a camera and a stock of unexposed film in his personal possession. Only exceptional figures such as Mullens and Nöggerath had their own darkrooms. In the early years of the last century, exposed film was sent off to be developed in England or France. Sometimes the cinema operators might employ a local photographer or cameraman to shoot pictures, and from around 1910 it was possible to hire a cameraman from Pathé in Amsterdam.

We do not know whether Jean Desmet had his own film camera. The only actuality that might have been commissioned by Desmet is a film about a flight by Jan Olieslagers, nicknamed 'The Antwerp Devil', which was shot at Nymegen on 5 October 1910 and shown two days later. The Desmet Collection contains a film, dated 1910, called OLIESLAGERS Vlieg Pogingen in de Watergraafsmeer (OLIESLAGERS ATTEMPT AT FLIGHT IN WATERGRAAFSMEER\*), but this was shot near Amsterdam.<sup>123</sup> Many of the films advertised by Desmet as his 'own pictures' turn out on closer analysis to be productions of Alberts Frères or Nöggerath. In addition to the Alberts Frères films mentioned above – Lustrum Festivities in Delft, The Christening of H.R.H. Princess Juliana and A Tour of the Bulb Fields of Haarlem – Desmet also showed their Spoorwegongeluk bij Contich (Train Crash at Contich\*, 1908). As already noted, the Imperial Bio screened the Nöggerath production of THE GERMAN KAISER'S VISIT TO MIDDACHTEN in 1909. Dutch actualities of this kind do not feature in Desmet's programmes in 1907, but they do appear regularly in the programs for 1908 and 1909. In November 1908 in Tiel, Desmet advertised the Delft Lustrum film as his 'own picture'. The following year at Delft, the same film was introduced as 'pictures from our own house'. Both these films were in fact productions by the Mullens from 1908 and 1909. Here, Desmet was simply annexing someone else's productions. As he saw it, the maker of a movie was less important than its exhibitor. He clearly had no desire to refer to his Dutch competitors in his own advertisements. At best, therefore, Desmet's description 'our own pictures' can be taken to mean Dutch productions, that is to say, films that were not made by large foreign firms such as Pathé.

The only three of Desmet's Dutch actualities to survive from his travelling days are OLIESLAGER'S ATTEMPT AT FLIGHT IN WATERGRAAFSMEER, a copy entitled BULB FIELDS OF HAARLEM which might be the Alberts Frères film mentioned earlier, and THE CHRISTENING OF H.R.H. PRINCESS JULIANA.<sup>124</sup> The birth

of a successor to the House of Orange, which had experienced problems in producing heirs, was one of the most important events of 1909. Born 30 April 1909, Princess Juliana was christened on 5 June of that year. One of the most striking moments in the somewhat jerky film reportage of *THE CHRISTENING OF H.R.H. PRINCESS JULIANA* is its record of a slight accident. The Queen and her husband have just alighted in front of the church, when the coach carrying Emma, the Queen Mother, collides with the coach of Queen Wilhelmina. The wheels of the two coaches become entwined. A high-ranking military figure is seen tearing a strip off the coachman. The incident is a breach of decorum, but it has the effect of reducing official ritual to human proportions. Remarkably enough, Mullens simply kept the shot in the film.

Turning to feature films, it is not easy to deduce their genres from the Dutch titles in the advertisements, but we can say that, generally speaking, the films Desmet advertised were mostly dramas. This does not necessarily imply that dramas were the main ingredient of his programmes (the opposite was in fact the case); simply that he felt they needed more publicity than the comedies.

In the period 1907-8, feature films were advertised far less conspicuously than actualities anyway. The same applied to reviews of the programmes in the press. In contrast, there are a few advertisements from this period in which the titles are all given an equal amount of space. No one film appears to be more important than another. It was not until 1909 that advertisements listing several titles appeared, with one title printed large and in bold. An example of this is the advertisement for the Imperial Bio's performance at Leiden in the *Leidsch Dagblad* of 27 July 1909. Along with *THE CHRISTENING OF H.R.H. PRINCESS JULIANA*, *THE LATEST REVIEW OF THE ENGLISH FLEET ON THE THAMES*, and *PITY TO LOVE (DALLA PIETÀ ALL'AMORE, SAFFI-Comerio 1909)*, the title *THE GHOST* ('a high-tension drama') appears in large print.<sup>125</sup>

But Desmet just as often placed advertisements announcing a variety of genres. The indication of diversity was evidently considered sufficient in those times. The films themselves are interchangeable. In the *Leidsch Dagblad* of Saturday 18 July 1908, Desmet announced the screening at the Imperial Bio of 'Enthralling dramas, beautiful scenes of nature, hilarious comedies, superb fairy-tale spectacles and the latest and most prominent events at home and abroad'. He then listed just the *LUSTRUM FESTIVITIES IN DELFT* and *THE TRAIN CRASH AT CONTICH*, followed by 'etc., etc.'<sup>126</sup> This sort of cataloguing approach to film genres is repeated in his advertisements for the Imperial Bio at Tiel (October 1908), Zaandam (November 1908) and Leiden (July 1909).

The majority of the feature films mentioned by Desmet in his advertisements in 1907-8 were Pathé productions, particularly the dramas. The Desmet Col-

lection still has copies of *LUTTE POUR LA VIE* (*STRUGGLE FOR LIFE*, 1907), *LA MAISON ENSORCELÉE* (*THE HAUNTED HOUSE*, 1908), and two of the films mentioned above, *LA VENGEANCE DU FORGERON* and *PARDONNE GRAND-PÈRE*. *LA MAISON ENSORCELÉE* is a comedy about a haunted house with superb special effects by its maker, Segundo De Chomón. The other three are modern dramas. *LUTTE POUR LA VIE* (Fig. 11) is the film mentioned earlier in which ‘an unemployed and desperate labourer summons all his energy and decency of character to work his way up to the position of deputy manager of a large factory’.<sup>127</sup> In passing, we enjoy a tour of the monuments of Paris during a sequence in which the hero follows a coach. In *LA VENGEANCE DU FORGERON*, a cuckolded blacksmith kills his wife’s aristocratic lover during a fight with hammers, and *PARDONNE GRAND-PÈRE* tells of the reconciliation between a grandfather and his daughter, who is disowned on account of her relationship with a woodcutter, but received back into the family through the intercession of her small daughter.

Desmet advertised *LUTTE POUR LA VIE* as a film lasting no less than thirty minutes, although according to the Pathé catalogues it was 300 metres long, which makes a film of about a quarter of an hour. The nitrate copy of the film, which is still present in the Desmet Collection, is actually only 271 metres long. Press descriptions leave no doubt that it is the same film. The length of



Fig. 11. *Lutte pour la vie* (Pathé 1907) – the tramp follows a carriage through Paris to offer a lady his services

films, particularly dramas, increased appreciably during this period. The new longer dramas could be included alongside standard-length farces, non-fiction films and short dramas, none of which ever exceeded 300 metres. Up to this time, a film had lasted a quarter of an hour at the most. So length could now be used as a weapon of publicity and promoted as an object both exclusive and modern. It was evidently unimportant whether the film advertised actually lasted for half an hour. Another film purporting to be thirty minutes long was *THE DISCOVERY OF AMERICA*, a film Desmet showed repeatedly throughout his career with the travelling cinema. It was most probably the Pathé movie *CHRISTOPHE COLOMBE* (*CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS*) dating from 1904: hardly a recent release, therefore, and just 265 metres long.<sup>128</sup>

Desmet's programmes changed in 1909, at least as far as the titles advertised are concerned. He continued to show Pathé films, but films by other French production companies, such as Film d'Art and Éclair, also appeared on his programmes, together with a large number of Italian productions by companies such as Itala, Ambrosio, Comerio and Aquila. These programmes were further embellished by two American movies by Vitagraph. There was a marked fashion in 1909 for so-called 'art films', which were films about historical figures such as Henry III (*ENRICO III/HENRY THE THIRD*, Itala 1909) and Napoleon (*THE LIFE DRAMA OF NAPOLEON BONAPARTE AND THE EMPRESS JOSEPHINE OF FRANCE* and *NAPOLEON, MAN OF DESTINY*, a 1909 Vitagraph movie in two parts). The former is a precursor of the Italian epic film, which later became such a popular genre. The latter is an example of the Vitagraph version of the historical genre.<sup>129</sup> Films of this kind were well received by the press, as we can see from a piece that appeared in the *Delftsche Courant* in 1909:

The Fall of Napoleon is one of the finest and most clearly narrated films among the films currently being shown. The whole history of Napoleon's life unfolds before our eyes on the screen. We see the battles he won and those he lost. Finally, there are fine shots of him as a prisoner on St. Helena. There we see the great Corsican standing on top of a rock, with bowed head, hands behind his back in a bent position, the famous cocked hat on his head and long coat. The waves roll towards us out of the distance and crash against the rock.<sup>130</sup>

Both the Italian and the American 'art' films emerged from the French 'film d'art' movies, which built a reputation for themselves throughout Europe and the United States from 1908 onwards.<sup>131</sup> In response to the growing criticism of the crudeness, sameness and surfeit of (mainly French) dramas and comedies, there was a search for alternatives that showed a modicum of educational responsibility. These films were distinguished mainly by their enlist-

ment of professional stage actors and their adaptation of popular historical novels and plays. For a while, film in general benefited from the success of these films. It was hoped that this kind of 'packaging' would attract the wealthier people who normally went to the theatre. But they were also intended as a way of securing the acceptance of the phenomenon of cinema as such, at a time when the earliest cinemas were coming under heavy critical fire. The 'film d'art' was in a certain sense a sequel to the actuality, which had served to legitimate cinema up to that point. Like the actualities, however, the 'film d'art' formed only a small part of a whole programme. The rest of the programme was taken up by the grotesque burlesques and violent dramas of Pathé and their imitators.

Desmet's advertisements homed in on the legitimating potential of the 'films d'art'. He placed the following advertisement in the *Leidsch Dagblad* on 29 July 1909: 'The hit of the fair is the Imperial Bio which is offering items never before shown by us or anyone else: art films performed by the great French actors of the Odéon Théâtre, the Comédie Française and the Théâtre Gymnase in Paris.'<sup>132</sup> The titles of these films were not stated, but Desmet was probably referring to films like *LA MAIN* (*THE HAND\**, Film d'Art 1909), which he had shown a month earlier in the Imperial Bio at Dordrecht.

The years 1908-9 witnessed the rise of new national film industries. Italy and the United States not only joined in with the 'film d'art' but also underwent general expansion. In the years 1908-9, the young Italian film industry secured a position in the international market, which was due largely to its production of historical movies.<sup>133</sup> The United States too discovered Europe as an important outlet for its films around 1908.<sup>134</sup> In 1907, Vitagraph became the first company to open branches in Paris and Berlin. The firm had established its own laboratory in Paris to produce screening copies from negatives sent over from America, which were then distributed in the various European countries. The perforation-strip on the copies made in Paris note their place of origin.<sup>135</sup> 'The Vitagraph Company of Paris' is still legible on nitrate copies of Vitagraph films in the Desmet Collection.

It is not known whether Desmet showed many Vitagraph movies in his travelling cinema, but he certainly did show several Italian films. In July 1908 in Dordrecht, for example, he screened *FACCIA A FACCIA* (*FACE TO FACE\**, Itala 1908) at the Imperial Bio. The growing variety of Desmet's programming was presumably connected with new developments in his film business. On 13 March 1909, Desmet opened his first permanent cinema at number 28 Korte Hoogstraat in Rotterdam: the Cinema Parisien. In Rotterdam, he managed to obtain a new kind of material. *FACCIA A FACCIA* was shown just two weeks after the opening of the Cinema Parisien before it went on to Dordrecht.<sup>136</sup> The opening programme at the Cinema Parisien consisted of an assortment



Fig. 12. *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* (Ambrosio 1908) – introduction of Nidia, the blind flower seller

of Italian shorts such as *UN DRAMMA AL CIRCO* (A DRAMA AT THE CIRCUS\*, Cines 1908), *FURTO ALLA MOSCHEA* (THE THEFT IN THE MOSQUE\*, Aquila 1908) and *LE BIRICCHINATE DI UN RAGAZZO* (THE LITTLE IMP, Ambrosio 1909), surmounted by *GLI ULTIMI GIORNI DI POMPEI* (THE LAST DAYS OF POMPEII, Ambrosio 1908) as the main feature (Fig. 12). This was just one of the films with which the Italians were creating an international sensation, although the scene of the eruption of Vesuvius nowadays looks clumsily done, and the beautiful Greek Ione is played by a rather ghastly actress. The film was based on Edward Bulwer-Lytton's historical novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834), which enjoyed great popularity at the time. Desmet claimed in his advertisements that the actors in the film were from the Comédie Française. He was clearly trying to get in on the 'film d'art' trend before the Italian film had actually secured that kind of reputation. However, that was not long in coming. The rise of Italian and American cinema in Desmet's programming had to do with more than just Desmet's establishment in Rotterdam, for it was connected with another important development: the arrival of Dutch film distribution.

## Conclusion

In 1907, Christian Slieker, the pioneer, gave up his travelling cinema and Desmet started his own. That same year, F.A. Nöggerath Jr. opened one of the first permanent cinemas in the Netherlands. Jean Desmet began his career at a time when the world of travelling cinema was going through a period of scaling up, increased investment, 'gentrification' and selection of the fittest for survival. Judging from the location of his fairground sites, the opulence of his booth and the composition of his programmes, Desmet belonged to the middle order of travelling cinema operators. He was not as big as Alberts Frères, but certainly bigger than Slieker, Carl Welte and Carmine Riozzi.<sup>137</sup> He took his travelling theatre to large cities and medium-sized towns that were largely provincial in outlook. When the opening of permanent cinemas brought about a gradual contraction of this market between 1908 and 1912, he did not turn to alternative fairground attractions. Unlike showmen such as Riozzi and Welte, Desmet refused to let himself be pushed out into country villages where there were still no cinemas. Like the Mullens, he just pressed on into the big cities where the permanent motion-picture theatres were beginning to appear and became an important pioneer of this new development. He plunged into the operation of fixed venues, first in Rotterdam and soon afterwards in Amsterdam. Having established this base, he set about opening cinemas throughout the country, eventually creating the first cinema chain in the Netherlands. Desmet's emulation of Nöggerath did not stop at cinema ownership. Following in the wake of Nöggerath and Pathé, he was to become one of the most important distributors in the Netherlands.

## II. In the Beginning...

### Film Distribution in the Netherlands Before Desmet

What was the situation of film distribution in the Netherlands before Desmet arrived on the scene? How did he acquire his films between 1907 and 1910? Unfortunately, the Desmet Archive does not offer much help on these questions. Sources not directly concerned with Desmet offer more information. The Dutch fairground trade journal *De Komeet*, of which only a few odd copies have survived from Desmet's fairground years between 1900 and 1910, contains advertisements from distributors and production companies. Trade journals specific to film did not exist at the time. Another source is the film programmes of the period, notably the programmes of F.A. Nöggerath's Bioscope Theater. On the basis of *De Komeet*, film programming in general in the years 1907-10 and the film copies still extant in the Desmet Collection, it can be established that Desmet had a choice of three sources for his films: F.A. (Anton) Nöggerath Sr. and Jr., the Dutch branch of Pathé and the foreign production companies themselves. In addition to these, Desmet took Dutch news productions from the Mullens brothers which he probably purchased from them directly.

#### I. Nöggerath

The first major Dutch film distributors were Franz Anton Nöggerath, father and son. Where Desmet, the Mullens brothers and Benner stand as representatives of the world of travelling cinema at the beginning of the last century, Nöggerath Sr. and Jr. were important figures in the world of Dutch variety theatre. Parallel to the fairground circuit covered by Desmet in the years 1907-9 was another world that also fostered the development of a Dutch film culture. This was the world of variety theatre.

In cities such as Amsterdam and Rotterdam, film was to be seen mainly in the variety theatres. Amsterdam had possessed a flourishing variety-theatre circuit since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Towards the end of the century, this was concentrated on Rembrandt Square and nearby Amstelstraat (Flora Theater, Grand Théâtre, Rembrandt Theater) (Fig. 13), as well as along the River Amstel (Carré Theater). In Rotterdam, Samuel Soesman's



Fig. 13. Amstelstraat, Amsterdam, c.1910

Casino Variété on Coolsingel and Carl Pfläging's Circus Variété on Station Square were the trendsetters, but the whole of central Rotterdam buzzed with theatre and variety, particularly on and around Coolsingel.<sup>1</sup> The variety-theatre shows were often called 'speciality shows'. They consisted of a varied series of numbers, such as acrobats, performing dogs, comic monologues and singing, which were sometimes combined into a revue. Artists came from all over the world to perform in them. Films were often shown as the closing number at the Flora and Carré Theatres in Amsterdam and at the Casino Variété and the Circus Variété in Rotterdam. The length of the film programmes in these theatres remained short, even after films themselves grew longer. Complete or whole-evening performances of film were exceptional in Amsterdam at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> As we saw above, after the banning of the (autumn) fair by the city authorities in 1876, the variety theatres were for many years the only places in Amsterdam where movies could be seen.

The Flora Theater was run by Anton Nöggerath Sr. (Fig. 14). He quickly zeroed in on the potential of film exhibition and film production, but he was also a pioneer in the sphere of film distribution.<sup>3</sup> From the end of 1897, Nöggerath was the representative for the Netherlands, Denmark and Norway of the Warwick Trading Company.<sup>4</sup> The sale of equipment was more important than the sale of films at the end of the nineteenth century. At the turn of the century, Warwick was one of the largest distributors of equipment such as Charles Urban's 'Bioscope' projector. The company also released films, including the films of the two British film-makers George Albert Smith and James Williamson. Under Urban's management, Warwick also managed to become the sole agents for Georges Méliès (Star Film) and Lumière. Thus, even in the early days, Nöggerath had access to a very wide range of films. He also distributed his own productions. Initially, these were Dutch actualities and staged 'actualities' à la Méliès, but later he made fiction films. Either directly or through Warwick, he distributed his actualities to the rest of the world.<sup>5</sup>

His letterheads pointedly emphasised that he had set up his distribution company in 1897. He called it FAN-film (with FAN standing for Franz Anton Nöggerath). 'The Royal Bioscope' or 'Royal Biograph', as he called his shows after Urban's 'Royal Bioscope', was always the concluding item on the pro-



Fig. 14. Anton Nöggerath Sr.

gramme at the Flora variety theatre. He also supplied films on a regular basis to the Rotterdam Casino Variété and to the travelling cinema operators. He is known to have supplied films to the Mullens brothers and Slieker.<sup>6</sup>

Nöggerath travelled all over Europe (or had someone else do so on his behalf, the facts are unclear) to put on his 'Royal Bioscope' at other variety theatres and rented halls. In the theatres of surrounding countries like Germany, film performances were also often the closing number of the variety shows and were an important attraction.<sup>7</sup> Compared with other Dutchmen, Nöggerath was in a privileged position. His travel and international perspective quickly alerted him to new developments in the film world. Apart from the modest actualities and feature productions of Nöggerath and Alberts Frères, there was almost no film production in the Netherlands, so the nation's dependence on foreign sources was total.

In 1897 Nöggerath sent his eldest son, Anton Jr., to Britain to learn the film business with Maguire & Baucus, later the Warwick Trading Company. Anton Jr. worked there mainly as a cameraman and film developer. To what extent he became involved in film distribution in England, acquiring a grasp of the business that he could later put to use in the Netherlands, remains unclear. Both contemporary and later sources have nothing to say about Nöggerath's experience in the British distribution business, but it seems quite likely that he learned a few things about it during his time with Urban and Warwick.<sup>8</sup> After the death of his father on 21 December 1908, Nöggerath Jr. returned to the Netherlands and, in partnership with his mother, assumed the management of the Flora Theater in Amsterdam, the Bioscope (Film) Theater in Amsterdam (opened in 1907) and the Flora Theater in the Hague (opened in 1908). Nöggerath set up a little factory for titles behind the Amsterdam cinema. He also took over his father's distribution operations. He broadened his father's field of interest to include other French firms such as Gaumont, Eclipse, Éclair, Lux and Le Lion, the American Biograph Company and Italian film companies such as Cines, Ambrosio and Itala.<sup>9</sup> The variety of programming that Desmet was able to offer from 1909 onwards was probably due simply to the fact that he had transferred his film purchasing from Pathé to Nöggerath Jr.

## 2. Pathé

Nöggerath's was not the only address where Desmet could go for his films (Fig. 15). Shortly before he started his travelling cinema, it became possible to buy Pathé films directly in Amsterdam, so that they no longer had to be or-



Fig. 15. Interior of the Pathé sales and rental agency, Paris, rue Favart 10, 1910

dered from Paris. Pathé had opened a branch on Leidsestraat in December 1905 where they sold their own Pathé equipment, such as projectors, condensers and lenses, as well as Pathé films. Price lists for the equipment and catalogues containing stills from the films were available on request. For a long time, this was the only branch of a foreign film concern in the Netherlands.<sup>10</sup>

At the time Desmet started up in film, Pathé dominated the entire international film market, from Europe to the USA.<sup>11</sup> Its continuous mass production, standardisation and large network of agencies made 'Pathé' the appropriate format for production, distribution and exhibition. Pathé called the tune everywhere, including the Netherlands. Both travelling showmen and variety theatres must have been regular customers of Pathé, first in Paris and then later in Amsterdam, or indirectly via Nöggerath.

By 1907, the firm of Pathé Frères, established on 30 September 1896, had expanded exponentially. Besides the head office in Paris, the company had branches in Moscow, New York, Brussels, Berlin, Vienna, Saint Petersburg, Amsterdam, Barcelona, Milan, London, Odessa, Rostov, Kiev, Budapest, Calcutta, Warsaw and Singapore. The Pathé film factory at Vincennes steadily increased its output of films and managed to maintain continuous sales of a wide variety of film material, so buyers tended to remain loyal clients. Production took on huge proportions. In 1906, for instance, Pathé turned out 20

kilometres of film a year, enough for about 240 films, most of which were short farces. Pathé was popular with the exhibitors because of the stable perforations on its films and the tough base of its film materials.<sup>12</sup> All genres were represented on its palette of movies: comedies, dramas, historical films, fantasy and special effects films, religious films, films on sport and acrobatics, real and staged actualities and, if that's what you wanted, sexually risqué films, the 'scènes grivoises'. Many of the fantasy movies and travalogues, as well as films in other genres, were also filled in with colour by means of the so-called stencil or 'pochoir' technique, already used for colouring postcards. Pathé gained an international reputation with its colour system, Pathé Coloris, although it was certainly not the only company to colour its films.

### **3. Fresh Developments**

#### **Film Rental**

With its switch to film rental in 1907, Pathé set a precedent that was to be adopted everywhere as the general practice. With rental, Pathé retained a kind of exclusive right over its own products. They could no longer be sold or distributed by others without further ado. This arrangement did not work completely smoothly in the Netherlands however, as can be gathered from the advertisements placed in *De Komeet* in 1909/10 by Desmet's competitor Nöggerath for films that were unmistakably Pathé productions.<sup>13</sup> The Netherlands acted no differently from other countries on the matter. In Germany at the beginning of 1907, Pathé offered films for sale or hire, so there was apparently still a choice.<sup>14</sup> Other countries changed over from purchase to rental at a later date, with Italy switching to renting Pathé movies only in 1909.<sup>15</sup>

#### **Brand awareness**

In the summer of 1907, Desmet had to deal with a further development in Pathé's strategy that was intended to secure more product recognition in the Netherlands and to build up more prestige. The French firm's strategy was presumably an extension of its campaign to push through the changeover to a system of film rental. While it is certainly true that Pathé dominated the programmes of the travelling cinemas as well as those of some permanent addresses, such as Frans Goeman's Winter Garden in Rotterdam, it is hardly

possible to tell this from the press advertisements. The operators 'claimed' the material as their own, and only the posters referred to the origins of the films. This all changed in the summer of 1907 when performances specifically emphasising the Pathé trademark were given in three different places in Amsterdam. These were the Grand Théâtre, the Rembrandt Theater and the Paleis voor Volksvlijt (Palace of Industry). It was a development that had repercussions all over the Netherlands, due to the fact that Abrassart and Favier, the organisers of these shows, took up residence in the country.<sup>16</sup> Pathé performances were held at the Grand Théâtre again the following year, organised this time by Daniel van de Vijver. Van de Vijver called himself Director of the Belge Cinéma in the Netherlands and concessionaire for Belgium and the Netherlands of Pathé Frères, Paris. He also put on shows in the Hague and Rotterdam.<sup>17</sup>

This development worked its way through to Dutch operators such as Desmet, Nöggerath and Alberts Frères. At the Wageningen fair of October 1907, Desmet announced that his programme contained 'the latest films of the world-renowned cinematographers [sic] Pathé Frères from Paris and of other large firms from London, Berlin and New York'.<sup>18</sup> Shortly after this, at the fair in Amersfoort, he made a more or less identical announcement about the sources of his material. It is doubtful whether he really had films from all these countries in his stock. The point was that he considered it important to print the name Pathé Frères in bold in his advertisements to show that he was just as up-to-the-minute as his rivals.

### **Art films**

In contrast to other cities, where full-evening film shows had been seen at fairs and in hired auditoria for a long time, the Pathé performances in the Grand Théâtre, the Rembrandt Theater and the Paleis voor Volksvlijt were the first independent film shows in Amsterdam. The one exception was the Bijou Biograph Theater, a miniature, nickelodeon-like cinema that had opened in 1906. Much more impressive was Nöggerath's Bioscope Theater which opened on 7 September 1907. This was situated on Reguliersbreestraat, close by the entertainment district of Rembrandt Square and just across from the place where Pathé opened an office a year later. Initially, the programmes of the Bioscope Theater consisted pretty well exclusively of films by Pathé, of films by companies associated with Pathé such as SCAGL and Film d'Art, and of Nöggerath's own productions, which consisted mainly of short films and occasional longer actualities.<sup>19</sup> The years 1908-10 were slack times for Nöggerath's cinema. Farces and variety were more popular than film, but in 1908/9, 'art films' such as *L'ASSASSINAT DU DUC DE GUISE* (THE ASSASSINATION

OF THE DUKE OF GUISE, Film d'Art 1908) and LA TOSCA (Film d'Art 1909) all made their appearance. The Mullens brothers also created a niche for themselves with this genre in 1909. At their shows in July 1909 at the Grand Théâtre and in September and October at the Amsterdam Paleis voor Volksvlijt, it was the 'art films' of Pathé, SCAGL and Film d'Art that set the tone.<sup>20</sup>

In 1909, Desmet's programming was somewhat similar to Nöggerath's at the Bioscope Theater. It seems likely that at this time, Desmet was renting or buying various films from Nöggerath before setting up as a distributor himself. From 1908/9, Nöggerath began to specialise in selling and renting French art films and Italian historical films. At the end of 1909 and at the beginning of 1910, for example, he placed large ads in *De Komeet* for the Film d'Art movie MACBETH (1909).<sup>21</sup> His *Komeet* ads for the spring and summer of 1910 gave pride of place to IL RATTO DELLE SABINE (Cines 1910).<sup>22</sup> No copies survive of LA MAIN and ENRICO III, which were shown both by Desmet and the Bioscope-Theater, but the Desmet Collection does contain one act of L'ASSOMMOIR (DRINK, Pathé 1909) which did good business at the Bioscope Theater. It played there for two weeks, which was quite a novelty at a time when programmes were changed inexorably once a week.<sup>23</sup> A copy of IL RATTO DELLE SABINE also survives in the Desmet Collection, but Desmet bought this in Germany and not from Nöggerath.

Following in Pathé's footsteps, Nöggerath switched from selling to renting. In *De Komeet* he announced that he was renting both new and 'used films in very good condition from 3 cents a metre per week'.<sup>24</sup> But presumably he continued to sell films at the same time, since the Desmet Collection contains films from Nöggerath's lists. Nöggerath usually showed the films he sold or rented in his own cinema first, but this was apparently not an iron law. Among the films he advertised in *De Komeet* was ENRICO II, which Desmet screened at the Imperial Bio in June 1909, a month before it played at the Bioscope Theater.

It is possible that GLI ULTIMI GIORNI DI POMPEI came into Desmet's hands via Warwick and Nöggerath and was thus preserved. In England, Warwick had taken over the distribution of the films of the Italian production company Ambrosio, and in 1908 they issued this successful historical film. The film was distributed as a Warwick production in England. This was one of the bad habits of this British company, which had already issued Nöggerath's productions under its own name before.<sup>25</sup> But Nöggerath might have acquired the film from the French firm Raleigh & Robert, which distributed Ambrosio films in France.

At the time he was still in the travelling cinema business, Desmet may have bought a Nöggerath production called DE GREEP (THE GRIP \*1909) from Nöggerath. There is still a copy of this film in the Desmet Collection. It is the

only Dutch feature film in the collection, and the sole surviving film produced by Nöggerath in the years 1909-12.<sup>26</sup> *DE GREEP* was based on a play by Jean Sartène with the Dutch stage star Louis Bouwmeester in the leading role, and appears to have been inspired by the French art films. But it was also a film record of a play that Bouwmeester and his fellow actors had been performing at the Bioscope Theater.<sup>27</sup> Bouwmeester plays a mentally and physically handicapped old man who strangles his adulterous daughter-in-law in revenge for the death of his son.

### **Programme rental as opposed to miscellaneous sales and rental**

Nöggerath's advertisements show that around 1910 art films could be rented as separate items, whereas the normal practice in other countries was to rent whole programmes. In the case of the Netherlands, it is not at all clear whether operators were in the habit of taking complete programmes or individual films. Nöggerath's advertisements in *De Komeet* suggest that they could hire films separately and compile their own programmes. Pathé's advertisements in *De Komeet* merely state the footage of individual movies and say nothing about sales or rentals or the packaging of films into ready-made programmes.<sup>28</sup> However, we do know that when Desmet started up in film distribution in 1910, it was normal to rent ready-made programmes from Pathé.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps this is why Nöggerath also rented his films as complete programmes. Müller states that in Germany the separate rental of 'film d'art' films was actually the first stage in a new kind of film merchandising: the rental of the individual film.<sup>30</sup> The art films were so expensive that they were hired out separately, so the cost of acquiring them could be recovered. Otherwise, they might just be snowed under in a complete film programme. This could mean that Nöggerath also rented such films separately at a higher price.

### **Buying abroad**

Besides taking films from Nöggerath and Pathé, Dutch travelling showmen also ordered films directly from abroad, particularly from firms in France and Germany, such as Gaumont in Paris and Théophile Pathé in Berlin.<sup>31</sup> *De Komeet*, which was the Dutch trade paper of the fairground business, kept the operators informed about foreign production companies and distributors. In 1905, they could choose their films from catalogues and order them direct from Théophile Pathé or from the Amsterdam branch of Pathé, which were rather like mail-order firms. The operators decided on their selections for themselves. Gaumont advertisements from the same year differed from

Pathé's in that they not only supplied a list of film titles but also contained extensive descriptions of the contents of two of the films. Both suppliers gave footages and Gaumont listed the price of each film. Gaumont stated that deliveries were sent carriage-paid and that rates and price lists were available upon request in French and German.<sup>32</sup> Three years later, all that Gaumont stated about their films was that 'they are the best and most tasteful films available in art and humour' and that 'pictures in colour' were available.<sup>33</sup> The latter referred to films that were coloured-in. Gaumont was increasingly popular with the fairground market since it continued to sell films directly to the exhibitors. As Richard Abel has noted, 'only in 1909 did Gaumont institute a separate distribution company, Comptoir Ciné-Location, and begin to rent its films according to the principles first established by Pathé.'<sup>34</sup>

In 1908, films were available from Germany as well as France. The Berlin Internationale Kinematographen- & Licht-Effekt Gesellschaft advertised its so-called 'Phono-films', which were sound films with numbers sung by the opera singers Porten and Becker among others.<sup>35</sup>

### **The Netherlands compared to the surrounding countries**

The above sketch of the situation of film supplies in the Netherlands roughly compares with the state of affairs in other countries. Belgium, another country with very little film production of its own in those years, was also dependent on the foreign market.<sup>36</sup> For a long time, Pathé was the only firm with a branch in Brussels. From 1905, Pathé films could be ordered directly there. Through this office and the Pathé distribution office Belge Cinéma, established in Brussels in 1908, Pathé acquired a firmer grip on Belgium than the Netherlands. A cinema of a kind called 'Ladenkino' or 'cinema shop' and named Cinéma Pathé had been opened in Ghent before 1904, and in 1908 Pathé opened its first cinema in Brussels, which was followed by twenty more cinemas in Leuven, Antwerp and several other towns.<sup>37</sup>

Belgian travelling cinema operators could order American Vitagraph films from Paris along with the Italian films of Cines and Ambrosio.<sup>38</sup> Paris became a centre of international film trade as well as production. From 1 April 1907, shortly after the opening of its branches in Paris and Berlin, Vitagraph began to advertise in *La Comète belge*. At the beginning of 1907, the Italian firm Cines had branches in Paris, London, Barcelona and Berlin. Cines films could be ordered via Raleigh & Robert, who were established at the same address.<sup>39</sup> This firm, which dated from 1903, distributed the films of Warwick, American (Mutoscope &) Biograph and Ambrosio.<sup>40</sup> Around 1909, Brussels began to develop its own international distribution market. From 1909, the films of French production companies such as Gaumont and Lux

could be acquired directly from Gaumont's new branch in Brussels, or from the distributor Maurice Gigan.<sup>41</sup> Brussels became an important trading centre for the Dutch film world.

Film culture in Germany had developed at a faster rate than in the Netherlands and Belgium. Not only had the cinema boom begun much earlier there, the film market too had already grown to enormous dimensions before 1910. Around 1908, the boom reached temporary saturation. At the same time, travelling cinemas with their fixed exhibition periods and high entrance prices were supplanted by permanent cinemas. Anne Paech has described the disappearance of travelling cinemas in her study of film culture in the city of Osnabrück: 'The end of the period of travelling cinemas overtook the cities, including Osnabrück, around 1908/9, when the travelling exhibitors and their mobile cinema businesses came up against their ultimate competitors in the shape of the first fixed cinemas.'<sup>42</sup> National film production lagged far behind operation and distribution, although, as might be expected, German film production was somewhat more prolific than Dutch or Belgian production. Most German production companies did not normally distribute their films directly, but left this to a flourishing distribution trade. The screens of German cinemas were dominated by foreign films, with French films at the forefront. Pathé already had a branch in Berlin by 1905 and was followed by Gaumont in 1906. The Danish company Nordisk had a branch in Berlin from 1908. Like Gaumont's, it was situated on Friedrichstrasse, one of the great shopping streets in the city centre. It was here that the international film business was to be concentrated.<sup>43</sup> Outside Berlin, the film trade was spread over the whole of Germany with concentrations in Frankfurt am Main and the Ruhr area. Krefeld was the seat of Westdeutsche Film Börse, Desmet's first large supplier when he set up as a distributor.

## Conclusion

It is noticeable that up to 1908, the films Desmet showed in his travelling cinema consisted mainly of Pathé films, acquired either from Pathé's Amsterdam branch or from Nöggerath Sr. In this respect, Desmet's practices were entirely in line with those of other Dutch travelling showmen: in the years 1902-9, the selection of films on the fairgrounds was largely determined by Pathé. Between 1907 and 1908, it was Pathé who set the standards of quality, and the company became a name to conjure with, both in travelling and permanent cinema and in theatres where films comprised part of the bill. Paradoxically perhaps, this was also a period of growing diversification, in the

course of which Pathé's hegemony was being slowly eroded. On the one hand, we see Pathé 'art films' taking pride of place at the theatres of Nöggerath, the Mullens brothers and occasionally Desmet. On the other hand, Nöggerath Jr.'s distribution lists and Desmet's programmes show that they were beginning to acquire more and more films from French (Gaumont, Éclair), American (Vitagraph) and, above all, Italian (Cines, Ambrosio and Itala) production companies. The growing variety of Desmet's programmes seems to be due to his close contact with Nöggerath. Variety would prove to be attractive to Desmet, both as the owner of permanent cinemas and as a budding independent film distributor.

### III. Gold Rush

#### In the Throes of Cinema Mania (1909-1914)

Although you may not yet have read about it in the press, and although the public health inspector has so far refrained from becoming involved, I have absolutely no reason to conceal from you that here we have been infected for some time by a disease that is claiming more victims by the day. I hear that in medical circles they are calling it cinema fever.<sup>1</sup>

In 1909, Jean Desmet transferred from the fairground to permanent cinema. It was a move that was typical of the times, not just in the Netherlands, but also in the world at large. Permanent cinemas reached countries such as France, Germany and Great Britain earlier than the Netherlands and developed on a larger scale. The Netherlands caught 'cinema fever' from abroad, but the bug did not spread wholesale, and Amsterdam was not infected immediately. Together with members of his family, Desmet began in 1909 to create one of the first (if not *the* first) cinema chains. In both Rotterdam and Amsterdam, where his cinemas were both named Cinema Parisien, he was one of the first to open a permanent cinema. Although not the first person to set up a permanent motion-picture theatre, he undoubtedly spearheaded the new trend. In both Rotterdam and Amsterdam, the number of permanent cinemas increased explosively from this point onwards, peaking in the former in 1910 and in the latter in 1912.

With the opening of the Cinema Palace in 1912, Desmet was also involved at the onset of a differentiation between smaller theatres catering to neighbourhoods and larger luxury theatres in city-centre shopping streets and entertainment districts. Both the breakthrough of permanent cinemas and their classification according to type were due in large measure to changes in film programming consequent upon the arrival and success of the long film, which staked out a position for itself within film performances as the 'main feature'. Another factor contributing to subdivision was the increasing competition among cinema owners, and the legitimisation of film and cinema as more than mere fairground fun. While it is true that there was little difference between the programmes of both kinds of cinema, the degree to which these programmes were up to date could vary enormously, as could the performance environment. This produced different kinds of performances. Different

types of cinemas and performances existed side by side. Looking at Desmet's cinemas, we get a very good idea of how cinema was being promoted and how programmes were being compiled early in the second decade of the twentieth century. The most notable aspects of this development are the accumulation of short and long films, the variety of genres and countries of origin, the order in which programmes proceeded from location to location, the phenomenon of continuous performance and the accompaniments to film performances provided by explicateurs, pianists and small orchestras.

## I. Desmet in Rotterdam

### The change to permanent cinema

Two years after starting his travelling cinema, the Imperial Bio, Jean Desmet opened his first permanent venue on 13 March 1909. This was the Cinema Parisien, at 28 Korte Hoogstraat in Rotterdam. With it, Desmet became one of the pioneers of fixed cinemas: he was not the first, but certainly one of the first.

A number of reasons may be suggested for Desmet's switch. Did Mullens and Benner, who claimed all the big fairground sites, force him to look around for an alternative to which these claims did not apply? Or did he realise that by employing low-paid staff and renting their premises and films, the operators of permanent cinemas could enjoy lower overheads and higher profit margins? All this is really no more than to ask whether Desmet was a success or a failure as a travelling showman. As capital assets, Desmet's fairground attractions and their accessories were worth almost *f*40,000 in 1908.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, his debts at this time considerably exceeded this figure.<sup>3</sup> This does not necessarily indicate failure, seeing that Desmet was the sort of person who calmly waited until the last minute before paying his debts, regardless of whether he was in or out of funds. The more important indicators are the press reports of his somewhat discontinuous screenings and occasional lack of audience, along with his own letters to local authorities complaining of community taxes and site fees.

At first, the change was actually more of an extension of his normal activities than a completely new step, for in the summer of 1909 Desmet's travelling cinema was still in full operation, and was taken out of storage on at least two occasions in the autumn of 1910. Desmet was clearly being cautious about suddenly allowing his entire existence to hinge on a permanent cinema. As long as the travelling cinema was a money-spinner, he certainly

wished to hold on to it. Thus, in 1909 he asked the community of Delft several times for deferment of the rent for his travelling cinema: first in March, when he had just taken over his permanent cinema, which had 'drained all my cash assets', and then again in July because his permanent cinema was not doing well, 'but it is not my fault if I am having a run of bad luck'.<sup>4</sup> From this we might conclude that the new cinema was not an unqualified success, and was passing through a running-in period like other early Dutch cinemas. But as suggested, it may have been simply a way of playing for time, and if this was the case, then it is a sign that Desmet was a genuine Dutch businessman in the making.

From October 1909, Desmet stored his travelling cinema equipment in a warehouse in Delfshaven (now part of Rotterdam) where it remained until May 1919, apart from one re-emergence in the autumn of 1910 for Desmet's final appearances in Nymegen and Tiel.<sup>5</sup> In 1919, it was sold along with the fairground trucks.<sup>6</sup>

Desmet had a nose for new developments. With his permanent cinema, he stood on the threshold of a revolutionary change in Dutch film culture. Permanent cinemas were opened in several Dutch cities around the year 1907. It was not a mass-cultural phenomenon, however, since only the major cities were involved. On the other hand, with their posters, advertisements, publicity stunts and barkers, the cinemas were a conspicuous presence in these cities.

Not all cinemas managed to stay the course. The new theatres had to survive a sort of trial period, and several operators went to the wall. The cinemas were usually not purpose-built theatres but converted shops and cafés, often no wider in front than a shop or an ordinary house.<sup>7</sup> Some operators had their auditoria extended at the back, but most cinemas kept their narrow entrances, which were often used as foyers. The entrance halls of both Nöggerath's Bioscope Theater and Desmet's future Cinema Palace in Amsterdam had the width of an ordinary facade, though the auditoria behind them were twice as wide again. The period after 1910 saw the rise of several cinemas with broader frontages. These were either new, purpose-built cinemas, or cinemas created by knocking two buildings into one, such as the Cinema De La Monnaie and the Witte Bioscoop in Amsterdam.<sup>8</sup>

Outside Rotterdam, permanent cinemas made their first appearance in cities such as The Hague, Utrecht, Leiden and Haarlem between 1906 and 1909. From 1906, movies were shown in The Hague in a theatre auditorium on the Passage under the names ' 's-Gravenhaagsche<sup>9</sup> Bioscope Company', 'Salon Cinemato-Français' and 'Vitascope Theater'. The Apollo Theater was opened in The Hague in 1907. A small, two-hundred-seater cinema initially, it

was duly enlarged into a six-hundred seater in 1909, giving it just a hundred seats fewer than Nöggerath's Bioscope Theater.<sup>10</sup> In Utrecht the Grand Cinematograph 'Olympia' opened on 16 October 1907 in the auction rooms known as the Venduhuis, but probably survived for only a month. Desmet knew the place well, as he had appeared there with his wheel of fortune in the winter of 1904-5.<sup>11</sup> A second cinema opened in Utrecht at the end of 1907. This was the Cinematograph, owned by the Germans K. Kirchhoff, Dr. Schaf-frath and H. Kraemer from Krefeld, which held on for a year.<sup>12</sup> On 3 October 1908, Richard Bresser, owner of the Venduhuis, opened the doors of his Bioscoop Theatre, subsequently renamed Bioscoop Salon Vreeburg and then Vreeburg Bioscoop. Unlike the earlier initiatives at this location, this cinema managed to survive.<sup>13</sup> In Leiden, Alex Benner's travelling cinema continued to give performances in the Amicitia Building in the autumn of 1908, and the city's first permanent cinema, the Bioscope Theater Imperial, was opened on 1 May 1909.<sup>14</sup>

The Mullens Brothers were important pioneers of the permanent cinema culture, particularly in Haarlem and The Hague, cities where they had appeared for years during and outside the fair weeks. From February 1909 onwards, they established themselves at the Zaal De Kroon in Haarlem, where they screened films continuously except during the summer months. The Mullens Brothers went on showing films in De Kroon until the end of 1914, and also at the Sociëteit De Vereeniging. The Zaal De Kroon thereby became the first permanent movie house in Haarlem. In April 1909 the Mullens brothers opened the Residentie Bioscoop or Residentie Theater in The Hague. For years afterwards, the Residentie Theater was the only cinema where the Queen went to watch films. Willy Mullens moved to The Hague permanently shortly afterwards, and in 1910 opened another cinema there called the Haagsche Bioscoop. Bernard (Albert) Mullens was to take over the Grand Théâtre in Amsterdam in 1911 and run it as a cinema for a while.

Rotterdam modelled itself on countries abroad, rather than just following developments in the Netherlands. In Rotterdam, the switch to permanent cinemas happened more rapidly than elsewhere. In France, the first permanent cinemas had appeared in Paris and Marseilles in 1904. In 1906, the official free day for workers was introduced, so 'weekend amusement' acquired a firm basis. Pathé wanted to expand its clientele beyond people working on fairgrounds and in music halls, and was also interested in attracting large middle-class audiences. In pursuit of this aim, the firm set up a new film operating company in November 1906, which triggered the opening of cinemas all over France. The first Pathé cinema in Paris, the Omnia Pathé, was opened a month later. 'Cinema fever' now spread rapidly, and within the space of a few weeks cinemas were springing up across the country. By the summer of

1907 Paris already had fifty cinemas, which were located mainly in the shopping and entertainment districts. By 1909, this number had risen to a hundred, of which more than twenty belonged to Pathé. At this point in time, Pathé owned around two hundred cinemas in the country as a whole.<sup>15</sup>

Things were happening equally rapidly in Germany. Following the opening of the first cinemas in Berlin and Hamburg in 1905, the country was overtaken by cinema fever in 1906/7. The first permanent cinema in Berlin was opened in March 1905, and by the end of that year there were 16 cinemas in the city as a whole. According to official figures, Berlin had about 139 cinemas by 1907. The trade press put this at around 260. Between 1907 and 1912, the figure hovered between three and four hundred. The fever spread throughout Germany, and by 1910 there were between 1,000 and 1,500 motion-picture theatres in the country as a whole; a number that was set to triple over the next three years. Many of these cinemas were so-called 'Ladenkinos' or 'cinema shops': simple, converted private houses, shops and small rooms in cafés. In 1906, the Union Company was set up in Frankfurt am Main, and soon Union Theatres – or UTs for short – were opening up all over Germany. It became the largest German cinema concern of the period 1910-20. A Union cinema opened in Brussels in 1907, and by 1911 there was one in Amsterdam.<sup>16</sup>

But in Europe it was Britain that caught the worst bout of the fever. At the end of 1910, there were 22 cinemas in the West End of London alone.<sup>17</sup> According to Nicholas Hiley, by 1910 the country had 2,900 'electric theatres', as cinemas were then called. In 1909, however, the Cinematograph Act, with its stringent fire prevention regulations, brought the uncontrolled proliferation of cinemas in shops to an early halt in Britain.<sup>18</sup> The Dutch trade journal *De Kinematograaf* estimated in 1913 that Belgium had about 635 cinemas, of which 115 were in Brussels; Germany 2,000, of which 200 were in Berlin, and England 2,000, of which 400 were in London.<sup>19</sup> What is truly striking here is that German film production was respectable but not huge, British production extremely light and production in Belgium virtually non-existent. The presence of a large number of cinemas did not therefore immediately lead to a sizeable, national film-production industry. In comparison with the countries listed, film culture in the Netherlands may be described as modest.

### Setting up in Rotterdam

Why did Desmet choose Rotterdam for his first permanent cinema in 1909? The presence of his sister Rosine's café with its adjoining dance hall may have had something to do with it. In the winter of 1904/5, Desmet had for a time stored the gear for his wheel of fortune in an empty shop on Hoog-

straat.<sup>20</sup> He was also familiar with the city from his visits with the wheel of fortune, the Canadian Toboggan and the travelling cinema. His brother Ferdinand had also appeared on the fairground there with his dance hall. But aside from these personal reasons, Rotterdam was simply the second largest city in the country in terms of area and population, with an entertainment life that could hardly be described as small-scale. Its position as a port and its good railway connections made it convenient for bringing in new films and equipment from Amsterdam or from abroad. Given the lack of both a national film-production industry and locally manufactured equipment, cinema operators were heavily dependent on other countries. Another factor may have been the banning of the Rotterdam fair in 1908, which robbed travelling showmen of the opportunity of screening their films, unless they were able to use permanent auditoria, or simply conjured up the permanent auditoria themselves by opening permanent cinema venues.

Of equal importance was the film and cinema climate in Rotterdam. Up to 1908, film shows had been restricted to a supporting role in the variety theatres and to screenings at the Winter Garden in the Tivoli Complex during the winter months. In addition, there were the regular visits by travelling showmen to the fair in the summer and to rented halls during the winter, exactly as in other cities. In 1908, however, film exhibition received an important boost. Following the example of the Winter Garden at the Tivoli, the Belgian Augustin de Ruijffelaere began to put on film performances in the Salon Doele under the name 'Imperial Vio' from January onwards. Frans Goeman, who was in charge of the film screenings at the Tivoli, began to show films there the whole year through from the autumn of 1908, instead of winters only. In the north of Rotterdam, the banquet room of the café-restaurant Transvalia was opened as a cinema on 21 November 1908. At around the same time, S. Metskes began screening films under the name 'Cinéma Parisien' at his hotel-café on Korte Hoogstraat.<sup>21</sup>

What kind of a city was Rotterdam in 1909, when Desmet was starting up in business there? The city on the Maas was developing at a rapid pace. The infrastructure was being sweepingly modernised and expanded. The port of Rotterdam was acquiring international status, but other branches of industry, such as brewing and distilling, were also thriving, and the latter would turn out to be an important factor in the rise of cinema theatres like Desmet's Parisien. Rotterdam had good transport connections with the Dutch hinterland and with foreign countries, either by sea or by rail, which greatly facilitated the importing of films, film equipment and cinema furnishings. The journey to Brussels, Paris, Cologne or the Ruhr area of Germany took next to no time by train. The journey from Rotterdam to Amsterdam took just a

quarter of an hour longer than today and, at three hours, the Rotterdam-Brussels stretch was only half an hour longer than it is now.<sup>22</sup> There were strong connections with Germany due to the traffic on the River Rhine, but people also travelled regularly from Rotterdam to England, the United States and the Dutch East Indies. There were several boats a day to London.<sup>23</sup> The Holland-America Line sailed to the USA. In those years, tens of thousands of emigrants, most of them East European Jews, arrived at Rotterdam's Maas Station by special trains, prior to embarking for the New World. Transatlantic lines such as Holland-America made considerable profits from the service.<sup>24</sup>

The availability of electricity was an important incentive for the opening of permanent cinemas like the Cinema Parisien, for it meant that projectors could be run and cinemas lit without the need for private generators as on the fairgrounds. Central Rotterdam had possessed its own electricity supply and telephone system since before the turn of the century. Since the 1880s, there had been several private initiatives to provide electricity in the Netherlands, but supplies were often restricted to private firms, large hotels or municipal street-lighting systems. German concerns like Siemens (The Hague) or the Dutch Electra Company (Amsterdam) had been involved in this. In 1895, Rotterdam was the first city to open a municipal power station selling electricity to the general public. Its first customers were the great shipping offices, quickly followed by shops and clubs in the area round the Blaak and Hoogstraat.<sup>25</sup> Electric light did for shops, cafés and cinemas what it had already done for travelling cinematographs and other fairground attractions. Apart from its use to spotlight goods in shop windows or to illuminate the front of cinemas, electric light simply drew people towards it. Together with street lighting, it invited them to stay out on the streets longer in the evenings than was strictly necessary.<sup>26</sup> Gaslight on the streets had certainly had this effect too, but the much more radiant electric light enhanced the attraction of a shopping street or an entertainment district. It induced a feeling of safety and tempted people to stroll about.

The potential audience of the Cinema Parisien was large and extremely heterogeneous. Rotterdam's population, which had been growing explosively at the rate of 50,000 new souls per decade since the 1870s, increased at twice that rate between 1900 and 1920. In the period 1900-10, the population of Rotterdam rose from 319,000 to 427,000. Between 1910 and 1920, it rose again from 427,000 to 511,000.<sup>27</sup> There was a massive migration from the country to the city. Emigrants – people who were actually on their way to the United States – also settled in the city. Among the latter was the future cinema owner Abraham Tuschinski, who set up a boarding house for emigrants, a lucrative source of income at the time. The stream of immigrants benefited the city as well as the shipping companies. The shipping lines and the emi-

grants gave Rotterdam a strong American orientation. Van Gelder states that in 1906, around 48,000 East-European Jews were living in Rotterdam *en route* to the United States.<sup>28</sup> The *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad* of 1909 was full of advertisements for travel to America. On the day that Desmet opened his cinema, a full-page ad appeared in that newspaper announcing the opening, in Hoogstraat, of a Rotterdam branch of the 'American Shop', a building that stood a good five stories high.<sup>29</sup> The film shows at the Circus Variété were called 'American Bioscope' and those at Tivoli 'Royal American Bioscope'.

Desmet's audiences also came from out of town. Local travel connections had improved appreciably, along with long-distance travel. An extensive tram network made it easier to travel into the big city from the surrounding region. In addition, there were now regular rail and boat services to Rotterdam from West Brabant and the islands of South Holland and Zeeland. Livestock farmers from South Holland, Zeeland and Brabant brought their animals to Rotterdam, which boasted the largest cattle markets and slaughterhouses for miles around. Despite their proverbial stinginess, the Zeeland farmers often immediately spent part of their proceeds in the city, which thereby acquired its share in the profits from their presence.

The location of the *Parisien* could not have been better chosen. It was in the centre of Rotterdam in a prosperous district where the middle classes set the tone. Hoogstraat (Fig. 16) was *the* shopping street, where you could find all the large fashion and department stores. Around the corner from Hoog-



Fig. 16. Hoogstraat, Rotterdam, c. 1910

straat was Korte (short) Hoogstraat where Desmet opened his Parisien. There were fashion shops such as gentlemen's outfitters here, along with tobacconists, a wine merchant, a furniture shop, a shoe shop, a baker, a patisserie and a hairdresser. The catering industry was represented by cafés or 'coffee houses': the Restaurant Du Passage, the café-restaurant South Holland Hotel and Pschorr, a popular and elegant café-restaurant in those days. Round the corner from the Restaurant Du Passage was the Passage itself. A typical feature of the modern city, this attractive covered shopping arcade connected Korte Hoogstraat with Coolsingel. One of the attractions there was the Panopticum. The entertainment life of Rotterdam was concentrated largely on and around the fashionable boulevard of Coolsingel. Samuel Soesman's Casino-Variété (1898) and the Tivoli Complex (1890) were there, along with other places of amusement. In 1911, De Ruijffelaere would open his Palace Bioscope Theater on Coolsingel, followed in 1913 by Desmet's second Rotterdam cinema, the Cinéma Royal Elite Bioscope.

Korte Hoogstraat was not just a street of fashionable shops and entertainment. It lay between Schiedamsedijk and Rode Zand, streets that did not enjoy the best of reputations.<sup>30</sup> Desmet's audiences were therefore probably very mixed. The nearby Zandstraat quarter was one of the city's less salubrious areas and was demolished during the First World War to make way for the new city hall designed by the architect H. Evers. From 1908, Desmet's sister Rosine ran a café or pub on Zandstraat, to which she added a dance hall the following year, just one door further down the street.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Cinema Parisien and the Rotterdam cinema boom**

Desmet's Cinema Parisien was not a genuinely new cinema. In 1908, number 28 Korte Hoogstraat was the address of S. Metskes, a hotel and café proprietor.<sup>32</sup> He rented the building from the Van der Schalk brothers, who were brewers and distillers from Schiedam.<sup>33</sup> Although he did not have a licence from the Rotterdam city authorities, Metskes had begun to show films on the premises at the end of November 1908.<sup>34</sup> It is unclear whether it was he who converted the building into a cinema. What is clear, however, is that Metskes soon gave up, as the landlords were already looking for another tenant around the turn of the year. The Mullens brothers were the first prospective tenants, and had this plan gone ahead, it would have been their first permanent cinema. But it quickly became known that the new tenant was to be Jean Desmet. Desmet took a lease on the whole building, not just the ground floor. He also took on the existing furnishings, together with the items listed in the inventory of the cinema. Unlike Metskes, Desmet *did* procure a licence for cinematographic performances.

Considering the luxurious appointments of the travelling Imperial Bio, it seems probable that Desmet 'dressed' the place before opening it.<sup>35</sup> It was not unusual for operators who were in a hurry to launch their cinemas to defer part of this dressing until after the opening. We do not know what the Cinema Parisien looked like in 1909. However, it is possible to reconstruct the interior on the basis of an inventory taken in 1917, although by then the cinema was neglected and past its prime.<sup>36</sup> Thanks to this detailed inventory, we can form an impression of what a customer would have seen on entering the Rotterdam Parisien (Fig. 17).

Arriving at the cinema, you would see film posters on wooden hoardings next to the entrance and above the portico, which was done in the neoclassical style. The entrance was lit by three Philips arc lights and twenty-four small lights mounted on a curved piece of wrought iron on the facade. At the entrance, you would encounter the commissionaire who always wore a cap and uniform, over which he wore a thick coat in the winter. 'Uncle David', as he was known, was praised by the newspapers for his 'pleasant and diplomatic manner'.<sup>37</sup> You then bought your ticket from the box-office girl, sitting on her Viennese chair in a box office that was heated during winter by a small gas fire. The box-office girl had all kinds of stamps at her disposal, including one marked 'admission for children'. On the wall of the box office hung a telephone. Having passed the entrance and box office, you came to the vestibule, where there were two large mirrors on the wall. The doors had copper handles and curlicued copper ornamentation. The next room was the bar where you could buy beer and spirits supplied by Desmet's landlord, Van der Schalk. There was a bar-buffet unit here with mirrors and undercounter drawers. On the walls hung the regulations applying to the retail sale of strong drink, the drinking licence for places of public entertainment, the licence of the Van der Schalk brothers (which was an extension of the latter), the seating plan of the auditorium and two frames containing close-up portraits of well-known artists. The bar consisted of a double nickel drip-tray, four beer pumps with carbonating taps and a refrigerator. There was a sink with a small copper tap and a copper gooseneck.

On entering the auditorium, you could choose from twenty-one ordinary five-seat rows; three luxury, six-seat rows in Viennese style; six plush-covered four-seat rows; nine plush-covered four-seater stalls; three plush-covered, three-seater stalls and three ordinary Viennese chairs. Excluding standing space, the cinema was therefore capable of seating 189 customers. Besides the usual lights and footlights, the auditorium was also equipped with emergency lighting. The floor was covered with three coconut mats. The screen was surrounded by plush-velvet curtains inside a decorated proscenium arch. A pianist supplied live accompaniment to the films. The piano was a



Fig. 17. Entrance of the Cinema Parisien, with staff posing for the camera

Bechstein, presumably the one from the Imperial Bio. The pianist was able to communicate with the projection box by means of an electric button on the piano. By looking into a mirror – already broken by 1917 – he could see what was happening on the screen. In its early years at least, the cinema must have had an explicateur as well as a pianist. According to one source, R. Roodvelt, who had been Desmet's explicateur on the fairground in 1910, also performed at the Rotterdam Parisien.<sup>38</sup> The auditorium was heated by gas fires. The storm doors were finished in oilcloth. The auditorium, vestibule and projection box were provided with fire extinguishers.

The remaining rooms on the first floor were not accessible to the public and consisted of a small kitchen, the motor-housing, the small hallway of the projection box and the projection box itself. The projectionist could press a button to sound a bell in the auditorium, where he could be reached in the projection box by the same means. He used an English Pathé projector for the films and a Pathé lantern for projecting stills. The spooling reels were also made by Pathé. At the back of the premises, on the outside, was a light box bearing the name 'Cinema Parisien'.

On 1 March 1909, Desmet signed a tenancy agreement with Van der Schalk which was effective from 6 March.<sup>39</sup> Performances began on Saturday 13 March. The main feature that evening, and for the rest of the week, was the Italian production *THE LAST DAYS OF POMPEII*.<sup>40</sup> The rest of the programme

was made up of dramas, comedies and non-fiction movies, the majority of them Italian-produced.<sup>41</sup>

The name 'Cinema Parisien' was not original, having been used previously by travelling showmen who sometimes feminised the word 'cinéma' with the adjective 'parisienne'. It is evident from this and other cinema names that, in addition to the current fixation with the United States, there was also a strong orientation towards France. Not only did many films and much projection equipment come from Paris, but the mere word 'Paris' was a synonym for artistic refinement and quality, since at the beginning of the last century Paris was universally considered to be the very centre of European culture. Besides this, of course, 'Paris' also signified 'daring' and 'risqué'. The French may have started the trend by using the name 'Cinéma Parisien' themselves: 'Cinématographe Parisien' was the name of the cinema that had first opened its doors in January 1905 in the working-class district of Belleville, making it one of the very first cinemas in Paris.<sup>42</sup> Desmet would also use the name Cinema Parisien again for his first cinema in Amsterdam. His brother Mathijs opened a Cinema Parisien in Eindhoven in 1917, and in 1939 Desmet's nephew Theo used it once more for a new cinema in Uden.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, it was not an exclusive Desmet trademark. Utrecht too had a Cinema Parisien, but it had nothing to do with the Desmet family.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the Cinema Parisien in Rotterdam had already sported that name under its previous owner.

In March 1909, Desmet's competitors in the world of movie theatres were still few in number. His biggest rival at the time seems to have been Goeman at the Tivoli Winter Gardens, an impression that a glance at the frequency of his press advertising tends to confirm. But the Tivoli showed only Pathé films, whereas Desmet introduced variety into his programmes, especially with his inclusion of Italian films.<sup>45</sup> Goeman repeatedly prolonged his programmes, whereas Desmet's ads suggest that he offered new films every week. But there was also clearly something of a stumbling-block at the Tivoli. The integration of film shows into an entertainment complex aimed at the middle and upper classes on one of the most exclusive boulevards in Rotterdam did not prove to be a recipe for universal appeal.

But there were other reasons why Desmet was able to attract broader and bigger audiences than the Tivoli. Unlike Goeman's, Desmet's performances were continuous. During the matinees (between 2 p.m. and 5 p.m.) or the evening performances (from 7 p.m. until midnight), anyone could enter his shows at any time they pleased, and view the whole programme – or 'series', as Desmet called his film compilations in the press ads.<sup>46</sup> Desmet put on daily matinees, in contrast to Goeman who ran them only on Saturdays, Sundays

and Wednesdays. There were three types of seating for evening shows at the *Parisien*, priced at 40, 25 and 15 cents, respectively. Daytime prices were lower, with rear and front stalls costing 25 and 15 cents. Children were admitted for 10 cents. The busiest day was normally Sunday. To satisfy as many customers as possible, Sunday shows ran without a break between 2 p.m. and midnight.

Admission prices at the *Parisien* were a little lower than they had been at Desmet's travelling cinema. They were certainly lower than at the performances he gave in hired halls, but even compared to the fairground shows the *Parisien* was cheaper. Under Desmet's predecessor Metskes, there were just front and rear stalls at the *Parisien*, priced at 30 and 50 cents.<sup>47</sup> Desmet was therefore cheaper than Metskes. Lower admission prices were one of the main weapons in the competition between the earliest fixed cinema venues and the travelling cinemas, but also between the early permanent cinemas themselves.

With the opening of the *Cinema Parisien*, Desmet fired the starting shot for the opening of new cinemas in Rotterdam. It was a development that gained rapid momentum in the year that followed. The press spoke of 'cinema fever' or the 'cinema epidemic'. A week after the inauguration of the *Parisien*, J. F. Strengholt opened the *Apollo Bioscope* in the former *Salon des Variétés*. Strengholt later became a regular customer of Desmet's distribution business. The following year, he and his associate H. Mohren started the *Hollandia Bioscope*. P. Verhaar supplied them with competition from the *Olympia Bioscope*.<sup>48</sup>

Cinema fever peaked in Rotterdam in 1911 with the opening of seven new cinemas: *Bioscope Americain* (Strengholt and Mohren's third cinema), *De Ruijffelaere's Palace Bioscope Theater*, the *Flora Theater*, the *Scala*, the *Edison*, the *Kosmorama*, and finally Abraham Tuschinski's *Thalia Theater*.

Most Rotterdam cinemas were clustered on or around *Hoogstraat*, with just one cinema in the district by the station.<sup>49</sup> This was the trend internationally. Film culture unfolded within a new kind of geography, a geography of dynamic urban spaces, such as shopping streets and areas close to railway stations. They expressed the accelerated development through which large cities were passing at the turn of the century. In her analysis of the development of film culture in Naples, Giuliana Bruno describes the mushrooming of cinemas around the station and in the central shopping arcade: in areas, that is, with a pronounced middle-class character. Russell Merritt sketches an exactly parallel development in Boston, Mass.<sup>50</sup> In Rotterdam, as in Naples and Boston, cinemas shot up in places where people and commodities gathered and circulated. By day the shop windows attracted the spectator's gaze; by night the cafés, restaurants, theatres and cinemas took over. Desmet's choice

of Korte Hoogstraat as the place for a cinema was thus symptomatic of developments that were both local and global.

When he was not touring with the travelling cinema and spending the night in his luxury caravan, Desmet probably lived above the Parisien for a period in 1909/10. He continued to be an officially registered resident of Den Bosch until 1911. This was convenient as taxes there were lower. In Den Bosch, he rented a warehouse from a nunnery in which he stored his street organs and other objects. In 1911, he registered as a resident of Eindhoven.<sup>51</sup> By then he had been living above his second cinema in Amsterdam for quite some time. After the opening of this cinema in March 1910, all mail, except for his tax bills, was sent to that address. He did not actually register as a resident of Amsterdam until 12 May 1918.<sup>52</sup>

## 2. Desmet Goes to Amsterdam

### Amsterdam in 1910

Desmet was not satisfied with just the one permanent cinema. As soon as the Rotterdam Parisien was up and running, he began to think of another cinema, this time in Amsterdam. Desmet was just as much a pioneer in Amsterdam as in Rotterdam. Abraham Tuschinski, on the other hand, missed the beginning of the cinema boom, but joined the action just as it was peaking in Rotterdam. With his de luxe movie theatres and cinema chains in Rotterdam and Amsterdam, he would gradually outstrip Desmet.

At the end of 1909, when Desmet was planning to open there, the city of Amsterdam had hardly even begun to acquire permanent cinemas. The American Andrew Rawson Jennings had opened the Bijou Biograph Theater on Damstraat in 1906, although the term 'permanent cinema' is somewhat flattering. The little auditorium was only fifteen metres long and 4 metres wide. The projector stood in the auditorium, and until 1915 there was no piano accompaniment to the films.<sup>53</sup> According to Maurits Dekker – whose memoirs must be dated after 1915, since he mentions a piano in the Bijou – the place was 'the ground floor shop of a house, with blacked-out windows, a couple of dozen chairs and a rattling projector that you could hear as you entered a little porchway, separated from the auditorium by a simple curtain. There was a piano for illustrative music and an explicateur who added dialogue and explained the action.'<sup>54</sup> Jennings's initiative looks like an example of the American 'nickelodeon', the small, cheap movie house that closely resembled the German 'cinema shops'.

The cinema established on Reguliersbreestraat by Franz Anton Nöggerath in 1907 was more impressive. It was simply called the Bioscope-Theater, and later the 'Nöggerath'. Nöggerath had arranged the cinema like a small dramatic theatre. Its 700 seats were unequalled for years. However, since Amsterdam remained unaffected by cinema fever before 1910, Nöggerath badly needed to retain both the word 'theatre' in the name and the theatre-like character of the cinema as a space if he was to attract customers. His evening film programmes were not complete film shows, but curtain-raisers for conventional theatrical performances: popular farces or one-acters, featuring stars like Louis Bouwmeester. 'Only a few living pictures recall the original idea of this building', noted the *Algemeen Handelsblad* at the beginning of 1910.<sup>55</sup> From 1907, films were also shown in places like the Grand Théâtre and the Paleis voor Volksvlijt, though only during the summer when the dramatic theatres were in recess. Finally, films were still being shown as fillers or closing numbers at the variety shows at the Flora and Carré theatres.

At first sight, it seems strange that in 1910 Desmet would want to open a permanent cinema in a city that did not appear to require one at that time. But there were signs that the time was ripe for a permanent cinema in Amsterdam. An important impulse was coming from the shows given in Amsterdam by the Mullens brothers, alias Alberts Frères. By this time, the brothers were the most prominent travelling cinema operators in the Netherlands, but in 1909 they were also involved in large-scale initiatives on the permanent cinema scene. Having wandered the length and breadth of the Netherlands and Belgium and taken top position in every other Dutch city, they turned to storm the last bastion: Amsterdam. From July 1909, the Mullens showed films throughout the summer at the Grand Théâtre on Amstelstraat, drawing large audiences according to the press.<sup>56</sup> In an article on their screening of the popular film *L'ASSOMMOIR*, the *Handelsblad* commented: 'the remarkable thing is that the action is not taking place amid stage props, but in Paris, on the street, in an inn or on top of scaffolding. The temperance movement is having a field day with this film. Catchy leaflets, warning against the perils of drink, are being distributed with reckless profligacy.'<sup>57</sup> In contrast to Pathé's summer performances in Amsterdam in 1907 and 1908, the brothers stayed on in Amsterdam after the summer of 1909, transferring their operation to the Paleis voor Volksvlijt where they continued their programmes until the end of November. In December, they gave screenings at the Odeon Theater.<sup>58</sup>

As we have seen, besides the Mullens's performances there was a second major development in progress outside Amsterdam in other Dutch cities, with Rotterdam leading the way. There, several cinemas had already sprung into being between 1907 and 1909. Outside the Netherlands, permanent cine-

ma had spread like an oil slick, even if this had not led to a comparable saturation of the Netherlands. Amsterdam was extremely late on the scene by the time it finally acquired a new cinema. Many years had passed since the openings of the Bijou and Nöggerath's Bioscope-Theater in 1906 and 1907. And again, as far as its cinematic offerings were concerned, the Bioscope-Theater of 1910 could no longer even be called a genuine cinema. Unlike the Bioscope Theater and the Bijou, Desmet's Amsterdam Parisien stimulated a wave of new motion-picture theatre openings in the capital.

The existence of an already huge choice of entertainment did not make things easy for a newcomer like Desmet. On the other hand, Amsterdam contained large numbers of people looking for cheaper and more evanescent forms of amusement than theatre or variety theatre. With its low admission prices and continuous programmes, cinema was an attractive option.

Amsterdam was already the most densely populated city in the Netherlands when Desmet arrived in 1910. One-tenth of the Dutch population lived there. This population had expanded enormously since the 1870s, particularly just before the turn of the century. With around 574,000 inhabitants, Amsterdam was about the same size as Copenhagen, Dresden, Rome, Milan and Barcelona. Berlin, on the other hand, had four times, Paris five times and London thirteen times as many inhabitants as Amsterdam.<sup>59</sup>

The infrastructure of Amsterdam matched that of Rotterdam for quality. Its rail links provided good connections with the rest of the country, as well as with Germany and Belgium. The tramway network provided transport to and from the suburbs and surrounding villages and the city centre. Like Rotterdam, Amsterdam in 1910 was in the full flush of economic growth. The Dutch 'Belle Epoque' was the fruit of this boom. Prices remained relatively stable, and the guilder was strong.<sup>60</sup>

However, not everyone enjoyed the same prosperity. For large numbers of Amsterdammers, even the cinema, with its low admission prices, was still an expensive form of entertainment. Officially, unemployment was almost nil, but dissatisfaction with low pay and poor working conditions led to frequent strikes in the Netherlands around 1910 and again in 1913.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, the enormous population growth had created a housing shortage, particularly in Amsterdam. While there had been a lot of building between 1870 and 1900, it had not been enough to keep pace with the influx of newcomers, and the houses that were built were probably out of reach for the destitutes entering the city from the countryside. The quality of the building was poor, and the houses were packed so tightly against each other that very little sunlight ever got into them.<sup>62</sup> There was no immediate solution to this housing crisis. The legally regulated social care for which the Netherlands would later be inter-



Fig. 18. Nieuwendijk, Amsterdam,  
c. 1900.

nationally renowned was still in its infancy in 1910. The large-scale improvement of housing would only become a reality in the 1920s.<sup>63</sup>

The centre of Amsterdam in Desmet's time can be represented as a curved axis which begins at the Central Station (1882-1898), behind which lay the port and the waters of the IJ, and runs down Nieuwendijk, Kalverstraat, Reguliersbreestraat and Amstelstraat as far as the River Amstel. The axis passes through three squares: Dam Square, Muntplein and Rembrandt Square.

Nieuwendijk (Fig. 18) lies between the Central Station and Dam Square, and it is here that Desmet decided to open the *Cinema Parisien* in 1910, with other operators later following in his footsteps. At the turn of the century, Nieuwendijk was an ordinary shopping street; by no means chic, but certainly a cut above the surrounding neighbourhood.<sup>64</sup> G. van Hulzen described Nieuwendijk as a 'more respectable' street than Haarlemmerdijk: 'No one from the Jordaan<sup>65</sup> creates too much of a ruckus here or behaves in a vulgar and unseemly manner as he normally does in his own streets. He may feel



Fig. 19. Kalverstraat, Amsterdam, c.1900

wonderfully liberated here, but he also knows exactly where to draw the line. Let him just cross the sluice into Nieuwendijk, however, and he turns into a person shackled by self-restraint, which gives him a trapped and helpless look.<sup>66</sup> The neighbouring street, Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal, was dominated by printing works and the offices of newspapers such as the *Nieuws van de Dag* and the *Algemeen Handelsblad*. It was a convenient location since it was close to the port and the railway station, and many delivery companies had their headquarters in the immediate vicinity.<sup>67</sup>

On the other side of Dam Square, towards the Munt (the old Mint), lies Kalverstraat (Fig. 19). Desmet's luxury cinema, the Cinema Palace, would rise here in 1912, together with other luxury motion-picture theatres such as the Theater Pathé and the Cinema De La Monnaie. Kalverstraat was Amsterdam's number one shopping street, a place of hotels, cafés, restaurants, lunch-rooms and clubs, but also of diamond merchants, art and antique dealers, and exclusive bookshops.<sup>68</sup> Among the larger shops were those of Singer, Lewenstein, Miele, the English Bazaar and the fashion houses of Gerzon and Au Bon

Marché.<sup>69</sup> Kalverstraat symbolised Amsterdam's consumer culture at the beginning of the last century, and was not always viewed in a positive light. For some, the street simply meant big money, the place where rich Amsterdamers did their shopping, or the seductions of the shop windows that turned the heads of the poor.<sup>70</sup> The potential audience of the Cinema Palace was more solidly middle class than that of the Parisien, which was mainly lower middle class. Besides their local catchments, both cinemas undoubtedly regarded shoppers from in and out of town as target customers.

Between the Munt and Amstelstraat was the entertainment district of the late nineteenth century, at least the official one. From Reguliersbreestraat with Nöggerath's Bioscope Theater and the Pathé offices (1908), and later the Salon du Pathéphone (1911), pleasure seekers came to Rembrandt Square with its enormous cafés and Rembrandt Theater (1902).<sup>71</sup> Having passed through the square, they entered Amstelstraat, both sides of which were lined with places of distraction, such as the Grand Théâtre (1852), the Panopticum (1882) and Nöggerath's Flora Theater, with the popular Wiener Café right next to it. The Grand Café-Restaurant De Nieuwe Karseboom, also in Amstelstraat, could accommodate no fewer than 1,500 customers. An all-boy band and an all-girl band took turns playing deafening music.<sup>72</sup> Theatre, variety and dance venues were an important source of evening amusement, but the character of Amsterdam's evening life, and above all its nightlife, was shaped by the cafés – from the elegant cafés of Rembrandt Square, nicknamed 'beer island', to the seedy dance taverns of Zeedijk. 'The huge rooms of the coffee houses are the big attractions now. The light in these places is bright and glaring, but the fumes of hot toddies, cigar smoke and human breath drift across it like a blue mist.'<sup>73</sup> Problems such as unemployment and poor housing were distracted by entertainment, but they were more often than not simply drowned in drink. Nöggerath's Bioscope Theater on Reguliersbreestraat and the film shows at the Mullens' Grand Théâtre on Amstelstraat were later joined by the Rembrandt Theater, which was converted into a cinema in 1918, and by Tuschinski's picture palace on Reguliersbreestraat which sprang up in 1921. Jean Desmet did not have a cinema in this area, but at the end of the 1920s he took over the Flora Theater from Nöggerath with the intention of converting and expanding it into a multi-purpose amusement centre.

### The Cinema Parisien and Amsterdam film fever

It was in this geography of shopping and going out on the town, wealth and poverty, local residents and casual visitors that Desmet established his base in 1910. In November 1909, he received permission from the city to convert a former hat shop at 69 Nieuwendijk into a cinema.<sup>74</sup> The building was owned by B.A.J. de Wolf, a proprietor from Antwerp, and Desmet became his tenant from November 1909 at a monthly rent of *f*159. In a sense, history was repeating itself for, like Metskes in Rotterdam, a certain E. Hasen had already tried in vain to turn these premises into a cinema.<sup>75</sup> Desmet is said to have appeared there earlier with his wheel of fortune, but I have been unable to find anything relating to this, either in the Desmet Archive or in the city licensing records. The idea goes back to newspaper articles that appeared around the celebrations of the sixtieth anniversary of the Parisien.<sup>76</sup> In December 1909 Desmet was negotiating the installation of electricity for his cinema with the Schiefelbusch company. Schiefelbusch delivered the equipment for the projectors, along with lighting, an electrically regulated ventilator, coloured lights for the auditorium and a light box for the sign.<sup>77</sup> As in Rotterdam, Desmet had a regular supplier of alcoholic drink: the Zuid-Hollandsche Bierbrouwerij from The Hague. Beer drinking became one of the attractions of film-going and was clearly an important source of income for the cinema operators. Indeed, it may reasonably be asked whether the business of the early cinemas was the sale of tickets or the sale of drink.

The architect Jos Hegener designed the cinema. Paul Broers has reconstructed the appearance of the interior and exterior of the Cinema Parisien as they were in 1910 (Fig. 20).<sup>78</sup> Hegener rebuilt the 1881 facade in the neoclassical style. Double doors opened into the foyer. The front facade was painted in light ochre and a bluish green, with gold paint on the tympanum above the doors and on the corbels. These were bright colours that recalled the travelling cinema. Mounted on the left-hand wall inside the foyer was an enormous tableau composed of tiles and measuring 13 metres by 4 metres, in the middle of which was a bird's-eye view of the Zuid-Hollandsche Bierbrouwerij.

To the right of the hallways were four small booths selling beer and confectionery, and a box office. Double revolving doors led to a rear hall or vestibule containing luxuriously appointed toilets, finished like the booths with elegant cornices and lavishly decorated tiles. On the right-hand side of the rear hall was the entrance to the auditorium, which was an almost perfect square. Its walls were stuccoed panels, painted in ochre and dark brown, and above them was a sheet of stretched ochre-coloured cloth and gilded double pilasters made of papier maché. They were crowned by a frieze, an



Fig. 20. Cinema Parisien, Amsterdam, handcart with advertising posters at the entrance to the cinema

echinus and coving. The projection room was positioned on the roof of the rear hall.

According to Broers, there was no seating at the Parisien in the early years. However, the Desmet Archive contains several letters and bills from the end of 1909 and the beginning of 1910 relating to the delivery of chairs and bench seating. Also in the archive is a plan of the cinema in 1913, in which seating is clearly included.<sup>79</sup> This plan also shows that there was, by that time, no longer a wall separating the rear hall from the auditorium, so the seating continued backwards into the former rear hall. The bar was placed to one side of the auditorium itself. The *Bioscoop-Courant* duly commented on this in 1915: 'The little place is one of the cosiest in Amsterdam, where you can get yourself a nice glass of beer even while you're watching the pictures.'<sup>80</sup> Directly below the screen was the exit onto Hasselaarsteeg. This detail has given rise to the story that at very busy times the audience was packed together and pushed forwards, until it eventually left the cinema by the exit below the screen: the so-called 'mincer system'. I have found no confirmation of this anecdote in the contemporary sources. Like the stories of the hat factory and the wheel of fortune's previous appearance in the building of the Parisien, it first appeared in the newspaper articles surrounding the Parisien's sixtieth anniversary.<sup>81</sup>

The Cinema Parisien was opened to the public on 26 March. On Saturday 26 March 1910, the *Handelsblad* announced that 'today Saturday at 7 o'clock' the director of the Cinema Parisien 'will formally open his bioscope theatre.'<sup>82</sup> Desmet probably held an opening for specially invited guests on Good Friday, the day before, of which there is no mention in the press, and then opened to the general public a day later. This was fairly normal practice at the opening of cinemas, and it was repeated at the inauguration of Desmet's later cinemas, the Cinema Palace in Amsterdam and the Cinema Royal in Rotterdam. By way of appealing to female audiences, he promised to present a 'souvenir' to every lady who attended the opening. This type of publicity stunt became an established custom. When the Witte Bioscoop opened in Amsterdam in 1911, the first 5,000 female customers were presented with boxes of chocolates.<sup>83</sup> In the same advertisement in the *Handelsblad* of 26 March, Desmet announced that, as in Rotterdam, programmes would be screened continuously from two in the afternoon on weekdays and from midday on Sundays and public holidays. In his first ads for the Parisien, Desmet only guaranteed new programmes every week. He did not yet list their contents.

Desmet used all available means of publicity to spread the news of his cinema and its programmes. He concluded an agreement to place ads for a year in the *Courant*, the *Nieuws van de Dag*, the *Amstelbode*, the *Noordhollandse Courant* and the *Nieuwsblad van Nederland*.<sup>84</sup> In addition to the usual posters next to the entrance to the cinema, there were enormous posters covering the entire facade above it. On the roof of a house at the corner of Dam Square and Nieuwendijk there was a large light box made by the firm of De Vries & Co that flashed short ads for various businesses: mainly small traders and the hotel and catering sector. Desmet booked space there to advertise the Cinema Parisien from 21 March 1910, shortly before the opening, until well into 1911.<sup>85</sup> He was the first exhibitor in Amsterdam to use this medium to advertise film shows. From the end of 1911, he put a light box on the Parisien itself, displaying the text 'Modern Bioscope Theater.' Just as he had done previously in Rotterdam, he sent barrows with posters out onto the streets. The Desmet Archive contains a postcard showing one of these advertising barrows standing in front of the entrance to (probably) the Rotterdam Parisien.<sup>86</sup> Between 1910 and 1912, Desmet had between five and six thousand flyers printed every week. On Nieuwendijk, he placed so-called 'boniseurs' or barkers to pull in the customers with their laudings, flyers and sometimes their bare hands. The barkers of the Parisien and the neighbouring Centraal Theater took things a little too far, however, and in 1914 the neighbourhood resorted to a legal action that led to the imposition of a street-ban by the city authorities:

The doormen of these cinemas were often at loggerheads. In their enthusiasm to pull in as many passers-by as possible, they tried to shout each other down. As they yelled themselves hoarse they distributed leaflets that soon turned the pavement into a thick carpet of paper. The end result of this littering was the addition of article 6 to the cinema licensing conditions, which stated 'that neither in front of the theatre, nor anywhere else on the public thoroughfare, may leaflets be offered to the public in pursuit of the aims and purposes of the institution concerned'.<sup>87</sup>

The protest worked, for Desmet was punished with the withdrawal of his licence for two weeks, and the barkers were ordered to confine themselves henceforth to their proper jobs of 'doorkeepers'.

Broers assumes that the Parisien's audience consisted of workers.<sup>88</sup> It was in fact rather more heterogeneous than this, comprising small tradesmen and their employees, office workers, sailors, dockers and day trippers. It is quite possible that the growing number of cinemas, and particularly the opening of luxury cinemas on and around Kalverstraat from 1911, produced a shift in the social composition of the Parisien's audience. The part of the audience that wanted – and could afford – a change might well have begun to find the Kalverstraat cinemas more interesting after this time.

Jean Desmet was Nöggerath's first new competitor. He did not have to share Amsterdam with anyone else immediately. After the opening of the Cinema Parisien on Nieuwendijk, it was about a year before other rivals began to appear on the scene. But Desmet had set a trend. In 1911, the cinema craze finally hit Amsterdam, peaking in 1912, when nineteen new cinemas threw open their doors.<sup>89</sup> Between 1911 and 1914, four sprang up on Nieuwendijk alone: the Groot Bioscoop Theater (later named the Kosmorama), the Family Bioscoop, the Juliana Bioscoop and the Centraal Theater, which was right next to the Parisien. On Kalverstraat, the Theater Pathé appeared in 1911, followed by the Cinema De La Monnaie and the Cinema Palace in 1912. The Union Bioscoop opened just round the corner on Heiligeweg in 1911. In the area around Rembrandt Square, the growth of cinema culture was stimulated by the repositioning of the Bioscope Theater and the Grand Théâtre as cinemas first and foremost, and the conversion of the concert hall at the Panopticum on Amstelstraat into a cinema auditorium. All in all, Amsterdam's 'cinema fleet' expanded to about forty cinemas between 1910 and 1914, with the films shows at the Paleis voor Volksvlijt, the Carré and the Flora adding to this figure.

There were not only more cinemas in Amsterdam than in Rotterdam, but also more suburban and neighbourhood venues located outside the central shopping and entertainment circuit. However, it has to be said that quite a

few of these local cinemas disappeared within a couple of years.<sup>90</sup> Some lasted barely a year. This was not without influence on the development of Desmet's clientele when he became actively involved in distribution. During the cinema boom, he supplied films to a number of new Amsterdam cinemas, and when this market was saturated he began to focus on the provinces.

The most prominent cinemas of the 1910s were those on Kalverstraat, plus the Union on Heiligeweg and the Bioscope Theater on Reguliersbreestraat. New feature films had their first release in these cinemas. This was not simply due to their position in the shopping and entertainment district, but also to the fact that the earliest film distributors Nöggerath, Pathé, Desmet and Gildemeijer all owned cinemas there: the Bioscope Theater, the Theater Pathé, the Cinema Palace and the Union, respectively. As owners of cinemas, they did not depend upon other film distributors, so they could decide for themselves when and where their new programmes would run. Once the new long films began to attract attention and became more readily available, they could premiere them at their own theatres. All the other cinemas had to wait in line until the new programmes and new films had played for a week at these prestigious venues. There was usually a change of programme every week. After the week in the metropolitan cinemas owned by the distributors, the programmes would progress down the hierarchy of Dutch cities: first Rotterdam and The Hague, then other large cities such as Utrecht, Groningen, Maastricht, Leiden and Haarlem. It could, therefore, often take months for a programme to return to Amsterdam for screening at one of the smaller cinemas.

### **3. The Hierarchy of Permanent Cinemas**

#### **The elite: Cinema Palace and Cinema Royal**

A few years after the first permanent cinema, and very soon after the onset of the cinema boom in Amsterdam, the arrival of luxury cinemas, often called 'elite cinemas', added an extra dimension to the phenomenon of permanent cinema. The Elite Bioscoop Theater Union, which opened in March 1911 was probably the first cinema in Amsterdam to award itself this title.<sup>91</sup> Desmet opened his Cinema Palace in Amsterdam at the end of 1912 and the Cinema Royal in Rotterdam in mid-1913. These were his deluxe motion-picture theatres.

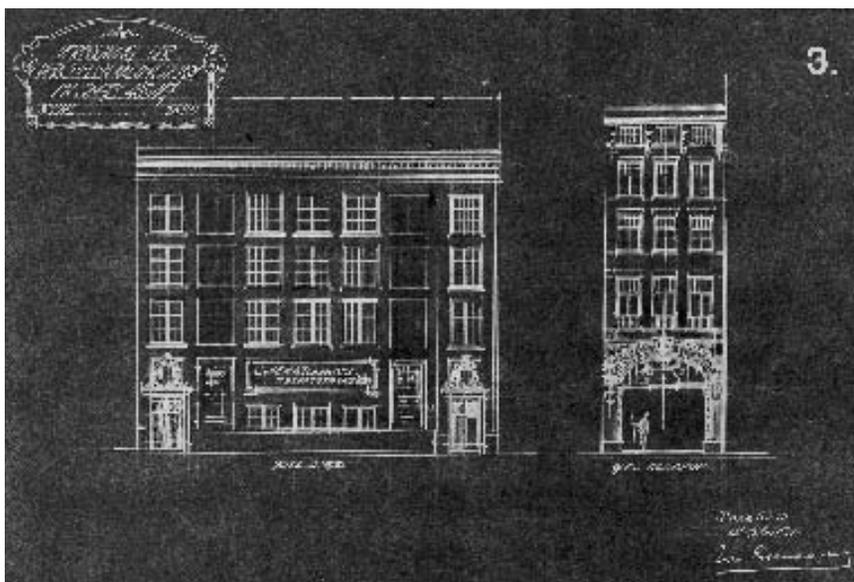


Fig. 21. Builder's drawing of the external front and rear façade of the Cinema Palace, Amsterdam, c.1912

With the establishment of a development company named NV Middenstad on 28 October 1911, Jean Desmet became one of three directors and a major shareholder of Cinema Palace (Fig. 21).<sup>92</sup> The other two directors were Elias De Hoop and David Hamburger, two Jewish entrepreneurs who had started out in the diamond business.<sup>93</sup> Because of his experience in film distribution, Desmet took on the job of acquiring movies for the cinema for a while. Later, in the spring of 1914, Middenstad was to buy the Cinema De La Monnaie next to their Cinema Palace and rename it Cinema De Munt (Mint Cinema). Around 1914, however, this company gave birth to the Cinema Palace distribution company, which turned out to be a cuckoo in the nest that would make life difficult for Desmet. Eventually, he was undermined by De Hoop and Hamburger 'on his own turf'.<sup>94</sup>

The decision to turn Cinema Palace into a public corporation was an innovation in the Netherlands at the time, although it was already an established practice in other countries. A cinema of the same name had been opened in Paris in February 1907 and was one of the busiest cinemas on the great boulevards. Along with the Pathé Omnia, it was used to premiere the latest films. In 1908, the Paris Cinema Palace became part of a corporation named Universel Cinéma. This was becoming the normal way of doing business in Paris at the time, and France quite probably provided the inspiration

for Dutch cinema entrepreneurs.<sup>95</sup> From 1912, more and more Dutch cinemas became limited companies. This was probably due to the coming of larger and more comfortable cinemas, but land prices may also have been part of the calculation. On a fashionable shopping street like Kalverstraat, land was undoubtedly extremely expensive in 1912. Limited companies generated capital for building cinemas and spread the financial risks. Personal and family capital was not exposed. Another factor was that after the turn of the century the whole of the Dutch construction industry had begun to make use of limited companies.

The company had obtained permission to convert number 224 Kalverstraat and numbers 465 and 467 Singel into a cinema as early as 1912, but almost a year elapsed before the new theatre opened its doors. The architect was Evert Breman who was also one of the principals, a common way of doing things at the time. Breman had previously designed the new Theater Pathé, which was also on Kalverstraat.<sup>96</sup> Desmet's investment of f10,000, of which he deposited the first quarter on 11 May 1912, made him a major shareholder of Middenstad together with Hamburger and De Hoop, and he was also engaged as the cinema's technical director.<sup>97</sup> NV Middenstad bought up a mirror and painting business on Kalverstraat and a rye bread factory behind it on Singel, both of which were demolished to make way for the new cinema. Meanwhile, just one door further down the street, the company's competitors were hard at work on the construction of the new Theatre annex Taverne De La Monnaie, which actually opened a month before the Cinema Palace.<sup>98</sup>

The Cinema Palace had a high but not very large entry hall with a foyer above it, behind which was a spacious and lofty auditorium with a balcony and an orchestra pit. The performances were accompanied by a small orchestra led by Boris Lensky, a celebrated violinist of the time who had spent part of his career at the Flora Theater. The cinema occupied an area of 470 square metres, and the auditorium contained 600 seats.<sup>99</sup> Both the front entrance of the theatre on Kalverstraat and the rear exit on Singel had opulent facades. The Cinema Palace opened on the evening of Friday 27 December 1912 with a performance for a specially invited audience. On Saturday, it opened its doors to the general public:

The superb new 'Cinema Palace' at 224 Kalverstraat near Muntplein, which we described in an earlier number, opens its doors this evening. The first performance took place before a specially invited audience yesterday evening and was a truly festive occasion. The brilliant, electrically lit entrance was full of flowers, and there were throngs of curious onlookers in front of the doors throughout the evening. By eight thirty, everyone was seated and the performance began. First the orchestra played the Palace Movie Waltz, a lively number specially composed in honour

of the directors by the conductor, Mr Boris Lensky. The managing director then paid tribute to all whose efforts had made this superb theatre possible, extending special thanks to the architect Mr E. Brema, and the contractor Mr Louis Mohrmann. A fine programme was then 'run'. The 'Palace-Courant' featured a review of the most recent events abroad and the audience was then treated to a quite decent melodrama, not too exaggerated and performed by well-known actors from the Royal Theatre of Copenhagen. They were many other pleasant and interesting films besides. We feel confident of a very positive audience response to this comfortable and welcoming theatre.<sup>100</sup>

Jean Desmet's second 'Elite Bioscope' was the Cinema Royal. In October 1912, he bought the building at 17 Coolsingel in Rotterdam for f95,000, a considerable sum at the time.<sup>101</sup> That same month, he paid f5,000 for the yard adjoining it. Months went by before the opening of a new cinema designed by the architect Jac van Gils. On Friday 1 August 1913, with the newspapers full of reports of the war in Macedonia and the Tivoli Theater performing the operetta *Film Fever*, Desmet opened under the name Cinéma Royal Elite Bioscope (Fig. 22). Like the Cinema Palace, the Royal opened to invited guests on a Friday evening and to the general public the following Saturday after-



Fig. 22. Entrance of the Cinema Royal, Rotterdam, with poster of *Il veleno delle parole* (Celio 1913)

noon.<sup>102</sup> The performances were again musically embellished by a small orchestra conducted by Ch. Wallage. This opening received extensive coverage in *De Kinematograaf*. Even aldermen and city councillors put in an appearance, along with the heads of the police and fire departments, members of the press and, of course, the proud Desmet and his wife.<sup>103</sup> The trade paper *De Kinematograaf* describes the cinema as follows:

We hardly need to stress that the Cinema Royal leaves nothing to be desired in the way of comfort and safety. The superb lighting enhances the pleasant atmosphere in no small measure. The lighting in the auditorium itself is equivalent to 15,000 candles, while the five large arc lamps on the front of the building and the brightly lit vestibule create a very pleasing effect. The establishment accommodates about 400 persons and is divided into loge, parquet and front and rear stalls. There are four exits and two emergency exits, as well as a spacious 'cloakroom' where you can leave unneeded items of clothing at no cost. In front of the Perlatino projection screen, the very latest invention, which is also called 'Desmet's screen', is an electrically operated curtain. The well-stocked and tastefully designed buffet is under the supervision of Mr Corns Smits, who has the task of catering to the audience with 'a good selection of drinks and prompt and polite service'. It is a pity, therefore, that this establishment will not remain in its present shape for very long. Mr Desmet intends in the foreseeable future to create a world theatre by buying the premises next door to it. This new building will be an up-to-date structure with space for 2,000 people. So we await further developments.<sup>104</sup>

Nothing would actually come of this 'world theatre', but Desmet did buy up several premises in the neighbourhood of the cinema. Although Desmet continued as owner, in April 1914 the Cinema Royal acquired a new manager in the person of Abraham Tuschinski. With his new Thalia cinema on Hoogstraat, Tuschinski had proven himself a competent and successful cinema operator. This cinema, which Tuschinski had opened in 1912 after his first Thalia on Coolvest was forced to close, was regarded as the most luxurious cinema in Rotterdam at the time. Desmet had known Tuschinski professionally for some time, as Tuschinski had rented Pathé newsreels from him in 1913-14 and booked the long feature *Cleopatra* in 1914. This was probably CLEOPATRA (Helen Gardner Feature Plays 1912), distributed by the Wilhelmina Company. Desmet thus rented the film on to Tuschinski.

Tuschinski was Desmet's greatest rival. Fearing that Desmet might trump him with the Royal, Tuschinski had his Thalia extensively altered before reopening just a day after the inauguration of the Royal. By building an extra balcony and demolishing the refreshment buffet, he managed to add another hundred seats, so he could now seat 500 instead of 400 customers – a

hundred more, therefore, than the Cinema Royal.<sup>105</sup> On top of this, he had engaged the popular cabaret artist Dumas and a snake dancer called La Joula to liven up his film shows. It is not known whether there were variety acts at the Cinema Royal.<sup>106</sup> Like Desmet, Tuschinski employed a small orchestra at the Thalia under the direction of Simon Feldt. The Thalia also had an explicateur, first Leo Riedée and then, after the reconstruction, Vaillant.

We can only guess at Desmet's reasons for handing over the running of the Royal to his competitor within a year of opening it. Desmet had originally assumed the management himself, but his commitments in Amsterdam kept him away from Rotterdam, leaving him unable to keep the operation under his own control. For the same reasons, he had previously entrusted Heinrich Voltmann with the management of the Cinema Parisien in Rotterdam and installed his brother-in-law Piet Klabou at the Amsterdam Parisien. He was therefore looking for someone to manage the cinema on the spot, and that person was Tuschinski. It is also possible that Tuschinski wanted to take over the Cinema Royal and was getting his foot inside the door by renting the theatre in the meantime.<sup>107</sup> On the other hand, Tuschinski did not exchange contracts with Desmet until during the war, and there was no mention at that time of a previous agreement. It is therefore unlikely that Tuschinski was buying the place in instalments. In 1916, Tuschinski was to acquire the Royal for no less than f350,000 (€2,886,363 or approximately US\$2,625,000 at today's prices).

Tuschinski reopened the cinema on 11 April 1914 as simply the 'Cinéma Royal'. When he became the director, he continued to rent films from Desmet, but no longer took complete programmes from him. He ordered only single films and the occasional Pathé newsreel. Presumably, he had agreements with other distributors, perhaps via earlier arrangements for the supply of films to his Thalia cinema, and used Desmet's films just to fill his spare slots.<sup>108</sup>

### **Programme variation, screenings and publicity at Desmet's cinemas**

The programmes at the Cinema Palace in Amsterdam and the Cinema Royal and Cinema Parisien in Rotterdam illustrate how cinemas were programmed and portrayed to the public in those days. The programming of the Amsterdam Parisien is hard to follow, as Desmet did not include it in his distribution books.<sup>109</sup> Although the films screened at the two Parisiens did not differ noticeably from those offered at the Cinema Palace and the Royal, the differences between these cinemas in terms of ambience, musical accompaniment, location and audience would have affected the character of the actual performances.

From the opening of the Amsterdam Cinema Palace in December 1912 onwards, Desmet first ran his programmes for a week at that cinema. The Cinema Parisien was too modest a cinema for these first runs.<sup>110</sup> Desmet's letter-head proudly announced that he was the head of the Cinema Palace (the names of his partners were not included). Like his competitors, Desmet ran his programmes in other Dutch cities according to a fixed order after their week at his first-release theatre, the Cinema Palace. From there they moved to Rotterdam for a week, then to The Hague, then to Utrecht for a week and so on. After a certain amount of time had lapsed, a programme would appear in Amsterdam again, though this time at a smaller cinema, such as Desmet's Parisien. Anyone willing to pay extra could be sure of securing a first-run programme, and the Mullens brothers did this from time to time. On the other hand, they often took just the longer film or 'main feature' from a complete programme, not the programme as a whole. Usually, the exhibitors accepted Desmet's ready-made programme, which had either been compiled by Desmet himself or made up in advance by a foreign distributor. Besides the main feature, Desmet's programmes consisted of a variety of films, and as long as they had not played at that particular theatre before, they did not all have to be equally 'fresh'.

Unlike the programmes from before 1910, with their relatively interchangeable titles, genres and lengths, the rise of the long film began to affect the programme as a whole. Programmes became more hierarchical and acquired a stricter form. It became usual for the performance to begin with a musical overture, which was often a march specially composed for the cinema, or a piece of music that had been adopted as the house 'signature tune'. Next came a newsreel, which Desmet often called the 'Cinema Revue', or the 'Palace Courant' after the name of the cinema itself. Bearing in mind that in the Netherlands Pathé had next to no competition to worry about in this area, these newsreels would certainly have been mainly Pathé productions before mid-1914. They would be followed by short documentaries such as travelogues with images of exotic places. Depending on the length of the main feature, it might be preceded by short dramas and comedies. The main feature was largely dramatic in character, but by way of making sure that the audience did not leave the building with tears streaming down their faces, the programme was often rounded off with a short farce.

Nationalities and genres alternated continuously. During its first week (27 December 1912 to 2 January 1913), the Cinema Palace showed a newsreel and a travelogue on the area around Luchon (in the French Pyrenees), followed by a French historical drama, a British comedy about thieves, an American western and a documentary about the boxer O'Brien. The main



Fig. 23. Boris Lensky during a recording

feature (Fig. 31) was a Danish film, *TRE KAMMERATER* (*THE THREE COMRADES*, Nordisk 1912). With an eye still to Christmas which was just over, the western shown on this occasion was *BRONCO BILLY'S CHRISTMAS DINNER* (Essanay 1912).<sup>111</sup>

The long feature films that played at the Cinema Palace in 1913 were German, Italian, French, Danish and American. Most of them were German, with Italian productions in second place.<sup>112</sup> Many of the long French and Danish films were by *Éclair* and *Nordisk*. In the case of other countries, the selection was varied: *Selig*, *Vitagraph*, *Ambrosio*, *Cines*, *Messter*, *Deutsche Bioscop*. Short films, on the other hand, came mainly from *Gaumont* and *Vitagraph*. *Tuschinski's* *Thalia* in Rotterdam also regularly showed *Vitagraph* and *Gaumont* films in 1913 and stated their place of origin in its advertising. Since *Tuschinski* rarely booked films from *Desmet*, it is possible to speak of a general trend here: *Vitagraph* and *Gaumont* films enjoyed a great deal of exposure in the Netherlands from 1910 onwards.<sup>113</sup>

The Cinema Palace was again a focus of interest from the autumn of 1913, due to its premiering of the first films by the Dutch film company *Hollandia*

to be widely acclaimed: *NEDERLAND EN ORANJE* (*HOLLAND AND THE HOUSE OF ORANGE\**, 1913), *SILVIA SILOMBRA* (1913) and *ZIJN VIOOL* (*BROKEN MELODY*, 1914). The music for *NEDERLAND EN ORANJE* was composed by resident conductor Boris Lensky (Fig. 23).<sup>114</sup> In *ZIJN VIOOL*, Lensky went even further, for he wrote the script and acted in the film as a violinist. To the great delight of the audience, he played the same solo violin pieces during the show as he played on the screen as the violinist. On the other hand, both the screenplay and the acting were criticised as below standard in comparison with other countries.<sup>115</sup> Hollandia films were not actually distributed by Desmet but by his rival Gildemeijer and his Union company.<sup>116</sup>

From its opening in August 1913 to the point at which Tuschinski took over the management, the Cinema Royal Elite Bioscope was Desmet's first-release house in Rotterdam. Before that, his films had been premiered at the Rotterdam Cinema Parisien.

During its first two weeks the Royal screened the Messter film *RICHARD WAGNER* (1913) (Fig. 24 and Colour Plate 15), a film biography of the famous composer, produced in commemoration of Wagner's hundredth birthday



Fig. 24. Apotheosis, *Richard Wagner* (Messter 1913)

(and the thirtieth anniversary of his death). The composer Giuseppe Becce, who also played the part of Wagner in the film, arranged a score consisting of music by various composers. This score was supplied along with copies of the film.<sup>117</sup> The Wagner year was well commemorated in the Wagner-loving Netherlands in gala performances, memorial volumes and brochures. *The Ring* was performed in its entirety in Rotterdam in 1913, and *Tannhäuser* and *Tristan and Isolde* were performed in Amsterdam.<sup>118</sup> The screening of the film was thus part of a larger cultural framework. It was launched with the same blaze of publicity as two months previously at Willy Mullens's Residentie Theater in The Hague. The film was 2,500 metres long and ran for two hours, which was quite unprecedented at the time. The city's fashionable business paper, the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, praised the film in its review for its realistic representation of famous personalities and events. The 'mishmash' comprising the musical accompaniment, on the other hand, was not quite so well received:

Bits of Wagner's own works, then a little Rossini and Schumann, a minuet by Boccherini, and the Meditation from Thaïs. And then sure enough, when Wagner and Mina Planer divorce, we hear the Romance of Violin by Svendsen. Find the connection if you can! However, the playing is correct and everything sounds very tasteful, which is the most important thing in these instances.<sup>119</sup>

Just as he had with the Union and the Cinema Palace, which were also designated 'Elite' to suggest 'cachet', Desmet wished to imply that this was a kind of cinema that might (also) be frequented by the bourgeoisie. The net effect of this was that he failed to attract enough customers, so he quickly reduced his admission prices.<sup>120</sup> The better-off part of the audience was clearly a minority presence at the first open performance, but this segment shrank even more afterwards, whereas the numbers for the cheap seats actually rose sharply. He clearly did not need to have too many bottoms on the most expensive seats. The fall in the number of better-off customers meant that he had to take immediate steps to keep the cheaper seats well occupied. This confirms the suspicion that he replaced the 'highbrow' RICHARD WAGNER with more sensational films to accommodate his less wealthy patrons. This move bore fruit, for on Sunday 17 August, the dearest seats took f28 and the cheapest f105.60.<sup>121</sup> The fact that RICHARD WAGNER, the cinema's inaugural film, played for two weeks before making way for more sensational films could explain the increased attendance of the less well-heeled and the abrupt decline of the audience that could afford the higher prices. It is probably safe to assume that RICHARD WAGNER was not a film with wide audience appeal. In any event, the enthusiasm of the social elite that attended the opening was genuine enough.

The Cinema Royal showed Desmet's own film programmes as a matter of course. A new programme from Desmet's distribution stock was shown each week with one new main feature. The Italian spectacular *IN HOC SIGNO VINCES* (*THE TRIUMPH OF AN EMPEROR*, Savoia 1913) was shown for a week, but returned the following February for another two weeks. *L'ENFANT DE PARIS* (*IN THE CLUTCH OF THE PARIS APACHES*, Gaumont 1913), rented from Nöggerath, was screened for two weeks between 24 October and 6 November 1913.<sup>122</sup> Other films, such as *IVANHOE* (Imp 1913), were sometimes heralded by massive advertising, but played no longer than the usual week. A popular movie like *L'ENFANT DE PARIS*, on the other hand, often returned to the same city, but was then shown at other cinemas.<sup>123</sup>

In 1913, the screenings at the Cinema Parisien in Rotterdam were put together from largely the same material as the Cinema Royal, except that they consisted of slightly fewer films: four to five, compared to an average of four to six at the Royal. Both programmes contained newsreels, non-fiction movies, short comedies and dramas, and one long feature. Before the opening of the Cinema Royal, the films running at the Amsterdam Cinema Palace were quickly transferred to the Rotterdam Parisien, sometimes after just a week. *THE COUNT OF MONTE CHRISTO* (Selig 1912) could be seen from 3 to 9 January 1913 at the Palace, and at the Rotterdam Parisien from 10 January. In rare instances, the audience of the Cinema Palace had to wait for the audience of the Parisien, as in the case of *THE MILLS OF THE GODS* (Vitagraph 1912), which could be seen first from 24 to 30 January in Rotterdam and only from 28 February to 6 March in Amsterdam. Generally speaking, however, new main features were shown shortly after each other in the two cinemas. The Parisien occasionally re-ran older works as main features, such as *DEN SORTE KANSLER* (*THE BLACK CHANCELLOR*, Nordisk 1912), which had played at other cinemas in 1912.<sup>124</sup>

It is noticeable that the Rotterdam Parisien frequently received one or two extra films or 'numbers'. These were often older films (between six months and two years old), but their length and genre varied from week to week. They were sometimes short comedies, but successful older numbers were regularly included, such as Danish dramas and thrillers from 1911 and 1912. In addition to these, the Parisien very occasionally received programmes for children. They consisted mainly of non-fiction films and short comedies, but also included short dramas. Long films, however, were a rarity. Sometimes just a couple of short films were received, which were probably intended to be shown in combination with some of the films from the evening programmes. At other times, entire loads of one-reelers might arrive for showing on occasions such as Queen's Day (which in those times was celebrated on 31 August, the birthday of Queen Wilhelmina).

Once the Cinema Royal had been opened in August 1913, the route taken by the films changed to the extent that new films spent the first week of their release at the Cinema Palace in Amsterdam, the second at the Royal in Rotterdam and the third or fourth, and sometimes later, at the Rotterdam Parisien. This happened with *JACK* (Éclair 1913), for instance, which was screened at the Cinema Palace from 19 to 25 September, before moving to the Cinema Royal from 26 September to 3 October and finally reaching the Parisien from 7 to 13 November. On only one occasion did the Royal take second place to the Parisien for the 'second week' run. The film in question was *HOCHSPANNUNG* (*HIGH TENSION\**, Messter 1913), which ran at the Cinema Palace from 12 to 18 September, from 10 to 16 October 1913 at the Cinema Parisien, and finally arrived at the Cinema Royal the following week.<sup>125</sup>

It is typical of Desmet that all his performances were continuous, just as they had been on the fairgrounds, and this applied both to popular cinemas like the two Cinema Parisien theatres and fancy theatres like the Cinema Palace in Amsterdam. If you missed the beginning of the performance, or a particular film, you could simply stay in your seat until you had seen everything right through. The Cinema Palace in Amsterdam announced that its performances were continuous from two o'clock in the afternoon to twelve o'clock midnight.<sup>126</sup> The largest audiences were expected on Sundays, when the shows began earlier, usually at twelve noon.

The programmes at Desmet's Cinema Royal in Rotterdam had fixed starting times, but whoever wanted to could drop in during a performance and stay until they had seen the whole show. The performances there began at two o'clock, quarter-past seven and quarter-past nine. Sunday performances ran from one o'clock in the afternoon until midnight.<sup>127</sup> Because of the rush of people to see *RICHARD WAGNER* at the Cinema Royal, there were performances every two hours on Sunday 10 September from half-past one onwards. This must mean that the film was shown on its own, without supporting shorts or musical prologues and intermezzi. Desmet advised his audience to book in advance to avoid disappointment.

This system of continuous performances is explained by the location of all three of the cinemas named on streets and in neighbourhoods that were full of people shopping during the day and looking for amusement in the evening. Continuous admission was thus a flexible response to the consumption patterns of the prospective customer. The film-goer did not have to wait for the beginning of the show if he or she just happened to be in the area, or was tired of shopping and in need of a rest. The admission of latecomers also allowed the operator to fill seats left unsold at the beginning of the performance. Ushers had the job of making sure that people did not occupy their seats for too long.

Continuous performances were not a specifically Dutch phenomenon, for they were popular in Germany too, as Emilie Altenloh has noted. The reasons given there were that the film-goer was not tied to a particular time and had the option of a quick visit that did not demand too much concentration. Altenloh considers this a more important reason for the attractions of cinema than the lower admission prices.<sup>128</sup> Against this, one might argue that the arrival of longer feature films was placing heavier demands on the viewer's powers of concentration, but it is doubtless true that most small neighbourhood cinemas did not feel obliged to go over to fixed performance times just because of the long feature films. At least not immediately.

Continuous performances were certainly the rule up to 1914, although not everyone found the arrangement congenial. People who were more accustomed to going to the theatre, where there were intervals during which they could stroll about, buy a drink and chat, were not too keen on continuous performances. Comparing various Amsterdam cinemas, the feared Amsterdam theatre and film critic Simon B. Stokvis noted in 1912 that:

The really nice thing about this cinema [Nöggerath's Bioscope Theater] is the way in which everything is made to harmonise with the idea of a self-contained, rounded performance. That relentless, mechanical recycling of the same programme, with no break to speak of and no proper intermission, is really extremely cheerless. But it is the system now being followed everywhere, and the Bioscope Theater on Reguliersbreestraat is the sole exception.<sup>129</sup>

Although the Cinema Parisien in Rotterdam and its namesake in Amsterdam showed roughly the same movies as the Cinema Royal and the Cinema Palace, the difference between the two sets of cinemas was more than just a matter of the relative freshness of their fare. The surroundings and ambience of the performance, the musical accompaniment and the standard of the commentaries were much more significant as differentiating factors.<sup>130</sup>

The Cinema Royal and the Cinema Palace both had small resident orchestras, and the appearances of the conductor and violinist Boris Lensky at the Cinema Palace were mentioned repeatedly in the press. These ensembles were not large, but they could be expanded for screenings of special and prestigious films such as RICHARD WAGNER. Desmet's competitors also took on more musicians for authoritative pictures such as QUO VADIS? and THE LAST DAYS OF POMPEII (Ambrosio 1913) – both shown at Nöggerath's Bioscope Theater – and also IN NACHT UND EIS (BY NIGHT AND ICE\*, Continental Kunstfilms 1912), a film about the sinking of the Titanic which played for several weeks at the Witte Bioscoop.<sup>131</sup> There was both an orchestra and an organ for QUO VADIS?

and at performances of *IN NACHT UND EIS* the hymn 'Nearer my God to Thee', said to have been played as the ship went down, was sung by a female quartet at the afternoon shows and by a male quartet in the evening.

Lensky's accompaniments to *RICHARD WAGNER* were highly praised in the newspapers. And it was apparently not just the press that liked him, for 'on this very afternoon [at the performance for invitees] this most able musician was presented with a laurel wreath to thunderous applause'.<sup>132</sup> Lensky also adapted some of Wagner's music for performance by solo violin. Amsterdammers had less of a problem than Rotterdammers with the performance of works by composers other than Wagner during the film. A number of 'serious composers' apparently attended the gala preview, and the audience was said to have been enraptured by what it heard and saw. We should perhaps bear in mind that at this period in time, the Dutch – notably the Amsterdam bourgeoisie – were extremely fond of Wagner.

Lensky also received rave reviews for other accompaniments. The screening of *TREFF BUBE* (*THE LETHAL SHOT*, Vitascope 1912), for which he composed an arrangement of pieces by Moszkowski, d'Ambrosio and Beethoven, was a case in point. Following this performance, the *Nieuws van de Dag* wrote: 'You generally don't hear applause in cinemas. Only the odd Hehs! and Ohs! and laughter tell you that the audience is following the performance. These musical performances, however, were cheered loudly.'<sup>133</sup>

If Lensky was the big attraction at the Cinema Palace, many of the other cinemas in the period 1910-20 had a resident explicateur rather than a musician as their star turn. The Amsterdam *Parisien* had an explicateur, J. Dahmen, although it is not clear when and for how long. The *Bioscoop-Courant* praised his commentaries in 1915:

Furthermore, the music always provides a good accompaniment and doesn't distract your attention from the explanations by Mr Daamen, whose way of doing this could hardly be improved and is clearly very much appreciated by the audience, to judge from the silence and attention with which it follows the pictures.<sup>134</sup>

*De Kinematograaf* of 1913 criticised the Rotterdam *Parisien* for dispensing with its explicateur:

We have to consider that a large part of the audience is fond of commentaries; in fact, it cannot do without them, for the simple reason that it would not be able to follow the action of the film. But even those who don't have this problem still enjoy listening to a lucid and educated interpretation. It is, so to speak, the icing on the cake.<sup>135</sup>

The publication goes on to urge Desmet to 'bring back' his explicateur, suggesting that the Parisien had had one earlier on. There is no documentation on (possible) explicateurs at the Cinema Royal and the Amsterdam Cinema Palace.<sup>136</sup> Because of their size, their location and their aura as deluxe theatres, these cinemas probably did not need explicateurs and opted instead for small orchestras. Desmet's luxury cinemas fit into a somewhat varied pattern of musical accompaniment. As far as the other luxury theatres of Amsterdam in 1912 are concerned, the Theater Pathé had just a small orchestra led by N. Snoek, and the Union a pianist, a violinist and an explicateur. Despite its size and elegant surroundings, Nöggerath's Bioscope Theater had only a pianist. Until 1912 this was Gerrit van Weezel, whom Simon Stokvis rated highly. The cinema also employed an explicateur, H. de Jong, who was also popular with Stokvis.<sup>137</sup> The two Parisiens, on the other hand, were on a much more modest scale, and since they provided only piano accompaniment to films, it would have been perfectly possible for an explicateur to be heard above the music.

But size was insufficient in itself to explain the exclusion of the explicateur. The Witte Bioscoop in Amsterdam boasted some 600 seats after its extension in 1912, which brought it up to the same size as the Palace, but it continued to employ explicateurs. In fact, for a time it had several. On the other hand, this was a cinema for a simpler type of audience, where the only musical accompaniment was a piano, supported just once by a violinist. In addition to this, the Witte Bioscoop was situated on Damrak, a street of cafés and hotels representing a mixture of 'high and low' culture.<sup>138</sup> The Union, which had a mere 350 seats, but certainly paraded itself as a luxury cinema, employed both an explicateur and a group of musicians.

Although there is little information about commentaries at the Rotterdam Parisien, we do know something about the details of performances. On 17 June 1914, the terms of Desmet's licence for the Rotterdam Parisien were changed.<sup>139</sup> He was now allowed to open for cinema performances, with accompanying piano and string music, from twelve noon until midnight. But he held no licence for other attractions, which presumably meant male or female singers, and stage shows or variety acts. The performances could only be given within the prescribed times, outside of which the cinema had to be closed. It had to be made impossible for people to drop in off the street and peep at the shows during performances, so the doors had to be closed and constructed of opaque glass or masked with material. There was to be no shouting out the programmes in front of, behind or next to the cinema (the idea was to get rid of the yelling 'barkers'), and the cinema had to have just one entrance on Korte Hoogstraat. Female employees were restricted to working at the refreshment bar and were not allowed to wait on the tables or

engage in other more scandalous activities. After all, a cinema had to be something more than a low drinking hole.

Desmet's own publicity again serves to underline the differences between the two Parisiens and the two deluxe theatres. The posters he had printed for the Parisiens were announcements that promoted the cinema experience.<sup>140</sup> The genres of the films were indicated, but not their titles. The poster designed by Julien Felt for the Rotterdam Parisien (Colour Plate 2) depicts a lady and a gentleman in evening dress sitting in a box, while in the background there is a rear view of a crowd of people gazing at the screen. There is no film on the screen, just the address of the cinema, Desmet's name and the designation 'Modern Bioscoop Theater'. In the lower part of the picture, the genres are announced in French: 'sensations poétiques, actualité, artistique, fantaisie, opérette, dramatique, sportif.' Below this is a longish text on a scroll festooned with roses. The text includes *inter alia* opening times and admission prices. The top part of the poster is also decorated with roses below and left.

The poster for the Amsterdam Parisien (Colour Plate 3), whose designer is unknown, is a kind of 'stock' poster: to the left of the picture an elegant lady with a feather hat and lorgnette is positioned next to a text frame, whose wording could be altered to suit any occasion. However, that did not happen to this poster. At least there are no surviving examples. The text contains only general information about the cinema, such as opening times and address. Both cinemas changed their films on Fridays, which became a practice observed by all cinemas.

The two posters explicitly highlight the phenomenon of continuous performance. The Rotterdam poster goes into it at some length: 'Continuous cinema performances. Admission at any time. Waiting unnecessary. Patrons may always see the entire programme, so they are no longer tied to a fixed time.' In brief, continuous performances were such a novelty that they needed to be explained clearly.

As far as is known, special posters advertising the cinemas themselves were not designed for the Cinema Palace and the Cinema Royal. Perhaps permanent cinema had by now become so familiar that it did not require further explanation as a phenomenon. In addition to this, exhibitors could advertise their business perfectly well by producing framed posters for their main features with the names of the cinemas on them, or by pasting text strips with Dutch titles across the original foreign posters. It seems hardly accidental that, with the breakthrough of long feature films, the deluxe movie theatres began to write themselves into the story, eagerly exploiting the popular obsession with these films and their actors.

The arrival of long feature films brought an enormous increase in the

sheer quantity of publicity material. For both format and design, cinema operators were managing to acquire a far greater variety of posters for their feature films, and they were receiving them in larger quantities. Besides posters dealing with individual films, they could obtain others featuring pictures of actors and comedians that were not linked to specific movies. This profusion of posters can be viewed in the film *ONAFHANKELIJKHEIDSFEESTEN TE ROTTERDAM OP MAANDAG 17 NOVEMBER 1913* (INDEPENDENCE CELEBRATIONS IN ROTTERDAM MONDAY 17 NOVEMBER 1913\*).<sup>141</sup> When Queen Wilhelmina visited Rotterdam for the centenary of Dutch independence, Jean Desmet had a film of the event made specially for the Cinema Royal. Along with the record of the Queen's arrival and tour of the city, the film contains several shots of Rotterdam streets (including Coolsingel) which are thronged with people. The crowd seems fascinated as much by the camera as by the sovereign. Included in the coverage of the festivities are a few earlier shots of the Cinema Royal and the Cinema Parisien (Figs. 17 and 22), which are at that moment playing films from Desmet's own distribution company: *IL VELENO DELLE PAROLE* (LYING LIPS, Celio 1913, starring Francesca Bertini), *DEN LURENDE DØD* (THE LURKING DEATH\*, Dania Biofilm 1913) and *LA TUTELA* (THE MONEY SHARKS, Celio 1913, starring Leda Gys).<sup>142</sup> The cinema staff are posing by the entrances to the theatres. Hoardings with posters are prominently displayed next to the entrances, but even more striking are the giant posters hanging above them, some of which display announcements painted in on the spot. As far as we know, these are the only contemporary film images of Desmet's (Rotterdam) cinemas.

#### **4. New Desmet Cinemas Outside Amsterdam: the Gezelligheid in Rotterdam, the Cinema Palace in Bussum**

From 1910 onwards, Jean Desmet, his brothers and eldest sister set about building a small cinema empire. By 1912, Desmet already owned the Parisien in Rotterdam and the Cinema Palace and Parisien in Amsterdam, but from 1913 he and his family began to accumulate more cinemas. In 1913, Desmet opened the Cinema Royal in Rotterdam and a cinema in Bussum, which was also called the Cinema Palace. His sister Rosine opened a cinema called the Gezelligheid ('Conviviality') in Rotterdam. More were to be added after the outbreak of war: the Delfia in Delft, the Bellamy in Flushing, the Amersfoort Bioscoop Theater and the Cinema Parisien in Eindhoven. Desmet's brother Theo ran the Bellamy, and the Cinema Parisien in Eindhoven was operated

by his brother Mathijs. The two Parisiens in Amsterdam and Rotterdam were run by persons related to Desmet by marriage. In short, more than half of Desmet's chain of cinemas was part of a family concern.

In 1913, Desmet's sister Rosine took over the *Gezelligheid* (Fig. 25) which had been opened a year before by J. Sanders. It is unclear to what extent Jean Desmet himself had interests in the *Gezelligheid*. At all events, his letterhead lists the *Gezelligheid* along with his own cinemas.<sup>143</sup> Unlike the *Royal*, the *Gezelligheid* was a neighbourhood cinema. The place flourished on ticket sales and sales of drink. At the front of the cinema was the bar, where Rosine Desmet herself drew the beer. Behind it was the auditorium, which consisted of rows of chairs to the left and right, separated by a central aisle. The performances were always accompanied by a pianist and an explicateur, but there were no barkers or men distributing leaflets in the street. But like her brother, Rosine sent handcarts plastered with posters onto the streets to announce new films and programmes. She regularly took her films from



Fig. 25. Cinema *Gezelligheid*,  
Rotterdam

Desmet. To keep her prices down, she rented films that had already played elsewhere, and this could mean that they were not always in the best condition. 'I'm sending a few bits of film cut from the main number. It's amazing how damaged it is. The perforations are quite ruined. I've cut out just a few pieces to show you what I mean, but I reckon that the damage stretches over about 30 metres.'<sup>144</sup> Rosine paid f50 a week for a programme consisting of seven or eight titles. The films were often delivered from the Rotterdam *Parisien*.<sup>145</sup> Performances ran continuously from 7 to 11 and on Sundays from 2 to 11, just like the *Parisien*. On Saturdays there was a matinee from 2 to 5. The admission prices were low at 30, 20 and 10 cents, respectively, for rear, centre and front stalls. On Sunday, the busiest day, prices were raised by 5 cents after 4 o'clock in the afternoon. Like the *Parisien*, therefore, the *Gezelligheid* was a little cheaper than travelling cinemas such as *The Imperial Bio*. On the other hand, a performance at the *Gezelligheid* was not particularly long. There would be about an hour's worth of film, which consisted of an actuality, a drama of three quarters of an hour and one or two comic shorts.<sup>146</sup>

In November 1912, Desmet bought a building on Havenstraat in Bussum.<sup>147</sup> It was converted into a cinema by the architect G.J. de Vos. Originally, it was to be called the *Cinema Parisien*, like Desmet's theatres in Rotterdam and Amsterdam. But after the opening of the luxury *Cinema Palace* in Rotterdam, the new cinema had to be given that name too. On Saturday 3 May 1913, Jean Desmet opened it as 'Cinema Palace'.<sup>148</sup> Among other items, the first week's programme featured the Italian dramatic thriller *PADRE* (*FATHER*, Itala 1912). The manager, H. Koppel, announced that he would be offering '3,000 metres of the most recent films' each week and that 'every performance will merit the fullest confidence, as no pictures will be shown that could cause the slightest moral offence.'<sup>149</sup> The *Cinema Palace* was the first cinema in Bussum, although earlier on the Mullens brothers had created a sensation with their shows at the fair and in rented indoor venues. But just two months later, Desmet faced competition from a new theatre, the *Novum*, which was opened to coincide with the June fair and also showed film programmes.<sup>150</sup> It was advertised as a combined theatre and deluxe cinema.

The performances at the *Cinema Palace* were initially continuous like the two *Parisien*s, and lasted about an hour and three quarters. On Wednesday and Saturday afternoons, there were children's and family performances. The system of continuous performance did not appear to work in Bussum. Audiences remained seated, and customers arriving for the next performance were forced to stand. 'Needless to say, this kind of behaviour is disagreeable to both audience and management.'<sup>151</sup> Three evening shows, at fixed times, were quickly introduced on Sundays and public holidays, enabling seats to be reserved in advance. The performances consisted of eight or nine shorts,

plus one long feature. The prices at the Cinema Palace were considerably higher than at the Gezelligheid: 60, 50, 35 and 20 cents, respectively, for circle, rear, centre and front stalls, plus a five per cent local tax.

## Conclusion

Desmet's move to a permanent cinema in 1909 can be seen as his way of hitting back at Mullens and Benner, his rivals on the fairgrounds. The tables were now turned. Although they followed his example and started their own permanent cinemas, neither was able to build up a cinema chain or open a luxury motion-picture theatre like the Cinema Palace. Mullens has gone down in history as a film producer; Benner has vanished into oblivion. Desmet's travelling cinema was taken out of service in 1910. His major competitors on the fairgrounds managed to hang on there for a couple more years, but they too started up permanent theatres during their last years on the fair. The smaller travelling showmen held out for longer, but had to be satisfied with small towns and villages, which either acquired permanent cinemas only years later or not at all. Desmet's relations with both the large and the small former travelling cinema owners changed: they were no longer fairground rivals but clients of his distribution company. However, it was in the first instance the explosive growth of permanent cinemas in the Netherlands that created the need for specialists who could guarantee weekly or twice-weekly programme changes. These were the film distributors.



## **IV. Film Market Europe**

### **Buying Films Abroad (1910-1914)**

Early in 1910, Jean Desmet began to diversify his activities in the film world. He now became a distributor as well as a cinema exhibitor. The story of the rise and flourishing of his distribution business provides an insight into the growth of Dutch and foreign film culture between 1910 and 1914. In this short period the Dutch film world underwent rapid and sweeping changes, which were partly determined by events abroad. In the years 1910-12, Desmet imported second-hand films from Germany which were delivered in ready-made programmes. From 1912 to 1914, he purchased directly from production companies, or from international distributors and their agents who owned the rights for particular film companies. From this point onwards, his buying was centred on Brussels and Berlin. The source of the majority of these films, which are the basis of the present Desmet Collection, can be traced through an examination of Desmet's dealings with Westdeutsche Film-Börse and Deutsche Film Gesellschaft, his most important contacts in the period 1910-12, and with his principal suppliers in Brussels and Berlin in the years 1912-14. This chapter therefore focuses in detail on these contacts and the kind of films he acquired through them.

#### **I. Second-Hand Films (1910-1912)**

##### **The German distributive trade. The acquisition of complete programmes and the rise of the long feature film**

The beginnings of Desmet's film distribution are directly linked to important developments in Germany, which were already in evidence from 1906/7 onwards.<sup>1</sup> Initially, both travelling showmen and permanent cinema operators simply bought their films. An example of this practice in the Netherlands is Frans Goeman of the Tivoli Winter Garden, who bought Pathé films in Paris up to 1907. Goeman changed half his programme every four weeks and then sold the worn films to smaller operators or to travelling showmen. He stopped buying and selling when Pathé introduced film rental in 1907.<sup>2</sup>

Germany had a large number of cinemas from an early stage. The pur-

chase of huge quantities of films created a need for dealerships. An extremely heterogeneous market in used films came into being, from film exchange fairs to small retailers. Films were even sold in department stores. Commercial distributors represented just a small group within this range of traders. Müller argues that the cinema boom in Germany could not have begun without the development of this buoyant second-hand market.<sup>3</sup>

Films from all countries and production companies were offered for sale or rent after their first run. The second-hand traders charged prices that were far below those of the production companies themselves, so the latter often experienced difficulties in selling their new films. The producers faced competition not only from each other but also from their own past productions. This exhausting competition gave rise to a crisis in the industry that also affected the cinemas, which were changing their programmes more and more frequently merely to attract customers. The second-hand market exacerbated this spiral. At the same time, exhibitors had to drop their admission prices in order to remain competitive. These practices were tolerated because of the lack of regulation within the German film trade. The only system of any kind was the so-called 'Terminfilm' or 'fixed-release film', which was introduced in 1909. Production companies would announce the release dates of these films in advance, enabling buyers to make their plans. They were thus informed at an early stage of forthcoming releases. The disadvantage of this sort of marketing was that since its release had already been announced, a film that did not immediately find a buyer ran the risk of being left on the shelf.<sup>4</sup>

German producers tried time and again to restrain the free market, and film companies did what they could to intervene at the international level; but it was of little avail. A conference of European film producers, distributors and exhibitors held in Paris in February 1909 floated the idea of a minimum selling price of 1.25 francs, with the obligation of returning copies to the production companies after four months, but the latter element of the proposal ran into stiff resistance. Another proposal for an across-the-board switch to film rental also failed to attract general enthusiasm. However, the idea of price regulation did seem to catch on in some countries, since from 1912 Desmet acquired all his films in Brussels for 1.25 francs.<sup>5</sup> At this time, the French franc and the Belgian franc were on a par with each other. As film rental became more popular, the practice of tying the rental price to the age of the film was established. The longer the run, the lower the price. In Germany in 1910, a programme of seven films cost between 50 and 350 marks.<sup>6</sup> There was thus no question of fixed rental prices.

Although the German second-hand market was a disaster as far as the film industry was concerned, it offered Desmet an attractive way of acquiring films advantageously and renting them on to third parties afterwards. He began by buying complete programmes after they had played for two weeks in Germany.

Before 1911, films were seldom offered individually, but bundled together in a whole evening's programme. These programmes consisted of a mixture of dramas, comedies and non-fiction movies, with the longest film measuring no more than 350 metres and lasting no longer than a quarter of an hour. As we have already seen, Dutch permanent cinema operators were receiving ready-made programmes from the Netherlands branch of Pathé. But Dutch distributors like Desmet, who imported films from abroad, also often took these programmes intact from foreign suppliers and rented them on to Dutch cinemas. As the Dutch press noted with regularity, this meant that the films still carried German or French explanatory- and dialogue intertitles. Desmet had no trouble with this at first. In the earliest years of his distribution, he offered films 'with German intertitles which people here in Holland can read easily enough'.<sup>7</sup> It took a little time before Dutch distributors replaced foreign titles with Dutch titles, or ordered films with Dutch titles for which they themselves supplied the translations. They could also order films without titles and have them added by specialised Dutch firms.

Like other countries, the situation in the Netherlands was also affected by the introduction of long feature films. The long film claimed the central spot in the programme; short films were carefully grouped around them. Press reviews and advance publicity focused almost exclusively on the long film, which was known as 'the main feature'. In the years 1911-12, these films consisted largely of Danish thrillers and German dramas, among them the films of Asta Nielsen, Europe's first film star. Through his German contacts, Desmet took advantage of this trend, and by the spring of 1911, he was distributing several long features. He did not at first need to bother himself very much about these films, since they were generally included in the programmes he acquired, although this practice had still not been adopted by his first major supplier.

### **Westdeutsche Film Börse**

Desmet first made contact with Westdeutsche Film Börse, a German distributive-trading company in Krefeld, as early as August 1909. That summer, he was still busily touring the Netherlands with his travelling cinema. His first permanent cinema, the Cinema Parisien in Rotterdam, had been open for

almost six months. Through W. Tepe, a Dutch employee of Westdeutsche Film Börse, he was put in touch with Gustav Hattingen, the firm's manager.<sup>8</sup> Desmet was able to obtain two complete film programmes from Hattingen, which had played for five, six, seven or eight weeks in German cinemas, so he got them cheap.<sup>9</sup> Desmet's film business began on a second-hand basis.<sup>10</sup>

It took a few months for the deal to go through, and Desmet was in a hurry as the opening date of the *Parisien* (26 March 1910) drew closer. On 14 March, Desmet paid for his first consignment of films, which was probably delivered around the same date. From this point onwards, Desmet received a weekly consignment of films of 2,500 to 2,800 metres, occasionally slightly less, which was enough for two complete film programmes. Initially, these films were rented, so there are no surviving prints in the Desmet Collection.<sup>11</sup> Westdeutsche Film Börse remained Desmet's most important supplier until July 1911.

Desmet always received programme synopses in advance, so he was kept informed about the films due to arrive. The films were put on the train in Krefeld and collected in Amsterdam. They were returned again by rail after use. This form of transport was not always ideal. Desmet did not realise at first that it was much cheaper to send films by regular post and avoid customs duties. Sometimes Westdeutsche Film-Börse sent the wrong films or sent replacement titles when those originally announced were unavailable. At other times, the films were so badly packed that they were damaged upon arrival in Amsterdam. In these cases, Desmet sent full details of his complaints to his supplier, retaining a copy of each complaint for his records.

For reasons that are not entirely clear, Desmet decided at some time between July and October of 1910 to have his films sent to the *Cinema Parisien* in Rotterdam. The reason may have been the better rail connection from there to Krefeld. There were five daily trains from Amsterdam to Krefeld, but the films had to be transferred each time to another train at Duisburg. All these trains stopped at Rotterdam on the way. On the other hand, there were five other direct connections between Krefeld and Rotterdam by another route.<sup>12</sup> The management of the *Parisien* in Rotterdam had meanwhile been taken over by a member of Desmet's family, the German Heinrich Voltmann, who was married to his niece, Johanna Dahrs.<sup>13</sup> Voltmann took care of the screenings of Desmet's films at the *Parisien*, and also delivered films to the Rotterdam exhibitors Goeman and Strengholt, to Silvius in Dordrecht and to Van de Boogert and Lagrand in Delft.<sup>14</sup> He had a gauge with which he measured all films imported from Germany for Desmet. In the margins or at the bottom of the invoices, he entered the actual lengths of the films sent to Desmet by Westdeutsche Film Börse. These tended to differ somewhat from the stated length and Desmet regularly made a fuss about this too.

From October 1910 Desmet began to buy his films from Westdeutsche Film-Börse instead of renting them. However, he was now buying only half his previous meterage, taking an average of 1,200 metres of film a week, which was enough for one complete programme. The films were priced by the metre, regardless of whether they were bought or rented. The purchase price was 45 German pfennigs per metre. It is in any event clear what Desmet was receiving in October 1910, since many of the films from this period are now in the Desmet Collection. Thus, the programme of 25 October contained the Italian film *IL ROMANZO DI UN FANTINO* (*THE ROMANCE OF A JOCKEY*, Ambrosio 1910), that of 22 November the French drama *LE FILS DU PECHEUR* (*THE SON OF THE FISHERMAN*\*, Pathé 1910) and that of 20 December the British travelogue *MANXLAND AND ITS BEAUTIES* (Tyler 1910). These three movies are still in the collection.

Originally, Desmet received a weekly programme consisting of seven films. Posters were supplied with the deliveries from the beginning, with still photographs coming in a little later. The photos were free, but there was a charge for the posters. On 8 February 1911, Desmet and Hattingen met at the Grand Hotel du Soleil in Nymegen to thrash out a new agreement. Desmet undertook to buy two four-week-old programmes at 40 pfennigs per metre, which was slightly cheaper than before. 'Kolorit' or colouring-in was charged extra. The contract was to take effect from 14 March. This agreement was changed on 12 March, with Desmet now paying 40 pfennigs per metre for two weekly programmes consisting of films with a three-week run behind them, but with an extra 275 marks per delivery on top of this for 'rent'.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps Desmet rented these programmes for his two Parisiens during the first week, and then bought them in order to hire them on to other cinemas. He obviously considered their value as brand new prints important enough to justify putting out a little extra for them. The arrangement lasted until early July 1911. Desmet received a weekly consignment of between 2,550 and 2,850 metres of film. One programme arrived on Saturdays, the other on Tuesdays.

The films of Westdeutsche Film Börse reflected what was currently on offer internationally, as well as the prevailing hierarchy inside the European film market. The majority of these programmes consisted of French films by Pathé and Gaumont, followed by Italian, American, German and Danish productions. The importation of German programmes did not necessarily imply that the films themselves were exclusively German. The German selection consisted mainly of productions by Messter and Deutsche Mutoskop and Biograph; the Italian films came largely from Cines and the American films from American Biograph and Kalem. At least half of the early American Biograph films in the Desmet Collection got there by this route. Among them are some fascinating D.W. Griffith movies, including a tinted version of the fa-



Fig. 26. *La caduta di Troia* (Italia 1911)

MOUS LONEDALE OPERATOR (American Biograph 1911), with Blanche Sweet as the plucky switchboard operator waylaid by two crooks.

Most of the films from Westdeutsche Film Börse were one-reelers of between 300 and 350 metres. Longer films were occasionally included, such as the Italian spectacle *LA CADUTA DI TROIA* (*THE FALL OF TROY*, Itala 1911) at 600 metres, acquired in April 1911. *Trojas Fall*, as it was called in Germany, was an adaptation of the classic tale with the accent on the relations between Helen and Paris. The film begins with the abduction of Helen by Paris and ends with Paris's death and the sacking of Troy by the Greeks. Apart from some ingenious special effects and imposing sets, the film is most notable for its huge cast of extras, particularly in the sequences depicting the entry of the Trojan Horse and the capture of Troy. The film also features superb back-lit shots of the burning city, tinted in brilliant red, viewed from the palace of Priam (Fig. 26).<sup>16</sup>

Desmet acquired his copy of *THE FALL OF TROY* from Otto Schmidt, who was Itala's representative in Germany.<sup>17</sup> Schmidt stipulated that the film should not be screened in the Netherlands before 8 April, and that for the first four weeks after that, it could only be sold or rented on in Germany or Scan-

dinavia. It was on no account to reach Italy before 1 July, since it would then be competing with the copies playing there from March or April. The film became one of Desmet's hits, and he was still advertising it years afterwards as one of his greatest films. The film was a success worldwide and founded the reputation of the Italian film industry.

Another long film acquired from Westdeutsche Film Börse and successfully distributed by Desmet was the Pathé spectacular *LA VIE ET LA PASSION DE NOTRE SEIGNEUR JÉSUS CHRIST* (*THE PASSION PLAY*, 1907). This film (Colour Plate 4) was released in Germany in March 1907, where it was a box-office hit. The *Passion Plays* were screened for years at Christmas, Easter, and Whitsun, as well as during the fairground and harvest seasons. With its tinted images, extraordinary length (over 900 metres) and familiar scenes, the film made such a huge impression that it could be shown indefinitely. Müller describes it as 'the first big hit movie of early German cinema'.<sup>18</sup> Although he bought it late (end of 1910), Desmet had no trouble getting bookings for it in a Catholic city such as Maastricht. In March or April 1911, this copy of *THE PASSION PLAY* was partially destroyed by fire and could no longer be rented.<sup>19</sup> Desmet managed to obtain another copy, for in May 1911 the film was again booked to travelling showman Alex Benner.<sup>20</sup>

The third long (650 metres) feature film acquired by Desmet through Westdeutsche Film-Börse was the sensational Danish drama *DEN HVIDE SLAVEHANDEL* (*THE WHITE SLAVE TRADE*, Nordisk 1910).<sup>21</sup> Desmet ordered this film from Hattingen on 19 December 1910 along with a number of other titles, adding the comment 'these films have surely by now finished playing in Germany.' *DIE WEISSE SKLAVIN* (*THE WHITE SLAVE GIRL*), as it was called in Germany, had indeed been distributed there by Ludwig Gottschalk of Düsseldorf, among others, since the end of September 1910.<sup>22</sup> It is not known when Desmet bought *THE WHITE SLAVE GIRL*, as it was also known in the Netherlands once other films in the series came out, but he was renting the film from February 1911. It was not a money-maker for long, for his copy was destroyed by fire at Röhr and Laudan in Tilburg in April 1911.<sup>23</sup> *THE WHITE SLAVE TRADE* set off a wave of 'white slave girl' films, with Nordisk's own sequel *DEN HVIDE SLAVEHANDELS SIDSTE OFFER* (*IN THE HANDS OF THE IMPOSTORS*, Nordisk 1911) making the biggest impression. Desmet also managed to get hold of this sequel.

On 1 June, Hattingen wrote to Desmet requesting early payment, as he himself had to meet large bills. Hattingen was indeed having financial difficulties, for on 13 July, Desmet learned that Tonhallen Theater Gesellschaft GmbH in Bochum had taken over the outstanding billing of Westdeutsche Film Börse, and that he should remit to them instead of Hattingen.<sup>24</sup>

Desmet then began negotiations with Tonhallen Theater Gesellschaft. With his measuring apparatus, he had established that many of Hattingen's films were shorter than the lengths for which he was being invoiced, and he requested an adjustment of the bill. Tonhallen Theater's general manager, Goldstaub, came to Amsterdam on 17 July to deal with the matter personally. Goldstaub dealt in films on his own account as well. Desmet was keen to buy the film *DAS MODELL* (*THE MODEL\**, Deutsche Mutoscop und Biograph) from him, but found the asking price of 700 marks too high: 'you will never be able to get this price in Holland'.<sup>25</sup>

Through Tonhallen Theater Desmet came into contact with W. Jokisch, a businessman with a film office in Berlin and a business in Budapest called Projectograph Kinematographen & Filmfabrik AG. Among the numerous films Jokisch asked Desmet to obtain for him for his Hungarian clients were *ZIGOMAR* (*ZIGOMAR*, Éclair 1911) and various second-hand Pathé movies, so that Desmet ended up both buying from and selling to him. But the material Jokisch received turned out to be too bad to be projected and was returned.<sup>26</sup>

Desmet not only had films sent to him, but sometimes went out after them as well. In November/December 1911, Heinrich Voltmann made a tour of various German and foreign distribution and production companies on his behalf, focusing particularly on Berlin.<sup>27</sup> In Berlin, Voltmann viewed new films at Nordische Film (Nordisk), Deutsche Bioscop, Messter, Vitascope, Deutsche Mutoscop- und Biograph and Gaumont. The first negotiations were a failure. Desmet's Dutch rival, Johan Gildemeijer of Union Film, another debutant film distributor, was quicker in acquiring several of the Asta Nielsen films that were so popular at the time. Gildemeijer was set to become the biggest importer and distributor of German films in the Netherlands.<sup>28</sup>

Voltmann and Desmet also clinched a deal with Herman Nerlich in Pankow. Nerlich dealt in 'stock films' (another name for second-hand movies), which he acquired in Sweden. From Nerlich Desmet obtained films produced by Dekage, Hepworth, Éclair and BB films. He also supplied films to Nerlich and others in December 1911.<sup>29</sup> Nerlich and Jokisch had done business with each other before, but they fell out over Desmet. Nerlich informed Desmet in 1911 that he wanted nothing more to do with Jokisch, as he was unable to keep his mouth shut. By trumpeting around Berlin that Desmet was doing business with him, Jokisch had made it impossible for Nerlich to acquire various 'exclusives' for Desmet. It is clear from this that the concept of exclusive rights was gradually increasing in importance, and suppliers were trying to offer these guarantees to their foreign clients – though naturally at an additional cost.<sup>30</sup> Desmet informed Nerlich that he would cancel the deal with Jokisch if Nerlich was able to promise better deliveries. But Nerlich was a

long way from becoming Desmet's biggest supplier. Desmet was perhaps still disinclined to pay the extra cost for exclusive films, for he did not issue his first until 1913. The delayed Dutch recognition (1912) of the Bern Convention of 1908 doubtless played a part in this.

### **Deutsche Film Gesellschaft**

Meanwhile, Desmet took his chances with one of Westdeutsche Film-Börse's competitors, Deutsche Film Gesellschaft.<sup>31</sup> This company was based in Cologne under the direction of Jakob Schnick, a former employer of Hattingen's. Schnick attempted to coax Desmet away from Hattingen by flattering him and making nasty remarks about Hattingen. Desmet remained cautious. He declared himself ready to take a chance on Schnick, but continued to deal with Hattingen right up to the latter's financial failure.

Desmet started by taking a few single, long films from Schnick. He bought the aforementioned Danish film *IN THE HANDS OF THE IMPOSTORS* in March 1911, followed in April by *VED FAENGSLETS PORT* (*TEMPTATIONS OF A GREAT CITY*, Nordisk 1910) and in May by the German film *HEISSES BLUT* (*HOT BLOOD\**, Deutsche Bioscop 1911): two successful Danish features plus one German drama starring Asta Nielsen. Desmet brought the house down with these movies in the Netherlands. The popularity of *HEISSES BLUT* was such that he bought a second copy from his former supplier Hattingen at Westdeutsche Film-Börse in June 1911.<sup>32</sup> In *HEISSES BLUT* (Colour Plate 5), Asta Nielsen gets caught red-handed in an adulterous relationship with her chauffeur. Both are banished from the house by her husband. Asta is arrested when she breaks into her ex-husband's home, but her child, who has meanwhile fallen sick, brings about a reconciliation.<sup>33</sup> *VED FAENGSLETS PORT* was lauded by Schnick as '... the greatest hit ever made and you will do absolutely fantastic business with it'.<sup>34</sup> The German word 'Schlager' was being adopted by the Dutch film world as a term for a 'winner' or 'smash hit'.

Schnick succeeded Hattingen as Desmet's regular supplier. He delivered complete programmes to Desmet from 22 July 1911. These amounted to between eight and fourteen films a week up to March 1912. The longer films that were becoming part of the programmes naturally brought about a reduction in the number of films shown. The long feature film gradually became an accepted part of the scene. But the length of films within the typically short-film genres, such as comedy and non-fiction, also increased. The total length of the weekly deliveries to Desmet varied between 2,400 and 2,750 metres, or two hours of film: enough for two cinema performances. In 1910/11, Hattingen had sent slightly more meterage per week. The overall length of a pro-

gramme hardly changed, therefore, though the lengths of individual films certainly did.

As with Hattingen, Desmet paid Schnick by the metre: 50 pfennigs. He was therefore prepared to pay a higher price for less weathered programmes with more long films. From the beginning, films were also delivered with matching sets of posters. From October 1911, sets of stills were included as well. Normal-sized posters cost 50 pfennigs, with smaller and larger formats costing 20 pfennigs and 1.50 marks, respectively.

Schnick's billing always noted the production company of a particular film, so it is easy to determine sources. Initially, films from Pathé Frères accounted for between a quarter and a half of Desmet's films. In second place were the Italian firms Cines, Ambrosio and Itala and the French Gaumont company. The selection gradually acquired greater variety. It began to contain more German and American titles (Messter, Vitascope, Welt-Kino, Kalem, Vitagraph), although they remained a clear minority. Unlike the programmes from Westdeutsche Film Börse, the programmes from Deutsche Film Gesellschaft regularly included longer films. To a greater extent than with his previous supplier, Desmet's arrangement with Deutsche Film-Gesellschaft enabled him to present himself as the distributor of programmes containing the popular long Danish, German and Italian thrillers and melodramas (Fig. 27). Unfortunately, some of these long features, *BALLHAUS ANNA I AND II* (*BALLROOM ANNA\**, Vitascope 1911), for instance, and *MARIANNE, EIN WEIB AUS DEM VOLKE* (*MARIANNE, A WOMAN OF THE PEOPLE\**, Messter 1911), have been lost from the Desmet Collection and can no longer be acquired elsewhere.

The preponderance of Pathé movies on Desmet's programmes began to wane. Schnick's first programme of July 1911 contained six Pathé films out of a total of fourteen titles, but by the beginning of 1912 this had changed to programmes consisting of eight or nine titles, of which two or three at the most were from Pathé. Through Deutsche Film Gesellschaft, and to a lesser extent Westdeutsche Film Börse, Desmet built up a personal collection of dozens of Pathé movies, many of which remain in the Desmet Collection. Most of these films are short dramas and comedies, but there are also a few non-fiction films, such as Alfred Machin's *CHASSE À L'AIGRETTE EN AFRIQUE* (*HUNTING EGRETS IN AFRICA*, 1911). Desmet's acquisition of Pathé films began to stagnate when he stopped doing business with Schnick. This explains why most of the Pathé movies in the Desmet Collection date from the period 1910-12. After this date, Desmet's orders from the Dutch branch of Pathé were largely confined to newsreels and actualities.<sup>35</sup>

In the autumn of 1911, Desmet began to complain about Schnick's deliveries: 'I also want to draw your attention to the enclosed pieces of film that I

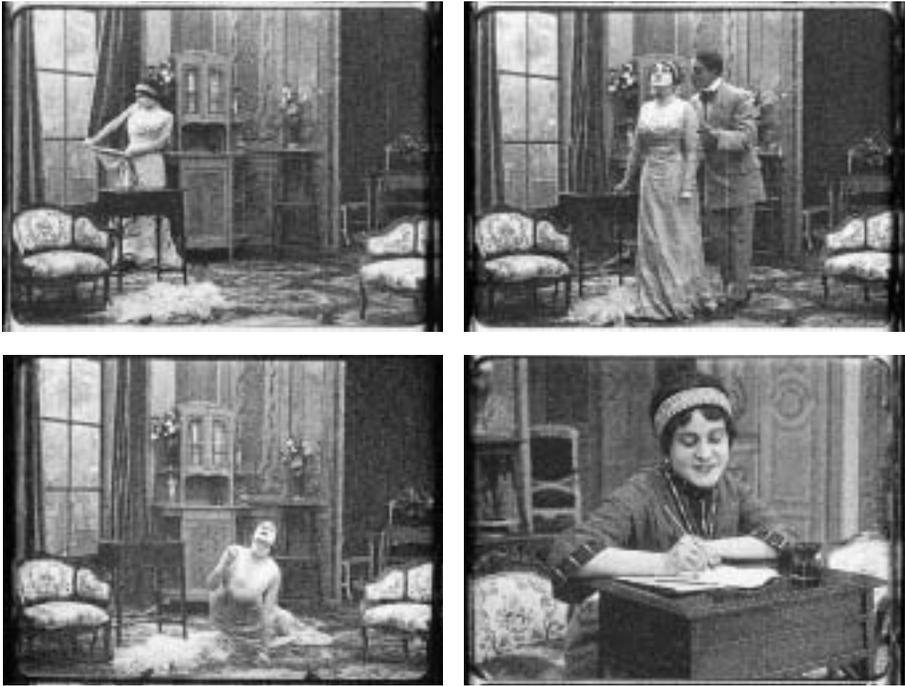


Fig. 27. The Italian melodrama *L'uragano* (Pasquali 1911) was acquired from Deutsche Film-Gesellschaft

have had to take out of the film *Sündige Liebe*, due to the *poor condition* of the film. You can see for yourself that this is no way to send out a film.'<sup>36</sup> Schnick was unable to put the matter right straight away, for a month later Desmet was complaining again: 'I enclose eight leaders from the last programme which has still played only here in Amsterdam and not yet in Rotterdam. All eight are damaged. You will see that the condition of these films renders them useless to me.'<sup>37</sup> When the problem had not been resolved by December and he again had to write an angry letter about the poor state of the movies, Desmet decided that enough was enough.<sup>38</sup> At the beginning of January, he informed Schnick that 'Due to the huge competition in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, I am no longer able to use programmes that are *three* weeks old, and am therefore obliged to take only new prints, which I consider sufficient reason to cancel the contract signed 1 May 1911, effective July 1911.'<sup>39</sup>

Desmet's break with Schnick was undoubtedly due in part to the deteriorating quality of Schnick's prints and the growing demand from the leading cinemas for perfect prints. Rival distributors were not exactly dragging their feet, and cinema owners were becoming more fastidious. However, a number

of important changes within the European film trade were also in play. These were the direct purchase of films from the production companies and large international distributors, the purchase of single films, the advance of the 'exclusive' film and, finally, the rise of Berlin and Brussels as centres of international film trading. On 5 March 1912, Desmet wrote to six different Brussels distributors on the same day: 'In view of my need to purchase films quickly, I would greatly appreciate your coming to Amsterdam this week. I therefore very much look forward to receiving you at my premises at your earliest convenience.'<sup>40</sup> Five of these distributors – Max Delbrügger, Claude Robinet, Maurice Gigan, Ferdinand Guillaume and the Brussels branch of Gaumont – became Desmet's regular and most important suppliers up to the outbreak of the First World War. Schnick's role was therefore essentially played out, and his deteriorating supplies offered sufficient excuse for Desmet to ditch him.

## **2. Between Brussels and Berlin. Desmet's Purchases 1912-1914**

### **The European network. Changes after 1912: the coming of the exclusive film, direct buying from production companies and international distributors**

The first experiments with the renting of individual films, like the 'film d'art', were succeeded by structural changes in the way that films were put on offer, following the arrival of the long feature film and the subsequent introduction of the so-called 'exclusive' or 'monopoly' system.<sup>41</sup> The long movie and the exclusive system reached Germany in 1910 and 1911, which was a little earlier than the Netherlands, where they appeared in 1911 and 1913, respectively. According to Müller, 'the contemporary term "monopoly film" referred not to a particular kind of film but to a trading practice within the distribution industry. The exclusive rental was historically the first example of film distribution applied systematically to an individual film, and it therefore marked the transition to a "modern" system of film trading.'<sup>42</sup> When he acquired an exclusive film, a distributor bought both a copy of the film and exclusive rights of exhibition, which were valid for an agreed period of time (a few months, one or more years) within a particular area (a city, a region or a whole country). Distributors paid unusually large sums to the production companies for these rights. As a system, it was not entirely new, for it had already been possible for film traders to acquire sole sale and rental rights on all films from a particular production company from quite early on. But the revolutionary as-

pect of the new system was the possibility of temporally assigning this exclusive right of exhibition in a city to a *single* operator for exhibition in a *single* cinema – and again for a considerable price. Anyone else issuing the same film could face prosecution. Furthermore, the system focused on individual films, rather than the complete output of a particular film company. Desmet's competitor, Johan Gildemeijer, commented as follows on the European pricing policy of those years:

The normal price of a metre of film is 0.60 guilders here, 1 mark in Germany and 1.25 francs in France. This applies to comedies of 100-150 metres and short dramas and comedies of between 200 and 300 metres. Thus, the numbers you find on any programme cost 60 to 100, or 150 to 180 guilders, respectively. Long films of about 800 to 1,000 metres therefore cost between 500 and 600 guilders. These are the normal films, however. For the past year, the market has been dominated by the exclusive films which command higher, often exorbitant prices.<sup>43</sup>

The exclusive system focused on expensive, long feature films. The combination of long films and the exclusive system allowed prices to be raised, both to the distributor and operator, as well as at the box office. Exhibition, distribution and production were becoming more profitable. Production companies were able to build larger studios, make more expensive pictures and pay higher salaries to film-makers and actors. Distributors could step up their publicity, pay higher purchase prices and spend less time stalking their competitors. Exhibitors received a guarantee that there would be no more unfair competition from rivals who came up with the same film at the same time. Film copies rented as exclusive were generally less worn, since they had previously been screened in only a few towns. Cinema exhibitors too were in a position to build bigger and more luxurious cinemas, spend more on fixtures, such as cinema orchestras, and raise their admission prices if the films were big enough. The audience was offered more comfort and better guarantees of new films, bigger productions as the main feature and film stars such as Asta Nielsen and Henny Porten. The exclusives put an end to the crisis in the movie industry and film business caused by the second-hand trade and the free market, and gave a shot in the arm to trade and industry. They also triggered a far-reaching selection process in the cinemas by opening a gulf between the rich operators of the luxury film theatres who took these films, and the managers of the suburban cinemas who could not afford them and had to be satisfied with the films they could get on the free market, or with exclusive films whose first releases in the Netherlands were over.

The system of exclusive screening rights did not reach the Netherlands until early 1913. The delay was due to the Dutch government's late recog-

tion of the Bern Convention (1908), which regulated authors' rights and created the legal framework for combating plagiarism among the producers and contesting unlawful film exhibition. The Bern Convention was ratified by Germany in 1910, paving the way for the arrival there of the first exclusive films, but Dutch ratification came only in the autumn of 1912. By a legal enactment of 23 September 1912, the law of copyright was extended to apply to 'cinematographic works and works produced by similar procedures'.<sup>44</sup> Copyright could be assigned in writing. Authors and proprietors were protected by the law, and if necessary money charged for admission to an illegal showing of a film could be seized.

Up to that point, the market had remained beyond the reach of the law. Whoever got in first with a film could net the big-city audiences. However, other distributors might easily buy or hire a second copy and rent it to other cinemas, or to schools and private individuals. In Amsterdam, distributors would sometimes come up with a rival copy just a week after, or even simultaneously with, the first screening of a long feature film. Desmet himself was no stranger to this practice.

Even after the introduction of exclusive screening rights, many films were still being exchanged freely, since some film companies preferred to sell as many copies as possible. Short films and older films did not usually come under the exclusive system. No one had extra money for films that were lower on the programme and had little publicity value. Desmet adopted the practice of renting his exclusive films at a lower price once they had lost their exclusive value after their first week in the various cities. This practice actually rather resembled his method of dealing with new feature films *before* the arrival of the exclusive film system.

Jean Desmet had already tried to acquire an exclusive in 1911. This was the film *DAS MODELL* mentioned above. On 2 August he offered to buy a three-week-old copy of the film from Goldstaub at Tonhallen Theater in Bochum for 400 marks 'as a monopoly film for me in Holland and Belgium, with exclusive rights to screen and sell the film in both countries'. Nothing came of this, as Goldstaub was demanding too much; so some time was to pass before Desmet acquired his first exclusive movie. *AFGRUNDEN* (*ABYSS*, *Kosmorama* 1910), the Danish movie that had precipitated the breakthrough of the exclusive system in Germany, was nowhere near to being such a smash hit in the Netherlands.<sup>45</sup> Early in 1911, Desmet rented *AFGRUNDEN*, in which Asta Nielsen made her *début* as a film actress, to several cinema operators, but it seems that the copy was not his own and that he was renting it on behalf of one of his fellow distributors.<sup>46</sup> Desmet's most popular films in 1911 were mostly films that could be bought on the open market. Besides the Danish films, these were mainly the German films *HEISSES BLUT*, *DIE WEISSE*

SKLAVIN III (THE WHITE SLAVE GIRL\*, Vitascope 1911), DAS BALLHAUS ANNA I and II and MARIANNE, EIN WEIB AUS DEM VOLKE.<sup>47</sup>

At the beginning of 1912, Desmet's distribution practice changed radically. He was now concentrating his activities on Brussels and Berlin, rather than Cologne and Krefeld. Instead of acquiring films from any number of film companies, as had been his practice with Westdeutsche Film Börse and Deutsche Film Gesellschaft, he now bought directly from production companies, or from companies that had managed to acquire exclusive sales rights on all films by specific film companies in certain countries. In France in particular, firms such as Aubert often held not only the French rights for a number of film companies, but also the rights for surrounding countries like Belgium and the Netherlands. Companies like these often had agents in cities like Brussels, or held exclusive contracts there with private film traders, who thereby re-acquired the sole rights of sale for smaller areas such as Belgium and the Netherlands. Some production companies, Lux and Éclair for example, also distributed films by other companies. In this way, the European dissemination of films grew into a dense network of production companies, international distribution concerns, franchised dealers, retailers and local renters. In terms of scale, efficiency and intricacy of structure, this network, which linked all countries to each other, ranked on a par with the telephone and railway networks which were already established by then. For Desmet, Brussels functioned as the distribution centre for French, Italian, British and American movies bound for the Netherlands, with Berlin supplying the German, Danish and occasionally American and Italian contingents.<sup>48</sup>

Distributors generally had their offices in strategic locations, often in the areas near a railway station.<sup>49</sup> In Brussels, they could be found on or around the Boulevard du Nord (now the Boulevard Adolphe Max).<sup>50</sup> Several cinemas were established there, but it was also close to the Gare du Nord, where trains departed to Flanders, the Netherlands and Germany (Fig. 28). In Berlin, nearly everyone was on or around the south side of Friedrichstrasse, an important shopping and entertainment street, which terminated at its southern end at the city's principal railway station, Bahnhof Friedrichstrasse (Fig. 29). Films could easily be put on express trains to Amsterdam.<sup>51</sup> In London, the trade had its base on and around Wardour Street, Cecil Court – nicknamed 'flicker alley' – and Charing Cross Road, not far from Charing Cross Station.<sup>52</sup> Given the small size of its city centre, the siting of the film trade close to the railway station was not so important in Amsterdam. However, in his distribution office on Nieuwendijk, above the Cinema Parisien, Desmet was very close to Amsterdam Central Station.<sup>53</sup>

In 1910, the Netherlands, along with the countries surrounding it, pos-



Fig. 28. Place Brouckère, Brussels

sessed 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 (more if you changed trains) between Brussels and Amsterdam. The trip from Berlin to Amsterdam took eleven hours, and from Brussels-Noord to Amsterdam three and a half hours.<sup>54</sup>

Not only was distance less of a hurdle, but time too had been 'canalised'. The Netherlands finally adopted a uniform clock-time in 1909. This differed by half an hour from Greenwich Mean Time (which applied in Belgium) and from Central European Time (which applied in Germany). 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 authorities settled for local Amsterdam time as the measure. This system remained in operation until the Second World War.<sup>55</sup>

The need for efficiency and standardisation is apparent in other areas besides railways and time. In Desmet's own archives (Colour Plate 6), one observes a passage from handwritten to typewritten letters and invoices in the cause of maximal clarity and intelligibility. English, French and German



Fig. 29. Bahnhof Friedrichstrasse, Berlin

were the languages of the film trade, and this applied to letters received from Italy and Denmark, as well as to mail sent out by Desmet and his associates. Desmet was reasonably fluent in French, but had to get others to translate German and English for him. In the first year of his distribution office, he wrote his own business mail. Jan Binksma took over the major part of this from April 1911. From mid-1912, his foreign correspondence was handled by George de Vrée who, though much better at languages than Desmet, was far from perfect in French and English.

Desmet used telegrams in cases of emergency, or when he wanted to conclude a piece of business quickly. Emergencies arose fairly often, particularly when new films due to begin their run on a particular day of the week (usually a Friday) failed to arrive on time. He also often resorted to telegrams as deadlines on business offers approached; usually when this involved expensive deals like exclusive rights on individual films or a complete year's production.<sup>56</sup> In certain cases, Desmet used the telephone (by Amsterdam standards, he was connected fairly early on), but for the most part he did business by letter, so he could always refer back to his letters in cases of legal conflict.<sup>57</sup> He kept carbon copies of his outgoing mail. On letters received, or on bits of paper attached to them, he would jot down brief replies, which were then elaborated either by himself or his employees.

Sometimes Desmet went off to view and purchase movies himself. He

was in Berlin for a while at the beginning of April 1913. On this occasion, he paid visits to the Eiko offices, where he viewed and ordered *DAS RECHT AUF DASEIN* (*THE RIGHT TO EXIST\**, Eiko 1913), to Hanewacher & Scheler, where he viewed *DIE CZERNOWSKA* (*CZERNOWSKA\**, Monopol 1913) and to Messter's premises in connection with the purchase of *RICHARD WAGNER*. On 9 or 10 April, he met his old acquaintance Hermann Nerlich from Berlin-Pankow, from whom he bought the Hepworth movie *TRIED IN THE FIRE* (Hepworth 1913) and *DES MEERES UND DER LIEBE WELLEN* (*THE WAVES OF SEA AND LOVE\**, Dekage 1912), a film that was shot partly in Volendam.<sup>58</sup>

Mostly, however, Desmet let people come to him. Representatives from the production companies and international distributors, often called 'travellers', regularly visited the Netherlands to parade their latest offerings.<sup>59</sup> They might also tell Desmet in advance that they would be doing this in German cities close to the Netherlands, such as Aachen and Cologne. In Amsterdam, these demonstrations were either for Desmet's benefit alone or took place in public, allowing the competing parties to bid against each other. The travellers were also happy to forward a few sample metres of a film to allow the picture quality to be examined, so-called *échantillons*.<sup>60</sup> The word 'échantillon' could also apply to a sample of a complete film. Thus, Desmet would occasionally receive a complete film on approval. He also kept abreast of films for sale via various foreign trade journals. Trade journals, such as *De Bioscoop-Courant* and *De Kinematograaf*, had also existed in the Netherlands since 1912. In addition, and as already stated above, Desmet received advance film descriptions and posters which kept him in the picture.

From this point forward, films had to be new and flawless, certainly for the luxury cinemas of the big cities. Several suppliers tried to sell Desmet films they had already shown as 'échantillons' as new films, but he saw through their act time and again. In one case, we find Desmet's assistant, G.K. van Soest, writing on his behalf to the Brussels distributor Guillaume: 'I kindly request you to note that "Constantine" [*CONSTANTINE*, Éclair 1913], which I received from you, is a sampler, and that this should be reflected in your invoice.'<sup>61</sup> Desmet would sometimes accept these copies on condition of a rebate, but he usually declined and sent them back.<sup>62</sup> When the firm of Vay & Hubert offered him a movie which had already been playing for three weeks at the rival Kosmorama he reacted indignantly: 'How could you recommend me a picture that is already playing somewhere else!'<sup>63</sup>

If a film arrived late, either because the supplier or production company had despatched it too late, or for whatever other reason, Desmet usually refused to accept it and returned it immediately. His view seemed to be that if the supplier could not deliver on time, he was under no obligation to accept

and pay for the film. This also meant that if a Dutch competitor, such as Nöggerath, had also bought a copy of the same movie, Desmet would miss out on a first run. On one occasion, he received the film *ONÉSIME A UN DUEL À L'AMÉRICAINNE* (*ONESIME'S DUEL À L'AMÉRICAINNE\**, 1912) two days late from Gaumont. He sent the film back, '...since this film should have been here two days ago and is advertised in the programme and I have had to disappoint my audience.'<sup>64</sup> Advertising material, particularly posters, also had to arrive on time, which meant seven or eight days before the screenings. Furthermore, he demanded film synopses in advance to give him time to have them printed. This too did not always go without a hitch. While the suppliers and production companies complained that Desmet was continually late in sending in the translations they needed in order to insert Dutch intertitles, Desmet himself regularly hit the ceiling when texts, posters and films sometimes arrived late, or at the very last minute.

Films were often in colour, either tinted or coloured-in. Salesmen were always promoting films in colour. Colour was a marketing argument and delivered cultural capital. Tinted or coloured-in films were not optional, or at least not presented as such. As a buyer you paid the extra costs of colour, just as you paid extra for the postage. But not every film was entirely coloured-in. Invoices would therefore often state the number of tinted metres alongside the total meterage. Desmet's Brussels suppliers charged him 10 Belgian centimes extra per tinted metre, and 40 cents extra per coloured metre, on top of their standard rate of 1.25 francs per metre. The costs for the print and the rights on an exclusive film like *RICHARD WAGNER* were so high (1,500 marks for the first copy, and 2,000 marks for the second, plus 3,500 marks for the exclusive rights for the Netherlands and another 4,000 for the rights for Belgium) that tinting, post and packaging were included.<sup>65</sup> Neither Desmet nor his Dutch competitors passed on the costs of tinting to their cinema customers. Dutch titling firms charged no extra for coloured titles either.

Desmet's films were provided with Dutch titles from 1912 onwards. Before 1914, Desmet had his titling done by the firms from whom he acquired the films, such as Maurice Gigan in Brussels. Sometimes Gigan sent the lists of French titles to Desmet, sometimes they would be sent to him directly by the parent company of Louis Aubert in Paris. Desmet then sent back the Dutch translations. Gigan and Desmet often had arguments about the delay of the translation copy, as Desmet was constantly late sending it in. Desmet never seemed to allow for the extra transit time needed for Cines films, which had to come all the way from Rome, unlike movies made in the northern Italian cities. Desmet really needed to get his translations for these films in on time. Given the speed required, occasional mistakes in the contents of the translations were unavoidable. For a while, the lists of titles were translated

by Voltmann, the German operator of the Rotterdam Parisien. His shaky knowledge of Dutch did not exactly help to reduce the complications caused by spelling mistakes and mistranslation.

From the end of 1913, Desmet resorted more and more to the services of Dutch firms specialising in the production of titles: Nöggerath, Alberts Frères and the Eerste Rotterdamsche Filmfabriek (First Rotterdam Film Factory) at Overschie near Rotterdam. It did not worry him that Nöggerath was also his rival. Desmet also started to order more and more prints without titles from abroad to economise on price. The first large-scale producer of titles for Desmet was Albert Mullens (of Alberts Frères) from January 1914 to 1915. Mullens produced titles mainly for farces; usually just a single opening title, as many farces had hardly any dialogue titles. They were not necessary anyway, as the plots spoke for themselves.

Finally, a film had to be complete. Films from which footage was missing were a thorn in the side of Desmet. Either he or one of his employees regularly noted the real length of a film, compared with the length stated by the supplier, in the margin of the invoice. With a film of 900 metres this could make a difference of 200 metres. Desmet was endlessly badgering his suppliers about their overcharging on the meterage. The firm might claim that he needed to allow for a certain percentage of waste, but this cut no ice with him. He simply paid according to the lengths of the films as he measured them himself. This explains why Desmet's business archive is chock-full of additional bills on Desmet's part and angry letters on both sides. Many film companies and traders were prepared to accept Desmet's credit slips in order to retain his business, but they did so under protest. Writing to Desmet in connection with an Italian film on 16 January 1914, Louis Aubert told him that he was fed up with his complaints about short footages. The footage was the footage as stated by the company's head office in Rome. Furthermore, footages were always verified in Aubert's depot before despatch. 'You have no idea how annoying these continuous complaints about footage are.'<sup>66</sup> Even if one of their employees was occasionally guilty of an error, it was highly unlikely that the same error would occur over and over again, was Aubert's view of the matter. On the other hand, Aubert's words could be taken to imply that Desmet was by no means the only person to complain.

Desmet was sometimes quite rightly concerned about the cuts that production companies and foreign suppliers had had to make to films to comply with censorship in their own countries. Thus, we find him writing to Komet Film that his copy of *DIE LEBENDE BRÜCKE* (*THE LIVING BRIDGE\**, 1912) should include any scenes that might have had to be cut from the version shown in Germany. 'You must remove nothing at all from the film, as the sequence involving the murder may be shown in Holland.'<sup>67</sup> Despite this, there were



Fig. 30. Order form of Desmet's rental agency, showing the logos of the production companies whose films he distributed

indeed parts missing from the film when it finally arrived: 'When watching the film, I noticed that the bit containing the fight with the bear had been taken out. I would be grateful for if you would now send me that bit, for we are allowed to show it here in Holland.'<sup>68</sup>

All in all, the international film industry had become one huge mechanism whose parts all had to function synchronously to keep it moving. Desmet realised this in good time and made sure that his organisation 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, he acquired greater influence on the composition of cinema performances. From now on he compiled his own programmes (Fig. 30).<sup>69</sup>

## Berlin

From 1913, Desmet bought exclusive movies in Germany, but not all were actually offered as such. In 1913, for example, the Eiko Company sold Desmet *DAS RECHT AUFS DASEIN* as an exclusive in the Netherlands for 1,200 marks, but another Eiko movie, *ILSE UND IHRE DREI FREIER* (*ILSE AND HER THREE SUITORS\**, 1913), was sold in the normal way for 455 marks. In a similar manner, Desmet bought *RICHARD WAGNER* and *SCHULDIG* (*GUILTY\**, 1913) from the

rival Messter<sup>70</sup> Company as exclusives, but other Messter movies made in 1913, and particularly their shorter movies, were acquired on the free market.<sup>71</sup> In January 1913, Vitascope offered Desmet their prestigious exclusive *DER ANDERE* (*THE OTHER\**, 1913), but that year he bought only their regularly priced films, such as *TREFF BUBE* (*THE LETHAL SHOT\**), *ZWEI VERIRRRTEN* (*TWO LOST SOULS\**), *ZWEI BESTIEN* (*TWO BEASTS\**) and *DER GRÜNE TEUFEL* (*THE GREEN DEVIL\**).<sup>72</sup> In 1913, Deutsche Bioscop marketed *TURI DER WANDERLAPPE* (*TURI, THE LAPP*, 1913) as an exclusive in the Netherlands and Belgium for 1,580 marks – the dialogue titles of the copy were bilingual to take account of the Belgian sales – but sold an older film, *DIE VERRÄTERIN* (*THE TRAITRESS\**, 1911), as a non-exclusive. We may conclude from this that older and shorter films were not normally offered for sale as exclusives, and that many German film companies did business both on the open market and within the exclusive system.

Notwithstanding the claims of his rival Gildemeijer at Union Films, Desmet did in fact do business with Union, since that company controlled the films of Vitascope in 1914. In April 1914, Desmet acquired Vitascope's *PAULINE* (1914), *PARADIES DER DAMEN* (*PARADISE OF WOMEN\**, 1914) and *DIE WELT OHNE MÄNNER* (*THE WORLD WITHOUT MEN\**, 1913) through Union (Colour Plate 7). Union thereupon invited Desmet and De Hoop, his partner at NV Middenstad, to come to Berlin and spend three days viewing movies at eight Union cinemas (the so-called UT theatres) with all expenses paid.<sup>73</sup>

In Berlin 1913/14, Desmet bought films from other countries as well as just German movies. In May 1912, he bought *RETTUNGSKORPS DER VEREINIGTEN STAATEN* (*UNITED STATES LIFE GUARDS*) and *HIS DAUGHTER* (Edison 1912) from the Edison Gesellschaft GmbH. Through Skandinavisk Films, again in Berlin, he acquired the Russian film *ROZHDYESTVO OBITATELI LYESA* (*A CHRISTMAS WITH THE FOREST INHABITANTS*, Chanzjonkov 1911-12) around the turn of the year 1913. This was an animated film by Ladislav Starevich, which the seller described rather bluntly as a loss-making film 'for which absolutely no credit is available on sales abroad'. This additional piece of information was, of course, only volunteered after Desmet had bought it.<sup>74</sup>

One of the most important branches with which Desmet did business was the Nordische Film Co., the Berlin office of the Danish Nordisk Company. From Karl Süring, who was manager there, Desmet ordered several Danish films in 1912, which included *DEN SORTE KANSLER, SCENEN OG LIVET* (*ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE\**, 1912), *TRE KAMMERATER* (Fig. 31) and *HANS VANSKELIGSTE ROLLE* (*HIS MOST DIFFICULT PART\**, 1912).<sup>75</sup> In March 1913, he negotiated with Süring for the exclusive rights for all Nordisk films in the Netherlands. Nordisk was able to let him have one weekly drama at 2 marks per metre and a continuous supply of comedies and nature films at 1.50 marks. Desmet



Fig. 31. *Tre Kammerater* (Nordisk 1912)

needed to be quick, for his competitors were also on the prowl. But he dithered for too long, despite Süring's panicky telegrams, and the deal fell through. Süring had a contract to supply movies to Gildemeijer, but when that expired in the summer of 1913, he was ready to do business again, though only in non-exclusives.<sup>76</sup> In December 1913, after Süring had been replaced, Desmet was asked if he still wanted to become a regular client, but again nothing came of it.<sup>77</sup> Desmet was presumably unwilling to commit himself.

Desmet obtained many foreign films through the middlemen in Berlin as well as via the agencies. From Otto Schmidt, from whom he had acquired *LA CADUTA DI TROIA* in 1911, he bought the farces *TOTÒ HA EREDITATO* (*TOTO'S INHERITANCE\**, Itala 1912) and *COME TOTÒ RISCUOTE L'AFFITTO* (*HOW TOTO EXACTS RENT\**, Itala 1912) in 1912; the Danish movie *EN KVINDES AERE* (*A WOMAN'S HONOUR\**, Kinografen 1912) in 1913, and early in 1914 the thriller *DET HEMMELIGHEDSFULDE X* (*SEALED ORDERS/THE MYSTERIOUS X*, Dansk Biograf 1913) by Benjamin Christensen.<sup>78</sup> Schmidt was touting himself at the time as the German representative of Itala and Vitagraph, but he was clearly dealing in everything. Other German traders supplied German productions only. Henri Adolph Müller in Hamburg sent him *DAS GEHEIMNIS VON CHA-*

TEAU RICHMOND (THE MYSTERY OF RICHMOND CASTLE\*, Kieswetter 1913). This purchase acquired a coda when it was discovered that Heinrich Voltmann, Desmet's assistant and operator of the Rotterdam Parisien, was secretly trying to hire out the film behind Desmet's back.<sup>79</sup>

## Brussels

From 1912, the bulk of Desmet's movies came from Brussels. The Brussels free-market traders charged at the single rate of 1.25, regardless of whether the films were short or long. This was in conformity with French pricing policies. Desmet's principal contacts between 1912 and 1914 were Gaumont, Maurice Gigan, Ferdinand Guillaume, M.P. Sales Agency and Claude Robinet.<sup>80</sup>

## Gaumont

Desmet had a contract for film hire with Gaumont's Brussels branch as early as 1910.<sup>81</sup> It is uncertain how long this lasted. However, at that time he did acquire from Gaumont the actuality FUNERAILLES D' EDOUARD VII D' ANGLETERRE 20 MAI 1910 (FUNERAL OF EDWARD VII, 1910) which showed pictures of the funeral of Edward VII and the proclamation of King George V.<sup>82</sup> In addition, Desmet received several Gaumont movies through Westdeutsche Film Börse and Deutsche Film Gesellschaft. When Deutsche Film Gesellschaft withdrew, there was a real emergency. In response to Desmet's letter of 5 March 1912, the Brussels representative of Gaumont, Adolphe Karelse, visited Desmet in Amsterdam to show him his latest movies. As a result of this meeting, Desmet began to take films from Gaumont, which started to dribble in from the end of March. Desmet booked an average of two films from each weekly offer. Gaumont repeatedly offered him actualities, but despite the hype of their publicity, he was not tempted.<sup>83</sup> He bought equipment such as lenses and capacitors from Gaumont from time to time, but his first priority was films: of all genres and lengths, tinted or coloured.

Among the long films was the ever-present crime movie LE MYSTÈRE DES ROCHES DE KADOR (IN THE GRIP OF THE VAMPIRE, 1912), which Desmet bought in November 1912.<sup>84</sup> In this film (Fig. 32) a villainous uncle drives his niece to madness in order to get his hands on her inheritance, but with the help of a film camera she manages to recover her reason. The director of LE MYSTÈRE DES ROCHES DE KADOR was Léonce Perret. Perret also played one of the lead roles in the movie, alongside Suzanne Grandais (Colour Plate 8).<sup>85</sup> However, Perret's two biggest box-office hits, L'ENFANT DE PARIS (IN THE CLUTCH OF THE PARIS APACHES, 1913) and LE ROMAN D'UN MOUSSE (THE STORY OF A SHIP'S APPRENTICE\*, 1914) were bought up by Desmet's rival Nöggerath, although



Fig. 32. *Le mystere des roches de Kador* (Gaumont 1912)

Desmet did manage to acquire copies of *L'ENFANT DE PARIS* at a later date. It is evident from the Desmet Collection that Desmet owned many of the comedies of the Léonce series directed by Perret, with Perret himself and Suzanne Grandais in the lead roles. As Richard Abel has said, 'if Gaumont consistently produced the most outrageous of the slapstick comedies in the Onésime series, the company was also responsible for the most sophisticated – Perret's Léonce series'.<sup>86</sup> A superb example of Perret's 'sophisticated comedy' is *LÉONCE À LA CAMPAGNE* (*LÉONCE IN THE COUNTRYSIDE\**, 1913), a daring comedy for its time, dealing with spring, kisses and consequences.

Besides Perret's films, the comedies (particularly those featuring the child stars Bébé and Bout-de-Zan) and dramas of Feuillade are very much in evidence in the collection and are proof that Feuillade directed many films besides the crime movie series for which he is best known. However, Louis Feuillade's famous *FANTOMAS* series was released by another competitor, the Wilhelmina Company (see Chapter VI). Finally, there are the wild, 'outrageous' farces featuring Onésime, Zigoto and Calino by Jean Durand. Crazy chases and destruction are the main ingredients of these movies, as in *ONÉSIME ET SON COLLÈGUE* (*ONÉSIME AND HIS COLLEAGUE\**, 1914), in which a

young girl's uncle-guardian wrongly suspects Onésime of having an affair with her. *ONÉSIME HORLOGER* (*ONÉSIME CLOCKMAKER\**, 1912), on the other hand, is a completely surrealist movie. Here Onésime receives a legacy, but he will not actually get his hands on it for twenty years. By making the city's central clock run fast, he accelerates life so quickly that the twenty years pass by in a few minutes. Equally surreal is *ONÉSIME ET SON ÂNE* (*ONÉSIME AND HIS DONKEY\**, 1913), in which a donkey is taken for a prince: in the bathroom, in restaurants and in bed – a kind of anticipation of Bunuel's cow in *L'ÂGE D'OR* (1930).

The present Desmet Collection still contains eleven of Perret's films, fourteen of Durand's and fourteen of Feuillade's from the years 1912-14. The films of all three were mainly comedies. Desmet took non-fiction as well as fiction films from Gaumont. Gaumont made many films about the landscapes of France and was particularly obsessed with the splendours of the Pyrenees. Among the Gaumont collection of travel and scientific films there are still a lot of colour-stencilled movies, whose colours appear diffuser than the bright tints of the coloured Pathé movies (Colour Plate 9).

### **Maurice Gigan (Lux, Eclipse, Cines, American independents)**

In December 1911 Desmet dropped in on the Belgian distributor Maurice Gigan in Brussels. Gigan had previously worked for the Brussels branch of the French Demaria-Lapierre company which distributed Lux films.<sup>87</sup> Gigan had probably set up for himself as Films Cinématographiques Maurice Gigan in 1911, bringing his Lux franchise – full name Société des Phonographes et Cinématographes Lux – in with him. Gigan also represented the two Paris-based companies, the Société Générale des Cinématographes Eclipse and the Compagnie Générale du Cinématographe L. Aubert.<sup>88</sup> Aubert held the rights for the Italian firm Cines in France, Belgium and the Netherlands. The French firm also supplied films by the Danish Nordisk Company, the American Selig Polyscope Co. and the films of Hepworth in Britain. Gigan was also able to offer Desmet films by Aquila, Radios, Urbanora and Méliès, as well as an assortment of small American companies such as Flying A, IMP, Nestor and Rex which would later be absorbed by Universal. In December 1911, Gigan promised to call on him in Amsterdam: 'I come to Amsterdam every week and will visit you next Wednesday or Thursday to see what sort of things I can offer you from here.'<sup>89</sup> He apparently did not come in person, but sent one of his travelling salesmen to show this selection to Desmet. 'All our new films cost 1.25 per metre net, plus colouring with titles in Dutch. The issue date is the same in Amsterdam as in Paris and Brussels,' wrote Gigan. Gigan's (and Desmet's) French productions were, therefore, brand new.

From March 1912, Desmet bought one Eclipse film a week from Gigan, usually a short comedy, and one Cines movie. From the same point onwards, Gigan also sent him French Lux films and American films from the small companies mentioned, although he took these less regularly. From a weekly selection of between seven and twelve films Desmet chose one or two a week, occasionally more, sometimes none. Desmet was certainly not the only Dutch distributor to take films from Gigan. He faced regular competition from Nöggerath and A.E. Ghezzi, and sometimes Gildemeijer and the Witte Bioscoop.

The Lux and Eclipse films were mainly one-reelers, and included many of the comedies featuring characters such as Cunégonde and Polycarpe. Eclipse also made a number of non-fiction movies consisting mainly of travelogues on France and the countries surrounding it. The Italian movies from Cines and the allied firm of Celio were made up of a motley collection of short comedies – often featuring the comics Kri Kri and Lea – short historical and contemporary dramas, non-fiction films on the natural beauties of Italy, early westerns and a few longer dramas. Among the latter were *LA TUTELA* and *FAZZOLETTO RIVELATORE* (*THE INCRIMINATING HANDKERCHIEF\**, Cines 1913), two crime thrillers featuring actress Leda Gys, and *TERRA PROMESSA* (*LAND OF PROMISE\**, Celio 1913) and *L'AMAZZONE MASCHERATA* (*THE MASKED AMAZON\**, Celio 1914), two drama spectaculars starring Francesca Bertini. Before acquiring *TERRA PROMESSA* and *L'AMAZZONE MASCHERATA*, Desmet had already bought a few short comedies and dramas featuring Bertini from Gigan. They included *IL FASCINO DELLA VIOLENZA* (*THE FASCINATION OF VIOLENCE\**, Cines 1912), *PANNE D'AUTO* (*BREAKDOWN\**, Celio 1912) and *IL VELENO DELLE PAROLE* (see Fig. 22). He had also acquired a few Bertini movies in previous years, and later bought one of her diva films; so the first four years of Francesca Bertini's film career can be followed quite well from the Desmet Collection.

## **F. Guillaume and M.E. Guillaume-Decotte (Éclair, Vitagraph)**

The Brussels distributor F. Guillaume held the Belgian and Dutch franchises of Éclair and Vitagraph, but he also sold Desmet films produced by Hepworth and Savoia.<sup>90</sup> Savoia had an agreement with Éclair for the distribution of its films, so they were obtainable via Éclair from Guillaume. At first, Desmet was billed by the Antwerp cinema operator De Backer, who was one of his clients. Later, he dealt directly with Guillaume. In 1913, Guillaume was succeeded by his wife, M.E. Guillaume-Decotte.

Vitagraph and Éclair movies began to flow in from March 1912, and they form a considerable part of the collection. In March 1913, Desmet immediately bought the crime movie *ZIGOMAR CONTRE NICK CARTER* (*THE PHANTOM BANDIT*, 1912), a film about 1,050 metres in length. Many of Éclair's films

were short comedies featuring comics such as Gontran, Petronille and Gavroche, but Desmet also ordered several long features, including *AU PAYS DES TÉNÈBRES* (*THE LAND OF DARKNESS*, 1912), a drama about miners. This was released in the Netherlands under the German title *GLÜCK AUF!*, which referred both to the greeting exchanged by miners and a play of the same name by Herman Heijermans, which had been staged in the Netherlands in 1910. Other long features from *Éclair* were *LE MYSTÈRE DU PONT NOTRE-DAME* (*THE MYSTERY OF THE BRIDGE OF NOTRE DAME*, 1912), *LA BERGÈRE D'IVRY* (*THE SHEPHERDESS OF IVRY\**, 1913), *JACK* (*JACK*, 1913) and *LES ENFANTS DU CAPITAINE GRANT* (*THE CHILDREN OF CAPTAIN GRANT\**, 1914). The selection of *Éclair* non-fiction movies shows a preference for films about exotic cultures, particularly African and Asian, as well as scientific films dealing with subjects such as the lives of insects.

The Vitagraph titles were almost all one-reelers, and included some thirteen comedies starring Vitagraph's popular fat comic John Bunny, and his inseparable companion skinny Flora Finch. Other actors such as Maurice Costello, Lillian Walker, Clara Kimball-Young and Norma Talmadge appeared regularly in Vitagraph's short comedies and dramas. Maurice Costello appears in thirteen films, including the comedy *THE PICTURE IDOL* (1912), in which he parodies his own star status, and the drama *THE MEETING OF THE WAYS* (1912), in which he plays a lawyer who defends his own brother. Desmet also took many westerns from Vitagraph, more in fact than from any other American company. Oddly enough, Vitagraph's output of westerns was small in relation to its production of comedies starring Bunny and others. The only long Vitagraph features that Desmet purchased from Guillaume were the two-reeler *STRENGTH OF MEN* (1913, Colour Plate 10), and the three-reelers *THE MILLS OF THE GODS* and *THE WRECK* (1913), all directed by Ralph Ince. *THE WRECK* is no longer in the Desmet Collection.<sup>91</sup>

As with Gaumont and Gigan, Desmet faced competition from Nöggerath in his dealings with Guillaume, for Nöggerath had been doing business with Guillaume for some time. Desmet received about twenty posters for each film one week before the delivery of the movie. He also received stills when available. On average, he took two or three titles from Guillaume's weekly selection, regardless of length.



Plate I. *Een reis langs de bloembollenvelden te Haarlem* (Alberts Frères 1908)

**CINEMA PARISIEN**  
 28<sup>A</sup> KORTE HOOGSTRAAT  
 ROTTERDAM  
 MODERN  
 BIOSCOOP  
 THÉÂTER  
 DIRECTEUR  
 JEAN DE SMET

**SENSATIONS  
 POÉTIQUE  
 ACTUALITÉ ARTISTIQUE  
 FANTASIE OPÉRETTE  
 DRAMATIQUE  
 SPORTIF**

**INTERESSANT VOOR VOLWASSENEN  
 LEERZAAM VOOR KINDEREN**

ELKEN DAG  
 2 TOT 5 EN VAN 7 TOT 12 UUR  
 ZON- en FEESTDAGEN DE GEHELE DAG VAN 2 UUR  
 DOORLOPENDE BIOSCOOPVOORSTELLINGEN  
 MEN KAN BINNENKOMEN OP WELK UUR MEN BENEDEFT NIET TE  
 WACHTEN DE BEZOEKERS ZIEN ALTIJD HET GEHEELE  
 PROGRAMMA ZO DAT MEN NIET MEER DAN EEN VASTEN LAJD GEDONDENIS  
 PRIJZEN DER PLAAZEN

AVONDVOORSTELLINGEN MATINEES  
 1<sup>o</sup> RANG 0.40 2<sup>o</sup> RANG 0.25 3<sup>o</sup> RANG 0.15 1<sup>o</sup> RANG 0.25 2<sup>o</sup> RANG 0.15  
 (DE DIRECTIE JEAN DESMET)

IEDERE WINDAG NIEUW PROGRAMMA  
 ZONDAG 'S NA AFTON DER WAK HEGS LAUFT WAK DE PRIJZEN 0.25 CH  
 3<sup>o</sup> RANG MET 50<sup>o</sup> PER PLAATS VERHOOGD

Plate 2.  
 Cinema  
 Parisien,  
 Rotterdam



**Cinema PARISIEN**  
MODERN  
**Bioscoop-Theater**  
Nieuwendijk 69. - AMSTERDAM.

---

Elken dag van 2 tot 12 Zondags vanaf 12 uur

---

DOORLOOPENDE  
**Bioscoop-Voorstellingen**  
zonder ophoud;

op welk uur men ook komt, ziet men altijd het  
geheele PROGRAMMA.

**Iederen Vrijdag nieuwe beelden.**

Directeur JEAN DESMET.

De Persgroep, Amsterdam

Plate 3. Cinema Parisien, Amsterdam



Plate 4. *La vie la passion de Notre Seigneur Jesu Christ* (Pathé 1907) – The Massacre of the Innocents



Plate 5. *Heisses Blut* (Deutsche Bioscop 1911)

# HEINRICH ERNEMANN

## AKTIENGESELLSCHAFT FÜR CAMERAFABRIKATION



DRESDEN A. DEN 9. August 1912  
54-ANDWERGSTR. 46

## Rechnung

an Herrn Jean C. J. H. Desmet  
v. B. Umschaltereien

---

**Rechnungsbetrag:** 167,00  
 Gegen Konto Nr. 2, Scheck Nr. 1111 an die Kassa der Ernemann Aktiengesellschaft Dresden  
 2. März 1912 und Guthabenskonto Nr. 1111 an die Kassa der Ernemann Aktiengesellschaft Dresden

Nr.	Beschreibung	Menge	Preis	Betrag	M.	Pf.
	Anweisung H. C. 115 10/12					
	besonders nach Tilburg, Jubiläumsgesand					
167870	1 Imperator mit Re. handig mit 11. 1/2 in Mammocelle mit großen Spulen			1670,-		
	1 Paar Schutzschichtbrille			70,-		
	1 Lampengehäuse mit Hart glas-Linsen			45,-		
	Transport			16,50		
				167,00		

Bei Kassaeröffnung bitte ansetzen v. d. v. Kass.-H. 1912.

Die in der Rechnung beschriebene Lieferung ist zu bezeichnen durch die Zeichen 1111 an die Kassa der Ernemann Aktiengesellschaft Dresden.

Plate 6. Invoice from the Ernemann company to Desmet

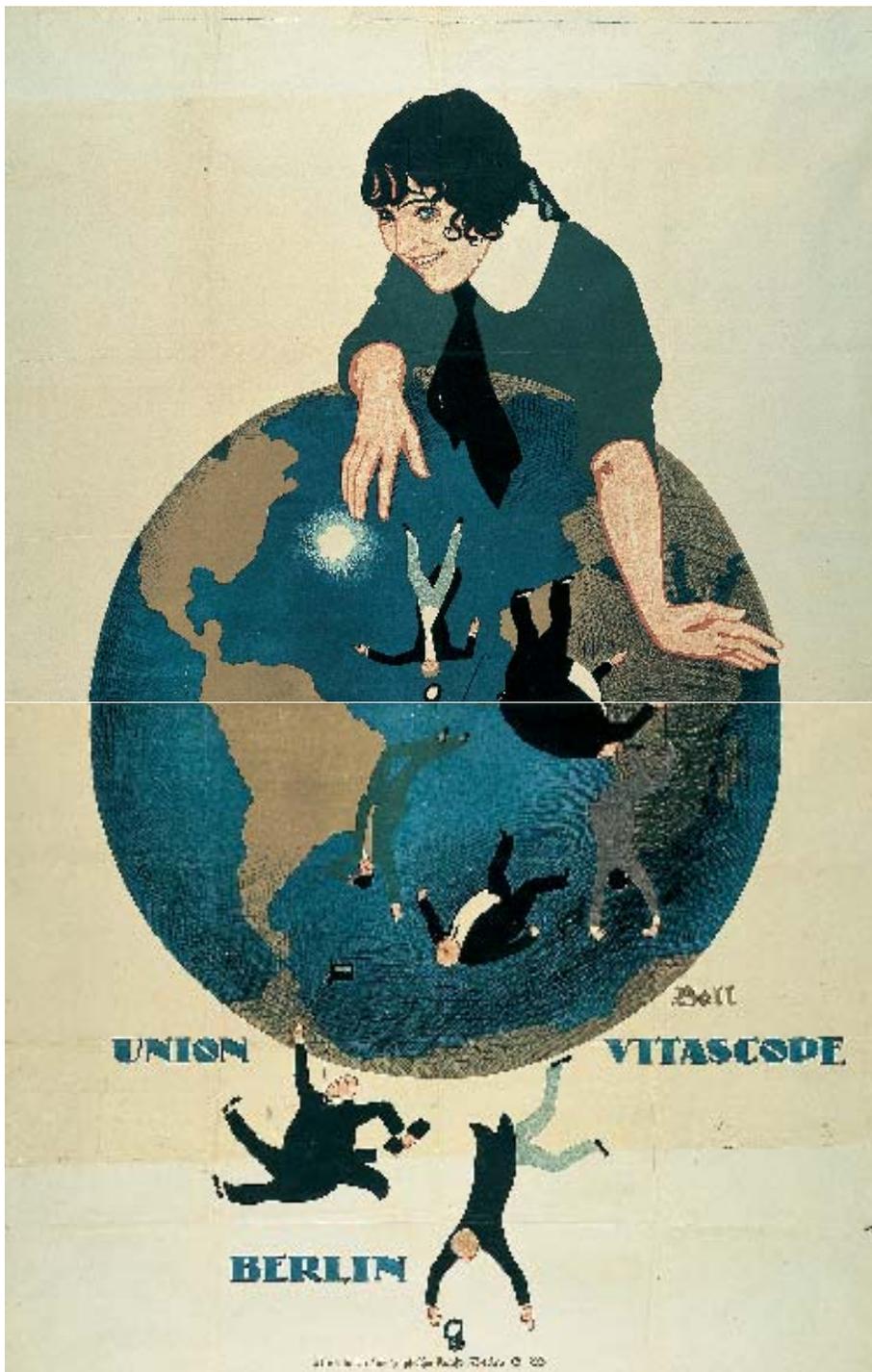


Plate 7. *Die Welt ohne Männer* (Vitascope 1913)



Plate 8. *L'Obsession du souvenir* (Gaumont 1913) – starring Suzanne Grandais



Plate 9. *Fleurs des champs* (Gaumont 1912)

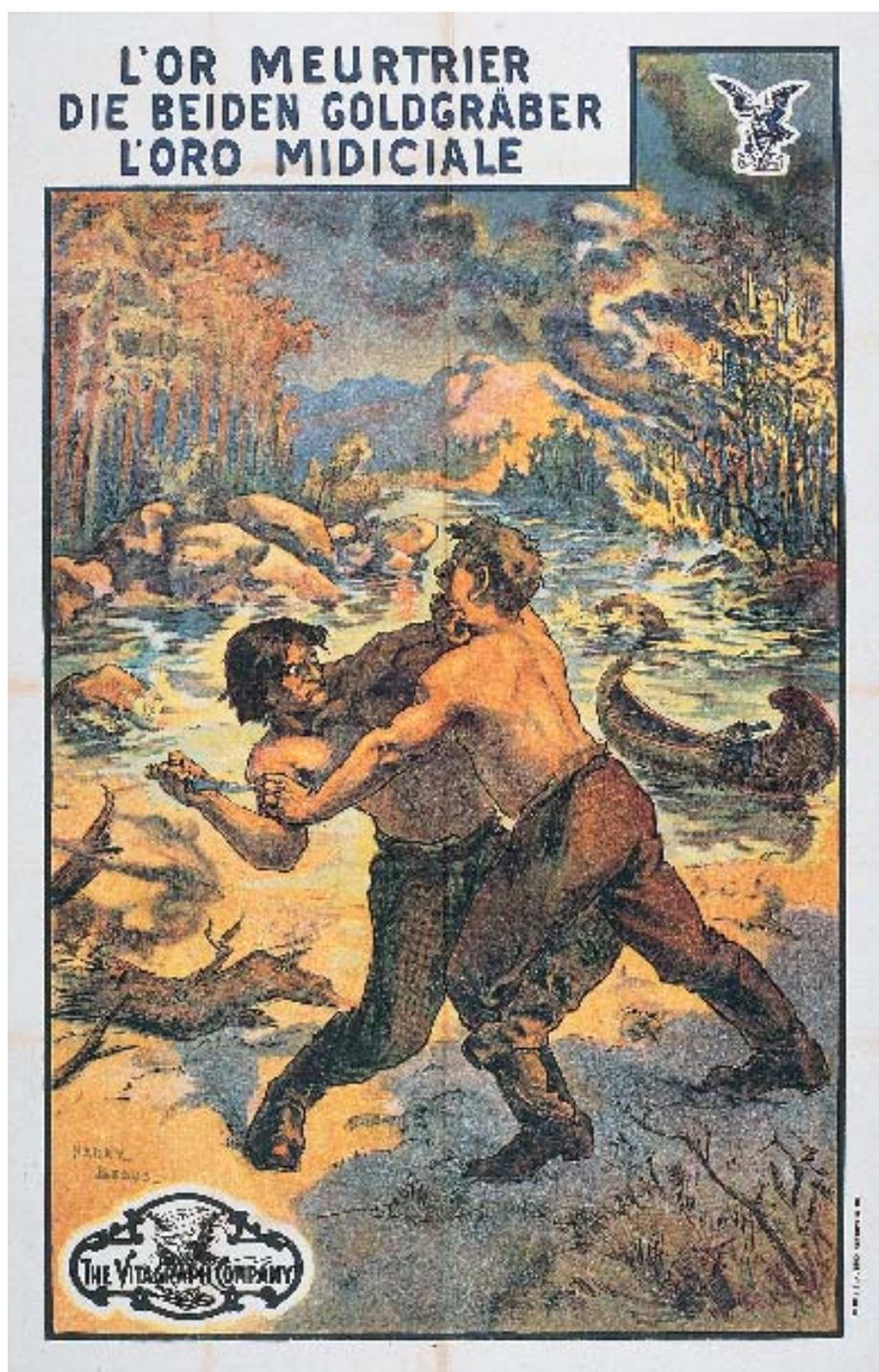


Plate 10. *Strength of Men* (Vitagraph 1913), poster in three languages for the European film market



Plate 11. Unidentified Ambrosio film – images of Venice and surroundings

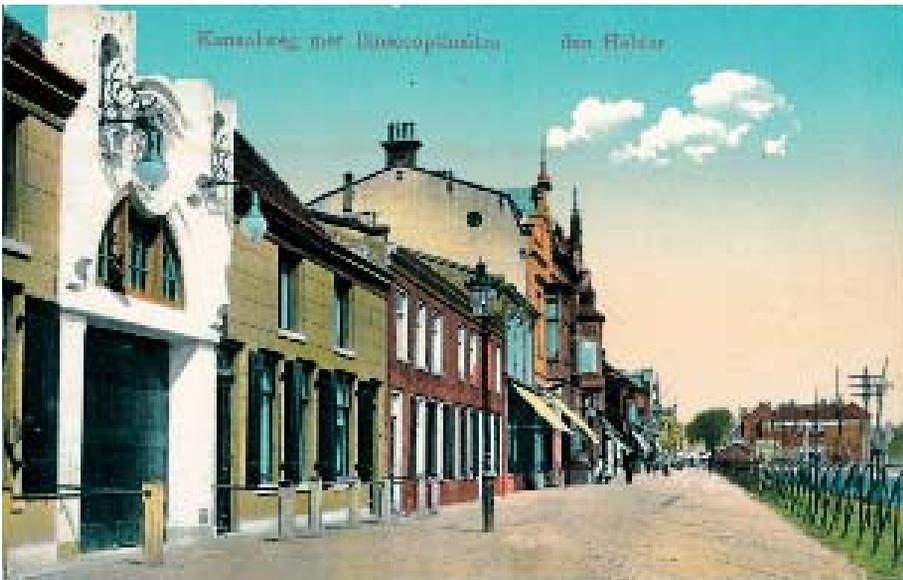


Plate 12. Den Helder, Eerste Heldersche Bioscoop. One of Desmet's regular customers



Plate 13. Den sorte Kansler (Nordisk 1912).

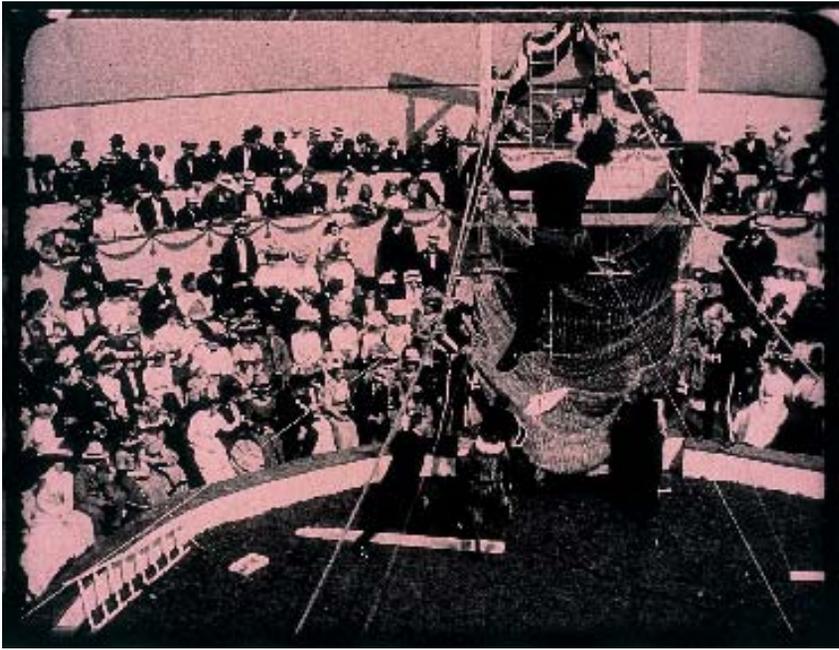


Plate 14. *De fire Djaevle* (Kinografen 1911) – stunt without a net, with catastrophic results

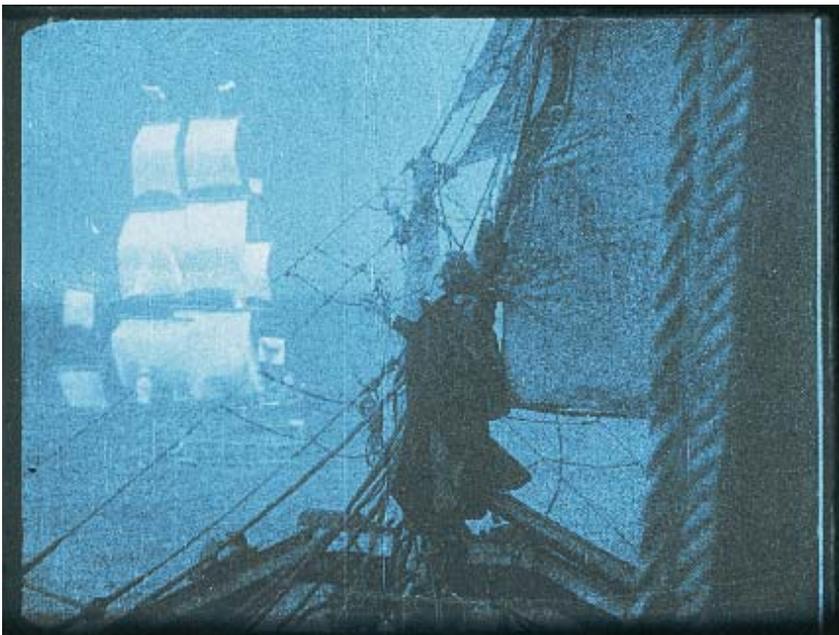


Plate 15. *Richard Wagner* (Messter 1913) – Wagner dreams of *The Flying Dutchman*



Plate 16. *Fior di male* (Cines 1915) – Lyda is stabbed to death by her own son



Plate 17. *Alexandra* (Messter 1914) – the desperation of Alexandra

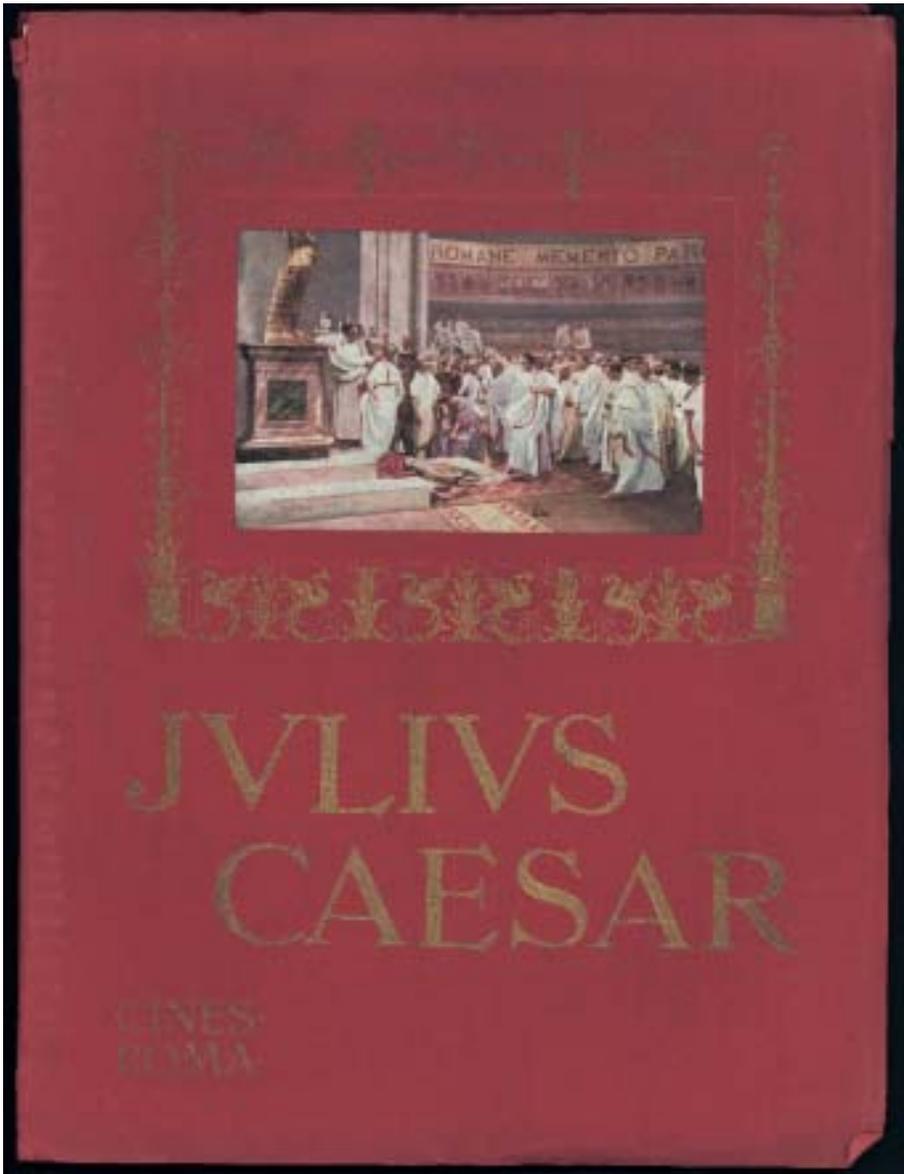


Plate 18. *Cajus Julius Caesar* (Cines 1914), deluxe photo album



Plate 19. *Fior di Male* (Cines 1915) – solitude



Plate 20. Art-deco interior of the Cinema Parisien, now at the Netherlands Film Museum



Plate 21. *Gebrochene Schwingen* (Messter 1913) – hunted by the police in America



Plate 22. Unidentified Ambrosio film – sunset in the Venetian lagoon

### **M.P. Sales Agency (American Biograph, Kalem, Lubin)**

From April 1912, Desmet received films from the Motion Picture Sales Agency (known as M.P. Sales), a branch of a London company.<sup>92</sup> M.P. Sales was a large distribution company with branches in nine world cities, which handled films by the American companies American Biograph, Lubin and Kalem – all members of the film trust Motion Picture Patents Company – along with films by the British firms British & Colonial and Empire, the German WKF (Welt-Kino Film), and the Aquila company in Italy. The distributor released about ten films a week from its various production companies, all of which were advertised and discussed in its own weekly magazine *The Picture*.<sup>93</sup> The M.P. Sales representative in Brussels was Max Dellbrügger. Dellbrügger called on Desmet to show him his films in early March 1912. Purchases followed swiftly and included films from all the companies mentioned. The films were sent from London via Dellbrügger. There were no advance samples, since the company was supposedly issuing 16,000 feet of film a week.<sup>94</sup>

It appears that in June 1912, Desmet offered to become the company's agent in the Netherlands, for the British company wrote from London on 1 July to enquire into the details of his business.<sup>95</sup> However, he failed to obtain the agency. He repeated his offer in the autumn, having heard that Dellbrügger was no longer to be the concessionaire for Belgium and the Netherlands, but the idea backfired owing to Desmet's insistence on choosing his own films. 'I cannot give a price for the films for exclusive use in Holland,' wrote Desmet in English, 'because every film I want to see before I buy them. There should be to[o] many what is nothing for our business.'<sup>96</sup> M.P. Sales was expected to send him all 20,000 feet of their current stock from which he would choose 3,000-4,000 feet. The British company did not like this idea very much, but via Dellbrügger or others, they sent him around 4,300 feet of samples, from which he selected just 1,000 feet, which was not at all what they wanted.<sup>97</sup> Desmet, however, felt that Dellbrügger was not in a position to decide what was best for him: '...because what he should find nice, we could find nothing for our customers and we know the best, what we must buy or not.'<sup>98</sup> By asking for films to be sent on approval, Desmet was hoping to be able to offer films to his competitors in return for a commission. He was prepared to travel round the Netherlands and Belgium personally, or to send out one of his assistants. But M.P. Sales apparently preferred a state of free competition, and simply sent their films to rivals such as Nöggerath and Gilde-meijer; so Desmet failed to get his commission and watched the films he had been offered appear on the screens of his rivals. He was quite vocal in complaining to his supplier, but did not actually cease to do business with the

company.<sup>99</sup> When Delbrügger moved to Berlin in the autumn of 1913 to work for the M.P. Sales branch, Desmet switched to M.P. Sales Berlin (Lichtbild-Vertrieb) and to Delbrügger's own firm there, the Western Import Co. But the inflow decreased drastically when, around the same time, a Dutch competitor offered to take over all of M.P. Sales films.

M.P. Sales's American movies were almost all one-reelers and consisted largely of dramatic films set in the Wild West on or around trains on the Mexican border. Among them were *THE COLONEL'S ESCAPE* (Kalem 1912), *THE STRONG MAN'S BURDEN* (American Biograph 1913) and *JUAN AND JUANITA* (Lubin 1912). Many of the films were about smuggling and forgery. There were also urban comedies such as *FIXING A FLIRT* (Lubin 1912) and *A BARBER CURE* (American Biograph 1913), as well as disaster movies like *WHEN THE EARTH TREMBLED* (Lubin 1913), which featured the San Francisco earthquake (Fig. 33). The share of Kalem and Lubin films was twice as large as that of American Biograph. Desmet appealed to M.P. Sales for specific films, but not always successfully. On 14 October 1912 Desmet asked in vain for 'that masterpiece "The Massacre"' (Fig. 34).<sup>100</sup> This was D.W. Griffith's epic western *THE MASSACRE* (American Biograph 1912), although no one in the Nether-



Fig. 33. *When the Earth Trembled* (Lubin 1913)

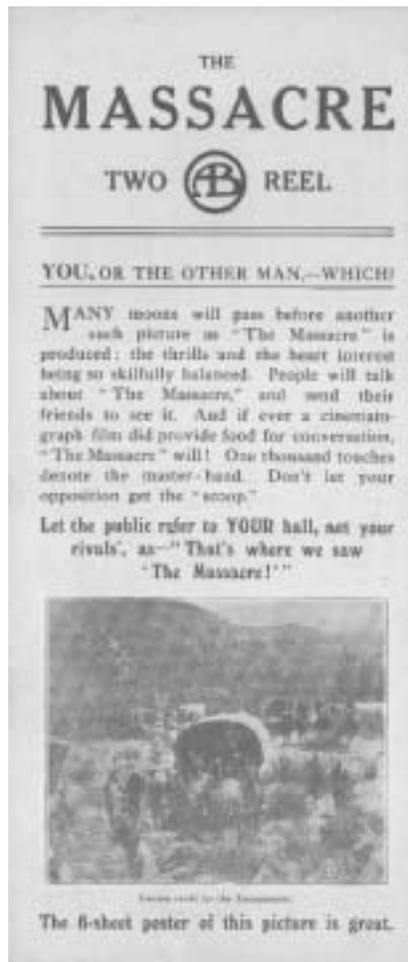


Fig. 34. Brochure for *The Massacre* (American Biograph 1912)

lands at the time knew who D.W. Griffith was. However, Desmet did manage to acquire Griffith's *THE STRONG MAN'S BURDEN* and *THE BATTLE OF ELDERBUSH GULCH* (1913) from M.P. Sales.<sup>101</sup> As far as acquisitions from M.P. Sales of productions from other countries are concerned, Desmet bought the long feature *SATANASSO* (Aquila 1913), released in England as both *SATANAS* and *PRINCE OF DARKNESS*. From Weltkino or WKF, he bought a few travelogues and films on sport, and from the British companies Empire and British & Colonial he took such documentaries as *LIFE IN THE KAFFIR KRAAL* (Empire 1912) and *SEAL FISHERY* (British & Colonial 1912). Apart from *SATANASSO*, *THE BATTLE OF ELDERBUSH GULCH* and the two British documentaries, all these films are still in the Desmet Collection.

### **Claude Robinet (Itala, Ambrosio)**

Desmet also did business in Brussels with Claude Robinet, who was a concessionaire of the Italian Itala company. By virtue of an agreement with the French distributor Paul Hodel, Robinet held the Itala rights for Belgium and the Netherlands. Hodel held the exclusive rights for Itala in France, Belgium and the Netherlands and used Robinet as his middleman for his Dutch and Belgian business.<sup>102</sup> Besides Itala, Hodel delivered films by Bison, Reliance, Ambrosio and Milano. Desmet seems to have first made contact with Robinet at Nöggerath's in August 1911. For a while, Robinet was supplying Itala films to both Desmet and Nöggerath, but on 24 June 1912 Desmet and Robinet concluded an agreement for exclusive exhibition rights on films by Itala, Ambrosio, Milano and Bison. Desmet would receive 1,000 metres a week from Robinet and a five per cent commission. The films were supplied with Dutch titles. Playbills were sent eight days in advance, with the films themselves arriving four or five days before the play-dates. This contract was made for three months with tacit renewal, but does not appear to have lasted long, for the Ambrosio epic *GLI ULTIMI GIORNI DI POMPEI* was brought out by Nöggerath at the end of 1913, and the great post-1913 Itala movies, such as *CABIRIA*, *MACISTE* (1915) and *MACISTE ALPINO* (1916), were not distributed by Desmet either. Desmet seems to have taken more Ambrosio films than Itala films from Robinet. There were a lot of comedies among the Ambrosio films, including those starring his supplier's namesake Robinet. He also took *NELLY LA DOMATRICE* (*LOVE AGAINST THE LIONS*, Ambrosio 1913) and *LA NAVE DEI LEONI* (*THE SHIP OF LIONS*, 1912), two films about female lion-tamers, *COME UNA SORELLA* (*LIKE A SISTER*, Itala 1912), a drama about an aircraft pilot, and documentaries such as *TRIPOLI* (Ambrosio 1913), which contained some remarkable 'split-screen' effects (Colour Plate 11). Among Desmet's most important purchases from Robinet was the drama *PADRE*, with the stage actor Ermete Zacconi in the lead role, and a spectacular rescue from a fire as its climax.

### **Reimers Eenberg (Edison)**

While Desmet did buy two American films from Edison in Berlin, he took the bulk of his Edison movies from B. Reimers Eenberg, who was Edison's concessionaire in Brussels. From March 1912, he bought on average one film a month from this agent. The films were invariably one-reelers. In early 1914, his purchases from Edison dropped to one film every two months. One possible reason for this is that from the autumn of 1913, Edison's traveller, Piérard, was constantly previewing his new films with Desmet's competitors A.J.

Povel and G. van Royen of the Witte Bioscoop in Amsterdam. Desmet was always informed of these screenings, but was clearly no longer Edison's most favoured client. Edison's changed attitude was in all likelihood due to the irregularity of Desmet's orders from them: two films a month for a spell, then nothing again for several months. Among Desmet's purchases from Edison were documentaries such as *AT HOME IN THE WATER* (1912), comedies such as *OVER THE BACK FENCE* (1913) and dramatic movies like *SHADOWS FROM THE PAST* (1914). Desmet's American films generally contained few non-fiction films, and such films as he did buy were mainly Edison documentaries. In addition to the titles listed above, the Desmet Collection includes fifteen Edison films purchased in Brussels.

### **Emilio Ghezzi**

The importer and distributor A.E. (Emilio) Ghezzi was a special case. This trader, who had originally started out in Liège, supplied Desmet with movies from April 1912 onwards, partly as a reseller and purchaser from distributors such as Hodel and Aubert and partly by purchasing directly from the Italian film companies.<sup>103</sup> He also supplied Italian movies to Nöggerath. When wearing his Italian hat, he called himself 'Concessionaire exclusif des plus importantes fabriques des Films D'Art Italiens'. Ghezzi began by dropping in on Desmet to show him his latest selection of movies. Sometime between June and July 1912, he set up in Amsterdam, calling his business 'Kinematographische Films A.E. Ghezzi'. He did well, becoming 'General representative of the film factory F.A.N.' (Nöggerath) and styling himself as a Dutch agent for Clarendon, Centauro, Danske Films, Deutsche Bioscop, Komet Film, Kineto, Pasquali, Savoia Film and Vitascope. Ghezzi became one of the two directors of the new Cinema De La Monnaie which opened in November 1912, one month before Desmet's Cinema Palace, and just one door further down from it on Kalverstraat. On 16 May 1913, he announced to potential buyers that he would be screening films every Tuesday morning in his cinema.<sup>104</sup> In 1914, Ghezzi acquired the rights of the Italian Gloria company for Belgium, the Netherlands and the colonies. As either distributor or agent of Dutch and foreign businesses, he was the most important supplier of Italian films to the Netherlands in the period 1912-20.

It is remarkable that Ghezzi was often able to deliver comedies in the month of their certification by the Italian censor. In 1912, he sent Desmet numerous film comedies featuring Butalin, Robinet, Fricot and Polidor, along with documentaries such as the propagandistic *TRA LE PINETE DI RODI* (*AMONG THE PINE TREES OF RHODES*, Savoia 1912), which begins as an idyllic tourist movie, but closes with a reference to the occupation of the island by

the Italian Army. These films were followed in 1913 by the drama *VERSO L'AMORE* (TOWARDS LOVE\*, Latium 1913), the comedy *PIÙ FORTE DI SHERLOCK HOLMES* (STRONGER THAN SHERLOCK HOLMES, Itala 1913) and the crime thriller *VITTORIA O MORTE* (VICTORY OR DEATH, Itala 1913), featuring the actress Berta Nelson as a woman detective who escapes from a sinking ship with remarkable cool, and pilots an airplane with the same lack of fuss. A year later, Ghezzi sold Desmet a few farces featuring Robinet and Totò, along with the long feature *LA MASCHERA PIETOSA* (A CARNIVAL TRAGEDY, Ambrosio 1914). This was a subtle melodrama set during the Turin carnival. Desmet also acquired the spicy comedy *ACQUE MIRACOLOSE* (MIRACULOUS WELLS 1914), which opens as a living doll's house with all the various characters on view. Desmet did not buy everything Ghezzi offered him and chose few long features, despite their growing popularity with audiences. *LA MASCHERA PIETOSA* and *VITTORIA O MORTE* were long feature films; the rest were shorts. All the films mentioned are in the Desmet Collection. Apart from these Italian works and a single British movie, Ghezzi sold Desmet a few German movies. Examples are the grim documentary *FÜTTERUNG VON RIESENSCHLANGEN* (FEEDING GIANT SNAKES\*, Komet-Film 1912), showing the throttling and consumption of innocent little rabbits by boa constrictors, and the bizarre melodrama *ZWEIMAL GELEBT* (A SECOND LIFE\*, Continental Kunstfilm 1912), in which a woman awakens from a coma and falls in love with her doctor, but when she sees her husband and child again she is tormented by inner conflicts and commits suicide.

## London

Kristin Thompson describes London as the centre of American film distribution at this time:

Although in 1908 Vitagraph, the leader in foreign distribution, had opted for Paris as the headquarters of its foreign laboratory, most [American] firms chose to work through London... London continued to be the centre of American foreign distribution between 1909 and 1916; even after its decline in that capacity, it retained its role for the European distribution of American films.<sup>105</sup>

In the light of Desmet's situation, this requires a little qualification. Although Desmet received his M.P. Sales Agency films (American Biograph, Kalem, Lubin, Thanhouser) from London, he actually ordered them from the Brussels office. Edison, Vitagraph and films by the independent companies also came to him via Brussels, so Brussels was clearly an important distribution centre. Desmet's main American company was Vitagraph, whose films were

delivered by the Paris branch and sold to Desmet via Guillaume in Brussels, who held the rights.<sup>106</sup> In other words, American, Italian, French, British and Danish films were only rarely despatched directly to the Netherlands, but arrived there indirectly via agencies, distributors and traders in surrounding countries.

Thompson herself acknowledges that Germany was the best market for American films after England, and considers that this was due to the small scale of domestic production. The same applies to Belgium. In countries such as France and Italy, which had their own vigorous film production, only Vitagraph actually did good business. American imports were negligible in Denmark. This explains why American films took second place after French films in Desmet's film selections. He bought them in countries like Germany and Belgium, where national production was in the one case small, and in the other virtually non-existent. The latter was also the case in the Netherlands, which was a greedy importer of films from all countries. 'Branches and agents in London did quite well in selling to Belgium and Holland, for example; the sales in these two countries were reported to be nearly equal to those in Italy.'<sup>107</sup>

At the same time, however, the Dutch market for the American film industry and the British trade was so small that shortly before the war, only M.P. Sales and Transatlantic (Universal) had representatives in the Netherlands. No genuine branches of American production companies had been opened there as yet.

Apart from his transactions with M.P. Sales, Desmet did little business with London, although he regularly received offers from that quarter. In August 1913, Desmet was involved in negotiations with M. Baer & Co (The Continental Film Exchange). This time he was not interested in acquiring films, but actually looking to sell them. The British firm finally replied that it was now only interested in long films, and Desmet was offering only a few of these. In June 1914, another company, The Ideal Film Renting Co., asked Desmet for a copy of the German long feature film *DIE LANDSTRASSE* (Deutsche Mutoscop 1913), but Desmet does not appear to have done anything about it. Although his London contacts were not very fruitful, the name Desmet was clearly not unknown in London.

In October 1913, and again in April 1914, Sidney M. Baber, the general manager of the American Famous Players Film Co. Ltd, offered Desmet the exclusive Dutch rights on Famous Players films.<sup>108</sup> Baber wanted to visit Desmet himself to discuss the matter. Desmet had bought the film *THE SIGN OF THE CROSS* (Famous Players 1914) and was certainly interested. However, when he heard that he would have to commit himself to buying all new Fa-

mous Players pictures over a period of a year, he backed out. Desmet refused to become involved in this type of system, just as he had turned down the contract with Nordisk the previous year. He insisted on being able to make his own choices. This time, however, he had also passed up the historic opportunity of becoming the Dutch concessionaire of what would later become Paramount, the most important film company of the immediate post-war years and the early 1920s. In the spring of 1914, however, Famous Players was not yet the immensely popular American company it was to be in later years. Up to the First World War, the Dutch film world remained strongly attached to European films.<sup>109</sup>

### 3. Survey of Desmet's Purchases 1910-1914

Table I. Number of films purchased expressed in percentages (1910-1914)

	1910	1911	1912	1913	1914
France	42	56	57	52	45
USA	5	10	11	20	19
Italy	21	15	18	10	15
Germany	11	12	7	10	14
Denmark	10	7	5	2	3
Other	11	0	2	6	4
Total	100	100	100	100	100
(number)	63	490	437	337	126

The overviews in Tables 1 and 2 are far from complete, but they give a reasonable impression of the scale of Desmet's buying and the differences in film lengths and numbers of titles over the years.<sup>110</sup> In the period October 1910 to July 1911, Desmet's purchases consisted mainly of complete programmes from Westdeutsche Film Börse. From July 1911 to February 1912, the bulk of his purchases was made up of programmes and single films obtained from Deutsche Film Gesellschaft. From March 1912, Desmet took single films from Brussels and Berlin. His involvement with Berlin suppliers only began to yield results from 1913 onwards, which is reflected in the import of German films in this table. The figures for 1914 refer to the whole of that year.

Table 2. Desmet's film purchases by length and country in percentages (1910-1914)

	1910		1911		1912		1913		1914	
	<i>short</i> 99%	<i>long</i> 1%	<i>short</i> 95%	<i>long</i> 5%	<i>short</i> 85%	<i>long</i> 15%	<i>short</i> 75%	<i>long</i> 25%	<i>short</i> 77%	<i>long</i> 23%
France	42	100	55	12	60	17	62	15	52	16
USA	5	0	10	0	15	5	23	9	15	26
Italy	22	0	15	13	18	23	8	25	17	14
Germany	11	0	12	27	4	19	5	49	10	28
Denmark	10	0	7	45	1	40	0	1	3	8
Others	10	0	1	3	2	6	2	1	3	8
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
(number)	63	1	471	19	397	40	283	53	84	42

The number of French films remained enormous, but it consisted mostly of one-reelers. In 1910, Desmet bought roughly the same number of Pathé as Gaumont films. Although the total number of French films did not decrease between 1911 and 1912, there were of course changes of genres. The heaps of Pathé fiction movies that made up the bulk of his French films in 1911 made way for Pathé newsreels and actuality films after 1912. In 1912, Desmet bought 77, and in 1913, 86 newsreels and actualities from Pathé. Other short French films in the period 1912-14 came mainly from Gaumont and Éclair.

Initially, the United States provided the smallest number of long films, but its share gradually increased. By the spring of 1914, the Americans were supplying a lot of two-reelers. In 1910/11, the accent was on Edison films, but between 1912 and 1914, the emphasis switched to Vitagraph.

In 1910, Italian films represented more than a fifth of the total number of films purchased. Although this share fell in the years that followed, Italian films continued to make up between a fifth and a quarter of the total number of long films. The short films acquired in 1910 and 1911 were mainly Ambrosio productions. The long films of 1912-14 were largely from Cines and Celio.

The share of Danish movies remained small, but in 1911 and 1912 almost half of Desmet's long features came from Denmark. In 1913 and 1914, however, Desmet concentrated on long German features. The Danish films between 1910 and 1914 were mainly Nordisk productions. Messter supplied most of the German films in 1910/11, after which the selection becomes more varied. The 'others' are largely British films. Finally, it should be emphasized

that, given that we are looking at a reconstruction, the figures in the tables are merely provisional.

## **Conclusion**

There is a clear correlation between the rise of permanent movie venues on the one hand and the increase in the number of films available, the introduction of film rental and the arrival of the distributors on the other. The coming of permanent theatres created a demand for regular changes of programme. Due to the late switch to permanent cinemas in the Netherlands compared to other countries, Pathé and Nöggerath had so far had little difficulty in satisfying the demands of the Dutch market. With the steep rise in the number of permanent theatres from 1910 onwards, however, there was a crying need for more movies. Desmet, who faced the same problem with his own cinemas, discovered a gap in the market that he was quick to exploit. In this, he typifies the rise of distributors as a new professional group. The rapidly expanding, highly diverse and readily accessible foreign film market gave rise to large-scale imports and distribution. The film rental system made it possible to send a particular programme to a different client every week. Cinema owners no longer needed to buy films themselves, as was usually the case on the fairground. Starting up a cinema was becoming a more attractive proposition.

## V. **White Slave Girls and German *Kultur***

### **Film Rental and Distribution Strategies in the Netherlands (1910-1914)**

From November 1910, Desmet began to present himself to the world as a film distributor. Up to that point, he had been showing films in his two Parisiens and occasionally renting to third parties, but his film distribution only took on real shape when he began to buy programmes from Westdeutsche Film-Börse. From that month on, he was advertising regularly in the fairground trade journal *De Komeet*, which, in the absence of a proper professional journal for cinema operators and distributors, was the organ that had to cater for both the itinerant and the fixed versions of cinema. His clientele now grew so ramified that he started to keep separate ledgers for his outgoing correspondence. His 'client books', in which he entered the details of programmes and films rented, also date from this time. On 18 November 1910, therefore, we find him writing to the Amsterdam theatre owner J. Sieders, who was looking to open a cinema in Enschede, that he was in a position to offer him programmes of at least 2,000 metres 'with one or two coloured films every week and three lithos, for the price of f75 per week. Payment on delivery.'<sup>1</sup> Before the year was out, Desmet had bought his first long feature, although during that first year in the distribution business he dealt mainly in programmes of short films. Desmet stood at the cradle of the distribution of long movies in the Netherlands. From the spring of 1911, the long feature film triggered sweeping changes in programmes, genres, countries of origin, cinema advertising, rental contracts, prices and market competition. It is also clearly apparent from Desmet's relations with his customers that the arrival of this new type of film was going to make exhibitors much more choosy and fastidious about what they rented.

## I. The Beginnings of Desmet's Distribution Business and the Consolidation of His Clientele (1910-1912)

The *sine qua non* of Desmet's distribution was his capacity to deliver. The films he received from Germany from March 1910 onwards were the basis of his first two years in the business. He also bought the occasional actuality, such as the FUNERAILLES D'ÉDOUARD VII,<sup>2</sup> and rented his stock of old films from his travelling days to travelling showmen.<sup>3</sup> The travelling showman Hommerson was receiving films from Desmet in October 1910, slightly before the first programmes from Germany came in. It is just possible that between March and November he rented his films from Westdeutsche Film-Börse to others, before sending them back to Germany. He certainly received a number of enquiries from clients before November 1910, but except in a few cases it is not possible to ascertain from his archive whether he actually rented films to them.

Desmet began to distribute on a regular basis in November 1910 and to build up a regular clientele. He relied partly on his old fairground acquaintances, some of whom had made, or were about to make, the switch to permanent venues, and partly on operators of permanent venues who had previously been his competitors in places like Rotterdam. Between November 1910 and the summer of 1911, Desmet did regular business with travelling operators. Alex Benner and the Mullens brothers were his main clients, but he also supplied Antoon Wegkamp, Dirk Schouten, Willem Hommerson and Carl Welte. He likewise began to deal with the owners or managers of permanent cinemas, some of whom later became regular customers.<sup>4</sup> These cinemas had often either just opened or were on the point of opening.

It was clear from the outset that the small group of travelling showmen was not Desmet's most important constituency. Weekly programme changes and the large number of new cinemas meant that Desmet devoted more of his time and energy to the owners of permanent venues. Nevertheless, he did not completely neglect the travelling showmen, certainly not if they were loyal and free-spending clients. One of Desmet's biggest customers in 1911 was P. Silvius, who owned a cinema in Dordrecht. From March 1911, he sent Silvius 14 or 15 titles a week (two film programmes).<sup>5</sup> The films were sent to him via the Rotterdam Cinema Parisien, where Voltmann inspected the prints before they continued their journey. Rotterdam became Desmet's distribution centre for south-west Netherlands, despatching films to towns such as Dordrecht, Delft and Breda. Under this arrangement, films did not have to move to cities on the other side of the country at the end of

a week's run, and bookings could be organised with an eye to the location of forthcoming performances. The arrangement did not always work efficiently.

Desmet's clientele expanded rapidly between the autumn of 1911 and the spring of 1912. After his own cinemas, his biggest customers were Benner and Silvius. There were also other important clients, one of whom was J.F. Strengholt, who owned three permanent cinemas in Rotterdam.<sup>6</sup> Between September 1911 and May 1912, films were delivered to him by the Rotterdam *Parisien*. Desmet's former rival in the Rotterdam cinema business had now also acquired 'client' status.

The expansion of Desmet's clientele was due to the explosive increase in the number of permanent cinemas. Desmet exploited this situation fully by offering exhibitors new to the game anything they might possibly require in addition to films, such as projectors, chairs and rows of seating. All these services were advertised in *De Komeet*. One-week programmes could be rented by the day or by the week, from f25 for between 1,200 and 1,500 metres per week.<sup>7</sup>

Desmet accepted payment by instalment for his film equipment. In these cases, the equipment was only on hire until all the instalments had been paid. If the renter failed to meet his payments or to pay on time, Desmet had the right to demand the return of the goods. Moreover, the renters were committed to taking films from Desmet for a stipulated period; often for a year. Thus, anyone buying a projector from Desmet was automatically tied to his distribution for a certain period of time. Desmet's relations with his customers are immediately evident from one of his earliest surviving contracts with Johan Laudan, who had a cinema in Tilburg.<sup>8</sup> In September 1911, he sold Laudan a motor with a dynamo, an arrangement under which the latter was obliged to take at least 1,500 metres of film per week at a price of f60. Laudan was also one of Desmet's largest buyers in 1911/12. In another case, Desmet sold a Pathé projector, together with accessories (a slide projector and a motor), to C. Betlehem and A.J. van Roon in Den Helder (Colour Plate 12).<sup>9</sup> The terms of Desmet's instalment system required Bethlehem and van Roon to hire programmes of between 1,300 and 1,500 metres for one year (with automatic renewal for at least a year). Like Laudan, they paid f60 a week for this service.<sup>10</sup> In this way, they too were drawn into Desmet's circle of regular customers. Films hired on contract were initially delivered by programme only. In 1911, these programmes consisted of an average of seven titles, or between 1,250 and 1,500 metres of film, but these lengths soon quickly increased to between 2,200 and 2,500 metres. On the other hand, numerous operators made do with around 1,500 metres to keep the price down. Again in the interests of economy, some asked expressly for older movies. Travelling showmen in par-

ticular tried to acquire their movies as cheaply as possible. 'Just remember that we are the little men,' wrote Henry Frères.<sup>11</sup>

Desmet charged his Amsterdam clients considerably more than those in the distant provinces. In 1911, the normal price of a programme of about seven to nine titles was between *f*35 and *f*75. M. A. van Boekhout, for instance, who ran the Bellamy cinema in Flushing which was later taken over by Desmet, paid *f*100 for two weekly programmes of between 1,700 and 1,900 metres per week.<sup>12</sup> In some cases, Desmet charged 1 cent per metre for one day, 2 cents per metre for three days and 5 cents per metre for a week. These prices normally applied to travelling exhibitors and permanent venues in small provincial towns. Prices also differed according to region and the size of the town. In 1912, the travelling operator Carl Welte, who toured the northern part of the Netherlands (certainly not the richest part of the country), paid a daily rate of *f*10 to *f*15 for programmes consisting of about five films (Sundays were more expensive as turnover was higher), or *f*17.50 for two days. In 1911-12, his competitors on the fairgrounds, Vet Wegkamp and Schouten, paid *f*17.50 and *f*12.50 to *f*15 per day, respectively, for seven to eight titles.<sup>13</sup>

The composition of Desmet's programmes at this time may be reconstructed by examining the programmes of the Rotterdam Parisien and the cinemas of Strengholt, Desmet's Rotterdam competitor.<sup>14</sup> According to the Desmet Archive, the Parisien programmes always began with a newsreel. This would occasionally be followed by a non-fiction film, after which came a stream of comedies and melodramas, with the programmes ending, strangely enough, with a melodrama rather than a comedy. But the cinema did not of course always have to play the films in this order. Desmet sent Strengholt a newsreel once at the most, but the performances normally opened with a non-fiction film, followed by comedies and dramas. The inclusion of a newsreel was often at the expense of the non-fiction film here.

In a programme normally consisting of seven films, the sixth was often the main feature. The main feature was the longest film on the programme and was usually a drama. 'Longest' here must not be taken to imply a film lasting an hour and a half. From the spring of 1911, films such as *THE FALL OF TROY*, and Danish and German features lasting half or three-quarters of an hour (so-called two- or three-reelers) appeared on Desmet's bills. In the first three years of their existence, long films tended not to exceed an hour in length. Since Westdeutsche Film Börse, Desmet's biggest supplier, rarely offered him long films in their programmes, he had just two long films in his stock before 1911, both of which had been acquired as individual films. In the summer of 1911, he switched to a new supplier, Deutsche Film Gesellschaft,

which was able to offer him a constant supply of programmes containing long films. But even these did not include long films as a standard item. Long films only began to be commonplace from 1912. In 1911, the less fashionable cinemas were still having to make do with programmes in which the longest films only just exceeded 300 metres, which was the usual maximum length of a one-reeler, making about a quarter of an hour's worth of viewing.

Genre-wise, actualities were still very much in demand in 1910, just as they had been at The Imperial Bio in 1908 and 1909. The films of the funerals of Edward VII of Britain and Leopold II of Belgium were popular. W.J. van Lier rented the concert hall in Maastricht for film performances. In December 1910, he complained to Desmet about the programmes he was sending. He was giving just one-evening performances and he did not want to fill them with melodramas and 'silly jokes' [farces]. 'Are you quite sure you have nothing of topical interest?' he asked. He was not necessarily just thinking of actuality films; any recent film sensitive to current trends would be suitable. Van Lier also made a point of asking for nature films, which were also popular elsewhere.<sup>15</sup> In October 1911, J. F. Mounier in Den Bosch asked Desmet to replace the Pathé newsreel with nature films, 'for they are very much in demand here, and we have not seen one in two or three weeks.' Nature films, scientific films and other educational genres were popular with Dutch film-goers throughout the second decade of the century. They were a standard item in programmes, but could also be packaged separately into programmes for screening in schools and other pedagogical institutions. Desmet himself occasionally compiled special performances of this kind. At the same time, he had other clients who wanted only melodramas and fantasy films, especially when they were in colour. 'Coloured pictures' were particularly requested by J. Sieders, for example, who was looking for material for his film shows in Enschede.<sup>16</sup> Natural-history films and actualities remained popular after the advent of long films, though there was less demand for coloured feature films.

## 2. Films by the Kilometre

The year 1911 was under the sign of the breakthrough of the long feature film, Danish and German cinema and Asta Nielsen, the first internationally famous film star.<sup>17</sup> Desmet had of course bought the long feature *THE PASSION PLAY* at the end of 1910, and was renting *WHITE SLAVE I* at the beginning of 1911, but the fashion for long features only hit the Netherlands with the se-

quel to *THE WHITE SLAVE TRADE: IN THE HANDS OF THE IMPOSTORS* (Fig. 35). On Saturday 16 March, this Danish thriller was premiered simultaneously at Nöggerath's Bioscope Theater and the Mullens's Grand Théâtre in Amsterdam.<sup>18</sup> The *Handelsblad* wrote:

The film is very easy to follow and very true to nature here and there. We see how a girl falls into the hands of white slave traffickers, who shut her up in a house, where they mistreat her and finally try to sell her. Kidnappings by car, masked men, fights on roof-tops and so forth appear on the screen in rapid succession. At the end of this exciting story, an engineer, who has witnessed the girl's abduction at the beginning, manages to rescue her from the hands of the miscreants. This romance runs for about an hour.<sup>19</sup>

On the day the film was given its first screenings by his competitors, Desmet managed to get hold of a copy from Deutsche Film Gesellschaft. A week later, it was playing at the Union Cinema in Amsterdam, which had opened shortly before (4 March). With its sensationalising approach to the risky subject of trading in women, *WHITE SLAVE (II)* contributed greatly to the popularity of Danish films in the Netherlands. But it also helped to establish the reputation



Fig. 35. *Den hvide Slavehandels sidste Offer* (Nordisk 1911)

of both long films and the permanent cinemas themselves. Press euphoria about long feature films went hand in hand with jubilation about the number of cinema openings. Long films and new cinemas were seen as extensions of each other. It was also the first time a long feature had received so much coverage in the Dutch press. *WHITE SLAVE* was so much in demand that the designation 'part II' was omitted.

The film became a phenomenon and set the trend for subsequent long Danish features such as *VED FAENGSLETS PORT*, an erotic melodrama about a young playboy who seduces a girl of humble origins, gets thrown out of the house and returns as a burglar. This film played at the Bioscope Theater at the beginning of April. As with *IN THE HANDS OF THE IMPOSTORS*, Desmet managed to get hold of a rival copy from Deutsche Film Gesellschaft, which he then put into distribution.<sup>20</sup> By importing from Germany, Desmet was able to react quickly to the trend for longer films. In April, he issued *VED FAENGSLETS PORT* along with *THE FALL OF TROY* and a German drama *DAS GEFÄHRLICHE ALTER* (*THE DANGEROUS AGE\**, Messter 1911). These were followed in May by the issue of *HEISSES BLUT* (*Colour Plate 5*), directed by Urban Gad and starring Asta Nielsen in the lead role.<sup>21</sup>

Nielsen and Gad's first collaboration, *AFGRUNDEN* (*ABYSS*), another three-reeler, had been released in Germany and other countries in 1910, but it appears to have been distributed in the Netherlands only on the back of the success of other long features after *IN THE HANDS OF THE IMPOSTORS*. It was probably shown in the second and third weeks of April 1911 by Alberts Frères at the Grand Théâtre under the title *LEVENS AFGRONDEN* (*LIFE'S ABYSS*).<sup>22</sup> Desmet himself did not own a copy of *LEVENS AFGRONDEN* but was allowed to rent a competitor's copy to a couple of exhibitors in remote parts of the country.<sup>23</sup> The star cult around Asta Nielsen did not set in immediately after *AFGRUNDEN* and *HEISSES BLUT*, even though the latter was much in demand over the following months. In April and May, Desmet also showed the long American feature *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN* (Vitagraph, 1910), which was again not his own film.<sup>24</sup> Finally, Desmet's *PASSION PLAY* from Pathé was given a new lease of life by the rage for long movies, and was regularly in demand from the spring of 1911.

The length of the long German and Danish features earned them the soubriquet 'kilometre movies'. In August 1911, Desmet bought Pathé's *LES VICTIMES DE L'ALCOOL* (*IN THE GRIP OF ALCOHOL*, 1911) and *BALLHAUS ANNA I* from Schnick. The former was a film of 795 metres and the latter, though officially 960 metres long, actually measured only 892 metres according to Desmet's reckoning. In September, he took *AVIATIKEREN OG JOURNALISTENS HUSTRU* (*THE AVIATOR AND THE JOURNALIST'S WIFE*, Nordisk 1911), which weighed in at 1,160 metres. It was the first film from Deutsche Film-

Gesellschaft to exceed 1,000 metres. From September 1911, almost every programme from Deutsche Film Gesellschaft contained a film of between 500 and 1,200 metres. They were predominantly Danish or German productions, but occasionally French, Italian or American. From 1911 onwards, the major part of Desmet's publicity was to focus on these long feature movies.

The carry-over of the popularity of the longer films can be observed in Desmet's rentals to two clients from the travelling cinema scene: Alex Benner and the Mullens brothers. In 1911, Alex Benner was still busy on the road, working the fairgrounds in the summer and showing in rented halls in the winter.<sup>25</sup> After taking his first deliveries in February 1911, he became Desmet's regular customer from May onwards. Benner usually took fourteen titles from Desmet, so he was receiving around 2,450 metres of film in a single delivery. In line with common practice, however, he was probably changing the films on his programme once or twice a week. All this can only mean that in 1911 Benner was entirely dependent on Desmet for his films.

From May 1911, Benner rented *The White Slave Girl* on several occasions, which presumably meant *IN THE HANDS OF THE IMPOSTORS*. On the first occasion that he hired him the film, Desmet informed Benner that it was in three 'parts' (reels) and that he had to show them one after the other. This idea was clearly so new that it required special mention, and Desmet's instruction shows just how unusual the long film still was at this point in time. It was obviously one of the first long films that Benner had shown. The film was accompanied by an advertising package consisting of eleven normal-sized posters and a poster in three sections.<sup>26</sup>

In August, Benner showed *LES VICTIMES DE L'ALCOOL*, a film of 795 metres, directed by Gérard Bourgeois. The film tells the classic tale of how a family is destroyed by the father's alcoholism, a subject treated in many a magic lantern series in the nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup> *LES VICTIMES DE L'ALCOOL* seems to have been popular, for Benner rented it again in October and December. However, most of the programmes Benner took from Desmet in 1911 did not contain long films. On the fairgrounds at least, the long feature film was still uncommon. On 21 December, Alex Benner opened the Bioscope Theater in Bergen-op-Zoom; it was his first permanent cinema.<sup>28</sup> After mid-January, Benner stopped taking films from Desmet, as he had just bought a large consignment of films that had never been shown in Bergen-op-Zoom.<sup>29</sup> This was more or less the end of Desmet's contact with Benner.

In the years 1910-12, the Mullens Brothers had one foot in the world of the fairground and the other in the permanent cinema scene. In his early years as a distributor, Desmet supplied films regularly to Alberts Frères for perform-

ance in their travelling cinema. The Mullens were showing films at rented venues such as the Arts and Sciences Building in The Hague and the Grand Théâtre in Amsterdam (which Albert Mullens was shortly to acquire), but in the summer of 1911 they were also still in business with their travelling cinematograph. Between May and August, they were hiring films regularly from Desmet, albeit mainly shorts. In one case only were they enough to cover an entire programme, but generally they were rented as fillers.<sup>30</sup> From 1912, however, they began to take more. In that year, they rented one or more films a week, or every two weeks, from Desmet. In 1911, the Mullens showed two of Desmet's long films: *HEISSES BLUT* appeared on their bill in May, followed by *IN THE HANDS OF THE IMPOSTORS* in August. The latter triggered a number of productions that milked its success. The words 'white', 'white women' and 'female slave' alone were enough to persuade both the exhibitors and the distributors. In 1911, the German Vitascope company came in with *WHITE SLAVE III*, which Desmet bought in June of that year and offered to the Mullens brothers. However, they were not seduced by this *WHITE SLAVE* and turned it down. Neither the accompanying notes nor the attached poster matched the film itself, which they regarded as beneath consideration anyway. In June 1911, they wrote Desmet, 'Just tell the firm from whom you bought this film that this is a fraudulent attempt to cash in on the advertising for White Slave No 2.'<sup>31</sup> That month, Benner too took an Italian film from Desmet that exploited the 'white slave trend'. This was *THE BLACK SLAVE GIRL (AMORE DI SCHIAVA)*, produced in 1910 by Cines, although it was a mere one-reeler of 310 metres.<sup>32</sup>

Encouraged perhaps by the success of their rival Benner, the Mullens rented *LES VICTIMES DE L'ALCOOL* in September and October for screening in Maastricht, Weert, Roermond and Haarlem. Hommerson, another competitor, also rented it in September and October for performances in Bussum and Amersfoort. Yet *LES VICTIMES DE L'ALCOOL* did not enjoy the same success everywhere it played. Travelling showman Carl Welte screened it at the Mepel fair in September 1911, but fairground audiences wanted nothing to do with it. 'Yesterday I returned "Alcohol" to your address, as it's been driving people out of my tent here. They've had enough of it. Yesterday I was asked if "Alcohol" was coming back and when I said no, they said thank God, what's a film like that doing on a fairground?'<sup>33</sup> The role of the exhibitors themselves in this misadventure is an open question, for both Welte and his explicateur Bertus Niemeijer were among the 'victims of alcohol'.

Even in 1912, by which time most large cities had one or several permanent cinemas, the Mullens were still screening films at the fairs and in rented halls, alongside their shows in Amsterdam and The Hague.<sup>34</sup> It seems their shows

were able to hold their own against the earliest permanent venues. But this was to be their last year on the fairgrounds. They were now hiring long, and above all Danish, films from Desmet with greater frequency than in 1911. The most popular of these were *DEN SORTE KANSLER*, directed by August Blom, and *DE FIRE DJAEVLE* (*THE FOUR DEVILS\**, Kinografen 1911), directed by Alfred Lind and Robert Dinesen. *DEN SORTE KANSLER* (Colour Plate 13) was a costume adventure about an unscrupulous ruler who is trying to marry off his daughter against her will to a neighbouring prince. Like earlier films by Blom, the locations were realistic and contained subtle lighting effects.<sup>35</sup> *DE FIRE DJAEVLE* (Colour Plate 14) was a film about a group of circus trapeze artists. The action scenes featured high- and low-angle shots of a kind not previously seen. The movie marked the breakthrough of the Danish circus movie, of which Desmet acquired such subsequent specimens as *DØDS-SPRING TIL HEST FRA CIRKUS-KUPLEN* (*A FATAL DECISION OR THE GREAT CIRCUS CATASTROPHE*, Nordisk 1912).<sup>36</sup>

Long German and Danish films involved fixed and considerably higher prices. The Mullens brothers could well afford to premiere Desmet's new movies. They paid f250 for *DEN SORTE KANSLER* for the first week's run in The Hague. The brothers were so keen to get it that they had it sent to them for a trial projection at their own expense. They also spent a fortune on advertising material, including expensive posters in several sections. Since Desmet did not open his own first-run theatre in Amsterdam, the Cinema Palace, until the end of 1912, he probably had no objection to releasing *DEN SORTE KANSLER* in The Hague, rather than at his Parisiens in Rotterdam and Amsterdam. The film also opened at Nöggerath's Bioscope Theater in July. It seems that, as with the earlier Nordisk films *IN THE HANDS OF THE IMPOSTORS* and *VED FAENGSLETS PORT*, Desmet and Nöggerath both owned a copy.

Unlike *DEN SORTE KANSLER*, Alberts Frères did not give the first performance of *DE FIRE DJAEVLE*. This had taken place at the Union Bioscoop in Amsterdam in November, after which it had been shown at the Bioscoop Theater Doelen in Gorinchem during travelling showman Hommerson's season there in December 1911. *DE FIRE DJAEVLE* seems to have been such a winner that Desmet's print remained in distribution for years. The film was a hit all over Europe. After *DE FIRE DJAEVLE*, the Kinografen company was able to invest in the biggest film studio in Scandinavia in the hope of achieving the same success with subsequent films. However, these expectations were not destined to be fulfilled.

*DEN SORTE KANSLER* was not the only long film for which people were prepared to stump up the extra cash for a first-week run. The Mullens brothers

paid *f*200 for *IN NACHT UND EIS*, Mise Misu's feature film about the Titanic disaster that had occurred just a few months earlier. The melodrama *GUVERNØRENS DATTER* (*THE GOVERNOR'S DAUGHTER*, Nordisk 1912) cost the brothers *f*175 a week. The price of a film fell dramatically after its first few weeks on release. A daily rate of *f*15 for a film that was no longer new was normal in 1912. In the autumn of 1912, hits like *DEN SORTE KANSLER* and *DE FIRE DJÆVLE* were also available at *f*15 a day, with two days priced at *f*25 and a week at *f*100.<sup>37</sup> These charges were a little up on 1911, when films that were no longer new could be hired at *f*10 a day for a three-day rental.<sup>38</sup>

The Mullens regularly rented short films from Desmet as well, for which they paid by the metre, rather than at a fixed price for the whole. These prices varied considerably: in 1912, actualities and some documentaries cost 10 cents per metre per week, and comedies, dramas and certain travelogues 20 cents per metre per week. In 1913, the rate for non-fiction films was increased to 12 cents, with comedies and dramas remaining the same. For shorter rental periods (e.g. three days), the price of comedies and dramas was 12 cents a metre. Thus, the brothers were paying 20 cents a metre on average for short comedies like *THE PICTURE IDOL* (Vitagraph 1912). The documentary *LE DYTIQUE* (*THE WATER BEETLE\**, Éclair 1912) cost 10 cents a metre, and the travelogue *LES BORDS DE L'YERRES* (*ON THE BANKS OF THE RIVER YERRES\**, Gaumont 1912) 20 cents a metre. The price differentials could have been due to differences of genres, but they could also have been due to the amount of time that a particular print had been in circulation. Not all short films were charged by the metre. The Mullens brothers sometimes also paid fixed prices for one- and two-reelers.

Following the introduction of the long features, Desmet was also distributing individual films more often, in addition to complete programmes. The popularity of these films enabled him to raise his prices sharply, particular if the print was still reasonably fresh. In May 1911, for example, he offered *AFGRUNDEN* and *VED FAENGSLETS PORT* to the Leeuwarden exhibitor Jelsma for *f*15 a day and *f*75 a week, and *DAS GEFÄHRLICHE ALTER* for *f*20 a day and *f*100 a week.<sup>39</sup>

The price increases worked through to the renting of complete programmes. In 1912/13, the average price of a programme rose to between *f*50 and *f*100 per week. At the end of 1911, travelling exhibitor Hommerson needed to pay Desmet *f*30 per weekend for a programme of 2,000 metres without a 'big picture' (feature film), and *f*35 for a programme 'with a big picture'. Hommerson's assistant, Nico Broekema, protested in vain that he could get programmes from a competitor (meaning Pathé) at *f*25 a day for 2,000 metres or more, 'all new films', but he came round in the end.<sup>40</sup> The same thing happened with the exhibitor P.E. Scharphorn in Hengelo. If it was

actually true that he would have to pay *f*10 a day for 'big numbers' and between *f*60 and *f*65 for a four-day run, then he did not want Desmet's films: 'A joke's a joke, but I want nothing to do with this kind of Jewish trickery.' But Scharphorn too capitulated. Less than a month after his big words he was renting *DE FIRE DJAEVLE* from Desmet at *f*60 for four days. German and Danish films were simply too popular to ignore.<sup>41</sup>

The longer features not only pushed up prices but also affected Desmet's business on other fronts, such as contracts, selling, advertising and competition. From 1912, the length of films was stated in contracts for hire. In an agreement concluded in December 1912, Carl Disch and his partner Tilanus at the Apollo Bioscoop in Haarlem stipulated that Desmet would include a film of at least 800 metres in his weekly programmes for them.

The long features played an important role in Desmet's sales. In 1911/12, Desmet sold a number of his films. Perhaps he wanted to dispose of his old repertoire. On November 1911, he despatched fifteen films, consisting mainly of short comedies, to Carl Welte. It is, however, also perfectly likely that the buyers were simply happy to spend money on Desmet's films, certainly if he was offering popular long features. On 24 October 1911, Desmet passed on his copy of *BALLHAUS ANNA I* to the German trader Jokisch. Desmet had done reasonable business with this film, but his reasons for parting with it are explained by the comments of the Haarlem exhibitor Anton Haffke: '[...] picture terribly dark and spotty, possibly due to washing.'<sup>42</sup> The print was probably just exhausted. In January 1912, he sold P.R. van Duinen his copy of *LES VICTIMES DE L'ALCOOL*, the film that had done such good business for Benner and the Mullens Brothers.<sup>43</sup>

References to length were very much the trend in the advertising of the period. 'Giant Movie (1,100 metres long)' was one description of *MADELEINE* (Deutsche Bioscop 1912), and *DØDS-SPRING TIL HEST FRA CIRKUS-KUPLÉN* was portrayed as a 'Giant Main Feature'.<sup>44</sup> The name of the distributor of a movie was not announced in the cinema ads that appeared in publications such as *De Kunst*. Details like this were reserved for the trade press. Production companies were also named only sporadically, though it is noticeable that Desmet and his competitors were mentioning them more and more frequently in their ads between 1912 and 1913. After announcing the title of the main feature, Nöggerath's ads for the Bioscope Theater in *De Kunst* in 1912 continue with a list of production companies (Vitagraph, Gaumont and Cines), rather than films, by way of indicating the rest of his programme.<sup>45</sup> Even the 'outside world', it seems, knew at any given moment what Vitagraph and Cines stood for. Desmet's ads in *De Komeet* for 1911 and 1912 omit the names of companies and consist of only an enormous list of titles available from him

for rent. However, he did include the names of the companies for whom he sold film equipment: Pathé, Gaumont, Ernemann, Messter and Buderus. He never failed to mention that he could offer films 'of 1,000 metres and longer'.<sup>46</sup> Another interesting feature of his advertisements in *De Komeet* is that, in contrast to his days with the Imperial Bio, he was now printing his own name in large bold letters. He had abandoned his tendency to stinginess with advertising and was now taking two pages a month in the fairground journal. Competition between cinema operators was now being driven by film lengths. Desmet's customers were kept informed of foreign box-office hits by his ads in *De Komeet*, along with the advertising and film reviews in foreign publications. Everyone wanted to obtain long movies such as *IN THE HANDS OF THE IMPOSTORS* from him, but since he normally had just one print in his possession, he could hardly meet all requests. A client would often have to wait a week or longer before he could rent a particular hit. But Desmet did his best to oblige his customers and to comply with requests for alterations to the advertised titles in a programme. Usually, these requests were for long feature films.<sup>47</sup>

### 3. 'Monopoly' Films. Distributing the Exclusive Film in the Netherlands (1913-1914)

The monopoly film reached the Netherlands in 1913. Distributors began to acquire from production companies the distribution rights on a single film for one or more years within a defined geographical area, which in this case meant either the Netherlands only, or the Netherlands plus the Dutch East Indies. The distributors, in turn, sold the cinema exhibitors the exclusive right to exhibit a particular film in their city. This guaranteed the exhibitors a first-week run without competition from others showing the same film. Only after these rights had lapsed was it possible for other distributors to buy the film, and for other cinemas to screen it. The system of sole rights, with its guarantees of exclusivity, was an answer to the practice of releasing copies of new films simultaneously. The adoption of the new foreign system was doubtless greatly facilitated by the fact that the prestigious Amsterdam cinemas were already owned by the most important distributors. One of the first signs of the change in the wind was announcements, like those of the Theater Bellevue in summer 1912, that the main feature had 'never before been shown in any bioscope theatre'.<sup>48</sup> In his advertisements in *De Komeet* for that year, Desmet declared that he could supply 'all the exclusives and smash hits'.<sup>49</sup>



Fig. 36. *Vor Tids Dame* (Nordisk 1912)

All this notwithstanding, in 1912/13, cinemas were still regularly showing the same main feature simultaneously in one city. Up to this point in time, the unrestricted sale of films had been unproblematic because the programmes had consisted only of short films. The chances that someone might be showing exactly the same films as his competitor were slight. With the coming of the long film, however, attention was focused on just a few titles that everyone wanted to screen. The existence of the free market had allowed several distributors to buy and rent the same film. Another option, though one rarely taken up, was for one distributor to buy multiple prints of a single title. A combination of both situations arose in November 1912, when Desmet advertised the Titanic movie *IN NACHT UND EIS* in *De Komeet*. The same number contained an ad from his former client, P. Silvius, who had meanwhile turned to distribution. Silvius did a big splash on the same film, claiming that he had four prints, two with Dutch and two with German titles.<sup>50</sup> Other examples of the simultaneous release of long features were *THE COUNT OF MONTE CHRISTO* and *VOR TIDS DAME* (*A MODERN GIRL*, Nordisk 1912). In the first week of January 1913, *MONTE CHRISTO* was playing at Desmet's Cinema Palace, Nöggerath's Bioscope Theater and the Cinema De La Monnaie.<sup>51</sup> The following week, *VOR TIDS DAME* (Fig. 36) could be seen at the Cinema Palace, the Bioscope Theater and the Plantage Bioscoop.<sup>52</sup>

Competition between cinemas primed the contestants to pay inflated prices for exclusive exhibition rights. Outside Amsterdam, distributors could rent their exclusives to the highest bidder, although they usually called the tune themselves. It did not matter who rented first, as long as the distributor booked the film to no more than one cinema exhibitor in a given city, but even that arrangement could be ignored if someone came in with a higher bid. The situation in Amsterdam was a little more nuanced, since the leading cinemas were all owned by the big distributors. But even without the exclusive system, they made sure that new films were premiered at their own 'elite' theatres. Amsterdam cinemas that did not belong to this select club tended to miss out. The difference made by the introduction of the monopoly system, however, was that it was now possible for this select group to neutralise competition from each other's luxury theatres in Amsterdam. The Union could not put on a film already playing at the Cinema Palace. Expensive advertising campaigns for a particular new film could no longer be undermined by the competitor who suddenly appeared from nowhere with the same title to milk free profits from all the publicity.

The Cinema De La Monnaie was the first cinema to describe a main feature as an 'exclusive' or 'monopoly film' when it showed a film adaptation of Franz Lehar's operetta *Die Lustige Witwe*, presumably Éclair's *LA VEUVE JOYEUSE* (*THE MERRY WIDOW*\*, 1913), in January 1913.<sup>53</sup> Desmet was quickly in on the new act, and two weeks later he was presenting *LA RANÇON DU BONHEUR* (*LIFE OR DEATH*, Gaumont 1912) as 'a Cinema Palace Exclusive'.<sup>54</sup> Gildemeijer triggered the first quarrel in this business midway through January, when the police impounded his first exclusive, *TIRE AU FLANC* (*THE SHIRKER*\*), a French comedy about military life (*Grands Films Populaires*, 1912). He had spent a lot of money buying the film as an exclusive in Paris, probably from distributor Louis Aubert who normally sold his films to Nöggerath and Desmet. However, it appeared that there was an agent in Brussels who held the rights for both Belgium and the Netherlands.<sup>55</sup> Judging from his advertisements and the discussions of his movies in the press, it looks rather as if Nöggerath brought up the rear in the race for exclusives. However, he managed to turn the tables with his purchase, distribution and exhibition of *THE MIRACLE* (*Miracle Film* 1913) and *QUO VADIS?* which played at his Flora Theater in The Hague, and at the Bioscope Theater in Amsterdam from the end of March 1913.<sup>56</sup>

There were precursors of the exclusive films. From 1911, the Theater Pathé owned the exclusive rights for the first runs of all new Pathé movies. Nöggerath and Gildemeijer also showed their new films at their own venues first. The difference between this and the exclusive films was that the latter system was concerned with the purchase and distribution in the Netherlands of indi-

vidual films or, in some cases, of 'series' featuring well-known actors. With their spectacular scenes, 'casts of thousands' and stars, or the cachet attached to the name of the author on whose work they were based, these movies commanded astronomical sums. The many German features based on the works of famous authors or playwrights, the so-called 'Autorenfilme', belonged to this latter category, of which Desmet possessed a copy of *DIE LANDSTRASSE* (*THE COUNTRY ROAD\**, Deutsche Mutoscop & Biograph 1913, adapted from Paul Lindau).<sup>57</sup> *DIE LANDSTRASSE* was praised by the press for its lack of dialogue titles. The *Algemeen Handelsblad* noted a tendency to eliminate both the spoken word of the explicateur and the printed word of the title. 'Continuing this tendency towards simplification is a piece by Paul Lindau entitled *The Vagabond*, which has just reached Amsterdam cinemas. The film dispenses entirely with informative, clarifying or explanatory text.'<sup>58</sup> A short description taken from Lindau's text was all there was. The film-going public was probably less impressed by the film than the press, for *DIE LANDSTRASSE* did not play for very long in the Netherlands.

Some exclusives were even sold by auction. Although these films undoubtedly fetched more money in other countries, the prices they commanded in the Netherlands were high enough.

Exhibition rights for the Netherlands and Colonies of the films *Quo Vadis*, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, *Richard Wagner*, *Spartacus*, *Cleopatra*, *Atlantis* and *The Blue Mouse*, all films of between 1,700-2,300 metres, or 2,000 on average, cost between 6,000 and 10,000 guilders. As a rule, 2 or 3 additional copies were purchased at the regular price of 60 cents a metre.<sup>59</sup>

Anyone wishing to make it in the distribution business had to be ready and able to invest a lot of money.

*RICHARD WAGNER* (Colour Plate 15) was a typical Desmet exclusive. In the spring of 1913, the Mullens Brothers, who had meanwhile split and started separate operations in Amsterdam and The Hague, both rented films from Desmet: Albert for his Grand Théâtre in Amsterdam and the Bussum fair, and Willy for his screenings in The Hague. Willy rented *RICHARD WAGNER* for a two-week run at the Residentie Bioscoop. For the first week (14 to 20 June), he paid no less than *f*1,000. He also took several posters and other advertising materials for a further *f*233. For the second week, he paid another *f*750, excluding the costs of publicity material. This enormous outlay was all for a film that had already played for two weeks at Desmet's Cinema Palace in Amsterdam from 22 May to 5 June.<sup>60</sup> Desmet did, however, provide Mullens with a brand-new print, since he had bought two from Messter. With the pre-

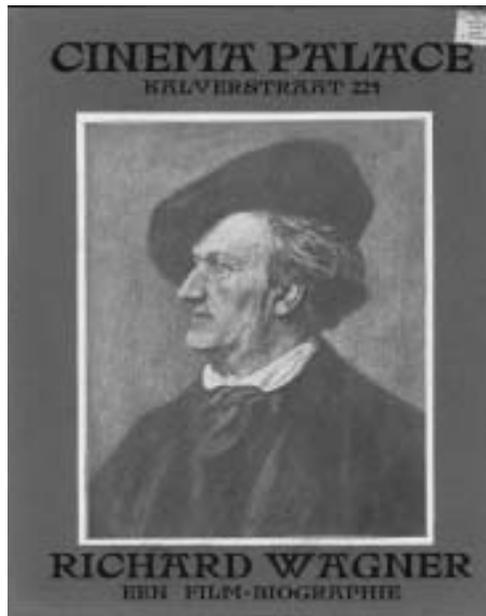


Fig. 37. *Richard Wagner* (Messter 1913)

miere of RICHARD WAGNER in The Hague, Mullens was seeking to ensure for himself the kind of profits he had made earlier with *DEN SORTE KANSLER* and *IN NACHT UND EIS*.<sup>61</sup> With bookings of this kind, Mullens was Desmet's highest-paying customer before the First World War.

Mullens was clearly wanting to create a big splash with RICHARD WAGNER in The Hague. He increased the size of the orchestra to 22 players, all members of the Residentie Orchestra. The publicity was lavish. Along with hundreds of posters in every imaginable format, Desmet delivered 1,500 brochures for the first week and another 350 for the second (Fig. 37). Desmet was well prepared for a big advertising campaign like this and could serve his client hand and foot. It is doubtful whether all this publicity achieved the desired effect. On 16 June, Mullens wrote Desmet: 'To my great regret, I am having to deal with a powerful competitor in the shape of the beautiful weather [...] The city is full of Richard Wagner, but people feel they have to go to Scheveningen or to stay out on the street: bad luck, therefore, and an enormous setback.'<sup>62</sup> If bad weather had been the bugbear on the fairground, good weather was the enemy of the permanent cinema. That autumn, Mullens looked back ruefully on the screenings: 'As you know, this film has not exactly made me rich...'<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, he rented RICHARD WAGNER again in 1914 and 1915. The film itself could not be blamed for the poor attendances, and the June 1913 performance received good reviews in both the *Nieuwe Courant* and

the trade paper *De Kinematograaf*.<sup>64</sup> The *Nieuwe Courant* described the first performance in The Hague: 'The house was completely full and when the last image had given way to a dark screen, and the last notes of music had faded, the audience broke into enthusiastic applause that ended only when Mr. Alberts Jr. appeared on the stage to acknowledge the ovation.' The conductor, Gerrit Van Wesel, received a pat on the back for the performance of the music of Wagner and other classical composers.<sup>65</sup> The paper was clearly not exaggerating, as can be seen from Mullens's letter to Desmet of 16 June: 'I can inform you that our performance of the Wagner film on Saturday evening was a great success. I had been expecting a good response from the audience, but I was quite astonished by the ovation at the end.'<sup>66</sup> As an old hand in the business, Willy Mullens had noticed immediately that seven scenes had been cut from the film, including scenes presumably regarded as immodest or politically sensitive by the German censor, such as a shot of Mina Planer undressing, a bathing scene and a large section of a sequence dealing with the 1848 revolution. He had also noted that although the copy was brand new, two of the scenes had already developed tramlines.

The exclusive system was reflected in the contracts Desmet signed. It was invariably the owners of the more fashionable cinemas who had the extra money to secure the first screening of a prestigious movie in their cities. Desmet's contract with Willy Mullens for RICHARD WAGNER in June 1913 was his first for the exclusive rental of a single film.<sup>67</sup> Frits Brasse of the Chicago cinema in Den Bosch made a similar agreement a month later, also for the Wagner film, and again in April 1914 for DET HEMMELIGHEDSFULDE X (Fig. 38). Desmet signed further exclusive contracts in 1914. David Hamburger Jr. and his partner Lorjé at the Rembrandt Bioscoop in Utrecht signed for the rights of IN HOC SIGNO VINCES (rented for May-June 1914), LES ENFANTS DU CAPITAINE GRANT (June 1914), DET HEMMELIGHEDSFULDE X (June-July 1914) and SCHULDIG (July 1914).<sup>68</sup> Desmet sometimes topped up these films with shorts to make a full evening's programme of between 2,000 and 2,500 metres. Some exhibitors just booked these main features from Desmet and took care of the supporting programme themselves. It is noticeable from these contracts that the cinemas in Den Bosch and Utrecht probably enjoyed preferential treatment from Desmet because of the frequency with which they booked films from him. From October 1913, Hamburger and Lorjé were renting between 1,800 and 2,000 metres a week from Desmet. Desmet was also without doubt the most important supplier of films to the Chicago in Den Bosch, the town in which he had lived for so long without ever managing to get a foot in the door with his film shows and other attractions.

Just as the long film had needed time to become established, not every



Fig. 38. *Det Hemmelighedsfulde X* (Dansk Biograf 1913)

cinema operator wanted to get in on the exclusive system immediately. When A.W. Smits, who ran a cinema in Flushing, heard that he would have to pay *f*600 to rent *RICHARD WAGNER*, he found the price absurd: 'I took *QUO VADIS?* from 21 to 27 July (a brand new film playing for the first time at my place) and I paid only *f*400 for the privilege.'<sup>69</sup> Then there is the reaction of Mounier in *Den Bosch*: 'Only in the highly exceptional case of a film with worldwide success such as *QUO VADIS?* do we take enough to justify the extra expense of this type of film.' Mounier also felt that Desmet's weekly programmes were already much more expensive anyway than those of Nöggerath and Pathé.<sup>70</sup>

The relationship between exclusives and films acquired on the free market can be seen from the main features shown at the Cinema Palace in Amsterdam in 1913. The two systems existed side by side, but Desmet evidently distributed more films acquired on the free market than exclusives. He may have considered the exclusives too expensive to buy in large quantities, but the number of exclusives available internationally was probably still limited

in 1913. The main features shown at the Cinema Palace were sometimes not genuine long movies, but modest two-reelers like *IL VELENO DELLE PAROLE*. At other times, the main feature was indeed a 'kilometre movie' like *RICHARD WAGNER*. The Wagner film played for two weeks in Amsterdam (Cinema Palace), The Hague (Residentie Bioscoop) and Rotterdam (Cinema Palace), which was quite exceptional in those days.<sup>71</sup> Such long runs were only repeated with other prestigious Desmet films such as *SCHULDIG* (an Autorenfilm by Messter).<sup>72</sup> The Wagner film was one of Desmet's biggest in 1913, if not the biggest. It was the title he advertised the longest, and it was on offer in every number of the recently founded trade paper, *De Kinematograaf*, from June to November 1913.<sup>73</sup>

The rise of the exclusive film was also the setting of a general change in the type of films on offer. If we look at the series of main features screened at the Cinema Palace in 1913, we see that Danish films are no longer the force they were in 1911 and 1912. Almost as many French, Italian and American films are being shown, while the number of German films tops the rest. By 1913, therefore, Desmet was styling himself as more of a specialist in German than Danish films. The films shown at the Cinema Palace came from many different production companies. Although the selection of Danish and French films was dominated by Nordisk, Gaumont and Éclair, no single production company dominated the supply from other countries, and films came in from a wide range of firms. Several copies of long Danish and German feature films from the years 1911-14 have vanished in the passage of time: some over the past few decades, others in Desmet's own day.

#### **4. Mature Clients. Desmet's Shifting Clientele (1912-1914)**

Between 1912 and 1914, the proportional relationship between Desmet's clients in Amsterdam and those in the rest of the Netherlands changed considerably. In Amsterdam, the explosive growth of cinemas peaked in 1912 with perceptible effects on Desmet's distribution. More and more of his business was with Amsterdam cinemas. He had, of course, had previous dealings with the owners of cinemas such as the Union Bioscoop and the Witte Bioscoop, but he now acquired new clients in Amsterdam, such as the cinemas Edison, Tavenu, Apollo and Wester Bioscope. He was now dealing in films with the Amsterdam representative of the Ernemann company in Germany, M.B. Neumann, with whom he was also engaged in much larger transactions in the purchase of film equipment.<sup>74</sup> Yet despite this very extensive Amsterdam clientele, Desmet's best customers in 1912 were spread right

across the Netherlands. Some of them, like *Silvius* in Dordrecht, were old acquaintances. Among the profitable new customers were R. Ubels in Amersfoort, Joh. De Liefde in Utrecht and Legeer in Zeist. Other contacts faltered: Strengholt, for instance, with whom he finally stopped doing business in May 1912.<sup>75</sup>

The ratio in favour of the Netherlands outside Amsterdam simply increased in 1913/14. Although Desmet had contacts with other Amsterdam cinemas in 1913, they were mainly short-lived.<sup>76</sup> The only exhibitors in Amsterdam who continued to take programmes on a regular basis in 1913/14 were Desmet's own Cinema Palace, the Witte Bioscoop, the Dam Bioscope, Bioscope Haarlemmerplein and the Rozen Theater.<sup>77</sup> The new customers Desmet acquired during this period were mainly from outside Amsterdam. Among them were a number of loyal travelling showmen such as Wegkamp, Schouten and Welte, who had had to be contented with spear-carrying roles. The big new provincial buyers were the Rembrandt Bioscoop in Utrecht, the Flora Cinema of George van der Werf in Enschede and Desmet's own new cinemas: the Cinema Palace in Bussum and the Cinema Royal in Rotterdam. Some of Desmet's earlier contacts, such as F. Geenen in Helmond, increased their business.

According to their letters, exhibitors were withdrawing from Desmet because of the poor content and technical inferiority of his offerings. Desmet was certainly purchasing new films regularly, but apparently not in quantities sufficient to provide all his Amsterdam clients with brand new prints free of tramlines. The weekly rotation of a single copy of a film from city to city meant that other exhibitors in the same city sometimes had to wait quite some time before they could obtain the same material. Amsterdam was more fastidious about the condition of prints than the provinces. In November 1913, Eduard Schade of the Dam Bioscope threatened to terminate his contract with Desmet if he could not supply him main features that were more attractive:

By no stretch of the imagination can the main features I have received during the past few weeks be described as special attractions, quite apart from which they have already played too long, so that screening programmes like those you have been sending me does absolutely nothing for the reputation of my bioscope theatre. However, in view of your pleasant and accommodating style of business, we should perhaps meet to take a closer look at the matter, and possibly find a solution acceptable to both parties.<sup>78</sup>



Fig. 39. Albert Mullens's Grand Théâtre,  
Amsterdam

Cinema exhibitors and their audiences were becoming more mature. In 1913-14 Desmet was often including older long features like *DE FIRE DJAEVLE OF THE FALL OF TROY* as extra numbers in programmes containing new long features. This did not go down well with everyone. When he screened *VED FAENGSLETS PORT* at the Cinema Palace in 1913, *De Kinematograaf* retorted: 'There's also an extra number "The Temptations of a Big City", but really! The film was fired off at a quite ridiculous speed. No wonder people were saying, "it's just like a puppet show". Precisely why this long film was played as an extra number – with German titles to boot, which simply added to the audience's confusion – is not at all clear.'<sup>79</sup> By 1913, films with foreign-language intertitles were no longer acceptable; ditto for outdated movies.

Albert Mullens may be numbered among the 'mature' Amsterdammers. In 1913, he rented a few more films from Desmet, including the long Danish production *DEN TREDIE MAGT* (*THE STOLEN TREATY/THE SECRET TREATY*, Nordisk 1912). But he was not ordering every week. Mullens normally rented individual films rather than ready-made programmes. These were sometimes short comedies, and at other times long main features. In the autumn of

1913, Mullens stopped renting from Desmet, unlike his brother Willy, who took films in September and October for screenings in Breda and Weert, and from December 1913 to August 1914 for The Hague.<sup>80</sup> Willy took mainly short comedies or travelogues, but sometimes long dramas and sensational productions such as *SCHULDIG*, or a long comedy like *DIE WELT OHNE MÄNNER*. But he was renting less. The deliveries were occasional rather than regular and never included complete programmes. On the other hand, other cinemas in The Hague, such as the Tip-Top Theater and the Empire Bioscoop, were showing a very large number of Desmet's movies.<sup>81</sup>

It was not only the Amsterdammers who showed their displeasure when Desmet had the nerve to persist in renting them worn-out movies. Other, higher-paying clients complained too. From Nymegen, Mounier sent Desmet pieces of *DIE GELBE ROSE* (*THE YELLOW ROSE\**, Eiko 1913) to convince him that his print was no longer in a fit state to be screened. In this case, the problem was not just wear and tear but also the brittleness of the film material, which had caused the film to develop cracks.<sup>82</sup> A letter from the Apollo Theater in Haarlem informed him: 'Included herewith are two main numbers, which are too old and splotchy to be shown in our theatre. We would have considered *f*40 pretty 'presumptuous' for a programme with this kind of old rubbish in it. But since you are asking us for *f*100, and we have a right to a good programme, we will spare ourselves any further comment on this way of doing business.'<sup>83</sup> Even the films for the Cinema Royal in Rotterdam, Desmet's own 'elite' theatre, occasionally included prints that had seen better days. The manager of the Royal, C.H.J. Welzenbach, reported in August 1913 that the film *VELDBLOEMEN* (presumably *FLEURS DES CHAMPS/WILD FLOWERS\**, Gaumont 1912) was no longer fit for exhibition (Colour Plate 9). 'This morning we took out around 2 metres which I shall return to you. I suggest, with respect, that you bear in mind the kind of audience we get here.' Such problems were no doubt due to factors such as the lack of properly trained projectionists and the rush to get films on to the next customer, which left little time to inspect them for damage and wear and tear.

Desmet's prices in 1913/14 were more or less the same as they had been in previous years. Travelling showmen were still paying *f*10 on weekdays, and between *f*15 and *f*17.50 on Sundays, for a programme of 7 to 10 titles that included one feature film. Depending on the age of the material and their own location, permanent cinemas paid between *f*50 and *f*100 for a week's run. Cinemas in Amsterdam (Dam Bioscoop), The Hague (Empire, Haagsche Bioscoop) and Haarlem (Apollo Theater) were soon paying *f*100. The Chicago theatres owned by the brothers J.F. and P.J. Mounier in Nymegen, Eindhoven and Den Bosch stumped up *f*75 a week. However, there were excep-

tions. Desmet's Cinema Palace in Bussum laid out between *f*100 and *f*125 a week for film rental. When Tuschinski took over the Cinema Royal, he had to find around *f*220 for a complete programme. The Amsterdam Cinema Palace paid no less than *f*300, and on one occasion even *f*400, for a week's show, which was probably due to the fact that these programmes were first-release runs of new films. No wonder, therefore, that Tuschinski only twice bought a complete week's programme from Desmet.

The competition was not much cheaper. Gildemeijer's prices around 1913-14 were as follows: 15-20 cents a metre for a first-week run, 10-12 cents for a second week, 7-10 for a third weeker and so on downwards. These prices applied to films Gildemeijer had purchased from the supplier at the regular price of 60 cents. This meant that a programme of about 2,000 metres, enough for a two-hour performance, was costing anywhere between *f*300 and *f*400 for a first-week run, *f*200-240 for a second week and *f*150 for a third. Since Desmet's programmes were usually slightly shorter than 2,000 metres, Gildemeijer was probably no cheaper than Desmet:

The price of a film is so much higher in the early weeks of its release because the print is then new and without scratches and streakings, which are inevitably disfiguring, and also because cinema managers want to make sure, come what may, that their audience has not already seen the film elsewhere. The release date of the show on offer is its principal attraction. The smaller theatres in the lower-class districts, where admission prices are between 10 and 30 cents, normally pay between 50 and 100 guilders a week for a programme that has already been shown at larger venues in the same city.<sup>84</sup>

Gildemeijer's last sentence needs a little qualification. Due to the enormous demand for films in 1911, the new city-centre cinemas were good customers of Desmet's. The age of his material did not yet matter quite so much. Furthermore, there was not a great deal of difference between local and city-centre cinemas. By 1913, however, the number of films on offer had increased so greatly that a process of selection and ranking had taken place, just as Gildemeijer states: the richer cinemas showed new, unblemished films and the suburban and neighbourhood cinemas had to make do with older stock.

On top of this, Desmet treated his own cinemas in different ways. Before Desmet concluded the contract that installed Voltmann as its manager in March 1913, the Rotterdam *Parisien* received its films free. Afterwards, Voltmann paid *f*100 a week. The Cinema Royal also received films free up to Tuschinski's assumption of the management there. Desmet's sister Rosine, the owner of the Bioscoop *Gezelligheid*, received a weekly and none too recent programme from her brother at the low price of *f*50. The steep rentals

charged to the Cinema Palace conflict somewhat with the treatment of the Royal in Rotterdam. The former cinema was not Desmet's personal property, however, but was owned by a company in which he held a large number of shares. He was thus renting his first-release movies to a limited company (NV Middenstad). All of which tends to suggest that he was treating the Palace as his milk cow.

In contrast to earlier years, programmes were now made up of fewer films on average, owing to the all-conquering long films, whose lengths simply continued to grow. The average programme now consisted of six rather than seven films. There was scarcely any change of genre within the programmes. Each programme contained a long feature, which was generally accompanied by a newsreel, a documentary and short dramas and comedies, though there were always more comedies than dramas. As before, cinema owners continued to demand certain genres. Everyone was trying to steal a march on everyone else with the newest and most widely discussed films. In Venlo, for example, the American historical production *IVANHOE* was screened at the Scala as a counter-attraction to another American costume drama *THE PRISONER OF ZENDA* (Famous Players 1913), which was being shown by a rival. 'American pictures' (westerns) and comedies featuring Max Linder, Pathé's popular comic, were now more in demand than coloured films. Travelling showman Hommerson was among those who asked for them for his shows at the fair in Schagen: 'Make sure you send some good comedy pictures to show to the farmers here! And a good American cowboy number, with a new newsreel for each programme.'<sup>85</sup> The biggest draws of all, however, were the films with sensational effects. Travelling showmen Welte, Groth and Hommerson, to name but a few, rented *IN NACHT UND EIS* time and again.<sup>86</sup>

Given that both short and long films were available on the free market, several distributors might have the same film on their books. It was not rare, therefore, for Desmet to receive letters from clients complaining that the programmes they received contained titles they had already shown, usually as part of a programme supplied by another distributor. Desmet was sometimes even careless enough to send out titles that exhibitors had already received from him the year before as part of another programme. In most cases Desmet had little trouble finding them replacements. The duplications were usually shorts rather than main features. Duplications of previous programmes did not matter to exhibitors so much when they turned up in shows for children.

Films in those years followed a route determined by the pecking order of towns and cities. Desmet's films for permanent theatres in the Netherlands

journeyed as follows: week one at the Cinema Palace in Amsterdam, week two at the Rotterdam Parisien, or at Willy Mullens's Theatre in The Hague, and then the following weeks at the Scala or Rembrandt in Utrecht, the Chicago in Den Bosch and so on. This order was not always followed consistently. One of the consequences of the opening of the Cinema Royal in Rotterdam in mid-1913 was that the Parisien was replaced as Desmet's first-run cinema in that city. A new film might crop up occasionally at the Royal without being shown at the Cinema Palace at all – as was the case in the autumn of 1913 with *L'ENFANT DE PARIS*, *CLEOPATRA* and *AUF EINSAMER INSEL* (*ON A LONELY ISLAND\**, Eiko 1913). The first two of these films probably failed to get a showing at the Cinema Palace because Desmet did not own them himself, but was renting them for the Royal from rivals Nöggerath and Wilhelmina. Once they had completed their first run at their own theatres in Amsterdam, Nöggerath and Wilhelmina, who owned no cinemas in Rotterdam, apparently had no problem with releasing their movies in Rotterdam through one of Desmet's cinemas.

## 5. Expansion. Distribution in Belgium, the Dutch East Indies and Elsewhere

Desmet was already trying out his wings across the border in 1912. The ads he placed in papers such as the *Algemeen Nederlands Exportblad*, *Mail Editie*, *Holland Abroad* and *South Africa Guide* were bringing in offers from all over the world (Vienna, Constantinople, Bucharest, Rio de Janeiro) from people willing to act as his agent. Desmet was on the lookout for an agent in South Africa, and made contact with Jesse C. Ghevers in Cape Town, but Ghevers wanted first to see a few samples of Desmet's movies.<sup>87</sup> It is not known whether this proved to be an insuperable obstacle, but Desmet acquired agents and resellers only in Belgium and Dutch East Indies.

Desmet distributed films in Belgium both before and during the First World War, particularly in Antwerp and the area surrounding it, as well as in Turnhout and Ghent.<sup>88</sup> A lot of films were despatched to Flanders from 1913 onwards, since it was easy to obtain Dutch or French/Dutch versions of films in the Netherlands. But this was also a rather tricky business both before and during the war. The problem before the war was that many films had already played in Belgian cinemas in French-language versions by the time that Dutch versions appeared on the market, and some cinema owners pulled out for this reason.

In the Antwerp area, Desmet's clients were J. de Backer, Willem Frank,

Mme. J. Robbeson and Raymond van Hest. From December 1911 to August 1912, he did business with De Backer, sending him films such as *DE FIRE DJAEVLE*, *MADELEINE* and *DEN FLYVENDE CIRKUS* (*THE FLYING CIRCUS/THE PRIDE OF THE CIRCUS*, Nordisk 1912). In 1913, Desmet had a representative in Antwerp named Willem Frank who supplied films to the city and region. From January to September 1913, Frank regularly rented on complete programmes for Desmet to cinemas in Antwerp, Berchem, Borgerhout, Merkssem, Hemiksem, Kiel, Roeselare, Sint Niklaas and Turnhout. Frank's business collapsed at the beginning of 1914. Desmet suspected him of embezzlement and called in the police. He finally recovered all his films a year later. From September to November 1913, Desmet dealt briefly with Mme. J. Robbeson in Borgerhout, but she was so put out by his late deliveries of publicity material and the age of his films that she quickly stopped doing business with him. Early in 1914, Desmet was trading with Raymond van Hest, owner-manager of the *Cinéma Américain* in Antwerp, who also booked films out to others on Desmet's behalf.

Desmet's contact with J. Peeters of the *Cinema de Spiegel* in Turnhout quickly ran into trouble after a period of trade from January to April 1914. Desmet had sent Peeters a programme containing the exclusive *IVANHOE* for which he had no rights in Belgium. The Belgian owner of the rights, J. Dardenne, threatened to have the print seized. This left Peeters without a film, and he telegraphed Desmet, who immediately offered *SUI GRADINI DEL TRONO* (*ON THE STEPS OF THE THRONE\**, Pasquali 1913). However, Peeters had already shown this film, although he did not at first inform Desmet of this. Desmet promised to drop by soon and asked him to hold *IVANHOE* for him, but he failed to appear. Peeters responded by holding the whole programme including *IVANHOE*, whereupon Desmet asked what was happening to his films (meaning the rest of the programme). After an angry exchange of letters, Desmet finally went to see Peeters and sorted the matter out.

Films were disappearing from Desmet's stock largely because he was selling them off. In 1913/14, Desmet regularly met with buyers of films who either lived and traded in the Dutch East Indies (modern Indonesia) or sold their films there. The demand in the East Indies for films was greater than in the Netherlands, as programmes there were changed twice a week, as opposed to just once in the Netherlands. Films which had completed all their runs in the Netherlands were sent to the Dutch East Indies, where they embarked upon a 'second run'. Needless to say, the quality of these prints left a lot to be desired.

One of Desmet's clients was the Ernemann representative M.B. Neumann, an old acquaintance to whom he sold a lot of films in 1913, and again in 1914

and 1915. Between May and August 1913, Neumann bought eight long and eight short films, including the Asta Nielsen picture *BALLETDANSERINDEN* (THE BALLET DANCER, Nordisk 1911) and *DER EID DES STEPHAN HULLER* (THE OATH OF STEPHAN HULLER\*, Vitascope 1912).<sup>89</sup> His second contact was E.V. Hélant, an exhibitor in former Djocja (now Yogyakarta). Hélant purchased movies for his own house, the Royal Standard Biograph, from February to October 1914, as well as for cinemas belonging to others. Finally, there was N.J. Bakker in Weltevreden, Batavia (now Jakarta), who took films between March and May 1914 that were earmarked by Desmet for the Dutch East Indies. Bakker's nephew Berinsohn viewed and ordered the films at Desmet's premises in Amsterdam. He ordered *Gestoorde Wittebroodsweken* (*Interrupted Honeymoon*), *UN BAL D'APACHES DANS LE GRAND MONDE* (THE HOODLUMS' HIGH-SOCIETY BALL\*, Lux 1912) and *THE MAN HIGHER UP* (Vitagraph 1913), and then nine long feature movies, including one Asta Nielsen movie: *DER FREMDE VOGEL* (THE STRANGE BIRD\*, Deutsche Bioscop 1911).<sup>90</sup> Hélant, on the other hand, was more interested in acquiring short French and Italian comedies, taking no fewer than one hundred and ninety films for a consideration of 25 cents per metre. Desmet sold him only three long films: *SATANASSO*, *DIE WELT OHNE MÄNNER* (Colour Plate 7) and *DER HUND VON BASKERVILLE* (THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES\*, Vitascope 1914). At 60 cents per metre, these were more expensive.<sup>91</sup> Bakker reported the sale of a Desmet copy of 'Satanus' to J.F. de Calonne who, thanks to Bakker's publicity, was one of the biggest film dealers in Java. Was this Hélant's copy of *SATANASSO* (Fig. 40)? De Calonne was said to have purchased the copy without going through Bakker in order to deprive him of his commission. 'People out here simply begrudge each other the sunlight.'<sup>92</sup>

Desmet's relatively large sales to the Dutch East Indies in 1914 would have been even larger but for the fact that the film world there had changed so much. In that year Dutch 'hand-me-downs' were no longer so welcome. The East Indies wanted the newest films, preferably exclusives, just like everybody else. Firms such as Éclair opened agencies in the Dutch East Indies, enabling them to buy sole rights for the country at much lower prices than those they were paying the Dutch. In 1914, De Calonne, who had once approached Desmet for films and had bought regularly from Nöggerath, or from Desmet's contact Neumann, was buying productions for a whole year direct from production companies such as Bison, Vitagraph and American Biograph. In this way, he avoided paying the middlemen. It was becoming much easier to acquire new films through other channels. Many of the titles offered by Dutch dealers had often already played for a long time in the East Indies. This change anticipates Kristin Thompson's comment on film trading in the Far East: 'This relegation of the Orient to the status of a 'junk' market

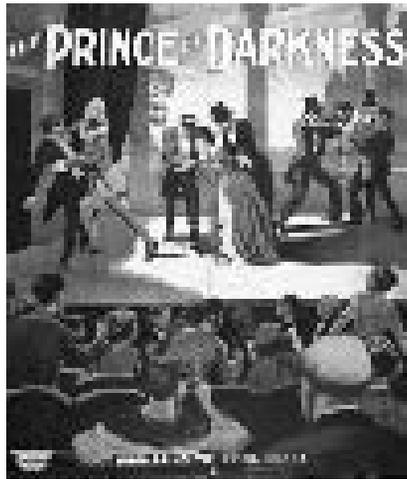


Fig. 40. *Satanasso* (Aquila 1913)

would eventually end as the USA looked abroad for alternatives to European markets lost during the war.<sup>93</sup>

Through Bakker, Desmet tried to rent on exclusives that were still officially the property of the production company, but he met with little success. One reason was that, unlike Nöggerath, Desmet did not send all his films on approval for viewing by potential buyers.<sup>94</sup> The other Dutch distributors also ran into problems. Gildemeijer, for instance, had troubles with his contact at the NV Oost Java Handels Comp., as did Nöggerath with his East Indian representative Frank. 'Nöggerath's films are coming in here everywhere at the moment – but I'm afraid that it won't be for long, for his prices are so ridiculously high that some of the Chinese here will be happy to sell their contracts with Nöggerath at a loss of f1,000,' wrote Bakker on 10 July 1914. Nevertheless, Desmet managed to sell Bakker's competitor Héliant 190 films in half a year, even though they were predominantly short comedies. One of the factors that was no doubt in play was that, with the increase in the number of long films, short comedies were not considered to be as 'passé' as short melodramas. Indeed, Héliant specifically asked Desmet not to send him short dramas. And again, perhaps people were less critical of shorts because they were not the main item on the programme.

In 1914, Desmet entered negotiations with exhibitors and distributors in Surinam, another Dutch colony at that time, but they produced little in the way of actual selling and renting.

## Conclusion

Jean Desmet's clientele was grounded initially in his connections with the travelling cinema world, but it soon came to consist of the rapidly expanding group of permanent cinema operators, whose demand for films was insatiable. Among these exhibitors were clients who were also, or later became, Desmet's competitors in film distribution. Not all of these cinema-struck exhibitors were equally fastidious about the quality of the contents of their films. The critical gaze developed with the passage of time, the growing selection of films and the arrival of long films. Some of Desmet's clients complained about the technical quality and the age of his films, for he rented them out for long periods of time. However, Desmet certainly continued to purchase new films intensively until the end of 1913. Although the breakthrough of the long film revolutionised film programming and distribution practices, Desmet continued to offer a mix of long and short films. This is how the present-day collection of long feature films made during the second decade of the century came to be accompanied by hundreds of short films from the same period.

## VI. Onésime et Son Collègue

### Competition (1910-1914)

In 1910, Jean Desmet faced competition from three other large distributors who had all become professionals and who, like himself, owned release cinemas in Amsterdam. Pathé had first claim on their own productions, and after 1910-12, when he was buying his programmes in Germany, Desmet was able to obtain only their newsreels, the Pathé-Journals, which were available on the open market. Nöggerath specialised in Italian epics such as *QUO VADIS?* and *THE LAST DAYS OF POMPEII* but also offered a bit of everything. Gildemeijer became the main importer and distributor of German films and secured exclusive rights on all Asta Nielsen films. Around 1913, they were joined by Wilhelmina, who released German and Italian films. This had the effect of narrowing down the selection of films available to Desmet. Nonetheless, he was now part of the Dutch film distribution establishment. In 1911/12, he made his mark with Danish films and in 1913/14 he brought out long German feature films.

Even before the introduction of exclusive films, Desmet and the other Amsterdam distributors were monopolising the first-week runs of programmes. The first-week system set the pattern for the other less powerful cinema operators who wanted to acquire the films after them. By locating their de luxe theatres in smart shopping streets, and by virtue of their dual function as owners and distributors, Desmet and his associates made the other cinema owners dependent on their little group. They became the trendsetters of Dutch film culture. However, this situation made it difficult for Desmet to increase his profits by releasing his films in other de luxe Amsterdam cinemas, which was one reason why he took over the elegant Cinema De La Monnaie through his NV Middenstad company in 1914.

These cinema operators consolidated their position through the establishment of trade journals, in which they set out their stall as professionals, and drew a line between themselves and those who were merely dabbling in the business by holding sample viewings for potential clients and issuing demands for regulation. Despite this consolidation, owners and distributors competed ruthlessly among themselves. Calls for the regulation of cinemas were also being raised in other quarters, though here the motives were educational, moral, religious and legal.

## I. **Gildemeijer versus Desmet. The Tug-of-War for Asta Nielsen**

Up to 1912, Desmet had three powerful rivals in Dutch film distribution in Gildemeijer, Pathé and Nöggerath. Between 1911 and 1912, Johan Gildemeijer (Fig. 41) became a major importer and distributor of films, with a particular focus on German films, which he premiered at the 'Elite Bioscoop Union' (opened 4 March 1911).<sup>1</sup> Gildemeijer worked in tandem with Siegfried Levy who ran the Union theatre. Gildemeijer's distribution office was called Union, in line with the motion-picture theatre and the German parent company.<sup>2</sup> It seems that in 1911 Gildemeijer's own supplies of movies were not yet sufficient to keep the screens of the Union and those of his clients busy on a regular weekly basis, for between November 1911 and January 1912 he was ordering seven or eight titles a week from Desmet: enough for a whole programme. His discontinuation of these orders after January suggests that he had enough films of his own by then to offer a serious challenge to Desmet. Moreover, Desmet's rentals to Gildemeijer are evened out somewhat by Gildemeijer's rentals to him in November of 1911.<sup>3</sup> Gildemeijer could offer weekly deliveries of between 1,200 and 1,500 metres of films. His films were also supplied with Dutch titles, something Desmet was still unable to offer in



Fig. 41. Johan Gildemeijer

1911. Gildemeijer had films from foreign production companies such as Lux, Gaumont, American Biograph, Vitagraph and Éclair, which had played for between one and four weeks. In the years 1911 and 1912, this meant that part of Gildemeijer's supply of films was 'fresher' than Desmet's, whose German imports had already played for at least three weeks in Germany.

Desmet himself rented the films of the companies just mentioned, so it is unlikely that he took many of them from Gildemeijer. A more significant matter was that Gildemeijer was at this same time offering all the latest Asta Nielsen movies, which had run for at least three weeks at other cinemas, such as the Union Bioscoop.<sup>4</sup> Gildemeijer set himself up as the owner of the sole rights on the films of the new star. Following the release of her first two films *AFGRUNDEN* and *HEISSES BLUT* (Colour Plate 5), the Danish actress was still not the celebrity in the Netherlands that she was in other European countries. This is evident from Gildemeijer's words in *Koningin Kino* of 1914, in which he looks back to his first visit to *AFGRUNDEN*:

I still remember vividly how one evening I was sitting through a cinema performance at the Grand Théâtre, feeling fairly disinterested until the beginning of 'Afgrunder'. My attention was seized instantly by this young woman's acting. [...] The look of desperation on her face when she recovers consciousness, but above all her departure from the scene of the catastrophe, was gripping, deeply tragic, a revelation. It was art. [...] This closing scene of 'Afgrunder', unsupported by the spoken word, with such restrained gestures, sometimes just a single glance of her huge, soulful eyes; the incomparable way Asta Nielsen does these things. It's a divine gift!<sup>5</sup>

Although Gildemeijer was clearly smitten instantly by Asta Nielsen, the Dutch press took a little longer to make up its mind. It was not until the autumn of 1911, when he released his own first Nielsen movie, the Danish production *DEN SORTE DRØM* (*THE BLACK DREAM\**, Fotorama 1911), that the *Algemeen Handelsblad* promptly published a substantial article on the acting in the movie that culminated in an eulogy of Asta Nielsen:

We were taught something about this new territory – is it theatre, art, science, entertainment, reality? – by the dazzling debut of a star of cinematography. [...] The highly refined mimetic talents of this artist moved her into the realm of cinematic art, where her expressive acting and facial expressions were so deeply impressive, that this is clearly a medium in which she can develop her talents to the full and without constraint. For the creation of such moods in a photographic record, unsupported by a single spoken word, and removed from tangible reality in a world without colour surely calls for very special gifts.<sup>6</sup>

We may, of course, ask how much Gildemeijer himself contributed to the text of this seductive article. The press's concentration on the qualities of the star rather than those of the film was free publicity for the next films in his series. As noted earlier, the relationship between film description and film review was still fairly close in the early years of cinema, so that within this frame, Gildemeijer's 'discovery' of Nielsen may be seen as an extension of his own self-promoting activities.

Desmet did not succumb to Gildemeijer's offer of all the Asta Nielsen films.<sup>7</sup> However, he did rent *DEN SORTE DRØM* from the German Union company via Gildemeijer in late November 1911, and he may well have been influenced to do so by the laudatory press reviews. Union, which was originally just a cinema chain, was the producer of Nielsen's German films. The initial producer was Deutsche Bioscop, but they were quickly replaced by Union's own production division, Produktions Aktiengesellschaft Union (PAGU). In setting up a new distribution company, Union also acquired the distribution rights for *DEN SORTE DRØM*.

The renting of *DEN SORTE DRØM* remained an isolated episode. Desmet was more interested in buying Asta Nielsen films than renting them from others. This is evident from his renting and purchase of these films *before* November 1911. We have already mentioned Desmet's periodic re-renting of *AFGRUNDEN*. On the other hand, he actually bought the Nielsen movie *HEISSES BLUT* and rented it regularly and profitably. Desmet was able to buy and rent this film in 1911 because, regardless of Gildemeijer's claims, Asta Nielsen's first German films were available on the free market. What seems most likely is that Gildemeijer only acquired sole rights on Nielsen films when Nielsen and her director Urban Gad signed an exclusive contract with PAGU director Paul Davidson. Nielsen and Gad committed themselves to producing an annual minimum of eight films for PAGU in the years 1912, 1913 and 1914, in return for a third of the profits. The films were distributed worldwide by Internationale Vertriebsgesellschaft, a company created by the three parties to the deal.<sup>8</sup> As Union's representative for the Netherlands, Gildemeijer had little problem in acquiring the sole rights for Asta Nielsen pictures.<sup>9</sup>

In the light of Gildemeijer's claim, it seems odd that Desmet was still able to purchase Nielsen films after the summer of 1911. When Desmet's assistant Heinrich Voltmann visited Berlin in December 1911 to view and buy films from German and foreign companies, one of his tasks was to acquire Asta Nielsen films.<sup>10</sup> In Berlin Voltmann failed to obtain three films that had already been bought by Gildemeijer, but he did manage to acquire a copy of *DER FREMDE VOGEL* from what his letters call 'the film factory', meaning Deutsche Bioscop. Desmet had initially been offered a guarantee that he would be able to obtain all the titles that Union also wished to buy; indeed,



Fig. 42. *Die Verräterin* (Deutsche Bioscop 1911) – the French marchioness dresses up in vain for the German officer

he could even receive them fourteen days ahead of their German release. So how solid was Gildemeijer's claim? Voltmann joked that Desmet ought to hire these films on to the Amsterdam Union cinema under false titles, so they would be in for a bit of shock when their own copies turned up. Desmet was not amused.

The preparation of Desmet's copy of *DER FREMDE VOGEL* was taking so long that Voltmann suggested he take the Asta Nielsen picture *DIE VERRÄTERIN* (*THE TRAITRESS\**, Deutsche Bioscop 1911) as a replacement (Fig. 42). But Desmet wanted what he had asked for, and told Voltmann that if necessary he would bring in a lawyer. To crown matters, it seems that something had gone wrong with the prints of *DIE VERRÄTERIN* and, in the event, Voltmann did actually come back with *DER FREMDE VOGEL*. In a full-page advertisement of his entire stock in *De Komeet* of December 1911, Desmet announced that '*Der Fremde Vogel* from the Asta Nielsen series no. 1, the first copy in the Netherlands, may be viewed by anyone interested from Saturday 30 December 1911 to Friday 5 January 1912 at the Apollo Theater, Spuistraat, The Hague.'<sup>11</sup>

Deutsche Bioscop also offered Desmet older Nielsen movies.<sup>12</sup> *NACHTFALTER* (MOTHS\*) and *HEISSES BLUT*, both made in 1911, were sent to him on approval in May 1913, but he returned them a month later as he already owned copies. In the absence of other evidence, we must rely on Desmet's own statements concerning *NACHTFALTER*, Asta Nielsen's first German film. In May 1913, he tried to obtain *AFGRUNDEN* from Deutsche Bioscop, but it was available only via the United States on payment of 1,000 marks.

When Desmet had the audacity to re-release *DER FREMDE VOGEL* under the title *The Death of Asta Nielsen*, Gildemeijer had the film seized for infringement of his sole rights on Nielsen movies during a performance at Desmet's Cinema Palace.<sup>13</sup> Desmet then tried to get hold of a new copy from Deutsche Bioscop, but they had officially sold the film to the Union company in Germany, so it was no longer available to him. He then at least bought a copy of *DIE VERRÄTERIN* from Deutsche Bioscop, the film he had turned down two years previously. Unlike the other Asta Nielsen films that Desmet purchased, the copy of *DIE VERRÄTERIN* is still in the Desmet Collection.<sup>14</sup> It is unclear to what extent Deutsche Bioscop was still authorised in 1913 to sell Nielsen movies such as *DIE VERRÄTERIN*, *HEISSES BLUT* and *NACHTFALTER*, all of which dated from 1911. The affair of the seizure of *DER FREMDE VOGEL* quickly fizzled out, for Gildemeijer published a statement in *De Kinematograaf* of 25 July 1913 to the effect that Cinema Palace had not violated the rights of his NV Union company.<sup>15</sup> Desmet seems to have retrieved his copy from Gildemeijer, for in March 1914 he sold *The Death of Asta Nielsen* to N.J. Bakker.<sup>16</sup>

Union failed to buy up the Danish Nielsen movie *BALLETDANSERINDEN* because the producers, Nordisk, were sticking stubbornly to the free market and refused to become involved in Union's exclusive system.<sup>17</sup> Desmet probably acquired it directly from Nordisk, and it was screened in January 1913 at the Cinema Parisien in Rotterdam. Like *DER FREMDE VOGEL*, Desmet's print of *BALLETDANSERINDEN* probably ended up in the Dutch East Indies, for Desmet sold it to the film dealer, Neumann, in the same year that he bought it.<sup>18</sup>

## 2. Desmet versus Pathé. Competitor and Client

During the first two years of his career in distribution, Desmet competed against the Dutch branch of Pathé with Pathé's own films. Taking his films from Westdeutsche Film Börse and Deutsche Film Gesellschaft, Desmet managed to release scores of Pathé pictures in the Netherlands between 1910 and 1912, none of which had come directly from France. Westdeutsche Film Börse, for example, sent him the tinted version of *L'ÉPOUVANTE* (THE FRIGHT,

1911), an exciting thriller featuring the actress Mistinguett, who is waylaid in her home by a trespasser who has hidden under her bed. The film deploys modern film techniques such as over-the-shoulder shots and tracking shots.<sup>19</sup> The Dutch Pathé office tolerated this competition probably because of its own stronger position. Their own offerings were not only fresher but cheaper too, so that cinema owners like P.H.J. Sips in Breda explicitly requested Desmet not to put Pathé films into their programmes.<sup>20</sup> Pathé could also guarantee that their films would arrive on time, which was not always the case with Desmet's deliveries. Cinemas such as the Rembrandt Bioscope on Jodenbreestraat in Amsterdam (not to be confused with the Rembrandt Theater) showed programmes consisting exclusively of Pathé movies supplied by the Amsterdam branch. The advertising material was generally abundant and in good condition. Pathé had films in every genre and often included colour films in their deliveries. The upshot of this competition was that Desmet found himself with a growing surplus of Pathé movies. He immediately sold a batch to his contact Jokisch in Budapest, but when he sent a second consignment, the crate of films was returned, and there were no further sales.<sup>21</sup> In 1914, he again sold a series of Pathé productions in the batch of films sent to Héliant in Djocja, but he was ultimately left with a pile of Pathé films, which remain in the Desmet Collection to this day.

Desmet's rivalry with Pathé was no obstacle to doing business with them. In fact, he was already striking deals with them in the Netherlands in March 1910.<sup>22</sup> Up to July 1911, he had bought film equipment from the branch in Rotterdam, but he rarely took films. From September 1911, he was doing business with the Pathé branch in Amsterdam, where the Theater Pathé had opened on Kalverstraat on 15 July of that year. The former Hotel-Café-Restaurant De France (where films had already been shown from time to time) had been converted by the architect Evert Breman into an elegant four-hundred-seat cinema. Breman, who had previously been responsible for the splendid Rembrandt Theater on Rembrandt Square, would also provide the design for Desmet's Cinema Palace a year later. Unlike in other cinemas, there was no explicateur at the Theater Pathé, but the films were accompanied by a small orchestra led by N. Snoeck. Only Pathé movies were shown at this theatre, and new Pathé productions were screened there first. One of the biggest attractions was the cinema newsreel, which was called the Pathé-Journal, locally re-baptised the 'Pathé-Courant'. The local press dwelt on the fascination of these films and their attraction for the modern urban *flâneur*, who could now just stroll into a cinema and imbibe the world news.

A new branch devoted exclusively to Pathé's film business had opened above the cinema, by the side exit.<sup>23</sup> The gramophone department and the

film department, which had been housed together hitherto, were formally separated from this time onwards. Under the management of L. Infroit, the film office moved to Keizersgracht, where Infroit assumed the title of 'sole representative of the Cinematograph Pathé Frères'. Desmet continued to buy equipment from Pathé: projectors, resistors, carbons, and projectors for lantern-slide advertisements. The equipment was intended for his own cinemas, his regular customers and anyone else who wished to buy from him. He received a 5% commission from Pathé for anything he sold.

In March 1912, Desmet bought a complete Pathé Kok system from Infroit. This was Pathé's new home cinema equipment, which used non-inflammable film in an unusual 28 mm format. Desmet was one of the first in the Netherlands to buy this type of equipment. But it is unclear whether he actually acquired all this paraphernalia for himself. Two months later, he sold the whole kit to Ernemann, Pathé's biggest rival in the equipment business in the Netherlands. Ernemann launched a home cinematograph of their own, the Ernemann Family Bioscope, at the same time as Pathé. However, theirs took ordinary, inflammable 35-mm film. It was a way of giving old films a new lease of life, and Ernemann made a point of asking Desmet to sell them his old stock. This he did, albeit on a somewhat limited scale. Even so, it is highly probable that Pathé movies were projected in sitting rooms via the technology of Pathé's biggest competitor.

Apart from equipment, the bulk of Desmet's business with Pathé was in newsreels (Fig. 43). In October 1911, Desmet rented newsreels from Infroit for a month. He was allowed to keep them for two weeks. They were on no account to be shown in Rotterdam, where Pathé had an exclusive contract with Goeman at the Tivoli Gardens. Business seems to have gone quiet for a while after this, for according to the Desmet archive, no newsreels were either bought or rented between November 1911 and March 1912.

From March 1912, Desmet took to buying rather than renting copies of Pathé's Pathé-Journal from Infroit.<sup>24</sup> The newsreels probably did not figure in Pathé's distribution policy and were either sold or rented as separate items. They were also sent direct from Infroit's depot, whereas fiction films came in from France. It was useful for Infroit to have the newsreels ready to hand, since this allowed locally filmed pictures to be inserted into them. Pathé released two newsreels a week called 'A' and 'B'. Their length and contents were roughly the same. The company presumably produced two a week because of the twice-weekly change of programme, which was already a well-established practice in countries like Germany, though not very common in the Netherlands. From May 1912, Desmet was buying both the 'A' and the 'B' numbers of the Pathé-Journal, and continued to take it in one



Fig. 43. *Pathé Journal 172a* (1912) – Lapize wins the Paris Brussels cycling race

form or the other up to July 1914. However, there were one or two arguments with Infroit's successor, Louis Justet, since he did not always take both numbers.<sup>25</sup> On 14 October 1913, Justet reduced the price of the newsreels on condition that Desmet again ordered both numbers every week.<sup>26</sup> Six months later on 20 April, Desmet wrote to Justet informing him that he definitely no longer wanted the 'B' number, one newsreel a week being quite enough in his view.<sup>27</sup> Notwithstanding this, he sporadically bought a couple of 'Bs' up to 2 May 1914. In any event, he continued to buy the 'A' number up to 2 July 1914.

Thus, from the beginning of 1912 through to mid-1914, Desmet acquired somewhere between 150 and 200 cinema newsreels from Pathé.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, very few copies of these remain, so the newsreel appears somewhat undervalued as a genre in the Desmet Collection. Desmet presumably did not think it necessary to keep them for long, as they dated so much faster than fiction films. During the war, they were recycled as film leaders.

Desmet occasionally bought or rented features and documentaries from Pathé.<sup>29</sup> These were a little more expensive than newsreels. Between 17 October and 21 November 1912, Desmet obtained seven of Pathé's special actualities on the Balkan Wars from the Amsterdam Pathé office. A few months earlier, in July 1912, Infroit had announced that he had set up a film labora-

tory, making it possible for people to commission their own local film footage. On the evidence of both the trade papers and the Desmet Archive, Desmet made no use of this facility. On the other hand, he did buy a number of ready-made actualities, set mainly in Amsterdam, such as AVIATEUR CHANTELOUP À AMSTERDAM (AVIATOR CHANTELOUP IN AMSTERDAM\*, 1913) and VISITE DES SOUVERAINS DANOIS À AMSTERDAM (VISIT OF THE DANISH ROYAL COUPLE TO AMSTERDAM\*, 1914). Nothing remains of these local actualities.<sup>30</sup> What does remain are the films CARNAVAL DE NICE (CARNIVAL OF NICE\*, 1913) and INCENDIE À HOBOKEN (BLAZE AT HOBOKEN\*, 1913), the latter now an item in a Pathé-Journal.

In 1912, Desmet bought two coloured copies of the Pathé production LA VIE ET LA PASSION DE N.S. JÉSUS CHRIST (Colour Plate 4).<sup>31</sup> Since a new version of this film did not appear until 1913, we can be fairly certain that he bought two copies of the 1907 version. As noted previously, Desmet had already bought one copy in Germany at the end of 1910, which he released successfully in the Netherlands in 1911. It seems likely that his old copy was worn out, and that he thought he could continue to do good business with the film. Cheese-paring attitudes and the film distribution system itself could also have been factors. The rights on Pathé movies made in 1907 had probably expired, leaving the films freely available for purchase. Films of their age must have cost considerably less than new films. Desmet's copies came in very handy a year later, when NV Liefiefilm brought out the American biblical film FROM THE MANGER TO THE CROSS (Kalem 1913). This highly prestigious production, filmed in Palestine and based on biblical illustrations by the British artist James Tissot, received a special performance at the Theater Carré instead of a normal cinema and, according to the *Algemeen Handelsblad*, attracted thousands of customers during its two-week run there.<sup>32</sup> Biblical movies seemed to do very well in Catholic Amsterdam. The film's distributors filed charges against Desmet for showing his Pathé version at the same time at the Cinema Royal in Rotterdam under the identical title *From the Manger to the Cross*. Desmet defended himself against these accusations in *De Maasbode*.<sup>33</sup> His argument was that there was no copyright on book titles and therefore none on film titles either. Furthermore, he had owned his copy for a long time, and finally: his version was in colour. Desmet omitted to mention that his film was not exactly new and had been shot not in Palestine but in a French studio. At the end of November, Pathé put an end to Desmet's stretching of the truth by issuing a new version of the PASSION PLAY, accompanied by the statement 'not to be confused with the earlier Passion Play'.<sup>34</sup>

When Desmet's importation of Pathé movies from Germany ceased, he became dependent on the Pathé branch in Amsterdam, but in view of the competition from this office, he was not inclined to buy Pathé feature films abroad. Moreover, apart from its newsreels, Pathé was now selling hardly any films in the Netherlands. Except for its newsreels and equipment, Desmet did not therefore really need Pathé. He created a niche for himself by importing and distributing precisely the sort of films that Pathé could *not* offer. This explains why, despite his high prices and other obstacles, cinema owners were happy to do business with Desmet. Desmet had gone into distribution at a moment when the entire sphere of international distribution was entering a period of differentiation. Gaumont, the Italian films, and later the long Danish and German feature films were clear alternatives to Pathé. Precisely these films would bring about sweeping changes in the format of film programmes. Pathé continued to dominate the short film scene in 1910, but now had to share its position with companies such as Gaumont, Éclair and Vitagraph. This state of affairs can be reconstructed from the Desmet Collection's holdings of the films Desmet was offering at this time. We can say in general that up to the end of 1912, half or more of a normal film programme would consist of short films. Apart from the three-reelers lasting about three-quarters of an hour, which were the usual type of long films between 1911 and 1914, the film programme was still always, and once and for all, filled with a motley selection of short one-reelers. Desmet's imports at this time consisted mostly of one-reelers.

### 3. Nöggerath, Desmet and the Italian Costume Epics

Along with Pathé, Anton Nöggerath (Fig. 44) was one of Desmet's biggest rivals in the distribution world, although this did not prevent him from doing business with him. In the autumn of 1913, he rented *L'ENFANT DE PARIS* from Nöggerath for screening at the Cinema Royal in Rotterdam, where it played for a full two weeks. He rented it again in June 1914.<sup>35</sup> *L'ENFANT DE PARIS* is a mixture of crime and melodrama. With its skilful editing and taut narrative structure, it is an exciting film, despite its extreme length (eight reels). It also contains fine location shots of Nice as well as back-lit scenes.<sup>36</sup> *L'ENFANT DE PARIS* is a story about a young girl from a wealthy family who is kidnapped by a villain and hidden at a cobbler's house. The cobbler's young apprentice falls in love with the girl. When the villain escapes with her during a police raid, the boy follows them to Nice where he manages to free the girl. Her grateful father becomes his benefactor. Desmet seems to have been somewhat besotted by this film, for he later bought Nöggerath's copy during the First



Fig. 44. Anton Nöggerath Jr.

World War.<sup>37</sup> None of this implies an easy relationship between Desmet and his rival, as is evident from their competition for Italian costume spectacles.

Although Desmet released *LA CADUTA DI TROIA* in 1911, the distribution of the big Italian historical films was largely in Nöggerath's hands.<sup>38</sup> The trend towards film spectacles received an enormous boost from the Cines production of *QUO VADIS?* in 1913. *QUO VADIS?* (Fig. 45) cleverly combined individual scenes and large crowd scenes into a complex narrative structure which did justice to the popular novel by Henryk Sienkiewicz on which it was based. Another striking feature of the movie was director Enrico Guazzoni's impressive use of space and depth in the decor. Familiar subjects from history, literature and painting, such as the burning of Rome, the persecution of Christians and gladiatorial combats in the Roman arenas were represented very convincingly.<sup>39</sup> The film was a worldwide box-office hit and increased the standing of Italian cinema and the film medium in general. In Paris, it was distributed by Aubert and shown at the Hippodrome Gaumont Palace: the biggest cinema in the world at the time. In London, *QUO VADIS?* attracted thousands of people each evening to the Royal Albert Hall, which had been converted into a cinema for the occasion. Even the British royal family went to see it. In New York, it was shown at the Astor Theater, making it the first

movie ever to be shown at a leading Broadway theatre. The admission prices were pushed sky-high in many cities (at the Astor people were paying three times the amount normally paid in the luxury cinemas), but this hardly stemmed the tide.<sup>40</sup>

Desmet wanted *QUO VADIS?* and conveyed this to Louis Aubert, who held the rights for the Netherlands. However, the competition was stiff. At 16,000 francs, Nöggerath's bid for the film was the highest, and it was premiered before the press on 4 April 1913 at his Bioscope Theater. The next day it opened to the public, a month after its release in Italy. 'The film industry is making extraordinary advances!' wrote the *Nieuws van de Dag*.<sup>41</sup> Nöggerath had put in an orchestra and an organ to provide the right kind of musical accompaniment. The film played to full houses for three weeks at the Bioscope Theater and returned there in August 1913 and February 1914 for runs of two weeks and one week, respectively.<sup>42</sup>

The competition was lying in wait, however. On the very day of Nöggerath's premiere, the Union Bioscoop advertised *Keizer Nero en de Brand van Rome* (*Emperor Nero and the Fire of Rome*), a drastically abridged version of *QUO VADIS?*<sup>43</sup> A version with the same title was shown at Desmet's Amsterdam



Fig. 45. Brochure for *Quo Vadis?* (Cines 1913)

Cinema Palace on 7 April. The entire film was reduced to a 'short' that was basically a compilation of the highlights. This decimated one-reel movie circulated for a while alongside Nöggerath's official version. Thus, we find the *Rotterdamsche Courant* of 14 May 1913 advertising a performance of these scenes from *QUO VADIS?* at Desmet's Rotterdam Cinema Parisien from 14 May under the title *DE BRAND VAN ROME EN GRUWELDADEN EN DOOD VAN KEIZER NERO* (THE FIRE OF ROME AND THE ATROCITIES AND DEATH OF EMPEROR NERO).<sup>44</sup> Desmet doubtless did all this to avoid losing his audience to a rival cinema. Nöggerath blew his top when he heard about this reduced version. He owned the only complete version of the movie, and as far as he was concerned that was how it should have stayed. Film-goers should not allow themselves to be duped by other versions. Nardus Wolf, the editor of *De Kunst* and a fervent disciple of Nöggerath's movies, was another who was incensed. He insinuated that the fragments being screened were taken from a film that had been made a year earlier:<sup>45</sup>

The Union acted honestly and openly by showing the film under its proper title – which is the title by which it is known internationally (Fire of Rome). But another cinema theatre has acted unfairly by advertising this same film on the burning of Rome as 'scenes from "Quo Vadis?"', which is both unfair and inaccurate. For it is, after all, well known in the world of film theatre that Mr. Nöggerath has had to find an enormous sum of money for the sole exhibition rights on the real 'Quo Vadis?', which is currently playing at the Bioscope Theater – a sum respected by the entire world of cinema, and for which honest dealers are happy to grant the enterprising director both his financial success and the right to his monopoly on the film. Only in a country like ours, where there is no law against unfair competition, are such things possible; in Germany, this sort of practice would be punished severely.<sup>46</sup>

Desmet again used a selection à la *QUO VADIS?* during the screening of *THE LAST DAYS OF POMPEII* at the Cinema Palace in Bussum. The 1908 Ambrosio version of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novel was followed by two new versions in 1913. On 4 September 1913, Nöggerath premiered *THE LAST DAYS OF POMPEII* in the later Ambrosio version (*GLI ULTIMI GIORNI DI POMPEI*, Ambrosio 1913) at his Bioscope Theater, while his competitor Gildemeijer brought out the Pasquali version at his Union Bioscoop on the very same day (*GLI ULTIMI GIORNI DI POMPEI*, Pasquali 1913). Gildemeijer and Nöggerath fought like mad for their audiences, each claiming that he alone possessed the genuine version, that he was in first and that the other was guilty of plagiarism. Nöggerath declared that his version was not to be confused with 'inferior imitations', meaning Gildemeijer's version. Gildemeijer declared, for his part, that

if his competitor was coming up with films of the same name, they must be films bought up from the 1911-12 season: old material in other words.<sup>47</sup> When Wolf entered the fray for Nöggerath, charging Gildemeijer with unfair competition, Gildemeijer hit back by revealing that, in defiance of all agreements, Nöggerath had bought the film in Brussels on a frolic of his own. Dutch film distributors were just about to sign an agreement obliging them to consult together over the purchase of big films, when Nöggerath suddenly had to go off 'on holiday' and delay his signature.<sup>48</sup> It is unclear whether Desmet took over the Ambrosio or the Pasquali version of the film, but he showed it anyway at his Cinema Palace in Bussum in October 1913.<sup>49</sup> Again, as with *QUO VADIS?*, he showed only highlights such as the eruption of Vesuvius, at a total length of about 400 metres. The argument for stripping the film down was that people did not wish to sit watching just one film drama for the whole evening, and needed something to laugh at a little during the show. In line with this, therefore, the fragments of *THE LAST DAYS OF POMPEII* were combined with two comedies and three farces plus a drama in three parts (*LA BOUQUETIÈRE DE MONTMARTRE*/*THE FLOWER SELLER OF MONTMARTRE\**, Éclair 1913).<sup>50</sup>

Nöggerath followed up his series of epics after *QUO VADIS?* and *THE LAST DAYS OF POMPEII* with *MARCANTONIO E CLEOPATRA* (Cines 1913), which was advertised in November 1913 both as *CLEOPATRA* and *DE SCHRIK VAN DE NIJL* (*THE TERROR OF THE NILE*) and touted as a movie from the 'Quo Vadis series'.<sup>51</sup>

During 1914, Desmet was packing in the audiences with the historical epic *IN HOC SIGNO VINCES*, which he had acquired through the Brussels agent M.E. Guillaume. After a good deal of haggling over payment and delivery conditions, Desmet paid the bill on 15 November 1913. *IN HOC SIGNO VINCES* ran for an exceptional two weeks at the Cinema Royal from 13 to 26 February 1914, but was not shown simultaneously at the Amsterdam Cinema Palace. Set against the backdrop of the decaying Roman Empire, the film combines the family histories of the late Roman emperors with the famously spectacular moments of the life of Emperor Constantine, such as the crossing of the Alps, the defeat of Maxentius and the decree of Milan. Due to the popularity of Italian historical films, but above all to the impact of its Christian message, particularly in the Catholic south of the country, the film continued to be in demand until well into the 1920s. *IN HOC SIGNO VINCES* was rented on thirty-three occasions up to 1923, nineteen of them before April 1916. It was thus not an enormous initial success, but certainly profitable in the long run. As in the case of *RICHARD WAGNER*, the eventual audience figures fell short of those expected.<sup>52</sup> Desmet ordered another copy intended for the Dutch East Indies; he had second thoughts but was then forced to hold on to it.<sup>53</sup>

The Italian historical movies were not to everyone's taste. With his publicity for the allegedly Dutch (but in fact British) production *De Brand in de Jonge Jan* (A CASE OF ARSON, Brittanic Film Producing Syndicate 1913), Desmet's rival Silvius was really bucking the trend for the Italian films: 'Stop boring the audience with all these Roman horrors. Stop paying such enormous rental prices. Show this genuine Dutch story, written by one of the best of our Dutch authors [Herman Heijermans] and acted by the celebrated Dutch actor Henri de Vries.'<sup>54</sup> For the time being, however, the Dutch cinema owners – Desmet included – blandly ignored his advice.<sup>55</sup>

#### 4. New Competitors

In 1913, Desmet was part of the established order of Dutch film distribution, alongside Pathé, Gildemeijer and Nöggerath. Following the adventure of his own film production in 1911/12, Nöggerath had devoted himself to bringing out the big Italian epics, prestigious productions like *THE MIRACLE* and the Gaumont film *L'ENFANT DE PARIS*. *THE MIRACLE* was the screen version of one of Max Reinhardt's 'mega-productions' for the theatre, 'Das Mirakel', which had been staged with great success in London and Vienna in 1911/12. Unusually, the film was premiered at Nöggerath's Flora Theater in The Hague, where it played for three weeks. Only after this was it shown at the Bioscope Theater in Amsterdam, where it rapidly vanished from sight: although widely acclaimed by the press as a 'work of art' it was considered too intellectual by movie-goers.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, with their spectacle and sensational effects, *QUO VADIS?*, *THE LAST DAYS OF POMPEII* and *L'ENFANT DE PARIS* were great successes with the public, in Amsterdam as elsewhere, and were screened for three successive weeks in the Bioscope Theater, which was rare at a time when films were regularly replaced after a week. When it came to revivals, *QUO VADIS?* topped the list.

In the April numbers of *De Kinematograaf* in 1913, Gildemeijer had styled himself as the owner of the rights for Nordisk films, but this contract lasted probably only a couple of months.<sup>57</sup> On 13 August 1913, Desmet wrote to Karl Süring, the German representative of Nordisk, telling him that he had heard that Gildemeijer's contract with Nordisk had expired, and asking if Nordisk films were now available first-hand.<sup>58</sup> However, in October 1913 Nöggerath announced in an advertisement that he held the sole rights on Nordisk's 'author films'. It is not possible to assess the strength of all these claims, but they could explain why Desmet did not purchase many Nordisk films in 1913, in contrast to previous years.

Gildemeijer had specialised in German films, particularly the Asta Nielsen movies made by Union/PAGU, but he sometimes distributed Danish and Italian movies as well, including Nordisk and Pasquali productions. Pathé, of course, showed Pathé films, along with movies made by its production units abroad, such as Belge Cinéma Film.<sup>59</sup> Pathé caused a stir with films of such literary classics as Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (LES MISERABLES, SCAGL 1912) and Emile Zola's *Germinal* (THE TOLL OF LABOUR, SCAGL 1913). Desmet offered a bit of everything, but where long films were concerned, he excelled in Danish thrillers (DET HEMMELIGHEDSFULDE X), German dramas (RICHARD WAGNER, SCHULDIG) and comedies (DIE WELT OHNE MÄNNER).<sup>60</sup> Other than these, he had a sheerly endless supply of short films. His competitor for the films of Ambrosio, Cines, Gaumont and Vitagraph was Nöggerath, and he pitted himself against Union for films from German companies such as Vita-scope and Deutsche Bioscop.

Desmet, Nöggerath, Gildemeijer and Pathé had been joined by newly arriving distributors in 1912/13. Foremost among these was the Wilhelmina company, which began trading in 1913. The managing director was Frits Boerck-



Fig. 46. The famous singer tactfully rejects a suitor in *Ma l'amor mio non muore* (Gloria 1913)

hardt, a former employee of Nöggerath's. He was later succeeded by D. van den Berg. Boerckhardt was one of Desmet's former customers, to whom he had rented films between August and October 1911. In the years to follow, Boerckhardt and his successor were to challenge Desmet with their distribution company, sometimes offering the same film titles. All this got rather out of hand in 1912, when Desmet temporarily acquired sole rights on Ambrosio movies and Wilhelmina put out a copy of the Ambrosio movie *LA NAVE DEI LEONI*.

Wilhelmina rented countless short films of all nationalities, including several of the films Desmet had on his books. As already stated, short films were not protected individually unless a distributor had bought the sole rights on all films by a particular production company. According to their advertisements, Wilhelmina had a monopoly on the Gloria and Kosmograph companies. In the autumn of 1913, for instance, Wilhelmina advertised *MA L'AMOR MIO NON MUORE* (LOVE EVERLASTING, Gloria 1913, Fig. 46), the first film starring Lyda Borelli, which it immediately announced as a film from the 'Lyda Borelli series'.<sup>61</sup> *De Kunst* was full of praise for the Italian actress's performance:

She embodies all the qualities required of a first-class film actress. She is a young woman with a slender, well-shaped figure and a wonderfully beautiful face. She wears her precious costumes elegantly and tastefully, and her movements are supple and elegant. Her fine manners, urbane conduct, indeed her whole personality, betray the woman of breeding – in her performances, at least, we recognise immediately the cultivated actress. And in those instances where high technical demands are made of a film actress, when she has to dance just as elegantly and gracefully as she must ride a horse spiritedly and like a true sportswoman, or when she must be just as poised on water, on a train or on dangerous mountain pathways – we can see that Lyda Borelli is equal to all the demands made of her and capable of dealing with all kinds of roles.<sup>62</sup>

The film promptly played for two weeks at the Cinema De La Monnaie.

Inspired by Union's Asta Nielsen series, rival distributors also brought out similar series of films focusing on a single film star. Two months before Wilhelmina introduced Borelli as a film star, they had already begun to promote another star. The Messter star, Henny Porten, was launched on the back of a series of films released by Messter's branch, Autor-Film. The series contained movies that Desmet did not have: *EVA* (EVE\*, 1913), *KOMTESSE URSEL* (COUNTESS URSEL\*, 1913), *ZWEIFEL* (DOUBT\*, 1913), *NON PLUS ULTRA* (1913) and *DER FEIND IM LAND* (ENEMY IN OUR MIDST\*, 1913). The latter were the first films to be sold by Messter as exclusives. In 1911/12, Desmet had shown several Messter films with Porten in the lead role and would bring out his own



Fig. 47. Cinema De Munt, Amsterdam,  
*De Filmwereld* 1919

'series' of Henny Porten movies in 1914/15. But the promotion of 'la Porten' as a star in the Dutch press was the initiative of Wilhelmina. Desmet's other rival, Nöggerath, took up Wilhelmina's challenge shortly afterwards with a series of films starring the Scandinavian actress Betty Nansen. Stars were becoming more and more important in the world of cinema.

Where Desmet used the Cinema Palace as his first-release theatre, Pathé used the Theater Pathé, Nöggerath his Bioscope Theater and Gildemeijer the Union Bioscoop. Premieres of Wilhelmina films were held at the Cinema De La Monnaie. However, this came to an end in May 1914, when the directors of the adjoining Cinema Palace (Desmet, Hamburger and De Hoop) took over the De La Monnaie and reopened it as the Cinema De Munt (Fig. 47). Its films were henceforth partly determined by Desmet's current stocks and partly by films from other distributors, possibly Wilhelmina. The advertisements for the Cinema Palace and the Cinema De Munt frequently appeared together in the press as a single ad, and they often exchanged programmes with each other half way through the week. Wilhelmina films were shown at other Desmet cinemas from time to time: the Amsterdam Cinema Palace, for instance, or the Cinema Royal in Rotterdam.

Wilhelmina released *LES TROIS MOUSQUETAIRES* (*THE THREE MUSKETEERS*, Film d'Art 1913) in the autumn of 1913, the premiere taking place around 30 October at the Cinema De La Monnaie, where it played for three weeks.<sup>63</sup> De La Monnaie thereby became the second Amsterdam cinema to achieve this record. Pathé had apparently turned over the distribution of the movie to

Wilhelmina, for on 7 November Pathé's representative Louis Justet reacted strongly to Desmet's demand to be told why *he* had not got the film:

I telephoned you on several occasions, but neither you nor anyone else at your end were available to take the call and give me an answer, and I have the impression that your people neglected to tell you of my telephone enquiry. I would also like you to note that when I write to you I never receive a reply, thus I had no other way of getting in touch with you. I have now been at our Amsterdam office for a year but I have as yet never actually had the pleasure of meeting you there, so I do not see that it is up to me to go to any further trouble to keep either you or anyone else informed.<sup>64</sup>

Justet's roasting of Desmet did not prevent him from selling him his usual Pathé-Journals.

Desmet still managed to rent *LES TROIS MOUSQUETAIRES*.<sup>65</sup> When the film was shown at the Rotterdam Cinema Royal at the beginning of January, three figures dressed as musketeers rode through the city on horseback. The orchestra was beefed up for the occasion with four extra musicians.<sup>66</sup> According to *De Kinematograaf*, the film was about 4,000 metres long and had cost f20,000.<sup>67</sup> Besides the length of films, the high prices paid for them were apparently regarded in trade circles as cultural capital available for exploitation in publicity. Due to the extreme length of the film, just two performances a day were given at fixed times.

It is possible that besides Desmet, Wilhelmina also acquired prints from Nöggerath, for at the end of November Wilhelmina was advertising *CLEOPATRA* and *JEANNE D'ARC* (*GIOVANNA D'ARCO/JOAN OF ARC*, Savoia 1913), both of which had been advertised earlier by Nöggerath. In the pages of *De Kinematograaf*, Wilhelmina accused other distributors of disinformational advertising, which drew an angry response from Nöggerath in a subsequent issue.<sup>68</sup> The correspondence in the Desmet Archive suggests that they were probably distributing different films. Desmet actually rented Wilhelmina's print of *CLEOPATRA*, which was shown in December 1913 at his Cinema Royal in Rotterdam. This was a print of a mere 700 metres, which originally came from Pathé. It was probably the American *CLEOPATRA* (Helen Gardner Picture Players 1912) that had appeared on the market in the autumn of 1912.<sup>69</sup>

Another new player to appear on the scene in 1913 was J. Godefroa with his *Algemeen Internationaal Filmbureau*, alias The World's International Film Office, Amsterdam. In the autumn of 1913, Godefroa had managed to acquire sole rights for the films of M.P. Sales Agency.<sup>70</sup> Henceforth, Desmet had to

order M.P. Sales films from Godefroa, which included the purchase of SATANASSO in December 1913. Direct purchases from M.P. Sales fell back sharply. Desmet was also critical of the selection of M.P. films offered through Godefroa. On the sales lists, he wrote in the margins next to the titles: 'just about', 'much too long', 'nothing' or 'lalala'. Only one was awarded a 'not bad'. The archive does not tell us whether Desmet made these judgments after viewing the films (from copies received on approval), from trade descriptions, or on the basis of the titles alone. Perhaps he had the same problem with these films as he had had earlier with Delbrügger, namely that he did not like having his films pre-selected for him and assumed that he was likely to be faced with second-choice, or even hand-me-down, films.

In January 1913, Godefroa had established the trade paper *De Kinematograaf*. It seemed at first that his purpose was simply to publicise his own films in advertisements and background articles, but after just one month, competitors such as Desmet, Union and Pathé began to advertise in the paper. Along with *De Bioscoop-Courant*, which had begun in September 1912, *De Kinematograaf* was the second Dutch trade journal for movies, and together they were to set the tone of the Dutch film press between 1912 and the end of the First World War.<sup>71</sup>

The supply of films from another American film source was cut back for Desmet with the arrival in the market place of another Dutch representative. The Transatlantic Co. was the European representative of the American Universal Company. In 1912, several small American companies with whom Desmet had done business, including Rex, IMP, Nestor and Crystal, were merged with Universal. Transatlantic was based in London, but also had an office in Paris named Anderson & Ziegler.<sup>72</sup> The latter held the rights for Transatlantic in France, Spain, Italy, Belgium and the Netherlands. The manager of the London and Paris sections was John D. Tippett. Desmet initially ordered consignments of film from Transatlantic, but these orders shrank perceptibly when the firm acquired an agency in Amsterdam. This was probably in 1913, and the agent was Carl Bolle. Bolle was also the Dutch agent for the films of the Swedish Aktiebolaget Sveafilms company, the Danish Kinografen company and the American Essanay company. He probably acquired the Essanay and Kinografen movies from Germany at 1 mark per metre, excluding a charge of 10 pfennigs per metre for colouring. The Swedish films came from Belgium or France at 1.25 francs a metre and another 10 centimes for colour. This was the fixed price that the Brussels branches of Gaumont and other Belgian distributors also charged Desmet.<sup>73</sup>

## 5. The Ranks Close. The Trade Journals and Control of the Cinemas

In the course of 1913, criticisms of the unrestrained cinema fever were voiced, and Desmet was one of those affected. *De Kinematograaf* of 21 February carried an article entitled 'Cinema Mania', which deplored recent developments in the business. Anyone who pleased could set up a cinema without further ado, and without necessarily having any grasp of the business (Fig. 48). Cinema owners came from extraordinarily diverse professional backgrounds, and not every butcher, baker, brewer or photographer was suited to the cinema business. A month later there was another report in the same paper:

And still the stream continues. The small investors have now also caught the fever and are putting their last penny into any old long, narrow room. They dream up an impressive name, put a lady in a box office, get a doorman and there's your new cinema. Clearly, not all these enterprises are going to keep their audiences.<sup>74</sup>



Fig. 48. *Picture Palace Picnics* (Vaudefilms 1914) – vagrants take over a nickelodeon, ignoring the safety regulations

This call for professionalism had much to do with the kind of people who were complaining. The group around *De Kinematograaf* and *De Bioscoop-Courant* regarded themselves as the legitimate cinema owners, and they wanted to protect themselves by preventing the market from expanding further.

The authorities too were trying to curb the wild proliferation of cinemas and to 'separate the wheat from the chaff'. One way of doing this was through the imposition of fire safety regulations. Rotterdam had made special statutory provision for fire regulations in 1912, which applied to Desmet's Parisien along with other cinemas. The new Amsterdam fire regulations came into force on 1 May 1913. They applied primarily to projectionists and projection boxes. Henceforth, only qualified projectionists were allowed to work in cinemas, and there had to be two of them in every projection box.<sup>75</sup> Exactly as in England after the Cinematograph Act of 1909, the new fire regulations led to the closure of cinemas, although the effects were not as drastic as in other countries. The Amsterdam Olympia Bioscoop belonging to J. Jerolimsky, a client of Desmet's, shut down two weeks before the law came into effect, but reopened afterwards. The Amsterdam Fire Brigade must have already been keeping an eye on this cinema, as a fire had broken out in the projection box in February 1912.<sup>76</sup> Other cities followed the example of Rotterdam and Amsterdam by introducing their own fire regulations.

At the same time, according to *De Kinematograaf*, cinema remained popular due to low prices, the absence of intervals in continuous performances, the opulence of the better cinemas, the variety of the programmes, new stars such as Max Linder, John Bunny and Asta Nielsen, and sophisticated comedies. Finally, the trade paper praised cinema for its undemanding nature and its mildly relaxing effects. Since films left only fleeting impressions, there was no danger of them putting the wrong kind of ideas into people's heads.<sup>77</sup>

Other people felt rather differently about the matter. The morality lobby viewed the rise of permanent cinemas with dismay. In nineteenth-century Amsterdam and in Rotterdam in 1908, it had taken a great deal of effort to get the drunken, indecent and anarchic fairs abolished, and now it was all threatening to return via the back door of cinema. The principal sources of protest in 1912 were educational institutions, the churches and the police. The popularity of cinema with children, particularly those from 'lower' social backgrounds, was a thorn in the side of many. It seemed that cinema was set to be a 'repository of graphic instruction in housebreaking, arson, murder, rape and blackmail, offered as a welcome distraction from the "boring" classes at school'.<sup>78</sup> Cinema owners were portrayed as 'people of very inferior quality, fortune seekers perhaps, or social failures; in short, a breed of folk who entice ordinary decent people into their cinemas with the glib fairground patter of their advertising and posters, causing them to abandon their sense of respon-

sibility, along with everything taught them by their upbringing'.<sup>79</sup> The sensationalistic film dramas, be they French crime thrillers such as ZIGOMAR or Danish 'white-slave' films, were denounced as meretricious: as films that just turned the heads of the young. The cinemas that showed these films were labelled as 'cinemas of arousal'. The analysis of publicity materials, surveys and opinion polls conducted in 1912 and 1913 led to the creation of municipal watch committees, which previewed films and decided the age groups to which they were allowed to be shown. The Cinema Committee of Rotterdam was established in 1913. Its members consisted of educators, heads of police and the press of repute. In 1912, the 'Committee Against the Perils of Cinema' was established in Amsterdam, with theatre critic Simon B. Stokvis at its head. However, in contrast to his fellow censors, Stokvis had an eccentric tendency of accepting or rejecting films on aesthetic rather than moral grounds. He aired his views regularly in the press. Desmet and his fellow cinema owners repeatedly off-loaded their dissatisfaction with Stokvis in the trade press: 'Does stockfish have to be pounded and then soaked, or is it soaked then pounded? Stockfish has to be beaten well for a quarter of an hour or so, and then soaked in water for a least half an hour.'<sup>80</sup> But Stokvis only became the official city film censor after the First World War. In this respect, Amsterdam was a privileged exception within the film censorship system that was being put in place in the first part of the second decade.<sup>81</sup>

The Dutch press also did its bit for the moral lobby, albeit on a more modest level. The *Nieuws van de Dag* wrote on the premiere of Desmet's RICHARD WAGNER:

Film performances are often criticised – and certainly not unjustly – when they offend against decency, and above all when they contain material that is suggestive and damaging to young people. But full marks must be given where they are due, as is the case with the show currently running at the 'Cinema Palace' on Kalverstraat. [...] The extremely absorbing stages of a rich life, presented in extremely high quality images, are illustrated at the 'Cinema Palace' by very beautiful music performed by an enlarged orchestra under the baton of the distinguished Boris Lensky.<sup>82</sup>

It is noticeable that the main players in the Dutch film world – Desmet, Nöggerath, Pathé and Gildemeijer – reserved their position throughout this entire discussion because they were wearing two hats. On the one hand, as cinema exhibitors they wanted to protect their market and defend the reputation of motion pictures and cinemas. On the other hand, they benefited as distributors if cinemas were allowed to increase and multiply, since they were all potential clients.<sup>83</sup>

## Conclusion

On the eve of the First World War, Jean Desmet was still one of the most important distributors in the Netherlands, holding his place in an industry that had expanded enormously in just a few years. His clientele was extensive, though its membership changed frequently. Desmet had built himself a nationwide reputation with his long Danish and German dramas and crime thrillers and his comprehensive selection of genres and nationalities. Like the rest of his colleagues, he sold films for which he no longer had a use to the Dutch East Indies, which was the dumping ground of the Dutch film trade of the times. There they embarked on a second life. Desmet owned two of the smartest motion-picture theatres in Amsterdam, one equally luxurious cinema in Rotterdam, and a number of smaller cinemas in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Bussum. He had excellent contacts with a well-oiled network of international film distribution, whose main intersections were Berlin and Brussels. For the moment, he was sailing before the wind. However, a storm was brewing in the East.



## VII. Das Ende vom Lied

### The Impact of the First World War (1914-1916)

'Owing to the European war of the last years, business in Holland was in a bad condition, so that for a long time we could not release the film and then we could rent it only a few times. We were even unable to sell it to the Colonies on account of the problems with shipping in the present time,' wrote Desmet to the Cines head office in Rome.<sup>1</sup> The First World War had far-reaching consequences for the Dutch film world. The pre-war international network was disrupted, which led to shortages of films and changes in the international films on offer. New distribution methods, new kinds of audiences and new forms of competition in film distribution came to the fore. Desmet was affected by all these changes. The war marked the end of his distribution business and cinema ownership. By the end of the hostilities, little remained of the flourishing business of the pre-war years.

#### I. The Impact of the Outbreak of the First World War on the Dutch Film Trade and Film Availability in the Netherlands

The First World War did not have such disastrous consequences for the Netherlands as for Belgium, but its effects on the Dutch economy were profound, and they in turn affected the Dutch film trade. Coal shortages reduced railway traffic. The war at sea and the bureaucracy of the Dutch Overseas Trust Company slowed down deliveries by sea precisely at the moment when Brussels fell, and Berlin was being forced to concede a growing share of the market to London as the centre of the international film trade.<sup>2</sup> From being a place of international transit for films, Berlin became just a place for national production. Import restrictions gave an enormous stimulus to internal German production, and exports to neutral countries such as the Netherlands increased. German and Italian films dominated the Dutch market to a greater extent than before the war. For the time being at least, the popularity of American movies was confined to Chaplin and the 'serial'.

There were rumblings in the air in the summer of 1914.<sup>3</sup> The murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austrian throne, and his wife in Sarajevo and the ensuing ultimatum to Serbia duly got through to the Dutch press. To the average Dutch person, it looked like a repetition of the Balkan War of 1912: very much present as a visible event in cinema newsreels, but no real concern of the Netherlands. However, the local conflict between the Austrians and the Serbs proved to be the green light for a world war. Declarations of war between the European powers came in rapid succession. The Allied front comprised Serbia, England, France, Russia and Belgium, who were gradually joined by Italy, Romania, Greece and the USA. The Central powers consisted of Germany, Austria-Hungary and later Turkey and Bulgaria. The Netherlands, Spain, the Scandinavian countries and Switzerland remained neutral. On 4 August, the Germans invaded neutral Belgium and pushed through far into France. They had crossed the Marne and were approaching Paris when they were checked by a huge counter-offensive. The Western front was transformed into a trench war.

The Netherlands declared their neutrality immediately after the Austrian declaration of war against Serbia, and the army and navy were mobilised. The German Commander-in-Chief Moltke declared that he would respect Dutch neutrality, but the Dutch government was far from reassured. The Germans had come very close to invading Belgium through the Dutch province of Limburg, which would have undoubtedly led to war between Germany and the Netherlands.<sup>4</sup> The German Army quickly became notorious for the destructive guns of Krupp and Skoda, the mass murders committed against the Belgian population and its torching of towns such as Visé, Dinant and Louvain. In the towns of Aarschot, Dinant, Louvain, Andenne and Tamines, the Germans executed hundreds of citizens in reprisal for (real or suspected) armed resistance. Dutch anxieties were doubtless increased by the fact that, despite their assurances, the British and the French offered the Belgians very little military assistance. The German guns (which were audible far inside the Dutch borders) and German terror made Dutch politicians cautious. In the end, the Netherlands made no attempt to intervene in the occupation of Belgium, which was to lead to recriminations after the war.<sup>5</sup>

In the Netherlands, panic broke out immediately (Fig. 49).<sup>6</sup> There was a general fear that the country would be flattened by the mighty German Army, just like Belgium. A conflict with England would be fatal to Dutch trade, particularly trade with the colonies. Food was hoarded, accounts were closed. There was a flight of confidence from paper money, and only coins held their value. Share prices sank, and industry was disrupted. The government was able to gain control of the situation by issuing emergency regula-



Fig. 49. Run on the Dutch National Bank at the outbreak of the First World War

tions, such as a ban on gold exports and certain other goods, and by temporarily suspending the gold standard.

The First World War brought two new audience groupings to the Dutch cinemas: Belgian refugees and soldiers. The bombardment of the Antwerp fortresses, to which the Belgian Army had withdrawn, led to a mass flight of Belgians into the Netherlands. A good 900,000 people crossed the Dutch border, bringing initial food and housing problems. About 35,000 Belgian soldiers arrived as well. They were interned, and some were hired at the Limburg mines. Many returned to Belgium after the first panic had subsided, but between 50,000 and 100,000 refugees remained in the Netherlands until the end of the war. They were accommodated in refugee camps and private lodgings.<sup>7</sup>

The Dutch Army mobilised on 1 August 1914. Two hundred thousand men were called to arms. The army was none too large and somewhat antiquated. Morale was low. The army was seen as a necessary evil, in contrast to the navy, which was associated with former Dutch sea power. An entertainment scene gradually took shape consisting of refugees on the one hand and conscripted men on the other: two large audience groups. The slender financial resources of both groups attracted them to the cheaper forms of diversion, such as cafés, dance halls and cinemas. Many conscripts were stationed in border towns such as Roosendaal, where cinemas sprang up in rapid suc-

cession. The same was true of garrison towns. Not everybody was happy with their military clients, as they had a habit of wrecking the furniture when they got bored or drunk. However, the army had become an important target group. During the war Jean Desmet advertised his shows at the Amsterdam Cinema Parisien in the *Soldatencourant* ('The Soldiers' Courier'), a special military newspaper. In Rotterdam, his advertising outlets included *La Belgique*, which was a paper for Belgian refugees who had a reputation for film-going. After all, most of them came from Antwerp, a city with a small matter of thirty cinemas in 1914.<sup>8</sup>

The mobilisation may have brought Desmet more film-goers, but there were negative sides to it as well in the shape of a loss of buyers. A. Mahler Dickson, the former explicateur at the Empire Bioscoop in The Hague, always received a commission from Desmet for the delivery of Desmet's programmes to the cinema, which was common practice at the time. The salaries of explicateurs were low, and they were glad to earn a little extra. When Dickson was called up, Desmet continued to pay him f10 a month, by way of ensuring that when he resumed his work as explicateur he would continue to act as Desmet's intermediary. Desmet halved this sum to f5 in 1916, when it was clear that Dickson would be staying in the army for the time being, and that the war was set to continue. When Dickson protested, he wrote: 'As you yourself know, I paid half of the rent of the programme immediately after the mobilisation just to keep the business running, which left me considerably out of pocket.'<sup>9</sup> The mobilisation also affected Desmet personally. Members of his family, including his nephews Heinrich and John Dahrs and his brother-in-law Piet Klabou, were also called up. Klabou, the manager of the Cinema Parisien was conscripted immediately. He was granted leave from October 1915 to January 1916, enabling him to return to work at the cinema, but the army command turned Desmet down repeatedly when he tried to get his leave prolonged.<sup>10</sup> The trade press lamented the loss of cinema staff, particularly projectionists. Amsterdam fire regulations required the presence of two qualified projectionists in every projection box, and in Amsterdam in particular exhibitors often had to make do with inexperienced replacements.<sup>11</sup>

In the winter of 1916, the North Sea was declared a war zone and mined by the British Navy. The Germans responded with submarine warfare. Ships from neutral countries like the Netherlands were henceforth permitted by the Allies to load and discharge only in allied ports. Dutch ships found themselves being directed to England. Traffic to the Dutch East Indies was subject to drastic restrictions. The war therefore had a considerable impact on the Dutch economy, including the film trade. The Netherlands were heavily dependent on the colonies and overseas imports for raw materials, and they

now became dependent on the British, who had thrown up a maritime blockade. Dutch ships had to prove that their cargoes were intended exclusively for the Netherlands, otherwise the Allies could confiscate them as contraband. In order to sustain their neutrality at any price, the Netherlands complied as far as possible with all the restrictions imposed by other countries, particularly the Allies.

The Dutch government did not dare to intervene, but Dutch industry did. Its response to British restrictions was the creation of the Dutch Overseas Trust Company (Nederlandsche Overzee Trust Maatschappij or NOT) on 23 November 1914. This public corporation was established by prominent bankers and ship owners for the purpose of securing the passage of merchant shipping to and from the colonies. The company issued licences for imports to the Netherlands on condition of assurance that no goods would be sold on to Germany. This body thereby acquired effective control of the Dutch trade. NOT became a kind of state within the state. In response to pressure from London, NOT began to function in April 1915. Dutch imports, including the import of films, film equipment and film publicity material, came under its purview. However, a large grey area of reselling to Germany continued to hold its own. There was a great deal of black-market dealing with the Germans, and the Netherlands were swarming with German agents who smuggled NOT-listed goods to Germany through Belgium and by other routes. To avoid offending the Germans too much, the Dutch government did not crack down too heavily on this trade. The Netherlands were dependent on Germany for the import of coal, chemicals and dyestuffs, although some of the coal requirements were already satisfied by England. Moreover, the Netherlands exported a great deal of agricultural and market-garden produce to Germany. The British became so irritated with all the 'leaks' in NOT that they threatened to withdraw their recognition of it. This was followed by stricter controls. Rationing was introduced in the Netherlands. To combat the black market, people were required to list their needs. These measures ensured that there were strong anti-British as well as anti-German feelings among the Dutch. Both England and Germany tried repeatedly to influence public opinion by laying all the blame on each other.

The war naturally affected supplies of film to the Dutch film world and the type of films it was able to offer. Brussels vanished entirely as a distribution centre for the Dutch. But many branches of foreign production and distribution companies were also disappearing from Berlin, making it more difficult for Dutch distributors to obtain films in Germany. In retaliation for parallel closures of German branches in London and Paris, the assets of the foreign branches of companies such as Pathé and Gaumont were frozen in Berlin.

French staff were interned or repatriated and the companies placed under state supervision. Only the Danish firm Nordisk maintained its branch in Berlin, much to the disgruntlement of its competitors.<sup>12</sup> Italy remained neutral until the spring of 1915, so up to that point it was not difficult to obtain Italian films via Germany, France or England. This was precisely the time when both the Italian epics and the Italian diva movies were at the height of their popularity in the Netherlands.

London was already one of the great distribution centres for American films.<sup>13</sup> Before the outbreak of war, there had been daily sea crossings to and from the British capital and Rotterdam and Flushing.<sup>14</sup> Desmet's pre-war movies, however, had come not from London but from Brussels and Berlin. For neutral countries like the Netherlands, London now became an important transit port for their copies of French films, even though the number of French films on Dutch cinema screens fell enormously after the outbreak of war, which had precipitated a collapse of French film production. In an article in a 1915 number of *De Bioscoop-Courant*, J. Trompeter listed the various obstacles he encountered when he went to England to fetch Pathé films ordered from France: inflexible French, British and Dutch customs controls, films left behind in France and only later sent on, visas, a compulsory delay of 48 hours in Folkestone before departure for the mainland, suspicion of being German or of working with the Germans, mines out at sea and, last but not least, storms at sea.<sup>15</sup>

The export of used films to the Dutch East Indies suffered under the naval blockade and the submarine war. Desmet's sales to the East Indies stalled after October 1914. Around April 1915, England threatened to impose a complete ban on exports to neutral countries such as the Netherlands, but the NOT managed to forestall this. Dutch importers of films had to deposit bank guarantees with NOT equal to the value of the films they were importing.<sup>16</sup> In March 1916, Britain banned all film exports, regardless of their destination, unless the films had special licences such as those of the NOT.<sup>17</sup> Besides reasons such as handing on secret messages and dealing in dangerous substances like inflammable film, the most important argument for the ban was 'the Government's increasing desire to render impossible all direct trading with the enemy'. From 1917, coal shortages added to the beleaguered state of the film business. Inland and international train services were cut, making it harder to forward films.<sup>18</sup>

Import restrictions led to a lack of new films in the Netherlands just at a time when exhibitors were screaming for them. In this situation, old films were re-released. Not all the movies that were screened for longer than the usual week in this period were actually box-office hits. The cinema operators knew just how difficult it was to get hold of fresher fare. So they made do

with lesser material. This was noticed abroad. Writing in the German film paper *Der Kinematograph* in July 1916, P. Körner noted that 'most of the foreign films shown in Holland at the moment are fairly old'.<sup>19</sup> Sometimes films were reissued under new titles to disguise their age. There were now also more variety acts in the cinemas than previously, although this was also part of the 'gentrification' of Dutch cinema.<sup>20</sup> It had already been noted before the war that due to the high price of long feature films it was cheaper for an exhibitor to bring in a singer, a comic actress or a conjuror. The return of the variety artists was therefore also a response to high rental prices.<sup>21</sup>

There was also a positive side to import problems and isolation in that they stimulated the growth of native Dutch film production. During the war years, the Hollandia studios produced twenty long features, among them *MAJOOR FRANS* (*MAJOR FRANS\**, 1916) and *HET GEHEIM VAN DELFT* (*THE SECRET OF DELFT\**, 1917). Theo Frenkel, previously active abroad but now forced by the war to work in the Netherlands, directed feature films such as *HET WRAK IN DE NOORDZEE* (*THE WRECK IN THE NORTH SEA*, Amsterdam Film 1915) and *GENIE TEGEN GEWELD* (*GENIUS VERSUS VIOLENCE\**, Amsterdam Film 1916). Desmet's rival, Johan Gildemeijer, went into film production and earned himself a reputation with the musical *GLORIA TRANSITA* (*VANISHED FAME\**, Rembrandt Film 1917). The growth of film production in the Netherlands was noted by Körner in *Der Kinematograph*: 'Due to the enormous demand and the delays now experienced with films from all countries, the Dutch film industry has been compelled to expand.' The German trade press did not fail to comment on the 'stagy' character of Dutch movies: 'There is still a shortage of competent film actors in the Dutch film industry; performers dedicated wholly to cinema are few and far between.'<sup>22</sup>

The selection of movies in the cinemas changed during the war, but some of these changes had already taken effect before the war. It was now impossible to think of life without long feature films. Stars like Asta Nielsen, Henny Porten and Waldemar Psilander remained firm favorites with Dutch audiences. German actors such as Hella Moja and Ernst Lubitsch became the new box-office draws. Lyda Borelli and Francesca Bertini were consolidating their star status just as new Italian stars were rising: Pina Menchelli for instance, and Diana Karenne, Elena Makowska and the tough guy, Maciste. In the United States, British comedian Charlie Chaplin and his imitator Billy Ritchie were replacing comics like John Bunny. The flourishing Dutch feature film produced Annie Bos, the only Dutch film diva of the silent movies.

The 'serial' film came to the fore during the First World War, though not immediately in 1914. The American serials from the period 1914-16, featuring Pearl White and Helen Holmes, were probably hardly shown in the Nether-

lands.<sup>23</sup> The genre came to prominence around 1916 when distributors Loet Barnstijn and Anton Nöggerath brought out the American and French serials of Universal, Kalem and Gaumont, and the Amsterdam Pathé office began to release American Pathé serials. The movies of serial queens Pearl White, Grace Cunard, Marie Walcamp and Ruth Roland reached the Dutch screen, where they competed for attention with the serials featuring tough guys, detectives and acrobats, such as Bartolomeo Pagano (Maciste), Max Landa (Joe Deeb), Ernst Reicher (Stuart Webbs), Sidney Drew (Ultus), Eddie Polo and Elmo Lincoln (the first Tarzan). The term 'serial film' is a little confusing because after 1913, all kinds of films featuring big stars were presented as 'serials', although they were not long movies divided into episodes, but individual long feature films built round a single star and sold *en bloc*. Today, they would be described as 'series'. Series of this type as well as the serials proper were a means of making sure that audiences would return for the next instalments, provided of course that the movies were good enough.

American movies were barely acknowledged by the Dutch trade press in these early days. In 1916, *De Bioscoop-Courant* still considered American films too cool, although critical attitudes towards Americans were certainly changing. 'The American film director has had to model himself on Europe and the actor has had to abandon his phlegmatic style of acting: his tendency to play every scene with the same smooth face and the same well-combed hair – no matter whether he's a bandit from the slums or a multimillionaire – the same eternal facial expression, the same laugh and the same biting of the lower lip when called upon to express either excitement or disappointment.'<sup>24</sup> Nuanced and powerful expressions of emotion such as those encountered in the playing of Asta Nielsen or the Italian divas were valued more highly. *De Bioscoop-Courant* also considered it a sign of progress that the American movies had moved away from their exclusive preoccupation with westerns, civil war films and detective movies, and that under the influence of film imports from Europe the American film industry was going in for the production of 'family dramas, personal tragedies and the tragedies of the financial world, the latest productions of the American market bearing witness to its success with these forms. The comedies and farces that were previously so insipid and crude are now also making great advances.'<sup>25</sup> In other words, provided the entertainment was civilised and took Europe as its model, the bourgeoisie was now prepared to grant official acceptance to film and cinema.

## 2. Jean Desmet's Wartime Purchases

### Sweeping changes

At the outbreak of the First World War, Jean Desmet was the owner of a flourishing import and distribution business, but by the end of the hostilities there was almost nothing left of it. The decline was brought about by changes within international film production, which, in turn, changed the way in which films were made available. New purchasing and distribution methods also played a part, along with fresh trends and naturally the war itself. However, it was also due to Desmet's changing business interests.

In the autumn of 1914 Desmet added little to his stocks. In 1915, his acquisitions increased again. They invariably consisted of single films, particularly long features, which he bought mainly from foreign production companies or their branches, but also sometimes from Dutch resellers. After 1915, Desmet bought only occasionally.

The German occupation of Belgium basically put an end to the abundant supply of imported films that Desmet had enjoyed in the pre-war years. Before the war, he had relied heavily on his Brussels suppliers, and now that dependence began to cost him dear. He did his best to obtain replacement films from elsewhere, but the results were disappointing. Furthermore, the distribution 'front' was changing in the Netherlands. The freedom with which Desmet was able to obtain films everywhere in his early years was being severely restricted by the appearance of competitors. He now had to apply to Carl Bolle for Universal movies, but Bolle would only let him see remaindered items. J. Godefroa, who had a monopoly on M.P. Sales Agency's movies before the war, added the German Eiko company to his list at the end of 1914.

Due to the German occupation of Belgium, many French films were sent to the Netherlands via England, but this was possible only with a declaration from the NOT containing a promise not to sell the films on to the Germans. Desmet repeatedly signed declarations for the NOT, one of which was for the importation of the Gaumont serial *LES VAMPIRES* (*THE VAMPIRES*, 1915-16). Another was for a new copy of the pre-war hit *L'ENFANT DE PARIS*. He could not pass on the imported item to the Central Powers. The Central camp demanded similar declarations. When Desmet imported Ernemann equipment from Germany in August and September 1915, he had to sign an undertaking to use it only in the Netherlands or the Dutch East Indies.<sup>26</sup> In October 1915, the German government imposed a ban on the import and export of exposed film, but this was essentially a censorship measure – at least in the view of *De*

*Bioscoop-Courant*. As long as films were accompanied by the necessary clearance certificates and censorship cards when they were presented to the Berlin customs office, they could be sent as usual to neutral or axis countries. But when this ban was repeated on 20 November 1916, the Dutch feared that a full-scale export ban was in the offing. In the event this did not happen, although the censors became more vigilant, and censorship cards and export permits were no longer sufficient. All in all, it was becoming increasingly difficult to import German films into the Netherlands.<sup>27</sup>

The Dutch film world reacted cautiously and indecisively to the outbreak of hostilities. One immediate effect of this was the suspension of payments. When Desmet's rival Nöggerath bought *DAS GEHEIMNIS DES SCHLOSSES RICHMOND* from him, he took three months to pay for it.<sup>28</sup> Desmet behaved no differently than his colleagues. He did not pay outstanding bills from his suppliers immediately. 'I beg to inform you that it was my intention to send the money to you today, but due to the problems we are experiencing just now, I am compelled to defer it for a few days', was the message of a letter to Eiko on 31 July 1914. His argument was simply that he was short of cash because his customers were just as slow with their payments to him.<sup>29</sup> In Desmet's case, there was another factor in play. From his earlier letters to suppliers, it seems he was generally inclined to defer payments until the last minute, and then to complain of excessive charges for meterage. The companies abroad sometimes made an accommodation (i.e. a reduction) to persuade him to pay immediately – at least as long as he did not use this ruse too often. From October 1914, the cinema business and the film trade picked up again, and Desmet was in a position to resume large payments. Thus in November 1914, he paid all his outstanding bills from M.P. Sales Agency together, which amounted to a total of 3,305 francs.<sup>30</sup>

Due again to the war, there were no more visits from representatives of the various production and distribution companies. Despite this, Desmet persisted with his pre-war practice of viewing films in advance and selecting them himself. He regularly asked for films on approval, especially where long and expensive films were concerned. A number of companies turned him down in advance, since they were unwilling to send copies on approval. They ran the risk that Desmet would show the film for a week, pocket the takings and send the print back. But business also tailed off with the companies who were willing to send movies on approval. Desmet burned his boats with the German Luna company during the war. On 27 January 1915, Luna complained that he was constantly sending back the films they had sent him, with all the transportation costs involved. From now on, they would offer their films to the Dutch through Desmet's competitor, Ghezzi.

Owing to the lack of films from abroad during the war, Desmet bought films from other Dutch importers and middlemen, although he had done this before the war. After war broke out, Silvius, Godefroa, Ghezzi, Minden, Neumann and others offered their films via a central list of customers.<sup>31</sup> Through this channel, Desmet bought the Danish movie *DØDSVARSLET* (*MEMENTO MORI\**, Skandinavisk 1912) from Godefroa, the documentary *HOW MOTION PICTURES ARE MADE AND SHOWN* (Edison 1912) from Ghezzi and various Cines films from Deutschmann. It is possible that Deutschmann, who was a German representative of Cines, came to the Netherlands to sell his wares, and that Desmet bought them on that occasion.<sup>32</sup> Other German dealers such as Theodor Breiting offered films to the Dutch in the same way.

Table 3. Purchases 1914-1916. Percentages based on the number of films.

	1914			1915			1916		
	<i>Total</i>	<i>Short</i>	<i>Long</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Short</i>	<i>Long</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Short</i>	<i>Long</i>
France	45	52	16	27	43	7	0	0	0
USA	19	15	26	14	22	7	9	0	34
Italy	15	17	14	36	35	40	0	0	0
Germany	14	10	28	13	0	26	18	0	66
Denmark	3	3	8	7	0	13	0	0	0
Others	4	3	8	3	0	7	73	100	0
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
(number)	126	84	42	32	17	15	11	8	3

The difference in the number of films bought before and during the war is enormous. Where Desmet was still fairly busy acquiring films in July 1914, despite the fact that it was the summer season, his buying fell dramatically afterwards.<sup>33</sup> Another three films arrived on 31 July 1914.<sup>34</sup> After that, imports ceased for a while. Only two films are entered in Desmet's books for August.<sup>35</sup> From September until November 1914, just one film a month came in. Only the November film was a long movie.

Imports picked up a little in 1915. In that year, several American, Italian, French, German, and Danish movies arrived, mainly between January and September. There was even one Russian film: the Chanzjonkov production *ZJENSITSJINA ZAVTRASJNEGO DNJA* (*THE WOMAN OF TOMORROW*, 1914). The selection consisted of both large dramas and historical epics and short come-

dies and documentaries. Apart from recent films, which were bought as exclusives, Desmet sometimes bought older films too, such as *L'ENFANT DE PARIS* and *AVIATIKEREN OG JOURNALISTENS HUSTRU*. Desmet managed to set out his stall again with the acquisition of the historical epic *CAJUS JULIUS CAESAR* (*JULIUS CAESAR*, Cines 1914), the diva films *SANGUE BLEU* (*BLUE BLOOD\**, Celio 1914) and *FIOR DI MALE* (*FLOWER OF EVIL\**, Cines 1915); and then three Henny Porten dramatic vehicles: *ALEXANDRA* (*ALEXANDRA\**, Messter 1914), *DAS ENDE VOM LIED* (*END OF SONG\**, Messter 1915) and *NORLANDSROSE* (*ROSE OF THE NORTH\**, Messter 1914), all of which were exclusives. Sad to say, most of these films did not run for very long.

Besides feature films, Desmet bought several actualities from the Dutch Pathé office, which explains the large number of French films in Table 3. More than half of them are Pathé actualities. The films mentioned under 'others' in Table 3 are undated Dutch newsreel compilations, which are listed for the most part under 1916 but could possibly date from 1915 or 1917. The newsreels consist of items made by foreign producers such as Pathé, and could be counted among the productions of the countries concerned, but they are counted as Dutch productions here because of their compilation structure. The Desmet Collection contains three films from 1915 that are not entered in the books but are counted in the table: *DAS ENDE VOM LIED*, *TOYS OF DESTINY* (American Biograph 1915) and *MORE THAN FRIENDS* (American Biograph 1915).<sup>36</sup>

Only three feature films were bought in 1916: *From the Jaws of Death* (an unidentified crime thriller by Messter, released in the Netherlands as *A Fight to the Death*, *WILLIAM VOSS* (Meinert Film 1914), on which Desmet bought the sole rights for two years, and *THE SIGN OF THE CROSS*.<sup>37</sup> The three remaining short films from 1916 are two Dutch actualities by Pathé and a film dealing with the floods in North Holland in 1916. Desmet probably failed to buy a single feature film in 1917.

Half of the 36 films bought in 1915 were long features. The films Desmet added to make up his programmes were mainly pre-war shorts. If a table were to be made of film lengths, the distribution per country would appear different. In 1915, most of the titles were supplied by the Italian Cines company and its affiliate Celio, but Germany also supplied a large number of long features. There is a noticeable increase in long feature films from America in 1914. This reflects the rise of long American and Italian films alongside German films, a development already in evidence before the war.

### Pathé, Gaumont, Éclair

Judging from the acquisition of *LES ENFANTS DU CAPITAINE GRANT* (1914) and *LE ROMAN D'UN CAISSIER* (*THE STORY OF A CASHIER\**, 1914) from Éclair and *L'ENFANT DE PARIS* (1913) from Gaumont, Desmet's policy during the war was to buy new copies of old successes, along with occasional new films. Typically, the couple of French films that Desmet managed to obtain during the war were older films. His competitors also brought out pre-war productions during the war.<sup>38</sup> The revivals of the French movies were doubtless caused by the decline of French film production, coupled with the undiminished popularity of French films during the war, despite the small number available. Due to the conscription of their staffs, Pathé, Éclair and Gaumont produced next to nothing in the autumn of 1914. They later managed to resume production with severely reduced workforces.<sup>39</sup>

Desmet bought no features or documentaries from the Pathé branch in Amsterdam during the war, but he did buy a series of special war newsreels, two Dutch actualities and some equipment. After mid-July 1914, he received no more regular Pathé-Journals. These deliveries were not resumed, although he was sometimes warned by the Pathé management that in the absence of these regular newsreels, he must not attempt to issue special war films as 'Pathé-Journals'.<sup>40</sup> He tried to bring their price down by asking for actualities that were two to three weeks old, but Pathé was only interested in selling new films. Pathé was producing too few feature films itself to meet the demand. In the winter and spring of 1916, Pathé even reissued a few of the prestigious pre-war movies by Film d'Art and SCAGL. Financial constraints restricted the company's own production largely to Rigadin comedies, the Pathé-Journal, travelogues in Pathécolor and educational films. However, Pathé did continue to distribute new films by SCAGL and Film d'Art, among others.<sup>41</sup> Due to the politics of the Amsterdam distribution office, however, Pathé films and films distributed by them were well-nigh unobtainable by Desmet. The only Pathé feature he managed to secure during the war was a second-hand copy of the pre-war film *L'ASSOMMOIR*, a film based on the novel by Émile Zola. However, it was not Pathé Amsterdam that sold him this copy in October 1915, but Adolphe Karelse, the former representative at Gaumont's Brussels office, who had opened an office in Amsterdam under his own name during the war. When part of *L'ASSOMMOIR* was destroyed in a fire at Desmet's Cinema Palace in Bussum six months later on 4 June 1916, Desmet asked Karelse to send him a new copy, but Karelse was unable to oblige as he had bought the film from someone who had brought it from the Dutch East Indies. Pathé Frères, the owners of the Dutch rights, were no longer selling films.<sup>42</sup>

Desmet did succeed in buying a few films from Gaumont and Éclair. His contacts with Gaumont continued during the war, though they were less frequent. Desmet had acquired enormous numbers of Gaumont films before the war, but the company's great hit, *L'ENFANT DE PARIS* (Fig. 50), had been bought by Nöggerath. Nöggerath apparently had more than one print of this film, which was something rare at the time.<sup>43</sup> In August 1915, he sold two copies to Desmet, but their perforations were so damaged that they were useless, and Desmet demanded a replacement.<sup>44</sup> He acquired a new, untitled print of *L'ENFANT DE PARIS* from Gaumont in April 1916 at the pre-war price of 1.25 francs a metre. By that time, Nöggerath's exclusive rights (which were usually for two years) had lapsed, so the film could be sold to others without any problems. At first, Desmet objected that this was actually a lot to pay for a film that was no longer new, but Gaumont stuck to its price, and Desmet finally paid the bill in September 1916. With the receipt, he could receive a declaration from the NOT enabling him to import the film, which had to come from France via England. In May 1916, at the request of the NOT, Desmet had deposited a bank guarantee of f12,028 in favour of the NOT with the Rotterdam bank of



Fig. 50. *L'Enfant de Paris* (Gaumont 1913)

R. Mees and Sons as proof of his solvency. *L'ENFANT DE PARIS* and its posters were not sent to him until January 1917. The film played for no fewer than three weeks at the Parisien in Rotterdam in August 1917, and would continue to do good business for Desmet well into the 1920s.<sup>45</sup>

Desmet also continued to take films from *Éclair* during the war. Having lost his contacts with the Belgian firm of Guillaume-Decotte, he contacted *Éclair*'s head office in Paris. He was critical of the copy of *LES ENFANT DU CAPITAINE GRANT* that he had purchased in April 1914. After six months of projection, all the coloured sections had allegedly become useless. *Éclair* replied that the fault was not the tinting but poor projection. Desmet haggled over the purchase of a fresh copy. *Éclair* refused to send the film as an exclusive, although Desmet actually had a contract with them from April 1914 that granted him exclusive rights. A new copy was finally forwarded to him at the beginning of November. It carried no titles, enabling Desmet to economise by having them inserted himself.<sup>46</sup> Desmet was also looking for a new copy of *LE ROMAN D'UN CAISSIER* and asked for samples, but *Éclair* refused, as they already had an agreement with Ghezzi, whereupon Desmet proposed himself as their new representative when Ghezzi's 'concession' expired. But Desmet never obtained this agency. All the same, *LES ENFANT DU CAPITAINE GRANT* turned out to be a great success. The film was rented for a total of fifty-nine weeks, played for five weeks at Desmet's Cinema Parisien in Amsterdam and was shown up to the end of 1922. *LE ROMAN D'UN CAISSIER*, on the other hand, was a flop. According to Desmet's books, it was rented for just five weeks, mainly at Desmet's own cinemas.<sup>47</sup>

The French companies were making fewer and fewer short films and concentrating largely on long feature movies. The last short comedies featuring Perret and Bout-de-Zan were shot by Gaumont in 1916.<sup>48</sup> This development was not just confined to France, but was part of a worldwide trend. In that year too, Italy, another big producer of short comedies, made the last farces featuring Kri Kri and Gigetta, having already discontinued the Robinet and Fricot comedies the previous year. Only the Polidor burlesques continued to be made until 1918, albeit on a greatly reduced scale.<sup>49</sup>

## Cines

Because of Italy's neutrality at the start of the First World War, the Italian film sector, like the Dutch, could continue to do business with everyone, including Germany. Cines movies in particular were reaching Desmet via Berlin until the middle of 1915. Trade then ceased when Germany and Italy went to war against each other. Neither the French branch of Cines nor the importer Ghezzi could offer Desmet an alternative supply route. Another possible fac-



Fig. 51. *Per amore di Jenny* (Cines 1915) – bought from Deutsche Cines Gesellschaft

tor in this was that Desmet was simply unable to recoup his costs from a few expensive Italian exclusives.

The German invasion of Belgium had already put a stop to business with Gigan (Cines), Robinet (Ambrosio, Itala) and Guillaume-Decotte (Savoia), his most important suppliers of Italian films in Brussels. The supply of Savoia and Itala films had ceased entirely, and just one more Ambrosio film had arrived, but most of the Italian films that did still come in were from Cines and Celio. Desmet no longer obtained his Cines and Celio movies from Aubert in Paris, but from Deutsche Cines Gesellschaft in Berlin. He closed contracts with Deutschmann of Deutsche Cines Gesellschaft for the exclusive rights in the Netherlands and colonies on three films: *SANGUE BLEU*, *CAJUS JULIUS CAESAR* and *FIOR DI MALE* (Fig. 51).<sup>50</sup> The Italians became embroiled in the war in May 1915, choosing the side of the Allies. This threatened the German agency. The parent company of Cines wrote to Desmet on 2 September 1915, stating that he would henceforward have to do business with them through Ferdinand Loup-Rosenberg in Paris.<sup>51</sup> But Desmet was doing good business with Deutschmann and did not wish to give up the relation; on top of which he had already had a serious clash with Rosenberg. Desmet spoke to Rosenberg in Amsterdam on 23 July 1915 and tried to acquire the Dutch concession

for Cines, but Rosenberg refused him point-blank. Desmet then refused to order films he had not seen in advance. He claimed that he had always received long films on approval and had no intention of abandoning this practice. Rosenberg departed from Desmet in a rage and then threatened to end all sales. 'The day you are willing to buy our film productions in the form that they are offered, I shall be more than happy to oblige you.'<sup>52</sup>

Desmet had backed the wrong horse. The distribution of Cines films through Germany collapsed.<sup>53</sup> Deutschmann offered Desmet a number of films that the latter was unable to use, either because the films had already been shown in the Netherlands, because the rights had already been assigned or simply because the titles failed to interest him.<sup>54</sup> When Italy chose the Allied side, people in Rome and Paris promptly claimed distribution rights for Holland. Paris reacted rather coolly towards a distributor who had bought exclusive rights via the wartime enemy. In July 1916, Desmet noted that the Paris agent Rosenberg had sold a print of *SANGUE BLEU* to his Dutch contact Ghezzi. Desmet was livid about this because he had bought the exclusive rights of distribution in the Netherlands and colonies from Deutschmann. He wished to acquire Ghezzi's copy for a reasonable price, seeing that Ghezzi could not release it because of Desmet's exclusive rights. Cines told Desmet that he would have to settle the matter with Rosenberg, and that they had lost contact with German Cines. Rosenberg, however, named a very steep price. Whether Desmet did indeed buy the copy from Ghezzi remains an open question, for *De Bioscoop-Courant* of 28 September 1917 announced the release of the film *Prinses Hélène* by the firm HAP-Film. *Prinses Hélène* was none other than *SANGUE BLEU* reissued under a new title.<sup>55</sup>

Desmet also had problems with *CAJUS JULIUS CAESAR*. He fancied that this film was set to be an enormous success, and on the day of the premiere in The Hague (2 September 1915), he ordered a second print without intertitles from Cines in Rome. After the war, he wrote that he had barely recovered his costs on *CAJUS JULIUS CAESAR* and also that an illegal copy had circulated in the Dutch East Indies during the war, against which he had been powerless to act.<sup>56</sup>

This does not imply that Italian films ceased to reach the Netherlands. Desmet's competitors, Nöggerath, Cinema Palace and HAP-Film (Barnstijn) released several Italian films during the war. The importer Ghezzi also continued to offer Italian films to Dutch distributors, including Desmet, during the war. He regularly invited them to view new long feature films in cinemas such as *De Munt*.<sup>57</sup> Nöggerath took a lot of films from him, but Desmet bought very little.

## Messter

Desmet's 'adventure' with Messter's Henny Porten movies was a fiasco. These films could recover their costs after a relatively short time on release, since all three of them were exclusives. After they had completed their runs in the big cities, Desmet should, in principle, have more or less covered his expenses. But even that failed: two of the three films bombed particularly badly.

Desmet's regular business with Messter had actually been stagnating before the war broke out. In October 1914, he concluded an agreement for features with Autor-Film, which was affiliated with Messter. This took the shape of the purchase of three important Henny Porten movies, which were presented as 'the Henny Porten series'. Desmet had to dig deep in his pocket to acquire the sole rights on these films. No doubt he thought that he could exploit Henny Porten's success in the Netherlands and make a killing. He had already distributed all kinds of Porten films in 1911 and 1912. At that time, Porten had not yet acquired the fame and star status she would later achieve with the films released in the Netherlands from 1913 onwards: *EVA*, for example, or *DER FEIND IM LAND*. These movies were not released in the Netherlands by Desmet, however, but by his competitor Wilhelmina. Given the prevailing lack of new supplies, Wilhelmina reissued them during the war. From December 1914, Desmet conducted intense negotiations with Messter for the purchase of the Henny Porten series. *NORLANDSROSE*, *ALEXANDRA* and *DAS ENDE VOM LIED* were released in the Netherlands from January 1915 onwards.<sup>58</sup>

In December 1914, Messter sent Desmet a list of the titles along with a description of *NORLANDSROSE* (Fig. 52). The film is a modern drama about two young men who are in love with the same woman. Rolf saves Gerhard's life on condition that Helga marries him, but afterwards she escapes with Gerhard by boat. Rolf manages to seize control of the boat and steers it against a cliff. However, it is he who gets killed. On December 14, Desmet told Messter that his copy had to be in mint condition, since renters were being extremely fastidious about clean prints and decent plots. The film was also the first of a series. Desmet regretted that there was not more advertising material sent with it. It was becoming more and more essential to have plenty of advertising material at hand for the release of a film. He also wanted to know the precise length of the film, probably in order to arrange the programme around it.<sup>59</sup>

On 8 January 1915, Desmet complained to Messter that he had not received a reply to his previous letter. He wanted to release *NORLANDSROSE* that month, otherwise he would be facing serious problems. Desmet bought



Fig. 52. *Nordlandsrose* (Messter 1914)

the film for 2,000 marks and paid more on top for new Dutch titles and inter-titles, which were inserted by Messter. On 20 January, Messter informed him that they would be sending two copies of *NORDLANDSROSE*, each measuring 750 metres. Along with this consignment, Desmet received a package of publicity materials that was rather on the slight side compared with what he had received from them in 1913 for *RICHARD WAGNER*.<sup>60</sup>

Desmet complained to Messter again on 24 January. He was dissatisfied with *NORDLANDSROSE* after all the publicity he had given it. He still had no takers for the film, as his potential clients wanted to see something of it before committing themselves to a whole series. 'The cinema owners here are spoiled. I don't think that I can get them to sign a contract with this film as the first of a series. I think it would be best if you would send me the second or third of the series as soon as possible, once they are ready, and I will then release it as the first of the series. *NORDLANDSROSE* is no credit, either to me or Messter. You should send me something to the effect that the delivery of the first film has been delayed, which I can then show my clients.'<sup>61</sup>

On 28 January Messter replied that they agreed that *ALEXANDRA*, rather than *NORDLANDSROSE*, should be released as the first of the Henny Porten series. *ALEXANDRA* had done well in Germany, and Messter thought that it would be a certain success in the Netherlands too. This film would certainly

not affect Desmet's contracts with his Dutch clients. However, they were surprised by Desmet's comments on *NORLANDSROSE*: 'We are astonished by your comments on the quality of "Nordlandsrose": there is absolutely nothing bad about this film, and although not every film can be a hit, "Nordlandsrose" is an above-average film.' They also pointed out that the film had cost a lot of money to make because of the long journeys involved in the location shooting.<sup>62</sup>

On 1 February, Desmet wrote that he had sent 3,000 marks for *ALEXANDRA* and that he needed the film as soon as possible, as his clients were becoming rather suspicious after all his advance publicity. He returned *NORLANDSROSE* to Berlin for measurement. On 20 March, he sent a cheque for 3,000 marks for *DAS ENDE VOM LIEDE*, the third instalment of the Henny Porten series.<sup>63</sup> It was Desmet's last film from Messter. *ALEXANDRA* was released later that month. *DAS ENDE VOM LIED* and *NORLANDSROSE* were not released until the spring and summer of 1916. *ALEXANDRA* did respectable business, but *DAS ENDE VOM LIED* was in distribution for just twelve weeks and *NORLANDSROSE* for a mere five weeks.<sup>64</sup> Desmet had clearly been correct in his view that *NORLANDSROSE* was not up to much as a movie.

## America

Desmet's purchases of American films were already in serious decline before the war. In 1914, he took mainly Vitagraph films, a single Edison or Selig movie and a couple of Kalem productions. The loss of Brussels agent Guillaume-Decotte put an abrupt end to imports of Vitagraph films via Paris and Brussels after July 1914. At the outbreak of war in August, Vitagraph closed their Paris studio and moved their printing operation to London.<sup>65</sup> This put an end to Desmet's large-scale buying from Vitagraph. Up to the end of May 1915, he bought just a handful of short and long films by other companies: American Biograph, Kalem, Rex, Thanhouser, Keystone and Famous Players. He made several attempts to rectify this situation.

His negotiations with both Mutual and Famous Players show that although he was certainly ready to make the switch to the new American films, he was less enthusiastic about the American system of investing in new films in one single payment of a sum with four or five zeros in front of the comma. But as we have seen, he was prepared to put down almost 10,000 marks for copies of, and exclusive rights to, Messter's three Henny Porten movies. Perhaps he had more confidence in the German dramas, which had built up a reputation in the genre, than in the less familiar dramas of Famous Players. Another consideration was Porten's status as a star: there were still hardly any big American stars – at least as far as Dutch audiences were concerned.

Finally, American movies as a whole did not yet occupy a very significant share of the Dutch market, particularly when it came to long feature films.

It is striking that in 1916, Desmet was prepared to work with the Americans only on the basis of prices expressed in metres, whereas he had previously bought numerous exclusives from the Italians, Germans and French for which the price was not determined by the metre. Desmet was perhaps being cautious, for due to the war and the fragile infrastructure there could be no guarantee that a complete year's film production, or a serial in 24 parts, would reach the Netherlands without running into problems along the way. But maybe it was also the wrong moment for him. In 1916, Desmet discovered that he could not meet his costs with a number of very expensive films, and he therefore opted for the earlier system of a free market and purchase by the metre.

### Universal

Around 1916, the Dutch trade was familiar enough with developments in the film industry across the Atlantic, but mistrusted the astronomical figures that were always being mentioned. *De Bioscoop-Courant* wrote about the enormous film city which had arisen in Los Angeles: Universal City. The Dutch trade press responded soberly to the stories of a tailor, 'a certain Carl Laemmle', who had tapped his family and acquaintances for the capital to start up his film company. For a starting sum of a million dollars (which was the sum mentioned in the press), you needed professional know-how and experience, not just a circle of charitable friends. The choice of Los Angeles as a location was also down to knowledge and enterprise. And finally: 'Universal City was a fusion of already existing companies, a film trust, and you didn't need a tailor to invent that idea.'<sup>66</sup>

Universal's supplies of films to Desmet came to a halt during the First World War. From 28 January 1915, he had to take all his films from the Dutch agent for Universal, Carl Bolle. This confirms Thompson's claim that in January 1915, the Transatlantic Film Co. Ltd, the British office of Universal, opened an office in Amsterdam.<sup>67</sup> Desmet complained to Universal in vain about Bolle in his best English: 'Look here what is also the reason, Mr. Carl Bolle, your agent visits me, when he has been first by other firms, and they have the best choice. Those films I don't see more.' Desmet refused to buy leftovers. 'I will give each hour of the day my projection room for showing the films. Before the war we did just the same, among others Vitagraph, Eclair, etc. : visit me and turned [i.e. projected, I.B.] their films. Mr. Nöggerath, Mr. Gildemeyer, and others came to me and we could make our choice. Formerly it happened that we bought with others the same film, what

is at this moment not the question, because the agent does not turn everywhere the whole collection.<sup>68</sup> In April 1915, Desmet received just *THE BARRIER OF FLAMES* (1914) from Thanhouser (now under Universal), after which he stopped buying Universal films altogether.

Up to mid-1917, Universal had stuck with the idea of a programme consisting of a lot of short films. This was also the principal part of production: one-, two- and three-reelers, despite the success of some of their pre-war long features such as *TRAFFIC IN SOULS* (1913). Later too, a great deal of their production continued to consist of two-reel comedies and westerns.<sup>69</sup> But in addition to this, Universal became famous in the Netherlands with the serials brought out by Barnstijn and Nöggerath.

### Mutual

In 1916, Chaplin films were as popular as the Asta Nielsen films in the period 1911-12. Desmet did his level best to get hold of them. On 8 April 1916, he made contact with Chester Beecroft of Mutual when he heard that Mutual were to take over the production of Chaplin movies. Desmet asked him for the price per foot of the next twelve Chaplins. Mutual replied by telegram that they were selling the rights for the Netherlands for 30,000 dollars. A third of this sum was payable immediately. Desmet refused to pay 10,000 dollars all at once and opted for a price per metre and individual purchase. He telegraphed back: 'Impossible to accept – Holland small country here also new copies Keystone and Essanay Chaplins so much competition – offer for your production exclusive Holland and Colonies eight cent American foot cash no titles – two or three copies.'<sup>70</sup> Chester Beecroft found this offer unacceptable and asked Desmet to revise it. When Desmet replied, 'Wire your rockbottom price production Chaplin three prints,'<sup>71</sup> Beecroft answered, 'Have offer eighteen cents per foot third advance.'<sup>72</sup> Desmet was prepared, if necessary, to pay twenty cents per foot for two copies with the right to order a third.<sup>73</sup>

While he was negotiating the Chaplin films with Mutual, Desmet was also trying to obtain Mutual films from the British film trading company, Anglo-Italian Films.<sup>74</sup> In November 1916, they offered him the whole of Mutual's production on a 60%-40% basis, involving a minimum purchase of copies and a minimum profit of 45 cents (US) per foot on the 60% due to Anglo-Italian. When Kearey of Anglo-Italian told Desmet that he had to act quickly as another buyer was interested in acquiring the Chaplin movies for the Netherlands and colonies, Desmet telegraphed back a day later that he was offering 2 shillings per metre for one copy with the right to acquire others. However, Desmet almost certainly failed to buy a single copy of a Mutual Chaplin film, either from Anglo-Italian or Beecroft Mutual.



Fig. 53. *His New Profession* (Keystone 1914)

On 30 November, Desmet informed Beecroft that their telegram had arrived too late since he had meanwhile bought twelve Chaplin movies in England. Was this a bluff? The Desmet Archive offers no answer to the question. For a long time, there were two unidentified Chaplin titles in the Desmet Collection, *De trouwe echtgenoot* (*The Faithful Husband*) and *De toneelknecht* (*The Stagehand*), but these two titles had already been bought from P. Silvius as early as 1915. The former could have been *TILLY'S PUNCTURED ROMANCE* (Keystone 1914). The latter was identified as *THE PROPERTY MAN* (Keystone 1914), but it may also have been *HIS NEW PROFESSION* (Keystone 1914) (Fig. 53).<sup>75</sup> This means that, in any event, Desmet bought older Chaplin movies, on which the rights had expired, in order to profit cheaply from the Chaplin craze. Chaplin left Keystone for Essanay in 1914 and moved over to Mutual in 1916.

## Famous Players

Desmet again came up against the new distribution methods in his dealings with Famous Players. Sidney M. Baber at the British branch of Famous Players had already offered Desmet exclusive rights on a whole year's productions before the war, but Desmet had hesitated. In January and April 1914, Desmet talked directly with Adolphe Zukor of Famous Players about buying. However, he wanted to see the films before acquiring them.<sup>76</sup> Zukor supposedly sent Baber to call on Desmet to show him some new productions, but it is not clear whether this meeting actually took place. It was about this time that the French distributor Louis Aubert obtained the Famous Players concession for France, Belgium and the Netherlands.

On 11 May 1916, Baber again offered to sell Famous Players films to Desmet, though this time under new conditions. 'We would be willing to lease you the rights for a period of two years at a fixed sum per foot or enter into an arrangement with you on a sharing basis with you advancing us an amount per foot to be arranged, based on gross receipts.'<sup>77</sup> The price depended on the number of film prints Desmet intended to sell, but two weeks later he replied that he was unable to give a number. It would depend on the subject, the quality of the photography and suchlike. Famous Players should make their own estimate. The film company then made a suggestion that not only committed Desmet to taking a minimum of 52 films within a single year but also reserved most of the trading profits for Famous Players. Desmet would have to rent the films from Famous Players on the same percentage basis as Anglo-Italian. 'We supply you with all posters, photographs and other publicity at cost price. The films would remain our property and would have to be returned to us at the end of two years from the date of delivery.'<sup>78</sup>

Desmet protested and insisted on sticking with the pre-war system of the sale of films by the metre, and the ownership rights with the buyer: 'Any brand, American as well as French and Italian, is sold here at one shilling per metre (over 3 ft.) and with the condition that the film remains the property of the buyer.' Desmet based his argument for this system on his previous purchases by the metre from Famous Players through Aubert, and on Famous Players' own undertakings: 'Looking over invoices, we notice that we bought your films from your representative Mr Aubert in Paris, for frs.1.25 per metre [the fixed price before the war]; see our letter to you dated Jan. 22<sup>nd</sup> '15, and your reply to us of Jan. 26<sup>th</sup> '15, by which you even offered us one of your best features for sale at frs. 1.25 per metre.'<sup>79</sup> Rather than make the enormous investment in a whole year's production, Desmet made the counter-offer of a (modest) bank guarantee. 'At the same time we draw your attention to the fact, that our house is the oldest film-exchange in Holland, having a lot of

renters, which will certainly mean the best chance for you of a successful business.' However, Famous Players had no intention of deviating from the new course in film trading and turned Desmet down.

Insofar as Desmet went on buying Famous Players movies, his acquisitions seem to have been older films that were probably already out of copyright and therefore cheaper. In the summer of 1914, Desmet bought the exclusive *Téléphone sauveur* (presumably CHELSEA 7750, Famous Players 1913) through Aubert and Gigan, his agent in Brussels, but with the outbreak of war, the delivery of the copy was delayed, and it is open to question whether Desmet ever got it. Desmet was furious when he later saw that a copy of CHELSEA 7750 had been sold by London to the Dutch East Indies, but Aubert replied that Desmet had actually bought the rights for the Netherlands only. The bickering over this film continued through to March 1915, but the matter remained unresolved. In January 1915, Desmet acquired temporary control of the Famous Players movie *A DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS* (1913) through the importer Ralph Minden. Shortly afterwards, he issued it under the same title in Dutch.<sup>80</sup> In 1916, he succeeded in acquiring the Famous Players' costume drama *THE SIGN OF THE CROSS* (1914) through the Gaumont agent Karelse, and probably issued it in the autumn of 1916.<sup>81</sup> *De Bioscoop-Courant* announced the purchase in October 1916, but Desmet did not follow it up with an extensive advertising campaign of his own in that journal.<sup>82</sup> Based on a stage play by Wilson Barrett, *THE SIGN OF THE CROSS* was an American clone of *QUO VADIS?* Here again, Christians and Romans come into conflict at the time of Emperor Nero, but unlike in the Italian film, the main characters are tortured to death, which was something a little unusual in an American movie.

### 3. Desmet's Wartime Clientele

#### Desmet's Dutch clients after the summer of 1914

Desmet's clientele gradually crumbled away during the war due to the serious decline in his buying. Only his imports of new German and Italian hits enabled him to keep up his reputation as a film distributor for a while in 1915 and 1916. The world of cinema recovered fairly rapidly from the shock of the outbreak of war and went on showing movies, but it was taking progressively fewer of its films from Desmet. The bigger cinemas in particular chose distributors who could keep them regularly supplied with new and interesting titles. Desmet's poor returns on the films he was still issuing in 1916, such as

FIOR DI MALE, NORDLANDSROSE and DAS ENDE VOM LIED, were most probably caused by the industry's loss of confidence in him as a source of supply.

It was galling for Desmet to watch his two opulent Amsterdam cinemas, De Munt and the Cinema Palace, vanish into the possession of old acquaintances. With the loss of the two most important theatres in his cinema chain, he also forfeited two major clients of his distribution business. De Munt became the first-release cinema of his former client Barnstijn, who had meanwhile become the biggest distributor in the Netherlands. Cinema Palace became the first-release cinema of Hamburger and De Hoop, his partners at NV Middenstad, who had begun their own distribution company under the same name of Cinema Palace.

In the case of De Munt, it has to be said that Desmet had become aware that he was no longer in a position to keep it supplied with films. Perhaps this is why he no longer had an active interest in running a luxury cinema with high overheads and a dependence on other film distributors, now that his own supplies were no longer being renewed. Finally, he sold the Rotterdam Cinema Royal to Tuschinski that same year. But Hamburger and De Hoop may have been his reasons for parting with De Munt.

Desmet remained a co-director of the Cinema Palace until 1918, but had more or less ceased to supply films to the cinema after the autumn of 1914. Hamburger and De Hoop's new distribution company decided on most of what would be shown at the Cinema Palace, and premiered their new films there. Besides Desmet's films, the firm of Cinema Palace showed films that Desmet either could not or would not buy, such as the Charlie Chaplin movies, German detective movies, the Italian box-office hit *CABIRIA* and Dutch features. Desmet tried once more to spread his wings over Germany and Belgium in an attempt to attract new audiences to his basically pre-war selection of films, but these ventures did not last for very long.

### **Chaos and recovery after the outbreak of war**

'It's awful,' wrote George van der Werf of the Enschede Flora Theater on 5 August 1914 to Desmet.<sup>83</sup> 'Like everyone else, we've just stopped [...] All my performances have been cancelled', declared van der Werf's colleague Sips in Breda.<sup>84</sup> For a short period after the outbreak of war, there was chaos in the Dutch film and entertainment business. All performances were cancelled temporarily in Enschede, Breda and other cities. Those who were still allowed to show films had another problem: transport. For a while, both foreign and inland express rail traffic were at a complete standstill. The system whereby a consignment of film canisters was put on the train in Amsterdam and picked up by the exhibitor from the station at the other end ground to a halt. Desmet

had already written to Van der Werf on 3 August to say, 'It will hardly surprise you to hear that the films for this coming Friday (7 August) will have to be fetched from here in view of the probable lack of rail transport.'<sup>85</sup> He did not realise at the time that Van der Werf was not even allowed to project films and would have to suspend his orders for a while. Otherwise, the transport blockade did not last very long, and within a few days it was again possible to get films from Amsterdam to The Hague. Thus, G.N. van Eyk at the Hague Empire Biscoop wrote to Desmet on 5 August to tell him that 'as long as the films are sent by express delivery and priority order, goods transport has not stopped and everything is working pretty much as usual.'<sup>86</sup> In small cinemas such as the Empire, however, audiences fell away in such numbers that Van Eyk threatened to close the cinema if Desmet did not halve his film rental prices, which was what in fact happened. A bad customer was better than no customer, was probably the way Desmet saw it. But there were obviously problems in Amsterdam as well, for George van der Werf wrote at the beginning of September: 'I am very sorry that there is also very little to be done in Amsterdam. [...] We'll just have to sit it out and wait for things to change.'<sup>87</sup>

Many foreign artists were conscripted, and variety theatres such as the Flora closed for several weeks. Pathé's Dutch representative, Louis Justet, also departed for France, leaving the business in the hands of his bookkeeper, Verbunt. Numerous regular advertisers in the film and art journals simply put things on hold for a time. Yet at the beginning of September, following the Battle of the Marne, the theatres and cinemas began to recover a little. The trains were running again and films could once more be shuttled to and fro. Cinemas were allowed to show movies again and immediately began asking for films of the war (or any war) along with exciting movies.

In Amsterdam, the cinemas simply went on showing films as usual during the tense days at the end of July and beginning of August 1914. As long as the distributors had enough films in stock, they were not dependent on the railway. Desmet's Cinema Palace and De Munt also continued to show films as usual at first. Around 6 August, the Cinema Palace was still screening the Italian drama *LA MASCHERA PIETOSA*. However, on the evidence of their advertisements in journals such as *De Kunst* and newspapers such as the *Algemeen Handelsblad*, many cinemas seem to have closed for two or three weeks between mid-August and early September.<sup>88</sup> Yet the effects of the outbreak of war were nothing like as devastating as in France, where almost all cinemas closed and did not re-open until November 1914. After a lull of three weeks in August, Nöggerath resumed his advertising for the Bioscope Theater in *De Kunst*. The first war newsreels began to reach the cinemas, including the Cinema Palace, from mid-September and were to be seen everywhere in the weeks that followed.

## Decay

Desmet's old customers were renting fewer and fewer films from him. More and more of the larger cinemas were falling away. His own cinemas, the two Parisiens, De Munt, his sister Rosine's Gezelligheid and his brother Theo's Bellamy remained loyal from necessity, as long he could still supply films. The same was true of his regular customers Van Eyk (Empire) in The Hague, Denijs van Roon (Bioscoop Theater) in Amersfoort and A.G. van Roon (Eerste Hieldersche Bioscoop) in Den Helder (Colour Plate 12). Ralph Minden also continued to take films regularly. Minden owned a number of cinemas in Amsterdam (Nassau Bioscope, Apollo, Scala, Prinsen Theater) and supplied films for the performances at the Pschorr Café in Rotterdam.<sup>89</sup> Besides these cinemas, Desmet's best clients in the period 1914-15 were the Victoria Bioscope and the Thalia in Amsterdam and Henry Dirks in Antwerp. None of these cinemas prospered for very long. The Victoria and Thalia, two tiny cinemas, closed their doors in 1915, and deliveries to Dirks were also discontinued.<sup>90</sup>

Desmet's old client and colleague, Willy Mullens, took several films from him after the outbreak of hostilities, but Desmet was plainly not his only source. Mullens generally took one or two short films to fill out a programme acquired elsewhere. It is noticeable too that Desmet re-rented some of his films, such as RICHARD WAGNER, which Mullens had already shown in 1913 and now booked again in March 1915, and the Danish comedy NAAR MANDEN GAAR PAA BØRSEN (IN THE CONSUL'S UNIFORM, Nordisk 1913), which Mullens screened for a week in September 1914 and again in February 1915. As already noted, Mullens premiered SANGUE BLEU in The Hague in the summer of 1915, but he missed the boat with CAJUS JULIUS CAESAR (Colour Plate 18), which went to his competitor at the Olympia Theater.<sup>91</sup>

The 'rising star' Abraham Tuschinski was still regularly renting films from Desmet between the winter of 1914 and the end of 1915, but they were mainly single films and shorts for topping up a programme. But new shorts also often went to Tuschinski for their first week. During the period under consideration, Tuschinski rented ten long features from Desmet, and it is noticeable that they were mainly the long features that Desmet was advertising in the trade press, such as DE ZIGEUNKONINGIN (THE GYPSY QUEEN\*, presumably IL DRAMMA DEL COLLE DI GUI, Aquila 1913), SHANNON OF THE SIXTH (Kalem 1914), A FIGHT FOR FREEDOM/EXILED TO SIBERIA (Solax 1914), DIE TOTEN LEBEN (THE DEAD WALK\*, Vitascope 1914) and ALEXANDRA. Tuschinski even took LES ENFANTS DU CAPITAINE GRANT and A FIGHT FOR FREEDOM twice for his Thalia and Royal. On 20 June 1915, one of the reels of IL DRAMMA DEL COLLE DI GUI burned out while he was holding it on approval. Desmet nonetheless charged

him a full week's rental for the screenings that had been intended for 24 June to 1 July. Perhaps Tuschinski showed the film with the explicateur simply talking the audience through the missing section, which was a common solution to this kind of emergency at the time.<sup>92</sup> Following this incident, *IL DRAMMA DEL COLLE DI GUISSANO* played at the Amsterdam and Rotterdam Parisiens in the incomplete version.

### **Distribution in Belgium and Germany**

During the war, from October 1914 onwards, Desmet did business with the Antwerp exhibitor Henry Dirks who owned the Odéon, Alhambra and Prince Albert cinemas in Antwerp, and the Monopole in the Antwerp suburb of Berchem.<sup>93</sup> Desmet's films were in great demand, not only because of the crippling lack of films consequent on the ban on the screening of new films made by the Allies, but also because his films came with Dutch intertitles. Within the framework of the so-called 'Flanders Policy', the occupying Germans ordained that from March 1915, only films with Flemish [Dutch] intertitles were allowed to be screened in Flanders. Spelling mistakes were treated as acts of resistance.<sup>94</sup> Until July 1915, crates of film were regularly sent to Dirks, travelling by train to Rotterdam and by boat from Rotterdam to Antwerp, and returning by train from Antwerp via Roosendaal to Amsterdam. From October 1914 to May 1915, Dirks's son Edmond worked at Desmet's distribution office. In April 1915, there were problems with the German censor who wanted to begin scrutinising all film programmes in Brussels before they could be screened in Belgium. Dirks and Desmet adjusted to these measures, but in August 1915 Dirks informed Desmet that he wanted no more films since, for the time being, there could be no question of showing 'Flemish-language films', meaning films with Dutch intertitles. The obstacles placed in Desmet's way probably had more to do with the source of his films than the language of their titles. Convents observes that up to May 1915, pre-war films made in allied countries were still allowed to be shown in Belgium. After this date, the films on offer were dominated by German films distributed directly from Germany to Belgium.<sup>95</sup>

During the war, Desmet supplied films to Alexander Strony, owner-manager of the Oud-Gend cinema, to the reception hall of the Maatschappij Vooruit (The Forward Society, a leftish community centre), to C. Huylebroek of the Cinema Flora and to O. de Geyter of the Cinema Modern, all situated in Ghent.<sup>96</sup> Strony visited Desmet in Amsterdam on 20 May 1915 in search of 'Flemish-language' films and took away two programmes. Every week, he exchanged films with the Vooruit. Huylebroek and de Geyter swapped programmes with each other halfway through the week. When Desmet discov-

ered that the latter two gentlemen were trying to rent his programmes on to others behind his back, he decided that henceforth Strony would always get first choice for screenings in Ghent, with the second week going to Vooruit. After that, Huylebroek and de Geyter might take over the same programme if they so wished. They would receive no more films directly from Desmet. In June 1915, he appointed his brother Theo to keep an eye on this business from his home town of Flushing, and to visit the men from Ghent and recover the films together with the money owed on them.<sup>97</sup>

Since his stock of films quickly declined after the outbreak of war, leaving him with a huge number of pre-war films, Desmet was attracted by the prospect of giving this old material a new lease of life in Germany. The Berlin firm of Films Erneuerungs Gesellschaft had several crates of movies sent to Berlin in the autumn of 1914 with the intention of showing them there. This all came to an end quickly as Desmet came up against the implacable German customs authorities, who imposed extremely high import duties on the films. This customs levy was, in fact, a way of protecting Germany's own film production by keeping foreign productions out. Desmet categorically refused to pay the duties, taking the view that Films Erneuerungs Gesellschaft should foot this particular bill themselves. Meanwhile, the films were being held in Berlin with storage costs mounting. Films Erneuerungs Gesellschaft refused to pay either the import duties or the storage costs. Presumably, they did not want to spend any money on the films as long as they were not allowed to use them. The impounded films did not come back until 14 May 1915. Desmet then paid the bills. Films Erneuerungs Gesellschaft probably never screened the films. Several films in the Desmet Collection carry references to this affair in the form of perforation stamps from German customs at both ends of the film. The Desmet Collection thus came rather close to being a good deal smaller.<sup>98</sup>

#### **4. Mounting Competition**

During the First World War, Desmet's competitors were the same group of people as before the war, notably Nöggerath, Pathé and Gildemeijer, but now they were joined by new distributors like Cinema Palace, Filma and HAP-Film (Barnstijn).<sup>99</sup> While Nöggerath flourished, first with his Italian epics and then the diva films, and Gildemeijer did good business in Danish and German films, Pathé's trade dropped because of a lack of merchandise. Both Cinema Palace and Filma began by renting old films, but they became large

enterprises afterwards, distributing a varied selection of new films that partly overlapped with the old generation, as far as production companies and countries of origin were concerned. HAP-Film created a distinctive profile for themselves with American and French serials and several Italian hits. After the release of *IL FUOCO* in 1916, Barnstijn again caught the public's attention in 1918 with *MACISTE ALPINO* (*MACISTE ALPINE RIFLEMAN\**, Itala 1916). This group was joined by a few small distributors who had dealt in old films from the beginning, and basically continued to do so later. They were P. Bremer (Casino), Jac. Merks (Kino) and P.R. van Duinen. Besides those just mentioned and the distributors who were in business before the war, about a dozen new, minor film distributors made their appearance during the war. In the period 1917-22, a number of new distributors stepped forward, such as NV Nordisk, Sun Film, Nebima, Wortham's, P.I.G. Film, Emelka and L.C.B.'s Standaard Films. Along with those mentioned and the new Dutch agencies of Paramount, Ufa, Fox and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, these firms would determine the shape of Dutch film distribution in the 1920s.

Desmet was the first of the first generation of film distributors to get out of the business. His sale of *LES VAMPIRES* to Barnstijn was the first sign of this development. Wilhelmina collapsed at roughly the same time as Desmet. Gildemeijer's distribution office was sold to Nordisk in 1917 and came into the hands of Ufa in 1918. The office did good business under the name NV Nordisk.<sup>100</sup> Anton Nöggerath Jr. closed his film distribution office in 1921 and passed FAN-Film on to Piet Vermeer Sr. With the collapse of the Italian film industry, FAN turned to other countries.<sup>101</sup> At the beginning of the 1920s, Pathé ceased to distribute 35mm film, and from 1925 focused entirely on home cinema via the new firm Kinomaatschappij Cinelux.

### **Cinema Palace: Cinema and Distribution Company**

The Cinema Palace took few programmes over 1,000 metres from Desmet after the end of July 1914, and more or less stopped taking programmes altogether after mid-October. The Messter movie *ALEXANDRA* was booked in March 1915, and from then until the end of April 1915 the theatre booked only the weekly newsreels *LAATSTE BIOSCOOP WERELDBERICHTEN*.

The reason for the loss of Cinema Palace as a client was the new film rental company started up by Hamburger and De Hoop, Desmet's partners at NV Middenstad. The new distribution office was also part of NV Middenstad. Desmet had spent years initiating his colleagues into the film distribution business, and now they repaid him by setting up for themselves. Desmet's relations with his partners cooled quickly after this. At a stormy meeting of NV Middenstad on 8 September 1916, Desmet accused the other

two of overcharging clients and of pocketing money due to the NV. He was also opposed to the 30% commission on profits from film rental received by the shareholders, as it led directly to malpractice. Desmet received little support, which was not surprising, seeing that one of those who took this commission was another Hamburger (A. Hamburger). However, he went on doing business with Hamburger and De Hoop.<sup>102</sup> From the spring of 1915, he supplied both his own and Cinema Palace's popular movies to theatres in the provinces. Cinema Palace naturally used its own cinema as a first-run theatre for its own films. The firm secured its reputation once and for all with the release of the Italian epic *CABIRIA*. In view of the decrease in Desmet's rentals to Cinema Palace the cinema, it seems likely that Cinema Palace the distributor was already operating in July 1914.<sup>103</sup> By the beginning of 1915, Cinema Palace was busily advertising a wide range of German, Danish and American films in the trade press, with part of their selection initially consisting of pre-war productions. Gradually, their offerings began to cover more recent material, including Dutch films.

### **Barnstein/HAP-Film and Les Vampires**

Loet Cohen Barnstijn (Fig. 54) began as a cinema operator and occasional client of Desmet and appears to have started his own distribution business at the turn of 1915. The name of his firm, HAP-Film Company, was derived from the first letters of the cinemas he owned together with his brother Eduard and the Groningen exhibitor R. Uges: Haagse Bioscoop (The Hague), Alhambra Theater (Enschede) and Palace Bioscoop (Groningen).<sup>104</sup> His style was distinctive from the beginning: a huge number of photographs accompanied by boastful captions would be his way of bringing his new films to everyone's attention. Before then, it had been Desmet of all people who was known for printing more than just the usual single-page film advertisement in the trade press. But Barnstijn beat him easily by having several pages of advertising printed for new films and by publishing an exhaustive list of cinemas playing his films. *De Bioscoop-Courant* in particular grew appreciably thicker from Barnstijn's advertising campaigns. These campaigns undoubtedly influenced Desmet, for after 1914 he too conspicuously increased the number of pages he took in the trade press.

One of the serials brought out by Barnstijn during the First World War was Gaumont's *LES VAMPIRES*, a modern crime serial in which, just as in the Zigomar films, evil plays the main role. In this film, evil is embodied by a female criminal dressed in a black leotard: Irma Vep (an anagram for 'vampire') played by Musidora.<sup>105</sup> Desmet, who had contacts with Gaumont, acted as a go-between for Gaumont and Barnstijn. On 26 March 1916, Desmet



Fig. 54. Loet Barnstijn

completed a contract for the sale of *LES VAMPIRES* to Barnstijn.<sup>106</sup> Desmet used his bank guarantee to the NOT to procure an import declaration for *LES VAMPIRES*. The Gaumont agent Karelse then submitted the declaration to the head office in Paris with a request for the serial. In June, the film was shipped to the Netherlands via England. In July, Desmet had new Dutch intertitles inserted for Barnstijn by Hollandia, which was Desmet's regular supplier during the war years.<sup>107</sup>

Barnstijn did not release *LES VAMPIRES* immediately. When he eventually did so, he tried it out first in the provinces at the Luxor Theater in Arnhem, where it ran from early October 1916. At the same time, he launched a big advertising campaign for the film in the trade journals, making use of local press reviews. This 'try-out' was a normal procedure. Barnstijn's earlier serials *UNDER THE CRESCENT* (Universal 1915) and *THE MASTER KEY* (Universal 1914-15) had also had their first runs at the Arnhem Luxor. *LES VAMPIRES* was a success and was discussed at length in the *Bioscoop-Courant*. It was quickly rented by Tuschinski, now the biggest cinema owner in Rotterdam. In November, it played at the Olympia and the Scala, Tuschinski's smaller Rotterdam cinemas. Afterwards it went to the Olympia Theater in The Hague, which was one of the leading cinemas of the time.<sup>108</sup>

In 1919, Loet Barnstijn established his own distribution company, LCB's Standaard Films, issuing mainly American movies. With HAP-Films and his new company, Barnstijn was the most powerful distributor in the Netherlands at the end of the war decade and afterwards.

## Conclusion

The stagnation of Jean Desmet's affairs was initially due to the war, the consequent loss of Brussels as a distribution centre and the drastic decline of Berlin as a port of transit. His potential share of the market was also diminished by his competitors' acquisition of a larger share of the market through their monopolisation of production companies, series and stars. It was further reduced by the rise of pushy new distributors such as Barnstijn and Cinema Palace. Furthermore, the output of many of the companies with whom Desmet did business fell dramatically from as early as 1913, as they began to abandon, or severely cut back on, the production of short films in favour of long feature films. This meant that there were now fewer titles available, just when the number of distributors in the Netherlands was actually growing. The exclusive system made it progressively difficult to buy films that had also been acquired by a competitor. Pre-war production companies like Vitagraph faded from the scene after the outbreak of war, or at least they did for Desmet. When John Bunny, the Vitagraph comic, died in 1916, a new comic of the American cinema had become the star of the Dutch silver screen: Charlie Chaplin. But Desmet either refused to buy his movies or was unable to do so.

## VIII. Quo Vadis?

### **Desmet's Film Rental and Cinema Operation During the Great War (1914-1916)**

'In answer to your letter of 26 Sept, I can tell you that "The Battle of the Somme" has not yet been shown at the Cinema Palace. As far as my own films are concerned, it's no longer worth the trouble. You'll receive "The Vagabond" (DIE LANDSTRASSE) for 6 to 10 October, but then that's it for me,' wrote Jean Desmet to his brother Theo, manager of the Bellamy Bioscoop in Flushing, on 1 October 1916.<sup>1</sup> Desmet's film distribution and cinema exhibition businesses collapsed during the First World War. It was not the end of Desmet's career. In 1916, he switched to a new livelihood.

#### **I. The Exhibition and Reception of Desmet's Films During the War Years**

During the war years, Desmet distributed war newsreels. They were mainly war actualities from Pathé and newsreel compilations assembled in 1915/16 under the title LAATSTE BIOSCOOP WERELDBERICHTEN (LATEST CINEMA WORLD NEWS\*). He stopped buying the usual Pathé-Journals and also turned down offers of newsreels from other companies such as Eiko and Messter, preferring to rent the British Topical Budget newsreels for his own cinemas and regular customers. He also tried to get hold of the English Gaumont Graphic newsreels, but it is unclear whether he succeeded, since there are no surviving copies of them in the Desmet Collection.

After the outbreak of war, Desmet set his sights on major feature films, the big box-office hits. He still occasionally bought short comedies and melodramas but on a much more modest scale than previously. However, his supply of hits was irregular, and a distributor like Nöggerath, with his large claim on new Cines productions, was able to guarantee greater continuity.

It is instructive to follow Desmet's wartime film offerings just by looking at his advertisements in the trade press. In this period he was renting a lot of pre-war pictures. There were then a number of titles that he advertised repeatedly with accompanying stills. These were films placed at his disposal temporarily by the importer Ralph Minden, such as IL DRAMMA DEL COLLE DI

GUIS, SHANNON OF THE SIXTH, A FIGHT FOR FREEDOM and A DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS. These films are mainly long American features. American long features appear to be well represented in Desmet's stocks, but he did not actually own them himself.

Continuing his pre-war practice, Desmet's advertising focused on long features. Up to the end of April 1915, he was advertising regularly in *De Kinematograaf* and *De Bioscoop-Courant*. He placed ads with stills for *SANGUE BLEU*, *DIE TOTEN LEBEN*, *DAS TEUFELSAUGE* (THE DEVIL'S EYE\*, Vay & Hubert 1914), *FILIBUS* (Corona 1915) and the films borrowed from Minden. His most intensive campaigns were reserved for the Henny Porten series, beginning with *ALEXANDRA*. Oddly enough, he stopped advertising in *De Kinematograaf* after mid-April 1915, while continuing to use the rival *De Bioscoop-Courant* until the autumn of 1916. Unfortunately, *De Bioscoop-Courant* has not survived in its entirety, making it difficult to get a picture of the pattern of Desmet's publicity in its pages.

### **Non-fiction: War newsreels and the struggle for *The Battle of the Somme***

Oskar Messter had managed to shoot film of the war front for his newsreel *MESSTER WOCHE* from the beginning of the war. In other countries, it took longer before film-makers got permission to film on the front. The French screened special war newsreels from the beginning of 1915. Unlike the normal newsreels, these often featured just one item devoted exclusively to the war. Although he received offers from Eiko, Messter, Pathé and Gaumont, Desmet did not acquire very many war newsreels of this type.<sup>2</sup> His refusals were always accompanied by the remark that such films were not allowed to be shown because of the war situation. How true was this? Desmet did in fact buy a few actualities from Pathé, notably a series in July 1915 which included *LE MORAL DU SOLDAT APRÈS 300 JOURS DE GUERRE* (THE SOLDIER'S MORALE AFTER 300 DAYS OF WAR\*).<sup>3</sup> He later acquired the Dutch actualities *RÉFUGIÉS BELGES* (BELGIAN REFUGEES\*, 26 November 1915) and *LA HOLLANDE SEPTENTRIONALE INONDÉE* (THE FLOODS IN NORTHERN HOLLAND\*, 20 January 1916).<sup>4</sup> The Desmet Collection also includes newsreels called *LAATSTE BIOSCOOP WERELDBERICHTEN* (Fig. 55).<sup>5</sup> These films are compilations of news items by German and Austrian (Messter, Eiko, Sascha) and French and British film companies (Pathé, Gaumont). It is impossible to tell for sure whether Desmet compiled them himself. His competitor Nöggerath advertised *LAATSTE BIOSCOOP WERELDBERICHTEN* in the trade papers, but the Desmet Archive contains no invoices from Nöggerath relating to the sale of such films.<sup>6</sup> The German trade paper *Der Kinematograph* remarked that Nöggerath had invested *f*50,000 to obtain war pictures from the Germans, British and French, and



Fig. 55. *Laatste Bioscoop Wereldberichten* (c.1915) – anti-war demonstration in Parma

exchanged these films with his suppliers.<sup>7</sup> So Nöggerath was doing business with both sides of the war. The two new distribution companies, HAP and Filma, also offered this type of compilation newsreel. The newsreels were probably combined in this way because the Dutch were anxious to maintain their neutrality and wished to avoid offending any foreign power. The Amsterdam Pathé cinema, on the other hand, showed only French Pathé-Journals and was a hotbed of sympathy for the French cause. Performances there were often interrupted spontaneously by the singing of the Marseillaise.<sup>8</sup>

The documentation in the Desmet Archive refers only to the purchase and rental of British newsreels by Gaumont Graphic and Topical Budget during the First World War. Desmet ordered editions of the Gaumont Graphic newsreel in October 1916 from Gaumont Co. Ltd in London. He was looking for copies between six and seven weeks old and thus not too expensive, and emphasised that he was an old customer of Gaumont Paris. In December, Gaumont replied that they could send him month-old editions of Gaumont Graphic at one pound for two copies (there were two editions a week). Desmet agreed to this, but Gaumont first required export certificates from the NOT. The correspondence ceases after this, so it remains unclear whether Desmet did, in fact, receive Gaumont Graphic films from early January 1917. There are no surviving copies of the newsreel in the collection.<sup>9</sup>

Between July 1915 and January 1916, Ralph Minden regularly sent Desmet the Topical Budget newsreel, which was marketed by the M.P. Sales Agency in London.<sup>10</sup> Minden, a Dutch cinema exhibitor, had previously worked in the British film world. During the war, he had his own business, the Imperial Film Service, through which he imported and distributed British and American films, including the Topical Budget newsreel.<sup>11</sup> Desmet rented these to his own cinemas and to regular customers like the cinemas *Gezelligheid* in Rotterdam (Rosine Desmet), *Bellamy in Flushing* (Theo Desmet) and *Empire* in The Hague.<sup>12</sup> Again, there are no copies of the Topical Budget in the Desmet Collection. So it looks as though Desmet was only renting them.

Foreign countries were keeping a careful watch on the Netherlands, including the type of films shown in Dutch cinemas. The combatants considered it important to maintain an influence on public opinion in the neutral Netherlands. During the first two years of the war, foreign propaganda was restricted largely to the printed word, with the British leading the way. The British Consulate in Rotterdam disseminated propaganda materials such as photographs and printed matter. The films shown in Dutch cinemas kept the consulate up to date on pro- or anti-British sentiments. The British did not launch their own propaganda films before the beginning of 1916. They had contacts inside the Dutch film world, since the correspondence of the Rotterdam consulate for 1916 refers to a report by Nöggerath on war films in Dutch cinemas.<sup>13</sup>

On 9 September, Desmet's assistant, J. Kleerekoper, told the British War Films Committee that Desmet wished to release the British propaganda film *THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME* (British Topical Committee for War Films 1916, Fig. 56) in the Netherlands. In support of this request, Kleerekoper added that Desmet owned no fewer than seven cinemas in the Netherlands, and that he regularly supplied films to a large clientele. The figure of seven cinemas probably made little impression on a country like Britain, but Desmet was the only distributor to own that number of cinemas in the Netherlands.<sup>14</sup> When the British refused to send him a copy, having already sold the rights to David Hamburger and his Cinema Palace distribution company, Desmet declared his readiness to distribute their subsequent war films, but nothing came of this either.<sup>15</sup> Desmet then sent another letter to the British War Films Committee, in which he expressed the hope that his Belgian origins might secure him a favourable decision:

I myself am Belgium [sic], from Belgium descent and some of my relatives serve in the French army. Though living over 40 years in Holland, my nationality is still Belgium and therefore it will be pleasant for me to serve the cause of the Allies by

handling the film for you entirely free of any charge in Holland. I figure that half of the returns make out expenses for travelling, advertising, salesmen, commission etc., which leaves the other half as profit and this I wish to hand over to the British Red Cross.<sup>16</sup>

He suggested that there was room enough in the Netherlands for a second copy which he would then release himself, but he was again turned down.

Following a private screening in Amsterdam on 27 September 1916, *THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME* was bought by Cinema Palace and released in the cinema of the same name, over which Hamburger and De Hoop had meanwhile assumed control. At the beginning of October an audience consisting of the Ministers of Defence and the Navy, the entire military command and a few foreign ambassadors viewed the film at the Familie Bioscoop in The Hague.<sup>17</sup>

The British Consulate in Rotterdam was irritated by the high speed at which *THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME* was projected at the Cinema Palace.<sup>18</sup> The blame was laid at the door of the pacifists. In December 1916, after long procrastination, H. de Beaufort of the office of press propaganda was despatched from London to the Netherlands to inspect the cinemas. The situation was apparently hushed over, for Hamburger was allowed to release the latest



Fig. 56. *The Battle of the Somme* (British Topical Committee for War Films 1916)

British propaganda film *THE BATTLE OF THE ANCRE AND THE ADVANCE OF THE TANKS* (War Office Cinematograph Committee 1917) in the face of strong competition from others.<sup>19</sup> He even secured a two-year contract on the film, allowing him to distribute it in the Dutch East Indies as well.<sup>20</sup>

The Netherlands trade press also saw *THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME* as a pacifist film. The *Bioscoop-Courant* wrote:

There is certainly no better way of inducing anti-war sentiments in an audience than by getting them to look at the pure reality of the horror of this war with human beings. This film could serve as an excellent piece of pacifist propaganda, although this may not be exactly the intention of the British Government at the moment.<sup>21</sup>

The British took pride in their propaganda films. Both their distribution materials and their internal memoranda show that they considered the Germans to be inferior to them in this area, although they also conceded that they could do better.<sup>22</sup> The German trade organ *Der Kinematograph* naturally took a more negative line, describing these films as 'advertising films for England's performance in the war, filmed largely in England or behind the front, whose real purpose is all too readily revealed by the transparent play-acting.'<sup>23</sup>

### Feature films

Although he made strenuous efforts to acquire *THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME*, and although he rented newsreels and actualities on a modest scale, Desmet was interested primarily in long feature films: epics, modern dramas featuring the German and Italian stars, and thrillers with wild chases, preferably involving modern forms of transport. The prestige of such films and their potentially fabulous earnings were fully apparent both to production companies and distributors. Movies like these bore the imported German description of 'Schlager'.

Modern dramas with great stars meant films like the three Messter movies with Henny Porten, and the Italian diva movies *FIOR DI MALE* and *SANGUE BLEU*. The thriller genre embraced films such as *DAS GEHEIMSSCHLOSS* (*THE SECRET CASTLE\**, Apollo 1914), the screen version of Jules Verne's *LES ENFANTS DU CAPITAINE GRANT*, and the Italian spy film *FILIBUS*. Desmet also dusted off pre-war favourites such as *PADRE* and the historical epic *LA CADUTA DI TROIA*.<sup>24</sup> Desmet revived *LA CADUTA DI TROIA* just at the moment when Dutch audiences were under the spell of *CABIRIA*, another Italian epic.<sup>25</sup> New prints of old successes did well in Desmet's smaller cinemas. A new copy of *L'ENFANT DE PARIS* played for three weeks at the Rotterdam Cinema Parisien in

the summer of 1917. There were also frequent bookings for a new print of *LES ENFANTS DU CAPITAINE GRANT*.

Curiously enough, Desmet bought no Dutch feature films during the First World War. The trade press was certainly aware of the shortcomings of Dutch productions (lack of budgets and large studios) compared with titles from abroad. Yet, in their own country at least, the films of Gildemeijer, Theo Frenkel and the Hollandia studios certainly enjoyed something of a reputation. However, there is no evidence to suggest that Desmet even tried to get hold of these films. Either they were held by other distributors, or he did not consider it worth his while to go to the trouble of acquiring them. He presumably anticipated more box-office success for German star Henny Porten than for Dutch diva Annie Bos.

### **‘The sweetheart of the audience’: Henny Porten**

During his time in the second-hand trade before the war, Desmet had acquired several Messter dramas starring Henny Porten, including *PERLEN BEDEUTEN TRÄNEN* (*PEARLS MEAN TEARS\**, 1911) and *DES PFARRERS TÖCHTERLEIN* (*THE CLERGYMAN’S LITTLE DAUGHTER\**, 1912). The Desmet Collection holds copies of these films, along with such other early Porten movies as *KÜNSTLERLIEBE* (*THE LOVE OF AN ARTIST\**, 1911), *LIEBE UND LEIDENSCHAFT* (*LOVE AND SORROW\**, 1911) and *DER KUSS DES FÜRSTEN* (*THE KISS OF THE PRINCE\**, 1912). In these films, Porten was not yet the star she was to become after 1913. There were no Porten movies among the films Desmet regularly ordered direct from Messter in 1913/14. In 1915, Desmet turned the situation round with the ‘Henny Porten Series of 1915’, of which two films had been produced in 1914. He advertised the series in *De Bioscoop-Courant* and *De Kinematograaf* from the first week of January 1915. His ad in *De Kinematograaf* of 1 January 1915 contained no fewer than seven pages of photos of Henny Porten. The ad in the edition of 26 February focused specifically on *ALEXANDRA*, and consisted of a portrait of Henny Porten spread across two pages. This ad demonstrates how it was becoming impossible to think of the world of film in isolation from the phenomenon of the star system. A photograph of the star of a film was sufficient publicity in itself. Captions such as ‘the celebrated actress’ and ‘sweetheart of the audience’ confirmed the system.

*ALEXANDRA* (Colour Plate 17) was shown at the Cinema Palace in Amsterdam from 19 March. Cinema exhibitors were invited to view and book the film there. It played subsequently in the Netherlands until the end of 1921, enjoying a long and moderately successful release. According to Desmet’s records, *ALEXANDRA* was screened for just six weeks up to February 1916, so it was certainly not playing week after week in 1915.<sup>26</sup> The film ran for a



Fig. 57. *Das Ende vom Lied* (Messter 1914-15)

grand total of twenty weeks. It was the most successful of the three Messter films acquired by Desmet during the war, running for at least two weeks at Desmet's own Parisien in Amsterdam in September 1916, and again for a week in the spring of 1918.<sup>27</sup> The film is both a painful drama and a critical exploration of the male double standard. Alexandra, a young woman of aristocratic descent, is exploited by gypsies. A rich count seduces her and then abandons her. After giving birth to a child who dies of exposure, she is imprisoned on suspicion of murder. After her release, she resumes contact with the count and marries him with the intention of exacting revenge, but she is restrained by her marital contentment. However, when she tells him the story of her life in the third person, her husband shows no sympathy for her fate. In despair, she commits suicide and the count recognises his errors too late.

The story of *DAS ENDE VOM LIED* (Fig. 57) is equally tragic. An innkeeper's daughter looks after a man injured during a hunting expedition, but later encounters one of his friends who forces himself upon her after getting drunk. She moves in with the injured man, but when she sees the friend again, an old flame seems to rekindle. When he notices this, the sick man has a heart attack. The girl discovers that her lover already has another woman, however, and drowns herself. The first performance of the film probably took place at

the Eerste Heldersche Bioscoop (Van Roon's cinema in Den Helder, Colour Plate 12) around 24 March 1916, despite the fact that it was not a luxury metropolitan theatre, but merely a provincial cinema owned by one of Desmet's regular customers. Desmet advertised *DAS ENDE VOM LIED* regularly in *De Bioscoop-Courant* from the end of March to early May. Tuschinski's fashionable Thalia was one of the theatres to book it at the beginning of April. In December 1918, it appeared for a week at the Amsterdam Cinema Parisien. It ran for a total of just twelve weeks.

*NORLANDSROSE* was not released in the Netherlands until 1916, and then as the third of the Henny Porten series, and not the first as originally envisaged. Like *DAS ENDE VOM LIED*, it was also premiered at Van Roon's cinema in Den Helder, playing there from 1 September 1916. Desmet advertised it in *De Bioscoop-Courant* from 16 June to 8 September, taking two full pages in the first weeks and just one page subsequently. Despite all this publicity, *NORLANDSROSE* received no further bookings in 1916 after the screenings in Den Helder. It was rented three times in 1917, including a February run at the Amsterdam Cinema Palace, and last played in November 1918 at one of Abraham Tuschinski's cinemas. *NORLANDSROSE* ran for a total of five weeks, marking an all-time low for Desmet. It was not only the last Messter production he acquired, but also the last film he advertised on a large scale before gradually beginning to withdraw from film distribution after 1916. The failure of the Messter films doubtless played an important part in this development.

Henny Porten continued to be the focus of interest, but after 1916 her films were no longer distributed by Desmet. He was replaced by new distributors like Loet Barnstijn with his HAP-Film company, and by members of the old guard such as Anton Nöggerath of FAN-Film.<sup>28</sup>

### **Epics: *Cajus Julius Caesar* and *Cabiria***

Among the Cines movies Desmet acquired from the Deutsche Cines Gesellschaft, the most prestigious and successful title was *CAJUS JULIUS CAESAR* (Colour Plate 18). This film is a biography of the Roman general and deals with all the famous feats of battle and dramatic moments of his life: the Gallic Wars, rivalry with Pompey, conflict with the Republicans, infatuation with Servilia, imperial ambition and assassination by his foster son Brutus in league with the Republicans in the Senate. All these events are represented in a kind of tableau-vivant style. The detailed and copious intertitles clarify the historical context, but also slow down the action. The film was released in the Netherlands as *JULIUS CAESAR*. Desmet ordered huge quantities of posters and stills, and had numerous programmes and brochures printed, including

luxury editions of photographs bound in red cardboard with gold lettering. Willy Mullens had informed Desmet as early as April 1915 that he wanted to launch *CAJUS JULIUS CAESAR* in The Hague at the Arts and Sciences Building. He offered Desmet *f*1,500 for a fourteen-day projection run, but when he had still not heard from him by the end of June he cancelled the film and it went to Engels, whose Olympia Theater was his competitor in The Hague. Engels was renting regularly from Desmet at this time. It is possible that Willy only wanted the film for his summer shows at the Arts and Sciences Building and that Desmet wished to avoid a mid-summer release.<sup>29</sup> The interesting side to this episode is its demonstration that film premieres no longer absolutely had to take place in Amsterdam. The Hague, or even a provincial location like Den Helder, would do just as well.

*CAJUS JULIUS CAESAR* was premiered for the press at the Olympia Theater on 2 September. After that, it was open to the general public and ran for three consecutive weeks at the same cinema. Rave reviews in the newspapers of The Hague attracted extra-large audiences. The Dutch brochure included with the film praised the historical reconstruction and the handling of the crowd scenes. There was also a special appreciation of Amleto Novelli who played the leading role and was already well known from his performances in *QUO VADIS?* and *MARCANTONIO E CLEOPATRA*. He was singled out for the quality of his acting of the various stages of Caesar's life.

Along with all its merits as a graphic piece of historical instruction, *CAJUS JULIUS CAESAR* stands immortalised as a document of unsurpassable film direction and film acting. Schiller's disillusioned adage 'Dem Mimen flicht die Nachwelt keine Kränze' (Posterity weaves no laurel wreaths for the actor) is about to be disproved by this film.<sup>30</sup>

The film remained in circulation for a long time after its premiere in The Hague. In cities such as Utrecht and Nymegen, it played for two whole weeks. Desmet advertised it in all the film journals up to 26 May 1916, often with stills spread over two whole pages, supported by captions such as 'A hit in every theatre', 'Already retained everywhere!' and 'Rave reviews in the press!' In September 1916, it was shown in Flushing at the Bellamy Bioscoop owned by Desmet's brother Theo, and in February 1917 Tuschinski launched it in his Rotterdam cinemas under a blaze of publicity.

*CAJUS JULIUS CAESAR* suffered from the simultaneous success of *CABIRIA*, another massively publicised and press-hyped super-production.<sup>31</sup> In the summer of 1914, Desmet had gone to Paris specially to view *CABIRIA* at the office of Paul Hodel, who held the rights on Itala movies in France, Belgium and the Netherlands. Hodel was asking 50,000 francs for it, however, and Desmet

was unwilling to part with that kind of money. His first offer was 25,000 francs. He then teamed up with his competitor Gildemeijer to draw up a contract for a joint purchase of the film for 35,000 francs, but it was no use. The newcomers at Cinema Palace got the film, buying no fewer than three copies, which was something unique at the time. This auctioneering approach to the sale of distribution rights was reserved initially for super-productions like *CABIRIA*. During the war, importers such as Emilio Ghezzi initiated the practice of holding sample viewings of exclusives at Amsterdam cinemas and then selling them to the highest bidder. *CABIRIA* was premiered on Thursday, 23 September 1915 at the Cinema Palace, where it ran for three weeks before appearing for another three weeks at the Cinema De Munt, followed by three weeks at the Witte Bioscoop, making a record-breaking nine weeks in Amsterdam. The film became a household name and played all over the country for a long time afterwards. It would be the benchmark for Italian epics for years to come.

### **Divas: Fior di Male and Lyda Borelli**

Between 1910 and 1920, Italy was renowned as an exporter of film stars as well as historical epics. For a period of five years or so, the actresses Lyda Borelli, Francesca Bertini, Pina Menichelli, Diana Karenne and Maria Jacobini were enormously popular, and they played a very significant part in the creation of the star cult in the Dutch film world.<sup>32</sup> The year 1918 saw the first appearance of the *De Filmwereld*, a magazine devoted to the exploitation of the star cult that featured items of gossip and rumour, descriptions of films, film stills and portraits of stars.

Lyda Borelli's first two films, *MA L'AMOR MIO NON MUORE* and *LA MEMORIA DELL' ALTRO* (Gloria 1914), had been released by Wilhelmina, who had sole rights to Gloria productions.<sup>33</sup> After this, Borelli went over to Cines. Some of her Cines movies were issued by Nöggerath: *LA DONNA NUDA* (1914) and *LA MARCIA NUZIALE* (1915). Cinema Palace distributed *LA FALENA* (1916), followed after the war by *MADAME TALLIEN* (1916). Desmet also distributed a Borelli movie, *FIOR DI MALE* (Cines 1915, Colour Plate 19), which was released under the title *KINDEREN DER ZONDE* (*CHILDREN OF SIN*). Like *ALEXANDRA*, it is a film about a woman who gets a foot on the social ladder but fails to find love or peace. She rises to the position of head of a fashion house and inherits both the title and the fortune of an old count. She tries in vain to find the son she abandoned as a baby, and the man with whom she falls in love turns out to be infatuated with her step daughter. Pursued by her dark past as a nightclub hostess and escaped prisoner, she is finally murdered by her own criminal son. *FIOR DI MALE* is an authentic diva movie. Somewhat in the manner of

grand opera, the action is brought to a standstill periodically in order to allow the actress full scope for the expression, in mimed speech and bodily gestures, of her despair, sorrow and loneliness.

Desmet had bought the film from Deutsche Cines Gesellschaft on 15 April 1915. His first advertisements for *KINDEREN DER ZONDE* appeared in *De Bioscoop-Courant* of 7 January 1916. After this number, Desmet advertised *FIOR DI MALE* in each subsequent number of *De Bioscoop-Courant*, usually with stills. From 25 February, he was even taking a double-page spread, containing four stills for the first two weeks, and three in subsequent numbers. The number for 7 March also contains a description of the film's plot. *FIOR DI MALE* appeared at the Flora Bioscoop in The Hague from 17 to 26 March 1916, and at the Thalia Theater, also in The Hague, at around the same time. The trade press wrote: 'We had an opportunity to admire this art film and the excellent performance of the actress Lyda Borelli, and we have to say that it exceeded our already high expectations of plot, acting and decor.'<sup>34</sup> Desmet himself advertised the film as 'a tense drama in 4 parts [...] full of beautiful and touching scenes'. The film was plainly built around the star. In bold lettering the ad announced 'Lyda Borelli in the main role,' and continued: 'This first-rate artist excels herself in this dramatic film. She is the mistress of the art of depicting both the deeply fallen and the socially elevated woman.'<sup>35</sup> The advertisements were discontinued after 31 March, resumed again for another two weeks, and then ended for good. In spite of all its publicity, *FIOR DI MALE* stayed on the shelf for months on end. It was not until the last week of December 1916 that it got a screening at the Cinema De Munt, which had been taken over in the meantime by Barnstijn.<sup>36</sup> According to Desmet's register for the period, it was booked just nine more times after that.<sup>37</sup> Compare this with *LES ENFANTS DU CAPITAINE GRANT*, which was rented a record 59 times. Like Desmet's earlier pre-war exclusives such as *RICHARD WAGNER* and *DIE LANDSTRASSE*, *FIOR DI MALE* was a clear demonstration that not every film lauded by the press was an automatic smash-hit at the box office.

### **Francesca Bertini and *Sangue Bleu***

The name of Francesca Bertini was already familiar to Dutch audiences before she began appearing in diva films in 1914. Before the outbreak of the war, Desmet had purchased several Bertini films in the period when she was working for Film d'Arte Italiana and Cines.<sup>38</sup> Her name was already being mentioned at the beginning of some of these films, in which she is pictured smiling towards the audience from a medallion-shaped frame within the frame (a so-called 'plan emblématique') in the title sequences. *IL FASCINO DELLA VIOLENZA* and *TERRA PROMESSA* are good examples. Bertini films were also get-

ting longer. In 1910-12, her movies had been one-reelers. But *TERRA PROMESSA*, made in 1913, was a three-reeler, and in July 1914 Desmet acquired her four-reeler *L'AMAZZONE MASCHERATA*.

Bertini confirmed her reputation as an actress with the film pantomime *HISTOIRE D'UN PIERROT* (*PIERROT THE PRODIGAL*, Celio 1914), which was issued in the Netherlands by Nöggerath in June 1914 to the accompaniment of good press notices. Her recognition as a film diva in the Netherlands came in 1915 with the appearance of a whole series of her films. These films were often bought unseen. HAP-Film (Barnstijn) placed page after page of advertisements listing the films as 'number etc. of the Francesca Bertini series'. There must be some doubt as to whether the films of Bertini, anymore than those of Asta Nielsen or Henny Porten, were actually offered for sale by the series. It was primarily Nöggerath, however, who went to town with her, particularly her Caesar productions *NELLY LA GIGOLETTE* (*NELLY THE DANCER\**, 1914) and *ASSUNTA SPINA* (1915).

At the same point in time, Desmet released another Bertini film in Dutch cinemas entitled *DE VORSTIN VAN MONTECABELLO* (*THE PRINCESS OF MONTECABELLO*). This was the Celio production *SANGUE BLEU* (1914, Fig. 58).

This drama of human life is divided into four parts and transports us into grandiose royal palaces and glorious landscapes of majestic natural scenery, as well as theatre and cabaret. In point of action, decor and production, it is unsurpassable in its genre. The performance of this eminent actress is gripping from beginning to end; no more so than during the 'dance of death' in the fourth part, which is both moving and ornate.<sup>39</sup>

In contrast to *ALEXANDRA* and *FIOR DI MALE*, this film is about a woman who topples down the social ladder. A wealthy countess divorces her jealous and adulterous husband. When she begins an affair with an artist, she loses custody of her child. The artist turns out to be a sponger who gambles away her money and jewels. Both men refuse to let her see her child. The lover, whom she does not really care for, forces her to become a burlesque dancer. The degraded woman stabs herself in despair during a performance of her 'tango de la mort'. Badly wounded, she is taken home by her husband who undergoes a change of heart. As in *ALEXANDRA*, the male double standard is the target of criticism in a movie whose central theme is the sufferings of women. Like Lyda Borelli in *FIOR DI MALE* and Henny Porten in *ALEXANDRA*, Francesca Bertini excels in the portrayal of emotion through body language. The trauma of the mother forced to part with her child is again the theme of Bertini's 'tearjerker' *ODETTE* (Caesar film 1916), which was remade in 1927 and 1934, with Bertini again in the leading role.<sup>40</sup>



Fig. 58. *Sangue Bleu* (Cines 1914) – divorced and disgraced, the princess pines for her daughter

In January 1915, Jean Desmet signed a contract for *SANGUE BLEU* with Deutschmann of Cines Berlin, but it was not until July of that year that the film was advertised in *De Bioscoop-Courant*. Unlike *CAJUS JULIUS CAESAR*, the premiere did go to Willy Mullens this time. *SANGUE BLEU* played from 25 June to 1 July 1915 at Mullens's cinema at the Arts and Sciences Building in The Hague.<sup>41</sup> After the week of the premiere, it was rented just three times up to November. From November 1915 to February 1916 Desmet re-advertised it in *De Bioscoop-Courant*. This seemed to help, for it was booked at the Union in Amsterdam at the end of November, and at Tuschinski's in Rotterdam in mid-December. The press commented on the screening at Tuschinski's merged Thalia and Royal cinemas: 'The accompanying music, "le dernier tango" was very appropriate. It must be said that this is one of the best Bertini numbers we have seen. The plot is exciting and the performances are dazzling.'<sup>42</sup> No subsequent performances are recorded by *De Bioscoop-Courant*. *SANGUE BLEU* played for two weeks between 7 and 20 April at the Amsterdam Cinema Parisien with J. Dahmen as explicateur:

This film is captivating the audiences here, and has the able support of Mr. J. Dame's [Dahmen's] excellent commentary, which brings to the fore the interest-

ing parts of the action in well-chosen words. The audiences were so good that the management decided to retain the film for another week, which is a sure sign of satisfactory business.<sup>43</sup>

The film had already played at the Parisien in January 1916. On that occasion, *De Bioscoop-Courant* remarked that 'Mr Desmet's programmes have managed to get business moving again, and no wonder when this week's main feature was "The Princess of Montecabello", a stunning film starring the celebrated Francesca Bertini'.<sup>44</sup> *SANGUE BLEU* was rented on a total of 27 occasions, making it a modest 'winner'.<sup>45</sup>

Francesca Bertini remained on view in the Netherlands after *SANGUE BLEU*. Indeed, *LA SIGNORA DALLE CAMELIE* (*THE LADY OF THE CAMELIAS\**, Caesar 1915) and *TOSCA* (Bertini/Caesar 1918) enjoyed very long runs and were repeatedly re-released by FAN-Film after their normal period of circulation.<sup>46</sup>

## 2. Desmet's Cinema Operations and Dutch Cinemas (1914-1916)

Desmet's chain of big-city cinemas was getting smaller. He had begun to target the provinces, where he and members of his family opened four new cinemas and took over several cinemas from others. With the single exception of a theatre in Eindhoven, none of these ventures was a success. With Jean's support, Mathijs Desmet opened a cinema in Eindhoven and became the cinema king of the city, albeit with no thanks to Desmet's stock of films.<sup>47</sup> Desmet's sister Rosine opened a new cinema in Rotterdam, while her eldest brother sold his elite theatre there for a great deal of money, and watched his first cinema slide downhill in the hands of a series of bad managers.

### Changes in the Dutch cinema world and in Desmet's cinemas

New cinemas were opened in the Netherlands during the war years after the great cinema boom of 1911 and 1912, but they were far fewer in number. The new motion-picture theatres were larger, more comfortable and more luxurious than their predecessors, although the arrival of the first thousand-seater venue was delayed until the end of the war. It is remarkable that almost no new cinemas were opened in Amsterdam during the war. Rotterdam acquired one or two cinemas a year, including Piet Vermeer's Centraal Theater at the end of 1914 and the Bioscope Feijenoord, opened by Desmet's sister Rosine in 1915.<sup>48</sup> Established Amsterdam cinemas, such as Desmet's Cinema

De Munt and Gildemeijer's Union changed hands, and sometimes reopened under new names.<sup>49</sup> Several cinemas actually closed down during the First World War. These were mainly popular or neighbourhood picture houses such as the Thalia and Victoria in Amsterdam, both good customers of Desmet in the years 1914-15. The larger cinemas in the main shopping streets and entertainment areas fared better. To a certain extent, these events were the continuation of a development that had begun before the war. The strong were already beginning to devour the weak in several cities, even at this early stage. With his takeovers of the Scala (1915) and the Cinema Royal (1916), the newly built Olympia (1916) and the much-renovated Thalia, Abraham Tuschinski became the cinema king of Rotterdam.

The maritime blockade and the confiscation of ships by the Allies caused a lot of unemployment among dockers and sailors during the war, leaving these groups with less to spend on entertainment. But the small cinemas with their relatively low admission prices remained accessible. The disappearance of cinemas was more a matter of rising costs and overheads than falling audiences. If they were not to succumb to their competitors, owners of motion picture theatres needed to decorate, enlarge and modernise. Tuschinski's 'restyling' of the Thalia and Cinema Royal in Rotterdam was a striking illustration of this development. Steadily rising entertainment taxes and stricter safety regulations also pushed up operating costs. Long-term film-rental contracts and the increasing length of films created potential risks. A pre-booked selection might harbour a box-office flop which could be offset by other films, as in the days when programmes consisted of a number of short films.

### **The decline of the Cinema Parisien in Rotterdam**

The story of the Cinema Parisien in Rotterdam typifies the decline of Desmet's cinema empire during the First World War, and also mirrors the fate of numerous smaller cinemas in the Netherlands. The Parisien was initially run by Heinrich Voltmann, who had married into the Desmet family. He was first an employee and later a tenant. According to a slip of paper in the Desmet Archive, Desmet and Voltmann came to an agreement at some point between March 1914 and November 1915 concerning the latter's renting of the Parisien.<sup>50</sup> Desmet undertook to supply weekly programmes of between 1,500 and 1,700 metres. The films did not have to be new. Since there is no extant copy of a contract, however, it remains unclear whether Voltmann put his signature to this agreement. It is, however, evident that he had already been paying Desmet for rented films since 1913. Voltmann caused problems for Desmet. Relations between them soured during the First World War, following the 1913 affair with the German film *DAS GEHEIMNIS VON CHATEAU*

RICHMOND, which Voltmann had tried to distribute behind Desmet's back. The cinema was doing badly. In October 1915, Van der Schalk, the owner of the premises, complained that Voltmann was in considerable arrears with his rent. Desmet paid it himself.<sup>51</sup>

Shortly after the agreement with Voltmann expired in December 1915, the photographer Th.J.J. de Jong called on Desmet to ask him if he might take over from Voltmann.<sup>52</sup> A tenancy agreement with de Jong was signed on 18 December 1915. De Jong paid a deposit of f1,000, giving him a lease on the first and third floors, in addition to the cinema on the ground floor. Desmet retained the second floor for his own use. He was toying with the idea of turning the cinema into a cabaret theatre with an adjoining concert room, but nothing came of this. The place remained a cinema for the time being, but it continued to be run badly, and Desmet's contacts with De Jong became steadily more strained.<sup>53</sup> In September 1916, De Jong cancelled the contract, and the cinema reverted to Desmet in December. Desmet advertised for a new tenant in the December editions of the newspapers *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*, *Het Vaderland*, *Haagsche Courant*, *Avondpost* and *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad*, apparently without response.

That same month, Desmet received an order for the redecoration of the cinema from its owners, who had been receiving complaints:

16 windows have been broken or cracked, and the place as a whole looks more than a little the worse for wear. Wherever one moves, there is the cracking of glass underfoot, and several of the rooms are filled with collections of old rubbish, papers and rags. There is also a terrible smell in there. A lot of rubbish carts will be required if the place is to be tidied up properly.<sup>54</sup>

If Desmet himself did not have the place cleaned up, the owners would do it themselves and send him the bill. They wished to know who was now running the cinema and stipulated that Desmet should refuse to take on people who were likely to bring the 'house' into disrepute. Desmet tidied the building up and paid the overdue rent.

For a brief period in 1916, Desmet was once more the operator of his own very first cinema. He went to work energetically. Having attended to the redecoration, he cut his costs by reducing the salaries of his staff.<sup>55</sup> As the licensee, he received a 10% commission on the entire turnover on top of his own salary. The programmes shown at the Parisien during this period of Desmet's personal management were by no means drawn exclusively from Desmet's own film stocks. Desmet realised that this selection was now antiquated, and he therefore rented weekly programmes from his competitor

Filma, one of the new Dutch distribution firms. Considering how little Desmet paid for these programmes, however, Filma's films could also hardly have been new.<sup>56</sup> In August 1916, he ran his new copy of *L'ENFANT DE PARIS* for three weeks at the Parisien, placing ads in several newspapers. The cinema received around three thousand printed programmes (probably leaflets) a month. Besides posters and flyers, Desmet placed ads in the *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad* and *La Belgique*.<sup>57</sup>

On 28 August 1917, Desmet made a tenancy agreement with M. Kesten of Amsterdam.<sup>58</sup> Kesten took over the cinema on 1 September, paying four weeks' rent in advance. There were immediate problems with Kesten. The owners had noticed that he was planning to use the top floor as a hotel. Desmet replied that this was impossible, since he had reserved the attic and the six rooms on the second floor for himself. Kesten claimed that Desmet had retained only a single room for himself, which Desmet promptly denied. Desmet wrote Kesten an angry letter, accusing him of trying to sublet the first and the third floors of the building, and complaining that the building's fixtures had been damaged, that a stretch of a wall was un-papered and that the doors would not close because of faulty latches. He demanded that all this damage be put right in accordance with the terms of the contract of 28 August 1917.<sup>59</sup> Whether Kesten actually tidied the place up remains unclear. At all events, Desmet stepped in soon afterwards, and Kesten vanished.

On 11 October 1917, Desmet made another contract for the renting of the cinema with Uscher Selig Mansberg from Amsterdam. Mansberg ran the cinema with his partner M.A. Sprecher. They showed mainly old films supplied by Desmet: *QUO VADIS?* in October and *IN HOC SIGNO VINCES* in December. The following year their films included *L'ENFANT DE PARIS*, *CAJUS JULIUS CAESAR*, *LES ENFANTS DU CAPITAINE GRANT* and *IN HOC SIGNO VINCES*. Mansberg was no real improvement on Kesten, for on 14 January 1918 Desmet was served a writ ordering him to clear the upper story, where a hotel-café named 'Café-Hotel York' had been established. He was also required to do something about the rooms below, all of which had been rented out, including the cinema manager's office. How this final item was supposed to square with the showing of films in the cinema is unclear. A week later, on 22 January, Desmet's lawyer Limburg told him that 'the matter should be settled quickly, as it is far from innocent and has come to the attention of the vice squad'. There is a clear possibility that the cinema was being turned into a brothel.

Following this affair in January, Mansberg and Sprecher continued to rent films from Desmet up to the end of August. In that month they also offered to take over Desmet's inventory. But when their contract expired in September, Desmet decided that enough was enough and merely requested Mansberg

and Sprecher to pay him their arrears. Mansberg absconded to Berlin, leaving his debts unpaid. Sprecher continued to operate the business on his own for another two years. When the lease with the owner expired on 14 November 1918, Desmet refused to renew the contract and terminated the lease. But this was not yet the end of the Cinema Parisien, for Desmet continued to rent films to it until early 1920. The Gaumont drama *L'ENFANT DE PARIS* was one of them, and the Italian crime thriller *FILIBUS* another (Fig. 59). The latter was actually rented three times between 1919 and 1920.<sup>60</sup> Desmet delivered his last programme to the Cinema Parisien in August 1922. A year later, Sprecher moved to the Ooster Theater owned by R. Uges.

### The prime of the Amsterdam Cinema Parisien

Unlike the Rotterdam Parisien, the Amsterdam Parisien flourished as never before during the war. 'The Cinema Parisien has always enjoyed good audiences, and is sometimes even too busy,' wrote the *Bioscoop-Courant* in 1915. Unemployment at the Amsterdam docks had no immediate impact on cinema audiences at the Parisien. The trade press was very pleased with the commentaries at the cinema, and this was an important compliment during the First World War, which was the Golden Age of the picture-house explicateurs. The Parisien was still Desmet's 'home cinema' and depended on his supply of films. In effect, this meant that it was playing old films on a regular basis. But as long as they kept their popularity, this was not necessarily a bad thing. Advertising stunts were dreamed up to pull audiences in, one of which involved the positioning of life-sized dolls next to or above the cinema entrance. *De Bioscoop-Courant* published the following vignette during the performance of *IVANHOE*:

"That's really lovely, that is!" said someone next to us when we found ourselves standing outside the Cinema Parisien on Nieuwendijk in Amsterdam. Above the entrance, we beheld Ivanhoe standing in full armour in front of a clever imitation portcullis with the pennant of the noble crusaders planted next to him. It was a particularly splendid sight in the evening, when the running lights and the continuously flashing electric spotlight made the copper armour shimmer and the word "Ivanhoe" shone out in phosphorescent letters.<sup>61</sup>

The Cinema Parisien in Amsterdam was one of the last cinemas that continued to show Desmet's films. The popular Gaumont drama *L'ENFANT DE PARIS* (Fig. 50) was screened for no fewer than five consecutive weeks in 1916, from 28 July to 31 August.<sup>62</sup> *QUO VADIS?* ran for five weeks in the summer of 1917: for three weeks in Desmet's abridged version, and then two more weeks in

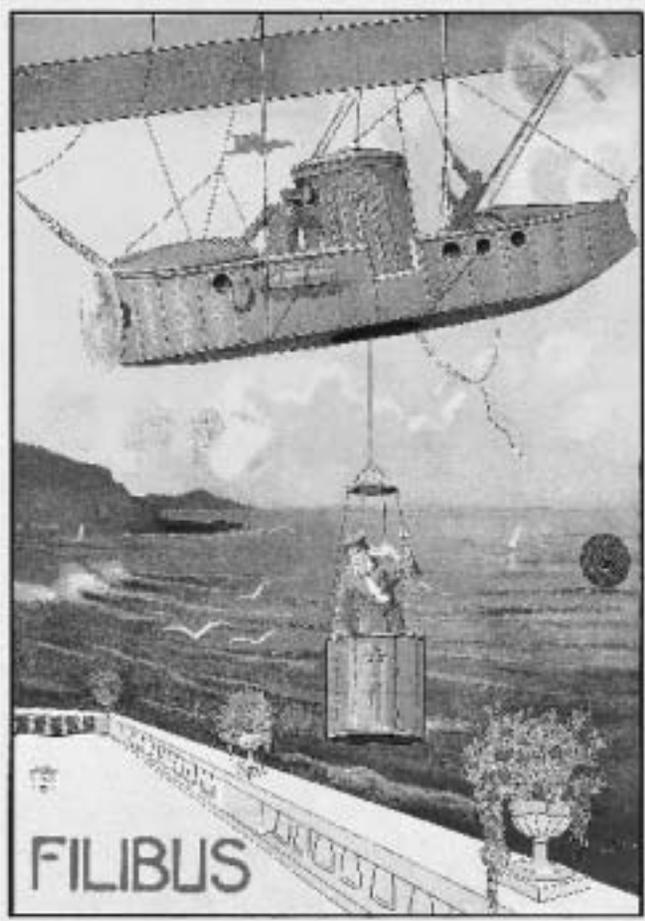


Fig. 59. *Filibus* (Corona 1915)

Nöggerath's complete version. The classics did well at the Parisien.<sup>63</sup> With the collapse of Desmet's distribution operation, the cinema gradually began to take its films from other distributors, but Desmet's films were still shown there occasionally until after the war. In 1917, Desmet's films were alternated with the films of Cinema Palace distributors. In the following year, the Parisien's films came mainly from Cinema Palace and NV Nordisk Films, successor to Gildemeijer's Union distribution company. Only four Desmet films were still being shown: *FIOR DI MALE*, *ALEXANDRA*, *SCHULDIG* and *DAS ENDE VOM LIED*.

### Shedding the luxury theatres: the Cinema De Munt and the Cinema Royal

The Cinema De Munt rented Desmet's films regularly up to June 1915. Desmet shamelessly ran his pre-war films for years on end at this cinema, which was undoubtedly a factor in its sale. At the end of 1914 and the beginning of 1915, the De Munt was screening films Desmet had bought and released years before, such as *MORMONENS OFFER* (*THE VICTIMS OF THE MORMON\**, Nordisk 1911), *DEN SORTE KANSLER* (1912) and *MONTE CHRISTO* (1912).<sup>64</sup> When Desmet's licence finally expired in mid-May 1916, the cinema came under the management of Benjamin Mendes, son-in-law to De Hoop.<sup>65</sup> Henceforth, De Munt would be the Amsterdam first-release theatre of Desmet's rival Barnstijn, who had previously only owned cinemas in The Hague. From 1917, the programmes that played at De Munt were drawn almost exclusively from films distributed by Barnstijn.<sup>66</sup> De Munt re-opened on 26 May 1916 with the Italian diva film *IL FUOCO* (Itala 1915, Fig. 60), which had been re-named *DE DEMON IN DE VROUW* (*WOMAN IS A DEMON*). It was an enormous success and instantly sealed the reputation of Barnstijn and his HAP-Film company. Despite Barnstijn's claim, Desmet's films still cropped up at De Munt from time to time. *FIOR DI MALE*, for instance, played in the last week of December 1916, following immediately on the heels of his *LIDENSKABENS MAGT* (*THE POWER OF PASSION\**, Danmark 1915) the previous week.<sup>67</sup>

The earliest portent of the end of Desmet's cinema chain was a deliberate and carefully considered action by Desmet himself. On 1 March 1916, Desmet bought a piece of open land in Rotterdam, along with several small houses, for f50,500, with the ostensible purpose of extending his Cinema Royal. On 20 July 1916, however, he sold the Cinema Royal together with the empty site and the houses to Abraham Tuschinski, the current operator of the theatre, for the princely figure of f325,000.<sup>68</sup> Desmet may have bought the land and the houses already with an eye to selling them to Tuschinski. It is not known whether Tuschinski extended the Cinema Royal after the sale, but he was certainly said to have made it more attractive by cutting admission prices and 'brightening up' the interior.<sup>69</sup> He was already living above the Royal, but this was not unusual for a cinema manager in those times. Tuschinski continued to live in Rotterdam even after the opening of the Tuschinski Theater in Amsterdam. Along with the building and the land, Tuschinski took over the entire inventory of the Royal. With this purchase, he became the owner of both the Thalia and the Cinema Royal: in their day, the two most famous cinemas in Rotterdam.



Fig. 60. *Il fuoco* (Itala 1915), the film with which the Cinema De Munt reopened in 1916

### 3. New Cinemas in the Desmet Family

#### Flushing: Theo

In January 1914, Desmet heard that the Bellamy Bioscoop in Flushing (opened 1913, Fig. 61) was on the brink of closure.<sup>70</sup> The Bellamy was a cinema with around 400 seats and together with its rival, the Alhambra, the main provider of cinema in Flushing during the second decade of the century. Desmet proceeded to rent it from Jac. Frank, a jeweller from Middelburg. Desmet's brother Theo was sent to Flushing, and he reopened the cinema on 10 October 1914.<sup>71</sup> The centrepiece of the opening programme was the Danish thriller *DET HEMMELIGHEDSFULDE X*. According to the local *Vlissingsche Courant*, the large audience at the opening performance expressed its pleasure with frequent outbursts of applause.<sup>72</sup>

From the first week of business, Theo took programmes from his brother Jean, and this arrangement continued until October 1915. During the First World War, Theo also acted as a go-between in contacts with the cinemas in

Ghent and Antwerp that rented films from Desmet. Things went well for a time at the Flushing cinema, but gradually Theo began to complain about the low attendance figures at the Bellamy. The difficulties were hardly due to any lack of publicity, for Theo advertised every week in both the *Vlissingsche Courant* and the *Nieuwe Vlissingsche Courant*, but rather to Theo's regular supplier of films: his brother Jean. Between 1914 and 1916, Theo Desmet received many pre-war films as main features from Jean, although some of them may not have played in Flushing before. The Desmet Archive contains invoices for advertisements in the *Vlissingsche Courant* and the *Nieuwe Vlissingsche Courant* through to the beginning of October 1916. The weekly deliveries were then discontinued. The last programme supplied by Jean Desmet contained *DIE LANDSTRASSE* as its main feature.

In December 1918, Theo Desmet wrote to tell his brother that he was going through a bad time business-wise due to the demobilisation and the Spanish influenza epidemic. He was unable to meet his debts and was involving himself in other ventures at the same time. In 1918, he had invested in a pharmaceuticals company calling itself Verum. The whole business turned out to be a fraud, and he lost all his money. In 1920, Desmet sent him to Germany with their brother Ferdinand in order to buy caravans, but this too turned out to be far from lucrative.

Towards the end of 1919, Theo stopped renting films from Jean, turning instead to Loet Barnstijn. In 1920, for example, he signed a contract with Barnstijn for the supply of 26 programmes at f70 each. It was effectively a



Fig. 61. Bellamy Bioscoop, Flushing (right of fountain)

block-booking. On one occasion that year, Barnstijn's films caught fire at Theo's cinema. A second mortgage was taken out on the cinema to pay his debts. In 1921, the year of the opening of the big Tuschinski cinema in Amsterdam and the Asta in The Hague, Theo made an attempt to upgrade the Bellamy. He had the auditorium redecorated and installed decent ventilation. The renovated theatre was re-christened Luxor, a name that exuded a certain modernity and 'class', following the opening of new cinemas like the Luxor Bioscoop in Rotterdam.<sup>73</sup> Theo's debts continued to mount, however, and finally he went bankrupt. In 1928, he transferred the operation of the Luxor to the rival Alhambra and went to live in Tilburg.<sup>74</sup>

### **Eindhoven: Mathijs**

Jean Desmet had put on films in the Oranjezaal in Eindhoven as early as January 1911. The Oranjezaal was a concert room belonging to the coffee house owner Houbraken situated on the Vrijstraat. Desmet had bought this café with its adjacent concert room in April 1911 and installed G.W. Jacobs as manager. Desmet sometimes put on film shows there. For tax reasons, 19 Vrijstraat was also Desmet's official place of residence before 1918. However, the tax authorities quickly realised that Desmet was living in Amsterdam.

The café was doing badly, particularly after the outbreak of war and the coming of mobilisation. Dancing was prohibited in Eindhoven during the mobilisation period. Soldiers billeted there were turning the café into a rubbish heap. Desmet sacked Jacobs and put his brother Mathijs into the business. Mathijs Desmet had started out by touring the fairgrounds with a dance hall and had then lived for a period in Venlo, running a café. He had also arranged film venues for Jean in towns in the province of Limburg. He refurbished the Eindhoven café and reopened it on 14 November 1915. He weeded out the worst customers and put the place back on its feet. Mathijs was first employed by his eldest brother, who paid him the modest sum of *f*15 a week for work, lodgings and commission. At the time, this was the kind of money earned by cashiers and projectionists. With the success of the café, however, Mathijs's position improved.

In April 1917, Mathijs opened the Cinéma Parisien in the café's concert room, though he could scarcely be described as a steady client of Desmet's distribution firm.<sup>75</sup> He managed to build up a regular audience by showing serials. For a while, he also employed a popular explicateur at the Parisien in the person of Frans Vilé. With the aid of Jean, who had become one of its shareholders, he took over the rival Chicago cinema in 1919. The Chicago had been built in 1913 by J.F. Mounier with the support of the city's elite, which included the Philips family, Eindhoven being the (original) home of the fa-

mous Dutch electrical company. Mounier had also opened Chicago theatres in Den Bosch and Nymegen. The Parisien catered largely to the working class, whereas the Chicago was Eindhoven's elite cinema. Mathijs Desmet also bought the premises of the Parisien from his brother and thus became the biggest cinema owner in Eindhoven.

### **Amersfoort and Delft: Jean**

Just as he had done in Flushing, Jean Desmet took over an existing cinema in Amersfoort. In April 1915, he became the owner of the cinema of Roelf Ubels, a regular customer of his film programmes, who had fallen into debt. In January 1912, Ubels had bought a building on Langestraat, the city's main street, where on 3 February 1912 he opened a modest-sized cinema called the Amersfoortsch Bioscoop Theater. In 1916/17, Desmet had the building converted, improved the equipment and attracted a new manager named Denijs van Roon, another old customer of his. Van Roon rented weekly programmes from Desmet at a price of *f* 70.

Van Roon went on renting films from Desmet until 1919, but in 1919/20 he began to take weekly programmes from Desmet's competitor Nöggerath for *f*60 a week. Desmet also helped him to obtain programmes from others. Van Roon rented the cinema up to 1922, when he was forced to close down due to debt, including money owed to Desmet for film hire. The cinema seemed singled out for bad luck. Like Ubels in 1914, Denijs van Roon lost films in fires, which simply added to his financial cares.<sup>76</sup>

On 19 November 1915, Desmet opened a two-hundred-seater cinema at the former café-restaurant Phoenix in Delft, situated not far from the railway station (Fig. 62). 'There was a large crowd in front of the illuminated little building, where arc lights bathed this usually quiet part of the Binnenwatersloot in a sea of light. [...] The "Delfia" cinema is beautifully set up, both inside and outside. It's a very nice place to go and sit.'<sup>77</sup> The raked floor of the cinema, which allowed everyone a clear view of the screen, was noted with approval in the press. Likewise the atmospheric lighting, which could be slowly dimmed and raised, and the central heating, ventilation and fireproof projection box: 'if a film catches fire, the opening that connects the box with the auditorium is sealed off by iron shutters.'<sup>78</sup> In the advertising, Desmet referred to the cinema as his ninth after his cinemas in Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Bussum, Flushing and the Concertzaal in Eindhoven (where films were occasionally shown). The Delfia's programmes were continuous, just as in his pre-war cinemas. The main film on the opening night was the Italian spy movie *L'AMAZZONE MASCHERATA*. The local population liked it: 'The action



Fig. 62. Delfia Bioscoop, Delft

and the whole idea of the picture are very interesting. The actors who played in it never degenerated into cinematic excess; the whole thing was beautiful.<sup>79</sup> *NERONE E AGRIPPINA* (*NERO AND AGRIPPINA*, Gloria 1913), another Italian film, was shown as an extra number. The manager of the business was Cornelis Betlehem, who had previously been one of the managers of the *Eerste Hieldersche Bioscoop* in Den Helder, and one of Desmet's best clients before the war. The Delfia booked weekly programmes with Desmet at a time when his films were steadily ageing. This affected business adversely, for the Delfia's main competitor was the *Stadsdoelen* cinema, which was run and supplied by Barnstijn.

The Delfia showed Desmet's films for quite a long time and was still booking weekly programmes from him as late as 1918, by which time Desmet had long ceased to acquire films from abroad. Even at the opening of the Delfia, Betlehem had been sparing in his use of things like electric signs, a practice later adopted by the municipality as an official regulation during the wartime shortages. But Betlehem still failed to make ends meet, and Desmet dismissed him in August 1919 and sold the cinema for *f* 42,500 to J.J. Dekker and F.H. Jansen, who reopened it at the end of the month.

### **Rotterdam: Rosine**

In 1915, Rosine Huizenaar-Desmet opened a combined cinema and dance hall on Oranjeboomstraat called the Feijenoord which was much patronised by Belgian refugees during the First World War.<sup>80</sup> The cinema lay in the South district, where there were many working-class families. The Feijenoord was taken over in 1924, when it was renamed Deca Bioscoop, and closed two years later. Rosine continued to run the Bioscoop Gezelligheid up to the end of 1917. She gave up taking films from her brother on a regular basis at the end of January 1917. After that, she booked just the occasional film before deliveries ceased for good in December of that year.<sup>81</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Was Desmet a failure as a businessman? Seen from the perspective of the film world, he probably was. On the other hand, if we view him in the context of property development, he was in no sense a failure. His highly profitable sale of the Cinema Royal in Rotterdam set him up in a new livelihood in property and investment, a profession that made him independent of developments abroad. This latter consideration must have been a particularly strong factor during the First World War. From now on, Desmet concentrated on the national and local situation and left the international market to its own devices. The end of his career as a cinema exhibitor and film distributor hardly left him destitute. On the contrary; he had become a wealthy man and now embarked on a career in which his wealth would increase even more rapidly.



## **IX. Afterlife**

### **A New Career and the Beginning of a Collection**

From 1916 onwards, the Dutch cinema world was caught up in a process of change. The increasing dominance of American and German production companies, the German influence in Dutch exhibition, the arrival of the first real cinema palaces and the growing professional organisation among Dutch exhibitors and renters altered the Dutch situation for good. Desmet's own abandonment of cinema exhibition and the film trade around 1916 was but the first symptomatic moment of a general development.

Jean Desmet did not abandon the film trade completely when he moved over to property development. The winding down of his buying and selling of films was if anything a gradual process. Certainly, it became an ever more peripheral activity, but he held on to his films for a while for the simple reason that until about 1922 he was still finding occasional customers for his old films. At the beginning of the 1920s, he was also still the owner of three small cinemas, in addition to being a shareholder and supervisory director of the Cinema Royal, which was one of the most important cinemas in Amsterdam in the 1920s and 1930s. During the decade including the First World War, as well as during the 1920s, Desmet tried to sell his films several times. Only in 1938, when part of his collection of publicity materials was lost in a fire at the Cinema Parisien, did he finally get round to making an inventory of his films and arranging for their safe storage. It was the first step in the creation of a film collection: the Desmet Collection.

#### **I. The Dutch Film World from 1916. The Demise of Desmet as a Motion Picture Exhibitor**

On 8 November 1918, three days before the armistice, Desmet placed an advertisement in *De Bioscoop-Courant*, the popular newspaper *De Telegraaf* and the Jewish paper *Nieuw Israëlitisch Weekblad*. 'Following the sale of the Cinema Palace at 224 Kalverstraat, the undersigned has decided to sell his other cinemas.'<sup>1</sup> In October 1918, Desmet, Hamburger, De Hoop and the other shareholders of NV Middenstad sold their holdings in the company, thereby surrendering their interest in both the Cinema Palace cinema and

the Cinema Palace distribution operation.<sup>2</sup> It marked the end of Desmet's career as a prominent cinema owner. He had certainly given it a try with a few new cinemas, including his brother Mathijs's Eindhoven Parisien, but the plain truth was that Desmet's failure to procure new films and the resulting collapse of his distribution business had also put an end to his role of exhibitor.

Little remained of Desmet's cinema chain at the end of the First World War. Cinemas that had opened before the war, such as the Cinema Parisien in Rotterdam, fell into decay. The new cinemas in Flushing, Amersfoort and Delft were not really profitable and were all soon sold again.<sup>3</sup> After 1916, Desmet's cinemas, along with those belonging to members of his family, turned more and more to Desmet's competitors and successors for their supplies of films. Cinemas that were financially and administratively weak, such as the Rotterdam Parisien, became victims of Desmet's antiquated film stocks.

Desmet disposed of his de luxe cinemas by selling the Cinema Royal in Rotterdam to Tuschinski in 1916, by not renewing his exhibitor's licence for the Cinema De Munt in the same year, and by selling his shares in the Amsterdam Cinema Palace in 1918 (the latter had not been Desmet's first-release cinema since 1914). He thus lost his leading position as a cinema owner in both Amsterdam and Rotterdam. He also sold other cinemas, such as the Delfia and stopped supplying cinemas whose premises he did not own himself, such as the Rotterdam Parisien. Desmet kept only the Cinema Parisien in Amsterdam and, for a time, his cinemas in Amersfoort and Bussum, although the latter two were doing poor business.

With his temporary chain of cinemas, Desmet had been the first to enjoy direct control of a considerable number of cinemas, even though some of them were in fact run by other exhibitors; either old business contacts, such as Betlehem and Van Roon, or his brothers Theo and Mathijs. In both Flushing and Eindhoven, the Desmet Brothers were brought into action when it became necessary to restore order and discipline to the business. In the absence of living parents and by dint of his instinct for business coupled with good luck, Desmet was a sort of *pater familias*. Turning some of his siblings into cinema managers was presumably not simply an act of family solidarity, but arose from his need for loyalty, control and security. The involvement of the whole family in the business was entirely normal in the world of cinema anyway, and when necessary Desmet had always been able to mobilise the family in the early days on the fairgrounds.

### Picture palaces. Cinema exhibition after the war

It was not only Desmet's cinema operations that were caught in an upheaval. The world of cinema in general was experiencing a profound change. Many cinemas were regularly filled to the rafters during the war. As the years elapsed, and people became more worried about the shortages, cinema audiences simply went on growing. It was precisely the growth of audiences which created the capital that enabled exhibitors to open a few very large new cinemas, such as the Luxor in Rotterdam (1917), towards the end of the decade. Only at the end of the war was there a temporary decline in cinema audiences, which was due to the outbreak of Spanish influenza. In an attempt to contain this lethal epidemic, several cities banned cinema performances for children.<sup>4</sup>

Cinemas were closing down after the war, just as they had done during it. Yet the beginning of the 1920s also saw the creation of many new, de luxe establishments. In Rotterdam, the opening of the Luxor, the first thousand-seater, was followed, in chronological sequence, by the opening of the WB Theater or the Wester Bioscoop (1919), the Ooster Theater (1921), the Grand Théâtre Pompenburg (1922) and the Theater Soesman (1922). The Grand Théâtre, which was taken over by Tuschinski in 1923, was considered the leading cinema in the city. The arrival of these motion-picture palaces started a wave of modern 'restyling' of existing cinemas. Desmet's Cinema Parisien in Amsterdam received one of these facelifts in 1924. After the neoclassicism of the early years, cinemas were now treated to a mixture of the typical Dutch deco style of the 'Amsterdam School' and exoticism à la Leon Bakst (Colour Plate 20).

The main impetus for this was given in 1921, when the Tuschinski Theater (Fig. 63) was opened on Reguliersbreestraat in Amsterdam soon after the openings of the Rialto Theater and the Ceintuur Theater. With the rich and elaborate decoration of this cinema, which displays a positive *horror vacui*, Abraham Tuschinski deliberately set out to awe the average movie-goer. It was designed by the Dutch interior designers Jaap Gidding, Willem Kromhout, Pieter den Besten and Chris Bartels. The richly coloured oriental tapestry in the foyer was designed by Gidding, the decorative tiling and wrought-iron lamps by Bartels, the auditorium ceiling by Kromhout and the eclectic wall decorations by Den Besten. The theatre is a landmark in the Dutch tradition of decorative design and is more interesting artistically than many of its contemporary American counterparts. It was visited at the time by numerous American and German film celebrities. The 'Tuschinski style' immediately influenced cinema architecture nationwide. Unusually sumptuous by Dutch standards, this 'film cathedral', which is still the most famous



Fig. 63. Abraham Tuschinski (centre) & Adolph Zukor (centre-right) in the foyer of the Tuschinski Theater (1927)

cinema in the Netherlands, opened on Friday, 21 October 1921 – just two doors down the street from Nöggerath’s Bioscope Theater of 1907. Within a period of fourteen years, Dutch cinemas had developed from modest little buildings into great picture palaces. Tuschinski and his supplier Barnstijn had taken over from Nöggerath, Gildemeijer and Desmet.<sup>5</sup>

Desmet’s contemporaries, Gildemeijer and Nöggerath, owned only one or two cinemas and had no more than regular contracts with certain cinemas owned by others. Loet Barnstijn and his family, on the other hand, owned several picture houses in The Hague, Enschede and elsewhere. The post-war period saw the rise of genuine cinema chains in the form of trusts, such as the NV Nederlandsche Bioscoop Trust (Netherlands Cinema Trust NV). Eight cinemas were linked with the trust: four in The Hague, two in Utrecht and two in Nymegen. Hardly the humblest of establishments, they included the Thalia in The Hague, the Rembrandt Theater in Utrecht and the Chicago Bioscoop in Nymegen. Loet C. Barnstijn’s Standaard Films was also part of the trust and supplied all the cinemas with films. Barnstijn had a seat on the Board of Management as well. David Hamburger Jr. was on the advisory board. These cinema chains were getting longer and longer.

## The growing German and American influence

Desmet's sale of his NV Middenstad (Cinema Palace) shares to the Olympia association (which was partly owned by Ufa) not only signalled the end of his managerial role at the Cinema Palace cinema but also underwrote the growing influence of German cinema on cinema in the Netherlands. If the Union in Amsterdam had been the sole outpost of the German film industry before the war, the years that followed saw Ufa assume ownership of the biggest cinemas in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, along with several other smaller venues. With the arrival on the scene of new distributors, such as NV Nordisk and Nebima, German films were sold in the Netherlands at an even more hectic rate than before. All the same, the domination of the Dutch cinema screen by American films was now firmly established, although there is no hard evidence of any plans at the time to open American cinemas in the Netherlands.<sup>6</sup>

In the years 1917-19, partly while the war was still in progress, German cinema acquired a large stake in the Dutch film world, first in film distribution and subsequently in exhibition. It was a development that typified the changed nature of the film business at the end of Desmet's career in distribution. Before 1917, Gildemeijer had been the main distributor of German films. In that year, however, the distribution of German films was more or less the monopoly of NV Nordisk Films, which became an affiliate of Ufa in 1918.<sup>7</sup> In 1918, Ufa set its sights on exhibition. Dutch cinemas were bought up through the Dutch cover organisation NV Neerlandia, and theatre buildings like the Rembrandt Theater in Amsterdam were converted into cinemas. Neerlandia, Nordisk distribution and Ufa were all part of a single enterprise.<sup>8</sup>

One of Neerlandia's first acts was to buy part of the shares of NV Middenstad from Desmet and his associates. On 16 October 1918, NV Middenstad was taken over by a company named Olympia. For f625,000, Olympia acquired all Middenstad shares along with the company's existing clientele, and assumed ownership of the Cinema Palace cinema and the distribution company of the same name.<sup>9</sup> Middenstad was committed to taking 20% of its films from NV Nordisk Films, but because Middenstad was itself active in distribution the Cinema Palace company was not obliged to offer all the films shown in its own theatre to other clients. One of Olympia's shareholders was the lawyer Maurits Stibbe, who on behalf of Neerlandia – and therefore Ufa – held 21 of Middenstad's 100 shares. In this way, Ufa acquired a 20% stake in Middenstad.

But Ufa was not satisfied merely with minority interests in companies such as Olympia/Middenstad. Ufa had already acquired Gildemeijer's cine-

ma Union, and in 1919 bought the Amsterdam Edison Theater, but soon found that the former was too small and the latter too unprofitable. Ufa and Neerlandia then adopted a more ambitious approach and acquired two large cinemas in Rotterdam and Amsterdam: the Luxor and the Rembrandt Theater. In 1918, Ufa bought up the shares of Luxor and began renting the Rembrandt Theater in 1919.<sup>10</sup> Before Tuschinski opened his movie palace on Reguliersbreestraat in 1921, the Rembrandt Theater was the largest cinema in the city. It became *the* cinema for German films in Amsterdam, just as the Tuschinski Theater was *the* cinema for American productions. The largest cinema in The Hague in the 1920s was the Asta, named after Asta Nielsen and like the Tuschinski it opened in 1921. Ufa finally acquired a half-interest in the Asta, giving it control of spacious and prominent cinemas in the three biggest cities in the Netherlands.<sup>11</sup>

American domination remained invisible in the Netherlands until the end of the war. According to Kristin Thompson, in the middle of the second decade German productions accounted for 25% of the films shown in the Netherlands, Italian films another 25%, and French films 20%, with the remaining 30% divided between the Danes, Swedes and Americans.<sup>12</sup> Judging from the Dutch film press, the presence of the Americans was more in evidence from that time onwards. Anti-American sentiment certainly persisted in the trade press until the end of the war. In 1918, Felix Hageman was still writing in *De Filmwereld* about ‘...little American “sketches”, trivial incidents at the workplace, whose tearful and sickly sentimentality might suit people in the suburbs of San Francisco, but leaves us Dutch stone cold’.<sup>13</sup> Hageman preferred Danish and Italian ‘art’ films, Suzanne Grandais comedies, Gaumont’s film versions of novels and literature and German dramas starring Henny Porten. What he failed to notice, however, was that the films he preferred were in the process of making way for a different kind of film repertoire. But Hageman’s remarks indicate the context of Desmet’s wary attitude towards the new American companies.

The First World War brought about a change in the relations between Europe and the United States.<sup>14</sup> While the French, Danish and Italian industries were simply folding and completely losing touch with what was happening outside Europe, the American film industry was busily conquering the world by first securing all the territories outside Europe. London was forced to cede its position as the international distribution centre for American films to New York. Where French film companies had previously reigned supreme as film producers, and where Britain had monopolised overseas trade and film transport with its global fleet, the Americans now came to dominate both the production and the distribution markets. Companies such as Universal,

Famous Players-Lasky (later to become Paramount) and Goldwyn (later MGM) opened offices everywhere and gradually swallowed the rest of the world, including the Dutch East Indies. By the time European cinema had managed to struggle to its feet again in 1919, it was already too late.

The Americans did not open branches of other production companies in the Netherlands until much later. With their limited market, the Netherlands were not so vital to the Americans, who were anyway used to arranging the European distribution of their films through European firms such as M.P. Sales and Transatlantic. Universal did not establish an office in Amsterdam until 1922, followed by Fox in 1923 and Famous Players-Lasky in 1924.<sup>15</sup>

The First World War was not just the period of the rise of the big American studios (Universal, Famous Players/Paramount) and their assumption of the lead over the companies of the Motion Picture Patents Company (Edison, American Biograph, Vitagraph). It was also the period that saw the formation of Ufa, the huge German conglomerate that devoured pre-war companies like Messter, Eiko and Vitascope, from which Desmet had acquired so many of his films.

Corinna Müller's study of German cinema does not advance beyond 1912, whereas the expansion of German cinema into the Netherlands only got underway around 1911, in the wake of the international success of the Asta Nielsen films. The expansion continued year by year after that, even during the war. Both Desmet's business archive and the Dutch film press show the Germans becoming steadily more involved in the Netherlands, in film distribution and in cinema operation. These institutional developments were fully in step with the rising reputation of German films. In the post-war period in the Netherlands, German films were synonymous with well-made entertainment and 'quality'.<sup>16</sup>

### **Increasing organisation and mergers**

The world around Desmet was changing its organisational shape too. It had been every man for himself when he started out in 1907, but by the time he began to withdraw from it around 1915, cinema had become a fully organised 'business'. Desmet himself withdrew into the background as this development unfolded.<sup>17</sup>

But it was the cinema staff, rather than the exhibitors and distributors, who were the first to create professional organisations for themselves. In the face of wage cuts imposed by cinemas such as Desmet's Rotterdam *Parisien* as part of the economic retrenchment necessitated by rising operational costs, cinema personnel clearly had good reason to form themselves into unions in

order to resist further developments. The Netherlands Union of Cinema and Theatre Employees (Nederlandsche Bond van Bioscoop- en Theater-Geëmployeerden) was founded as early as 29 November 1912, and held its meetings in the Amsterdam hotel-café 't Hof van Holland on Rembrandt Square. Initially, it was just a small team, consisting largely of people from Amsterdam. Amsterdam cinema employees became more energetically unionised with the establishment of the Amsterdam Union of Cinema Staff (Amsterdamsche Bond van Bioscoop personeel) on 22 March 1916.<sup>18</sup> Like the national union, this local union had a lot of explicateurs in its directorate: people used to exercising their vocal chords. Meetings were held in the upper room of the Café Populaire on Reguliersbreestraat. One of its most active members was the explicateur Cor Schuring, who wrote articles in the trade press in support of more specialised and better trained cinema personnel. He later became the union's chairman.<sup>19</sup> The national Netherlands Union of Cinema and Theatre Employees, which was often called the Union of Theatre and Cinema Staff (Bond van Theater- en Bioscoop personeel) already numbered more than 800 members in 1918. The Amsterdam union published a paper called *De Lichtstraal* (*The Light Beam*), which quickly became the organ of the national Union of Cinema Staff.<sup>20</sup>

The cinema owners felt that they had to organise themselves in order to resist the unions. In June 1916, shortly after the creation of the Amsterdam Union of Cinema Staff, the Association of Amsterdam Cinema Exhibitors (Vereeniging van Amsterdamsche Bioscoop-Exploitanten) made its appearance. Its chairman was De Hoop, the manager of the Cinema Palace. The secretary was L. van Rood, chief executive of the Theatre Pathé, and the treasurer was Mendes, the new manager of the Cinema De Munt.<sup>21</sup> The conspicuous absentees from this list were Nöggerath, Gildemeijer, Tuschinski and Desmet.

The film distributors also joined forces in 1916, albeit not yet in an official association. In the autumn of 1916, they organised an official film exchange, which was to take place every Monday until the 1970s: first in Café Schiller on Rembrandt Square and subsequently in the Winter Garden of the Grand Hotel Krasnapolsky on Dam Square (Fig. 64). The establishment of the exchange meant that exhibitors no longer had to make the rounds of individual film distributors. They were able to find out where a particular film or programme was playing. They could also buy new spare parts for film equipment and machinery. These events were attended by importers and agents as well as exhibitors and distributors. They could exchange the latest gossip, display the publicity materials for new films and make appointments for viewings, contracts and the like. The film exchange made the film world more efficient, but also turned it into a tight clique, meeting behind closed



Fig. 64. Film exchange in the Winter Garden of the Krasnapolsky Hotel, Amsterdam (1924)

doors.<sup>22</sup> Even after the exchange had moved to the Krasnapolsky, Café Schiller continued to function as the place where people met afterwards.

Monday was a busy day, for it was also the day of the artists' exchange, which was held at Café De Kroon, directly opposite the Schiller on the other side of Rembrandt Square. This made it convenient for exhibitors to take a look at people they might wish to engage for variety acts or musical performances.<sup>23</sup> This was a comfortable situation to be in at a time when variety acts and cinema orchestras were featuring more and more regularly in cinemas.<sup>24</sup> Monday was also the day builders, foremen and architects met, which was convenient in the boom period of cinema construction or redecoration.

One of the editions of the Pathé-Journals in the collection of the Netherlands Film Museum gives a good impression of the film exchange. It features the opening of the new film fair at the Krasnapolsky on Monday 24 April 1924. Just one woman is visible with a hat and fur. Otherwise, the exchange is populated exclusively by men. Tastefully dressed, looking very well fed and smoking cigarettes and cigars, they are pictured listening earnestly to the speeches of David Hamburger and his friends, and laughing at their jokes. Conspiratorial glances are exchanged with the camera from time to time, while in the background it is just about possible to make out display stands bearing film posters through the haze of smoke.

The nationwide Union of Dutch Cinema Exhibitors (Bond van Exploitanten van Nederlandsche Bioscoop-Theaters) came into being in 1918 via the association of exhibitors and the film exchange, and was followed in 1919 by the nationwide Federation of Film Distributors (Vereeniging van Filmverhuurkantoren). These two organisations merged on 18 July 1921 to form the Netherlands Cinema Union (Nederlandsche Bioscoopbond, or NBB). Its first chairman was David Hamburger Jr., owner of the Rembrandt Theater in Utrecht and at one time an important client of Desmet's. Desmet's old business chums filled the important positions. Elias De Hoop became the Union's treasurer and chairman of its Amsterdam section. David Hamburger Sr. (no relation to Hamburger Jr.) became chairman of the Board of Arbitration.<sup>25</sup> The NBB was the organisation that controlled Dutch film exhibition and distribution until well after the Second World War.<sup>26</sup> The NBB made it more or less impossible for outsiders to operate in the Netherlands, unless they did so under the auspices of its members. It brought to an end the 'Wild West' era of Desmet and his generation. Desmet was one of the group that founded the NBB, but he was to follow its fortunes mainly from the sidelines. He remained a member until the end of his life and regularly attended its meetings, sometimes as a distributor, but usually as the owner of the Amsterdam Cinema Parisien, and as a member of the Board of Commissioners of the NV Cinema Royal.

## 2. Desmet's Activities after 1916

Desmet did not throw in the towel immediately after the collapse of his purchasing activities in 1916. Despite his new career as a property developer, he was to remain connected with the film business for a long while to come. He went on trying to purchase films and to obtain agencies, but the people he approached were those who had been the market leaders before the war: old European film companies like Gaumont, who had little to say for themselves as film producers after the war. He continued to rent films occasionally, although distribution was becoming a more and more marginal activity for him. Furthermore, in the 1920s and 1930s he became a major shareholder in the new Amsterdam Cinema Royal.

Desmet increased his capital by selling cinema buildings and shares in cinemas, which enabled him to proceed to new investments. His investments in the Cinema Royal and the money-eating Flora project demonstrate the degree of his fortune and how, despite failures in shipping and currency speculation, he had achieved success as a businessman. These two projects also

reflect a shift of interest from celluloid to cinemas and entertainment palaces, from ephemeral and risky products like motion pictures to solid bricks and mortar.

### **The worsening situation in the Netherlands in 1917-1918**

Life only became truly difficult in the Netherlands in the last two years of the war, when the shortage of essentials began to bite. We also hear Desmet complaining about this. The import of grain was blocked, resulting in the rationing of bread, flour and rye in February 1917. Tea and coffee were also obtainable only with rationing coupons or on the black market. When the Americans entered the war in April 1917, they banned the export of coal, fuel oil, grain, flour, cattle feed, artificial fertiliser, fat, iron and steel. The lack of cattle feed led to the enforced slaughter of cattle and poultry, which in turn resulted in milk shortages. One of the biggest headaches was the coal shortage, however, which was causing serious power cuts. In 1918, the economic malaise was exacerbated by the compulsory deliveries of potatoes to England and Germany, which led to shortages and riots at home. The end of the war brought little respite for the Netherlands, for the anxieties of the Spanish influenza epidemic were promptly supplemented by the fear of the 'red peril', and the spread to the Netherlands of the revolutionary uprisings in Germany. In the event, there was neither a Russian-style revolution nor a Spartakist rising in the Netherlands.

The modern and efficient European infrastructure that had served Desmet so well before the war had been in ruins for more than four years. The already fragile connections between the Netherlands and Belgium simply worsened during the final years of the war. German restrictions helped to cut off Desmet's contacts with his Belgian customers. It became progressively difficult to keep up even purely personal connections. Desmet exchanged letters with George Fritz Krieger, who was fighting with the Belgian Army in the trenches. 'Like yourself, we are hoping this will be the last year you will have to spend in the trenches,' he wrote on 29 January 1917. But the war was to last almost two more years. Desmet sent Krieger family photographs and sometimes parcels containing cigars, cigarettes and loose tobacco, but they did not always reach him. When Desmet had not heard from Krieger for some time, he asked his friend Karelsen to make enquiries: 'Perhaps he is injured and unable to write, or maybe he has not been receiving my letters.'<sup>27</sup>

Karelsen was Gaumont's Belgian representative and also their Dutch representative for a time during the war. He was called up for military service, however, and became an airman on the Belgian front. Getting Gaumont films to the Netherlands therefore became a more onerous business than it had

been at the outbreak of war. It is clear from the following letter that Desmet and Karelsen were good friends:

I can tell from your letters that you are still in good health and are coping well with military life and that being with the flyers suits you well, which is good news for us, and we only hope that you will remain alright as long as this time goes on. I can tell you that business here goes on as usual, although food is beginning to get very scarce and if things don't change quickly, we'll be worse off than you are. But we are hoping that it will be over soon and that we'll soon be able to do business again and go out together.<sup>28</sup>

Film equipment also became more difficult to come by. Before the war, Desmet had bought a great deal of Pathé equipment, but both during and after the war his supplier was more often than not Ernemann. Both firms had experienced import difficulties since 1915, and prices had risen steeply. This situation was merely exacerbated in the later war years. In March 1917, Ernemann projectors became 20% more expensive, and the price of motors and films rose by an astonishing 40%. In March 1917 a supplementary tax of a further 50% was imposed on motors. Given the scale of the demand for these products and the lack of staff to deal with it, delivery times for equipment were now several months, compared with between ten and fourteen days just one year previously. In June 1917, the supplementary tax on motors and projectors leapt to 100% and 40%, respectively. That same month, M.B. Neumann, Ernemann's Dutch representative, was dismissed – probably for reasons of economy. Pathé followed more or less the same course, except that Desmet was able to get substantial discounts from them for deliveries of their equipment to third parties.<sup>29</sup>

### **Property**

From a business point of view, Desmet was doing better all the time after 1916.<sup>30</sup> His profitable sale of the Cinema Royal allowed him to spend f100,000 on buying almost all the shares in two property companies, NV Fortuna and NV Roggeveen, in both of which he became a director and majority shareholder. Desmet owned 35 of the 42 Fortuna shares, the two other shareholders being J. Mulder, who advised Desmet on tax matters, and Desmet's brother-in-law Klabou. Fortuna owned a building on Onbekende Gracht and several premises on Nieuwe Prinsengracht, close to the Theater Carré. Roggeveen owned houses on Roggeveenstraat, north west of the city centre. Like Desmet's distribution company, the offices of these two firms were initially situated above the Parisien. Desmet was still in films, but devoting



Fig. 65. Desmet and family in his car at the Villa Pax

more and more of his attention to property. With his partner Klabou, he quickly proved to be a no-nonsense landlord: he billed his tenants for more or less all interior and exterior decoration, and threatened those who failed to pay their rent in advance or on time with bailiffs and eviction.

Besides Fortuna and Roggeveen, up to 1918 Desmet still also owned his shares in the Amsterdam Cinema Palace through NV Middenstad, his shares in the cinemas of his brother Mathijs and war bonds.<sup>31</sup> He was additionally still the owner of the cinema in Amersfoort and the café-concert hall (later cinema) in Eindhoven, and also held leases on the premises of the cinemas in Bussum, Delft and the two Parisien cinemas in Rotterdam and Amsterdam.

In 1918, Desmet built himself a fine modern villa at the end of Admiral de Ruyterweg in the Amsterdam suburb of Sloterdijk. He named it the Villa Pax.<sup>32</sup> The offices of Fortuna were also situated there (Fig. 65). But Desmet's wife was unable to settle down in this new environment and moved for a while to an apartment on Damrak, just round the corner from Nieuwendijk and the Parisien. Desmet was buying huge amounts of German marks at this time, possibly speculating on a German victory. He also bought two boats: the trawler Albatros and the lugger Jeanne Aleida. Following the American intervention in the war and the German reversal in the battle of the Yser, food

prices, including fish, had risen so steeply that Desmet thought there might be money to be made in sending out fishermen to catch fish for him. Both investments proved to be failures. The value of the German mark fell dramatically in 1919. The fishing boats spent more time moored in port than out at sea and became completely worthless.<sup>33</sup>

### 3. The End of Desmet's Film Distribution Business

From 1915 Desmet was renting fewer and fewer complete programmes and more and more single long films or main features. It was possible to rent a main feature from him that was padded out with short films to make a complete programme, although the short films were usually pre-war. Exhibitors normally had no problem with this. Criticisms of Desmet's films were levelled more at the condition of the prints than the age of the film. Desmet brazenly hired out prints that were more than ready for the knacker's yard, and this can only have hastened the decay of his network. With the decline of his cinema clientele and his 'yesteryear' stock, he took to renting to alternative organisations such as factories. His main features consisted for the most part of his major successes and such movies of repute as *ALEXANDRA*, *RICHARD WAGNER*, *LES ENFANTS DU CAPITAINE GRANT* or *CAJUS JULIUS CAESAR*.

On 16 November 1918, five days after the signing of the armistice, Desmet wrote to Eclipse, Itala, Vitagraph and Gaumont, who had supplied him so many films before the war. He fancied that he might be able to do some business by buying and distributing films which, though successful in wartime Holland, had not been allowed to be shown in Belgium. Examples of the films concerned are *THE BATTLE CRY OF PEACE* (Vitagraph 1915), *MÈRES FRANÇAISES* (*FRENCH MOTHERS\**, Eclipse 1916), *LES VAMPIRES*, *MACISTE ALPINO* and *TIGRE REALE* (*BENGAL TIGER\**, Itala 1916).<sup>34</sup> Nothing was to come of this project, however.

Desmet also tried in November 1918 to set up a film dealership with the Belgian exhibitor Henry Dirks, but the films, which Dirks had put on the roof of his car to drive across the border, were seized by the Dutch customs. He needed an export licence, which he could only obtain in The Hague from the Netherlands Export Centre (*Nederlandsche Uitvoercentrale*), a revamped version of the NOT. In spite of all Desmet's efforts, the licence was issued only six months later. By that time, Dirks had long since lost interest in Desmet's stock, for Belgium had meanwhile been swamped with French, American, British and Italian films.<sup>35</sup>

The German films Desmet purchased after the First World War were *DIE*

TEUFELSKIRCHE (THE CHURCH OF THE DEVIL, Lucifer Film 1919), KAISERIN ELISABETH VON ÖSTERREICH (EMPRESS ELIZABETH OF AUSTRIA\*, Indra Gross Films 1920) and the Austrian film LANDRU DER BLAUBART VON PARIS (LANDRU, BLUE-BEARD OF PARIS\*, Ottol Film 1920).<sup>36</sup> KAISERIN ELISABETH VON ÖSTERREICH appears to have been a bad buy, as the exhibitors to whom he sent samples all turned it down.<sup>37</sup> Desmet had actually bought two copies of this film. He did not accept defeat, however, for in 1936, by which time the silent film had become *passé*, he submitted it to the Central Film Censorship in The Hague.<sup>38</sup>

From time to time, Desmet would re-emerge as a film distributor from his position in the margins. In April 1923, he wrote to several companies in Berlin, Brussels and Paris offering to become their representative in the Netherlands. He also went on trying to buy old films cheaply. In 1925, for instance, he asked Cines for a copy of CHRISTUS (1916) and even enquired as to whether he could obtain exclusive rights on it. As already noted earlier, films on religious subjects tended to enjoy a long life in the Netherlands. In 1927, Desmet was in Berlin to talk to his pre-war contact Karl Süring about possible purchases, although he must have been doing this on behalf of NV Cinema Royal, rather than on his own account.

In August 1918, just before the war ended, Desmet was again in touch with Gaumont's parent company in Paris. Besides ordering a new copy of L'ENFANT DE PARIS, he offered himself as Gaumont's agent: 'Knowing that M. Adolphe Karelsen, your representative and my friend, is currently "at the battle front" and thus no longer able to represent your house, I would be extremely grateful if you would tell me whether I might take over this function myself.'<sup>39</sup> He was prepared, if necessary, to send a sum on deposit. They rejected his offer to represent them, saying that they had made too few negatives during the war and wanted to continue the old arrangements via their Belgian representative as soon as he was able to take up his work again.

On 1 December 1922, a new Belgian agent, Ed. Guérin, informed Desmet that Gaumont had opened an office in The Hague. The representative was Séverin Farbstein, who was renting both Gaumont films and the brands on which Gaumont held distribution rights, such as the Swedish Svenska and the Russian Ermoliev companies. Desmet approached Gaumont a few months later in April 1923. He observed that there were now very few Gaumont films available in the Netherlands, and proposed himself as distributor for the whole country. Gaumont now answered that although they were happy to do business with him, they were intending to release only part of their total output of films in the Netherlands. Guérin visited Desmet in Amsterdam at the end of May. On 31 May and 1 June, they made two agreements giving Desmet the distribution rights on the following films: from Gaumont

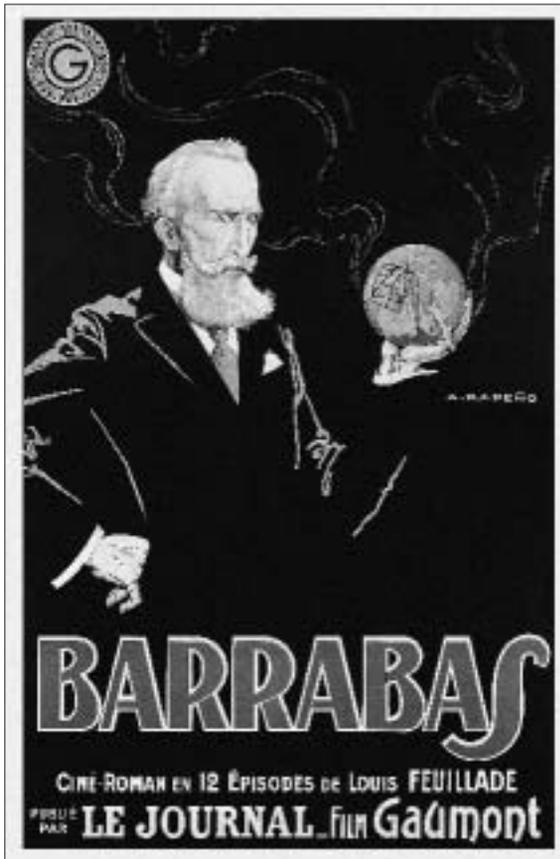


Fig. 66. *Barrabas* (Gaumont 1919)

JOCELYN (JOCELYN\*, 1922), DON JUAN ET FAUST (DON JUAN AND FAUST\*, 1923) and BARRABAS (1919, Fig. 66); from Svenska SON FILS (probably EN VILDFAGEL/A WILD BIRD, AB Svensk Filmindustri 1921) and LE MARRIAGE DE JOUJOU (DUNUNGEN/IN QUEST OF HAPPINESS, AB Svenska Biografteatern 1919); from Ermoliev LA VIE POUR LA VIE (ZHIZN' ZA ZHIZN'/A LIFE FOR A LIFE, Khanzonkov 1916, but offered via Ermoliev), LA DAME DE PIQUE (PIKOVAYA DAMA/QUEEN OF SPADES, Ermoliev 1916) and *La fresque inachevée* (*The Unfinished Fresco*). Some were older films intended for a second run in the Netherlands. Desmet obtained the rights on them for three years at a price of 1.10 francs per metre. But did he actually take delivery of them?<sup>40</sup> Desmet's distribution books and acquisition lists contain no definite evidence of an actual purchase. The last distribution book or 'invoice book' in the archive stops in 1922.

The whole Gaumont affair was essentially the final death spasm of both Desmet's film distribution and Gaumont itself. Gaumont, one of the biggest pre-war producers, made just eleven films in 1919, before ceasing production altogether in 1925. After that, the company concentrated on the import and distribution of American films and its own chain of cinemas.<sup>41</sup>

Desmet managed to go on distributing films for years after he stopped buying them. But the cinemas that had taken complete programmes from him in the past now booked only individual box-office draws, which might be films that had not been shown previously in a particular cinema or provincial location. His prices were calculated according to the size of the town. Or they might be films considered popular enough to be given another run. RICHARD WAGNER, for instance, was booked by Karl Weisbard in December 1919. Like Tuschinski, Weisbard was an emigrant who had settled in Rotterdam, where he had opened the imposing Wester Bioscoop or WB Theater on 20 November 1919. Just a few weeks later, he booked Desmet's RICHARD WAGNER, which had been drawing audiences in the Netherlands since 1913. Its screening was not fortuitous, for Weisbard had made his booking with Desmet as early as the end of July 1919.<sup>42</sup> Desmet had stipulated to Weisbard that he had to show the film before 31 December 1919. He was making arrangements of this kind regularly at the beginning of the 1920s. Exhibitors obtained an option on one or more films, which had to be taken up within a few months or a year. The films concerned were always long or 'main' features with some kind of reputation, such as ALEXANDRA, FIOR DI MALE, CAJUS JULIUS CAESAR and LES ENFANTS DU CAPITAINE GRANT. Religious epics such as THE SIGN OF THE CROSS and IN HOC SIGNO VINCES were still booked occasionally, particularly in the provinces around Christmas or Easter. Desmet often had two copies of them to hand, so that the one that was less worn could be rented out. These feature films were offered in programmes of around 3,000 metres, which included additional short films that often dated from the pre-war period.<sup>43</sup>

From July 1918 to February 1919, Desmet had the same sort of agreement for programmes of main features and shorts with I.J. Benjamins. Benjamins was at that time manager of the Astoria Theater in Rotterdam, which had opened on 7 September 1918 with Desmet's FIOR DI MALE. Desmet heard nothing more from Benjamins after December 1918, and he had stopped paying his bills. He had simply done a moonlight flit. When Desmet eventually engaged a solicitor in the autumn of 1920, it was discovered that Benjamins had a long history of bankruptcy. The affair went to court in 1921, when it emerged that the tax authorities also had demands upon Benjamin and that they had priority over Desmet. This swindler eventually cost Desmet about f 2,000.

It was not so much the ageing pictures and their lack of novelty and length that annoyed exhibitors and their audiences as it was the sometimes abominable state of Desmet's prints. When *ABSINTH* was rented by the Dutch Development Company and Home Mission (Nederlandsche Landkolonisatie en Inwendige Zending) at Drachten in November 1920, the film not only arrived at the very last minute but was also in a quite deplorable condition: '...it looked so old and the perforations were so defective that I could not risk using it for further performances. The film broke continually and my staff had their work cut out sticking it back together.'<sup>44</sup> Yet Desmet seems to have built himself a circuit outside the cinema world, for a year later, in 1921, he managed to rent films to the Federation of Dutch Rubber Manufacturers (NV Vereenigde Nederlandsche Rubber-Fabrieken), otherwise known as the 'Hevea' factories, in Heveadorp. There too, there was a lot of criticism of the prints. 'The film "Ivanhoe" broke several times, which our projectionist tells us was due to inadequate splicing. The film "De Paardedieven" [Horse Thieves] was in a very poor state: in some places it had even been stuck together with pins. [...] The audiences at our cinema have decreased appreciably, and we are told that this is due entirely to the inferior quality of the films you are sending us.'<sup>45</sup> After a few more weeks of this, Hevea decided they had had enough.

The bad state of the films was due not only to wear and tear but also to mistreatment at the hands of Desmet's customers. Films were frequently returned by cinema owners in a damaged condition, and Desmet had no qualms about charging them for it. Not everyone was prepared to pay the bills for these damages. In 1917, when a Roosendaal exhibitor named Hertoghs refused to pay one of these surcharges, Desmet called in his solicitor. The cinema's former explicateur, the famous Vas Diaz, had told him that Hertoghs 'dragged the films through the projector piece by piece if he didn't like them'.<sup>46</sup>

#### **4. Jean Desmet's Career after the First World War: Cinema Royal and the Flora Project**

In the post-war years, Desmet bought and sold cinema buildings and shares, loaned money to acquaintances and business connections and invested in new cinemas. His loans financed the enterprises of other people. Together with his brothers Mathijs and Ferdinand, he lent f15,000 at 12% interest to the De Haan brothers who ran cinemas in The Hague.<sup>47</sup> He also lent money to his own Fortuna company to enable it to buy cinemas and to pay for his new

villa. It is striking how frequently Desmet's borrowers offered property as security.

One notes Desmet's tendency to reduce his risks. He gambled with sums of money in a manner that is almost impossible for the outsider to follow, but his dealings also seem to confirm his maturity as a businessman. He was mainly concerned with the purchase of cinemas he had previously only rented, such as the Cinema Parisien in Amsterdam and the Cinema Palace in Bussum, or with selling off cinema premises such as the Cinema Parisien in Eindhoven. But he was also sometimes simply speculating in cinemas, as in the case of the cinema Delfia in Delft, which he bought in 1919 and then immediately sold to a new exhibitor for a tidy profit.

In July or August 1919, Desmet sold his old cinematograph booth along with the Imperial Bio's transporters for *f* 6,250, though it is not known to whom. He sold his caravan to the travelling showman Janvier for *f* 6,000. In 1920, he bought the land and premises of the Cinema Parisien on Nieuwendijk. He realised *f*40,000 on the sale to his brother Mathijs of the premises housing the Cinema Parisien in Eindhoven, where Mathijs was already in charge. At the beginning of the 1920s, Mathijs also bought up Desmet's shares in his other Eindhoven cinema, the Chicago. Desmet redeemed the mortgage on the cinema in Amersfoort, and in 1922 he lent money to Fortuna in order to buy the building that housed the Cinema Palace in Bussum. At the beginning of the 1920s, therefore, he still owned three cinemas (the Amsterdam Parisien, and the cinemas in Amersfoort and Bussum), and his sales of buildings and shares had made him a wealthy man. This new capital was put to work in new investment, Desmet's principal 'hobby' in the 1920s.

With the establishment of the NV Cinema Royal in 1920, Desmet became one of the principal backers of a new cinema in Amsterdam on 'his' Nieuwendijk: the Cinema Royal (Fig. 67).<sup>48</sup> Between 1924 and 1935, he bought hundreds of shares in the company, often at ridiculously low prices.<sup>49</sup> Besides being a major shareholder in NV Cinema Royal, Desmet was also one of its creditors. As a member of the company's supervisory board, he kept a careful eye on where the money was going. In 1931, when it seemed that the gold standard was about to be abandoned, Desmet immediately gave notice that he would ask for the return of his money if the gold standard actually was abandoned and the value of money fell.

The building of the Cinema Royal began in 1920, and it was opened on 8 February 1922. The Cinema Royal seated no fewer than 1,400 people and between the wars its low admission prices and central position made it the cinema of choice for ordinary Amsterdamers. Together with the Rembrandt Theater on Rembrandt Square, it was Tuschinski's most formidable competitor.<sup>50</sup> NV Cinema Royal controlled a number of other cinemas, including the



Fig. 67. Cinema Royal, Amsterdam

Corso (the former Pathé cinema), the Scala and Luxor in Amsterdam and the Capitol and City in Rotterdam.

Desmet was an important director with NV Cinema Royal. At its monthly meetings, he had a voice in all the important business of the cinema chain, such as the renting of consignments of films, and the purchase of sound equipment upon the arrival of the talkies.<sup>51</sup> He sometimes accompanied the manager J. Veerman to the weekly film exchange to buy new films. As a member of the supervisory board, Desmet oversaw the management of financial matters. He also had the job of vetting decisions that had hardly been problematic in the days when he was a one-man business, such as the employment of family members. N. Bierman, the former manager, was Veerman's brother-in-law, the commissioner B. Schaap was Veerman's father-

in-law, and G. Veerman, Veerman's brother, ran the cinemas in Rotterdam for a period. On the other hand, Desmet met with no opposition when, on Schaap's death in 1936, he proposed his own brother Mathijs as his replacement. By this time, however, Mathijs Desmet was a major Dutch cinema exhibitor, with three film theatres in Eindhoven and three in Haarlem. He was therefore fully acquainted with the business. Together, Jean Desmet and his brother owned 51% of the company's capital, giving them a controlling interest in NV Cinema Royal. In 1937, Desmet sold most of his shares to NV Ambio, which took over the management of the Cinema Royal that year.<sup>52</sup>

A large part of the money remaining to Desmet, after deductions for mortgage repayments and the like, was lost in the disastrous venture with the lugger and the trawler at the beginning of the 1920s. According to his tax statements at least, Desmet did not net much profit. Nonetheless, his assets were impressive. His claims on members of the family, business connections and institutions in respect of loans were equally considerable. He dealt henceforth in buildings, shares and money instead of films. In 1928, it becomes abundantly evident that he was none the worse for the experience, for this is the year in which Jean Desmet, who had a chronic weakness for luxury cars, bought the chic, custom-made Hispano Suiza, owned by and specially made for Prince Hendrik, the prince consort of Queen Wilhelmina.<sup>53</sup>

In 1928, Desmet embarked on one last great venture, which took him back into the world of entertainment. On 21 December 1928, he bought the Flora variety theatre from his competitor Anton Nöggerath, who had put it up for auction along with his cinema. Nöggerath's stage reviews at the Flora had been very popular during and immediately after the First World War, but they had been badly hit afterwards by the competition from cinemas and more modern theatres. Nöggerath went bankrupt in 1923, and the municipality ordered him to install a new manager in the theatre. This was Luigi Difraen. The theatre managed to struggle on for another five years, but then the curtain fell for good.

Jean Desmet bought the Flora through the development company NV Madrid, which he used specifically to advance his plans for the theatre.<sup>54</sup> Besides the theatre at 24 Amstelstraat, the Flora complex included sections of the buildings at 20 and 22 Amstelstraat and the canal house behind the Flora at 607 Herengracht, where the Flora offices were situated and also where the Nöggerath family had been living up to this time. A few months later, on 12 February, a fierce blaze completely destroyed the variety theatre and the café adjoining it. It was so cold at the time that the water from the firemen's hoses froze solid, transforming the ruin into an ice palace. The event was well preserved on film and photographs.<sup>55</sup>

The fire was a blessing in disguise, for Desmet wanted to build an entirely

new complex on the site of the Flora, with enough space for a dramatic theatre (which could also be used as a cinema), a roller-skating rink and a restaurant with a winter garden equipped with a sliding roof. In 1931, he added the buildings at 609-611 and 613 Herengracht to his purchases. The entrance to the complex was on Herengracht. Passing through the cloakrooms and cafés that would be situated in these monumental canal houses with their splendid eighteenth-century ceiling frescos, the visitor would proceed first to the winter garden and then to the theatre and the skating rink, which were intended to be placed above each other on Amstelstraat. The new part of the complex was designed in the new functionalist style. The architect of this daring new entertainment complex was Jan Wils, who was also the architect of the Amsterdam Olympic Stadium (Fig. 68).

The project failed to take off. The city of Amsterdam dragged its feet endlessly, while raking in huge annual taxes. Meanwhile, the economic crisis of the early 1930s had made investors cautious. The crisis also impacted on the film world. Despite the increasing size of their audiences, exhibitors had to reduce their admission prices in order to fill their more expensive seats. The audiences were switching to the cheaper stalls. Desmet must have watched



Fig. 68. Exterior of the Flora-Palace, designed by Jan Wils

these developments closely, for the Royal's receipts fell sharply, despite an overall increase in audience sizes. Even cinema king Tuschinski was hit by the slump. The wild dance parties at La Gaité, the elegant dance hall in the Amsterdam Tuschinski cinema, gave way to the cabaret acts of the German émigré Rudolf Nelson. In 1935, Tuschinski hived off Desmet's former Cinema Royal to the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, which turned it into a news theatre.

Curiously enough, Tuschinski experienced a failure with an ambitious building scheme that paralleled Desmet's but had even more drastic consequences. In his case, the project was a large cinema in The Hague. In 1931, Tuschinski and his brothers-in-law – who were also his associates – acquired land in the centre of The Hague, on which Tuschinski planned to build a new film palace. When the financier, a rich German refugee related to Tuschinski, withdrew from the project, Tuschinski got into difficulties, since the city of The Hague forced him to continue to pay the rent on his long lease. He and his brothers-in-law were declared bankrupt in 1936, but the Tuschinski cinemas were saved by the intervention of Jewish bankers, the chairman of the NBB and the accountant Koop Blom. Two new companies took over the management of the property and the running of the cinemas, while Tuschinski and his in-laws were reduced to the status of company employees, although they continued to represent themselves to the world as owners.<sup>56</sup>

Just like Tuschinski's plan, Desmet had come along with his amusement palace just a little too late. The euphoria of the late 1920s was over. He continued to argue the feasibility of the project for years, but finally had to surrender.<sup>57</sup> His greatest dream turned into his greatest disappointment.

## 5. From Film Stocks to Museum Pieces

It was about quarter to three when a policeman patrolling Damrak, and several residents on Nieuwendijk, called the fire brigade more or less simultaneously to report a rapidly spreading blaze on the roof of the high building housing the cinema "Parisien". The flames were breaking out on three sides and spreading a fierce heat over the entire area. There was clearly a serious danger that the fire would spread further [...] The fire engines on Haarlemerplein, De Ruyterkade and Prinsengracht were rushed to Nieuwendijk, together with a ladder truck, a personnel carrier and an equipment truck [...] Within half an hour, the blaze had been sufficiently contained to remove the danger of it spreading. The work of extinguishing it completely continued for some time under the attentive gaze of wakened residents and late-night strollers.<sup>58</sup>

In the early hours of the morning of Sunday, 7 August 1938, a fierce blaze broke out in the loft above the rear part of the entrance hall of the Cinema Parisien. According to the press it had been caused by a short circuit. No one was injured. Desmet had not lived above the cinema for a long time, and his brother-in-law Piet Klabou (the manager) and his wife, who occupied the upper floors, happened to be in Scheveningen that night. The roof and the garret were burned out completely. The third floor below them suffered extensive damage both from the fire and the water used to put it out.

The blaze resulted in the loss of 240 large-format posters (so-called 'gevel-doeken' or 'facade posters') and a large quantity of other publicity material.<sup>59</sup> The printed materials consumed by the flames included programme notes with stills and film texts, synopses and smaller posters for Desmet's most prestigious long features: the films he called his 'monumental items'. The archive was in a room under the loft where the blaze had raged fiercest. Desmet reported that the publicity materials in the archive and loft were all either completely burned out or too badly damaged by water to be of further use. If this is so, then not all the publicity material could have been kept in the loft, for a good deal of it survives to this day: there are now dozens or hundreds of booklets for particular films where there were once thousands. Three-quarters of Desmet's stock of booklets was lost in the fire. Only one or two copies of the facade posters were spared, although quite a few smaller posters survived. The Desmet Archive bears traces of the fire. Some of the materials show signs of damage by smoke and water, and a copy of Giuseppe Becce's specially composed score for RICHARD WAGNER is now no more than a bundle of scraps (Fig. 69).<sup>60</sup>

Had it spread to the front part of the loft, the fire would have probably claimed Desmet's entire collection of films. The force and pressure of burning and exploding nitrate film would have devastated the entire building, and probably the area surrounding it. Desmet was fully aware of the fire hazard presented by highly inflammable nitrate film. In 1913, when filling in his policy form for Labor, the commercial section of the 'De Nederlanden van 1845' insurance company, he had entered 'films' in the section requiring him to list the combustible materials in his building. In 1915, Labor had asked him to let them install fire extinguishers at his distribution offices, but the frugal Desmet replied that he would do so only if the company supplied them free of charge.<sup>61</sup>

Immediately after the fire, Desmet drew up an inventory of his films and posters. The Dutch titles of his largely foreign films were all entered in two small notebooks. This list may be regarded as the inventory of what was now basically a private collection. The films were stored in 40 crates and 85 parcels. Desmet drew up a list of 1,013 titles, of which 7 were described as 'frag-



Fig. 69. Remains of the musical score of *Richard Wagner* (Messter 1913)

ments', 7 as 'unknown', 3 as 'intertitles' and 47 as 'newsreels' or 'weekly reviews'. Since the collection now contains slightly more than nine hundred films, only a very small part of it has been lost since 1938. Desmet's original stocks from the period 1910-20 were larger than this. Assuming that in 1914 (see below) he owned between 1,500 and 1,600 films, a third of his stock must have already been lost before 1938.

### Desmet's stocks 1910-1920

Let us now attempt to describe Desmet's stock of films. The task of reconstructing his stocks in the period 1910-20 is complicated by the fact that they were constantly changing. Expansions due to new purchases were offset by various losses and reductions. None of Desmet's films were destroyed by the fire of 1938, but films and parts of films had been torched in previous fires. *LA VIE ET LA PASSION DE N.S. JÉSUS CHRIST* and *DEN HVIDE SLAVEHANDEL* had been burned out completely. The destruction of individual reels of *L'ASSOMMOIR* and *KAISERIN ELISABETH VON ÖSTERREICH* made them unusable.<sup>62</sup> Films also caught fire at Desmet's Amersfoort cinema in 1914 and 1919.<sup>63</sup> In only a few cases did Desmet buy replacement copies of the lost titles. He sometimes got rid of large batches of films, which he described as 'film waste'. 'Waste' in the eyes of a film renter might have been anything: films in too bad a condition to be shown, films too old to be shown, fragments of films or worn out intertitles. In September 1916, he crated and sold 118 kilograms of this waste to Vincent Hoffmans, a chemicals factory in Waalwijk, followed by two more crates in January 1917. If the 1917 consignment contained as many films as the one in

1916, Desmet must have been conducting a very extensive clear-out.<sup>64</sup> Desmet also sold waste film to Germany, despite rumours that the Germans were using nitrate film for weapons. 'I probably have around two hundred kilos left, since I sent two hundred kilos to Germany not long ago,' he informed Hoffmans on 19 September 1916.<sup>65</sup> Desmet also asked the distributor Bremer at the Casino and Mrs. Saks at the Apollo Theater (both in the Hague) if they wished to get rid of any waste film, as theirs and his could be sent in one lot to Hoffmans. We can assume, therefore, that the three crates sent to Hoffman may have contained other people's film waste besides his own.

Despite Desmet's intensive buying before the First World War, the Desmet Collection contains very few newsreels, and a letter of 20 September 1915 to Deutsche Cines Gesellschaft perhaps explains why. 'Concerning the leaders, I should inform you that I have been making blanks out of old newsreels and using them for this.'<sup>66</sup> Desmet had been stripping the emulsion from his newsreels and recycling them as start leaders. In earlier years, he had bought extra leaders for this purpose. By September 1915, he had used up his newsreels and had to buy more.

Since 1911, Desmet had sold films to travelling showmen and dealers such as Welte, Jokisch and Van Duinen. In 1913/14 he was selling on a larger scale to people such as Bakker, Neumann and H elant, who bought up films for the Dutch East Indies. The 190 films acquired by H elant certainly took a bite out of Desmet's old stock. Desmet advertised a list of films for sale in *De Kineematograaf* of 28 August 1914.<sup>67</sup> Sales lists in the Desmet Archive also indicate that in 1914, Desmet was looking to sell more or less his entire stock. Variety numbers, slapstick farces, comedies, nature films, science films and melodramas generally sold at between 20 and 40 cents per metre. More was charged for coloured films and for a small number of long features, such as *IN HOC SIGNO VINCES*, *SATANASSO*, *SCHULDIG* and *DET HEMMELIGHEDSFULDE X*, which were offered at between 50 cents and 1 guilder.<sup>68</sup> Both during and after the war, Desmet sold the odd film from time to time. In 1915, he passed on his copy of *DAS GEHEIMNIS VON CHATEAU RICHMOND* to N oggerath. *DET HEMMELIGHEDSFULDE X* and *QUO VADIS ?* were sold to C. Krikke in 1919, and his second copy of *CAJUS JULIUS CAESAR* vanished into the possession of Van Duinen in 1924.<sup>69</sup>

As late as 1927, Desmet sold seven shorts to the distributor Ed. Pelster, most of them dating back to the days of his travelling cinematograph: Path e's *PARDONNE GRAND-P ERE*, for example, and *L'OBSESSION DE L'OR* (*THE ARTISTS'S DREAM*, Path e 1906). The others were probably also mainly Path e productions. The two last-mentioned films were later included in the distribution catalogue of the Central Office of Ligafilms, the distribution office of the Dutch Filmliga, as examples of pre-war blood-and-thunder melodrama.<sup>70</sup> Quite why Pelster bought these films in the first place remains unclear. Did

he perhaps want to rent them as children's films like his rival Van Duinen? Or did he buy them for their value as historical curiosities? The latter would have been remarkable in 1927, when there was still no such thing as a Dutch Cinémathèque. The Central Film Archive was established in 1921, but it only collected Dutch non-fiction films considered to be of historical value. It was a rather small operation and was dissolved in 1933 when it ran out of funds.<sup>71</sup> The systematic collection and cataloguing of motion pictures began only in 1946 with the founding of the Netherlands Film Museum.<sup>72</sup>

There are snags and pitfalls everywhere when we try to reconstruct the story of Desmet's films. He would sometimes rent films belonging to other distributors, which he then hired to his own cinemas and regular customers, giving the impression that his stock was larger than it really was. The films *A DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*, *SHANNON OF THE SIXTH* and *IL DRAMMA DEL COLLE DI GUI*s, which he advertised widely in the trade press, were probably only briefly in his possession as they belonged to the film importer and distributor Ralph Minden. When Minden went off to the Dutch East Indies in February 1916, he took these films with him, along with *Aballino, de Roverhoofdman* (*Aballino the Robber Chief*) and *A FIGHT FOR FREEDOM*.<sup>73</sup>

After the First World War, Desmet made several new attempts to sell parts of his collection. In 1921, we find him writing to Frans Bastings, a manufacturing company in Maastricht: 'My brother-in-law informs me that you were at the cinema on Nieuwendijk today, presumably having heard of a place to buy a batch of films. I am writing to inform you that I have around three or four hundred thousand metres of film for sale.'<sup>74</sup> His firm responded to all requests for films in the want ads of newspapers such as *De Telegraaf*: 'In reply to your advertisement in *De Telegraaf* of the 9<sup>th</sup> inst. in connection with films for home cinemas, I write to invite you to select from our large collection of films, which includes scientific and general interest films, comedies, slapstick and dramas great and small,' wrote Desmet's brother-in-law Klabou in 1923.<sup>75</sup> A lot of these ads were placed by people looking for material for home film projectors, since some of them took normal 35mm film.<sup>76</sup> Only a few film dealers were interested in Desmet's obsolete stock of films, however, either because there were already numerous distributors trying to get rid of old stock like his or because his asking price was too high.

Until around 1924, Desmet rented a small number of long melodramas, crime films and historical epics such as *RICHARD WAGNER*, *FILIBUS*, and *IN HOC SIGNO VINCES*. *CAJUS JULIUS CAESAR* played at the Amsterdam Cinema Royal from 3 to 9 March 1922. Although the takings were modest, these films retained their commercial value until the mid-1920s, and Desmet continued to pay the high insurance premiums on his collection up to this time.<sup>77</sup>

From 1913, during the heyday of his distribution business, Desmet insured his film stocks for *f* 50,000 with the Rotterdam insurers D. Hudig & Co. His cover was raised to *f*75,000 in 1914, which converts to approximately €676,000 in the year 2000. It was usual for distributors to insure their distribution stocks for large sums during the boom before the First World War. Desmet's films remained insured at the same amount up to 1925.<sup>78</sup> After 1925, Desmet clearly did not consider it worth his while to go on paying insurance premiums on films that were not making any money. There are no documents in the archive relating to special insurance for the films after 1925. This was undoubtedly connected to Desmet's loss of the larger part of his cinemas.

Desmet naturally kept registers of his films since 1910, otherwise he would have been quite unable to run his business efficiently. However, most of these registers are undated. Also, the exact acquisition dates of films are missing from the lists in many cases, making it difficult to get an overview of what was in stock at any particular moment. It is again evident that some films, such as a part of the newsreel stocks, were not entered in the registers.

Desmet's film stocks in the period around the outbreak of the First World War can be reconstructed from the shelf numbers. The shelf numbers for Desmet's sales lists of 1914 run from 841 to 2094.<sup>79</sup> Desmet divided his stock into comic numbers (fast-action films such as chase-farces), comedies (bourgeois situation comedies), short dramas, long dramas, geographical films (often travelogues), science films and filmed variety numbers. Taking these in sequence, Desmet's collection of films appears as follows:

Table 4. Sales lists 1914

<i>Genre</i>	<i>Numbers</i>	<i>Quantity</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
Comic Numbers	841-1198	357	Older farces
Comic Numbers	1199-1336	137	
Dramas many one-reelers	1337-1704	367	Older productions,
Comedies	1705-1796	91	
Dramas (Zigomar)	1797-1924	127	1 un-numbered
Variety Numbers	1926-1937	11	
Science Films	1938-1960, 2080, 1792	24	
Geographical/Nature Films	1961-2094	133	

On the strength of this, we can say that in 1914 Desmet owned about 1,200 films. But to what did the missing first 800 numbers refer? Were they perhaps films he had got rid of at an earlier stage? Since newsreels are excluded from the sales list, we need to add a further 200 films to the total given here. He also bought numerous films after 1914, but they would have added up to a few dozen at the most. This gives a grand total of between 1,500 and 1,600 films.<sup>80</sup>

The table gives no indication of length, but the long films come mainly under the heading of 'drama', with 'comedy' in second place.

The Desmet business archive informs us that all the films were insured against fire from 1913. From that point onwards, the films were treated as a single insured item. In any event, Desmet was looking to preserve his film collection, paid a steep annual insurance premium on it and took care to store it safely. He was initially interested merely in the temporary preservation of his films, and it was not in fact until the 1930s that his arrangements began to take on a more permanent aspect.

The precise location of the collection between 1910 and the early 1930s can be determined from the insurance documents. The floor of the loft area of 69 Nieuwendijk housed *f*75,000 worth of films and accessories, stored in tin canisters lined with asbestos. The films were not kept above the theatre itself but above the entrance to it.<sup>81</sup> Like the use of asbestos, the latter precaution was probably a condition of insurance. The cinema auditorium was situated at the rear of the building. Should fire break out in the loft, the flames would not spread immediately to the auditorium, and the audience would be able to escape via the rear exit of the cinema. A table used for packing films for despatch stood in the loft above the entrance hall. Films needed for despatch might also be lying around in the distribution office on the first floor.

Desmet's publicity material was also kept in the loft, but at the back and partly in a garret projecting above it. The front and rear of the building were separated by a space containing the projection box. The idea was to prevent the rapid spread of any fire that might break out in the projection box. The collection of publicity material was not insured together with the films, but covered separately by the distribution office's contents policy, which included furniture, typewriters, carpets and other fixtures.<sup>82</sup> Ilse Hughan, Desmet's granddaughter, recalled that the business archive had been stored in a shed behind the cinema. It was probably moved there at a later stage, although another part of it may already have been in storage there. The most recent section of the archive was presumably in the office on the first floor. Another part was in the archive room in the loft, at least until the fire of 1938.

### Private collection: the move to Amstelveen

Besides making an inventory of his films after the fire at the Cinema Parisien, Desmet set about storing them in a safer place, for he realised that he was keeping a 'bomb' in his loft. Just two weeks after the blaze, he made an arrangement with the distributor A.J. Dresscher in Amstelveen, near Amsterdam. Dresscher ran a company named Express Firma in the 1930s. Desmet stored his films in a garage behind Dresscher's house which was already being used as a film vault. From 1938 until at least 1952, he rented his so-called 'little vault' from Dresscher for *f*240 a year. And this is how the films survived the Second World War. While there is no absolute proof that they remained in Dresscher's vault until they were taken over by the Netherlands Film Museum, it is unlikely that they went back to the Cinema Parisien after 1952 (the date of Dresscher's last rent bill). This is sustained by a note by the Desmet family accountant Mutsaers, dated 21 November 1956, remarking: 'silent film archive Amstelveen *f*1,000'.<sup>83</sup>

While there is no inventory of the films stored with Dresscher, we can assume that the films concerned were those listed in the notebooks mentioned above. There were of course always films lying around the projection box at the Parisien, but they were just the films currently being screened. When a fire broke out in the projection box in 1942, the only films to be burned up were those rented for the day's performance from Ufa, Lumina and Tobis.<sup>84</sup>

Whether or not Desmet's films and advertising materials could be described as a collection when they were under his ownership is open to question. Yet all doubts were resolved as soon as the collection entered the Netherlands Film Museum. Jean Desmet died on 21 November 1956. A few months later, in April 1957, Desmet's daughter Jeanne Desmet-Hughan presented the films and the publicity materials to the Netherlands Film Museum. The museum's director, Jan de Vaal, also managed to acquire the family business archive. From that moment on, the films and the publicity were treated as a single corpus. The business archive was added as a third section and was also described as 'part of the Desmet Collection'. The material had become a museum collection.

## Conclusion

A remarkable combination of business sense, thrift, unsaleable stock, respect and chance secured one of the finest and most varied collections of film in the world for the Netherlands Film Museum, where it remains to this day. The Desmet Collection represents an immeasurably valuable resource due to the presence of hundreds of unique film copies, which have now been transferred to non-inflammable acetate film stock, using the best available preservation methods and preserving the original colours. The responses of audiences to screenings of these films, both in the Netherlands and abroad, have been overwhelmingly enthusiastic. Also unique is the survival, as a single whole, of a film collection, a publicity collection and a business archive. Together, they provide a rich and homogeneous picture of an independent film distributor and cinema owner in the years 1907-16 and, through him, of the entire film culture of those years. It is rare that we come upon text and context in such a unified form. The Desmet Collection underlines the importance of examining a medium in its context, which is here the context of film distribution and film exhibition.



# **X. In Retrospect**

## **Jean Desmet's Place in Film History**

Within the historical retrospect of Desmet's business, there are six key themes. Allowing for certain significant differences, the Dutch situation resembles the open models of Britain and Germany cited in the Introduction. Desmet's development forms part of the institutionalisation of cinema at a critical moment in time. By following his development, we are able to trace not only changing exhibition practices but also shifts within the power structures of film distribution, both in the travelling cinema period and afterwards. His story shows how he was at various times a 'winner' or a 'loser', a modern or a conservative businessman; how he sometimes set the trend and at other times merely followed it. The task of reconstructing the history of Desmet's career teaches us to appreciate the value of a commercial archive as an historical source. And finally, in looking at things through Desmet's eyes, we are made more aware of the many changes that have taken place in cinema since its early days.

### **I. The Netherlands in an International Perspective: 'Open' and 'Closed' Situations**

The changes taking place outside the Netherlands cannot be projected onto the Dutch situation without further ado. National developments are only to a limited extent part of international developments.

This applies particularly to the situation in France and the United States. In the early stages, the production companies in these countries formed a closed front with sweeping powers of control over film trading and cinema exhibition. During the heyday of the travelling cinema, the Netherlands had been heavily dependent on Pathé, but this situation changed dramatically after 1909. Henceforth, Dutch distributors chose their films for themselves, thanks to the arrival of permanent motion-picture theatres, independent distributors and the growing variety of films on offer. Schemes like the creation of the Belge Cinéma subsidiary, through which Pathé sought to incorporate both Belgium and the Netherlands, proved unsuccessful. Like Britain and Germany in the years before 1914, the Netherlands was a country where it was possible for anyone to import, distribute or hire movies.

It remains difficult to establish precisely to what extent the Netherlands adopted the closed system, which introduced the practices of block-booking and blind-selling that Kristin Thompson observes in Britain. In any event, the power of Dutch exhibitors and distributors did not come to an end, despite the restrictions of choice that followed the rise of Ufa and the American studios. The Netherlands may well have been unfamiliar with the Pathé and MPPC models of vertically integrated production, distribution and exhibition, but this did not prevent the Dutch 'front' of exhibitors and distributors from turning itself into a closed shop with the establishment of the NBB in 1921. The NBB prohibited all exhibition and trading activities by non-members. In 1945/6, it even took on the powerful American Motion Picture Export Association (MPEA) when the latter was trying to establish a monopoly of the whole of Europe in the wake of the Second World War. For almost a year, the NBB successfully boycotted American films in the Netherlands, until the MPEA reluctantly agreed to get back in line. It was not until the 1980s that the NBB fell apart under the impact of compulsory centralisation and the concentration of cinema ownership in the hands of a small number of exhibitors.<sup>1</sup>

### **The grey area between short and long**

The Desmet Archive completely supports the applicability to the Netherlands of the findings of Müller, Staiger, Bernardini and others concerning the importance of film length and the transition from short to long films in countries such as Germany, Italy and the United States.

Once they had become used to this new phenomenon, many Dutch exhibitors were no longer satisfied with programmes consisting only of short films. Some of them would now only rent single, long films from Desmet instead of complete programmes. Desmet, on the other hand, tried to restrict small-town and neighbourhood cinemas to short films for a while longer, and he even reduced long film epics to one-reel versions in order to preserve the older form of programming. His perseverance with short films was connected with the dominant position of Pathé and Gaumont, and with the powerful presence of the American MPPC trust. By remaining wedded to the one-reeler, the MPPC was deliberately attempting to perpetuate its policy of standardised films and programmes.

In the Netherlands, there was for years a sort of grey area in which the old system continued to exist side by side with the new practices.<sup>2</sup> Short films still accounted for between a quarter and half of a programme, and they were not 'protected' against simultaneous screenings by competitors. This is what makes Desmet's epoch interesting as a transitional period. The films of the Desmet Collection exemplify the diversity of short and long films, even

though copies of a large number of Desmet's most successful long films have now gone missing. The advent of the long feature and the monopoly film was less of a catastrophe for the small cinemas in the Netherlands than for those in the United States, where the nickelodeons were completely marginalised by a combination of long films and rising rental prices. In the Netherlands, most cinemas were opening just as the long feature films were making their first appearance, and the construction of cinemas capable of seating audiences of more than a thousand only properly got underway there after the war. The impact of the long film was therefore more benign and did not lead to the large-scale closure of small Dutch cinemas.

### **The Netherlands compared 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 which 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 were spared the crisis experienced by the German film world following the introduction of long films and exclusives.

In 1910, Germany and the Netherlands were primarily 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 were finding a ready market in the Netherlands and beginning 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. As Müller shows in her book, a great change took place in Germany in 1911/12, 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. 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 pre-war 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, this investigation 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. As the Belgian historian Guido Convents notes:

Taken as a whole, the Belgian cinema fleet around 1912 is estimated at 650 units, catering to around 7,500,000 inhabitants. In Brussels and its suburbs, there were said to be about 115 cinemas. Most of these establishments were rather small-scale. The larger cinema palaces accounted for perhaps no more than one-fifth of the total number of cinema auditoria.<sup>3</sup>

The Belgian lead was due partly to the Belgian economic boom. Convents: 'This country in the heart of Europe was one of the richest and most densely populated industrial areas on the continent.'<sup>4</sup> According to the Dutch historian J.C.H. Blom, 'economic growth [in the Netherlands] at the same time paved the way for an unprecedented growth of prosperity, although in this period [the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, IB] the standard of affluence lagged somewhat behind that of rapidly expanding Belgium'.<sup>5</sup> 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 all the most important international production companies. Agencies jointly catering to Belgium and the Netherlands could also be found there sometimes. In 1914, this network was abruptly ruptured, and for four years the Dutch had to get their films from elsewhere. The war probably caused Dutch distributors to shift their focus permanently from Brussels to London and Berlin.

## 2. The Institutionalisation, Internationalisation and Localisation of Cinema

Film culture acquired a form and shape in Desmet's time. A cultural infrastructure was established which was to last until well after the Second World War. 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, 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 programme 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. 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. The Desmet Collection and the story of Desmet's career in the film business are thus enormously valuable resources for research into the infrastructure of the cultural life of the times and the part played in it by the First World War.

A precondition of the new film culture was a good general infrastructure, facilitating rapid and efficient transport and communication (Fig. 70). The rapid postal service via the railway system enabled Desmet to import his films quickly and to send them round the Netherlands with speed and efficiency. With all its domestic and foreign letters, telegrams, memos to employees, invoices and carbon copies, the Desmet Archive is actually one huge documentary record of transport and communications between 1910 and 1915. The value of this infrastructure becomes all the more evident when we consider the number of things that were delayed, disrupted or abandoned for anything up to four years by the First World War: film carriage, postal services and, in countries such as France and Italy, even film production itself.

When we look at the history of Desmet's career, it is evident that institutionalisation was beginning to be an important factor around the time of the First World War. Film distributors and cinema owners were beginning to create their own professional organisations and to arrange regular times and places to meet and do business. Cinema employees were also starting to organise themselves at this same time: unions were set up, and there were strikes. Social movements have a way of crystallising after a while and devel-



Fig. 70. Map of the West European railway network, c.1910

oping into routines, which is precisely what happened to film distribution as a separate branch of the industry after the First World War. By the time Desmet left the stage, the Wild West days of film distribution were already history.

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 globalisation.<sup>6</sup> 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 globalisation begins to accelerate. Some of its most typical signs 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 develop-

ment of worldwide competition and international prizes, and the development of universal norms of citizenship, law and human identity.<sup>7</sup>

### **Localisation and differentiation: specification**

The student of the history of Desmet's business has to learn to approach terms like 'suppliers' and 'buyers' with care. From Desmet's point of view, there was a quite considerable difference between second-hand dealers, international distributors and production companies. Everyone had his own particular agenda. In the case of his customers, the differences were related to the location of the cinema within a city, the size of the city, the number of cinemas there and the city's place in the general hierarchy of cities. The strict censorship policies of a municipal authority or the lobbying activities of a dominant religious movement could affect the kind of movies that exhibitors were prepared to take. Cinema entrepreneurs also had their own preferences and priorities: short or long films, specific genres, films from particular countries or featuring particular stars, cheap or expensive films, copious advertising material or only a little, explicateurs or orchestras, and continuous or fixed performances.

The same applies to the Dutch distributors. Customers in the provinces or travelling showmen were treated differently to the luxury film theatres/cinemas in the big cities. There were certain films that all distributors wanted in their repertoire, and this applied particularly to short films. With the arrival of more and more long films, distributors like Gildemeijer and Nöggerath were bent on acquiring certain stars, genres and the films of certain companies and countries. Desmet had no particular specialisation. His successors, Barnstijn and Cinema Palace, went in for similarly broad selections, although there were always certain individual biases, such as Barnstijn's special liking for serials. Diversification and specialisation were parallel phenomena.

## **3. Who's in Charge?**

### **Travelling cinema culture in the Netherlands**

One might wonder which played the more decisive role in shaping film-historical developments at the beginning of the twentieth century, travelling cinema or variety theatre? This is not an easy question to answer, even after a close examination of the relevant materials. For a long time, it was thought

that the role of variety theatre was more influential, a view supported by Robert Allen and Corinna Müller.<sup>8</sup> The United States, France and Germany all had a rich 'vaudeville' culture. The same seems to have been the case in Italy too. However, the last few years have seen the recognition of the important contribution of travelling cinema. This much is clear from Charles Mussler's study of the travelling showman Lyman Howe, Vanessa Toulmin's work on Great Britain, Małgorzata Hendrykowska's study of Poland, Aldo Bernardini's work on Italy and Guido Convents's writing on Belgium.<sup>9</sup> Like Britain, the Netherlands had a thriving travelling-cinema culture. Except in the three big cities, variety theatre, and film as part of variety theatre, were almost unheard of in the Netherlands. It was the travelling cinema owners who ran the show. Before the arrival of the Mullens brothers and Desmet (c.1908-10), the cities of Rotterdam, The Hague and Amsterdam had little to offer in the way of film culture. Elsewhere, it was travelling showmen like the Mullens and Benner who were shaping film culture on the fairgrounds and in rented halls. New films, including Dutch actualities, were first screened in the variety theatres, but it was the part played by travelling cinema owners – notably the two Mullens brothers with their own films, explicateurs, continuous performances and efforts to legitimate film and cinema – that was of decisive importance in the rise of permanent cinemas.

Who decided what was going to be shown in the travelling cinemas? To begin with, the view widely held in American film literature that the exhibitors had the main say in the early years must be queried in the case of the Netherlands and probably the rest of Europe as well. Richard Abel's book on Pathé's activities in the United States raises doubts as to its validity for that country too.<sup>10</sup> At a time when three-quarters of a programme was made up of Pathé films, it is reasonable to ask who was really calling the tune. Although the remaining quarter of the programmes – which tended to consist of actualities – was also sometimes advertised more prominently and discussed in greater detail by the press, there is no way round the fact that around 1909, the bulk market in films was controlled by the French multinational. It was only with the rise of competition and the arrival of a more varied selection of films, offering more options, that exhibitors were in a position to compile programmes that were significantly different from each other. It was, of course, open to any exhibitor to arrange the sequence in which his films were projected and to suggest his own interpretation by adding music and commentaries, and considering the uniformity of the available film material, such injections of diversity were probably very necessary.

The changes in the type of films on offer were prompted to a great extent by the replacement of film purchase by film rental. Pathé themselves were the initiators of a change that played into the hands of their competitors. From

1907 onwards, the year of Pathé's switch to the rental system, Pathé's domestic and foreign rivals began to open international distribution offices in Paris, London, Berlin and Brussels. In the Netherlands, the rising fortunes of the distributor Nöggerath Jr. in 1909 and the arrival of Desmet himself in 1910 are part of this change. The increasing number of films and the convenience of film rental stimulated the opening of permanent cinemas. Low operating costs enabled the new theatres to lower admission prices and to undercut the travelling cinemas. For the travelling showmen, this all came on top of the daily struggle for survival on the fairground. They were forced to choose between switching to other fairground attractions, going over to permanent cinemas or being shunted out into the small towns. Permanent cinemas arrived later and spread more slowly in the Netherlands than in countries like Belgium and Germany, so that travelling cinemas continued to wander round the country for longer there than elsewhere. It took until 1911/12 for most of them to disappear.

Desmet was one of a generation of travelling showmen who devoted a lot of attention to the interior and exterior appointments of their fairground booths, giving careful consideration to matters of size, luxury, comfort and safety, and who could afford the increasingly expensive site fees. Most of this generation later opened permanent cinemas. Desmet belonged to the third generation of travelling showmen, succeeding pioneers like Slieker and innovators such as the Mullens brothers. As Van der Maden has noted, this generation was exclusively profit-oriented: 'Moral and aesthetic criteria faded into the background and played a subordinate role in the running of the business.'<sup>11</sup>

Desmet was actually not very different from the Mullens brothers and Alex Benner, his biggest competitors and the leading travelling showmen of the period between 1905 and 1910. He was certainly not a 'showman' by nature and was therefore less concerned than they were to occupy the centre stage. His approach was more measured and frugal than theirs, and he generated less of the continuity that they were able to achieve by returning year after year to the same fairground or to the same rented hall, with the same musicians and explicateurs. His performances had a more local flavour, since he tended to hire his pianists and explicateurs on the spot. But like Benner and the Mullens, he paraded his wealth through his luxurious cinema booth, and like them, he advertised big when necessary, provided suitable musical accompaniments and commentaries, and regularly changed his programmes. He respected his audiences but did not hide behind a learned or pious exterior like Frederik Keijzer, nor did he play on his audiences' national feelings as the Mullens supposedly did.

Desmet's programmes changed regularly, usually every two days, al-

though this does not mean that the programme was changed in its entirety. Since he was moving from town to town, he did not need to renew his selection every week. Competitors like the Mullens did not do this either. This did not prevent him from sometimes quickly inserting actualities into his programmes. In 1907, all genres were treated as equal. By 1908/9, actualities were featuring as lead items in advertising and press reviews. They might be foreign actualities dealing with subjects like the earthquake in Messina, a flight in a Zeppelin, or films of such purely Dutch events as the christening of Princess Juliana. In 1909, French 'art films' began to assume an important place in Desmet's programming, followed by American and Italian historical films. Desmet's development was synchronous with the rest of the Netherlands and with countries abroad. Competitors Mullens, Benner and Lohoff went in for big advertising splashes on actualities around 1908-10. Films depicting Zeppelins were popular in Germany and the films of the earthquakes in Messina and Calabria went down well in Belgium.<sup>12</sup> Nöggerath and the Mullens brothers started the trend for the 'film d'art' movies. Nöggerath promoted himself as a distributor and exhibitor of Italian historical films, a genre that gained international recognition with productions such as the first version of *GLI ULTIMI GIORNI DI POMPEI*. However, in terms of length, neither the actualities nor the 'art films' ever made up the main part of a programme. The bulk of the programme was devoted to ordinary dramas and comedies.

In a sense, the travelling cinema culture was partly continued into the earliest permanent venues, primarily via the system of continuous performances. Here too, Desmet was one of the front runners. The phenomenon of the full-evening film performance originated on the fairgrounds. Outside the fairgrounds, film was merely an intermezzo or the final act of a variety show. The major initiators of permanent cinema came from a fairground environment, like Desmet and the Mullens brothers. The latter were an important inspiration behind the transfer of explicateurs to permanent theatres and the promotion of entertainment suitable for the whole family.<sup>13</sup> The travelling cinemas themselves were making way more and more for the permanent cinemas between 1909 and 1912. The huge sums required to secure sites at the fairgrounds, to set up an eye-catching booth or to buy new films were not needed in order to set up a small permanent cinema. The venue was leased rather than purchased, and fitted out simply and quickly. With the advent of film rental, it was no longer necessary to travel the length and breadth of the country in order to recoup the price of a film. The risk was now the distributor's rather than the exhibitor's. The lower admission prices at the permanent cinemas drove yet another nail into the travellers' coffin. And if someone absolutely had to have a luxury cinema in an expensive location, there were al-

ways institutions such as public corporations through which a lot of money could be raised in a short space of time, without calling on family resources or risking personal savings. Electricity companies, architects, brewers and distillers were on hand to cater to every whim of the pioneers and 'gold prospectors' from the cinema trade.

### **The Dutch repertoire 1910-20**

Who decided what was on offer at the birth of the permanent motion-picture theatre venue? Whether on the fairground or in permanent cinemas, the small operators have always had very little say. Small fairground exhibitors took over their programmes from others, or rented worn-out films cheaply from the distributors. The owners of small neighbourhood cinemas or small cinemas in provincial towns had to make do with programmes that had already played in all the major cities. Usually, the exhibitors would receive ready-made programmes. Exhibitors in the urban centres were choosier and better able to afford new films. The situation became more acute with the rise of the luxury cinemas. However, the exhibitors who carried the most clout were the exhibitor-distributors: Desmet, Nöggerath, Gildemeijer and Pathé. They were in a position to show their films in their own cinemas first.

With the rise of independent distributors like Desmet, the exhibitors were forced to yield a large slice of their power, or such power as remained to them. On the other hand, the power of the exhibitors and distributors was relative, for both of their fortunes depended on continually growing audiences. Without the growing demand, the rise of exhibitors and distributors would never have taken on the dimensions it did. The desire to see films was also a factor in the willingness of audiences to accept the inconvenience of looking at reissued movies or worn-out and damaged prints. Müller's claim that changes in the early world of cinema were determined by supply alone requires some reconsideration in the light of this context. Her view conflicts with that of the American film historian Eileen Bowser, who ascribes a more prominent role to cinema audiences in such changes within the world of cinema as the rise of the star system.<sup>14</sup>

The Dutch situation is distinguished by the mutually beneficial influence of exhibition and distribution on the one hand and audience reception on the other. As long as Desmet was buying complete second-hand programmes in Germany, he had little say in his choice of titles. At best, he could switch to another supplier of this type of programme who might put more of the coveted long features into a programme. The balance of power changed around 1912 when Desmet began to buy films directly from production companies and international distributors. This enabled him to create his own pro-

grammes, although he was obviously dependent on what was currently available on the market. Here he was restricted by what companies showed him, but also by what his competitors stole from under his nose. Consequently, Desmet's power was relative.

The more the American companies came along with their contracts for obligatory subscription to a year's production, under which they retained ownership rights and forced the client to buy films unseen, the less room for manoeuvring there was for the independent Dutch distributor. During the war, Desmet distanced himself from the exclusive film system by trying to buy films on which the rights had lapsed (*L'ENFANT DE PARIS*, Fig. 50) and took on the Americans by refusing conditional sales and demanding pricing by the metre rather than by the title. He refused to yield his power and took his stand on the personal selection and full ownership of new films. Such attitudes excluded him from a large part of the market. He concentrated on precisely the old French, American, Italian, Danish and German companies, which either collapsed after the outbreak of war, or merged with new conglomerates like Ufa. He was therefore betting on precisely those who lost out as a result of the First World War. Despite the powerful new NBB, American and German production companies were increasing their hold on the Dutch film world. It is possible to speak of a wave-like movement. Up to around 1908, Pathé held a more or less monopolistic position. After this, there was a period of unrestricted trade and a proliferation of distributors and production companies. After the First World War, this made way for an oligarchy of American and German production companies.

The decline of Desmet's distribution and cinema operations was also an effect of growing competition. In 1914, new distributors had appeared alongside the Cinema Palace distribution company mentioned above. Desmet's rival, Gildemeijer, acquired a greater share of the German, Scandinavian and American films, and Desmet's share of those markets shrank.<sup>15</sup> The field was now occupied by the new generation of film distributors, the Barnstijns and Tuschinskis, who competed against each other furiously, took their chances with the Americans, imported serials, built picture palaces and got a more than satisfactory return on their massive investments. From 1916, this new generation acquired its own organisational structure through the establishment of a weekly film exchange, which later developed into the NBB. Desmet was no longer very much involved in these matters. He would always make sure to stay in the background of organisational associations.

## 4. Between Conservatism and Modernity

### Family businesses and family ties

Although Desmet may have played his part in the internationalisation of film culture, there were less modern sides to his business. His membership of public corporations did involve him in cinema building and project development, it is true, yet the firms he owned through his property companies and business partnerships rather resembled family businesses.<sup>16</sup> This was, in effect, the continuation of a practice adopted earlier on when he was founding his chain of cinemas. Desmet's property consisted in part of cinemas that were often run by families. Members of his family held seats on the boards of his own companies such as NV Madrid, which was set up in order to finance his Flora amusement palace, and NV Cinema Royal in which he was a major investor. In this way, he stayed in control and was in all respects a *pater familias*. He was certainly not the only person with a family concern. His competitors Barnstijn, Nöggerath and Tuschinski indulged in similar nepotistic manoeuvres. Internationally too, of course, family businesses were hardly a rarity in the world of cinema. One need look no further than the famous examples of the Lumière brothers, Pathé, Warner Brothers and the Cohn brothers at Columbia, all of whom at least started out as family businesses.

Desmet's activities in film distribution, but particularly his cinema operations, attest the importance of family ties in the Dutch film world at the beginning of the last century; their role in promoting relations of mutual dependence and a kind of 'moral community'. Several members of Desmet's family worked in his cinemas and were dependent on him. For his part, as the senior member of the family, Desmet considered himself responsible for his brothers, sisters and various in-laws, particularly when they ran into difficulties. But Dutch film distribution can also be regarded as a kind of family, or at least a community. Before the First World War, it consisted of a small group of people who did business with each other and sometimes took films from each other, despite competing against one another ruthlessly and indulging in all kinds of tricks to hitch a ride on the back of each other's successes. The first attempts to form associations may have been made at this time, but basically the trade consisted of a group of independent pioneers or 'go-getters'. Film distribution and cinemas were better organised after the First World War, a development that culminated in the founding of the NBB in 1921. Desmet's participation in this organised new world was confined to its sidelines. The 1910 generation of film distributors, of which Desmet was a typical member, was different in character from the generation that rose to

prominence during the First World War, with Loet Barnstijn as its leading representative. At this point, a situation arises that is to some extent comparable with developments in the United States: a generation dominated by non-Jewish – in the Netherlands largely Catholic – cinema entrepreneurs makes way for a generation composed largely of Jewish entrepreneurs, with the Catholics in a minority position.

### **Desmet, a career**

Desmet's career is on the whole a success story, a narrative of social advancement, particularly if one looks beyond his career in the film business. As a character, he stands somewhere between the main protagonist of the French drama *LUTTE POUR LA VIE* (Pathé 1907), a popular item on the programmes of Desmet's travelling cinema, and Charles Foster Kane, the central figure in Orson Welles's *CITIZEN KANE* (RKO 1941). In *LUTTE POUR LA VIE* (Fig. 11), a tramp goes to the big city where, by dint of hard work and decency, he rises to the position of overseer and son-in-law of a factory owner. *CITIZEN KANE* tells of how a cool and resourceful young man manages to transform a dying newspaper into a sensational popular daily. He makes a fortune and becomes a collector. His second wife, a woman from a modest background similar to his own, grows bored with their palatial house. The ever-increasing affluence and commercialisation of his existence have a deadening effect on his life, and like Desmet, he develops a hankering for the past.

Desmet's social rise was accompanied by the acquisition of a middle-class persona. His story is a perfect illustration of the process of bourgeoisification in Dutch society observed by Blom:

It was expressed among other things, in the dominance of a system of values and norms that was inscribed within a set of rules of behaviour and propriety. Central to this construction was a love of one's country, and the honest, thrifty, diligent and temperate family, featuring the father as breadwinner, the mother as homemaker and the children in a position of natural subordination. Authority and the social order were objects of respect, but social advancement was perfectly possible for a person with assiduity, intelligence and a will to succeed. Individual self-fulfilment, that most cherished of liberal values, was certainly just as important as accommodating oneself to the prevailing social order.<sup>17</sup>

Desmet was just moderately fond of his country, but with regard to thrift, uprightness, perseverance and the urge for self-fulfilment, he can be said to have satisfied all the requirements listed here.

From the point of view of the world of cinema, Desmet was a failure as a

distributor and cinema owner. In his own eyes, however, his decision to give up film distribution made him a trendsetter. Both Gildemeijer and Nöggerath Jr., who were still doing well as distributors during the First World War, later moved on to new careers in which they came to grief, whereas Desmet succeeded. It seems that for this generation of film pioneers, distribution was not a business in which they found their life's fulfilment. Desmet went into film in the first place in order to make money, and it was perhaps easy for him simply to exchange this 'attraction' for something else, just as he had once switched from his 'Canadian Toboggan' to a travelling cinema. Regardless of his liking for money, however, it must be said that Desmet applied himself with enthusiasm and single-mindedness to his pioneering activities in permanent cinema operations and film distribution.

Desmet did not become a 'cinema king' like Tuschinski or a 'cinema big-shot' like Barnstijn. He sometimes backed the wrong horse. But his passage from the fairground via permanent cinema and film distribution to property dealing follows a single straight line. From the story of his career emerges an image of a cautious and introverted man who put his business, rather than himself, in the foreground. He had a nose for new trends, possessed a talent for starting out again, and was good at minimising business risks and making sound investments. As far as films themselves are concerned, he was probably not what one would call a cinephile, although he was certainly fond of cinema as a form of entertainment.

Desmet's values and lifestyle were shaped by his business, and conversely, his personal conduct influenced his business. Desmet's upward social mobility is indisputable. Had he gone bankrupt like his competitor Nöggerath, he would probably have sold off his films. He did of course try to sell his old stock, making a concerted effort just after the First World War, but he chose the wrong moment. There was no interest in pre-war films. Thus, today's Desmet Collection is more the product of a chain of coincidences than deliberation.

Desmet was a frugal and hard-working man. His bids for fairground sites and skimpy press advertising during that period of his career are strikingly cheese-paring. He also sometimes offered too little for costly popular films. Had he not conducted his affairs in this way, he would probably never have become so wealthy. Moreover, it is due largely to his frugality that film history has acquired such a treasure-trove of films. He was also not a greedy man. As the eldest son of an orphaned family, he felt responsible for his brothers and sisters and regularly assisted them financially. Even in his fairground days, Desmet paid good money for a luxury caravan and spared neither cost nor effort on the embellishment of his booth when starting out with the travelling cinema. Nor did he stint on advertising. He soon became convinced

that advertising was essential to a successful run, and complained when suppliers included too little publicity material with their films. The further his career advanced, the larger the sums he invested, the climax being his Flora project. Desmet was able to dream and think big. In this respect, Charles Boost's description of him as both stingy and generous is hardly wide of the mark.

### **Desmet the pioneer**

Did Desmet set trends or merely follow them? Boost, who deals only with the fairground period, is wrong to call him a 'cine-pioneer', as Desmet was hardly in a position to boast of being a pioneer in those early days. In his dealings with his American suppliers, he claimed to be the oldest and largest distributor in the Netherlands. As a co-director of the Amsterdam Cinema Palace, he also played the part of the 'Nestor' of the Dutch film scene, and later assumed a similar role with the NV Cinema Royal. None of this meant that he was seeking to promote himself as a public figure.<sup>18</sup> While he may have had a predilection for the 'show' side of show business – the Flora complex was conceived as a sort of permanent 'kermesse d'été' – he felt no need to be the centre of attraction himself.

Looking back, we can say that Desmet was definitely a pioneer in several respects. He started late with the travelling cinema, but his permanent cinemas in Rotterdam and Amsterdam were among the very first in those cities. His competitor, Abraham Tuschinski, only opened his first film theatre after he had seen what a gold mine cinema had proved to be for others. Desmet opened one of the first elite cinemas, which placed him at the beginning of the differentiation of cinemas into specific types. He also pioneered film distribution and long feature films, and was one of the first to release Danish and German thrillers and melodramas. Following the generation of Nöggerath Sr., Gildemeijer, Nöggerath Jr. and Desmet belonged to a new class of distributors who zeroed in on the boom in fixed venues and the insatiable demand of cinema owners and cinema audiences for new films. After 1913, their example produced successor companies such as Wilhelmina, Cinema Palace and HAP-Film. Desmet went along with the development of the exclusive system of renting films, though not without putting up a struggle. He drew the line at the distribution and sales practices of the Americans, made no attempt to distribute Dutch features and refused to pay over the odds for popular films, preferring a new life as a property owner and financier. He effectively ended his film career in 1916 when he went into property.

## 5. Business Archive or Trade Press?

The usefulness of a business archive as an historical source is immediately evident when one is researching film exhibition and reception. Press opinion often differs from audience opinion. Although lauded by the trade press and the daily newspapers, Desmet's prestigious dramas *RICHARD WAGNER* and *DIE LANDSTRASSE* (Fig. 71) were not big box-office successes. Despite lavish publicity and favourable reviews, Desmet's Henny Porten melodramas and the Italian diva films failed to cover their costs, either through the sale of the exclusive rights or after long runs. One reason for this was the simultaneous presence of competition from other films in the same genre, or from other more popular genres such as thrillers.

An analysis of Desmet's distribution books and correspondence reveals that good reviews and intensive advertising campaigns did not always guarantee commercial success. The daily press ignored complete flops. At best, the trade press might return to them years later in an incidental comparison with recent films, but more often than not it would either damn them with faint praise or simply say nothing. The ideology of the trade press drew the line at enlarging on failures within its own industry. For this reason, film-historical research based on trade journals may produce a good description of



Fig. 71. *Die Landstrasse* (Deutsche Mutoscope & Biograph 1913)

the ideology of a professional group, of the way people wished to see themselves, or of current debates within the business, but it does not tell us what happened to a film at the box office.

A business archive seems to be more reliable as a source, since it was never intended to serve as an organ of public information. On the other hand, it is necessary to sound a cautionary note about Desmet's letters to suppliers and distributors, as well as their letters to him. For not everyone told the truth in a letter. A subtext of ulterior motives might be just as much a part of the story in a letter as in the trade press. Scribbled marginal notes sometimes give us more insight into Desmet's motives than official letters and invoices. Desmet's habit of insisting on reductions for late deliveries and short footage, for example, may have been a way of enforcing efficiency and exactness and of making sure he was not cheated, just as he stated in his letters. Yet it was equally a way of making money on which he might otherwise have missed out.

Another problem highlighted by Desmet's archive is the silent presence of other forms of communication, notably the oral or verbal: discussions with employees, telephone conversations, meetings at the office with sales representatives or cinema operators, conversations during previews at his cinema or someone else's, visits to Brussels or Berlin, meetings in border towns and working visits to the cinemas outside Amsterdam. The written and typed communications in Desmet's archive are evidence of other forms of communication. However, the references to these unwritten communications are usually vague. Despite all the copious documentation, the reader is constantly aware that part of the communication is missing.

One advantage the Desmet Archive has over the contemporary Dutch trade press is that it offers a more immediate contact with the film world of those days. Its varied forms of communicational media provide a much more detailed, differentiated and sharply focused image of film exhibition and film distribution. It gives a better idea of the 'infotainment' of the times, and the ways in which information and advertising were combined in a single message. Furthermore, we get a better impression from the archive of the everyday practices of a Dutch distributor around the time of the First World War – from placing orders and ordering transportation to compiling programmes. And by taking the history of a Dutch film distributor as a test case, we are in a better position to specify and differentiate between the general changes taking place both in the Netherlands and the rest of Europe.

It might be thought from the above that I am arguing the case for a neo-Rankian, empirically grounded historiography. This needs some qualification. On the one hand, I have tried to test the reliability of as many sources as possible and, when they proved to be lies, tried to see how interesting they

were as lies and how they might be explained. On the other hand, the very activity of selecting, using and interpreting his sources makes a film historian conscious of his own subjectivity and unreliability. Yet isn't this precisely what makes historiography so exciting in the first place? In her *De l'histoire du cinéma*, Michèle Lagny insists on the general importance of 'a taste for archives' as a requisite of historical research. Not merely because of the emotional character of the direct, physical handling of the material, the sensation of being on the scent of the past: 'But above all because in manipulating the document, we are creating a new object, shaping a new knowledge, writing a new archive, or in other words, simply making a new history'.<sup>19</sup>

## 6. The Perspective of the Present

The historian vacillates between identification, empathy and critical distance. You are seduced by the tactile encounter with the material, you immerse yourself in it, and (re)construct an image for yourself, but since your task is to subject the materials to an interpretation, matters will be ultimately decided by the third of these three positions, namely critical distance. Both positions, empathy – and with it continuity – and the acknowledgement of the distance of these objects from the present, are necessary. Here I am in agreement with the American film historian Tom Gunning when he writes:

By acknowledging our own role in the historical interpretation of works of art, we define the hermeneutic task involved in film history. This means recognizing the temporal distance these films have from us, and our own historical position in reaching across that gap to understand them. This historical understanding is based on both an understanding of the difference between the past and the present – "the tension between text and present", as Gadamer puts it – and an assertion of a continuity between the two.<sup>20</sup>

It is only when you begin to look at things through Jean Desmet's eyes that you get a proper idea of the difference between the way a film distributor looked at his films in 1912 and the way they are seen by the viewer of today. Two obvious examples are the use of colour and intertiting. The work of conserving Desmet's nitrate film has been going on for more than a decade and has revolutionised techniques of colour conservation. Tinted films were part of the landscape of Desmet's world. Desmet had to pay extra for them, but this was never an item over which he made a fuss. When he asked his buyers if they wanted their films in colour, he meant hand-coloured or stencil-

coloured film. Intertitled films were equally taken for granted in 1910. All there was to haggle about was their quality and price. From 1913 onwards, Desmet had his titles made in the Netherlands, and he would often switch suppliers if he was dissatisfied with an offer. Before this, he had had the problem of German titles when he bought German cinema programmes. But he was not the only distributor in the Netherlands to rent out films with foreign texts. Moreover, most Dutch cinemas had explicateurs on hand to deal with that problem.

All aspects of a film print – length, intertitles, colour – were always approached strictly commercially: price, technical quality, efficiency and delivery according to specification were primary considerations. Aesthetic considerations were not noticeably a part of Desmet's concern. He bought a number of special, long feature films as exclusives, which gave him sole rights for the Netherlands, Dutch East Indies and Belgium. He certainly had to pay extra for these films, but he could recoup his outlay from the cinema operators who, in turn, paid extra to secure the exhibition rights on such special films. At the same time, Desmet continued to order one-reelers in bulk, notably from Brussels, where he bought dozens of films from Gaumont, Vitagraph and Éclair in 1912-14.

Generally speaking, Desmet was very much the frugal and conservative Dutch merchant when buying films. Although he certainly participated in the monopoly system, the genuine 'blockbusters' among the films of the second decade that were traded in this way were mostly in the hands of his competitors. In buying by the metre, he was evidently trying to spread his outlay and avoid unnecessary risks. When this began to be more and more difficult, he preferred to invest in other business projects. He was perfectly happy to come up with large sums of money to purchase property, since he knew from his sale of the Cinema Royal to Tuschinski that he could make a lot of money at once in that type of business. Moreover, large sums of money could be extracted from properties by taking out mortgages on the buildings. We are therefore left wondering how far Desmet was still really prepared to adapt to the changes taking place in the international film industry after 1915.

Jean Desmet was very much a representative figure of the pre-war European film world. He went along with the development of the exclusive system, while continuing to acquire the larger part of his film repertoire on the open market. However, he was disinclined to accept the 'modern' American system of blind buying, obligatory subscription to a year's output, waiver of ownership rights on copies and payment to the producer of more than half the profits. American films were the coming thing and were growing more and more popular, but Desmet was too much of an independent distributor to act as the extension of a production company. He refused to invest in ex-

pensive serials, despite helping his rival Barnstijn to get hold of *LES VAMPIRES*. He was himself prepared, even before the war, to resort to methods such as obligatory one-year subscriptions to his films from cinema operators whom he had supplied with film equipment and cinema furnishings. Long-term contracts did not bother him as long as they were performed for him, rather than by him.

Money was Desmet's passion rather than cinema. He swapped films and cinemas for more profitable activities, just as he had previously swapped the fairground for films. In both instances, he chose a good moment for moving on to a fresh attraction and a new career, his aim being to make his living from a business in which the risks were low. The returns on the properties he owned were guaranteed. He was his own boss, just as he had been on the fairground, and just as he had been as a distributor and exhibitor of motion pictures. His later enterprises, such as his investments in cinemas, were conducted as safe investments ('real' estate) and exemplify the tendency to 'play safe' that is still so characteristic of the film business in the Netherlands: by all means invest in the screening of films, but not in their production. However, Desmet never turned his back entirely on the film scene. With his development of new projects for cinemas and palaces of entertainment, he would show that notwithstanding his tendency to go for security, he still had the nerve for risky undertakings.

### **Priorities and preferences**

Desmet's priorities when choosing films differed from those of the modern film buff. The tastes of film audiences have undergone a radical transformation. Desmet's most prestigious films – *RICHARD WAGNER* (Colour Plate 15) for instance – are now no longer automatically seen as his most attractive. Conversely, the brilliant short travelogues of the Desmet Collection, with their beautifully coloured-in pictures and shots from moving trains, cars and trams, were probably regarded by Desmet as no more than average cinema fare. Although there was a marked preference for documentaries in the Netherlands of those days, such films were rarely featured in whole series in cinema programmes. Certainly, there was never more than one documentary during an evening performance in a permanent cinema. This was due less to Desmet's personal tastes than to the standardisation of cinema programmes and Desmet's compliance with it. He was a typical child of his times.

Desmet's personal preference for programmes made up of short films, particularly comedies, induced him to reduce Italian epics to one-reelers when compiling programmes for exhibition in small city cinemas or at provincial venues. Such displays of self-will were, however, probably re-



Fig. 72. *Gebrochene Schwingen* (Messter 1913) – the German officer leaves for America to seek his fortune

served for his transactions with the smaller operators. In his own deluxe theatres he showed the extremely long Wagner film without an accompanying short, and without batting an eyelid. However, with its episodic, *tableau-vivant* style, the film could easily be construed as a series of shorts. The same *tableau-vivant* style can also be seen in other Desmet films such as *CAJUS JULIUS CAESAR* (Colour Plate 18) and *LES ENFANTS DU CAPITAINE GRANT*.<sup>21</sup> From 1910 onwards, Desmet showing such long films more frequently. Films such as *TERRA PROMESSA* and *GEBROCHENE SCHWINGEN* (*BROKEN WINGS\**, Messter 1913, Fig. 72) changed their genre, and often their location, after each reel, which makes them also look like a series of shorts. In this way, the old programme culture of rapid changes of form and subject matter in a motley succession of shorts was to some extent continued. However, this was not something for which Desmet could take the credit, since it had all been done for him in advance by the producers. As a formal device, it was doubtless intended as a sop to audience expectations. Desmet's own preferences may well have been a factor in the purchase of hybrid films of this kind.

Finally, it must be noted that as far as Desmet and his customers were concerned, a film's physical condition was a more important criterion than its content. Anonymously produced travelogues, as well as popular long features – early 'classics' like *L'ENFANT DE PARIS*, *RICHARD WAGNER* and *CAJUS*

JULIUS CAESAR – were still in distribution ten years after their first showing. Tramlined prints, damaged perforations and missing scenes were considered to be more of a problem than the film's age, if the film had never before played in the particular location concerned. Thanks to modern methods of print repair and reduplication using the wetgate process, the new copies of Desmet's films that we see today look immaculate compared to the prints that were still being screened at provincial cinemas years after their first release.

There is currently a remarkable correspondence between Desmet's outlook and today's ideas about film. Like Desmet, film history is no longer interested exclusively in masterpieces. The average cinematic fare of yesteryear is attracting just as much attention, and we are now acquiring a more comprehensive overview of what the average film renter would have had on offer, what the average film exhibitor would have screened, and what the average film-goer of 1912 would have seen. Even though we may be separated from them by almost a century, we are coming a little closer to their experience. Thanks to the availability of these films, we can rediscover the films, genres, national cinemas, directors and stars popular in those times. Moreover, many of the films considered standard items then may strike us as highly interesting now. A run-of-the-mill farce – and the Desmet Collection is full of them – may be remarkable for its special effects or branding strategies. The average colour-stencilled travelogue on the French Pyrenees can enchant us today. A less well-known Borelli film such as *FIOR DI MALE* (Colour Plate 19) may not have drawn huge audiences in its day, but can surprise and impress us even now. Resources such as the Desmet business archive enable us to contextualise these films, to trace their 'first lives' and to frame them within film history. Now that we have the films, we can judge them for ourselves.



# Notes

## Notes Preface

- 1 Nicolaas Matsier in *De Volkskrant* of 13 September 1995 on the occasion of the auction of the collected correspondence of the solicitor, J. P. Hooykaas.

## Notes Introduction

- 1 Paolo Cherchi Usai to the author, 23 December 1995
- 2 Eileen Bowser to the author, 6 December 1995.
- 3 Peter Delpout, 'Niet alle zwijgende nachten zijn zwart. Een ander licht op de geschiedenis van de zwijgende film', in *Skrien* 157, winter 1987-1988, 56-9. The aspect of colour was also emphasised in the brochure produced for the 1986 festival at Pordenone. See Frank van der Maden and Emmy de Groot, *The Netherlands Filmmuseum presents: The Desmet Collection* (Amsterdam, Nederlands Filmmuseum, 1986). The Desmet Collection was the inspiration behind Peter Delpout's film *LYRISCH NITRAAT* (*LYRICAL NITRATE*, 1990), which was composed entirely from films in this collection.
- 4 Paolo Cherchi Usai to the author, 23 December 1995.
- 5 Roland Cosandey to the author, 7 July 1999.
- 6 Jean Baudrillard, 'The System of Collecting', in John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (eds), *The Cultures of Collecting* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1994), 7-24.
- 7 Charles Boost, *Biopioniers* (Amsterdam, Nederlands Filmmuseum, 1961), 13. Abraham Tuschinski (1886-1942) owned the largest cinema empire in the Netherlands in the 1920s and 1930s.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 9 Frank van der Maden, 'De komst van de film', in Karel Dibbets/Frank van der Maden (eds), *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse film en bioscoop tot 1940* (Houten, Het Wereldvenster, 1986), 46. See also Van der Maden's 'Film per meter. De opkomst van de filmhandel en betekenis van de Desmet-collectie', in *Interessant voor volwassenen, leerzaam voor kinderen. Aspecten van de vroege film. Cinematheek Journaal (NFM)* 6, November 1985, 9-23; Emmy de Groot and Frank van der Maden, 'De schatkamers van Desmet', in *Skrien* 148, summer 1986, 30-4.

- 10 Martin Loiperdinger, *Film & Schokolade. Stollwercks Geschäfte mit lebenden Bildern* (Frankfurt am Main, /Basel, Stroemfeld /Roter Stern, 1999), 9-10.
- 11 Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment. America in the World Film Market* (London, BFI, 1985), x. This lacuna is evident in Georges Sadoul's classic film history *Histoire générale du cinéma, Le cinéma devient un art 1909-1920, vol. I. L'avant-guerre* (Paris, Denoël, 1951).
- 12 *Ibid.* xi.
- 13 Thompson (1985); Janet Staiger, 'Combination and Litigation: Structures of US Film Distribution, 1896-1917', in *Cinema Journal*, vol. 23, 2, winter 1983, 41-71.
- 14 Richard Abel, *The Ciné Goes to Town. French cinema 1896-1914* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994); Robert C. Allen, *Vaudeville and film, 1895-1915: a study in media interaction* (New York, Arno, 1980); *idem*, 'The Movies in Vaudeville: Historical Context of the Movies as Popular Entertainment', in Tino Balio, *The American Film Industry* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 57-82; Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907-1915. History of the American Cinema*, vol. 2 (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994); Miriam Hansen, *Babel & Babylon. Spectatorship in American Silent Film*, (Cambridge, Mass./ London, Harvard University Press, 1991); Russell Merritt, 'Nickelodeon Theaters, 1905-1914: Building an Audience for the Movies', in Balio (1985), 83-102; Staiger (1983); Thompson (1985); Yuri Tsivian, *Early Cinema in Russia and its Cultural Reception*, (London/New York, Routledge, 1994); William Uricchio/Roberta Pearson, *Reframing Culture. The Case of the Vitagraph Quality Films* (Princeton University Press, Princeton 1993).
- 15 Staiger (1983). On the monopolistic strategies of both Pathé Frères and the MPPC, see the excellent recent study by Jens Ulf-Møller, *Hollywood's 'Film Wars' with France: Film Trade Diplomacy and the Emergence of the French Film Quota Policy* (Rochester, University of Rochester Press, 2001). On the MPPC and American film distribution, see also Bowser (1990), 21-36, 73-85; Robert Anderson, 'The Motion Picture Patents Company: A Revaluation', in Balio (1985), 133-52; Ralph Cassady Jr., 'Monopoly in Motion Picture Production and Distribution, 1908-1915', in *Southern California Law Review* 32, 4, Summer 1959, 325-90, reprinted in Gorham Kindem (ed.), *The American Movie Industry: The Business of Motion Pictures* (Carbondale/ Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 25-75.
- 16 Several other factors were involved in the collapse of MPPC besides the rise of the feature-length film. George Eastman, the most important producer of unexposed film of the day, and up to then MPPC's exclusive supplier, began to supply film to non-MPPC companies as well. European sales of MPPC films fell appreciably in 1915 due to the First World War, just as the Independents were conquering the world market. Legal and financial factors were also involved in the end of the MPPC. The trust was relying too much on internal financing.

- Finally, MPPC was taken to court under the antitrust law in 1912, although a judgment was not given until 1915.
- 17 Staiger (1983), 65.
- 18 This was established recently by Richard Abel in his book *The Red Rooster Scare. Making Cinema American, 1900-1910* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999).
- 19 Ulf-Møller (2001), 8.
- 20 Abel (1994), 9-58.
- 21 Abel (1994), 47, 53.
- 22 Thompson (1985), 29.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 29.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 29-30.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 36.
- 26 Aldo Bernardini, *Cinema muto italiano. II. Industria e organizzazione dello spettacolo, 1905/1909* (Bari, Laterza, 1981) and *Cinema muto italiano. III. Arte, divismo, mercato* (Bari, Laterza, 1982).
- 27 Thompson (1985), 83 .
- 28 *Ibid.*, 83.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 84.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 84.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 130.
- 32 Corinna Müller, *Frühe deutsche Kinematographie. Formale, wirtschaftliche und kulturelle Entwicklungen 1907-1912* (Stuttgart, Weimar, J.B. Metzler, 1994). See also Peter Lähn, 'Afgunden und die deutsche Filmindustrie. Zur Entstehung des Monopolfilms', in Manfred Behn (ed.), *Schwarzer Traum und weisse Sklavin. Deutsch-dänische Filmbeziehungen 1910-1930* (München, edition text + kritik, 1994), 15-21; Evelyne Hampicke, 'Vom Aufbau eines vertikalen Konzerns. Zu David Olivers Geschäften in der deutschen Filmbranche', in *Schwarzer Traum und weisse Sklavin* (1994), 22-9.
- 33 Corinna Müller, 'Filmform und Filmgeschichte', in Corinna Müller/Harro Segeberg, *Die Modellierung des Kinoprogramms zwischen Kurzfilm und Langfilm 1905/06-1918* (München, Fink, 1998), 55. 'Cinema of attractions' is a term used to describe the early years of cinema, when 'display' (colour, sensation and visual tricks) was more important than narrative structure. Tom Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde', in *Wide Angle* 8, 3/4, 1986, 63-70, reprinted in Thomas Elsaesser, Adam Barker (eds), *Early Cinema: space – frame – narrative* (London, BFI, 1990), 56-62.
- 34 Müller draws on writers such as Peter Bächlin who sees economic motives as the driving force behind the development of the world of film, which is not to say she is always in agreement with him. She is particularly suspicious of his ungrounded and reductionist approach to early cinema. Peter Bächlin, *Eko-*

- nomiese geschiedenis van de film* (Nymegen, SUN, 1977). The book originally appeared as *Der Film als Ware* (Basel 1945).
- 35 Ansj van Beusekom, *Kunst en amusement. Reacties op de film als een nieuw medium in Nederland, 1895-1940* (Haarlem, Arcadia, 2001).
- 36 On the importance of vaudeville for film culture in the USA, see Allen (1980) and Allen (1985).
- 37 Ton Bevers, 'Kunst, geschiedenis en sociologie', in Marlite Halbertsma, Kitty Zijlmans (eds), *Gezichtspunten: een inleiding in de methoden van kunstgeschiedenis* (Nymegen, SUN, 1993), 251.
- 38 Bevers (1993), 254.
- 39 A study comparable to Thompson's is Ian Jarvie's *Hollywood Overseas Campaign. The North Atlantic Movie Trade, 1920-1950* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992). Jarvie draws on official information even more than Thompson in his investigation of the ins and outs of the American film industry's conquest of the local forces in Canada and Great Britain. However, with its focus on the Anglo-Saxon world, Jarvie's book fails to take account of the opposing forces in Germany and by extension the Netherlands. He wrongly accuses Thompson of Euro-centrism.
- 40 Interview with Ilse Hughan, Jean Desmet's granddaughter, 5 September 1995.

## Notes Chapter I

- 1 Gerth van Zanten, 'Vader bewaarde alles...', in *De Telegraaf*, 24 May 1958.
- 2 Van der Maden, 'De komst van de film' (1986), 26-38.
- 3 *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad*, 19 August 1907.
- 4 Harm Nijboer and Asing Walthaus, *George Christiaan Slieker (1861-1945). De eerste bioscoopondernemer in Nederland*. (Leeuwarden, Perio, 1995); Adriaan Briels, *De komst van de Levende Fotografie op de kermis* (Assen, Van Gorcum & Co., 1973).
- 5 Nijboer and Walthaus (1995), 33-4. See also A. Slieker, 'De 1ste films in Nederland', in *Het Veerwerk* 7, 11, November 1950, 201-203; Simon van Collem, *Uit de oude doos* (Amsterdam, De Bezige Bij, 1959), 7-8; Boost (1961), 7-9; Deac Rossell, 'A Chronology of Cinema 1889-1896', in: *Film History* 2, 1995, 157
- 6 'Correspondentie van Gustav Bayerthal met Jean Desmet, April 1907-April 1911', DA 62. Desmet and Bayerthal appear to have signed a contract for this order on 23 April 1907. The contract is not in the Desmet Archive.
- 7 Marja Keyser, *Komt dat Zien! De Amsterdamse kermis in de negentiende eeuw* (Amsterdam/Rotterdam, B.M. Israël/Ad. Donker, 1976).
- 8 Steef Vooren, *Van Doon tot Duin. Rotterdam de revue gepasseerd* (Rotterdam/Utrecht, Luxor Theater/Kluwer, 1990), 19.
- 9 *Leidsch Dagblad*, 22 July 1911. The drink problem was the main reason for the

abolition of the Leiden fair. Symbolically perhaps, the French melodrama *LES VICTIMES DE L'ALCOOL* (Pathé 1911) was shown during fair week at the Bioscope Theater, the city's permanent film theatre.

- 10 Inschrijvings Somma Kermis 1907, 5 June 1907, GADV; *Haagsche Courant*, 13 May 1907.
- 11 *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, 8 and 12 May 1908; *Provinciale Groninger Courant*, 8 May 1908.
- 12 Although correspondence relating to his tours survives in the Desmet Archive, there is nothing in the press of the time to indicate, for instance, his presence at the fair in Leiden in July 1907. In other cases, the helter-skelter and the travelling cinema are mentioned as attractions but are not named as Desmet's. Desmet's application for a site at the Leiden fair of July 1907 and the response of the city's aldermen cannot be pursued further, since a large part of the Leiden city archives was destroyed by fire in 1929.
- 13 Geoffrey Donaldson, 'De eerste Nederlandse speelfilms en de gebroeders Mullens', in: *Skrien* 28, 1972, 3-14; Van der Maden (1986), 33-8; Guido Convents, 'Motion picture exhibitors on Belgian fairgrounds', in *Film History*, 6, 1994, 247-8.
- 14 Guido Convents, 'De komst en de vestiging van de kinematografie te Leuven 1895-1918', in: *Arca Lovaniensis artes atque historiae reserans documenta. Jaarboek 1979* (Leuven, Vrienden Stedelijke Musea, 1979) 296-303; Nijboer and Walthaus (1995), 18-19.
- 15 Rob de Kam and Frans Westra, *Eene zeer interessante vertooning. 80 jaar bioscopie in Groningen* (Groningen, Xeno, 1983); Frank van der Maden, *Mobiele filmexploitatie in Nederland 1895-1913, voor zover het mogelijk is deze te beschrijven en te analyseren aan de hand van de ontwikkeling in Nijmegen* (MA thesis, Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen, Nijmegen, 1981); SDB, Minutes B&W, 1901-10.
- 16 *Nieuwe Haarlemsche Courant*, 20 August 1906.
- 17 Convents (1979), 302, and *idem* (1994), 245-6.
- 18 H. van Oers, 'De Familie Benner', in *Zwieren en Zwaaien*, Christmas 1987, 30.
- 19 Van der Maden (1981), 223-6, 229; Herman de Wit, *Film in Utrecht van 1895 tot 1915* (MA thesis Universiteit van Utrecht, Utrecht, 1986); Paul Spapens, *De geschiedenis van de film op de Tilburgsche kermis* (Tilburg, Gemeente Tilburg, 1994), 12-18; SDB, Minutes B&W, 1901-10, SDB.
- 20 GAW, Alex Benner to the B&W of Wageningen, 22 March 1907.
- 21 DA 44, De Laat to Jean Desmet, 25 September 1907, DA 44; AIH, telegram from Alberts Frères to Jean Desmet, 19 September 1907.
- 22 Hotel Communal, Ixelles/Elsene, Belgium, Office of Records.
- 23 AIH, Passport Maréchal Desmet issued by Department of War, 2nd Cavalry Regiment, 6 November 1874; AIH, marriage certificate of Maréchal Desmet and Petronella Hertogs, 25 November 1874; 'Twaalf en een half jaar Directeur van

- de Chicago-bioscoop. Een gesprek met den heer M. Desmet', in *Eindhovenensch Dagblad*, 13 December 1930.
- 24 Ursula died in 1898. Frederik probably also died young.
- 25 AIH, Notes by Jeanne Hughan-Desmet.
- 26 SDB, Archives of the R.K. Orphanage, inv. nr. 78, 709. Only the names of Henriëtte, Mathijs and Theo Desmet appear in the archives of the R.K Orphanage in Den Bosch. It is possible that Ferdinand and Rosine were already fending for themselves, so that Jean no longer needed to support them. Henriëtte, Mathijs and Theo were enrolled on 21 July 1894. They seem to have made quite a nuisance of themselves as Mathijs and Theo were expelled in 1900, followed by Henriëtte in 1902.
- 27 AIH, Marriage certificate of Jean Desmet and Catharina Dahrs; SDB, Office of Records.
- 28 José de Kruif, 'Zoveelen missen het onontbeerlijke... Zorg en samenleving.', in A. Vos ed., *'s-Hertogenbosch. De geschiedenis van een Brabantse stad 1629-1990* (Zwolle/'s-Hertogenbosch, Waanders/Stadsarchief 's-Hertogenbosch, 1997), 199.
- 29 Ad van Drunen et al., 'In de kluisters van het water. Een geografische beschrijving', in De Vos (1997), 173.
- 30 Ibid., 170.
- 31 Vos (1997), 201.
- 32 Ibid., 205.
- 33 SDB, Office of Records. Their first child, Jean Joseph, was born 18 March 1897, but died just a few months later on 10 June.
- 34 GARM, Office of Records. Mathijs Desmet implied in the *Eindhovenensch Dagblad* of 18 December 1930 that he had assisted his brother Jean on the fairground. I have found no evidence for this. All that is known about Mathijs is that he travelled round with a dance hall and was running a café in Venlo around 1910.
- 35 SDB, Office of Records; DA2, telegram from Jean Desmet to Heinrich Dahrs, April 1917.
- 36 In 1906 and 1907, Desmet took his helter-skelter to the fair at Haarlem where it was erected on the Butter Market. According to a set of notes by Jeanne Hughan-Desmet, now in the archive of her daughter Ilse Hughan, Jean Desmet and Rika Klabou first became acquainted at this time.
- 37 A letter dated 3 June 1897, DA 43, contains an order for 'a wheel with painted numbers' which could mean that Desmet started with the wheel of fortune shortly afterwards.
- 38 *Provinciale Noordbrabantsche en 's-Hertogenbossche Courant*, 9 September 1901. This advertisement was repeated on 10 and 12 September. Desmet returned to the fair at Den Bosch with the wheel of fortune the following year. See *Provinciale Noordbrabantsche en 's-Hertogenbossche Courant*, 12 September 1902.

- 39 DA 43, Rough draft of a letter from Desmet to the local authority of Nymegen, September 1903; DA 50, rough draft of a letter to the organising committee of the Apeldoorn Festival of Gymnastics, [day and month unknown] 1905.
- 40 Desmet is known to have bought his first organ from Gasparini in Paris, and by 1907 he owned two Gasparinis and two organs by Gavoli. See AIH, Estate of Catharina Desmet-Dahrs, 18 February 1908; AIH, notes of Jeanne Hughan-Desmet; DA 62 insurance policy 79979 of the 's-Hertogenbossche Brandwaarborg-Maatschappij, 16 January 1908.
- 41 DA 44, De Laat to Desmet, 3 February 1904. In the same year, Jean Leenen offered to sell Desmet a dancing booth with a cinematograph. See DA 44, Leenen to Desmet, 30 October 1904.
- 42 DA 44, 'Brieven van J.C. de Laat, 1902-1907'.
- 43 AIH, Documents of the Office of Taxes, Customs and Excise, Den Bosch, 27 September and 4 October 1902, and bill from A.E. Sélis, Gent, 12 November 1902.
- 44 DA 49, Catharina Desmet-Dahrs to her husband [beginning of July 1905].
- 45 DA 50, Committee of the XIXth Public Performance of the Dutch Gymnastics Association, Apeldoorn to Desmet, 24 July 1905.
- 46 DA 44, De Laat to Desmet, 7 August 1905. The photograph archive of the Netherlands Film Museum contains photos of Desmet's helter-skelter. In 1905, the helter-skelter was a popular new fairground attraction all over Europe.
- 47 For the correspondence of Tewe and Desmet, see DA 52 and DA 53; *Zaanland-sche Courant*, 26 August 1905. In an article on the fair, the helter-skelter is still treated as one of Grünkorn's attractions.
- 48 Advertisements also mentioned cinema shows, but these were clearly considered less spectacular. They were not discussed in the reviews, and the advertisements simply mentioned the medium, with nothing about who was putting on the performance or what it contained. The Canadian Toboggan was discussed in *Het Vaderland*, 16 May 1907; in advertisements for the spring fair in the *Haagsche Courant* of 2, 10 and 22 May 1907; and in *Het Vaderland* of 10, 13 and 15 May 1907. See also: DA 44.
- 49 Geert Mak, *Amsterdam. A Brief Life of the City* (London: The Harvill Press, 1999/2001), 190.
- 50 SDB, Minutes of B&W Den Bosch, 17 December 1906; *Provinciale Noordbrabantsche en 's-Hertogenbossche Courant*, 9 September 1907. There was a travelling cinema show at the fair in Den Bosch, but it was Alex Benner's. There was also a helter-skelter, but it belonged to Desmet's rival, Kunkels. The Desmet Archive contains no bills relating to the purchase of either a projector or films during Desmet's years on the fairground. So it remains unclear whether he was showing films under the 'flag' of the Canadian Toboggan before July 1907. In the light of the headings on the letters in the Desmet Archive, any such screenings were minor events.

- 51 Desmet advertised in 1906 in the *Oprechte Haarlemsche Courant*, *Stadseditie* of 4 and 7 August 1906 and again on 7 August 1907. The *Nieuwe Haarlemsche Courant* of 3 August 1907 records the appearance of the helter-skelter on the Butter Market, but without giving the name of the operator. Both Alberts Frères and Lohoff appeared at this fair with their travelling cinemas. At the Schouwburg, Theatre Pathé (Abrassart) put on matinees that included film screenings. It was probably because of this competition that Desmet was unable to get hold of a license for another travelling film show. For an account of the toboggan at Alkmaar, see: *Alkmaarsche Courant*, 26 August 1907.
- 52 *Oprechte Haarlemsche Courant*, 20 August 1906, 405-6.
- 53 GAR, Desmet to the B&W of Rotterdam, 26 August 1907, and minutes of B&W Rotterdam, 20 September 1907.
- 54 *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad*, August 1907; *De Rotterdammer*, August 1907; *Goedkoop Nieuwsblad*, August 1907; *Rotterdamsche Courant*, August 1907; *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, August 1907. The press mentions a helter-skelter only in passing, but it probably referred to Desmet's. In the municipal documents and Desmet's application, on the other hand, there is mention only of a 'bioscope'.
- 55 *Leidsch Dagblad*, 13 September 1907.
- 56 In 1908 Desmet appeared at the Deventer fair with just the helter-skelter, exactly as in the two previous years. See *Deventer Dagblad* of 3 June 1907 and 1 June 1908. In both years the travelling-cinema site was awarded to Alex Benner. Exceptionally for him, Desmet placed an advertisement for the helter-skelter in the *Deventer Dagblad* of 3 June 1907.
- 57 *Nieuwe Groninger Courant*, 11 May 1908.
- 58 *Delftsche Courant*, 10 and 12 August 1909.
- 59 Van der Maden (1986), 47. See also: Van der Maden (1981), 175-6, where he claims that the city of Nymegen had banned helter-skelters since 1908. According to De Wit (1986, 111), on the other hand, helter-skelters could still be seen in 1910 at the fair in Utrecht.
- 60 For film fatigue in Belgium in 1907, see Convents (1994), 247-8. Even the Mulens brothers had occasional financial problems. In both 1909 and 1910, they had difficulties with the rent for the fairground in Den Bosch. See SDB, Minutes of B&W, nr. 906, 1 April 1909, nr. 1714, 19 August 1909, nr. 1256, 19 May 1910, and nr. 1944, 1 August 1910.
- 61 *Wageningsche Courant*, 9 October 1907.
- 62 Krüger's cinema and its entire technical staff at Antwerp were later taken over by Pathé Frères. Krüger himself went bankrupt in 1908. See Convents (1994), 238-49. Jean Desmet used his epithet 'L'Empereur du Bioscope' in one of his advertisements for the Imperial Bio in Groningen. See *Nieuwe Groninger Courant*, 11 May 1908, and *Provinciale Groninger Courant*, 8 May 1908. For 'President Kemp' see Vanessa Toulmin, 'Telling the tale. The story of the fairground bio-

- scope shows and the showmen who operated them', in: *Film History* 6, 1994, 223.
- 63 De Sonnevile's sketch for this face-lift is preserved in the Desmet Collection. Poster Collection Netherlands Film Museum, AR AFF 01, the Imperial Bio sketch plan.
- 64 Desmet paid f800 for the pitch. Desmet's license certificate for the fair at Delft for 1909, GAW, 26 January 1909. In a letter to the local authority at Wageningen, Desmet writes of a travelling cinema booth with a frontage of 25 metres and a depth of 11 metres. GAW, Jean Desmet to the town clerk of Wageningen, 22 September 1907.
- 65 *Leidsch Dagblad*, 30 July 1909.
- 66 GAW, Jean Desmet to the town clerk of Wageningen, 22 September 1907.
- 67 Few Dutch travelling cinema operators had their facades done in this sort of art-nouveau style, possibly because they had little interest in a style that was typically Belgian. The motifs are encountered again only on the facade of Alex Benner's cinema, but they are nothing like as dominating there as on Desmet's. Gabriele Fahr-Becker, *Jugendstil* (Cologne, Könemann, 1997), 131-62.
- 68 According to an insurance policy of 1908 (DA 20), Desmet still had three other organs: two Gavioli organs and another Gasparini. The policy states that between December 1907 and May 1908 Desmet insured his travelling cinema, his helter-skelter, the four organs, his luxury caravan, a second caravan, an organ transporter and three other transport trucks for f28,750. Toulmin writes that in England, the increased dimensions of the facades of travelling cinemas around 1905 was due partly to the novelty of the large mainland-European organs, such as the Gaviolis, which were mounted onto the facades. Toulmin (1994), 227-228.
- 69 *Amersfoortsche Courant*, 22 October 1907.
- 70 *Streekbode voor Zeist, Driebergen en Omstreken*, 4 September 1909.
- 71 The *Oprechte Haarlemsche Courant* of 6 August 1906 had already noted the arrival of Desmet's toboggan in its coverage of the fair, and continued: 'Alongside the helter-skelter, as an additional attraction, stands a modern luxury caravan from the world exhibition at Liège, for which the owner says he paid 25,000 francs'.
- 72 *De Prins*, 25 April 1908, 195.
- 73 *Nieuwe Groninger Courant*, 11 May 1908; *Provinciale Groninger Courant*, 8 May 1908.
- 74 *Tielsche Courant*, 18, 20 and 25 October 1908; *Delftsche Courant*, 10, 12 and 14 August 1909; *Streekbode van Zeist, Driebergen en Omstreken*, 4 and 8 September 1909. The Delft press also published a description of the interior, supplementing the article in *De Prins* with a description of the electric fire in the drawing room. The bathroom contained a toilet and even a bathtub. The walls of the bathroom were finished in thick frosted glass and white tiles. The polished mahogany

- walls of the carriage were protected by a shield of sheet iron. See *Delftsche Courant*, 12 August 1909.
- 75 Later on, the caravan was used by the Bergen-op-Zoom fairground artist J.W. Janvier. It could still be seen in Stadskanaal in 1990, albeit stripped of most of the luxuries of Desmet's time. S.C.F. Vinke, 'Ingezonden', in *Zwieren en Zwaaien*, July 1990, 32-3. See also Dimp Nelemans's study of Janvier *Alles draait... ik zie sterretjes. Geschiedenis van een kernisdynastie* (Raamsdonksveer, Verse Hoeven/D.S.H. Nelemans, 1996), 56, 88. Jan de Vaal, former director of the Netherlands Film Museum tried without success to acquire the vehicle for the museum. Interview with Jan de Vaal, 8 November 1995.
- 76 Desmet may have failed to secure a place on the fairground for his travelling cinema, but he did finally manage to put on a show in the auditorium of the Association building. He was not the first to appear there, however. Tewe's Electro Bioscoop Parisien gave film performances there in April 1907, followed by the Mullens brothers in December of the same year. A certain Jansen had already shown there in 1903, and in November 1905, F. Goemans applied for a license to use the hall for film shows. *Noord-Brabanter*, 12 April 1907; SDB, minutes of B&W, 14 November 1905. Desmet had already visited the fair at Den Bosch with his previous attractions: the wheel of fortune (in 1901 and 1902), and the helter-skelter in 1905.
- 77 Although the travelling cinema and the helter-skelter were described by the local press in both Arnhem and Apeldoorn, Desmet's name was not mentioned, nor did Desmet himself place advertisements for them. However, letters contained in the Desmet Archive indicate that it was he who appeared there with both the cinema and the toboggan. *Arnhemsche Courant*, 1 August 1908; *Apeldoornsche Courant*, 27 August 1908.
- 78 *Amersfoortsche Courant*, 24 October 1907.
- 79 See for example *La Comète belge* 86, 15 January 1909. *La Comète belge* has been in existence since 1905, and unlike the Dutch *Komeet*, its numbers are preserved almost complete in the Royal Library Albert I in Brussels.
- 80 *Nieuwe Groninger Courant*, 9 and 13 May 1908; *Provinciale Groninger Courant*, 7, 9 and 11 May 1908.
- 81 Musser, Charles, Carol Nelson, *High Class Moving Pictures. Lyman H. Howe and the Forgotten Era of travelling exhibition 1880-1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 6-7. Musser portrays Lyman H. Howe as a construction, or commercial fiction, created by Howe himself.
- 82 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 83 AIH, Letter concerning the estate of Catharina Desmet-Dahrs, 18 February 1908; DA 18-34, Driving licence issued 23 December 1907.
- 84 Hans Knippenberg and Ben De Pater, *De eenwording van Nederland. Schaalvergroting en integratie sinds 1800* (Nymegen, Sun, 1988), 43-91.

- 85 DA 44, De Laat to Jean Desmet, 25 September 1907.
- 86 See the triple competition in 1907 in Haarlem, note 51.
- 87 The Nymegen fair of 1910 featured the cinema of Desmet's rival Alex Benner as well as his own. Van der Maden (1981), 175.
- 88 DA 44, Jos van Wel to 'F.A. Alten, Régisseur Imperial Bio, 's-Hertogenbosch', 27 January 1908. F.A. Alten was Desmet's *régisseur* in the winter of 1907-8. Broeke-  
ma was *régisseur* for the travelling film of Hommerson et Fils at the Leiden fair  
in July 1910. See *Leidsch Dagblad*, 23 July 1910. The Hommersons, a genuine fair-  
ground family, boasted that their travelling cinema had been in existence since  
1897. They were also related to the Desmets by the marriage of Clasina Hom-  
merson to Desmet's brother Theo.
- 89 DA 110, 'Copijboek I', 27 January 1911 (Groningen, Tilburg), 31 January 1911  
(Groningen), (day illegible), February 1911 (Utrecht) and 5 July 1911 (Den  
Bosch). For Nymegen, see Van der Maden (1981), 226, 229. For the accounts for  
the fairs at Tilburg, Nijmegen and Den Bosch, see DA 111, 'Copijboek II', 8 Oc-  
tober 1911. See also SDB, Minutes of B&W, 6 July 1911. In Utrecht and Gronin-  
gen, the Hommersons' cinema was present at the fair. In Groningen H. Fey was  
there with his cinema as well. See further Herman De Wit, *Film in Utrecht van  
1895 tot 1915* (MA thesis, Universiteit van Utrecht, Utrecht 1986), 111, and De  
Kam and Westra (1983), 16.
- 90 D110, 'Copijboek I', January 1911; Van der Maden (1981), 188. In 1912, Desmet,  
Benner, Hommerson and Wegkamp agreed that they would not set up their cin-  
emas in Nymegen if the site were to be awarded to third parties, but their car-  
tel-like behaviour, which was intended to force down the price, backfired. That  
year, there was no travelling cinema at all at the fair. A year later, the municipal-  
ity of Nymegen abolished the cinema site at the fair. As far as we know, this  
was the last time that Desmet was described as a travelling cinema operator.
- 91 Ansjé van Beusekom, 'Louis Hartlooper (1864-1922). Explicateur te Utrecht', in:  
*Jaarboek Mediageschiedenis* 6, 1995, 183-94.
- 92 *Nieuws van de Week*, 28 December 1907.
- 93 *Tilburgsche Courant*, Saturday 15 February 1908.
- 94 *Nieuwe Groninger Courant*, 11 May 1908; *Provinciale Groninger Courant*, 8 May  
1908.
- 95 *Provinciale Noordbrabantsche en 's-Hertogenbossche Courant*, 13 February 1909.
- 96 *Boost* (1961), 14.
- 97 *Zaanlandsche Courant*, 7 November 1908; *Provinciale Noordbrabantsche en 's-Herto-  
genbossche Courant*, 15 February 1909; *Tielsche Courant*, 22 October 1910.
- 98 *Streekbode van Zeist, Driebergen en Omstreken*, 4 September 1909.
- 99 *Amersfoortsche Courant*, 22 October 1907.
- 100 *Limburg*, 11 December 1907.
- 101 *Nieuwe Groninger Courant*, 13 May 1908.

- 102 Ibid., 11 May 1908; *Provinciale Groninger Courant*, 8 May 1908. A photograph of Desmet's Imperial Bio at the Groningen fair shows posters with sometimes barely legible titles such as 'La pêche du thon', 'Exp...ion...glace', 'Les Forbans' and 'Les armures'. These are presumably the Pathé-films PÊCHERIES DU THON EN SICILE (1907), EXPLOITATION DE LA GLACE EN SUÈDE (1907), LES FORBANS (1907) and ARMURES MYSTÉRIEUSES (1907).
- 103 *Nieuwe Groninger Courant*, 11 May 1908.
- 104 *Streekbode van Zeist, Driebergen en Omstreken*, 1 September 1909.
- 105 Ibid., 4 September 1909.
- 106 *Nieuws van de Dag*, 4 September 1907.
- 107 *Tilburgsche Courant*, 22 February 1908. The film mentioned could have been any one of the following Pathé films: PAUVRE INSTITUTEUR (1906), UN MAÎTRE À TOUT FAIRE (1907), ÉCOLE DU MALHEUR (1907) and L'ÉCOLE DU MAÎTRE (1907).
- 108 *De Limburgsche Aankondiger*, 14 December 1907.
- 109 Boost (1961), 13. *Provinciale Groninger Courant*, 7, 9 and 11 May 1908; *Nieuwe Groninger Courant*, 9 and 13 May 1908. See also *Tielsche Courant*, 22 October 1910. According to a file marked 'Market funds' in the Roermond municipal archives, the Mullens's cinema booth measured 240 square metres in 1900 and 1904.
- 110 For comparison: Slieker's booth had 116 seats in a space of 128 square metres; Riozzi's offered 350 seats in a booth that varied between 95 and 180 square metres. If we compare Desmet with Slieker, Boost's figure of 280 seems possible. In comparison with Riozzi, 600 is a more likely number. Nijboer and Walthaus (1995), 18-19; J.W. Drukker, 'Op de kermis. 2', in *Skrien* 91, November 1979, 28, 32. The maximum audience capacities at the cinemas of Benner and the Mullens are not known.
- 111 *Leidsch Dagblad*, 18 July 1908.
- 112 The Bioscope Theater in Amsterdam had 700 seats. At the time it was opened, the Apollo Theater in the Hague had only 200 seats, but this was increased to 600 after alterations in 1909. These remained exceptions in Dutch cinema until the boom of 1911-12.
- 113 Toulmin notes that in England, the travelling cinemas of William Taylor and Mrs. Holland could hold an audience of 1,000. 'The show [Taylor's] was fitted entirely with plush seats and could accommodate 1,000 people. Mrs. Holland's Palace of Light was fitted in a similar vein with seating for over 600 people and standing room in the gallery for over 400 more.' Toulmin (1994), 228.
- 114 *De Nieuwe Koerier*, 17 December 1907.
- 115 Musser (1991), 8-11.
- 116 Ibid., 281.
- 117 *Zaansche Courant*, 7 November 1908.
- 118 Such was the Dutch preference for actualities and documentaries that the docu-

mentary qualities of fiction films were constantly singled out for praise in the reviews. This tendency persisted even after the coming of the long feature film.

- 119 *Tilburgsche Courant*, 15 February 1908.
- 120 *Ibid.*, 20 and 22 February 1908; *Nieuwe Tilburgsche Courant*, 22 February 1908.
- 121 Charles Urban made a series of films about the British naval fleet in July and August 1907, which included REVIEW OF THE HOME FLEET and TORPEDO ATTACK ON H.M.S. DREADNOUGHT. See Urban's sales catalogues. Desmet's film perhaps referred to the first of these two titles. In his book on Lyman Howe, Charles Musser refers to the film as ENGLAND'S NAVAL DISPLAY, and notes that Urban supplied Howe with a copy. The film was shown as the 'pièce de resistance' at Howe's presentation at Ford's Theater in Baltimore in August 1907. Musser (1990), 176.
- 122 According to Urban's catalogues, the fleet was not on the Thames but on the south coast of England, off Portsmouth and Cowes in the Solent. This was also picked up by the Dutch press. The *Nieuwe Koerier* of 17 December 1909 wrote about Desmet's performances in Roermond as follows: 'The performance consisted of a rapid alternation of the comic with the serious, but there was no lack of instructive material, as exemplified by the great review of the fleet off the English coast, which included pictures of battleships and their equipment.'
- 123 The film shows Olieslagers as well as several foreign pilots in action in the air and on the ground. A man with a large head and a long moustache, filmed obliquely from behind, is busying himself with the pilot. It is difficult to make him out, but he looks like Desmet. For the announcement of the filming in Nymegen, see: *Nijmeegsche Courant*, 6 and 7 October 1910. Alex Benner also showed his 'own pictures' of Olieslagers' flight over Nymegen at the same fair. There are, besides this, photos in the Desmet Collection showing Jean Desmet in a pilot's cap and coat in the company of Olieslagers. It is unclear where the pictures were taken. It is impossible to say for sure whether the film shown at Nymegen really was commissioned by Desmet.
- 124 If BULB FIELDS OF HAARLEM is the Mullens' film, it is probably incomplete. In addition to a tour of the bulb fields, the original film contained a fictional sequence entitled THE LEGENDARY ORIGINS OF FLOWER BULB CULTIVATION IN HAARLEM (1909). Donaldson (1997), 73.
- 125 *Leidsch Dagblad*, 27 July 1909.
- 126 *Ibid.*, 18 July 1908.
- 127 *Zaansche Courant*, 7 November 1908.
- 128 The Desmet Collection still contains copies of Pathé movies from the period 1907-8 that are not mentioned in the advertisements: L'OBSESSION DE L'OR (ARTIST'S DREAM, Pathé 1906), LA VIE ET LA PASSION DE N.S JÉSUS CHRIST (1907), LA MARIÉE DU CHATEAU MAUDIT (1907), *Kiekjes uit een Afrikaansche dierkwekerij (Snapshots of an Afrikaner Animal Breeding Farm, 1907?)*, MÉDOR AU TÉLÉPHONE

- (1907), CRUELLE PLAISANTERIE (1908) and CHEZ LES TOUAREGS (1908). The last-named film was only ever mentioned once briefly in a press review.
- 129 In theory, the film screened by Desmet in 1909 could be Pathé's NAPOLÉON, which was also released in 1909, but the presence in the Desmet Collection of a copy of the Vitagraph film suggests that Desmet screened the Vitagraph version. The Netherlands Film Museum has a fragment of the Pathé version, but it is not part of the Desmet Collection.
- 130 *Delftsche Courant*, 16 August 1909.
- 131 Aldo Bernardini, *Cinema muto italiano II. Industria e organizzazione dello spettacolo 1905-1909*, (Roma/Bari, Laterza, 1981), 159-60, 173-80; Uricchio and Pearson (1993), 52.
- 132 *Leidsch Dagblad*, 29 July 1909.
- 133 Vittorio Martinelli ed., *Cinema italiano in Europa 1907-1929* (Roma, Associazione italiana per le ricerche di storia del cinema, 1992).
- 134 Thompson, (1985), 29.
- 135 Guido Convents, 'La Vitagraph in Europa. Il caso belga', in Paolo Cherchi Usai (ed.), *Vitagraph Co. of America. Il cinema prima di Hollywood* (Pordenone, Edizioni Studio Tesi, 1987), 155-70.
- 136 *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad*, 20 March 1909.
- 137 For Carl Welte, see Van der Maden, "Welte komt!": *de geschiedenis van C. Welte's cinematograph, theater van levende fotografieën* (Arnhem, Vereniging 'Vrienden van het Openluchtmuseum', 1989). For Riozzi, see J.W. Drukker, 'Op de kermis'in: *Skrien* 90, 1979, 42-45.

## Notes Chapter II

- 1 J.K. Looijen, *Een geschiedenis van Amsterdamse theaters. Wie kwam er niet in de Nes?* (Amsterdam, Heuff/Uniepers, 1981); Joost Groeneboer and Hetty Berg (eds), *...Dat is de kleine man... 100 jaar joden in het Amsterdams amusement, 1840-1940* (Amsterdam/Zwolle, Joods Historisch Museum/Waanders, 1995); Vooren (1990), 5-33; Geoffrey Donaldson, 'Film in Rotterdam. De eerste jaren', in *Skrien* 98, July-August 1980, 36-41.
- 2 Announcements of the film shows at the Flora and Carré can be found in the *Nieuws van de Dag* and the *Algemeen Handelsblad*. See also Mark van de Tempel, 'En zie ik duizendmaal vergroot.... De Nederlandsche Biograaf- en Mutoscope Maatschappij en de films uit DE NIEUWE PRIKKEL REVUE', in *Jaarboek Mediageschiedenis* 5, 1993, 21-38; Ansjé van Beusekom, 'Dubbele salto tussen De nieuwe prikkel en DE JANTJES. De hechte relatie tussen de Nederlandse revue en vroege film' in *Jaarboek Mediageschiedenis* 8, 1997, 179-200. See also Groeneboer and Berg (1995) and J.K. Looijen (1981).

- 3 Rossell (1995), 170. From 25 October 1896, Madame Olinka showed the cinematograph made by H.O. Foersterling & Co. at the Flora Theater.
- 4 Science Museum, Urban Collection (URB 10/24), catalogue of the Warwick Trading Co. [1900]. In a brochure from the Warwick Trading Co., probably from 1900, and now in the Urban Collection of the London Science Museum, there is an advertisement that lists Nöggerath Sr. as the company's representative in the Netherlands, Norway and Denmark. There is no mention of him in two earlier Warwick catalogues from 1897-98 and 1899. See also: Geoffrey Donaldson, 'Wie is wie in de Nederlandse film tot 1930: F.A. Nöggerath', in: *Skrien* 128, summer 1983, 34-36; Ruud Bishoff, 'De zwiiggende speelfilm', in Dibbets and Van der Maden (1986), 56-7.
- 5 The various films of Queen Wilhelmina's coronation in 1898 were advertised again and again in the Warwick catalogues for 1899, 1901, 1902 and 1902-3.
- 6 In June 1906, Nöggerath was immediately able to offer the Mullens Brothers a new stock of films when their entire stock was destroyed by fire during their appearance at the fair in Bruges. He had just bought a new supply of Pathé films in Paris. According to Adriaan Briels, Nöggerath was also one of Christiaan Slieker's suppliers. Convents (1994), 245. Briels (1973), 32
- 7 Müller, (1994), 10-27.
- 8 The Urban Collection in the London Science Museum, the Urban papers in the British Film Institute, and Urban's memoirs are all silent on the subject of Nöggerath's period in England. For Urban's memoirs, see Luke McKernan (ed.), *A Yank in Britain. The Lost Memoirs of Charles Urban, Film Pioneer* (Hastings The Projection Box, 2000). Nöggerath's own memoirs deal extensively with his stay in England, but mention only his work as a cameraman and film processor. The memoirs appeared in irregular instalments as 'Uit de herinneringen van een opname-operateur' and 'Hoofdstukken uit het leven van een opname-operateur' in *De Kinematograaf* of 15 February 1918. For an English translation and commentary, see my 'Chapters from the Life of a Camera-Operator. The Recollections of Anton Nöggerath – filming news and non-fiction, 1897-1908', in *Film History* 11, 1999, 262-281. See also Dibbets and Van der Maden (1986), 57-64.
- 9 In *De Komeet* of 31 December, Nöggerath Jr. announced that he could supply films from these companies.
- 10 Ivo Blom, 'De eerste filmgigant in Nederland. De snelle verovering van Nederland door Pathé', in *Jaarboek Mediageschiedenis* 8, 1997, 129-152. Before the arrival of Pathé, there had been an office of the American Mutoscope & Biograph Company (the Nederlandsche Biograaf- en Mutoscope Maatschappij) in Amsterdam from 1898, but it was declared bankrupt in 1902. The gap this left in the market was largely filled within the next year by Pathé movies. The Lumières did not have a branch in the Netherlands. Strangely enough, they never even

- shot film in the Netherlands, unlike Biograph and Pathé. Van den Tempel (1993), 21-38.
- 11 Jacques Kermabon, 'Chronologie', in Jacques Kermabon (ed.), *Pathé, premier empire du cinéma* (Paris: Éditions du Centre Centre Pompidou, 1994), 19-39; Henri Bousquet, 'L'Age d'or', in Kermabon (1994), 47-73; Richard Abel, 'In the belly of the beast: The early years of Pathé Frères', in *Film History* 5, 1993, 363-85; Thompson (1985), 4-10.
  - 12 Most of Pathé's nitrate copies seem to have weathered the ravages of time down to the present.
  - 13 Kermabon (1994), 61. For Nöggerath's advertisements for Pathé films, see *De Komeet*, 21 December 1909, 1 February 1910, 1 May 1910, 1 July 1910.
  - 14 Müller (1994), 70
  - 15 Bernardini (1981), 152-8.
  - 16 Blom (1997), 137.
  - 17 *Ibid.*, 138.
  - 18 *Wageningische Courant*, 9 October 1907.
  - 19 *Nieuws van de Dag*, 4 September 1907; *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 9 September 1907; Richard van Bueren, *Saturday Night at the Movies. Het grote Amsterdamse bioscopenboek II* (Amsterdam, Lecuona, 1998), 213, 215
  - 20 Among other films, they screened: *MADemoiselle Faust* (Pathé 1909), *L'ASSOMMOIR* (SCAGL 1909), *NAPOLEÓN* (Pathé 1909), *FLEUR DE PAVÉ* (SCAGL 1909) and *JEANNE D'ARC* (Pathé 1909). For *L'ASSOMMOIR*, see *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 22 July 1909.
  - 21 *De Komeet*, 31 December 1909 and 1 February 1910.
  - 22 *Ibid.*, 1 May, 16 June and 1 July 1910.
  - 23 Desmet may have had a copy of *L'ASSOMMOIR* at the time. All that is known for certain is that he bought a second-hand copy much later from the Gaumont agent Karelsen, of which one reel survives.
  - 24 *De Komeet*, 31 December 1909. This is the earliest surviving advertisement by Nöggerath Jr. in *De Komeet*. Very few copies of the journal survive, so Nöggerath could have switched to rental at an earlier date.
  - 25 It was due to this claiming practice that Nöggerath's film *THE 'BERLIN' DISASTER AT THE HOOK OF HOLLAND* (1907) was filed as a Warwick production by the London National Film & Television Archive (NFTVA).
  - 26 For *THE GRIP*, see Donaldson (1997), 75.
  - 27 Dibbets and Van der Maden (1986), 58; Blom (1999), 262-267, 270, 278-281; Donaldson (1997), 88. In contrast to Desmet's detailed legacy, little remains of either the distribution collection or personal productions of Nöggerath father and son: *JACK'S GAME OF CRICKET ON BOARD HMS. 'GIBRALTAR'* (Warwick 1900), eleven Dutch actualities dating from c.1899-1902, *THE GRIP*, *THE 'BERLIN' DISASTER AT THE HOOK OF HOLLAND*, a fragment showing the variety artist Johan Buziau and

a documentary about the Dutch railways. JACK'S GAME OF CRICKET ON BOARD HMS. 'GIBRALTAR' is Nöggerath Jr.'s only British film to survive and is held in the NFTVA.

28 *De Komeet* 172, 1 March 1908.

29 This is apparent from various comments on Desmet's programmes in letters from his clients.

30 Müller (1994), 105-108. This experiment, begun in October 1908, was soon dropped, so film d'art films could also be purchased from 1909.

31 In 1905, Théophile Pathé, a younger brother of Charles Pathé, set up a company of his own named 'Théophile Pathé Frères', and opened branches in Berlin, Vienna and Saint Petersburg. However in 1907, Charles Pathé sued him for unfair competition and prevented him from using the name Pathé Frères. Kermabon (1994), 22.

32 *De Komeet* 99, 16 February 1905.

33 *Ibid.* 172, 1 March 1908.

34 Abel (1994), 36.

35 *Ibid.* 172, 1 March 1908. These films were largely sold at a fixed rate of 1.50 marks per metre.

36 Guido Convents, 'Les premières années du cinéma en Belgique. Un survol général', in: Jacques Polet (ed.), *Les premiers temps du cinéma en Belgique. Revue belge du cinéma* 38-39, March 1995, 11-21.

37 Convents (1979), 336-339; G. Deseyn, 'De pioniersjaren van de film te Gent (1896-1916)', in *M&L. Monumenten en landschappen* 5, September-October 1988, 43; Jo Braeken, 'Paleizen voor de hoofdstad', *idem*, 49.

38 Convents (1987), 160-161.

39 Cines and Raleigh & Robert, Rue St. Augustin 5, Parijs.

40 Thierry Lefebvre and Laurent Mannoni 'Annuaire du commerce et de l'industrie cinématographiques (France - 1913)', in *1895*, October 1993, 52.

41 Guido Convents, 'Immagini cinematografiche in Belgio', in Martinelli (1992), 100-5.

42 Anne Paech, 'Der erste Kinematograph in Osnabrück', in J. Steffen, J. Thiele, B. Poch (eds), *Spurensuche. Film und Kino in der Region* (Oldenburg, Carl von Ossietzky Universität, 1993), 169. These texts originally appeared in Paech's book *Kino zwischen Stadt und Land. Geschichte des Kinos in der Provinz: Osnabrück* (Marburg: Jonas Verlag, 1985), 13-25. See also Herbert Birett, *Lichtspiele. Das Kino in Deutschland bis 1914* (München, Q-Verlag, 1994), LXX-LXXI and 71-5.

43 In 1909, the German branch of Raleigh & Robert stood at the intersection with Mauerstrasse. At number 16 was Messter, at 18 the French Eclipse, at 46 Gaumont, at 235 the Berlin Film Exchange, at 236-I Itala-Film and at 236-II the Deutsche Bioscop company. See *Der Kinematograph* 106, 6 January 1909. Raleigh & Robert were Ambrosio's distributors in Germany and Belgium.

### Notes Chapter III

- 1 This is according to a chronicler from The Hague in 1911, in the *Nijmeegsche Courant* of 12 and 13 November 1911, quoted in Van der Maden (1986), 49-50.
- 2 DA 43 'Insurance policy 1907-1908, 's-Hertogenbossche Brandwaarborg-Maatschappij'. See also AIH, Estate of Catharina Dahrs (nalatenschap Catharina Dahrs), 18 February 1908.
- 3 AIH, Estate of Catharina Dahrs, 18 February 1908.
- 4 GADL 'Ingekomen Stukken B&W', Desmet to B&W of Delft, 29 March and 1 July 1909.
- 5 DA 137 'Van Kuyk/Van Dorp'.
- 6 DA 39 'Dossier onderzoek Rijksinkomstenbelasting naar vermogen Jean Desmet periode 1912-1924'. It is not known who took over the travelling cinema. The luxury caravan was sold in 1921 to the fairground operator Janvier at Bergen-op-Zoom. See also AIH, Desmet's brother-in-law and bookkeeper Ign. Mutsaers, 21 November 1956, and 'Algemene beschouwing' (s.a), in 'Dossier boedelscheiding naar aanleiding van Desmets overlijden'.
- 7 This kind of cinema was called a 'Ladenkino' ('cinema shop') in Germany. See Müller (1994), 29-39
- 8 Ivo Blom and Paul van Yperen, 'De Witte, een katholieke familiebioscoop', in: *Ons Amsterdam* 3 March 1997, 58-62; Broers, Paul, *Het Nederlandse bioscoopgebouw 1912-1922*, (unpublished MA thesis, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, 1989); idem, 'Het eerste interieur van de Cinema Parisien', in *Ons Amsterdam* 11, November 1990, 301-303; idem, 'Schoenendoos wordt filmpaleis. Bioscoop als nieuw type gebouw', in: *Ons Amsterdam* 10, October 1991, 243-247.
- 9 's-Gravenhage (adjective 's-Gravenhaagsch) is the formal Dutch name for The Hague.
- 10 The Apollo Theater was the oldest cinema in The Hague.
- 11 De Wit (1989), 32-3.
- 12 According to Herman de Wit, this was the first permanent cinema in Utrecht. De Wit (1989), 33.
- 13 Desmet had appeared at these auction rooms with his wheel of fortune in the winter of 1904-5. See DA 48, 'Stukken betreffende diverse standplaatsen 1904-1908. Utrecht 1904'.
- 14 Coby Bordewijk and Jaap Moes, *Van bioscoopkwaad tot cultuurgoed. Honderd jaar film in Leiden* (Leiden, Leidese Historische Reeks, 1995).
- 15 Abel (1994), 24, 29-31. See also Jean Jacques Meusy, *Paris-Palaces ou le temps des cinémas 1894-1918* (Paris, CNRS Editions/AFRHC, 1995).
- 16 Müller (1994), 29-30. Uta Berg-Ganschow and Wolfgang Jacobsen, 'Kino-Marginalien', in: *...Film...Stadt...Kino...Berlin* (Berlin, Argon, 1987), 19-20, 24. See also

- Michael Hanisch, *Auf den Spuren der Filmgeschichte. Berliner Schauplätze* (Berlin, Henschel, 1991).
- 17 Allen Eyles and Keith Skone, *London's West End Cinemas*, (Sutton, Keytone Publications, 1991), 13-28.
- 18 Nicholas Hiley, 'The British Cinema Auditorium', in Karel Dibbets and Bert Hogenkamp (eds), *Film and the First World War* (Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 1995), 160.
- 19 *De Kinematograaf*, 5 September 1913.
- 20 DA 52 'Stukken betreffende diverse standplaatsen 1904-1908. Rotterdam 1905'.
- 21 Henk Berg, *Over stallet en parket. Rotterdam en het witte doek. Een historisch overzicht van de Rotterdamse en Schiedamse bioscopen* (Rotterdam: Ad. Donker, 1996), 21; Kristine De Valck, 'Bioscoopbeelden kunnen rustig bezichtigd worden'. De opkomst van Rotterdamse bioscopen in de jaren tien', in *Tijdschrift Mediageschiedenis* 1, 1998, 32, 39-41.
- 22 Collectie Nederlands Spoorwegmuseum (The Collection of the Museum of the Dutch Railways), *Het 5 cents Nederlandsch Spoorboekje, zomerdienst 1 mei 1910*. Due to the time differences between the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany, a little ingenuity is called for when reading the railway timetables of those years.
- 23 Advertisements by W. Müller and other shipping lines in *Guide d'Amsterdam* (Amsterdam, Kotting & Cie, 1909).
- 24 Herman Romer, *Rotterdam rondom een eeuwwisseling* (Zaltbommel, Europese Bibliotheek, 1986), 71-5.
- 25 C.E. van de Stadt and C. Vroon van Gelder, *De ontwikkeling onzer electriciteitsvoorziening 1880-1938* (s.l. 1938), 12-14.
- 26 Wolfgang Schiefelbusch, *Disenchanted night. The industrialization of light in the nineteenth century* (Berkeley etc., University of California Press, 1995), 143-54.
- 27 B.R. Mitchell, *European Historical Statistics 1750-1970* (London/Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1975), 78.
- 28 Romer (1986), 71-5; Henk van Gelder, *Abraham Tuschinski* (Amsterdam, Nijgh & van Ditmar, 1996), 11-21; Nelleke Manneke and Arie van der Schoor, *Het grootste van het grootste. Leven en werk van Abraham Tuschinski 1886-1942* (Capelle aan den IJssel, Voet, 1997), 17-22.
- 29 *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad*, 13 March 1909. According to the advertiser, the 'American shop' was the highest building in the street.
- 30 Romer (1986), 17.
- 31 *Adresboeken Rotterdam 1908-1913. Plattegrond der Gemeente Rotterdam met de ontworpen uitbreidingsplannen* (1903). According to the Rotterdam directories, Rosine Desmet remained on Zandstraat until 1913.
- 32 Metskes is described as a hotelier in the *Adresboek Rotterdam 1908*. The meeting room of 'Grundo' (a society for ex-Groningers) is listed at the same address. Pre-

- sumably, Metske's café had a room that was used for meetings of this kind before he began to use it to show films.
- 33 DA 172 'De zaak van der Schalk'. The Van der Schalk Brothers also called themselves a 'brewery and vinegar distillery'. Desmet had been in contact with Van der Schalk about a takeover since July 1908.
- 34 *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad*, 20 November 1908; Berg (1996), 21.
- 35 There are no documents in the Desmet Archive relating to a 'restyling' of the cinema. In fact, the archive contains very little material from 1909.
- 36 DA 405 'Parisien, Rotterdam'.
- 37 *De Kinematograaf* 31, 22 August 1913.
- 38 *Nieuw Weekblad voor de Cinematografie*, 12 December 1947.
- 39 DA 172 'De zaak van der Schalk'.
- 40 *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad*, 13 and 17 March 1909.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 17 March 1909. The other films shown were: *FURTO ALLA MOSCHEA*, *LE BIRICCHINATE DI UN RAGAZZO*, *UN DRAMMA AL CIRCO* and *DE TONNEAU EN TONNEAU* (Pathé 1907), as well as three unidentified films: *De droom van een hoofd-conducteur*, (*The Ticket Collector's Dream*) *De Hond* (*The Dog*), and *Een reisje van Orléans naar Neussarques* (*An Excursion from Orléans to Neussarques*).
- 42 Meusy (1995), 113.
- 43 *De Tijd*, 25 October 1967; *De Telegraaf*, 2 July 1970.
- 44 *De Wit* (1989), 33.
- 45 *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad*, 27 December 1909. Goeman's offerings did occasionally include Italian films from Film d'Arte Italiana (which was affiliated with Pathé), such as *OTELLO* (*OTHELLO*, Film d'Arte Italiana 1909).
- 46 *Ibid.*, 17 and 20 March 1909. For the differences in screening practices between Rotterdam theatres combining variety and cinema, and cinema auditoria with continuous performances, see De Valck (1998), 36-7, 39-41.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 16 November 1908.
- 48 P. Vermeer took over Transvalia and reopened under the name Royal Bioscope Transvalia. See Berg (1996), 21-2.
- 49 Berg (1996), 22.
- 50 Giuliana Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map. Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993), 35-57; Merritt (1985).
- 51 AIH, Certificate of Residence, Municipality of 's-Hertogenbosch; DA 470-471 "Concertzaal/ Cinema Parisien Eindhoven 1911-1921"; D 39 'Belastingzaken'.
- 52 AIH, Certificate of Residence Municipality of Amsterdam.
- 53 Richard van Bueren, 'Saturday Night at the Movies I', (Oss, NCAD, 1996), 115. The cinema was later known as the Damstraat Cinema and the New York Cinema. This was the place where the explicateur Max Nabarro practised his craft from 1910. Nabarro's colourful recollections were published as: 'Een stem voor

- het doek (A voice in front of the screen). Max Nabarro, explicateur', NFM The-  
mareeks 6, 1992, reprinted in my English translation as 'Max Nabarro. This is  
my life', in *Iris* 22, autumn 1996, 183-200. The cinema ceased to exist in 1924.
- 54 Maurits Dekker, *Amsterdam bij gaslicht* (Amsterdam, Wereldvenster, 1949), 18.  
The film critic L.J. Jordaan also mentions this little cinema in his memoirs, *50  
jaar bioscoopfauteuil* (Amsterdam, Meulenhoff, 1958), 6-8.
- 55 *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 2 February 1910.
- 56 As noted in the previous chapter, films d'art such as *L'ASSOMMOIR*, *SAMSON*  
(Pathé 1909) and *JEANNE D'ARC* could also be seen at Alberts Frères as well as  
Nöggerath's Bioscope Theater.
- 57 *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 27 July 1909.
- 58 Film d'art films again took pride of place at the Paleis voor Volksvlijt: *LA VIC-*  
*TIME* (Film d'Art 1909), *LA TOUR DE NESLE* (Film d'Art 1909) and *LE ROI S'AMUSE*  
(SCAGL 1909) were shown there, as well as home-produced farces such as *KEE  
EN JET* (*KEE AND JET*, 1909). There is a flyer for the presentations at the Odeon in  
the Desmet Archive, DA 191 'Bioscoopprogramma's'. The following year, 1910,  
the Mullens brothers appeared again at the Grand Théâtre from June to August.  
In 1911, one of the two brothers, Bernard Albert Mullens, took over the Grand  
Théâtre.
- 59 Mitchell (1975), 20, 76-8.
- 60 The consumer price index rose extremely slowly during the period 1900-1914. It  
was not until the outbreak of the First World War that prices began to rise  
quickly, eventually peaking in 1920 (though due to the failure of wages and  
salaries to keep pace with inflation, this was in fact the nadir for the consumer).  
*Consumentenprijsindexcijfers, werknemersgezinnen met laag inkomen, totaal, 1900-  
100 (jaargemiddelden), berekend op 1997. Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, divisie  
sociaal-economische statistieken.*
- 61 Mitchell (1975), 167, 175. There were 146 strikes in 1910 with the loss of 366  
working days. In 1913, this rose to 427 strikes with 912 days lost. In 1910, 15,000  
workers went on strike, but in 1913, there were no fewer than 55,000 workers  
involved in strikes.
- 62 Giovanni Fanelli, *Moderne architectuur in Nederland 1900-1940* (Den Haag:  
Staatsuitgeverij, 1978), 41. Fanelli writes of 'revolutionary building'. A lot of  
this revolutionary building is still to be found in districts such as De Pijp and  
Oud-West.
- 63 F. M. Wibaut, later chairman of the Amsterdam housing authority, describes in  
his memoirs the kind of squalor he encountered when visiting the slums and  
crowded tenements as a member of the housing inspectorate, the so-called  
'board of health'. F.M. Wibaut, *Levensbouw, memoires* (Amsterdam Querido,  
1936), 134-5. See also Mak (2001), 236.
- 64 *Algemeen Adresboek der stad Amsterdam, voor de jaren 1908-1909*, 1363-5

- 65 The quintessential popular neighbourhood of Amsterdam in the pre-war years, glorified in song and theatre. Now a trendy quarter with small shops, bars and restaurants.
- 66 G. van Hulzen, *Cinematograaf, trilbeelden*, 1, (Amsterdam: L.J. Veen, [ca. 1905]), 143-4.
- 67 *Algemeen Adresboek der stad Amsterdam, voor de jaren 1908-1909, 1499-1501, 1626-7*.
- 68 *The illustrated practical guide for Holland. Special exhibition edition, Amsterdam 1909* (Amsterdam, John Wesselink, 1909), 60. Wesselink was a travel agent with an office in the restaurant of the Rijksmuseum.
- 69 *Algemeen Adresboek der stad Amsterdam, voor de jaren 1908-1909*, 1277-9.
- 70 G. van Hulzen, *Cinematograaf, trilbeelden* 2 (Bussum: Van Dishoeck, 1906), 39-40, 42.
- 71 Looijen (1981), 44-61. Jacques Klöters, 'Amusement in de dagen van Olim', in Groeneboer and Berg (1995), 88-90.
- 72 *Eigen Haard*, 9 October 1909, 636.
- 73 Van Hulzen, 2 (1906), 105-6 ('Nachtstad'). In 1909, the periodical *Eigen Haard* notes that Rembrandt Square was known as 'beer island' on account of its many coffee houses and pavement cafés. J.A. Doesburg Lannooy, 'Amsterdam.... vroeg!', in: *Eigen Haard*, 16 October 1909, 670.
- 74 GAA, Bouwvergunning inv. 2072 nr. 7911 and 'zwarte mappen/ ('black folders') 5180 nr. 7911.
- 75 Van Bueren II (1998), 248. Hasen was at first refused a licence. When he did obtain one a year later, he had to give up the cinema due to the illness of his wife. Oddly enough, film had entered the scene fourteen years earlier in December 1896, just one door further down the street at number 71, when a German named Wilhelm Schmitz hired a shop to show his 'Kinematograph' machine. See Adriaan Briels, *De intocht van de levende fotografie in Amsterdam. De Kinetoscoop, 1894, en de Cinematografen, 1896-1898* (Amsterdam, NBB, 1971), 18.
- 76 See for example *De Volkskrant* of 5 April 1960. On this occasion, Desmet's widow and his brother Mathijs were honoured at the film fair at the Krasnapolsky Hotel on Monday 26 September. Presumably, the anecdote about the wheel of fortune originated with them.
- 77 DA 255 'Correspondentie Schiefelbusch'. See also DA 321. The firm of Schiefelbusch was itself in the film business, since it rented Desmet's dynamo to cinemas in the south of the Netherlands. It also acted as middleman for Desmet's film rentals in that region.
- 78 Broer's article contains pictures of a scale model of the Parisien and of drawings by Broers. Broers (1990), 301-3. See also Van Yperen (1991) and Broers (1991).
- 79 DA 307, 'Parisien inrichting/verbouwing 1909-1917', Floor plan Parisien 1913.

- 80 *De Bioscoop-Courant*, 26 November 1915.
- 81 *Het Parool*, 2 April 1960.
- 82 *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 26 March 1910; Broers (1991), 246; Van der Maden (1986), 47; Van Zanten (1958).
- 83 Blom and Van Yperen (1997), 60.
- 84 DA 333-335 'Parisien reclame'. Between April 1910 and June 1912, Desmet had ads designed by the De Kroon printers for publication in newspapers such as the *Nieuwsblad van Nederland*, *De Noord-hollandsche Courant*, *De Amstelbode*, *Nieuws van de Dag* and the *Algemeen Handelsblad*. He also advertised in *De Telegraaf* from April through November. In 1912, he placed daily ads in *Nieuws van de Dag* for a period. From April 1911 through June 1913 he advertised once a week in *De Amstelbode*, with an interruption in December 1911, when *De Amstelbode* refused to accept further business from him.
- 85 DA 333-335, 'Parisien reclame', Correspondence De Vries & Co.
- 86 See Photo Collection Film Museum, dossier nr. 6204.
- 87 Van Bueren I (1996), 70; see also Van Bueren II (1998), 250. For the court case against the barkers, see GAA, Notulen Openbare Vergaderingen van de Gemeenteraad (Minutes of Public Meetings of the City Council ) 1914 I, arch. nr. 5079-105, microfilm 1460, 216. This records the petition by F. de Haan and others, dated 2 February 1914, 'for an end to the deplorable state of affairs created by the cinemas established at plots 67 and 69 Nieuwendijk.' De Haan's letter is missing from the petitions to the city council, arch. no. 5079-776.
- 88 Broers (1991), 246.
- 89 In 1912, the municipality of Amsterdam received 33 applications for new cinemas. Van Bueren (1996), 48.
- 90 Van Bueren (1996), 48-52, 113.
- 91 *Nieuws van de Dag*, 4 March 1911.
- 92 DA 480-81, 'NV Middenstad'. The NV Middenstad was created on 28 October 1911 by the architect Evert Breman and the insurer N.H. Urban. The starting capital was f100,000, which was converted into 100 shares of f1,000 each. By a royal decree of 31 January 1913, the capital was set at f200,000 and f100,000 worth of new shares were issued. For 60 shares the existing shares were converted into shares of f500 instead of f1,000.
- 93 David Hamburger should not be confused with another David Hamburger, who managed the Rembrandt Bioscope in Utrecht. To separate one from the other, we shall refer to them as Hamburger Senior and Junior, although they were not father and son.
- 94 DA 480-81, 'Cinema Palace/NV Middenstad'. For the takeover and programming of De Munt, see Van Bueren III (1998), 263.
- 95 Meusy (1995), 158-160, 206-207.
- 96 GAA, Bouwvergunningen (building permits) inv. nr. 2198 nr. 1731 and 'zwarte

- mappen' 5180, nr. 1731. From the licensing records of the Amsterdam city council, it is evident that the assignees for NV Middenstad were Berman and B.I. Citroen. See also Van Bueren (1998), 309.
- 97 DA 480-81, 'NV Middenstad', 11 May 1912. The document is also signed by Hamburger and De Hoop. This means that these three were already the major shareholders of Middenstad. It also states that Desmet would act as the technical director of the new cinema (i.e. the Cinema Palace), which NV Middenstad was proposing to operate. In 1912, Desmet owned 10 shares at f1,000. When the company's capital was increased and the shares converted to partial shares in 1913, Desmet probably also increased his holding. Thus, I assume that in 1915, Desmet owned 20 shares, of which he sold fifteen in order to lend Middenstad f15,000.
- 98 *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 11 May 1912.
- 99 *Nieuws van de Dag*, 4 March 1911. For comparison: the Union Bioscope had only 350 seats.
- 100 *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 23, 24 and 28 December 1912. The Cinema Palace was licensed for music from 19 February 1913. The licence notes that Desmet was a director of NV Middenstad.
- 101 DA 420 'Royal, Rotterdam'. Desmet paid f15,000 immediately and raised the remaining f80,000 by taking out a mortgage.
- 102 *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, 30 and 31 July 1913.
- 103 *De Kinematograaf* 29, 8 August 1913.
- 104 Ibid.
- 105 Ibid., 31, 22 August 1908.
- 106 *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, 2 August 1913.
- 107 Van Gelder (1996), 37-42. Van Gelder suggests this on the basis of Tuschinski's memoirs in *Tuschinski Nieuws*.
- 108 DA 420-21 'Royal Rotterdam'.
- 109 DA 155-59 'Klantenboek 1-4, November 1910-July 1914'. For audiences at the Rotterdam Parisien, see De Valck (1998).
- 110 DA 158 'Klantenboek 4, January 1913-September 1913'. Desmet's films were not always premiered at the Cinema Palace. Some of the movies he had bought before December 1912 appeared again later as features at the Palace. ZIGOMAR CONTRE NICK CARTER (Éclair 1912), for instance, had been acquired in March 1912 but was not shown at the Cinema Palace until March 1913. These were exceptions, however.
- 111 DA 157 'Klantenboek 3, March 1912-January 1913'.
- 112 DA 158 'Klantenboek 4, January 1913-September 1913', and DA 159 'Klantenboek 5, September 1913-July 1914'.
- 113 *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, 9 August 1913. Almost all the titles listed in the

advertisement for Thalia are Vitagraph and Gaumont films. Only the main film is Danish.

- 114 *Nieuws van de Dag*, 11 September 1913. The premiere of SILVIA SILOMBRA refers only to the Amsterdam premiere, as the film had been shown earlier in Haarlem. Donaldson (1997), 109.
- 115 *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 19 March 1914.
- 116 ZIJN VIOOL was distributed by Union and Cinema Palace. Bearing in mind that the film was premiered in March 1914 at the Cinema Palace, it is possible that the Cinema Palace distribution company was already in existence at this time. Donaldson (1997), 119-21. The Hollandia films were issued by several distributors: by Union (mainly) in 1913/1914, by Nöggerath in 1915, by Cinema Palace in 1916/1917 and by HAP-Film (Barnstijn) in 1918/1919.
- 117 For more on this, see Ennio Simeon, 'Giuseppe Becces Musik für RICHARD WAGNER. Paradoxien der ersten deutschen Filmpartitur', in *KINtop* 3, 1994, 65-71. For Desmet's acquisition of this film, see my 'Filmvertrieb in Europa 1910-1915. Jean Desmet und die Messter-Film GmbH', in op. cit., 79-80.
- 118 On Wagner's popularity in the Netherlands and the celebrations of the Wagner year in 1913, see Henk Suèr and Josine Meurs, *Geheel in de geest van Wagner. De Wagnervereniging in Nederland, 1883-1959* (Amsterdam, Theater Instituut Nederland, 1997).
- 119 *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, 6 August 1913.
- 120 DA 425 'Royal, Rotterdam'. Weekday performances here in 1913 cost 70,50, 40 or 25 cents, and on Sundays and public holidays the prices were 1 guilder, 75, 50 or 30 cents, respectively, which was considerably more than the Parisien. On Saturday 2 August 1913, the day after the opening, these performances attracted customers whose numbers were distributed as follows: 51 (loge), 101 (stalls), 105 (lower balcony) and 150 (upper balcony). On Sunday 17 August 1913 the distribution was 28, 106, 309 and 352 for the same seats. This means that on an average Sunday, the Royal attracted around 800 customers. These are the only two dates for which admission prices and box-office takings are available. Both prices and receipts may have been different outside the summer period.
- 121 DA 425 'Royal, Rotterdam'. But Desmet's receipts, on 2 August 1913, of f37 for the most expensive seats (51 at 70 cents) and f37.50 for the cheapest (150 at 25 cents) are not to be sneezed at.
- 122 DA 159 'Klantenboek 5, September 1913-July 1914'.
- 123 Ibid. Desmet did not show L'ENFANT DE PARIS endlessly on the programmes of the Royal, as Van Gelder maintains. Also, it was Nöggerath who distributed the film. Desmet initially rented Nöggerath's copy for his own cinemas or on behalf of others. He only bought a copy from Gaumont years later. See also Van Gelder (1996), 39-40.

- 124 DA 157 'Klantenboek 3, March 1912-January 1913' and 158 'Klantenboek 4, January 1913-September 1913'.
- 125 DA 158 'Klantenboek 4, January 1913-September 1913' and 159 'Klantenboek 5, September 1913-July 1914'.
- 126 *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 27 December 1912.
- 127 *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, 7 August 1913.
- 128 Altenloh claims that the lower admission prices of cinemas compared to theatres were compensated by the larger cinema audiences. Using a questionnaire, she established that one-third of the film-goers went to the cinema at least once a week, and were therefore spending as much as people who went to the theatre once or twice a month. Emilie Altenloh, *Zur Soziologie des Kinos. Die Kino-Unternehmung und die sozialen Schichten ihrer Besucher*, (Jena, Diederichs, 1914 ), 55-6.
- 129 Simon B. Stokvis, 'Bioscoop-Enquête. Vervolg. Bioscope-Theater (Nöggerath)' in *De Wereld* 23, 23 February 1912, 6.
- 130 For film commentary at the beginning of the 1910s, see Ivo Blom and Ine van Dooren, "'Ladies and gentlemen, hats off, please!" Dutch Film Lecturing and the Case of Cor Schuring', in *Iris* 22, autumn 1996, 81-102; Ansje van Beusekom, 'The Rise and Fall of the Lecturer as Entertainer in the Netherlands. Cinema Exhibition Practices in Transition Related to Local Circumstances' in op. cit 22, 131-44.
- 131 Stephen Bottomore, *The Titanic and the Silent Cinema* (Hastings, The Projection Box, 2000), 115-124; Michael Wedel, 'Schiffbruch mit Zuschauer. Das Ereigniskino des Mime Misu', in Thomas Elsaesser and Michael Wedel (eds), *Kino der Kaiserzeit: Zwischen Tradition und Moderne* (München, edition text & kritik, 2002), 197-254.
- 132 *Nieuws van de Dag*, 23 May 1913.
- 133 *Ibid.*, 12 April 1913.
- 134 *De Bioscoop-Courant* 10, 26 November 1915.
- 135 *De Kinematograaf* 31, 22 August 1913.
- 136 We know only that when Tuschinski took over the Cinema Royal, he did in fact employ an explicateur named Fierlier for a while. He left in February 1916. *De Bioscoop-Courant*, 25 February 1916.
- 137 Simon Stokvis, 'Bioscoop-Enquête', in *De Wereld* 22, 16 February 1912, 10-11, and *idem* 23, 23 February 1912, 6-7.
- 138 Blom and Van Yperen (1997), 60.
- 139 Following a police report of 15 June 1914, 'A Nos. 18/26. Intrekking besluiten 4 Juli 1908 No.6079 B and 23 April 1909 No.2972 B', and the provisions of the Sunday laws. DA 172 'De zaak van der Schalk'.
- 140 Poster Collection Film Museum, rec. 4796 en rec. 489.
- 141 Film Collection, Film Museum.

- 142 According to Desmet's order books, *IL VELENO DELLE PAROLE* and *DEN LURENDE DØD* played at the Cinema Royal from 29 August to 4 September. *LA TUTELA* was shown during the same week at the Cinema Parisien. The shots of the two cinemas were therefore made three months before the filming of the independence celebrations. DA 158 'Klantenboek 4'.
- 143 *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad*, 27 September 1912. The cinema had also been called *Gezelligheid* under Sanders's management. Sanders's explicateur was André de Jong and his projectionist was H. Scheuermann. This may have been the Scheuermann who was later the projectionist at the Cinema Royal, and possibly the person we encounter in the Desmet Archive as one of the writers of Desmet's correspondence in German in connection with his film distribution business.
- 144 DA 100, 'Bioscope *Gezelligheid*', Kees (last name unknown), third husband of Rosine Huizenaar-Desmet, to Jean Desmet, 29 May 1914. Kees was a fitter who repaired everything in and around the cinema, such as dynamos and projectors.
- 145 Interview with Mrs A. Huizenaar-de Geus, daughter-in-law of Rosine Desmet (actually Huizenaar-Desmet), 1 April 1994.
- 146 DA 120 'Bioscoopprogramma's', flyer for the *Gezelligheid* cinema, programme of 20 to 26 February 1914.
- 147 *Bussumsche Courant*, 6 November 1912. Desmet was already familiar with Bussum as a place where he had tried to acquire a site on the June fair for his travelling cinema at the beginning of 1907. The site was awarded to his rival, Lohoff. The applicants' names and the sums they had offered were given in the *Bussumsche Courant* of 23 January 1907. Desmet's bid was clearly too low. See also DA 430-433 'Palace, Bussum'.
- 148 *Bussumsche Courant*, 30 April and 7 May 1913.
- 149 *Ibid.*, 30 April 1913.
- 150 *Ibid.*, 7 May 1913.
- 151 For Willy Mullens's explanation, see Blom and Van Dooren (1996), 90-3.

## Notes Chapter IV

- 1 Müller (1994), 43-9.
- 2 'Onder de mensen. Bioscope VI' [a series of interviews with Frans Goeman], *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, 13 June 1914. In principle, therefore, Desmet could still have been buying films from Goeman in 1907.
- 3 Müller (1994), 48.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 88-94.
- 5 The debates arising from the Paris conference of February 1909 and a second conference in April 1909, as well as subsequent discussions at all kinds of na-

- tional conferences in Germany, can be followed in the German trade journal *Der Kinematograph* for 1909. See also Müller (1994), 62-5, and Abel (1994), 45-6. Similar conferences were also held in Belgium in 1910 and 1913. See Cherchi Usai (1987), 158.
- 6 Altenloh (1914), p. 18.
- 7 From a letter to a new cinema in Arnhem in: DA 110 'Copijboek 1', 25 December 1910. When Daniel Vandevijver toured Dutch cities with Pathé programmes on behalf of Belge Cinéma in 1908, the audiences objected to the French titles on the films. According to the *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad* of 18 and 19 May, the problem was solved by having the translations spoken loudly across the auditorium. In the course of the next decade, the problem of foreign titles, could, in principle, be dealt with by the lecturers who were such a popular institution in the Netherlands, but the actual situation was a little more complicated than this: 'For the period when the lecturer was out-of-fashion, the often stated explanation for his continuation is that he was hired to translate the foreign, especially French, intertitles for audiences unable to read them. [...] As some reports reveal, however, the lecturers performed anything but a literal translation of French intertitles. Knowledge of French was not even listed as a requirement in the advertisements for hiring lecturers. Moreover, the height of the Dutch lecturer's success occurred long after Dutch intertitles had replaced the foreign originals.' Ansjé van Beusekom, 'The Rise and Fall of the Lecturer in the Netherlands. Cinema Exhibition Practices in Transition Related to Local Circumstances', in *Iris* 22, autumn 1996, 132.
- 8 Gustav Hattingen did not come from the world of fairground and cinema. He was originally a pharmacist and dealer in chemical products. He may just possibly have been involved in photography. In common with the world of cinema operators, the film trade consisted of people from the most disparate professional backgrounds, and they often came from the lower-middle classes. *Der Kinematograph* 117 of 24 March 1909 notes with reference to the Westdeutsche Film-Börse: 'The personally liable partners are the pharmacists Hermann Dietz and Gustav Hattingen. The company began trading on 1 November 1908.'
- 9 According to Desmet's letters to Hattingen, the Kaiserliche Kino in Düsseldorf was one of the places where the films had played. See DA 110 'Copijboek 1', 5 December 1910. On 28 November Desmet complained that he was receiving films that had played in Essen, despite Hattingen's assurances that they would be coming from Düsseldorf. The perforations on the films from Essen were extensively damaged. DA 110 'Copijboek 1', 28 November 1910.
- 10 DA 67 'Westdeutsche Film-Börse'.
- 11 Given that the correspondence from and to Westdeutsche Film-Börse up to October 1910 appears incomplete, it is possible that Desmet had occasionally purchased films from the company before October 1910.

- 12 *Het 5 cents Nederlandsch Spoorboekje. Zomerdienst 1 mei 1911; idem. Zomerdienst 1 mei 1914.*
- 13 Johanna Voltmann-Dahrs was officially employed by Jean Desmet, presumably as her husband's assistant, but he dismissed her on 22 May 1911. DA 110 'Copijboek I', 22 May 1911.
- 14 DA 67 'Westdeutsche Film-Börse'. Goeman's film shows seem to have ceased to consist exclusively of Pathé movies from this point onwards. Desmet's cinema clients and distribution activities are considered in detail in the following chapter.
- 15 DA 67 'Westdeutsche Film-Börse'. The reason for this extra charge is unclear. 'Programme hire' is written underneath the final figure due on the bill. It is not known whether Desmet rented a weekly programme from Hattingen in addition to the two programmes purchased.
- 16 The copy of this film is in the Desmet Collection. See also Bernardini (1982), 89, 118, 135, 145, 151.
- 17 DA 67 'Itala-Film (Otto Schmidt)'.
- 18 Müller (1994), 109-110.
- 19 DA 110 'Copijboek 1', 8 April 1911. Desmet mentions the fire damage to this copy in a letter to the Arnhem cinema manager Prokupek.
- 20 DA 155 'Klantenboek 1', programme despatched 23 May 1911.
- 21 A film called DEN HVIDE SLAVEHANDEL by Fotorama had already appeared four months before the Nordisk version, but was not as widely distributed. The Nordisk version follows the plot of the Fotorama version literally. Both films were about forty minutes long. See Michael Esser, 'Fesselnde Unterhaltung. Mit weissen Sklavinnen zu neuen Ufern', in: Behn (1994), 55-63, and Jürgen Kasten, 'Weg von der eingefrorenen Leiblichkeit. Vom Kampf zwischen Sozialnorm und sinnlichen Instinkten', *ibid.*, 63-72.
- 22 DA 110 'Copijboek 1', 19 December 1910. Müller (1994), 112-115.
- 23 DA 110 'Copijboek 1', 3 May 1911: 'Concerning the film "The White Slave Girl" (1st series) which was destroyed by fire at your premises...' The film was part of Desmet's consignment of 19 April 1911.
- 24 DA 67 'Tonhallen Theater Gesellschaft'.
- 25 DA 110 'Copijboek 1', 2 and 15 August 1911.
- 26 DA 67 'W. Jokisch' and 'Projectograph'.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 'Parisien Rotterdam (H. Voltmann)'.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 'Parisien Rotterdam (H. Voltmann)'. Voltmann was in Germany again in February and March 1912, this time in Aachen to purchase films on Desmet's behalf.
- 29 DA 70 'Hermann Nerlich', 71 'Hermann Nerlich' and 72 'Hermann Nerlich'.
- 30 The concept of exclusive exhibition rights is described in detail in section 2 below.

- 31 DA 67 'Deutsche Film-Gesellschaft' en 68 'Deutsche Film-Gesellschaft'.
- 32 DA 110 'Copijboek 1', 7 June 1911.
- 33 Renate Seydel, Allan Hagedorff (eds), *Asta Nielsen. Ihr Leben in Fotodokumenten, Selbstzeugnissen und zeitgenössischen Betrachtungen* (Berlin, Henschel Verlag 1981), 42-3.
- 34 DA 67 'Deutsche Film-Gesellschaft', 11 April 1911.
- 35 DA 326 'Parisien. Bioscoopmateriaal'. On Desmet's relations with Pathé, see my paper 'What's in a name. Pathé in the Netherlands as envisioned in the Pathé-Desmet relationship', given at the Domitor conference, Paris 1996, and included in a forthcoming volume published by Domitor. For Pathé's implantation in the Netherlands, see my above-mentioned article in *Jaarboek Mediageschiedenis* 8. (1997), 129-152. See also Sabine Lenk, 'Filmographie', in Eric De Kuyper, *Alfred Machin, Cinéaste/Film-maker* (Brussels, Cinémathèque Royale, 1995), 200-1.
- 36 DA 112 'Copijboek 3', 25 October 1911. The film in question is SÜNDIGE LIEBE (SINFUL LOVE, Deutsche Bioscop 1911).
- 37 Ibid., 25 November 1911.
- 38 Ibid., 7 December 1912.
- 39 Ibid., 15 January 1912. Desmet ceased to receive programmes from Schnick after mid-March. A few single films later in March were followed in June by the long feature DER EID DES STEPHAN HULLER (Vitascope 1912), which was the last film he took.
- 40 Ibid., 12 February-15 July 1912.
- 41 Müller (1994), 105-57.
- 42 Ibid., 126.
- 43 Johan Gildemeijer, *Koningin Kino* (Amsterdam, De Nieuwe Tijd, [1914]), 44.
- 44 *De Kinematograaf* 140, 24 September 1915. In this and the following number, the law relating to exclusive rights was explained to readers by the lawyer J.W. Spijjer. Some Dutch distributors and theatre operators were announcing exclusives before 1913, but truly large-scale exploitation of the phenomenon did not get going until a later date. For the effects of the Bern Convention on the exclusive system in Germany, see Müller (1994), 126-7. For Dutch responses to the exclusive system, see *De Kinematograaf* 10, 28 March, and 34, 12 September 1913.
- 45 Müller (1994), 115-117, 128, 132-5.
- 46 DA 110 'Copijboek 1', 3 May 1911. In May 1911, Desmet rented it to Jelsma, one of his regular customers in Leeuwarden. As with his other longer films, he rented it for the fixed price of f75 rather than by the metre. This was his usual price for this type of long film. Although the renting on of copies owned by others was not a regular practice, it was not entirely unusual.
- 47 Müller states that not everyone switched over to the exclusive system when it was introduced in Germany. The examples she cites are the very titles with which Desmet caused such a stir in 1911. Müller (1994), 140.

- 48 London was the port of transit for American films, but most films from the USA reached Desmet via British and American distribution agencies in Brussels, Paris and Berlin.
- 49 Only Paris seems to have been an exception. The large French production companies had their sales and rental offices on, or close to, the great boulevards, and some, such as Pathé and Gaumont, were a long way from the stations. Following the development of the nineteenth-century entertainment district of theatres and cafés with music, the largest and most fashionable cinemas were situated on the large boulevards. Here the proximity of newspaper offices, the Bourse, various commercial establishments and famous cafés and restaurants counted more than infrastructural considerations like the proximity of railway stations. It is noticeable, however, that many branches of foreign firms (M.P. Sales, Nordisk, Vitagraph, Edison) had their offices in the ninth and tenth *arrondissements*, not far from the Gare du Nord and the Gare de l'Est. See Meusy (1995), 389.
- 50 *Annuaire du Commerce, Brabant, Bruxelles et Faubourgs 1914*, 1493-5.
- 51 Hans Borstorff, *Die Entstehung des Standortes der Filmindustrie in der unteren Friedrichstrasse* (Berlin, LBB Schriften, 1938).
- 52 Ernest Betts explains the concentration of the film industry in or around Wardour Street from the presence there of old-established photographic and instrument-making businesses where many of the earliest film traders made their start. Ernest Betts, *The Film Business. A History of British Cinema 1896-1972* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1973), 77. For an overview of all British distribution firms, see *The Post Office London Dictionary 1912*. According to the *Kinematograph Yearbook of 1914*, there were around 150 film distributors in London by 1913. *Kinematograph Yearbook 1914*, 279-81.
- 53 Many of the earliest distributors were also cinema owners, so their distribution offices were often in the same building as their cinemas. This was the case with both Desmet and Nöggerath. Nöggerath moved his office to Wagenstraat, a side-street off Amstelstraat near the Flora Theater, in 1910. Others, like Gildemeijer and Pathé, had separate premises. Gildemeijer was on Singel. In 1911, Pathé's film distribution was situated above the cinema on Kalverstraat, but in 1912 it moved to its own premises on Keizersgracht, with a subsequent move to Raadhuisstraat in 1913.
- 54 *Het 5 cents Nederlandsch Spoorboekje. Zomerdienst, 1 Mei 1911*. The journey from Brussels to Amsterdam took just half an hour longer than 85 years later. Half an hour needs to be added to the times advertised in the timetable due to the time-difference then existing between Belgium and the Netherlands. It was actually necessary to subtract half an hour from the time given for the Amsterdam-Berlin connection. See also Knippenberg and De Pater (1988), 48-60.
- 55 Knippenberg/De Pater (1988), pp. 77-82. The German occupation put the

- Netherlands on Central European Time on 16 May 1940, and this was continued after the war.
- 56 On the popularity of the telegraph and the telephone, see Knippenberg and De Pater (1988), 60-6.
- 57 The Netherlands had acquired a large telephone network by around 1912, so it was easy to call Berlin, Brussels and Paris from Amsterdam. Knippenberg and De Pater (1988), 62-3, 65.
- 58 DA 79 'Copijboek Buitenland 1', 22 April 1913 (Messter), 26 April 1913 (Eiko) and 2 May 1913 (Hanewacher & Scheler). This is one of the very few clues relating to Desmet's visits to Berlin. On 10 May, Desmet was in Cologne to look at the two Deutsche Bioscop films *FROU-FROU* (1913) and *DIE PRIMA BALLERINA* (1913). He noted that he was interested in films featuring Wanda Traumann and Suzanne Grandais. See DA 79 'Copijboek Buitenland 1', 16 May 1913. On 9 May, he informed Vitascope that he would be coming to Berlin personally within fourteen days. I have found no evidence that he actually made this visit. See 'Copijboek Buitenland 1', 9 May 1913. According to a letter to Vay & Hurbert, Desmet was also in Berlin in December 1912, see DA 79 'Copijboek Buitenland 1', 8 December 1912, and also in May 1914. For *DES MEERES UND DER LIEBE WELLEN*, see Ivo Blom, 'Of Artists and Tourists. Locating "Holland" in Two Early German Films', in: Thomas Elsaesser and Michael Wedel (eds), *A Second Life. German Cinema's First Decades* (Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 1996), 246-255.
- 59 This was already the practice in countries like Germany, as explained in the Introduction.
- 60 The representatives of foreign firms who either visited Desmet or arranged to meet him in places such as Cologne, included Adolphe Karelse of Gaumont, Max Delbrügger of M.P. Sales Agency, Piérard of Edison Brussels, Kersten-Jäger of Messter, Kaftanski of Luna and Grosskortenhau of Deutsche Bioscop. The representatives of Gigan and Guillaume are known only by their first names of Felix and Alphonse. Karelse also showed Desmet some of Robinet's films during his visits.
- 61 DA 79 'Copijboek Buitenland 1', 19 June 1913.
- 62 *Ibid.*, 25 January 1912, to Gigan about *TORTILLARD DETECTIVE* (Lux 1913); *ibid.*, 2 September 1912, to Guillaume about *GAVROCHE ET SON CHIEN* (Éclair 1912); *ibid.*, 27 December 1912, to Guillaume about *LE GIBUS DE PAPA* (probably *HER FATHER'S HAT*, Vitagraph 1912); *ibid.*, 19 June 1913, to Guillaume about *CONSTANTINE* (Éclair 1913); *ibid.*, 21 January 1913, to M.P. Sales Agency about *THE RENEGADES* (Lubin 1912).
- 63 *Ibid.*, 6 February 1913.
- 64 *Ibid.*, 24 August 1912. Guillaume's film *TU PASSERAS POUR MA SOEUR* (*WANTED: A SISTER*, Vitagraph 1912) also arrived two days late and was returned; *ibid.*, 24

- October 1912. *DUE VITE PER UN CUORE* (Cines 1912) came two days late from Aubert, but Desmet kept it in return for a discount; *ibid.*, 4 December 1912.
- 65 Although Desmet had acquired the Belgian rights to *RICHARD WAGNER*, there is some doubt as to whether the film ever played in Belgium. It is not covered in the *Revue belge du cinéma* of 1913 and 1914. Generally speaking, there is not much mention of German films in the Belgian trade press before the First World War.
- 66 DA 72 'L. Aubert'.
- 67 DA 79 'Copijboek Buitenland 1', 7 December 1912. See also *ibid.*, 8 December 1912: 'You should cut nothing from the films I buy from you, as the police here are not as strict as in Germany.'
- 68 *Ibid.*, 22 December 1912.
- 69 For the internationalisation of the film trade in general, see the selection of articles in the collection of Roland Cosandey and François Albera (eds), *Cinéma sans frontières 1896-1918/Images Across Borders 1896-1918* (Lausanne, Payot/Nuit Blanche, 1995).
- 70 Nöggerath and Gildemeijer appear as Messter's biggest customers in the memoirs of Messter's assistant, Maxim Galitzenstein. Desmet is not mentioned, despite his purchases of the exclusives *RICHARD WAGNER*, *SCHULDIG* and later *ALEXANDRA* (*ALEXANDRA*, 1914), *DAS ENDE VOM LIED* (*END OF SONG*, 1914-15) and *NORLANDSROSE* (*ROSE OF THE NORTH*, 1914). Bundesarchiv Koblenz, Nachlass Oskar Messter, 46, letter from Maxim Galitzenstein to Oskar Messter, 22 August 1922. In this letter, Galitzenstein states that on average two copies of each exclusive movie were sold to the Netherlands, one for the Netherlands and one for the Dutch East Indies. According to Galitzenstein, Messter's first exclusive was *DAS GEFÄHRLICHE ALTER* (*THE DANGEROUS AGE*, Messter 1911) in which Henny Porten played a small role. Desmet bought this film. The Bundesarchiv in Koblenz has held a copy of this film since 1985. It should be noted that Galitzenstein's letters were a source for Messter's published recollections, where they are sometimes reproduced word for word. See Oskar Messter, *Mein Weg mit dem Film* (Berlin, Hesse, 1936).
- 71 The relations between Desmet and the Messter company are described in detail in my article 'Filmvertrieb in Europa 1910-1915. Jean Desmet und die Messter-Film GmbH' (Blom 1994). The article appears in a special number of *KINtop* devoted to Oskar Messter and his company. *KINtop* also published another book on Messter, *Oskar Messter – Filmpionier der Kaiserzeit* (Basel/Frankfurt am Main, Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 1994), on the occasion of an exhibition of his work. For Desmet, Eiko and the Eiko film *AUF EINSAMER INSEL* (*ON A LONELY ISLAND*, 1913), see Ivo Blom, 'Il primo cinema tedesco nella collezione Desmet', in: *Nuovo Cinecritica* 2/3, April-September 1996, 129-33. See also Elsaesser and Wedel (1996).

- 72 DA 70 'Nieuwe Films. Vitascope'.
- 73 DA 75 'Projections A.G. Union', 16 May 1914. The complementary ticket was valid from 16 to 18 May, and dated 16 May 1914. Desmet was probably in Berlin again in May 1914 and received this little gift to a good customer upon arrival.
- 74 DA 69 'Skandinavisk Films', letter from Skandinavisk Films to Desmet, 22 January 1913. Starevitch's films did generally well in the Netherlands, as did the films he made later in France. The Netherlands Film Museum holds several (often tinted or coloured-in) examples of Starevitch's work in its main collection.
- 75 In his article on the Nordisk director August Blom, Ron Mottram cites twenty films from the period 1910-1914, which he describes from viewings of the copies. Desmet acquired a good half of these via Deutsche Film Gesellschaft and Nordische Films Co. Some are still in the Desmet Collection: VED FAENGSLETS PORT, EXPEDITRICEN (1911), HAEVNET (1911), UNGDOMMENS RET (1911), HANS VANSKELIGSTE ROLLE and GUVERNØRENS DATTER (1912). Mottram also discusses films that had been in the Desmet Collection before being transferred to the film archive in Copenhagen in 1973: TRE KAMMERATER, DØDENS BRUD (1912), DEN NAADIGE FRØKEN (1912) and FRU POTIFAR (1912). Finally, he describes films that had disappeared earlier from Desmet's personal stock, notably DEN SORTE KANSLER and MORMONENS OFFER (1911). Ron Mottram, 'August Blom', in: Paolo Cherchi Usai (ed), *Schiave bianche allo specchio. Origini del cinema in Scandinavia 1896-1918* (Pordenone, Studio Tesi, 1986), 133-68.
- 76 DA 80 'Copijboek Buitenland 2', 13 August 1913.
- 77 DA 74 and 75 'Nordische Films'. Desmet did, in fact, order three Nordisk movies in May 1914: BILLET MRKT TROSKAB 909 (1914), NAAR MANDEN GAAR PAA BØRSEN (1913) and ENDELIG ALENE (ALONE AT LAST, 1914), which did not arrive until July, due to the late dispatch of the intertitle translations.
- 78 DA 86 'Alfabetisch register'. The copy of DET HEMMELIGHEDSFULDE X, a very popular film in its day and still well thought of, was, alas, sold by Desmet to Krikke on 17 October 1919. The archive contains a letter to Desmet from Christensen himself. See: DA 72 'Otto Schmidt/Dansk Biograf Cie'. See also Martin Sopocy, 'Benjamin Christensen: "Det hemmelighedsfulde X" e "Häxän"', in Cherchi Usai (1986), 79-84, and Hiroshi Komatsu, 'Benjamin Christensen, l'Europa e l'America', *ibid.*, 103-22.
- 79 DA 160 'Klantenboek 6', DA 70 and 71 'Henri Adolph Müller'. This affair must have blown over since Voltmann stayed on at the Parisien until 1915. On the other hand, there is almost no material on relations between Voltmann and Desmet for the period after 1913. We may assume that Voltmann was no longer involved in Desmet's distribution and was kept on strictly as theatre manager. DAS GEHEIMNIS VON CHATEAU RICHMOND was sold to Nöggerath on 21 January 1915. Most of the companies listed were concentrated on the Friedrichstrasse:

Edison at no. 10, Nordische Film at no. 13, Otto Schmidt at no. 220, Eiko at no. 224, Skandinavisk at no. 235 and Deutsche Bioscop at no. 236. Only Messter was out of line; its office was at 32 Blücherstrasse.

- 80 The Brussels addresses were: Gaumont, 29 Rue de la Fiancée; Maurice Gigan, 17 Avenue du Roi; M.P. Sales, 65 Rue Van Artevelde; Claude Robinet, 11 Rue Saint-Lazaire; F. Guillaume, 77 Rue de l'Intendant; Reimers Eenberg, 29 Place de Brouckère. Most were close to the Gare du Nord or in the city centre. Only Gigan was in the area around the Gare du Midi.
- 81 The Brussels branch of Gaumont advertised in *La Comète belge* from the beginning of 1909. Gaumont had gone from selling to renting in 1910. Since it had no branch in the Netherlands, the company had no objection to selling its films to Dutch distributors through its Belgian branch. See also Gildemeijer (1914), 44. For Gaumont's development and expansion, see Abel (1994), 35-6, 49-50, and Lefebvre and Mannoni (1993), 34-5, and Philippe d'Hugues and Dominique Muller, *Gaumont - 90 années du cinéma* (Paris, Ramsay/Cinémathèque française, 1986).
- 82 DA 110 'Copijboek 1'. According to a letter dated 11 November 1910, Desmet visited Gaumont in Brussels in mid-November to conclude an agreement. On 27 March 1911, he asked Gaumont for the date of the coronation in Britain, the shooting schedule, and the date he would receive a copy of the film. The coronation was on 11 June. It is not certain whether Desmet also bought these scenes. A copy of the Gaumont film of the funeral ceremonies and the proclamation of George V remains in the Desmet Collection. A film of the coronation of George V, source unknown, was in the main collection of the Netherlands Film Museum, but was sent to the National Film & Television Archive in London.
- 83 Desmet was buying these 'Balkan-Journals' from Pathé at the time. See DA 337 'Bioscoopmateriaal Parisien, July 1909-July 1912', and the forthcoming publication of my Domitor paper on Pathé and Desmet.
- 84 Desmet probably acquired this movie at the same time as Nöggerath and others, since the film played in four Amsterdam cinemas both simultaneously and successively. It was advertised at the Amsterdam Plantage Cinema for 6 December 1912, for 7 December at both Desmet's Cinema Parisien and Nöggeraths Bioscope Theater, and for 10 December at Mullens's Grand Théâtre. *Nieuws van de Dag*, 6, 7 and 10 December 1912.
- 85 Jean Mitry, 'Léonce Perret ou l'invention d'un langage cinématographique', in: D'Hugues and Muller (1986), 65-9; Abel (1994), 351-4.
- 86 Abel (1994), 417.
- 87 *Annuaire du commerce. Bruxelles et sa banlieue*, 1910, 1911, 1912. Gigan is listed in *La Comète belge* at the beginning of 1909 as the representative of Lux at 15 Rue de la Braie, Brussels. For more on Lux, see Abel (1994), 37-8, Lefebvre and Man-

- noni (1993), pp. 42-3, and Eric Loné, 'La production Lux', in: *1895* 16, June 1994, 59-76.
- 88 For the background of Eclipse, see Abel (1994), 37, 50-1, Lefebvre and Mannoni (1993), 29-30, and the dissertation by Youen Bernard, *L'Eclipse. L'histoire d'une maison de production et de distribution cinématographique, de 1906 à 1923* (Paris, Université Paris VIII, 1992-93). For Aubert, see Abel (1994), 41-2, 54-5, Meusy (1995), 265-7, and Lefebvre and Mannoni (1993), 26. For the early period of Cines in Belgium, see Convents (1992), 100-1. For Cines in general, see Riccardo Redi, *La Cines. Storia di una casa di produzione italiana* (Roma: CNC, 1991). For the international expansion of Cines and other Italian companies, see Bernardini (1982), 131-54, and *idem*, 'L'avventura internazionale del primo cinema italiano', in Riccardo Redi (ed.), *Verso il centenario: Cinema italiano muto 1905-1916* (Roma: CNC, 1991), 33-46.
- 89 DA 68 'Nieuwe Films. Maurice Gigan', Gigan to Desmet, 18 December 1911.
- 90 For Éclair, see Abel (1994), 38-9, 51-3; Lefebvre and Mannoni (1993), 28; 1895 12, October 1992, *Griffithiana* 44/45, 1992; *Griffithiana* 47, 1993. For Vitagraph, see Cherchi Usai (1987). This collection contains Guido Convents' article 'La Vitagraph in Europa. Il caso belga', 155-70, which lists the various Vitagraph distributors in Belgium, including Guillaume and Guillaume-Decotte (165-7). The article also mentions other Desmet contacts in Brussels such as Delbrügger (p 165), Reimers Eenberg (164) and Gigan (165), who distributed the films of other American film companies.
- 91 THE STRENGTH OF MEN is discussed by Barry Salt in his article on Ralph Ince: 'Ralph Ince, un fratello "minore"?' in Cherchi Usai (1987), 387-402. See also Mustafa Özen, *Sprekende affiches voor stomme films. De Amerikaanse Vitagraph-affiches in Europa 1910-1915* (Amsterdam, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 1998, MA thesis), 25-6.
- 92 Thompson (1985), 200-1. Thompson notes that from April 1912, Biograph, Kalem and Lubin were distributed through M.P. Sales Agency. *Idem*, 202. For the Paris branch of M.P. Sales, see Lefebvre and Mannoni (1993), 46. The Motion Picture Patents Company had its own distribution company in the United States, the General Film Company, but this firm does not appear to have been a significant player on the European scene.
- 93 *The Picture*, 22 June 1912.
- 94 DA 68 'M.P. Sales Agency', letter from M.P. Sales Agency London to Jean Desmet, 25 June 1912.
- 95 *Ibid.*, letter from M.P. Sales Agency to Desmet, 1 July 1912.
- 96 DA 79 'Copijboek Buitenland I', 18 October 1912.
- 97 *Ibid.*, 13 January 1912.
- 98 *Ibid.*, 4 October 1912.
- 99 *Ibid.*, 5, 8, 14 and 19 December 1912, 7 and 12 January 1913.

- 100 Ibid, 14 October 1912. In all likelihood, the film was not sold to Desmet, as there is neither a copy of the film nor poster material relating to it in the collection. It is only mentioned in a leaflet.
- 101 Ibid, 26 August 1912. In a letter to M.P. Sales of 26 August 1912, Desmet's assistant De Vrée asked for a new copy of a film called *THE TWO BROTHERS*. He returned the old copy to M.P. Sales at the same time. 'Because my principal finds this a very nice film', he requested a new copy, plus twenty posters, for renting out films without advertising material was simply not done. He was presumably referring to the Biograph film *THE TWO BROTHERS* (1910), of which there is still a copy in the Desmet Collection. *THE TWO BROTHERS* is another D.W. Griffith movie.
- 102 For Hodel, see Abel (1994), 54, Meusy (1995), 272, Lefebvre and Mannoni (1993), 38, Cherchi Usai (1987), 163. For Ambrosio, see Ivo Blom, 'Un tesoro nascosto. I film Ambrosio nella collezione Desmet', in Paolo Bertetto and Gianni Rondolino (eds), *Cabiria e il suo tempo* (Torino, Museo nazionale del cinema/Il Castoro, 1998), 117-25; Convents (1992), 104-5. For Itala see Martinelli (1992), 101-3, Bernardini's studies of Italian expansion and Paolo Cherchi Usai, *Giovanni Pastrone, Gli anni d'oro del cinema a Torino* (Torino, Utet, 1986).
- 103 Ghezzi's Liège firm was called 'The Universal Novelty. Comptoir Général des Inventions Nouvelles'. A true pioneer, Ghezzi began by selling phonographs, American typewriters and the so-called symphonographs produced by the Klingsor firm, in addition to cinematographic equipment.
- 104 DA 70 'A.E. Ghezzi', 16 May 1913. Ghezzi's office was at 469 Singel, Amsterdam.
- 105 Thompson (1985), 29.
- 106 Ibid., 28-40.
- 107 Ibid., 38.
- 108 Abel (1994), 54. Between October 1913 and April 1914 Louis Aubert, one of Desmet's biggest suppliers, acquired the rights for Famous Players movies in Belgium and the Netherlands. Desmet bought *THE SIGN OF THE CROSS* through him.
- 109 M. Baer & Co./The Continental Film Exchange, 28 Gerrard Street; The Ideal Film Renting Co., 76-78 Wardour Street and 45 Gerrard Street; Famous Players Film Co. Ltd, 84 Charing Cross Road.
- 110 From September 1912, Desmet kept a record of his new acquisitions. These appear to be correct up to the end of 1913. For the preceding period, Desmet's purchases have been reconstructed from invoices in the Desmet Archive. The records do not mention the Pathé newsreels Desmet bought weekly from March 1912, and twice weekly from May 1912. On average, they were 120 metres in length. A random sampling also revealed that a fair number of long Danish feature films bought in 1912 and 1913 were missing from the records. The

Pathé actuality films and several fiction movies bought by Desmet are not included either. In view of the fact that not all the bills for the Danish films from 1912 have survived, it is hard to establish whether Desmet acquired them in 1912 or at a later date. Both the Pathé films and the Danish features are included in the table above. The records for 1914 appear to be equally unreliable. Some of the films purchased at the beginning of 1914 were not entered into the record. On the other hand, the newsreels bought that year were recorded. The purchases have been estimated on the basis of the invoices in the Desmet Archive.

### Notes Chapter V

- 1 DA 110 'Copijboek 1', Desmet to J. Sieders, 18 November 1910.
- 2 Desmet rented the film in June 1910 to the Nijmegen exhibitor H. Kersten. DA 96 'Nijmegen 1910', telegram Kersten to Desmet, 8 June 1910. FUNERAILLES D'EDOUARD VII is still in the Desmet Collection. Desmet had taken other actualities from Gaumont in 1910-11, but the scanty correspondence with the company in this period is silent on the matter.
- 3 In November 1910, for instance, Grootendorst and Baartmans from Amsterdam and The Hague received a children's programme and an evening programme of which two-thirds consisted of films made before 1910; DA 110 'Copijboek I', Desmet to Grootendorst and Baartmans, 19 November 1910.
- 4 One of them was Frits Brasse. Brasse was still living in Enschede at the time, where he was giving shows under the name of 'Chicago Bioscope', but he later became manager of the permanent cinema called the Chicago, owned by Mounier in Den Bosch. Brasse's explicateur at the Chicago, George van der Werf, left for Enschede in 1912 to set up his own permanent cinema, the Flora. He also became a good customer of Desmet's. See *De Komeet*, 284, 1 November 1912, and DA 155 'Klantenboek 1'.
- 5 Silvius opened the Dordtsch Bioscope Theater, the first permanent movie house in Dordrecht, in December 1910.
- 6 DA 156 'Klantenboek 2'.
- 7 *De Komeet* 284, 1 November 1912.
- 8 DA 109 'Amsterdam'. See also DA 97 'Tilburg 1911'.
- 9 DA 128 'Den Helder'. See also DA 97 'Den Helder 1911'.
- 10 DA 109 'Amsterdam'. The same type of hire-purchase arrangement was made with J. de Leeuw and P. Streefkerk in Gorinchem in 1912, who bought cinema seats and equipment. See DA 98 'Gorinchem 1912'.
- 11 DA 96 's-Gravenhage 1910', Henry Frères (W. Hos), Den Haag, to Desmet, 22 September 1910.
- 12 DA 109 'Vlissingen'. See also DA 99 'Vlissingen 1913'.

- 13 DA 98 'Mobiele exploitanten 1912: Welte', DA 97 'Mobiele exploitanten 1911: D. Schouten', DA 97 'Mobiele exploitanten: overigen'.
- 14 DA 156 'Klantenboek 2'.
- 15 DA 96 'Maastricht', W.J. van Lier to Desmet, 4 December 1910.
- 16 DA 155 'Klantenboek I', J. Sieders (Bioscoop-Theater 'Amsterdam', Enschede) to Desmet, 6 December 1910.
- 17 Riccardo Redi (ed.), 1911... *La nascita del lungometraggio* (Pesaro, CNC Edizioni, undated [1992]).
- 18 *Nieuws van de Dag*, 13 March 1911; *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 14 and 15 March 1911.
- 19 *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 15 March 1911.
- 20 Although DEN HVIDE SLAVEHANDELS SIDSTE OFFER has vanished, VED FAENGSLETS PORT still adorns the Desmet Collection. Marguerite Engberg, 'Il lungo melodramma erotico', in Redi (1992), 27-9. Engberg describes the movie as the first of the Danish erotic melodramas. See also Ron Mottram, 'August Blom', in Cherchi Usai (1986), 140-3.
- 21 DAS GEFÄHRLICHE ALTER was one of the few films that Desmet did not purchase from his regular German suppliers in 1912. He acquired the copy on 20 April 1911 in Rotterdam from Robert Weil of the Aktiengesellschaft für Kinematographie und Filmverleih in Straatsburg. See DA 67 'Nieuwe films. Robert Weil, Rotterdam/Straatsburg'. The film was Messter's first exclusive film, but it was available on the free market very soon after its release. See Müller (1994), 122-3.
- 22 *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 13 and 20 April 1911. It is impossible to be certain that LEVENS AFGRONDEN did indeed refer to the Danish movie AFGRUNDEN.
- 23 DA 155 'Klantenboek 1' and DA 110 'Copijboek 1', Desmet to Jelsma, 3 May 1911. The renter of AFGRUNDEN was perhaps Gildemeijer, since it was he who later distributed the Asta Nielsen pictures.
- 24 DA 110 'Copijboek 1'.
- 25 DA 155 'Klantenboek 1' and 156 'Klantenboek 2'.
- 26 DA 110 'Copijboek 1', Desmet to Benner, 1 May 1911.
- 27 Richard Abel notes that this film is not just an old-fashioned melodrama but contains narrative and representational elements that distinguish it from its predecessors. In pursuit of authenticity, the film uses actors from local theatres rather than regular Pathé performers. The camera spends a lot of time in medium shot, so that there is something quite claustrophobic about the spaces. Furthermore, unlike in earlier versions the family here is middle class, rather than working class, 'shifting the locus of what the French press usually described as a working-class social problem'. Abel (1994), 326-7. Desmet acquired LES VICTIMES DE L'ALCOOL in August 1911 from his contacts at Deutsche Film Gesellschaft in Cologne, which was also where he bought the short Pathé movies included in his programmes in the period 1910-12. Pathé's Amsterdam office allowed Desmet to distribute the film freely.

- 28 DA 13 'Uitnodigingen 1911-1961', invitation to the opening of the Bioscope Theater, 14 October 1911.
- 29 DA 98 'Bergen op Zoom', Benner to Desmet, 12 January 1912. As Bergen op Zoom is near the Belgian border, and not too far from Antwerp and Brussels, Benner could have obtained his films more easily and cheaply in Belgium. Desmet did a little business with Benner in the autumn of 1915, when he rented him *DET HEMMELIGHEDSFULDE X* and *LES ENFANTS DU CAPITAINE GRANT*. Benner ran the cinema, later renamed Luxor, until his death on 15 February 1945, with an interval between 1925 and 1937, during which he lived in Belgium.
- 30 DA 155 'Klantenboek 1' and DA 156 'Klantenboek 2'.
- 31 DA 67 'Alberts Frères', Mullens to Desmet, 24 June 1911.
- 32 For *AMORE DI SCHIAVA*, see Müller (1994), 114-115. Curiously enough, the character in the film is not black at all.
- 33 DA 97 'Mobiele exploitanten 1911: Welte', C. Welte to Desmet, 21 September 1911. See also Van der Maden (1989), 23.
- 34 DA 156 'Klantenboek 2' and DA 157 'Klantenboek 3'. The Desmet Archive suggests that between October 1911 and June 1912 there was a lull in Desmet's rentals to the Mullens brothers.
- 35 Cherchi Usai (1986), 154-5.
- 36 Marguerite Engberg, 'Alfred Lind', in: Cherchi Usai (1986), 128-9, Barry Salt, 'Schiave bianche e tende a strisce. La ricerca del "senzazionale"', *ibid.*, 70. *DE FIRE DJAEVLE* was taken from a short story by Herman Bang and was filmed again several times, including a version by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau.
- 37 Of the Danish films mentioned for 1912, only *DE FIRE DJAEVLE*, *GUVERNØRENS DATTER* and an incomplete version of *DØDS-SPRING TIL HEST FRA CIRKUS-KUPLEN* remain in the Desmet Collection.
- 38 DA 97 'Apeldoorn 1911', E. Bruins to Desmet, 23 November 1911, in connection with the renting of *HEISSES BLUT*.
- 39 DA 110 'Copijboek 1', 3 May 1911.
- 40 DA 97 'Gorinchem 1911', Nico Broekema to Desmet, 29 November 1911.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 'Hengelo 1911', P.E. Scharphorn to Desmet, 5 December 1911.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 'Haarlem 1911', Anton Haffke to Desmet, 15 October 1911.
- 43 For Van Duinen, see DA 156 'Klantenboek 2'. Van Duinen later made his mark as a distributor of low-priced second-hand films to schools and neighbourhood cinemas and to the Dutch East Indies, where they embarked on a second life. He became a medium-sized distributor in the 1920s.
- 44 *De Kunst*, 235, 27 July 1912, 242, 687, and 7 September 1912, 800.
- 45 In *De Kunst*, 251, 16 November 1912, 112, Nöggerath merely described his films as 'the latest and most sensational movies from the Vitagraph Company, Gaumont, Éclair, Itala, Edison, Cines, etc.' without mentioning the title of a single main feature. Page 222 of *De Kunst* (257) of 28 December 1912 contains an

example of the announcement of a main feature, in this case MONTE CHRISTO, followed by the quotation just mentioned. The announcements of the main titles at the Plantage Bioscoop, which opened on 2 November, were always accompanied by the statement 'other attractions include superb pictures from Gaumont, Cines, Vitagraph, Éclair, Pasquali, etc.' See *De Kunst*, 253, 30 November 1912, 143, and 254, 7 December 1912, 159.

46 *De Komeet* 284, 1 November 1912.

47 Antoon Wegkamp, for instance, had to wait until one of the White Slave movies was free. See DA 110 'Copijboek I', Desmet to Wegkamp, 20 April 1911. Hommerson wanted to show DE FIRE DJAEVLE over Christmas, but had to make do with two other long films: AVIATIKEREN OCH JOURNALISTENS HUSTRU and MARIANNE, EIN WEIB AUS DEM VOLKE (Messter 1911). See DA 97 'Correspondentie met bioscoopexploitanten. Gorinchem 1911, 7 and 17 December 1911.

48 *De Kunst* 242, 7 September 1912, 800.

49 *De Komeet* 284, 1 November 1912.

50 *Ibid.*, The same number contains a small advertisement by the Groningen cinema owner R. Uges, who also offers the film for hire.

51 *De Kunst* 258, 4 January 1913, 221-3.

52 *Ibid.*, 259, 11 January 1913, 238-40.

53 *Ibid.*, It is unclear who the distributor was. It could have been the Wilhelmina company, which released several films at the Cinema De La Monnaie in 1913. Another possibility was A.E. Ghezzi, who was an importer of films as well as co-director of the De La Monnaie.

54 *Ibid.*, 268, 25 January 1913, 271.

55 *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 24 January 1913 and *De Kinematograaf*, 3, 7 February 1913. For Aubert and TIRE AU FLANC see Meusy (1995), 266

56 From 24 March 1913, THE MIRACLE played for three consecutive weeks at the Flora Theater in The Hague, before moving to Amsterdam where it played for a week from 16 May at the Bioscope Theater. QUO VADIS? premiered at the Bioscope Theater on Saturday 5 April 1913 and played there for three consecutive weeks. According to *De Kunst*, both films were sold out for the first two weeks and were still playing to very full houses in the third week. *De Kunst*, 270, 29 March 1913, 407-14, 407; *id.*, 271, 5 April 1913, 428; *id.*, 272, 12 April 1913, 441-5; *id.*, 274, 26 April 1913, 477; *id.*, 278, 24 May 1913, 529-32. Wolf suggested that Nöggerath had paid three million French francs for the rights, but this seems a gross exaggeration. See Wolf, in *De Kunst*, 270, 29 March 1913, 407. On QUO VADIS? and THE MIRACLE, see also the reviews by Simon Stokvis in the journal *De Wereld* 80, 18 April 1913, 10-12, and *id.*, 30 May 1913, 10. For THE MIRACLE and the competing German version by Continental Film, see Michael Wedel, 'Misus MIRAKEL. Eine transatlantische Karriere, eine transatlantische Kontroverse', *KINtop* 10 (2001), 73-87.

- 57 For these films, see Müller (1994), 219-26.
- 58 'Onder de streep. Bij den weg', anon. in *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 6 April 1914.
- 59 Gildemeijer (1914), 45. Intended are, next to previously mentioned titles, the films *ATLANTIS* (Nordisk 1913), *DIE BLAUE MAUS* (*THE BLUE MOUSE*, Vitascope 1913) and *SPARTACO* (*SPARTACUS*, Pasquali 1913).
- 60 Desmet did not advertise the Amsterdam showing in *De Kinematograaf*. He may have been keeping the week in Amsterdam 'low-key' in connection with his agreement with Mullens.
- 61 Gildemeijer remarks that f1,000 per week was considered the largest amount obtainable for an exclusive in the large Dutch cities. The huge two-thousand-seater cinemas in other countries leapt at sums of f3,000 to f5,000 per week. Gildemeijer (1914), 46. Desmet may have advertised the first week in Amsterdam in the rival trade paper *De Bioscoop-Courant*, but only a few numbers of this periodical survive from 1913.
- 62 DA 99 's-Gravenhage 1913', Mullens to Desmet, 16 June 1913.
- 63 Ibid., Mullens to Desmet, 13 October 1913. The Desmet Archive still contains 400 copies of the brochure for *RICHARD WAGNER*. An inventory taken by Desmet himself in 1938 lists no fewer than 3,350 remaining copies! Only one copy of the poster for the movie survives, however, and it is composed of photographs and text.
- 64 *De Kinematograaf*, 22, 20 June 1913. This number contains a reprint of the revue in the *Nieuwe Courant*. The first advertisements for *RICHARD WAGNER* also appeared there. *De Bioscoop-Courant* of 19 March 1915 announced that *RICHARD WAGNER*, one of the great successes of the previous year, was to be shown again at Mullens's Residentie Bioscoop.
- 65 The score for the Wagner film is still in the Desmet Collection, though it has been badly damaged by fire (most probably during the blaze at the Amsterdam Parisien in 1938).
- 66 DA 99 's-Gravenhage 1913', Mullens to Desmet, 13 October 1913.
- 67 DA 109 'Contracten. 's-Gravenhage' and DA 99 's-Gravenhage 1913'.
- 68 Desmet also concluded a few film deals after the outbreak of war: with Eduard Cohen Barnstijn of the Haagse Bioscoop for *DET HEMMELIGHEDSFULDE X* (for two weeks in December 1914-January 1915), and with Engels of the Olympia Theater in The Hague for *ABSINTH* (Imp 1913) and *IN HOC SIGNO VINCES* (both December 1914).
- 69 DA 99 'Vlissingen', A.W. Smits (Alhambra) to Desmet, 5 August 1913.
- 70 DA 100 'Den Bosch', Mounier to Desmet, 16 March 1914.
- 71 *RICHARD WAGNER* played at the Cinema Palace from 22 May to 5 June, at the Residentie Bioscoop from 14 to 27 June and at the Cinema Royal from 2 to 14 August 1913. It also strikes the eye that two copies had been bought of *RICHARD WAGNER*, *IVANHOE* (Imp 1913) and the Italian epic *IN HOC SIGNO VINCES*, another

film that ran for two consecutive weeks in some places. Moreover, and quite exceptionally, Desmet had acquired both the Dutch *and* the Belgian rights for RICHARD WAGNER. The second copy is included in Desmet's register for 1916-22, but is no longer present in the collection.

- 72 SCHULDIG played from 13 to 26 March at the Cinema Palace. See DA 159 'Klantenboek 5', and *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 12, 17 and 23 February 1914.
- 73 *De Kinematograaf*, from no. 22, 20 June 1913 to mid-November 1913. RICHARD WAGNER had already been announced in *De Kinematograaf* of 4 April 1913, and was again discussed in the number of 30 May 1913, without mention of Desmet's name. However, Desmet's first ad for the film did not appear in *De Kinematograaf* until the number for 20 June.
- 74 DA 157 'Klantenboek 3'.
- 75 Ibid.
- 76 DA 158 'Klantenboek 4'.
- 77 Ibid., and DA 159 'Klantenboek 5'.
- 78 DA 99 'Amsterdam 1913', Eduard Schade to Desmet, 21 November 1913. Schade had a contract with Desmet for weekly deliveries of films from May 1913. See DA 109 'Dossiers betreffende contracten met bioscoopexploitanten. Amsterdam'.
- 79 *De Kinematograaf* 8, 14 March 1913.
- 80 The immediate reason for Albert Mullens's halt to renting Desmet's films might have been that after 1913 he ceased to show movies at the Grand Théâtre. Willy Mullens established himself in the Hague, where he opened cinemas such as the Residentie Bioscoop and the Hague Bioscope. In the years 1910-12, the Mullens were still showing particularly large numbers of actualities and the occasional fiction movie purportedly produced by them, although it is impossible to say for certain whether this was the case. *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 1909-11; Van Bueren II (1998), 159-60.
- 81 DA 99 'Mobiele exploitanten 1913: Hommerson'. It was not only Mullens and Benner who disappeared from the scene. In the autumn of 1913, Desmet was regularly renting single movies to Hommerson, another old acquaintance from the travelling circuit, but this came to a halt in November 1913.
- 82 Ibid., 'Nijmegen', Mounier to Desmet, 15 May 1913. This probably explains why there is no longer a print of the film in the Desmet Collection.
- 83 DA 100 'Haarlem', Apollo Theater to Desmet, 14 March 1914.
- 84 Gildemeijer (1914), 46.
- 85 DA 99 'Mobiele exploitanten 1913: Hommerson', Hommerson to Desmet, 5 June 1913.
- 86 Ibid., 'Mobiele exploitanten 1913: Groth'; *ibid.*, 'Mobiele exploitanten 1913: Hommerson'; *ibid.*, 'Mobiele exploitanten 1913: Welte'.

- 87 DA 175 'Ingekomen stukken betreffende firma's die als Desmets agent willen optreden bij de verkoop/verhuur van films, 1912-1914'.
- 88 DA 139 'Ingekomen stukken betreffende verhuur aan firma's in België'.
- 89 DA 158 'Klantenboek 4' and 159 'Klantenboek 5'.
- 90 DA 159 'Klantenboek 5'. Desmet sold some of these films to Bakker on behalf of Nöggerath when Nöggerath's agent Frank withdrew from the Dutch East Indies in May 1914 and passed on his agency to De Calonne. See DA 173 'Correspondentie Nederland-Indië: N. Bakker, Weltevreden', Bakker to Desmet, 20 May 1914.
- 91 DA 173 'Correspondentie Nederlands-Indië' and DA 178 'Copijboek Nederlands-Indië 1914-1916'.
- 92 DA 173 'Correspondentie Nederlands-Indië: N. Bakker, Weltevreden', Bakker to Desmet, 10 July 1914.
- 93 Thompson (1985), 45.
- 94 DA 173 'Correspondentie Nederlands-Indië: N. Bakker, Weltevreden', letters from Bakker to Desmet, 13 May and 15 June 1914.

## Notes Chapter VI

- 1 According to his own account, Johan Gildemeijer entered the film trade in 1907 as an exporter of films to the Dutch East Indies. See Gildemeijer (1914), preface. Desmet's would-be competitors used to approach him for special services, and in the autumn of 1911, Gildemeijer sent his films to him to be washed and cleaned. Another rival, P. R. Duinen, did the same in 1911 and early-1912. See DA 156 'Klantenboek 2'.
- 2 See Paul Broers, 'Amsterdamse bioscopen. De Elite Bioscoop "Union", Heilige-weg 34/ 36 – Handboogstraat 24/ 26', in *Binnenstad* 19, February 1992. See also Geoffrey Donaldson, 'Van straatzanger tot miljonair' [From street singer to millionaire], in: *Skrien* 150, November / December 1986, 40.
- 3 DA 67 'Gildemeijer/Union'.
- 4 *Ibid.*, Asta Nielsen films cost 15 cents per metre for a fourth week alone; 24 cents for a fourth and a fifth week; 33 cents for the fourth, fifth and sixth weeks and 42 cents for the fourth to seventh weeks. The other Gildemeijer films were cheaper: 11 cents per metre for a second week alone; 20 cents for the second and third weeks; 27 cents for the second to fourth weeks and 32 cents for the second to fifth weeks. Gildemeijer presumably anticipated a three-week run of his Asta Nielsen movies at the Union, whereas the other films became generally available after just a week at the Union. It is also possible that the Nielsen movies were already reserved for other exhibitors for the second and third weeks.

- 5 Gildemeijer (1914), 52. The film was screened by Mullens at the Grand Théâtre in April 1911.
- 6 *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 3 October 1911.
- 7 According to Van Gelder, Abraham Tuschinski already had an agreement with Gildemeijer in 1911 for the exclusive rental of Asta Nielsen films in Rotterdam. Van Gelder also notes further on in his book that there was some danger in 1912 that the Nielsen movies would go to Gildemeijer's rival, De Ruyffelaere. Clearly, 'exclusivity' was a matter of some debate at the time. This is why Tuschinski is said to have concluded an agreement for the exclusive exhibition of all new Asta Nielsen films in Rotterdam. This involved him in the purchase of a whole series of films, which had to be bought unseen at higher rates. This in turn suggests that the earlier Asta Nielsen movies were shown in advance by the distributor and offered individually. Van Gelder (1996), 23-4, 34-7. See also *Tuschinski Nieuws*, 4 March 1927, 2-3.
- 8 Behn (1994), 20-1.
- 9 Desmet himself stated in a letter to Deutsche Film Gesellschaft that he was willing to take their copy of *HEISSES BLUT* for the same price as *VED FAENGSLETS PORT*, since both prints had played for three weeks, and there were already two other prints of *HEISSES BLUT* in circulation in the Netherlands. This confirms that *HEISSES BLUT* was readily available on the free market. See DA 110 'Copijboek 1', Desmet to Deutsche Film Gesellschaft, 27 April 1911.
- 10 DA 67 'Parisien Rotterdam (H. Voltmann)'.
- 11 There is a draft of this ad in DA 110 'Copijboek 1', 25 November 1911. This was intended for the 1 December number of *De Komeet*. The number itself is no longer traceable. According to an announcement in *Nieuws van de Dag* of 12 January 1912, *DER FREMDE VOGEL* was shown at Desmet's own *Parisien* in Amsterdam the week after the screenings at the Apollo.
- 12 DA 70 'Deutsche Bioscop Gesellschaft'. Even after 1911, Desmet managed to get films such as *MADELEINE* and *TURI DER WANDERLAPPE* from Deutsche Bioscop, but apart from *DIE VERRÄTERIN*, he got no other Asta Nielsen films.
- 13 The *Nieuws van de Dag* of 12 July 1913 reported that the film in question was *DER GROSSE AUGENBLICK* (Deutsche Bioscop 1911), another Asta Nielsen film, but this must be a mistake.
- 14 The Desmet Collection still includes a German poster for *HEISSES BLUT*, designed by the Dutchman Ernst Bottema, and another German poster for *DEN SORTE DRØM*. The register for 1916-22, DA 87, mentions a film entitled *Diep Gezonken (Heet Bloed)* [FALLEN LOW/HOT BLOOD], but it is listed as a Nordisk film. This could have been a mistranscription, of course, so Desmet may still have owned a copy of *HEISSES BLUT* until the early 1920s.
- 15 *De Kinematograaf* 27, 25 July 1913.
- 16 For the sale to Bakker, see DA 159 'Klantenboek 5'.

- 17 The film was released in Germany under the title *Brennende Triebe*. Müller (1994), 155.
- 18 Loc. cit.
- 19 Pathé was not named in the invoices of the German suppliers, in Desmet's invoices to local cinemas or in programmes and flyers. Deutsche Film Gesellschaft supplied more Pathé films than their predecessors, and they did state the name of the producers on their bills.
- 20 DA 97 'Breda 1911' Sips to Desmet, 26 October 1911.
- 21 DA 111 'Copijboek 2I', Desmet to Jokisch (Projectograph, Budapest), 6 December 1911.
- 22 This is probably the reason why all bills and correspondence relating to Pathé were kept in a section of his books headed 'Apparatuur Parisien' [Equipment Parisien], even when the transactions were film purchases or rentals. The same applies to his business with Ernemann.
- 23 The Amsterdam Pathé office successively occupied the following addresses: 4a Begijnesteege, 456 Keizersgracht and 42 Raadhuisstraat. See Blom (1997), 145.
- 24 At this time the Pathé-Journal cost 50 cents a metre.
- 25 According to Yuri Tsivian, Infroit left for Russia in January 1913 where he took over from Maurice Hache at the Pathé branch and became more involved in distribution than production. An interview with Infroit appeared in the Russian journal *Sine-Fono* 4, 1913. Correspondence with Yuri Tsivian, 25 June 1996. Louis Justet, who had previously worked in Brussels, took over the Amsterdam office and in 1913 moved it to special, purpose-built premises on Raadhuisstraat. Showroom, laboratory, storerooms, despatch room and an apartment for the Justet family were brought under one roof on several floors. Justet's regular cameraman and laboratory assistant was Herman van Luinen, who worked for the firm up to Justet's death in 1928. Justet's daughter, Mrs L. Debs-Justet, used to translate the intertitles in the 1920s. Conversation with Mrs. Debs-Justet, 15 December 1994. See also Geoffrey Donaldson, 'Wie is wie in de Nederlandse film tot 1930: Hermanus Johannes Wilhelmus van Luijnen', in *Skrien* 149, September-October 1986, 33-5; Blom (1997).
- 26 The newsreels now cost 45 instead of 50 cents a metre.
- 27 So Desmet was now back to the old price of 50 cents per metre. By comparison with this, the charge for renting was 20 cents per metre for new first-week. When Desmet hired his newsreels in 1911, they cost 15 cents per metre.
- 28 Oddly enough, the Pathé-Journals are not recorded in Desmet's list of acquisitions for September 1912-December 1913, although they are included in the following list. My only explanation for this is that Desmet's bookkeeping was inconsistent.
- 29 In 1912, Desmet rented LA DAME AUX CAMÉLIAS (Film d'Art 1912), DE ONTSNAPING VAN HUGO DE GROOT UIT HET SLOT LOEVENSTEIN (Hollandsche Film 1912), a

programme that included *UNA CONGIURA CONTRO MURAT* (Film d'Arte Italiana 1912), a programme containing *inter alia* *LA PORTEUSE DE PAIN* (SCAGL/Pathé 1912), and a programme consisting entirely of scientific films.

- 30 The other actualities bought from Pathé were *INCENDIE DANS UNE USINE DE PRODUITS CHIMIQUES À AMSTERDAM* (BLAZE IN AN AMSTERDAM CHEMICALS FACTORY, 1913) and *ENTERREMENT D'UN SOUS-OFFICIER DES POMPIERS À AMSTERDAM* (BURIAL OF AN AMSTERDAM FIREMAN, 1914). DA 86 'Register 1914-1916' mentions a film entitled *Groote brand in New-York* (*Fierce Blaze in New York*) as belonging to Desmet, which could refer to *INCENDIE À HOBOKEN*. The Film Museum possesses a newsreel with an item on this fire.
- 31 One of these copies was found almost complete in the Desmet Collection and has been restored and conserved by the Film Museum. Either the other copy or Desmet's previously rented copy (see Chapter IV) was sold in 1912 to A. van Impelen, owner of the cinema Apollo in Haarlem. See DA 156 'Klantenboek 2, 1911-12'.
- 32 *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 6 and 18 July 1913.
- 33 Desmet's response in *De Maasbode* was quoted in *De Kinematograaf* 38, 10 October 1913.
- 34 *De Kinematograaf* 44, 21 November 1913.
- 35 Nöggerath's print of *L'ENFANT DE PARIS* was rented to Desmet in June 1914 for one of his cinemas in Rotterdam. See DA 74 'Nieuwe films. F.A. Nöggerath'. Nöggerath apparently did not take exception to Desmet showing the film outside Amsterdam. The same applies to other rentals by Nöggerath to Desmet. Desmet's purchases from Nöggerath are likewise evidenced by the presence of Nöggerath's own production of *DE GREEP* in the present Desmet Collection. The 1908 version of *THE LAST DAYS OF POMPEII*, the first film to be shown at the Rotterdam Parisien and likewise still in the collection, was originally also distributed by Nöggerath.
- 36 Abel (1994), 381-4.
- 37 Desmet's acquisition lists indicate that he bought the film on 4 August 1915. See register DA 86.
- 38 Desmet did have a lot of short historical films on offer, which were mainly of Italian origin. They were generally one-reelers such as *LA SPOSA DEL NILO* (Cines 1911) and *AGRIPPINA* (Cines 1911), both directed by Enrico Guazzoni, who later directed *QUO VADIS?*. In addition, there are a few longer historical films in the Desmet Collection, such as *L'ODISSEA* (Milano 1911) by Giuseppe De Liguoro.
- 39 Ivo Blom, 'Quo Vadis? From Painting to Cinema and Everything in Between', in: Leonardo Quaresima, Laura Vichi (eds.), *La decima musa. Cinema e le altre arti/The Tenth Muse. Cinema and other arts* (Udine, Università degli Studi/Forum, 2001), 281-296.

- 40 Bernardini (1982), 146-51; *Nieuws van de Dag*, 3 April 1913; Dibbets and Van der Maden (1986), 64.
- 41 *Nieuws van de Dag*, 3 April 1913; Dibbets and Van der Maden (1986), 64.
- 42 *Nieuws van de Dag*, 26 April and 9 August 1913; *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 14 February 1914.
- 43 *Nieuws van de Dag*, 4 April 1913.
- 44 *Rotterdamsche Courant*, 14 May 1913. It is likely that Desmet took over this abridged version from Gildemeijer, seeing that it had played first at the Union. In August 1917 Desmet had Hollandia make new positive and negative prints of his fragments from *QUO VADIS?*. There were 72 metres of film identified on a scrap of paper as 'lion scenes', doubtless referring to the sequences in the Roman arena. See DA 77 'Hollandia, Haarlem'.
- 45 It is possible that these remarks on an earlier version referred to *NERO AND THE BURNING OF ROME* (Edison 1908). If so, the incident was a repeat of Desmet's re-release in 1912 of Pathé's 1907 *Passion film* as a competitor to *FROM THE MANGER TO THE CROSS*. Ambrosio had earlier issued a film dealing with Nero's torching of Rome called *NERONE* (1909), but it contained no scenes of lions in the arena. If the quotation from Wolf refers to one of these two films, then Desmet certainly showed a different film to Gildemeijer.
- 46 N. Wolf, 'Quo Vadis?', in: *De Kunst* 272, 12 April 1913, 441-2.
- 47 *De Kinematograaf* 38, 10 October 1913.
- 48 For Wolf's protest and Gildemeijer's response, see *De Kinematograaf* 34, 12 September 1913.
- 49 *Bussumsche Courant*, 4 October 1913.
- 50 In this case, too, the so-called fragments could in fact have been an older film, namely Desmet's copy of Ambrosio's earlier, 1908 version of *THE LAST DAYS OF POMPEII*. The present copy in the Desmet Collection measures 347 metres, the original length being 366 metres
- 51 *De Kunst* 305, 29 November 1913, 137-42, 144.
- 52 DA 204-5. In 1938 Desmet still had 3,500 programme brochures of the film. The Desmet Collection still has 530 copies. More brochures are left over from *IN HOC SIGNO VINCES*, therefore, than for any other film.
- 53 In October 1917, the Rotterdam distributor Casino advertised *IN HOC SIGNO VINCES* in *De Bioscoop-Courant*. It is possible that Desmet sold on one of his two copies to Casino. See Ivo Blom, 'Nella collezione di Amsterdam. Jean Desmet, distributore dei primi film italiani', in: Renzo Renzi (ed.), *Sperduti nel buio. Il cinema muto italiano e il suo tempo 1905-1930*, (Bologna: Cappelli, 1991), 148. See also *De Bioscoopcourant*, 26 October 1917.
- 54 *De Kinematograaf* 49, 26 December 1913.
- 55 Silvius' trade was not limited to 'Dutch' films. In May 1914, Desmet bought *PARSIFAL* (Ambrosio 1913) through his firm the Hollandsch-Belgische Filmcen-

trale, followed in June of the same year by the acquisition of THE ADVENTURES OF LIEUTENANT PETROSINO (Feature Fotoplay Co. 1912). A CASE OF ARSON was directed by A.E. Coleby, who in 1913 also worked for the same production company as director of THE GRIP, the film version of Louis Bouwmeester's successful play *De Greep*, with Bouwmeester himself in the main role.

- 56 *De Kunst* 270, 29 March 1913, 407-414, and 278, 24 May 1913, 529-32. For the reception of THE MIRACLE, see also Van Beusekom (1998), 77-8, 79, 81.
- 57 *De Kinematograaf*, 12, 11 April 1913; *De Kinematograaf*, 38, October 1913.
- 58 DA 80 'Copijboek Buitenland 2', Desmet to Süring, 13 August 1913.
- 59 In the 1911-12 season, Pathé appeared on the scene via a Dutch production unit, which produced and distributed films under the name De Hollandsche Film. These films were mainly fiction movies produced by Alfred Machin. Desmet rented DE ONTSNAPPING VAN HUGO DE GROOT UIT HET SLOT LOEVENSTEIN from Pathé. See De Kuyper (1995), 204, and note 29 of this chapter.
- 60 DIE WELT OHNE MÄNNER was one of the few films that Abraham Tuschinski rented from Desmet for the Cinema Royal after he had bought it from him. The film played at the Royal in mid-May, immediately after its showing at the Cinema Palace in Amsterdam. It is a great pity that neither this print of the film nor any other has been found anywhere in the world. According to the list in DA 86, the print was sold to the Dutch East Indies. See also Michael Wedel, *Max Mack: Showman im Glashauss* (Berlin, Freunde der Deutschen Kinemathek, 1996), 183-4.
- 61 *De Kinematograaf* 49, 26 December 1913; Ivo Blom, 'La lunga vicenda del cinema italiano in Olanda', in Martinelli (1992), 64-5. Borelli's next film, LA MEMORIA DELL'ALTRO (Gloria 1914), was also distributed by Wilhelmina and was premiered at their regular first-release theatre the Cinema De La Monnaie. See *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 29 January 1914.
- 62 *De Kunst* 309, 27 December 1913, 203-4.
- 63 *Nieuws van de Dag*, 30 October 1913.
- 64 DA 314 'Parisien: Bioscoopmateriaal', Louis Justet to Jean Desmet, 7 November 1913.
- 65 DA 72 'Nieuwe films. Int. Verhuurmij Wilhelmina', Wilhelmina to Desmet, 2 January 1914 (invoice).
- 66 DA 100, 'Rotterdam 1914', letter from W.J. Welzenbach (Cinema Royal) to Desmet, 3 January 1914.
- 67 *De Kinematograaf* 39, 17 October 1913.
- 68 *Ibid.*, 47, 12 December 1913, and 48, 19 December 1913. In October 1913, Nögerath reported in *De Kinematograaf* that he had bought *Cleopatra* as an exclusive in London for f 100,000. See *De Kinematograaf* 40, 24 October 1913. In December he was saying that he had bought the film on 6 October for Ffrs. 30,000, and that higher admission prices were therefore unavoidable. See *De Kine-*

- matograaf* 48, 19 December 1913. Wilhelmina also occasionally rented other material to Desmet. At the end of March 1914, Desmet took their film of the international football match between Holland and Belgium. DA 73 'Nieuwe films. Int. Verhuurmij Wilhelmina', 28 March 1914
- 69 Given their American contacts, it appears more likely that Pathé had acquired this film rather than the Cines version since Aubert had sole rights on Cines productions, which Desmet and Nöggerath then acquired from him on a regular basis. What does remain puzzling, however, is that the Helen Gardner film was five or six reels long, whereas Wilhelmina's version was only a three-reeler, in which case it must have been a shortened version. DA 97 'Nieuwe Films. Int. Verhuurmij Wilhelmina', Wilhelmina to Desmet, 5 December 1913 (invoice). Given that the unused posters were returned, it is impossible to determine precisely which version Desmet had.
- 70 M.P. Sales's deliveries came via World's International from November 1913.
- 71 Ad Franssen, 'De eerste Nederlandse filmbladen en de rol van Pier Westerbahn', in *Jaarboek Film 1984* (Weesp, Wereldvenster, 1984), 31-42.
- 72 Anderson & Ziegler (Paris) also had the Dutch rights for the films of Mathieu Hackin (Brussels), Aktiebolaget Sveafilms (Stockholm) and Victoria Films (Berlin).
- 73 Bolle's profit margin is uncertain. The representative for Bolle's Universal Film Agency was Paërl, presumably the Jo Paërl who later became head of the Dutch Universal office. In 1913, Desmet bought SVENSKA HÖGFJÄLLSTRÄKTER I MIDVINTERSKRUD (THE MOUNTAINS OF NORTHERN SWEDEN IN MID-WINTER, Svea Film 1912) from Bolle, followed in 1914 by HIS HOUR OF TRIUMPH (IMP 1913), ABSINTH, ONE OF THE BRAVEST (IMP 1912), AN EVIL OF THE SLUMS (Powers 1912) and CAPTAIN KIDD (Bison 1913). Only the copy of CAPTAIN KIDD failed to survive from the American films listed here. The German and French prices stated agree with Gildemeijer's figure. See Gildemeijer (1914), 44.
- 74 *De Kinematograaf* 9, 21 March 1913.
- 75 For the Rotterdam fire regulations, see DA 400 'Cinema Parisien Rotterdam', resolution passed by B&W, 7-14 February 1913, and DA 172 'Van der Schalk'. The new Amsterdam fire regulations were reprinted in *De Kinematograaf* (7) of 7 March 1913. See also *De Bioscoop-Courant* 21, 14 February 1912.
- 76 *De Kinematograaf* 9, 21 March 1913; Van Bueren (1998), 238. Desmet's business archive refers to this exhibitor as 'Jerusalemki'.
- 77 *De Kinematograaf* 9, 21 March 1913.
- 78 Simon B. Stokvis, *Het Amsterdamse schoolkind en de bioscoop* (Amsterdam 1913), quoted in Joost Vermoolen, 'Simon B. Stokvis (1883-1941). De strijd van een omstreden filmkeurder', in: *Jaarboek Mediageschiedenis* 6, 1995, 265.
- 79 M.C. Nieuwbarn, *Het dreigend gevaar* (Amsterdam 1912), quoted in Van der Maden (1986), 50.

- 80 Van Beusekom (1998), 66.
- 81 Onno De Wit, 'Pedagogen en zedenmeesters in de greep van het bioscoopkwaad', in: *Jaarboek Mediageschiedenis* 3, 1991, 15-40. See also Vermoolen (1995), 259-78, and Van Beusekom (1998), 60-7.
- 82 *Nieuws van de Dag*, 23 May 1913.
- 83 In 1912-13, Desmet's personal assets were assessed at f47,500 by the tax authorities and in 1913-14 at f95,548.15. They consisted of property, stocks and shares. In 1913-14, it was noted that due to a mortgage and other debts amounting to f110,500, his current account was f14,951.85. According to the Local Income Tax Office in Amsterdam, Desmet's income rose as follows: f6,200 in 1911/1912, f6,200 in 1912/1913 and f11,000 in 1913/1914. Desmet also paid tax in Eindhoven, although there his income was assessed lower. He was officially a resident of Eindhoven and was assessed in Amsterdam as a 'non-resident'. See File relating to investigation by the State Income Tax Authority of the assets of J.D. in the period 1912-24, in DA 39.

## Notes Chapter VII

- 1 DA 76 'Deutsche Cines-Gesellschaft/Société Italienne Cines', Jean Desmet to Cines Rome, 27 July 1916. The reference is to the film *SANGUE BLEU*.
- 2 For the Dutch Overseas Trust Company (Nederlandsche Overzee Trust Maatschappij), see E. H. Kossman, *The Low Countries, 1780-1940* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988/1978), 550-1.
- 3 For general literature on the history of the Netherlands during the First World War, the best study in English is still E.H. Kossman (1978/1988), 545-560. See also, J.C.H. Blom in J.C.H. Blom and E. Lamberts (eds), *History of the Low Countries* (New York: Berghahn, 1999), 421-423. See also in Dutch: H.W. von der Dunk, 'Nederland ten tijde van de Eerste Wereldoorlog', in: J.C. Boogman et al., *Geschiedenis van het moderne Nederland. Politieke, economische en sociale ontwikkelingen* (Houten: De Haan, 1988), 348-59; and the excellent comprehensive study of the Netherlands during the First World War by Paul Moeyes, *Buitenshot. Nederland tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog, 1914-1918* (Amsterdam/Antwerp, Arbeiderspers, 2001).
- 4 Frans Peeters, 'De Zomer van 1914', in: *Vrij Nederland*, 11 August 1984, 2-19.
- 5 Sophie de Schaepdrijver, *De Grote Oorlog. Het koninkrijk België tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog* (Amsterdam/Antwerpen, Atlas, 1997), 67-102.
- 6 Boogman (1988), 348-59.
- 7 Evelyn de Roodt, *Oorlogsgasten. Vluchtelingen en krijgsgevangenen in Nederland tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog* (Zaltbommel, Europese Bibliotheek, 2000).
- 8 DA 333-335 'Parisien. Kantoorbepodigheden en reclame'. For the Antwerp cinemas, see Clement Wildiers, *De Kinema verovert de Scheldestad* (Antwerpen, Syn-

- dikale Kamer van Antwerpen van Kinema's en Bijvakken, 1956), 10-14. A more recent study of Antwerp cinemas is urgently needed.
- 9 DA 15 'Doorslagen van uitgaande stukken betreffende financiële en privé-aan-  
gelegenheden', Desmet to A. Mahler Dickson, 9 January 1916.
- 10 Ibid., Desmet to the Minister of War, 11 July 1916.
- 11 *De Bioscoop-Courant*, 25, 10 March 1916.
- 12 However, foreign films continued to reach Germany from Denmark and the Netherlands. Since the United States remained neutral up to 1917, American movies continued to be shown in Germany up to that point. See Deniz Gök-türk, 'Market Globalization and Import Regulation in Germany' in Dibbets and Hogenkamp (1995), 193-5. See also Herbert Birett and Sabine Lenk, 'Die Behandlung ausländischer Filmgesellschaften während des Ersten Weltkriegs', in Michael Schaudig (ed.), *Positionen deutscher Filmgeschichte. 100 Jahre Kinematographie: Strukturen, Diskurse, Kontexte* (München, Diskurs Film, 1996), 61-74. At the outbreak of war, the British had immediately interned Germans who worked in the London film distribution business. Max Baer at the head office of M.P. Sales Agency was one. Leah Blanche Kippax took over the company in November 1914. See *The Bioscope*, 16 March 1916, 1163.
- 13 *The Bioscope*, 9 March 1916, 1075-83. A report on film distribution in Scotland notes that London film distribution was still concentrated in the same streets: Shaftesbury Avenue, Wardour Street, Denman Street, Gerrard Street and Charing Cross Road.
- 14 Around 1910, the Batavier Line ships of W. Müller & Co. ran direct, daily (Sundays excepted) sailings from Rotterdam to London, but one could also travel by train and boat via Flushing and Dover, Flushing and Queensborough, and the Hook of Holland and Harwich. The journey by the Batavier Line took 12 hours. L.A. Bouma (Maritiem Museum) to the author, 23 June 1998.
- 15 *De Bioscoop-Courant*, 26 February 1915.
- 16 Thompson (1985), 68.
- 17 *The Bioscope* 493, 23 March 1916, 1233-4. See also Thompson (1985), 67.
- 18 Cinemas were also affected by the coal shortages. Electricity was used more sparingly, so there were fewer illuminated signs, and in some towns electricity supplies to cinemas were cut off at ten o'clock in the evening. Generators from the days of travelling cinema were put through their paces once again.
- 19 P. Körner, 'Film und Kinematographie in Holland', in *Der Kinematograph* 500, 26 July 1916.
- 20 For the rise of variety acts in Dutch cinemas during the war, see *De Bioscoop-Courant* 42, 7 July 1916.
- 21 *De Kinematograaf* 10, 28 March 1913.
- 22 Körner (1916).
- 23 The first Pearl White serial to be shown in the Netherlands was probably THE

EXPLOITS OF ELAINE (Pathé 1914-15), which was released by Pathé Amsterdam at the end of 1916. It was followed by other *serial-queen* serials, such as THE ADVENTURES OF PEG O' THE RING (Universal 1916) in 1916, LIBERTY (Universal 1916), THE RED CIRCLE (Pathé 1915), THE PURPLE MASK (Universal 1916) and RAVENGAR (Pathé 1916) in 1917, and THE BROKEN COIN (Universal 1915) in 1918. See Rudmer Canjels, *Serials in Nederland, 1915-1925* (MA thesis, Universiteit van Utrecht, Utrecht, 2000). Despite a lack of publicity and press coverage, surviving copies of the serials in the collection of the Film Museum suggest that the *serial queens* did not pass the Netherlands entirely by in the years up to 1916. The Film Museum holds one episode of WHAT HAPPENED TO MARY (Edison 1912), fragments of THE ADVENTURES OF KATHLYN (Selig 1913-14) and several episodes of the Helen Holmes serial THE HAZARDS OF HELEN (Kalem 1914-17).

24 *De Bioscoop-Courant*, 13 October 1916.

25 Ibid.

26 DA 327 'Parisien Bioscoopmateriaal', Jean Desmet to Heinrich Ernemann AG, 20 August 1915 and *ibid.*, 20 December 1915.

27 *De Bioscoop-Courant*, 8 December 1916.

28 Desmet sold his copy of DAS GEHEIMNIS DES SCHLOSSES RICHMOND (including lithos) to Nöggerath on 21 January 1915.

29 DA 80 'Copijboek Buitenland 2, 1913-15', Desmet to Eiko Film GmbH, 31 July 1914.

30 *Ibid.*, M.P. Sales Agency Ltd, Statement of Account, 14 November 1914. It is not clear whether these were French or Belgian francs, but the value of the two currencies was the same at that time.

31 DA 84 'Register van te koop aangeboden films'.

32 The Edison film was described as a Keystone film in Desmet's inventory, but Keystone did not actually make a film on this subject.

33 Desmet's lists are not entirely reliable. The principal source for the period 1914-16 is the register of purchases DA 86. There is no list for the following years. But the films acquired after February 1916 as well as earlier films from 1914 and 1915 (purchase dates unknown) are not dated precisely in DA 86. On the evidence of the invoices in the Desmet Archive, most of the films from 1914 whose acquisition dates are not recorded were bought before the outbreak of war.

34 They were the Nordisk comedies NAAR MANDEN GAAR PAA BØRSEN (1913) and BILLET MRK TROSKAB 909 (1914) and the Ambrosio film DUETTO IN QUATTRO (DUET BY FOUR\*, 1914).

35 These were the unidentified German film *De roman van een beeldhouwer* (*The Story of a Sculptor*, Hanewacker) and the Italian comedy LA DOMENICA DELLA FAMIGLIA FRICOT (THE FRICOT FAMILY'S SUNDAY\*, Ambrosio 1914).

36 There are a number of films in the Desmet Collection that have not been identified and have been dated at around 1915 or 1916: *De liefde van de markies* (*The*

- Love of a Marquis, Eclipse*), *Een bende valsemunters opgerold door de pers* (*A Gang of Counterfeiters Caught by the Press*, Rex) and *Een misdadig plan verijdeld* (*A Criminal Plan Overthrown*, Kalem). One of the films that 'disappeared' to Denmark in 1973 was *LIDENSKABENS MAGT* (*THE FORCE OF PASSION\**, Danmark Film 1915). All these films have been counted as purchases for 1915.
- 37 The first film named was sold by A.E. Ghezzi, and the second by Theodor Breitung, representing Meinert Film. *JAWS OF DEATH* and *WILLIAM VOSS* are entered in the last register on 19 and 23 February 1916, respectively. These are the only 1916 titles recorded. Unfortunately, the copies of several titles purchased during the war vanished before the collection reached the Film Museum. They include such films as *AVIATIKEREN OG JOURNALISTENS HUSTRU* and *MARIA PANSÁ, HET KLEINE MEISJE* (*TRAGICO CONVEGNO/TRAGIC CONVENT\**, Celio 1913). Desmet's copy of *TRAGICO CONVEGNO* resurfaced at the Film Museum in 2000 in the collection of J. van Liempt.
- 38 Carl Disch reissued *WEISSE SKLAVIN III* under the title *AGNES, DE WITTE SLAVIN* (*AGNES, THE WHITE SLAVE*), Wilhelmina redistributed *MA L'AMOR MIO NON MUORE* as *VROUWENLIEFDE EN LEED* (*WOMAN'S LOVE AND SORROW*) and Barnstijn revived *SANGUE BLEU* as *PRINSES HELENE* (*PRINCESS HELEN*).
- 39 Abel (1994), 159.
- 40 DA 326 'Parisien. Bioscoopmateriaal', letter from Pathé to Desmet, 2 August 1914.
- 41 Kermabon (1994), 163.
- 42 Part of the copy of *L'ASSOMMOIR* in the Desmet Collection is still missing. This print should perhaps now be combined with the fragmentary copy held at the Cinémathèque Française.
- 43 P.R. van Duinen offered Karelse a second-hand copy of *L'ENFANT DE PARIS* for resale, probably to Desmet. This was possibly one of Nöggerath's worn-out copies. See DA 76 'Gaumont'.
- 44 On the other hand, the film played for five weeks at the Amsterdam Parisien in the summer of 1916. If this was one of Nöggerath's copies, it cannot have been so very useless. According to a bill dated 31 August 1915, Desmet bought two copies of *L'ENFANT DE PARIS* from his rival on 15 August of that year for f 800. This price included 40 lithos and 100 programme booklets. See DA 76 'F.A. Nöggerath, Amsterdam'.
- 45 In 1928, *L'ENFANT DE PARIS* was one of the few films dating from the decade 1910-20 to be submitted to the national film censorship. It was submitted by Filma, rather than Desmet and Nöggerath. Filma had possibly bought a copy from Desmet or Nöggerath. See *Nieuw Weekblad voor de Cinematografie*, VII, 1, 1928.
- 46 DA 76 'Société Eclair, Parijs'.
- 47 DA 86 'Register 1914-16'.

- 48 Frédérique Moreau, 'Filmographie Gaumont: films de fiction 1896-1986', in D'Hugues and Muller (eds), *Gaumont, 90 années du cinéma* (Paris, Ramsay / Cinémathèque française, 1986), 213-214.
- 49 Paolo Cherchi Usai and Livio Jacob (eds), *I comici del cinema muto italiano. Griffithiana* 24/25, October 1985.
- 50 Desmet also took some older Cines movies in 1915: RAPALLO (1914), NEL PAESE DELL'ORO (IN THE LAND OF GOLD\*, 1914), LA TROVATA DI KRI KRI (BLOOMER'S SMART IDEA, 1914) and TRAGICO CONVEGNO (TRAGIC CONVENT\*, 1913), one recent film, PER AMORE DI JENNY (FOR LOVE OF JENNY\*, 1915) and one unidentified documentary entitled *Egypte* (*Egypt*).
- 51 DA 76 'Deutsche Cines Gesellschaft/ Société Italienne Cines, Berlijn/ Parijs', Società Italiana Cines, Rome, to Desmet, 2 September 1915.
- 52 Ibid., Ferdinand Loup-Rosenberg to Desmet, 9 September 1915. Rosenberg reminds Desmet in this letter of their unfortunate conversation of 23 July.
- 53 According to a report in *De Bioscoop-Courant* for 15 Juni 1917, the German Ministry of Trade froze the assets of Deutsche Cines Gesellschaft and Società Italiana Cines in Germany on 27 May 1917 as part of a package of retaliatory measures against Italy announced on 24 November 1916. See also Schaudig(1996).
- 54 DA 76 'Deutsche Cines Gesellschaft/ Société Italienne Cines, Berlijn/ Parijs', Deutschmann to Desmet, 20 September 1915. The films concerned were two Lyda Borelli films, MA L'AMOR MIO NON MUORE (LOVE EVERLASTING, Gloria 1914) and LA DONNA NUDA (THE NAKED TRUTH, Cines 1914), and two thrillers IL PORTAFOGLIO ROSSO (THE RED BILLFOLD\*, Cines 1914) and IL CANE ACCUSATORE (THE ACCUSING DOG\*, Cines 1914). In November 1915, Deutsche Cines Gesellschaft also offered Desmet Celio's LA TORRE DEI FANTASMI (THE TOWER OF THE GHOSTS\*, 1914), which he certainly wanted to acquire but did not pay for quickly enough. As he noted six months later, a competitor stepped in to snap up the film. DA 76 'Deutsche Cines Gesellschaft/Société Italienne Cines, Berlijn/Parijs', Deutschmann to Desmet, 4 November 1915 and 17 June 1916.
- 55 This copy was screened at a cinema in Alkmaar in December 1917.
- 56 DA 78 'Deutsche Cines Gesellschaft/Société Italienne Cines', Desmet to Società Italiana Cines, 17 July 1923. Desmet wanted to take action against an illegal copy which was circulating in the Netherlands at that time. Cines, which had meanwhile become a subsidiary of the Unione Cinematografica Italiana trust (U.C.I.), answered that he could extend his rights for 5,000 francs, which would enable him to take legal steps afterwards. It is probable that nothing came of this, and to crown matters, U.C.I went bankrupt that same year. Desmet sold his second copy of CAJUS JULIUS CAESAR and its accompanying publicity material to his rival P.R. van Duinen in 1923. DA, folder 109, invoice from Desmet to van Duinen, 18 April 1924. The film was still able to fetch f1,250. The first copy is still in the Desmet Collection.

- 57 In the absence of new material, Ghezzi certainly sold old films. On 14 January 1916, for instance, he made an offer of films that had been distributed by Wilhelmina in 1913, among them several Henny Porten films. Ghezzi died in 1919. The distribution company PIG-Film, established by Ghezzi's daughter, concentrated initially on Italian thrillers and films starring Francesca Bertini. When Ghezzi's daughter passed on the business to H.J. van Grinsven, he focused less on Italian films, which were thoroughly finished by then. For PIG-Film, see Ivo Blom, 'La lunga vicenda del cinema italiano in Olanda' in Martinelli (1992), 63, 73.
- 58 NORDLANDSROSE and DAS ENDE VOM LIED were also released as NORDLANDROSE and DAS ENDE VOM LIEDE.
- 59 DA 75 'Messter, Film Berlijn', Jean Desmet to Messter, 14 December 1914.
- 60 At first, Messter sent only photos in advance. The publicity material for NORDLANDSROSE, which finally arrived with the film copies, consisted of twenty posters featuring Henny Porten, 2 sets of photos of 8 per set, 40 'portraits' of Henny Porten, 20 large 'portraits of Porten' and 152 postcards.
- 61 DA 75 'Messter Film, Berlijn', Messter Film to Desmet, 28 January 1915.
- 62 Desmet ordered only one copy of ALEXANDRA at first, although there are two in the Desmet Collection, as opposed to just one copy of NORDLANDSROSE. He could have swapped one copy of NORDLANDSROSE for a copy of ALEXANDRA when he sent the first copy back to Berlin to have it measured. To publicise ALEXANDRA, Desmet requested twenty copies of all the advertising material, 3 sets of photographs and two sets of descriptive notes. For DAS ENDE VOM LIED, he requested 20 large and 40 small photographs and 1,000 postcards for 25 marks.
- 63 DA 86 'Register 1914-16'. See also Blom (1994), 73-92.
- 64 Thompson (1985), 203-4. The American Selig company, which had previously had its European prints made in Paris, also transferred this activity to London.
- 65 *De Bioscoop-Courant*, 6 October 1916.
- 66 Thompson (1985), 204.
- 67 DA 75 'The Trans-Atlantic Film Co., London', Desmet to The Trans-Atlantic Film Co. Ltd, 4 April 1915. Desmet's statement confirms once again that before the war, two or more people could buy the same film as someone else without any problem.
- 68 Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment. The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994), 86-7.
- 69 DA 77 'Beecroft Mutual Film, New York', Desmet to Beecroft Mutual, 1 September 1916.
- 70 *Ibid.*, Desmet to Beecroft Mutual, 19 October 1916.
- 71 *Ibid.*, Beecroft to Desmet, 22 October 1916.
- 72 *Ibid.*, Desmet to Mutual, 22 October 1916
- 73 *Ibid.*, 'Anglo-Italian Films, London'.

- 74 *De trouwe echtgenoot*, a copy measuring 271 metres, was sent to the film archive in New York (MOMA) in 1985. The Desmet poster collection contains posters for TILLY'S PUNCTURED ROMANCE (1914) and HIS NEW PROFESSION (1914), two Keystone productions featuring Chaplin. The posters in the Desmet Collection are usually proof that Desmet also bought the films belonging to them. *De trouwe echtgenoot* could thus be TILLY'S PUNCTURED ROMANCE, but this film is a six-reeler, which means that the Desmet copy is far from complete.
- 75 The letters from Desmet to Zukor are in DA 80 'Copijboek Buitenland 2, 1913-15', 5 January and 4 April 1914. Famous Players' pre-war offer was made on 21 October 1913.
- 76 DA 76 'Famous Players Film Co., London', Sidney Baber to Desmet, 11 May 1916.
- 77 Ibid., Sidney Baber to Desmet, 22 June 1916.
- 78 Ibid., Desmet to Famous Players Film Co., 3 July 1916.
- 79 The Desmet Collection still has a poster of the crime movie CHELSEA 7750. The film itself was never entered in Desmet's acquisition list. All that remains of A DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS, a historical drama à la QUO VADIS?, is a Dutch text strip *Een Dochter van de Bergen. Groot Drama uit de Tijd van Keizer Nero (A Daughter of the hills. Grand Drama from the Times of Emperor Nero)*. A DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS vanished to the Dutch East Indies along with other films Desmet was looking after for Minden.
- 80 Jean Desmet clearly lost an important member of his network when Karelse was called up in 1917. Desmet bought THE SIGN OF THE CROSS as an exclusive, including the rights for the Netherlands and colonies. It was obtained in Britain from Anglo-Italian Films. DA 76 and 77 'Anglo-Italian Films'.
- 81 *De Bioscoop-Courant*, 20 October 1916. The following month, Desmet had Dutch intertitles made for the movie by Hollandia. DA 77 'Hollandia, Haarlem', Hollandia to Desmet, 30 November 1916.
- 82 DA 100 'Enschede', George van der Werf to Jean Desmet, 5 August 1914.
- 83 Ibid., 'Breda', P.H.J. Sips to Jean Desmet, 8 August 1914.
- 84 Ibid., 'Enschede', Desmet to Van der Werf, 3 August 1914.
- 85 Ibid., 'Den Haag', G.N. van Eyk to Jean Desmet, 5 August 1914.
- 86 Ibid., 'Enschede', Van der Werf to Desmet, 3 September 1914.
- 87 From mid-July, the Bioscope Theater re-ran earlier popular successes such as QUO VADIS?, LE ROMAN D'UN MOUSSE and MARCANTONIO E CLEOPATRA. But these re-runs could have been due as much to the fact that it was the summer season as to the outbreak of war, and the same may apply to the temporary drop in advertising, but it was not the usual practice compared to earlier years.
- 88 DA 160 'Klantenboek 6'. Gildemeijer's Amsterdam Union bioscoop was still occasionally renting films from Desmet, taking A FIGHT FOR FREEDOM in February 1915 and DIE TOTEN LEBEN in May-June 1915.

- 89 Van Bueren (1996), 52, and (1999), 371-2.
- 90 Willy Mullens went on to give summer shows at the Arts & Sciences Building until 1922. In August 1914, he established his own small production factory, concentrating more and more on the production of non-fiction films. In 1916, the government commissioned a film from him about the Dutch Army and Navy, called HOLLAND NEUTRAAL (NEUTRAL NETHERLANDS\*) or LEGER- EN VLOOTFILM (ARMY AND NAVY FILM\*). In the first decade of the century Mullens had specialized in comedies and actualities, after which he moved over to making films for industry and the educational sector. See Bert Hogenkamp, *De Nederlandse documentaire film 1920-1940* (Amsterdam, Van Genneep, 1988), 9-24.
- 91 DA 160 'Klantenboek 6'.
- 92 DA 139 'Antwerpen, dossier Henry Dirks' and DA 124-138 'Copijboek 15-29'.
- 93 Guido Convents, 'Cinema and German Politics in Occupied Belgium', in Dibbets and Hogenkamp (1995), 171-8.
- 94 Convents (1995), 173.
- 95 DA 139 'Gent' and DA 135 'Copijboek 26'.
- 96 It is impossible to say exactly how long these deliveries to the Ghent exhibitors continued, but it was certainly for several months.
- 97 DA 74 and DA 75 'Films Erneuerungs Gesellschaft'. See also Ivo Blom, 'Film-distributie tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog. Jean Desmet en de Films-Erneuerungs-Gesellschaft', in: *GBG-Nieuws* 21, summer 1992, 34-6.
- 98 For Filma and the men behind it, E. Pelster and P. Bedijs, see Céline Linssen, Hans Schoots, Tom Gunning, *Het gaat om de film! Een nieuwe geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Filmliga 1927-1933* (Amsterdam, Bas Lubberhuizen, 1999), 100-6.
- 99 On 23 March 1917, Gildemeijer's films were taken over by Nordisk Films Co. of Copenhagen, who continued his distribution business under the name Nordisk Films Co., as a branch of the Danish parent company. Because of debts owed by Nordisk to Ufa, the Amsterdam branch passed to Ufa in June 1918. The Dutch film distribution business continued in existence until the end of 1924. According to the *Nieuw Weekblad voor de Cinematografie*, it marked the disappearance of the last distribution office to deliver complete weekly programmes. *Nieuw Weekblad voor de Cinematografie* 14, 2 January 1925. See also Bundesarchiv Koblenz, Ufa-Archiv R 109 I, 476, 1.
- 100 Before this, Vermeer had been employed in FAN's financial section and had also run the Transvalia and Centraal cinemas in Rotterdam. FAN's latest films were always shown in their first week in Rotterdam at Vermeer's Centraal Theater. After the transfer of ownership, FAN moved its offices to Rotterdam. Vermeer later made over FAN-Film to his son, Piet Vermeer Jr. The firm continued to exist well into the 1950s. For Nöggerath, see Blom (1999), for Vermeer see *Nieuw Weekblad voor de Cinematografie* 14, 2 January 1925.

- 101 Upon the establishment of the Association of Cinema Exhibitors in that year, De Hoop was described in the trade press as the manager of the cinema. The question is obscure. Information relating to development companies in cinema is not readily available in the Registry of Companies published by the Chamber of Commerce. When Hamburger and De Hoop set up their own distribution company, it was Hamburger who did the buying, while De Hoop took care of the rental business.
- 102 Judging from letterheads and dates, Cinema Palace was possibly already in existence in January 1914. DA 480-481 'NV Middenstad'.
- 103 Marcel Linnemann, 'Loet C. Barnstijn's Filmstad. Innovatief ondernemerschap en de opkomst van de Nederlandse geluidsfilmindustrie in de jaren dertig', in *Jaarboek Mediageschiedenis* 2, 1990, 42-3.
- 104 It is worth noting that the earlier Gaumont serial *FANTOMAS* (1913), which features so prominently in film literature, was not nearly as popular as *LES VAMPIRES* in the Netherlands. *FANTOMAS* was distributed in the Netherlands by Wilhelmina in 1913-14.
- 105 Two copies were involved at a cost of 3.35 francs per metre for the first nine episodes. Barnstijn had to make an initial down payment of f5,000. DA 17 'Doorslagen van uitgaande stukken betreffende financiële en privé-aangelegenheden', Desmet to Cohen Barnstijn, 26 March 1915. The accompanying publicity could only be described as extremely meagre: 'fifteen posters and two sets of photographs of all types'. There was a desperate shortage of publicity materials from France at this time. Barnstijn made copious use of the photographs in his page-long ads in *De Bioscoopcourant*. The shortage of paper in France can be judged from these posters. The quality of the paper in the posters delivered is strikingly poor when compared, for instance, with Messter's.
- 106 In the years 1916-19, Desmet used Hollandia to provide new opening titles and dialogue titles for his films. The films were mainly pre-war productions.
- 107 In *De Bioscoop-Courant* of 10 October 1915, Gildemeijer announced that as from 1 October he held sole rights in 'Netherlands and Colonies' for the purchase of films from the production companies PAGU (Union), Svenska, Oliver-Film, Kalem and American Biograph.

### Notes Chapter VIII

- 1 DA 15 'Doorslagen van uitgaande stukken betreffende financiële en privé-aangelegenheden', Jean Desmet to Theo Desmet, 1 October 1916.
- 2 In a letter of 13 October 1914, Messter tried to sell Desmet his newsreel *Messter-Woche* for 80 cents a metre, but Desmet was more interested in feature films. See DA 75 'Messter Film/Autor Film', Messter to Desmet, 13 October 1914. Eiko had already offered him *Eiko-Woche* in the spring of 1914. They repeated

- this offer in August 1914, lauding their own pictures of the front. See DA 75 'Eiko Film, Berlijn'.
- 3 The others were: AVEC NOS SOLDATS DANS LES FORETS DE L'ARGONNE (purchased 16 July 1915), CAVALERIE D'AFRIQUE AU FRONT (20 July 1915), COMMENT ON NOURRIT NOS SOLDATS (20 July 1915), BOMBARDEMENT DU BOSPHORE PAR LA FLOTTE RUSSE (23 July 1915). For actualities on the war by French production companies, see Laurent Veray's excellent study *Les Films d'actualité français de la Grande Guerre* (Paris: S.I.R.P.A./ A.F.R.H.C., 1995). With the exception of the film on the Bosphorus, all the films bought by Desmet are mentioned in Veray's filmography, 222. CAVALERIE D'AFRIQUE AU FRONT is listed as NOTRE CAVALERIE D'AFRIQUE AU FRONT.
- 4 The films of the 1916 floods in North Holland in the Desmet Collection could be either by Pathé, Nöggerath or Mullens. Seeing that the Desmet Archive contains an invoice for the Pathé version, the surviving copy of the film in question appears to be by Pathé, but Nöggerath also offered Desmet his own version in January 1916. See DA 326 'Bioscoopmateriaal Parisien'; also DA 76 'F.A. Nöggerath, Amsterdam', F.A. Nöggerath to Desmet, 16 January 1916.
- 5 The Desmet Collection still contains nine of these newsreel compilations, the majority of which bear the title LAATSTE BIOSCOOP WERELDBERICHTEN. Intertitles and summaries of contents may be found in DA 94.
- 6 *De Bioscoop-Courant*, 12 February 1915.
- 7 Körner (1916).
- 8 For the wartime newsreels at the Amsterdam Theater Pathé, see 'Kinematografie. Oorlogs-Journaal', in *De Kunst*, 548, 24 July 1915.
- 9 DA 77 'Gaugmont Co. Ltd.'
- 10 Veray (1995), 19-20; Luke McKernan, *The Great British News Film: Topical Budget* (London, BFI, 1992).
- 11 NN, 'Onze Theatredirecteuren: Ralph Minden', in: *De Filmwereld* 47, 1919. According to *De Filmwereld*, Minden had been sent to the Netherlands from London in 1913 as the distribution agent of M.P. Sales Agency. That year does not agree with Desmet's direct negotiations with M.P. Sales Agency in Brussels and Berlin, or with Godefroa's activities in connection with M.P. Sales Agency described in the previous chapter. It seems more probable that Minden was M.P. Sales Agency's representative from the beginning of the war onwards, when Desmet's contacts with the firm ceased and Godefroa's business activities quickly fell away. Both during and after the war, Minden played an important part in the structural changes within the cinema business. From 1915, he was secretary of the Association of Amsterdam Cinema Directors, and from 1918 he held the same office with the Dutch Union of Cinema Directors. His firm, the Imperial Film Service, did not remain in existence for very long.
- 12 DA 76 'The Imperial Film Service (R. Minden), Amsterdam'.

- 13 Public Record Office, FO759, Consular Correspondence Register 3, 1916-17, 13 September, 25 September and 10 October 1916.
- 14 DA 77 'British War Films Committee', letter from Desmet to the British War Films Committee, 9 September 1916.
- 15 Ibid., letter from Desmet to the British War Films Committee, 23 September and 12 October 1916.
- 16 Ibid., Desmet to the British War Films Committee, 12 October 1916.
- 17 *De Bioscoop-Courant*, 6 October 1916.
- 18 Public Record Office, London, FO759, Consular Correspondence Register 3, 1916-17, 2 and 31 October 1916; 2, 4, 15, 17, 21, 24 and 27 November 1916.
- 19 According to the correspondence records of the Rotterdam Consulate, the distributor P.R. van Duinen tried in vain to obtain copies of THE BATTLE OF ANCRE AND THE ADVANCE OF THE TANKS – also known as TANKFILM. Public Record Office, FO759, Consular Correspondence Register 3, 1916-17, 2, 8 and 14 February 1917.
- 20 For Hamburger's purchase of the TANKFILM, see Public Record Office, FO759, Consular Correspondence Register 3, 1916-17, 10, 13, 15, 17, 22, 15 and 26 January 1917, 10, 13, 14, 17 and 19 February 1917, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 15, 16 and 21 March 1917. See also *De Bioscoop-Courant* 23, 2 March 1917.
- 21 *De Bioscoop-Courant*, 29 September 1916.
- 22 Public Record Office, INF 4/ 1B, John Buchan (Foreign Office, Department of Information) to Carson, 2 December 1917.
- 23 Körner (1916).
- 24 For the advertising of PADRE, see *De Bioscoopcourant*, 18 February 1916.
- 25 Desmet advertised the re-release of LA CADUTA DI TROIA in *De Bioscoop-Courant* from 7 January 1916, before the film was shown at the Witte Bioscoop in Gouda, which was one of his regular customers. In September of that year, the distributor Kino placed ads for THE TROJAN HORSE (HET PAARD VAN TROJE), the new title of LA CADUTA DI TROIA.
- 26 DA 87 'Register'.
- 27 *De Bioscoop-Courant* of 29 September 1916 reports that the film was entering its second week at the Cinema Parisien at that moment. See also DA 163 'Factuurboek 1917'. This renting book contains a record of Desmet's film rentals for the period 1917-22, but it also records the programmes received by the Parisien, both from Desmet and other distributors.
- 28 Opinion is divided on the subject of Henny Porten's significance and function as an international standard bearer of the German film industry during the First World War. Ramona Curry sees her as a medium of film propaganda on behalf of the German nation as a whole, towards which the German film industry was extremely accomodating. Helga Belach and Corinna Müller are not so convinced. It should be noted that Porten made only one short propaganda film

- during the First World War. Both before and after the war, she played lead roles in pacifist and anti-chauvinist films such as *FEIND IM LAND* (1913), *BERGNACHT* (1913-14) and *LUISE, KÖNIGIN VON PREUSSEN* (1932). This was also held against her and had a negative effect on her career. Ramona Curry, 'How Early German Film Stars Helped Sell the War(es)', in: Dibbets and Hogenkamp (1995), 139-48. Helga Belach, *Henny Porten. Der erste deutsche Filmstar 1890-1960* (Berlin-West, Haude & Spener, 1986). Corinna Müller, 'Henny Porten', in Hans-Michael Bock (ed.), *Cinegraph. Lexikon zum deutsch-sprachigen Film* (München, text & kritik, 1984).
- 29 DA 109 'Contracten. 's-Gravenhage'.
- 30 There are currently 200 copies of the brochure for *CAJUS JULIUS CAESAR* in the Netherlands Film Museum's publicity archives. In the 1930s, Desmet still had 2,200 copies. The lavish film album issued for the movie is held in the museum's photograph collection. It was an unusual and expensive form of publicity for its time, comprising twenty tinted photographs in large format, protected by rice paper. The binding is red with gold lettering, with a polychrome illustration on the front cover.
- 31 For the distribution of *CABIRIA* in the Netherlands, see Martinelli (1992), 56-8.
- 32 For the performance and reception of the diva movies in the Netherlands, see Martinelli (1992), 64-73.
- 33 In 1915 Wilhelmina readvertised *MA L'AMOR MIO NON MUORE* (also known under its Dutch title *Vrouwenliefde en Leed/A Woman's Love and Sorrow*) in the trade press. See *De Kinematograaf*, 5 March 1915.
- 34 *De Bioscoop-Courant*, 17 March 1916.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 10 March 1916.
- 36 DA 162 'Klantenboek 8'.
- 37 DA 87 'Alfabetisch register van aangekochte films'. This register is incomplete.
- 38 They were: *TRISTANO E ISOTTA* (Film d'Arte Italiana 1911), *ROMEO E GIULIETTA* (Film d'Arte Italiana 1912), *IL FASCINO DELLA VIOLENZA*, *PANNE D'AUTO* (Celio 1912), *TERRA PROMESSA*, *IL VELENO DELLE PAROLE* and *L'AMAZZONE MASCHERATA*. The Netherlands Film Museum still holds copies of these films. For an example of Desmet's publicity for *TERRA PROMESSA*, see *De Bioscoop-Courant* of 4 July 1913.
- 39 *De Bioscoopcourant*, 26 November 1915.
- 40 The Netherlands Film Museum has an incomplete copy of the 1927 version of *ODETTE, MEIN LEBEN FÜR DAS DEINE (MY LIFE FOR YOUR LIFE\*)*, a popular Franco-German co-production of the period, starring Bertini, Fritz Kortner and the British actor Warwick Ward. This film does not form part of the Desmet Collection.
- 41 DA 13 'Uitnodigingen (invitations) 1911-1961'.
- 42 *De Bioscoop-Courant*, 17 December 1915.

- 43 Ibid., 14 April 1916 and DA 162 'Klantenboek 8'. Dahmen's name was also written Dame, Damen and Daamen.
- 44 *De Bioscoop-Courant*, 28 January 1916. It seems that things were not going too well for the Parisien at that moment.
- 45 DA 87 'Register'.
- 46 The reception of Francesca Bertini's films in the Netherlands is discussed in Martinelli(1992), 65-8.
- 47 Between 1919 and early 1922 Desmet ran the Cinema Palace in Bussum jointly with the broker and coal merchant G. De Kort. He afterwards rented the cinema to G. Visser. The Cinema Palace changed its name to Flora, and was later called the Pallet. The cinema remained the property of the Desmet family until 1985, although it was always leased to third parties. It was purchased in 1985 and demolished a year later.
- 48 The Centraal Theater became Nöggerath's regular first-release cinema in Rotterdam. It is therefore not so surprising that it was Vermeer who took over Nöggerath's distribution company in 1921.
- 49 The coal shortage of 1917 brought about the closure of the cinemas Pathé and Centraal in The Hague. The Monopole Bioscoop and the Japanese Bioscoop had already closed there the previous year. Desmet took over cinemas in Flushing and Amersfoort.
- 50 DA 401 'Parisien Rotterdam'. Desmet rented the cinema to Voltmann for f186 per week. In 1912 Voltmann had opened his own cinema, the Imperial, on Hoogstraat in Rotterdam. After his time at the Parisien, he lived in Kruisstraat as a film dealer and exhibitor and opened a hotel there in 1920. The Imperial was sold to the City-Concern in 1927.
- 51 Ibid. The owner, Van der Schalk, also took the opportunity to enquire in passing whether Desmet would care to mediate in the issue of deliveries of beer to Desmet's Delfia cinema in Delft. Van der Schalk had just taken over a brewery in Delft. This passage again underlines the close links between the world of beer brewing and the world of cinema.
- 52 Ibid., Th.J.J. de Jong to Desmet, 4 December 1915, and A. Bouwman to Desmet, 10 December 1915.
- 53 Ibid., 'Afschriften financiële overzichten Parisien Rotterdam 1916'.
- 54 Ibid., W.C. Hogerzeil to Desmet, 25 December 1916.
- 55 Compared to previous years, the wages of the projectionist were cut considerably. The doorman and the pianist stayed at the same level, but the cashier took the biggest cut.
- 56 Film programmes cost f35.15 a week, whereas two years later, the Cinema Parisien in Amsterdam was paying around f100 for a programme.
- 57 The takings for this period (April-August 1917) were more or less the same from Monday to Friday, with the occasional bonus. The takings for Saturdays

- were between 50% and 100% higher than on weekdays, and even 400% higher on Sundays. The average Sunday takings ranged from *f*55 to *f*75. Tickets for the rear stalls cost 40 cents, centre stalls 30 and 25 cents, and front stalls 20, 15, 10 and 5 cents.
- 58 DA 401 'Parisien, Rotterdam', lease contract with M. Kesten, 28 August 1917, starting 1 September 1917.
- 59 *Ibid.*, Desmet to Kesten, 6 October 1917.
- 60 DA 163 'Klantenboek 9'.
- 61 *De Bioscoop-Courant*, 1 October 1915.
- 62 L'ENFANT DE PARIS was put on time and again as a summer-season film (always in August). Apart from the run at the Amsterdam Parisien in 1916, it featured regularly on the bill at the Rotterdam Parisien: one week in 1914, three weeks in 1917, one week in 1918 and one week in 1919. Rosine, Desmet's sister, rented it for three weeks in 1916, and Mathijs, his brother, took it again in November 1918.
- 63 The high reputation of L'ENFANT DE PARIS was endorsed during my interviews with people who saw the film at that time: B. W. van Royen-Fontaine (interviewed 4 October 1994) and L. Schuring (interviewed 6 February 1995).
- 64 DA 160 'Klantenboek 6'.
- 65 *De Bioscoop-Courant*, 14 April 1916; Van Bueren (1999), 263. Desmet's licence for De Munt ran from 2 October 1914 to 25 May 1916. According to Van Buren, the earlier cinema, the De La Monnaie, had been taken over by Desmet and reopened as De Munt on 21 May. It seems that Desmet was only the exhibitor there and not one of the owners, for there is nothing in the archive referring to the sale of the premises. There was also no reference to De Munt in 1918, when Desmet's shares in the Cinema Palace were sold through NV Middenstad. DA 480-481 'NV Middenstad/Cinema Palace'.
- 66 Barnstijn spoke of this change with pride: 'The theatre had been supplied with films by two different distributors for a period of four years [Wilhelmina and Ghezzi and then Desmet and Cinema Palace IB] and always at an enormous loss. Whenever people talked about the place, they would say "you can do what you like, but you'll never be able to fill it with an audience"'. *De Bioscoop-Courant* 48, 18 August 1916.
- 67 DA 162 'Klantenboek 8'.
- 68 DA 420 'Royal, Rotterdam', contract for the sale of the Cinema Royal to Abraham Tuschinski, 20 July 1916. Desmet had bought the site and the houses from a property owner named Mrs Van Limburgh. Tuschinski stated later that he had been renting the Royal for years with the option of purchase. See *Tuschinski Nieuws*, 4 March 1927.
- 69 Van Gelder (1996), 42, Manneke/Verschoor (1997), 37
- 70 The owner, M.A. van Boekhout, was one of Desmet's customers. He tried halv-

ing the wages of his staff, but to no avail. Jac. Frank bought the cinema, but that did not seem to improve matters.

- 71 Just like Jean, Theo Desmet had previously toured the fairs with attractions such as a Cakewalk and a 'Shattered Kitchen', which involved inviting people to smash up kitchens.
- 72 *Vlissingsche Courant*, 12 October 1914. See also Desmet's ad in the *Vlissingsche Courant* of 17 October 1914, in which he states that he owned seven cinemas besides the Bellamy, as well as 'the biggest international film sale and rental company in the Netherlands [...] and thus well able to take on all comers in the business'.
- 73 *Ibid.*, 29 December 1921.
- 74 Flushing municipal register 1910-21; letter from A. Meerman, city archivist at the municipal archives in Flushing to the author, 6 January 1998. See also the *Provinciale Zeeuwse Courant*, 31 March 1966 and 18 November 1967, and DA 440-443 'Bellamy, Vlissingen'. The Bellamy/Luxor ceased operation as a cinema in 1966 due to high overheads and entertainment taxes. A year later it became a chapel of the Pentecostal Church. The building was demolished in 1977.
- 75 In the 1920s, Mathijs Desmet brought the popular singers and variety-theatre stars Jean-Louis Pisuise and Louis Davids to the stage of the Chicago. In 1927, he simultaneously opened the Rembrandt Theater in Eindhoven and the Rembrandt Theater and the Cinema Palace in Haarlem, which were later to be followed by the Roxy. They were joined after the Second World War by the City Theater in Geldrop and the Select in Eindhoven. See *De Tijd*, 25 October 1967; DA 470-473 'Concertzaal Eindhoven 1911-1921'. Mathijs still occasionally rented films from his brother up to the end of 1919, booking mainly melodramas and epics. In 1918 he took *DIE LANDSTRASSE*, *L'ENFANT DE PARIS* and *SCHULDIG*, and in 1919 *THE SIGN OF THE CROSS*, *IN HOC SIGNO VINCES*, *CAJUS JULIUS CAESAR* and *RICHARD WAGNER*. The Eindhoven Parisien closed in 1999, but it too was a new building on the same site by then. See DA 163 'Klantenboek 9'.
- 76 The Amersfoortsch Bioscoop Theater came under new management (date unclear) and was called Cinema Royal for a while. In 1930, the cinema was bought by Jan Jogchem and was known henceforth as the Rembrandt. It was closed in 1974. See DA 450-453 'Amersfoortsch Bioscoop-Theater, Amersfoort'.
- 77 *Delftsche Courant*, 18 November 1915. See also DA 460-461 'Delfia, Delft'.
- 78 *Delftsche Courant*, 18 November 1915.
- 79 *Ibid.*, 20 November 1915. Desmet's advertisement also appeared in this newspaper on 18 and 20 November. Admission prices for rear, centre and front stalls were 55, 40 and 25 cents. Matinees were usually cheaper. The only one of Desmet's former cinemas still in existence is the Delfia in Delft, albeit in the form of a new building in the same place.
- 80 Rosine Desmet subsequently opened a café in the Katendrecht district of Rot-

terdam. She finally moved to Brabant where her brothers Mathijs and Theo were in business as managers of the City Theater in Geldrop. The Rotterdam cinemas of Desmet and his sister were wiped out by the German bombing of Rotterdam in 1940. Interview with Rosine's daughter-in-law Mrs A. Huizenaar-de Geus, 1 April 1994; Berg (1996), 163-4; Rotterdam directories 1914-20.

81 DA 163 'Klantenboek 9'.

## Notes Chapter IX

- 1 *De Bioscoop-Courant*, 8 November 1918. The new manager of the Cinema Palace was Aron van Dijk. Its business manager was David Hamburger, one of the former directors. Hamburger relinquished this post around 1920, along with his activities in film distribution. The violinist Boris Lensky moved to Nöggerath's Bioscope Theater and was replaced by Max Tak and his quintet. With the coming of the sound era, Lensky moved over to radio, making regular appearances with the pianist and former Tuschinski organist Pierre Palla on the AVRO radio service. See *De Tijd*, 25 May 1963; Van Bueren III (1998), 310. The Amsterdam Cinema Palace was bought by Tuschinski in 1927 and renamed Roxy. In 1987, the auditorium became the famous Roxy discotheque, which went up in flames on 21 June 1999. The neighbouring Cinema De Munt became the Plaza in 1949 and burned down in 1972.
- 2 Desmet was on the payroll of the Cinema Palace as technical director until the end of 1919. In the years 1915-19, he received an annual salary of f3,000. This represented between a quarter and a sixth of his total annual earnings. f3,000 was an above-average income for the times. However, after 1915, this directorship was possibly more notional than real. The Cinema Palace was not doing well at the beginning of the war, and Desmet had to pump f15,000 into it in December 1915, merely to keep it going. He may have done this by selling shares to his partners. His annual salary as a director would then have constituted the repayment of a loan, which may explain why Desmet was still receiving a director's salary of f3,000 in 1919, when the cinema had in fact been sold. After 1916, things began to improve at the Cinema Palace, due probably to the switch to the 'in-house' supplier, the Cinema Palace distribution company. Desmet's earnings, interest, dividends and share of profits rose to f4,011.51 (of which 40% was made up of dividends) in 1916. The interest returns alone climbed to f3,150 in 1917 (45%) and then to f3,850 (55%) in 1918. In 1918, his 7 shares (other sources put this at 11) in NV Middenstad were worth no less than f35,000. He probably got another 10% on top of this when he sold them. There is no reference in Desmet's tax records either to the profits on his earlier sale of Middenstad shares or to the 1918 profits. See AIH; DA 480-481 'NV Middenstad'; and the tax files DA 14 and DA 39.

- 3 Rosine Desmet's cinemas, the Gezelligheid and the Bioscope Feijenoord in Rotterdam do not appear to have formed part of Desmet's chain.
- 4 Max van Wezel, 'Het Bioscoopbedrijf en de Griep', in: *De Filmwereld* 43, 1918. Across the world, the influenza epidemic of 1918 claimed more victims than four years of world war. This certainly applied to the Netherlands.
- 5 On the building and opening of the Tuschinski Theater, see Van Gelder (1996), 50-60; Manneke and Van der Schoor (1997), 41-7; Van Bueren III (1998), 342-7; Mariëlle Kempen, 'Tuschinski en Royal in de jaren twintig. De concurrentie tussen twee filmtheaters', in *Ons Amsterdam* 2, 1996, 52-6.
- 6 At the beginning of October 1918, the Bild-und-Film Amt announced that the Allies had purchased properties in The Hague with the intention of converting them into a large cinema. The contracts were exchanged at the American Embassy. The development company was represented by two Americans and one Dutchman. See Bundesarchiv Potsdam, Auswärtiges Amt, Bufo-Archiv, Akten 1918, no. 83.
- 7 There were other film producers in Germany besides Ufa (Decla for instance), so Nordisk was not the only distributor of German films. But it was among the most important.
- 8 On 1 October 1932, Neerlandia merged with the Ufa Maatschappij voor Film- en Bioscoopbedrijf NV, which was registered as a company a year later. The liquidator of Neerlandia was Charles van Biene. For a complete list of takeovers of Dutch cinemas and distribution firms by Neerlandia/Ufa, see Bundesarchiv Koblenz, Ufa Archives, R 109 I, 475, 13-31; 476, 1-20; 478, 1-8; 480, 1-2, 7, appendix 2.
- 9 The 100 NV Middenstad shares of f1,000 per share were sold for f550,000. Assuming that each shareholder received the same amount, Desmet would have received f38,500 (or f462,000 at 2000 values) for his holding. Middenstad loaned Olympia f300,000, for which Olympia offered shares in Olympia as security, pending the full payment of the sum. A mortgage was taken out on the cinema to facilitate this. Bundesarchiv Koblenz, Ufa Archives, R 109 I, 475, 13-19.
- 10 Bundesarchiv Koblenz, Ufa Archives, 109 I, 478, 1-8. The 'attack' on Rotterdam is described in a report dated 1920.
- 11 The man at Ufa was Charles van Biene, formerly at Nebima, which had merged with Ufa in 1930. Through Nebima, founded in 1920, Van Biene had been responsible for the Dutch distribution of such famous films as *DAS CABINET DES DR. CALIGARI* (*THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI*, Decla 1919) and *DR. MABUSE DER SPIELER* (*DR. MABUSE, THE GAMBLER*, Decla-Bioscop 1921-22). Van Biene was also the last manager of NV Nordisk and later founded the Astra Films company. See *Nieuw Weekblad voor de Cinematografie* 52, 23 September 1932.
- 12 Thompson (1985), 84.

- 13 Felix Hageman, 'Excelsior?', in *De Filmwereld* 46, 1918.
- 14 Kristin Thompson's chapter on the years 1916-18 is appropriately entitled 'Cashing in on Europe's war'. See Thompson (1985), 61-99.
- 15 Thompson (1985), 209; Linssen, Schoots and Gunning, (1999), 106. In 1915, Universal had opened an office of Trans-Atlantic, its European distribution organisation, in Amsterdam. See Thompson (1985), 204.
- 16 Van Beusekom (1998), 116-117. Films such as *HOMUNCULUS* (Deutsche Bioscop 1916), *MADAME DUBARRY* (Ufa 1919) and *DAS CABINET DES DR. CALIGARI* played an important part in establishing this reputation.
- 17 Dibbets and Van der Maden (1986), 231.
- 18 The chairman was Max Polak, the secretary E. de Vos, the deputy secretaries Sjef de Goeije and [Chef] van Dijk, and the treasurer Max Nabarro. For the unionisation of cinema staffs, see Bert Hogenkamp's article 'De Amsterdamse bioscoopstaking van 1924-25', in *Skrien*, 139, winter 1984-85, 55-7.
- 19 For Cor Schuring see Blom and Van Dooren (1996), 81-102.
- 20 The chief editor was Fr. J. Weber, who was the explicateur at the Amsterdam Scala Theater. The other members of the editorial board were Chef van Dijk and M.H. Levi.
- 21 The first members were Ralph Minden, manager of the Nassau Bioscoop, J. Kroonenburg, manager of the Tip Top Theater, Van Tijn, manager of the Juliana Bioscoop and J. Bierman, manager of the Centraal Bioscoop.
- 22 The first announcement of the film exchange appeared in *De Bioscoop-Courant* of 10 November 1916. Desmet's name does not appear on the list of distributors and importers who attended. De Hoop, Hamburger, Barnstijn, Ghezzi, Nöggerath, Pelster and Van Duinen are all mentioned.
- 23 Interview with Mrs. B. van Royen-Fontaine, 4 October 1994.
- 24 The coming of variety acts and orchestras to cinemas heralded the disappearance of the explicateurs. Some exhibitors deliberately encouraged this development in order to get rid of articulate and organised employees. Protests were raised in the trade press, but in vain. See, for instance, *De Bioscoop-Courant*, 8 September 1916, see also Blom and Van Dooren (1996), 85, and Van Beusekom (1996), 134-138.
- 25 For the careers of Hamburger and De Hoop, see *De Telegraaf*, 7 September 1935 (on the occasion of Hamburger's death) and *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 20 July 1937 (on the occasion of De Hoop's seventieth birthday). Elias De Hoop remained active in distribution and brought out the Danish Fy and Bi comedies in the Netherlands.
- 26 The Desmet Archive contains (still unopened) files with information relating to Desmet's membership of the NBB. For the history of the establishment of the NBB and its fortunes during the interbellum, see Dibbets (1986), 231-58.
- 27 DA 15, 'Doorslagen van uitgaande stukken betreffende financiële en privé-aan-

gelegenheden', Jean Desmet to Adolphe Karelsen, 30 October 1917. Krieger was probably killed in the war since there is no extant correspondence between him and Desmet in the archive for the post-war period. Karelsen, on the other hand, survived.

- 28 Ibid., Jean Desmet to Adolphe Karelsen, 30 October 1917. Desmet was exempt from the Dutch call-up, probably because he had served his military service and reserve long before the war started. The Dutch Army at wartime basically consisted of conscripts, reservists and volunteers.
- 29 DA 327 'Parisien Bioscoopmateriaal'. Another difficulty was that in 1917 the German government was demanding quantities of 'scrap metal' from neutral countries in return for the granting of export licences for the Netherlands.
- 30 Desmet was already a wealthy man by 1913 and remained so during the war years. According to the local taxation authority (Amsterdam) Desmet's net income rose as follows between 1914 and 1917: f11,000 in 1913-14, f13,000 in 1914-15, f13,000 in 1915-16, f15,000 in 1916-17 and f18,000 in 1917-18. In nominal values, his income seems to have trebled between 1911 and 1917. In real values, the rise is less rapid, though it still doubled. See tax file DA 39.
- 31 The war bonds were called 'Nederlandse Wettelijke Schuld' or NWS (Dutch Legal Debts). Dutch businessmen were apparently obliged to buy them. On top of these loans, Desmet paid wartime profit taxes and defence taxes. Queen Wilhelmina signed the Wet op de Oorlogswinstbelastingen (War Profits Taxation Act) in July 1916. It conferred retrospective powers and became law on 1 August 1914. Everyone earning above an average of f1,000 more than they had earned in the years 1911-13 were liable for the tax. This could amount to between 10% and 30% of personal earnings. Two separate defence taxes, one levied on capital and the other on income, were introduced in 1916, along with a surcharge for a loan fund to cover the interest payments and redemption of state borrowing during the wartime crisis. All these taxes remained in place for a period after the First World War. Cartoons on the war bonds appeared frequently in the Dutch press. See A.C.J. Vrankrijker, *Geschiedenis van de belastingen* (Bussum, Fibula Van Dishoeck, 1969), 92; Joh. Land, *De Buitengewone Belastingen voor iedereen. Oorlogswinstbelasting, Verdedigingsbelasting I en II en de Opcenten-Leeningwet* (Amsterdam, Cohen's Boekhandel, undated).
- 32 In 1918, Desmet bought the parcel of land at 424 Admiraal De Ruyterweg for f34,115. It is not known how much the villa cost to build. What is known is that Desmet advanced f18,000 to his Fortuna company for the construction. f18,000 in 1918 corresponds to c. €86,000 in 2000. See tax file DA 39. When Amsterdam expanded, the villa was pulled down. Sloterdijk is now part of Amsterdam.
- 33 NV Nooit Gedacht, the firm that owned the Albatros, went bankrupt in December 1921. Desmet's shares became worthless, but he was left with a strong legal claim against his two fellow signatories, Benner and Vet (from the two famous

- fairground families of the day). Desmet, Benner and Vet had loaned f14,000 each to Nooit Gedacht, and Desmet had paid Benner's and Vet's contributions. The cabin of one of the boats was placed on the roof of the Amsterdam Parisien after the fire in 1938.
- 34 DA 81 'Copijboek Buitenland 3, 1915-28' and DA 77 'Eclipse, Parijs', Desmet to Eclipse, 16 November 1918. According to a telegram from Mathijs Desmet, MÈRES FRANÇAISES had been extended the previous week, following a successful run at the Cinema Parisien in Eindhoven. See *De Bioscoop-Courant*, 8 November 1918.
- 35 In 1923, Dirks came back to Desmet again about an unpaid bill dating back to 1915. Dirks protested that with the fall of the Belgian franc and the continuing strength of the Dutch guilder, the bill had risen in the meantime to four times the original amount. The issue dragged on, and much ink was spilled over it. Even a meeting between the two men at Dirk's hotel-café Wagner in Antwerp failed to bring a resolution. It lingered on after Dirk's death in 1925, until his heirs finally paid the disputed sum in 1930. DA 139 'Antwerpen, dossier Dirks'.
- 36 Copies of these titles are still extant. The Desmet Collection also contains three films made in 1918: *OUT WEST* (Paramount Productions), *EIN VERHÄNGNISVOLLE SCHWUR* (Dagny Servaes Exclusiv) and *DR. SCHOTTE* (Greenbaum-Film). Desmet probably acquired these films only after the war. He may also have acquired others at that time, but they have not been documented and have meanwhile disappeared.
- 37 DA, file 109. The film was purchased from Mittelrheinische Film Gesellschaft at Ehrenbreitstein.
- 38 In that year, Desmet released a new film under the name of his old distribution office. This was *EN AVANT LA MUSIQUE* or *DE PATATKONING VAN OUD-BRUSSEL* (Gaston Schoukens 1935), a comedy written in the Brussels patois. The copy in the Desmet Collection contains an end leader bearing the name of Desmet's company. Desmet's name was also mentioned again in an advertisement in the trade paper *Nieuw Weekblad voor de Cinematografie* of 1 January 1937. An advertisement for NV Haghefilm lists the firms for which Haghefilm made subtitles in 1936. 'Int. Filmverh. kantoor Jean Desmet' is listed at number 7. Besides *EN AVANT LA MUSIQUE*, Desmet bought the German thriller *RINALDO RINALDINI* (Aafa-Film 1926-27) in 1927. The lead role was played by the Italian actor-acrobat Luciano Albertini. Desmet might have met Albertini himself since Desmet's daughter Jeanne received a postcard from Albertini inscribed, 'With affectionate memories of Mme Jeanne Desmet from Luciano Albertini, Amsterdam, 12 December 1927'. This postcard is now in the possession of Ilse Hughan. In the 1920s, Desmet also bought a copy of the comic horror movie *AU SECOURS* (1923), starring Max Linder.
- 39 DA 77 'Gaumont, Parijs', letter from Jean Desmet to Gaumont, 1 August 1918.

The negotiations with Gaumont can be found in DA C306 and C332 'Gaumont Brussel'. On 24 June 1921, Desmet again requested a new copy of *L'ENFANT DE PARIS*, provided the price was not too high. However, it is doubtful whether he ever actually acquired a new copy, either in 1918 or 1921. The registers make no mention of a new copy, other than the one he received in 1917.

- 40 Of the films mentioned, only *La fresque inachevée* has resurfaced so far, although there is no indication that the copy was Desmet's. It could be a copy released previously in the Netherlands. The Desmet Collection actually contains posters for the various episodes of the serial movie *BARRABAS*, which may be an indication that Desmet received this film. Moreover, the rights for the serial had probably expired, enabling Desmet to get it more cheaply.
- 41 François Garçon, *Gaumont, un siècle de cinéma* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 30-5. In 1922, Gaumont made an agreement with Loew Metro, followed in 1925 by another with Metro-Goldwyn.
- 42 DA 106 'Rotterdam'. On 28 July 1919, Weisbard signed a contract for the rental of *RICHARD WAGNER* for two weeks for f500. *RICHARD WAGNER* was even shown again on 11 July 1922 in Scheveningen, under the auspices of the City Theater in The Hague. The performance was accompanied by an orchestra of 10 musicians.
- 43 DA 105 'Noord-Scharwoude'. J.de Bakker, for example, rented five films from Desmet in February 1919 on the understanding that they would be screened within four months from that date. This agreement was later altered in favour of a weekly programme containing one new main feature.
- 44 DA 106 'Drachten', letter from the Nederlandsche Landkolonisatie en Inwendige Zending, 16 November 1920.
- 45 DA 107 'Hevea-Dorp', NV Vereenigde Nederlandsche Rubber-Fabrieken to Desmet, 24 October 1921 and 23 November 1921.
- 46 DA 15, Desmet to Hartog & Rassers, 5 May 1917.
- 47 When the De Haan brothers failed to meet their debt within the agreed period, Desmet had no problem with allowing the payments to be spread out over a period of time. They did not have to pay him anything extra. The only snag in the early twenties was inflation.
- 48 NV Cinema Royal was founded on 21 April 1920 by J.G. Ehrenfeldt, Nathan Bierman, Godschalk Veerman, W.C.L.G. Halverhout, H. Elte (the architect) and B. Schaap. It had capital of f1,000,000, which was issued in a thousand shares at f1,000 per share. See AIH and DA 485 'NV Cinema Royal, Amsterdam'.
- 49 Desmet paid an average of 17% of the par value. In 1932, he paid a mere 5%, which was the lowest price achieved. The economic crisis clearly played a part in this. In all, Desmet paid f44,432.50 for shares that would have cost f231,000 at par. Desmet became a member of the Board of Commissioners in 1927 and resigned in 1944. His brother Mathijs stood down in 1940. See AIH.

- 50 Kempen (1996), 52-6. According to the Desmet archive, Desmet was also involved in a loan to the new Asta Theater in The Hague.
- 51 DA 485 'NV Cinema Royal, Amsterdam'; AIH. The NV Cinema Royal was liquidated on 30 April 1958, the decision to do so having been taken on 17 July 1957. The company had been effectively inoperative since 1947. The value of Desmet's investment remains unclear. There was certainly talk of the existence of a second mortgage, but the archive throws no further light on the matter. The land register for North Holland has destroyed all papers on pre-1948 mortgages in accordance with the Renewal of Mortgage Registration Act.
- 52 Desmet's remaining shares were remitted to the Desmet family when NV Cinema Royal went into liquidation in 1958. Desmet himself had died two years before. See AIH.
- 53 F. van Drumpt, 'Het leven van een vorstelijke wagen', in the supplement of *De Telegraaf/Nieuws van de Dag*, 24 March 1968, 18. The Hispano was a six-cylinder, 6600-cc, 125-h.p car, measuring five metres in length and weighing 2,850 kilograms. According to Van Drumpt, Desmet saw the car as something special. Although he used to tinker with his cars on his free Sundays, he never touched this vehicle. He also never drove it himself, leaving that to his chauffeur.
- 54 According to the *Staatscourant* [Government Gazette] of 8 October 1928, NV Madrid had been established in September of that year as a 'Company for the development of real estate and movable property'. The founders were W.J. Draijer and Ph.R. Ruppert Jr. The shareholders were Jean Desmet, his brother Mathijs, his brother-in-law Piet Klabou and Ignatius Mutsaers, another brother-in-law. Mutsaers was married to Henriëtte (Jet) Desmet and was acting as the family accountant at the time. See AIH and DA 490-494 'NV Madrid/Floraschouwburg, Amsterdam'. On 21 December 1928, the Flora and the cinema were auctioned as a single lot for f604,000.
- 55 Pictures of the fire at the Flora can be seen in a Polygon newsreel of 12 February 1929, now held in the Nederlands Audiovisueel Archief (NAA) in Hilversum.
- 56 Van Gelder (1996), 115-115, 139-142.
- 57 Desmet's sale of his shares in NV Cinema Royal to NV Ambio in 1937 came in handy after his losses on the Flora project. In 1951, Desmet concluded an agreement with S. Barnstijn and N.F. Ewijk for the construction of a cinema in Amstelstraat, but instead of the imposing complex designed by Wils, the building that went up was a bare rectangular box. This cinema was opened in 1953 as the 'Flora'. Today it houses the 'It' discotheque. Something of the functional style of Wils's projected amusement palace can be seen in the architecture of the Amsterdam City Theater near Leideseplein (1935). Desmet's last building project came after the Second World War, when he built a fine villa for himself in Aerdenhout, near the Dutch coast.
- 58 *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 8 August 1938. Neither the auditorium of the Cinema

Parisien nor that of the neighbouring Centraal Cinema suffered much water damage, and performances could continue as usual. The newspaper blamed the short-circuit responsible for the fire on the old-fashioned system of leaving electric cables exposed. The cabling was simply fastened to the walls and run along the ceilings.

- 59 A 'geveldoek' in those days generally meant a piece of linen in one whole, with images painted on it. It therefore often referred to posters produced in the country of exhibition. The English word 'billboard' was used for this kind of poster. Desmet's billboard posters would have been lithographic posters produced abroad, consisting of several sections that would be put together on the spot over a backing made of linen. An example is the poster for *L'AMAZZONE MASCHERATA*, which is still in existence and consists of 8 sections which assemble into an image measuring 2.77 x 4.00 metres (or 11.08 square metres). Many references to earlier Desmet films, such as the posters for *IN NACHT UND EIS*, were lost in the destruction of these publicity materials. The posters for other surviving titles such as *LA CADUTA DI TROJA*, *L'ASSOMMOIR* and *IL VELENO DELLE PAROLE* were lost in their entirety.
- 60 All the draft letters, lists of materials, damage reports and correspondence relating to the fire of 1938 can be found in DA 204-205 'Verzekeringen. Inventarisatie van de collectie na de brand in 1938'. Among the items in this file are complete lists of the titles of burned posters. Some of the water damage could actually have been caused through the storage of the materials in a shed behind the cinema.
- 61 DA file 117 'Verzekering Cinema Parisien 1938-1940'.
- 62 The Pathé *PASSION PLAY* burned up in Arnhem in 1911. The Danish movie went up in smoke in Tilburg in the same year. The entire building in Tilburg was destroyed by burning films a year later. A reel of *L'ASSOMMOIR* caught fire at the Cinema Palace in Amsterdam on 4 June 1916. The inventory of 1938 records the presence of just one reel of *L'ASSOMMOIR* and the destruction of the fourth reel of the second copy of *KAISERIN ELISABETH VON ÖSTERREICH*. Complete and incomplete copies of the latter were indeed 'rediscovered' in the archive in 1990.
- 63 It is unclear which films burned up in the 1914 fire at Amersfoort. The register comprising DA 86 lists the title *Leer om leer*. This could be *WIE DU MIR SO ICH DIR* (Deutsche Mutoscope 1913). A list of the intertitles for this film is preserved in the Desmet Collection. The other Amersfoort fire in 1919 claimed one reel of *A FORTUNE AT STAKE*, one of the episodes of the British serial *THE GREAT LONDON MYSTERY* (1920). However, Desmet had rented this movie from Nöggerath.
- 64 DA 15 'Particuliere correspondentie 1916-1918'. It looks as though some of the film in the 1917 delivery had gone missing, for there was a discrepancy between the weight of the crates at the time of their despatch and their weight upon arrival at Waalwijk. Hoffmans paid f4 per kilogramme for waste film.

- 65 DA 133 'Copijboek 24, 1916-17', Desmet to Vincent Hoffmans, 16 September 1916. I have found nothing in the Desmet archive relating to the contents either of his deliveries to Hoffmans or to his consignments to Germany.
- 66 DA 76 'Cines, Berlijn', Desmet to Deutsche Cines Gesellschaft, 20 September 1915.
- 67 DA 177 'Moving Picture World', Stephen Bush to Desmet, 11 September 1914, Bush replied to the advertisement because he wanted to buy DIE CZERNOWSKA. The purchase probably did not go ahead since the print still adorns the Desmet Collection. It is rather a pity that there are no extant numbers of *De Kinematograaf* for 1914, for the 28 August number would have been an important source.
- 68 For sales catalogues for ca 1914, see DA 90 and 91 'Lijsten van aangekochte films'.
- 69 The Netherlands Film Museum holds two nitrate copies of the 1913 version of QUO VADIS? outside the Desmet Collection. One of them is a mangled version of 530 metres consisting of clips from the whole film. The other copy contains only the first three reels. For the sale of QUO VADIS?, see DA 163 'Klantenboek 9, 1917'.
- 70 On 25 October 1927, Desmet sold Pelster *De Nieuwe Opzichter* (probably LE CONTREMAÎTRE INCENDIAIRE, Pathé 1908), *Het Douanehuisje* (possibly DOUANIER SEDUIT, Pathé 1906, or DOUANIERS ET FRAUDEURS, Pathé 1906), LE BON PATRON (Pathé 1910), *Een Verjaardag Die Treurig Eindigde* (perhaps LA FÊTE DE JOSEPHINE, Pathé 1906), PARDONNE GRAND-PÈRE (Pathé 1908), L'OBSESSION DE L'OR (Pathé 1906) and one newsreel. He may also have sold him *Het Spookslot*, which was probably the Max Lindner comedy AU SECOURS. See also Linssen (1999), 65, 116, 267 (note 108) and 271 (note 234).
- 71 Hogenkamp (1986), 149-150.
- 72 Hendriks (1996), 71-76.
- 73 The same considerations apply to Desmet's rentals of the films of the Cinema Palace distribution company, a few Asta Nielsen movies and (before he acquired his own copies) Nöggerath's print of L'ENFANT DE PARIS.
- 74 DA 107 'Correspondentie met bioscoopklanten', Desmet to Frans Bastings, 21 April 1921.
- 75 DA 138 'Copijboek 29, 1921-24', P. Klabou, on behalf of Desmet, to *De Telegraaf*, 12 January 1923.
- 76 Besides the Pathé-Baby and Pathé-Kok systems, which required films in the irregular 28 mm and 9.5 mm formats, there were home projectors in the normal 35mm movie format such as the Ernemanns.
- 77 DA 138 'Copijboek 29, 1921-24'.
- 78 In 1925, Desmet's f75,000 was worth f105,000. The insurance documents for Desmet's films for 1913-22 are in DA 200-203, and those for 1922-25 in DA file

106; see also DA 202 'Brandverzekering Parisien'. According to papers DA 200-203, Desmet's competitor Cinema Palace insured its holdings for f50,000 in 1918, which equals €270,000 in 2000. A special clause was inserted into insurance policies during the First World War, under which the companies disclaimed liability for accidents resulting from the outbreak of war in the Netherlands. Although the Netherlands were neutral, the possibility of Dutch intervention in the war was clearly not considered to be beyond the bounds of possibility. Dutch inflation ran fast from 1915 on and reached a peak in 1920 after which it more or less stabilised.

- 79 DA 91 'Verkooplijsten 1914'.
- 80 This agrees roughly with the tables in Chapters IV and VII. The annual report of the Netherlands Film Museum of 1988 suggested that, on the evidence of the written documentation, Desmet originally owned about 3,000 films. This estimate seems too high to me.
- 81 DA 200-203.
- 82 DA 200-203 and file 106.
- 83 The letters exchanged between Desmet and Dresscher are in the archive of Ilse Hughan. The same archive also contains an appendix to a letter, dated 15 December 1956, from the family accountant I. Mutsaers to the lawyer HBFJA Peters in Amsterdam. Attached to this is a note indicating that Desmet's films were still at Dresscher's place in 1956.
- 84 DA files 183 (Parisien insurance 1939-42) and 192 (Parisien insurance 1942-47).

## Notes Chapter X

- 1 Bart Hofstede, *In het wereldfilmstelsel. Identiteit en organisatie van de Nederlandse film sedert 1945* (Delft, Eburon, 2000), 117-118, 140-2.
- 2 Corinna Müller notes that there was a grey area of this kind in the film trade in Germany for a while. Müller (1994), 140-3.
- 3 Guido Convents, *Van kinetoscop tot café-ciné: de eerste jaren van de film in België, 1894-1908* (Leuven Universitaire Pers Leuven, 2000), 309.
- 4 Convents (1994), 239.
- 5 Blom (1999), 405.
- 6 Roland Robertson, 'Mapping the Global Condition: Globalization as the Central Concept', in Mike Featherstone, *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity*, (London, SAGE, 1990), 26.
- 7 Mike Featherstone. 'Global Culture: An Introduction', in Featherstone (1990), 6.
- 8 Allen (1980) and (1985), Müller (1994).
- 9 Musser and Nelson (1991); Toulmin (1994); Małgorzata Hendrykowska, 'Film Journeys of the Krzeminski Brothers, 1900-1908', in *Film History* 6, 1994, 206-18; Aldo Bernardini, 'L'epopea del cinema ambulante', in Gian Piero Brunetta (ed.),

- Storia del cinema mondiale. I. L'Europa. I. Miti, luoghi, divi*, (Turin, Einaudi, 1999), 109-46; Convents (1994); Convents (1999).
- 10 For the view that it was the exhibitors who held sway in the early years, see Musser (1991).
- 11 Dibbets and Van der Maden (1986), 46.
- 12 Desmet showed a film about the Zeppelin at Zeist in September 1909, and another on the Messina earthquake at Den Bosch in February 1909. See *Streekbode van Zeist, Driebergen en Omstreken*, 4 September 1909; *Provinciale Noordbrabantse en 's-Hertogenbosse Courant*, 10, 12, 13, 15 and 16 February 1909. Müller (1994), 88, contains a reproduction of an advertisement for Messter's ZEPPELIN IN BERLIN (1909), the film shown by Desmet in Zeist in September 1909. For the screening of the Messina films in Belgium, see Convents (1992), 106-110.
- 13 On Willy Mullens' performance as an explicateur, see Blom and Van Dooren (1996), 90-3.
- 14 Bowser (1994), 106-119. Bowser also states that the development of film styles was an important factor, which is something that Müller barely considers. From 1908/9, there is an increase in the number of close shots in relation to wide shots. It becomes easier to identify the characters.
- 15 In *De Bioscoop-Courant* of 10 October 1915, Gildemeijer announced that from 1 October, he held the exclusive rights for 'the Netherlands and colonies' on the films of PAGU (Union), Svenska, Oliver-Film, Kalem and American Biograph.
- 16 After his adventures with NV Middenstad, Desmet had had his fill of these kinds of operations.
- 17 Blom, Leerssen and De Rooij (1993), 405.
- 18 After the Second World War, Desmet's reputation was fostered more by others than by Desmet himself. One example is an article on Desmet on the occasion of his 80th birthday, 'Pionier van het Nederlandse bioscoopbedrijf, Jean Desmet gaat zijn 80ste verjaardag vieren', in *Nieuw Weekblad voor de Cinematografie* 46, 12 August 1955, 1-2
- 19 Michèle Lagny, *De l'histoire du cinéma. Méthode historique et histoire du cinéma* (Paris, Armand Colin, 1992), 57.
- 20 Tom Gunning, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: the Early Years at Biograph* (Urbana/Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1994), p. 292.
- 21 Thomas Elsaesser, 'Early German Cinema: A Second Life?', in: Elsaesser and Wedel (1996), 32-4. On the style of early long films, see Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs, *Theatre to Cinema. Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997).

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