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AMERICAN MOVIES REACH THE NETHERLANDS

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American Cinema and Dutch Audiences

In June 1927 a group of young Dutch intellectuals formed the *Nederlandsche Filmliga* (Dutch Film League), an association that screened artistic films and published the periodical *Filmliga*.¹ Here cofounders Menno ter Braak, Leo Jordaan, and others propagated their ideas about film art that influenced contemporary and later generations of Dutch critics and filmmakers. A rigorous distinction was made between film as an art form and the movie theater as a site of reprehensible commercial amusement. Hollywood was explicitly labeled as the latter. According to Jordaan, the struggle for quality film was “a struggle against ‘Americanism’—against the senseless and mindless transplant of the insipid, childish mentality and the overflowing energy of a young, and newly-marketed culture onto our old, experienced and weary state of mind.”² In this respect the *Filmliga* movement did not deviate from the negative views held by most members of the Dutch cultural elite on commercial entertainment as a synonym for Americanization.

This uneasiness, however, was not shared by the large audiences that American cinema had won over in the Netherlands after World War I, just like in most other parts of the European market. While outside the Dutch borders the war raged, the emergence of American movies had become noticeable in the Netherlands. Charlie Chaplin, for instance, started to gain some popularity during the war years, although he was sometimes mixed up with (now forgotten) stars with a similar appearance, such as Billie Ritchie.³ American cinema competed with French, Italian, and Danish films during these years. It was mainly after the war had ended that the now globally dominant position of the American film industry became evident on the Dutch screens. The war had had a devastating effect on the European film industries, with the notable exception of Germany's, which rapidly evolved from an insignificant position before 1918 into the

3

THE
PERIOD
OF
THE
WORLD
WARS

1914-1945

biggest competitor of American films in the Dutch market. The American film companies had used their advantage over the European competition to professionalize and upscale the industry.⁴ Feature-length films and sensational serials with high budgets and equivalent production values could be turned out at a reliable, high rate. During the 1920s American and, in second place, German films dominated the Dutch theaters. With the introduction of talking pictures around 1930 the American market share dropped temporarily in favor of German film because the Dutch audience was more familiar with the German language. Subtitling solved this problem and Hollywood recovered and kept its leading position until the outbreak of World War II. In the meantime, the Dutch became accustomed to American voices in the cinema.

Still, the Dutch market was hardly worth the attention of the major Hollywood studios. Universal opened a Dutch branch in 1918, the other studios timidly opened branch offices several years later: Fox in 1923, Famous Players-Lasky in 1924, and First National in 1925. One year later two branches had already closed their doors. The Dutch market probably was too small to support the overhead costs of separate branch offices. American films were predominantly distributed by Dutch subcontractors. The most important Dutch distributor was Loet C. Barnstijn, active in the film trade since 1915. Barnstijn had gained prominence because he had secured important deals with American distributors. His brother Jack (Jaap) was a crucial contact in New York in gathering information and maintaining business relations overseas. Barnstijn visited the United States regularly to obtain distribution licenses. In the Dutch media and trade press he presented himself as a Dutch mogul, modeled after Laemmle and other business celebrities working behind the Hollywood scenes. His abundant advertising campaigns were seen as “typically American” compared to less conspicuous competitors.

The impact of American movies on Dutch society is as obvious as it is tricky to pin down exactly. Over the years Hollywood added a continuous stream of joy and suspense in a rich variety of stories and thrills to the pale diet of local pastime. This new and colorful dimension was as much appreciated as it seemed exotic to the general public, almost like a forbidden fruit. Its spectacle helped make the cinema a popular venue, but not on the same scale as in the United States or in any other European country. In fact, the frequency of movie-going per capita in the Netherlands has always been among the lowest in the Western world. The same goes for the number of movie theaters per capita. Picture palaces with a capacity of three thousand seats or more have never been built in the Netherlands; only a few venues could accommodate twelve hundred spectators. It is fair to say that cinema has remained a relative outsider in Dutch culture and that the impact of American movies has been less profound in the Netherlands than elsewhere.



Western movie star Tom Mix was greeted by huge crowds of fans at his arrival in Amsterdam on April 25, 1925.

3

THE
PERIOD
OF
THE
WORLD
WARS

1914-1945

The modest interest in movie-going diverges from international trends but is less atypical when compared to regions instead of nations. In the United States significant differences exist between New York and, for instance, Kentucky with respect to movie-going frequency, theater density, and audience preferences.⁵ Kathryn Fuller argues in her study of American small-town audiences that the centralized production and marketing of Hollywood before 1940 ran into local opposition against “sophisticated” movies ostensibly made for metropolitan audiences.⁶ The “city movie” became a term of abuse in rural areas. It may make more sense to compare Dutch film culture to Kentucky or Ohio than to New York. The huge popularity of “unsophisticated” cowboy heroes like Tom Mix and Buck Jones in Rotterdam and Amsterdam during the 1920s seems to support this view. Their success matched the reputation of stylish, “sophisticated” stars like Rudolph Valentino and Gloria Swanson.

Yet, a resemblance to rural America should not divert our attention from important differences. Dutch exhibitors were keen to call their venues “Chicago,” “New York,” or “Cinema Parisien,” which were unpopular names in the American countryside. More significantly, American movies had to compete with their European rivals in Dutch cinemas, and audiences could choose from a rich selection of foreign movies. Fan culture became a truly cosmopolitan experience of American, German, and French movie stars. Stimulated by the film industry, the popular press published gossip and photographs of international glamour, and its readers discussed the latest fad over lunch perhaps. It is hard to find specific information on Dutch movie fans and their preferences. Their numbers were barely large enough to support a small fan magazine over a longer period, *Cinema & Theater*. We do know, however, that Anne Frank, hidden away in an attic in Nazi-occupied Amsterdam during World War II, covered the wall of her room with pictures of Shirley Temple, Norma Shearer, and Ginger Rogers.

American Cinema and Dutch Film Production

Initially, there was only a very modest movie production sector in the Netherlands, which was similar to the situation in most other small countries. While the influence of Hollywood was obvious in film exhibition, one could argue that Dutch film production until 1940 was modeled after German rather than American cinema. Technical equipment and professional vocabulary came from Germany and France. The studio style and popular themes of Dutch films were closer to German than to American filmmaking. Dutch production history includes numerous examples of Dutch actors or film directors moving to Germany. After 1933 a wave of immigrants from Nazi Germany brought professional skills with them and began to stimulate new productions. Some of these profes-

TABLE 1

Top ten of the most popular feature films in the Netherlands until 1940⁷

	Country of Origin
<i>De Jantjes</i> (1934)	Netherlands
<i>Pygmalion</i> (1937)	Netherlands
<i>Ben-Hur</i> (1925)	United States
<i>Hygien der Ehe</i> (1922)	Austria
<i>Modern Times</i> (1936)	United States
<i>It's in the Air</i> (1938)	United Kingdom
<i>La Maternelle</i> (1933)	France
<i>Bright Eyes</i> (1934)	United States
<i>One Hundred Men and a Girl</i> (1937)	United States
<i>Boystown</i> (1938)	United States

sionals would soon move to the United States to continue their careers in Hollywood, including Herman Kosterlitz (Henry Koster), Detlev Sierck (Douglas Sirk), and Eugen Schüfftan.⁸ One of the rare Dutch feature films with an explicit reference to the United States is *American Girls* (1919), a vehicle for the popular singer Louis Davids, who played eleven parts in it. The action took place in Amsterdam and the girls mentioned in the title seemed to fit the stereotype of the spoiled daughters of an American millionaire.⁹ The — now lost — film appears to have reflected an older, quickly fading image of America, just before the breakthrough of a glamorous Hollywood cinema.

It comes as a surprise, therefore, that national film production managed to outstrip Hollywood in popularity during the 1930s. The list of the ten most popular movies seen before 1940 (table 1) is headed by two Dutch films, *De Jantjes* and *Pygmalion*, only to be followed by American pictures like *Ben-Hur* and *Modern Times*.

Censorship

If movie-going had any effect on political discourse at all, it has usually been attributed to Soviet cinema and its revolutionary propaganda. Hollywood, however, could also be seen as a risk to national security. In 1918, at the end of World War I, when a call for revolution reverberated in the Netherlands as well as elsewhere in Europe, several theaters responded by showing *The Bigger Man* (U.S., 1915), with its title translated as *Kapitaal en Arbeid* (capital and labor). Out of fear that this social melodrama might stir tensions by depicting inflammatory

3

THE
PERIOD
OF
THE
WORLD
WARS

1914-1945

class conflict, the movie was prohibited by local authorities in The Hague. Similarly, *Gabriel over the White House* (1933) could not be shown since it disseminated propaganda for dictatorship according to the censorship board.

Hollywood has been subject to a process of selective appropriation in the Netherlands as much as in the United States.¹⁰ While American movies have been quite successful in Dutch cinemas, we may wonder whether some aspects of Hollywood were received with more enthusiasm than others. Censorship serves as a key indicator. In addition to fear of eroticism and violent behavior, religion became an object of grave concern for the national board of censorship. Its Catholic and Protestant members were keen to spot religious issues and ban them from Dutch movie theaters. For instance, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1931) was prohibited on grounds that the movie contravened the Catholic tenet against influencing the soul by means of chemical substances. *The Green Pastures* (1936) also met with considerable opposition. This famous musical about Heaven as seen through the eyes of black children was at first banned altogether, though after a year of legal disputes spectators of fourteen years and older received permission to watch the movie. Prime Minister Hendrikus Colijn and his orthodox Protestant party tried to reverse the latter verdict in parliament without success. Still, Colijn's brother was able to ban the biblical musical from the town where he held the office of mayor.

Shirley Temple may serve as a final illustration of what Hollywood was up to when promoting its most successful stars in the Netherlands. "Shirley mania" erupted in 1936 with the release of *Curly Top* featuring this child starlet. A local exhibitor in Utrecht, the fourth largest Dutch city, used the occasion to generate publicity for his Flora Theater by offering a prize for the best Shirley Temple look-alike. Over three hundred mothers and their dolled-up children showed up for the contest on April Fool's Day. This was not different from similar events in the United States (or elsewhere for that matter), including perhaps a local journalist's observation that "the majority of the contestants looked as much like Shirley as a flea resembles an elephant."¹¹ More remarkable was the fact that children under fourteen years of age were not allowed to enter a movie theater in Utrecht because of the very strict regulations in effect there. And so Utrecht's youth could not experience Shirley Temple on the silver screen, but only through their mothers' zeal to dress them up. American cinema was able to operate in a distinctive Dutch context in ways not intended or expected by the original American producers.

- 1 For more on the Filmliga, see Ansje van Beusekom, *Kunst en amusement. Reactie op de film als een nieuw medium in Nederland, 1895-1940* (Haarlem: Arcadia, 2001); Céline Linssen, Hans Schoots, and Tom Gunning, *Het gaat om de film! Een nieuwe geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Filmliga 1927-1933* (Amsterdam: Bas Lubberhuizen, 1999).
- 2 Quoted from and translated by Rob Kroes, "The Reception of American Films in the Netherlands: The Interwar Years," *American Studies International* 28.1 (October 1990): 37-48.
- 3 Ivo Blom, *Jean Desmet and the Early Dutch Film Trade* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003), 264.
- 4 Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market, 1907-34* (London: British Film Institute, 1985).
- 5 Gregory A. Waller, *Main Street Amusements. Movies and Commercial Entertainment in a Southern City, 1896-1930* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 194-196; See also Robert C. Allen, "Relocating American Film History," *Cultural Studies* 20.1 (2006): 48-88.
- 6 Kathryn Fuller, *At the Picture Show: Small-Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 98-114.
- 7 Computed from data in Cinema Context, the online encyclopedia of film culture and its history in the Netherlands, <http://www.cinemacontext.nl>. Box office figures of individual movies are not available for this period.
- 8 Kathinka Dittrich, *Achter het doek. Duitse emigranten in de Nederlandse speelfilm in de jaren dertig* (Houten: Het Wereldvenster, 1987), 65.
- 9 The film is lost, but an elaborate script has survived. Geoffrey Donaldson, *Of Joy and Sorrow. A Filmography of Dutch Silent Fiction* (Amsterdam: Stichting Nederlands Filmmuseum, 1997), 181.
- 10 Richard Maltby, "Sticks, Hicks and Flaps: Classical Hollywood's Generic Conception of Its Audiences," in Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby, eds., *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 23-41, here 30.
- 11 Quoted from Bert Hogenkamp, "A Curly Top, a Royal Engagement and a Local Bylaw: Cinema Exhibition and Innovation in Utrecht in 1936," *Film History* 17 (2005): 139-147.