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A Curly Top, a Royal Engagement and a Local Bylaw: Cinema Exhibition and Innovation in Utrecht in 1936

Bert Hogenkamp

On April Fool's Day, 1936 more than 300 persons, almost exclusively mothers with their young daughters, crowded the Gebouw voor Kunsten en Wetenschappen (Building for Arts and Sciences) in the centre of Utrecht. They had responded to a newspaper advertisement placed by the local Flora Cinema which had called for Shirley Temple look-alikes to present themselves for a contest. The winner would be awarded a Shirley Temple doll, while her mother would receive the sum of 25 Guilders (a substantial amount of money at that time) in a savings account. Everyone was relieved that they were not being fooled when Is. Cohen Barnstijn,¹ the owner of the Flora Cinema, turned up with four gentlemen: the jury consisting of the director of the Gerzon fashion store which was sponsoring the contest, a photographer and two journalists. The local newspaper *Utrechts Nieuwsblad* could not help but comment that 'the majority of the contestants looked as much like Shirley as a flea resembles an elephant, although it needs to be said that there were some girls who really had something in common with the little American film star'.² The newspaper considered the 'special costumes' that some mothers had made for their offspring an 'eyesore', nor was it particularly impressed with the 'curly top wigs' that some of the girls were wearing. At the end of a long afternoon, three girls received a Shirley Temple doll from the jury, while the mother of Anneke Mietendorff, the ultimate winner, was presented with the coveted

savings account cheque. The contest was part of a publicity campaign for the new Shirley Temple film *Curly Top* that opened two days later at the Flora Cinema. Ironically, the three girls were not allowed to see that particular film – nor any other Shirley Temple film for that matter – as a local bylaw (*Lichtbeelden-verordening*) banned those under the age of fourteen from attending any film show within the municipality of Utrecht. Exception was made for 'films concerning the subject of science, industry, agriculture and trade', i.e. the kind of films that exhibitors were loath to screen (except on a Sunday morning for the members of an institute for adult education) knowing that they would make a loss.

The fact that young people were not allowed to see the films of Shirley Temple, the very symbol of innocence, offered local cinema exhibitors an ideal excuse to reopen their campaign to have the regulation repealed. They had fought this measure ever since it had come into force in 1915. So it would be easy to see the 1936 campaign as just another moment in the decades-long exhibitors' struggle to do away with the obstacles (entertainment tax was

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another) that were preventing them from maximising the volume of their trade. Thus Is. Cohen Barnstijn who, apart from the Flora Cinema, owned another film theatre (soon to be followed by yet another) in Utrecht, informed the Mayor and Aldermen of the city in April 1936 that he was losing an estimated annual income of 30,000 Guilders as a consequence of the law.³ In other words, he was waiting for the chance to sell some 70,000 to 80,000 extra tickets. This was a struggle that might well be characterised as 'defensive'. However, it is my argument that in 1936 a new factor came into play: innovation. The repeal of the ordinance became part of a larger strategy: to convince, if not the authorities, then at least the general public that the cinema in Utrecht was the most modern and superior form of entertainment. How the exhibitors managed to do this will be analysed in this essay.

Background

Utrecht was the fourth largest city in the Netherlands. Although it had the reputation of being 'dull', a town where nothing exciting ever happened, it was in fact a hub of railway transport, the seat of the Utrecht Trade Fair and a centre of learning thanks to the University which had been founded as far back as 1636, not to mention a substantial military presence. Like other towns in the Netherlands its population grew considerably between 1900 and 1940. During these years the municipal authorities not only tried to extend the borders of the city to accommodate the growing numbers of people according to plans devised by specialists in urban development, but they also took care of such amenities as local transport, electricity and gas, refuse collection, bath houses and the like. The result was a rise in municipal expenditure that far exceeded inflation (from 3 million Guilders in 1900 to almost 21 million in 1940). Utrecht was transformed into a modern city and as a historian of Utrecht has put it: 'Electric trams, cinemas and illuminated advertising were the outstanding symbols of the modern city.'⁴

The first travelling film exhibitor who visited Utrecht, in November 1896, was the well-known Christiaan Slieker. Within two years the cinema had become such a fact of life that a Utrecht newspaper wrote: 'The cinema is for most of the spectators no longer a novelty'.⁵ After the turn of the century, five to six exhibitors visited Utrecht annually staying from one or two days up to a fortnight. The most important venue was the annual fair. For an exclusive stand at

the fair exhibitors were prepared to up their bid. Alex Benner, for example, paid as much as 2,100 Guilders in 1908.⁶ By that time the city's first permanent cinema, the Cinomatographe at Oudegracht 144, was already in business. After a successful start in October 1907, however, this cinema, which was run by three Germans from Krefeld, had to close its doors within a year. But others followed and by 1913 there were eight film theatres in the inner city. There was fierce competition. Some owners went as far as to poach the most valuable asset of their competitor: the lecturer (who was extremely popular with the Utrecht audiences up until the mid-1910s). This did not deter travelling exhibitors from paying a visit, while bodies as diverse as the Van Houten Cocoa Factory and the Salvation Army also made use of film for propaganda purposes. In 1914 the bubble burst: three of the eight cinemas were forced to close down, while the number of non-theatrical film shows also declined considerably. The five remaining film theatres had the field to themselves until 1929 when another cinema opened, the city's only neighbourhood cinema: Olympia. There was a remarkable consistency in the management of the five cinemas. John Fris was managing director of the Scala from 1912 to 1935, A.J. Hoogenstraaten (Flora) from 1914 to 1928, David Hamburger Jr. (Rembrandt) from 1913 to 1927, B. van der Heuvel (New York) from 1913 to 1936 and Jan Nijland (Vreeburg) from ca. 1917 to 1963 (!).

As in other cities in the Netherlands, it was the teachers in Utrecht who campaigned against the harm that film shows might cause to children. Their concern was not so much the dangers of inflammable nitrate film stock, for stringent safety regulations had to be complied with. Rather, it was films 'whose subject and plot should definitely be kept out of the realm of thought of the child, and even more films which, through the sensation and excitement of the performance and through the titillation of the imagination, have an unhealthy effect on children, both physically and mentally' which caused concern. These words can be found in an advice prepared by the Legal Commission of the Utrecht municipal council. It followed a submission by the Utrecht branch of the Bond van Nederlandse Onderwijzers (Union of Dutch Teachers) in which much was made of the undesirable influence of the cinema on school children. The exhibitors could not turn the tide. Although some councillors felt that it was the parents' responsibility to decide which films their children

were allowed to see, the majority heeded the advice of the Legal Commission and voted in favour of a bylaw which banned children under the age of sixteen from visiting any film show in Utrecht.⁷ An exception was made for so-called children's screenings comprising a programme of films that had been passed by a censorship committee set up by the municipality.

On 6 February 1915 the *Lichtbeeldenverordening* came into force. Members of the Censorship Committee were recruited from teachers' unions and youth organisations. At the centre of attention was Andrew de Graaf, the chairman of the Censorship Committee. After years of campaigning against prostitution and moral decay, this inspector of the Central Federation for Internal Missionary Work and Christian Philanthropic Institutions had discovered a new challenge: cinema. De Graaf held the view that because of the principle of mechanical reproduction film, by definition, could not be a form of art. He dismissed the 'dramatic film' and only approved of the educational film. Moreover, he was in favour of banning anyone under the age of eighteen from visiting the cinema and therefore campaigned for even stricter regulation. The policy of the Utrecht Censorship Committee was clearly affected by De Graaf's views. It was no surprise that he topped the exhibitors' list of most hated men, especially after he started disseminating his views nationally.⁸ In Utrecht the exhibitors clashed with the Censorship Committee as soon as it started its activities in 1915. A decision of the Supreme Court in October 1916 forced the Utrecht authorities to rewrite the law and suspend the work of the Censorship Committee.⁹ Both the cinema exhibitors and De Graaf and his Committee did their utmost to have it amended in their favour. In the end both parties were disappointed: the old legislation, rewritten so as to make it legally waterproof, was adopted and came into force on 15 October 1917. The war between the exhibitors and the Censorship Committee resumed. The surviving correspondence is full of rumours that children were admitted, of demands that cinemas should be closed for not complying with the regulation, of complaints that members of the Committee were treated unfairly and of moaning that it was impossible to run a business. Given that the Committee judged only a handful of films as suitable for those under sixteen, it hardly paid to organise children's matinees; in the early 1920s the Vreeburg Cinema was the only theatre to offer such shows.¹⁰

The constant bickering with the local authorities proved to be excellent training for the Utrecht exhibitors. Although few in number when compared with Amsterdam or Rotterdam, their executive qualities were highly appreciated at a national level. It was no coincidence that it was David Hamburger Jr., the managing director of the Rembrandt, who invited his colleagues to a national meeting in Amsterdam on 11 February 1918, where they discussed ways of joining forces to counter the obstacles put in their way by church and secular authorities. As a result of this meeting, the Bond van Exploitanten van Nederlandsche Bioscooptheaters (Union of Managers of Dutch Film Theatres) was founded, later renamed the Nederlandsche Bioscoopbond (Netherlands Cinema Association, hereafter NBB), of which Hamburger was to become the chairman for many years.¹¹

Changes

In 1920 Hamburger had predicted that 'a fair and honest National Film Censorship can be expected shortly',¹² but it was not until March 1928 that such an institution started its activities as a consequence of the 1926 Cinema Act. Contrary to what the exhibitors had expected, the Utrecht bylaw remained in force. The censoring of films was now left to the Centrale Commissie voor de Filmkeuring (National Film Censorship Committee), whose 'fairness and honesty' could hardly be doubted by the Utrecht exhibitors, given the fact that Hamburger himself was a member of its board. But for films that the National Committee judged suitable 'for all ages', only those 'concerning the subject of science, industry, agriculture and trade' could be screened without permission of the local Censorship Committee (or the Mayor). That the hated De Graaf had resigned and the local Committee was now chaired by the art collector M.R. Rademacher Schorer made hardly any difference in practice. Those under the age of sixteen were still not allowed to see Charlie Chaplin films, for example. But there was another problem. The Utrecht ordinance knew only two age categories: 'under the age of 16' and '16 years and older'. The National Film Censorship Committee, on the other hand, judged whether films were suitable for 'all ages', '14 years and older' and '18 years and older'. This led to the strange situation that one week an exhibitor in Utrecht could be in trouble with the municipal authorities for admitting a fifteen-year-old person to a film that the National Committee had



Fig. 1. Frame enlargement from a New Year's message filmed by Polygoon (1932) with Is. Cohen Barnstijn proudly announcing the latest improvement at the Flora Cinema. Courtesy Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision.

given the certificate of '14 years and older', and the next week with the State for admitting a seventeen year old to a film with a certificate of '18 years and older'. Although the exhibitors had already drawn attention to this anomaly in 1929, it was not until early 1931 that the municipal council agreed to change the law and lower the age limit to fourteen years. However, a proposal by Labour Party representative Mrs. Wolthers-Arnolli to drop the age limit altogether was rejected. A request by the exhibitors to halve the entertainment tax (20 per cent on every ticket sold) met a similar fate, even though it had the unlikely support of the local censorship committee.¹³

The sound film arrived in Utrecht in 1929. The new owner of the Flora Cinema, Is. Cohen Barnstijn, introduced this novelty, not just for Utrecht, but for the Netherlands as a whole. Barnstijn was one of five brothers who were active in the cinema trade. He showed two shorts with synch sound on a disk, by means of a system based on the Vitaphone process, on 31 January 1929.¹⁴ The system was known as Loetafoon, named after Is. Cohen Barnstijn's brother, the film distributor Loet C. Barnstijn. It was not until the summer of 1929, however, that the Flora had two machines and could screen sound features without interruption. Its biggest success was the Warner Bros. production featuring Al Jolson: *The Singing Fool* (1928). The film had an unheard of continuous run of six weeks at the Flora in November and December 1929. The song 'Sonny Boy' became a hit, with everyone in Utrecht singing, humming or whistling it. After a few weeks Is. Cohen Barnstijn

even announced in the press that he had had to order another print from the distributor (i.e. his brother Loet C. Barnstijn), as the one with which he opened was completely worn out.¹⁵ The biggest theatre in town, the Rembrandt Cinema, was the first to follow the example of the Flora. It showed sound features from September 1929. In 1930 two further cinemas (the Palace and the Scala) followed suit; in 1932 it was the turn of the oldest cinema in town (the Vreeburg), and in 1933 the Olympia was the last to convert to sound, while both the Flora and the Rembrandt had in the meantime switched from the Vitaphone to the (optical) Movietone system. With the coming of sound cinema attendances increased considerably. Whether more inhabitants of Utrecht actually went to the cinema or the 'regulars' went more frequently is impossible to discern from surviving evidence. In 1929, 797,054 tickets were sold, in 1932 this number had risen to 990,002 and by 1934 the one million mark was passed for the first time (1,151,421).¹⁶ As the exhibitors had decided to put up the price of admission, the municipal authorities in Utrecht were more than pleased with the resulting rise in income from the entertainment tax.

The arrival of Is. Cohen Barnstijn caused a stir and started a new era in cinema exhibition in Utrecht. One of the first things Barnstijn did was to change the facade of the Flora, enlarge its entrance hall and improve the restrooms.¹⁷ An important means for Cohen Barnstijn to differentiate himself from his competitors was sound. Not only was he the first in Utrecht to convert his film theatre to sound, but in 1932 he also installed a provision in a section of the cinema that enabled those with a hearing impairment to follow the films by means of an earpiece. This latest technical improvement was proudly announced in a New Year's address that had been especially recorded by the Polygoon newsreel company for screening in the Flora (Fig. 1).¹⁸ A few years later Barnstijn felt that it was time for a complete overhaul; in January 1936 the existing sound installation in the Flora was replaced with a new one, 'so that the spoken word, as well as the music, is being done justice'.¹⁹ During the same month, Cohen Barnstijn opened a second film theatre in Utrecht: the City Cinema. It was a former party centre, where occasionally film shows had taken place, that had been converted into a modern cinema which its owner intended to use as a first-run house for 'quality' titles. Within a few weeks of the opening, Cohen Barnstijn had what he desired: the Utrecht premiere

of a feature-length documentary produced by Polygoon about the world trip of submarine K XVIII of the Dutch Navy, *40.000 Mijlen over Zee (40,000 Miles across the Seas)*. On Thursday night, 6 February 1936, all the great and the good found themselves in the City Cinema, including the Mayor of Utrecht and his wife as well as the Royal Commissioner of the province. The Navy Band, which added lustre to the event with appropriate musical renditions, had been marching all day through the city centre, with the result that it was almost impossible for ordinary citizens not to be aware of the film and where it was being exhibited.²⁰ Next, the Utrecht premiere of Max Reinhardt's *Midsummer Night's Dream* on 28 February, again 'attended by countless well-known persons', was introduced by a live concert performed by the Utrecht City Orchestra. The *Utrechts Nieuwsblad* doubted 'whether such an event is highly appreciated by all', but confirmed that it certainly was 'a curiosity'.²¹

Inevitably, Cohen Barnstijn's competitors felt the need to react. In 1932 the Vreeburg Cinema used the installation of sound equipment as an excuse to redecorate the interior of the theatre. Remarkably, the job was assigned to Gerrit Rietveld, the famous modernist designer and architect based in Utrecht who had the local Filmliiga to thank for this development. As the Utrecht branch of the national film society movement founded in 1927 by, among others, Joris Ivens, it had been using the Vreeburg Cinema since it started to present its members with avant-garde and Soviet films. Local Filmliiga-chairman and theatre critic, Cor Schilp, pointed out at the opening celebrations of the redecorated Vreeburg cinema on 16 September 1932 that 'the transformation that this theatre has undergone would not have happened in this form if it had not been for the profound contacts between this theatre and the Filmliiga'.²² The local newspaper *Utrechts Nieuwsblad* praised Rietveld's work: 'Although not an extra yard of space has been obtained, it still looks as if the hall has become much larger'.²³ The Rembrandt Cinema, the largest theatre in Utrecht, was the next to undergo a transformation, both internally and externally. H. van Vreeswijk, a specialist in cinema architecture, gave the Rembrandt a look that matched the ideas of the New Sobriety, although the facade that he designed in 1933 was considered by some to be far too stern. Lastly, in April 1935 the Scala Cinema, popular among the fans of Ufa films such as future novelist Clare Lennart, had to make way for the new

building of the Galeries Modernes department store.²⁴ Within a few months it reopened in a new purpose-built theatre, with all the comforts hidden behind a rather plain facade, one street down from its old premises.

Shirley-mania

At the beginning of 1936, Shirley Temple first proved her box-office potential. *The Little Colonel* (1935) opened on 10 January in the Flora and had a (then uncommon) run of three weeks. Despite its obsession with the young Hollywood star, the Utrecht audience was not to be fooled: an older 'Shirley Temple film', *Now and Forever* (1934), lasted only one week in the City Cinema. The film critic of the *Utrechts Nieuwsblad* correctly predicted that 'the spectator will have to wait far too long before he can see the cute face of Shirley, as she only appears in front of the camera once Carole Lombard and Gary Cooper have already performed in the better part of this film'.²⁵ Cohen Barnstijn, who had exclusive rights to the exhibition of Fox productions in the city of Utrecht, made sure that the next Shirley Temple film proper would be a real hit. This was *Curly Top* (1935). Some six weeks before it was released, the *Utrechts Nieuwsblad* devoted two thirds of its film page to the film, illustrated with publicity stills.²⁶ Just before *Curly Top* opened on 3 April, the Gerzon fashion store, which was located opposite the Flora across the canal and acted as a sponsor of the afore-mentioned look-alike contest (Fig. 2), displayed Shirley Temple photos in its windows.²⁷ There was all sorts of Shirley Temple merchandise on sale, even cigars that had a band with a portrait of the little star. In other words, Shirley-mania reigned in Utrecht. Like *The Little Colonel*, *Curly Top* had a three-week run in the Flora. In 1936 no other film in Utrecht had such an extended run with the exception of another Shirley Temple film, *The Littlest Rebel* (1935), about which more will be said later.

On 16 April the local newspapers published an appeal by the directors of all seven Utrecht film theatres to the authorities to repeal the regulation that banned children from attending a film show.²⁸ The case for the repeal rested on the argument that the law was detrimental to trade interest; it prevented exhibitors from selling more tickets and consequently deprived the municipality of extra income from the entertainment tax. Other Utrecht trades people, however, also lost out since families on a day trip would prefer to visit other towns where there was

Fig. 2.
Advertisement for
the Shirley
Temple
look-alike
contest, *Utrechts
Nieuwsblad*, 27
March 1936.

FLORA
HET THEATER MET DE BESTE FILMS

**SHIRLEY TEMPLE
KINDERWEDSTRIJD**

**WIE LIJKT HET MEEST OP
SHIRLEY TEMPLE ??**

De Directie van het Flora Theater besloot
ter gelegenheid van de vertoningen van

KRULLEKOPJE

het nieuwste filmwerk van **SHIRLEY TEMPLE**, dat van Vrijdag 3 April in **FLORA** ter vertoning gebracht zal worden, een wedstrijd uit te schrijven, waarbij het kind, dat het meest op **SHIRLEY TEMPLE** lijkt een

SPAARBANKBOEKJE MET f 25.—
KRIJGT, ALSMEDE EEN MOOIE POP.
Als troostprijs zijn verder nog enige poppen beschikbaar.

De Firma Gebr. GERZON, OUDEGRACHT heeft een speciale etalage gewijd aan dit populaire filmkind, zodat daar verschillende foto's te bezichtigen zijn.

WOENSDAG 1 APRIL des namiddags van half 3 tot 5 uur houdt een Jury, bestaande uit de redacteurs van alle Utrechtsche Dagbladen zitting in het **GEBOUW VOOR K. en W. MARIAPLAATS ALHIER**, waar de evenbeelden van **SHIRLEY TEMPLE** zich met haar geleidsters kunnen aanmelden

Direct na 5 uur wordt de uitslag bekend gemaakt en worden de prijzen uitgereikt.

no bylaw that prevented their children from going to the pictures. As a well-chosen example, the exhibitors referred to films about the Royal Family: 'Isn't it ridiculous that when one wants to show "The Tribute to HRM the Queen in the stadium" or "The Funeral of the late Queen Mother" one has to ask for exemption?' Lastly, they wondered whether the ordinance should not be extended to theatre, variety shows and the like, given the lack of a national censorship body for these forms of entertainment. It was true that there was no form of control over the special children's matinees which in Utrecht were, for example, regularly organised by the local theatre (Stadsschouwburg) and Heck's lunchroom, and advertised in the local press. Heck's belonged to a

national chain that had an excellent reputation for live entertainment in all its lunchrooms.

Following the public appeal, Cohen Barnstijn wrote a personal letter to the Mayor and Aldermen of Utrecht in which he elaborated on the question of the loss of income caused by the bylaw.²⁹ He estimated that during the Easter holiday 1936 alone the seven Utrecht cinemas had suffered a loss of 5,000 Guilders in trade. His main concern was that exhibitors outside the municipal borders of Utrecht were taking advantage of the situation. As an example, Cohen Barnstijn referred to the Figi theatre which was part of an internationally renowned hotel complex in the spa resort of Zeist, only ten kilometres from Utrecht. According to Cohen Barnstijn, the frequent tram service to Zeist meant that the children's matinees organised by the Figi 'could count on many visitors from Utrecht'. But his suggestion that the Figi targeted family audiences from Utrecht is not confirmed by the advertisements placed by the Zeist film theatre in the *Utrechts Nieuwsblad*. Appearing only intermittently, these advertisements did not single out films in the 'suitable for all ages' category (i.e. those families with children under the age of fourteen could attend) and made no special mention of the matinee shows at all.

Whereas the Mayor and Aldermen of Utrecht decided to remain silent on the matter, it was once again Labour councillor Mrs. Wolthers-Arnolli who went into action. At a council meeting on 11 June she introduced a motion to repeal the bylaw. This was referred to the Mayor and Aldermen for further advice.³⁰ To support their case the seven exhibitors immediately mobilised their own trade organisation NBB, as well as the Koninklijke Nederlandsche Mid-denstandsbond (Royal Netherlands Society of Tradesmen), the Utrechtsche Handelsvereniging (Utrecht Trade Association) and the Vereeniging voor Vreemdelingenverkeer Utrecht (Utrecht Tourist Board). They also received the support of the Centrale Commissie voor de Filmkeuring.³¹ But it was not until October that the municipal council took a decision on the motion introduced by Mrs. Wolthers-Arnolli. In the meantime, Shirley-mania in Utrecht showed no sign of becoming weaker.

Royal engagement

Unexpectedly, Shirley-mania in Utrecht was given a boost by the Royal engagement. Although rumours had been circulating for some time, the official announcement of the engagement of Crown Princess

Juliana of the Netherlands and the German Prince Bernhard zur Lippe-Biesterfeld on 8 September 1936 still took the country by surprise. The Flora Cinema happened to have booked *The Littlest Rebel* (1935) for release on 11 September. In July this Shirley Temple film had had a triumphant three-week run in the prestigious Tuschinski Theatre in Amsterdam. The Royal engagement offered Cohen Barnstijn an unexpected opportunity. He requested the Mayor and Aldermen for a temporary exemption from the ordinance as long as the engagement festivities lasted. He assured the authorities that he wanted to offer his customers the chance to see the film coverage of the engagement which was renewed each day by the newsreel companies (Polygoon, in the case of the Flora). To his joy this request was granted a few days after *The Littlest Rebel* had opened. Whereas this film was advertised on 9 September as being for '14 years and over', it was pointed out the following week 'that the screenings at the Flora Cinema can be attended by persons of any age'.³² As the Flora was the only cinema in Utrecht which had booked a film that was 'suitable for all ages', it meant that the cinema had an advantage over its competitors (including the City Cinema also owned by Cohen Barnstijn) during the rest of the month which had been declared a period of engagement festivities. During its extremely successful run of three weeks, *The Littlest Rebel* drew crowds of family audiences.

The Flora's most important competitor, the Rembrandt Cinema, showed Mervyn LeRoy's *I Found Stella Parish* (1935) on 11 September (for one week) and Willy Forst's *Allotria* (*Shenanigans*, 1936) on 18 September (for two weeks). The former was a Hollywood drama featuring Kay Francis that had a '14 years and over' certificate, while the latter was a German comedy with a strong cast that included Renate Müller, Jenny Jugo, Adolf Wohlbrück (later known under the name Anton Walbrook) and Heinz Rühmann and a very catchy musical score by Peter Kreuder which the Centrale Commissie voor de Filmkeuring had judged to be suitable only for '18 years and over'. It took almost a fortnight for the management of the Rembrandt Cinema to realise that it too could benefit from the exemption declared by the Mayor and Aldermen on the occasion of the Royal engagement. The only condition was a programme consisting entirely of films that had 'all ages' certificates. On Wednesday, 23 September, the Rembrandt first screened such a programme consisting of newsreels of the Royal engagement, a

Mickey Mouse cartoon and a nature film.³³ This one-hour programme was repeated on the following Saturday, Sunday and Wednesday afternoons, but discontinued after 30 September. The stalls seats were reasonably priced at 25 cents for the one-hour programme scheduled early in the afternoon (at 12.30 and 1.30 p.m.), but at 50 cents, the prices for balcony seats were rather high.

The newsreel theatre formula, half-heartedly introduced by the Rembrandt, was applied much more consistently by the Palace Cinema. This theatre was the latest of Cohen Barnstijn's acquisitions in Utrecht. Of all the cinemas in the city, the Palace Cinema was located nearest the railway station and had a reputation for specialising in American films. Taking advantage of the temporary exemption from the regulation and the thirst for films on the Royal engagement, the Palace started on Monday, 19 September with the exhibition of a one-hour programme which was repeated every hour from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. on weekdays. Provided there were seats available, the spectator could enter at any time and stay as long as he/she liked for the flat fee of 20 cents. In the evening the Palace showed its usual fare at its usual price of admission. The *Utrechts Nieuwsblad* commented that there was a need for Utrecht to have its own 'Cineac', but wondered how long this 'pleasure' in the Palace would last, given the bylaw.³⁴ 'Cineac' (from the French *ciné actualités*) was the name of a chain of newsreel theatres which had been operating since 1934–35 in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague. The fear of the *Utrechts Nieuwsblad* that the Utrecht 'Cineac' would only be temporary, proved unfounded. The formula was such a success that Cohen Barnstijn decided to continue it, even though the exemption from the ordinance expired on 30 September. As the word 'Cineac' could not be used, the name 'Filmac' was adopted.

Thursday, 8 October was the big day. The municipal council was going to discuss the motion introduced by Mrs. Wolthers-Arnolli to repeal the bylaw. Although her motion was supported by both the local censorship committee and the municipal council's social committee, she had to confess that the Mayor and Aldermen were against the motion to repeal. Ignoring 'the material interests of the exhibitors', which had been stressed in their petition to the authorities, the Labour member chose the narrow ground of 'social-hygienic considerations' to defend her motion. Unfortunately the debate soon degenerated into a shouting match between the different



Fig. 3. Frame enlargement from a Polygoon film protesting against the decision to uphold the bylaw (1936). The text reads: 'Utrecht, the fourth largest city in the Netherlands, is making itself eternally ridiculous by politicising the cinema; for the vote proved that this was purely right against left'.

[Courtesy Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision.]

political factions and had little to do with the issue at stake, simply pitting Left against Right. At the end of the debate the votes were equally divided: 19 in favour and 19 against.³⁵ This meant that another ballot had to be held. On 19 October the votes were once again equally divided (18 – 18) indicating that the motion was rejected. Thus the legislation remained in force. To the dismay of David van Staveren, the chairman of the Centrale Commissie voor de Filmkeuring, who publicly dismissed 'the attitude of the "majority" of the Utrecht municipal council as no less than unqualified, inefficient, harmful'.³⁶ The Utrecht exhibitors were furious. Cohen Barnstijn must have felt personally let down by the Mayor, who had so clearly enjoyed his hospitality at the City Cinema during the premiere of *40.000 Mijlen over Zee*. He immediately commissioned the Polygoon newsreel company to produce a short, silent trailer in which the spectators were called on 'to protest energetically against this interference, which disqualifies you from raising your children in the manner you see fit' (Fig. 3).³⁷

Business not quite as usual

Six weeks later, the Vreeburg Cinema was officially reopened. Director Nijland had given architect Gerrit Rietveld the chance to turn the cinema, the oldest in Utrecht, into a temple of modernism. The gala opening night on 10 December 1936 was attended by a large number of important people, but the politicians who had been responsible for ensuring that the regulation remained in force, particularly the Mayor,

were conspicuously absent.³⁸ Whether they had simply not been invited, or had wisely declined, is not known. The opening speech was given by the art collector M.R. Rademacher Schorer who happened to be chairman of the local censorship committee. He recalled his visits to the Vreeburg Cinema during his student days, but made no reference to the traumatic debate in the municipal council.

With the reopening of the Vreeburg Cinema a period of modernisation and innovation had reached its final stage. With the exception of Utrecht's only neighbourhood cinema, the Olympia, all the other film theatres in the city had been either renovated or completely rebuilt. New programme formulas had also been introduced, with an increase in attendance as evidence that these changes were appreciated: from 1,056,414 in 1935 to 1,230,446 in 1936 and 1,320,304 in 1937.³⁹ But the exhibitors had not forgotten the refusal of the Mayor and Aldermen to support the motion for the repeal of the bylaw. When the marriage of Princess Juliana and Prince Bernhard on 7 January 1937 offered them the chance to ask for a temporary exemption, similar to that granted on the occasion of the Royal engagement, they were prepared to suffer the loss of additional income by simply refusing to apply for an exemption. Through their trade organisation, NBB, even requests from other bodies such as the Nederlandsche Christelijke Radio Vereniging (Netherlands Protestant-Christian Broadcast Association) or the Oranje Vereniging (Orange Committee) for children's film shows were blocked. Understandably, this decision caused a lot of resentment. On the occasion of Princess Juliana's birthday on 30 April 1937, therefore, the exhibitors decided to make a gesture. Helped by the National Film Censorship Committee's ruling that news films on the Royal engagement and the Royal wedding would henceforward be categorised as 'films concerning a subject of science, industry, agriculture and trade' and could therefore be exhibited in Utrecht without permission from the Mayor and Aldermen, all the Utrecht cinemas showed a programme of such films. The box office receipts of 30 April were transferred to the accounts of 'a neutral charitable institution, whose name has a good reputation in Utrecht, i.e. the Utrecht Health Care Centre at Bosch en Duin'.⁴⁰ The ordinance remained in force until 1941 when the German occupation forces decided to do away with what they considered a local anomaly.

Notes

1. 'Is.', by which name a contemporary newspaper article abbreviated Barnstijn's first name, Isedor.
2. *Utrechts Nieuwsblad*, 2 April 1936.
3. Letter from I. Cohen Barnstijn to Mayor and Aldermen of Utrecht, 25 April 1936, Utrecht Archive (HUA) Stadsarchief VI 1059.4.
4. H. Buijter, 'De modern stad', in R.E. de Bruin e.a. (eds.), *'Een paradijs vol weelde'. Geschiedenis van de stad Utrecht* (Utrecht: Uitgeverij Matrijs, 2000), 435–463.
5. *Utrechtsche Courant*, 22 October 1898.
6. *Utrechtsch Provinciaal en Stedelijk Dagblad*, 21 July 1908.
7. Twenty members voted in favour of the proposal and thirteen against.
8. De Graaf published his views in various periodicals. A summary appeared under the title *Het bioscoopvraagstuk* [The Cinema Question], Utrecht 1919.
9. Documents regarding the supervision of cinema performances (Stukken betreffende het toezicht op bioscoopvoorstellingen), 1916–May 1918, in the Utrecht Public Record Office (HUA), VI 1059.2.
10. Documents regarding the supervision of cinema performances (Stukken betreffende het toezicht op bioscoopvoorstellingen), 1916–May 1918 and June 1918–February 1928, in the Utrecht Public Record Office (HUA), VI 1059.2 and VI 1059.3.
11. 'In Memoriam: D. Hamburger', in *Officieel Orgaan van de NBB*, 1947.
12. *Utrechtsch Dagblad*, 21 July 1920.
13. Documents regarding the supervision of cinema performances (Stukken betreffende het toezicht op bioscoopvoorstellingen), Stadsarchief VI 1059.4.
14. For the introduction of the sound film in Utrecht, see Evalina Looimeijer, *Horen, zien en zwijgen. De overgang van 'stomme' film naar geluidsfilm in Utrecht 1929–1931*, MA thesis, Theatre, Film and Television Studies, Utrecht University, 2001.
15. *Utrechts Nieuwsblad*, 21 December 1929.
16. Statistical Reports Utrecht Municipality (Statistische Berichten Gemeente Utrecht) 1929–1934.
17. *Utrechtsch Provinciaal en Stedelijk Dagblad*, 1 February 1929.
18. *Nieuwjaarswens Uitgesproken door enige Theaterdirecteuren*, Polygoon Docid 1006, Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision.
19. *Utrechts Nieuwsblad*, 16 January 1936.
20. *Utrechts Nieuwsblad*, 7 February 1936.
21. *Utrechts Nieuwsblad*, 29 February 1936.
22. *Utrechtsch Provinciaal en Stedelijk Dagblad*, 17 September 1932.
23. *Utrechts Nieuwsblad*, 9 September 1932.
24. Clare Lennart, 'Utrecht zoals ik het toen zag', in Arjaan van Nimwegen and Richard van den Dool (eds.), *Utrecht in tekst & beeld* (Vianen: Kwadraat 1984), 84.
25. *Utrechts Nieuwsblad*, 14 March 1936.
26. *Utrechts Nieuwsblad*, 22 February 1936.
27. *Utrechts Nieuwsblad*, 27 March 1936.
28. *Utrechts Nieuwsblad*, 16 April 1936.
29. Letter from I. Cohen Barnstijn to Mayor and Aldermen of Utrecht, 25 April 1936, HUA Stadsarchief VI 1059.4.
30. Report of a meeting of the City Council of Utrecht, 11 June 1936, HUA Stadsarchief VI 1059.4.
31. See various documents relating to the repeal of the bylaw, May–July 1936, HUA Stadsarchief VI 1059.4.
32. *Utrechts Nieuwsblad*, 9 September 1936, 17 September 1936, 19 September 1936.
33. *Utrechts Nieuwsblad*, 21 September 1936.
34. *Utrechts Nieuwsblad*, 21 September 1936.
35. Minutes of the council meeting, 8 October 1936, HUA Stadsarchief VI 1059.4.
36. D[avid] v[an] S[taveren], 'Neen Utrecht!', in *Licht-beeld en Cultuur*, 13, 10 (October 1936): 253–254.
37. *Reclamefilm Voor Flora*, Polygoon Docid 319, Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision.
38. *Utrechts Nieuwsblad*, 11 December 1936, *Utrechtsch Dagblad*, 11 December 1936.
39. Statistical Reports Utrecht Municipality (Statistische Berichten Gemeente Utrecht) 1935–1937.
40. *Het Witte Doek*, 1, 1 (1937): 14–15.