Film Museum Practice and Film Historiography

Lameris, Bregt

Published by Amsterdam University Press

Lameris, Bregt.
Film Museum Practice and Film Historiography: The Case of the Nederlands Filmmuseum (1946-2000).

Amsterdam University Press, 2017.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/66504.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66504

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2359653
CHAPTER 1

Private Collectors

The acquisition of silent films has been beset by a particular problem: by the time the first film archives were established in the 1930s, a large part of the entire corpus of silent films had already perished or been destroyed (Meyer and Read, 2000: 2). This was also the period when the ‘talkies’ replaced silent cinema, which meant it was no longer possible to acquire silent films from distributors after they were withdrawn from circulation. As a consequence, the NHFA – as EYE was called at the time – was dependent on the resources of private individuals who had built up collections of silent films in the past (Mallon, 2006).

In 1956, Jan de Vaal, the institute’s director, declared that the task of the Filmmuseum was to rescue as much as possible of this old film material from its storage places in basements, sheds, and attics throughout the Netherlands (Hendriks and Blotkamp, 1996: 12-13). As a result, the impression developed that the archive was a direct reflection of silent film culture in the Netherlands. The museum’s own annual report in 1989 tells us that the material in the archive was considered to be a ‘faithful reflection’ of the division between Dutch and foreign films shown in the Netherlands before 1930. However, EYE’s archive of silent film comprises all kinds of smaller, private collections, and this raises the question of whether this selection of films does indeed ‘faithfully’ represent Dutch film culture of the silent period. Private collectors, for the most part, selected films according to their own insights, goals, and passions. I would argue that the EYE archive cannot lay claim to being a direct reflection of Dutch screening culture; rather, it is a patchwork of silent films from that period. To illustrate this, I will analyse some of these private collections using the categories outlined by museum historian and theoretician Susan Pearce in her book, On Collecting (1995), to demonstrate how they relate to one another.
THREE COLLECTION STRATEGIES

In order to better understand the diversity of these private collections and the motives that lie behind their assembly, I will take a closer look at a series of fragments that can be found in the film museum archives. For example, some groups of fragments came to the archives in clearly defined sets, already arranged by topic or some other defining feature. Pearce (1995: 32) calls this ‘systematic collection’ – a process that follows a clear rationale, with the intention of producing sets of contiguous objects. Systematic collection fits within the tradition of classification and arrangement that emerged in the eighteenth century and became paradigmatic for the practice of collecting (Heesen te and Spary, 2001: 17).

The cinema employees who kept pieces from the films they worked with also contributed to the shape of these collections. In these cases, the fragments became personal memorabilia, ‘con-signing’ an interrelationship between films and collector. Pearce (1995: 32) calls this, ‘souvenir collecting’, and its result, an ‘object autobiography’: the items form a sort of diary, which reveals traces of the life and ideas of the individual collector.

Many fragments, however, were the result of coincidence: for example, they happened to be used as a beginning or end of a film, or the rest of the film had subsequently been lost or had deteriorated. The way collectors labelled such fragments as ‘old film fragments’, ‘fragments of unknown films’, or ‘unknown piece of an animation film’ indicates that they collected such unidentified fragments simply because it was film material. These vague descriptions also show that collectors often did not know their origin, so the footage cannot possibly have been collected because it represented a particular film title. In any event, the labels the collectors gave these fragments were not based on the footage, which indicates that they were not particularly interested in the content. Pearce (1995: 32) calls this, ‘fetishistic collection’, which she describes as the obsessive urge to possess as many objects of a particular sort as possible; in this case, the object of obsession happened to be film material. The variety of fragments in the archives illustrates the diversity of reasons that lay behind their collection, and these different motivations formed the grounds for the choices the collectors made, and to a large extent determined the final form the collections took. As film historiography is shaped by those films that survived, these motivations can still be traced in the film historical discourse.
One of the more important private collections in the former Filmmuseum’s archive is the collection of Jean Desmet, which it acquired in 1957.

Desmet worked as a showman and distributor from 1907 to 1916, and his collection was the result of his professional activities. As a consequence, his acquisition of films was primarily guided by what was available on the market at the time: any potential acquisitions were subject to the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion dictated by market forces, and this influenced the creation of his collection. For example, it does not include the films of certain production companies or those featuring certain movie stars because other exhibitors and distributors held monopoly rights over them. As a result, cultural, social, and economic criteria all played a part in determining the creation of the collection of films that later became known as the Desmet Collection (Blom, 2003: 22-23).

Despite this, the Filmmuseum concluded – on the basis of the collection’s history – that it was representative of the screening culture of the early dec-
ades of the twentieth century: its 1989 annual report announced its intention to inventory and describe the collection as a whole, due to its importance to the history of film culture in the Netherlands during this period. The Filmuseum’s initial ambition was to create a proper inventory, and this led to the active preservation by duplication of all the films in the collection a year later.

Film historian Ivo Blom relates the story of Desmet and his distribution activities in his book, Jean Desmet and the Early Dutch Film Trade (2003). This extensive study of Desmet is framed by an analysis of the creation of his collection. Blom appears to be aware of the fact that a collection is often coloured by its collector, and he even refers to the following quote from Jean Baudrillard (1994: 12): ‘[A] given collection is made up of a succession of terms, but the final word must always be the person of the collector.’ However, Blom (2003: 23) concludes that this does not apply to the Desmet Collection because it was created by accident – Desmet bought his films for distribution and exhibition purposes, letting the market make his choices for him. Consequently, he does not consider it important to investigate Desmet’s personal influence on the structure of the collection. He is only correct up to a point, however, because Desmet, as a collector, did have an impact on its final composition.

After Desmet retired from his distribution activities in 1916, the purchase of new films for his collection stagnated. However, unlike so many other distributors, he did not discard his old films. According to his daughter, E. Hughan-Desmet, her father never threw anything away, and this clearly applied to the films he had purchased for his distribution company. Desmet kept these films because he thought he might use them at a later date – and he did use them, in various ways. In the first place, he continued to rent out his old films until 1922, and he blanked old newsreels in order to re-use them as starting and ending strips for other films – in this way, he did not have to buy so-called ‘black film’. He also sold old film material to Hoffmans, a chemical factory in Waalwijk, for four guilders a kilo; and he sent it to Germany, where the combustible nitrate material was probably used to make ammunition (Blom, 2003: 327–328). Finally, he sold some of the films from his collection because they could still be screened. Remarkably, some genres were cheaper than others: Desmet offered ‘variety, comical film (slapstick), comedies (bourgeois comedies), nature films, scientific films and dramas’ for 20 to 40 cents a metre, and colour films and a few feature films for 50 cents (Blom, 2003: 303). The higher price that he placed on colour films and some features indicates that he literally valued these the most, or as Blom (2000: 300) says, Desmet regarded some of his films as ‘monumental pieces’. By contrast, the fact that he cannibalised newsreels to make starting and ending strips indicates his lack of appreciation for these particular filmic images.

All this indicates that Desmet did evaluate and assess the films in his col-
lection, and that it kept changing as a result of the way he recycled and disposed of material until well after 1916. As a consequence, Desmet’s activities cannot help but have had a distorting effect on the collection. If a researcher wants to conclude anything from the collection about distribution and exhibition practices between 1907 and 1916, he or she will have to take this inherent distortion into account. For example, about eighty percent of the current Desmet Collection consists of colour films. Of course, the presence of these films shows that he had an interest in colour; however, the extremely high percentage of these films in the collection also appears to be the result of the higher price this material commanded. It is also unlikely that Desmet would have disposed of films he valued highly by sending them off to Germany or to Hoffmans. It therefore seems logical that a disproportionately large number of colour films were preserved as opposed to newsreels, which had less chance of survival.

By 1925, Desmet had stopped insuring his films and renting them out, and stored them instead in the attic of his cinema on the Nieuwendijk in Amsterdam. Following a fire in 1938, he moved them to a garage in Amstelveen that he rented for 240 guilders a year. The act of storage divested the films of their original commercial function; Desmet stopped using them in any way that could earn money. What used to be a distribution collection turned into a private collection, and the films changed from commercial objects into pure collectibles (Blom, 2003: 333-334; Pomian, 1988: 14). The fact that the films, stripped of their original function, had become objects without financial value did not mean that Desmet considered them worthless – he continued to pay rent in order to ensure they were stored safely; it did mean, however, that they began to acquire new functions and meanings. My hypothesis is that they served as tokens of memory for Desmet, as souvenirs, and the collection as a whole had turned into Pearce’s ‘object autobiography’ referred to earlier.

After 1925, Desmet no longer made use of the films in his collection. This ‘non-use’ of collected objects is characteristic of collectors. Walter Benjamin describes the phenomenon in his 1931 essay, ‘Unpacking my Library’:

And the non-reading of books, you will object, should be characteristic of collectors? This is news to me, you may now say. It is not news at all. Experts will bear me out when I say that it is the oldest thing in the world. (Benjamin, 1977: 64)

In this respect, Desmet displayed the characteristics of a typical collector. As soon as the distribution collection turned into a private collection, it froze: nothing was disposed of anymore, nothing was used. He closed his collection like a diary with a lock and key.
The history of the Desmet Collection, therefore, reveals that it cannot be truly representative of Dutch film culture between 1907 and 1916 because it was altered in too many ways at a later stage. However, the Filmmuseum (as well as other experts) at the time did interpret the collection in this way, and drew conclusions about the history of film culture in the Netherlands based on its composition. One example was the idea, arising from the number of colour films in the collection, that eighty percent of the films Desmet showed in the 1910s were colour (Blom, 2003: 20). Further suppositions about Desmet as an exhibitor and distributor were then based on these conclusions – for example, due to the fact that he supposedly distributed such a high percentage of colour films, he was then defined as dealing in luxury entertainment. In this way, Desmet (accidentally) inserted his autobiography into film history through his collection of films, without even putting pen to paper.

When researching such collections, we must follow Baudrillard’s example and always take into consideration the motives of the person who has put the objects together, and, in the case of distribution collections, we have to remember that these collectors were largely constrained by the market. But the history of a collection, of course, goes beyond the moment of its emergence. A closer investigation of private collections provides an understanding of the various phases they may have gone through – from distribution collection, via a recycling phase, to autobiographical private collection. Every transformation a collection undergoes places a filter over the previous period. The collection becomes a diorama in time, distilling various stories from different periods, and it can in turn be analysed and defined with the help of these stories. However, the price that comes with an understanding of this role is the awareness that we cannot simply use a collection as a source for the investigation or description of one period of its history in isolation.

**THE UITKIJK COLLECTION: FILM AS ART**

A final interesting example of such a collection is the Uitkijk Collection. The Filmmuseum has always considered it as one of its main pillars. In 1976, the museum described the collection as deriving from the activities of the Nederlandsche Filmliga, which was active between 1927 and 1931 as part of the tradition of cercles du cinéma, ciné-clubs, and other groups interested in avant-garde cinema in Europe and America. Remarkably, however, this collection was not only considered important for historians of classical film, but was also regarded as a significant historical source for the study of wider cultural developments in the Netherlands in the 1930s. The fact that the Filmmuseum associated Vsevolod Pudovkin’s 1926 film, *Mat* (Mother), with the Film-
liga explains why the institute added it to the collection at a later stage. Yet, despite the seminal role the film played in the birth of the Dutch Filmliga (the league came into being because MAT was banned in the Netherlands), it was never part of the Uitkijk Collection. The fact that it later ended up on the list of titles included in the collection could be considered a form of ‘hyper-correction’, springing from the assumption that the collection was more closely intertwined with the history of the Filmliga than it actually was. This could also explain why the Filmmuseum decided to preserve and restore the entire collection as part of a project that focused exclusively on the history of the Filmliga.20

Originally, the Uitkijk Collection functioned as the distribution collection of the CBLF, the company that provided other film leagues in the Netherlands with films. The CBLF, alongside film leagues throughout the country, was part of the Nederlandsche Filmliga, that aimed at screening those films that could not be seen in commercial cinemas. This basically referred to the results of what ‘had been experimented and achieved in the workshops of French, German and Russian avant-garde [cinema]’ (Filmliga, 1982: 34). Menno ter Braak was the critic and writer who most influenced the Filmliga’s ideas and its acquisition policy in its early days. Ter Braak’s take on cinematography was fairly rigid, and, in the beginning, the Filmliga’s programming was characterised by a tendency towards experimental and abstract film.21 These sorts of films consequently form a large part of the Uitkijk Collection.

However, although it is true that the Filmliga showed a relatively large amount of avant-garde films from the 1920s and 1930s, it did show other types of film. For example, it exhibited feature films such as NOSFERATU (Murnau, 1921), THE CROWD (Vidor, 1928), UNDERWORLD (Von Sternberg, 1927), and THÉRÈSE RAQUIN (Feyder, 1928), as well as a variety of features by or starring Charlie Chaplin, and some famous Soviet films such as STAROYE I NOVOYE (Eisenstein, 1929) and STACHKA (Eisenstein, 1924). However, although the Filmliga showed all these titles, they never made it into the Uitkijk Collection. This leads to the conclusion that the decision over whether to purchase a film or not was probably based on practical considerations: the lesser-known, smaller, more experimental films, which were difficult to show in a ‘normal’ movie theatre, were often not for rent, and the only way the Filmliga would have been able to access these films was by purchasing them. After acquiring the films that it could, the league turned this more-or-less accidental series of films into a distribution collection, and, in 1928, it officially became part of the newly established CBLF.22 It also found a new manager for its collection in Ed Pelster, a professional who was also involved in film distribution outside of the Filmliga.

Overall, we can state with a fair degree of confidence that the origins of the
collection lie in the acquisition of European avant-garde films from the 1920s. However, the collection also contains other kinds of films, many of which originated from the collection of the Dutch production department for independent filmmakers, established in 1931. Both this production company and the CBLF were part of an umbrella company, the Maatschappij voor Cinegrafie NV (Society for Cinematography), in Amsterdam.

Furthermore, the Filmliga not only aimed to show (foreign and Dutch) avant-garde films, but also to present what it described as ‘old, good films that unfortunately were forgotten too soon’ (Filmliga, 1982: 34). In this, it seems the league set out to imitate similar initiatives in other countries. When Pelster purchased a number of older silent films from people such as Desmet, it was probably with this purpose in mind (Blom, 2003: 330). In reality, these films were presented very differently than was initially envisaged: instead of creating an appreciation for these forgotten films, the Filmliga noted that they clearly showed the contrast between films made in 1906/7 and ‘modern’ films (Linssen, 1999: 65). The Filmliga baptised these films as ‘cinéma d’avant-guerre’ (‘pre-war cinema’), following the tradition of the Cinéma des Ursulines in Paris, and presented them as ridiculous and outdated failures (Linssen, 1999: 65). Over time, this term was given a broader meaning and included films that were made after the war, such as AU SECOURS! (Gance, 1923), starring Max Linder, which was also designated as a ‘pre-war’ film. In 1928, Henrik Scholte (1982: 122) even claimed that all past films would eventually become cinéma d’avant-guerre, simply because films were rapidly improving. The term ended up referring to the inferior quality of a film, rather than the fact that it was made in a certain period; it connoted a negative assessment of a group of ‘outdated’ films, which the Filmliga presented as a contrast to contemporary cinema. Hence, it lost its descriptive essence and became synonymous with an aesthetic judgment.

In 1931, the Dutch Filmliga officially closed, but the CBLF continued to exist. From that moment on, Pelster’s influence over its acquisition policy grew exponentially, resulting in a new direction. Since Pelster personally preferred the genre of Cultuurfilm (the German Kulturfilm), the focus shifted away from the absolute and experimental to documentary film, and, as a result, a large number of these so-called Cultuurfilms also ended up in the collection. This shows that, although the fundamental raison d’être of the collection had always been to provide audiences with quality films, the choice and purchase of such films very much depended on the personal ideas and preferences of those who bore final responsibility for their acquisition. This again confirms Baudrillard’s statement that, in the end, it is the collector who determines the collection.

To recap, as film archival and museum institutes were mostly created after
the war, they almost always had to rely on private collectors to acquire silent films. Consequently, the largest part of the entire collection of silent films was formed for a variety of purposes. The collections of silent films in the different archives refer to various periods and processes in the history of film collecting, and this has had repercussions on the film historical discourse based on these collections. After all, the objects that enable this discourse have been pre-selected in more ways than one, which means that all potential historical hypotheses or statements will be partly predetermined. Thus, contemporary perspectives on the value of film and cinema had already largely determined the history of a number of these collections at a very early stage.

This raises the question of what implications this has had for the (film historical) referential function of private collections in particular, and silent film collections more generally, in the presentation strategies of film museums.