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De Lichtstraal, the organ of the Dutch Union of Theatre und Cinema Employees (1916-1921)

2006

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/16042>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Sammelbandbeitrag / collection article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Hogenkamp, Bert: De Lichtstraal, the organ of the Dutch Union of Theatre und Cinema Employees (1916-1921).

In: Frank Kessler, Sabine Lenk, Martin Loiperdinger (Hg.): *Quellen und Perspektiven / Sources and Perspectives*.

Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern 2006 (KINtop. Jahrbuch zur Erforschung des frühen Films 14/15), S. 126–136. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/16042>.

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DE LICHTSTRAAL

Maandblad van den Ned. Bond van Geëmpl. in het Kunst- en Amusementsbedrijf

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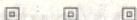
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De Lichtstraal, the organ of the Dutch Union of Theatre and Cinema Employees (1916-1921)

Thirty years ago Michael Chanan opened his pioneering study *Labour Power in the British Film Industry* with the remark that »one of the many neglected areas of study in British cinema is the history of the conditions of labour and trade union struggle in the industry«.¹ Shocking as this may have seemed for a nation that considered itself the cradle of trade unionism, in the rest of the world the situation was not much different. Since then a few books and articles, particularly on the struggles in the Hollywood studios, have seen the light.² But there is still hardly any serious scholarship on topics like the unionisation of cinema staff. One explanation for this neglect would be that the (scarce) evidence is generally to be found in labour history institutions – giving film scholars the impression that they better leave the subject to the labour historians. By examining the Dutch trade union periodical *De Lichtstraal* however I hope to show that film history has definitely something to win from studying sources like these.

The only surviving but incomplete run of *De Lichtstraal*, the organ of the Dutch Union of Theatre and Cinema Employees (Nederlandsche Bond van Theater- en Bioscooppersoneel), is being held by the renowned International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam.³ *De Lichtstraal* (Dutch for »Ray of Light«) was a monthly that was first published in April 1916. The first surviving issue dates from November 1916 (Vol. 1, Nr. 8) and the last known issue from October 1921 (Vol. 5, Nr. 13).⁴ Each issue was wrapped in a four-page »cover«, printed on coloured paper. Apart from the masthead with the title, this cover was filled for half or two thirds with ads, the rest (mainly the back cover) being used for union news. Among the advertisers were distributors, hotels and cafés which were frequented by those active in the entertainment sector, firms selling cinematograph and electric equipment and buyers of junked film stock.⁵ For all the issues that appeared until February 1919 the Dutch distribution office of Pathé used the front page to praise its films. Then it was the turn of the CAPI photography chain of C.A.P. Ivens, the father of documentary film maker Joris Ivens. By the end of 1919 however it obviously proved impossible to find advertisers willing to pay the rate for the front page and it was decided to make use of the empty space to exhort the unorganised to join the union (see illustration). By the middle of the next year virtually



all the ads, on the front page or elsewhere, had disappeared, even though *De Lichtstraal* boasted a circulation of some 2 000 copies.⁶ Apart from the cover each issue as a rule contained eight editorial pages. Only for the last two issues, when the union was in obvious disarray, the magazine size was abandoned for a tabloid size, 4-page format. *De Lichtstraal* featured contributions on trade union policies in general and those of the entertainment sector in particular, and published news from the union and its branches, including annual reports, congress reports, lists of union members, letters to the editor, etc. Far less frequent were articles on technical developments and on the debate over the 'Cinema Question' that the representatives of various religious, political and social groups were heavily engaged in during the late teens and early twenties.

The post of chief editor of *De Lichtstraal* changed hands frequently, remaining vacant too at intervals. Conspicuously the four persons who acted as chief editors between 1916 and 1921 were all lecturers.⁷ It was an indication of the importance of this profession at that time. Examining *De Lichtstraal* carefully one can find more evidence of the prominent role played by the lecturers. Like any trade union organ it reflected with a certain pride upon the history of its own organisation. The first chief editor Frans Weber in particular was not averse to having, in his own words, »a look at the past«.⁸ He argued that the union actually went back much further than most cared to remember, but that »it was not as today, a promising sturdy youngster, it was in bad health, a consumptive«. He traced the origins of the union back to attempts in Rotterdam in 1911-1912 to organise the local cinema staff. But after a while »the fire went dead«. The next attempt was made in Amsterdam, where a well-attended meeting was held in September 1912.⁹ As Weber recalled: »The debates lasted until late at night or rather early in the morning, but the statutes were drawn up, a vote was taken and they were approved.« The chief editor sketched a dramatic sequel, for after the meeting »the jealousy-bacil caused havoc«. As a consequence »the board resigned, the statutes had disappeared, stolen out of jealousy, it was pure chaos. Ten to twelve faithful remained, later this number dwindled to seven, out of these a new preliminary board was formed.«¹⁰ Finally three out of these – all active as lecturers – managed to establish a new union early in 1916. Its statutes received the seal of royal approval in May 1916, while it joined the socialist Netherlands Association of Trade Unions (NVV), one of the four national trade union umbrella organisations (the others being of catholic, protestant and syndicalist denomination). In a style that was typical for trade union publications of that time Weber stressed that the three founding fathers »must never be forgotten«.¹¹

The leading positions on the union's board – those of chairman (André de Jong), secretary general (M. H. Levi) and treasurer (J. Holbein) – were taken up by lecturers. The editorial commission of *De Lichtstraal* too consisted of three lecturers: M. H. Levi, Chef van Dijk (one of the three founding

fathers) and of course Frans Weber. On a local level too, it was the lecturers who were the organisational mainstay of the union. Take for example the Utrecht branch. In November 1916 it had thirteen members, of whom six were lecturers and four projectionists, while three held other positions.¹² By May 1917 the number had risen to eighteen – which was small compared to Amsterdam (244 members), Rotterdam (95) or The Hague (63). Although as a result of this rise the number of lecturers had declined in terms of percentage, they still dominated the Utrecht branch life, with the town's most celebrated lecturer Louis Hartlooper acting as chairman and Wouter Kaljee as secretary.¹³ But in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague too, where the lecturers were more clearly outnumbered by other occupations (for example projectionists, musicians and doorkeepers), their presence was very much felt. They knew of course how to make the best possible use of their professional skills, the gifts of verbal expression.

The prominent role played by the lecturers was not always appreciated, as chief editor Frans Weber did point out in an article »Who are the most important in our trade?« Although he was a lecturer himself, he started by sketching a remarkably negative picture: »Most lecturers, let us put it frankly, are celebrities who have fallen from their pedestal. Most of the time they are persons who were better off in the past and who, through their own fault or otherwise, have come down in the world.« But then came the twist: »And is it not an extremely fortunate phenomenon that these folk put their capacities favourably at the disposal of our general interest?« To make sure that the readers were fully aware what he meant, Weber added: »Let us appreciate this.«¹⁴ One gets the impression, however, that there was an important reason why the lecturers did indeed »put their capacities favourably at the disposal«: more than other professions, they were aware that they had something to gain from the union. Proof was the fact that they never figured on the lists of expulsions (for non-payment of membership fees or any other misdemeanour) published in *De Lichtstraal*. As Ansje van Beusekom has pointed out between 1913 and 1916 the position of the lecturer within the industry changed from one of collusion with to opposition to the exhibitors.¹⁵ In the light of this change the lecturers considered the union as a means to protect their position.

One of the lecturers who had joined the union and had been elected on its board as a »commissioner« was Frederik Keijzer (1862-1945) who had possibly the longest career in the trade. Given the opportunity to look back in *De Lichtstraal* at his 25 years as a lecturer, Keijzer recalled how he had started giving lectures with lantern slides in January 1893, after he had been fired as a »city missionary« in Amsterdam. Subsequently he made the switch from slides to moving images. He considered himself »the father of the lecturers«, but given his championing of social and religious causes, temperance in particular, he could as well – or even better – be characterised as an evangelist.¹⁶ After travelling the length and breadth of the Netherlands, Keijzer settled in Rotterdam



in 1913, finding employment in various local cinemas. In July 1918 he applied for the position of lecturer at the Vreeburg Cinema in Utrecht, but was turned away after a trial performance.¹⁷ That this was reported in *De Lichtstraal* was in itself highly unusual but an indication of Keijzer's special position. It clearly confirms Ansje van Beusekom's argument though.

With his missionary background Frederik Keijzer was not typical though of the lecturers who were active in the Union of Theatre and Cinema Employees. Most of them had previously had a career in theatre or vaudeville, like the aforementioned Louis Hartlooper (1864-1922) who had been an actor for many years before he became a lecturer.¹⁸ Another example was Cor Schuring (1880-1962), whose career has been examined by Ivo Blom and Ine van Dooren.¹⁹ Then there also was a generation that had »grown up« with the cinema, like the deputy treasurer of the union Max Nabarro (1889-1977). Coming from an Amsterdam Jewish proletarian background, where the ethos of self-organisation and self-education had been instilled by Henri Polak and his Diamond Workers' Union, Nabarro started as a film salesman before becoming a lecturer. In his memoirs he has described how he was fired by the managing director of the Dam Cinema in Amsterdam because of his activities for the union. Surviving by odd jobs as a substitute in various Amsterdam cinemas, almost two years went by before he got steady employment again, this time as a lecturer in a cinema in the neighbouring town of Haarlem.²⁰

A considerable number of lecturers and other cinema staff were Jews, like Nabarro. In *De Lichtstraal* there is only one explicit reference to the Jewish membership of the union. In June 1917 it published an intriguing warning for Jewish members to make enquiries with the board of the union, before they would »enter into relationship« with the owner of the Palace Cinema in Roosendaal near the Dutch-Belgian border.²¹ The obvious conjecture would be that there was a case of antisemitism. But in the same and following issues the director of the Palace Cinema featured on the list of subscribers to *De Lichtstraal*, as if nothing was the matter. What is more, a few months later the journal even praised him for his social policies, i.e. giving his staff a full day off per week during the summer months. Although *De Lichtstraal* called this »good news«, it did not hesitate to point out »that the staff had the right to a full day off not only during the summer months, but during the winter months too«.²²

The right to have a day off per week was not self-evident, even among the union members themselves. A good example is the proud announcement by the Utrecht branch in March 1917 that thanks to »the actions of our chairman [Louis Hartlooper, BH], the management of the Rembrandt Cinema had decided to give its staff *four days of leave of absence per year on full pay*«.²³ Along with wages, working hours were a key issue for the union, as cinema staff were expected not only to work seven days a week but also to make long hours.²⁴ But while the intention was declared in the union's programme

for 1917-1918 »to try to obtain for our members one free night per week«, the eight-hour working day, for which the trade union umbrella organisation NVV had been fighting so hard, was less of an issue.²⁵ The long working hours meant that union meetings started typically at 11 p.m. or even midnight, for it was only as late as this that the members would have finished their jobs.

Union branches mostly negotiated with individual cinema owners, although in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague they had to face the might of the local »bosses' associations«. In turn these branches could count on the expertise of the local trades council (»bestuursbond«). Sometimes the threat of a strike was enough to change the mind of a cinema owner, but at other times stoppage was the only resort. In September 1917 the New York Cinema in Utrecht was hit by a strike over wages, which lasted less than a single day. Interestingly, in the official statistics the strike was counted as »lost«, whereas the socialist daily *Het Volk* considered it a success as »the managing director has declared to raise the lowest wages, to recognise the union and to enter into further negotiations with it«.²⁶ These must have proceeded satisfactorily, for when the Utrecht branch discussed a campaign for higher wages two months later, the conclusion was rather surprising: »The wages in Utrecht are such, that only a few members agree with the need for a campaign. To pursue higher wages for non members does not appeal to the meeting at all.«²⁷

This kind of solidarity restricted to members only can be discerned in other activities of the union too. Starting in September 1917 *De Lichtstraal* offered a new service to its readers: »placement bureaus«. Union representatives acted as employment exchanges by promoting the skills of members who were looking for work or advertising positions that were vacant. So far this had been a profitable activity for specialised agencies or for the weekly trade papers *De Kinematograaf* and *De Bioscoop-courant*. As *De Lichtstraal* appeared only once a month, it is unlikely that the union could match their services whose frequency was much higher. After a couple of issues the column was dropped without further ado. Another concern of the union was the certification of projectionists. The idea of having an annual examination for such a certificate was put forward at the 1917 congress. It was referred to a commission which »came to the conclusion that a union certificate was desirable and necessary in the interest of the projectionists and their wages, as well as for the safety of the public«.²⁸ Restricting the number of trainees who could enter the examination was seen by the union as a means of protecting jobs for its members. It was not until after the Second World War that the Netherlands Cinema Union, the national association of cinema owners and film distributors, would realise a nationally recognised certification system for projectionists.

The aforementioned official statistics show that there were relatively few strikes in the entertainment sector, but 1918, the last year of the war with its price rises and shortages, was one of considerable activity in Rotterdam. In that year no less than 2 720 working days were lost as a result of strikes in the



Rotterdam entertainment sector.²⁹ To put this figure into perspective: a wildcat strike in the Rotterdam docks in the same year resulted in 30 000 lost working days!³⁰ The unrest in the Rotterdam entertainment sector first started in May with a short strike over working conditions and wages organised by the Union of Theatre and Cinema Employees among the technical staff of the Tivoli Theatre.³¹ This theatre was owned by Georges van Biene, who happened to be the chairman of the powerful Association of Managing Directors of Public Entertainment Venues in Rotterdam. In August the union called a strike in the Cosmorama Cinema »because of the outrageously low wages and long working hours«.³² After five days (20 lost working days) an agreement was reached. In the meantime a campaign had started for higher wages in the whole Rotterdam entertainment sector that was supported by all the unions concerned, not just by the Union of Theatre and Cinema Employees. The Association of Managing Directors of Public Entertainment Venues in Rotterdam was only prepared to partially meet the demands for what were called »high costs of living bonuses«, to make up for the price rises, with the argument that their costs too had risen and that their margins were therefore limited. The musicians' and artists' unions decided to increase the pressure by calling a strike, without waiting for the consent of the Union of Theatre and Cinema Employees. In September 1918 first the Building for Arts and Sciences (Gebouw voor Kunsten en Wetenschappen) had to cancel its shows because the musicians went on strike, then a number of other concert halls, theatres and cinemas followed this example. The Union of Theatre and Cinema Employees hesitated about its course of action and it had good reasons to do so. As even the socialist daily *Het Volk* had to admit, »the public did not exactly co-operate«.³³ All the time the ranks of the powerful Association of Managing Directors remained closed. It refused to give in and forced the strikers back to work after a dozen days.³⁴ There was no victimisation, but in the official recordbook the strike counted as another one that was »lost«.³⁵

After this strike the »winner«, the Association of Managing Directors of Public Entertainment Venues in Rotterdam, stubbornly pursued an independent course, refusing for example for more than half a dozen years to fully recognise the authority of the Netherlands Cinema Union, in which the managing directors of the cinemas and film distributors were organised nationally from 1921 onwards. Whereas the »loser«, the Netherlands Union of Employees in the Arts and Entertainment Business as it was now known, seriously looked into the possibilities of closer co-operation with the other entertainment unions such as the Association of Musicians (Toonkunstenaars Vereniging) and the two Association of Artists (Artisten Verenigingen). In December 1918 the union had over a thousand members, so it felt that vis-à-vis the others it was in a strong position. It was a question of forming a federation of entertainments unions or merging them into one big union. Piet Wigman, the new editor of *De Lichtstraal* explained that it was up to the members to make up

their minds about what they wanted.³⁶ The pages of the surviving 1919 issues of the union journal make clear that none of the prospective partners was willing to give up just one inch of his independence.

Quoting as an example how the managing directors of the cinemas had merged into one organisation, Wigman stressed in his 1920 New Year's address: »As our material interest is best served by a single powerful unity, without any argument, it is necessary that *for us* this is the year of unity.«³⁷ But it was to be the opposite. Although the union had increased its membership (in January 1920 it had a record 1439 members),³⁸ 1920 and 1921 were the years of splits rather than unity. As a result the union more or less ceased to exist by the end of 1921. A rival that had only recently established by former members of the Netherlands Union of Employees in the Arts and Entertainment Business, the syndicalist Federation of Theatre and Cinema Staff (*Federatie van Theater- en Bioscooppersoneel*), was now the only force to be reckoned with.

What went wrong in 1920 and 1921? *De Lichtstraal* gives us no straight answers, but a few clues can be found in its pages. In the late 1910s the exhibitors successively decided that they could do without the services of a lecturer. When it turned out that the union had little to offer in the way of job protection, the relationship changed drastically. Furthermore the composition of the union changed. The increase in membership meant that the lecturers, already a minority (albeit it a vocal one) when the union started, were now more and more outnumbered. Some lecturers saw the demise of their profession as an invitation to jump over the fence and become employer instead of employee. Former chairman André de Jong for example became managing director of the Luxor Cinema in Leiden and »founding father« Sijf de Goeije managing director of the Damstraat Bioscope in Amsterdam. Other prominent members left the union in an atmosphere of acrimonious mud slinging, like former treasurer J. Holbein (stage name for J. van Riet) in 1920 and former secretary M. H. Levi in 1921.³⁹ Finally a few looked to the union to help them out in times of distress but discovered that there was actually very little it could do for them. When for example a member of the Utrecht branch asked out of sympathy whether the union could not offer any assistance to secretary Wouter Kaljee, who had been made redundant, the answer was as vague as could be: »This will happen only as far as the union allows this.«⁴⁰ The union did allow Kaljee to place a free notice in *De Lichtstraal*, enabling him to offer his services as an »experienced lecturer«.⁴¹ To no avail it seems. Sadly Kaljee died a few months later, in August 1919, at the age of 36.

From 1918 onwards a process of radicalisation within the union can be discerned. The horrors of the First World War and the excitement about the events in Russia undoubtedly played an important role in this. It was conspicuous that even such a thoroughly reformist branch as Utrecht started using a »revolutionary« jargon and addressed its members as »Comrades theatre and cinema slaves«.⁴² In August 1920 *De Lichtstraal* used the word »extremists« for some



of its members. There were no lecturers among them, it was other occupations that now took the lead. Among the founding members in September 1920 of the Federation of Theatre and Cinema Staff were a doorkeeper, a projectionist and a chorist. The organ of the new federation was symbolically entitled *Our Struggle* (*Onze Strijd*). The syndicalist umbrella organisation Netherlands Labour Secretariat (Nederlands Arbeids Secretariaat), always keen to score points off its social-democratic rival NVV, immediately welcomed the new union in its midst. The main feat of the federation, which in 1924 changed its name to that of Union of Workers in the Amusement Sector (Bond van Werkers in het Amusementsbedrijf), was a cinema strike in Amsterdam in that same year, resulting in the loss of 1434 working days.⁴³

It would do little justice however to *De Lichtstraal* as a historical record to view it solely as a chronicle of labour struggles. The lists of its members that were published on its pages up until Vol. 2, Nr. 5 (complete with occupation and venue of employment) are a goldmine of both biographical and sociological information to film historians. As has been pointed out above, the journal offers interesting insights into the changes of the profession of lecturer. Given that the union organised employees both in the theatre and the cinema, *De Lichtstraal* gives fascinating evidence about 'intermediality' as it was experienced at the time. Lastly, *De Lichtstraal* must be seen as a 'counter record' vis-à-vis the trade papers that have been so avidly studied by film historians during the last decades.

Notes

1 Michael Chanan, *Labour Power in the British Film Industry*, BFI, London 1976, p. i.

2 Cf. Mike Nielsen, Gene Mailles, *Hollywood's Other Blacklist. Union Struggles in the Studio System*, BFI, London 1996; Gerald Horne, *Class Struggle in Hollywood 1930-1950. Moguls, Mobsters, Stars, Reds and Trade Unionists*, University of Texas Press, Austin 2001.

3 www.iisg.nl

4 Missing too are the issues 2-9 of Vol. 4.

5 In its April 1918 issue *De Lichtstraal* announced that it would no longer take advertisements for junked film stock because of the abuse that was made of it.

6 *De Lichtstraal*, Vol. 5, Nr. 8, October/November 1920.

7 Frans J. Weber was editor from November 1916 at the latest until June 1917, C.A.J.

Vaillant from July 1917 to September 1917, M.H. Levi from November 1917 to September 1918, and Piet Wigman intermittently from November 1918 to January 1921.

8 *De Lichtstraal*, Vol. 1, Nr. 10, January 1917.

9 The meeting may in fact have taken place two months later, on 5 November 1912. Cf. announcement in the socialist daily *Het Volk*, 5 November 1912.

10 *De Lichtstraal*, Vol. 2, Nr. 3, 15 June 1917.

11 The three founding fathers were: Sjef de Goeije, Chef van Dijk and Max Polak. Cf. *De Lichtstraal*, Vol. 1, Nr. 10, January 1917.

12 *De Lichtstraal*, Vol. 1, Nr. 8, November 1916.

13 *De Lichtstraal*, Vol. 2, Nr. 2, 15 May 1917.

- 14 *De Lichtstraal*, Vol. 1, Nr. 9, December 1916.
- 15 Cf. Ansje van Beusekom, »The Rise and Fall of the Lecturer as Entertainer in the Netherlands. Cinema Exhibition Practices in Transition Related to Local Circumstances«, *Iris* 22, Autumn 1996, pp. 131-144.
- 16 *De Lichtstraal*, Vol. 2, Nr. 11, 1 February 1918.
- 17 *De Lichtstraal*, Vol. 3, Nr. 5, 1 August 1918.
- 18 See Ansje van Beusekom, »Louis Hartlooper (1864-1922). Explicateur te Utrecht«, *Jaarboek Mediageschiedenis* 6, Stichting Mediageschiedenis / Stichting beheer IISG, Amsterdam 1995, pp. 182-194.
- 19 See Ivo Blom, Ine van Dooren, »Ladies and gentlemen, hats off. Dutch film lecturing and the case of Cor Schuring«, *Iris* 22, Autumn 1996, pp. 81-102.
- 20 The memoirs of Max Nabarro are held by the Filmmuseum, Amsterdam. Part of the manuscript has been published as *Max Nabarro Explicateur. Een stem voor het doek*, NFM themareeks No. 6, March 1992 (Amsterdam); English translation by Ivo Blom: *Iris* 22, Autumn 1996, pp. 183-200.
- 21 *De Lichtstraal*, Vol. 2, Nr. 3, 15 June 1917.
- 22 *De Lichtstraal*, Vol. 2, Nr. 6, 15 September 1917.
- 23 *De Lichtstraal*, Vol. 2, Nr. 1, 18 April 1917.
- 24 In contrast to the Anglosaxon world the Sunday opening of cinemas was never a major issue in the Netherlands, despite the influence of Calvinism.
- 25 *De Lichtstraal*, Vol. 3, Nr. 6, 1 September 1918.
- 26 See the database *Strikes in the Netherlands*: <http://www2.iisg.nl/databases/sta-kingen/>; *Het Volk*, 19 September 1918.
- 27 *De Lichtstraal*, Vol. 3, Nr. 9, 15 December 1918.
- 28 *Het Volk*, 3 October 1918.
- 29 See the database *Strikes in the Netherlands* (note 26).
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 This strike did not make it into the official records. It was reported in *Het Volk*, 21 May 1918.
- 32 *Het Volk*, 24 August 1918.
- 33 *Het Volk*, 16 September 1918.
- 34 *Het Volk*, 20 September 1918.
- 35 See the database *Strikes in the Netherlands* (note 26).
- 36 *De Lichtstraal*, Vol. 3, Nr. 8, 1 November 1918.
- 37 *De Lichtstraal*, Vol. 4, Nr. 10, 1 January 1920.
- 38 *De Lichtstraal*, Vol. 5, Nr. 2, 1 May 1920.
- 39 *De Lichtstraal*, Vol. 4, Nr. 12, 1 March 1920, and Vol. 5, No. 13, October 1921.
- 40 *De Lichtstraal*, Vol. 3, Nr. 10, 1 January 1919.
- 41 *De Lichtstraal*, Vol. 3, Nr. 10, 1 January 1919.
- 42 *De Lichtstraal*, Vol. 3, Nr. 6, 1 September 1918.
- 43 See the database *Strikes in the Netherlands* (note 26); Bert Hogenkamp, »Koekebakkers of slaggers: de Amsterdamse bioscoopstaking van 1924-25«, *Skrien*, Nr. 139, Winter 1984-85, pp. 55-57.



IMAGINAIRES
EN CONTEXTE (I)



DE VERBEELDING
IN CONTEXT (I)

Musée du Cinéma / Filmmuseum

Epitaaf



Programmbroschüre des Musée du Cinéma, Brüssel (1998)