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What the Papers say - The Case of the film-related Papers of Jean Desmet

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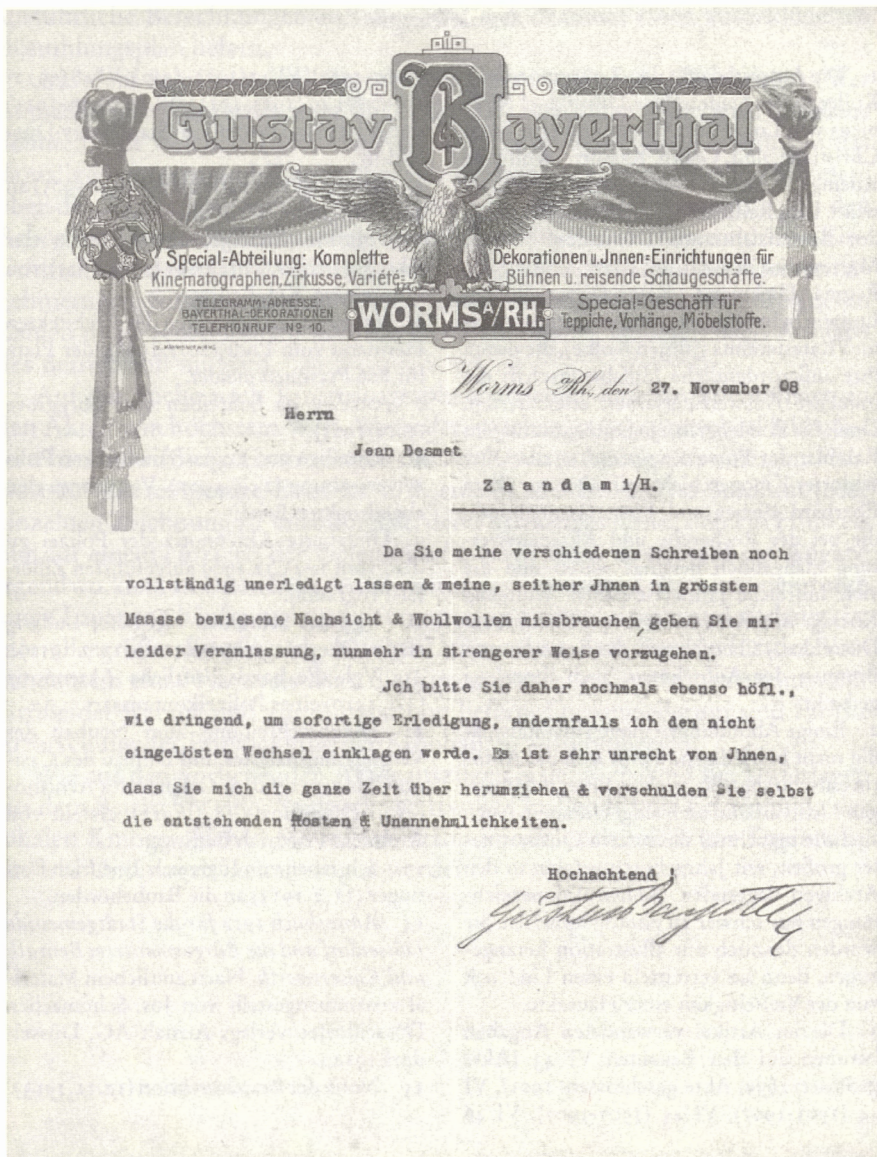
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Gustav Bayerthal, Worms, Germany, 27. 11. 1908, to Jean Desmet, Zaandam, The Netherlands (Desmet Collection, Nederlands Filmmuseum, Amsterdam)

What the Papers say

The Case of the film-related Papers of Jean Desmet

The present article is based on a quick-scan of the papers of Jean Desmet, deposited at the Nederlands Filmmuseum. Desmet was a fairground and travelling showman who, from 1909 onwards, became the owner of a series of purpose-built cinema theatres and a film distribution company. In its original form, this paper was written in response to a question posed by the then Nederlands Filmmuseum management. The question was: how can the Desmet papers be used as a basis for presentation activities? That is to say, besides obvious tasks, such as accessing the papers for research, what more could be done to present this huge collection of papers to the public? From the outset it was clear that showcasing a selection of these papers in a traditional exhibition format would be neither visually attractive nor enlightening. The very protection such objects require prevents the visitor from getting the information that would render these objects eloquent. Rather than, for instance, individual letters the sustained correspondence between Desmet and his clients contextualizes such single exhibits. For a larger public, reproduction in a book and/or on a website would be a much more useful way to access these artifacts.

I.

The Jean Desmet papers can be subdivided into three parts: papers concerning his private life; papers concerning his fairground activities; and papers concerning the acquisition, distribution, and sale of films and film-related objects (projectors, etc.) as well as correspondence concerning personnel. This subdivision covers most of Desmet's activities, although information about the day-to-day affairs of his theatres is sadly all but missing. Furthermore, it also misses some ancillary business; the letterhead on his 1915 stationery, for instance, reveals that Desmet also provided 'Electric lighting for parties and marquees'. This subdivision, moreover, is the one that follows Desmet's quite faithfully and respects the chronology of his career. Yet the contents of this collection of papers can, of course, be organized by more than one ordering principle. One may subdivide it according to type of material (letters, telegrams, programme bills, newspapers, programmes, agendas, cash-books, etc.); according to func-



tion (personal or legal correspondence, job applications, financial transactions, tenders, etc.); or to origin (distributors and cinemas at home and abroad, banks, insurance companies, real estate agents, family, personnel, etc.). Overlap is unavoidable, as categories are incompatible.

Nevertheless, one can get a fairly complete idea of a number of his business activities, particularly by combining various types of papers. Examples are: an inventory of the complete interior of his Rotterdam theatre Cinema Parisien in 1917; the electricity consumption of the same theatre; the acquisition, exploitation, and programming of another of his theatres, Cinema Palace, in the town of Bussum; the acquisition of films from the Gaumont company in Paris; the screening of films and programmes from Desmet's distribution catalogue in The Netherlands; or the correspondence between Desmet's distribution company and A. A. Dragten, theatre manager in Paramaribo, in the Dutch colony Surinam. Of some of these activities we don't know how complete the records are – the electricity bills do not cover the entire period of Cinema Parisien's commercial exploitation; perhaps there was more correspondence between Desmet and Paramaribo. But parts of the archive are consecutive for a certain period of time. And what is above all clear is that even a quick-scan provides a fairly complete picture of Desmet's acquisition and rental of films – volume, publicity, cost, origin of the films, including their length, colouring, manufacture of intertitles or price per meter – and of the spread and programming of his films in both purpose-built theatres and travelling shows in The Netherlands between 1910 and 1915.

On the other hand, a number of things can only be surmised. Although the nature of this investigation sets its own limits, one can safely assume that some aspects of Desmet's business will remain speculative. A few examples:

Fairground and film

In various ways there is a continuity between Desmet's fairground activities on the one hand and his distribution and theatrical businesses on the other. Part of that continuity is the focus on ›modern‹ technology – a word that often recurs in his notes. Since 1899, perhaps even earlier, Desmet plied his trade with a wheel of fortune (*rad van avontuur*). But a new betting act seems to have made it increasingly difficult to get this attraction accepted. The time had come to look for something new. Therefore, from 1905 onwards, Desmet also exploited a ›tobogan‹, an attraction promising a fast and thrilling ride. One may assume that he opted for this machine because of its technical, modern aspect, possibly to keep up with the competition (at the time, the connotation of the word ›electricity‹ would have been the same as that of ›cell phone‹ or ›internet‹ in our age). Incidentally, the prizes one could win at the wheel of fortune also changed; in the same year Desmet ordered pressure cookers and

other modern appliances from a company manufacturing *»hauswirtschaftliche Maschinen und Geräte«*. Although we cannot determine on the basis of the papers alone to what extent electrical attractions were a novelty in certain parts of the country, it is obvious that Desmet wanted to cash in on the popularity of and fascination with modern technologies. That, of course, makes his decision to show films understandable. Yet, Desmet didn't rush into the film business. Even though he was made an offer to buy a *Cinematograaf* in 1904, he took no chances. It was only in 1907, the year in which the popularity of film was unmistakeable and the cinema business began to boom, that he started showing films.

Initially, Desmet had been betting on two horses, with itinerant shows, in a tent called The Imperial Bio, and shows in his purpose-built Parisien theatres. But in 1911, his travelling shows were discontinued. Meanwhile Desmet had been creating a small empire as exhibitor of purpose-built cinemas and as distributor. Here one can detect another practice that is reminiscent of his fairground activities. Whereas formerly he had taken his attractions all over the Netherlands, and beyond, now he was covering the country with a chain of cinemas. After buying Bioscoop-Theater Bellamy, in October 1914, Desmet took an out ad in which he proudly listed all his cinema theatres in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Bussum, and Eindhoven, numbered from 1 through 7, and announced this latest acquisition, number 8, in Flushing. It would, however, turn out to be his last acquisition. The war that had just broken out prevented him from establishing a real nationwide chain. In november 1918, right after the war was over, he put up his theatres for sale.

Desmet's personality

Given the size and the period of time the papers cover it comes as no surprise that Desmet emerges as a meticulous man. That was also his style of doing business: always on the lookout for deceit, damage or mistakes (after the films returned from theatres they were checked for damage, after acquisition their lengths were measured – and he would never forget to report and discount that in his payments; when selling films, though, he wouldn't be above the same tricks). Also, he had a keen eye for windfalls and discounts (*»It goes without saying«*, he writes, *»that you will have to submit competitive prices in order for us to do business«*.) Still, what is striking is that his business-like attitude manifests itself in two distinct ways. On the one hand there is a certain coldness, or indifference, mainly in his dealings with suppliers and customers (as in a letter to a supplier of theatrical interiors in 1909: *»You can do whatever you want, but don't count on any payment before everything is shipshape, or we have discussed the matter.«* Generally speaking, to say that Desmet is slow in making payments is an understatement).



On the other hand, in his public activities his attitude takes on an almost sentimental aspect: as an entrepreneur he felt it his duty to please his spectators with beautiful, polished shows. Two examples may illustrate this impression: When in 1913, Dania Biofilm, in Copenhagen, asks Desmet to become their Dutch agent, he answers them that he »would certainly like to have the agency for your films, on the condition that I can select the films, as not all Prints are suitable for Holland«. Moreover, he expresses the wish that posters and stills are sent along with the films, emphasizing that the beauty of film is »when there are beautiful Placards and Photographs, etc.« (adding – Desmet being Desmet – »you will offer me the best Price per meter«). In a letter to A. A. Dragten, Paramaribo, the two sides of his professionalism nicely come together. In his reply to the exhibitor, who complained that he received too many short films, Desmet writes: »... and concerning the small films that you don't want, I don't care one way or the other. I did it in such a way as every good theatre programme should, and as I do in all my own cinema theatres. Variation, that is what is done in all Europe, big and small films are the most beautiful programme, and concerning the price, that is the same, because it's the number of meters ...« [I have tried to retain Desmet's imperfect grammar in the translations of his correspondence; NdK] Judging from this, and from the fact that Desmet has apparently never felt the need to go into film production, I would venture that Desmet was essentially a showman.

Despite the fact that Desmet's opinion about what constitutes a good programme didn't change substantially, one cannot accuse him of obstinacy. The two sides of his professionalism also show themselves over the years. This becomes particularly clear when we compare the way he ran his company initially with the later years, during the Great War. In those first years he is an aggressive player on the market: he buys an awful number of films (in 1913 he replies to a request from an exhibitor: »I don't publish a catalogue of my supply of films, also because it would have to be supplemented constantly with the new films that are bought every week.«); he recommends himself to exhibitors (»... when you take my Programme you will receive the Films' contents every week, which is convenient for the Lecturer«); and from the very beginning he seems bent on creating an empire of cinema theatres. And in his capacity as film distributor it is clear that he dictates the conditions. However, during the war it appears that Desmet can be mollified after all. In various letters, exhibitors politely insist on a reduction of rental fees, because of the »bad circumstances« and the ensuing unemployment (shipping!). Desmet's reply to the manager of cinema theatre Concordia, Rotterdam, is typical for his formal attitude: »In reply to your letter of 12 November 1914, and inform you that you and I first make a new agreement, before I can accept your writing.« But two weeks later a new contract *was* drawn up, reducing the weekly fee by 25 guilders. These and comparable papers are moving, not so much because of the tearful arguments of his clients, but, rather, because of the consideration

Desmet that shows. His clemency may have hidden a feeling of resignation about the future of his film business: the ›bad circumstances‹, including the increasing obstacles to the import of new films, have undoubtedly made him decide to close down his film company.

2.

Before the Desmet papers could play a role of any significance in the presentation activities of the Nederlands Filmmuseum, it would be imperative to scan the papers as text files. This, incidentally, would also be a way of preserving them: the ink of a large number of carbon copies of handwritten letters is slowly disintegrating. The papers in digital form would have the advantage that they allow a faster and easier overview of his various activities. (The publication, in 1998, of *Les premières années de la société L. Gaumont. Correspondance commerciale de Léon Gaumont 1895-1899* is as beautiful as it is inflexible; such publications, as well as catalogues, would be much more useful, and supplementable, in digital formats). The following, therefore, relates to the Desmet papers as both the basis for *other* activities and for a more autonomous role as a digitized collection.

A programme of entertainment

In view of Desmet's mode of operation, or personality, and his background as a fairground showman, two aspects stand out with respect to future public activities. In the first place, Desmet's showmanship. It seems that the noise of the fairground continues to echo in his ways of presenting films to the public. This is an aspect that is important for present-day screenings of the ca. 900 films Desmet also left behind. Practically, this means that such screenings should be visually and aurally attractive. Supporting evidence for Desmet's attitude towards the show comes from bills for repairs and inventories dating from his fairground career, which tell us that there always was musical accompaniment (›repair organ‹ says an 1898 bill; a 1908 insurance policy, from the time when Desmet ran both the tobogan and travelling film shows, mentions besides »a Bechstein piano« a »big organ by Gasparini Paris, the same by Gavioli & Co. Paris, symphony organ by the same«) and illumination (›ten wire arc lights and incandescent light‹).

Secondly, Desmet oriented his activities emphatically to his »Ladies and Gentlemen!« For him, the programme, the show, prevailed over the films' individual qualities. What counted was his intention to please all his spectators. It is striking that Desmet, who sometimes noted down his opinion about a certain title on purchase invoices, also bought films that seemed ›of no value‹



to him. One may conclude, therefore, that he understood the effect of the *ars combinatoria*, with which lesser films could nonetheless form part of an attractive programme. In this respect it is significant that he kept a newspaper clipping from 1907 (the year he began showing films) that reports that »Mr. Nöggerath [another Dutch film pioneer, NdK] always has two numbers follow each other in such a way that the first one makes everybody shiver with emotion, while the second makes the audience scream with laughter«. Would it have served him as an example? Equally significant in this respect is that bills and correspondence show that the films were bought and rented according to their generic classification, production company (»the films I supply come from all factories internationally also Pathé«), length (the number of acts), and colouring. While today films are generally appreciated for their individual, aesthetic qualities, Desmet's business correspondence makes clear that such considerations played no role in his selection and programming. A 1912 D. W. Griffith film, *BILLY'S STRATAGEM*, is bought with no reference at all to the by then well-known director. It is, again, an indication that the film *trade* (production and, particularly, distribution) primarily conceived of its product in terms of an *ars combinatoria*, a complete programme of entertainment.

A cautionary word about authenticity. Reconstructions of shows in Desmet's cinemas or other Dutch theatres that carried his programmes can, of course, never be literally authentic. For one thing, there is hardly a handbill of which all the listed titles are available in the archive. But what about reconstructions to the spirit of the letter? One problem is that the Desmet papers contain precious little information about his film shows. To be sure, there are applications by lecturers and musicians. But did Desmet always employ lecturers? (He usually left German intertitles untranslated, because spectators »here in Holland can read them very well« – incidentally, at the time the command of German and French »here in Holland« was much better than that of English). And did he always employ musicians? And if so, what music did they perform? And if we knew, how representative would that be? The papers suggest, moreover, that Desmet's ideas about programming were not always followed; for instance, the programmes of the Electro Bioscoop Theater, in the southwest of Holland, of which the papers contain a consecutive series of 1911 handbills, show a deviant make-up. Furthermore, until sometime in 1912, handbills for Desmet's Parisien theatres stated that spectators could enter the show at any time; later this announcement was dropped. Was this measure trendsetting or did Desmet, similar to his decision to enter the film business, just wait and see which way the wind blew? And what else was there to see? In a letter to E. Brandsma, from November 1915, Desmet reminds the addressee that the contract for the projection of »Thee [Tea] Brandsma« is up for renewal. Was this a reference to (lantern?) projections of commercial images? And what about the consumption of snacks and drinks? What else was there to hear, to

smell? On the basis of the Desmet papers, an authentic show would be one which exudes Desmet's personality and mode of operation rather than a show that represents film screenings between 1910 and 1915.

Electro theatre

Desmet's notes, letterheads, and advertisements all betray the importance of modernity, usually understood in technical terms. In his letters, though, Desmet didn't make much fuss about it: It was everyday business. But there was a distinct difference in the way he approached the public. Around the turn of the century and during the first decade of the twentieth century, the entertainment business and its venues were much more 'electrified' than other sectors of society. Entertainment, that is, came with a connotation of modernity. Moreover, film, as well as other fairground attractions, were the latest in a long line of technologically sophisticated entertainments: magic lantern; automats that contained various types of amusement: images (kinetoscopes), music (jukeboxes), snacks, books, etc.; X-rays, which were originally demonstrated on fairgrounds; and all kinds of mechanical and/or electrical attractions that moved patrons in ever more faster, higher or unpredictable ways (Ferris wheel, switchback, tobogan, etc.). A travelling show combining film screenings and a variety of mechanical and electrical machines and appliances would evoke the contemporary meaning, at least the contemporary connotations, of Desmet's entertainment.

Faction

The papers could form the basis of a book publication that would evoke, or recreate, a certain period (day, week or month) in the office of Desmet's distribution company. This would be completely different from the abovementioned published correspondence of Léon Gaumont, in the sense that this publication would overtly be a book of faction: a fictional reconstruction based on fact. In other words, rather than a literal reproduction, or facsimile, the correspondence and other papers could be fitted in a framework, a micro-level impression of daily transactions, that would allow one to go beyond what is possible or customary in a strictly historical account.

A similar mix of fact and fiction could be realized in a film. Since film allows a different way of evocation, the balance between fact and fiction will be distinct from a book. If the latter's framework could be defined by place (office, theatre) and time, a film would lend itself better to the evocation of Desmet's personality, i.e. character. The decline of his theatre empire – from the proud opening of the Bellamy theatre in Flushing to the sale of his cinema



theatres – could provide the dramatic arc. One can imagine a studio film to stress its evocative (i.e. fictional) quality, perhaps copying aspects of the style and colouring of the films Desmet showed and distributed, even to the point of suggesting the history of visual culture (a panorama for a travel scene, for instance).

Metonymy

The sheer size of the paper collection is partly the result of the intensity of postal traffic at the time. Moreover, it appears that letters and telegrams were accorded more importance than communication by telephone. Phrases like »in accordance with our phone conversation of yesterday ...«, after which a verbal agreement is confirmed or specified, abound. This suggests that the papers provide as it were a spyhole on various aspects of Dutch society during the first two decades of the twentieth century. The correspondence and transactions provide information about, among others, salaries and rates (of cinema theatre staff, but also of plumbers, carpenters, piano tuners, lawyers, etc.), prices (of programmes and films, but also real estate, printed matter, coal, water, electricity, etc.); the organization of the entertainment business (the changing relationships between itinerant and theatrical film shows; copyright; taxes; magazines; legislation; etc.); the communication infrastructure (postal and telegraph services; trains; shipping between Holland and its colonies; etc.); welfare: health care, education (letters of application in particular reveal the dramatic effects of sickness and hardship; each postal item tells something about the command of written language and its social implications); or the effects of the war.

These considerations could lead to the development of a digital database in which the Desmet papers are combined with data about contemporary Dutch society. The basic idea is that every archival item is a metonym: individual cases – a contract, letter of application, invoice, etc. – can be linked to information about, say, the contemporary legal and financial worlds, statistics about the Dutch population, or train schedules. Such a database has a dual purpose. It shows, first of all, how Desmet's activities were linked up with all kinds of social situations and bodies, the possibilities they offered as well as the limits they imposed upon his business (as the betting act did, for instance). Secondly, it allows one to reconstruct various activities involving film at the beginning of the twentieth century and to give a sense of cinema's enormous popularity: buying, selling, and renting; the fitting out of cinema theatres; the performance of travelling film shows; correspondence; the printing of admission tickets, handbills (5 000 a week in 1910, 7 000 in 1915 for his Parisien theatre), posters or stationery; the placement of advertisements (not just in the usual newspapers, but also in football or military magazines, illuminated advertising on Dam Square, etc.); or the payment of copyrights for musicians.

Beyond Desmet

The Desmet papers contain a comprehensive correspondence with exhibitors, distributors, production companies, agencies, etc. In other words, Desmet's theatrical and distribution activities were part of an international network, an international business. The digitization of the paper collection, notably the domestic and international correspondence, could also be the occasion to induce European archives – both public and private – to jointly develop a database with which it would be possible to show how the film industry and all its related businesses were interwoven. Bit by bit, parts could be added: Ernemann, Pathé, Edison, Messter, etc. For the Netherlands, the Desmet papers are a unique collection of documents, but within the context of the European film entertainment business it is just another link, the significance of which is only partly – locally – visible. The context of an international industry – including matters such as patents and other rights, ownership, technical and organizational developments (patent exchange, vertical integration, marketing) and institutionalization – may make us appreciate its significance fully and clearly.

