

# 'That pleasant feeling of peaceful coziness': Cinema Exhibition in a Dutch Mining District during the Inter-war Period

Thunnis van Oort

The house was rather empty. The Treebeek audience prefers a shabby variety show with 25th rate artistes. This was again one of those nights which the majority of South Limburg citizens craved. It is a pity that this audience does not want to understand art, but instead harbours cinema mania rather than elevated sentiments.<sup>1</sup>

**T**hus commented a reporter on the poor turn-out for the concert of the local choir that was held in one of the cinemas of the Dutch mining town of Hoensbroek. Perhaps the cinema manager in question expected to increase his respectability by programming a local performance with artistic connotations, or did he hope to appeal to a new audience? To stay in business he must soon have reverted to his usual fare, feeding the 'cinema mania' about which the anonymous journalist complained. Although most people in the town preferred visiting the movies, cinema-going remained a contested leisure activity for a long period.

This essay describes the history of the cinema exhibitors in a Dutch mining district through studying their business strategies and the shifting relations they enjoyed with the local community, in order to reconstruct the development of their profession between the world wars. The cinema exhibitor acted as an intermediary, not only between the local, the national and international contexts, but also in draw-

ing the novelty of cinema into the cultural and social life of the region. Bourgeois elites, represented in government and church authorities, were anxious to exert control over commercial entertainment, but looked at in isolation, their policies would reveal more about bureaucratic zeal or middle-class fears than actual cinema practice. The film exhibitor had to negotiate between these pressures from above and the demands of his audience. How he tried to resolve these issues can teach us much about the integration of cinema in modern society.

## Entertainment in an industrial zone

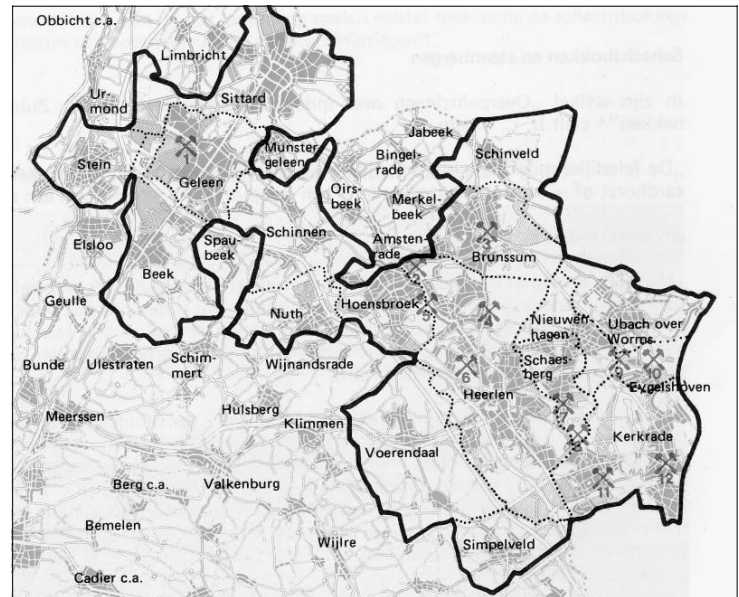
In the southeastern corner of the Netherlands, in the province of Limburg, large coal reserves were discovered during the 1890s or became available for exploitation because of new technologies and improvements in infrastructure. In 1901 the Dutch government decided to halt the further issuing of concessions to (mostly foreign) private companies, and monopolize the remaining Limburg coal fields for state exploitation. Nederlandsche Staatsmijnen, Dutch State Mines (hereafter DSM) became the larg-

**Thunnis van Oort** graduated in History at Groningen University in 1999 and worked at the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision before registering as a doctoral candidate at the University of Utrecht where he is researching cinema exhibition in the Catholic south of the Netherlands.  
E-mail: [thunnisvanoort@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:thunnisvanoort@yahoo.co.uk)

est employer in the region and, eventually, the second largest in the entire country. The most important grounds for monopolizing the mining industry were not economic in nature, even though a secure national supply of fuel and the prospect of profits were debated in parliament. The main reason was the fear that exploitation by private capital would expose the region to social upheaval caused by too rapid a process of industrialisation, as had occurred in other mining districts such as the Belgian Borinage or the German Ruhrgebiet. It was hoped that state exploitation would secure a controlled rate of change. Limburger members of parliament, in particular, hoped that DSM would limit the influx of foreign workers who, it was feared, would threaten the status quo in what was still an agrarian backwater.<sup>2</sup>

This status quo was, above all, perceived in terms of Catholic values that were considered essential for the well-being of Limburg and a fundamental element of its regional identity. Catholics were a large minority in the Netherlands, and were politically well organised. In coalition with the Protestants, they dominated the cabinets during the inter-war period. The Dutch Catholics were concentrated in the two southern provinces, thus their religious identity had a considerable geographical component. Socialism was considered the natural enemy of Catholicism, and was rather successfully combated. In the period under review, socialist organisations made few inroads into the Catholic stronghold.<sup>3</sup>

Commercial entertainment and, specifically, cinema were considered a menace to Catholic morality, at least from the point of view of the bourgeois elites. When the cinema boom in the Netherlands really started in the early 1910s, municipal councils were quick to react with censorship boards and regulations. With episcopal approval, a Catholic weekly was established in 1915 which judged which films were approved for Catholic spectators, describing with passionate detail why many films could not be accepted, or only on the condition that offensive scenes were cut. Several Catholic mayors adopted this periodical *Tooneel en bioscoop* (*Theatre and Cinema*) in ordinances that automatically prohibited all films that were censored by the editors of the journal who consisted mainly of clergymen. Catholic cinemas were established in some cities, but they never lasted very long, perhaps because a steady supply of Catholic films was not guaranteed. Moreover, the noble idea that a large audience was interested in virtuous films clashed with the reality of



patrons who requested entertainment instead of moral uplift.<sup>4</sup>

Apart from fighting cinema directly, Catholics stimulated an effective alternative to commercial amusements: club life. According to the clergy, the best place for a man to spend his spare time was at home with his family. For women, this was even more the case since they had less access to public entertainment. Cinema significantly broadened the opportunities for women to go out. If a Catholic sought recreation outside the home, he was encouraged to do so in a club, the board of which was usually 'advised' by a clergyman. A network of unions, youth clubs, leisure societies, sports, theatre and music clubs spanned the province. Of course these forms of sociability were not all (equally) influenced by the church, but even if they were, members could still have their own reasons for joining besides being a good Catholic. These clubs appear to have formed significant competition to the public entertainment sector.<sup>5</sup>

### Cinema exhibition in Hoensbroek

In the Netherlands the development of permanent-site exhibition occurred relatively late. Until the early 1910s, mobile film shows remained the dominant mode of cinema exhibition in Limburg, in contrast to Belgium which industrialized earlier where, in early 1907, the capital, Brussels, had more permanent cinemas than the whole of the Netherlands.<sup>6</sup> The reasons for this difference are not clear. A conven-

**Fig. 1.** Map of the Limburg mining region. The eastern mining district consisted of two main centres, Kerkrade (where coal mining had been going on for centuries) and Heerlen which developed into the main centre of the district. The symbols indicate the different mines. (The western mining district around Geleen did not develop until after the mid-1920s.) [Inventarisatie Mijnmonumenten (Maastricht, 1978).]0000

tional hypothesis blames Dutch Calvinist iconophobia, but that would not explain the slow development of cinema in the Catholic south. The lack of an outdoor entertainment tradition in the Netherlands may also be one reason. Apart from these factors, the organisation of the film distribution and exhibition business appears to have played a part. The scope of this essay precludes addressing this question in any comprehensive way, but case studies such as this one can, hopefully, contribute to finding more answers.<sup>7</sup>

The first permanent exhibition venues in the region opened in the season 1910–11. In the years up to the First World War, the number of cinemas increased rapidly. In this period, Hoensbroek was a sleepy village near Heerlen. In 1912, the town welcomed the Witte Bioscoop (White Cinema), run by the hotel-keeper, P.H. Moonen. The name, Witte Bioscoop, also stood for films that were morally safe, often approved by the clergy. Moonen's hall was located in the centre of the old town.

A large number, probably the majority, of the newly-opened cinemas in the region were run by local hall-keepers. Usually they were small businessmen who had practiced their trade before the cinema boom set in. They ran hotels and/or bars, sometimes also shops, and rented out their halls to numerous clubs, facilitating performances of amateur dramatics and music. They occasionally hired entertainers such as musicians or small-time vaudeville acts. Sometimes these halls featured travelling film shows. Carnival and seasonal fairs were peak moments in their business. The halls were an important part of the local infrastructure of entertainment, so it is hardly surprising that it was in this context that cinema was introduced as part of the entertainment culture of Limburg.

It is not certain whether the Witte Bioscoop played regularly in the period before the war. Nothing is known about its programming or what the theatre looked like. There is incidental evidence of competition. During the annual fair of 1913, a screening of *Titanic* was organised by the local brass band, Saint Caecilia, in the sports hall.<sup>8</sup> In 1914 film screenings were also occasionally held in the old church, organised by a Catholic organisation. According to unconfirmed rumours, even the mayor owned shares in this enterprise. *Van de kribbe tot het kruis* (*From the Manger to the Cross*, 1913) was one of the films that featured in Catholic initiatives.<sup>9</sup> In 1914 an ordinance was passed to regulate the cinema trade in

Hoensbroek. Children under sixteen years were barred from visiting the movies; similar local laws were passed around this time throughout the country.

With the opening of the second Dutch State Mine, Emma, in 1914, Hoensbroek rapidly developed into a mining town. Two other mines opened in neighbouring towns before the war ended (Fig. 1). These developments placed Hoensbroek at the centre of the transformation the region went through in the inter-war period. During the first quarter of the century, the size of the town grew by a factor of ten (compare Fig. 2 with Fig. 6).

Even though the Netherlands remained neutral, the outbreak of the First World War halted the expansion of the cinema exhibition sector. During the first months of hostilities, several municipal authorities prohibited public amusements. More damaging were the heavy import restrictions that affected the supply of films.<sup>10</sup> After the war, it appears as though the temporary interruption in growth was quickly compensated: in the years 1918–21, many new cinemas opened in the region, although in some parts a number also closed, in some cases after only a few months of operation. Of these short-lived initiatives, only fragmentary traces survive in local archives.

In Hoensbroek, however, the new theatres turned out to have remarkable longevity. In December 1918, the Emma Bioscoop (Emma Cinema) opened as a newly-built venue, while in this period most existing halls were still used as cinemas in these outlying regions. The Emma Bioscoop was located near the entrance of the State Mine of the same name. With 400 seats, it was of average size compared with other contemporary provincial cinemas. Concerning the manager, Heinrich te Poel, little is known.

In the summer of 1919, a third competitor joined the Hoensbroek scene. The Luxor Theatre (Fig. 3) offered more than 600 seats, and was also located near the Emma State Mine. In the original architectural elevation, the cinema was called Treebeek theatre. For presenting live performances, a stage and dressing rooms were provided. The reporter did not refer to the interior design other than to comment that the theatre met the highest standards of hygiene.<sup>11</sup> The enterprise was managed by W.B. Esser who also opened a new tobacco shop. The venture was financed by local notary Beckers who, since 1917, had been a member of the town council. Beckers was probably not the only dignitary



**Fig. 2.** Akerstraat ca. 1919. Luxor theatre, built in the summer of 1919, was located on the main road. The road is not metalled indicating that the town was still developing. On the right, the mine buildings are visible. [Courtesy Gemeentearchief Heerlen.]

in the region to be involved in the cinema business, but he is one of the few we know by name. Although some wealthier inhabitants, apparently, anticipated that the cinema business would prove profitable, they did not want their names being publicly associated with the dubious reputation cinemas held at the time. Several cinemas in the area were established as limited liability companies, but the names of many of the financial backers are not known.

The Witte Bioscoop was refurbished in 1919 when the newly-built auditorium could seat over 700 patrons. The interior decorations were praised by a local journalist: the wall paintings depicted 'landscapes and frescoes' which gave the visitor 'that pleasant feeling of peaceful cosiness often neglected in large auditoriums'.<sup>12</sup> The opening weekend was celebrated with a performance by a local Catholic theatre group. On the Monday, the grand opening film was shown: *20.000 Mijlen onder Zee* (*20,000 Leagues under the Sea*) which alternated with songs by the local choir.<sup>13</sup> By creating a cosy atmosphere and booking local acts, the Witte Bioscoop was clearly not aiming for a flashy reputation as a movie palace, but tried to blend in with local culture.

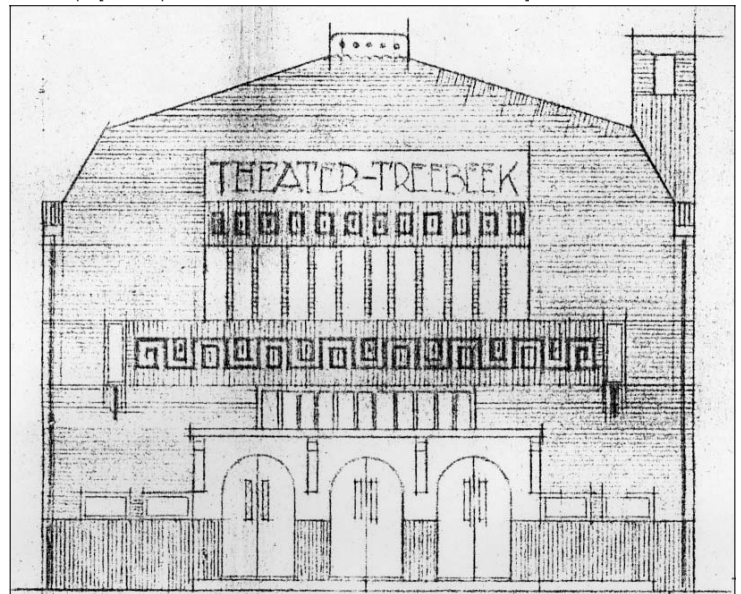
Unfortunately little is known about the cinema's programming. Advertising was considered unnecessary or too costly and, perhaps, not all miners regularly read newspapers. Ephemeral posters and pamphlets were used to announce the programmes. Film genres, details of programme changes, live entertainment acts, entry fees and

distributor contacts are data that have not been recovered, although we do know that over 1700 seats for a population of less than 8000 was exceptionally high when compared with other towns.<sup>14</sup>

### From Club Hall Treebeek to Charlie Theatre

Inspired by the prospering cinemas in Hoensbroek,

**Fig. 3.** Architectural elevation, Luxor Theatre, 1919. On the original plans, Beckers' Luxor theatre was named 'Treebeek Theatre'. The reason for the change in name is not known. Although still modest, the facade looks slightly more theatrical than the Emma Bioscoop. [Municipal Archives Hoensbroek, Inv. 1728 Licence.]



the DSM attempted to set up their own film entertainment programme. The failure of these attempts survives in the company archives, offering an unusual insight into an unsuccessful venture.

To accommodate the large workforce needed to operate the new mines, several new residential districts were built. One of the largest 'colonies' built in the Netherlands was Treebeek which was partly situated on Hoensbroek territory and housed workers for the Emma Mine. The land was owned by the DSM which exerted strict control over their tenants. Undesirable activities ranging from suspicion of extramarital affairs to socialist sympathies would be reported to the employer. How authorities and residents conceived of the position of entertainment within this centralised environment is particularly revealing.

Treebeek was completed in 1921 and contained over 900 housing units. In the central square, a community building was erected, Vereenigingsgebouw Treebeek (Club Hall Treebeek), which was administered by Fonds voor Sociale Instellingen (The Fund for Social Institutions, hereafter FSI). The principal objective of the FSI, mainly financed by DSM, was to stimulate the cultural development of workers. For the most part this was achieved by subsidizing music clubs, choirs, libraries and domestic courses. When the Club Hall was at the planning stage, FSI officials proposed to exploit the building as a commercial cinema, encouraged by the success of cinemas in neighbouring Hoensbroek. A projection booth was included in the original architectural elevation, with seating for over 400 people.<sup>15</sup>

In June 1921, FSI secretary Niederer reported that the cinema was almost ready for use. A manager was appointed for 225 guilders a month plus 10 per cent of the profits. His name was Hubert den Doop who, in later years, operated cinemas in nearby Brunssum and Spekholzerheide (west of Kerkrade). According to his son, Anton den Doop, Hubert den Doop also ran a general store in Treebeek.<sup>16</sup> No details are known about the opening of the cinema, but in September 1921, W. Frowein, general managing director of the DSM and also chairman of the FSI, urged den Doop to cut down expenses in operating the cinema. In the board meeting of 9 December, he proposed to split off the cinema operation, since it 'did not live up to expectations'. The FSI had found someone willing to take over its operation with the not inconsiderable loss of 1000 guilders the FSI had

incurred in recent months. The man who took over the enterprise was Heinrich te Poel, manager of the Emma Bioscoop in Hoensbroek. He agreed to pay 3000 guilders a year for renting the building. After only two months, Te Poel wrote an alarmed letter to the FSI:

I wish to inform you that, judging from experience, it is utterly impossible, notwithstanding extensive advertising, to operate the Club House Treebeek without significant loss. The prejudice of the population against the State mines and its institutions, which also affects the building under consideration, is very difficult to eliminate so I cannot run this facility without significant loss.<sup>17</sup>

He suggested renting the hall free for six months to see whether circumstances would improve. DSM agreed to ease his contract a little, allowing him also to rent out the hall to clubs. But that was not enough, because after two weeks, Te Poel decided to quit. DSM refused to release him from his contractual obligations, since they had warned him about the difficulties his predecessor had experienced. Eventually DSM called in a bailiff to collect the debts, but Te Poel failed to meet their demands. The FSI annual report noted a loss of almost 1400 guilders through the cinema. How this affair affected te Poel's Emma Bioscoop in Hoensbroek is discussed below.

Still, a new candidate stepped forward to take over the Treebeek cinema: M. Verberkt offered to rent the hall for 1800 guilders a year. He had run a cinema in the neighbouring town of Brunssum, but Verberkt was passed over for a Treebeek resident by the name of Charlie Sluiter who dubbed the cinema the Charlie Theatre. He paid a rent of 50 guilders a week which was soon lowered to 30, a clear indication that business was still slow in Treebeek. Sluiter sent the FSI a revenue account to prove that he was still unable to make a profit (see Table 1). He insisted that his competitors in Hoensbroek did their best to damage his business, since they undercut his prices. He asked the board's permission to organise separate film screenings for white-collar employees. The answer to that request is written in pencil in the margin by a DSM official: 'This will not happen!'<sup>18</sup> This final attempt did not succeed, and after the demise of the Charlie Theatre, the use of the building was changed. With the failure of the Treebeek cinema,

Table 1: Revenue account, Charlie Theatre, Treebeek, 13 January – 5 March 1923

Receipts	Guilders	Expenditure	Guilders
Box office takings	1108.85	Hall rent State mines	275.70
Tax refunds	217.80	Film rent	368.93
Various receipts	89.00	Taxes	590.75
		Music	156.50
		Operator	83.50
		Printing/advertising	115.10
		Wages for cleaning, delivering advertisements, ticket collector	68.05
		Electricity	28.50
Deficit	424.04	Other expenses	152.67
	<b>1839.69</b>		<b>1839.70</b>

the Club Hall was used for official meetings and, eventually, educational evenings for miners.

In DSM's policy, white-collar and blue-collar workers were socially and culturally separated. The white-collar DSM functionaries were called *beambten* (pronounced 'be'amten'). They consisted of (educated) office personnel who worked as overseers supervising miners underground, engineers and private police officers, etc. There was an unmistakable cultural and social divide promoted by the employer, but also by the employees themselves. For want of better terms, 'blue-collar' and 'white-collar' are used interchangeably with 'workers' and *beambten*.

*Beambten* usually lived in separate streets or neighbourhoods. Their leisure activities were organised in special clubs that were financed by the DSM. Those clubs were called *casinos*, though there was no connection to the gambling activities with which the word is usually associated. In the *casinos*, various cultural and leisure activities were available for the employees. Blue-collar miners were not admitted. The active cultivation of the class divide by the DSM is illustrated by the following episode. In 1927 the *casino* of the Emma State Mine applied for a permit to serve liquor. The DSM management considered this an issue that required clearance from the Minister of Interior Affairs who ultimately was responsible for DSM policies. Despite its reluctant attitude towards the use of alcohol, DSM advised the Minister to approve the liquor permit. For, in the current situation, *beambten* visited local pubs 'where they convened with subordinates' which the board considered 'highly undesirable'.<sup>19</sup> The state government finally even waived the permit fee of over 2000 guilders. In sanctioning the sale of hard liquor rather

than the mixing of employees of different classes, the former was deemed the lesser of two evils.

In the 1912 inventory of the first *casino* that was established, the DSM Wilhelmina, a film projector was listed. This indicates that from early on employees were given the opportunity of watching films, in an effort to reduce the need to visit the local cinema. No further information is known about these private film screenings, but it illustrates the class difference that existed in leisure entertainment, whether promoted by the management or by the employees themselves.

The Emma *casino* merged with the nearby Hendrik *casino*. In 1923 the *casino* moved into the Club Hall in Treebeek square which had remained empty after various attempts to create a cinema for blue-collar miners failed. According to Te Poel, blue-collar workers were prejudiced against the efforts of the DSM to organise their entertainment. Members of the *casino* founded the club Algemeene Ontwikkeling (a term equivalent to the German *Bildung*), which occasionally screened films in the building. After the Palace Theatre in Hoensbroek opened in 1921, the cinema was rented regularly by Algemeene Ontwikkeling on Thursday evenings. Employees and their families could enjoy their night out at the movies in an up-to-date theatre without mingling with ordinary workers. The issue of class division might be somewhat overstated here because of the lack of evidence to the contrary, but it is supported by oral history where miners have testified that the social distinction between blue- and white-collar workers was felt strongly, at least until the late 1950s.<sup>20</sup>

In the late 1920s, the FSI rekindled its ambitions to provide films for blue-collar miners. From 1929 until 1942, more than 50,000 guilders were



**Fig. 4.** The Emma Bioscoop, Hoensbroek, ca. 1930. The boy in front of the building wearing a tie is Henk van der Linden. Some posters are just visible by the entrance at extreme left. The simple facade of this purpose-built cinema contrasts sharply with metropolitan theatre architecture which was more exotic. [Private collection, Henk van der Linden.]

invested in free film screenings and theatre shows for workers and their families. The purpose of these films remained cultural uplift, not plain amusement for which miners relied on the thriving cinemas of Hoensbroek and environs. While the film nights of the *beambten casinos* took place in the Palace Theatre, the FSI screenings were in the Club Hall. So, finally, the workers were able to watch films again in the Treebeek Club Hall, but this time free of charge although not just for fun. Regular entertainment, however, remained outside the domain of the employer, and took place in town. The Hoensbroek cinemas succeeded in creating an atmosphere where miners could feel more comfortable in spending their leisure hours.

#### **Hoensbroek during the 1920s and 1930s: consolidation**

In 1923, shortly after the failure of the Treebeek cinema, the Emma Bioscoop was taken over by Cor van der Linden (Fig. 4). It is likely that the financial

consequences of the Treebeek fiasco forced Te Poel to quit. Cor van der Linden originally came from Friesland, a northern province. He arrived in the region in 1912, attracted by the Heerlen mining boom. He started working in a grocery store, and worked his way up to manager of a new branch in Hoensbroek. He seized his opportunity to start his own business in the Emma Cinema, and succeeded in making a solid living out of it, without prior experience in the trade.<sup>21</sup> Compared with the former hall-keepers, van der Linden was a different type of exhibitor. He was one of those young newcomers in the area who, attracted by the economic activity of the region, hoped to make his fortune. Many did not succeed in consolidating their business, but some did, depending on their wits and commercial talents.

It should be noted that the majority of cinema exhibitors had a (lower) middle-class background. Their father's jobs, or their former jobs before entering the cinema trade, were often in the tertiary sector, usually running a pub or a store. Examples of miners who started their own cinema are very rare.<sup>22</sup> This point may be illustrated by the following case. In the nearby village of Nieuwenhagen, Johan P.H. Bertram ran the Cinema Americain. He was a member of the town council from 1931 to 1935. When he tried to reduce entertainment taxes, the majority on the council opposed him, accusing him of personal interest. In so doing he betrayed his election promise to champion the workers' cause. With a successful cinema business, he was not considered a worker anymore, as a council member observed.<sup>23</sup> So, even if Johan Bertram started out with a working-class background (which is unknown), by successfully entering cinema exhibition, he was automatically considered a member of the middle class.

The exhibitors Moonen, Beckers and Van der Linden were to dominate the Hoensbroek entertainment sector for many years. The remarkable stability of cinema enterprises from the early 1920s onwards is also noticeable in other urban centres in the region, such as Kerkrade and Brunssum. In Heerlen, which developed into the major centre in the district, the 1920s was a relatively calm period. Around 1928, however, this changed due to issues that were played out above the local level. We will briefly characterise national developments in order to understand the changing position of the local exhibitor.

In 1921, Nederlandsche Bioscoopbond (Netherlands Cinema League, hereafter NCL) combined distributors and exhibitors into one organisation. The

Table 2: Hoensbroek entertainment taxes<sup>24</sup>  
(rounded to the nearest guilder)

Year	Entertainment taxes total	Entertainment taxes cinemas
1911	159	
1912	264	
1913	357	
1914	265	
1915	226	
1916	300	
1917	445	
1918	371	24
1919	4334	3617
1920	12736	10792
1921	13371	11501
1922	10638	
1923	10349	
1924	11898	
1925	10972	
1926	13549	
1927	18222	
1928	15999	
1929	17949	13756
1930	22845	18135
1931	24484	18048
1932	28116	20798
1933	26615	18891
1934	24775	18569
1935	18104	15088
1936	18711	14987
1937	21181	15981
1938	23766	17829
1939	24131	19379

NCL demonstrated its power and stamina in several conflicts over taxes or other issues with municipal governments, using the boycott as its principal weapon. Closed cinemas ensured that the public coffers lost out on the much-prized entertainment taxes. This financial argument often persuaded local government to succumb to the NCL's demands.

The national government was slow to adopt cinema legislation. Impatient Catholic cities set up their own central censorship organisation. When, in 1928, a national Cinema Act was finally passed, the Catholic censorship board came into conflict with the NCL. Finally, in the following year, the great majority of cinemas in the south were closed for months. Prime Minister Ruys de Beerenbrouck (originally from Limburg) had to intervene personally to solve the conflict.

The hostilities affected the relationship of many exhibitors with local authorities. During the 1930s, control over exhibition appears to have tightened through increased interference by local authorities. These circumstances can be revealing with regard to the position of the exhibitor in the local exercise of power. How did they mediate between what were sometimes conflicting loyalties to religious and other authorities, and their obligations to their audiences and the industry?

Besides the increasing influence of the NCL and tensions between the NCL and Catholic authorities, the introduction of sound film, which commenced in Limburg around 1929, and, later, the advent of the economic crisis, are important factors to consider in the history of Hoensbroek.

In statistics regarding entertainment taxes, we can read the development of the Hoensbroek cinemas. In Table 2 the total annual amount is indicated in the central column with the (incomplete) right column showing the share of entertainment taxes paid solely by the cinemas. It is clear that cinema was by far the most important form of commercial entertainment, apart from pubs which hardly entered into the calculations of entertainment taxes. During the mid-1920s there was little variation until a sudden and unexplained peak in 1927 which reduced again the following year. A rise is again demonstrated in 1929, despite the fact that cinemas were closed for months during that year. A new jump in the figures in 1930 seems to be caused by the introduction of sound which, presumably, drove up prices. The peak in 1932 dropped quickly when the economic crisis began to take effect. It is hard to draw conclusions from the tax statistics, but they do offer a general guideline of developments in the period from 1911 to 1939.

In 1931, when business was still prosperous, a new competitor came to town when a fourth cinema, the Palace Theatre, was built (Fig. 5). Henk van der Linden was only five years old at the time, but according to what his father, Cor van der Linden, told him later in life, opposition to the new cinema was fierce.<sup>25</sup> It is not clear what happened exactly, but somehow the newcomer backed out. Possibly the NCL, instigated by existing exhibitors in the town, used its influence to discourage the newcomer.

Cor van der Linden took the opportunity to rent this new theatre which, equipped with a stage for live performances, doubled his capacity to 850 seats. It was in this theatre that the *beambten* club Alge-



**Fig. 5.** Garage Moderne, 1927. In 1931 the garage was transformed by the owner Otermans into the Palace Theatre of which no photographs survive. Courtesy Gemeentearchief Heerlen.



meene Ontwikkeling held their exclusive film and theatre shows each Thursday evening. Van der Linden proved to be a skilful businessman by agreeing these deals with the former owner of the Palace Theatre and with Algemeene Ontwikkeling.

The old Emma theatre remained empty for some years. Around 1935 it was reopened by Huub te Poel, supposedly a cousin of the earliest manager, Heinrich te Poel. He too was not very warmly received by the other exhibitors. According to the testimony of Henk van der Linden, the existing theatre managers had divided the Hoensbroek market among themselves. All the major distributors had contracts with the Palace, the Witte Bioscoop or the Luxor (Fig. 6). According to Henk van der Linden, the Emma Bioscoop was dependent on third-rate westerns and action movies. Without advertisements or distributor archives, we cannot check the pattern of local programming. Henk van der Linden remembered that te Poel enticed children to visit his cinema on Sunday afternoons by offering free ice cream, something which Henk van der Linden considered to be undignified behaviour. A few years later, the theatre burnt down under suspicious circumstances.

The depiction of te Poel as an intruder is part of van der Linden's discourse of reminiscence that depicts the Limburg exhibitors as a tight community.

He recollected weekly train trips to the Amsterdam film exchange as celebrations of professional fraternity. Exhibitors in the region all knew each other well. As a youth, he admired his father and his colleagues as men of enterprise and conviviality. According to him, they considered themselves free-spirited and independent members of the middle class.

Obviously, oral history has its limitations, especially when other sources are rare or lacking. Yet it does allow us to draw hypotheses on matters that otherwise would remain in the dark. If understood within the discursive frame in which it is set – in this case, a possibly romanticised image of a father by his son – it at least gives us some clues as to what ideals were present among some of the exhibitors. Clearly, in Henk van der Linden's narration, there is a longing for the close-knit community of Catholic exhibitors with its own commercial and social codes. For instance, business was often conducted in an informal manner while drinking and eating, and was regularly conducted at home. Social skills were considered essential also when dealing with local authorities. Van der Linden recalled, for instance, that although his father did not always agree with the chaplain's requests to remove certain publicity photos, in the interest of his business he did not argue with him. In return, he received credit. Another anecdote



**Fig. 6.** Akerstraat, 1935. The Luxor Theatre, a single-story building, is visible halfway down the street opposite the first car parked on the right. [Courtesy Gemeentearchief Heerlen.]

dote refers to an incident that took place during the mission week. A priest not known locally delivered a fiery sermon aimed at the dangers of cinema. According to Henk van der Linden, the local chaplain suddenly rushed into the church urging his father to go to the cinema since he was needed there. In this instance, van der Linden's position in the local community was valued higher by the chaplain than the official view of the Church which was suspicious of cinema.

Van der Linden's recollections give less prominence to another side of the ongoing professionalisation of the trade that was largely stimulated by the NCL. From 1935 onwards, the opening of any new cinema required the approval of a special NCL board. Cinema attendance was rising but, by limiting the opening of new theatres, the NCL appears to have been able to secure the profits for those already in business by creating a cartel. The setting of minimum prices further impeded free competition. The example in Hoensbroek illustrates how difficult it was to establish a new business (although not impossible). This is supported by evidence from other towns in the region.

Compared with other countries, no large cinema chains were established in the Netherlands, although the effects of economic concentration were felt in Limburg. The Jewish brothers Hirschberg, who fled from Nazi Germany, attempted to rebuild the cinema empire they had been forced to abandon. In

a few years, they acquired cinemas in different Dutch cities. The Hoensbroek notary Beckers cooperated with the brothers, and they merged several Heerlen cinemas and the Hoensbroek Luxor into a single operation.

However, the cinema exhibitor as an individual businessman with local ties remained far more representative of pre-1940 Limburg than the few larger entrepreneurs who extended beyond their local base. Van der Linden and Moonen were succeeded by their sons, and most cinemas in Limburg remained family businesses. Once established, they were often marked by a notable stability over the generations, supported by the NCL's tendency to restrict competition.

### Conclusion

Within a couple of decades, the profession of cinema exhibitor in Hoensbroek had developed from a novelty into a fairly common profession. Although various sources have been used, ranging from government documents, newspapers, company records and oral history, our knowledge of Hoensbroek cinemas remains fragmented. A lot of questions remain unanswered or even unasked. An important gap is the absence of programming data, which is only available from the mid-1930s, and we hardly know how the three theatres related with each other. They all catered to a miners' audience, they all featured occasional performances of local groups,

but where they actually differed remains unclear. In fact, according to Henk van der Linden, there was no fundamental specialisation or distinction among the three.

In the heavily-regulated mining region, the cinema exhibitors who lasted longest all acted successfully as intermediaries between their audiences and the regulatory bodies of local government, church, DSM or NCL. The long-lasting success of the Hoensbroek cinemas serves as evidence that a continued demand existed for film as a recreational activity. The local acceptance of cinema entertainment was mediated by the exhibitors who adapted the cinematic product to local circumstances by using the same familiar halls where weddings, amateur theatre or carnival festivities were celebrated. They also used their newly-built theatres in a similar way, facilitating social and cultural life in auditoria where 'that pleasant feeling of peaceful cosiness' was stressed, instead of the exotic escapism with which cinemas are often associated. While the audiences appear to have distrusted the attempt of the DSM to run a cinema in the Treebeek Club Hall, the private suppliers of commercial cinema in Hoensbroek succeeded in offering a space for leisure that fit the needs of their customers. The majority of cinemas in Limburg were family businesses, not part of anonymous chains or international conglomerates. The policy of the NCL reinforced the position of existing exhibitors restricting the opportunities for new competitors.

Nevertheless, cinema entertainment remained the object of cultural contestation. There was no

such thing as a complete process of integration for cinema in the local community. Going to the movies became a part of everyday life for many inhabitants, but for others, cinema represented an intrusion that warranted strict control. For example, in 1937 the Kerkrade authorities implemented a new regulation hoping to improve the moral respectability of the local cinema. The two exhibitors who had been in business for decades were obliged to switch on the lights in the auditorium after two reels had been projected.<sup>26</sup>

To a large extent, this top-down perspective is part of a wider concern for the transformation of the region. Attempts to direct sweeping changes included urban planning which stimulated Catholic unions, press and other organisations into response. The regulation of public amusement was only a small part of this larger project. Age restrictions and censorship ordinances conditioned the development of the cinema to a degree, but did not impede it. Top-down initiatives for film exhibition failed commercially, or at least had only a limited appeal. The Treebeek example demonstrates that point, and also attests to the absence of a viable group of Catholic cinemas able to compete with the commercial sector.

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## Notes

1. 'Treebeek. Luxor-theater', *Limburgsch Dagblad*, 18 February 1920.
2. Loek Kreukels, *Mijnarbeid: volgzaamheid en strijdbaarheid. Geschiedenis van de arbeidsverhoudingen in de Nederlandse steenkolenmijnen 1900–1940* [History of labour relations in the Dutch coal mines] (Maastricht and Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986), 16–24.
3. Kreukels, *Mijnarbeid*; see also Jos Perry, *Roomsche kinine tegen roode koorts. Arbeidersbeweging en katholieke kerk in Maastricht 1880–1920* [Labour movement and Catholic church in Maastricht] (Amsterdam: Van Genneep, 1983).
4. See Pim Slot, 'Katholieken en film in Nederland, 1912–1940. Pogingen tot vorming van een katholieke filmzuil', *Jaarboek Katholiek Documentatiecentrum*, 21 (1991), 61–98, on the problematic formation of Dutch Catholic organisations in film production, distribution and exhibition.
5. A similar situation existed in the German Ruhrgebiet, a much larger industrial zone on the other side of the border, see Dagmar Kift, 'Arbeiterkulturforschung und Arbeiterkultur im Ruhrgebiet', in Dagmar Kift (ed.), *Kirmes – Kneipe – Kino. Arbeiterkultur im Ruhrgebiet zwischen Kommerz und Kontrolle (1850–1914)* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1992) 1–32. For analogous non-commercial organisations in Britain, see Peter Bailey, 'The politics and poetics of modern British Leisure', *Rethinking history*, 3 (1999): 131–175, 145.
6. Karel Dibbets and Guido Convents, 'Verschiedene

- Welten: Kinokultur in Brüssel und Amsterdam', in *Die alte Stadt* 28, 3 (2001): 240–246. Guido Convents, *Van kinetoscoop tot café-ciné. De eerste jaren van de film in België 1894–1908 [The first years of film in Belgium]* (Leuven: Universitaire Pers, 2000), 303. There were approximately twelve cinemas in Brussels in February 1907. The first permanent-site cinemas in the Netherlands opened in 1906. See Karel Dibbets and Frank van der Maden (eds.), *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse film en bioscoop tot 1940 [History of Dutch film and cinema until 1940]* (Weesp: Het wereldvenster, 1986), 38–39.
7. This Dutch Sonderweg is one of the central questions in the current University of Utrecht research project, 'Cinema, modern life and cultural identity in the Netherlands, 1895–1940', a collaborative project involving Bert Hogenkamp, Karel Dibbets, André van der Velden, Clara Pafort-Overduin, Fransje de Jong and the author, funded by the Dutch Foundation for Scientific Research.
  8. Advertisement, *Nieuwe Limburger Koerier*, 11 January 1913. This probably was the film *In Nacht und Eis* (Continental Kunstfilms, 1912), see Ivo Blom, *Jean Desmet and the Early Dutch Film Trade* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003), 124–125.
  9. Advertisement, *Nieuwe Limburger Koerier*, 17 January 1914. The organisation, 'Katholieke Sociale Actie' (Catholic Social Action), toured the country with this film. Blom, *Jean Desmet*, 226. See also J.M. van de Venne, J.T.H. de Win, P.A.H.M. Peeters, *Geschiedenis van Hoensbroek [History of Hoensbroek]* (Hoensbroek, 1967) 716–771; and Hoensbroek town council minutes, 28 February 1914.
  10. Blom, *Jean Desmet*, 243–250.
  11. 'Luxor theater', *Limburgsch Dagblad*, 21 June 1919.
  12. 'Nieuwe bioscoop', *Limburgsch Dagblad*, 19 October 1919. ('dat aangename gevoel van rustige gezelligheid wat dikwijls bij den aanleg van groote zalen uit het oog wordt verloren.')
  13. Advertisement, *Limburgsch Dagblad*, 18 October 1919.
  14. No systematic data are available for the ratio of cinema seats per inhabitant in the Netherlands. Heerlen, circa 1920, had approximately the same number of cinema seats as Hoensbroek, a town with four times the population. The town of Kerkrade had two cinemas, one of which had 350 seats; the other cinema was probably not much bigger although with over 25,000 inhabitants, this ratio is even worse. It should be noted that the Hoensbroek cinemas probably drew audiences from neighbouring municipalities, a process which inflates the statistics.
  15. DSM Archives 17.26/11A Sociale zorg en maatschappelijk werk 1902–1939 [Social care]. Inv.nr. 116 'Het verhuren van een zaal van het verenigingsgebouw Treebeek ter exploitatie als bioscoop. [Renting out Treebeek hall for cinema]'. Unless otherwise indicated, this file is the source of information relating to the Treebeek cinema.
  16. Personal interview, 9 March 2004, with Anton den Doop (then aged 88). The son could not remember this store himself, but recounted the family tradition. See also: A. Reijnders en J.M. Mobers, *Adresboek voor Heerlen 1922-'23* This inventory listed den Doop's home address as Treebeek Square 2, the same as the cinema.
  17. 1 February 1922. Newspapers have been searched for advertisements without success, so te Poel must have tried other ways of attracting the attention of his audience.
  18. Undated letter, March 1923, Sluiter to DSM.
  19. DSM Archive. 17.26/11A Sociale zorg en maatschappelijk werk 1902–1939. Inv.nr. 98 Verlof/vergunning Casino Emma-Hendrik.
  20. Josine Marell-Jenekens, 'Macht en onmacht. Een beeld van de Staatsmijnen in Limburg in de periode 1900–1974', unpublished MA thesis, Department of Cultural and Social Anthropology, University of Nijmegen, 1987.
  21. Personal interview with Cor's son, Henk van der Linden (born 1924), 14 June 2004.
  22. The miner-overseer, Rudolf Kubica, screened films in the villages of Ubach over Worms and Schaesberg around 1930. His business did not last long. Charlie Sluiter from Treebeek was probably a miner too, but as we noted, his Charlie Cinema remained in business for only a short period.
  23. Nieuwenhagen Council Minutes, 20 December 1933.
  24. After 1920 (in 1922, 1926 and 1935) small tariff changes occurred, but generally the entertainment tax for cinemas was 20 per cent of the gross box office takings from 1920 on. This rate was quite common. Specific amounts for the cinemas are only incidentally available. Source: Archief Gemeente Hoensbroek [Municipal Archives Hoensbroek] 1800–1940 Inv. Stukken betreffende de verordening op de heffing en invordering van de belasting op openbare gemakkelijkheden, enz.; Inv. Kohieren, staten of lijsten van ontvangsten wegens belasting op toneelvoorstellingen en andere gemakkelijkheden.
  25. Personal interview, Henk van der Linden, 14 June 2004.
  26. Archief Gemeente Kerkrade [Municipal archives Kerkrade] 1795–1946 Inv. 2864 Stukken betreffende de plaatselijke commissie van toezicht op de bioscopen 1928–1954.