

## From “Crocodile City” to “*Ville Lumière*”: Cinema Spaces on the Urban Landscape of Colonial Surabaya

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The development of exhibition spaces in Surabaya, from canvas and bamboo tents to luxurious cinema palaces, between 1897 and World War I demonstrates the burgeoning movie-going scene in this major colonial-era port city in Eastern Java. The evolution of these venues on the modernizing urban landscape came in the context of other processes of development and social change, which informed both the decisions of cinema entrepreneurs and the mobility of spectators. As a site in which technology, race and colonialism converged, the cinema represented a liminal space in Surabaya’s multiethnic and increasingly polarized colonial society.

**Keywords:** cinema, Dutch colonialism, ethnicity, Indonesia, modernization, popular culture, Surabaya, urbanization.

In December 1909, three visitors to Surabaya, the major coastal town of eastern Java, from the interior of Java decided to go to a moving picture show (*Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad*, 23 December 1909).<sup>1</sup> Yet, according to the report in the local Dutch-language daily newspaper, an argument erupted among them over which venue they should patronize. One of the visitors had his heart set on the Aurora Biograph, which was giving shows in a “permanent tent” located just north of the courthouse in the commercial and entertainment district of Pasar Besar, a structure constructed a little more than a year earlier and owned by a local Armenian cinema entrepreneur (*Nieuwe Soerabaja Courant*, 11 September 1908). Another member

of the group favoured the next-door Royal Standard Bioscope, which had begun to offer shows a few days earlier in a Chinese-owned iron structure painted green and built just three months before on grounds belonging to Dutch military authorities. Situated next to a shop specializing in the sale of chemicals, it had space for some 1,500 spectators: 700 “Europeans” and 800 “Natives” (*Nieuwe Soerabaja Courant*, 10 September 1909). Finally, the party’s driver claimed that it would be most worth their while to venture out to the Chinese kampong. He recommended the significantly cheaper Concurrent<sup>2</sup> Biograph (*Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad*, 23 December 1909). “In the end we decided to go to the Aurora ... which is well known in the hinterland for its exquisite films”, one of the visitors reported to the Surabaya newspaper. “We were not disappointed and really enjoyed what we saw” (*ibid.*).<sup>3</sup>

This anecdote from everyday life in colonial Surabaya, though in fact a thinly veiled promotional piece for the Aurora Biograph, gives us a sense of the scope of the exhibition of moving pictures in this urban centre of the Netherlands East Indies at the beginning of the twentieth century. Drawing on contemporary newspapers in Dutch and Malay, illustrated magazines and government documents, this article examines the burgeoning movie-going scene in the city by studying the development of the spaces — from canvas tents, to bamboo structures, to luxurious cinema palaces — in which movies were shown. It explores the evolution of these venues on the modernizing urban landscape in tandem with other processes of development in city planning and transportation, newly introduced legislation on and taxation of public amusements and the social changes that colonial society was undergoing at the time. Focusing on the cinema as a social institution, in which technology, race and colonialism converged, it takes moving picture venues as liminal spaces in which daily interactions across boundaries could occur within Surabaya’s multiethnic and increasingly polarized colonial society.

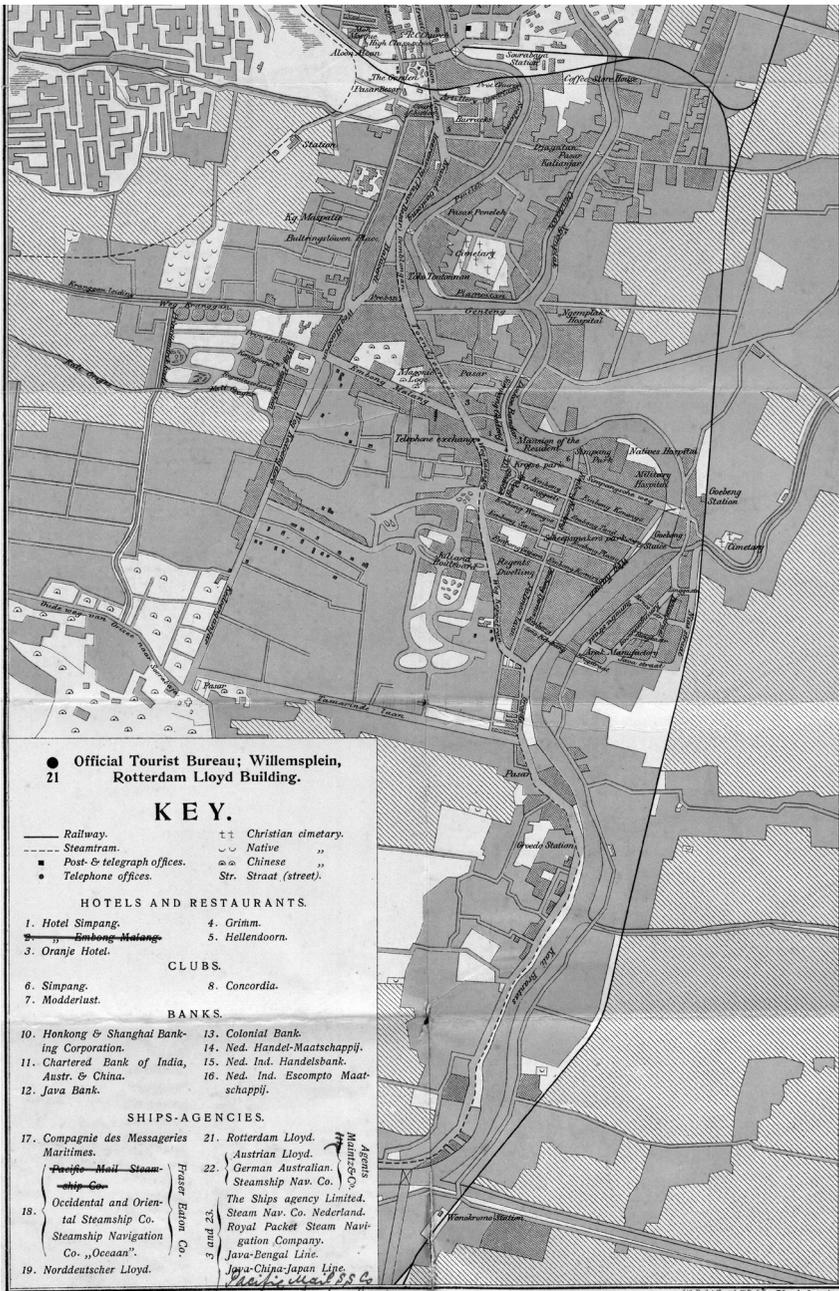
While other forms of popular entertainment in this period have received academic attention, the study of cinema history in the

region has only recently attracted consideration.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, whereas Western-centred studies of early cinema have largely marginalized colonial outposts like Surabaya, the research on which this article draws has found that the city was a frontrunner for its modern cinema amenities not only in the Dutch colonial context but also in comparison with the mother country, where movie-going was not a widespread leisure activity at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup>

Surabaya serves as a dynamic and fruitful case study for several reasons. While Batavia was the "seat of government" and the city generally "perceived as [the] cosmopolitan metropole" of the colony, Surabaya was a major military town and the principal mercantile centre of the Netherlands East Indies (Cohen 2006, p. 29). It served as the hub of the sugar, coffee, rubber and tobacco trades. With a recorded population of about 150,000 residents in 1906, this highly multicultural city was home to a Muslim majority of 124,473 Javanese and Madurese ("Natives" or "*Inlanders*" in Dutch colonial censi), 14,843 Chinese and 2,482 Arabs ("Foreign Orientals" or "*Vreemde Oosterlingen*"), and 8,063 "Europeans" or "*Europeanen*" — mostly in fact Eurasians (von Faber 1934, p. 2).<sup>6</sup>

Most importantly for the purposes of this research, popular entertainment had a prominent place on the landscape of Surabaya throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the nineteenth century, the city was the breeding ground for the popular Malay opera form of *komedi stambul*, and it frequently hosted French and Italian operetta companies, American magicians, British and Indian circus outfits and Australian and Japanese acrobats and performers (Cohen 2006, pp. 9–12). Such travelling showmen and women, moving-picture entrepreneurs among them, travelled extensively by railway and steamship across the entire archipelago to visit cities large and small, as well as more rural towns and regions. Nevertheless, it was in the big cities that fixed exhibition venues for moving pictures proliferated at the beginning of the twentieth century. In these new hubs of local entertainment districts, moving pictures soon entirely replaced the earlier varieties of popular entertainment, such as the *komedi stambul*.





## The Arrival of Moving Picture Shows in Surabaya

A French photographer based in Batavia by the name of Louis Talbot appears to have given the first commercial projections of moving pictures in Surabaya from mid to late April 1897. The venue was the Surabaya Theatre or Schouwburg, in the European settlement in the northwestern part of the city, and Talbot used a so-called Scenimatograph device (*Soerabaija-Courant*, 17 April 1897).<sup>7</sup> The programme comprised titles shipped from Europe, including scenes which may be attributed to Georges Méliès, the stage magician who was just beginning to make a name for himself as a filmmaker.<sup>8</sup> In addition, Talbot screened local views that he had filmed himself on the streets of Batavia, where he began his tour of Java and Sumatra in October 1896, merely ten months after the first Lumière brothers' commercial screenings in Paris in December 1895.<sup>9</sup> Moving image projection therefore arrived in the Netherlands East Indies earlier than has commonly been reported in work on the history of cinema in Indonesia, which claim the first screenings took place in Batavia only in December 1900.<sup>10</sup>

The Surabaya Theatre, the European-style theatre at the Komediëplein (Theatre Square) selected for Talbot's shows, was "completed in 1854 at a cost of 55,000 guilders and renovated in 1877 under the supervision of an actor from a touring French operetta company" (Cohen 2006, p. 35). But, already at this time, Talbot met with competition from the so-called Kenotograph at Chinatown's Kapasan Theatre, on the east side of the Kali Mas river, in the form of cheaper moving-picture shows given at the same time by J. van der Lely, who worked by day as a Surabayan jewellery tradesman (*Soerabaija-Courant*, 17 April 1897). The Kapasan Theatre also played host to *komedi stambul* troupes, *féerie* stage acts and *tableaux vivants*. In many ways, the "theatre rivalled the theatre of the Europeans at Komediëplein, with its spacious hall, double roof, fresh decor, good lighting, and ventilation" (*Java-Bode*, 15 February 1893, quoted in Cohen 2006, p. 72).

The two venues catered to different audiences, as the prices of tickets to the moving picture shows that they presented makes clear.

While Talbot offered his screenings at a steep cost of one guilder per ticket, with an additional 25 cents for reserved seating, the Kenotograph's prices varied: 1.50 guilder for a booth seat, 1 guilder for first class, 75 cents for second class, and 25 cents for third class (*Soerabaija-Courant*, 17 April 1897). It therefore appears likely that, whereas the Scenimatograph shows would have been attended mostly by Europeans, Chinese and members of the native elite, the audience at the Kenotograph would have comprised spectators of more mixed class and ethnic backgrounds.<sup>11</sup> As moving picture shows began to move out of existing theatres and the premises of the exclusive European clubs known as *sociëteiten* (or, colloquially, by the term *soos*) into larger circus tents or independently touring canvas tents, which often offered seats for "Native" spectators at lower prices, the increasing diversity of audiences and the subsequent need to organize spaces accordingly were to become prominent features of the movie-going experience. We must understand these developments in the context of some of the other processes of change under way in Surabaya at the turn of the century.

### Turn-of-the-Century Urban Development and Social Change in Surabaya

While its entertainment scene was constantly growing and incorporating new forms and technologies, Surabaya experienced the most irregular urban development of all the great cities of Java (von Faber 1934, p. 17). "[I]n an alluvial delta", on land that rose just a few metres above sea level, the "fertility and accessibility of this rice-growing plain was the key to Surabaya's early prominence in the maritime trading world" (Dick 2002, p. 326). It became a colonial trading post in the mid-eighteenth century, when a Dutch settlement was established alongside the original Javanese kampong to the west of the Kali Mas river (*ibid.*, p. 330). A parallel Chinese settlement on the east bank of the same river is also apparent in maps from the period (*ibid.*). In 1835, when the city became a Dutch military installation, the old settlement was destroyed and the wooden

buildings resting “among trees and streams” made way for “bridges, canals, paved streets, and buildings of brick and stone” (Frederick 1989, p. 2). By the end of the nineteenth century, as Surabaya gained in economic significance, “it was the largest city in the Netherlands East Indies, an energetic, if unplanned, tangle of cultural styles and values, in which local tradition jostled for attention with modern technological power and a bustling international trade” (ibid.).

A guide book from 1897 probably gives the most vivid impression of Surabaya in the early days of moving pictures (van Bemmelen et al. 1903 [1897]). After arriving at the harbour and travelling into the city by *kossong* (horse-drawn carriage) along streets filled with European and Chinese shops and offices, it quickly concluded,

Soerabaja compares unfavourably with other Dutch East Indian towns, on account of the greater part of the dwelling-houses not being detached, in the midst of beautifully shaded grounds, but built close together, and bordering on the streets. Besides this, the offices, warehouses, stores, shops, and dwelling-houses, European, Arabian, and native, are a great deal too much mingled together; and a separation between the lower or mercantile part and upper or European part of the town, is more difficult to define than in Batavia or Samarang.

Now this may give to Soerabaja a livelier and more European character, but it makes it at the same time dirtier, more oppressive, and less desirable to live in. Next to the finest private houses, we find little native tumble-down shops, or Chinese hovels, that are called “*Warongs*”... Once past the Concordia Club, the outward appearance of the town gets a little better. Here we come upon a cross-way, that to the left leads to the station, and to the right ... to the Aloen-Aloen, on which there is a beautiful mosque. Before us, the road has the appearance of an avenue ... on the right side of which there is a small park called the *Stadstuin* (City Garden), where military concerts are given twice a week, and at the end, a small square, where a beautiful building is situated. This is the *Grimm Restaurant*, the finest café in the whole of the Dutch-Indies. (ibid., pp. 81–82)

As a final point, and adding the disagreeable climate to its list of grievances, the guide book concludes by advising travellers “to stay no longer at Soerabaja than is necessary” (ibid., p. 82).

The above description nevertheless failed to acknowledge some of what distinguished the city around this same time. The first gas street lights appeared in Surabaya in 1881 (von Faber 1934, p. 105). "Urban populations were being moved, slums demolished, and avenues paved in the name of progress. A telephone office was opened in 1884, and by 1897 it was possible to telephone Batavia" (Cohen 2006, pp. 33–34). By the end of the nineteenth century, Surabaya was being "altered to meet the needs and tastes of a small minority of Europeans. Dry docks, machine factories, jails, banks, newspaper offices and presses, import-export firms, elegant Victorian pastry shops and stylish clubhouses were built in rapid succession" (Frederick 1978, p. 15). Yet, it was only after the establishment of the Surabaya *Gemeente* (municipality) in 1906 that one could really speak of municipal policy and city planning. From about 1910, these latter took the form of "the planned layout of large urban extensions, the clearance, regulation and modern redevelopment of urban *kampung* areas, the introduction of a consistent overall road plan and other major infrastructural works" (van Diessen 2004, p. 101). Construction of the modern harbour began in 1910, and plans for electric tram lines were being drafted in 1911 (*Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad*, 9 November 1911).

As the suburbs pushed steadily southwards and investment in infrastructure proceeded apace, various modes of transport, from *kossongs* and *sados* (pony carts) through a horse omnibus service introduced in 1859 and the more advanced steam and later electric tram, eased movement through the growing city (Dick 2002, p. 348). Many Europeans owned their own horses and carriages to meet their daily travel needs, and a growing number of automobiles, first imported to Java in 1894, appeared on Surabaya's streets over the years: from 77 in 1906, to 3,761 in 1917, and up to 12,000 in 1930 (von Faber 1934, pp. 3, 202; Dick and Rimmer 2003, p. 66; Bloembergen 2009, p. 141). Vehicle ownership for Indonesians meant bicycles and, according to available data, their number was "about 9,000 in 1917, doubling to 18,000 in 1925, and again to 36,000 in 1937 (SGS, annual)" (Dick 2002, p. 349). The 20-kilometre steam tram line, open to the public in 1890 and connecting Surabaya's

harbour to its outskirts, ran through the city once every half an hour from Wonokromo via Grudo, Keputran, Kaliasin, Tunjungan, and Pasar Besar to Ujung (von Faber 1934, p. 3).

As goods and individuals transported at increasingly higher speeds through and around the city, Surabayan society was itself experiencing rapid changes. For one, it gained a stronger Dutch colonial flavour from the emergence of more exclusive ethnic hierarchies. “A key institution in this new pattern was the *soos* (colloquial for the *sociëteit* or club), a kind of clubhouse facility for Europeans at which the binding ingredient was camaraderie in both drink and talk, serious and not” (Frederick 1978, p. 17). Hosting parties, musical soirées, amateur dramatic performances, and touring magicians, as well as some of the earliest moving picture shows, such institutions quickly developed a growing preoccupation with ethnic exclusivity among their members. The Ethical Policy — introduced by Queen Wilhelmina in 1901, combined with laws on administrative decentralization, which led to the establishment of municipal government — further strengthened the emphasis on ethnic divisions in colonial society. This effect was especially evident in the cities of the Netherlands East Indies, “which were precisely the points at which European and indigenous forces threatened to meet and associate most closely” (ibid., p. 32). Thus, while the “population pressure, economic conditions and improved transportation [which] brought more, and more different, Indonesians to Surabaya” left urban kampongs increasingly diverse, these areas became at the same time more “introverted” (ibid., pp. 45–46). Neglected by the newly founded municipality, which focused its efforts on infrastructural development of European neighbourhoods, Surabaya’s kampongs were literally “[h]emmed in by the city and separated in many ways from it” (ibid., p. 46).

Popular entertainment venues, such as circus and *komedi stambul* tents and moving picture exhibition spaces, counted among the few sites that continued to attract and accommodate thousands of people of mixed ethnicities and social classes in close quarters on a daily basis. As places “where one can go to soothe one’s body ... [and] one’s thoughts” after a hard day’s work (Cohen 2006, p. 14, quoted

from *Bintang-Barat*, 4 October 1890), they figured importantly in the everyday life experience of residents of the big cities of the Indies. And, among those cities, Surabaya maintained and even increased its status as a centre for leisure and entertainment in this period. By the 1920s, another English-language travel guide noted, "As regards amusements Sourabaya enjoys the reputation of being the gayest city in the Dutch East Indies. There are two Night Clubs (Dance Clubs), two large Social Clubs, a Cabaret, an Ice Cream Palace and a number of Cinema Theatres" (*See Java: Garden of the East* c.1920, p. 4). The range of entertainment options in modernizing Surabaya led many commentators to dub the "Crocodile City" (*Krokodillenstad*), as it was commonly called, a "ville lumière" or city of light (Buitengeweg 1980; *Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch Indië*, 21 September 1911; K.M. 1920, p. 712).

As venues showing moving pictures in Surabaya became more permanent fixtures on the urban landscape from 1907 onwards, these overarching patterns of change in the city influenced both the undertakings of cinema entrepreneurs and the mobility of their spectators. The sections that follow examine the particular conditions with which exhibitors of moving pictures had to contend, in the form of local legislation, licensing and taxation. These entrepreneurs had to balance the concerns of colonial authorities — in order to gain permits to hold their shows — against the need to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, to meet their own commercial objectives. Their choice of location for their venues reflected not only the identity of their target audiences but also the growing availability and wider reach of various modes of transport in Surabaya.

### From Canvas to Bamboo Tents

One of the main spots for popular entertainment and early movie-going in Surabaya was the street corner where the Alun Alun (the main town square) met Pasar Besar.<sup>12</sup> In fact, almost immediately after the first moving picture shows in 1897 and throughout the subsequent decade, showmen travelling with their own tents normally

set up at the Alun Alun, next to the military garrison or across from the courthouse. When not in use by exhibitors of moving pictures, such public spaces were occupied by circus tents, steam carousels and other forms of public amusement.

In 1908 the location also became a site for filmmaking when the Vardon Biograph placed an advertisement in the newspapers calling on people to show up outside the Grimm Café and Hellendoorn Restaurant on a Sunday morning with their bicycles, cars and carriages, “preferably with open tops”, in order to appear in a film. To be shown first in Surabaya and then presented as a gift to Queen Wilhelmina, this film was intended to give her an impression of the busiest city in the Netherlands East Indies (*Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad*, 31 January 1908).<sup>13</sup> Vardon may have placed this advertisement in the knowledge that the corner in question was otherwise likely to be empty on a Sunday morning, as a description from 1910 of a typical Saturday night in Surabaya suggests:

It’s 8 o’clock. Party-going Surabaya is in full swing. Saturday night, the last night of the week, which is followed by a free day, a Sunday, a day of rest, a day of sleeping in .... The Alun Alun is the centre of Surabaya’s big city buzz. The cinemas are bathing in a sea of electric light, which expands widely between the trees, with aspects of light hitting the surrounding buildings and the asphalt of the street. Cheerful music penetrates from the silent theatres to the outside, luring one to enter. Then suddenly the music ceases, but only for a few moments; the band resumes, the music becomes sadder, melancholic, the presently projected film is indeed a drama. It’s not difficult to guess this.

The number of kossongs, which are rolling in from all directions ... increases the hustle and bustle beyond measure; the hordes of coachmen with their whips; their shouts together, their sneering laughter and their irrational conduct as they run for the entrances of Hellendoorn or Grimm when they spot some people getting up to leave. All this gives an extraordinary impression of the busy city life. And were there not many natives to demonstrate the contrary, one would imagine he was in Europe, in the heart of the big cities. (*Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad*, 4 July 1910)

While the sounds from the cinemas reached the surrounding streets, the noise and commotion from the road was equally likely to

penetrate the cinemas, with an inevitable effect on spectators' viewing experience. The heavy, largely unregulated traffic, especially the presence of the steam tram in the midst of the crush of carriages, freight wagons and handcarts, served as a constant source of aggravation for shop owners and residents of this main quarter. Reports of accidents, some minor and others fatal and many involving pedestrians, appeared frequently in the newspapers of the day. At the same time, by locating their tents in strategic spots in the city, exhibitors ensured that potential customers had easy access to their venues. These venues, located among cafés and restaurants, also helped create in Surabaya a sense of a modern city centre, on par with the great cities of Europe. One recently arrived Dutchman, another newspaper reported, taking delight in the "radiating light from the cinema and tart palace [on Pasar Besar,] ... even ventured to compare it to the Leidseplein in Amsterdam" (*Nieuwe Soerabaja Courant*, 13 November 1914).

Advertisements from the period make clear that moving picture exhibitors usually offered shows two or even three times a day over the course of several weeks, with programme changes twice per week. Their programmes were comprised of actualities and shorts imported from Europe and the United States. Longer-reel films of half an hour in length included early classics such as Méliès's *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), stories from *One Thousand and One Nights* and other folk tales, and adaptations of Shakespearean plays or Goethe's *Faust*. Most movie-goers in the Indies would have already gained familiarity with many or all of these classics, stories and plays through their previous adaptation for the *komedi stambul* stage.<sup>14</sup> In addition to imported films, from the very beginning exhibitors often incorporated into their programmes films that they had shot themselves locally: street scenes and natural landscapes, festivals featuring native dancers, the wedding ceremonies of Javanese princes, and the celebrations of the birth of Dutch Princess Royal Juliana. Just about anything that could be filmed *was* filmed, at times from several points of view, by local cinematographers representing competing companies. Even a production of *Nyai Dasima*, the famous 1896 novella by Gijsbert Francis which was adapted numerous times for the stage and also

later screen productions,<sup>15</sup> was reportedly recorded on film by the Royal Bioscope as early as 1906 (*Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 26 June 1906).

Since audience turnout was inversely correlated to the extremity of weather conditions, especially the tropical rainstorms and humidity whose effects were only exacerbated by heat from the projector, exhibitors often made a point of including precise descriptions of their tents in advertisements and promotional pieces. Thus, in 1901 the Java Biorama, associated with veteran Surabayan photographer Herman Salzwedel, advertised that it would present its shows in a tent that was “extremely well ventilated and completely waterproof” (*Bintang Soerabaia*, 11 February 1901). In 1903, Indian showman Abdulally Esoofally’s Royal Bioscope toured with a tent “100 feet long and 50 feet wide, propped by four posts, [which] could hold a thousand people” (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 1963, p. 9). However, reports of flooded cinema tents were not uncommon, leading one newspaper to proclaim that the “rain is a sworn enemy of the cinema tent” (*Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 4 February 1904). By 1905, the Netherlands Indies Biograph Company, owned by three Armenians, was touring with “a giant waterproof tent ... made in America especially for the tropics, [which] can easily contain 2500 people” (*Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad*, 20 May 1905).

Information on the cost of site rental for these tents remains rather sketchy. According to evidence for one case in 1905, the Royal Bioscope rented the space next to the military garrison for 250 guilders per month, and was required as part of this arrangement to offer free admission to soldiers once a month (*De Locomotief*, 8 November 1905). At the same time, its competitor the Netherlands Indies Electro Bioscope paid only 25 guilders per month for renting space on the grounds of the state railways (*ibid.*).

Tents soon gave way to gigantic, extravagant bamboo constructs which could seat thousands of people: the first class seats for Europeans were in elevated boxes at the rear, while the cheapest seats on the ground for the “Native” class of spectators were often located behind the screen (Coulter 1909, p. 1039; and see Figure 2). Although it is unclear exactly when such seating arrangements were



**FIGURE 2** Bamboo tent of the East Java Bioscope, c.1912 (*Weekblad voor Indië*, 30 November 1913).

first introduced, they definitely had already obtained in at least some of the canvas tents. A 1904 newspaper report animatedly described the “Waa...h!” that arose from behind the screen during a screening in the tent of the Netherlands Indies Biograph Company, as well as other expressions of excitement, amusement or terror in reaction to the changing scenes on the screen (*Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad*, 25 November 1904). Setting aside the racial aspects of this practice, this sort of arrangement of space would have been familiar to spectators used to Javanese *wayang kulit*, whose spectators may view the puppet show either from the shadow side or from the puppeteer’s side. It also suggests that movie-going represented an available option for anyone who could afford it, as members of all classes and races in colonial society attended moving picture shows. Even those unable to afford a ticket found ways to sneak into or peek inside the tent. Moreover, it is unclear how rigidly separation by race was observed. Some evidence suggests that members of the Indonesian elite class were allowed in the section for “Europeans”

or that they enjoyed at the very least a seating area separate from that of “Native coolies” (*Nieuwe Soerabaja Courant*, 10 September 1909).<sup>16</sup> The same applies to Chinese spectators who were at times also offered separate seating. In fact, Chinese proprietors owned many moving picture venues as well as exhibition and distribution companies, in a pattern that paralleled their involvement in other contemporary forms of popular entertainment.

Entrepreneurs already associated with the local cinema industry often erected these “bamboo tents” (*bamboetent*) for rental to exhibitors for several months at a time. Spectators could purchase food and drink as well as cigarettes and tobacco, whether at stalls provided by the owner of the venue or at an independent *warung* just outside. And, while the risk of fire in such venues might seem real, in fact the more burning question in Surabaya concerned matters of hygiene.<sup>17</sup> Cholera apparently took the life of at least one cinema exhibitor in 1902, forcing the police to burn his canvas tent (*Soerabaija-Courant*, 22 October 1902). Neither did the subsequent introduction of iron, zinc and asbestos structures eliminate this danger, as became clear during major cholera outbreaks. The public could easily contract the disease in cinema spaces through exposure to contaminated water or to the many people that these spaces put into close physical contact with one another. The owner of the Sirene Bioscope, for instance, faced inspection and closure of his cinema after dead rats were discovered buried just behind it (*Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad*, 12 June 1911). Interestingly, as soon as a municipal inspection committee approved the venue for running shows again, the exhibitor opted to capitalize on his tribulations by including a film about the cause, spread and control of cholera in his programme (*Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad*, 16 June 1911). The period of the epidemic proved a difficult time for exhibitors in Surabaya and elsewhere in Java, who were still mostly operating travelling shows, as several local authorities opted for quarantine and simply refused to give out licences.

Acts of petty crime typical of an urban setting — pickpocketing, plundering the lemonade and tobacco stocks of stalls, theft of bicycles

parked just outside tents — further plagued exhibition venues (*Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 9 March 1914; *Soerabaiasch Nieuwsblad*, 27 November 1909; *Nieuwe Soerabaja Courant*, 7 January 1908). Not surprisingly, contrasting claims regarding the positive or negative effects of cinema on Indonesian spectators, along with debates on the pedagogical potential of educational scenes versus the detrimental influence of detective or crime films, filled many pages of newspapers and official reports over the years (for instance, *Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 10 July 1906; *Pleyte* 1907; *De Locomotief*, 2 October 1908; *Nieuwe Soerabaja Courant*, 10 February 1910; *Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad*, 9 August 1911).

A persistent transience marked Surabaya's early-twentieth-century cinema spaces, apparently built out of materials similar to those of the temporary pavilions constructed for the annual *Pasar Malam* (Night Market), whose diversions also included moving picture shows. Movie-goers who patronized these bamboo and iron structures were constantly reminded that the "government may terminate the rental [of the land] any day. If now the tent looks as if built for eternity, one must remember that it can be fully dismantled" (*Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad*, 9 September 1909). And legislation concerning public amusements — which governed kiosks, *warung*, tents, circuses, race tracks and cinemas — makes clear that this reminder was correct (*Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad*, 10 December 1908). In accordance with the regulation on "the temporary use of public roads, streets, squares, parks and other grounds, with the exception of pasars in the Surabaya region", the local government (*Plaatselijk Bestuur*) could grant permits for a period of up to three months, while permits for longer periods required application to the regional council (*Raad*), a far more complicated and presumably more costly procedure. The municipality charged entrepreneurs a licence fee that took location, duration of use and size into account according to the following terms: for shorter durations (less than three months) and an area of 100 square metres or less, f 0.05 to f 0.50 per day; for a space of 100 to 500 square metres, f 0.50 to

f 2.00 per day; and for an area of 500 square metres or more, f 2.10 to f 10.0 per day. For durations longer than three months, it levied a charge of at least f 0.50 per month (ibid.).

Some exhibitors may have subverted the tight time limits by simply splitting up their company into two or three companies, with one company immediately following the other in renting the same space, once the three-month licence expired. For example, the Johannes Biograph and Vardon Biograph, active from 1909, both appear to have been linked to the Netherlands Indies Biograph Company, originally established in April 1905 by Amirkan Johannes and Mackertich Johannes of Kediri and Mackertich Abraham Nahapiet of Surabaya (*Extra-Bijvoegsel der Javasche Courant*, 28 April 1905, no. 54, no. 26). From October 1905 A.C. Vardon<sup>18</sup> joined the company as manager (*Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 25 October 1905). Since other cities later adopted the legislation in force in Surabaya, evidence of this sort of practice began to appear in newspaper reports from across the archipelago (*Bataviaasch-Nieuwsblad*, 17 March 1910).

In any case, the abovementioned law very quickly proved inadequate. For one, it only covered use of public and not private spaces; use of the latter as venues for showing films became more and more common. Secondly, it was deemed that provisions should be put in place specifically for cinemas, in view of the “increasing indulgence of the [native] population” in what have by now become “permanent fairgrounds” on practically every town square (*Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad*, 10 December 1908). Targeted regulation, it was believed, would make possible limitation of the nature and quantity of cinema tents and the duration of their emplacement, as well as the sale of alcohol on their premises (ibid.). Thus, in June 1909 the tax on public amusements came into effect in Surabaya (*Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad*, 3 June 1909). A municipal stamp would be added to every ticket, to be checked at the entrance by a European and a “Native” official. In addition, movie-goers were to hold on to the tickets because a policeman would check inside the cinema, to catch anyone who had sneaked in. This system limited

the number of free tickets that exhibitors could distribute, as they now had to pay tax in respect of all tickets issued. This change led exhibitors to stop offering free admission to residents living close to their venues, a practice that had presumably prevented them from complaining to the authorities about the noise.

Nevertheless, the new legislation did not make any concessions on the three-month duration of exhibition permits, even in the case of exhibitors who had invested substantial resources in constructing their venues. For example, the Chinese owner of the Sirene Bioscope, which opened in September 1909, rented land from military authorities and constructed an impressive building of iron on the site, housing a buffet and a *warung* for the pleasure of visitors (*Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad*, 9 September 1909). The interior was apparently just as striking as the sturdy-looking outside, with green-coloured wallpaper on the walls of the section intended for European spectators, a section also equipped with electric lighting and excellent ventilation (*Nieuwe Soerabaja Courant*, 10 September 1909). The section for "Native" spectators was divided into two, one intended for members of the elite class and the other for the Indonesian coolies. "Everything beams of novelty in the massive space, without any annoying pillar which hinders the view — the decoration is simple and tasteful, the furnishing of the interior is simply perfect for such a purpose" (*Soerabaiasch Nieuwsblad*, 13 September 1909). And yet, once his three-month exhibition permit expired, the owner could no longer show films himself. At least under the new legislation, he was not compelled to tear down his venue (*Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad*, 8 December 1909). He resorted to renting the space to other exhibitors for periods of up to three months, after which he was again able to show films himself.

Some newspapers sought to make their readers more sympathetic towards exhibitors. One 1909 report claimed that, while many believed that moving pictures were a lucrative business, this had been true only up until a few years before (*Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad*, 23 December 1909). But competition had grown to such an extent and the business required so much investment that a cinema company was

now content if it made even a six per cent profit. Exhibitors had the option of either buying or renting films, and the more sophisticated “theatre films” were available for rental “only under extremely severe conditions: no less than 50 per cent of the gross income must be paid to the film’s rights holder” (ibid.). While exhibitors were not exclusively tied to a single provider of films, the French company Pathé Frères had an unrivalled position in the sector. After opening an office in Singapore in 1907 to cover the entire region, it immediately placed advertisements in the local newspapers of the Indies, both Dutch- and Malay-medium (*Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad*, 26 August 1907; *Bintang Soerabaia*, 25 August 1907). By the beginning of 1908, it had stationed an agent in the Indies (*Nieuwe Soerabaja Courant*, 3 February 1908). It was not beyond this man to pick up the phone to a newspaper editor, to protest an unfavourable review (*Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad*, 26 October 1909).

### Constructing Cinema Palaces

In the 1910s, as Surabaya experienced rapid urban expansion and its division into a *benedenstad* (lower town) encompassing the port and business district and a *bovenstad* (upper town) of new residential neighbourhoods further to the south grew clearer, it gained a reputation in the Indies as the crowned leader in cinema amenities and comforts (Dick 2002, p. 341; *Java-Bode*, 6 October 1910). By the beginning of 1912, cinema had come to be recognized as a genuine need in the life of Surabaya’s residents, and the idea that competition would lead to cheaper ticket prices became current (*Nieuwe Soerabaja Courant*, 15 January 1912). As cinema companies were still battling it out over permits for shows at the permanent tents in Pasar Besar or at the Stadstuin, several entrepreneurs, including Vardon and Nahapiet, began to eye property further down the road, on the marshland to the east of the Tunjungan-Gembalangan bridge, and even to draw up competing building plans that they shared with city planners and journalists (*Nieuwe Soerabaja Courant*, 20 January 1912; *Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad*, 24 January 1912). Hughan, another bidder

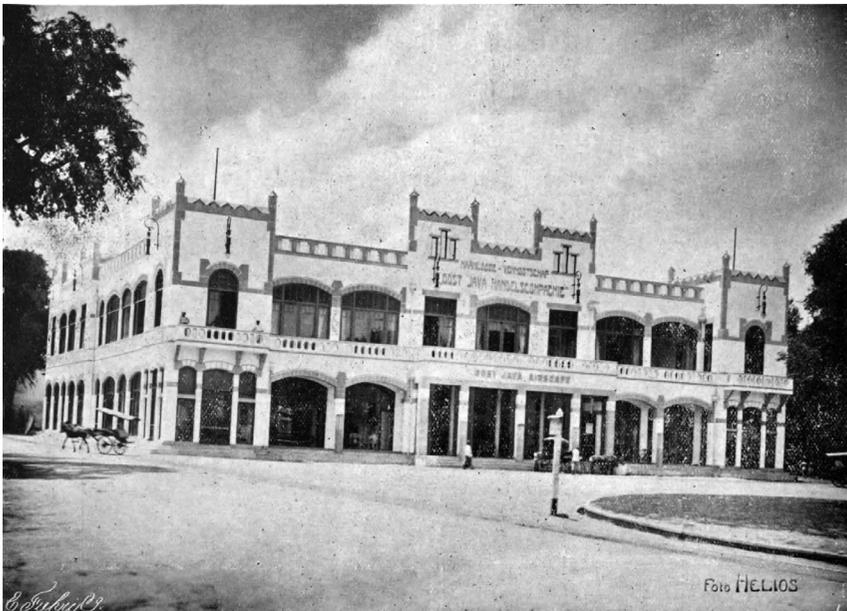
for the same property, proposed that the beautiful and monumental building that he was planning serve to conceal the "hideous view" of the kampong behind it (*Nieuwe Soerabaja Courant*, 20 January 1912). However, none of these men received a permit, as the local authorities claimed that they had plans for widening the road (*Nieuwe Soerabaja Courant*, 25 January 1912).

Another entrepreneur by the name of Droste<sup>19</sup> bought kampong land in Tunjungan from its Chinese owner Han Kong Gie for 11,000 guilders (*Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad*, 24 January 1912). He planned to uproot the kampong dwellers from their homes and to build new residential housing, as well as a giant cinema theatre (ibid.). It is not clear what kind of compensation, if any, he would have offered to the "Native" population of the kampong, although by the 1910s the authorities were showing increasing concern for "Native" rights, even when private entrepreneurs were involved (Dick 2002, p. 355). Meanwhile, Pathé's representative in Batavia Mr Schwartz also sought to buy land even further south, on the corner of the suburban Embong Malang and Simpang, from an Arab landlord. He awaited approval for the building plans while the municipality sought the neighbours' consent (*Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad*, 24 January 1912). He finally obtained his licence in September 1912, and construction was scheduled to start in November (*Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad*, 23 September 1912).

Yet the most successful figure of this period by far was photographer-turned-lanternist-turned-cinema-entrepreneur C.J. Umbgrove, director of the East Java Bioscope and a man who, according to his own account, first saw moving pictures when Esoofally came to Surabaya in 1905 (von Faber, pp. 385–86). In his cinema palace and adjacent film studio, Umbgrove, who was most likely of mixed European and Indonesian descent,<sup>20</sup> wanted to "compile a film archive, so that we will always be able to watch scenes from various Surabayan festivals on screen" (*Nieuwe Soerabaja Courant*, 16 May 1914). When discussion of the proposed electric tram line was still in progress and while restaurants at Pasar Besar were fighting calls to shut them down before 1:00 a.m. every night,

the East Java Trading Company managed to secure land roughly a kilometre away, next to the gas works (*Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad*, 1 October 1912). And where others had failed, the company obtained all the necessary documents to enable it to construct a cinema out of brick along with a film development and rental depot, on land formerly occupied by the Oei Moo Liem First Indies Beer Hall at the crossroads of Baliwerti and Gembalongan (*ibid.*).<sup>21</sup>

In November 1913, the East Java Bioscope had its grand opening (*Nieuwe Soerabaja Courant*, 8 November 1913). Built in accordance with the Dutch high architectural style of the day, it had separate entrances on either side of the building — one for Europeans and the other for “Natives”. Positioned on a prominent Y junction, the cinema was a monumental building on one of Surabaya’s main traffic arteries which could seat 750 “Europeans” and 400 “Natives”



**FIGURE 3** The new building of the East Java Bioscope, 1913 (*Weekblad voor Indië*, 30 November 1913).

(*Weekblad voor Indië*, 30 November 1913). Featuring busts of Queen Wilhelmina and her husband, the lobby opened by way of large mirror doors on to the bar, where easy chairs enabled one to sit back comfortably and watch cars, carriages, trams and pedestrians moving busily all the way to Pasar Besar (*Weekblad voor Indië*, 7 December 1913).

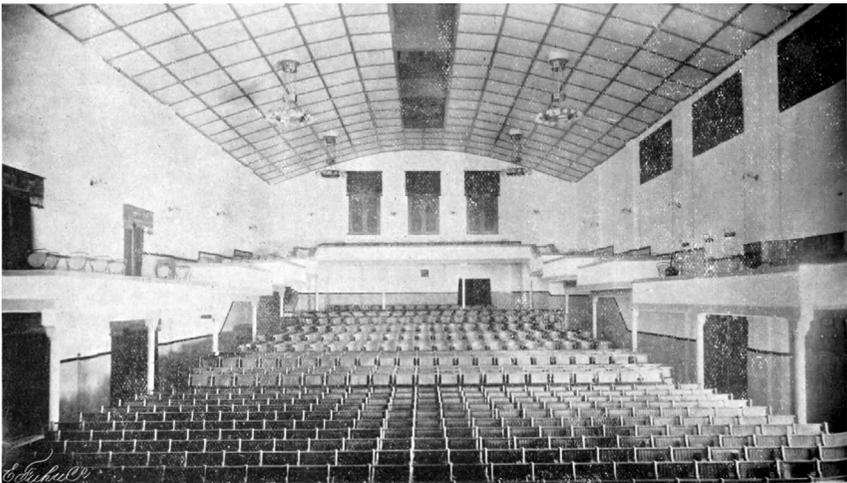
The staff of the East Java Bioscope dressed in neat uniforms, which they could put on in a changing room made available for them. Electric lighting was provided by Siemens, the grand piano was built on special commission, and the folding cinema chairs were specially imported from Vienna's finest furniture manufacturers, Jacob and Josef Kohn. The upstairs *Balcon de luxe* provided a comfortable vantage point from which one had an unobstructed view of the screen and the audience in the hall. Of course, there was no view of the "Native" spectators, whose benches were, once again, behind



**FIGURE 4** The lobby of the East Java Bioscope, 1913 (*Weekblad voor Indië*, 7 December 1913).

the screen. These benches could be covered when a variety troupe was to perform and a larger stage was necessary. The attached East Java Restaurant had a large hall on the ground floor in addition to an upstairs room for banquets, meetings, or magic shows (ibid.).

Yet, unfortunately, even cinema palaces were not destined to last. In 1918 the East Java Bioscope burned to the ground, and more than 100,000 metres of film were destroyed (von Faber 1934, p. 386). At least some of the “permanent tents” on the Pasar Besar thus outlasted Surabaya’s movie palace. Entrepreneurs’ attempts at linear progress to make movie-going a more European, elitist, or middle-class leisure activity proved problematic. Attendance figures provide a good indication of just how mixed movie audiences remained, as by the 1920s about eighty per cent of cinema companies’ revenues apparently came from Indonesian and Chinese movie-goers (Arief 2010, p. 20, quoted from *De Locomotief*, no. 70, 1926). At the same time, movie houses continued to be some of the most modern structures built over the following decades, including the first buildings to be fitted with air conditioning (Mrázek 2002, p. 111).



**FIGURE 5** The hall of the East Java Bioscope, 1913 (*Weekblad voor Indië*, 7 December 1913).

## Conclusion

Counter to the move towards more segregationist policies on a municipal level — and although exhibition venues for moving pictures often differentiated between the different classes of spectators, whether by relegating the so-called “Native” section to the space behind the screen or by seating them in the front rows known as the *kambing* (goat) class — moving picture venues in colonial Surabaya, as in other parts of the archipelago, continued to function as spaces in which class and racial lines could potentially be traversed.<sup>22</sup> As Rudolf Mrázek writes about riding the trains in the Indies, even though there were separate cars for each class of passengers, “the rhythm of the train, the shaking, and the machine were the same. All the passengers were (traveling) humans, and their uncomfortable sameness could nowhere be seen, felt, and smelled as strongly as in the train” (ibid., p. 13). While the comfort level in the cinema was similarly stratified — in terms of access, seating comfort, and even the direction of the text of intertitles — all spectators, seated in the dark, could be transported together to another world thanks to the images they were watching on screen, projected from the same flickering device. And despite the fact that they often could not see each other, they could presumably still hear and smell each other.

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## NOTES

1. This article forms part of an ongoing research project on “The Nation and Its Other: The Emergence of Modern Popular Imagery and Representations”, funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). An earlier version of this article was presented at the Fifteenth Annual Cornell Southeast Asia Graduate Student Conference, 1–3 March 2013. Thanks are due to the commentators at the conference, the editor of *SOJOURN* Michael Montesano and the journal’s anonymous referees for their comments and encouragement.
2. Literally, “rival”.

3. All translations from Dutch and Malay are my own, unless otherwise stated.
4. In addition to this ongoing research project, another doctoral dissertation, recently published by Nadi Tofighian at Stockholm University on transnational entertainment in Southeast Asia, also helps to shed light on the period of early cinema in colonial Indonesia (Tofighian 2013).
5. For more on the early movie-going scene in the Netherlands, see van der Velden and Thissen (2010).
6. The population of Surabaya reached approximately 190,000 in 1920: 17,500 Europeans, 22,000 Chinese, and 150,000 Indonesians (von Faber 1934, p. 30).
7. Louis Talbot gave his first shows in Batavia already in October 1896 (*Java-Bode*, 9 October 1896). However, following a fire that erupted on the first night because of the “carelessness of a native” who accidentally knocked over a candle and set all the films but one into flames, it took a few more months before Talbot could secure new films. Some of these were ordered from Europe, while others were scenes that he shot locally (*Bataviaasch-Nieuwsblad*, 12 October 1896; *Java-Bode*, 4 March 1897).
8. According to a later report in the Singapore press, among these titles were “‘Disappearance of a lady on the opera stage’ as performed by Robert Houdin in Paris”, “The Haunted House” and “A Nightmare” (*The Singapore Free Press*, 17 January 1898). These titles may correspond to Méliès’s *Escatomage d’une dame au théâtre Robert Houdin* (1896), *Le manoir du diable* (1896) or *Le Château Hanté* (1897) and *Le cauchemar* (1896).
9. According to a report in *Java-Bode* from 19 March 1897, at the conclusion of his shows in Batavia, Talbot’s planned tour route was as follows: Buitenzorg (Bogor) on 21 March, Cianjur on 23 March, Bandung on 24 March, Sukabumi on 25 March, Garut on 26 March, Purworejo on 28 March, Yogyakarta on 29 March, Klaten on 31 March, Solo (Surakarta) on 1 April, Semarang on 4 April, as well as further destinations for which no prearranged dates were at the time available. These latter included Kudus, Pati, Juwana and Surabaya. After making his way across Java back to Batavia in July 1897, Talbot travelled to Sumatra, where he gave shows in Medan and Binjai in November and December 1897 (*Java-Bode*, 14 July 1897; *Deli-Courant*, 17 November 1897, *Deli-Courant*, 24 November 1897). He then travelled via Penang to Singapore in January of 1898 (*Deli-Courant*, 22 December 1897). Nadi Tofighian has found mention of further shows in Thailand in June of 1898 (Tofighian 2013, p. 135). This is by no means an exhaustive list. There may have been other shows. Yet, as many other towns did not have newspapers and as

- some newspapers did not carry advertisements or reviews for the shows, it is difficult to sketch out a complete route.
10. See Abdullah et al. 1993; Biran 2009; Tjasmadi 2008. I would like to thank Nadi Tofighian for sharing his findings on the 1897 screenings in Surabaya with me, which enabled me to trace Talbot's activities back to 1896 and further to unearth his tour route across the Indonesian archipelago. For more information on Talbot's Scenimatograph and other contemporary travelling exhibitors of moving pictures in the Indies, see forthcoming dissertation (Ruppin 2014).
  11. In the 1890s a "Native" servant would have earned between 16 and 18 guilders per month, making the cost of a ticket nearly a day's wage (Worsfold 1893, p. 29).
  12. Formerly Herenstraat, the street was originally a continuation of the Aloen-Aloen Straat going south. Pasar Besar itself, or the Great Market, moved to its new location at Pasar Turi in 1905.
  13. A copy of the 1929 film showing the heavy traffic on Pasar Besar, filmed by J.C. Umbgrove's East Java Bioscope, is held in the collection of the EYE Film Institute in Amsterdam.
  14. See Cohen (2006, pp. 381–90) for a list of important plays in the *komedi stambul* repertoire.
  15. The earliest known production was the famous Tan Koen Yauw company's 1929 production of *Njai Dasima* <[http://filmindonesia.or.id/movie/title/lf-n011-29-352520\\_njai-dasima-i](http://filmindonesia.or.id/movie/title/lf-n011-29-352520_njai-dasima-i)> (accessed 17 November 2012).
  16. According to interviews with members of the Indonesian elite who grew up in Batavia in the 1920s and 1930s, one self-proclaimed movie-going buff talked about the first time his father took him to a movie theatre, when he was eight years old and about being seated in the prestigious box seat (Mrázek 2010, p. 118).
  17. The opposite was true of Batavia, which experienced several fires in bamboo cinemas and therefore introduced stricter regulations on the construction of exhibition venues (*Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 15 October 1912). It is likely that other municipalities, Surabaya among them, were aware of these developments, as were exhibitors and spectators. Stories about cinema fires in other cities, whether in the Indies or in Europe and the U.S., were regularly reported in local newspapers.
  18. Sometimes spelled "Warden".
  19. Sometimes spelled "Dreste".
  20. Charles Jacob Umbgrove was born on 15 February 1868 in Lumajang and died on 16 July 1936 in Surabaya. His parents were Jan Louis Umbgrove and Fatima Loemadjang <<http://www.genealogieonline.nl/genealogie-baert-cornelis-kalshoven/I10231.php>> (accessed 20 December 2012).

21. The land was originally bought by the local firm of Maurice Wolff, which intended to set up a large shop building, but the idea was dropped and the property went to a consortium headed by Surabayan attorney Mr Feenstra (*Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad*, 1 October 1912). The consortium subsequently reached agreements with the East Java Trading Company and Glaser Automobile Trading Company allowing them to set their businesses up on the property (*ibid.*).
22. This article does not touch on gender issues, as it appears Surabaya venues did not practice separation between men and women, other than restricting occasional shows containing erotic content to men only. The research has nevertheless found several venues in other cities intended only for “Native” spectators, in which separation of the movie-going audience by gender did obtain. Moreover, in regions in which Islam played a more pronounced public role, such as parts of Sumatra, this separation appears to have occurred in mixed “European”/“Native” venues, at least in the “Native” section of the cinema. Tofighian has similarly concluded that the world of popular entertainment in Southeast Asia as a whole transitioned from the segregation of audiences at the turn of the twentieth century, with separate entertainment for “Europeans” and “Natives”, towards the “relatively [more] inclusive nature of cinema exhibitions” (2013, p. 198). He has not found evidence of the screen being used to separate “European” and “Native” spectators in any other location in the region. Nevertheless, in *The Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*, Stephen Bottomore (2005) has noted that this practice did also obtain in British Malaya (p. 591). And the prevalence of the ethnic demarcation of society in the Netherlands East Indies may have made the practice particularly widespread there.

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