

## Film Consumers in the Country: The Culture and Business of Small-Town and Rural Cinemagoing in the Netherlands

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At five o'clock on a Tuesday morning in August 1955, the Protestant choir of Kooten, a small village in rural Friesland, got on the bus for their annual outing. After a first halt at the naval base in Den Helder, the day trip continued through the dunes to Egmond aan Zee, where they stopped for lunch and enjoyed the beach. In the afternoon, the choir took a boat tour on the North Sea Canal, admiring the Hoogovens steel plant and the big sea ships. Via Haarlem, the bus reached its final destination: Amsterdam. Here the outing climaxed with a visit to the movies. As a leading Frisian newspaper explained: for most 'provincials' a day trip that did not end at the Tuschinki Theater or another cinema in the centre of Amsterdam 'would not be a proper getaway'.<sup>1</sup>

Were there no movie theatres in Friesland? Yes of course, but even at the height of the post-war boom in cinemagoing this rural and predominantly Protestant province in the north of the Netherlands counted in total only twenty-five commercial film outlets for a population of around 470,000. Moreover, many of these cinemas were only open two or three days a week and utilised multifunctional halls. For the inhabitants of Kooten, the nearest 'real' movie theatre was the Cinema Modern in Drachten 17 kilometres away. During the winter season, there were also 'film evenings' in Surhuisterveen (7.5 kilometres away), where two café-restaurants each had a hall that was used for screenings by religious, cultural and political associations, but also occasionally by a commercial film exhibitor. Going to the movies in Leeuwarden by bus, moped or car was another option. The Frisian capital (70,000 inhabitants in 1947) had three cinemas with a total seating capacity of 1,600. In addition, films were regularly programmed at the 1,000-seat Harmony hall.<sup>2</sup>

Was the market situation in Friesland unique? Not exactly, although there were rural regions in the Netherlands that were much better served as we will see. This said, the number of movie theatres per capita and seats per 1,000 inhabitants was much lower across the Netherlands than in other Western European countries. Even the country's three largest cities – Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague – had fewer cinemas than one might expect considering their population. In the early twentieth century, when the rapid proliferation of permanent cinemas created a revolution in public entertainment, the Dutch already lagged behind and until today, the number of screens remains lower than in most parts of Western Europe. Over the past decade, film historians working on the Netherlands have sought to understand the restrained development of the Dutch cinema market focusing on both economic and sociocultural aspects. As a result, we now begin to grasp the larger dynamics at work in Dutch



film history. Particularly striking are indeed the significant geographical differences in cinema attendance, not only between big cities, small towns and rural localities, but also depending on the dominant religion (Protestant/Catholic), secularisation and the degree of industrialisation.

This chapter opens with a historical overview of the film exhibition market in the Netherlands until the 1970s, followed by a selected review of the literature on the peculiarities of Dutch film culture. The insights from the existing historiography provide the context for a closer analysis of cinemagoing in the countryside in the Protestant north, focusing on the so-called Veenkoloniën, a peat district in the province of Groningen. This agro-industrial region stood out for its high number of film exhibition outlets and seats, which suggests a close resemblance with metropolitan film culture despite its predominantly rural character.

## THE EARLY EVOLUTION OF THE DUTCH FILM MARKET

In the late 1890s, itinerant showmen introduced the novelty of the moving pictures to large segments of the Dutch population. They toured the country with their mobile theatres during the fairground season (spring–autumn), travelling from one fair (*kermis*) to the other. During the winter season, some exhibitors set up a semi-permanent show in a concert hall, café-restaurant establishment or public meeting hall, typically in one of the larger provincial towns. Around 1900, moving pictures could also be enjoyed in *variété*-theatres as part of a mixed-bill programme. However, in the Netherlands, this type of entertainment venue remained a geographically limited outlet for the new film medium as one only found them in Amsterdam, The Hague and Rotterdam. Moreover, in social terms, variety theatres also had a limited reach because the shows were too expensive for the working classes.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, the fairs attracted a much broader and mixed public, although primarily coming from the lower segments of society. Hence, the cinema gained the reputation of a fairground entertainment (*kermisvermaak*), with negative connotations of lowbrow taste and working-class recreation.

The first permanent cinema opened in 1906, but in sharp contrast to neighbouring countries the diffusion was very slow.<sup>4</sup> By January 1908, the total number had only increased to seven permanent venues: Amsterdam (1), Rotterdam (2), The Hague (3) and Utrecht (1). Together these four cities had a population of 1.2 million people. It was not until 1910 that a period of substantial growth began, which was spurred by the outbreak of World War I. From 1915 onwards, ticket sales for all kinds of commercial entertainment rapidly increased due to a combination of war-related factors, notably a rise in youth wages, an influx of Belgian refugees and a shortage of coal, which prompted the Dutch to seek entertainment outside their cold homes.<sup>5</sup> The growing popularity of moviegoing eventually led to a construction boom of picture palaces, although again on a limited scale and geographically concentrated in the nation's largest cities. Cinema attendance continued to increase during most of the 1920s. In terms of the box office, 1930 was a top year with around 30 million tickets sold.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, compared with other European countries, the average attendance was much lower with 3.8 visits annually per capita in 1930, compared to 8 in Belgium, 20 in the United Kingdom and 7 in France.<sup>7</sup>



During the interwar years, Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague accounted for about half of the total ticket sales, whereas their combined population comprised just about a quarter of the Dutch population.<sup>8</sup> This figure suggests that on average people living in these three cities went twice as often to the cinema as those in the rest of the country. However, we must not forget the impact of tourists and other out-of-towners on the box office. For instance, in the 1930s, Amsterdam attracted some 8 million day-trippers per year and many of them went to one of the movie theatres, which were part of the city's attraction.<sup>9</sup> The same goes for the largest cities in the provinces and for market towns in the countryside. In 1930, only 12.7 per cent of the Dutch municipalities (137/1,078) had at least one commercial cinema and only 54 towns (5 per cent) had two cinemas or more.<sup>10</sup> This means that people who lived in and near the smaller towns and villages often had to travel quite far to go to the movies or else depended on the visit of a travelling showman and screenings in the non-commercial circuit (like film programmes set up by the Catholic Church). Moreover, in most small towns with a movie theatre, cinemagoing remained a weekend activity, with perhaps an additional screening on Monday or Wednesday. In 1932, less than half the film exhibitors claimed to operate on a daily basis and outside the main cities many movie theatres closed down entirely during the summer months.<sup>11</sup> Yet, these national averages hide important regional differences and disregard the fact that 1930 marked the beginning of a new era for small-town and rural audiences.

## THE POST-WAR CINEMA BOOM AND THE MODERNISATION OF THE COUNTRYSIDE

By the eve of World War II, the provision of cinemas outside the largest cities had already improved considerably. In 1938, the Central Bureau of Statistics reported that 109 cinemas (31.1 per cent of the total) were located in municipalities with 5,000–20,000 inhabitants and 24 in communities with less than 5,000 inhabitants (6.8 per cent).<sup>12</sup> Drawing primarily on statistics from the Netherlands Cinema Alliance (NBB), the national organisation of film exhibitors and distributors, Karel Dibbets convincingly argues that small-town and rural film exhibition showed a long and sustained growth from the early sound era onwards.<sup>13</sup> Between 1930 and 1960, the number of municipalities with a single cinema more than tripled from 83 to 263. By contrast, the number of municipalities with two or more cinemas increased by 'only' 37 per cent from 54 in 1930 to 74 in 1960. Perhaps even more significant, the number of cinemas in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague stabilised at around 75 venues as early as 1935 (with only a slight increase to 80 in the late 1950s). As Dibbets points out, the lack of building activity in the bigger cities (except in Rotterdam to replace the movie theatres which were destroyed during the air-raid of May 1940) suggests that the metropolitan market for cinemagoing had already reached saturation point in the 1930s.<sup>14</sup> The semi-rural segment of the market saw the strongest growth during and after the war. In fact, the German Occupation seems to have prompted the expansion of stationary film exhibition in the Dutch countryside. We witness an explosive growth of permanent movie theatres in larger villages and smaller towns between 1942 and 1944, especially in the northern and eastern provinces. This happened when the NBB



temporarily lost its cartel-like control over the market to the Film Guild of the *Kul-turkamer*.

After the Liberation, many of the new movie theatres in the country remained in business. The majority were qualified as 'B-cinemas', which means that they opened not more than two or three days per week or less, usually on the weekend (hence, the widespread expression 'weekend-cinema'). When not used for film screenings, these venues usually accommodated a wide range of activities, including theatrical performances and concerts (mostly by local amateurs), dances, gymnastics, political meetings and so on. Most B-cinemas were managed by family-owned regional chains with roots in the business of travelling cinema.<sup>15</sup> For instance, in the north, Johan Miedema Jr gained almost a monopoly in small-town and rural film exhibition in Friesland and parts of Drenthe, whereas his brother became a prominent player in Overijssel and Gelderland (see Van Oort in this volume). Similarly, from the 1920s until the late 1960s, the Abeln family programmed under the name Cinema Hollandia a dozen multifunctional halls in the peat districts around Winschoten and Emmen. The Abelns also owned a large hotel-café-restaurant complex with a multipurpose hall in Emmer-Compasuum and a movie theatre in nearby Klazienveen. Other small-town cinemas were set up by newcomers who ventured into film exhibition to profit from the post-war boom in demand.<sup>16</sup>

The late 1940s and 1950s were the heydays for Dutch film exhibitors. Ticket sales reached an all-time high of almost 90 million in 1946 with an average of 9.5 visits per capita. After the post-war euphoria, the demand shrank but remained much higher than before the war. Admissions fluctuated at around 64 million per year until 1959, when they began to freefall. By the early 1970s, the Dutch went to the movies about twice a year on average. Within less than a decade the film exhibition sector had lost two-thirds of its audience and 170 cinemas had gone out of business. Small, independently-owned venues and movie theatres that belonged to regional chains that operated outside the main urban centres were the main victims. Particularly hard hit were the weekend-cinemas. Their number decreased from 95 in 1960 to 35 in 1970, meaning that fewer and fewer people in the countryside had access to movies in their own neighbourhood. The remaining small-town and rural cinemas struggled to stay in business and many of them eventually closed their doors.<sup>17</sup> Those movie theatres that survived the crisis, which deepened even further during the 1980s, were typically owned by a large chain and located in major cities and in medium-sized towns with a regional function as a shopping and leisure centre.<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, as Dibbets points out, in the post-war era, the economic balance in Dutch film exhibition shifted from the country's biggest cities to 'the provinces' (*de provincie*), which by 1965 accounted for 60 per cent of the national ticket sales.<sup>19</sup> More importantly, in this period, small-town and village life in the countryside underwent profound transformations, notably due to the rapid mechanisation of agriculture, industrialisation (to create new jobs), new schools, better roads, increased mobility and access to electronic communication technologies – private telephones, radio and television. As part of this larger process of modernisation, which had its roots in the early twentieth century but greatly accelerated after 1945, the cinema and other media brought 'the city' to the towns and villages in the hinterland, making life in the countryside more attractive, especially for young people.



An interview with the mayor of a small town in northern Friesland gives us some insight into the changes of rural life in the post-war era. 'Wolvega is an agrarian centre, the pig market is one of the largest in the country,' the newspaper explained, 'but it also wants to become an industrial centre ... . A lot has happened in Wolvega since the war'. Indeed, between 1945 and 1955, the town grew from 4,702 to 5,675 inhabitants, attracting mostly workers from nearby villages but also from further away. New factories, improved roads, the opening of several high schools and a technical school contributed to this success. The housing shortage, and especially the scarcity of good houses, remained a major problem. Like elsewhere in the rural north, hovels were still quite common. Yet, what the town needed most urgently, according to the mayor, was a modern entertainment complex:

We are waiting impatiently for a theatre that is well-equipped for film screenings.

The municipality is willing to sponsor such a venue with an operational subvention, but we will also contribute 50,000 guilders to the building costs, which will be at least 200,000 guilders.

We are currently investigating how we can realise our plans and we are not pessimistic.<sup>20</sup>

The realisation of the mayor's ambitious plan took a few years, but in 1960 the brand-new 480-seat Asta Theater with a 9x5-metre screen opened its doors and replaced the old 200-seat multipurpose venue, which was turned into a dance hall. Commercial cinema was rarely embraced with the same enthusiasm as by the mayor of Wolvega, although the attitude towards the cinema relaxed in the post-war era because municipal authorities and the churches began to better understand the social, cultural and economic benefits of having a cinema in their town or village. Still, the modernity of the movies reached small-town and rural audiences at different times and in different ways, not only in Protestant regions but across the Dutch provinces. Perpetuating a long history of public suspicion against commercial entertainment, which had its roots in Dutch Calvinism but was widely shared across the denominational and political spectrum, the reception of permanent cinemas typically ranged from cautious approval to straightforward resistance depending on the religious and socioeconomic make-up of the population as well as on municipal politics. To understand how these forces shaped the geography of cinemagoing in the Netherlands, we will now look at cinema's position in the broader cultural landscape.

## DUTCH FILM CULTURE AND THE FORCES OF PILLARISATION

A central force in Dutch society for much of the twentieth century was the phenomenon of pillarisation (*verzuiling*), that is, the breakdown of society into Catholic, Protestant, socialist and liberal pillars. As Karel Dibbets points out, the development of film culture in the Netherlands was hampered by the fact that the cinema did not fit into the existing platforms of public life, which were painstakingly segregated along pillar lines. Each pillar had its own political parties, newspapers, social clubs, schools, etc., but attempts to set up pillar-specific infrastructures for cinema failed.<sup>21</sup>

The Catholics were the most active force in trying to control film exhibition. Their initial ambition had been to establish a national network of so-called 'white



cinemas', which would only show films that were formally approved by the Church. However, local attempts to open up Catholic movie theatres usually fell through because audiences preferred what was on offer in commercial cinemas. Moreover, the Catholic initiatives were repeatedly frustrated by the Netherlands Cinema Alliance. Catholic cinemas were seen as unfair competition for the film exhibition business because thanks to their not-for-profit status they were exempted from local amusement tax, while commercial counterparts had to pay up to 30 per cent tax on the box-office returns. After a successful boycott by the film distributors in the NBB, the strategy of the Catholic leadership shifted from full control towards a policy of containment. From the mid-1920s, they no longer opened their own cinemas, but sought instead to minimise the 'moving picture danger' by way of censorship, taxation and age restrictions.

In sharp contrast to the Catholics, the other pillars did not seek to control the film business. For a brief period during the 1910s, the socialists tried to open 'red cinemas', but these attempts failed. In line with their political ideology, the liberals left the cinema to the market. Finally, the Protestant pillar was quite segmented, but the different denominations – from the moderate *Hervormden* to the orthodox *Geformeerden* and including the Dutch Lutheran churches – all relied on Calvinism to define their relation with visual culture and entertainment. Hence, they shared a strongly negative attitude towards the film medium and even more so towards the cinema. As a result, like the Catholics, the Protestant pillar had considerable impact on the Dutch cinema market, but in a very different way.

In their research on Dutch film culture during the interwar years, John Sedgwick, Clara Pafort-Overduin and Jaap Boter convincingly argue that in predominantly Protestant regions and towns, the development of film culture was curbed both on the supply and the demand side. On the one hand, local authorities would be inclined to impose restrictive measures upon film exhibitors in line with the official policies of the Protestant parties to curtail cinemagoing. On the other hand, many Protestant citizens avoided cinematic entertainment themselves, especially when they belonged to an orthodox congregation.<sup>22</sup> However, after 1945, the general trend in the Protestant milieu changed to a cautious acceptance of the cinema, in particular from members of the *Hervormde kerk* (the largest denomination within Dutch Protestantism). These more moderate Protestants often retained a preference for non-commercial screenings of 'cultural' and 'educational' films, but they no longer rejected commercial film exhibition outright. In the late 1940s, the *Hervormde kerk* even began to organise 'introduction to film' courses and special screenings to elevate the taste of the Protestant cinemagoers and guide them in their choice of films. This top-down educational project and similar, more bottom-up initiatives (like the Christian Film Action) were mostly directed at small-town and rural audiences. As one of its leaders explained, 'in terms of film appreciation the countryside is still very much behind and needs to catch up', adding that in rural regions 'the church and cultural organisations can do a lot for all the beauty that the Creator had given to the medium film'.<sup>23</sup> In many respects, this new discourse on the cinema legitimised what was already happening at the grass-roots level. In the immediate post-war years, youngsters from conservative Protestant milieux often ignored their parents' advice to avoid the movies and attended commercial cinemas in increasing numbers.



However, within the Protestant milieu, the orthodox churches (*Gereformeerde kerken*) and other (ultra) conservative Protestant denominations remained fundamentally opposed to commercial cinema and the film medium itself was rejected in almost all its forms.<sup>24</sup> This traditionalist attitude, which persists until today in the Dutch Bible Belt, shaped the leisure practices of orthodox believers not only in rural regions but also in the city. A survey conducted in Amsterdam in the mid-1950s revealed that residents with an orthodox Protestant background (*Gereformeerden*) went to the movies less often than any other religious group.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, a national survey carried out in 1955 by the Central Bureau of Statistics shows a negative correlation between churchgoing and cinemagoing among Catholics as well as Protestants, but in no other denomination was the effect as strong as among the *Gereformeerden*. Respondents who were not affiliated with any denomination were the most frequent moviegoers.<sup>26</sup>

Because Protestants and Catholics were geographically clustered in the Netherlands, the business opportunities for commercial film exhibitors varied greatly across the provinces.<sup>27</sup> To give the two extremes: in the first half of the twentieth century, the overwhelmingly Catholic province of Limburg (98 per cent Roman Catholic) in the south had the highest density of cinemas, whereas one found hardly any movie theatres in the ultra-orthodox communities in the Dutch Bible Belt, an area which stretches from the northern part of the province of Overijssel in the north-east of the Netherlands to the province of Zeeland in the south-west. Religion also explained local variations in the provision of cinemas within the Protestant regions. In a preliminary study of film culture in Groningen and Friesland, I used census data to determine the demographic profile of the potential audience in small towns and villages. The first results suggest that the cinema flourished in municipalities in which the Protestant population was highly fragmented but the moderate *Hervormden* constituted a small majority (25–30 per cent) and formed political alliances with the Liberal Party. In these denominationally heterogeneous towns, the municipal authorities would not seek control over commercial entertainment on the basis of religious identity and moral concerns. On the other hand, when the conservative Protestant minority – often a cluster of several smaller orthodox congregations – was large enough to determine local politics, this had a negative impact upon the film exhibition business and cinema attendance.

## BEYOND PILLARISATION: CLASS

The historiography of Dutch society in the twentieth century tends to focus on the impact of pillarisation and its demise (depillarisation). Especially among cinema historians, class has been under researched as a deciding factor in everyday life.<sup>28</sup> From the perspective of class struggle, pillarisation is first and foremost a top-down hegemonic process imposed by the Protestant and Catholic sections of the bourgeois elite with the aim of structuring public life along mutually exclusive religious and ideological lines. Only the socialist pillar rallied its members on the ground of a shared class interest. The other pillars were, so to speak, 'vertically integrated' in socioeconomic terms. Catholic and Protestant leaders in particular sought to conceal class differences within their respective pillars, rallying their constituencies around a shared religious identity.



Whereas the political and cultural elite maintained close and friendly contact, the lower classes were encouraged to organise their social lives exclusively within the pillar and to keep apart from people who belonged to other pillars, thus reducing working-class agency outside the confines of the pillar.<sup>29</sup> For instance, well into the post-war era, Catholic workers were prohibited to vote for the Social Democratic Party or to join socialist unions under the penalty of excommunication. Instead they were expected to become members of a Catholic workmen's organisation.

While there is no doubt that working-class leisure patterns were firmly contained by the hegemonic forces of pillarisation, this does not mean that working-class audiences were not a force on the Dutch film market. Taking Rotterdam as an example, André van der Velden and I have argued that in the metropolitan context, cinema's working-class reputation hampered its integration into bourgeois cultural life.<sup>30</sup> To explore how the combined forces of class and religion shaped Dutch cinemagoing in the countryside, the remainder of the article looks at the dynamics of film exhibition in the Veenkoloniën, the peat district around Winschoten in eastern Groningen. In sharp contrast to Friesland, cinema attendance in this remote but semi-industrialised region in the extreme north-east of the Netherlands approached metropolitan levels even before World War II, making it an interesting case for cross-regional and urban-rural comparisons.

## SMALL-TOWN CINEMAS IN EASTERN GRONINGEN

Eastern Groningen was known for sharp social contrasts. A small number of rich farmers and factory owners constituted the local elite, which was known for its liberal ideals in politics and modern capitalist practices in farming and business. In a rather un-Calvinistic fashion, they showed off their affluence by building large estates in the town centres and alongside the main connecting roads in the area. By contrast, the large working-class population lived in poverty in small cottages or in row houses especially built for the working classes. Among (day) labourers the poverty was often extreme, especially during the winter when there was little work. Until the early 1900s, most workers were employed on the farms or as peat cutters in the high moors, which had been exploited since the seventeenth century as a source of cheap fuel. Initially most of the peat was cut by hand, but like the farm work, peat cutting was increasingly achieved by mechanical means in the early twentieth century. As a result, job opportunities declined, but this was partly compensated by a growing demand for factory workers in the emerging agro-industry (notably sugar beet refineries, strawboard factories and potato flour factories) and in shipbuilding, which developed along the canals that had been dug to facilitate the large-scale exploitation of peat. The area was predominantly Protestant in religious terms and progressive in political terms, either liberal or socialist depending on class. Some rural communities were strongholds of communism.

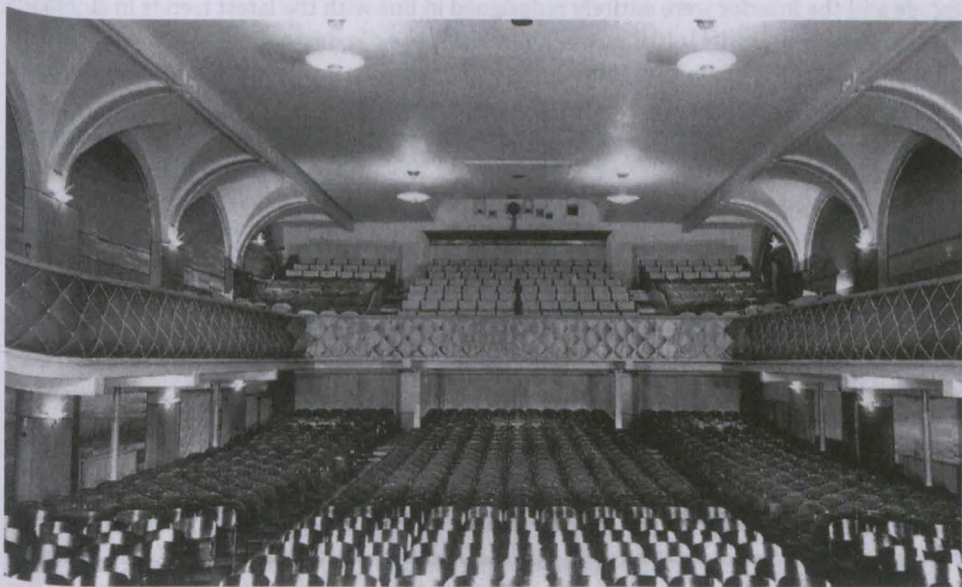
Cinema culture in rural Groningen has been largely ignored by Dutch film historians.<sup>31</sup> The main reason for this is that there were very few purpose-built movie theatres, so it seems at first sight that the region followed the Bible-Belt pattern. But this is not the case. In most municipalities, the policy on commercial entertainment was marked by a tolerant *laissez-faire* attitude. The cinema was welcome as long as film



exhibitors respected local building codes and fire regulations stipulated to guarantee the physical safety of the public. Already during the 1920s and 1930s, permanent cinemas flourished in Winschoten (13,342 inhabitants in 1930 according to the census), Stadskanaal (9,659 inhabitants), Veendam (13,383 inhabitants) and the conglomeration Hoogezand-Sappemeer (11,429 and 6,504 inhabitants).

A closer look at Winschoten, the largest and oldest town in the Groningen peat district, gives us a more detailed insight into the history of small-town film culture in the region. In the late nineteenth century, the new film medium infiltrated the area via the fairs. More regular screenings started as early as 1911 in the theatre of Hotel Wisseman (later Dommering), after the owner had installed a steam engine to generate electricity in order to include movies in the standard entertainment programme of plays, concerts and other live performances. Hotel Wisseman was a multifunctional entertainment complex, the largest in the region, but not untypical in its cultural and social function. In addition to the 1,000-seat auditorium, which dated from 1899, the building included a ballroom with a small stage, a billiard room, a reading room, a café-restaurant, and a large garden for entertainment in the summer and winter (ice-skating).

It was not long before the success of Bioscoop Wisseman attracted competitors. From 1912 to 1916, there was a small makeshift movie theatre on the main street, which began under the name Metropole but soon switched to Bioscoop Modern, a name that might be deemed more appropriate for a small-town cinema. During the mid-1910s, Hotel Smid also programmed films in its hall (estimated seating capacity 300), although this does not seem to have been a weekly activity. More serious competition for Wisseman came from a modern, purpose-built 700-seat movie theatre, which opened its doors in late 1915. The new Scala Theater was equipped with the latest conveniences and with luxuries thereto unknown for most people in Winschoten. This is 'a venue which one only sees in big cities', boasted the local newspaper with obvious pride. The journalist described the



Main auditorium, Hotel Wisseman-Dommering, Winschoten (Photo courtesy of [www.nazatendevries.nl](http://www.nazatendevries.nl))





Scala Theater, Winschoten, around 1918

new theatre in great detail, fascinated by everything modern. Thus, we learn that the façade was brightly lit with two 'half-Watt lamps each with 3,000 candle power' and that the lobby was 'bathing in a sea of light'. This must have produced indeed a stunning effect on audiences in a town that did not yet have electricity.<sup>32</sup> In 1927, the Scala was bought by Hollemans, a film exhibitor with roots in the fairground trade, who was expanding his travelling business with a small chain of permanent cinemas. The new owner celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the Scala with a total makeover of the building. Both the façade and the interior were entirely redesigned in line with the latest trends in cinema architecture. Echoing its initial reception in 1915, the discourse about the town's new 'film palace' implied again that cultural life in Winschoten was in no way inferior to the big city thanks to its 'hyper-modern metropolitan theatre'.<sup>33</sup>

As far as the film programme was concerned, there was little difference between the two cinemas in Winschoten during the 1920s and 1930s. Like elsewhere in the Netherlands, Hollywood movies constituted the mainstay of the fare, with German films coming second. Tickets in both theatres showed a wide price range (from 15 to 75 cents in the 1930s), which suggests that they aimed at people from all strata of society, rather than favouring a particular social segment of the audience. I did not find any evidence that educational films were programmed on Sundays or Christian holidays in respect of the conservative Protestant minority. In fact, Sunday seemed to have been the best day at the box office with more screenings than on Saturday. The main difference between the two venues was that the Scala Theater was almost exclusively used for commercial screenings, whereas Wisseman remained a multifunctional space. On Thursday nights and occasionally also on other days, the main auditorium was used for professional theatre and music, but also for amateur performances and special events organised by local associations. The Hotel Wisseman complex was 'multipurpose' in a political sense too: whoever was willing to pay the bill and respect the furniture could rent the premises. During the interwar years, political



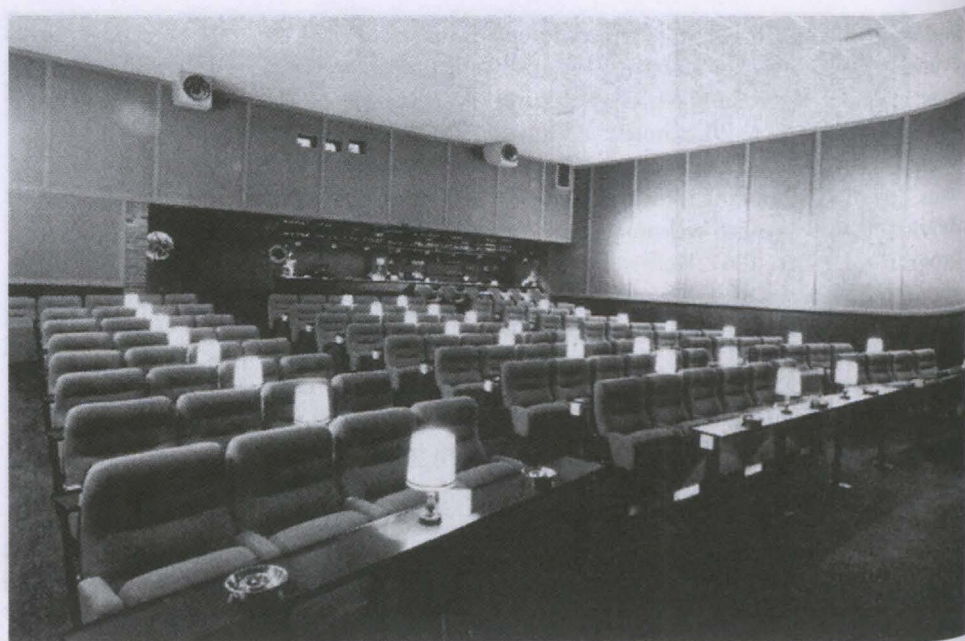
parties and clubs from right to left, including the communists, rented the large hall for big events, especially during elections. The smaller ballroom was also used for political gatherings, although Hotel Smid remained the most popular meeting hall in town.

Film exhibition in Winschoten and surroundings was barely interrupted by World War II except in the first and final months. Whereas Jewish exhibitors lost their businesses and lives, the Dutch film exhibition sector as a whole profited from the Occupation as the movies provided a much-welcomed escape from wartime anxieties. What changed was the programme. In late 1941, Hollywood films were banned by the Film Guild of the newly appointed *Kulturkammer*. Henceforth, the schedule consisted of a mix of German, Austrian and Italian films, with sometimes an older Dutch production. In May 1945, when the nation celebrated the end of the war, Bioscoop Wisseman marked the occasion by immediately switching back to American movies. Its week-long Liberation programme started with Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire starring in *Swing Time* (1936), followed by the adventure film *Gunga Din* (1939) and the musical comedy *High Flyers* (1937).<sup>34</sup>

During the post-war boom in cinemagoing, Hotel Dommering-Wissemann (renamed after its new owner) and the Scala Theater increased the number of screenings to satisfy the high demand. Hollywood dominated the screen again, but German films continued to be popular, especially teen-pics with idols like Conny Froboess and Peter Kraus. In the 1960s, as cinema attendance rapidly declined, the core business of Dommering shifted from movies to Dixieland and rock-and-roll concerts by local bands, with occasionally a widely-publicised performance by a minor British pop star. Dommering did well with this new business strategy of targeting a teenage audience as it integrated the venue in a youth subculture that was increasingly centred on music and dancing. But it closed abruptly in 1967 after the main auditorium burned down. Without competition and with a growing regional clientele thanks to increased car ownership and the closing of weekend-cinemas, the Scala Theater survived the crisis and remained open until 1991, when its owner moved into a brand new multiscreen cinema.<sup>35</sup>

The majority of the small-town theatres in the north-east managed to remain in business well into the late twentieth century and some until this day. Key to their survival is that they were locally embedded, family-owned businesses and part of small regional chains that valued independence and service to the community more than sheer profit. Like their parents, the second and third generation tried to keep up with the latest trends in film exhibition, usually in the footpath of the Abeln family who always seemed ahead of the competition. All chains in the region cut back their travelling business and divided their permanent cinemas into multiscreen theatres to give their customers a choice of films. Programming practices were also oriented towards diversification. For instance, the Smoky cinema in Stadskanaal accommodated the local *ciné-club* once a week so that its members could watch art-house and political films in better conditions than at the local youth centre. In the late 1970s, *ciné-clubs* were springing up in many places in the countryside, often set up by left-wing youngsters in protest against the low-brow commercial fare in the regular cinemas, where soft porn, karate movies and other exploitation genres helped to maintain the cash flow.<sup>36</sup> Innovation came in the form of the 'service cinema' concept, which was introduced by the Abelns in 1977.<sup>37</sup> At any point during the show and with a just push on the service button, patrons in their theatre in Klazienaveen could call for a waiter who would serve drinks and snacks. The auditorium was equipped with





Service cinema Smoky I, Stadskanaal (Source: *Film*, 1 May 1983)

little tables, adorned with cosy twilight lamps and ashtrays, thus mimicking a living-room setting. By the early 1980s, most cinemas in eastern Groningen, including Smoky 1 & 2 in Stadskanaal, had switched to the new format to enhance customer experience. It proved a quite successful strategy in the fight against the attraction of the television set and VCR.

## WEEKEND-CINEMAS AND TRAVELLING EXHIBITION

During the interwar period, the threshold for operating a successful permanent cinema was a population of around 10,000 in eastern Groningen. Yet many smaller towns and villages in the region already enjoyed more or less regular commercial film screenings and did not have to wait for the annual fair. Travelling exhibitors served smaller communities like Oude Pekela, Bellingwolde, Vlagwedde, Ter Apel, Beerta, Musselkanaal and Finsterwolde, where they worked in close collaboration with local hotel-café-restaurant owners. Initially, they travelled with their projector and films, but by the early sound era, many multipurpose halls in the region had permanent projection booths. When the local demand was high enough, the make shift cinema would operate on Friday night, Saturday and Sunday matinees and evenings, and in the winter often also on Monday and/or Wednesday evening. In other villages and towns, screenings would be less frequent, at best once a week, but more commonly twice a month. These minor outlets would still be served by a projectionist who would bring along his own equipment. As mentioned before, this interrupted pattern of film exhibition was the standard outside the major cities and towns in the Netherlands. However, cinemagoing in the villages in eastern Groningen already flourished before the war, whereas in most rural regions it was a post-war phenomenon.





Café-Restaurant Schot with the Flora Bioscoop, Ter Apel. Note the film posters and other publicity materials behind the windows to inform potential customers about the programme



Aerial view of the Café-Restaurant Schot and Flora Bioscoop, Ter Apel, with an old grain mill on the upper left (Source: [www.oudterapel.nl](http://www.oudterapel.nl). Photo courtesy G. Kanninga)

Moreover, the weekend-cinemas in the Veenkoloniën were much larger than elsewhere in the Dutch countryside.<sup>38</sup> For instance, the Flora Bioscoop adjacent to Café-Restaurant Schot in Ter Apel had 550 seats for a population of 3,712 inhabitants (1930 census). In



Musselkanaal (5,152 inhabitants) movies had been shown in a large multifunctional hall on weekends and Wednesday nights since the mid-1920s. In 1942, the village got a brand-new multifunctional entertainment complex (De IJzeren Klap) with a *bioscoop-theater* that accommodated up to 600 patrons. Surviving box-office figures from this new cinema indicate that attendance came close to the national average despite the rural surroundings and strong presence of orthodox Protestant churches. Profiting from the extremely high demand for entertainment after the Liberation, it did booming business attracting 60,725 visitors in 1946 and 86,294 in 1947. In the late 1950s, the cinema sold an average of 36,000 movie tickets annually, peaking to 44,835 admissions in 1961.<sup>39</sup>

Until 1945, most weekend-cinemas in eastern Groningen were set up in privately owned buildings. After the war, many municipalities in the northern provinces invested in the construction of multifunctional village halls as part of their modernisation programme and with the idea that they could thus ensure life in the countryside remained attractive, especially for young people. Liveability was not the only motive. The cinema generated income (via the amusement tax) and public-private partnerships put the town council in the position to have a say in the programming. Usually the municipality would sublet the venue to one of the regional chains, which would then integrate the new weekend-cinema into their travelling circuit, offering the same commercial fare as in their permanent theatres. It seems that most town councils did not interfere with the programming or at least not in too explicit a way, except in Finsterwolde where Soviet films and political documentaries dominated the programme at the 'people's house'. This led to complaints because, at the opening in 1955, the communist council had promised that it would be a 'cultural centre' for everyone – 'farm hands and factory workers, tradespeople and farmers, the elderly and the young' – and regardless of their political views or religion.<sup>40</sup> While the situation in Finsterwolde was rather exceptional, the screening of political and explicitly class-oriented films had a long tradition in the region. From the 1920s onwards, both the social democrats and the communists used the cinema for propaganda. Typically, the film was part of a larger programme, which included speeches by prominent party members, communal singing of political songs and some kind of 'Agit-prop' stage show.<sup>41</sup> For instance, in February 1937, some 450 people turned up in a local café-hall in Nieuwe Pekela to listen to 'comrade Beuzemaker', the chairman of the Communist Party and watch the Soviet film *Lyubov i nenavist* (*Love and Hate*, 1935).<sup>42</sup> Newspaper evidence suggests that by the 1930s, such left-wing cultural events had become an integral part of social life in the Veenkoloniën and that they only began to decline in popularity in the 1960s.

## CONCLUSION

How to explain this lively film culture in eastern Groningen and the high provision of cinema seats, far above the national average?<sup>43</sup> If we look at the demographic make-up of the population, three factors seem to have positively influenced the business opportunities for film exhibitors and the demand for motion-picture entertainment in Winschoten and surroundings.

First, among the Protestant population, those who belonged to the moderate Reformed Church (*Hervormden*) were in the majority. The rest of the religious landscape was extremely fragmented with many independent Protestant congregations (for instance,



Stadskanaal had over fifteen Protestant churches), with some Catholics and Jews. In addition, the census reveals very high rates of secularisation – typically around one-third of the population, more than twice the national average (14.4 per cent in 1930).<sup>44</sup> Second, a considerable part of the working-class population in the northern peat districts consisted of relatively recent migrants who had come to work on the farms, in the peat industry or factories. Social coherence in the new towns and villages that had emerged with the peat industry was less pronounced than in old farming communities and its inhabitants seem to have been less sensitive to pressures from the pillarised society. In his study of unschooled workers in Groningen and Friesland, sociologist Jan Haveman described the lower segments of the working class in the Veenkoloniën as a proletariat that rejected vested authorities, tending to left-wing extremism in politics and membership of sectarian Protestant denominations if they were religious.<sup>45</sup> Third, voting patterns reflected the socioeconomic profiles of the population and the tendency towards secularisation with the Social Democratic Party and the liberals dominating local politics. This political constellation translated into a tolerant attitude towards commercial film exhibition. The local authorities did not seek to regulate commercial entertainment on ideological grounds. Licences were granted provided that the owners complied with safety regulations and building codes. Sunday shows were not an issue, neither were public screenings of Soviet and other communist films. Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), which caused great concern among Dutch mayors and was prohibited in many Dutch towns, was shown without any interference by the local authorities in towns like Veendam and Winschoten.<sup>46</sup>

That said, in some municipalities in eastern Groningen, we find no commercial film venues before World War II. This situation, which is very similar to that in Friesland and other rural regions in the Protestant provinces, requires a case study in itself. However, a first examination of census data and election results suggests that the cinema did not play a role in public life when conservative Protestants formed a significant minority, in which position they not only influenced everyday life but also local politics. In such contexts, at least until 1940, the mayor often refused to grant a licence for commercial film exhibition or he would prohibit shows on Sunday – the best day at the box office. This dependence on the attitude of municipal authorities may explain why film exhibitors in the Veenkoloniën hesitated to invest in the construction of purpose-built movie theatres: the outcome of the next election could ruin their business almost overnight. By operating in existing multifunctional halls and continuing the ambulant cinema mode of the early days (except that only the projectionist and films travelled), they reduced the risk associated with doing business in an area in which a considerable segment of the population remained opposed to the film medium or at least to commercial film screenings.

After the war, film exhibition business boomed all over eastern Groningen. Many halls that had been served occasionally by a travelling cinema were turned into weekend-cinemas, while existing weekend-cinemas switched to daily screenings. Even among the ultra-conservative Protestants, resistance to cinemagoing seemed to have lessened because we see new venues opening in localities where there was no evidence of commercial film exhibition in the 1920s and 1930s. In the post-war period, the religious milieu no longer had such a great influence on how people spent their free time. Peers rather than parents determined leisure preferences. Consequently, youth culture – in mainstream and subcultural forms – became the dominant force with which the film exhibitors had to reckon. In the margins of mainstream film culture, a politicised



working-class cinema culture developed in some multifunctional halls, notably in the communist municipalities and later also in the milieu of the ciné-clubs. However, in sharp contrast to the reception of the cinema among the metropolitan middle and upper classes, I found no evidence that the cinema was considered a specifically working-class entertainment in eastern Groningen, neither before nor after the war. In this rural context, its identity was first and foremost defined in terms of its relation to modernity and the modernisation of the countryside. The cinema was perceived as an urban or even metropolitan institution and experience. Depending on ideological orientation and religious affiliation, this close association with a modern, urbanised lifestyle could have positive or negative connotations, with at the extreme end the unqualified condemnation of cinemagoing by the ultra-conservative orthodox Protestants.

Finally, a crucial aspect of film exhibition in the Veenkoloniën is the resilience with which the local chains adapted to changing market conditions. Although more research is needed to establish the exact economic dynamics of rural and small-town film exhibition in the Netherlands, as a group the film exhibitors in the peat district seem to have fared better than their colleagues elsewhere in the Dutch countryside. Of course, they could continue to build upon what had already been established in the interwar years, but they also cautiously avoided taking big financial risks despite booming business in the immediate post-war era. Most new theatres in the region were multifunctional community centres built with public funding rather than private money. The local chains renovated their venues, but did not seek expansion. Without exception the cinemas in the Groningen peat district remained small, independent 'pop-and-mom' businesses and the families continued to combine permanent cinemas with the travelling film business until the weekend-cinemas were no longer profitable. In sum, the operational flexibility which had once been imposed upon these countryside film exhibitors by the specific conditions of the 'Protestant market' offered a long-term advantage because they could adapt the scale and scope of their businesses quite easily to the shrinking demand when cinema attendance began to decline.

## NOTES

Parts of this chapter, in particular the historiographical overview of the debate about Dutch film culture, were published in an earlier version in Judith Thissen, 'Understanding Dutch Film Culture: A Comparative Approach', *Alphaville Journal of Film and Screen Media* vol. 6 (Winter 2013) ([www.alphavillejournal.com](http://www.alphavillejournal.com)).

1. 'Amsterdam betekent voor "provincialen" meestal: Artis, rondvaarten en plezier', *Leeuwarder Courant*, 12 March 1955, p. 13.
2. Information based on the Cinema Context Database ([www.cinemacontext.nl](http://www.cinemacontext.nl)).
3. Ivo Blom, 'De eerste filmgigant in Nederland. De snelle verovering van Nederland door Pathé', *Jaarboek mediageschiedenis* vol. 8 (1997), p. 131.
4. For a comparison with Belgium, see Guido Convents and Karel Dibbets, 'Verschiedene Welten. Kinokultur in Brüssel und in Amsterdam 1905–1930', in Corinna Müller and Harro Segeberg (eds), *Kinoöffentlichkeit/Cinema's Public Sphere (1895–1920)* (Marburg: Schüren Verlag, 2008), pp. 148–54.
5. André van der Velden and Judith Thissen, 'Spectacles of Conspicuous Consumption: Picture Palaces, War Profiteers and the Social Dynamics of Moviegoing in the Netherlands, 1914–1922', *Film History* vol. 22 (2010), pp. 453–62.



6. Karel Dibbets, 'Het bioscoopbedrijf tussen twee wereldoorlogen', in Karel Dibbets and Frank van der Maden (eds), *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse film en bioscoop tot 1940* (Houten: Het wereldvenster, 1986), p. 245.
7. Karel Dibbets, 'Het taboe van de Nederlandse filmcultuur: Neutraal in een verzuild land', *Tijdschrift voor mediageschiedenis* vol. 9 no. 2 (2006), p. 46 (Table 1).
8. Dibbets, 'Het bioscoopbedrijf tussen twee wereldoorlogen', pp. 244–5.
9. J. Nikerk, 'Onderzoek naar de economische betekenis van het ontspanningsleven in Amsterdam', *Tijdschrift voor economische geografie* vol. 34 no. 6 (1943), pp. 84–7.
10. Karel Dibbets, 'Bioscoopketens in Nederland: Economische concentratie en geografische spreiding van een bedrijfstak, 1928–1977'. Master's thesis, University of Amsterdam (1980), pp. 24–5 (Table 3.1.1).
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 17 and 24 (Table 3.1.1).
12. Centraal bureau voor de statistiek, *Statistiek van het bioscoopwezen 1939, waarin mede opgenomen gegevens omtrent de filmkeuring* (The Hague, 1938), p. 9.
13. Dibbets, 'Bioscoopketens in Nederland', pp. 18–19.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 19. There was enough overcapacity to absorb the increased demand in the immediate post-war years. A comparison between ticket availability and actual ticket sales in 1938 in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague shows that on average only one-third of the seats were occupied. *Statistiek van het bioscoopwezen 1939*, p. 18 (Table 6).
15. Dibbets, 'Bioscoopketens in Nederlands', pp. 43, 49.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 58. See also, Jan Mooibroek, *Bewegende beelden – witte doeken. Van kermistent tot bioscooptheater Stadskanaal* (Stadskanaal: Streekhistorisch centrum, 1998).
17. Dibbets, 'Bioscoopketens in Nederland', p. 73.
18. The decline in attendance came to a halt in the 1970s, thanks to a series of Dutch box-office hits, including *Blue Movie* (1971) and *Turks Fruit* (1973). Between 1980 and 1985, cinema attendance plunged again by half to stabilise at an average of one visit per year for another decade. A slow rise set in during the late 1990s due to the combined effect of the opening of multiplexes and a boom in Dutch film production. See Judith Thissen, 'Les dynamiques historiques de l'exploitation des films en salle aux Pays-Bas', in Laurent Creton and Kira Kitsopanidou (eds), *Les salles de cinéma: Enjeux, défis et perspectives* (Paris: Armand Colin/Recherches, 2013), pp. 47–51.
19. Dibbets, 'Bioscoopketens in Nederland', pp. 72, 74. 'De "Provincie"', *Film*, 1 November 1965, p. 3.
20. *Leeuwarder courant*, 11 June 1955, p. 5.
21. Dibbets, 'Het taboe van de Nederlandse filmcultuur'.
22. John Sedgwick, Clara Pafort-Overduin and Jaap Boter, 'Explanations for the Restrained Development of the Dutch Cinema Market in the 1930s', *Enterprise and Society* (2012), pp. 657–58.
23. A. R. van Dijk, quoted in 'Platteland heeft kans film in goede banen te leiden: Voorlichting en vorming zijn daarbij van groot belang', *Leeuwarder courant*, 20 April 1959, p. 6.
24. Exceptions were made for scientific films, documentaries that gave a purely photographic representation of reality or historical events (without the use of professional actors), animation films and fairy tales (again on the condition that no professional actors were used). Jan Hes, *In de ban van het beeld. Een filmsociologisch-godsdiensociologische verkenning* (Assen: van Gorcum, 1972), p. 94. See also, P. Jongeling, 'Kanttekeningen: Het voorzichtig verdrag', *Gereformeerd gezinsblad*, 30 July 1948, p. 198.
25. Sedgwick *et al.*, 'Explanations for the Restrained Development of the Dutch Cinema Market in the 1930s', pp. 26–7.
26. *Vrijtijdsbesteding in Nederland, Winter 1955/1956* (Zeist: Centraal bureau voor de statistiek, 1957), vol. 3, quoted in Hes, *In de ban van het beeld*, p. 165.



27. Hans Knippenberg, *De religieuze kaart van Nederland: Omvang en geografische spreiding van de godsdienstige gezindten vanaf de Reformatie tot heden* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1992); Jaap Boter and Clara Pafort-Overduin, 'Compartmentalisation and Its Influences on Film Distribution and Exhibition in the Netherlands, 1934–1936', in Michael Ross *et al.* (eds), *Digital Tools in Media Studies. Analysis and Research. An Overview* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2009), pp. 55–68.
28. Judith Thissen and André van der Velden, 'Klasse als factor in de Nederlandse filmgeschiedenis. Een eerste verkenning', *Tijdschrift voor mediageschiedenis* vol. 12 no. 1 (2009), pp. 50–72.
29. Arend Lijphart, *Verzuiling, pacificatie en kentering in de Nederlandse politiek* (Amsterdam: J. H. de Bussy, 1982).
30. In schematic terms, the argument goes as follows: in the big cities, large segments of the middle classes stayed away from the cinema or at least did not embrace the new entertainment like their counterparts in neighbouring countries because the social experience of the cinema did not conform to vested norms of bourgeois respectability. Van der Velden and Thissen, 'Spectacles of Conspicuous Consumption'.
31. There is however a decent overview compiled by local amateur historian Jan Mooibroek, *Bewegende beelden*, which I used for my case study in addition to census data, newspapers and the academic historiography on the region.
32. *Winschoter courant*, 29 October 1915, quoted in Mooibroek, *Bewegende beelden*, pp. 48–9.
33. Mooibroek, *Bewegende beelden*, p. 50.
34. Advertisements Bioscoop Wissemann, *Winschoter courant*, 15 and 24 May 1945.
35. The Hollywood was built with the support of the municipality. It had three screens and a total seating capacity of 335. A fourth screen was added in 1996, bringing the total seating capacity to 440. It remained in business until 2008. Since then the nearest commercial cinema is Smoky (three screens) in Stadskanaal, which is owned and operated by the Abeln family.
36. 'Het Groninger filmcircuit', *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, 20 October 1978, p. 35.
37. Mooibroek, *Bewegende beelden*, p. 117; 'Nieuwe bioscopen: Smoky 1 en 2 – Stadskanaal', *Film*, 1 May 1983, p. 8.
38. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics, around 80 per cent of the cinemas in communities with less than 5,000 inhabitants had less than 400 seats. *Statistiek van het bioscoopwezen 1939*, p. 24 (Table 9).
39. Mooibroek, *Bewegende beelden*, p. 106.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 128; 'In Finsterwolde volksgebouw geopend', *Waarheid*, 18 April 1955, p. 3.
41. See for instance, 'Met den rooden auto op reis', *Het volk*, 22 and 26 February, 6 March 1926, p. 1.
42. See for instance, 'Twee uitstekende vergaderingen in het Hoge Noorden', *De tribune*, 17 February 1937, p. 4.
43. For instance, in Winschoten the provision was one seat per fourteen persons, compared to the national average of one seat for forty-eight inhabitants (1930s), whereas in the villages in the Veenkoloniën the provision was even higher (six to ten inhabitants per seat).
44. Mostly these were former members of the *Hervormde Kerk*. See Knippenberg, *De religieuze kaart van Nederland*, p. 230. In communist strongholds like Finsterwolde and Beerta over half of the population reported no religious affiliation (census 1930).
45. Jan Haveman, *De ongeschoolde arbeider. Een sociologische analyse* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1952), pp. 143–4. Peat workers in particular were widely seen as a subcultural community that lived economically and socially on the margins of society, clustering in certain streets and neighbourhoods.
46. 'De Potemkin film', *De tribune*, 10 December 1926.