

# Identifying Cinema Cultures and Audience Preferences: A Comparative Analysis of Audience Choice and Popularity in Three Medium-Sized Northern European Cities in the Mid-1930s

## Abstract

For this study we have adopted a comparative approach to better understand the regularities and differences of cinema markets and cultures. Our subject is the film preferences and choices of audiences in the cities of Ghent (Belgium), Utrecht (Netherlands) and Bolton (United Kingdom) in 1934 and 1935. Saturday, January 5th, 1935 serves as a pivotal date and the starting point for analysis of the film programming data of these three cities. Our findings show that by adopting a comparative approach it is possible to detect 'unique' titles that reflect the peculiarities of the local film culture. The data confirms that audiences in Bolton, Ghent, and Utrecht were attracted strongly to films originating in their own or neighbouring countries, particularly if they contained elements of song and dance.

**KEYWORDS:** film popularity, film preferences, cinema cultures

## Introduction

The cinema culture of the 1930s has been the subject of much recent research. Lies Van de Vijver and Daniel Biltereyst examine the balance of American versus European film screenings in Ghent and the social significance of this, both in terms of language and broader class/sectarian divisions in the city.<sup>1</sup> John Sedgwick, Clara Pafort-Overduin and Jaap Boter identify and explain the peculiarities of the Dutch cinema market by comparing it to that of the UK and in doing this conjecture reasons for the restrained development of the Dutch market.<sup>2</sup> Joseph Garncarz has collected an impressive quantity of secondary data that allows him to compare multiple European national film markets.<sup>3</sup> Finally, Sedgwick has co-authored investigations into the American, Australian and British markets concerning the distribution of films and film popularity during this decade.<sup>4</sup> Taken as a whole, the research suggests that while the shape and function of cinema markets can be explained through economic principles, audience preferences as manifest in the listings of the most popular films is very much a cultural phenomenon.

In this paper we add to the knowledge of film preferences by taking a comparative approach based on local film programming data.

Central to the experience of cinemagoing during the period of this investigation was a succession of films, which appeared and then disappeared from the screens of cinemas as part of a well-practiced and understood routine. For the most part films were enjoyed but not perceived as being particularly special, having a short exhibition life. Such films stand in contrast with a much smaller body of films that were special in that they attracted huge audiences and were commonly regarded as 'must see': films that were so popular with audiences that as 'giants' they specifically contributed to cinema culture as well as in some way being a reflection of it. These films can be identified by their position on the far right of the right tail of the statistical distribution of revenues generated by audiences at the box-office. They were giants in relation to the average. Although from year to year the films that made up the distribution were always different, this statistical pattern was not. It constituted an ever-present phenomenon: an empirical regularity.

This paper makes clear that this phenomenon can be observed in the mid-1930s in the three cities of comparable size that form the subject of this study – Bolton, Ghent and Utrecht, with populations respectively of 180,000, 170,000 and 160,000 inhabitants. However, the paper also makes clear that many of the films that were 'giants' in 1934-1935 were not only particular to time but also place; meaning they were not shared. Through their choice behaviour, audiences in each city established a series of 'hit' films made by domestic production companies that were not common to the audiences in the other two cities. The earlier mentioned studies of British, Dutch, European and Australian Cinema during the same period uncovers a similar pattern in that some domestically produced films were perceived as being special but only in their own market, while remaining largely unseen in other territories. Thus, it would appear that audiences exhibited a cultural preference for films that were home grown, or from territories that bordered culturally with them (German films in the Netherlands, French and German films in Belgium, British films in Australia), and were largely indifferent towards films made elsewhere. The exception to this rule, of course, was Hollywood, whose films were able to transcend what business historians term the 'liability of foreignness'.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the major studios of Hollywood not only produced and distributed a sizeable proportion of films screened in these territories but also contributed many of the 'hits' of the day: in this, it is apparent that Hollywood films were integral to cinema culture, not just in these cities and countries, but everywhere.

Comparative work on Dutch and British cinema during the mid-1930s identifies clear differences in the kinds of films Dutch and British audiences enjoyed, pointing to particular cultural preferences. Thus, during the mid-1930s the Dutch Top 10 comprised humorous song and dance films with a distinctive class perspective that depicted middle and working/lower class characters in a more sympathetic light than those emanating from the upper classes. Also, female characters in these films challenged confessional social norms. In contrast, the British Top 10 contained many films that had historical dimensions, dealing in various combinations with war, adventure, biography and the British Empire.<sup>6</sup>

In comparing the films that audiences saw in the cities of Bolton, Ghent and Utrecht in the mid-1930s, this study contributes to the literature on transnational cinema. In mapping out the networks through which films were distributed, it is clear that a symbiotic relationship exists between the supply side of the industry (distribution and exhibition) and the demand side (audience preferences) that resulted in audiences getting to choose between films. Our focus is the film preferences of audiences in these three cities. In doing this, attention is drawn to the principal characteristics of those films that proved to be most popular, as well as the national origin of the films supplied and consumed. Combined these findings illustrate differences in the cinema cultures of the three cities.

Our discussion begins with the exposition of an analytical framework for understanding the choice behaviour of audiences. This is followed by an account of our methods for establishing audience preferences based upon the POPSTAT Index of film popularity. Derived from the film programmes of cinemas in each of the three cities our findings are described through a series of tables and charts. In this, attention is drawn to the peculiar institutional arrangements prevalent in each of the cities. Finally, in the conclusion, we maintain that a comparative approach to film cultures allows us to better understand the exceptions and the regularities of different cinema markets and cultures in the mid-1930s.

### **The matter of choice**

That audiences make choices is implicit to understanding cinema as an economic and cultural form within a market economy. Choice encompasses many facets. Shaped by past social, institutional, legal and economic arrangements, different societies face different possibilities and make different choices.<sup>7</sup> The films that are screened both reflect and affect these cultures. 'New' audiences position themselves towards these films and find them strange, funny, interesting, abject, not worth the money, exciting or any other qualification one can think of. We can get an understanding of what audiences liked by analysing the choices they made.

However, understanding and explaining the choices made by historical audiences is not an easy task. Theoretically speaking, as choices are inherently personal there can be as many explanations as there are filmgoers. One of the specificities of film consumption is that when buying a ticket, consumers can never be certain that their expectations will be met. They necessarily incur risk. Once the choice is made and the money spent, the experience that results, is irreversible. Rationally, depending on their personal degree of appetite for risk, film consumers will try to make the right choice – a choice in which high expectations are formed, met, or even exceeded – by gathering information about the films available to them.<sup>8</sup> It is this part of the decision process that the marketing departments of distributors are so interested in: their function is to secure as large an audience as possible by providing persuasive information to potential consumers. This interdependency has created a system in which stars (be they actors or directors), styles, stories and genres are used as signals by the film industry to sell tickets, and by film consumers to form expectations: a system in which box-office and the anticipation of psychic pleasure coalesce.

Reflecting differences in the attitude of audiences to risk, Leo Handel in his formative work on film audience research distinguished between three types of audience: non-selective, selective, and those who follow recommendations.<sup>9</sup> In their study on film choices of Philadelphia audiences in 1935-1936, John Sedgwick and Michael Pokorny produced evidence to show that 'hit' films can only be understood in terms of the selective choices made by audiences, and working from the same dataset Catherine Jurca and John Sedgwick indicate that it was not just first and second-run audiences that were selective, but also that audiences attending third and fourth-run cinemas demonstrate distinct film preferences.<sup>10</sup>

The outcome of choice – the appeal of particular films – is measured by the box-office performance and attendance figures of films. In aggregation these numbers take the form of a long right tail statistical distribution, in which 'hit' films appear as extreme events in relation to the median film. High marketing budgets and shrewd marketing tactics are not sufficient to explain relative box-office performance. Rather, the relationship between film budgets and marketing costs and box-office is best described by the idea of variance, caused by the unpredictable nature of audience behaviour: an irreducible element of idiosyncrasy is associated with the choices made by audiences.

Thus, in taking box-office, or in this case a proxy of it, as a given, this paper investigates underlying preferences of particular audiences, separated by place, country, language, history, and culture. We conclude that the conceptual intersection between audience preferences and film characteristics holds the key as to why some films have the potential to attract selective audiences of size and others not. In studying this intersection, we will not only identify those films that proved most popular in Bolton, Ghent and Utrecht during the mid-1930s but also the characteristics that they shared, as well as those they did not.

## Methods

In the absence of cinema attendance figures or box-office ledgers, film programmes are a source of information, which when aggregated can serve as a proxy estimate of film popularity. Applying Sedgwick's POPSTAT methodology, the relative popularity of any particular film among a population of films is determined by box-office potential of the cinemas at which it was screened, the length of its run and billing status – films screened on a double bill film programme attract half the weight of those screened as single billings.<sup>11</sup> The basic assumption is that films with more screenings in large cinemas draw greater audiences and higher box-office than films that have fewer screenings in smaller theatres. When available, price information is also included in the calculation. Furthermore, taken together, film programmes reveal actual practices of distribution and exhibition, allowing the researcher to chart the life cycle of films as they pass in time and space through a locality.

Through this bottom-up approach to film culture, we first investigate the array of movies screened on the evening of Saturday 5 January 1935 in the three cities. This cross-section will reveal some films being screened for the final time, while other are being premiered. Moving beyond the record of what was screened on a single day to assessing the popularity of what was

being screened involves instituting a time frame: in this case the said day represents a mid-point Saturday in a time frame that is taken back to 1 January 1934 to forward to 31 December 1935.

Essential to our method is the idea that films moved through time and space in a manner designed to maximize their revenues. That is to say that institutional impediments to the free movement of films were minimal and that distributors and exhibitors cooperated in getting films to audiences who were willing to pay for them. In the absence of this condition, film popularity has no meaning. While in all three cities institutional arrangements and societal attitudes with respect to films differed, our research shows that in each some films were diffused more widely than others, getting longer screenings in first-run cinemas and more screenings outside of the first-run. Such films were evidently more popular.

### Programming statistics

Table 1 shows the distribution of film programmes for the years 1934 and 1935 in the three cities. Altogether, 2,726 individual films were screened in the cinemas of the three cities during the course of 1934 and 1935, with single bill programmes dominating. Given that they had similar populations, the difference in the velocity of film programming is striking, with the number of distinct programmes in Bolton twice that of Ghent, and an astonishing five times that of Utrecht, providing a strong indication of the relative social importance of cinema culture in the three cities.

Further evidence of the disparity between the three cities and their respective nations can be found in Table 2, indicating that the Dutch film market was very much less intense than that of Great Britain and Belgium. Not only were there fewer cinema seats in the Netherlands compared with Great Britain and Belgium (respectively by multiples of 4 and 3) but also annual admissions per head were much lower (respectively by multiples of 5.5 and 2.5). Based on these numbers it can be supposed that habitual, non-selective, cinemagoing in the Netherlands was a rarity.

*Table 1. Film programmes in the dataset. Sources: For Bolton, The Bolton Evening News; For Ghent, De Gentenaar; Vooruit; La Cinégraphie Belge; Revue Hebdomadaire. For Utrecht, Utrechts Nieuwsblad and K. Dibbets, Cinema Context. Film in the Netherlands from 1896, an encyclopedia of film culture, online database, viewed 20 May 2016, <http://www.cinemacontext.nl>.*

	Bolton	Ghent	Utrecht	Total
1934				
No. of films screened	684	700	325	1709
Single Bill programmes	1078	439	210	1727
Double Bill programmes	461	299	98	858
Total number of film programmes 1934	1539	738	308	2585
1935				
No. of films screened	590	629	299	1518
Single Bill programmes	918	489	232	1639
Double Bill programmes	402	391	87	880
Triple Bill programmes	0	6	0	6
Total number of film programmes 1935	1320	886	319	2525

Table 2. Comparative descriptors of the size and intensity of the cinema market in Great Britain, Belgium and the Netherlands in 1934-1935. Sources: 1) C. Feinstein, *Statistical Tables of National Income, Expenditure and Output of the United Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) tab. 55; De Toekomst, 3 March 1935; Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS), *Bevolkingsdichtheid der gemeenten van Nederland op 1 januari 1935* (The Hague: Trio, 1936); 2 & 3) S. Rowson, "A Statistical Survey of the Cinema Industry in Great Britain in 1934," *Royal Statistical Society* 99 (1936): 67-129; CBS, *Statistiek van het bioscoopwezen* (The Hague: Rijksuitgeverij, 1937); 4) *Kino Weekly*, 26 August 1937; 5) K. Dibbets, "Het Bioscoopbedrijf tussen twee wereldoorlogen," in *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse film en bioscoop tot 1940*, ed. K. Dibbets and F. Van der Maden (Houten: Wereldvenster 1986), 245.

Country & City	inhabitants <sup>1</sup>	Total number of cinema's <sup>2</sup>	Total seating capacity <sup>3</sup>	Average seating capacity	Population per seat <sup>4</sup>	Average number of cinema tickets per head <sup>5</sup>
Great Britain	46.666.000	4.305	3.872.000	899	12	19
Bolton	180.000	17	20.392	1.200	9	not known
Belgium	8.299.940	1.128	not known	not known	16	9
Ghent	171.000	19	13.060	687	13	not known
Netherlands	8.392.101	333	174.145	533	48	4
Utrecht	159.895	6	3.819	637	42	not known

If we compare the seating capacity in the three cities the differences in the intensity of cinema culture becomes even more evident. Bolton and Ghent have about the same number of cinemas, respectively seventeen and nineteen, but the total number of cinema seats is much higher in Bolton, as is the average seating capacity of those cinemas. Eight of Bolton's theatres had 1,000 seats or more; four had more than 1,500 seats; and one of them over 2,000 seats (Regal with 2,380 seats). The five remaining cinemas had a seating capacity ranging from 580 to 944. In conjunction with the turnover of cinema programmes presented in Table 1, the existence of so many large theatres points to cinema as a very regular activity for the people of Bolton. Although numerous, the cinemas of Ghent were much smaller than those in Bolton – indeed of a similar size to those in Utrecht. Nevertheless, the ratio of seats to population is of the same order as in Bolton, suggesting a thriving cinema culture but as we shall see, one more fragmented. In Utrecht, the low number of cinemas (high number of inhabitants per seat) suggests a far less intense cinema culture among its population. Patrons could frequent only one cinema with over 1,000 seats (Rembrandt with 1,320 seats) – the rest ranged between 350 and 652 seats. Of the six cinemas, Scala (632 seats) had the most distinctive programming policy based on premiering German films (many of them being UFA films).

### The films shown on 5 January 1935

So, what did we find out about the films screened on 5 January 1935? Table 3 shows that filmgoers in Bolton had nineteen films to choose between, spread over sixteen film programmes, of which only five were double bills. Of these nineteen individual titles two appeared twice on a programme. *Born to be Bad* (1934, USA, George Nichols Jr. and Wanda Tuchock) was shown as a single bill at the Palladium and paired with *Finishing School* (1934, USA, Lowell Sherman) as a double bill at the Majestic, while *Finishing School* was programmed as a double bill with

Table 3. Overview of the programmes audiences could choose from on 5 January 1935. Notes: In Bolton and Ghent two films were screened in two separate cinemas. Not all cinemas offered a programme on that day, or at least did not advertise it. In Bolton no screenings were found for the Embassy. In Ghent no programme information was found for *Cameo*, *Familiekinema*, *Nord1*, *Nord II* and *Oud Gend*. In Utrecht the programme information was complete.

Place	Single bill programs	Double bill programs	Triple bill programs	Individual films
Bolton	11	5	0	19
Ghent	8	5	1	19
Utrecht	5	1	0	6

*Stingaree* (1934, USA William A. Wellman) at the Theatre Royal. Audiences in Ghent were also offered nineteen film titles in fourteen programmes, of which five were double bills and one was a triple bill. The double bill programme of *Broken Melody* (1934, UK Bernard Vorhaus) and *Fraulein Hoffman's Erzählungen* (1933, DE, Carl Lamac) was screened at both the Forum and Ideal cinemas. In comparison only seven films spread over six programmes were screened in Utrecht, including one double bill.<sup>12</sup>

Of the 43 films screened in the three cities on 5 January 1935, only six were programmed in cinemas in all three cities at some point within the two-year time frame from 1 January 1934 to 31 December 1935. This indicates a separation of film cultures along the lines suggested earlier. Of the six films, five were Hollywood productions (Table 4a). The films that emanated from Hollywood crossed borders most frequently. This is confirmed in part b of Table 4 which shows a breakdown of the national origins of the films and the cities they surfaced in, with 28 of the 43 films produced in Hollywood. Perhaps not so surprising, but nevertheless telling, is absence of foreign language films screened in Bolton: these did not cross the North Sea. By way of contrast, the taste for German films seemed to have been shared by Ghent and Utrecht audiences, while French films were particular to Ghent. We will come back to this later.

The three POPSTAT columns in Table 4a provide a clue to the relative popularity of these films in each of the three markets. Derived from the two-year time frame, index numbers based upon the median film in each city taking the value of 100 show all six films to have been highly popular in Bolton and Ghent, while Utrecht audiences were less persuaded by three of them.

As an illustration of the varied mix of characteristics that comprised major film attractions at the time, two of the six films common to all three cities have been selected. The British International Picture (BIP) production *Blossom Time*, presents a European focus. This operetta in the then popular Viennese-style starred the Austrian tenor Richard Tauber. It tells the story of a young woman whose father would like to see her married into the Viennese upper class, while their neighbour, the composer Franz Schubert, desperately in love, pursues her without revealing his true feelings.<sup>13</sup> The film mixes music and song, romance, and humour in equal measure.

By way of contrast, *Tarzan and his Mate* is a film in which virile male behaviour is foregrounded, manifest in the tension and excitement caused by the chase and thrill of Tarzan's spectacular just-in-time rescues of Jane. The film is set in the jungle and comprises a succession of exciting life-threatening situations with wild animals or warriors from other tribes, in which Tarzan always triumphs. Throughout, Tarzan demonstrates a loving devotion to Jane.

Table 4a-c. Films shown on 5 January 1935 in Bolton, Ghent and Utrecht (100 = median film).

**4a. Details of the six films in common**

Film	Year	Country	Director	Production Company	POPSTAT	POPSTAT	POPSTAT	Mean POPSTAT
					Bolton	Ghent	Utrecht	
Blossom Time	1934	GB	Stein, Paul L.	British International Pictures	426	319	124	290
Tarzan and his Mate	1934	US	Gibbons, Cedric	Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer	334	539	362	412
Only Yesterday	1933	US	Stahl, John M.	Universal Pictures	300	368	100	256
Viva Villa!	1934	US	Conway, Jack	Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer	275	312	362	316
Cleopatra	1934	US	DeMille, Cecil B.	Paramount Pictures	237	166	124	176
Way to love, The	1933	US	Taurog, Norman	Paramount Pictures	184	173	198	185

**4b. National origins of the 43 films**

Nationality	Number of films	Bolton			Ghent		Utrecht	
		Bolton-Ghent-Utrecht	Bolton-Ghent	Bolton-Utrecht	Ghent-Utrecht	Bolton	Ghent	Utrecht
USA	28	5	3	4	2	9	4	1
British	6	1	2	0	0	1	1	1
French	3	0	0	0	0	0	3	0
German & Austrian	5	0	0	0	3	0	1	1
Dutch	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>4</b>

**4c. Circulation within the three cities between 01 January 1934 and 01 January 1936**

Location	Circulation
All three cities	6
Bolton-Ghent only	5
Bolton-Utrecht only	4
Ghent-Utrecht only	5
Bolton only	10
Ghent only	9
Utrecht only	4

Both Tarzan and Jane know how to ‘fly’ the lianas and their moves through the jungle look like spectacular circus acts. These stunts allow them to expose their bodies in the process, culminating in an underwater swimming duet of Tarzan with a naked Jane.<sup>14</sup> Across the three cities *Tarzan and his Mate* was highly popular, particularly so in Ghent, generating a POPSTAT score of over five times that of the median film.

**The Distribution of Films**

Expanding the investigation from the films screened on 5 January 1935 to the two-year period within which the films screened on that particular Saturday were in circulation, 75 have been identified as having been screened in all three cities, almost all of which (93 per cent) were produced in Hollywood (see Figure 1).<sup>15</sup> This, of course, is testament to the reach of Hollywood’s distributors and the ubiquity of their in-house films. But it is also an illustration of the centrality of Hollywood to European film culture. These films were screened to European audiences because they were willing-to-pay for the pleasure.

However, the other side of this coin is just as revealing. The fact that no film of Dutch or Flemish origins and hardly any from France and Germany were screened in Bolton cinemas (Figure 2), while British films were comparatively rarely screened in Ghent and Utrecht cinemas (Figures 2 and 3), seems to suggest that those films did not travel because of their cultural



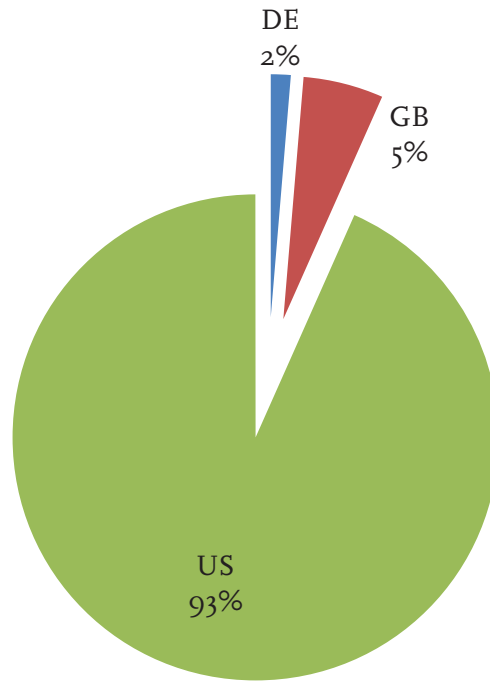


Figure 1. National origin of the 75 films in the dataset shown in all three cities.

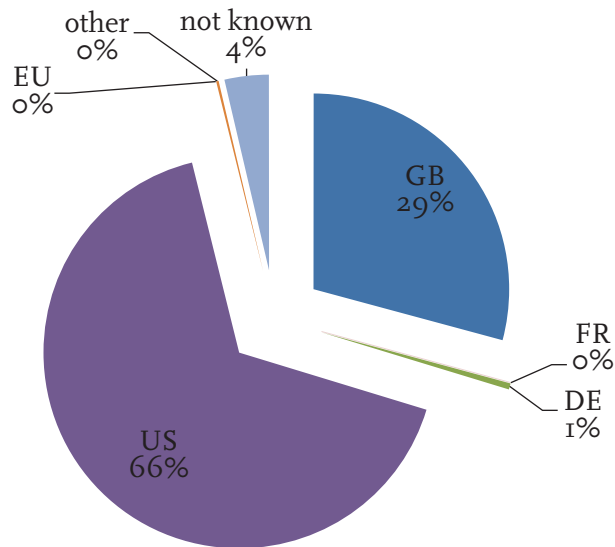


Figure 2. National origin of all 983 films shown only in Bolton, 1934-1935.

specificity. This is to argue that audiences are strongly attracted to films which evoke a feeling of what is called ‘cultural nearness’ – reflecting prevailing cultural affinities. The assumption here is that indigenous producers usually find a way of incorporating cultural specificities into the content of their films.<sup>16</sup> For this reason, a producer/writer/director who is engaged in making a film targeted at, say, a Dutch audience, recognises the unlikelihood of it attracting audiences outside of the Dutch/Flemish speaking world. Accordingly, by identifying those films

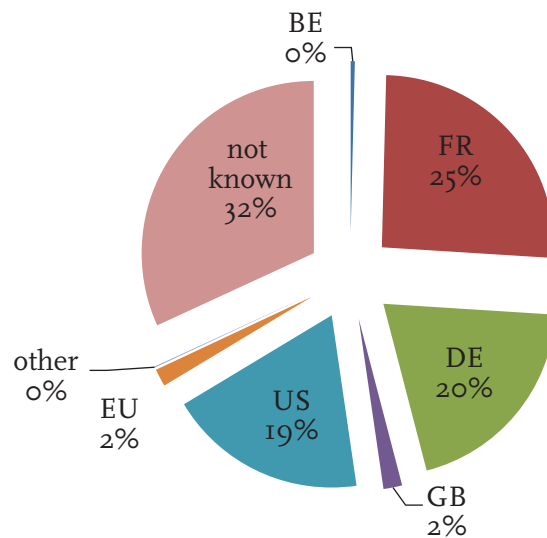


Figure 3. National origin of all 1023 films shown only in Ghent, 1934-1935.

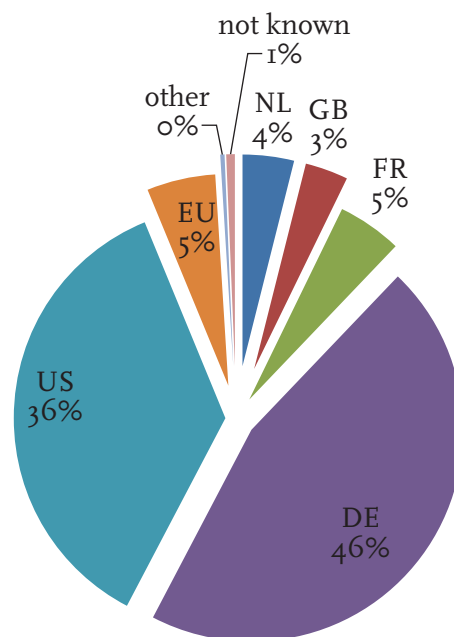


Figure 4. National origin of all 305 films shown only in Utrecht, 1934-1935.

that were screened in one city only, attention is drawn to the distinctiveness of each of the three film cultures.

Figures 2, 3, and 4 support this thesis. In these charts each locality generates a distinctive pattern of preferences: In Bolton, audiences did not see German or French films; in Utrecht audiences saw only a very small proportion of French and British films; and in Ghent, when compared to Utrecht, a much smaller proportion of German films were screened, with British

films again poorly represented. Indeed, in contrast to the other two cities, almost equal shares of American, German and French films were shown in Ghent, although the large proportion of films that we have not been able to trace (32 per cent) somewhat weakens this result. The high market share of French films in Ghent can be explained by the presence of a substantial French speaking community: speaking the French language was seen as a source of social distinction.<sup>17</sup> This was especially the case for two of the larger cinemas in the centre of Ghent (the Savoy and Capitole) that primarily programmed films in French without Dutch subtitles. The ready availability of German films in Ghent and Utrecht indicates the popularity of particular German genres; in particular musical romances and comedies featuring acting singers such as Richard Tauber, Jan Kiepura, Willy Frost and Martha Eggerth.<sup>18</sup>

### Film Popularity

Earlier in the paper, the POPSTAT method was introduced as a means of estimating consumer demand for particular films. By ranking films from first to last according to their POPSTAT Index values, it is possible to generate a statistical distribution of film popularity that can be used for comparative purposes.

These distributions are depicted in Figures 5, 6 and 7. All three are strikingly similar, taking the form of a long right-tail distribution, in which a few top-ranking films generate very high POPSTAT scores in relation to the median, after which the curve flattens as marginal differences between consecutive ranks diminish. The similarity between the three curves suggests that across the three cities the market operated by allowing those films that were most popular with audiences to be screened much more frequently than films that were not so popular: popular films were made less scarce than unpopular films. The higher POPSTAT values recorded by the top-ranking films in Ghent and Utrecht reflect a greater inequality in the statistical distribution caused by the extraordinary performance of a small number of ‘hit’ films in relation to the median film.

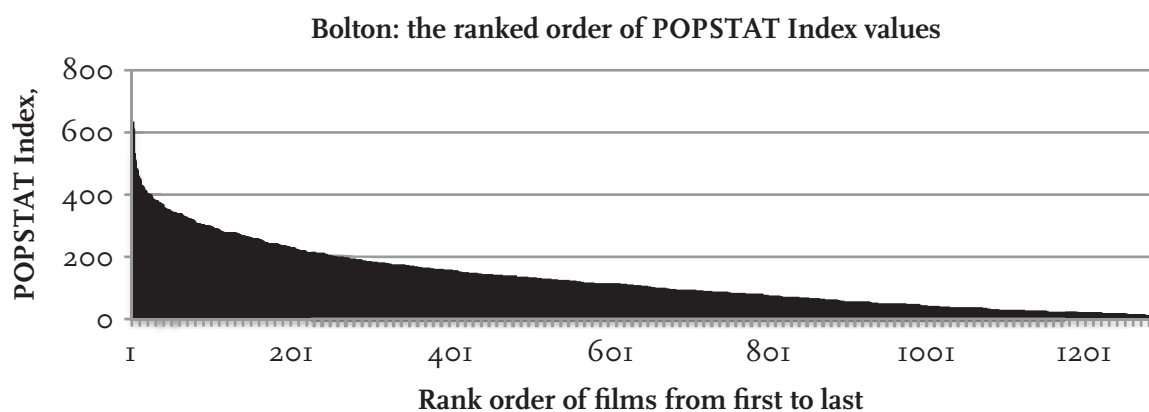


Figure 5. POPSTAT Index Values of films screened in Bolton, 1 January 1934 to 31 December 1935. Note: the median film takes the POPSTAT Index value of 100.

### Ghent: the ranked order of POPSTAT Index values

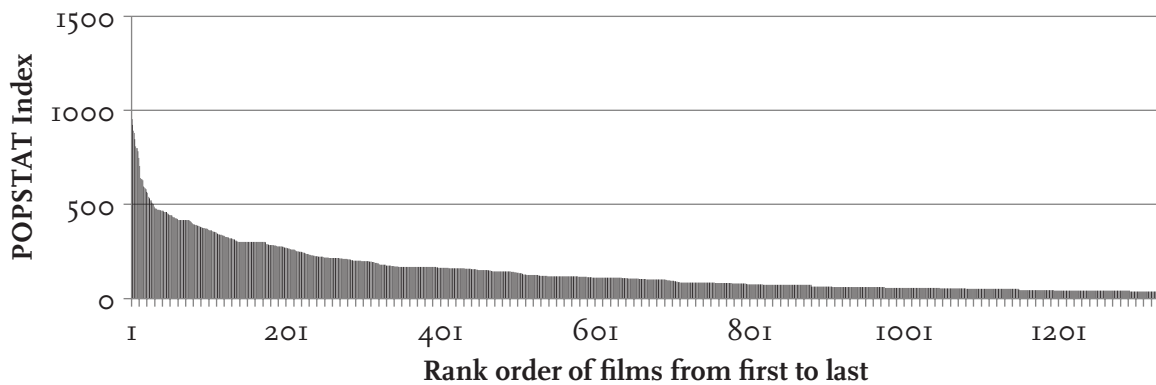


Figure 6. POPSTAT Index Values of films screened in Ghent, 1 January 1934 to 31 December 1935. Note: the median film take the POPSTAT Index value of 100.

### Utrecht: the ranked order of POPSTAT Index values

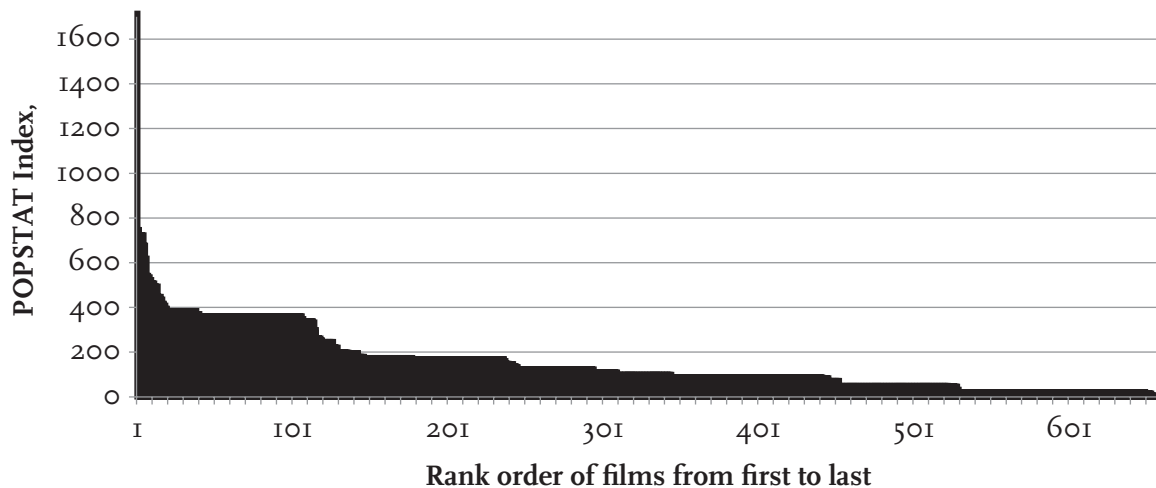


Figure 7. POPSTAT Index Values of films screened in Utrecht, 1 January 1934 to 31 December 1935. Note: the median film takes the POPSTAT Index value of 100.

In Table 5 the country origins of the films in the Top 10, 20 and 50 are presented. From this we can read a similar pattern to that of the composition of films screened in one city only (Figures 2, 3 and 4). The Bolton lists are dominated by US films and completed with domestic productions, with the share of British films rising to a third in the Top 20 and Top 50 categories. In Ghent and Utrecht, the picture differs markedly. Audiences in both these, show marked preferences for European productions, especially in Ghent where US films contribute only eight (16 per cent) of the Top 50 berths. The preference for German and Austrian films is common to both cities, but the high number of French films in these lists is distinctive to Ghent.

In Table 6, the Top 10 films of the three cities are listed. These are the 'giants' of their day. All three lists show an emphatic liking for particular films that relate to the cultural context of their local audience. In Bolton the two top films feature Gracie Fields, the famous 1930s British comic actress singer who, coming from a poor Lancashire family, was strongly associated with

Table 5. The representation of films of national origin in popularity charts.

National origins	Bolton			Ghent			Utrecht		
	Films in Top 10	Films in Top 20	Films in Top 50	Films in Top 10	Films in Top 20	Films in Top 50	Films in Top 10	Films in Top 20	Films in Top 50
USA	8	13	34	0	4	8	2	5	21
British	2	7	16	1	1	2	0	0	0
German & Austrian	0	0	0	4	6	16	2	6	19
French	0	0	0	2	6	19	0	1	1
Dutch	0	0	0	1	1	2	6	8	10
Belgium	0	0	0	2	2	3	0	0	0
Others	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table 6. Top 10 of the most popular films in each of the three cities.

City	Film Title	Year	Country	POPSTAT Index (median =100)
Bolton	Sing as we go	1934	GB	630
Bolton	Love, Life and Laughter	1934	GB	606
Bolton	The Lives of a Bengal Lancer	1935	US	528
Bolton	One Night of Love	1934	US	506
Bolton	The House of Rothschild	1934	US	479
Bolton	Roman Scandals	1933	US	479
Bolton	David Copperfield	1935	US	474
Bolton	Footlight Parade	1933	US	456
Bolton	Merry Widow, The	1934	US	448
Bolton	Babes in Toyland	1934	US	445
Ghent	Maitre de forges, Le	1933	FR	953
Ghent	Alleen voor U	1935	BE	923
Ghent	Misérables, Les	1934	FR	890
Ghent	Leise flehen meine Lieder	1933	DE	878
Ghent	I Was A Spy	1933	GB	845
Ghent	Witte, De	1934	BE	808
Ghent	Frasquita	1934	AT	799
Ghent	Wenn du jung bist, gehört dir die Welt	1934	AT	798
Ghent	Jantjes, De	1934	NL	782
Ghent	Liebelei	1933	DE	745
Utrecht	Jantjes, De	1934	NL	1715
Utrecht	Vier Mullers, De	1935	NL	747
Utrecht	Malle gevallen	1934	NL	724
Utrecht	Familie van mijn vrouw, De	1935	NL	724
Utrecht	Episode	1935	AT	724
Utrecht	Viktor und Viktoria	1933	DE	678
Utrecht	Op hoop van zegen	1934	NL	619
Utrecht	Queen Christina	1933	US	543
Utrecht	Merry widow, The	1934	US	537
Utrecht	Big van het regiment, De	1935	NL	525

Northern working-class culture. Her film persona was the embodiment of self-sacrifice and consensual behaviour.<sup>19</sup> In *Sing as We Go* (1934), Fields plays the role of a working class ‘lass’ bravely standing up for the rights of cotton mill factory workers who are being made redundant, while in *Love, Life and Laughter* (1935) she graciously accepts that her loving prince cannot marry a plebeian girl. Her popularity in Bolton, where she was the number one star, was exceptional but not replicated nationally. Indeed, based on programme data collected for the years 1932 to

1937 from London and British provincial city first-run cinemas, these films, enjoyed so much by Bolton audiences, did not make the annual Top 20 listings for 1934 and 1935, being placed respectively 37th and 65th.<sup>20</sup> Derived from the same dataset, she is ranked 86th in a list of stars appearing on British screens: a list headed by Clark Gable.<sup>21</sup>

The other eight Top 10 entries are Hollywood productions, two of which, interestingly, are based on episodes in British nineteenth-century history reflecting aspects of Britain's pre-eminent position as an imperial and financial power, respectively *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer* and *House of Rothschild*. Indeed, Except for *Babes in Toyland* (a Laurel and Hardy film) and *Footlight Parade*, the remaining Hollywood films in the Bolton Top 10 have a European dimension either in their story and or setting. Again, it appears that film audiences prefer films that demonstrate 'cultural nearness'. Finally, the prevalence of song and dance in these films is apparent, with half the films exhibiting these generic characteristics.

In stark contrast with Bolton none of the Top 10 films in Ghent is from the US. With two French films, two Belgian and one Dutch film, the bi-lingual French- and Dutch-speaking (Flemish) composition of the city is reflected. All films in the Top 10 are made and set in Europe, with the only British film in the listing based upon the story of a Belgium nurse working as a spy during the First World War. The second listed film is the Belgium (Flemish language) romantic operetta *Alleen voor U* (1935), designed to replicate the sentiment and success of its very popular predecessor *De Witte* (1934) also in the Top 10 – both involving director Jan Vanderheyden and leading star Willem Benoy.<sup>22</sup> In Belgium, as in the Netherlands, national film production was very small – only fifteen films were produced in the two years 1934 and 1935 – making the success of these two films highly significant as far as film tastes are concerned. Like Bolton, musical and operetta films were popular, taking five of the Top 10 berths.

Particularly striking is the dominant position of Dutch films among the filmgoers of Utrecht: six of the films in the Top 10 are domestic productions. This is especially noteworthy, given the very small number of films produced annually in the Netherlands. Indeed, during the years 1934 to 1936 only 27 Dutch features were made.<sup>23</sup> However, unlike the partial popularity of the two Gracie Fields films in the British market, the popularity of indigenous cinema in Utrecht reflected a nationwide liking for Dutch films. In particular the extremely high POPSTAT Index score garnered by *De Jantjes* (1934), was repeated across the Netherlands. It was based on a very popular theatrical production play that had been reprised many times, featuring songs that were widely known. This cleverly made film, with a laugh and a tear, was marketed as a Dutch film with a Dutch heart. A study into the reception of the film teaches us that Dutch audiences flocked to see the film because it was culturally familiar. Set in Amsterdam and spoken and sung in their own language, meant Dutch audience members understood it as their own. It marked the beginning of a short Dutch wave of successful films.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the film also did very well in Ghent where it reached a position in the Top 10. Given how few films were made in Flemish, language is likely to have played a role here as well, as Dutch is very similar to Flemish.

In addition, the Utrecht list features two German language films and two US films. Similar to Bolton, both Hollywood productions have a European setting and in the case of

*Queen Christina* starred Greta Garbo as the Queen of Sweden. Again, films with song and dance have a strong presence (five out of ten films).

In short, this brief characterization of the most popular films in each of the three cities clearly shows a shared preference for musicals and operettas as well as films that generated a sense of ‘cultural nearness’ be it local, national or maybe even as broad as European, in contrast to Hollywood films set in the United States. The films listed in Table 6 were highly attractive to audiences within each of the cities, but as was the case of the Gracie Fields films in Bolton and the Flemish language film in Ghent, not necessarily as popular elsewhere in the country.

## Conclusion

By comparing the programming data of the three cities of Bolton, Ghent and Utrecht we have shown similarities and differences between cinema cultures. In this analysis, the ubiquity of Hollywood productions is a given, serving as a testament to the availability of Hollywood films through their in-house distribution organisations as well as their general popularity. They thus serve as a backdrop to the particular findings presented here. Although having similar sized populations, the size and intensity of the three city markets differed markedly, with the people of Utrecht sharing the general indifference to cinema found throughout the Netherlands. Even so, the statistical distribution of audience preferences in all three cities takes the same long right tail form – an indication that distributors were able to supply audiences with the films they wanted to see.

To identify specific audience preferences, data have been collected and analysed from three different starting points. We began with a particular date, identifying films that were shown in all three cities on 5 January 1935. Of the six films identified, five were American. Two of the six were highlighted to illustrate the varied nature of the choices facing audiences at the time, with *Blossom Time* suggesting a cultural affinity European audiences had for European subjects, while the *Tarzan and His Mate* film offered audiences an altogether different entertainment in which action and adventure set in the exotic backdrop, centred upon a strong male/female relationship.

Extending the time frame one year back and forward from this date, analysis was conducted on the national origins of films screened in just one of the three cities: whereas 75 films were screened in all three cities, the number of films screened in one city but not the other two was 983 in Bolton, 1023 in Ghent and 305 in Utrecht. From the large number of films screened in one city only we deduce the existence of distinct cinema cultures, the key to which we term ‘cultural nearness’ (see Figures 2,3 and 4). For the Netherlands the major supplier of films was Germany: for Belgium, France and Germany; and for Great Britain, the United States.

However, these analyses are based on crude supply numbers. By introducing film popularity into the analysis, it is possible to reflect what audiences actually went to see. Applying the POPSTAT methodology for all films screened in each of the three cities, it is apparent that only two of the Top 10 films screened in one city were common to the other two. Taken together, our findings again support the cultural nearness argument, confirming a clear liking for films of

national origin, or films of proximate cultural affinity. Clearly, this was not true of all films with such characteristics, but it is true that among the very most popular, films that manifest these ‘nearness’ characteristics are very well represented. Furthermore, many of the Top 10 American films screened in Bolton, Ghent and Utrecht had European subjects that were of immediate interest to audiences.

The inclusion of the films that were only shown in one city raises questions about the role of distribution. It is conceivable that Dutch and Belgian distribution channels were not sufficiently developed to extend to Great Britain. However, this would not be the case with German distributors who had very well-developed distribution channels in much of mainland Europe. Yet, German films carried by these distributors by and large did not reach Great Britain either. Evidently, the structure of the market does not explain the specific local preferences we observed. For that we need to delve more thoroughly into the characteristics of the films that were popular among audiences and those who made them. Nevertheless, from this study of the national origins of films screened in three distinctive small European cities, it is possible to identify distinctive film cultures both in terms of the intensity of filmgoing and the choices made by audiences. Ultimately, this is to argue that the films that audiences went to see are integral to understanding film cultures.

## Notes

1. Lies Van de Vijver and Daniel Biltereyst, “Hollywood versus lokaliteit. Het (on)gelijke aanbod van Amerikaanse en Europese films in de jaren dertig in Gent,” *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis* 13, no. 2 (2010): 60-79.
2. Clara Pafort-Overduin, “Distribution and Exhibition in the Netherlands, 1934-1936,” in *Explorations in New Cinema History. Approaches and Case Studies*, ed. R. Maltby, D. Biltereyst and P. Meers (Malden and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 125-139; Clara Pafort-Overduin, “Watching Popular Films in the Netherlands, 1934-36,” in: *Watching Films. New Perspectives on Movie-going, Exhibition and Reception*, ed. K. Aveyard and A. Moran (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2013), 331-349; John Sedgwick, Clara Pafort-Overduin and Jaap Boter, “Explanations for the Restrained Development of the Dutch Cinema Market in the 1930s,” *Enterprise & Society: The International Journal of Business History*, 13, no. 3 (2012): 634-671.
3. Joseph Garncarz, *Wechselnde Vorlieben. Über die Filmpräferenzen der Europäer 1896-1939* (Frankfurt am Main and Basel: Stroemfeld, 2015).
4. John Sedgwick, Michael Pokorny and Peter Miskell, “Hollywood in the World Market – Evidence from Australia in the mid-1930s,” *Business History* 56, no. 5 (2014): 689-723.
5. J. Johanson and J. Vahlne, ‘The Uppsala Internationalization Process Model Revisited: From Liability of Foreignness to Liability of Outsidership’, *Journal of International Business Studies* 40 (2009): 1411-1431.
6. Sedgwick, Pafort-Overduin and Boter, “Explanations for the Restrained Development”.
7. Douglass North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
8. John Sedgwick, *Popular Filmgoing in 1930s Britain. A Choice of Pleasures*. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), 25-38.
9. Leo Handel, *Hollywood Looks at its Audience* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1950).
10. John Sedgwick and Michael Pokorny, “Film Consumer Decision-Making: The Philadelphia Story, 1935-36,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 12, no. 3 (2012): 323-346; Cathy Jurca and John Sedgwick, “The Film’s the Thing: Moviegoing in Philadelphia, 1935-36,” *Film History* 26, no. 4 (2014): 58-83.
11. Put formally

$$POPSTAT_{it} = \sum_{j=1}^n a_{jt} \times b_{ij} \times I_{ijt}$$



where,  $n$  is the number of cinemas in the sample set,  $a_{jt}$  is a weighting factor for cinema  $j$  during period  $t$ , reflecting the relative revenue generating potential of cinema  $j$ ;  $b_{ijt}$  reflects the exhibition status of film  $i$  at cinema  $j$  during period  $t$ . That is,  $b_{ijt}$  takes on the value 1 if film  $i$  is presented as a single bill programme, 0.8 if it is the main attraction of a double bill programme, 0.5 if it is an equal of part of a double bill, 0.2 if it is the minor attraction of a double bill programme, and 0 if it is not shown at cinema  $j$ ; and  $l_{ijt}$  is the length of exhibition of film  $i$  at cinema  $j$  during period  $t$ , measured to the nearest half week.

12. For Bolton and Ghent, two films being screened simultaneously in two different cinemas explains why the number in the Individual Film column does not tally with the number of films suggested by the billing information.
13. Stephen Guy, "Calling All Stars: Musical Films in a Musical Decade," in J. Richards ed., *The Unknown 1930s. An Alternative History of the British Cinema, 1929-1939* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1998), 99-118.
14. Because of this, as well as a scene in which a random killing takes place, the Dutch censors initially forbade the film. A second ruling permitted its screening for audiences over the age of eighteen but demanded nine cuts ([www.cinemacontext.nl](http://www.cinemacontext.nl)).
15. Undoubtedly, as the time dimension of distribution was not uniform across the three cities, the number of films common to the three cities would have been greater had our datasets gone further back and forward in time.
16. Vivian Barrera and Denise D. Bielby, "Places, Faces and Other Familiar Things: The Cultural Experience of Telenovela Viewing among Latinos In the United States," *Journal of Popular Culture* 34, March (2001): 1- 18. Peter Miskell tried to explain differences in the popularity of Hollywood films abroad by identifying the foreign orientation of the films. He created a measure for the foreign orientation index based on the nationality of the director, scenario writer, writer original source, actors, two main characters and the setting. He found that in the 1930s, Hollywood films with high foreign orientation were more likely to generate high profits abroad than films with a low foreign orientation. Peter Miskell, "International Films and International Markets: The Globalisation of Hollywood Entertainment, c.1921-1951," *Media History* 22, no. 2 (2016): 174-200, DOI:10.1080/13688804.2016.1141044; see also Garncarz, *Wechselende Vorlieben*, 142-146.
17. E. Langendries, "Nu naar de Vlaamsche Hoogeschool! De laatste fase van de strijd voor vernederlandsing van de universiteit" in *Interbellum in Gent*, ed. A. Capiteyn (Ghent: Stad Gent, Stadsarchief and Museum Arnold Vander Haeghen, 1995), 139-151.
18. Van de Vijver and Biltreyst, "Hollywood versus lokaliteit," 73-74; Pafort-Overduin, "Distribution and Exhibition in the Netherlands," 136.
19. Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace*, (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1984), 169-190; Stephen C. Shafer, *British Popular Films 1929-1939. The Cinema of Reassurance*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 193-219.
20. Sedgwick, *Popular Filmgoing in 1930s Britain*, 120.
21. Ibidem, 191.
22. Roel Vande Winkel and Dirk Van Engeland, *Edith Kiel & Jan Vanderheyden, pioniers van de Vlaamse film*, (Brussels: Cinematek, 2014).
23. Pafort-Overduin, "Distribution and Exhibition in the Netherlands," 128.
24. Ibidem, 128.

## Biography

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