How Hollywood Conquered Belgium after the First World War

In the years following the First World War, Hollywood developed an impressive strategy to conquer the world. How did the tiny kingdom of Belgium fit into this global puzzle? A story about effective distribution, diplomatic backing, appealing pictures, and lots of money.

The Founding Myth

One of the biggest questions in cinema history is how a handful of Hollywood producers were able to control the international flow of motion pictures. How could this happen? Were Hollywood movies simply better or more attractive? How does Hollywood still dominate European screens, even though the Old Continent produces more pictures than the USA?

To get to the bottom of this question, we need to go back to the First World War and beyond the old binary of Hollywood versus Europe. The German film historian Thomas Elsaesser once called this dichotomy the founding myth of academic film studies. In reality, Hollywood was actually full of European directors, writers, and stars, while audiences often preferred Hollywood pictures over European ones.

Another important film historian, Richard Maltby, observed that little is known about what he considers to be the key to understand Hollywood's hegemony: film distribution. By now, we know quite well what happened in major European countries like Britain, France, or Germany, where governments and the local industry at times tried to block American pictures.

But what about smaller markets with no substantial production of their own? What were the Hollywood studios' distribution strategies there? Was the market in a country like Belgium big enough to establish a local branch?

"They seem to spring up in the night"

The Belgian case, which remains largely unexplored, is particularly well-suited to understand how Hollywood operated after the First World War. American film trade journals and official government reports tended to underline Belgium's unique position. The Belgian market was of course small and rather complex, given its multilingual character and cultural diversity. But trade press reports praised the vitality of Belgium's film exhibition scene.



Advertising for Universal's local branch on the Place des Martyrs in Brussels, published in the Belgian film trade yearbook Annuaire Générale du Spectacle, de la Musique et du Cinéma (1928, p. iv). (source: Royal Film Archive)

August 20, 1921	MOVING PICTURE WORLD	
All the Belgian Exhibitor Has to Do Is to Give 'Em All Slapstick Stuf		
(Special to Moving Picture World) N Belgium, as in other countries, rection	By GEORGE CECIL	The next meeting all that remained a schoolboase was a pile of brides, several
	is wet, the proprietor has no reason to gramble,	
happiness and contentment of the inhabi- tants. Not only in Brussels, Annuery, Linge		tice door, which though tars from its hit had remained unstabled. Oddly enough
and other large town do the pictures draw	for the pictures. Although in the large towns the cisewa house frequently spells the last word in lexury.	projectionis's apparatus was more the vitor its adventures.
and townlets, the greater part of which have	house frequently spells the last word in lexury,	Films Which dee Wanted
and other large system do the pictures fram good audience, but even in the small system and townsten, the greater part of which have been devastated by German shell-fee and bomb, one finds the cinema is hell uring. The	in some of the townless the covertainment is given under different conditions. In the	In Ecuards, thus of almost every des
whitee of which more area.	denotated areas, for example, the performance run take place in what was once a dignified.	tion are volcomed, particularly those do with sporting creats and amnorments at I
Brunels always having been famed for its galety, it is not surprising that its cinema	may take place in what was once a diguided, finely paneled half. Half knocked to pieces during the war, the shell belos in the walls	and alread. American trotting races, Derly and the Grand National, winter spo
	are patched with targuaks; corrugated from sheets are interposed between the dispidited	Scandinavia, Switzerland and the Aus- Tyrol; Indian native cavalry displays, a
tissons performances are continuously packed, a proportion of the spectators calmly remain-		
ing for a second performance, such is their Belgian lecenness on getting their muscy's worth. This form of enterprise, however, is	acress the windows. No Flack Chairs	Brandless energously. The higher forms of corsely leave cold, but holsterous humor invariably m
worth. This form of enterprise, however, is not welcomed by the enterprise management.		cold, but bolisterous humor invariably or
	been damaged by repeated attacks, or ewing to the scarnity of coal-used for freewood, the	the desired appeal particularly if the chiters hat each other hard every two see The performer who, within two remain
mist, he soon has him out of the beaking. There're, dill There	testing accommodation consists of a few chairs for the homogenestre and the other village	
Exerclosive from the general communities		
	Happily, the Belgians are a cheerful review.	the head, thrown into the river, smethers floor and immerced in a barrel of tread
chief justice to the youngest court messenger log, and from the white-haired commercial magnate to his little office log, is an ardest		assured of appliance galore. Consequently American knocksboot film is in special
magnate to his little office log, is an ardent	of adversity. So, resigning themselves to the inavitable, they enjoy the performance and longer that they are sitting in a dranghty the-	quest, more so perhips than those of the class hading from other countries.
wedding a christening, accession to forware,	sorget that they are sitting in a dranghly the- atre and on a hard wooden seat. Besides, they always find consolation in the large rouge of	
patron of the potents. A coming of age, a wedding, a christening, accessive to forware, cerry sort of event, barring a fineral, in fact, is calebrated by the host making up a "novie" party. And if the purey is a large one, great	always find consolution in the large reage of	Blood-brated drama and ungary done comedy also get a look in, and topical en- particularly legisls happenings, are pop- arothing brong to do with the royal fix
	light beer with which they refresh themselves during the scatts. These, by the way, are (by arrangement between the management and the	comedy also get a look in, and topical ev-
at which years have been taken. Recently a source Percellois, who had were a		arothing furning to do with the royal fa
	more lengthy the interval, the greater the publican's takenge. Besides, an audience which	
to his native sown quickly got rid of a lew handred frames by inviting all his friends and	has been well present with beer is ready to excuse mishape, such as showing a film speade	perhaps to Belgium owning so few \$55
acquaintances where name was legion to go to the best picture above in the place. For	down, or a defective motor and subsequent cartaining of the program.	possessions. Even the Belgian Compo-
days afterward they talked of the exertain- ment and, anterally, the circum to which they had betaken themselves benefited.	certailing of the program. Jos Interrupted Show	Dramas which have for their satisfies the colocies are not in great request, or perhaps to Belgium owning so few list processions. Even the Belgium Component fuzze in the locally manufact. "movies." This, however, may be locally mission in not auxious to be reminished of
had betaken themselves benefited.		Congo rabber activities of some years ago. On the whole, what Brenoch idea is I downer be Belgam. The mentality of braves Belgam, in much the same all own.
Spring Up Libe Maskreome		On the whole, what Bressels likes in I
It probably is not known how many citerial establishments there are in Brussels. They seem to spring up in the night. The frozz of a mean-looking bosse is covered up with scaf-	cucept those which the Boche kept open for his own ammorment. Shortly before the armistics, however, a few were respected.	braves Belges" is much the same all over country; primitive ideas are easily gatered
seem to spring up in the night. The front of	even in the small tawas over which enemy aircraft were known to hover. Upon one oc-	An elaborately and exponsively staged scarcely is within their lens, and conturns g
folding, harmering has gone on for some days,	aircraft were known to hover. Upon one oc-	scarcely is within their hen, and contume p
and workenes come and go. Then, one feet	casion, in a frontier towelet, a show was associated—the first since the war had been	are Greek to the average inhabitant, main thing is to make them laugh. So film which causes the loodest laughter oxide
removed, and the legend "Cineras de Laxe:	declared. The local land of the manor took sexts for	is the right film for Bolgium.
a mean-souring notice is covered up with interfolding, harmsering has gone on for some days, and workness come and go. Then, one fast warring, die neighbors had the toatfolding removed, and the legend "Cineras de Laxe: Prix Moderns" embhasocad in golden letters on the wall. It is doubtful if the legending are not the wall. It is doubtful if the legending as-	himself and for those of his torants who had said their rent. The hourgomestre amended	Piras Little Mery Although Mary Pickford is scaecely
thorities even have time to compile a return showing the number of these places, so busy		
Arrevers is another strenghold of cinema in-	as calls, had the presentants of the convenience in most of the gain occasion, and leaving agriculture to take care of itself, but therefore in record driefs, and themselves in record driefs, and had then to the local schoolbours, which, being one of the few healthings comming unsembed, was turned	of the Channet, she has been admired as nesseth the following. A little girl of whose christming for some unexplained
terests, for if it does not possess as many "monies" to the square kilometer as the capital	direct semptementy, pledged their country and thoroughers in record driving, and hind there to	whose christming for some unexplained son had been postponed, was brought to che
does, it at least can show a good number. This is partly accounted for he the fact that	the local schoolhouse, which, being one of the	for the customary ceremon, her father mother stating that she wished to be ca-
This is partly accounted for by the fact that the safer element bello large; indeed, 30 per		
cent of the audience often is of the nactical persuasion. Liege also supports several shows,	All West Well Till-	"Bet," quoth the netonished priest, turn to the child, "that's a very long name you sure you wouldn't like to choose a shoe
while Ostende and other seaseds places, during their all too short seasons, run to casemas by	At first all were well the hard story of "Judes" (a singularly dail production) making	you sure you wouldn't like to choose a shoe
their all too short seasons, run to cinemas by		
Bad Weather Welcome	while the interest-seed as it is of each har- nawing situation was enhanced by the brazing	"Good girl! Certainly, you shall be cal
	orchestra, which mostly played out of time. All is fast, went recommingly till—harg! "Lights out?" bellowed the hourgmentre, as	"Bisses, Father, I'd like to be called Mar "Good geri! Certainly, you shall be cal- after the Resed Virgin." "Please, Father," piped the shill, "I want to called after Many Politics." "Was be called after Many Politics." "Who says the "montes" are not popular Belgians?
	"Lights out" believed the hourgmostre, as	Who says the "species" are not comfar
near shell-shattered Dankerque, for instance, the "picture palace" to a very modest affair, but at Ostende, where all the wealthy people	the hulding shoel with the concession cannot by an exploding bomb. Another burg, and the windows were shartered to ambbereess, while	Belgium?
but at Ostende, where all the wealthy people in Belgium disport themselves from about the end of July till the middle of September, reach	a wall gave way, falling-by great good look-	As a lad Richard Dix, Goldwan actor, a
and of July till the middle of September, much money is seent on decounties the muldish-	available our inference is an experience, was a sail gave way, falling—by great good brot-outwards. Five minutes have, the andimor man deposed of in the natures ordan and other salverranean shelters, where they heard	
money is spent on decounting the rathbolo- ments and on obtaining the most criticing films that can be had. Any amount of france change hands during the season, and if the weather	other subcernarian shelters, where they heard the sub-equent explosions in comparative	next and an electrical engineer, and that highest be dabbled in all of these studies, because he known almost as much as a most
hands during the second and if the change	safety.	picture director.

Country report on Belgium, published in the Moving Picture World, 20 August 1921 (p. 787). (source: Internet Archive)

In August 1921, for example, *The Moving Picture World* published a juicy country report on the small kingdom. The trade journal's correspondent wrote that in Brussels and Antwerp cinemas "seem to spring up in the night," and added that "it is doubtful that licensing authorities even have the time to compile a return showing the number of these places, so busy are they granting licenses to new ones." Continuous film performances were fully packed, and exhibitors were incessantly demanding popular films, especially American comedies and slapsticks.

American trade journals presented Belgium not only as a vibrant film market with proportionally high numbers of screens, theaters, and film attendance. They also presented the country as a unique free trade market with an amazingly liberal film policy. Because there was no substantial local film production, the country didn't have any form of protective policies. In contrast to most other markets, there was also no obligatory censorship. And the country's multilingual character made it a perfect playground to test Hollywood pictures abroad.

A French Colony?

Thanks to the recent digitization of movie magazines and trade journals, such as those on the Media History Digital Library, it is now relatively easy to trace the attempts of American movie businessmen to conquer the Belgian market. One challenging factor was that French films and companies were trying to regain Belgium as if it were part of the French market, like it used to be before the war. French companies, so a report of the American Department of Commerce stated in February 1920, often purchased Hollywood films with the exclusive rights for France and Belgium. American films like those featuring Charlie Chaplin, which were scarcely seen during the Great War, now became tremendously popular [DB].



During the German occupation, American pictures were forbidden or reduced to a minimum, so that few Belgians had seen Chaplin movies. This is probably one of the first programs with a Charles Chaplin's picture on it, to be shown in April 1918 in Cinema Zoologie nearby the famous Antwerp Zoo. (source: Felix Archief, Antwerp & Cine ZOOlogie platform)

The trade press is also an incredible source to discover how Hollywood sent company representatives to negotiate territorial contracts in Europe. When the European market reopened at the end of 1918, First National, Goldwyn, and Paramount were among the few studios that began to open foreign exchanges in Europe. In 1919, most Hollywood majors had offices established across continental Europe, in some cases also in Brussels. In the first few years after the war, many American producers operated with local distributors, or they used subsidiaries of major French companies like Gaumont or Pathé. This was the case, for instance, with Selznick Enterprise in 1920, which opened offices in Paris, Bordeaux, Lille, Lyon, Marseilles, Strasbourg, and Brussels [DB], with Paris as its main office.



Universal's 1919 Blind Husbands was shown as a special one-off screening on September 15, 1921, in cinema Salle de Paris in the city of Mechelen. This poster indicates that the Belgian distributor Comptoir du Film released Erich von Stroheim's sulfurous blockbuster. (source: Beeldbank Mechelen)

Towards Direct Distribution

Trade journals are only one source for investigating the distribution strategies of major American film companies. More research is needed, but the data behind Cinema Belgica clearly indicate that in the 1920s, there was a major shift towards direct distribution with local branches. One example is Universal. Just after the war, blockbuster pictures like *Blind Husbands* (1919) were distributed in Belgium by French and local Belgian companies [DB]. From 1922 onwards, however, Universal applied the more lucrative model of direct distribution [DB].



In the winter of 1924, another Universal picture by von Stroheim, Merry-go-Round (1923), is shown in the same prestigious cinema, Salle de Paris. The Cinema Belgica dataset [DB] indicates that the movie is now distributed by Universal's local branch. (source: Beeldbank Mechelen)

Another case is Paramount, which had previously worked with the French companies Pathé and Gaumont. But in 1922, it opened a branch in Brussels [DB].

In July 1922, Paramount submitted The Life of the Party (1920) to the Belgian Film Control Board as Fatty candidat [DB]. The leading actor was the tremendously popular and controversial Roscoe Fatty' Arbuckle. (source: State Archives of Belgium)



By the end of the 1920s, when the introduction of synchronic sound film formed another major obstacle and challenge, Hollywood companies had conquered the hearts (and money) of Belgian cinephiles. Whereas in the years after the Great War, Pathé and Gaumont treated the Belgian market as a French province, things had changed drastically now. By the end of the decade, Paramount, Universal, and Fox were kingmakers in the market [DB]. In the 1930s, they would be joined by Warner, which acquired First National in 1928 [DB] and started to release its own pictures. American distributors, however, were not the only ones to sell Hollywood fare. Many Belgian and French distributors [DB] also had American pictures on their lists, which only boosted Hollywood's appeal.



The small Belgian distributor General Ciné-Film highlights the fact that they acquired the exclusive rights of American, English, and other pictures. (source: Revue Belge du Cinéma, 24.8.1919, Royal Film Archive)

Database

Research on distribution strategies is often descriptive, even anecdotal. Systematic archival work is often impossible, given the lack of business archives on both sides of the ocean. One of the advantages of the datasets behind Cinema Belgica is that they offer researchers many options for systematic analysis. The datasets do not only contain names of distribution companies, but also of producers and exhibitors. They can be combined with film-related data such as the year and the origin of production, the release date, or information on film control and possible cuttings.

Researchers who wish to understand how major American producers and distributors operated in a country like Belgium, have near-endless opportunities for combining these different kinds of data. One obvious example is to make simple calculations of the number of companies, the amount of movies they had on the market, and the pictures' origin. The longitudinal character of the datasets allows for the usage of other analytical tools, such as timelines and graphs indicating the changing market shares of the major distribution firms on the market.

Another interesting tool, which we would like to illustrate with the case of Hollywood distributors in Belgium, is the one of visualizing data and mapping. Cinema Belgica's analytical tools enable researchers to identify networks and relationships between companies.

Further Research

On Cinema Belgica there is much more to discover about Hollywood's distribution practices and strategies. Some interesting topics for further research are:

- Were there differences in the distribution strategies of major Hollywood companies like Fox, Warner, or Paramount in Belgium?
- How big was the film catalogue of these companies?
- ▶ Did US distributors sell European movies as well?
- Given the harsh Belgian post-war resentments towards Germany, when were German films first released in Belgium, and who had these pictures in their portfolio?
- What happened with the arrival of sound? Was sound a blessing for French companies, and do we see an increase of French-language movies and French distributors on the bilingual Belgian market? What about Belgian companies? And, of course, did Hollywood lose or increase its power?



This tiny Belgian company, Les Films Talba, still seems to distribute silent films in 1932. Talba was active on the Belgian film market between 1929 and 1934. [DB] (ad in L'Annuaire Belge du cinéma 1932, source: Royal Film Archive)

Other Sources and Data

Researchers who are interested in the topic of film distribution and the dominance of Hollywood in Belgium and Europe, can also look at:

- BelgicaPress [digitized Belgian historical newspapers of the KBR/Belgian Royal Libary]
- <u>Cinema Context</u> [Dutch online platform with detailed information on movies' distribution patterns in the Netherlands]
- <u>Cinema ZOOlogie</u> [digital platform on the history of Cinema Zoologie in Antwerp, 1915-36, with online access to program booklets]
- <u>Cinematek</u> [library catalogue of the Belgian Royal Film Archive]
- Media History Digital Library [key platform for media and film historians with digitized film magazines and trade journals]

Further Reading

Quotes and sources used in this narrative:

- Cecil, G. (1921) All the Belgian Exhibitor Has to do Is to Give 'Em All Slapstick Stuff, *Moving Picture World*, 20/8/1921, p. 787.
- Elsaesser, Th. (1994) "Putting on a Show: The European Art Movie," *Sight and Sound* 4(4): 25.
- Maltby, R. (2020) "Perhaps everyone has forgotten just how pictures are shown to the public": Continuous performance and double billing in the 1930s, in D. Biltereyst, R. Maltby & Ph. Meers (eds.) *The Routledge Companion to New Cinema History*. London: Routledge.

More information on the history of Belgium's film distribution scene can be found in:

- Engelen, L. (2016) Filmdistributie in bezet België (1914-1918), *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis*, 19(1): 5-21.
- Vande Winkel, R. (2017) Film Distribution in Occupied Belgium (1940–1944): German Film Politics and its Implementation by the 'Corporate' Organisations and the Film Guild, *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis*, 20(1): 46-78.

Also relevant to contextualize the Belgian case within Hollywood's postwar strategies:

- Higson, A. & Maltby, R. (eds.)(1999) Film Europe and Film America: Cinema, Commerce and Cultural Exchange, 1920-1939. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.
- Thompson, K. (1985) Exporting Entertainment: America and the World Film Market, 1907-1934. London: British Film Institute.
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- Ulff-Moller, J. (2001) Hollywood's Film Wars with France: Film-Trade Diplomacy and the Emergence of the French Film Quota Policy. Rochester, NY: Rochester University Press.

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