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« Ladies and gentlemen, hats off, please! » Dutch Film Lecturing and the Case of Cor Schuring¹

Schuring belongs to the progressive party. He always walks up and down during his lecturing. Grader is definitely right-wing. He constantly turns his back on the public to the left-side. Schuring is luxuriant in his comic explanations. Grader would be a good chairman of the Chamber of Deputies for his modest, quiet and calm grace. Schuring speaks forcefully, Grader softly. Schuring is fire, Grader water. Schuring belongs to the modern school, Grader clings to the traditions of the old guard, especially when uttering a distinct pronunciation of the Dutch language. Schuring is, musically speaking, the major key, Grader the minor key, and both find in the pianist Brandès their best melody conductor. His accompaniment is sober, but always appropriate, never blaring, always artistic. This trio contributes considerably to the success of the beautiful films received at the Witte (Cinema).²

Cor Schuring's son Lo Schuring remembers being taken to the cinema from a young age. He found the critic's remarks questionable because, according to him, a lecturer had to be an « all-rounder », dealing with comic films as well as with serious dramas. A lecturer was expected to be able to cope with a diversity of film genres.

The explicateur. A case study drawn from memories

Early cinema history studies have enhanced our understanding of early film production, distribution and exhibition practices. For one thing, silent cinema was

never silent. Music, speech and even sound effects were an important accompaniment to early films. It is appropriate to direct attention to a presence in the history of early cinema that was predominantly aural. The film lecturer lent a voice to the soundless pictures on the screen. He mastered his task by adapting to a variety of roles: the « narrator », the « entertainer », the « actor », the « explainer », the « educator », and the « commentator ». In the Netherlands, the film lecturer was called the *explicateur*.

The *explicateur* was a sort of oral chameleon, bending his voice to express moods, comments and character-lines, responding to what was occurring on the screen as well as in the house. The lecturer's bodily presence was surely noticed by the spectator, at times dominantly so, but more often forgotten while enraptured by the film stories. The *explicateur* performed his work quietly in the dark. His line of employment disappeared when features lengthened and cinema theaters aspired to a different status. A fugitive figure is bound to keep secrets. Precisely how the *explicateurs* worked and how their audiences responded will forever be locked in the past. However, it is possible to construct a hypothetical frame through which to resuscitate this oral presence. This article attempts to follow some traces exemplified by a case study centering on the *explicateur* Cor Schuring.

Our evidence and interpretations are based upon distinctly discrete sources. Besides relying upon such written documents as the early film trade press, we draw largely on two thick scrapbooks filled with clippings and memorabilia in the possession of Lo Schuring. He vividly remembers his father's role in the cinema. Conversations with him provided us with interesting stories about his father, Cor Schuring, who worked for over fifteen years as an *explicateur* in numerous Dutch cinemas. In research, personal memories are easily disregarded because of their anecdotal, nostalgic character. They often present a particular and colored view, full of omissions and distortions. However, in their directness and vividness, they also inform us, not so much about facts, but about experiences. While this type of information needs to be confirmed, these memories are valid and valuable as resources precisely because they present an historical immediacy that enables us to recall atmospheres, sensitivities, and situations. Personal reminiscences can provide us with details lost to processed or official documented sources. Oral history has proven effective – a complementary method bearing fruitful nuances – to interpreting the past.³ In this article, our ambitions are modest. We mean to share some thoughts and query some ideas about this phenomenon – the *explicateur* in the Netherlands.

Cor Schuring. Theater, Variety, Cinema

Cor Schuring was born in Amsterdam on 10 January, 1880. He started his career as an actor, performing with various companies. In 1902 he changed to vaudeville, among other things having an act as an « eccentric conjurer » and taking part in a « jumping-pantomime ». Becoming a member of the trio Barry-Barry took Schuring all over Europe. In 1906, for example, he performed at the Petit Casino de Paris as one of the « Jongleurs excentriques de l'Alhambra de Paris ». For a while, he joined Fred Karno's company doing an act together with Charlie Chaplin, which later was repeated in one of Chaplin's films, *A Night in the Show* (Essanay, 1915). After his return to Holland, Schuring went back to his theatrical career and, not before too long, he made his film debut. He acted in one of the early Dutch film dramas *De ballingen* (Nöggerath, 1911), appearing with his future wife.⁴



The trio Barry-Barry, Timm Dellebarre, the dog, Cor Schuring.
Lo Schuring's clipping book.

Schuring at the pictures

Apparently Schuring established a reputation as an all-round « performer ». In January 1912, he received a telegram from Alberts Frères (the brothers Willy and Albert Mullens, pioneers of the Dutch cinema trade), inviting him to become a lecturer in their cinema at The Hague (*de Haagsche Bioscoop*).⁵ Schuring responded affirmatively and thus entered the profession of *explicateur*. Schuring remained in The Hague until May 1912 and then moved to the cinema Chicago in Nijmegen, where he worked from July 1912 until February 1913. The Chicago was clearly proud of its new *explicateur*, and the *Chicago Nieuws* (its own magazine) prominently displayed him in a full page photograph and in laudatory prose about his lecturing.⁶ Several film programs that Cor Schuring lectured were distributed by Jean Desmet.⁷

On 14 March, 1913, Schuring established himself again in Amsterdam and worked that year for the Witte Bioscoop situated at the Damrak. The « White » Cinema was a name for cinemas that claimed to show « innocent » programs. They wished to attract a wide ranging audience, including children. These cinemas largely followed the censorship decisions declared by the Catholic Church, which was stricter than the communal censor. Actually, the Witte name meant no sex, but violence was permitted. In the latter part of the teens, the Witte at Amsterdam, for example, even became a cinema that specialized in action films.⁸ Here Cor Schuring lectured together with a colleague *explicateur*, Jan Grader (see the quote at the beginning of this article). At this time Schuring was possibly employed to lecture at different cinemas. His *explication* accompanied the prestigious Italian epic *Quo Vadis?* (Cines, 1913) although it is not clear if this was at the Witte Bioscoop.

In the period 1914-1920, Schuring changed employers frequently, but no exact dates could be found for when he worked in each cinema. From April until October 1914, Schuring lived at The Hague, probably working at this time as a lecturer at the Cinema Monopole. In October 1915, he settled down in Ede, where he lectured at the Militaire Bioscoop, a special cinema for soldiers. (During the First World War, many young Dutchmen were mobilized in anticipation of possible action. The long mobilization period created tensions and protests in generally anti-militaristic Holland. The film programs offered were a welcome diversion.) From Ede, Schuring moved to the nearby city of Wageningen, where for awhile he worked together with Van Aalst at the Cinema Modern owned by J. Pollak. The trade paper *De Bioscoop-Courant* made special mention of Cor Schuring's lecturing to the film *Maciste* (Itala, 1915). The film was an « enormous success », and the audience flocked in « in spite of the tropical heat.»⁹ Later, in 1916, Schuring and Van Aalst both left the Cinema Modern.

Schuring went back to work at the Witte Bioscoop, but this time one situated in Haarlem. He also worked for the Cinema Centraal and subsequently for the Prinsensbioscoop in Amsterdam. In this period, the Witte Bioscoop showed many muscle men films like the popular *Maciste Alpino* (Itala, 1916), westerns, and crime stories. Other favorites were melodramas like *Fiacre Nr. 13* (Ambrosio, 1917), starring Helena Makowska. Toward the end of the teens, the Witte showed many serials. Each week a new episode would stop at the most exciting moment. The lecturer had an important task in supporting this growing tension, ensuring the audience's return the following week in order to satisfy the business interests of the proprietor.

The exhibitors could not show just any film they thought would do well at the box office. They had to consider local censorship. Lo Schuring said: « Normally the films were shown on Thursday in daytime for the local censorship committee. Cinemas like the Witte Bioscoop did not take on films which they thought were not suited for the young. Frequently this was taken too far. I even recall that there was one Chaplin for over sixteen only ».¹⁰

On 19 March, 1920, Schuring became both manager and lecturer of the Cinema Empire in The Hague. This combination of professions – manager/lecturer – was at this time quite common, especially in smaller theaters. The owners of the Witte Bioscoop in Amsterdam, Mr. Povel and Mr. Van Royen, also owned the Cinema Empire, and thus offered Schuring the opportunity to transform this sleepy cinema into a flourishing attraction, which he managed to do. Schuring's son explained that this offer was not just a favor but a political move, too. At the time, Cor Schuring was known to be an active member of the union for theater and cinema employees, even chairing it for a while. Schuring was not afraid to protest against certain cinema industry politics. Povel and Van Royen, probably goaded by other cinema and theater exhibitors, hoped to make Schuring meek by putting him under their obligation. The proprietors apparently succeeded in this intention. In the teens, Schuring had published regularly on matters concerning the abuse of the trade, within and outside of the cinema. Trade papers like *De Bioscoop-Courant* and *De Kinematograaf* frequently printed his writings on underpayment, amateurism among lecturers, film censorship and the banning of children from films that were too violent, criminal or erotic. However, from around 1920, Cor Schuring's name practically disappeared from the press circuit. Only in one particular case did he again intervene. He had an intermediary role during a cinema strike at The Hague in the twenties. Schuring Jr. recalls: « Then Loet Barnstijn [one of the fiercest Dutch exhibition and distribution moguls in the twenties] wanted to “go about it in a heavy-handed way”, but my father intervened, and it all ended quietly. Barnstijn never forgave him and forbid all his cinema managers to employ him ».¹¹ This last episode and the implied scheme behind Schuring's move to The Hague

confirms how much the position of the lecturer in the late teens and early twenties was politicized.¹²

The Empire, a modest local cinema, grew under Schuring's management into a popular place for amusement. The cinema developed a vast regular audience: the matinees were always sold out and the children's programs were packed. The type of audiences changed considerably every few days. According to Lo Schuring, « On Wednesday and Thursday the civil servants would come in, but on Friday, Saturday and Sunday a rougher audience would visit the theater. One looked each other up on specific days, people did not mingle that easy ».¹³ In the two years that Schuring ran the Cinema Empire he showed various films similar to the type of films offered at the Witte Bioscoop in Amsterdam. His programs included many action films with Douglas Fairbanks, Eddie Polo, W.S. Hart and Elmo Lincoln and comedies with Eddie and Lee.¹⁴

The screen was not always populated by these all-American heroes. From time to time, a Dutch film production was prominent in the cinemas. Beginning 29 September, 1921, the Cinema Empire showed a re-release of *Op Hoop van Zegen* (*The Good Hope*, Hollandia, 1918). *Op Hoop van Zegen* was a film based upon a well-known social and dramatic theater piece by Herman Heijermans. Esther De Boer-van Rijk performed the part of Kniertje, the old fisherman's widow, who loses her last two sons to the cruel fate inflicted by the sea. Just as Esther De Boer-van Rijk had done a hundred times on the stage, she moved the audience with her acting. The film, a Hollandia production by Maurits Binger, ran for a long time after its first release in October 1918. Evidently both the exhibitors and the audience enormously appreciated the film. The *Haagsche Courant*, a newspaper that normally only placed advertisements for the cinema and reviewed no film programs, dedicated in this case laudatory lines to the presentation of this « classic » at the Empire:

*This film waited for its re-release in order to make a new triumphant march through the Netherlands. (...) They (the actors) live in surroundings so familiar to us here and, in a story of rare tragedy, portray the dangerous and difficult lives of fishermen. The management of the Empire has done well in bringing this beautiful film back to their repertoire. It is a film so suitable for lecturing, and it will enjoy much satisfaction from it.*¹⁵

For health reasons, Cor Schuring had been obliged to leave the Empire around April in 1922. He went on lecturing in cinemas elsewhere, mainly in the south of the country – Tilburg and Oisterwijk. Here, however, he had no longlasting success. In this period, religious segregation ruled the Netherlands, and this had adverse effects on some lecturers' careers, particularly in the Catholic south. Lo Schuring remembers: « One day a priest came to our home and urged the family to

become Catholic. For it was Catholic money that ran this business [this cinema]. The priest said, “we cannot permit it that one of our employees is not Catholic”... My father answered, “I want my wife and children to have the liberty to choose their religion”. This response, of course, cost him his job ».¹⁶

Finally, and for quite awhile, Cor Schuring was employed at the Luxor theater in The Hague. At this popular cinema, Schuring lectured with various so-called « *Jordaan*-films ». These films were staged after favorite popular theater comedies. Most of the stories were set in the Jordaan, a local common area of Amsterdam. The stage actors would often perform as well in the film versions. Due to his Amsterdam background, Schuring was extremely well equipped to lecture with these films and to perform the typical « Jordanese » (partly Yiddish) humor. The film shows were often interrupted by « live » performances given by artists also appearing on the screen. The popular vaudeville actress Adriënne Solser had great success with these « double acts ». The screening of the film *De Jantjes* (*The Bluejackets*, Hollandia, 1922), for example, was stopped several times to change its presentation from film to stage. The popular songs of the stage version would be performed live. This combination of variety and film proved to be such a success that *De Jantjes* had to be prolonged for several weeks. Quite a number of the regular visitors were happy to come back again and see the same show. Apart from *De Jantjes*, other popular films were: *Bleeke Bet* (*Pallid Betsy*, Actueel Film, 1923), *Oranje Hein* (*Orange Harry*, Actueel Film, 1925) and *Mottige Janus* (*Pock-marked Johnny*, Hollandia, 1922). When the film *Oranje Hein* was shown, there was even an orchestra present, and it was customary with all the films for the audience to cheerfully sing along with the artists.¹⁷

*The old man kept his contacts with the world of variety and the wild amusement life that went on in those years. There were wrestling games in the cinemas where he performed. Another attraction was The Living Aquarium, where a man swallowed frogs and fishes and spat them out afterwards. This he did as an intermezzo, in between two films. My father in the twenties became an actor again (on the stage), together with Charles Braakensiek, also a famous lecturer from the teens, and Jules Verstraeten.*¹⁸



Johan Elsensohn and Maurits de Vries in De Jantjes (The Bluejackets, Maurits Binger and B.E. Doxat-Pratt, Hollandia, 1922)

When sound film arrived, Schuring realized that his days as a cinema lecturer were definitely over. Lecturers and musicians were no longer needed and had to develop careers in other directions. Apart from the theater and the film, Schuring had always liked the circus. After various minor initiatives in theater and variety productions and after a brief connection with the circus Olympiade in 1928, Schuring eventually joined the circus Strassburger (probably in 1936). This circus put on their shows at the Carré theater in Amsterdam, which was purposely built as

a winter circus. Cor Schuring worked for the Strassburger as the ringmaster, in fact not dissimilar from his track as a lecturer. At the same time, he also performed as a ringmaster at circus Sarrasani, but it is unclear exactly when. Schuring remained ringmaster at Strassburger, later called Mikkenie-Strassburger, until 1954, when he retired. Cor Schuring died on 29 March, 1962.¹⁹

Schuring's Lecturing

On 13 March, 1913, a civil servant at Amsterdam registered Schuring as « Explainer Cinema-theater ». Although in a literary sense, « lecturer » means « explainer », Schuring's son says this description is incorrect: « A lecturer did not have to explain anything. Mostly he just personified the characters represented on the white screen by imitating their voices synchronously with the images. The lecturer did not explicate what he saw or what the actors did ».²⁰

*With comedies he seldom spoke, with Charlie Chaplin films he uttered at the most a rare « Aha! ». With documentaries described as « nature-films », and newsreels, there was no lecturing at all. Music was used to express emotions or even increase them. What was clearly shown on the screen did not need further explanation in the cinema hall.*²¹

Clearly Lo Schuring expresses here only one opinion. Other lecturers had different views and offered comments and explanations.

A testimony of filmgoing in the teens suggests that Dutch spectators at that time badly needed lecturers. Now in her nineties, Mrs. B. van Royen-Fontaine, the daughter-in-law of the first owner of the Witte Bioscoop at Amsterdam, Mr. G. van Royen, recalls how she already visited the Witte Bioscoop in her childhood, before and during the First World War. One of the reasons that she attended this cinema, she says, was the pleasant lecturing. She remembers Schuring welcoming his audience with: « Ladies and gentlemen, hats off, please ». Contrary to this, the Pathé cinema at the Kalverstraat held bad memories for her because in this theater there was no lecturing at all: « We did not understand a thing of it ».²² Pathé abolished all lecturing from their theaters. When the Amsterdam Pathé theater opened in 1911, no lecturer was present; instead, the films were accompanied by a small orchestra conducted by Mr. N. Snoeck.²³ Still, the spectators who especially visited the smaller cinemas had difficulties with the huge number of foreign films that flooded the Dutch screens. They demanded adaptations – a « translation » in their own culture, their own language or even their own dialect.²⁴ It should be understood that since cinema's arrival, the films offered in Dutch theaters were mainly foreign. Dutch film production never achieved dominance, although some Dutch feature

films and documentaries had great impact. Foreign cultures were for many not yet familiar. In those days, going « abroad » was, for large groups of people still socially and financially unattainable. Even to many middle-class cinema visitors of provincial towns, Amsterdam was considered « abroad ».²⁵ Only the top layers of society travelled easily across borders. For many people, the image of « abroad » was not based on personal experience and therefore could be a rather detached vision, more a fiction than a fact. Thus, the cinema was an important source of information about foreign countries and not just in travel films and newsreels, but also in fiction films that showed different values and cultures, different acting traditions and, through shots on locations, different surroundings.²⁶ Lastly, one should not forget that in this period, in spite of the stabilization occurring after the introduction of the obligatory primary school, illiteracy was still an obstacle for certain spectators. Spectators who had difficulties reading the intertitles needed the explanation even more when intertitles became longer and more frequent.

Although one lecturer per show was normal, it was not unusual to have several. The Witte Bioscoop, both with the presentation of *Cabiria* (Itala, 1914) in 1915 and with *Maciste* in 1916, had three different lecturers accompanying the film: De Munck, De Vos and Van Dijk. As mentioned earlier, Cor Schuring worked on various occasions together with another lecturer.²⁷

Schuring presented himself in a modest position when he lectured. Neither he nor the musician(s) were in the spotlights. He often stood at the side of the screen. This could be for practical reasons, since the lecturer sometimes would have to create sound effects. Lightning was imitated on a zinc plate; an electric bell served as a telephone or a doorbell; and a clapper was used for gunshots. While lecturing, Schuring would walk up and down the gangway and also through the auditorium.

*Once, when a Biblical film was shown (The Sign of The Cross?), he was quietly walking up and down without watching the screen. It was the last night of the projection of this film. He had seen it over and over again and knew it by heart. He arrived at his closing words: And it happened in those days, that an order was sent out by the Emperor Augustus, that the whole earth should be described. The audience stood up silently and left the theater as if leaving a church. My old man turned around and, to his great astonishment, saw that the film was not yet over, but still slowly running to its end.*²⁸

The lost Explicateur

Since the beginning of cinema in 1895, films have been accompanied by words, uttered to announce the film's attractions and to explicate the silent pictures. The

brothers Willy and Albert Mullens (Albert Frères) were among the pioneers in the Netherlands who presented the wonders of the Cinematograph. They initially travelled around Holland and Belgium exhibiting films on kermesses and at fairs. In the summer of 1905, they took their ambulatory film show to open the season of the Olympia Palace, in the Dutch seaside resort Zandvoort. The local press remarked:

The business Albert Frères has gotten far with its pictures. The projections are in focus and the shade of colors are clear and neat with magnificent tinting. The effect is surprisingly pleasing to the eye but the ear is not forgotten because with the image one of the Alberts gives a nice and often humorous explication.²⁹

Cor Schuring, who was appointed by Alberts Frères in his first employment as a film lecturer, would work in this profession until well into the 1920s.

For thirty years the explicateur was a common presence in the Dutch film trade. Strangely enough, this significant figure left only a slight trace. Up until now, few studies in the Netherlands were concerned with the specific role of the film lecturer.³⁰ One reason for the fading of the explicateur's prominence lays in the shortage of (reliable) literature on early Dutch cinema practices. For example, little information exists about the position of the explicateur in the travelling cinemas. The first film journals appeared only about 1910, and not all issues survived. Local newspapers, if searched meticulously, surely would offer extended insights. National newspapers regularly printed advertisements but few reviewed film shows. Furthermore, the press seldom devoted explicit accounts of the lecturer's role. The trade papers, apart from printing announcements and ads, focused mainly on matters of the industry's business or on the content of film programs and later on the performances and lives of film actors. The explicateur's presence is frequently remarked upon but often in one line sentences to the effect of « the lecturing was good again ».

Other reasons for the explicateur's elusiveness lay in his deliberate erasure from film presentations when new developments caused change. The explicateur was in part a victim of the emergence of feature-length films in which stories became ever more self-contained. Audiences acquired different tastes and no longer needed the guidance of a film explainer. Cities housed larger and classier cinemas. The explicateurs were made redundant and disappeared from the sites of the more fashionable cinema theaters. To accompany the silent features, the proprietors employed instead small or large orchestras. With the arrival of sound film, lecturing became an outmoded tradition linked with a « primitive » period best forgotten.

We would like to suggest another dimension to the explicateur's « invisibility ». The very singularity of his profession contributed to his obliteration. The film lecturer had primarily an aural status; he was more heard than seen. His physical presence was dominated by the skilled variety in which he used his voice. His per-

formance was every single time a unique presentation, very much like an actor's performance in the theater. However, unlike the actor who stood in the spotlight and got the audience's full attention, the explicateur was standing in the dark, giving lip service to the stories and characters on the screen. Certain explicateurs were popular, and the audience returned especially for their type of lecturing. But seldom was he regarded a star in the way that film actors were idolized and subsequently promoted by the cinema industry. Apart from some exceptions, the explicateur's name rarely appeared in film programs or on film announcements.³¹ His role in the cinema increasingly became first a matter of fact part of the overall experience and later more of an outdated hindrance. A portion of silent films survived and can be screened even today. The actors and people in the pictures become once again very much alive. The explicateur's presence died with his trade. He most literally stayed behind in the dark.

The *explicateur*: a profession

The task of an *explicateur* was never clearly defined. Advertisements placed by lecturers looking for work and theater directors offering a position emphasized qualities that in general referred more to the importance of an impeccable character than to specific professional skills. In the major Dutch film journals from the teens, the same words frequently recurred: « civilized », « competent », « respectable », and « trustworthy ».³² However, indications about skills were given in phrases like: « calm and clear explanation, » « good diction » experienced in modern languages, and « familiar with theater activities ». The *explicateur* had to be flexible and adaptable, changing his mode of speech several times during the entirety of a film program. The audience was presented with a diverse series of films containing, for example, a documentary or a news film, a comedy, and a drama. Furthermore, the *explicateur* had to adapt his lecturing style to suit different genres. A suspenseful serial, a throw and fling slapstick, an historical costume drama or a moral tearjerker all demanded varied means of delivery. At the same time, he had to adjust the direction in his lecturing while judging his audiences' responses.

*A witty and civilized explicateur, such as, for example, Mister Alberts (Willy Mullens), knows how now and again and unexpectedly to bring those who are too easily impressed with the pictures back to reality. With one single word spoken in his own characteristic nice, witty, solemn way, he manages to make the packed house in the building of Arts and Sciences burst into laughter.*³³

The *explicateur* professionalized his personal lecturing style through preparation and practice. At times a prefabricated delivery added an artistic touch: « The

pretty verse, which Mr. Alberts (Willy Mullens) has made on what happened, and which he recites during the various scenes, contributes much to the success ».³⁴ There was not always time for the *explicateur* to see the films in advance which meant he had to rely entirely on his talent for improvisation. This skill was also needed to avoid restlessness during unforeseen intervals, such as, for example, when the film strip broke and suddenly the screen went blank.³⁵ The dominant part of the lecturer's task was taken up by speech but occasionally he made use of sound effects. As one critic reviewing a comedy said: « It was never really clear if the audience had more fun with the hilarious caprices that glided over the screen, or with the unsurpassable way with which, for example, the party sounds were imitated ».³⁶

In the teens, Dutch movie theaters were referred to as « popular » and « elite » cinemas. Popular theaters were situated in local neighborhoods and attended by common people. Elite cinemas were more upscale venues that attracted a more bourgeois audience. The film programs each offered were accordingly different at meeting the public's taste, and the *explicateurs* adapted their lecturing to these particular preferences. The « respectable » correspondents in the trade papers were inclined to acclaim a civilized and modest lecturing style while protesting against a too exuberant or philistine *explication*.³⁷ They preferred a natural way of speaking, well articulated, and sparing in words. The *explicateur* should express the right atmosphere without exaggeration. The use of rough language was condemned. Cor Schuring thought the critics too fretful:

*Do you think the expression « Harridan » in a comic number too thick? It is a common enough expression, and I confess to have used even stronger terms when talking about a snappish mother-in-law; well, if you have one yourself, you will know that one can get worked up about something like that.*³⁸

People visiting the « popular » cinemas did not mind a more lively speech with occasional loudness and double entendres.³⁹

In this article, we focus on the *explicateur* working in the regular cinema circuit. In the Netherlands, however, several special branches of cinema exhibition existed. These were mostly non-commercial enterprises where the *explicateur* had to educate his audience or propagate an attitude toward life. Dutch society was organized in a system where pillars of religious and socio-political groups all demanded regulated representations in any important aspect of the cultural arena. When Cor Schuring moved to the south to lecture in Tilburg, the whole family was pressed to become Catholic. The Salvation Army had their own *Bioscoop-Brigade* (Cinema League) showing films to plead their cause. In 1918, the *School Bioscoop* (School Cinema) was erected. A book by its founder David van Staveren stressed that the *explicateur* had to be a « schoolmaster », an « organizer », a « civilized

man » a « good declaimer », and a « hygienic speaker ». The explication with the films « should never be “heavy-handed” or “learned”, but always lively and attractive ». ⁴⁰ His initiative was followed in 1920 by the foundation of the *Onderwijs en Jeugd Bioscoop* (Education and Youth Cinema) where films, besides being instructive, should instigate good morals. ⁴¹ In addition, some regular cinema proprietors were praised for offering entertainment as well as education:

It takes much pedagogical insight to constantly assure good results with the program choice. The intention is to keep the youths pleasantly busy with images suitable for them and from which they can learn something as well... Luckily the management exercises exquisite enlightenment in their choice of films, while an animated and a pithy explication accompanies the films. ⁴²

Earlier in this article, we have already referred to the views held by the *Witte Bioscoop* (the White ‘Catholic’ Cinemas). Another type of Youth Cinema was provided by the *Rode Bioscoop* (Red Cinema), whose general aim it was to show artistic features with a predominantly socialist tendency. They organized special children’s film programs with explication.

Whichever type of cinema and whatever film programs were offered, the *explicateur* also had his own *explication* preferences and specific lecturing styles that he had developed over the years.

An absent presence

Modern viewing experiences would let us believe that the *explicateur’s* presence was at its best when hardly noticeable. The « classic » film spectator liked to retreat into another world, forget the actual environment, and emerge in an imaginary continuum represented on the screen. The early cinema spectator would have had a different experience in which the apparent bodily presence of the *explicateur* was not necessarily regarded as disturbing. The Dutch cinema was in more than one way connected with related forms of entertainment such as variety and the popular theater. ⁴³ Not only were film exhibitions screenings of a series of films accompanied by live music and live *explication*, but they were also intertwined with live performances and musical interludes. Audiences, therefore, were accustomed to shifting their attention from screen to stage, from the illusory presence of film characters to the real presence of the performer, the musician and the *explicateur*. Furthermore, being at the movies was a much more sociable experience. It was quite common for people to talk, eat, smoke or drink during the film program. ⁴⁴ In such a garrulous environment, the physical presence of the *explicateur* might not have been a disturbing feature at all.

Nevertheless, the film presentation was a decidedly different kind of experience than attending a theater play. The audience wished to absorb the film pictures, helped by the words of the *explicateur*, whose role was to reveal and mediate the film's bearing without drawing explicit attention to his visual presence.⁴⁵ The oral *explication* had to give full play to the film images. The audience was engaged with the actors on the screen and, as such, not with the *explicateur* in the auditorium. Of course, the spectator would witness the *explicateur's* presence from time to time but only in brief glances. S/he wanted to follow the development of the film as illustrated on the screen. Herein we can find an important difference between the early cinema experience and the presentations of magic lantern shows. The lantern lecturer is often regarded as the putative origin of the film *explicateur*, except that the lantern lecturer talked to a series of « static » images that were held on screen for the period in which he conveyed his stories. The lantern lecturer talked practically continuously whereas the *explicateur* added speech here and there. The lantern lecturer was more of an elocutionist or a showman. The magic lantern presentation allowed the spectator to shift freely his attention from the screen to the lecturer and *vice versa*. The spectator knew that in returning his/her gaze to the screen the same image would still be there, and s/he was confident that the lecturer would announce a change to the next slide. The projection of film images is essentially different. Not without reason is cinema attendance referred to as going to see the « moving pictures ». The image is constantly changing, and in order to experience the entire film, the spectator is bound to watch the screen more continuously. It was the *explicateur's* voice addressing the spectator's hearing that dominated the film lecturing and not his bodily appearance.⁴⁶

The lure of the Voice

The voice was the *explicateur's* most precious instrument. His « presentational » qualities lay in the way in which he used his voice – the variety of his intonations and modulations, the expressiveness in the dialogues, the regulated diction in how to say things and when, and knowing at which moments to be silent. A shifting range of differences in atmosphere, feelings, and the delivery of interesting details in information were all given utterance. Cor Schuring stressed this important aspect of his *métier*: « The first requirement is to have vocals, a voice which can as clearly express the soft sound of a child, the sorrow of a father, or the anger of a madman ».⁴⁷ Lo Schuring remembered how precious the vocal cords were to his father. Cor Schuring took extra care of his throat, exercising it and avoiding any risk of getting a cold.⁴⁸ The *explicateur's* voice had to verbalize what the characters mimicked on the screen: « The art of becoming a good *explicateur* can only be found in the way in which one is able to identify oneself with the

role(s) expressed by the film actors ».⁴⁹ Charles Braakensiek, a popular film lecturer, was admired for his tasteful dramatizations and oral personifications:

*(Braakensiek) motivates every gesture, every movement by distending or restraining his voice, thus by force of expression and intonation. And he does this with so much conviction, completely identifying himself with the character, that the public is deeply impressed. And the drama is fervently sympathized with, in such a way I have never seen – and heard - sympathy.*⁵⁰

This dialogue type of *explication* was often delivered in direct speech, enhancing the spectator's empathy for and identification with the represented world on film.

Another form of *explication* helped the audience to understand what was visualized on the screen. In the Netherlands, the *explicateur* was also known as the *filmuitlegger* (film explainer). Other terms frequently used in the Dutch trade papers of the teens are *toelichten* (elucidate) and *verklaren* (comment). The *explicateur* added cohesion to the film stories and enhanced the audience's comprehension, « The explanation (...) does not just leave enough space for the imagination of the spectator, but it is as well the guiding principle necessary to grasp the intrigue, to understand, and therefore be able to take in, the content of the film completely ».⁵¹ However, this affirmation that the *explicateur* fulfilled an important guiding role also raised question marks about his responsibilities in moral matters. Film censorship was a strong issue in the Netherlands, and this was expressed in many fierce discussions in the trade press of the teens.⁵² Films were often thought to be too violent, too corrupt, or too sexy by « middle class custodians of morals »:

*The censors meant to expel from the programs the sensuous, the gruesome, the sensational, or at least, they tried to minimize it. This is made possible in enforcing cuts so one should feel at ease. But now there is a chance that the explicateur, with his speech, his indications, his jokes may yet again lead the attention to those dangerous points that the audience's film censors have carefully tried to suppress. Or, the lecturing raises the tension artificially, and the sensational is yet again put in the foreground.*⁵³

The enforced control of institutionalized film censorship was not so easily extended to ruling over the intrinsic flexibility of the *explication*. The authority with which the *explicateur* used his speech however could bend either way and, accordingly, he was attacked for his « misleading and inciting speech » or praised for his civilized and model lecturing.

Concluding

Research into the role of the *explicateurs* in the Dutch cinema has uncovered the *explicateur's* importance. Film lecturing was a momentary oral profession leaving few tangible traces. *Explication* was supplementary, if not subordinated, to the films' visuals. Yet, the *explicateur* was distinctively featured in the Netherlands and, he had an essential role in the overall filmgoing experience. The *explicateur* was present during the entire silent film period, even though the profession faced a noticeable decline at the end of the teens. The fact that by then the national trade papers wrote less about the *explicateurs* can be partially explained by their predominant occupation with what was going on in the major cities and larger cinemas. The *explicateurs* continued to work in smaller local cinemas until the arrival of « talking pictures ».

This article traces some characteristic features of the *explicateur's* role and status. The case study of Cor Schuring, which was mainly based upon information gathered by interviews and a scrapbook of clippings, presents a personal history of an *explicateur*. Schuring came from a variety and theater background, a typically Dutch connection shared with other *explicateurs*. Schuring's case shows his political role within the cinema trade and stresses the explicit demand for social flexibility and adaptability in managing lecturing skills. Cor Schuring frequently changed employment, regularly moving from one town to another. In his profession, he adjusted his lecturing to diverse genres, roles and audiences. Schuring ended his career as a circus ringmaster inviting attention for the spectacular. The reappearing *explicateur* appeals for recognition of the audibility of silent cinema.

Notes

1. We would like to thank for their kind cooperation: Mr. and Mrs. Lo Schuring, Mrs. B. van Royen-Fontaine, Ansjé van Beusekom, Geoffrey Donaldson, Michael Punt, Paul van Yperen, staff and employees of the Nederlands Filmmuseum (especially Marjan Hietbrink and Paul Kusters). Sources were found at: Nederlands Filmmuseum Amsterdam, Gemeentearchief Amsterdam, Koninklijke Bibliotheek Den Haag, and the clippings' archive of Mr. Lo Schuring.

2. The two lecturers, working together for a cinema in Amsterdam, were thus compared in an untitled article, no date, Lo Schuring's clipping book (LSCB).

3. For further reading, see: Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past. Oral History*, New York, Oxford University Press, (1978) second edition 1988.

4. All the information about Cor Schuring's theatrical and vaudeville career originates in memories, as told to Lo Schuring by his father, and in facts extracted from the clippings' archive collected by Schuring's son. At the Petit Casino, Schuring performed in the same show as a young variety artist: Maurice Chevalier! The Karno act with Chaplin had Schuring standing on a stage while Chaplin threw objects at him. The film *De ballingen* was about prisoners in Siberia and starred Nöggerath's leading lady, the stage actress Caroline van Dommelen. Schuring's son recalls, « My father played a grim guardsman, complete with boots and whip. My mother acted as one of the exiles who had to wade through the snow together with Caroline van Dommelen ». Personal interview with Lo Schuring, Amsterdam, 6 February, 1995.

5. This telegram is still prominent in the clippings' archive of Schuring's son.

6. *Chicago Nieuws*, 1912, LSCB.

7. On Jean Desmet, see: Ivo Blom, « Filmvertrieb in Europa 1910-1915. Jean Desmet und die Messer-Film GmbH », in *KINtop*, n° 3, Frankfurt, 1994, pp. 73-91; and « La collection de films de Jean Desmet (Nederlands Filmuseum) », in *Cinémathèque*, n° 3, Paris, 1993, pp. 96-99.

8. Before the National Cinema Law of 1926 (effective in 1928), the Netherlands only knew local censorship committees, which were heavily contested by the cinema trade for their capricious and unrepresentative judgements. For the development of national censorship, see: Karel Dibbets, « Het bioscoopbedrijf tussen de twee wereldoorlogen », in Karel Dibbets and Frank van der Maden (eds.), *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse film en bioscoop tot 1940*, Houten, Wereldvenster, 1986, pp. 229-270. See, for censorship in Amsterdam, the article on the municipal film censor Simon Stokvis: Joost Vermoolen, « Simon B. Stokvis (1883-1941). De strijd van een omstreden filmkeurder », in *Jaarboek Mediageschiedenis*, n° 6, 1995, pp. 259-278. On censorship in Rotterdam, see: Onno De Wit, « Pedagogen en zedenmeesters in de greep van het bioscoopkwaad. De Rotterdamse bioscoopcommissie 1913-1928 », in *Jaarboek Mediageschiedenis*, n° 3, 1991, pp. 15-40.

9. *De Bioscoop-Courant*, 12 May, 1916.

10. Personal Interview with Lo Schuring, February, 1995. See, also, Joost Vermoolen, « Simon B. Stokvis (1883-1941). De strijd van een omstreden filmkeurder », *op. cit.*

11. Personal Interview with Lo Schuring, 6 February 1995.

12. *Ibid.*, LSCB.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Lo Schuring's clippings' archive contains dozens of advertisements for these action films shown at the Empire.

15. *Haagsche Courant*, 29 September 1921.

16. Interview with Lo Schuring, 6 February 1995.

17. *Ibid.*, LSCB.

18. *Ibid.*, Charles Braakensiek changed work regularly among the cinema, the variety, and the theater. From 1913 until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, Braakensiek was the director of the Rozentheater in Amsterdam. See, *De Komeet*, n° 464, Saturday 1 May 1920.

19. Lo Schuring possesses an equally vast clippings' archive on his father's circus career.

20. Interview with Lo Schuring, 6 February 1995.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Personal interview with Mrs. B. van Royen-Fontaine, 4 October 1994. She later married one of van Royen's sons, who took over the Witte Bioscoop from their father. From the thirties to the fifties, they possessed a whole chain of cinemas, mainly in Amsterdam. Most of these theaters were local cinemas.

23. For more information about Pathé in Netherlands, see: Ivo Blom, « Pathé, de eerste filmgigant in Nederland », *Jaarboek Mediageschiedenis*, n° 8, 1997.

24. This need for adaptation can also be detected in the Dutch intertitles made for foreign films shown in the Netherlands. Many foreign names or locations were changed to Dutch names and Dutch locations. This phenomenon becomes obvious when viewing the films from the Desmet-collection, or more generally the films in the collections of the Nederlands Filmmuseum.

25. For the upscale growth of infrastructure and communication in the Netherlands in the teens, see: H. Knippenberg and B. de Pater, *De eenwording van Nederland. Schaalvergroting en integratie sinds 1800*, Nijmegen, Sun, 1988.

26. The film distribution collection by Jean Desmet, now at the Nederlands Filmmuseum, includes an enormous variety of foreign films, proving a rich source for illustrating these views. See: Ivo Blom, « La collection de films de Jean Desmet (Nederlands Filmmuseum) », *op. cit.*; and Ivo Blom, « Comme l'eau qui coule : les films de rivières de Gaumont dans la collection Desmet », Thierry Lefebvre (sous la direction de), « *Images du réel. La non-fiction en France (1890-1930)* ». 1895, n° 18, Paris, Summer 1995, pp. 157-164.

27. *De Bioscoop-Courant*, 12 November 1915; and 12 January 1916. See the quotation at the beginning of this article, from LSCB.

28. Interview with Lo Schuring, 6 February 1995.

29 *Zandvoortsche Courant*, 15 July 1905.

30. Only scarce lines were dedicated to the lecturer in a standard book on early Dutch cinema: Frank van der Maden, « De komst van de film », Karel Dibbets and Frank van der Maden (eds.), *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse film en bioscoop tot 1940*, *op. cit.*, pp. 30, 34-35, 40. In recent years, a few publications have appeared on lecturing in the Netherlands: Ansjé van Beusekom, « Louis Hartlooper (1864-1922). Explicateur te Utrecht », Karel Dibbets et als. (eds.), *Jaarboek Mediageschiedenis*, n° 6, 1995, pp. 182-194; and « Een stem voor het doek. Max Nabarro, explicateur », *NFM Themareeks*, n° 6, 1992. The latter is a transcript of part of the not yet published autobiography by the former lecturer and jack-of-all-trades, Max Nabarro. The entire manuscript is archived in the library of the Nederlands Filmmuseum, Amsterdam.

31. The *explicateur* Louis Hartlooper was idolized in his local town of Utrecht. See: Ansjé van Beusekom, « Louis Hartlooper (1864-1922). Explicateur te Utrecht », *op. cit.* Max Nabarro, in a sense, created his own myth in writing his autobiography and reappearing

occasionally as *explicateur* in the sixties. See « Een stem voor het doek. Max Nabarro, explicateur », *NFM Themareeks*, *op. cit.*

32. See the advertisements that appear in the trade papers *De Bioscoop-Courant* and *De Kinematograaf*.

33. *De Kinematograaf*, n° 141, 1 October 1915, p. 1982. The Arts and Sciences building was an exploitation Alberts Frères used as a winter cinema.

34. The critic refers to the presentation of the film *De mesavonture van een Fransch heertje zonder pantalon aan het strand te Zandvoort* (*The Misadventures of a French Dandy without Trousers on the Beach at Zandvoort*, Alberts Frères, 1905), preserved in the Netherlands Filmmuseum. *Zandvoortsche Courant*, 5 August 1905.

35. In his autobiography, Max Nabarro recalls various anecdotes regarding him improvising, either because of a broken film or a lack of foreknowledge. « Een stem voor het doek. Max Nabarro, explicateur », *NFM Themareeks*, *op. cit.*

36. *De Kinematograaf*, n° 129, 9 July 1915, p. 1684.

37. See the survey on Amsterdam cinemas carried out by the Dutch critic Simon Stokvis for the magazine *De Wereld* in February 1912. Simon B. Stokvis, « Het Tooneel. Bioscoop-Enquête », in *De Wereld*, n° 22, 19 February 1912, pp. 10-11; and n° 23, 23 February 1912, pp. 6-7. Stokvis condemned the stiff, false, and exaggerated language of the *explicateur* of the Witte Bioscoop. (At that time Cor Schuring was not yet employed at the Witte Bioscoop.) Stokvis, a *bourgeois* liberal, preferred the witty and sober lecturing of the *explicateur* André De Jong who worked at the cinema Bioscoop-Theater.

38. *De Bioscoop-Courant*, 19 March 1915, p. 16.

39. Max Nabarro writes in detail about double entendres used by lecturers and exhibitors as well as about the rough language used by the patrons who visited the small local cinema at Amsterdam where Nabarro worked. « Een stem voor het doek. Max Nabarro, explicateur », *NFM Themareeks*, *op. cit.*

40. David van Staveren, *De bioscoop en het onderwijs*, Leiden, 1919.

41. On educational film production and school cinema, see: Bert Hogenkamp, *De documentaire film in opkomst*, Karel Dibbets and Frank van der Maden (eds.), 1986, p. 150.

42. *Nieuw weekblad voor de Cinematografie*, n° 6, 1922, p. 9.

43. Louis H. Chrispijn Sr., was an important theater innovator before he became a film director in the teens for the Dutch film production company *Hollandia*. Many *Hollandia* actors worked simultaneously for the film company and on the stage. Piet Hein Honig, *Acteurs - en kleinkunstenaarlexicon*, Diepenveen, 1984. Ruud Bishoff, *Hollywood in Holland. De geschiedenis van de Filmfabriek Hollandia 1912-1923*, Amsterdam, Toth, 1988. The popular *Jordaan* films from the twenties starred well-known variety artists. *Explicateurs* often had alliances with the theater. Cor Schuring, Charles Braakensiek, and Louis Hartlooper, all started their career in theatrical circuits.

44. Interview with Lo Schuring, 6 February 1995. The exuberant behavior in cinemas was critically reviewed by correspondents like Stokvis. Simon B. Stokvis, « Het Tooneel. Bioscoop-Enquête », *op. cit.*, and Joost Vermoolen, « Simon B. Stokvis (1883-1941). De strijd van een omstreden filmkeurder », *op. cit.* A fine study dealing with non-filmic parts of

the cinematic presentation (projecting speed, illumination, the noise of the projector, film music, sound effects and so on), is Yuri Tsivian's *Early Cinema in Russia and its Cultural Reception*, London/New York, Routledge, 1994. As yet no counterpart of this kind of approach to Dutch film culture exists. See, however, Ansje van Beusekom, *op. cit.*, and « Een stem voor het doek. Max Nabarro, explicateur », *NFM Themareeks*, *op. cit.*

45. Interview with Lo Schuring, 6 February, 1995.

46. See for the comparison between lanternist and film lecturer: André Gaudreault, « Showing and Telling: Image and Word in Early Cinema », Thomas Elsaesser (ed.), *Early Cinema: Space – Frame – Narrative*, London, British Film Institute, 1992, pp. 274-281.

47. Cor Schuring, in *De Bioscoop-Courant*, 19 March 1915, p. 16.

48. Interview with Lo Schuring, 6 February 1995.

49. *De Kinematograaf*, 4 April 1913, p. 61.

50. *De Bioscoop-Courant*, 18 February 1916, on Charles Braakensiek. *De Kunst*, 2 August 1913.

51. *De Kinematograaf*, 13 August 1915.

52. See Joost Vermoolen, « Simon B. Stokvis (1883-1941). De strijd van een omstreeden filmkeurder », *op. cit.*, and Onno de Wit, « Pedagogen en zedenmeesters in de greep van het bioscoopkwaad. De Rotterdamse bioscoopcommissie 1913-1928 », *op. cit.*

53. *De Bioscoop-Courant*, 7 January 1916, p. 13 and p. 16.

Aux Pays-Bas, on appelait le bonimenteur de film l'explicateur et il a été présent dans les salles de cinéma jusqu'à l'arrivée du cinéma sonore. Cet article tente de retrouver cet artiste de l'oral, et par là même insaisissable, à travers quelques traces des traits caractéristiques de son rôle et de son statut. Il est illustré par une étude de cas sur un explicateur néerlandais, Cor Schuring, basée principalement sur des entretiens avec son fils et sur un album de coupures de presse. Schuring venait des variétés et du théâtre, et ce parcours, typiquement néerlandais, était celui de bien d'autres explicateurs. L'exemple de Schuring montre le rôle politique de ce dernier dans le commerce du cinéma et fait ressortir la demande explicite de flexibilité sociale et d'adaptation dans la gestion des techniques de commentaire.