

FILM MUSEUM PRACTICE AND FILM HISTORIOGRAPHY



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FILM MUSEUM PRACTICE AND FILM HISTORIOGRAPHY

The Case of the Netherlands
Filmmuseum (1946-2000)

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TO GWIN

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This book began in 1999, on the terrace of a small café in Amsterdam, just around the corner of the Vondelpark, where the Nederlands Filmmuseum was located at the time. I was working there as a cataloguer. Frank Kessler, who supervised my MA thesis at the Radboud University in Nijmegen, came to the library for some research. We went for coffee and the first thing he said when we sat down was: 'OK, so what will your PhD project be about?' I thought quickly, and responded: 'the Filmmuseum', which was basically the first thing that came to my mind. He thought it was a great idea, and the research project on the interrelationship between film historiography and film museum practice was born.

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After a period during which I combined work at the Filmmuseum with formulating a research project, I got the opportunity to embed my work into a larger research group at Utrecht University called 'Scenarios for the Humanities', with Frank Kessler, William Uricchio, and Nanna Verhoeff as my supervising team. I dug deep into all kinds of archives containing correspondence between the institute in its infancy and its partners. It was a most curious quest, following the traces of the institute's first directing manager Jan de Vaal into the Stedelijk Museum, to chance upon his private mail that was sometimes intermingled with his professional correspondences. Simultaneously, all the work done by the people who were directly working with the films in Castricum and later Overveen also stole my heart because of the dedication and perseverance shown to build a safe house for these treasures at a time when only a few people were interested in these unknown (early) films.

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Introduction

In the archive of the Nederlands Filmmuseum there is a photograph that shows a number of people gathered together on a podium: the wall behind them is dominated by a large film screen, and a woman with long curly hair is speaking into a microphone (Image 3, page 60). All those present look slightly overwhelmed, shy but proud – perhaps of the speaker, perhaps of themselves. It was taken in 1991, at the Teatro Verdi in Pordenone, during Le Giornate del Cinema Muto (Days of Silent Cinema), and the people on stage were employees of the Nederlands Filmmuseum (now EYE Filmmuseum). Along with their director Hoos Blotkamp, they were about to receive the most prestigious award for film history and archiving, the Premio Jean Mitry, established in 1986 to reward individuals or institutions for their ‘contribution to the reclamation and appreciation of silent cinema’.¹ The Nederlands Filmmuseum was the first institution to be recognised in this way. To emphasise the fact that the institution and not just the director had received the accolade, Blotkamp asked all the Filmmuseum employees to come up on stage to celebrate their achievement together. The photo is a record of the high esteem in which the Filmmuseum was held by the film archive and film historical world in 1991 as a result of the institute’s pioneering work in the preservation and presentation of silent films.

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Early silent cinema had been in vogue in the broader field of film studies and archiving since the early 1970s, reaching a high point with the famous Brighton FIAF (the Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film) conference in 1978. FIAF brought together film scholars and archivists, programmed early British films that had remained below the radar, and created an environment that promoted discovery and debate. From that moment on, early films became *the* films to preserve and to study.

A few years after receiving the Jean Mitry award, the Nederlands Filmmu-

seum organised two workshops: 'Non-fiction from the 1910s' (in 1994) and 'Disorderly Order: Colours in Silent Film' (in 1995), events that once again brought scholars and archivists together and revealed a corpus of understudied early films. The workshops represented another important moment in the development of early film studies: they not only opened up the archives but also the discussion on recently preserved unknown films. The impact these workshops had is remembered to this day by members of the film community. Film programmer Mariann Lewinski, for example, declares that they were a seminal experience; film historian Martin Loiperdinger that they were real 'eye-openers'; and Martin Koerber, director of the film archive at the Deutsche Kinemathek in Berlin, adds:

I think one of the key events was the Amsterdam workshop in 1995, 'Disorderly Order: Colours in Silent Film'. [...] [N]obody who is working in film history or film archiving will ever again say that silent cinema was only black and white. (Koerber, 2015: 104)

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All in all, the Nederlands Filmmuseum had an excellent reputation in the fields of film archiving and film historiography during the 1990s. This was remarkable because, until the 1980s, it had been considered a rather small institution with a collection of non-canonical film titles deemed of little importance from a film historical perspective. As Frank Roumen (1996: 155-59) explains in his article, 'Die Neue Kinemathek – Ein anderer Ort, ein anderes Publikum, eine andere Zeit', however, these apparently unimportant films were transformed during the 1980s and 1990s into valuable film-historical source materials. The emergence of new perspectives focused film historiography on the discovery and appreciation of these previously disregarded non-canonical films.

The Filmmuseum's archive is particularly special in the sense that it contains only a small number of the 'big' canonical titles and a far larger collection of such lesser-known films. Placing it under a historical microscope enables us to conduct a detailed investigation into the various aspects of film museum practice, especially as the nature of its archive has forced the institute to exercise its creativity in its attempts to access films from the canon, on the one hand, and its presentation of the unknown titles in its own collection, on the other. The history of an institute with this sort of 'difficult' collection is one that charts the struggle between finding a place within the broader field of film museums and mounting a challenge to the mainstream ethos. Indeed, the story of EYE highlights the nature of the 'normal' processes and principles of collection, preservation, and presentation, and helps to trace the relationship of these practices in developments in film historiography. As such, it contrasts with the histories of other, bigger institutions, in which such

traces are usually hidden from view by virtue of the very ‘normality’ of their procedures. Added to this is the fact that EYE, as a long-standing member of FIAF, has always been a player at both national and international levels, and so its historical development is inextricably linked to the wider international practice of film archiving.²

Of course, as I show in the first two chapters of this book, this collection of unknown films was the result of dogged hard work, particularly during the earlier period when such films were dismissed as having minor importance. However, the collection was not formed in a vacuum: collections and archives are neither gathered nor presented without reason or motive. As Caroline Frick (2011: 23) states in her book, *Saving Cinema*, the preservation and presentation activities of film archives and museums should be considered socially constructed practices. Every act of archiving or presentation that a museum undertakes is heavily influenced by the prevailing discourses of the time. During the 1990s, the Nederlands Filmmuseum’s activities were strongly rooted in contemporary film historiographical discourse, but not much is known about its relationship to film historiography at other moments in its past. The interrelationship between the film museum as a socially constructed practice and film historiographical discourses will form the main focus of this investigation. It raises the question of how the Filmmuseum’s policies, choices, and activities were interrelated with the film historical debates – that is, when and how did its policies towards preserving and showing unknown films change film historiographical opinions and perspectives, and vice versa?

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MUSEUM, ARCHIVE, COLLECTION: UNRAVELLING DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTS

Clearly, what characterises every film archival institute is the use of visual reproduction techniques to render the objects in their collections accessible again. This is a practice born of necessity: historical film material is very vulnerable and hazardous, and this has forced museums to project duplicates rather than the old nitrate prints. This more practical side of film museum practice means that such institutions have a rather particular way of handling films as historical objects. The processes of selection, preservation, and presentation all present problems that are connected to the fact that it is necessary to duplicate films in order to render them visible.

Apart from this common ground, however, the field of film museum practice and archiving is wide and diverse. Audio-visual archives often have very different aims and traditions, and their collection, preservation, and presentation practices are shaped in various ways, depending on their backgrounds. Some institutes, for instance, tended to keep the audio-visual material they

produced according to its potential for commercial exploitation. One example I got to know from the inside, is the former Pathé Télévision, which held the Pathé archive before its merger with the Gaumont archive in 2004 and the establishment of the Fondation Jérôme Seydoux in 2006. Pathé Télévision was a commercial institute, which mainly collected documentary material because this usually sold better than fiction films, and its commercial attitude naturally shaped its archive in a particular way. Other institutes, such as the former Stichting Film en Wetenschap (the Foundation of Film and Science), now part of the collection of the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, gathered audio-visual material as a source of information on the history of a region or country.³ Its remit positioned the institute within the tradition of national archives that collect paintings, books, manuscripts, and other objects primarily for their historical value; the potential aesthetic value of these artefacts is accorded secondary importance. In the cultural field, such institutes are often presented in opposition to museums. A similar division can be traced in the film field: in contrast to the more archival institutes described above, film museums or *cinémathèques* can be placed within the art museum tradition.⁴ As such, this third category of institute takes the complex interrelationship between aesthetics and history into account. The Nederlands Filmmuseum, the main subject of this investigation, belongs to this category.

This double focus, combining the historical with the aesthetic, is not entirely unproblematic, however, since not everything the history of film has produced could be called aesthetically interesting and, depending on the remit of the research, not everything that is supposedly aesthetically interesting is historically valuable. Interestingly, this combination of perspectives is not unique to film museum practice. Debates on the history of film have, for a long time, revolved around the importance of aesthetics to film – either championing and defending the idea, or rejecting it. The question not only concerns the way film museum practice has defined film as both an historical and an aesthetic object, but also how this discourse relates to similar debates in film historiography. The way the interactions, and the occasional friction, between these two positions are played out in an institution such as EYE Film-museum, which espouses an aesthetic, historical perspective on film, forms the focus of this book.

Finally, an obvious difference between film museums and archives is revealed in the material appearance and daily practice of an institute: film museums, as opposed to archives, exhibit their films in a theatrical setting. Giovanna Fossati explains this clearly in her book, *From Grain to Pixel*:

Most film museums and *cinémathèques* are usually characterized by an active exhibition policy. This is typically realized in one or more public screening theatres run by the institution itself: here films from the collection are shown regularly, alongside films from other archives and contemporary distribution titles. (Fossati, 2007: 23)

Film archives do not usually present their films in a theatrical setting, whereas the number of screening rooms at EYE Filmmuseum and the care taken in their design, as well as its daily programme of films, shows that the institute falls into the category of film museum/*cinémathèque*.⁵

Due to the fundamental differences between film archival and film museum institutes, I will use the term 'film museum' throughout the book, even though the institutes defined here as museums are often called film archives in everyday parlance.⁶ In relation to this, it is interesting to see how EYE has translated the concept of the film museum in various ways. For example, when it was still called the 'Filmmuseum' (with the double 'm' written as a single, four-legged letter), during the period when it was part of the Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam's museum of modern art), it projected a film-museum identity that was very different from the one it adopted after it became a more independent institution.⁷ I will discuss this phenomenon in more detail in Chapter 7.

So far, I have explained how a film museum differs from a film archive. However, since the term 'archive' does not simply define an institute but also functions on many other levels, it still occurs in the book on various occasions. The concept can indeed be traced in different guises throughout the history of the Nederlands Filmmuseum. In the first place, the institutes that formed the basis of the Filmmuseum were called the Nederlandsch Historisch Film Archief (Dutch Historical Film *Archive*) and the Uitkijk-Archief (Uitkijk *Archive*). Both were archives according to the definition outlined above: they were institutes that archived films for collection and distribution purposes. In 1952, these two archives merged to become the Nederlands Filmmuseum, located at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, where the new Filmmuseum began to screen the films it had collected, and its status shifted from an archive to a museum.

Secondly, the term is also used by the Nederlands Filmmuseum to describe the films and other objects the institute has collected and preserved over the years. In this case, the description does not refer to the type of institution but to the objects it has in its possession or care. Interestingly, on this level, an 'archive' can be confused with a 'collection', which also refers to a selected series of objects; both terms appear to refer to the same thing. In the interests of clarity, therefore, I use Eric De Kuyper's distinction between the two, at least

on the level of the collected films. He defines an ‘archive’ as the total amount of films an institute possesses and a ‘collection’ as a series of films found within the constellation of the larger archive.⁸ However, these particular concepts have been used in different ways throughout the history of the Filmmuseum, and I will return to the concepts and their possible definitions and usage at various times in the book. For now, though, I simply wish to point out that, unless otherwise stated, whenever I use the term ‘film collection’ I am writing about a selection from the entirety of the ‘film archive’.

This definition deviates from the conception of the archive as it has been defined and studied in the larger sense since Michel Foucault’s (1971) theoretical problematisation of the term. In her book, *The Past is a Moving Picture*, Janna Jones (2012: 15) explains how, since Foucault, scholars have viewed archives as sites of construction where histories are created. Over the last decades, a large amount of literature has been published theorising the archive as a constructed and a discursive site.⁹ Of course, this book is strongly linked to this school of thought, particularly as it analyses an institution that functions as a site where histories were (and are) created.

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COLLECTIONS AND CASE STUDIES

The musealisation of films, and the interaction between their film historical and aesthetic aspects, is a process that occurs both on a macro- and micro-historical level. However, in order to give a nuanced view of this process, it is important to investigate historical events at the ‘coalface’. Obviously, broader international events are of importance, but these can only be fully understood if contextualised by their micro-level history (Ricoeur, 2004: 210). Downscaling the historical research is especially important in this investigation as it not only enables the historical detail to surface, but also allows us to make connections that answer some of the questions that arise. It does this by focusing on the role played by historical and aesthetic approaches in archival mechanisms and processes at the level of the individual films.¹⁰ Indeed, Michael Lynch (cited in Jones, 2012: 17) advises us to ‘climb into the archival trenches so to better understand the archive as a site with its own specific histories of alliance, resistance, and contingency’. I followed this advice for several years, digging in the trenches of the Filmmuseum’s history, exploring and analysing its collection and its preservation and presentation policies, and the way these were (or were not) intertwined with film historiography before the ‘digital turn’. The result is a micro-perspective on this *pas-de-deux* that shows in a very detailed way the points at which film historiography took the lead and the times when the Filmmuseum led the way, as well as those

instances when the institute launched into a solo turn, and the reasons why it did so.

When looking at the history of EYE, I zoom in on the collection of silent films in its archive, making an occasional exception for an early sound film.¹¹ There are three reasons why I came to this decision, all related to the role of museum films in film historiography. First and foremost, since the mid-1970s (say, from the time of the FIAF Brighton conference), both film museum practice and film historiography have been strongly preoccupied with silent cinema. As a result, the interrelationship between the Filmmuseum and film historiography can be seen most clearly in the domain of silent films. These were subject to changes in the way they were described and perceived as historical and aesthetic objects during the period under review. In order to better understand these mechanisms, my investigation is limited to this corpus. Secondly, the Nederlandsch Historisch Filmarchief (NHFA), a predecessor of the Filmmuseum, was established in 1946, so all silent films had finished their commercial cycle and were already regarded as historical objects, of no further practical use, when the Filmmuseum acquired them. Finally, the bulk of this corpus was released on fragile, self-destructive nitrate film material. Not only do these films supposedly have a relatively short lifespan, but also they cannot be projected because nitrate material is highly flammable: the hot lamp of the projector could easily ignite the film, with disastrous consequences for the film, film theatre, and audience alike. In addition to this, nitrate films have gained a special status and are now considered unique objects, closer in nature to paintings or other museum artefacts than the acetate or polyester prints. For example, the Desmet Collection at EYE consists of more than 900 unique nitrate prints from the 1910s, and was consequently inscribed in the UNESCO Memory of the World Register in 2011.¹² This carries the implication that the utmost care should be taken in the films' passive and active preservation. It is interesting to note, however, that, since the digital turn, even acetate prints and their projection equipment are increasingly regarded as valuable museum objects as well.¹³

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A further sharpening of the focus of this investigation led to the decision to restrict it to the study of the silent material in four particular collections found in EYE archive: the Collectie Nederland (films produced in the Netherlands); the Uitkijk Collectie (films that formed part of the Uitkijk Archive); the Desmet Collectie (films that came to the Filmmuseum as part of Jean Desmet's legacy); and the collection of film fragments. Each collection raises issues that are particularly relevant to this study. The Netherlands Collection is an example of the fact that film production in the Netherlands always played an important role in the policies of the Filmmuseum (and later, EYE) as a result of the FIAF idea that each archive should be responsible for its national

film production heritage (Borde, 1983: 120). However, the task of collecting and preserving Dutch film ran counter to the institute's aesthetic aims, creating tensions between these objectives. This duty also caused problems in the Filmmuseum's collaboration with the other major film-collecting institution in the Netherlands, the Institute for Sound and Image, in Hilversum.

Meanwhile, the second case study, the Uitkijk Collection, allows for an analysis of the institute's attitude towards 'art films'. The collection originated in the Nederlandsche Filmliga (Dutch Film League), which was founded in 1927 by a number of cinephiles in order to screen art films. In some cases, these films had not been distributed, so the Filmliga had to purchase them first before screening them, resulting in the emergence of a collection of films that initially served as a distribution collection administered by the Centraal Bureau voor Ligafilms (Central Bureau for League Films) or CBLF. As the collection, which later found its way into the Filmmuseum archive, consisted of films that were already considered part of the canon to a large extent, its history demonstrates how the Filmmuseum handled films that had already achieved canonical status before it acquired them.

The third case study, the Desmet Collection, contains the films collected by Jean Desmet, a Dutch showman, distributor and owner of the Cinema Parisien, in the early years of the twentieth century. The collection mainly consists of commercial films from the 1910s and holds great interest for film historians: it provides an historical perspective on the interaction between film museum practice and contemporary theoretical arguments around the history of film.

Finally, the fourth group under investigation is the collection of film fragments. These also play a central role in this study as they demonstrate a number of key problems for the collection, preservation, and presentation of museum films, especially when this not only involves fragments that derive from clearly recognisable films, but also some that are largely unidentified and labelled in the archive as 'Bits & Pieces'.

The period under investigation spans around fifty years, from 1946 to the mid-1990s; 1946 was the founding year of the NHFA, the predecessor of the Filmmuseum and EYE, and the period after 1996 witnessed the transition from analogue to digital reproduction technologies. The new technologies gave the Filmmuseum a fresh momentum, starting in 1997, the year in which the plans for a Centrum voor Beeldcultuur (Institute of Visual Culture) were developed, which clearly anticipated that the advent of technological transformations heralded a revolution in film museum practice. That year also saw the first fully digital restorations, causing a shift in the debate on film archiving and restoration (Fossati, 2009: 25). These changes have been extensively discussed in Fossati's *From Grain to Pixel*, a book that has undergone several reprints since its first publication in 2009.

With all these changes happening, it is important not to forget that new ways of collecting, preserving, and presenting film always build on the earlier work that went into shaping film archives and film history. By focusing on the period before the digital turn, the present investigation demonstrates how such activities formed both the institute's archives and ideology. Furthermore, looking at the present through the lens of the past allows us to make some hypothetical predictions about the course of the future.

Another reason to investigate the period before 2000 is the fact that new, larger film museums have emerged in recent decades – not only EYE, but also the Deutsche Kinemathek in Berlin, the new building of the Cinémathèque française in Paris, and the Museo del Cinema in Turin. Interestingly, in addition to their stance on film history, these museums either consciously or unconsciously also present their own history as institutions – consciously, for example, by projecting a replica of the old Cinema Parisien screening room in the new EYE building on the banks of the IJ; unconsciously, because all the choices, activities, and acts of the past have left their traces in the archives, and as a consequence, in the memories of these film museums. Their current activities thus automatically reflect that past.

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STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This book follows the workflow of the Filmmuseum, which consists of a combination of collection, preservation, and presentation. The musealisation of film is based on these three main pillars. Collection or acquisition is a process of choice and selection, and hence of inclusion and exclusion, and constitutes the first necessary activity, but further selections among the already acquired films are also part of the process that shapes a collection. Aside from gathering new titles and original prints, acquisition also entails the production of new prints by duplicating film titles that are already part of the archive. The issues and problems involved in these acts of collection are central to the first part of the book. The second part, meanwhile, discusses the historical and aesthetic standards that played a role in the preservation and specific kinds of restoration of nitrate films. Again, choices are made: should we add this particular piece of film in order to reconstruct its narrative, or not? Should we remove this particularly damaged part, or not? All such decisions are guided by film historical and aesthetic ideas. Finally, the third part of the book analyses the ways in which the Filmmuseum renders the results of these processes and activities visual in its screening programmes. These presentations construct new meanings for – and tell new stories about – the same material and the same images. An analysis of these themes and topics will clarify how film

was constructed as an historical and an aesthetic object through film museum practice and the writing of film history.

The first two parts of the book are strongly inspired by archival and museum studies, as well as by theories on the acts of collection and restoration. Due to the nature of the topic, the third part of the book on the presentation of museum films is closest to what could be considered ‘traditional’ cinema studies. I further introduce theoretical frameworks that are necessary to explain complex practices and their interrelationships with film historiography. All these theories are embedded within a specific understanding of film museums as socially and discursively constructed entities. Overall, the book gives an account of the *pas-de-deux* between film museum practice and film historical discourse, using the Filmmuseum as a case study, with the added intention of opening up the archival material on the history of the Nederlands Filmmuseum to the international community of film scholars and archivists.

20 | It is up to the reader to imagine similar cases, or to compare the structures and patterns it reveals with his or her surroundings or professional context.

In this sense, this book is also a contribution to the broader research project – ongoing for several decades now – that maps the history of international film museum and archival practice. A number of books have emerged from this project over the last thirty years, including Penelope Houston’s *Keepers of the Frame* (1994), a history of FIAF; Paolo Cherchi Usai’s *Silent Cinema* (2000); Caroline Frick’s investigation of the influence of national identity on film archiving in *Saving Cinema* (2011); and Janna Jones’ *The Past is a Moving Picture* (2012), a study of the moving image archive in relation to the construction of social, political, and cinematic pasts in the twentieth century. Additionally, Éric Le Roy (2013) has produced an overview of the history of film archiving; Mark-Paul Meyer and Paul Read (2000), and Leo Enticknap (2013) and Anna Bohn (2013) have written detailed handbooks on the technology of film archiving, preservation, and restoration. Alongside these more general books, a series of monographs on single institutes or collectors was written: for example, monographs on the Cinémathèque française one by François Olmeta (2000) and one by Laurent Mannoni (2006); Gerd Aurich’s book on Gerhard Lamprecht, the founder of Deutsche Kinemathek (2013); and Haidee Wasson’s *Museum Movies* on how MoMa helped define film art (2005). With its focus on EYE Filmmuseum, the present book adds a new layer to the history of the collection, preservation, and presentation of film in the era before the introduction of digital visual technologies enriched and transformed the field.

THE TIMELINE OF THE *PAS-DE-DEUX*

During the 1930s, Europe saw the foundation of the first national film museums, such as the Cinémathèque française in Paris, the National Film Archive (BFI) in London, and the Cinémathèque Royale in Brussels (Houston, 1994; Hagener, 2007; Bordwell, 1997).¹⁴ These institutions emerged out of the avant-garde film culture formed by film critics and filmmakers in the 1920s, who were often active members of ciné-clubs and film societies devoted to the defense of film as an art form. As film scholar Malte Hagener explains in his book, *Moving Forward, Looking Back* (2007), the avant-garde movement was very conscious of the history of the cinema, and, as a result, its members began to produce collections of films that were screened and discussed at the ciné-clubs. Some, such as Jean Mitry, Léon Moussinac, and Georges Charensol, also started to write film histories (Hagener, 2007: 113).¹⁵ Jean Mitry, who would become one of the best-known film historians in France, was also one of the founding fathers of the Cinémathèque française, illustrating the close connection film museums and film historiography enjoyed from the start. These newly formed national institutions, devoted to collecting and screening films, were thus strongly rooted in a film historical discourse that defined film as an art form. | 21

A similar process occurred in the United States. In 1935, the Film Library, headed by Iris Barry, was created as part of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.¹⁶ Barry had also been active in avant-garde film culture – before moving to New York in 1930, she was an important member of the Film Society in London (Hagener, 2007: 114) –; MoMA and Barry are considered important players in the construction of film history and the accompanying canon. It was during this early period that Barry helped organise a film course at Columbia University, which she later claimed to be the first of its kind (Polan, 2007: 16-18).¹⁷ She also supported Siegfried Kracauer in writing his book, *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947), which, according to Hagener (2007: 115), he would not have been able to complete without her help. In addition, MoMA provided a rental collection of historical films that it deemed to possess canonical status. Dana Polan describes the impact of this distribution collection:

Virtually overnight there was a proliferation of scattered courses in film appreciation or film history that were based on the MoMA collection and that regularized the study of film in standard patterns that would still be in place when universities came more systematically to introduce film curricula in the 1960s. (Polan, 2007: 16)

During this period (the 1920s and 1930s), a written history of so-called ‘classical film’ began to assert its influence. The historical narrative that emerged traced the evolution of film from a recording device into an art form (Bordwell, 1997: 22-21).¹⁸ According to this view, film could not be considered an art until around 1914; although this period saw the emergence of a number of filmmakers whose ‘inventions’ allowed film to take a step in this direction,¹⁹ it was not until after that date that film increasingly began to develop into what could be called a ‘true art form’. Film historians claimed that this transformation was linked to the birth of a series of important art-film movements, such as German Expressionism and French Impressionism, each characterised by its own emblematic directors,²⁰ whose ‘masterpieces’ were duly listed and described, and ultimately became the canon of silent film.²¹ As a consequence, the classical perception of film history depended on a hierarchical classification of films, whereby those films produced in the ‘primitive’ phase of ‘discovery’ were distinguished from those produced in the more ‘mature’ phase, when cinema was ‘perfected’. Following this chronological division, historians defined what they perceived as filmic highlights, designating certain works and filmmakers as canonical, and positioning these films well above all the others (Hommel, 1991; Christie, 2006: 68).

Because this historical discourse focused on the development of film as an art form, it automatically legitimised film as art. The structure of classical film history, which showed striking similarities with contemporary studies on the history of art and literature, reinforced this effect (Elsaesser, 1986: 247; Lagny, 1992: 130-131).²² The positioning of film history as part of this discourse helped the newly proclaimed art form to gain a place within the realm of the established arts (Lagny, 1992: 142).²³ The legitimisation of film as an art form obviously called for an aesthetics of film, which was said to comprise the true ‘essence’ of cinema. According to these first film critics, this essence could be discovered in the creative treatment of moving images.²⁴

The history of the Nederlands Filmmuseum begins in 1946. Although the Netherlands had witnessed calls for an archival institution that could preserve and show the country’s film heritage from as early as the 1930s, such an institution was not established until after the end of Second World War.²⁵ In 1946, Paul Kijzer, Piet Meerburg, and David van Staveren founded the NHFA. Jan de Vaal subsequently became involved in the archive’s activities, and soon shouldered responsibility for it. Shortly afterwards, in 1948, the Stichting Uitkijk-Archief (Uitkijk Archive Foundation) was established, also managed by de Vaal. In 1952, both film archives merged into the Dutch Filmmuseum and moved to the Stedelijk Museum, headed at the time by Willem Sandberg, and the tradition of weekly screenings began.²⁶ The new institution’s designation as a museum, and its presence among historically legitimised art forms

in the Stedelijk Museum, were clear indications of film's trajectory towards its consecration as an art.

However, the definition of what made a film 'art' was in constant flux. For example, in the 1950s, film critic André Bazin (1958) stated that the essence of cinema was to be found not in its potential for manipulating reality, but rather in its ability to capture that reality. At the same time as Bazin's essays made their appearance, a French movement arose that became known as the '*politique des auteurs*' ('auteur politics'). This emerged from the activities of a number of young film critics, associated with the *Cahiers du Cinéma*, who frequented the Cinémathèque française. They called for a re-evaluation of Hollywood's commercial films and directors, and a redefinition of the term 'auteur', which, in the 1930s, was usually associated with the writer of the screenplay. According to the *politique des auteurs* theorists, the term by rights should be applied to the film director, whom they considered to hold the final responsibility for a film's artistic value.²⁷ Although these radical young critics can- | 23
onised contemporary American sound films in particular, they also showed a strong preference for older American films – for example, they praised F. W. Murnau more for *SUNRISE* (1927) than for *NOSFERATU* (1922), and they showed great appreciation for the work of Buster Keaton.²⁸ They also reassessed commercial silent filmmakers such as Louis Feuillade.²⁹ What the advocates of the *politique des auteurs* did not do, however, was formulate a new aesthetics; instead, they simply upgraded a number of films into the art-film canon. They considered these films to be timeless masterpieces, disconnected from their historical context. As David Bordwell (1997: 76-81) points out: 'The auteurist canon [...] is a timeless collection of great films, hovering in aesthetic space, to be augmented whenever directors create more masterworks.'

Despite the various perspectives on film as art, the canon of silent cinema established during the 1920s and 1930s remained stable for some time. The notion that film developed from a recording technique into an art form, and the division of silent film into a primitive and an artistic phase, continued to hold sway. This structure, with its corresponding mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, dominated film historical discourse until the 1970s, and was often connected to the programming of film museums/*cinémathèques*. For example, Bordwell (1997: 42) comments that, even for the most diligent film historians, writing film history consisted of little more than listing the classics, which they probably saw as 16mm prints at MoMA or on the screen of the Cinémathèque française.³⁰

By the early 1960s, the Filmmuseum's ambitions outgrew the Stedelijk Museum: the auditorium where the Stedelijk Museum showed the films was not always available and the museum's technical facilities were too limited. After ten years of lobbying, the Filmmuseum finally found a place of its own at

the Vondelpark Pavilion, and, in the early 1970s, the institute moved into the Pavilion, bit by bit. The last milestone was achieved when it opened its own cinema in 1974. With its own location, the Filmmuseum had the potential to develop into an independent institute dedicated to the history of film and film art. This decade also saw a shift in archival policy: with the completion of proper nitrate film vaults in Overveen, attention increasingly focused on the preservation of films. This resulted in the first major public subsidy for film preservation, granted by the Dutch government in 1980.³¹

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The 1960s was also the period in which an interest in film started to grow among academics, who set up specialised journals, organised conferences, and developed university curricula. As these academic experts were mostly trained in philosophy, the history of art, and literary criticism, they integrated the analytical models of linguistics, formalism, and structuralism into the study of film (Sklar, 1990: 14). The French theorists found a route into English academia, for example, thanks to translations of their work published by the well-known film journal, *Screen* (Rosen, 2008: 266-267). At the same time, a fascination with formalism, abstraction and form, similar to that seen in the 1920s, re-emerged: *Screen* reprinted ideas on editing, theatre, and the audience developed by Sergei Eisenstein, Bertolt Brecht, and Lev Kuleshov.

These developments occurred simultaneously with a shift in ideas and perspectives on film history. British and American film archives and universities witnessed an upsurge of interest in early film, leading to the appearance of a number of filmographies, dissertations, and other publications focusing on early cinema (Christie, 2006: 69). The FIAF conference in Brighton in May 1978 is considered to have been especially instrumental in these developments. During the conference, FIAF showed approximately 600 feature films from the period 1900 to 1906, which had been previously ignored by most archives and film historians. The display of so many unknown silent films fundamentally changed the status of this period of film history. Following the conference, early film – which had until then been almost completely sidelined – became one of the most important and most studied periods in film history. Film historians and archivists declared the Brighton conference to be the high point of this transformation (Holman, 1982; Gartenberg, 1984; Gunning, 1991b).

Because early films were fundamentally different from the canon that had been the main subject of film history up to that time, they called forth new film historical methods and models (Horak, Lacasse and Cherchi Usai, 1991: 280). As in the 1920s, there was a strong focus on the visual power of film, and the new film historians used this to debunk the argument that film was primarily a narrative art. It resulted in new forms of writing about film history, focusing on multiple subjects, as opposed to the classical history that mainly rehashed the canon.³² This new film history called itself ‘revisionist’ because

its aim was to amend the discourse of film history. Due to the idea that this constituted a new form of film history, revisionism is also referred to as 'new film history'.³³ New film history aspired to be radically different from classical film history – for example, in relation to its use of historical sources. Classical film historians appeared to rely predominantly on secondary sources and their own memory for their historical research, and this inevitably led to misconceptions and errors; the new film historians, by contrast, decided to return to the primary sources.

This new attitude towards historical sources coincided with a move by film museums and archives to make their collections more accessible. In the 1980s and 1990s, the new policy of openness led to the establishment of *Le Giornate del Cinema Muto* (mentioned at the beginning of this chapter), an annual festival of silent films held in Pordenone in northern Italy, as well as the annual film festival of Bologna, dedicated to showing newly restored prints of rare and little-known films from the archives. Both initiatives were clear examples of a growing interest in the preservation and presentation of unknown archival films. Aside from these festivals, film museums themselves became more accessible. A broader preservation and programming policy, which included unknown films, allowed for an extended knowledge of film and greater possibilities for using such films as direct sources in historical research. The Filmmuseum also started to preserve large amounts of unknown early films, a policy whose benefits were enhanced by the fact that video technology began to make the archival material far more widely accessible, eliminating the need to visit the film vault or screening room.³⁴

The re-evaluation of early film material also led to a denunciation of the teleological model that comprised the main structural support of classical film history. The classical story had positioned early film as a primitive stage in the evolution of cinema, while the new film historians were at pains to show that these early films were products of their own paradigm.³⁵ Early film was defined as fundamentally different from everything that followed and, as a consequence, it should not and could not be considered as simply a step along the road towards the narrative feature films of the 1920s.³⁶ New film history jettisoned the 'big story' or metanarrative explaining the development of film; instead, smaller research projects sprang up, focusing on shorter periods, which allowed for in-depth investigations of source materials and, as a result, clear and detailed mappings of the issue or theme under investigation. The deployment of a multitude of theoretical models also made the discipline of film history increasingly scientific. This was accompanied by the abandonment of aesthetic considerations in the writing of film history: in contrast to classical film history, the new historians refused to enter into a continuous debate over the establishment of aesthetic standards in film (Lagny, 1992: 128, 133).³⁷

With the re-evaluation of previously unknown films, revisionism signalled its departure from the canon that had developed over the preceding decades. This did not mean that the revisionists demoted the canonical filmmakers and their films; they simply put them in a more historical context, analysing and demystifying them (Hommel, 1991a: 151).³⁸ Michèle Lagny (1992: 144) in fact notes that film historians, despite all the new historiographical insights, continued to regard these once-consecrated films as exemplars of the art of film.

The Filmmuseum also went through numerous changes during the 1980s. De Vaal left in 1984, to be replaced by Frans Maks, and Maks was succeeded in turn by Hoos Blotkamp in 1987, who appointed filmmaker, writer, scholar and cinephile Eric De Kuyper as deputy director. A minor revolution ensued, with the complete makeover of the Vondelpark Pavilion, and a shift in its approach to films as historical artefacts, which took the form of a new focus on the unknown films in the collection and the introduction of quality restoration and presentation of these 'new discoveries'. These changes were in line with the new developments in film history. The selection and preservation practices of the Filmmuseum during these years significantly enhanced the institute's international standing, culminating in its reception of the Jean Mitry prize in 1991 at Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, and it continues to garner praise to this day for its efforts to make early film history accessible.³⁹

