

Gezien, gehoord, gelezen

Geoffrey Donaldson

Of joy and sorrow. A filmography of Dutch silent fiction

Amsterdam (Stichting Nederlands Filmmuseum), 1997, 304 p., geïll., f 79,90,

ISBN 90.71338.10.X

This volume is not only the crown of a dedicated work of love, but also a milestone in film historiography. Researched and compiled over decades of intensive labour, it presents an exhaustive filmography of Dutch silent fiction film, covering a total of 342 films, each indexed individually including a synopsis, the title (original, alternative, and given titles along with an English translation), extensive production information, screening and distribution details (such as exhibition history, music, censorship etcetera), references and status of preservation. As only 83 films have survived intact with an additional nineteen in fragments, the majority of the material covered here is missing. This lost corpus is documented and visualised in numerous production stills and other photographic sources.

Each entry is meticulously researched, with information recruited from obvious – published and unpublished – sources such as trade papers, periodicals, and archive documentations as well as original interviews with directors, actors and actresses and materials from private collections, most prominently the author's own. The factual information often serves to correct previous studies and assumptions such as the determination of the first Dutch film, *GESTOORDE HENGE-LAAR* (1896) to name but the most striking example. Apart from this kind of historiographic information which documents the production and exhibition of each film in bony facts and figures, there are additional remarks which – along with the wealth of visual material included – succeed in bringing the films to life by adding the flesh of context: background stories on production companies, directors, the cast, the technology. Thus, although a film like

DE OORLOG IN TRANSVAAL, shot in 1899 by Franz Anton Nöggerath Sr., is missing, we nevertheless learn that it consisted of four shots, that it was filmed on the roof of Nöggerath's *Flora Variété Theater* in Amsterdam (which explains a contemporary viewer's suspicion that what we see behind the film's bearded Boer horsemen is not genuine African landscape but the *Kalfjeslaan*), that the unnamed actor playing Paul Kruger was an actor who also starred in one of three Boer war plays running in Amsterdam at the time, and that the screening, accompanied by couplets about the Transvaal, ended in an on-stage 'Apotheosis' in which Paul Kruger shakes hands with a wounded Boer. It is precisely this synthesis of data information and contextual mapping which makes this book unique: a cornerstone in film historiography which next to its colossal encyclopaedic achievement accomplishes the almost impossible task of giving a voice to silent films most of which have been lost or were destroyed decades ago.

In the past decade, the emphasis on difference, specificity, particularity on the 'small narratives' of microhistories and the discursive networks of contextualizations has led to a renewed interest in national cinema. In this context, Geoffrey Donaldson's work can be put alongside similar efforts to document the beginnings of national film cultures such as the work of *Cinegraph* in Germany or the *Pathé catalogue project* in France. While *Of joy and sorrow* must therefore be seen in the larger context of these historiographic endeavours to provide an inventory of a crucial area of national cultural history as a scholarly tool, the fact that it is the very first comprehensive filmography of

a particular national silent cinema sets it apart. Although the ambitious goal of comprehensiveness may – even despite the almost insurmountably vast field of data – be more readily accomplished in the context of a national cinema with a relatively limited output, Donaldson's work will set the standard against which similar projects in the future will have to be measured. Its chronological structure, its systematic account of all aspects concerning production and exhibition of each film, its thorough research of all but the minutest details, the range of contextual information, the visual documentation as well as the index of films, of persons and companies, and of characters make *Of joy and sorrow* an extremely valuable tool for a wide range of scholarly, archival and educational tasks.

Thus, to name but a few examples, for the archivist the identification of rediscovered film material will be greatly facilitated by the book's index and stills; courses on early cinema will benefit from the broad spectrum of questions which this filmography invites due to its variety and concreteness; and, due to its comprehensiveness and attention to detail, the study provides an essential resource for the scholar concerned with textual and contextual agendas

alike. All of these users of the book, including readers from other disciplines and backgrounds such as (social)history, cultural studies, art and literature or just plain film fans will, however, not only benefit from wealth of material compiled in this volume, but will also savour it for the quality of the photograph prints (including tinted film stills), its clarity and unclutteredness of its layout and its invitation to become a flaneur, to get side-tracked in back alleys, to draw lines and circles by aimlessly wandering through the territory which the book charts but never claims. Despite its comprehensiveness, its solidity, the weight of its scholarly accomplishment, the book remains surprisingly open, light, sensually appealing and pleasurable. For next to the historian's precision and responsibility, we sense the dedication, passion and enthusiasm of the collector, the aficionado, the cinema lover. Geoffrey Donaldson, an Australian teacher, correspondent, translator and film historian who has spent the past four decades in the Netherlands researching early Dutch film, not only provides us with a state of the art reference work, a unique documentation of early cinema but also book which documents the pleasure and passion this cinema is – still – able to provoke.

Eva Warth (Film- en televisiewetenschap, Universiteit Utrecht)