

From Brussels to Amsterdam: how 'all the films of the world' ended up in the Desmet collection

Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi

Curator Silent Film, Eye Filmmuseum

Hello, my name is Elif Rongen-Kaynakci, and I am the curator of silent film at the Eye Filmmuseum in Amsterdam. Today I will try to look at how film trade was done between Brussels and Amsterdam before the WWI; in particular how the Dutch film distributor Jean Desmet managed to buy the newest films from all around the world and show them in his cinemas as quickly as possible.

As you may already know, Desmet collection is kept at the Eye Filmmuseum and was inscribed onto the Memory of the World register in 2011. Jean Desmet was one of the pioneers of the film business in the Netherlands. His collection consists of various materials; over 900 films, 1000 posters, publicity materials and company bookkeeping and correspondence.

In this presentation I try to find out more about Maurice Gigan, a film sales agent operating from Brussels, representing many production companies from around the world. I will be looking into the Desmet Company documents, and try to reconstruct how Gigan conducted his day-to-day business. As the documents I have are the ones kept by Jean Desmet, we will also look into how Desmet as the local distributor in the Netherlands was dealing with Gigan, what he did with the films Gigan was offering him, what were the delicate issues between them, and so on.

Unfortunately we know very little about Maurice Gigan himself. Initially I wondered how old he was, where was he born, or how did he roll into the film business? All I had was the address of his company; thanks to numerous documents we can see that Gigan's business was situated at the Avenue de Roi, 17, in Sint-Gillis Brussels... (very near the Station Zuid/ Brussels Midi today where the Thalys and Eurostar trains stop), from where he probably took the train every week to Amsterdam. Conveniently, Desmet's office was also very near to the Amsterdam Central Station. But I am getting ahead of myself.

Thanks to Het Rijksarchief in Belgium I could find that: Maurice was a witness for his sister's wedding in 1905 in Sint-Gillis, where they probably lived with their father Charles Alfred Gigan at the address Rue de France, 6 [less than 10 minutes' walk from his office]! At the time Maurice was 25 years old (probably born in 1880? Which means he was circa five years younger than Jean Desmet). His sister Juliette was born in December 1881 in Dreux (Eure-et-Loir) France. Probably Maurice was also born there; the entire family seems still to be 'domicilié à Dreux'. In this 1905 document, Maurice Gigan is documented as a 'représentant de commerce' without further specification. We don't know if he was already in the cinema business, or was doing general trade. Father Gigan's profession is registered as 'industriel'. In an earlier 1889 foreigner's document, Gigan sr. is registered as 'représentant de commerce'. This is probably when he moved to settle in Brussels; at the time his children were around 8-10 years old.

When we search for Gigan in the online archives within the professional film documents, almost the only thing we find is that he is mentioned in *Cine-Journal* in 1911, as the representative of LUX company in Brussels. I am assuming this was news, since they singled his name out, whereas they refer to having a dozen of such agencies around the world.

Looking within the Desmet Collection, it seems that Jean Desmet first met Maurice Gigan in december 1911 through this letter Gigan sent to Desmet, offering him to come to Amsterdam on a weekly basis and quoting his price of 1,25 francs per meter film and guaranteeing that the films will appear in Amsterdam at the same time as in Paris and Brussels.

We can see in this letter, that next to Lux (FR), Gigan also represents Eclipse (FR), Radios (FR), Aquila (I), Cines (I), Urbanora(UK), Nestor (US), Rex (US), Melies (US).

Apparently Desmet accepted the offer, since we find a lot of weekly correspondence, and we can see clearly that a lot of the still existing films in the Desmet collection today were bought via Gigan.

What can we learn by looking at the various documents in these dossiers of the Desmet company archive to reconstruct Gigan's business? I will share with you different kinds of documents / due to limited time I will mainly concentrate on the examples regarding buying French films, or even more particularly regarding the Lux company. [But let me remind you again that in the Desmet Collection there are many more related paper materials; such as the posters, publicity flyers, etc., that are catalogued individually and not as part of the business papers].

The first type are these forms listing the titles of all the films submitted to the buyers for consideration (we have an almost complete collection of these from the full period 1912-1913 coming from Gigan).

Looking at these forms, we can see that new films got released on Fridays; the date on top is not the day of the screening for the buyers, it is the first release date of the film.

it is clear that Desmet was taking various notes on these sheets, about the films themselves, translating the French main titles into Dutch, using some mysterious marks, like dot-dot, dot-x etc, but also he was keeping track of what his rivals were buying. But how could he know this about films that were not yet released? On the left we see that Desmet wrote a pencil note saying "these are films from 1913" appreciating that he was being offered films produced in 1913 to be released in mid-February 1913. In this other one to the right he also noted what he bought himself, marked DES: ***La rupe del malconsiglio*** and Alice Guy's ***Two Little Rangers*** (Solax); both these films are still present in the Desmet Collection.

I am also showing this late 1913 form, for two additional reasons; one because it is addressed to Peter de Smet (and not to Jean), and secondly, because it stresses the deadline of ordering the films minimum two weeks in advance.

So going back to the original question; how could Desmet know what the others were buying? Digging further into this matter, my colleague Rommy Albers found a very interesting, confidential document in the Donaldson collection, that was originally coming from the Gildemeyer family, owner of the Union theatre in Amsterdam. In this document, dated 8 March 1913, we can clearly read that four Dutch distributors were secretly creating a bond, to make price deals and ensure some exclusivity and avoid unnecessary competition driving up prices against each other. We can see in detail that the foreign representatives were each asked to come on a different week day, to a different cinema, where the four buyers would all be present to watch and select the films for their respective companies. From this document we can conclude that Gigan was asked to come on Wednesday mornings 10:30 at the Union theatre.

This document explains how they knew about what the other one was buying, however, we already find such notes on earlier dates, such as August or September 1912; was the practice of watching the

films together already in place back then although not yet formalized, or did Desmet have other ways of knowing what the others were buying (perhaps even via Gigan himself?)

How was business conducted? Given the limited time here, I will take trading with the French companies as example. But to draw a general picture: Gigan offered the films to Desmet, and once he ordered a film, Gigan sent Desmet the intertitle list in French, asking him to translate them to Dutch, which Gigan would then send on to Paris to be printed and inserted into the films. These 'Dutch language version prints' would then be sent directly from Paris to Amsterdam via courier.

Sometimes, Gigan told Desmet that there was no need to translate the titles, as he already had a Dutch translation handy. [like we can see on this postcard]

Although Desmet bought many films from Gigan; on May 9, 1913, we find a lengthy handwritten letter from Gigan to Desmet saying '...you have not ordered our programs since the 1st of may...' providing a list for the entire month of May that had 5 release weeks, complaining that Desmet had only ordered two short films from him. Gigan writes: 'I come to Amsterdam every week, and offer you 4500-5000m films in total, which makes about 25000 meters in 5 weeks', and that Desmet has ordered only 247m of films in total. [so please imagine that Gigan or one of his employees brought with him about 15 mid-size film cans every week as screeners and brought them back to Brussels after the screening]. Gigan makes clear that although it is important for him to do business with the Desmet company, this amount of order is not in proportion to the effort Gigan is putting in. Then he reminds Desmet again of 18 film titles that he could still order by the end of the month. It seems that Desmet did not really reconsider these, since none of these titles are in the Desmet Collection today.

It is not always clear what part of the business was done through Brussels and what is happening directly with the French offices, and what their underlying agreements were. [here is an example where Gigan seems to be an agent for Aubert; adding Nordisk, Selig and Hepworth to his original list of companies.] There are also many documents, where Gigan put his stamp on the original Aubert or Lux bills, or even used their letterheaded paper, simply crossing out Paris and writing Brussels. Sometimes, it seems like Gigan is providing a poster, and then the French are sending the film, but sometimes this seems to be otherwise, and the bill for the film is sent from Brussels.... As you can see, these two bills for **Tortillard Detective** appear to be identical, both dated Feb, 1st and referring to the same amount to be paid. Or was there a mistake in the Paris bill that had arrived the week before on Jan 24, and that the February 1st bills were actually a correction of this mistake?

Regularly the practice of sending the intertitle translations back& forth became a matter of dispute, delaying the release of films on time. It created friction, culminating by the end of 1913 where Gigan wrote... ""...the only reason for the delay is yourself [le seul fautif c'est vous], since you only returned the Dutch translations to me on Sunday, and I sent them through to Paris on the same day..." upon which Desmet's office replied immediately the next day that Mr Felix who came to Amsterdam to show Gigan's films was already told that in urgent cases, it was alright to send the films with French intertitles; and hence the problem was not generated by them.

In this vein we see Desmet regularly protesting some payments, especially when the films have not arrived on time from France. In some cases Desmet didn't want a film because it transpired that one of his rivals already had bought it. Here we see the order Desmet put in for the film **La troupe Chinoise Li-Hong-Chan**, and to the right the letter he sent 8 days later saying that since Gildemeyer had already received this film, Desmet could not possibly accept it. In such moments, Gigan is the go-between, asking Desmet to show understanding for the delays and misunderstandings. In this particular case, of returning **Li-Hong-Chan** to Eclipse, Gigan assures him that Eclipse complied to this as a favour to him and that they will accept the film back and will not bill it to Desmet.

Finally it seems that the relationship got sour: on 29 Jan 1914; we find this letter from Gigan to Desmet, saying : “Today I received the news that *IVANHOE* will be released in Turnhout (Belgium) via a rental office in Amsterdam... Although I have no proof that this would involve your company, since you are the sole owner of this film in the Netherlands, allow me to warn you that our Belgian distributor La Maison Dardenne will take all the necessary measures to limit their losses...”

Here is the original letter and the posters from Sept. 1913 when Desmet had indeed ordered Ivanhoe from Gigan.

This is the last correspondence I found so far in the dossiers that I looked in. Could this letter signal the end of the trade between Desmet and Gigan? [I want to stress that I have been looking at only a dozen dossiers for this research; it is quite possible that there is more correspondence spread into other dossiers within the Desmet Collection]

In any case, Gigan’s business could probably not last much longer anyway. In Leen Engelen’s paper about the film distribution in Belgium during the WWI, we read that after the German occupation in august 1914, the situation between Belgium and the Netherlands changed dramatically, and since it became practically impossible to import films via France, the Belgians started asking Jean Desmet, who was in neutral territory to provide them with new films.

So what would this mean for Gigan’s business? Although on paper it looks like Gigan was also already representing some neutral companies like Nordisk from Denmark, Engelen stresses that since he was buying the Nordisk films through Aubert, who had the rights to the Nordisk films in Belgian territory, it also became impossible to get Danish films for Belgium. How and if Gigan could continue his business after august 1914 is very unclear. Did Gigan leave the business altogether, and perhaps moved back to France, to join her sister and her husband at Le Havre for example? Or did he maybe get drafted to fight in the WWI for the French army, being a French citizen, around 35 years old?

This is merely speculation on my side, but he certainly seems to disappear completely from the film trade business after 1914.

Please let me know if you know or find other references to Maurice Gigan.

In this presentation I limited myself to illustrate only very few cases but I hope I could convince you that there is much more we could learn about the film business behind-the-scenes from the Desmet company documents. We eagerly welcome you all to do more research within the Desmet collection.

Thank you for time and thanks to the DOMITOR conference organizers for letting me do this presentation.

Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi

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