Gaining a clear picture of Flemish film heritage

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An interim review of cross-sector film registration

Pictured: a canister in the CINEMATEK depot, © meemoo



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Introduction

News reports, documentaries, travelogues and amateur films probably aren't the first things that come to mind when you hear the word 'film', but these types of film are just as much a part of our collective memory as cinema films. Setting up an overarching registration process, under the right management, is therefore crucial in order to save and rescue the cultural film heritage stored in archives and by museums, heritage libraries, arts organisations and government institutions.

The state of Flemish audiovisual heritage as a whole was thoroughly investigated In 2013, with various difficulties and problem areas identified. For film in particular, this included fragmentation in film heritage management and unfavourable storage conditions, as well as a lack of specific attention for film collections, poor infrastructure and not enough knowledge about content and technical properties. This situation therefore formed the starting point for a collaboration between meemoo and the Royal Belgian Film Archive (also known as CINEMATEK).

Since 2015, we've worked together – with CINEMATEK and 61 archives, museums, arts organisations, government institutions and heritage libraries – on an approach comprised of five stages, from making an inventory to long-term storage, across different sectors. We reached a milestone in 2022: we have accurately registered the content and technical properties of more than 14,000 films – the bulk of what is found in our content partners' archives. This collaboration ensures we can organise the storage and digitisation of diverse and dispersed film collections in an efficient and affordable way, and forms a solid basis for further progress. Finally, this registration offers an opportunity to look more closely at film collections and provide statistical results.

In the first chapter, we show you what was happening with audiovisual heritage in Flanders in 2013. After providing this context, we zoom in on the collaboration between CINEMATEK and meemoo. Then, following a brief explanation about our approach to digitisation and how we encourage the re-use of archival content, the fourth chapter looks at the figures in more detail – what's actually in all those depots and archives, exactly? We finish by looking ahead to the future.

1 - How it all started

An inventory of Flemish audiovisual heritage

How can you properly preserve a wonderful film collection if you don't know what condition it's in? How can you prevent it from being lost if you don't know the threats it's facing? How can you make a unique collection such as this – which documents just about every aspect of social life in Flanders in the 20th century – accessible to the public if you don't know exactly what it contains?

Drawing up a global inventory

VIAA, which stands for *Vlaams Instituut voor (Audiovisuele) Archivering* [Flemish Institute for (Audiovisual) Archiving], was founded in 2012, and <u>has continued life as</u> <u>meemoo since February 2020</u>. Meemoo's work includes the digitisation of Flemish audiovisual heritage for its long-term preservation and to make it accessible. To do this, we started in 2013 by auditing a defined group of partners' audiovisual collections: cultural heritage organisations such as archive institutions, museums and heritage libraries, and also Flemish broadcasters (public broadcaster VRT as well as commercial and regional broadcasters). This resulted in a global inventory of audiovisual heritage in Flanders, created by meemoo (as VIAA and PACKED) in collaboration with FARO, which served as the basis for launching large-scale digitisation projects for audio and video carriers.

What is special about film?

The situation was a bit different for film stock – moving images captured on photographic film. The inventory showed that cultural heritage organisations and broadcasters were storing substantial film collections, and digitising all of them straight away simply wasn't possible. Film digitisation is **very expensive** – up to 100 times more costly than digitising some video formats. Furthermore, unlike for audio and video, there was **no international consensus** on how best to digitise film. Nonetheless, it was very urgent, and therefore required a special approach based on thorough research into how much film stock heritage there was, and its distribution and condition.

A thorough investigation

In October 2013, meemoo commissioned Noortje Verbeke and Rony Vissers¹ (working for PACKED, the Flemish centre of expertise for digital heritage, and also one of meemoo's predecessors) to investigate the current state of film heritage in Flanders. Their conclusions focused on the importance of **digitising** film heritage with a view to preserving its content and making it accessible.

^{1 -} Verbeke , N., & Vissers, R. (2013). Plan van aanpak voor de digitalisering van filmmateriaal in het kader van VIAA. Brussel: Packed vzw.

They identified **challenges for storing film** and highlighted the issue of **selection and prioritisation**, making reference to the technical decisions required for this process. The report from Vissers and Verbeke clearly outlined the state of film heritage in Flanders and laid the foundation for a concrete plan of action for the analogue preservation and digitisation.

Verbeke and Vissers estimated there were approximately **74,000** films in storage in total, spread across some **25** of the 40 collection management organisations that meemoo has as content partners at the time. The VRT was the only broadcaster in Flanders with a film collection – estimated to be around 66,000 film reels, or some 89% of the total quantity. The number of reels belonging to all the other cultural heritage organisations was estimated to be around 8,000. Some 75% of the films were 16mm format, with 17% consisting of 8mm and Super 8. We had to approach these figures with caution, however, considering they were **rough estimates**.

The state of film heritage in 2013

Verbeke and Vissers didn't just include estimates about quantities in their report; they also exposed a number of **challenges** regarding the condition of the film stock, with a view to formulating an approach to overcome them in collaboration with the partners.

Unfavourable storage conditions

The majority of cultural heritage organisations surveyed indicated that they did not have good storage conditions for their film stock. As well as temperature and humidity levels being unsuitable and fluctuating a lot, poor packaging materials were also significantly contributing to rapid decay. In some places, highly flammable nitrate films were even stored among other materials with heritage value and importance.

Need for knowledge and expertise

Even though some of the cultural heritage organisations surveyed had already given their film stock to the Royal Belgian Film Archive for storage, the film heritage was very dispersed in general. Archiving film was not a core activity for any of these organisations. The film reels were not usually stored separately, but in the proximity of other archival materials with a similar subject matter. Most organisations had little specific knowledge and insufficient resources or infrastructure to view, register or repackage film stock. Knowledge about the collections themselves was also limited; there was often no other option than to make educated guesses when estimating quantities and technical properties.

Poor visibility of content

There was usually only limited visibility of the film content – partly because of a lack of infrastructure for viewing it – which made it impossible for most organisations to assess the content of their own collections, let alone draw any conclusions about additional preservation efforts or potential disposal.

Widespread vinegar syndrome

Verbeke and Vissers asked collection managers to take random samples in order to gauge the deterioration of acetate-based film, because no organisations other than the VRT performed this type of assessment as a matter of course. Extrapolations from the samples showed that no fewer than 60% of the cellulose-acetate films in the cultural heritage sector were affected by <u>vinegar</u> <u>syndrome</u>², of which 9% were already past the autocatalytic point (when the reaction starts to accelerate exponentially). We should note here that in many cases the films were already in poor condition when the cultural heritage institutions acquired them. Affected films were also rarely stored separately from unaffected ones, which is undesirable given the infectiousness of vinegar syndrome.

2 - Vinegar syndrome is a degradation process that occurs with cellulose-acetate film when the acetate substrate starts to decompose. Characteristics are curling, shrinking or cracking of the film and a strong vinegar smell. All acetate films can suffer from degradation, but good storage conditions are an important factor. Poor ventilation or packaging, and significant fluctuation in air humidity and temperature, can increase the acidity of the film. Once the degradation has set in, it becomes autocatalytic, which means that the rate of decomposition accelerates exponentially.

2 - A collaborative approach

Based on the difficulties and challenges discussed in the previous chapter, and as recommended in the report by Verbeke and Vissers, we went in search of a suitable partner for the cultural heritage organisations'³ film collections. We found this partner in CINEMATEK, the Royal Belgian Film Archive. They have many years' experience in the long-term storage, registration, restoration, preservation and accessibility of Belgian film heritage. Meemoo and the Belgian Film Archive signed their first collaborative agreement – for the depositing, registration and preservation of films preserved by meemoo's content partners – in 2015.



Pictured: CINEMATEK registrars David Gruwez and Bobbie Noe at work, © meemoo

The film **storage conditions** needed to be improved quickly in order to slow down the increasing levels of vinegar syndrome, and preventive **preservation** was also necessary for many of the films. An overview of the **technical properties** would also allow meemoo to prepare better calls for tender for digitisation companies. Finally, the content partners had to be given the opportunity to decide which films in their collection were worth keeping and possibly digitising at a later date. An **overview of the content** would not just allow partners to make this decision based on their own collection policy; it would also enable comparisons between the organisations' collections themselves, as well as with CINEMATEK's. We have since devised and followed a set step-by-step plan for this registration and preservation process.

^{3 -}The public broadcaster VRT also has a large film collection, but since they have their own expertise, equipment and suitable storage facilities, it was agreed that they should restart their own registration project with support from meemoo. This project was completed in 2021 with a <u>total of 53,221 films</u> registered. The decomposition process can no longer be stopped or reversed; it can only be slowed down by adjusting the storage conditions.

1. Inventory

Each content partner was asked to list how many audiovisual carriers they had per carrier type. For film, they were asked in particular to note the format and number of reels per film. This information was initially provided by email, but meemoo has been using the Inventory Tool – which any organisation can now take advantage of to update its data at any time – since 2021.

2. Transportation

We contact every content partner that indicates it has film stock in its collection, for relocation of the films to CINEMATEK in Brussels. Meemoo takes care of picking up the films, with our content partners providing a collection number and packaging the materials for transportation.

3.Registration

In the autumn of 2013, meemoo commissioned the development of a database (AMS, Archive Management System) for carrier registration and logistical processing. The registrars at CINEMATEK use this tool to describe the films' contents and technical properties. This descriptive and technical metadata makes it possible to identify different versions or copies of the same film. The registrars at CINEMATEK also use the metadata to provide advice with regard to the content in the form of a score out of five. Content partners can use this metadata and advice to guide them in their assessment of whether a certain film is worth digitising.

4. Preventive preservation

CINEMATEK registers, views and gives each film a new spool on the viewing table to quickly identify the main preservation issues. After registering and describing the films, CINEMATEK also performs a number of preservation actions. The films are given a leader and end tape if these are missing, the core or spool is replaced if necessary, and each film is given a new, ventilated film canister. In some cases it is necessary to repair broken splices. If there is any paper with film-related information in the old film cans, photos are taken and the old film cans are scanned. This information is then preserved and stored digitally along with the digitised film.

If the content partner wishes, the old film cans are returned to them, but in most cases they only have very low heritage value and can be safely disposed of. A pH measurement⁴ is taken for all acetate films. All nitrate films are transferred to a fireproof storage facility outside Brussels.

⁴ - This measures a film's acidity level to estimate the extent of any vinegar syndrome and deterioration of acetate-based film.

5. Longer-term storage of analogue film

Good storage conditions are vitally important for film stock and can extend its lifetime significantly. Poor storage conditions, on the other hand, for example because of unsuitable packaging, excessive humidity or fluctuating temperatures, can cause issues such as vinegar syndrome. Meemoo's advice is to give films to CINEMATEK for storage, at least until they have been digitised. After digitisation, content partners can choose to leave their films with CINEMATEK for long-term storage, and this is recommended for those who do not have their own suitable storage facilities.



Pictured: the storage area at CINEMATEK, © CINEMATEK, photo by Bea Borgers

3 - Digitisation and the next step for re-use

Film digitisation is an expensive and complex affair, so not all film reels can be digitised at the same time, which makes it necessary to prioritise. The primary criterion is the film stock's condition. Meemoo has been running <u>large-scale digitisation</u> <u>projects</u> – to digitise the most threatened films – since 2015. For acetate films, this equates to an acidity level of 5.0 and below. But because the pH value alone does not always say everything about the condition of the film (acetate films with a high pH value may also be in poor condition), this combination of pH value with knowledge about storage conditions provides a useful predictive assessment for the evolution of the film's condition.

In addition to projects for film affected by vinegar syndrome, separate projects for <u>nitrate films</u> and digitising the <u>White Fathers</u>' film collection – the only audiovisual collection on the Flemish List of Masterpieces –have also been launched.



Pictured: photo of father Devroe at work with his camera, White Father's collection, KADOC-KU Leuven

Meemoo commissions film digitisation companies to digitise film stock. The films to be digitised are compiled in ad hoc batches for these projects, with the guiding principle to prioritise the most affected acetate films. We're aiming to digitise all films that content partners have identified as being affected by vinegar syndrome before the end of 2023. Even though new quantities of threatened film will continue to be registered and digitised for many years to come, this approach means that from 2024, we will also be able to focus on **digitising non-threatened films**.

Sustainably storing digital files is one step, but it's equally important to **re-use** the results of the digitisation process. We're doing this by helping content partners to make their digital files accessible via our <u>own meemoo channels</u>, and sharing knowledge with third parties so that they can learn how to make these files accessible themselves. For example, content partners can already search through each other's collections on the <u>Catalogus Pro platform</u>, where they can look for and find digitised films quickly and easily, and watch them in a secure environment, as well as contact each other to coordinate collection management and possible re-use.

4 - Results and insights: a summary

As part of our collaboration with CINEMATEK, over recent years we've described the contents and technical properties of thousands of films – providing a unique opportunity to gain a picture of this registration in numbers. This analysis is based on a dataset that was requested on 24 April 2022, when 14,060 films had already been fully registered.

Organisations with film stock

Films from **61 different content partners** in five different sectors (26 archives, 22 museums, 2 heritage libraries, 3 government institutions and 8 arts organisations) have been registered. In terms of distribution:

- archives registered the most films: 9,307 (66%);
- then comes the museum sector: 4,189 films (29%);
- heritage libraries, government institutions and arts organisations account for the remaining 5%.



infographic: digitised films per sector

Date of production

The date of production tells us something about the age of the film stock, although it wasn't always possible to find out when this date was: only 8,126 of the 14,060 films were identified with a date of production. **We therefore don't (yet) know the date for 42% of the films registered.** When these almost 6,000 films have been digitised, employees who work on the archives and collections at the 61 organisations will therefore start dating them based on their content and/or archival context. The following can also be noted from the data:

- films from 97 different years were registered in total;
- the oldest films date from 1908, the latest from 2013;
- most films come from the period 1951–1985, accounting for 6,120 films (75% of films with a production date);

• there is a peak in 1953, which can be attributed to one content partner receiving a collection of films from that year.



Film carrier

One of the most important factors in film preservation is the film carrier⁵: the media used to capture the film images. We identified three types of film carriers in Flanders. **Nitrate film** is the oldest, and all films produced between 1889 and 1920 are most definitely nitrate films. Nitrate film is highly flammable and susceptible to chemical decomposition, and both these properties have contributed to the fact that few nitrate films have survived worldwide. CINEMATEK registered 392 nitrate films, which is 3% of the total.

Cellulose-acetate film, or safety film, came into use as a safer alternative to nitrate film. This carrier became available from 1920 but only definitively replaced nitrate film in 1952. Acetate film is also susceptible to chemical decomposition in the form of vinegar syndrome. The vast majority of registered films are acetate films – some 13,618 items, or **97% of the total**.



5 - The structure of a film is the same for all types and consists of two primary layers,

which are both susceptible to decomposition:

- the transparent substrate, the thicker layer, serves as a base;
- the emulsion, thinner layer, provides the photo-sensitive materials in the gelatin binder.

A more recently developed film carrier is polyester film. **Polyester film** was only used for photography initially, but its flexibility, stability and strength led to it becoming a popular film carrier in the 1980s. Even so, only 50 polyester films were registered from the 61 Flemish organisations. This is related to the fact that there was a decline in the number of films produced (see date of production) from the 1980s onwards, which is partly explained by the rise in popularity of video media as it gradually replaced film.

Filmformat of gauge

Driven by technological innovation and to serve different kinds of use, film manufacturers have produced dozens of film formats since the 1890s. The film format, also called the gauge, refers to the width of the film. The most common film formats among meemoo's content partners are 35mm, 16mm, 9.5mm and 8mm. Some figures:



- **35mm** is the film format of choice for full-length (feature) films. Its large image area means it can provide high-quality images, but it only accounts for 1,926 films (14% of the total);
- The most commonly used film format among our content partners is **16mm**, accounting for 8,300 films (59%). 16mm film was introduced to the market as a cheaper alternative to 35mm. This format could be used in lighter cameras, which made it particularly interesting for professionals who could then also create news reports outside the studio. In the world of television in particular, 16mm has almost always been the universal standard format;
- 8mm was produced for amateur use and presented as a cheap alternative to 16mm. 1,938 films were recorded in 8mm (14%);
- **Super 8** is also an 8mm format, but with smaller perforations resulting in an image surface area up to 50% larger. This format was also intended for amateur film-makers, and accounts for 1,475 films (11%);
- The fifth most registered format is **9.5mm**, which French company Pathé introduced to the market in 1922. It uses 35mm film cut into three 9.5mm strips. This format accounts for just 304 films (2%);

In addition to these five most common formats, we also found a few more exotic ones. These account for less than 1% of the total and are: 2x16⁶, Super 16, ¼ inch (separate magnetic audio tape without image) and 17.5mm.

Audio

Audio film came onto the market in the 1920s, but only broke through in Belgium in 1930. Audio film exists on nitrate, acetate and polyester film. The data shows that audio is present in **5,488 films** (39%). There are also **838 films** (6%) with only an audio reel and no accompanying image reel. In addition, there are **747 films** (5%) with an image reel that most likely used to be accompanied by an audio reel, but which is no longer present. Finally, the biggest group is the silent films, which make up **6,987 films** (50%) of the total number of films. There is therefore no audio for 55% of the films. Re-using silent films poses a challenge because a report or interview without sound can be difficult to follow.

In principle, the audio content was stored with the film in one of two ways: on the same reel or on a separate audio reel. Each of these two methods can be further subdivided into two audio recording techniques: optical 61% (sepopt 9% and comopt 52%) or magnetic 39% (sepmag 31% and commag 8%)⁷.



6 - This little-used format is a 32mm film exposed on two sides, which has not yet been cut in half to 16mm. We only registered this format type for 62 films, all from the Amsab-Institute of Social History collection.

7 - Optical audio was used from 1930 until 1950. This audio could be added to the film strip itself (comopt) or on a separate negative (sepopt). The optical soundtracks were gradually replaced from 1950 with magnetic strips that were added to the film stock (commag). The audio quality improved because it was also possible to capture stereo and surround sound. In some cases, the magnetic strip was added to a separate film carrier (sepmag).

Colour or black-and-white

Of all the films registered, **49% are colour films**, with **40% black-and-white films. 4% include both black-and-white and colour clips.** It's not clear for 7%, 951 films, whether they are black-and-white or colour films: this was not indicated in the registration.

Colour films⁸ are susceptible to discolouration. The chemical reaction that affects the colours in a colour film is triggered by heat, humidity and poor air quality. Good storage conditions can however slow down any discolouration.



Deteriorating film

From 2015 until the end of 2023, meemoo is focusing on safeguarding threatened films in its digitisation projects. In particular, this concerns threatened nitrate film and films affected by vinegar syndrome.

1. Nitrate film

Nitrate films are the oldest films that are kept in archives worldwide. It's only a matter of time before these films perish forever. We digitised 85 nitrate films in 2022. The films that are in scope are those that have never been safeguarded before, either through digitisation or with a copy on acetate or polyester film. There are fifteen content partners involved in this project, and the digitisation partner is R3store Studios in London.

⁸ - The first colour films date from 1895 and were coloured by hand. From the 1910s, this method switched to film tinting, in which part of the film or the entire film in is placed in a dye bath. Another common method that emerged at the same time as tinting was toning, in which the dark colours on the film were converted into colour using a chemical process. There was no real large-scale breakthrough for colour film until the 1930s.

2. Acetate film

Just like nitrate film, acetate film has stability problems. Measurements taken by the CINEMATEK registrars show that some 79% of the 13,618 acetate films are affected by vinegar syndrome. Of this **79%**, **8%** are already past the autocatalytic point. The figures are therefore even worse than estimated in the Verbeke and Vissers report (60% affected, 9% past autocatalytic point).



Image: film affected by vinegar syndrome, © meemoo



infographic: affected acetate films selected for digitisation

Film stock that is affected by vinegar syndrome is prioritised for digitisation. Prioritising the most affected films means we have now been able to digitise all those selected by content partners that were already beyond the autocatalytic point. As the registration continues, we can of course come across new films in this stage of decomposition. The content partners chose not to digitise 40% of the films that were beyond this autocatalytic point. Over recent years, we have **digitised 2,954 affected films**.

Genres

During the registration process, CINEMATEK also assigns a genre to the films. This assigning is always subjective and partly artificial (because the same film can be categorised in more than one genre), but it does tell us something about similarities between content and subject matter.

- **145 different genres have been registered**. A single film can often be categorised in multiple different genres. For example, there are 13,610 with at least one genre and some 5,158 films with at least two genres. 20,085 genre labels were assigned in total, which equates to around 1.4 per film;
- It's notable that **three genres together account for around 50%** of the films. 'News report' was most commonly assigned and represents 23%. 'Amateur film' and 'documentary' follow in second and third place with 16% and 10% respectively;
- Of the 145 genres registered, certain genres are **complementary**. For example, the 'amateur film' genre is often named in combination with 'travelogue', 'family film' or 'children's film'. Another common combination is 'erotica' with 'pornography'. In some circumstances, it is also difficult to determine the difference between genres, as is the case with 'religious drama', 'religion' and 'religious film', for example;
- It's noteworthy that there are only a **few feature films** in the content partners' film collections. The 'feature film' genre was only assigned four times;⁹
- Finally, there are **42 genres** that only appear **once**. Examples include 'laboratory test', 'pirate film', 'Christmas film', 'circus', 'variety show', etc.



9 - Even though meemoo does not catalogue many feature films, CINEMATEK focuses on films from Belgian cinematographic history in developing its collection. The Belgian collections contain both historical films that depict Belgium's history and documentaries by Belgian film-makers.

Conclusions and challenges for the future

In April 2022, we counted just over 14,000 fully registered films from 61 content partners. This is a milestone to be proud of, and the result of a great collaboration between content partners, CINEMATEK and meemoo. This collaboration is the cornerstone of our broad approach to mapping out the film collections (registration), stabilising their condition (preservation and deposition) and drawing up a structural digitisation plan, with the primary focus on the most threatened films.

More films affected by acidity than previously estimated

How did we arrive at this approach? In 2013, meemoo conducted research into the status of audiovisual heritage in Flanders. This identified several challenges and proposals to get to work on, for audiovisual heritage in general but also specifically for film stock. Whereas the estimate in 2013 was that around 60% films would be affected by vinegar syndrome, the registration process showed that around **79%** of the films were suffering from this decomposition to some extent. The severity of damage caused by vinegar syndrome is therefore much worse than initially estimated. Some 8% of films are already beyond the autocatalytic point, which can be seen as the very final warning for these films.

Registration continues

We have registered a huge number of affected films over eight years, and the first batches of affected films have already been digitised. It is therefore an ideal moment to take stock of the situation, but still a long way off the end of the process. Many of meemoo's content partners are still acquiring films, so the **film registration is still continuing**, both for affected and unaffected materials. We still have at least 2,000 films on our radar for registration, and we expect this number to increase further over the coming years, albeit at a more gradual rate.

One important observation is that even though this approach covers a **very large portion** of the film collections in Flanders, it is still **not complete**. A number of collections, in particular those belonging to individuals and private companies, are not within scope. It can certainly be said, however, that Flanders is **gradually becoming the master of its film heritage** – managed by broadcasters, archives, libraries, museums, government institutions and arts organisations. From an international perspective, it's a unique achievement.

Plans for digitisation and accessibility

The overview of technical properties and content that we now have offers a unique and extremely valuable tool upon which to base future digitisation plans. On the one hand, we can respond to the most urgent needs for threatened film (we obviously prioritise these films), and on the other hand it allows us to spread our budgetary commitments by postponing the digitisation of films that are not threatened, without their condition deteriorating quickly.

Since 2015, we've been setting up digitisation projects for the most affected films, and for specific projects such as the White Fathers' collection. By the end of 2023, we're aiming to have digitised all the known affected films that content partners indicate they want digitised. For the unaffected films, **tools will soon be developed** that should allow for the content itself to determine what to digitise first. An **exchange procedure** is also being investigated to allow content partners to transfer films that have not yet been digitised and do not fit into their collection plans to colleagues. After all, these films may be of interest for another content partner to digitise as part of their collection.

The broad technical overview provided by film registration ensures that all these plans can first be designed in an **extremely efficient** way. This also forms the basis for a wide variety of target audiences being able to look up and re-use these collections.

Colophon

Authors

Brecht Declercq Céline Vermeire

Editor

Mirthe Schoofs

Design

Eline Cornelissen

Contact

<u>Céline Vermeire</u>

Location and year

Gent, 2022

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With thanks to all partners in this project

CINEMATEK

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This project was made possible with support from the Flemish Government.



