Cinema Parisien 3D

3D Visualization as a Tool for Studying the History of Cinema-going

Julia Noordegraaf
University of Amsterdam
J.J.Noordegraaf@uva.nl

Loes Openghaffen
University of Amsterdam
L.Openghaffen@uva.nl

Norbert Bakker
University of Amsterdam
Norbert.G.E.Bakker@gmail.com

Cinema Parisien

In March 1910, the Dutch-based cinema pioneer Jean Desmet (1875-1956) opened Cinema Parisien, his first permanent cinema theatre at Nieuwendijk 69 in Amsterdam. Building upon the success of the cinema theatre that he opened under the same name in Rotterdam the year before, Desmet broke the ground in Amsterdam for the establishment of permanent cinema theatres. The cinema theatre remained functional until 1987, for a long time also as an adult movie theatre. The cinema’s 1924 art deco interior was reinstalled at the Netherlands Filmmuseum at Vondelpark in the early 1990s and today can be seen in a recently opened cinema complex at De Hallen. The history of the Amsterdam Cinema Parisien has been well-documented, in particular because besides a distribution collection of over 900 films from the 1910s and a collection of film posters and photographs, Desmet left behind a vast business archive, that uniquely documents Dutch cinema industry and culture in the early period (Blom 2003). Recently, in the context of the Images of the Future digitization program, the entire Desmet collection has been digitized at EYE Film Institute Netherlands. The availability of the collection in digital form opens up new opportunities for investigating the history of early cinema in the Netherlands. In the context of the research project Creative Amsterdam: An E-Humanities Perspective, which studies the history of 400 years of cultural industries in the city with the help of digital data and tools, the authors investigated the opportunities of 3D visualization as a tool for studying the role and place of cinema theatres in the entertainment industry of early twentieth-century urban culture.
3D visualization as a Research Tool

The 4D Research Lab at the University of Amsterdam’s Centre for Cultural History and Identity aims to use 3D visualization as a tool that responds to the theoretical and methodological principles of archaeological and historical research as laid down in The London Charter (2009): models are based on documentation and transparent regarding the underlying source material and the choices made. In the case of cinema heritage, 3D visualization allows us to synthesize different types of archived assets, allowing for the presentation of the films themselves in the context of their exhibition, thus evoking the experience of cinema-going at a specific place and time.

In this paper we evaluate the relevance of 3D visualization as a research tool for the history of cinema-going. How does the process of building a 3D model of cinema theatres relate to what we already know about this history? In which ways does the modeling process allow for the synthesis of different types of archived cinema heritage assets? To what extent does this presentation of ‘content in context’ help us to better understand the history of film consumption? We will address these questions via a discussion of a specific case study, our visualization of Desmet’s Amsterdam Cinema Parisien theatre. The choice for this case is motivated by its historical importance as one of the first permanent cinema theatres in Amsterdam with a long, rich history that is extensively documented.

Figure 1: Cinema Parisien at Nieuwendijk 69, Amsterdam, in 1976 (left) and 3D visualization of the 1910 situation (right)
First, we reflect on 3D visualization as a research tool, outlining its technology and methodological principles and its usefulness for research into the historiography of movie-going. Then, we describe our 3D visualization of Cinema Parisien, discussing the process of researching and building the model. Specific attention will be paid to the ways in which we have increased the transparency of the modeling process: first, by creating a color-coded version of the model that indicates the level of certainty behind our modeling choices, and, second, by connecting the model to a newly created database that allows users to access the underlying source material as well as documentation describing the design process and choices made. Finally, we evaluate the result against the existing knowledge about the history of cinema going in Amsterdam and of this cinema theatre in particular, and answer the question to what extent 3D visualization as a research tool can aid our understanding of the history of cinema consumption.

![Figure 2. Color bar of the Level of Certainty Index developed for the Cinema Parisien 3D project.](image)

**Results**

The project has generated an interactive, extensively documented model of one of Amsterdam’s early permanent cinema theatres as it opened in 1910. It presents both researchers and general audience members with a comprehensible and evocative interface for exploring cinema-related heritage. A 3D visualization adds an experience of space and scale that cannot be equaled by written descriptions or 2D images. Besides, the level of detail that realistic 3D visualizations require, steers the researcher in directions that they may not have considered before but that often do yield unexpected sources (such as blueprints of buildings or tile tableaux advertisements that cinemas shared with shops and cafes). In addition, the transparency that an academically sound use of 3D visualization requires, invites the use of a database that not only organizes one’s research material but also makes it openly accessible for other researchers, increasing the sharing of knowledge and the verifiability of results.

Used in this way, 3D visualization of cinema theatres may be seen as a form of historiography on cinema-going, especially if users can navigate the various transformations of a cinema theatre over time, extending it into a fourth dimension. 3D modeling does, however, require multiple skills and involves time-consuming, interdisciplinary research, which is not always available or affordable. In addition, the non-linearity of the viewing experience raises the question how exactly it functions as historiography: how does one translate the insights gleaned from navigating interactive, multi-layered 3D visualizations in coherent historiographical accounts? For the time being, 3D models will have to be accompanied by written accounts, as provided in the proposed paper, or their audio-visual equivalents. As such, they present compelling accounts of the spatial experience of cinema-going in the past.
Figure 3. Still of the 3D rendering of the entry hall of Cinema Parisien, with vendor booths and tile tableaux advertisements. The background shows the projection beam in the adjacent theatre.

References


