



THE NORDISK FILM COLLECTION – AN INTRODUCTION

LISBETH RICHTER LARSEN



Ole Olsen, head of Nordisk Films Kompagni from 1906-1924.
Photo: Nordisk/DFI.



Nordisk Film's leading star Valdemar Psilander. Poster from the film "Lykken" (Holger-Madsen, DK, 1918).
Poster artist: Ernst Åkerbladh.
Photo: Nordisk/DFI.

Nordisk Films Kompagni in Copenhagen was founded in 1906 and was one of the biggest film producing companies in the world during the silent era. Big business means administration, administration means paperwork and that is what the Nordisk Film Collection consists of: paper.

There are letters – more than 70,000 – invoices, assurance policies, cashbooks, scrapbooks, annual accounts, contracts, scripts, film programmes and press releases. You can even find a pedigree for the watchdog that guarded the studios in Valby in 1919! Some documents and ledgers provide us with facts like dates, names, figures and film titles, and some give us an impression of the daily life and routines of a huge film company. You can choose to trace a person, a company or a film, or it is possible to focus on particular periods or specific events.

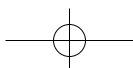
Since 1976 when the Danish Film Museum took over the archive from Nordisk Film, who kept it in removal crates in the attic of the *Paladsteatret* in Copenhagen, a number of scholars have used it for their research. It must have been a very time-consuming task though, as there were absolutely no search entries to the collection. The material was simply put on shelves in the stack straight out of the removal crates. In 2000 and 2001 the collection as a whole was organized, catalogued and indexed in a database that is now accessible on the Internet.

The history of Nordisk Films Kompagni has been roused from its magic sleep. The following serves as a brief introduction to the company and its special collection.

NORDISK FILMS KOMPAGNI

In the spring of 1905 Ole Olsen (1863-1943), founder of Nordisk Films Kompagni, opened one of the first movie theatres, *Biograf-Theatret*, in Copenhagen, and he soon started producing and distributing films too. Nordisk Films Kompagni was officially founded on 6 November 1906 and as Ole Olsen had a talent for the new entertainment business he expanded rapidly. Within a few years he had several studios, a management office and a factory in Copenhagen, branch offices in Berlin, Vienna, London and New York; and was represented in countries all over the world by either local firms or agents. His business was entirely based on exports, as only 2% of the production was for the home market. The company trademark – a polar bear on top of a globe – guaranteed a high-class movie, well acted by stars like Valdemar Psilander, Clara Wieth, Olaf Fønss or Gunnar Tolnæs, high technical standards, excellent cinematography and a good plot.

From 1906 to 1919, 1124 fiction films were produced at Nordisk Film – that is 97% of the entire silent film production from the company (Tabel 1, page 198).



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A manifestation of the company's worldwide dominance. From the distribution office in London, undated. Poster: Nordisk/DFI.

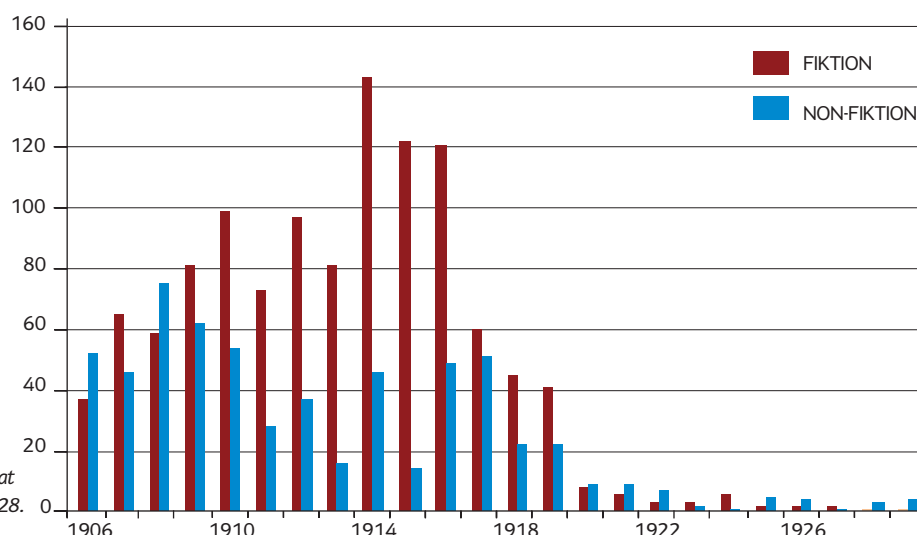


Table 1. Number of titles produced at Nordisk Films Kompagni 1906 - 1928.

However, World War I made it very difficult for Ole Olsen to keep his company's position in the market, and Nordisk suffered huge losses. In 1916 the branch office in New York was closed down, and the production of fiction films fell by 50% in 1917. The year 1917 became the absolute turning point, partly because Russia, Olsen's most important costumer, closed her borders, and partly because the German Reichstag chose to centralize national film production and founded UFA. Olsen was forced to sell all his German interests (close to 60 theaters and a production company), and he lost several million Danish kroner.

During the twenties the company concentrated its efforts on longer films with high production value and international appeal, such as the Dickens adaptations by A.W. Sandberg. They were a success, but only in Denmark: The world market was lost for good. Ole Olsen left the company in 1924, but the new management did not succeed in staving off the downturn. They tried remakes of earlier successes: *Maharajaens Yndlingshustru* (A.W. Sandberg, DK, 1926) with Gunnar Tolnæs and *Klovnen* (A.W. Sandberg, DK, 1926) with Gösta Ekman replacing Psilander. They engaged foreign stars as for instance the popular french actor Maurice de Féraudy and Ekman in *Klovnen* and Henry Edwards and Miles Mander from England in *Jokeren* (Georg Jacoby, DK, 1928). *Jokeren* was co-produced with a German company and was directed by the german Georg Jacoby, but it did not avert the crisis. Production rates reached rock bottom that year of 1928 with the one fiction film only. The polar bear gave up and Nordisk Films Kompagni went into liquidation.

However, only a few months later the company struggled its way back, this time in the hands of Carl Bauder (1882-1944), a wealthy stockbroker who had been a shareholder in the company for several years. He reconstructed Nordisk Film and brought something very important with him: the patents for the Petersen & Poulsen sound-system in Scandinavia. In the mid-thirties Bauder won a lawsuit against Paramount and some of the other major American film companies, and this meant huge profits from licence fees for Nordisk Film. The company started its sound feature



Carl Bauder. Photo: Nordisk/DFI.



Busy days in Valby, 1914. Production still from "Den hvide Rytterske" (Cohn, DK, 1915). Photo: Nordisk/DFI.

film production in 1930 and from then on Nordisk Film had a steady production.

Nordisk Film is still at its original site in Valby. Since 1992 it has been a subsidiary of the Egmont Group and today the company presents itself on its homepage as "... a modern media house that ... provides entertainment in all genres and in all media ...". There have been ups and downs over the years. But the company's contribution to film history – and not only Danish film history – is beyond dispute.

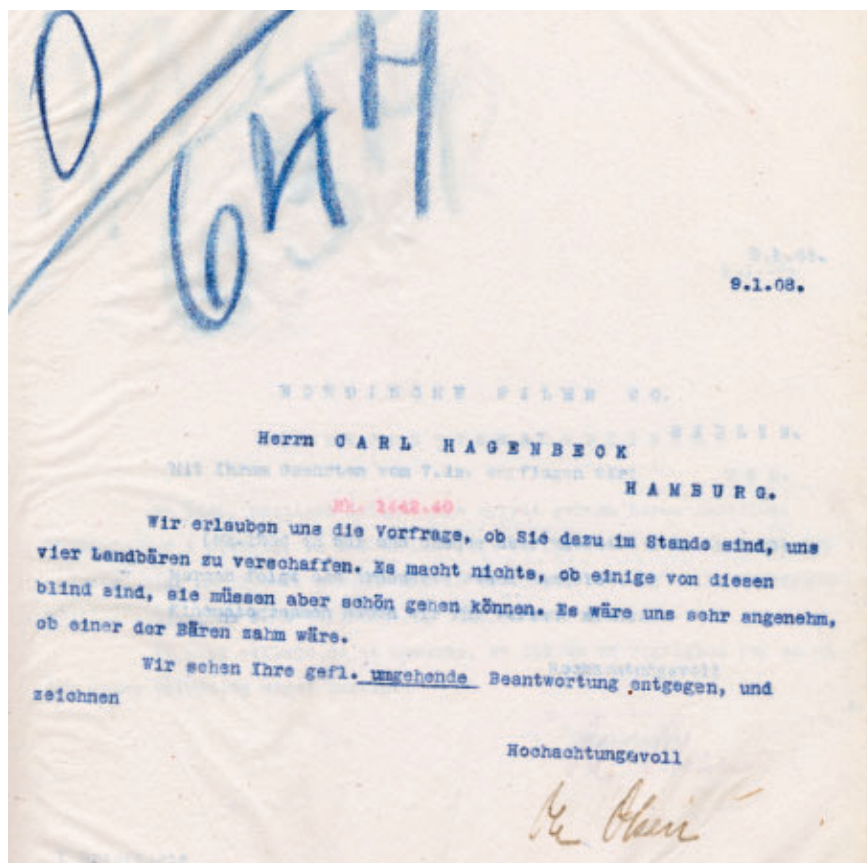
THE COLLECTION - SIZE AND CONTENT

When the Danish Film Museum took over the archive from Nordisk Film in 1976, some of the material was integrated into the different collections of the Museum. Stills, stills negatives and posters can be found in the Stills & Poster Archive, film programmes and descriptions are in the clippings archive at the Library, and the scripts are kept in a special collection at the Library. All other materials constitute what we have named "The Nordisk Film Collection".

It is a huge collection considering the fact that the material has survived almost a century. The books, folders and files take up about 30 running metres. Close to 9600 documents have been numbered, but that is no indication of the total amount of documents. A book or a folder containing documents is most often identified by one number only. For instance the letter books: There are 72 letter books, each containing about a 1000 pages. That means 72000 letters in all, but in the collection index they count 72 numbers only and the same goes for the scrapbooks and other materials.

The collection covers a period of time from 1905 to about 1960. The oldest document though, is a press cutting from 1899 – a short paragraph about Ole Olsen and his success as managing director of the amusement park *Malmö Tivoli* in Sweden.

As for the content of the collection, it contains a lot of different types of material. A cornucopia of information is gathered in the *letter books* mentioned above. They contain copies of every letter sent from the company from 1905 to 1915.



From letter book no. 6. Ole Olsen asks Carl Hagenbeck in Hamburg for the delivery of four brown bears, dated 9 January 1908. Probably for the film "Bjørnejagt i Rusland" (Viggo Larsen, DK, 1909).

Unfortunately incoming letters have not survived from this period. The letters are in Danish, German, English and French, and an alphabetical index of recipients is found in almost every book to guide you through the correspondence. 40 of the letter books are from the administration office and the studios, two are from the script department with rejection letters sent to writers, 21 are from the distribution department containing invoices for film prints, posters and stills, and 9 are from *Kinografen*, a subsidiary company. The letters are mostly in good condition but very fragile because of the poor quality of the paper.

Furthermore there are a lot of *contracts* with companies, writers and actors. Contracts with writers from the period 1912-1928 are gathered in two big portfolios containing 544 numbered contracts bearing names such as Gudmundur Kamban, Arthur Schnitzler, Gerhard Hauptmann, Bertha von Suttner and the widow of Emile Zola. Continuing in the silent era there is the considerable *negative register* which is the key to the total production of the company, as every film produced by Nordisk in the period 1906-1928 is listed here. The collection of scripts from the period 1911-1928 is close to being complete regarding the fiction films: We have 805 realised scripts and close to 500 unrealised. There are 14 *books containing intertitles* for almost every

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Conrad Uhl's
Hotel Bristol
Berlin
Unter den Linden 5 u. 6

Mellem Præsidenten Hr. Gösta Ekman og
Nordisk Film Kompagni er Dags-Boks indgaaet
følgende Overenskomst:

Hr. Gösta Ekman engageres til at spille Titrollen
i Filmen "Klovnen" under A.W. Sandbergs Regie.

Hr. Ekman stiller sin fulde Arbejdskraft til Disposition
i 2 Maanedes og erholder herfor et Honorar paa:
30.000 danske Kroner - skrevet Treli Tusinde danske Kroner.

Nordisk Film har Ret til at forlænge dette Engagement
med en halv Maaned og betaler i den Fald Hr. Ekman
et ekstra Honorar paa: 7.500 danske Kroner - skrevet Sjo Tusind
Trem Hundrede danske Kroner.

Engagementet træder i Kraft 1^{ste} Juli og varer til 1^{ste}
September 1926 - subsidiaert 15 September 1926.

Hr. Ekman har dog Ret til at indskyde Engagementet
begyndelse til 15^{te} Juli 1926, - i den Fald afsluttes Engagemet
allera 15 September, subsidiaert 1^{ste} Oktober 1926. Meddelelse
om denne Indskudelse maa dog være Nordisk Film Kompagni
i Hænde senest 1^{ste} Juni 1926.

Berlin 24 Marts 1926.

John Ekman

The contract with Gösta Ekman who played the title role in "Klovnen" (Sandberg, DK, 1926).

silent film - an invaluable and essential source for restoration. Furthermore there are several *distribution books* listing the specific titles and how many prints have been sold to which country.

There are *production accounts* for all sound films produced 1930-1950, *call sheets* and *shooting reports* from the years 1936-1958 and close to 50 *scrapbooks* covering the period from 1906-1944.

Contrary to the film stills and most of the portraits of actors from Nordisk Film that are to be found in the Stills & Poster Archive of DFI, *photos* relating to the



company – of buildings, offices, staff members etc. – have been kept in the collection. Examples include photos of the branch offices in Berlin, Vienna, Prague, London and New York (1906-1918), a photo album with pictures from a staff picnic in 1928, two albums with pictures of the studios in Valby and the movie theatre *Kino-Palæet* in the centre of Copenhagen totally destroyed by Nazi sabotage in February and March 1944, pictures of famous people visiting the studios: René Clair, Nikolaj Cherkasov, Gene Kelly (1957-1959) and of course a lot of portraits of the managing directors throughout the century: Ole Olsen, Carl Bauder, Holger Brøndum and Erik Balling.

The Nordisk Film Collection contains three sub-collections dedicated to companies either owned by or closely connected to Nordisk Film: *Paladsteatret* and *Kino-Palæet* – the two Copenhagen movie theatres – and *Kinografen*, a company founded in 1906 by Peter Elfelt and others. This company dealt with the exhibition, production and distribution of film, and became a subsidiary of Nordisk Film around 1916.

ORGANIZING THE MATERIAL - METHOD

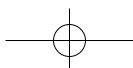
At the starting point of the organizing process the collection appeared as metre after metre of folders, portfolios, books in all sizes, wooden boxes containing index cards, a lot of material wrapped up in brown paper, a big black suitcase and documents by the hundreds or thousands. As far as I know, there is no generally acknowledged method for tackling a job like this. So the first step was to go through the entire collection from one end to the other and work out a rough catalogue listing every single item.

A registration would look like this:

SHELF NO. 7

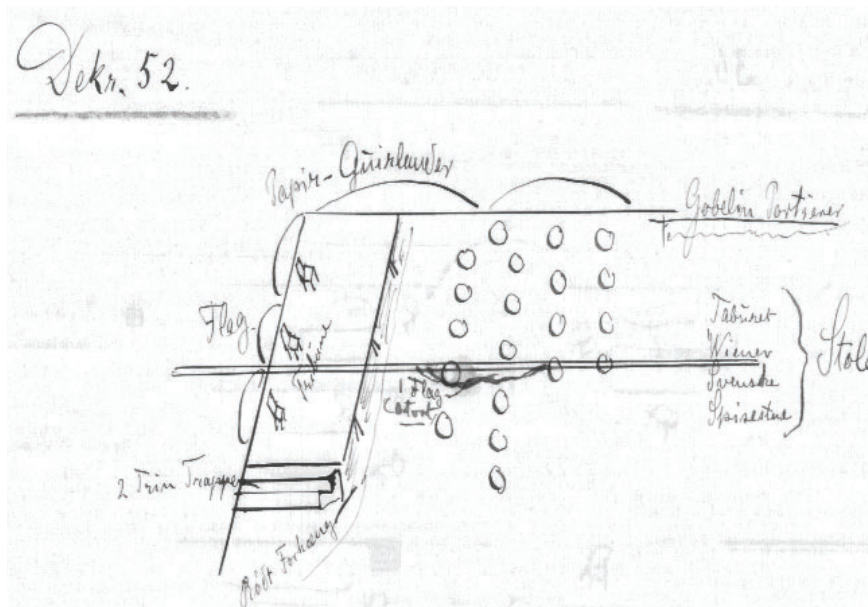
1 black book	order book on posters: titles, international titles, a description of the motive	5.3.1916-1922
1 black book	negative book: list of negatives from Oliver, Union and Luna	1915-1918
1 brown book	orders to Oliver Film, Berlin	1916
1 grey folder	list of furniture, equipment and wardrobes in Valby	1944
16 letter books	letter books no. 1-16	1906-1911

This stage of the process serves several purposes: You achieve a very good general view of the collection, you familiarize yourself with the material at hand and learn to recognize certain people's handwriting – and most importantly – every single document receives its proper place (for the time being) and can be found again. It has not been numbered yet but is registered by appearance and order.



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One of my favourites from the collection: A sketchbook from 1911. In the book, which is the only one of its kind, you will find production designs for 25 films made by Victor Fabian. This is a sketch of the Salvation Army Room, a set used in the film "Frelserpigen" (Augustinus, DK, 1911).



The decoration as it appears in the film "Frelserpigen" - a perfect match with the sketch.
Photo: Nordisk/DFI.



The second step is one that demands reflection, because this is where you decide on the structuring principles according to which the material is to be organized. In this case – and maybe it will always turn out to be like that – there are two or actually three conclusive factors that determine the structure the material itself and the notion of inquiries from research workers (What will researchers be asking for? Does the material itself indicate an obvious principle according to organization and grouping?). The third, overridingly important principle, is *simplicity*!

The Nordisk Film Collection has been organized into 17 main categories:

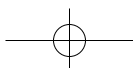
- | | |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| I. The company in general | X. Sound film production |
| II. Correspondence | XI. Post-production/technical matters |
| III. Accounts | XII. Distribution |
| IV. Staff affairs | XIII. The German occupation |
| V. Kinografen | XIV. Scrapbooks |
| VI. Paladsteatret | XV. Miscellaneous |
| VII. Kino-Palæet | XVI. Photos |
| VIII. Script affairs | XVII. Unrealised scripts |
| IX. Silent film production | |

Most of these categories speak for themselves, but some of them need further explanation:

"The company in general" (I) covers everything concerning the company itself and is mainly documents deriving from the head office or the superior administration of the company, e.g. insurances, lawsuits, the Companies Act, general meetings, board meetings, documents concerning the buildings and important contracts with foreign companies. Categories II, III and IV can actually be seen as subdivisions to "The company in general". "Script affairs" (VIII) contains everything concerning scripts (but not the scripts themselves), e.g. rejection letters to scriptwriters, reports from script meetings and several lists of scripts bought by the company. "The German occupation" (XIII) covers documents concerning the German occupation of Denmark during World War II. And finally the category "Miscellaneous" (XV) is material not directly related to Nordisk Films Kompagni, e.g. books, theatre programmes, a scientific report and articles and documents concerning other companies.

On the basis of these 17 categories, I was able to proceed to the third phase of the process, which was also the most time-consuming, namely going through the whole collection once again, but this time very thoroughly. The material was now re-arranged physically - or 'filed' - according to the categories. Every single document was numbered and registered in a database (explanation follows). A lot of old covers were replaced by new ones made of acid-free paper and hundreds of rusty paper clips were removed. The rough catalogue was adjusted according to the numbering, and minor errors were discovered and corrected.

The result of this process is a printed final catalogue. The purpose of this catalogue is to give the researcher an overview of the material in the collection, as every entity, i.e. book, folder or file, is described in a few words, has a date connected to it and can be located by a reference or item number.



THE DATABASE

The database contains detailed information on every document. We designed a database for this specific purpose, and the data have since been transferred from this database to Aleph, our central library database system. To every record in the database a number of subject entries are attached: **personal name**, **corporate name**, **film title**, **country**, **date**, **document type** (e.g. contract, book, letter, diary, receipt, order book) and **controlled subject headings** (e.g. board meetings, censor-ship, film museum, directors, war propaganda, script contest, music, Academy Award nomination, raw film, tax affairs – just to mention a few).

Furthermore the following information on every document has been typed in: **category number** (I, II, III, IV... according to the 17 categories), **item number** and eventually a **subordinated number** (if there are several documents in a folder), **language** used in the document, **pagination**, a description of the **physical condition** and a description of **content**.

The following is a print from the web version of the database. This is the information on a scrapbook from 1931:

Opstilling	NF XIV,13:
Titel/Beskrivelse	[Bauders scrapbøger - nr. 13/28: børs-stof, "Præsten i Vejby", "Hotel Paradis", reklamefilm, "Kirke og Orgel", tonefilm og Det kgl. Teater, interview med Asta Nielsen, nyt dansk tonefilms-selskab, Fy & Bi som tonefilm, Sophus Madsen i betalings-standsning, "Skal vi vædde en Million", interview med Schnéevoigt, dansk-norsk samarbejde, Wilhelm Stæhr død m.m.]
Publ./Datering	1931.
Fys.beskr.	160 sider
Note, fysisk stand	Vinrød udklipsbog, nr. 13/28 (fortsætter nr. 12).
Emne, person	Stæhr, Wilhelm
Emne, person	Nielsen, Asta
Emne, person	Schnéevoigt, George
Emne, person	Bauder, Carl (senior)
Emne, person	Madsen, Sophus
Emne, korp.	Bofa (Struer)
Emne, korp.	Det Kongelige Teater
Emne, korp.	Nordisk Films Kompagni
Emne, korp.	Palladium
Ukontr. emneord	børs-stof
Ukontr. emneord	reklamefilm
Ukontr. emneord	teater-anliggender
Emneord, sted	Norge
Emne, titel	Præsten i Vejby (NFneg 126)
Emne, titel	Hotel Paradis (NFneg 132)
Emne, titel	Kirke og Orgel (NFneg 148)
Emne, titel	Skal vi vædde en Million (NFneg 158)
Emne, periode	19311008-19311112
Klassifikation	NF XIV Scrapbøger

The Nordisk Film Collection is unique both in size and content. It provides us with documentation for a company that played an important part in film history internationally and most certainly in a domestic perspective. But even more than that, it represents a period of cultural history, Danish history, technological advances and the history of a specific trade. An entry point to this information is now available to everyone with internet access: www.bibliorama.dfi.dk (select "database Nordisk"). The material itself is kept in closed stacks, but our Carl Th. Dreyer Study Centre at the Danish Film Institute is open to researchers.

Examples of search results in the database:

Benjamin Christensen:	27 hits
Carl Bauder:	107 hits
Carl Th. Dreyer:	17 hits
Paul Fejos:	24 hits
Gerhard Hauptmann:	2 hits
Bodil Ipsen:	21 hits
George Schnéevoigt:	29 hits
Marguerite Viby:	13 hits
Gene Kelly:	1 hit
Continentalfilm, Stockholm:	7 hits
J. Dardenne & Co., Bruxelles:	8 hits
Oliver-Film, Berlin:	12 hits
Warner Bros.:	9 hits
Oscar nomination:	(29 documents) 1 hit
Subtitling:	14 hits
Icebear trademark:	30 hits
The liquidation (1927-28):	83 hits
The costume dept.:	11 hits
Belgium:	20 hits
Argentina:	7 hits
England:	52 hits
France:	34 hits
Norway:	62 hits
Hungary:	25 hits
Venezuela:	3 hits
Atlantis (film title):	16 hits
David Copperfield (filmtitle):	21 hits
Qivitoq (filmtitle):	14 hits

On the opposite page: The studios in Valby around 1918. The building in the foreground has been copied to make the company look even bigger than it actually was. Photo: Nordisk/DFI.

