

THE THEATRES OF WAR

■ *Cultures of Spectacle in German-occupied Belgium, 1914-1918 & 1940-1945*

- *Leen Engelen & Roel Vande Winkel* -

War zones are often referred to as a 'theatres of war', large-scale military conflicts described as 'spectacles of war'. This seems to hold the promise of a spectacle taking place. This experience has been the subject of ample historic research as well as fictional representations in novels, films, plays... In this introductory article (and by extension in this special issue) we ask a different question: what happened to theatres and spectacles during wars? How were theatrical performances, concerts, screenings, and illustrated lectures shaped by the war and how did the war affect their audiences? On cultural stages actors, musicians, dancers, and lecturers met; films were screened, plays and concerts performed. We refer to 'cultures of spectacle', an umbrella term we will use for live performances and screenings that took place in front of an audience that physically gathered in one space in order to attend a cultural event. In this article, we do not only argue for comparative research between different types of spectacle but also between different time periods. More concretely we propose to look at cultures of spectacle during the two German occupations of Belgium during both the First World War (1914-1918) and the Second World War (1940-1944).

In the early nineteenth century, following the Napoleonic Wars, Carl Von Clausewitz defined the *Kriegstheater* or theatre of war as a particular space over which war prevailed, whose boundaries were protected or at least delineated¹. His *Kriegstheater* was a translation of the much older Latin term *theatrum belli*, already used in the seventeenth century. Modern wars, such as the First and Second World War with their air bombardments and large-scale destruction have shown that war is indeed a spectacle unfolding, increasingly so on a global stage. Drawing on this metaphor and terminology, this French postcard from 1918 shows how ordinary soldiers (referred to as *les poilus*, literally 'the hairy ones', at the time a term of endearment for French infantrymen) take centre stage and play the lead role, destroying the enemy with a bayonet against the backdrop of a destroyed and burning city.

Côté cour, in the *coulisses* the yet unexperienced 'class of 1918' is shyly waiting for its turn to go onstage. *Les embusqués* (literally 'the ambushed', a term used in the First World War to refer to those in the military that keep or are kept away from the actual fighting), with their spick and span uniforms, polished high boots and cloth caps are positioned as extras looking on from a distance. *Côté jardin*, the auxiliary forces are putting out fires and rescuing big heavy books, such as from the university library of Louvain. The spectacle is watched and applauded by those sitting safely on the *parterre* and the balconies: civilians, war profiteers, and neutrals in their evening gowns and velvet seats. Behind the scenes – out of the audience's view – royals, political leaders, diplomats, industrialists, and politicians are no doubt pulling the strings. With biting irony, including the new years' wishes for 1918 glued on the proscenium, the war is pre-

sented as a spectacle applauded by those who paid for this performance. Printed in Paris, the postcard circulated in France in what was to be the final year of the war. This theatre was however seldom seen by the audiences confined to their cities and homes in occupied territories, such as Belgium and the North of France. Here, audiences were watching a play with the theatre curtains closed. Deprived from international news media and cut-off from family and friends at or behind the front they watched a different spectacle: the logistics and practicalities of a quickly unfolding occupation with the German officers as *jeunes premiers*. Nevertheless, the war was also played out on the proscenium stages of Brussels, Louvain, Liège, and Antwerp. While the show had to go on, it went on under different circumstances, determined by occupation policies, ideological struggles, political scuffles, and economic restrictions.

While the military theatres of war have been the object of study of historians of the First as well as the Second World War for several decades, interest in the cultural *stages* of war in Belgium is of much more recent date. Regarding the First World War, the work of Sophie De Schaepdrijver, most notably her book *De Grootte Oorlog. Het koninkrijk België tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog*², set a whole new field in motion. Next to a synthesis of the military history of the war, De Schaepdrijver connected a thorough study of life under occupation with a keen interest in and an exploration of art, entertainment, and culture in occupied Belgium. Her work benefited from pioneering work on cultural life during occupation by researchers such as Guido Convents and André Capiteyn and a number of war chronicles such as *Cinquante mois d'occupation allemande* (Gille, Ooms and Delandsheere, 1919) and the journalistic work by Karel Van de Woestijne³.

1. CARL VON CLAUSEWITZ, *On war*, Harmondsworth, 1968.

2. SOPHIE DE SCHAEPDRIJVER, *De Grootte Oorlog. Het koninkrijk België tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Antwerpen, 1997.

3. GUIDO CONVENTS, "Cinema and German Politics in Occupied Belgium", in *Film and the First World War*, Amsterdam, 1995, p. 171-178; Id., "Bioscopen in het Leuvense stadsbeeld 1910-1914; De Eerste Wereldoorlog en het bioscoopwezen in Leuven 1914-1918", in *Film en fiets rond 1900: Moderne uitvindingen in de Leuvense samenleving* (Arca Lovaniensis artes atque historiae reserans documenta), Leuven, 1981, 333-409; ANDRÉ CAPITEYN, "Niet alleen ellende. Het cultuur- en ontspanningsleven", in *Gent en de eerste wereldoorlog: het stadsleven in de jaren 1914-1918*, Gent: 1991, p. 89-92; KAREL VAN DE WOESTIJNE, *Verzameld werk. Deel 8. Het dagelijksch brood II. Dagboeken en brieven over den oorlog 1914-1918*, Bussum, 1950; LOUIS GILLE, ALPHONSE OOMS and PAUL DELANDSHEERE, *Cinquante mois d'occupation allemande*. Tome III: 1917, Bruxelles, 1919.



French satirical postcard about the 'theatre' of war, April 1917, A.H. Katz, Rueil. Source : private collection Leen Engelen.



Postcard of German soldiers quartered inside an unidentified Belgian cinema during the First World War. The occupation obviously put an end to the venue operating as a cinema hall. Source : private collection Leen Engelen.

Over the years, art historians have also paid attention to artists and the work they produced during the war. This research is mostly devoted to prolific artists working in the established art world, firmly keeping up the divide between “high” and “popular” arts and art and entertainment⁴. Cultural history of the war, a field that emerged internationally in the mid-1990s, first became interested in representations of war in areas as diverse as literature, cinema, theatre, the (penny) press, children’s books... The work of Laurence van Ypersele, Xavier Rousseaux, Axel Tixhon et Emmanuel Debruyne on *cultures de guerre* and ‘imaginaries of war’ was ground-breaking in this respect and sparked a further interest in studying military occupations from below⁵. The experiences of occupation and all aspects of daily life now became an important strand of new research⁶. In the meanwhile, this interest in culture has permeated more general studies as well. The increased availability of hitherto undiscovered or difficultly accessible sources has given this research a real impetus: personal diaries resurfaced, archives were increasingly digitised, and newspapers, journals, and films were aggregated and made available

online⁷. Several monographs devoted to specific cities or areas published on occasion of the centenary have been influenced by this renewed interest in the daily cultural life of those living under occupation⁸. While many of these studies engaged with how the occupier dealt with culture, art, and entertainment on a local or medium specific level, a thorough study of the overall policy of the occupying regime vis-à-vis culture and entertainment remains to be published⁹.

Regarding the Second World War there is also a considerable amount of published research about culture in occupied Belgium. Many (but not all) of these studies focus on what is traditionally referred to as “high arts”: literature, sculptures, painting...¹⁰. Such studies regularly refer to the guiding role of the German Military Propaganda Department Belgium (*Propaganda-Abteilung Belgien*, acronym PAB), which was divided into several cells or groups that focused on specific media and/or cultural activities. However, there is hardly any research which considers the PAB itself as a central research matter and/or which analyses the over-arching policy of the PAB¹¹. The only attempt

4. INGA ROSSI-SCHRIMPF and LAURA KOLLWELTER, eds., *14-19 Rupture or Continuity. Belgian art around World War I*, Leuven, 2018.

5. LAURENCE VAN YPERSELE, *Imaginaires de guerres. L'histoire entre mythe et réalité. Actes du colloque, Louvain-la-Neuve, 3-5 mai 2001*, Louvain-la-Neuve, 2003; LAURENCE VAN YPERSELE and EMMANUEL DEBRUYNE, eds., *De la guerre de l'ombre aux ombres de la guerre*, Bruxelles, 2004; BÉNÉDICTE ROCHET and AXEL TIXHON, *La petite Belgique dans la Grande guerre: une icône, des images*, Namur, 2012; AXEL TIXHON and MARK DEREZ, *Martelaarssteden, België, augustus-september 1914: Visé, Aarschot, Andenne, Tamines, Dinant, Leuven, Dendermonde*, Namen, 2014.

6. For an extensive overview of research on Belgium and the First World War, see: PIERRE-ALAIN TALLIER and SOPHIE ONGHENA, *Honderd jaar-en meer-geschiedschrijving over de Eerste Wereldoorlog in België*, 2 vols., Brussel, 2020.

7. <https://www-belgicapress-be> (KBR); www.nieuwsvandegrooteoorlog.be (VIAA); www.belgianwarpress.be (CEGESOMA); <http://project.efg1914.eu/> (Cinematek and other European film archives).

8. BRUNO BENVINDO and CHANTAL KESTELOOT, *1914-1918. Bruxelles, ville occupée*, Bruxelles, 2016; PIERRE-ALAIN TALLIER and SOPHIE ONGHENA, *Honderd jaar – en meer – geschiedschrijving over de Eerste Wereldoorlog in België*. Vol. 2, Brussel, 2020, p. 837-949.

9. Significant contributions were made by, among others, Ulrich Tiedau and Hubert Roland: ULRICH TIEDAU, “De Duitse cultuurpolitiek in België tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog”, in *Bijdragen tot de eigentijdse geschiedenis*, no. 11, 2003, p. 21-45; ERNST LEONARDY and HUBERT ROLAND, *Deutsch-belgische Beziehungen im kulturellen und literarischen Bereich 1890-1940/ Les relations culturelles et littéraires belgo-allemandes 1890-1940*, Frankfurt am Main, 1999.

10. VIRGINIE DEVILLEZ, *Kunst aan de orde: kunst en politiek in België 1918-1945*, Gent, 2003; MARNIX BEYEN, “Wetenschap, politiek, nationaal-socialisme: de cultuurpolitiek van het Duits militair bezettingsbestuur in België, 1940-1944”, in *Bijdragen tot de Eigentijdse Geschiedenis-Cahiers d'Histoire du Temps Présent*, no. 11, 2003, p. 47-70; Id., *Oorlog en verleden: nationale geschiedenis in België en Nederland, 1938-1947*, Amsterdam, 2002; DIRK DE GEEST, EVELINE VANFRAUSSEN and MARNIX BEYEN, *Collaboratie of cultuur? Een Vlaams tijdschrift in bezettingstijd (1941-1944)*, Antwerpen, 1997; LUKAS DE VOS, YVES T'SJOEN, and LUDO STYNEN, eds., *Verbrande schrijvers. ‘Culturele’ collaboratie in Vlaanderen 1933-1953*, Gent, 2009; BURKHARD DIETZ, HELMUT GABEL and ULRICH TIEDAU, eds., *Griff nach dem Westen. Die ‘Westforschung’ der völkisch-nationalen Wissenschaften zum nordwesteuropäischen Raum (1919-1960)*, 2 vols., Münster, 2003; WILLEM VANDEN EYNDE, « La vie musicale: une nature morte », in *1940-1945. La vie quotidienne en Belgique, Catalogue de l'exposition CGER, 21 décembre 1984-3 mars 1985, Bruxelles*, Bruxelles, 1984, p. 186-201.

11. This subject is currently being tackled by doctoral researcher Louis Fortemps, who is also contributing to this issue.



German soldiers walking past cinema Colisée in Lessines during the Second World War. The cinema did not operate during the German occupation. Source : private collection Roel Vande Winkel.



Postcard of the theatre in the occupied military camp Prince Baudouin in Brussels. The theatre hosted film screenings as well as performances for German military during the First World War. (postcard Ern. Thill, Bruxelles) Source : private collection Leen Engelen.

so far to make a substantial (book-length) analysis of the cultural policy of the occupation regime was made by Herman Van De Vijver (as a member of the research team that collaborated on Maurice De Wilde's television series)¹². It deserves praise for its pioneering role and remains an important publication, but it is largely based on wartime magazines and newspapers and leaves much ground unbroken.

The specific focus on cultures of spectacle presented in this special issue is of more recent date. In 2016, Roel Vande Winkel and Leen Engelen took the initiative to bring together scholars working on different types of spectacle in Belgium in the era before the introduction of television. They argued there was much to gain from interdisciplinary research and from looking beyond the borders of specific types of spectacle¹³. Before (visual) performances or spectacles moved into the living room with the advent of television in the early 1950s, they were the prerogative of public spaces such as cinemas, theatres, concert halls, circuses, music-halls, variety theatres, and multi-functional spaces such as village halls, fairs, or squares. Despite variations in their set-up, what unites these spaces is that they hosted attractions, or spectacles that were either performed live or projected in front of a live audience. Individual members of these audiences usually belonged to different audience groups as well: people not only went to the theatre, but also the circus or to a music performance. Moreover, very often different forms of spectacle were consumed in the same spaces and/or were even part of the same show.

Despite their commonalities, these different forms of spectacle are mostly studied separately, in well-defined academic disciplines (e.g., film-, dance-, performance-, and theatre studies, cultural history, heritage studies, music history...).

Breaking down these disciplinary boundaries, the cross-sections between film, theatre, lantern lectures, music-hall, circus, dance... became the focus of this group, funded by the Flemish Research Council (FWO) as a scientific research community (WOG, 2016-2020). One of the possible avenues for research on a variety of spectacles is to focus on short periods of time and/or specific geo-political circumstances. This approach makes it possible to examine a cross section of spectacles that define a society at a specific point in time and from there on allows for comparative research. As such, the "cultures of spectacle" approach proved valuable for research on two relatively short, distinct but to some extent comparable periods in Belgian history: the military occupations of the First and the Second World War. This resulted in the workshop "Cultures of Spectacle in German-occupied Belgium. Parallels and Differences between the First and the Second World War", organised at, and in collaboration with, CEGESOMA on 12 - 13 March 2020. The workshop and this special issue will hopefully give an impulse to further research on cultures of spectacle in two key periods of Belgian history.

We believe the "cultures of spectacle" approach is indeed valuable for the study of cultural life under military occupation. First, judging from the many references to entertainment life in war diaries and chronicles, spectacle is indeed a key aspect of life under occupation. In the First as well as the Second World War, entertainment life flourished. The organisation and regulation of culture and entertainment on the one hand and its consumption on the other hand are both defining traits of military occupation¹⁴. Interestingly, the occupation regimes had to reconcile different policies towards the local population. On the one hand, cultural life had to be restarted, to make it clear to the population that the occupier had the best

12. HERMAN VAN DE VIJVER, *België in de Tweede Wereldoorlog. Het cultureel leven tijdens de bezetting*, Kapellen, 1990.

13. LEEN ENGELEN, ROEL VANDE WINKEL, and LIES VAN DE VIJVER, eds., *Tijdschrift voor Mediastudies: Spektakelcultuur in de Lage Landen*, vol. 20, 2017.

14. SOPHIE DE SCHAEPRDRIJVER, "Occupation, Propaganda and the Idea of Belgium", in *European Culture in the Great War*, Cambridge, 1999, p. 267-294; MARTIN CONWAY and PETER ROMIJN, eds., *The War on Legitimacy in Politics and Culture 1936-1946*, Oxford, 2008.

intentions and that it was in everyone's best interest to adapt to the "new normal" or the "New Order" and resume their daily activities. On the other hand, public life could not really be resurrected in its pre-war form. There were various reasons for this. First, the occupying forces had an ideological agenda that affected daily life (including cultural activities) on various levels. For instance, German attempts to increase the influence of German(ic) culture at the expense of Francophone and English-language culture did have a visible impact and created a clear caesura between cultural life before and after the invasion. Second, the ongoing war introduced all kinds of constraints (curfew, limitation of electricity, limited import...) that also affected public life.

Bringing together piecemeal research and detailed studies on a variety of spectacles is a first step towards a better understanding of both the (cultural) policies of the occupier and the reactions towards these policies by the different parties involved. This foregrounds relevant questions regarding the cultural policies and practices of the German occupier overarching different entertainment cultures, venues, institutions, and geographic localities.

Second, bringing together research on both occupations will stimulate further comparative research. In general, comparative research on both wars in Belgium is still relatively scarce¹⁵. Although we explicitly invited comparative studies, few scholars have put this into practice. The work of Hedwige Schilders-Baeck and Erik Baeck on opera and symphonic concerts in Antwerp respectively is a noteworthy exception in this volume. Both specialists on these particular cultural scenes in Antwerp, they bring to the fore major differences, (dis)continuities and similarities between both occupations.

Together, the research presented in this volume draws a picture of life under occupation as well as

of different and subsequent occupation policies. It demonstrates how a focus on culture and spectacle overcomes the traditional dichotomy between occupied and occupier. Culture and spectacle are presented as fields of negotiation. The contributions brought together here highlight how politics and ideologies play out in the cultural field and how in entertainment propaganda and amusement come together beyond *Flamenpolitik* and collaboration. Entertainment and culture are, to a more or lesser extent, spaces where different parties clash and reconcile; where audiences are disciplined and seek escape; where economic benefits are constantly negotiated with conflicting political concerns. In short, this cross section of staged entertainment under occupation becomes a "theatre of war" which is, in itself, a stage where tragedies, dramas and comedies succeed each other.

A hitherto unexplored field is mapped by three contributions on lantern projections and lectures during the First World War. De Zwaan, Jonckheere and Buelens-Terryn demonstrate how public lecture evenings on cultural and political themes and lecture circuits contributed to war propaganda, *Flamenpolitik* and pillarization. They focus on the production and organization of lantern lectures by different groups on the political spectrum as well as on their reception. Together they bring to the fore the importance of this often-overlooked mass medium and – for the first time – demonstrate its relevance in the context of the German occupation in 1914-1918. By the end of the 1930s, the lantern as a medium had well passed the peak of its popularity and although no extensive research has been conducted on this era, it is likely that, in stark contrast to the First World War, its importance in the Second World War was marginal.

Of all types of spectacle, cinema received the most scholarly attention. Also in this special issue, cinema is well represented. Guido Convents, a pioneer in this field, brings together twenty years of research in his article on film

15. JAMES E. CONNOLLY, EMMANUEL DEBRUYNE, ELISE JULIEN and MATTHIAS MEIRLAEN, eds., *En territoire ennemi: expériences d'occupation, transferts, héritages (1914-1949)*, Villeneuve d'Ascq, 2018.



The audience of a performance, by the Opera of Essen (Germany), at the Monnaie Théâtre in Brussels on 2 July 1942. Source : CEGESOMA Photo n° 11965.

distribution and exhibition in occupied Belgium during the First World War. In his footsteps, Leen Engelen broadens the terrain by questioning the nature of the mixed film and variety programs customary during the war and connecting this type of programming to wartime realities such as import restrictions, travel restrictions, and unemployment in the entertainment sector. In his contribution on *Bezette Stad (Occupied City)*, literary scholar Erik Spinoy looks at Paul Van Ostaijen as a privileged member of the audience of the spectacles described by Engelen. He presents Van Ostaijen as an avid movie-goer and first-hand witness of entertainment culture during the war. This leads to an original rereading of Van Ostaijen's seminal work *Bezette Stad*, locating the manuscript firmly in the wartime entertainment culture in Antwerp.

In their contribution, Louis Fortemps and Roel Vande Winkel analyse the German policy towards cultures of spectacle (film screenings, musical and theatrical performances) in German-occupied Belgium (1940-1944). They analyse this from a bird's eye point of view, relying heavily on internal documents from the German propaganda services, but also incorporate the results of case studies written by several authors about film/theatre/music in a specific occupied city or region. The authors also draw some parallels with German policy of the First World War as described in the article of most notably Guido Convents. The

article offers not only an introductory overview but also marks various terra incognita and alleys for further research. Demonstrating the need for more comparative research, between both world wars (occupation regimes) as well as between various cultures of spectacle (in the same war as well as between both wars), this article fits perfectly into the scope of this them issue.

Musical culture during the (First and) Second World War is explored by the aforementioned contributions by musicologist Hedwige Baeck-Schilders and Erik Baeck on opera and symphonic orchestras. Their work is complemented by the research of Erik Derom on the Great Symphonic Orchestra of Belgian Radio, offering an intriguing contribution to the history of Belgian radio as well as to the history of classical concerts under occupation. What makes Derom's contribution extra interesting is his comparison between radio (musical programming) aimed at Dutch and French-language audiences. Jointly, Derom, Baeck and Schilders-Baeck bring together invaluable data on concert life under occupation.

In a concluding article, historian Sophie De Schaepdrijver muses on the relation between revolution/war and spectacle, already a founding myth of the Belgian nation state. As an expert on military occupation and based on the contributions brought together in this issue, she identifies some new and promising avenues for research.

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