

## “YOU’VE SEEN A LOT OF MOVIES”

■ *Rereading Paul van Ostaïjen’s Occupied City in Light of the Contemporary Cinema Culture in Belgium*

- Erik Spinoy -

*Occupied City*, a famous poetry volume (*Bezette Stad*, 1921), by Antwerp avant-garde poet Paul van Ostaïjen (1896-1928), offers the reader a subjective and highly partisan account of life in Antwerp on the eve of and during the Great War. It is traditionally considered to be one of the most prominent samples of avant-garde poetry in Dutch, Van Ostaïjen ranks high in the canon of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Flemish-Dutch literature, and *Occupied City* is among the most extensively commented texts in modern Dutch poetry. One could therefore be inclined to think that revisiting it is unlikely to yield a wealth of new insights. This paper refutes this idea by making a case for analysing the text as a ‘dialogic’ response to its historical context, while taking into account recent insights that have advanced in various fields of historical study. One of these fields is the history of entertainment.

## I. Introduction

So far, Van Ostaijen's work has mostly been read against the backdrop of the traditionally dominant paradigms in literary studies, i.e., comparative literature (and most notably avant-garde studies) and 20<sup>th</sup>-century autonomist tendencies in literary analysis, mainly inspired by European (post-) structuralism and American New Criticism. This resulted in readings focusing for the most part on influences exerted on Van Ostaijen's production by avant-garde movements and by authors operating in their circles, on the formal aspects of his texts, and on the relation of these with Van Ostaijen's poetological views<sup>1</sup>. One notable exception is *Paul van Ostaijen. Een documentatie* (1971), in which Gerrit Borgers assembled a treasure trove of material concerning Van Ostaijen's short life and the historical context in which he functioned, including all the correspondence that was available at the time. This work is still a milestone, and no discussion of Van Ostaijen can ignore it, but it could by now of course do with a thorough update, most notably due to the fact that a great deal of new textual material (especially correspondence) has become available since 1971. This, combined with the fruits of recent Van Ostaijen research and the expanding body of historiography concerning the wider political and cultural context in which he lived, allows for important factual corrections to be made to Borgers's account.

This general image also applies to most readings of *Occupied City*. As recently as 2009, Dutch scholar Hans van Stralen typically felt compelled to advance that his colleague Jef Bogman's con-

ception of the text as "first and foremost a linguistic reality" was "a vision I can fully adhere to, as Van Ostaijen held that linguistic signs possess an *autonomous meaning*, which does *not necessarily* have to entertain a *direct relationship with reality*"<sup>2</sup>. (my italics) The irony is that Bogman's work on *Occupied City* – although tributary to late structuralism and post-structuralism – can be considered to be one of the first attempts to part from hard autonomism and to recontextualize *Occupied City*. However, and in accordance with the predominant discourse in literary studies at the time, Bogman conceived of this context as made up of intertexts rather than of historical, social, or cultural facts and events, a view that was programmatically expressed in the title of his PhD thesis: *De stad als tekst. Over de compositie van Paul van Ostaijens Bezette Stad (The City as a Text. On the Composition of Paul Van Ostaijen's Occupied City, 1991)*. Nevertheless, Bogman's study does contain references to facts and events that go beyond mere intertextuality. It can therefore be considered to prepare a 'historical turn' in the study of Van Ostaijen's life and work in general and of *Occupied City* in particular. This turn can be seen to manifest itself in, among others, publications on Van Ostaijen by Marc Reynebeau, Geert Buelens and, more recently, in the work of Matthijs de Ridder, who is presently working on a new biography of the author<sup>3</sup>.

This evolution can only be welcomed. Van Ostaijen was profoundly engaged in the political and cultural reality of his time and in no way refrained from (often passionately) commenting on it in both his critical and in his creative work. Ignoring

1. See in this respect a.o. the influential studies by PAUL HADERMANN: *De kringen naar binnen. De dichtelijke wereld van Paul van Ostaijen*, Antwerpen, 1965; and Id., *Het vuur in de verte. Paul van Ostaijens kunstopvattingen in het licht van de Europese avant-garde*, Antwerpen, 1970; J.J. OVERSTEEGEN, "Paul van Ostaijen", in Id., *Vorm of vent. Opvattingen over de aard van het literaire werk in de Nederlandse kritiek tussen de twee wereldoorlogen*, Amsterdam, 1969, p. 155-184; ANNE MARIE MUSSCHOOT, "Het modernisme van Van Ostaijen in het licht van de literatuurwetenschap", in *Bzzlletin*, n° 66, 1979 (7), p. 153-159. The 'formalist' view of Van Ostaijen's work since *Occupied City* persists in José Boyens's 1995 study on the genesis of the book, see *De genesis van Bezette Stad. Ik spreek met de mannen en regel alles wel*, Antwerpen, 1995, p. 39-40.

2. HANS VAN STRALEN, "'Vreemde woorden dansen op de plakborden'. Over *Bezette Stad* van Paul van Ostaijen", in *De Uil van Minerva*, no. 2-3, 2007-2009 (22), p. 119.

3. See in this respect: MARC REYNEBEAU, *Dichter in Berlijn. De ballingschap van Paul van Ostaijen (1918-1921)*, Groot-Bijgaarden, 1995; GEERT BUELENS, MATTHIJS DE RIDDER and JAN STUYCK (eds.), *De Trust der Vaderlandsliefde. Over literatuur en Vlaamse Beweging 1890-1940*, Antwerpen, 2005; and MATTHIJS DE RIDDER, *Staatsgevaarlijk! De activistische tegentraditie in de Vlaamse letteren 1912-1933*, Antwerpen, 2009.

the context of his writings would therefore amount to obscuring an important part of the meaning and pertinence it had for the author himself as well as for his contemporary readership. Because this context is now, roughly a century later, no longer ours, one must attempt to reconstruct it in the best possible way. It is therefore crucial for any commentator of Van Ostaijen's work to acquire a profound knowledge of the political, social, and cultural reality of the first decades of the twentieth century, and particularly the Belgian and Antwerp context at the time. This does of course not entail that Van Ostaijen's work would entertain direct, mimetic relations with its context. These relations are, rather, to be conceived of as complex, often ambivalent and mediated by the (not seldom incoherent and conflicting) discourses of the day, which themselves form an integral part of the context in which the work was created.

In the present article, I will focus on the importance of entertainment with a particular focus on cinema culture for *Occupied City*. As we will see, Van Ostaijen's representation of entertainment in the text is intricately (and often obliquely) entwined with the general historical context of the day and with the political and ideological discourses that dominated it.

## II. Occupied City and its Author

Before turning to our discussion of *Occupied City*, it is useful to keep a few crucial facts concerning Van Ostaijen in mind. Coming from a petty bourgeois background (he was the youngest son of a plumber who had done very well for himself), he grew up in the booming port city of Antwerp, which was at the time dominated by a French-speaking (mainly) liberal bourgeois elite. He was barely eighteen at the outbreak of war in August 1914, and therefore escaped being drafted. As opposed to other young men, he would not leave the occupied city during the war to join the Belgian army fighting at

the Western front. He did, in fact, very much the opposite. Already before the war, Van Ostaijen was involved in Flemish-nationalist networks, part of which would during the occupation commit to the case of activism, a faction of Flemish nationalism that succumbed to the siren call of German *Flamenpolitik*, collaborated with the German occupier and, in doing so, became increasingly radical and anti-Belgian. Activism was a tiny but vocal minority, abhorred by an overwhelming majority of the population in occupied Belgium. It did, however, succeed in mobilizing an avant-garde of ambitious and promising young intellectuals, mostly from petty bourgeois backgrounds. Many of them would later play an important part in Flemish political and cultural life.

Van Ostaijen, too, would become a radical activist. He published poems, articles, and essays in various activist outlets (published with German authorization and support) and made his debut as a literary author at a time when publishing literature was considered to be an unpatriotic act<sup>4</sup>. He also took part in various activist demonstrations and rallies. At the end of the war, he even consented to becoming an officer in a planned, but never realized Flemish *gendarmérie*. Because of his high-profile collaboration, Van Ostaijen considered it wise to leave the country in the last weeks preceding the armistice. He was no exception in this: many activists fled the country, mostly to Germany and the Netherlands, to escape popular rage and official prosecution. Van Ostaijen ended up in Berlin, where he would stay until May 1921. The German capital was at the time in political turmoil, but also the European centre of avant-garde art, with the continuation of expressionism and the onslaught of Dadaism, and therefore provided a creatively stimulating environment. It is here that Van Ostaijen, in the summer of 1920, started working on *Occupied City*. The book would be published in Antwerp in early April 1921.

*Occupied City* opens with the poem "Dedication to Mr Soandso", an extensive evocation of life in

4. See SOPHIE DE SCHAEPPDRIJVER, "Occupation, Propaganda and the Idea of Belgium", in AVIEL ROSHWALD and RICHARD STITES (eds.), *European Culture in the Great War. The Arts, Entertainment and Propaganda, 1914-1918*, p. 274.



The cover of *Bezette Stad*, designed by sculptor Oscar Jespers (1887 - 1970). Source: Collection City of Antwerp, Letterenhuis.

Antwerp on the eve of the Great War. It continues with a number of poems relating the German conquest of Belgium and its direct aftermath, the most notable characteristic of which is the general mood of abjection in the city. The second half of the book contains several poems in which Van Ostaijen suggests – among others in a series entitled “Music-Hall” and in a tribute to Danish actress Asta Nielsen – that general morale is boosted by a resurgence of entertainment life. Logically, *Occupied City* concludes with “The Withdrawal” an elaborate poem on the retreat of the German army and the liberation of Belgium.

Van Stralen is of course right in claiming that *Occupied City* is not a directly mimetic text. It is indeed a highly subjective account of the Great War period in Antwerp. It renders the way Van Ostaijen experienced the war and does so, moreover, from a temporal and spatial distance. His story is therefore influenced by historical events and debates and by his own experiences and evolution in the period between the armistice and the completion of the book.

Van Ostaijen's political views are certainly expressed in *Occupied City*, but often in an oblique way, recognizable only to a readership familiar with the political context of the time. A good example of this is the unidentified appeal to an equally unidentified audience in the final poem, i.e. in the evocation of the period of liberation: “allons travailler”<sup>5</sup>. The words are most probably taken from a speech given by Belgian socialist key figure Emile Vandervelde (1866-1938) in the first days after the war<sup>6</sup>. They are an exhortation to rebuild the country, and the suggestion emanating from Van Ostaijen's text is that he views it in a less than sympathetic light. There are a variety of elements that can help

to explain this attitude. Firstly, the political aspiration of the radical avant-gardist Van Ostaijen was not a reconstruction of society, but rather a tabula rasa followed by a completely new beginning. Secondly, post-war sympathizers of the radical left such as Van Ostaijen considered European socialism to be largely co-responsible for the war. Furthermore, Vandervelde was during the war a member of the Belgian government in exile, which was detested by the activists. Finally, the socialist politician would go on to become minister of justice after the war, which was another reason for former activists to take a negative view of him, as he formed an integral part of a system that was unwilling to grant complete amnesty to activists punished by Belgian justice in the wake of the war<sup>7</sup>. It is, by the way, not unimportant that the appeal is formulated in French, which is thus subtly shown to reassert itself as the language of the Belgian ruling classes, with which socialism had by now supposedly compromised itself.

Even more prominent in *Occupied City* than politics, however, is modern entertainment. It has been pointed out on numerous occasions that the book abounds with references to cinema, popular music, fashionable dance styles (tango, ragtime), variety (the music-hall), and other forms of mass culture. Surprisingly little has been done, however, to identify these references and to reflect on the ways Van Ostaijen puts them to use in his text. In the 1970s and 1980s, amateur researcher Robert Snoeck published a series of annotations aiming to elucidate a wide variety of references that had become obscure, but his effort (undertaken in pre-internet times) is marred by imprecisions and the fact that several of his claims are impossible to verify<sup>8</sup>. Apart from Snoeck's publications, the most interesting contribution in this regard is Bog-

5. PAUL VAN OSTAIJEN, *Verzameld werk. Poëzie II*, Amsterdam, 1979, p. 147. In the rest of the text, quotations from *Occupied City* will be taken from David Colmer's (unpaginated) 2016 English translation.

6. Vandervelde is quoted by Flemish writer Karel van de Woestijne as uttering these words in a Brussels ‘Maison du Peuple’ on 14 November 1918. See: KAREL VAN DE WOESTIJNE, *Verzameld journalistiek werk. Deel 9. Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant maart 1916-september 1919*, ed. Ada Deprez, Gent, 1992, p. 449.

7. See in this respect: ERIK SPINOY, “Allons travailler!” Paul van Ostaijen's aversie voor Emile Vandervelde”. In: *Zuurvrij* n° 40 (2021), p. 63-72.

8. ROBERT SNOECK, *Paul van Ostaijen en zijn Bezette Stad (literaire en zakelijke toelichtingen). Deel 1: De opdracht*, [Gent] 1975; Id., *Paul van Ostaijen en zijn Bezette Stad (literaire en zakelijke toelichtingen). Deel 2: de Bedreigde stad*, [Gent,] 1977; Id., “Commentaar”, in: *Heibel*, n° 3, 1983 (17), p. 52-75; Id., *Paul van Ostaijen en zijn Bezette Stad (literaire en zakelijke toelichtingen). Deel 3*, [Gent,] 1984.

man's aforementioned *De stad als tekst*. Snippets of additional information can be assembled by browsing through the vast Van Ostaijen literature.

My own research of the past few years has been driven to a great extent by the intention to identify the references to popular culture in the text more systematically, to contextualize these references by linking them with (facets of) the local and transnational entertainment culture of the time, and to formulate a convincing answer to the question as to how Van Ostaijen put these references to use. This article aims to offer some provisional results of my research, more specifically in the field of cinema. As it is materially impossible to discuss the role of cinema in *Occupied City* in detail within the scope of this article, I will limit myself here to a meticulous analysis of the opening page of the book. In the concluding pages, I will discuss the role of cinematic references in the remainder of the book in a more cursory way.

Before embarking on our analysis of the text, however, we should again remind the reader that *Occupied City* is a retrospective text: a distance of several years separates its writing and its historical setting. Van Ostaijen's views of popular culture in *Occupied City* are, therefore, not always identical to the ideas he entertained in this regard before and during the war. It should be kept in mind that the text summons his wartime views of and experiences with the popular entertainment available at the time, while at the same time critically reflecting on them.

### III. "Dedication to Mr Soandso": "you've seen a lot of movies"

Originally, the long opening poem of *Occupied City* was to be entitled "Dedication to Peter Bae-

yens". Baeyens (1897-1946) was a close friend of Van Ostaijen's. His father published the activist newspaper *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, to which Van Ostaijen was a regular contributor. In addition to this, Baeyens is said to have been Van Ostaijen's partner-in-crime on his forays through Antwerp's nightlife before and during the war. After Van Ostaijen's departure to Berlin, the two started an intense correspondence which would go on until 1920, when they seem to have had a falling-out which led to a definitive termination of their friendship. Van Ostaijen then decided to change the title of the poem into "Dedication to Mr Soandso". It remains interesting, however, to keep the biographical background of the poem in mind when rereading the text in light of its historical context.

The opening lines of the poem have since they were first published been quoted and discussed numerous times. Still, they have so far hardly been read against the backdrop of the history of entertainment in Belgium in the final years preceding the Great War. When Van Ostaijen proclaims:

Much shall be forgiven you  
for  
you have seen a lot of movies

we know them inside  
out

he initially refers to the simple fact that, at the beginning of the 20th century, it has become logistically possible to see "a lot of movies" in Belgium, especially in its major cities Brussels and Antwerp. As a matter of fact, pre-war Belgium could be considered a pioneer in the distribution and (especially) exhibition of films. On the eve of war, the country boasted over 600 cinemas, which was more per capita than any other European country<sup>9</sup>.

9. See KASPAR MAASE, *Grenzenloses Vergnügen. Der Aufstieg der Massenkultur 1850-1970*, Frankfurt am Main, 1997, p. 108; DANIEL BILTEREYST and LIESBET DEPAUW, "De kruistocht tegen de slechte cinema. Over de aanloop en de start van de Belgische filmkeuring (1912-1929)", in *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis* 1, 2005, p. 5; GUIDO CONVENTS, "Ontstaan en vroege ontwikkeling van het Vlaamse bioscoopwezen (1905/1908-1914)", in DANIEL BILTEREYST and PHILIPPE MEERS (eds.), *De verlichte stad. Een geschiedenis van bioscopen, filmvertoningen en filmcultuur in Vlaanderen*, p. 24; Id., "Van gefilmde actualiteiten tot bioscoopjournaal in België. De ontwikkeling van het nieuws op het witte doek (1896-1918)", in *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, no. 1-2, 2009 (39), p. 42; and LEEN ENGELEN, "België verdeeld. Filmdistributie in bezet België (1914-1918)", in *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis*, no. 1, 2016, p. 5.

U zal veel worden vergeven

want

gij hebt veel films gezien

wij kennen van buiten  
onze zak

fanTOMas

[ igomar met grote [ trop long

## HET STALEN GEVANG

macaronifilms { graven  
princessen  
apachen

en

de *prachtfilm* Chéri **B<sup>i</sup>B<sup>i</sup>**

*fata/itas*

"Dieppe o mon pays natal je t'ai quitté en forçat; vicomte je te revois"  
ofwel

"je croyais m'être mis dans la peau d'un honnête homme; ME voilà dans celle  
d'un assassin."

*The opening page of Bezette Stad.*

Antwerp's central role in the rapidly expanding exploitation of films in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Belgium was of course linked to it being a vibrant and cosmopolitan port city. It was, in this 'first era of globalization', economically booming, and its population had roughly quadrupled since 1830, the year in which Belgium gained independence. In addition to its native inhabitants, it hosted foreign and domestic immigrants that would temporarily or permanently settle in the city, emigrants on their way to the New World, sailors, merchants, tourists, and workers and consumers from its Belgian hinterland. All these groups had to be catered for (in 'estaminets' or 'cabarets', bars, cafés, restaurants, taverns, inns, hotels, boarding houses,...), and entertained (on temporary fairgrounds or in permanent dance halls, music-halls, *café-chantants*, waxworks, brothels,...)<sup>10</sup>.

In the early years of the 20th century, films became an increasingly important part of entertainment. Initially a travelling attraction on fairs, the new medium was soon added to the portfolio of cafés and, especially, music-halls. In 1907, Antwerp's first cinema opened its doors, soon to be followed by many others. Van Ostaijen was, at the time, eleven years old and could, even at that tender age, go and see any film he felt inclined to see, as entrance fees were low and age restrictions limiting access to movie-theatres were non-existent.

On the eve of the war, dozens of movie-theatres were in business in Antwerp, most of them in pre-existent buildings (e.g. cafés, theatres, and music-halls), but at least one of them already in purpose-built premises. The biggest of these cinemas were enormous (1500 seats and more). The most prestigious ones were located in the neighbourhood of the recently (in 1905) opened Central Station, but movie theatres were also found in the historical city centre and in working-class

districts. The distinction between cinemas on the one hand and music-halls and cafés on the other was, for that matter, often a blurred one<sup>11</sup>.

This rapid expansion would of course never have taken place if the audience had not followed suit. As we said, the cinema infrastructure at the time was able to seat large audiences. In some cases, however, this substantial capacity still proved insufficient. Newspapers at the time reported disturbances caused by eager cinemagoers and offered recommendations to readers interested in seeing the popular films of the moment.

This is the context in which Van Ostaijen and his friend Baeyens saw "a lot of movies". Their case seems to have been rather typical. On the eve of the war, both were in their late teens. Socially, they can be considered to belong to the aspirational lower middle classes. As we said, Van Ostaijen was the youngest son of a wealthy retired plumber, while Baeyens's father was a newspaper owner. A few months before the German invasion in August 1914, Van Ostaijen himself became a clerk at the municipal administration. These urban young men were not working class, but they certainly did not belong to Antwerp's traditional bourgeois elites either.

Baeyens and Van Ostaijen seem to have fit the profile of a cinemagoer of the period. As could be expected, the new form of entertainment was enthusiastically embraced by the younger generations; and although it had started to gain some bourgeois respectability in the final years preceding the war, cinema attendance was still – in Belgium as abroad – predominantly a matter of the working and lower middle classes. This is not to say that this audience was a homogeneous mass. It can be said that cinema, as other forms of mass entertainment, had a democratizing impact in that

10. See in this context EVELIEN JONCKHEERE, "In search of identities: 'Foreigners' in fin-de-siècle Belgian café-concerts", in *Participations. Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* n° 2, 2019 (16), p. 384-403.

11. On early cinema culture in Antwerp see GUIDO CONVENTS, *Van kinoscoop tot café-ciné. De eerste jaren van de film in België. 1894-1908*, Leuven, 2000; Id., "Ontstaan en vroege ontwikkeling...", p. 27; and GERT WILLEMS, "Antwerpen 'Kinemastad'. Een kroniek van honderd jaar bioscoopcultuur", in DANIEL BILTEREYST and PHILIPPE MEERS (eds.), *De verlichte stad...*, p. 239-241.



it offered a form of entertainment that could be – and was effectively – enjoyed by all social strata, with the effect even that the traditional elites were in this field often reduced to followers rather than trendsetters. However, preferences and modes of reception varied often hugely, just as the cinema offer itself had increasingly started to diversify, and spectators' identifications were often bound up with specific patterns of film consumption<sup>12</sup>.

As for Van Ostaijen himself, the impression one gains when reading his work and the body of literature on his life at the time is that of a young man enthusiastically enjoying all forms of popular entertainment available, and most particularly film. In the field of cinema, he certainly appreciated the great popular successes of his day and could, in this way, consider himself modern and anti-elitist. At the same time, however, he strove to distinguish himself from the popular masses. He did so, first and foremost, by showing off his connoisseurship: he had seen “a lot of movies”, and knew therefore very well what he was talking about. This is clearly one way of distinguishing himself from the bulk of the cinemagoing audience, which was less cinema savvy<sup>13</sup>. On top of this, Van Ostaijen combined his mass cultural consumption with a production of (high cultural) literature and a reflection on painting and sculpture, traditionally elitist art forms, thus demonstrating a “new type of cultural superiority”<sup>14</sup>. The information available on Van Ostaijen's posture at the time suggests that he certainly did aim to stand out. This is how fellow poet Maurice Gilliams, four years Van Ostaijen's junior, remembers the way he presented himself in the later years of the First World War:

At night, on the De Keyserlei, I met Orpheus in Biedermeier attire. He was being gaped at because of his quaint tie, his red velvet waistcoat and his strange black clothes. Sometimes he wore a pearl grey macfarlane, and when the wind took hold of the shoulder panels, he seemed to take wing like an imperial eagle. In winter, he was seen with an otter cap; he wore a high stiff collar. He was the dandy, the lord in hard and grey Antwerp<sup>15</sup>.

If accurate, Gilliams's recollection bears witness to an attempt to combine high and low, elite and popular culture: Van Ostaijen is said to have been seen “on the De Keyserlei”, i.e. in Antwerp's modern entertainment district, but appears to have been dressed as a “dandy”, and therefore in a way reminiscent of an elitist literary posture typical of the *fin de siècle*. In other words, Van Ostaijen did partake in ‘democratic’ entertainment with gusto, among others by seeing “a lot of movies”, but the way he presented himself to his fellow entertainment seekers seems motivated by an eagerness to stress that he was certainly *not* like everybody else<sup>16</sup>.

It is interestingly significant that Gilliams associates Van Ostaijen with the fashionable De Keyserlei, the backbone of the station district which was known for its high-end cinemas and music-halls, and not with a popular district such as the Seefhoek. Yes, Van Ostaijen indulged in popular entertainment, but he always did so with a certain snobbishness, which also expressed itself in his penchant for luxury products and fancy brands, and maybe even in his choice of a partner. In 1917, Van Ostaijen started a relationship with a glamorous and beautiful fashion model,

12. See for this state of affairs KASPAR MAASE, *Grenzenloses Vergnügen...*, p. 110-112; and GUIDO CONVENTS, “Ontstaan en vroege ontwikkeling...”, p. 24 and 28.

13. Maase points out that this kind of ‘sophisticated’ behaviour was typical of young clerks and employees, who aspired to associate themselves with a sphere of modernity, exoticism, fashion, and luxury and thus to distinguish themselves from the more rustic preferences of the proletariat. (KASPAR MAASE, *Grenzenloses Vergnügen...*, p. 128-129)

14. “kulturelle Überlegenheit neuer art” (MAASE, *Grenzenloses Vergnügen...*, p. 238).

15. MAURICE GILLIAMS, *Vita brevis. Verzameld werk*, Amsterdam, 1984, p. 279-280. My translation.

16. The resulting image is a striking confirmation of Maase's claim that the more upscale entertainment venues in metropolitan centres attracted a highly heterogeneous audience: “Dandies, Studenten und abenteuerlustige Söhne der Bourgeoisie ebenso wie junge Angestellte” (*Grenzenloses Vergnügen...*, p. 67). The female part of the public was for the greater part made up of *demi-mondaines* and prostitutes.

who shared his love of both modern entertainment and upscale consumer goods.

#### IV. Anti-Bourgeois Resentment, Activism and Ambivalence towards Mass Culture

There is probably also a social and ideological dimension to the ambivalent way Van Ostaijen positioned himself as a consumer of popular entertainment. As we mentioned above, Van Ostaijen was born into the Antwerp lower middle class. Ostentatiously enjoying popular entertainment probably functioned as an additional way of offsetting himself from the same powerful bourgeois elites in his native city and in Belgium that he would also vehemently politically oppose. These elites were also the patrons and public of the traditionally prestigious art forms: classical music, painting, sculpture, and literature. For Van Ostaijen, unreservedly engaging with popular culture must have been one of several ways to provoke and *épater le bourgeois*, i.e., to identify as a 'non-bourgeois'<sup>17</sup>.

Van Ostaijen's anti-bourgeois stance went hand in hand with a proclaimed solidarity with the masses. However, these seemingly democratic sympathies were belied by his actual practice. During the war, Van Ostaijen became increasingly committed politically, but his involvement was with radical Flemish-nationalist activism, which certainly aimed to overthrow the existing Belgian bourgeois order, but primarily did not work towards the establishment of a more egalitarian society, let alone the dictatorship of the proletariat, but rather the realization of an autonomous Flemish nation (within the context of the Belgian state) or even of an independent Flemish republic. Younger activists such as Van Ostaijen combined these aspirations with those of German activism,

which called upon 'spiritual workers' (artists and intellectuals) to devote their forces to the creation of a 'spiritual' state.

Neither of these two strands of activism was overly worried about the plight of the working classes. Both were primarily concerned with supplanting the existing Belgian order, dominated as it was by a French-speaking, 'materialistic' bourgeoisie, and did not refrain from more or less openly collaborating with the German occupier to help realize this goal. It is no surprise, then, that there was little love lost between the activists and the working classes, which for the greater part remained loyal to Belgium, had to endure serious hardship under German occupation and had little to gain from the establishment of a Flemish rule.

The activists themselves were of course aware of the fact that they were a small minority, sandwiched between the traditional elites and the overwhelming majority of the lower classes. They attempted to legitimize their position by adopting an avant-garde stance: they articulated their own role as that of an enlightened and idealistic elite, fighting the oppressors of the (Flemish) people, which was itself seen as a dormant mass, unaware of its essential Flemish and possibly also 'spiritual' identity.

In its attempt to take over from the ruling 'Belgian' establishment during the war, activists also tried to take advantage of the German occupation to lay claim to the field of elite cultural production. In practice, this meant that activist artists tried to emulate and replace the existing bourgeois model by producing their 'own' high art. This was especially true in the field of literature: while patriotic Belgian (Dutch- and French-speaking) authors refrained from publishing during the war, (often young) activist authors unabashedly filled the void<sup>18</sup>. Their literary production was commented upon by critics writing for activist news-

17. This is in accordance with Maase's claim that the entertainment scene was associated with an overall "Herausförderung bürgerlicher Moral, zuweilen auch Gesellschaftskritik." (*Grenzenloses Vergnügen...*, p. 67)

18. The most prominent illustration of this is the publication in 1916 – the year in which Van Ostaijen, too, would make his debut – of the highly successful novel *Pallieter* by activist Felix Timmermans. (See SOPHIE DE SCHAEPRDRIJVER, "Occupation, Propaganda,...", p. 289)

papers and periodicals, which occupied a near monopoly position as most loyal, patriotic press outlets had ceased publication. This is the light in which the start of Van Ostaijen's literary career should be seen.

This information allows us to gain a better insight into the way Van Ostaijen's literary debut, which he published in 1916, must have functioned at the time. It will in all probability have been experienced as a triple act of defiance: firstly, because it was a literary work in Dutch published during the German occupation, when patriotic Belgian, and especially French-speaking, literary authors withheld from doing so. To add insult to injury, Van Ostaijen baptised his firstling *Music-hall*, after the title series in which the spectacle offered by music-halls is praised because it helps people to escape the depressing realities of life. This, too, will have displeased Belgian patriots, as having fun and enjoying light-hearted entertainment while the country was suffering under the heavy boot of the Hun was also frowned upon<sup>19</sup>. Provocative was, finally, choosing a title for a 'high' literary work that directly referred to contemporary popular culture, which was of course not seen as having any artistic legitimacy at the time, all the more so because it was often associated with immorality and social unrest. The common thrust behind this triple provocation is Van Ostaijen's passionate rejection of the Belgian elite's ideology and values, i.e., among others its fervent patriotism and its haughty disdain for the culture of the popular masses.

This is not to say that Van Ostaijen's own attitude towards modern popular culture was an unambiguously and permanently positive one. It should not be forgotten that he was first and foremost a literary author and an art critic. His primary focus was, in other words, the traditional high arts. In his work, popular culture was so to speak exploited

as an additional means to radically challenge the established order *within* these arts, without however fundamentally questioning their superiority.

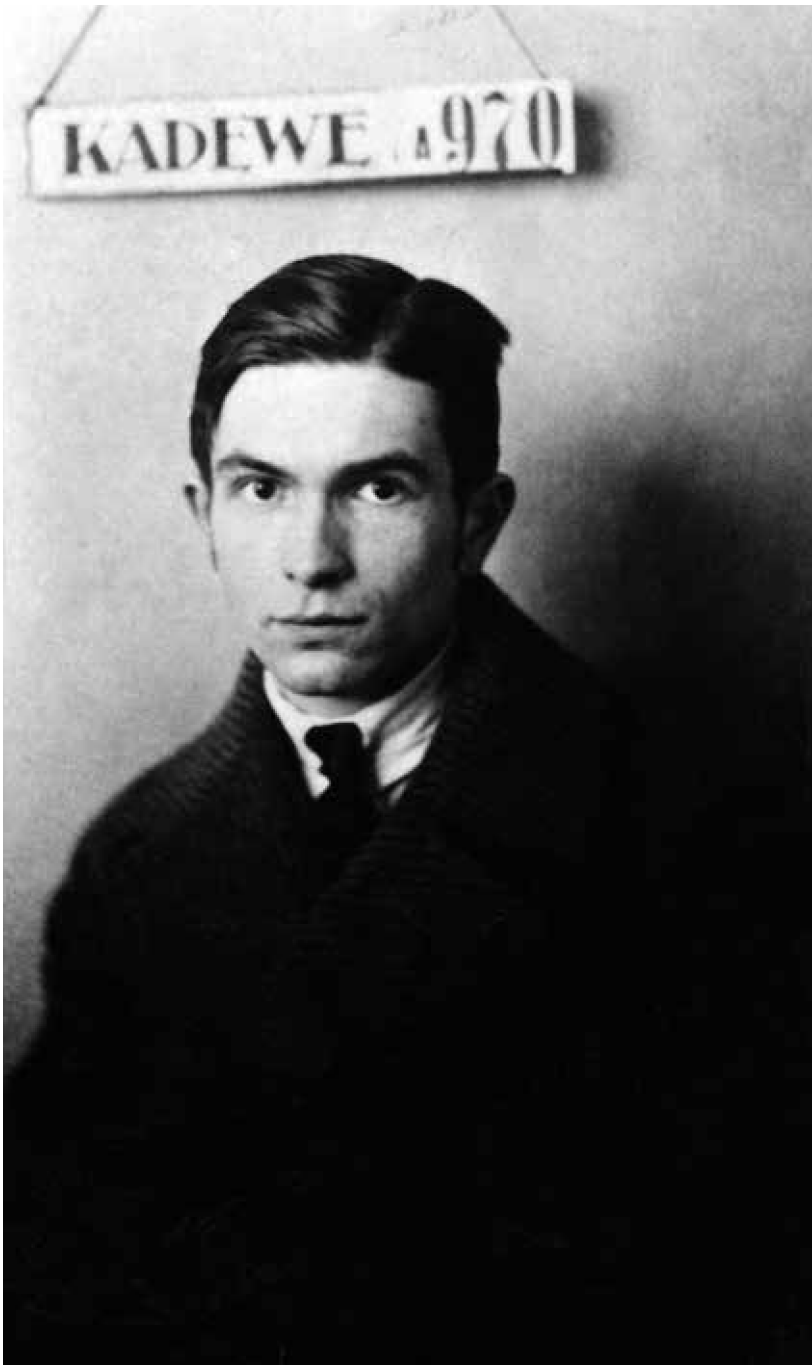
Although Van Ostaijen was undeniably an enthusiastic consumer of popular culture, it would in his mind always remain subordinate to 'real' art, even though he considered that the latter would have to undergo a ruthless process of renewal. It is therefore not surprising that his attitude towards popular culture would always be an ambivalent one and that it kept evolving throughout his work<sup>20</sup>. In *Music-Hall*, contemporary entertainment was framed as a positive force in at least three regards: because of its vital modernity, because it contributed to shattering social distinctions and because of its ability to offer a temporary escape from the bleak realities of life.

In *The Signal (Het Sienjaal, 1918)*, Van Ostaijen's second volume of poetry, popular culture also has an undeniable presence. It is repeatedly presented as an integral part of urban life, and a very attractive one at that. On the other hand, *The Signal* suggests that it can turn out to be a distraction from more important endeavours. By the end of the war, Van Ostaijen increasingly articulated his poetic identity as that of a forerunner showing humanity the way to a spiritual utopia of brotherly love. In the programmatic title poem of *The Signal*, the protagonist is shown to explicitly renounce the enticements city life has to offer, because they would constitute, in the most literal sense, a diversion from his higher mission.

*Occupied City (1921)* is Van Ostaijen's next poetry collection and the last one published during his lifetime. The entire book exudes a thorough and fond familiarity with the pre-war and wartime Antwerp entertainment scene. As indicated above, the collection contains references to this scene in its many guises: historical pageants, waxworks,

19. See in this context LEEN ENGELEN and ROEL VANDE WINKEL, "A Captivated Audience. Cinema-going at the Zoological Garden in Occupied Antwerp, 1915-1918", in *First World War Studies*, 2017, p. 5-6; and Id. and Id., *Ciné Zoologie. Hoe film de Antwerpse dierentuin heeft gered*, Borgerhout, 2018, p. 20 and 26.

20. See EVELINE EDELBROEK, *De sluwe vleierei van het schijn-schone leven. Paul van Ostaijen en zijn houding ten opzichte van de popcultuur*, Utrecht, 2010, p. 4-5 and 89.



*Passage from Bezette Stad. Source : Collection City of Antwerp, Letterenhuis.*

bars, 'estaminets' and 'cabarets', cafés and brothels, music-halls, popular and light classical music, dance styles, and of course, films and cinemas. It bears witness, in other words, to the fact that Van Ostaijen effectively saw "a lot of movies" at the time and that he was familiar with (what he calls himself in an ironic blurb text for the book) "all the famous songs of the past decade". At the same time, Van Ostaijen now seems to hold an increasingly critical view of popular entertainment. It may not be a coincidence that the opening lines of the book say: "you've seen a lot of movies" – and not: "I've seen a lot of movies". The "you" would then be his more superficial, less politically committed friend Peter Baeyens and/or an earlier version of himself.

This is certainly not to say that the Van Ostaijen of 1920-1921 rejected popular entertainment outright, but he now clearly cherishes more distanced and critical views of it: fascinating, attractive and deeply gratifying as it may be, it is also – like religion – a form of 'opiate of the people', diverting it from pressing for fundamental or even revolutionary political change. Van Ostaijen's views will have been influenced by his communist sympathies at the time and his frustrations over the failure of the revolution in Germany, which led him to increasingly view the popular masses as gullible and therefore easily manipulated by a cynical elite, which exploits to that end the 'ideological state apparatuses' at its disposal, and most notably religion, the media and entertainment<sup>21</sup>. This should not blind us to the fact that Van Ostaijen was still profoundly receptive to the hedonistic and probably also fetishist rewards modern mass entertainment had to offer. In addition to this, he was undoubtedly appreciative of its more subversive sides, and in particular of the ways it played out sexual fantasies and/or seemed to open up horizons of social upheaval and unfettered anarchic freedom. And finally, as we already

pointed out, he instrumentalized the success of popular culture as a powerful means to undercut traditional bourgeois culture and arts in a way that is reminiscent of the way Berlin Dadaism 'nihilistically' exploited popular culture at the time.

Notwithstanding all this, it has to be acknowledged that the rift between Van Ostaijen and modern popular culture that had started to open up in *Occupied City* would in subsequent years only continue to widen. While it is true that Van Ostaijen's later work repeatedly and positively refers to (among others) jazz music and popular dances such as the Charleston, the references to the entertainment of the moment become considerably less frequent. Van Ostaijen turns increasingly to what he considers to be unspoiled, spontaneous, and 'organic' – non-commercial, pre-industrial – forms of popular culture, and most notably to local (Flemish) and European folklore (folk songs, nursery rhymes, lullabies, commedia dell'arte figures,...)<sup>22</sup>.

## V. An Opiate of the People

As we saw, the opening verses of the "Dedication to Mr Soandso" imply that the addressee is a sinner in need of forgiveness: "Much shall be forgiven you/for/you've seen of lot of movies". The allusion is, of course, to the chapter in Luke (7:47) where Jesus says: "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much". Van Ostaijen's revision of the gospel text seems somewhat blasphemous: the sinner is said to be entitled to forgiveness not because of his love (viz. for Christ), but because of his infatuation with cinema. In modern society, Van Ostaijen suggests, religion has been replaced by entertainment. This can be seen to imply what we already stated above: modern entertainment supplants religion as the 'opiate of the people'. Both are to be rejected because they blind the masses to their 'objective interests'.

21. See in this context MAASE: „Das Grundmuster der linken Vorbehalte war einfach: Misstrauen gegen alle Vergnügungen, die angeblich vom politischen Engagement abhielten und nicht zum Klassenbewusstsein beitrugen.“ (*Grenzenloses Vergnügen...*, p. 165-166)

22. See EVELINE EDELBROEK, *De sluwe vleierei ...*, p. 96.

However, things are not as simple as they may seem. Indeed, the opening lines of *Occupied City* allow for multiple and contradictory readings. One of these would be to stress the emancipatory character of modern entertainment, conducive as it is to sweep away the world-hostile renunciation and asceticism preached by institutionalized Christianity in favour of 'superficial', mundane pleasures. A second reading would come to an almost diametrically opposed conclusion: the demise of 'real' religion is to be regretted, as the rise of modern entertainment results in the blind adoration of idols, created by materialistic entrepreneurs and exploited by the powers that be. Both readings, I would argue, apply at the same time. In order to understand this, it is necessary to consider a few biographical facts. One should be aware that Van Ostaijen had been raised in a devoutly Catholic family. His oldest brother, who died in 1910 and whom Van Ostaijen revered, was even a priest. The young Van Ostaijen, however, rebelled against the Catholic ecclesiastical apparatus, which he considered to be culturally, intellectually, and morally oppressive as well as unreservedly and unforgivably subservient to the Belgian elite. His resentment towards the Belgian church was further exacerbated by its staunch patriotism and its unflinching denunciation of activism during the war.

All this helps to explain why the opening lines of *Occupied City* are ambivalent and contradictory in this respect: yes, Catholicism cannot be ridiculed enough and modern mass entertainment must be hailed as its expansion has contributed to rid the masses from the oppressive power of Catholicism by granting them access to the worldly pleasures the church claimed were dangerous and sinful. At the same time, Van Ostaijen does not consider

the resulting secularization to be a genuine emancipation: it does not liberate the masses, but creates new forms of enslavement. In addition to this, he deplors that the rise of modern mass culture seems to go hand in hand with a loss of true religious feeling. In a letter to Peter Baeyens as well as in "Verse 5", another poem written in Berlin, Van Ostaijen explicitly labels himself a Catholic, a statement which is only partially ironic<sup>23</sup>. In the poem, he even calls himself "the last Catholic", i.e., a member of a race that is tragically vowed to extinction, comparable to the last of the Mohicans. In the same vein, the mingling of references to the Bible and modern entertainment at the beginning of the "Dedication to Mr Soandso" is only partially ironic, and therefore ambivalent rather than genuinely blasphemous. Van Ostaijen certainly aims to épater *le bourgeois* – and especially the Catholic and conservative bourgeois – in these opening lines, but he also wryly distances himself from the 'shallowness' of mass culture, attractive though it may be.

This may contribute to elucidate why Van Ostaijen stresses that it is first and foremost the "you" who is an unrepentant sinner and has seen "a lot of movies". If this "you" was indeed modelled after his friend Peter Baeyens, who was raised in a liberal and free-thinking household, one can indeed imagine that he would have had no qualms whatsoever about "seeing a lot of movies" and would have even considered doing so to be a redeeming – because thoroughly enjoyable – activity. However, the line that separates the (ambivalent former Catholic) "I" from the (free-thinking) "you" is quite thin. In the following lines, they merge into a "we", who are said "to know them [the movies, E.S.] inside out", implying that the "I" is no less a film *aficionado*<sup>24</sup>.

23. See GERRIT BORGERS, *Paul van Ostaijen. Een documentatie*, Amsterdam, 1996 [1971], p. 388; and PAUL VAN OSTAIJEN, *Verzameld werk. Poëzie I*, Amsterdam, 1979, p. 229. The letter was written on 29 September 1920, the oldest preserved versions of the poem date from April 1920.

24. A strikingly similar ambivalence with regard to cinema can be found in the writings of Van Ostaijen's close friend, the artist Paul Joostens (1889-1960), with whom Van Ostaijen shared a Catholic upbringing as well as a passion for film. Van Ostaijen and Joostens would often go and see films together during the war. In February 1921, Joostens writes in a letter to a friend: "If you do not see enough films you are lost." (PAUL JOOSTENS, *De cruciale jaren. Brieven aan Jos Leonard 1919-1925*, Antwerp, 1995, p. 100) The sentence predates the publication of *Occupied City* but reads like a paraphrase of the opening lines of the "Dedication".

## VI. *Fantômas*, *Zigomar*, and *Chéri-Bibi*

The interesting thing is that Van Ostaijen subsequently tells us exactly *which* movies they know so well. He quotes three names, two of which are absolute classics in early European film history. They are all French and belong to more or less the same genre: “*Fantômas*” (five films directed in 1913-1914 by Louis Feuillade for Gaumont), “*Zigomar*” (three films directed in 1911-1913 by Victorin Jasset for *Éclair*) and “*Chéri-Bibi*” (a film directed by Gérard Bourgeois in 1913, followed by a film directed in 1914 by Charles Krauss, both for *Éclair*). All of these films are adventure and crime/detective films with melodramatic and often highly spectacular intrigues, and they were all based on hugely successful serialized novels or novel serials<sup>25</sup>. The protagonist is in each case an extraordinarily gifted, shrewd, and technologically savvy master criminal, who challenges the authorities and the police in the boldest possible ways and succeeds in outwitting them time and again. These films struck a chord with the contemporary French audience because they tapped into contemporary fantasies surrounding the threat posed by the social *Other*: crime and the underworld, the ‘dangerous’ lower classes in the popular districts of Paris and in *la Zone*, and highly mediated phenomena such as the Parisian Apache gangs and the anarchist-criminal *bande à Bonnot*<sup>26</sup>. These ingredients were also very much present in the popular press and literature of early 20<sup>th</sup> century France, as well as in other forms of French popular culture, such as the theatre in the ‘Grand Guignol’ tradition. Their appeal can be

explained by the fact that they managed to combine a number of hugely attractive ingredients, such as populist dislike of the powers that be and a desire for political subversion, fantasies surrounding unfettered individual freedom and boundless *jouissance*, as well as the titillation provided by the horrified fascination with the dangers lurking beneath the surface of apparent social order and stability<sup>27</sup>. It is small wonder, then, that the huge popularity of these films stirred alarm in pre-war France, to the extent even that some of them were occasionally banned by local prefects. Of course, this would only add to the *risqué* aura of these films and therefore contribute to their appeal in the eyes of the public<sup>28</sup>.

Van Ostaijen’s inclusion of these three names in a poem evoking the state of affairs in Antwerp on the eve of the war is interesting first and foremost because it illustrates a simple historical fact, viz. the (albeit gradually fading) dominance of French film companies in Europe, and more specifically in Belgium and Antwerp<sup>29</sup>. The above titles were indeed shown in local cinemas, to the same overwhelming popular acclaim they had already enjoyed in France itself. The success was alluded to in advertisements published by cinemas screening these films, and local newspapers extended advice to their readership on how to make sure they could gain access to the theatres screening the films in question<sup>30</sup>.

It is also significant that Van Ostaijen mentions exactly these films. In the existing literature concerning *Occupied City*, the names have been more

25. While Gaumont would always remain ‘generalistic’, *Éclair* specialized in this genre. It is no coincidence, therefore, that it is behind two of the three titles mentioned here. (Cf. RICHARD ABEL, *The Ciné Goes to Town: French Cinema 1896-1914*, Berkeley, 1998, p. 298-299 and 358)

26. See in this respect RICHARD ROUD, “Louis Feuillade and the Serial”, in Id. (ed.), *Cinema: a Critical Dictionary. The Major Film-Makers*. S.I., 1980, p. 350-351; ANNABEL AUDUREAU, *Fantômas. Un mythe moderne au croisement des arts*, Rennes, 2010, p. 26 and 31-33; and JÉRÔME BEAUCEZ and JAMES CANNON, “Cette mauvaise réputation... Quand la ‘Zone’ fait des histoires (1895-1975)”, in *Ethnologie française*, 2018 (170), p. 329-344.

27. See in this context ANNABEL AUDUREAU, *Fantômas...*, p. 58 and 75-83.

28. About these films and their French reception see RICHARD ABEL, *The Ciné Goes to Town...*, p. 301-302; and ANNABEL AUDUREAU, *Fantômas...*, p. 127.

29. About the provenance of the film offer in Belgium on the eve of the war see GUIDO CONVENTS, “Le cinéma français en Belgique à la veille de la première Guerre Mondiale”, in *1895. Revue de l’Association française de recherche sur l’histoire du cinéma*, numéro hors série. L’année 1913 en France, 1993, p. 159-160.

30. See JEF BOGMAN, “Poetry as a Filmic and Historical Document: *Occupied City*”, in KAREL DIBBETS and BERT HOGENKAMP (eds.), *Film and the First World War*, p. 187.

or less correctly identified, but little attention has been given to the content and reception of the films they refer to. Suggestions are that public response in Belgium ran along the same lines as in France: here too, the films in question were not only hugely successful, but also highly controversial. The Belgian pre-war debate on the regulation of access to cinemas received a strong impulse from incidents surrounding the screening of a Zigomar film in Brussels in 1912. It is not neutral, therefore, that Van Ostaijen refers to precisely this film serial as being among the many movies he has seen before the war. In doing so, he identifies with films reputed to be politically and socially subversive, immoral and sensationalist and implicitly positions himself against the would-be regulators of film exploitation in Belgium, which amounts to a rejection of the views of cinema held by Belgian officialdom, the church, and parts of the bourgeois elite<sup>31</sup>. All in all, the first page of *Occupied City* seems to obliquely convey an anti-censorship position in the cinema debate of the 1910-1920 decade that meshes with Van Ostaijen's more general political, social, and ideological views, and more specifically with his Flemish activism during the war. After all, being an activist was tantamount to being radically anti-establishment, subversive, and even potentially revolutionary and to boldly opt for a position that was despised and reviled by the francophone patriotic elites. An activist was, in the historical constellation of the moment, a 'dangerous' person, somewhat like the Fantômas and Zigomar characters of the homologous films. Occupying such a position must have come with the added excitement and thrills of self-importance, risk-taking and defiance of a social

and political order the ideology and constraints of which were experienced as oppressive<sup>32</sup>.

The mention of the name "Chéri-Bibi" triggers an association with the word "fatalitas" and a double quotation in French.

Both testify to the fact that Van Ostaijen effectively knew what he was talking about. "fatalitas" is a key word in the Chéri-Bibi novels and (probably also) films: it is what the protagonist says repeatedly to comment on yet another unexpected and dramatic turn of events he is confronted with<sup>33</sup>. The second quotation refers to one of the crucial elements in the plot, viz. the fact that Chéri-Bibi murders a marquis and usurps his identity by, quite literally, taking over his facial traits. In this way, the convicted criminal hopes that he will be able to start a new life, but he soon discovers to his disarray that the marquis is a murderer himself, so that he finds himself pursued by justice once again<sup>34</sup>.

Two further aspects deserve attention here. The first of these is that the quotation is between quotation marks, which is a bit odd since *Occupied City* abounds with – generally unmarked – quotations. Why, then, use quotation marks here? As suggested by Jef Bogman, Van Ostaijen is probably inspired here by the generic conventions used for intertitles in silent movies, in which "character text" – as opposed to "narrative text" – was generally put between quotation marks. That would mean that the latter were already present in the original text and can be considered to form an integral, inalienable part of the quotation<sup>35</sup>.

31. On the Belgian cinema debate and the parties involved in it, see ARNAUD COLLETTE, *Moralité et immoralité du cinéma en Belgique de 1910 à 1920*, Liège, 1993; GUIDO CONVENTS, "Le cinéma français en Belgique...", p. 168; Id., "Ontstaan en vroege ontwikkeling...", p. 37-38; DANIEL BILTEREYST and LIESBET DEPAUW, "De kruistocht tegen de slechte cinema..."; DANIEL BILTEREYST, "Kruistocht tegen slechte cinema. De katholieke filmactie en bioscopen", in: Id. and PHILIPPE MEERS (eds.), *De verlichte stad...*; LEEN ENGELN, "Film/Cinema (Belgium)", in: UTE DANIEL e.a. (eds.), *1914 1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*; and Id. and ROEL VANDE WINKEL, "A Captivated Audience...", p. 6, 9 and 26.

32. A similar suggestion is made by SOPHIE DE SCHAEPRDRIJVER in: "No Country for Young Men: Patriotism and its Paradoxes in German-Occupied Belgium, 1914-1918", in RICHARD BUTTERWICK-PAWLIKOWSKI, QUINCY CLOET and ALEX DOWDALL (eds.), *Breaking Empires, Making Nations. The First World War and the Reforging of Europe*, p. 148.

33. See in this context E. BAERT, "Paul van Ostaijens antimelodramatische charge in dada-expressionistische filmstijl", in *Chronos*, no. 5, 1968 (2), p. 31; and ROBERT SNOECK, *Paul van Ostaijen en zijn Bezette Stad (literaire en zakelijke toelichtingen). Deel 1: De opdracht*, [Gent], 1975, p. 16-17.

34. See ROBERT SNOECK, "Commentaar", in *Heibel*, no. 3, 1983 (17), p. 54.

35. See JEF BOGMAN, "Poetry as a Filmic and Historical Document...", p. 180.



de prachtfilm Chéri **PiB** en  
fatalitas

Passage from Bezette Stad. Source : Collection City of Antwerp, Letterenhuis.

The second aspect to be commented upon is that the quotation is in French. This can be seen as referring to (socio)linguistic reality in pre-war Antwerp and Flanders in general. While it is of course true that Antwerp is a Flemish city and that the large majority of its population had Dutch or, to be more precise, most often a version of the local Dutch dialect as its mother tongue<sup>36</sup>, French was the language of the bourgeois elites, higher education and elite culture and important parts of the city's business and administrative life. In addition to this, it was to a high degree the language of entertainment, due to the fact that the bulk of mass culture at the time was French import. This was true not only for cinema, but also for popular music and dance styles. In addition to this, Antwerp was of course an important European port and consequently a multilingual city, with French and Dutch as its major languages. These were used, however, by different social strata and for different functions. While the upper classes predominantly spoke French and the popular masses the Antwerp dialect, it was the lower middle classes that were 'in between' and therefore very often at least bilingual, switching between languages on a daily basis depending on context, function, and addressees. As we saw, Van Ostaijen himself belonged to this intermediary social stratum. *Occupied City* is, basically, a text written in Dutch, but it 'quotes' from wildly heterogeneous texts in a variety of other languages, the most important of these being French. Seen from this perspective, the book can be conceived of as a subjective reconstruction of the linguistic state of affairs in Antwerp at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, corresponding to the lived experience of a Dutch-speaking young man originating from the petty bourgeoisie and enthusiastically embracing the pleasures offered by the entertainment industry, which was interna-

tional to be sure, but – in the pre-war Belgian and Antwerp context – heavily dominated by French cultural products. Van Ostaijen's command of French was, for that matter, superb – to the extent even that it could be said to surpass his mastery of Dutch<sup>37</sup>. Van Ostaijen's Dutch idiom was more or less a personal creation, concocted from (mainly Belgian variants of) contemporary spoken Dutch, written Dutch from literary and non-literary sources and miscellaneous material borrowed from foreign languages (especially French and German), and therefore ridden with barbarisms.

In the precise case of the above quotation, which was as we saw borrowed from popular and especially, film culture, it can be seen as referring to the fact that French entertainment in pre-war Antwerp was often imported as such, i.e., without being translated and/or adapted for a Dutch-speaking audience. In the case of film, Dutch translations were sometimes made available by the Belgian distributors, but they were generally of poor quality and apparently not systemically used<sup>38</sup>. A considerable part of the Dutch-speaking public seemed to have coped with this situation rather well, in a way reminiscent of the manner present-day non-Anglophone audiences incorporate mass-cultural English into their daily experiences. Here as elsewhere in *Occupied City*, the 'narrator' demonstrates his capability to understand and reproduce intricate French enunciations, wielding a vocabulary that goes way beyond 'basic French'. Throughout the book, Van Ostaijen flaunts his remarkable command of French, which suggests that he enjoyed using it and took pride in displaying his linguistic skills, somewhat like Dutch-speaking youngsters nowadays intersperse their Dutch with snappy English words and expressions.

36. According to the 1910 census, only "4.7 percent of the Flemish population" spoke French. (SOPHIE DE SCHAEFDRIEVER, "Occupation, Propaganda...", p. 288)

37. An important factor to be taken into account here was that even in Flemish secondary schools several subjects were still taught in French at the time.

38. See GUIDO CONVENTS, "Le cinéma français en Belgique...", p. 166. In a comment on an earlier version of this article, Leen Engelen suggested that Dutch translations were almost exclusively available for the major films.

## VII. “Macaroni Films”

Before wrapping up our discussion of the opening page of *Occupied City*, we should point out that it contains a fourth reference to film: “THE IRON PRISON” (“HET STALEN GEVANG”).

This title was initially identified as referring to an episode of *Les Mystères de New York*, the 1915 French rehash of the famous American Pathé serial *The Exploits of Elaine*, which hit the American cinemas in December 1914, i.e., after the war was declared<sup>39</sup>. It seems highly improbable, however, that Van Ostaijen would refer to a wartime film in a text in which all other references are to pre-war productions<sup>40</sup>. We therefore tend to concur with Bianca Stigter's suggestion that Van Ostaijen is thinking of a pre-war movie here too. The most likely suspect would then be *La prigionie d'acciaio*, a 1913 film directed by Roberto Roberti (pseudonym of Vincenzo Leone and the father of Sergio Leone) for the Turin-based company Aquila Films, which had considerable international success until the outbreak of the war<sup>41</sup>. A film titled *La Prison d'Acier* or (in Dutch) either *Het IJzeren Gevang* or *Het Stalen Gevang* was indeed screened in Belgium as of the end of 1913. In a 1916 advertisement, it was explicitly identified as being a product of the “célèbre maison Aquila film”<sup>42</sup>. It is a well-established fact – which is confirmed, for that matter, by the wording of the advertisement – that Italian films were well represented on the Belgian market on the eve of and in the first years of the war<sup>43</sup>.

It is possible that Van Ostaijen means to refer to this success when he associatively links up “THE IRON PRISON” with what he calls “macaroni films”. This could be read as confirming, first and foremost, that he is indeed talking here about a film by the Italian (‘macaroni eating’<sup>44</sup>) director Roberti. As we suggested, it can also be understood as underscoring more generally the strong presence of Italian films on the Belgian market.

“Macaroni films” is, in its turn, followed by a brace. The three words to the right of this punctuation mark seem to enumerate characters that are typical of “macaroni films”: “counts/princesses/apaches”. In what at a first glance may appear a somewhat random association, Stigter suggests that “macaroni films” could be read as an early equivalent of what we now know as ‘spaghetti westerns’. On closer inspection, her remark may not be as far-fetched as may seem. *La Vampira Indiana*, another 1913 Roberti film for Aquila, is considered by many to be the first spaghetti western. The film itself is lost, but it is known to have been about ‘Indians’ (‘apaches’) and to have had an Indian princess as one of its protagonists. And several Italian films of the pre-war period did indeed feature aristocratic characters and, more specifically, counts and princesses<sup>45</sup>. Be that as it may be, the three character types mentioned here by Van Ostaijen are of course too vague to tie them to any specific films with a reasonable degree of certainty. It seems safe to assume, however, that they are chiefly meant to conjure up a

39. See ROBERT SNOECK, *Paul van Ostaijen en zijn Bezette Stad...*, p. 10-12; Id., “Commentaar”, p. 52; JEF BOGMAN, *De stad als tekst. Over de compositie van Paul van Ostaijens Bezette stad*, Rotterdam, [1991], p. 44; and Id., “Poetry as a Filmic and Historical Document...”, p. 182.

40. It is highly improbable for another reason as well: *Les Mystères de New York* hit the French screens in December 1915. At that time, German censorship had already blocked new French films from entering occupied Belgium. (See a.o. LEEN ENGELEN, “Film/Cinema (Belgium)”).

41. See BIANCA STIGTER, “Jazz en dada nemen wereld over”, in *NRC-Handelsblad*, 2 April 2010.

42. *La Région de Charleroi*, 17 February 1916.

43. See GUIDO CONVENTS, *Van kinetoscoop tot café-ciné...*, p. 338; and Id., “Ontstaan en vroege ontwikkeling...”, p. 33.

44. As Leen Engelen pointed out to me, it so happens that “mangeurs de macaroni” was explicitly identified in an Antwerp wartime newspaper as a common nickname for Italians. (See: *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws* 6 March 1917)

45. This is undoubtedly related to the fact that many of the internationally successful Italian films belonged to the ‘historical’ genre. (See GIULIO CESARE CASTELLO, “Italian Silent Cinema”, in RICHARD ROUD (ed.), *Cinema: a Critical Dictionary...*, p. 525. Aristocratic characters were, for that matter, highly popular in pre-war cinema in general. (See JERZY TOEPLITZ, “The Cinema in Eastern and Central Europe before the Guns of August”, in KAREL DIBBETS and BERT HOGENKAMP (eds.), *Film and the First World War...*, p. 17)

# HET STALEN GEVANG

macaronifilms { graven  
princessen  
apachen

*Passage from Bezette Stad. Source: Collection City of Antwerp, Letterenhuis.*

few cliché characters of (most probably) the Italian film repertoire.

The term “apaches” does, for that matter, not necessarily refer to the native American tribe. The name was used considerably more frequently at the time for the aforementioned ‘savage’ gangsters prowling Paris at the time<sup>46</sup>. These apaches were of course particularly prominent in the media and popular culture in France, but they were notorious all over Europe – in heavily France-influenced Belgium,<sup>47</sup> for instance, but equally in Italy, as is illustrated by the 1914 *Za la-Mort* series, the protagonist of which is “a kind of romantic apache”<sup>48</sup>. Van Ostaijen’s acquaintance with the apache phenomenon will undoubtedly have been mediated primarily by French sources, and especially by the French popular press and literature, songs, and films, all of which found an eager audience in Belgium<sup>49</sup>. *Occupied City* contains several references to the Parisian *boulevards* and *quartiers* associated with a strong apache presence,<sup>50</sup> and some of the French idiom used seems to be inspired by the typical *argot* used by the apaches. *Occupied City* also contains direct allusions to the immensely popular *chalouspée* dance (in the poem “Bar”), which was also known as the ‘apache dance’, and – in the “Dedication” as well as in “The With-

drawal” – to the 1914 song “Julot tango”, in the lyrics of which the Julot character from the title is called “Le roi du Sébaste”, implying that he is an apache gang leader.

## VIII. Cinema Culture Throughout Occupied City

As indicated above, the opening page of *Occupied City* is certainly not the only one in the book to contain references to contemporary film and cinema culture. Several subsequent poems, too, evoke cinematic reality in Antwerp, most notably in the period of the German occupation, in a way that allows the informed reader to establish links with hard historical facts. One of these poems is significantly entitled “Empty Cinema” (“Lege Bioskoop”). The poem has often been read as a simple evocation of the desolation of life in Antwerp at the beginning of the occupation. It seems probable, however, that Van Ostaijen alludes to a palpable effect of widespread ‘patriotic’ reticence to partake in frivolous entertainment in such dire times for the Belgian fatherland: the cinemas reopen after having suspended business for a few months, but the audience seems initially inhibited by social pressure to go out and enjoy itself<sup>51</sup>. The poem

46. See MICHELLE PERROT, “Dans le Paris de la Belle Époque, les ‘Apaches’, premières bandes de jeunes”, in *La Lettre de l'enfance et de l'adolescence* n° 67, p. 71-78.

47. This is illustrated a.o. by *De roman van een jeugd. Een ondergang in Parijs* (Rotterdam, 1914), a novel by Flemish author PAUL KENIS, which refers repeatedly to the phenomenon (see p. 140 and 191); and by several newspaper articles on crimes committed by apaches. (See, among other examples, *De Nieuwe Gazet*, 2 February 1914; and *Het Handelsblad*, 25 June 1914) As Leen Engelen pointed out to me, a sketch entitled *Apachenliefde* (*Apache Love*) premiered in the later years of the war. (See e.g. *Het Tooneel*, 8 September 1917)

48. See GIULIO CESARE CASTELLO, “Italian Silent Cinema”, p. 528.

49. One of Van Ostaijen’s sources of ‘information’ on the phenomenon will certainly have been the Fantômas-films: in *Juve contre Fantômas*, the second instalment of the series (first screening September 1913), “Fantômas has an Apache gang” (RICHARD ABEL, *The Ciné Goes to Town...*, p. 373; see also ANNABEL AUDUREAU, *Fantômas...*). Apaches were a prime object of fascination in French cinema of the period, as is illustrated by (among numerous other examples, beginning with the successful 1905 film *Les Apaches de Paris*) another 1913 film: *Les Apaches*, directed by Gérard Bourgeois.

50. To Belleville, for instance, and to the infamous Boulevard Sébastopol. (See the poems “Empty Cinema”, “Asta Nielsen” and “The Withdrawal”)

51. See in this context SOPHIE DE SCHAEPPDRIJVER, “Occupation, Propaganda ...”, p. 275-276; LEEN ENGELEN, “België verdeeld. Filmdistributie in bezet België (1914-1918)”, in *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis*, no. 1, 2016 (19), p. 5-7; Id., “Film/Cinema (Belgium)”; Id. and ROEL VANDE WINKEL, “A Captivated Audience...”, p. 5-6. The patriotic stance seems to have motivated attempts by local authorities to impede the swift reopening of film theatres, whereas the German occupier heavily pushed for them to resume business as quickly as possible. According to Convents, the Germans were supported in this by the activists. Attending a film projection in the beginning of the war amounted therefore to no less than making a political choice. The narrator/protagonist’s presence in the “Empty Cinema” suggests a deliberate flouting of patriotic norms, and most probably also a siding with the German/activist position in the matter. (See GUIDO CONVENTS, “Cinema and German Politics in Occupied Belgium”, in KAREL DIBBETS and BERT HOGENKAMP (eds.), *Film and the First World War*, p. 172)

also mentions a few film titles – in Dutch only. This could be an oblique reference to the fact that from early 1915 onwards the occupying authorities in Flanders obliged cinema managers to provide Dutch translations of titles and inter-titles<sup>52</sup>.

The film titles themselves have so far proved impossible to identify with certainty, which is due to a number of reasons, including the fact that they are in Dutch and will therefore have been (often rather free) translations of the original titles – if they actually refer to existing films. However, the contrast between the obscure titles in “Empty Cinema” and the immediately recognisable names of pre-war successes such as *Fantômas* and *Zigomar* in the opening poem is striking. This too probably harks back to historical reality: during the war, cinema managers had to go to great lengths to assemble a minimally decent offer to cinemagoers. Due to an increasing film scarcity in the first years of the war, they often had to programme pre-war successes and lesser-known films (often ‘shorts’), which inevitably resulted in programmes that were far less exciting than what cinemas had screened in the final years preceding the war<sup>53</sup>.

As indicated above, the long “Music Hall” sequence in the second half of the book refers to a revival of nightlife in Antwerp: “THEN/inside the circle of her despondency/the city began to/live” (“PLOTS/binnen de kring van haar moedeloosheid/begon de stad te/leven”).

This can be read as referring to the historical fact that the longer the war dragged on, the more desperately people flocked to entertainment to escape the dreariness and hardship of life under occupation<sup>54</sup>. It also serves to remind us of the fact that early twentieth-century music-halls to an ever-increasing degree used films screenings as a cheaper alternative to live acts. One should also be aware that, at the time, the distinction between concert halls, music-halls, cafés, ‘brasseries’, and cinemas *sensu stricto* was often a blurred one. This was apparently even more so during the war, when entrepreneurs had to concoct an entertainment offer based on the limited array of attractions available to them<sup>55</sup>. Finally, the “Music Hall” sequence also focuses on the double function of film music: as a live performance in its own right (sometimes between films) and therefore as a contribution to the ‘attraction’ character of early cinema, but also as an evocative accompaniment of the film’s intrigue, a role which became increasingly important as film evolved<sup>56</sup>. The (mostly light classical) repertoire evoked by Van Ostaijen seems to correspond fairly well to the music that was effectively performed in Antwerp cinemas at the time.

Another crucial film poem in *Occupied City* is “Asta Nielsen”, about the immensely popular Danish film star of the silent film era. The poem refers among others to Nielsen’s unmistakable acting style, a number of her films and the enormous impact she had on an idolizing audience. Nielsen

52. See in this context GUIDO CONVENTS, “Cinema and German Politics...”, p. 174; LEEN ENGELEN, “België verdeeld...”, p. 6-9; Id., “Film/Cinema (Belgium)”; Id. and ROEL VANDE WINKEL, “A Captivated Audience...”, p. 10 and 12.

53. This state of affairs is described by a.o. SOPHIE DE SCHAEPRDRIJVER and EMMANUEL DEBRUYNE, “*Sursum Corda*. The Underground Press in Occupied Belgium, 1914-1918”, in *First World War Studies* no. 1, 2013 (4), p. 33; LEEN ENGELEN, “Film/Cinema (Belgium)”; Id., “België verdeeld...”, p. 6-9; Id., MICHAEL HAMMOND and LESLIE MIDKIFF DEBAUCHE, “‘Snapshots’. Local Cinema Cultures in the Great War”, in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* no. 4, 2015 (35), p. 635-636; and Id. and ROEL VANDE WINKEL, “A Captivated Audience...”, p. 5-6 and 12.

54. In a letter to Peter Baeyens written on 20 August 1920, Van Ostaijen situates this ‘awakening’ in ‘±1916’ (GERRIT BORGENS, *Paul van Ostaijen...*, p. 347). This subjective recollection is corroborated by Sophie de Schaeprdrijver’s findings. (See: “Occupation, Propaganda ...”, p. 275; and “Patriotic Distance”, in UTE DANIEL e.a. (ed.), *1914-1918 Online. International Encyclopaedia of the First World War*, p. 2; see also BARBARA DERUYTTER, “The Layering of Belgian National Identities during the First World War”, in NICO WOUTERS and LAURENCE VAN YPERSELE (eds.), *Nations, Identities and the First World War: Shifting Loyalties to the Fatherland*, p. 159)

55. See e.g. LEEN ENGELEN, MICHAEL HAMMOND and LESLIE MIDKIFF DEBAUCHE, “‘Snapshots’...”, p. 635.

56. See in this context Leen Engelen’s contribution to this issue, as well as: GERT WILLEMS, “Antwerpen ‘Kinemastad’...”, p. 242; DOMINIQUE NASTA, “Setting the Pace of a Heartbeat. The Use of Sound Elements in European Melodramas before 1915”, in RICHARD ABEL and RICK ALTMAN (eds.), *The Sounds of Early Cinema*, p. 104; and EVELINE EDELBROEK, *De sluwe vleierei ...*, p. 23.

# PLOTS

binnen de kring van haar moedeloosheid  
begon de stad te  
leven

*Passage from Bezette Stad. Source : Collection City of Antwerp, Letterenhuis.*

was, after all, the very “first film star to inspire worldwide adoration”<sup>57</sup>. It should be stressed here, however, that Nielsen was a star of the *German* film industry, and the fact that Van Ostaijen assigns the Nielsen poem a place in the second half of the book is consistent with another historical fact: the growing predominance and popularity of German film and its stars in Belgium by the end of the war. This was due to a thorough reorganization of the German film industry as part of the war and (more specifically) propaganda effort, which was aimed at occupied Belgium as well and which resulted in a considerably increased availability of new German films by 1917<sup>58</sup>. This, in combination with a 1915 ban on new films coming from the allied countries, profoundly reshaped the nature of the offer. While it is true that cinema managers tended to dissimulate the German origin of their offer, the audience by this time no longer seemed inhibited by patriotic reticence towards entertainment in general and cinema in particular, not even when the programmed films were German-produced. The new high-quality films drew large audiences, attracted by the aura of stars like Nielsen and Henny Porten, which was of course exploited by cinema owners<sup>59</sup>.

## IX. A Defiantly Unpatriotic Young Man

It is not inconceivable that Van Ostaijen's representation of cinema life in Antwerp during the war was, though historically correct in general, at least in part politically skewed. As a Flemish activist, he sided with the German occupier during the

war, with Belgian patriots as the common adversary. *Occupied City* seems to establish with sarcastic relish how the initial high-minded patriotic resistance against a return to ‘business as usual’ and more specifically against the German-stimulated resumption of entertainment life crumbled over the course of the war, to the extent even that by 1917 large audiences had started raving over German films. As is suggested by a poem such as “Empty Cinema”, the ‘I-narrator’ and protagonist implicitly presents himself as having disregarded patriotic social pressure from very early on in the war.

All in all, the unexpectedly prominent presence of light-hearted entertainment in a text the title of which announces a representation or evocation of life in Antwerp under German occupation must have given *Occupied City* a decidedly unpatriotic tinge in the eyes of contemporary readers. As we said, Van Ostaijen's political agency during and in the wake of the war may have been conducive in shaping this method of evoking the war and occupation experience. However, there may have been more to it than politics alone. It should not be forgotten that Van Ostaijen was eighteen by the start of the war, and therefore old enough to join the Belgian army, which would throughout the war continue to fight on at the Yser front in the West of Belgium. As indicated above, many young men in occupied Belgium would illegally cross the border during the war and enlist to defend their country. Van Ostaijen knew at least one of them intimately: his older brother Constant<sup>60</sup>. Van Ostaijen himself, however, did not follow suit. This made his position rather awkward: here was an able-bodied

57. BODIL MARIE STAVNING THOMSEN, “Die Asta and the Avant-Garde”, in HUBERT VAN DEN BERG e.a. (eds.), *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in the Nordic Countries 1900-1925*, p. 91.

58. About the profound reorganization of German cinema during the war see Guido Convents's contribution to this issue, as well as: RAMONA CURRY, “How Early German Film Stars Helped Sell the War(es)”, and DENİZ GÖKTÜRK, “Market Globalization and Import Regulation in Imperial Germany”, both in KAREL DIBBETS and BERT HOGENKAMP (eds.), *Film and the First World War*.

59. Much has been published about this poem. However, the historical and material conditions which made it possible for Van Ostaijen and his fellow Antwerp cinemagoers to see Asta Nielsen (and other German-produced) films have so far received scant attention from literary scholars. About the increasing dominance of German film productions in Belgium during the war, see GUIDO CONVENTS “Cinema and German Politics...”, p. 171-173; LEEN ENGELEN. “België verdeeld...”; Id., “Film/Cinema (Belgium)”; Id., MICHAEL HAMMOND and LESLIE MIDKIFF DEBAUCHE, “‘Snapshots’...”, p. 636; Id. and ROEL VANDE WINKEL, “A Captivated Audience...”.

60. Van Ostaijen refers to his ‘brother in arms’ in the 1917 poem “To a Mother” (“Aan een Moeder”): “my brother who is still standing/in the keel of the trenches” (*Verzameld Werk. Poëzie I*, p. 139; my translation).



ied young man manifestly *not* doing his patriotic duty<sup>61</sup>. As Sophie de Schaepdrijver pointed out, young men in Van Ostaijen's position were expected to lay low and withdraw from public life as much as possible, which implied among others refraining from "enjoying themselves in public"<sup>62</sup>. Those unwilling to conform to this expectation were frowned upon or even ruthlessly ostracized by the patriotic community.

It is obvious that Van Ostaijen was in the latter case. He led a very public life during the occupation, publishing two poetry books and a wide variety of essays and articles, mostly in activist outlets, he was of course politically active in Flemish activist – and therefore decidedly unpatriotic – circles and in an affiliated youth movement, and he was – as is testified by Gilliams – very visibly present in the wartime nightlife of his native Antwerp. And in each of these contexts, he all but certainly did not eschew having (direct or indirect) contacts with the occupying Germans. Altogether, this amounted to a demonstrative rejection of the patriotic doxa<sup>63</sup>. According to De Schaepdrijver, Van Ostaijen's case was not unique: other young men in a situation similar to his reacted with defiance to the stifling code of conduct that was imposed upon them by, in one way or the other, demonstratively breaching this code. The case warrants further study, but it would seem that the individuals concerned often framed their predicament in terms of a generation (father-son) conflict.

## X. By Way of a Conclusion

As we announced in the opening paragraphs, our discussion of Paul van Ostaijen's *Occupied City*

and especially of its opening page aimed to demonstrate that it is more than worthwhile to reread the text against the backdrop of its historical context. With regard to its many references to contemporary popular entertainment especially, the growing body of knowledge concerning the production, distribution, and consumption of mass cultural products available in Belgium and Antwerp at the time should be taken into account in order to grasp a wealth of implications and connotations that would otherwise go unnoticed in Van Ostaijen's text.

As far as film is concerned, this knowledge can help us answer such questions as: what were the material forms cinema culture took at the time, and how did they evolve? What was the film offer on the eve of and during the war? How was it influenced by wartime circumstances, conflicting framings and regulations? What was its degree of success and who was in the audience? Which imaginaries were created by films and film genres, and what did they mean for contemporary audiences? Answering these questions allows us to gain a keener understanding as to the way references to the cinema culture of the era function in this central text in Van Ostaijen's oeuvre. Contrary to established opinion in literary studies, which advances that historicizing readings are often reductive and shallow, I would argue that the resulting understanding will be a richer and more complex one, as it makes us aware of allusions to facts, events, and debates in contemporary historical reality that would otherwise escape the reader's attention. I can only hope that the above rereading of the opening page of the "Dedication to Mr. Soandso" and my subsequent suggestions for a discussion of the cinematic references in the remainder of *Occupied City* will be seen as a case in point.

61. Patriotic songs exhorted young men to join the Belgian army, calling those whose who failed to do so "cowards and traitors" (BARBARA DERUYTTER, "The Layering of ...", p. 160).

62. SOPHIE DE SCHAEPDRIJVER, "No Country for Young Men...", p. 144. See also Id., "Shaping the Experience of Military Occupation: Ten Images", in INGA ROSSI-SCHRIMPF (ed.), *14/18 – Rupture or Continuity. Belgian Art Around World War I*, p. 52-53.

63. In this respect, see again the 1917 poem "To a Mother": the speaker addresses a mother whose son fell on the battlefield, telling her that the words "fatherland", "just cause", "honour and hero" are nothing but lies. (*Verzameld werk. Poëzie I*, p. 139-140). This pacifist-humanist text (and similar texts in Van Ostaijen's wartime poetry) can, for that matter, be read as being "in tune with the occupation government's stated aim to foster 'a desire for peace' (*Friedenssehnsucht*) in the occupied country" (DE SCHAEPDRIJVER, "No Country for Young Men...", p. 149). If this reading applies, parts of Van Ostaijen's 'humanitarian expressionist' poetry (1917-1918) can be reframed as – knowingly or not – aligning themselves with the aims of the occupation government's policies.

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