

THE MOVIE THEATRE IN OCCUPIED BELGIUM AT THE CROSSROADS OF DIFFERENT CULTURES OF SPECTACLE (1914-1918)

The case of Louvain Palace

- Leen Engelen -

Cinema was a very popular pastime during the war. In December 1917, war chroniclers Louis Gille, Alphonse Ooms, and Paul Delandsheere wrote "cinema has never been as successful as it is now [...] at this moment there are 140 working cinemas in the Brussels area [...] and three big ones are under construction in the city centre"¹. But how exactly were cinemas defined in this context? Research on film culture during the war has looked at these venues, evidently referred to as cinemas or movie theatres, as places where films were shown. This is of course true, but many other spectacles and forms of entertainment were presented and enjoyed there. Most of these venues had a strong focus on film, but there was also a wide variety of live acts performed on stage. In a movie theatre you could have a beer, grab a bite, or in some cases even bowl². In the interest of fully understanding not only film audiences, but also the position of film culture within a larger culture of spectacle that in itself was heavily impacted by the war, this article will explore the hybrid nature of spectacle in movie theatres under the occupation.

I. Introduction: Film Cultures in Belgium

During the First World War, cinema was an important form of entertainment for both civilians and military personnel¹. This was certainly the case in Belgium. Situated at the crossroads of Allied and Central Powers, Belgium consisted of an occupied territory, a front zone, and a small area of unoccupied land. Already known prior to the war for their savviness in popular entertainment, particularly in film, Belgian audiences continued to flock to movie theatres during the conflict⁴. Film culture was and is a multi-dimensional cultural phenomenon. Even when studied in the clearly delimited context of wartime Belgium, film culture does not present itself as univocal: it takes on different forms in different geographical and administrative areas (free Belgium, the front, the *Etappengebiet* (the occupied staging area behind the front zone), occupied Belgium under the German General Government, Flanders, Wallonia...) and is further contextualized socially, culturally, and politically. To cite an example: at the German managed Brussels cinema Panthéon (previously the Pathé cinema), the audience had a significantly differ-

ent cinema-going experience than the audience attending a screening in Cinema Zoologie in occupied Antwerp, or in Cinéma Mondain in Liège. The program varied as did the composition of the audience. One has to take into account many different factors when explaining these differences: transportation and communication networks; industry-related workflows and practices; official regulations (such as censorship, curfews, public assemblies, travel, language issues, the protection of minors, and public safety...). In addition, cultural tastes and habits, (perception of) social status and class-based ideas about war, patriotism, and duty played equal roles in creating the audience's experience⁵. Research on film culture during the war – including my own – tends to focus primarily on professional practices and film programs. Identifying patterns and major evolutions regarding the acceptance of German films, the impact of censorship, the adoption of the feature film as the main element in the film program, the (in)visibility of specific stars, etc...⁶. A typical film program in the 1910s was much more complex than what we're used to today. Before the breakthrough of the feature film in the mid to late 1910s, a program con-

1. "Le cinéma n'a jamais tant fait fureur. [...] Il y a en ce moment 140 cinémas en exploitation dans l'agglomération Bruxelloise (...) et trois grands cinémas sont en construction dans le centre." LOUIS GILLE, ALPHONSE OOMS, and PAUL DELANDSHEERE, *Cinquante mois d'occupation allemande*. Tôme III: 1917, Bruxelles, Librairie Albert Dewit, 1919, p. 564-65.

2. For reasons of clarity, I will refer to specific venues as 'movie theatres' or 'cinemas' when they advertise themselves as such. This does not mean however, that there were only films on their program.

3. See: MICHAEL HAMMOND, *The Big Show. British Cinema Culture and the Great War 1914-1918*, Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006; LESLIE MIDKIFF DEBAUCHE, *Reel Patriotism. The Movies and World War One*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997; KLAAS DE ZWAAN, *Projecties van een Wereldbrand. De receptie van de Eerste Wereldoorlog in de Nederlandse bioscopen (1914-1918)*, Utrecht, 2018; KAREL DIBBETS and BERT HOGENKAMP, *Film and the First World War*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam university press, 1995; NICHOLAS REEVES, *Official British film propaganda during the First World War*, London, Croom Helm, 1986; EMMA HANNA, "Putting the moral into morale: YMCA cinemas on the Western Front, 1914-1918", in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television: The Great War and the Moving Image* no. 4, 2015 (35), p. 615-630; WOLFGANG MÜHL-BENNINGHAUS, *Vom Augusterlebnis zur UFA-Gründung. Der deutsche Film im 1. Weltkrieg*, Berlin, Avinus Verlag, 2004.

4. EMILIE BECO, *La croisade entreprise contre les mauvais cinémas pendant la guerre*, Turnhout, Brepols, 1919); SOPHIE DE SCHAEPRDRIJVER, "Occupation, Propaganda and the Idea of Belgium", in AVIEL ROSHWALD and RICHARD STITES (eds.), *European Culture in the Great War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 267-294.

5. See: SOPHIE DE SCHAEPRDRIJVER, "Patriotic Distance", in UTE DANIEL et al. (eds.), *1914-1918 Online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, Berlin, Freie Universität Berlin, 2015.

6. GUIDO CONVENTS, "Cinema and German Politics in Occupied Belgium", in KAREL DIBBETS and BERT HOGENKAMP (eds.), *Film and the First World War*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 1995, p. 171-178; GUIDO CONVENTS, "Film en de Duitse inval en bezetting in België 1914-1918. Op welke wijze de overheid film als machtsinstrument ontwikkelde", in SERGE JAUMAIN et al. (eds.), *Une guerre totale? La Belgique dans la Première Guerre Mondiale. Nouvelles tendances de la recherche historique*, Bruxelles: Archives Générales du Royaume, 2005, p. 315-328; LEEN ENGELEN, "België verdeeld. Filmdistributie in bezet België (1914-1918)", in *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis (www.tmgonline.nl)* no. 1, 2016 (19); LEEN ENGELEN, 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. 631-655; 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* no. 3, 2016 (9), p.243-264.

sisted of a series of six to twelve short films from different genres compiled by either the distributor or the cinema manager. Comedies, dramas, actuality-, and documentary films, and often a newsreel were compiled to form an attractive program. When there was a feature film (also multiple-reel film) on the program, the number of short films decreased. It was not exceptional for film screenings to last two to three hours. More often than not, these programs did not only consist of films. Most of them had a strong focus on film, but there was also live music both during and between the films. This was customary as the films themselves were silent. This music was performed by a pianist, a small or larger cinema orchestra, or by invited soloists that either improvised or performed (adapted versions) of sheet music and well-known melodies. Certainly not always, but in many cases the film program was completed with acts by travelling showmen (called varieties or music-hall acts) who performed in-between films. In more than one case this resulted in a programming strategy that was more akin to the pre-war music-hall than to our contemporary conception of a film screening⁷. Typically, film historians have read these non-film parts of the program as side-phenomena. Although acknowledging the increasing presence of films on the program, scholars looking at music-halls or café-concerts tend to consider the films on the programs of these venues as side-phenomena or just a specific type of variety⁸. In this essay I want to take a different approach. In the interest of fully understanding how not only film audiences, but also film culture as part of a larger culture of spectacle was heavily impacted by the war, more attention needs to be paid to the hybrid nature of spectacle under the occupation. The cultural landscape as a whole was affected by the war, resulting in a shrinkage of the overall cultural program⁹. Through a case-

study of the Louvain Palace in occupied Leuven, I will explore how wartime cinemas functioned as hubs for different cultures of spectacle; how this impacted the managerial practices and decisions, performers business strategies, and audience perceptions; and how this was part of a more general hybridization of the popular entertainment landscape under the occupation. I will use two methodologies to assess these questions. First, I will look at the architectural complex and the archival files documenting the building to evaluate what the intentions of the theatre managers were and how they translated in the different iterations of the building plans. Second, I will look at the actual programming during the war and assess the presence of the film and variety elements on the program.

II. Setting the Stage: Going Out in Leuven

Leuven (Louvain) was a catholic university town located in Flanders. Economically the city prospered. The 19th century industrial revolution – with beer breweries and the textile and metal industries as local strengths – had led to an impressive growth of the population from 18,000 in the early 1800s to about 42,000 in 1914. Despite Leuven's location in Flanders, the city administration as well as the university were francophone. Along with a lively, predominantly francophone intellectual and student life, Leuven also had a vibrant amateur clubs scene. No less than 36 theatre clubs, a similar number of choirs and a significant number of orchestras, study circles, soccer, and cycling clubs were active. Many of these local leisure clubs – a high number of which were subsidized by the city – organised performances and events in Flemish¹⁰.

7. See: GUIDO CONVENTS, *Van kinetoscoop tot café-ciné. De eerste jaren van de film in België*, Leuven, Peeters, 2000, p. 221-90; EVELIEN JONCKHEERE, *Kijklust en sensatiezucht. Een geschiedenis van revue en variété*, Antwerpen, Meulenhoff-Manteau, 2009; EVELIEN JONCKHEERE, *Aandacht! Aandacht! Aandacht en vertrooiing in het Gentse Grand Théâtre, Café-concert en variététheater, 1880-1914*, Leuven, Leuven University Press, 2017, p. 108-52.

8. Research on music-hall and variety in the Belgian context is rather scarce. Ground-breaking work on the pre-war years has been done by Evelien Jonckheere (see note 7).

9. ULRICH TIEDAU, "De Duitse cultuurpolitiek in België tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog", in *Bijdragen tot de eigentijdse geschiedenis*, 2003 (11), p. 21-45; DE SCHAEFDRIJVER, *Occupation, Propaganda...*

10. JOKE BUIJS et al., *Herleven. Leuven na 1918*, Leuven, City of Leuven, 2018, p. 113-27.

In 1910, under new ownership, the longstanding and reputed Alhambra (previously Théâtre de Bériot) was the first to introduce, next to its theatre and music-hall program, a full film program¹¹. The venue continued to offer different types of programs on different days for several years. By mid-1914, no less than 9 venues were screening films in Leuven on a regular basis. In the final years of the belle époque, different types of cinemas had emerged in the city, catering to a diversity of audiences. In January 1913, the small Catholic cinema Patria opened its doors. With its wholesome and child-friendly program, it targeted the family audience. Local periodical *Journal des petites affiches* referred to the large number of cinemas in the city but welcomed the initiative:

“There already are lot of cinemas, some even say there are too many, nevertheless Patria is a timely initiative. The cinema is a wonderful invention, worthy to be seen. Now, without apostatizing other cinemas, many families and individuals don't want to go there because they fear they will be confronted with one thing or another that will harm children or the faint at heart, and one cannot disagree. The families and individuals who want to have fun and a good laugh will now have found what they want: Cinema Patria was established exactly with this in mind¹².”

The report shows that cinema was well on its way to overcome class-based prejudices and become an acceptable form of entertainment for families as well as the upper middle classes. The latter were, for the most part, the audience segment Alhambra targeted. Also in January 1913, it halted its music-hall shows in favour of extending its all-film programs¹³. Considering the big success of the music-hall program, this raised eyebrows:

“Everyone asks whether it is true that Mr. Degunst renounced his *spectacles-variétés*. It has never come to the mind of the director of the Alhambra to suppress his spectacles, but the public is in favour of cinema these days and Mr. Degunst sacrifices to the fad of the day. He takes advantage of the infatuation of the public for this type of spectacle to bring the most sensational and new films to the screen. This week his loyal patrons were assured of the exceptional quality of his programs. We will not discuss here the comfort of the venue and all the safeties it offers to the public¹⁴.”

On the eve of the Great War, cinema was indeed an established and popular form of entertainment in the city, increasingly successfully competing with other forms of stage entertainment and effectively reaching different social classes. No doubt, commercial interests were the deciding factor

11. The film program was initially provided by the French firm Pathé and was advertised under the name ‘Alhambra Cinéma Pathé’. As of the autumn of 1912, the contract with Pathé terminated and the owner, M. Degunst, continued the film program independently under the name of ‘(Cinéma) Alhambra’ in collaboration with the French firms Éclair and Gaumont. Cinema Pathé moved to the then recently opened Théâtre du Nord. (*Gazette de Louvain: Journal de Dimanche*, 21 October 1909, 16 April 1910, 28 May 1910, 1 September 1912).

12. “Zijn de cinema's al te talrijk in Leuven, zelfs reeds te talrijk zoo men zegt, toch komt Patria op zijn uur en wel van pas. De cinema is toch eene allerschoonste uitvinding en waardig om gezien te worden. Nu, zonder de andere cinemas te willen achtervallen, toch is het wel zeker dat vele huisgezinnen en personen er niet naar toe willen gaan uit vrees er al 't een of 't ander te zien voorstellen wat kwetsend is voor kinderen of gevoelige karakters, en men kan zulke personen toch geen ongelijk geven. De huisgezinnen en alle personen die zich in zekerheid willen vermaken en eens goed lachten, zullen nu gevonden hebben wat zij verlangen: Cinema Patria werd met dit doel tot stand gebracht.” (*Journal des petites affiches*, 5 January 1913).

13. *Journal des petites affiches*, 29 December 1912.

14. “On nous demande de partout s'il est vrai que M. Degunst a renoncé à ses spectacles-variétés. Il n'est jamais entré dans l'idée du directeur de l'Alhambra de supprimer ces spectacles; mais le goût du public étant au cinéma, M. Degunst sacrifie au goût du jour. Il profite de l'engouement du public pour ces sortes de spectacles pour faire défiler sur la toile du cinéma Alhambra les films les plus sensationnels, et les plus nouveaux. Cette semaine son fidèle public a pu s'apercevoir de la qualité exceptionnelle de ses programmes. Nous ne parlerons pas du confort de la salle et de toutes ses sécurités que celle-ci offre aux spectateurs.” (*Journal des petites affiches*, 5 January 1913)

for M. Degunst. With an average of four or five different live stage acts on each program, screening films was most likely much cheaper and less time-consuming¹⁵. Especially since Degunst was able to make an exclusive deal with French film distributor Gaumont, which delivered packaged film programs on a weekly basis.

Among Alhambra's competitors were the centrally located Théâtre du Nord near the station and the neighbourhood cinemas Royal (Bogaardenstraat), Casino (Volkspplaats), Casino d'Allemagne (Diestsestraat), La Bergère (Tiensestraat), Moderne (Brusselsestraat), Palace (Parkstraat), and the aforementioned Patria (also in the Bogaardenstraat).

During the German invasion of the city on 25-28 August 1914, the historic centre suffered heavy losses: 248 civilians died – most of them had been shot – and more than 2000 buildings were burned down. Like most of Belgium, the city remained under German control for the duration of the war. Among the buildings that were burned down there were the Municipal Theatre, the cultural venue Tafelrond (including a concert hall), as well as four movie theatres: Casino and Patria (both approximately 200 seats), Cinema Royal (230 seats), and Théâtre du Nord (the local Pathé theatre), seating 600¹⁶. No doubt their disappearance created a gap in the previously vibrant cultural life of the city. With four cinemas burned down, there were still four cinemas left in the historic city centre: three smaller theatres (with estaminets) seating 200-400 (Casino d'Allemagne, Bergère and Palace) and Alhambra, the oldest, biggest (seating 2500) and most modern theatre in town. The construction of

Louvain Palace (seating 850), a second luxurious venue, was well on its way in the summer of 1914.

As was usually the case in the aestival season, the summer of 1914 was slow for movie theatres in Louvain. The management of Alhambra did redecoration work and Patria took a summer break because of the heat and a badly functioning (though brand new) ventilation system¹⁷. In August the chaos caused by the mobilisation, the violent invasion and subsequent occupation also caused the remaining cinemas to close. Although the mayor and some of the elected aldermen were in place for most of the war, Leuven was de facto ruled by the occupying forces. While local authorities still tried to have their say, they mostly lost out in negotiations with the occupying regime. One of the many disputes in the ruling of Leuven was the organization and control of public life, including the (re-)opening of entertainment venues. While German authorities were strongly in favour of resuming business as usual, the city fiercely opposed reopening. Their arguments varied from an objection against people spending welfare money in cinemas to the protection of minors and public safety. This scenario played out in most occupied cities in Belgium, but the game was played exceptionally hard in Leuven, hampering the reopening of cinemas in comparison to a lot of other cities. Only in the spring of 1915, after much ado and an extensive correspondence about authorisations and safety regulations with the city as well as the occupying authorities, was Alhambra the first movie theatre to obtain permission to reopen. In the initial months, the venue mainly hosted fundraising classical music

15. "Décidément M. Degunst gâte particulièrement son public cette année. Les programmes s'annoncent de plus en plus fameux et rien n'arrête la direction pour faire débiter à l'Alhambra les artistes les plus connus et les plus coûteux." (In December 1912 it still sounded that "For sure Mr. Degunst spoiled his patrons this year. His programs are becoming more and more famous and the management relentlessly invites the most renown and expensive artists to the Alhambra." (*Journal des petites affiches*, 20 October 1912).

16. GUIDO CONVENTS, "Bioscopen in het Leuvense stadsbeeld 1910-1914; De Eerste Wereldoorlog en het bioskoopwezen in Leuven 1914-1918", in LEO VAN BUYTEN (ed.), *Film en fiets rond 1900: Moderne uitvindingen in de Leuvense samenleving* (Arca Lovaniensis artes atque historiae reserans documenta), Leuven, Vrienden Stedelijke Musea, 1981, p. 381-83.

17. Alhambra announces it will reopen on September 5 1914 (*Journal des petites affiches*, 28 June 1914), Patria announces it plans to reopen in the course of September (*Journal des petites affiches*, 26 July 1914).

concerts. After Alhambra reopened, the owners of the other cinemas also began filing requests for reopening¹⁸. This resulted time and again in administrative battles between local Belgian and German authorities. The city authorities were finally overruled by the German *Zivilverwaltung*. In the spring of 1916, Casino d'Allemagne and Palace were back in business and the brand-new Louvain Palace was ready to open its doors¹⁹.

In what follows I will focus on Louvain Palace, which I consider an example of the so-called picture palaces that emerged in the 1910s and were gradually able to set a standard for international film exhibition throughout the 1920s. In Belgium, despite a few early examples such as Pathé Palace in Brussels (1913) and indeed Louvain Palace in Leuven, this new type of purpose-built movie exhibition venue, characterized by an upscale of the number of seats and a general upgrade of the movie-going experience, only really took off after the war²⁰. In the mid-1910s however, Louvain Palace exemplified dreams about making cinema-going acceptable for all layers of society and consequently about the possibility of economically successful cinema exploitation.

III. Louvain Palace: What's the Plan?

The *Soc. An. Louvain-Palace* was founded in April 1914 by a group of local businessmen, annuitants and some investors from other cities steered by the local cinema entrepreneur Henri Gerbosch and

his partner Victor Vanden Plas²¹. The latter would become the manager. At this point the future still looked bright, construction work was about to start, and the opening was initially planned for September 1914²². This opening did not, however, go as smoothly as planned. While construction work may have started in the spring of 1914, the theatre's opening was delayed because of the war. Looking at the different iterations of the building plans submitted to the city of Leuven between April 1914 and the eventual opening of the theatre in April 1916 and the relevant correspondence, one can deduct how the owners of *the Soc. An. Louvain-Palace* gradually changed their plans from opening a movie theatre to opening a venue that would be used for different types of entertainment. Later we will see that this change was not a mere coincidence, but a result of the wartime circumstances. It is indeed – as stated by Timothy De Paepe – by looking at the architectural complex (the auditorium, public areas, backstage rooms, the façade...) as well as at contextualising archival documents that we can understand theatres as barometers of urban cultural life and learn about the worldview and intentions of those who were commissioning and building them²³.

Louvain Palace was located on the same central avenue connecting the city's railway station to the historic centre on which the Municipal Theatre was located. The necessary official permits to open the cinema were requested from the city council well before the war. In April 1914, a local newspaper announced the establishment of the *Soc. An.*

18. Leuven City Archive (Modern Archive), Représentations cinématographiques, *Alhambra (ancien Bériot)*, no. 11255; Convents, *Bioscopen in het Leuvense stadsbeeld...*

19. ENGELLEN, HAMMOND, and MIDKIFF DEBAUCHE, 'Snapshots': *Local Cinema Cultures...*

20. DANIEL BILTEREYST and PHILIPPE MEERS (eds.), *De verlichte stad. Een geschiedenis van bioscopen, filmvertoningen en filmcultuur in Vlaanderen*. Tiel: Lannoo Campus. For a comparative perspective on The Netherlands during the First World War, see: ANDRÉ VAN DER VELDEN and JUDITH THISSEN, "Spectacles of Conspicuous Consumption: Picture Palaces, War Profiteers and the Social Dynamics of Moviegoing in the Netherlands, 1914-1922", in *Film History: An international journal*, 2010 (4), p. 453-62.

21. Gerbosch had acted as a Pathé representative and was already involved in the nearby Théâtre du Nord.

22. The *Journal des petites affiches* (26 April 1914) lists the following associates: "1. M. Henri Gerbosch, entrepreneur de cinématographie de Louvain; 2. M. Victor Vandenplas (sic.), rentier, id.; 3. M. Constant Nys, industriel, id.; 4. M. Eugène (Nys), id.; 5. M. Alphonse Moedbeck, rentier, id.; 6. M. Jean Steppé, négociant de Bruxelles; 7. M. Adrien Carton, inspecteur d'assurances, Louvain; 8. M. Oscar Van Winckel, représentant de commerce, id.; 9. M. Joseph Sody, rentier, id.; 10 M. Alphonse Sody, représentant de commerce, id.; 11. M. Jules Vande Kerckhove, industriel, Gand; 12. M. Victor Renard, négociant, Louvain; 13. M. Etienne Costermans, boulanger, id."

23. TIMOTHY DE PAEPE, "Visualizing the Theatrical Past. The virtual reconstruction of Theatrical Heritage" in CHRISTEL STALPAERT and BRUNO FORMENT (eds.), *Theatrical Heritage. Challenges & Opportunities*, Leuven, Leuven University Press, 2015, p. 136-37.



Architectural plan of Louvain-Palace Brasserie Cinéma, April 1914. Source : Leuven City Archive (SAL).

Louvain-Palace with the intention to open a “Brasserie-Cinéma” “in all its forms”²⁴. The required permission was obtained in July 1914. The building plans which were submitted to (and approved by) the city council show a venue with a stage and an orchestra pit, a large parterre with fixed seats surrounded by *baignoires* and a *pourtour brasserie* (where people can have a drink while watching the stage/screen in the café-concert and music hall tradition) as well as an adjacent second foyer with a buffet. The latter could be accessed directly from the main entrance. The first floor is a horseshoe-shaped balcony with an amphitheatre (with tiered seats) in the back and galleries on both sides. The adjacent brasserie assured those patrons with cheaper tickets could also enjoy drinks²⁵. The opening was scheduled for September 1914. Due to the mobilisation, the occupation of the city and the subsequent closing down of the theatres in August and early September, the plans were suspended. Other than the compulsory annual meeting of the shareholders, the Soc. An. had no activities in 1914 and most of 1915. As of November 1915, the owners frantically tried to obtain permission to open the venue. In correspondence with the city, Louvain Palace is initially still described as a “brasserie-cinéma”, but the Soc. An. now apparently altered its intentions: “our goal is to organise concerts, film screenings, and theatre performances”²⁶. Within the (lengthy) correspondence, the venue is gradually more often referred to as “théâtre Louvain-Palace” or a “salle de spectacle”, sometimes (in administrative and technical documents) with the addition “including (...) a cinema projector”²⁷. The detailed seating plans submitted

in 1916 as part of the authorization process refer to the venue as “Théâtre Louvain-Palace” as well as “brasserie-cinéma Louvain-Palace”. Looking at these blueprints, nothing much seems to have changed and the name of “brasserie-cinéma” still seems absolutely adequate as both functions are still present and seem of equal importance²⁸. In the basement plan however, one can see that a series of ten small dressing rooms were to be built below the stage. We can assume this means the management also planned to make use of them to host live performances. We cannot compare this plan dating from 1916 to the plans submitted in 1914, because there’s no blueprint of the basement in the archival file. Yet, a closer look at the programs will show a transformation had indeed started to take place (cf. *infra*).

In the course of the theatre’s wartime days some changes were made to the interior. In October 1916 a new high-quality screen was installed, indicating the importance of filmed entertainment on the program²⁹. In January 1918, the “pourtour brasserie” (where the visibility of the stage/screen must have been limited) was largely replaced with a fixed seating area (tiered stalls). This change may indicate the decreasing importance of the *brasserie* as well as an optimisation of the total seating capacity. A few months later, in July 1918, a bowling alley with three lanes was added in the back of the in-house brasserie on the ground floor³⁰. This indicates again, Louvain Palace was diversifying and tried to offer a broader variety of pastimes to its customers while simultaneously making maximum use of the infrastructure.

24. *Journal de petites affiches*, 26 April 1914.

25. City Archive Leuven. (Modern Archive), Construction Dossier, *Statiestraat 78* (1914, 1916, 1933).

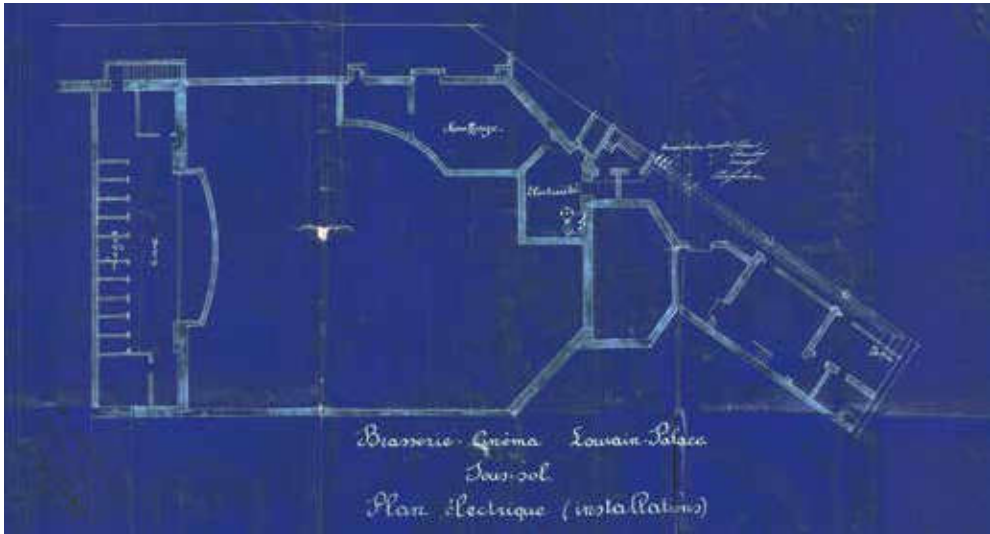
26. “notre but serait d’y donner des concerts, des représentations cinématographiques ou théâtrales” (City Archive Leuven. (Modern Archive), Représentations cinématographiques, *Louvain Palace/Forum*, no. 11256).

27. “comportant (...) un appareil de projections cinématographiques” (City Archive Leuven. (Modern Archive), Représentations cinématographiques, *Louvain Palace/Forum*, no. 11256).

28. Next to the parterre, the gallery and the amphitheatre with ample seating capacity, the bar was an important part of Louvain Palace with a “pourtour”, a regular café with a buffet, and a foyer.

29. “grande nouveauté: projections sur écran “LUMINA” dont Louvain Palace seul a l’avantage. (*Journal des petites affiches*, 8 October 1916.) In 1918 an article on LUMINA is published in *La Belgique*: “À tous ces avantages importants que présente le nouvel Ecran LUMINA de donner des projections plus belles, sans fatigue pour les yeux, sans nuisances présentes et futures pour l’appareil oculaire, il faut ajouter la suppression virtuelle des dangers d’incendie. La haute température dans la cabine de l’opérateur étant diminuée de moitié par le prodigieux rendement de l’Ecran, les causes d’incendie, susceptibles de se propager dans la salle, disparaissent.” (“Cinéma. Merveilleuse invention belge LUMINA”, *La Belgique*, 9 March 1918).

30. City Archive Leuven. (Modern Archive), Représentations cinématographiques, *Louvain Palace/Forum*, no. 11256, ‘project de modifications du pourtour et installation de stalles (28 January 1918)’.



Architectural plan of Louvain-Palace, basement, May 1916. Source : Leuven City Archive (SAL).

After the war, Louvain Palace explicitly presented itself as a theatre. With the Municipal Theatre still in ruins, the city found itself without a proper playhouse and Louvain Palace intended to continue filling this gap. As things slowly began returning to normal, this hybridity caused new problems with the city council. It turned out Louvain Palace was authorized as a movie theatre and not as a permanent theatre as such: “the room constructed for film screenings does not meet all the requirements to be authorized as a permanent theatre. As a consequence, the theatre plays can only temporarily be authorized by exception”³¹.

When analysing this terminology and the nature of the venue, one must keep in mind that the two first years of the existence of the *Soc. An. Louvain-Palace*, no public events took place at Louvain Palace. No less than two years passed between the initial plan to build a new cinema and the actual opening of Louvain Palace. The grand opening night was scheduled for 30 April 1916. A report about the evening in the local press clearly stated that “this original venue, of a kind we have never seen before, conceived especially for the big screen, nevertheless meets all the requirements to be considered an ideal theatre”³². In a way, the article made clear that Louvain Palace would not only be a movie theatre, as most *Louvanistes* may have thought, but also a theatre. In addition, the article also mentions the spacious stage and the safe and comfortable atmosphere offered by Louvain Palace, no doubt important issues for the theatre-loving bourgeoisie.

Louvain Palace’s versatile character was further proved by the inaugural program. The long-awaited opening was an important society event with a patriotic undertone. Surprisingly, there were no films on the program. The management had opted for a concert with classical music from (mostly) Belgian composers (Peter Benoit, Emile Mathieu, Hendrik Waelput, and Léon Dubois) performed by well-known musicians and vocalists, associated with both local and foreign conservatories of music. The program was hailed by local newspapers. The new venue itself received a lot of attention as well. The interior decoration (by Henri Driesmans from Brussels) was praised, especially the ornamentation whereof “the principal motif is the rose, the favourite flower of our beloved queen Elisabeth and the frieze alongside the ceiling is made of the monogram of Albert.” This may indicate that the decoration had been designed recently, possibly even postdating the occupation of the city in late August 1914, when popular patriotic and royalist feelings peaked. The evening was considered “a grand manifestation... of beauty” that made the audience forget, for a few hours, “the melancholy of the ruins of its devastated city.” The evening’s revenue was donated to *L’oeuvre du secours discret de Louvain*, a charity offering help to the local impoverished petty bourgeoisie³³. The mixture of an earnest musical program with a patriotic charity event was a winning combination. The standing of the opening concert, both on the musical and on the moral level, was played out in the press³⁴. Nevertheless, it turned out not to be entirely representative of what was to follow.

31. “la salle construite pour des représentations cinématographiques ne réalise pas toutes les prescriptions imposées aux théâtres permanents. En conséquence les représentations théâtrales ne pourront y être autorisées qu’à titre précaire et exceptionnel.” City Archive Leuven. (Modern Archive), Représentations cinématographiques, *Louvain Palace/Forum*, no. 11256, ‘letter from M. Vanden Plas to M. l’inspecteur du travail’, 14 February 1919.

32. “cet établissement original, inédit, conçu spécialement pour l’écran répond, malgré, à toutes les réformes proposés pour le théâtre ‘ideal’.” *Journal des petites affiches*, 23 April 1916.

33. *Journal des petites affiches*, 23 April 1916, 7 May 1916.

34. City Archive Leuven. (Modern Archive), Représentations cinématographiques, *Louvain Palace/Forum*, no. 11256. Letter from Van Winckel/Louvain Palace to the Burgomaster and the Aldermen of the City, 25 November 1915. Initially the plan was to donate the revenue to a charity supporting Belgian PoWs. The city council was not impressed and refused the authorization, stating that the prisoners or war were currently helped by many charities already and were not relying on festivities such as the one proposed by Louvain Palace. (‘response letter from the City Council to M. Van Winckel, 1 December 1915’). This refusal delayed the opening of Louvain Palace with a few months (until they were overruled by the *German Zivilverwaltung*).

IV. On the Screen, on the Stage

Broadly speaking two major types of events took place at Louvain Palace: film nights on the one hand and operetta and theatre nights on the other hand. The film nights were organised by the management of Louvain Palace and advertised as such in the local press. The theatre evenings were mostly organised by third parties such as local theatre troupes or cultural clubs that rented the venue. The theatre program of Louvain Palace was usually announced in the theatre or entertainment section (“Tooneel” or “vermakelijkheden”) of the local press and the name of the venue was then often referred to as “Schouwburg Louvain-Palace”. In 1917 and 1918 Louvain Palace was one of the recurring venues for *Het Vlaamsch Tooneel* (The Flemish Theatre), the constantly touring theatre troupe of the illustrious Alhambra theatre in Brussels³⁵. The troupe operated under the supervision of Flemish activist Adolf Clauwaert and made the propagation of Flemish-language theatre its primary mission³⁶. On the program were repertoire operettas and musical theatre in Flemish such as *De Zwans-Baron*, *Het lustige weewtje* (an operetta in three parts from V. Léon and Leo Stein), *De lustige boer* (Victor Léon and Leo Fall), *De aangebrande hutspot* (August Hendrickx, 1893) or *Kuische Barbara* (operetta by Oscar Nedball). These performances were mainly announced in the Flemish pro-German press. In order to support its pro-Flemish policies aimed at winning over the Flemish for the German side – the so-called *Flamenpolitik* – the German occupying regime had actively initiated and supported a series of Flemish papers and periodicals³⁷. No wonder the Flemish performances of *Het Vlaamsch Tooneel* earned

most critical acclaim from these publications. They were praised for their cultural importance as well as their high production values. Like most of the Flemish press referred to above, the activist paper *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws* was supported by the occupying regime. Despite its benevolence towards this type of theatre and favourable reviews of the performances by *Het Vlaamsch Tooneel* in Louvain Palace, the militant Flemish press reproached Louvain Palace its negligence towards the Flemish Case on several occasions. In June 1916, a lengthy article was published that raged against the anti-Flemish character of Louvain Palace, claiming that the “greedy managers” belonged to the French speaking aristocracy; and that in the music program, the audience was encouraged to sing-along in French. The fury of the author was also targeted at the city council which remained unresponsive to his complaints while “the nasty seed of Frenchification is sown” and the “degeneration of our beloved Flemish People” is encouraged³⁸. In January 1917 a contributor to *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws* complained again that the film program of Louvain Palace was now only announced in French: “did the managers maybe forget all the Flemish they managed to learn with such effort? Or do they deem it unnecessary to make announcements, such as the starting time etc., in the only language that’s comprehensible for 8/10 of their average audience member³⁹?” These attacks were most likely not due to spontaneous pro-Flemish enthusiasm, but rather pointed at an orchestrated propaganda effort in the pro-German Flemish press to fire up the *Flamenpolitik* and to force businesses to take sides. The criticism in the Flemish press is in sharp contrast with the generally very positive reviews

35. Because of its British ownership the Alhambra was sequestered by the German occupier in 1914. It was then rented out to Clauwaert who started with *Het Vlaamsch Tooneel* in December 1915. On 20 January 1918, the Alhambra was the décor of the proclamation of Flemish independence by the Activist Raad van Vlaanderen. See: ALBERT (AELBRECHT) PEERENBOOM and LUC VANDEWEYER, “Alhambra”, in *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, Tielt, Lannoo, 1998, p. 264-265; LIONEL RENIEU, *Histoire des théâtres de Bruxelles depuis leur origine jusqu’à ce jour*, Bruxelles: Editions Culture et Civilisation, 1924, p. 163.

36. ALBERT PEERENBOOM and FRANZ DENYS, “Clauwaert Adolf”, in *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, Tielt, Lannoo, 1998, p. 738; MANU VAN DER AA, *Tatave! Paul-Gustave Van Hecke. Kunstpaus-modekoning-salonsocialist*, Tielt, Lannoo.

37. For example *Het Tooneel* (a Flemish cultural weekly published in Antwerp), *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws* (an activist liberal Flemish journal published in Antwerp), *Vlaamsch Leven* (a Flemish illustrated weekly published in Brussels) and *De Vlam* (a Flemish socialist weekly published in Brussels).

38. *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, 29 June 1916.

39. *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, 10 January 1917.

Het Vlaamsche Nieuws published on the theatre plays by *Het Vlaamsch Tooneel* programmed in Louvain Palace. This may indicate Louvain Palace catered to (politically) different audience groups and that the performances of *Het Vlaamsch Tooneel* were aimed at (and attended by) a different crowd than their self-organised film programs.

A week after its opening (7 May 1916), Louvain Palace started with a regular film program. There were no less than seven different seating options with ticket prices ranging from 40 cents on the *galérie* to 1.50 fr. in the *baignoires*⁴⁰. This wide range of categories ensured separated access, seating, and drinking areas for patrons from different social and economic classes. On average, there were four film screenings a week: two on Sunday (matinee and evening) and one on Monday and Thursday night respectively⁴¹. As of 1917, an additional educational matinee was organised for school children on Thursday afternoons. The films screened in Louvain Palace were accompanied by a small orchestra conducted by A. Bracké, a popular violin player and tutor at the local conservatory of music. The 'film program' alternated films and variety acts. It usually included one or two longer dramas (two to five and exceptionally seven reels), a documentary (one reel) and one or more short comedies. Newsreels were not in the program. Two to four other entertainments (songs, acrobat acts, poems, clowns...) were integrated into the program. While there was some variation in format in the first weeks, this type of programming quickly became the standard format of the film nights. The films and variety acts were announced in the same program (but in two separately num-

bered sections) in the press. The varieties were referred to as *entr'actes* ("tusschenspelen"), suggesting indeed they were not the main point of attraction on the program. Throughout the war, the share of films (considering the number of reels, not necessarily the number of titles) gradually grew to the disadvantage of the variety program, which was bit by bit reduced.

A similar programming strategy was found in the program of Louvain Palace's main competitor, Alhambra. As noted above, Alhambra had opted for film-only programs in alternation with theatre and revue evenings well before the war. Over the years and through many entertainment fads and fashions, Alhambra had developed a loyal audience. Although Alhambra received a German permission to re-open early on (February 1915), the resumption of its regular program got off to a rough start⁴². Besides some charity concerts, it seems to have remained remarkably quiet in Alhambra until at least the end of 1915. A few weeks into the new year, Alhambra geared up and announced an upgrade to its film program: an orchestra would now be accompanying the films and a few musical *entr'actes* would be added to the program. Barely two weeks later, they announced their program under the title "Alhambra. Music-hall-Cinéma" and opted for a balanced program of variety numbers and films⁴³. From then on, they continued with mixed film and variety programs, which in fact catapulted the Leuven audiences back in time to Alhambra's music-hall days. On non-film days, the venue was rented out to local associations and cultural circles that organised concerts or theatre performances⁴⁴.

40. Baignoires (1,50 fr.); fauteuils (1 fr.); parquet (0,75 fr.); pourtour, (0,60 fr.); parterre, (0,50 fr.); amphithéâtre, (0,50 fr.) and the *galérie* (0,40 fr.).

41. Throughout the war, some changes in the program were introduced: a children's film matinee on Thursday (with educational films); a theatre or operetta night on Tuesday; occasionally the Thursday evening film screening was replaced with a play.

42. The reason for this was among others that local authorities and the occupation regime went against each other in their quest to (not) reopen the theatres in Leuven. See: GUIDO CONVENTS, *De komst en vestiging van de kinematografie...*, p. 381-88.

43. Remarkably they initially announced the films rather as an addition to the variety program than as the main element. *Journal des petites affiches*, 27 February 1916 and 12 March 1915.

44. In May 1916 a performance by *Het Vlaamsch Tooneel* took place at Alhambra. This performance of *De Zwans-Baron* seems to have been the only time the Clauwaert troupe performed there. As of November 1917, the performances by *Het Vlaamsch Tooneel* took place at Louvain Palace, including another performance of *De Zwans-Baron*. (*Journal des petites affiches*, 23 April 1916, 21 May 1916).

As of mid-1916 the film and music-hall program of the Alhambra was no longer published in the local press⁴⁵. Occasional charity concerts are only advertised few and far between. It is unclear whether Alhambra was boycotted by the press or had stopped its film-and music-hall program altogether. Considering the fact *Het Vlaamsch Tooneel* as of 1917 performed at Louvain Palace instead of Alhambra where it had previously organised successful performances, a hypothesis might be the Alhambra management fell out of grace from the occupying regime.

In what follows, I will briefly turn my attention to the film programming and exhibition strategies of Louvain Palace. In the next section I will then look in more detail at the variety acts on the program.

V. On the Screen

As elsewhere in occupied Belgium, scarcity on the distribution market was a serious challenge for exhibitors in Louvain⁴⁶. In October 1914, the occupation regime had established censorship for all media printed and distributed in Belgium: texts, pictures, sheet music, theatre plays, newspapers, and films. In November 1914, another German decree ordered that any communication or work of art not explicitly authorised was now automatically banned⁴⁷. Consequently, before appearing on screen, every film (play, lantern projection,

operetta...) now had to be evaluated by a German censor⁴⁸. At this point, censorship was political and commercial, rather than moral⁴⁹. Most cinemas were still closed in the autumn of 1914 and in an environment of official objections and sentiments of patriotic decency, the new censorship regulations did not exactly encourage them to reopen quickly. When cinemas gradually reopened in the spring of 1915, Germany had already tightened its grip on the film distribution market: every film available in occupied Belgium had to obtain a seal of approval from the German censor and importing films other than German was next to impossible. Consequently, Germany had complete control over the film titles circulating in Belgium⁵⁰. An obligation to show the films with Flemish language intertitles (as of October 1915), created an additional bottleneck in film availability. Exhibitors had no other choice at this point other than repeatedly rehashing pre-war German-approved films into new programs. This was also the case in Louvain Palace. Especially in the first year, 1916, older French and Italian series (e.g., *Fantômas*, *Polycarpe*, *KriKri*), dramas, and documentaries were steady components of their film program⁵¹. These films had been circulating in Belgium since 1912 or 1913 and most of them had already been screened throughout the country on several occasions⁵². While these French and Italian productions had been introduced on the Belgian market before the war, they were for the largest part considered politically harmless and thus approved. A refusal of all films from enemy

45. Its program is no longer advertised in the censored *Journal des petites affiches* as it used to be, but also in the only other local paper *De Gazet van Leuven*, which was published with German support as of December 1916, the Alhambra is never even mentioned.

46. For a more elaborate evaluation of the film programming and exhibition strategies of movie theatres in Louvain, see: ENGELEN, HAMMOND, and MIDKIFF DEBAUCHE, 'Snapshots': *Local Cinema Cultures*...

47. Decree of 13 October 1914 and Decree of 4 November 1914. In: JACQUES PIRENNE and MAURICE VAUTHIER, *La législation et l'administration allemandes en Belgique*, Paris, Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1925, p. 138-40.

48. MICHAEL AMARA and HUBERT ROLAND, eds., *Gouverner en Belgique occupée: Oscar von der Lancken-Wakenitz – Rapports d'activité 1915-1918. Édition critique*, Brussels-Bern, P.I.E.-Peter Lang, 2004, p. 73.

49. BECO, *La croisade entreprise contre...*, p. 72.

50. AMARA and ROLAND, *Gouverner en Belgique occupée...*, p. 355; ENGELEN, *België verdeeld...*

51. Even the films that are advertised as being 'special' or 'exceptional' predate the war (e.g. *Juve contre Fantômas*, 1913; *La destruction de Carthage*, 1914). The complete *Fantômas* series, for example, was screened in Alhambra in June 1914. *Journal des petites affiches*, 7 June 1914.

52. Before the war, the complexity of the multi-lingual and culturally diverse Belgian film market had initially discouraged new film exporting countries such as the United States to enter it, leaving it to major European film exporting countries such as France, Italy, Germany, and Scandinavian countries.

countries France and Italy (as of March 1915) by the German censors, would mean entirely bleeding the film supply chain to death. This needed to be avoided, were the cinemas to flourish. Because of the relatively short length of most of these pre-war films, the management needed at least five or six film titles for each program, providing that they also included variety acts to complete the program. Although in the months preceding the war, more and more medium-length and feature films, were programmed in Leuven (e.g., Pathé's 1914 *Le chevalier de Maison-Rouge* by Albert Capellani or Louis Feuillade's Fantômas drama *Le mort qui tue*, 1913), this trend was, however, suppressed during the war due to the lack of available new films. When possible, Louvain Palace did try to beat the competition with prestigious Italian or French feature films such as *Quo Vadis* (Guazzoni, 1914) or the popular Jules Verne adaptation *Les enfants du capitaine Grant* (1914) that had been released just before the war broke out. The most prestigious films on the program, however, were recent German or Danish (Nordisk) feature films which gradually conquered the Belgian market. In the course of 1917, Germany further tightened its control over the Belgian film market. Most German films were strictly entertainment. In February 1918, Louvain Palace programmed Lubitsch's *Schuhpalast Pinkus* (1917) and from May till July, the *Homunculus* series (1916-1917, Otto Rippert) was screened. One of the more remarkable films was the Richard Oswald's *Fiat Lux. Es Werde Licht* (1917). The first part of this educational film series on hygiene and venereal diseases was screened in Louvain Palace on 31 December 1917 and 1 January 1918. Throughout the spring of 1918, the sequels were promoted as "very educational and of exalted morality". These films were met with great approval

by the press. It is not unlikely that their success was a consequence of their sensationalist topic rather than their educational and moral value. The German origin of the films was seldom mentioned⁵³. Outright German propaganda films were only rarely shown and always as part of special "war film programs"⁵⁴. In November and December 1917, a series of such programs was organised in Louvain Palace. These evenings were hosted by the Brussels' Cinema Panthéon (then sequestered by the Germans) who rented out Louvain Palace on Saturday nights to screen war films. Among the films screened were Richard Oswald's *Seeschlacht* (1917) and the German answer to *The Battle of the Somme* (1916), *Bei unseren Helden an der Somme* (1917), produced by the German propaganda organisation Bild-und Filmamt.

Quite a few pre-war Danish films, such as August Bloms feature film *Atlantis* (1913), were shown in Louvain Palace in 1916 and 1917. Because of its close relationship with Germany, the Danish Nordisk company maintained a privileged position in the Belgian market⁵⁵. In the spring of 1917, several theatres in Belgium announced a batch of new films from Nordisk. The arrival of a series of new high-quality feature films on the market caused quite a stir among cinema owners who saw their chance to beat the competition with these attractive wares. After being screened in Antwerp, Liège, and Brussels, these films also reached Leuven. *Gift pilen (La flèche empoisonnée)*, 1917, *Maharadjahens yndlingshustru (La favorite du Maharadja)*, 1917, and *Mumiens halsbaand (Het halsnoer der mummie)*, 1916) for instance, were screened exclusively in Louvain Palace in the summer and autumn of 1918. The management of Louvain Palace, under very difficult circum-

53. *Journal des petites affiches*, 30 December 1917; *idem.*, 6 January 1918, *idem.*; 7 April 1918. A longer review is published in *Journal des petites affiches*, 14 April 1918.

54. *Journal des petites affiches*, 18 November 1917, 16 December 1917.

55. Ole Olsen, founder and general manager of Nordisk, Denmark's biggest film production and distribution company, had adopted a strategy of expansion as early as the end of August 1914. Profiting from the country's neutrality, the company not only pushed its film production but also its distribution in belligerent countries on both sides. Much to the discontent of its German competitors, Nordisk was quite successful. In the course of 1917, it strengthened its ties with the German film industry, which led to a forced buy-out of its German assets by UFA in January 1918. ISAK THORSEN, "Nordisk Films Kompagni will now become the biggest in the world", in *Film History*, no. 4, 2010 (22); ISAK THORSEN, *Nordisk Films Kompagni 1906-1924. The Rise and Fall of the Polar Bear* (KINtop. Studies in Early Cinema), London, John Libbey Publishing, 2017, p. 157-90.

CINEMA PANTHEON

PROGRAMME

van Vrijdag 29 September
tot Donderdag 5 October.

du Vendredi 29 Septembre
au Jeudi 5 Octobre.



PRIJS
PRIX : 25 Centimes



Imp. Litho., 61. rue de l'Olivier, Schaerbeek.

Program of the Brussels Cinema Panthéon, 29 September - 5 October 1916. Source : private collection Leen Engelen.

stances, tried its best to put together an interesting film program with, when possible, recent multiple reel films. They depended on heavily obstructed commercial distribution networks and as of 1917 increasingly on additional German and Danish channels. While Louvain Palace flourished, with new German and Danish feature films on the program week after week, a special German film program in 1917 and performances by *Het Vlaamsch Tooneel*, the competition seemed to falter. Throughout the war film remained an important part of the program, but even Louvain Palace could not do without live music, dance, acrobatic, and comedy acts to complete its program.

VI. On the Stage

In the first weeks after its opening, the film program at Louvain Palace consisted of a variety of short films alternated with performances by classical musicians, *diseurs* and *diseuses*, and an occasional classical dancer. These types of *entr'actes* can be qualified as more high-brow entertainment. However, in the course of a few weeks, the variety of the interludes was broadened: jugglers, contortionists, clowns, ventriloquists, popular singers, fakirs, and cyclo-acrobats took the stage. Every week two to three different performers were contracted, performing an average of three shows (two on Sunday, one on Monday). These artists usually travelled by train and stayed overnight in a local guesthouse. To put their program together, Louvain Palace worked together with several different artists and agencies, including the Brussels' Office Théâtral International of Adolphe Brachart⁵⁶. On Thurs-

days, there was a film only program, repeating (in 1916) the Sunday and Monday program with some additional films or (in 1917 and 1918) offering a completely new film program. There were roughly two categories of performers lining up in Louvain Palace: professional musicians (previously) attached to conservatories or orchestras and travelling performers with a circus or variety background. The first category was well represented in the first weeks, but later only performed occasionally in Louvain Palace. Coloratura soprano Mme Potoms-Crabbé, a class of 1909 Royal Conservatory of Music (Brussels) graduate, for example, performed in Louvain Palace on two occasions⁵⁷. In July 1916 she was announced as "Mme. Potoms-Crabbé, professeur de chant et piano, dans son répertoire" (professor of singing and piano, and her repertoire) and in October of the same year as "Mme Potoms, cantatrice Flamande" (Flemish singer)⁵⁸. The sources don't reveal exactly what was included in her repertory⁵⁹. In both instances, there were three films (a multiple reel drama, a comedy, and a documentary) and two additional variety performances (jugglers and equilibrists) on the program. Performing in a music-hall, cinema, or café-concert was not an obvious choice for serious musicians. This was certainly also the case for Mme. Potoms who had won several singing contests and performed on important Belgian musical stages before the war. Classical music performances in these venues were frowned upon by the cultural elite. In his diary, the (class conscious and patriotic) Flemish author Karel Van de Woestijne, for example, rants against a group of professional musicians performing classical music in a Brussels' *café-chantant*:

56. ADOLPHE BRACHART, *Guide des artistes de music-hall*, Bruxelles, Editions de l'Envers du théâtre, 1916.

57. Relatively little is known about this singer. She graduated from the Royal Conservatory of Music in Brussels in 1909 (Premier Prix avec distinction). Before the war, she was attached to La Monnaie in Brussels and Het Kursaal in Ostend. She occasionally performed on other stages, such as the concert hall of the Zoological Society in Antwerp. She was also active as a teacher at the Music Academy in Molenbeek. Songs and duets by composers such as Meyerbeer, Massenet and Verdi were part of her regular repertoire. After the war, she was one of the regular soloists singing with the Brussels' choir *Les Artisans Réunis*. In the 1920s she also performed in France and Switzerland. This information is mainly retrieved from Belgian newspapers digitized via Belgica Press and the Retrospective Index to Music Periodicals (RIPM). Many thanks to Jan Dewilde for referring me to RIPM.

58. *Journal des petites affiches*, 30 July 1916, 1 October 1916.

59. The mention that she was a Flemish singer suggests she also sang in Flemish. This is a feature that may have been politically interesting at that point in time.

“Then something strange happened. Something we regretted and that was outright tragic: a café-chantant announced, in between the *variété* items (these were of the more ‘serious’ kind) the performance, afternoon after afternoon, of a Beethoven septet performed by professors of the Royal Conservatory of Music in Brussels, most of them soloists at the orchestra of the *Muntschouwburg*, some of them have an international reputation. In that same environment, where one wouldn’t look for them in normal circumstances; before an unworthy audience that usually didn’t visit this particular venue except for entertainments of a different kind, the same esteemed artists performed, soon thereafter, chamber music from Mozart and Saint-Saëns. (...)”⁶⁰.

At this point, numerous musicians such as Mme. Potoms found themselves out of work. Many music societies and orchestras had suspended their performances and music schools were closed. New opportunities offered by German orchestras or opera companies may have partially compensated this, but joining these was not an evident option or opportunity for everyone⁶¹. Mme. Potoms occasionally performed in music-halls⁶² in the summer of 1916 and 1917 with a classical repertoire and sang at a few charity concerts.

Considering the disparate traces in the newspaper archives it is improbable that she performed in public on a regular basis. As a singer previously connected to the prestigious Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels and Kursaal in Ostend, she most likely did not have the habit of doing small gigs on the side in cinema, music-hall, or revue circles⁶³.

For performers with a background in the circus, the music-hall or as travelling showmen performing at fairs, this was a different story. Travelling was part and parcel of their job. War or no war, Brussels’ juggler August Declercq (1884-1947), for example, had a family business to run. During the war Declercq and his children were contracted over 50 times by a dozen different venues throughout the country⁶⁴. Between October 1915 and November 1918, they performed in cinemas, café-concerts, and music-halls in among other places Antwerp, Liège, Ghent, Namur, Hasselt, and Brussels. Starting as Les Declercq(s) (*équilibristes/acrobates sur perche*) in October 1915, they multiplied their acts in 1916 under the name of Otago-Bill (pantomime, “an abduction of a cowboy by the redskins, a juggling scene, acrobatics, equilibrists, and cyclists”)⁶⁵ and as of the autumn of 1916 under the name of Les Guerros’s (an athletic juggling act together with another performer called Gerros)⁶⁶. As soon as the war ended,

60. “Toen gebeurde iets vreemds. Iets dat wij jammer vonden en dat niet veel minder dan tragisch was: een café chantant kondigde, tusschen variété-nummers in (deze behoorden trouwens tot het ‘ernstige’ genre), de uitvoering aan, middag aan middag, van een septet van Beethoven door professoren van het Koninklijk Conservatorium te Brussel, meest allen solisten van het Muntchouwburg-orkest, waaronder er zijn die ook buiten de Belgische grenzen vermaardheid genieten. In dezelfde omgeving, waar men ze anders zeker niet zoeken zou; voor een publiek dat in gewonen tijd althans-hunner nu juist niet waardig was en bewust lokaal doorgaans niet bezocht dan voor genietingen van een ander soort, voerden, kort daarop, dezelfde hoogstaande artiesten kamermuziek uit van Mozart en van Saint-Saëns. En wij, die ons eerst uit afkeer, daarna uit waardigheid, van muziek hadden onthouden, wij vonden het dood-jammer, zoo voor de meesterstukken, die men dáár ten gehore bracht, als voor dezen, die het deden, die tot zoiets hadden kunnen besluiten.” Entry for 9 April 1915 in: KAREL VAN DE WOESTIJNE, *Verzameld werk. Deel 8. Het dagelijksch brood II. Dagboeken en brieven over den oorlog 1914-1918*, Bussum, 1950, p. 383-86.

61. See the contributions of Erik Baeck and Hedwige Baeck-Schilders elsewhere in this issue.

62. Eden and Folies-Bergère (both in Antwerp) and Kursaal in Brussels.

63. In the press Mme Potoms is often linked to La Monnaie. She is however not listed as a soloist in the program of La Monnaie, so she may have been a member of the choir. La Monnaie reopens in December 1918. ARTHUR DE GERS, *Théâtre royal de la Monnaie 1856-1923 toutes les troupes, toutes les créations, tous les artistes en représentation*, Bruxelles, 1924.

64. As a performance engagement we count a series of performances in the same venue on consecutive dates. In Antwerp they performed in three venues (Odéon, Cinéma Albert and Alhambra) who were owned by the same person (Henry Dirks). We count each venue as a separate performance engagement.

65. « Un enlèvement d’un cowboy par les peaux-rouge, scène de jongleurs, acrobatie, équilibristes et cyclistes ».

66. I wish to thank André De Poorter for sharing his incredible knowledge on the history of the circus in general and more specific on the Otago Bill acts.



Picture postcard promoting a Wild West performance of the Otago Bill troupe. Source : private collection Leen Engelen.

they found a home in the circus where seasonal contracts (instead of per performance contracts) were customary.

During the war, the Otago Bill troupe was a repeated guest at Louvain Palace. Since they offered different acts under different names, the family could travel together and perform twice on the same program. On 20 and 21 August 1916, they performed as “Les Ottages”⁶⁷ with an acrobatic equilibrist act (“power equilibrists”). On the same bill, figured a juggling and canon act (“jugglers with a canon”) by “Les Ottages-Bill”. In November the family returned to Louvain Palace: on 26 November, they performed as “Ottages” with a juggling and balance act only to return the next day as “Les Declercos” with a similar juggling and balance act. On both days, “Les Guerro’s” performed as well with a gladiator act. On 9 and 10 December 1917, “Otago Bill” performed in a Far-West act. On the same bill we find again “Les Declercos” with a juggling and balance act⁶⁸.

The situation of this type of artists was complex. Those who had worked in the circus and weren’t called to arms found themselves unemployed now that Belgian circuses had been closed down.⁶⁹ Some permanent venues, such as the Cirque Royal in Brussels, were used as depot for the Commission for Relief and remained out of business throughout the war⁷⁰. Being unable to move around freely, the travelling circuses halted

their performances. One or two semi-permanent circuses stayed in business for a limited time. The circus Friscot (which used to be a travelling circus) opened a more or less permanent venue on the Place de Plaine in Anderlecht in February 1915 under the name of *Le Nouveau-Cirque (Friscot)*. It operated for the most part as a music-hall and remained in business until January 1916⁷¹. The Circus Charles Adler from Schaerbeek allegedly set up its big-top in Charleroi at the beginning of the war until it was damaged in a storm and the circus closed down⁷². Up until the war, the circus world was very internationally oriented. Numerous Belgian artists secured seasonal contracts with big foreign circuses such as the American Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey⁷³. Needless to say, the international avenue was closed-off during the war. Not surprisingly, circus performers now flocked to the café-concerts, music-halls, and cinemas, which triumphed during the war. According to the (not entirely unbiased) artist agent Alphonse Brachart, the music-hall experienced such success that there were far too little venues to satisfy audience demand,⁷⁴ a situation that would soon be mended considering the large number of new music-halls that opened between October 1915 and February 1916⁷⁵. Brachart indicated that many successful artists were underemployed and very eager to perform. In his *Guide des artistes de music-hall* (1916), he listed over 250 different acts/artists in different categories (from gymnasts and athletes

67. In *Journal des petites affiches*, their names are consistently spelled with a double ‘t’. In their promotional material, the family spells the name of the act as ‘Otago’.

68. *Journal des petites affiches*, 20 August 1916, 26 November 1916, 9 December 1917.

69. ANDRÉ DE POORTER, *Brusselse circusartiesten*, Stroud: Tempus, 2011, p. 12, 102, 90; ANDRÉ DE POORTER, *Belgische circussen en foortheaters. Van Blondin tot Ronaldo*, Tielt, Lannoo, 2005, p. 36, 39.

70. See entry of 17 March 1915 in GILLE, OOMS, and DELANDSHEERE, *Cinquante mois...*, p. 293.

71. In 1918 Jean Friscot is found as the director of the music-hall Au Spytigen Duivel (later: Music-Hall Floréal) and the Casino de Saint-Josse. Information retrieved from RENIEU, *Histoire des théâtres de Bruxelles depuis leur origine jusqu’à ce jour*, p. 158. Collided with information received from André De Poorter in a private communication.

72. The Adler family consequently tried to find employment in music-halls, cinemas and café concerts with an aerial acrobatics act. In June and July 1918, they performed in Bruxelles-Kermesse, a café-concert previously known as Vieux Dusseldorf.

73. For a research project in progress on this topic, see www.circusnomads.com (by Gwendolien Sabbe).

74. Brachart berated the closing of the famous music-hall Palais d’été in Brussels, which was now used as a depot for the Commission for Relief and advocates its reopening as a music-hall. (See his pamphlet ‘Rouvra-t-on le Palais d’été?’ in: BRACHART, *Guide des artistes de music-hall*, p. 9-13.)

75. Renieu cites no less than 11 new music-halls for the greater Brussels’ area between October 1915 and February 1916. Several more would follow in 1916, 1917 and 1918. Some of these were former theatres, cinemas or skating rinks now turned into music-halls. (RENIEU, *Histoire des théâtres de Bruxelles...*, p. 157-58.)

to pantomimes, *siffomanes* and *ombromanes*) that were readily available for bookings⁷⁶. Some of the initiatives for new music-halls, such as the Nouveau-Cirque, were taken with the explicit goal to create employment for the artists⁷⁷. One can assume that it was easier to gain acceptance for this type of predominantly physical acts from the German censor than it was for spoken or sung performances. Not surprisingly, many of these artists found eager employers among the cinema managers struggling to put together an exciting film program week after week.

Otago Bill was only one of the many acts presented at Louvain Palace. The management offered everything from small contortionist pieces and performances with trained geese and dogs to impressive cycling and trapeze tours de force, such as a looping the loop act (including a looping construction) by Michaux (December 1916) and a sky diving act from a six-meter-high pedestal by the Brussels' group The 4 Marylands (January 1917). Considering the quality and variety of these acts, it is not surprising they were an essential part of the evening for the audience. From time to time, Louvain Palace was even referred to as a music-hall, rather than a cinema, indicating the importance of the varied program :

“Certainly, the success of Louvain-Palace is growing week after week. Rightly so. The programs are really interesting and if the crowd is running to the beautiful ‘Music-Hall’ of the rue de la Station, it is because the management, and certainly the sympathetic director M. Vanden Plas, manages to offer every week sensational acts worthy of the best houses of the country.”⁷⁸

Alphonse Brachart as well, includes Louvain Palace as well as its competitor Alhambra in his list of (over 30) Belgian music-halls⁷⁹.

VII. Conclusion: Cinemas at the Crossroads

During the war, the cinemas found themselves at the crossroads of different types of spectacles. They became venues for theatre performances, *revue* shows, music-hall acts, classical concerts, operettas, song and singalong evenings, and film projections; and became a hub for performers, impresarios, technicians, managers, brewers.... To provide an attractive program week after week, theatre managers not only had to deal with films distributors, artists, and impresarios, but also had to liaise with both local and occupying authorities. Considering the peaking popularity of cinema, they worked hard to keep film as the main attraction. Nevertheless, as is amply demonstrated by the case of Louvain Palace, they relied on live performances to complete their program, effectively turning their cinema program into a music-halls bill and alternating film evenings with other types of shows. While the majority of live performers that were part of the “film program” came from the circus, music-hall, and café-concerts, the programs also included trained dancers (classical and modern ballet) and classical musicians. Coming from different backgrounds and professional networks – the circus, concert and opera halls, ballet, the *café-chantant* or *café-concert* – their paths all crossed in the movie theatre. With their usual employers out of business, travel restrictions within occupied Belgium, and an impossibility to travel abroad, performers without long-term engage-

76. BRACHART, *Guide des artistes de music-hall*, p. 55-67.

77. The performances at the Nouveau-Cirque were organised by the *Union Artistique Belge* (UAB), the union of the music-hall performers. Also, the theatre performances in the Théâtre de l'Olympia in Brussels were organised by the *Oeuvre du secours aux artistes*.

78. “Décidément ‘Louvain-Palace’ voit sa vogue augmenter de semaine en semaine, et c’est justice. Les programmes sont vraiment intéressants et si la foule accourt au joli ‘Music-Hall’ de la rue de la Station, c’est que la Direction, et surtout son sympathique directeur, M. Vanden Plas, cherche chaque semaine à donner des numéros sensationnels, dignes des premières maisons du pays.” *Journal des petites affiches*, 6 January 1918.

79. BRACHART, *Guide des artistes de music-hall*, p. 24. The list includes over thirty venues that offer variety programs one to seven days each week.

ments were actively looking for work. They turned either to middlemen or directly to movie theatres such as Louvain Palace whose managers were in need of additional live performances to complete and complement their staggering film program. In appearance, these programs closely resembled the pre-war music-hall, albeit with a significant focus on cinema and a more or less entirely Belgian variety program. Simultaneously, continuing a tendency that had started before the war, film gradually became more important in the café-concerts programs, effectively turning a good number of them into brasserie-concert-cinéma during the war⁸⁰. This indicates that the transition which developed as to the nature of movie theatres under occupation was actually an integral part of a wider hybridization which was simultaneously developing in urban popular entertainment. The names given to entertainment venues – cinema, theatre, music-hall, café-concert, brasserie... – decreasingly functioned as markers for the type of entertainment they offered and the circumstances in which it was presented. Entertainment venues rapidly transformed and retransformed themselves in reaction to both supply chains and audience tastes.

This was also the case for Louvain Palace. Initially conceived as a movie theatre in the spring of 1914, its management changed plans during the occupation and by the time it was finally able to open in 1916, Louvain Palace offered its patrons films, concerts and operettas, theatre plays, several bars, a buffet, and by the summer of 1918 even a bowling alley. This broadening of their scope was not a coincidence. There are multiple reasons why opting for a versatile entertainment venue was a smart move under the occupation. First, many entertainment outlets failed to reopen quickly or closed down altogether during the war and the number of

cultural activities had generally decreased. There was obviously a gap to fill by those in business under the occupation. Second, offering a variety of entertainments allowed theatre managers to cope with ever increasing uncertainties. Scarcity on the film market was compensated by the profusion of live performers. Third, by diversifying their programs, venues had a wider appeal and were able to attract different (and thus larger) audiences. The possibility to make maximum use of the infrastructure (e.g. children's matinees, externally organised events on regular closing days, open bar during the daytime, and before and after events) increased their profits. Film and music-hall programs, educational children's matinees, Flemish theatre and operetta, classical concerts, patriotic charity events... catered for different audiences with different social profiles, political convictions, and time schedules. By the end of the war Louvain Palace indeed offered something for everyone: "(...) wholesome and tasteful film screenings (...) an ideal orchestra, artistic films from the big film producers; first class attraction; and afterwards, which makes it all worthwhile, one can have an excellent beer or an exquisite drink for a cheap price."⁸¹

In the years following the war, specific local circumstances continuously determined Louvain Palace's course. Although film distribution had recovered and films were readily available, Louvain Palace kept fulfilling its multifunctional role in the local cultural landscape. Each week several nights were reserved for theatre performances or concerts, often by local troupes who were happy to find a stage with the rebuilding of the municipal theatre repeatedly postponed⁸². On film nights, Louvain Palace adhered to a mixed program in which (increasingly longer) films were intertwined with one or two variety acts.

80. RENIEU, *Histoire des théâtres de Bruxelles...*, p. 65-66.

81. "(...) séances cinématographiques le cachet de bon gout et de bon aloi (...) orchestra idéal, films artistiques et de grandes marques; attractions de premier ordre; ensuite, ce qui ne gâte rien à tant de choses bien comprises, l'on peut s'y régaler à bon compte, d'excellentes bières et de boissons exquises". *Journal des petites affiches*, 16 May 1916.

82. It would take until 1938 before the Municipal Theatre reopened. See: JOKE BUIJS, MARIKA CEUNEN, et al., *Herleven. Leuven Na 1918*. Leuven: City of Leuven, 2018, p. 113-123.

Only in the late 1930s, after a period of unstable exploitation, several architectural interventions, and a wiring for sound film technology, Louvain Palace, now operating under a new name

(Forum) and new ownership, was transformed into modern movie theatre, only to find itself shaken up again by a new occupation just a few years later⁸³.

Leen Engelen is a film and media historian. She teaches at LUCA School of Arts (KU Leuven). Her research interests include media and film during the First World War, the history of film and cinema-going, cultures of spectacle, visual media such as the magic lantern and the panorama, media archaeology and ephemera such picture postcards and film posters. Her most recent book is an edited collection on Revival after the Great War (with Luc Verpoest), published by Leuven University Press. Leen is president of the International Association for Media and History (www.iamhist.net). Leen.engelen@luca-arts.be

83. DIRK VAN ENGLAND, *Bioscoop en film te Leuven (1940-1968). Een blik vóór en achter het witte scherm*. Master Thesis, KU Leuven, 1988; ANDREAS NYS, *Een eeuw Leuvense bioscopen (1909-2009). Case : Louvain-Palace/Forum*, Master Thesis, KU Leuven, 2011; LEEN ENGELEN, *Cinema Leuven. Een studie naar de Belgische filmaffiche aan de hand van de collectie van het Leuvens Stadsarchief* (SALSA Cahier), Leuven, 2012.