

## LANTERN LECTURES AT THE VLAAMSCHE KRING IN MORTSEL

Activism, avant-garde, and commerce in occupied Flanders

- Evelien Jonckheere<sup>1</sup> -

*"In order to appreciate the good, one must know the bad..."<sup>2</sup>*

On 2 December 1917, Paul Smekens (1890-1983) gave a lecture with *lichtbeelden* (projected images) on modern architecture at the *Vlaamsche Kring* (Flemish Circle) in Mortsel. "The architecture of the nineteenth century was the negation of all originality. Fixed rules were set according to which each building had to be built in a certain style according to its purpose: churches in gothic style, town halls in renaissance style, etc. The society that is constantly progressing did not understand much about this art of plagiarism and did not bother at all. This art was outside living life. (...) The lecturer distinguishes in today's architecture two directions: the one that is still under the influence of the XIXth century and is bad, and the one that has made itself free, and therefore good"<sup>3</sup>. With lectures on modern architecture, avant-garde art, science, and commerce, the *Vlaamsche Kring* moralized with seemingly 'neutral' images and by using a comparative strategy of contrasting images of a seemingly neutral subject such as architecture, subtle activist messages were dispersed by an organisation that declared itself "independent of any political colour"<sup>4</sup>. As such, it paved the way for the dissemination of radical politics in occupied Belgium during the First World War, supported by lantern slides as well as one of the major Flemish entrepreneurs of his time (and a producer of slides) Lieven Gevaert (1868-1935).

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## I. Introduction

Between June 1915 and March 1918, the *Vlaamsche Kring* in Mortsel hosted 33 instructive and 'neutral' lecture evenings about art, architecture, literature, and science. During German occupation, lectures with political messages were forbidden<sup>5</sup>. In at least 19 of them, a projection device or lantern was used to project images. These scientific and artistic illustrated lectures were similar to initiatives initiated in occupied Belgium later during the war, such as *Volksontwikkeling* (translated as 'Education for the people'). This activist and German-supported organization was founded in Brussels in 1916, and aimed to build a 'people's university' through lectures in Dutch<sup>6</sup>.

However, in the second half of the nineteenth century, several societies with the name *Vlaamsche Kring* (Flemish Circle) popped up in different cities and gathered Flemish people around cultural activities such as singing, music, theatre, or lectures<sup>7</sup>. By the end of the nineteenth century, an economic dimension was adjusted to these Flemish activities, inspired by Flemish economist and politician Lodewijk de Raet (1870-1914). He stressed the importance of Flemish emancipation by means of strengthening the *Vlaamsche Volkskracht*<sup>8</sup> (Flemish

power by the people) for economic benefit. He co-founded *Hooger Onderwijs voor het Volk* (Higher Education for the people), a network of so-called 'university extensions' in Flanders<sup>9</sup> in which lantern projections and demonstrations had been used since 1892. These lectures were done with the intent of spreading a liberal scientific belief in progress and preparing Flemish people to work in a modern liberal labor market<sup>10</sup>. As such, these initiatives aimed to catch up with French initiatives in Belgium such as the *Société Franklin* (started in 1865) and the *Ligue de L'Enseignement* (started in 1864) and to get rid of the notion that the Flemish inferiority was due to a low intellectual and cultural level<sup>11</sup>. Against the backdrop of an expanding electoral public and growing fear of social revolution and socialist criticism, educated Flemish workmen were valuable for Flemish entrepreneurs like Gevaert, in a situation where the majority of entrepreneurships in Flanders were still a matter of French-speaking bourgeois.

Lieven Gevaert, one of the first major twentieth-century Flemish industrialists, was inspired by the activities and rhetoric of Lodewijk De Raet and, in 1909, initiated evening schools at the Gevaert Company in Mortsel<sup>12</sup>. His company started producing photographic paper in Antwerp in 1890 and

1. This research is supported by the *Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek-Vlaanderen-FWO*: EOS-Excellence of Science research project 'B-magic'-project number 30802346.

2. *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, 5 December 1917.

3. *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, 5 December 1917.

4. This so-called neutrality is repeatedly mentioned in the correspondence to future lecturers by the secretary of the circle, Edward Léonard (cf. footnote 20).

5. CHARLES HENRY HUBERICH and ALEXANDER NICOL-SPEYER, *Législation Allemande pour le Territoire Belge Occupé (Textes Officiels)*, 4 dln., dl. 1, La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1915, p. 22-24.

6. More information on the relation between *Volksontwikkeling* and *Vlaamsche Kring* cf. infra and the contribution by Margo Buelens in this issue.

7. References to several nineteenth-century *Vlaamsche Kringen* (Tongeren, Sint-Niklaas, Antwerpen, Gent, Doornik et cetera) can be found in *Neerlandandia, Dietsche Warande en Belfort, De Gids, De Vlaamsche Kunstbode, De Vlaamsche School et cetera*. See [www.dbnl.org](http://www.dbnl.org)

8. DIRK VAN DAMME, *Universiteit en Volksontwikkeling. Het 'Hooger onderwijs voor het volk' aan de Gentse Universiteit (1892-1914)*, Gent, 1983, p. 53. For a more detailed work on cultural flamingantism see H.J. ELIAS, *Geschiedenis van de Vlaamse Gedachte, deel IV: Taalbeweging en cultuurflamingantisme. De groei van het Vlaamse bewustzijn, 1883-1914*, Antwerpen, 1971.

9. VAN DAMME, *Universiteit en Volksontwikkeling...*, p. 33.

10. VAN DAMME, *Universiteit en Volksontwikkeling...*, p. 36-42. See the contribution in this issue by Klaas de Zwaan to detect similar initiatives in the Netherlands: *Maatschappij tot Nut van 't Algemeen and Volksonderwijs*.

11. VAN DAMME, *Universiteit en Volksontwikkeling...*, p. 15 en p. 39.

12. LAURENT ROOSENS, WILLEM JANSSENS, FRANS NOURENS, *Arbeid Adelt. Een geschiedenis van de door Lieven Gevaert opgerichte fotografische industrie. Deel 1, De Pioniersjaren, 1894-1920*, Mortsel, Gevaert, 1993, p. 36.

moved to Mortsel, a suburban town of Antwerp in 1897. By the end of the nineteenth century, Mortsel was rapidly transforming from an agricultural town to an industrial hub<sup>13</sup>. Good railway- and tram connections made convenient travel to and from the city center of Antwerp and surrounding towns possible<sup>14</sup>, making the rural town of Mortsel a perfect place for Sunday leisure in the pleasure garden Allsopp's Garden<sup>15</sup>, for artist studios<sup>16</sup>, as well as an operational base for a quick expanding photographic supplies company, which had already offered jobs to 700 people in 1913<sup>17</sup>.

The *Vlaamsche Kring* in Mortsel was founded in 1909, the same year evening schools were initiated at the Gevaert Company. Moreover, a large number of board members at the *Vlaamsche Kring* were also teachers in Gevaert's evening schools<sup>18</sup>. Lieven Gevaert was appointed as honorary chairman in September 1909, together with Armand Segers (1848-1925), the mayor of Mortsel from 1908 to 1914 and one of the largest investors in the Gevaert Company<sup>19</sup>. The timing, the close relationship between the board and the company, and the fact that Gevaert was the main sponsor of the *Vlaamsche Kring*, illustrates a close connection between the factory and the town, which will be further demonstrated in this contribution.

Since its foundation on 27 March 1909, the *Vlaamsche Kring* in Mortsel promoted "complete equality of the two national languages in Belgium"<sup>20</sup>.

The board members claimed to pursue this ideal in a self-proclaimed 'neutral' position, in order to be able to attract both liberal and catholic adherents of the Flemish movement in Mortsel by taking distance from the growing tendency towards pillarization that divided the Flemish movement<sup>21</sup>. The *Vlaamsche Kring* succeeded in uniting both liberals and Catholics<sup>22</sup> and during the war, this 'neutral position' implied neutrality towards both activism (collaboration of the Flemish movement with the German occupier in order to maximize Flemish rights in Belgium), and passivism (part of the Flemish movement that rejected German collaboration).

The importance of this neutrality during the war is repeatedly and explicitly stressed in the official communication of the organization. When corresponding with future lecturers at the *Vlaamsche Kring*, the secretary of the circle, Edward Léonard (1890-1981), invariably insisted on a standardized way to ensure that lectures would be independent of politics: "For the record, as a simple notice, our circle is beyond politics and merely striving for Flemish *Volksonwikkeling* in the present circumstances"<sup>23</sup>. However, this contribution will reveal subtle hidden activist messages in the illustrated lectures of this self-proclaimed political neutral *Vlaamsche Kring* and demonstrates how neutrality was key for Gevaert to play both sides of the court due to commercial interest on the one hand, and Flemish ideologic-political interest on the other.

13. H. DIERICKX, *Geschiedenis van Mortsel*, Mortsel, De Seizoenen, 1961, p. 193.

14. DIERICKX, *Geschiedenis van Mortsel*, p. 205.

15. HK Mortsel, *Jaarboek 1993*, Mortsel, Heemkundige Kring, 1993, p. 151.

16. During the war, the artists Floris en Oscar Jaspers lived in a workshop in Mortsel Oude-God. In: GERRIT BORGERS, *Paul van Ostaijen. Een documentatie (2 dln)*. Amsterdam, Uitgeverij Bert Bakker, 1996, p. 115.

17. ADVN, "Fotograaf, ondernemer en Vlaming. Lieven Gevaert (1868-1935)", *Mededelingen* 56 (2017), p. 7.

18. Edward van Breedam, Armand Leemans, Louis Leemans and Hendrik Kuypers were the board members of the evening schools by Gevaert in ROOSENS e.a., *Arbeid Adelt, deel 1*, p. 176. All four were board members at the *Vlaamsche Kring*.

19. ROOSENS e.a., *Arbeid Adelt, deel 1*, p. 29.

20. "Volkomene gelijkheid der beide landstalen." In: Erfgoedbibliotheek Hendrik Conscience, *Verslagen Vlaamse Kring Mortsel*, Verslag Stichtende Vergadering van 27 March 1909 (Microfilm CB 1818).

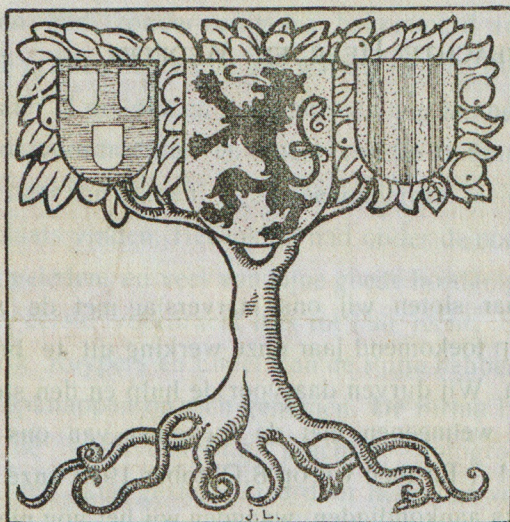
21. See the contribution by Margo Buelens-Terryn in this issue for more information on the pillarization in Belgian politics.

22. Erfgoedbibliotheek Hendrik Conscience, *Verslagen Vlaamse Kring Mortsel*, Verslag zitting van 28 juni 1909 (Microfilm CB 1823).

23. "Ten titel van eenvoudige inlichting zij u gezegd, dat onze vereeniging zich stelt buiten alle politiek en, in de huidige omstandigheden, slechts ijvert voor Vlaamsche volksontwikkeling." In: AMVC-Letterenhuis, *Vlaamsche Kring Mortsel K9048*, Correspondance by Léonard addressing Karel Gommers, 18 september 1918 (580).

# Vlaamsche Kring Mortsel

onder het Eerevoorzitterschap  
van den Heer L. Gevaert.



Sekretariaat : 12, SEPTESTAAT

## JAARVERSLAG 1917-1918

Drukk. L. BERREBIERS & Co, Abdijstraat, 200, Antw. Z. N° 32066

Traces of these hidden activist political messages can be found in detail in archived meeting reports<sup>24</sup>, press reports<sup>25</sup>, and correspondence between authorities, suppliers, lecturers, Gevaert, and secretary Edward Léonard<sup>26</sup>, who turned out to be a central character at the *Vlaamsche Kring* during war. Similarly, this local case-study offers with its rich details a unique insight in the logistics of illustrated lectures in general and the procedure of censorship during German occupation.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, this contribution demonstrates how lantern lectures were perfect to propagate subtle moral and ideological messages, while dressed up as neutral instructive lectures.

To reveal these messages, contexts, and interests in lantern propaganda at the *Vlaamsche Kring*, a true dissection of lantern lectures is needed. Frank Kessler characterizes in “The Educational Magic Lantern *Dispositif*” the lantern performance and its slides as a “multi-dimensional historical puzzle” of oral discourse, music, sound effects, and images. All these aspects participated together in a rhetorical strategy to entertain, amuse, amaze, inform, instruct, influence, convince, persuade, enthuse, agitate, and/or arouse the audience<sup>28</sup>. To approach this puzzle, Kessler developed a methodological concept, the ‘educational lantern *dispositif*’, consisting of an interplay of three poles: a performance context pole, a textual pole, and a user-spectator pole.

By following the structure of this threefold *dispositif*, this essay will successively deal with what took

place backstage at the *Vlaamsche Kring*, the performance context or logistics in the first part, the discourse or rhetoric in the lantern lectures in the second part, and the exchange between the lecturer and the spectator or audience position in the third part. As such, detailed elements will demonstrate an interacting context of subtle activism, nascent avant-garde, and Flemish entrepreneurship during the First World War. Although there are a multitude of detailed sources related to these lectures, we are still missing the protagonists: the lantern slides. Despite the recent discovery of many slide collections in numerous Belgian archives and institutions<sup>29</sup>, it has not yet been possible to link recently discovered lantern slides to images projected in the lectures at the *Vlaamsche Kring*<sup>30</sup>. Nevertheless, information on the distribution of images and lecturers and the different stakeholders of the *Vlaamsche Kring* reveals an intriguing interplay that unsettles the claim of a so-called ‘neutrality’.

## II. Behind the Scenes of the Vlaamsche Kring

The performance context pole in Kessler’s educational lantern *dispositif* refers to the technological and material context of the performance, the physical location, as well as the pragmatic status of the communication process taking place, including the historical, cultural, and social circumstances under which a communication process takes place<sup>31</sup>. Translating this performance context pole to the *Vlaamsche Kring* leads us consequently to

24. Erfgoedbibliotheek Hendrik Conscience, *Verslagen Vlaamse Kring Mortsel*, Microfilm c :lvd:3100964.

25. Every lecture was reviewed by *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws* during the war.

26. AMVC-Letterenhuis, *Vlaamsche Kring Mortsel K9048*.

27. Cfr. *Infra*. See the contribution by Margo Buelens-Terryn in this issue for more information on the development of censorship of lantern projection in Antwerp during the First World War.

28. FRANK KESSLER, “The Educational Magic Lantern *Dispositif*”, in *A Million Pictures. Magic Lantern Slides in the History of Learning*, London, 2020, p. 181.

29. For an overview of recently found collections in Belgium, see: <https://www.uantwerpen.be/en/projects/b-magic/lanternists-and-collections/collections/universiteitsbibliotheek-antwerpen/>.

30. One collection closely connected to the *Vlaamsche Kring* lectures, the Antwerp lantern slide collection of ‘Werk der Lichtbeelden in ‘t Onderwijs’, is said to be buried under concrete during the construction of a new school facade at the Antwerp Meir. In: ARNOUITS, TH, e.a., *Sint-Jan Berchmans: een eeuw collegeleven*. Antwerpen: Sint-Jan Berchmanscollege, 1989, p. 301. See publications by Wouter Egelmeers and Nelleke Teughels for more information on the use of the magic lantern in educational context in Belgium.

31. KESSLER, “The Educational...”, p. 182.

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the backstage activities at the *Vlaamsche Kring*, the preparation and accompanying logistics of the lectures and the surrounding spectacles as well as a broader network of German-friendly organizations, which will serve as a first indication of lacking neutrality at the *Vlaamsche Kring* in Mortsel.

The secretary of the *Vlaamsche Kring*, Edward Léonard, played a considerable role in introducing the lantern. This former architecture student and young art critic was secretary of the *Vlaamse Kring* starting in 1911 when he expressed the words "a nation that sings does not die, but singing is not enough to move forward"<sup>32</sup>. Léonard proposed as early as 1912 the organisation of a series of lecture evenings during the winter months "to educate the Flemish people in a multi-faceted fashion"<sup>33</sup>. Before the war, activities of the *Vlaamsche Kring* were limited to the organization of Flemish festivities such as the annual Conscience festivities on 11 July with speeches by Flemish politicians<sup>34</sup> and the writings of manifestos to stimulate Flemish in higher education institutions. After a repetition with illustrated art lectures in cooperation with *Het Algemeen Nederlands Verbond*, a series of instructive lectures was planned in the autumn of 1914<sup>35</sup>. However, this series was cancelled due to the German invasion and the fleeing of many refugees from Mortsel and its surroundings<sup>36</sup>.

Mortsel was heavily bombed during the war. The first destruction, from 3-5 October was the result of a Belgian bombing of buildings which obstructed the overlook from Antwerp fortifications on the approaching Germans. After these bombings, the German attack resulted in a second wave of bombing on Mortsel from 7-9 October<sup>37</sup>. By the end of October, fugitives started to return to their occupied hometowns. This return was also stimulated by Gevaert, who invited workmen with Dutch newspaper announcements to return to Mortsel. A rapid restart of the production in the occupied company was necessary as not to lose its market share to foreign competing companies<sup>38</sup>. In recent years before the war, several investments had been made, such as the start of a production line of glass plates in 1910 which also served lantern projection activities<sup>39</sup>.

The popularity of a scientific illustrated lecture by Dr. Couvreur on contagious diseases caused by flies in June 1915<sup>40</sup>, motivated the board to re-animate their pre-war intentions to introduce a series of 'popular lectures on art and science'. Since October 1915 a new series of lectures had been initiated, starting with August Borms' (1878-1946) popular lantern lecture on *Fransch-Vlaanderen*. After evaluation of the popularity of Borms' lecture, the *Vlaamsche Kring*

32. "Indien het waar is dat een volk dat zingt niet sterft, zingen is niet niet genoeg om vooruit te gaan." In: AMVC-Letterenhuis, *Vlaamsche Kring Mortsel K9048*, Correspondance by Edward Léonard addressed to the *Vlaamsche Kring*, Mortsel, 1 September 1912 (724-725). In het verslag van de vergadering van 28 juni 1909 wordt ook benadrukt dat tijdens de betooging geen strijdlieparen worden gespeeld om zich buiten alle politieke strekking te houden. In: Erfgoedbibliotheek Hendrik Conscience, *Verslagen Vlaamse Kring Mortsel*, Verslag Vergadering van 28 juni 1909 (Microfilm CB 1823).

33. "Ontwikkeling te brengen op een veelzijdig gebied": In: *Ibidem*.

34. Alberic De Swarte, Adelfons Henderickx, Leo Augusteyns...: AMVC-Letterenhuis, *Vlaamsche Kring Mortsel K9048*, Verslag der feestelijkheden vaandelinhuldiging, 17 augustus 1913 (726-728-737).

35. Erfgoedbibliotheek Hendrik Conscience, *Verslagen Vlaamse Kring Mortsel*, Verslag vergadering 30 maart 1914 (Microfilm CB 1910).

36. In: Erfgoedbibliotheek Hendrik Conscience, *Verslagen Vlaamse Kring Mortsel*, Notitie (Microfilm CB 1919).

37. HK Mortsel, Jaarboek 1993, p. 94.

38. ROOSSENS e.a., *Arbeid Adelt*, deel 1, p. 227-230.

39. ROOSSENS e.a., *Arbeid Adelt*, deel 1, p. 149.

40. He was experienced in giving similar lantern lectures on dangerous diseases (such as syphilis) see *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, 2 maart 1915 and AMVC-Letterenhuis, *Vlaamsche Kring Mortsel K9048*: Approval Kaiserliche Kommandantur 12 juni 1915. The dangers of the spread of diseases by flies, e.g. by unburied corpses, were already a popular topic in popular science lectures in the UK and the USA in 1910 in: GARY D. RHODES, *The Perils of Moviegoing in America: 1896-1950*, New York, 2012, p. 86 and <https://rammcollections.org.uk/object/118-1934-116/>. Similar lectures by Dr. Couvreur in Flanders are mentioned in Belgicapress: *De Gazet van Brussel*, 22 June 1915 and *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, 2 March 1915; 9 June 1915; 20 June 1915; 14 June 1915; 20 June 1915 and 24 June 1915.

considered it proven that lantern lectures were key for attracting a large audience<sup>41</sup>.

However, lantern lectures were not evident and required more extensive effort to organize, especially during occupation. Initially, the *Vlaamsche Kring* borrowed a device for the first lectures and subsequently they needed approval from the occupying government each time they wanted to transport this device. Every lecture title and every series of lantern slides also required approval<sup>42</sup>. This illustrates that the organization of illustrated lectures was not taken for granted<sup>43</sup>. Eventually, the *Vlaamsche Kring* hired a lantern device in November 1915 for the remainder of the season from Antwerp lantern service *Werk Der Lichtbeelden in 't Onderwijs* thanks to financial support from Gevaert. A sciopicon with a normal objective of 28cm width and an extension tube was hired for 110 francs<sup>44</sup>. This lantern device required two operators during the lecture, while the lecturer was positioned in front of the auditorium close to the projected images. Details in Léonard's correspondence teach us that the sciopicon device was operated by Frans Verhaert, F. Butgen and H. Segers<sup>45</sup>. It required a certain experience to operate this device properly and many thanks were regularly expressed to Hendrik

Kuypers (1875-1945), the first employee and technical manager of the Gevaert company<sup>46</sup> and the closest right hand of Gevaert. Kuypers also led the company in Mortsels during the war, when Gevaert resided in Den Hague.

In order to make the initial investment in the lantern device profitable, Léonard invariably emphasized his preference for lantern lectures when corresponding with the potential lecturers. To prepare for lantern lectures, speakers were given the opportunity to have a look at the lantern slides series for rent which could be consulted on demand with the corresponding textbooks, again by the Antwerp lantern service *Werk der Lichtbeelden in 't Onderwijs*. Correspondence with Antoon Moortgat, who lectured 'A trip to Congo' on 10 February 1918, indicates that two series of lantern slides were sent to him in advance. He was then asked to prepare his chosen selection of slides 'in the right order'. Consequently, his selection was transported to the lecture room<sup>47</sup>.

Other letters by Léonard indicate that series were sometimes borrowed from other lecturers such as Eugène De Bock, who lent a series of slides depicting Bruges<sup>48</sup>. Another letter indicates that the *Vlaamsche Kring* also owned some slides and

41. "De twee reeds gehouden voordrachten van den heer dr. Couvreur en dr. Borms hadden bewezen dat voordrachten met lichtbeelden op een groot publiek mochten rekenen." In: Erfgoedbibliotheek Hendrik Conscience, *Verslagen Vlaamse Kring Mortsels*, Algemeen verslag over de werking van mei 1914 tot mei 1916 (Microfilm CB 1931).

42. In the case of the *Vlaamsche Kring* this was once a transport by bumper from Ekeren over Antwerp to Mortsels in: AMVC-Letterenhuis, *Vlaamsche Kring Mortsels K9048*, Correspondance by Léonard addressed to the Kaiserliche Kommandantur Antwerpen, 15 juni 1915 (0583). See footnote 15 and AMVC-Letterenhuis, *Vlaamsche Kring Mortsels K9048*, Document by Der Presse-Delegierte für Antwerpen, Vorführung der Lichtbilder, 6 November 1916: with details about the approved lantern slide series (854).

43. Erfgoedbibliotheek Hendrik Conscience, *Verslagen Vlaamse Kring Mortsels*, Algemeen Verslag over de werking van mei 1914 tot tot mei 1916 (Microfilm CB 1931). The lantern's vulnerability was even demonstrated close after its acquisition, as the circle had a complaint that the condenser was turbid. According to the lantern service, this was attributed to straws being struck in the lantern due to its packaging. In: AMVC-Letterenhuis, *Vlaamsche Kring Mortsels K9048*, Correspondance from 'Werk der Lichtbeelden in 't Onderwijs' addressed to Léonard, 1 december 1915 (884).

44. AMVC-Letterenhuis, *Vlaamsche Kring Mortsels K9048*, Invoice of the acquisition of a lantern at 'Werk der Lichtbeelden in 't Onderwijs', 25 November 1915 (881).

45. Frans Verhaert was probably affiliated to the Gevaert company as he is mentioned as a member of the war comité initiated at the Gevaert Company during the war. In: ROOSENS e.a., *Arbeid Adelt, deel 1*, p. 180.

46. Erfgoedbibliotheek Hendrik Conscience, *Verslagen Vlaamse Kring Mortsels*, Algemeen verslag over de werking van mei 1914 tot tot mei 1916 (Microfilm CB 1931). More information on Kuypers: <https://fomu.atomis.be/index.php/kuypers-henri;isaar>.

47. AMVC-Letterenhuis, *Vlaamsche Kring Mortsels K9048*, Correspondance by Léonard addressed to Antoon Moortgat 7 February 1918 (643).

48. AMVC-Letterenhuis, *Vlaamsche Kring Mortsels K9048*, Correspondance by Léonard addressing Eugène De Bock, 26 March 1916 (591).

**VLAAMSCH KRING**  
onder het Eerevoorzitterschap  
van den Heer L. GEVAERT.  
Secretariaat: 12, Septestraat  
MORTSEL.

Mortsel, den 15 Juni 1915

Militärpolizeimeister

Buch Nr. 7072

N<sup>o</sup>. 6. 15.

B N<sup>o</sup> 6736 II b.

Aan de Kaiserl. Kommandantur  
Militär Polizeimeister  
Antwerpen.

Geachte Heer,

Wij danken U voor de gegevens  
betreffende de toelating die ons maandag ll. toekwam.  
De voordracht waarvan kwestie  
moet door lichtbeelden opgeluisterd worden.  
Het apparaat echter bevindt zich te Eekeren  
en nu weten wij niet of er eene toela-  
ting noodig is om dit vervoer te doen.  
Ued. zoudt ons derhalve verplichten indien  
het noodzakelijk is, ons derzelve te verleen  
om van Eekeren over Antwerpen naar  
Mortsel te gaan met een stootkar.

In afwachting bieden wij Ued.  
onze Vlaamsche groeten.

Namens het Bestuur  
Edouard Léonard  
schrijver

Letter from Edouard Léonard to the Kaiserliche Kommandantur, Militär Polizeimeister (15 June 1915) asking for permission to transport the lantern projector from Eekeren to Antwerp. Source: Collection City of Antwerp, Letterenhuis, K90483.



# Werk der Lichtbeelden in het Onderwijs

MEIRPLAATS, 36 — ANTWERPEN.

VERHURING VAN ZICHTEN  
MET VOORDRACHTTEKST.  
KATALOGUS OP AANVRAAG.  
GROOTE KEUS VAN TOESTELLEN  
VOOR LICHTBEELDEN.  
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VERHURING VAN FILMS.



BUREEL OPEN VAN 9 TOT 12  
VAN 2 TOT 6

TELEFOON: 6015.

Antwerpen, den 30 Oktober 1916

Aan het Secretariaat van den VLAAMSCHEN KRING  
Septe straat 12.

MORTSEL.

Mynheeren,

Wy ontvingen Uw geëerd schrijven van 27 dezer, en het verwondert ons ten zeerste dat Ued. de zichten niet gebruikt hebt.

Aangezien wy nooit zichten ter inzage opzenden, zouden wy U volgens het reglement de huur der twee reeksen moeten aanrekenen. Om nochtans aan Uw verzoek te voldoen, zullen wy voor het bedrag van frs. 0.90 goedschryven.

Wy hebben best nota genomen van Uwe aanvraag voor reeks 28, en houden deze tegen aanstaanden Donderdag tot Uwe beschikking.

Aanvaardt, Mynheeren, de verzekering onzer beste gevoelens.

Het "WERK der LICHTBEELDEN,"  
in 't Onderwijs,

Letter from 'Werk der Lichtbeelden in het Onderwijs' to the administration of the Vlaamschen Kring (30 October 1916) regarding the 'rent for glass slides'. Source: Collection City of Antwerp, Letterenhuis, K90483/B2.

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sold some of them to the architect and lecturer Paul Smekens<sup>49</sup>. Well-known lecturers such as Borms probably provided their own lantern slides and the architect Delvaux mentioned in his correspondence a personal collection of self-made lantern slides<sup>50</sup>. The latter asked for a try-out with the sciopicon, to check the light intensity of the device and its effect on his self-made lantern slides<sup>51</sup>. These indications give us a rare impression of the complexities involved in the preparation of an illustrated lecture.

Next to the administrative burden of authorization due to censorship, another challenge was the quest for affordable location, with possibilities for heating and lightning in wartime. The *Vlaamsche Kring* moved from *Het Oud-Gemeentehuis* in August 1917 to an auditorium called *De Arend*. Correspondence between Léonard and the manager of this café gives an impression of the decoration of the room where the lectures took place. This room was re-furnished by the *Vlaamsche Kring* with 8 cardboard plates with Flemish proverbs, 7 views of Antwerp museums, 8 framed photographic portraits, a green tablecloth, a large stage, and a canvas for lantern projection<sup>52</sup>. The framed portraits included a portrait of Hugo Verriest. This priest was one of the most important representatives of cultural flamingantism and was known for his initiatives to connect Catholic,

socialist, and liberal Flemings. The other portraits were of well-known Flemish writers<sup>53</sup>. The decoration of the room indicates the importance of the visual image in the Flemish movement. The visual image was key in the didactics of educating and propagating, as illustrated by the campaign by the *Groeningewacht* nearby Merksem, set up by August Borms in November 1913,<sup>54</sup> who lectured twice at the *Vlaamsche Kring* and sold the proverbs and illustrations to sympathizers such as the board of the *Vlaamsche Kring*<sup>55</sup>.

Lectures at the *Vlaamsche Kring* could last up to an hour and a half. Next to a warm and lighted auditorium and projections on a regular basis, the audience was attracted to the lectures with accompanying spectacle by actors, singers, piano, and musicians<sup>56</sup>. Recited literary work was invariably Flemish, by authors such as Guido Gezelle, Pol de Mont, René De Clercq, Tony Bergman, Flor Heuvelmans, Frans Snejders, and Jan and Theodoor Van Rijswijck. The music and lyrics were written by Flemish composers and poets such as Mortelmans, K. Mestdagh, Lodewijk Ledeganck, Joris de Bom, Edgard Den Haene, Willem de Mol, Jef Van Hoof, and Peter Benoit. These spectacular attractions were mainly implemented in the lectures during the last winter season and were probably connected with the intervention of the *Kunstpropaganda-komiteit* (Art Propaganda Com-

49. AMVC-Letterenhuis, *Vlaamsche Kring Mortsel K9048*, Correspondence by Léonard addressing Paul Smekens, 5 December 1917 (695): "30 diapositief plaatsjes 8x10½ aan fr. 1,25= 37,50 fr."

50. AMVC-Letterenhuis, *Vlaamsche Kring Mortsel K9048*, Correspondence by H. Delvaux addressing Léonard, 14 September 1918 (786).

51. "Werd nog verlangd, een zeer sterke verlichting aangezien de platen klein en de uitschijning donker zijn. Ik wensch ook eene proef van de projectie en ben liefst gevraagd buiten een der volgende dagen: maandag, donderdag en zaterdag." In: AMVC-Letterenhuis, *Vlaamsche Kring Mortsel K9048*, Correspondence by H. Delvaux addressed to Léonard, 14 September 1918 (785).

52. AMVC-Letterenhuis, *Vlaamsche Kring Mortsel K9048*, Correspondence by Léonard addressed to the management of *De Arend*, 16 March 1919 (605–606).

53. Hendrik Conscience, Stijn Streuvels, Jan Frans Willems, Jan Van Rijswijck, Peter Benoit, Guido Gezelle, Max Roose and Edward Coremans -the circle commissioned the photographer Jan Tresseniers to supply them shortly before the war with these portraits: AMVC-Letterenhuis, *Vlaamsche Kring Mortsel K9048*, Correspondence by Léonard addressed to Jan Tresseniers, 6 September 1918 (706).

54. They distributed a series of nine cardboards with Flemish proverbs with a large size of 1m20 in: AMVC-Letterenhuis, *Vlaamsche Kring Mortsel K9048*, Correspondence by Borms to the *Vlaamsche Kring*, 5 November 1913 (771)

55. AMVC-Letterenhuis, *Vlaamsche Kring Mortsel K9048*, Correspondence by Borms addressed to Léonard, 5 November 1913 (771).

56. *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, 15 March 1918.

mittee)<sup>57</sup>. According to Antoon Vrints, the latter was financed by the German occupier through the Flemish propaganda service, which maintained close ties with the Flemish Conservatory and the Academy in Antwerp<sup>58</sup>.

Another 'German-friendly' partner of the *Vlaamsche Kring* was the local organization *Volksopbeuring* (Encouragement for the people). Léonard exchanged song booklets with this organization and received from them a donation of 100 francs<sup>59</sup>. This organization was founded in the autumn of 1915 in Ghent, with the support of a *Hollandsch Steuncomité* (Dutch supporting committee) of which industrial Léo Meert was the president<sup>60</sup>. It was considered the Flemish counterpart of the Belgian and so-called 'frankiljon' NHVC, the *Nationale Hulp- en Voedselkomiteit* (National Aid and Food Committee). The NHVC was supported and financed by the Belgian government in LeHavre and consequently the main supervising power system of the Belgian government in cooperation with mainly French-speaking bourgeois patriots<sup>61</sup>. *Volksopbeuring* tried by dispersing similar food and goods for needy civilians, to compete with the NHVC, with support of the German occupiers who entrusted them with monopolies such as coal since 2 September 1916 and correspondence from and for prisoners of war<sup>62</sup>.

As such, *Volksopbeuring* was an interesting tool for the application of the *Flamenpolitik* as it undermined the NHVC and consequently, the loyalty of the Belgian civilians in occupied areas to the Belgian government and army. The Antwerp section of *Volksopbeuring* was set up in May 1916 and acquired a subdivision in Mortsel in 1917 in which Edward Léonard was involved<sup>63</sup>. The Antwerp wheat merchant Karel Angermille, who also gave a lecture in the *Vlaamsche Kring* on the O.L.V. Tower of Antwerp on 21 October 1916, played an important role in the development of *Volksopbeuring* into an extensive network<sup>64</sup>.

In cities such as Brussels, Lier, Mechelen, Leuven, and Turnhout, *Volksopbeuring* installed a section called '*Volksontwikkeling*' which organised instructive activities with lantern lectures, similar to those at the *Vlaamsche Kring*. The Brussels section was chaired by Pieter Tack, a hardcore activist of the Flemish Movement<sup>65</sup>. *Volksontwikkeling* in Brussels resulted in an impressive lantern infrastructure and framework, with German financial support. They had their own 'lantern service' at their disposal, including two lanterns with a value of 820.45 francs and a private collection of lantern slides with total expenses of 1031.18 francs in one year<sup>66</sup>. While three volunteers were able to handle the lantern device at the *Vlaamsche Kring*,

57. "Daarenboven was door de zorgen van het 'kunspropagandakomiteit' gezorgd voor een puik muzikaal programma: Mej. G. De Leeuw en de heer R. Veremans, beide eerste prijzen van ons Kon. Vlaamsch Konservatorium, zong en speelde er verscheidene stukken onzer beste Vlaamsche toondichters." In: *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, 23 oktober 1917.

58. Vrints, *Bezette Stad ...*, p. 228.

59. AMVC-Letterenhuis, *Vlaamsche Kring Mortsel K9048*, Correspondence from *Volksopbeuring* to *Vlaamsche Kring*, 17 October 1916 (877).: correspondence by Léonard indicated that in October 1916 a pile of songs was donated to them in the same month that Karel Angermille gave his lecture in the *Vlaamsche Kring*.

60. Léo Meert was together with Lieven Gevaert the co-founder of the 'Vlaamsche Handelsverbond' (Flemish Commercial Association) in 1908 and resided during the occupation in Den Haag as well. See nevb.be database.

61. In Antwerp, the NHVC was however more Flemish-minded than other Flemish cities thanks to Louis Franck's collaboration. In: Vrints, *Bezette Stad ...*, p. 350.

62. ADVN, *Volksontwikkeling Brussel. Algemeen Verslag 1916-1917*, B/15 (1288). For more information on *Volksopbeuring* and *Volksontwikkeling* in Flanders see: Kari Van Hoerick, "Het activisme te Mechelen (1914-1918)", BTNG-RBHC, XXIV, 1992, no. 3-5, p. 501-527.

63. Vrints, *Bezette Stad ...*, p. 257.

64. Vrints, *Bezette Stad ...*, p. 350-351.

65. Lodewijk de Raet was also a former teacher at several Athenea in Flanders and finally Professor of German Philology at the newly German-supported Flemish University in Ghent and member of the '*Raad van Vlaanderen*'.

66. ADVN, *Volksontwikkeling Brussel. Algemeen Verslag 1916-1917*, B/15 (1290): there was even the desire to purchase a third lantern.

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a team of seven salaried persons was responsible for the Brussels lectures<sup>67</sup>.

Lecturers such as August Borms and Jan Denucé presented at both the *Vlaamsche Kring* and *Volksontwikkeling*. It is remarkable however that the topics of the lectures presented at the *Vlaamsche Kring* were seemingly more neutral than those at *Volksontwikkeling*. Denucé (1878-1944), the curator of the Antwerp Museum Plantin during the war, lectured at the Vlaamsche Kring in Mortsel on 21 October 1917 on a seemingly un-Flemish topic 'a study tour in Spain and Portugal', while he lectured on 'the Renaissance in Flanders' in March 1917 as part of an illustrated lecture series '*Kunst voor het Volk*' ('*Art for the People*') organized by the Brussels *Volksontwikkeling*. Notwithstanding the 'neutral topics' of the *Vlaamsche Kring* lectures, it is remarkable that several lecturers at the *Vlaamsche Kring* were well-known activists, such as Karel Angermille, Karel Waternaux, Max Oboussier, Eugène De Bock and Antoon Moortgat.

The invitation of these notorious individuals, the cooperation with the *Kunstpropaganda Komiteit* and the relationship with the local section of *Volksofbeuring*, demonstrate the close connection of the *Vlaamsche Kring* with activist organizations. However, it is remarkable that Gevaert reprimanded Léonard in a letter on 13 June 1917, for accepting the donation of 100 francs from *Volksofbeuring*: "I therefore regret that you did not acquaint me with this earlier, as I, as Honorary President, insist on helping you in case of need. I would be very pleased if you would return the grant to 'Volksofbeuring'"<sup>68</sup>.

The following quote by Léonard, dating prior to the establishment of his *Volksofbeuring*-section

in Mortsel, seems to demonstrate that the *Vlaamsche Kring* executed a so-called 'neutral' or 'passive' position under the pressure of Gevaert even though they had a strong tendency towards activism: "If we no longer can count on Gevaert's support and not in the least to operate under his name, we will surely face our downfall here. If, as I think it will soon be the case, a Groeningewacht and next to it a department of *Volksofbeuring* will be established, an excellent job will be done, without having to compete each other. As such, it is not necessary for our activities of *Volksontwikkeling* to be expressed in an activist manner. Gevaert and the company... draw for us an income of about Fr. 500 a year... in any case, passivist people such as Gevaert are very rare"<sup>69</sup>.

One can derive from this quotation that Gevaert positioned himself as passivist to the outer world, while Léonard was clearly situated in the activist corner. Nevertheless, Léonard emphasized in each of his correspondences the importance of neutrality, even though a substantial part of the invited lecturers were well-known activists. The promotion of Léonard as chef marketing in the Gevaert Company in 1915<sup>70</sup> and the responsibility Gevaert gave to him in programming the lectures, might indicate that Gevaert, who insisted continuously on the so-called 'neutrality' and 'independence' of the *Vlaamsche Kring*, turned a blind eye to the activism by Léonard and a large part of the *Vlaamsche Kring*. In contrast to the 'neutral' profile they expressed externally, an activist sympathy was clearly expressed among board members as illustrated by the following quotation from a meeting report in September 1916: "Let's deal with the most important issue of this meeting: discussing the Flemish Movement. Chairman Robert Boen gives an overview of the situation in a reasona-

67. Each performance, two people operated the lantern and another person was responsible for transporting the lanterns from one place to another and for tightening and removing the bottles of gas. In: ADVN, *Volksontwikkeling Brussel. Algemeen Verslag 1916-1917*, B/15 (1290).

68. "Ik betreur dan ook dat u mij hiermede niet vroeger in kennis gesteld hebt, daar ik als Eerevoorzitter er aan houd, in geval van nood, zef bij te springen. Het zou mij zeer aangenaam wezen, indien U bedoelde toelage aan 'volksopbeuring' wildet terugstorten." In: AMVC-Letterenhuis, *Vlaamsche Kring Mortsel K9048*, Correspondance by Lieven Gevaert addressed to Léonard, Den Haag 18 January 1917 (617-618).

69. ARA, RV, D88, E. Léonard-VPB in: VRIJTS, *Bezette Stad ...*, p. 257.

70. ROOSENS e.a., *Arbeid Adelt deel 2C*, p. 748

ble and well-thought speech and discusses the position of both the activists and passivists in their fight for the Flemish rights. Chairman Van Der Ven informs if somebody wants to add something to these words. The following silence indicates the agreement with the present activist activities<sup>71</sup>.

### III. Rhetoric at the Vlaamsche Kring

The fact that activism was hidden behind this so-called neutrality could also be traced in the rhetoric of the lectures at the *Vlaamsche Kring*. By analyzing 'the textual pole' according to Frank Kessler's educational lantern *dispositif*, consisting of the projected images and including the accompanying words, music, and sound effects, this section examines the development of a rhetoric strategy developed within a frame of words, music, and sound in lantern performances<sup>72</sup>. Even though the exact visual projections are lacking, as well as the accompanying music and poetry, it is possible to trace subtleties in the rhetoric of the lectures, based on the press reports and archived correspondence.

The topics of their lecture were at first sight 'neutral' topics regarding art and science. This choice was clearly advised by Gevaert, who wrote in his correspondence to Léonard on 16 November 1917: "I am pleased to see that you have limited your choice to art and science subjects. This is of great importance, especially under the present circumstances and it is even advisable to be cautious in selecting the lecturers as well, in order to keep

any suggestion of political colour away from your work. We must be careful.<sup>73</sup>" Nevertheless, some of these 'neutral' lectures propagated subtle messages of courage, daring, judgment, and martyrdom, in brief, the perfect skills for activist resistance. For example, Edgar Peeters, a teacher at the Royal Athenaeum in Antwerp, gave an illustrated lecture on 'aviators, martyrs of science' on 5 April 1917. In this lecture, he underlined the importance of martyrs in society: "Not the daredevils and losers who, driven by a sense of adventure, accomplish daring acts, but those who, in order to give new knowledge and invention to the human race, risk their lives"<sup>74</sup>. This quotation could be interpreted as an alliance to the German race instead of fighting for the conservation of the nation.

A similar subtle metaphor was spread by Jozef or 'Jos' Léonard, who was the treasurer of the *Vlaamsche Kring* starting in January 1914<sup>75</sup>, a modernist graphic design artist, and Edward Léonard's brother. He presented on 3 February 1917 at the *Vlaamsche Kring* a lantern lecture on contemporary painting. In his plea for ultramodern painting, he claimed that Dutch artist Vincent Van Gogh was the most extraordinary innovator of modern art, who was, however, unfortunately misunderstood as artist during his entire life. According to Jos Léonard, painters such as Emiel Claus and James Ensor were similarly misunderstood by contemporaries in the recent past. Again, the misunderstood avant-garde artists could be read as a metaphor for the opposing minority position of the activists in the Flemish Movement<sup>76</sup>. Or as stated in the report by Jos

71. "Nu komt de beurt aan het belangrijkste punt van de dagorde 'bespreking voer de vlaamsche beweging'. De heer voorzitter robert boen stelt in een degelijke en goed doordachte rede de toestanden duidelijk voor en de houding van aktieven en passieven en den strijd voor het vlaamsche recht wordt kranig uiteengezet. Voorziter Van Der Ven vraagt aan de vergadering of niemand er het woord over verlangen. Het zwijgen maakt uit dat de vergadering geheel eens is met de aktivistische werking van heden." In: Erfgoedbibliotheek Hendrik Conscience, *Verslagen Vlaamse Kring Mortsel*, Verslag jaarvergadering 1916-1917 on 16 September 1917 (Microfilm CB 1958).

72. KESSLER, "The Educational...", p. 183.

73. "Ik zie met genoegen dat gij uwe keuze beperkt hebt tot kunst- en wetenschappelijke onderwerpen. Dit is vooral onder de huidige omstandigheden van groot gewicht en het is zelfs raadzaam van ook in het uitkiezen van de voordrachtgevers voorzichtig te zijn, om elke schijn van politieke kleur van uwe werking verwijderd te houden." In: AMVC-Letterenhuis, *Vlaamsche Kring Mortsel K9048*, Correspondance by Lieven Gevaert adressing Léonard, 16 November 1917 (619).

74. "Niet de waaghalzen en losbollen die uit avontuurzicht stoute stukken volbrengen, maar diegene die om het menschdom nieuwe kennis en uitvinden te schenken, hun leven wagen." In: *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, 5 April 1917.

75. Erfgoedbibliotheek Hendrik Conscience, *Verslagen Vlaamse Kring Mortsel*, Verslag van de vergadering van 26 januari 1914 (Microfilm CB 1905).

76. VRIJTS, *Bezette Stad ...*, p. 209.

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Léonard's lecture: "Young people and their innovative thoughts and rules, declare war to the old generation that is still preaching its own choir"<sup>77</sup>.

These subtle activist messages were not only the result of the accompanying words to the lantern slides, but were also enhanced by the sequence of the slides in a lecture. For example, in a lecture on modern architecture on 2 December 1917, architect Paul Smekens used the technique of juxtaposing images in lantern slides to convince his audience of the ideal architectural aesthetics. According to Smekens, Belgian nineteenth-century architecture was a negation of architecture that gave evidence of 'false' conventions and 'plagiarism'. This was illustrated by nineteenth-century churches built in a pre-dated gothic style and city halls in a pre-dated renaissance style. Smekens juxtaposed 'wrong' nineteenth-century examples with 'correct' counterimages: the neo-gothic railway station in Ghent, (which he described as 'the horror of peace') was contrasted with the 'beautiful' and 'elegant' modern railway station of Darmstadt which reflected the present-day materialist industrial culture and its modern realizations such as cars and airplanes. "Modern architecture has to imitate modern objects, which are logical and naturally adapted to their role: expressing simplicity and truth"<sup>78</sup>. Smekens' 'modern ideals' of "clearness, simplicity, sincerity, and truth"<sup>79</sup> contrasted to the 'false' and 'insincere' nineteenth-century architecture of neo-styles, which were the result of a French-oriented bourgeois taste for plagiarism, rooted in an elitist culture obsessed with the past. It's counterpart, Flemish

culture and its people, could be perceived as simple and sincere, looking forward with a belief in modern industrial and materialist culture. Again, this comparative and consequently polarizing contrast could be read as a subtle message of rejecting the French-speaking elitist bourgeoisie in Belgium and supported modern, 'simple' and 'sincere' Flemish culture, similar to a German modernist style.

This strategy of polarizing with contradictions was a well-known practice in illustrated lectures in art history. Swiss art historian Wölfflin radically changed the practice of art history by developing a methodology of comparative art history by using a sciopticon with juxtaposition of slides starting in 1893<sup>80</sup>. As such, he developed a psychology of art that not only analyzed images and movements formally but also took the psychic impression (*'Stimmung'*) and the expression (*'Ausdruck'*) of images seriously. On the basis of an 'immediacy of looking' rather than 'reading the image', he contradicted the Renaissance as an 'art of *Sein*' with linear, closed, and planarity characteristics, and the Baroque as an 'art of *Schein*' with painterly, open forms, and recession characteristics.<sup>81</sup> Subsequently, history of art was connected to psychology and attracted positivist psychologists such as Wundt. Soon it even tended towards morality, resulting in contested art theories such as the degeneration or 'Entartung'-discourse by the popular physician Max Nordau<sup>82</sup>.

The lectures of Paul Smekens and Jos Léonard resonated a similar moral approach of art his-

77. "‘t Is de Jeugd die, met nieuwe gedachten en nieuwe stelregels, den oorlog verklaart aan de verouderden die nog immer hun evangelie willen blijven prediken." In: *het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, 7 February 1917. This Flemish avant-garde discourse found a breeding-ground in the short-lived magazine *Jeugd, Maandschrift voor Kunst en Leven*, founded by the brothers Léonard in 1913 and involving other lecturers at the *Vlaamsche Kring* such as Paul van Ostaïjen. In: Katrien Van Haute, *Jos Léonard en de ontstaansgeschiedenis van het grafisch ontwerp in België (1918-1936)*, PhD Dissertation, Leuven, 2009, p. 31.

78. "Zooals deze voorwerpen logisch en natuurlijk aangepast zijn aan de kunktieën die zij hoeven te vervullen, zoo moet ook de moderne architectuur zijn: eenvoud en waarheid moeten haar uitdrukking geven." In: *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, 5 December 1917.

79. "Om te sluiten deed heer Smekens nogmaals een beroep op de toehoorders om in alles en altijd te zijn: duidelijk, eenvoudig, oprecht en waar." In: *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, 5 december 1917.

80. ÇELIK ALEXANDER ZEYNEP, *Kinaesthetic Knowing: Aesthetics, Epistemology, Modern Design*, p. 94.

81. ZEYNEP, *Kinaesthetic Knowing...*, p. 64-67.

82. ZEYNEP, *Kinaesthetic Knowing...*, p. 68-71 and 99-100. Wundt inspired authors such as Max Nordau, who's famous publication 'Entartung' was already translated in Dutch ('Ontaarding') in 1894.

tory, with categories of 'true' art versus 'false' art. Nevertheless, they can be situated in a tradition of moralizing people through so-called 'educational' (lantern) lectures appearing in Belgium in the late nineteenth century. Inspired by a similar early-twentieth century German 'Art Education Movement', the so-called *Kunsterziehungsbewegung* and the English 'Arts and craft movement' that arose from the combination of cultural and social critique by John Ruskin,<sup>83</sup> the Flemish movement realized the importance of consciousness of Flemish art education for moralizing the people. The invitation of the ANV to the *Vlaamsche Kring* to co-organize art historic lectures in 1913 (cfr. *Infra*) can therefore be understood within this cultural reform climate.

Next to architecture and art history, a similar moralization was executed through literature by Paul Van Ostaijen, a close friend of Jos Léonard and other lecturers and artists at the *Vlaamsche Kring* such as Jef Van Hoof, René Victor, Eugène De Bock, Edgar Denhaene, and Oskar De Smedt. Next to Van Ostaijen, Victor, De Bock, and De Smedt lectured on the sincerity and modernity of Flemish poetry. German friendly activist lantern activities by *Volksontwikkeling* showed a similar interest in Flemish art and literature. However, the rhetoric behind the lectures were different. *Volksontwikkeling* art lectures dealt mainly with the history of Flemish art, while those at the *Vlaamsche Kring* were oriented towards Flemish modernity and even avant-garde<sup>84</sup>.

An explanation for this difference can be found in the German strategy regarding Flemish art history as discussed by Ulrich Tiedau in "De Duitse cultuurpolitiek in België tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog". Tiedau illustrates how the German strategy of *Flamenpolitik* managed to present the Flemish

arts as the only area where oppressors of the Flemings in the past (French-speaking bourgeoisie, the Dutch, the Spanish...) had no impact during history. Flemish art thus illustrated a 'pure' Flemish spirit which was remarkable as no other people in Europe found a comparable potential of painters, composers, poets, sculptors, and writers<sup>85</sup>. Tiedau depicts how contemporary writers such as Stijn Streuvels (1871-1969) and Felix Timmermans (1886-1947) further developed this 'pure' Flemish spirit, depicting a characteristic representation of this pure spirit at the countryside with its rural population, permeated with mysticism and sensuality<sup>86</sup>, resulting in some sort of *Heimatliteratur* and stimulating the so-called *Flamenromantik*.

A romanticized past was contradictory to the avant-garde ideas of artists that gathered as lecturers at the *Vlaamsche Kring*. Lecturers such as Paul van Ostaijen and Jos Léonard were inspired by the avant-garde ideas that seeded in the Antwerp arts magazine *De Boomgaard*<sup>87</sup>. This magazine was published in Antwerp from November 1909 to December 1911 and organized various lectures disseminating a preference for decadence, dilettantism, and dandyism that was cultivated in a rejection of provincialism and "the flood of peasant novels, street histories, factory stories"<sup>88</sup>, in short, in an aversion to *Heimatliteratur*.

Nevertheless, it is remarkable that these avant-gardist lectures were mainly programmed in the first two seasons of the lecture series at the *Vlaamsche Kring* (1915-1916 and 1916-1917), while the last season (1917-1918) was more open towards romanticism and the Flemish *Heimat*. For example, on 20 January 1918 Alfons Van Hoof lectured on 'The rural beauty of Flanders' in which the lecturer guided the audience from the Polders to the Kempen, to the region of Lier, 't Pajottenland, 't Meetjesland, 't Land

83. FRANK KESSLER and SABINE LENK, "... To not only tell, but also to show, to show plenty..." The magic lantern as a teaching tool in art history around 1900", in: *Fonseca, Journal of Communication*, no. 16, 2018, p. 50.

84. Cfr *infra* denucé

85. ULRICH TIEDAU, "De Duitse cultuurpolitiek in België tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog", in: *BEG-CHTP*, no. 11, 2003, p. 41.

86. TIEDAU, "De Duitse cultuurpolitiek...", p. 42.

87. BORGERS, *Paul van Ostaijen...*, p. 52-54.

88. 'den vloed der boerenromans, straatjesgeschiedenissen, fabriek-vertelsels' In: Borgers, *Paul van Ostaijen...*, p. 51.

van Waas, between Leie and Schelde, the Dunes and the Sea, on the tones of local poetry<sup>89</sup>. This might indicate that the *Vlaamsche Kring* was increasingly affected by German *Flamenromantik*.

#### IV. Audiences at the Vlaamsche Kring

As third and last pole of the lantern *dispositif*, the user-spectator pole, positions the 'spectators' or audience, as well as their expectations and attitude. We have some information on the audience, even though it is impossible to reconstruct the exact composition of the audience attending the lectures at the *Vlaamsche Kring*. Reports from the board meetings of the *Vlaamsche Kring* mention the number of people present at each lecture. They even mention reasons for low numbers such as bad weather. These numbers and accompanying explanations are hard to verify on the verisimilitude of reality, but nevertheless, they allow us to make some assumptions on the audience of the *Vlaamsche Kring*.

The annual report of the first war season 1915-1916 indicated a total sum of 1199 spectators at the lectures<sup>90</sup>. At the first lecture by Borms 90 spectators were present and at the second by Paul van Ostaijen 125<sup>91</sup>. The last lecture of the season by Edgard Den Haene would even have attracted 150 listeners<sup>92</sup>. Nevertheless, the following season was significantly less popular. The whole season gathered barely 557 spectators with a minimum of 21 for Jos Léonard's lecture on modern art and 25 for Edgard Peeters' lecture on aviators<sup>93</sup>.

This sudden drop in the number of spectators at the *Vlaamse Kring* was probably due to an incident during the last lecture of the first season. On 15 April 1916 Edgard Den Haene, clerk at the Antwerp Town Hall<sup>94</sup>, poet and member of the 'triumvirate' with musician Jef van Hoof and Paul van Ostaijen in 1913 and 1914<sup>95</sup>, gave a tribute evening on Edward Keurvels with readings and music. Keurvels had died in January 1916 and was honoured as Flemish composer trained by Peter Benoit, an orchestral master in the Royal Dutch Theatre, the Antwerp Zoo Orchestra, and the founder of the Dutch Lyrical Theatre in 1893, the counterpart of the French Opera.

Den Haene's lecture was reported in *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws* on 17 April 1916 as "very witty in the beginning, being a fireworks of arrows and Flemish stereotypes, Flemish-mindedness and Belgian affairs"<sup>96</sup>. According to journalists at *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, generally perceived as an activist newspaper, this speaker was judged "all too hostile and all too harsh"<sup>97</sup> and attacked matters and persons who were not involved here, namely the church and the king. *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws* urged the *Vlaamsche Kring* to put things right.

With Den Haene's outspoken activist lecture, all the subtleties in the discourse of previous lectures were suddenly wiped off the table. This sudden explicit expression probably also explained the halving of audience numbers in the second season of the circle. Correspondence with Gevaert indicates that he continued to support the circle of this incident but advised to be cautious: "In this

89. *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, 26 January 1918.

90. Erfgoedbibliotheek Hendrik Conscience, *Verslagen Vlaamse Kring Mortsel*, Algemeen verslag over de werking van mei 1914 tot tot mei 1916 (Microfilm CB 1931-1933)

91. Erfgoedbibliotheek Hendrik Conscience, *Verslagen Vlaamse Kring Mortsel*, Verslag der vergadering van 15 november 1915 (Microfilm CB 1920-1921)

92. Erfgoedbibliotheek Hendrik Conscience, *Verslagen Vlaamse Kring Mortsel*, Hoogdringend verslag op dinsdag 18 april 1916 (Microfilm CB 1926).

93. Erfgoedbibliotheek Hendrik Conscience, *Verslagen Vlaamse Kring Mortsel*, Algemeen Verslag over de werking van het jaar 1916-1917 (Microfilm CB 1951-1952).

94. *Vrije stem* no. 15, 1916.

95. BORGERS, *Paul van Ostaijen...*, p. 64.

96. "Zeer geestig en een vuurwerk van pijlen en karakterschetsen over Flamingante, Vlaamschgezindheid, Belgische toestanden" in: *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, 17 April 1916.

97. "Al te hekelig en al te scherp" in: *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, 17 April 1916.



context, I think it is useful to point out that, in the present circumstances, we must avoid at all costs any lecture, or other presentation of a political or tendentious nature"<sup>98</sup>.

A much more severe condemnation of this lecture appeared in *De Vrije Stem*, a clandestine newspaper of passive flamingants reporting on this lecture with an anonymous article<sup>99</sup>. It presented the lecture of Den Haene and the position of the Vlaamsche Kring in less subtle terms: "Until now, the audience, full of sound reason and very few in number, had taken the effort to come and listen, hoping that among the various lecturers, some would have useful things to say. (...) With a rudeness similar to that of the most common villain and an improvisation of a failed primary school pupil, with a Flemish pronunciation laced with outlandish words that our Dutch neighbors would envy, this creature wanted to convince us why we had to love the dear Germans. There the monkey came out of the sleeve. His childish attacks on religion had displeased all the present Catholics, and now, through his even more cowardly attacks against our monarchs and liberators from slavery in 1830, he attacked the other patriots!"<sup>100</sup>

According to *De Vrije Stem*, a substantial part of the audience did not agree with Den Haene's

claims: "Under protests, shouts, screams, and whistles, almost all listeners left the hall to give air to their patriotic feelings in a nearby venue. Only the famous staff of Flemish-Germans and some of their followers from the city stayed in the hall and were forced to end the lecture"<sup>101</sup>. The writer ended playfully by giving a final swipe at the activists: "One final good advice: Mr. Den Haene, stay where you belong, in the henhouse, if you were tempted once again to come crowing in Mortsel so valiantly and unpatriotic, be assured that we would not let this opportunity pass us by, to convince you according to your own system (beating or lynching) that your place is not here"<sup>102</sup>.

Even though there is no objectivity in the report by *De Vlaamsche Stem*, it demonstrates some details on the composition of the audience and the board of the *Vlaamsche Kring*. It claims that the board of the *Vlaamsche Kring* was German-friendly, supported by friends from the Antwerp city center. They clashed however with spectators from Mortsel, who appeared to be rather passivist. That only a limited number of those spectators were employees from the Gevaert Company can be deduced from a suggestion at the meeting of 26 June 1916 to organize a series of lectures on chemistry 'in order to expand the audience by attracting the workmen of the Gevaert company'<sup>103</sup>. Neverthe-

98. "Te dezer gelegenheid meen ik het nuttig er u op te wijzen dat wij onder de huidige omstandigheden ons volstrekt moeten onthouden van elke voordracht, lezing of dergelijke, welke eene politieke of tendentieuze strekking zouden kunnen hebben." In: AMVC-Letterenhuis, *Vlaamsche Kring Mortsel K9048*, Correspondence by Lieven Gevaert addressed to Léonard, 26 September 1916 (614-615).

99. *Vrije stem* no. 15, 1916.

100. "Tot hertoe had het publiek, vol gezonde rede en zeer weinig talrijk, zich de moeite gestroost te komen luisteren, omdat het hoopte dat er toch onder die verschillende redenaars wel een zou aangetroffen hebben, waarvan het eenig nut zou kunnen meedragen. (...) Met eene onbeschoftheid als die van den gemeensten boef en een improvisatie van een mislukten lager onderwijsleerling, met eene Vlaamsche uitspraak, doorspekt met uitheemsche woorden, die onze hollansche naburen hem zouden benyden, wilde dat schepsel ons dan wijsmaken, waarom wij de lieve Duitschers moesten beminnen. Daar kwam de aap uit de mouw gekropen. Zijne kinderachtige aanvallen op den godstienst hadden alle aanwezige katholieken ontstemd en nu ging hij door zijne nog laffere aanvallen tegen onze vorsten en vrijmakers uit de slavernij van 1830 de andere vaderlanders treffen!" In: *Vrije stem* no. 15, 1916.

101. "Onder protestatiën, geroep, getier en gefluit, verlieten bijna al de toehoorders de zaal om in het dichtbij gelegen lokaal aan hunne vaderlandsche gevoelens lucht te geven. Enkel de fameuze staf dier Vlaamsch-Duitschers en eenige naloopers uit de stad bleven in de zaal en zagen zich verplicht de voordracht te sluiten." In: *Vrije stem* no. 15, 1916.

102. "Ten slotte een goede raad: mijnheer Den Haen, blijf waar ge meester zijt, namelijk in 't kiekenhok, want moest de bekoring u overvallen nogmaals zoo valsch en onvaderlandsch in Mortsel te komen kraaien wees dan verzekerd dat wij deze gelgenheid niet zouden laten voorbijgaan, om u volgens uw eigen systeem (oorvegen of lynchen) te overtuigen dat hier uw plaats niet is." In: *Vrije stem* no. 15, 1916.

103. "... om zoodoende de werklieden van de firma L. Gevaert en co te lokken en ons publiek aldus uit te breiden." In: Erfgoedbibliotheek Hendrik Conscience, *Verslagen Vlaamse Kring Mortsel*, verslag jaarvergadering 26 juni 1916 (Microfilm CB 1945); Gevaert also installed since 1910 evening classes in his company. In: *ADVN Mededelingen*, no. 56, 2017, p.7.

less, this proposition was quickly removed from the table, which reveals that the majority of the board had other messages in mind to communicate with the audience.

A certain elitism and arrogance characterized the lecturers and a part of the audience according to the report by the *Vrije Stem* on Keurvels lecture: “these friends and their followers are a selective circle in possession of a monopoly in the intellectual field. (...) among them, many weird specimens of artists with long hair and ludicrous coats and hats, with delicious pretensions about their own self, praising their own music and not understanding those of great masters”<sup>104</sup>. This description reminds of dandy-esque types such as Van Ostaijen who, with “velvet collar jackets, sailor’s pipe trousers, special cut brown-red suit etcetera,” portrayed himself in the tradition of decadent poets and expressed an attitude of *‘épater le bourgeois’*<sup>105</sup>. It is no coincidence that Van Ostaijen frequently met artistic types such as poets, musicians, architecture and art lovers, and practitioners during the occupation in surrounding towns of Antwerp such as Hove, Edegem, Boechout, and Mortsel<sup>106</sup>. These included not only his brother-in-law Piet Stordiau, composer Jef van Hoof, and the Léonard brothers, but also his colleague-poet Edgar Den Haene. Each of them was involved in activities of the *Vlaamse Kring*, as lecturer or as artist in the accompanying spectacle, indicating that a number of audience members were lecturers and artists.

Many of these young lecturers and artists met as civil servants at the Antwerp city council (Flor van Der Ven, René Victor, Eugene De Bock, Edgar Den Haene, Oskar De Smedt, and Van Ostaijen)

or got in touch with each other in the intellectual environment of the Antwerp Atheneum as student or as teacher (August Borms, Max Oboussier, Karel Angermille, Antoon Moortgat, René Victor, Eugène De Bock, Edgard Peeters, Edgar Den Haene, Van Ostaijen, and Oskar De Smedt). Both the Antwerp Atheneum and the Town Hall were generally perceived as hotspots for activism in Antwerp<sup>107</sup>. This network seems however to confirm the assumption that the *Vlaamsche Kring* was mainly a selective circle of Flemish artists and intellectuals closely connected to the city of Antwerp and its surroundings.

What was Gevaert’s motive for supporting the *Vlaamsche Kring* if it was not about educating his employees? Was this a classic act of philanthropic patronage<sup>108</sup>, stimulating the arts, science, and Flemish politics or was there more at stake? It is impossible to fully answer this final question with the available present-day information, but hypothetically, the *Vlaamsche Kring* functioned as a breeding ground for activists and those with innovative artistic and intellectual talents; both of which were similarly interesting as possible future employees at the Gevaert company. This was demonstrated by Edward Léonard’s appointment and the afterwar graphic design assignments at the Gevaert Company by Jos Léonard. Similarly, the *Vlaamsche Kring* might function as a way to maintain connections with the city government of Antwerp and their employees during the war, where several of the lecturers and audience members worked. Even though Gevaert externally appeared as passivist, as apparently did most of his workmen at the company in Mortsel, he supported activism by tolerating the *Vlaamsche Kring’s* activities. As such, he was indirectly sympathizing with the German occupiers, who controlled

104. “Op alle wijzen aantoonen dat ons volk enkel bestaat uit stommerikken; dat het met zijne vrienden en aanhangers eene keurbende vormen en op het verstandelijk gebied het monopoleum meenen te bezitten (...) vele rare exemplaren van artisten met lang haar en potsierlyke frakken en hoeden, met overheerlijke pretentie over hun eigen ik, hun eigen muziekstukken ophemelen en die van groote meesters niet doen verstaan” In: *Vrije Stem*, no. 15, 1916.

105. BORGERS, *Paul van Ostaijen...*, p. 74.

106. See descriptions of meetings by Van Ostaijen with artistic friends in BORGERS, *Paul van Ostaijen...*, p. 64.

107. VRINTS, *Bezette Stad ...*, p. 29 and LUDO STIJNEN, *Pol De Mont. Een tragisch schrijversleven*, Kalmthout: Polis, 2017, p. 377.

108. The idea of philanthropic patronage is also present in Gevaert’s ‘Kinderfeesten’, which were similarly organized by *Volksontwikkeling* in Brussels. These ‘Kinderfeesten’ offered distractive entertainment with stories and toy slides in a heated room during cold winter days.

the industrial activities of his company. A clear sympathy for the Germans would have conflicted with the passivist workmen at the company, as with his international market outlet in Russia, Austria-Hungary, Germany, Italy, and England, followed in 1913 by Belgium and the Netherlands<sup>109</sup> as they covered both Entente and Central Powers. His so-called 'neutral position', uniting activism and passivism, seemed necessary for his commercial activities, and echoed the political position of the pre-war *Vlaamsche Kring*, which claimed to be politically neutral, uniting both liberals and Catholics, but no socialists.

## V. Conclusion

The *Vlaamsche Kring* in Mortsel illustrates the power of the lantern to disseminate subtle propaganda. Especially during wartime, seemingly neutral images were valuable to communicate subtle messages of activism, propagating youth, honesty, and resistance by means of contrasting and moralizing images. In a tradition of stimulat-

ing *Volksonwikkeling* (Education for the people) and *Vlaamse Volkskracht* (Flemish power for the people), Gevaert's support to the *Vlaamsche Kring* could easily be seen as an act of philanthropy, but it served at the same time as a commercial return on investment. It attracted young and innovative intellectuals to Mortsel with connections to the Antwerp council and helped to consolidate a modern Flemish industry and connections with the German occupier. Nevertheless, Gevaert stressed the importance of seemingly neutral lectures and independence from similar German-supported activities such as *Volksonwikkeling*. As such, Gevaert succeeded to maintain a sense of objectivity towards both the German occupier and the allied nations, which was vital from a commercial point of view. Consequently, this contribution demonstrated how lectures at the *Vlaamsche Kring* unfolded against a complex interplay of Flemish activism, avant-garde, and commerce in occupied Belgium. It reveals the misleading 'neutrality' with lantern lectures during the war and their connection with the strategy of so-called 'neutrality' by Gevaert and his commerce during the occupation.

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109. ROOSENS e.a., *Arbeid Adelt, deel 1*, p. 218.

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