

Jonckheere, Evelien. *Aandacht! Aandacht! Aandacht en verstrooiing in het Gentse Grand Théâtre, café-concert en variététheater, 1880-1914*. Leuven: Universitaire Pers Leuven, 2017, 224 p. (ISBN 978 94 6270 100 7)

Don't be misled by the humble brown paper bag-look cover of Evelien Jonckheere's publication *Aandacht! Aandacht! Aandacht en verstrooiing in het Gentse Grand Théâtre, café-concert en variététheater, 1880-1914*. This publication, based on her awarded dissertation which she obtained in 2014 at the University of Ghent, offers a colorful variety of information on a topic that is not easy to investigate. Jonckheere has a particular interest in popular entertainment in Belgium of the nineteenth century. In 2009 she published *Kijklust en sensatiezucht*, based on her master thesis in Art Studies, a beautifully illustrated and tastefully written book on revues and variety theatres in Belgium, with an emphasis on Flanders and Brussels. Typical for Jonckheere is that she incorporates all kinds of archival materials to substantiate her arguments. By doing so she reveals the underexposed history of 'low-brow' theatre culture in Belgium.

Aandacht! Aandacht! – or in English *Attention! Attention!* – is a comparative study between the official theatre and popular entertainment in Ghent from 1880 till 1914. From an interdisciplinary approach (New Cultural History) Jonckheere looks specifically at the viewing experience and the 'problem of attention' of the nineteenth-century audience. The author derives the notion of the 'problem of attention' from Jonathan Crary's publication *Suspension of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* (1999), which signifies a tension between attention and perception (translated into *verstrooiing* by Jonckheere). The processes of modernisation in the nineteenth century, like urbanisation and industrialisation and the accompanying lavish stimuli, caused this tension. Jonckheere's research shows that the developments of the 'problem of attention' in the small provincial city of Ghent are no different than in metropolises like Paris or Berlin. The author also notes that the need to discipline the attention did not come up in the nineteenth century but was already visible in the eighteenth-century theatre theories by Denis Diderot.

The Ghent theatre crisis of 16 February 1898 serves as the occasion for her publication. On that day the subsidised city theatre the Grand Théâtre went bankrupt due to, according to its management, a changing public interest. Comparing three different genres: the 'official' subsidised Grand Théâtre, the café-

concert and variety theatre, Jonckheere looks for the causes of this change of interest by looking at the developments for each genre, embedded within the context of the modernising city. These developments are categorised in the repertoire, the playing style, technology and architecture and the behaviour of the spectator.

Next to newspaper articles and unique archival materials like announcements, posters, flyers and other ephemeral objects, the work of the Ghentian artist Jules de Bruycker (1870-1945) serves as an important visual source. 28 of a total of 150 displayed images were made by De Bruycker. The paintings and drawings depict people spending leisure time in Ghent theatres and public spaces. Especially the drawings in which De Bruycker has closely observed the spectators sitting inside the theatre and looking at the performance fit perfectly within the theme Jonckheere addresses. The three parts of the book are cleverly divided by three different works by De Bruycker. This supports the understanding of the different natures of the genres at a glance.

The Grand Théâtre symbolises the ‘high-brow’ theatre culture of Ghent in this publication. Throughout the nineteenth century the repertoire changed from several plays in one night into a single and longer one. The naturalistic acting style that Diderot already described was incorporated and the fourth wall was erected. The houselights were dimmed, opera glasses distributed, the benches replaced by individual seats and the architecture was adjusted to provide better lines of sight. There were rules in how to behave in the theatre, such as not interacting with the actors on stage and not bringing any consumptions. According to the discourse in newspapers, literature and (pseudo) sciences on attention, this genre reached its highest goal in order to discipline the attention.

The café-concert that came up at the end of the nineteenth century was the total opposite of the Grand Théâtre and was seen as a pathogenic threat in which therapy was the only solution to recover from it. This entertainment form had a wide-ranging repertoire including a lot of light music. The acting style was entertaining and had a ‘carnavaleske esthetiek’ (*carnavalesque aesthetics*). Consumptions could be ordered and consumed during the shows and the lights were not dimmed. The attention of the spectator was drawn everywhere and was addressed on a physical instead of mental level.

Variety theatre combined both attention and perception and therefore embodied the ‘problem of attention’. In Ghent this ambivalent genre was found in the Nouveau Cirque. The repertoire offered a variety of entertainment, but had a

similar structure every performance. Although the repertoire was amusing the need to discipline in a way was important. The didactic themes and sale of opera glasses were an example of this. The houselights remained on in order to keep an eye on the other spectators, but the consumptions were offered in an annexed foyer. The variety theatre used commercial strategies like for instance responding to the social differences of its audience by offering a variety of entrance fees.

Jonckheere can be seen as an authority on the Ghent theatre history of the nineteenth century. This publication contributes to the international interest to position popular entertainment or 'low-brow' culture within the academic world. By showing that the theoretical framework of the 'problem of attention' is applicable to a small provincial city (which was nevertheless subject to modernity), Jonckheere paves the way for further research. With her work the author invites other researchers to investigate other forms of popular entertainment like cabaret, café-chantants, casinos and theme parks and dive into the complex research of social audience. The large amount of exceptional images and quotes also makes the book fascinating for people who are merely interested in the theatre history of Ghent. Unfortunately, there is no map of the city enclosed in which the different venue locations are illustrated. However, this publication is a must-read for scholars who are doing research on history and popular culture in the nineteenth-century Belgium.

SYLVIA ALTING VAN GEUSAU