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## Film/Cinema (Belgium)

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**This article examines cinema in relation to the First World War in Belgium from two focal points. First, it describes how film production as well as film exhibition and cinema-going became cultural and economic battlefields in the war years, with the local and occupying authorities fighting for control over the industry, its finances and audiences. Second, the representations of the war in post-war Belgian cinema are explored against the background of the concepts of cultural mobilization and demobilization. The cinematic images of the war are considered from a cultural-historical perspective, and post-war cinema is established as a particular site of memory. The article reflects the *status quaestionis* of current research in the field and indicates interesting online and offline sources and archives.**

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### Introduction

In studies of wartime culture and [occupation](#), cinema is often mentioned as one of the most popular

pastimes of the population in [occupied Belgium](#).<sup>[1]</sup> Despite its seeming importance, the subject has not been widely studied so far. Drawing on existing as well as new research, this article deals with film production, cinema-going and film culture during the war on the one hand, and with representations of the war in post-war Belgian cinema on the other.<sup>[2]</sup>

## “We’d Rather Go to the Cinema than Go to Pieces“: Wartime Cinema-Going and Film Culture

Cinema culture was affected profoundly by the particular circumstances in wartime [Belgium](#): as of November 1914, the largest part of the territory was occupied by the Imperial Army and subject to a harsh occupation regime; a small stretch of the coastline known as “Free Belgium” was held by the Belgian army and continued to be supervised by [Albert I, King of the Belgians \(1875-1934\)](#) and the [Belgian government](#) (in exile). Consequently, cinema-going from 1914 to 1918 happened differently in occupied Belgium than in Free Belgium. Theater owners were not only subject to different legislations, they also depended on different film distribution networks and consequently on different films, different film stars and different audiences. Moreover, movie theaters for the troops were established on both sides of the frontline: in the German [Etappengebiet](#), they were called “War Cinemas” (*Kriegs-Kino*) or “Field Cinemas” (*Feldkino*) and were operated by the Imperial Army. On the allied side, they were usually referred to as *cinémas de l’armée* or “front cinemas” and were supervised by the Belgian or British military (depending on the sector), by local entrepreneurs or charity organisations like the [YMCA](#). When counting the experiences of Belgian [refugees](#) in (mainly) the Netherlands<sup>[3]</sup> and the [United Kingdom](#),<sup>[4]</sup> and those of the Belgian [prisoners of war](#) held in camps in Germany, the picture becomes increasingly more diverse and complex. So far, only fragmented research has been done on these different “theaters of war.” The following chapter will focus on wartime cinema-going in occupied Belgium.

In the years preceding the Great War, Belgium was known for its lively cinema culture. In 1913, the country counted no less than 635 movie theaters.<sup>[5]</sup> In the capital, audiences flocked to the recently opened Pathé Palace, the most luxurious cinema in the country, to attend screenings of prestigious French productions. The situation changed drastically with the outbreak of the war in August 1914. During the chaotic first months of the occupation, many movie theaters closed down. In October and November 1914, [Germany](#) established [censorship](#)-laws that applied to almost all media distributed in Belgium, such as texts, pictures, sheet music, theater plays, [newspapers](#), and included film. It was decreed that any communication or work of art not explicitly authorized was implicitly banned.<sup>[6]</sup> Consequently, every film had to be evaluated by the German censors before appearing on screen. Since there had officially been no censorship before the war, cinema owners were initially reluctant to abide by the newly established German regulations. They feared that after the war, the Belgian government would yield to the pressure of religious groups objecting to the supposedly detrimental influence of movies and the cinemas in which they were screened on [children and young people](#) and force official censorship on them. Eventually, most cinema owners conceded and continued

business under the new circumstances. By mid-1915, most cinemas were back in business.<sup>[7]</sup> Reopening was encouraged by the occupier who favored business as usual, while it was simultaneously often impeded by local municipalities trying to keep individuals on public or private welfare out of cinemas. The local authorities in Leuven, for example, complained that “spectacles attract mainly audiences living almost exclusively on public and private charity; the bourgeoisie abstains from visiting these theaters [...]”<sup>[8]</sup> Once reopened, cinemas became one of the most popular forms of wartime entertainment thus topping off the German as well as the local and provincial treasuries. By December 1917, there were approximately 1,500 cinemas in the entire territory.<sup>[9]</sup> Throughout the war, cinema and other forms of visual media spectacles would become a battleground for local and German authorities trying to control the sector.<sup>[10]</sup>

While the feature film was rising in the United States, most theaters in war-stricken Belgium stuck to variety programming, combining medium length and short films with live music, dance and comedy acts. For fear of propagandistic content, importing films from allied countries was no longer permitted. As most films had been imported from France and Italy before the war, sourcing films from the United States (which remained possible until 1917) was not very well established yet in 1914-1915, and so the depletion of regular imports confronted cinema owners with scarcity. However, all pre-war allied productions submitted to the censors before mid-May 1915 were still accepted, as can be seen for example in the continuous resurfacing of rehashed pre-war serials (e.g. *Fantômas*) and French, Italian (e.g. *Polycarpe*, *KriKri*, alias *Patachon*) and sometimes American shorts (e.g. a rare Keystone Chaplin or Essanay Broncho-Billy short) throughout the war.<sup>[11]</sup> The occupiers also favored German and Hungarian productions, as well as films from the befriended Danish company Nordisk Film. Gradually, German, Hungarian and Danish films (and their stars) replaced French, British and later also American films on the Belgian screens. The ban on allied films not only negatively impacted the French film industry, but also positively affected the German film business. After the founding of the *Bild- und Filmamt* (Bufa) in 1917 in Germany established a firm hold on the Belgian film market.<sup>[12]</sup> One of the aims of the German occupying force in Belgium was to win the Flemish-speaking Belgians over to their side. The so-called *Flamenpolitik*, a policy aimed at aligning Flemish and German interests, had to facilitate this. Whereas before the war, cinema had largely been a French-language pastime, it now became obligatory to feature bilingual inter-titles for films shown in Flanders. It is difficult to find out what version of the films was actually screened, but film programs in the press suggest that this regulation was not always observed.<sup>[13]</sup>

## Wartime Film Production: Front and Home Front

Censorship was not only established for film distribution and exhibition, film production was equally targeted. The latter was not very difficult to control, given the embryonic state of national film production. It was not until 1912, the major French film company *Pathé* – which dominated film distribution in Belgium – founded the first film production studio in Belgium, *Belge-Cinéma-Film*. The

French director Alfred Machin (1877-1929) became artistic leader as well as the sole director working for the firm. Next to Isidore Moray (?-1937), who directed the first Belgian feature film ever (*La Famille Van Petegem à la Mer*) in 1912, Machin was the only person who directed narrative films nationwide. In 1913, he made his *magnum opus*: *Maudite Soit la Guerre* is a Griffithian story of two friends from unnamed neighboring countries, who are separated by war and end up killing each other unknowingly as airmen fighting on different sides. Though the countries in the film were never named, the film was clearly referring to the existent pre-war tensions. In its depiction of war, it oscillated between traditional **warfare** – huge cavalry and ground army charges - and modern warfare – demonstrated in the film by reconnaissance flights, air duels and air bombardments. The film eerily foreshadowed the events that would hit Belgium only a few months later in August 1914. The dispatching of Machin to **Brussels** was of course an act of "colonization" by major French film production company Pathé who thus gained control over the exhibition, distribution and production of films in Belgium.<sup>[14]</sup> The war, however, turned the tide. Machin had been mobilized by the French army to join the war effort, and soon *Pathé* was surpassed by rising Hollywood firms taking advantage of the war in Europe.<sup>[15]</sup> Most Belgians who were active in the film business joined the army, and so the outbreak of the war also meant the provisional end of the Belgian film production industry.

After the German invasion, life in the occupied territory was heavily controlled by the occupier, making private initiatives for independent film production virtually impossible. Consequently the production of narrative films ceased. Belgian newsreel pioneer Hippolyte De Kempeneer (1876-1944), however, continued to shoot documentary footage, as he had been doing since before the war. Films like *Fabrication de Couques Scolaires à la Maison du Peuple* (1918) and *Laiteries du Comité National* (1918) documented life in occupied Belgium within the framework set by the censor. As of summer 1914, many professional cameramen working for foreign newsreels on both sides of the front began shooting images of the war in Belgium. Official film units were the military answer to the many commercial newsreel firms active at the front.<sup>[16]</sup> By analogy with the *Service Photographique de l'Armée Belge* (SPAB), a film unit was established within the Belgian Army. In between mid-1916 and the Armistice the *Service Cinématographique de l'Armée Belge* (SCAB) made dozens of films documenting the war on the Yser-front and the activities of the Royal family. By the end of the war, they were responsible for the official Belgian newsreel *Yser Journal*.<sup>[17]</sup> During the war, these official Belgian propaganda films were only screened abroad or in "Free Belgium."<sup>[18]</sup>

In occupied Belgium, the Germans tried their hand at using film for propaganda purposes. In the scope of the German *Flamenpolitik*, film was considered a marginal but relevant way to target Flemish audiences and to propagate Flemish identity and concerns. Although comprising more than half of the population, the Flemish were culturally, linguistically as well as politically dominated by a French-speaking elite. With its *Flamenpolitik*, Germany tapped into Flemish discontent about this situation. From spring 1917, Bufa film crews shot several documentaries in and about Flanders. In November 1917, for example, a lecture delivered to the Flemish inmates of the German prisoners of

war camp of Göttingen by the Flemish activist poet René De Clercq (1877-1932) was filmed by the Bufa, resulting in the documentary *Der Besuch des flämischen Nationaldichter René De Clercq im Kriegsgefangenenlager Göttingen*.<sup>[19]</sup> In 1918, Hauptmann Wilhelm Staehle (1877-1945), Signal Officer with the 4<sup>th</sup> High Command in Belgium, proposed an adaptation of Hendrik Conscience's (1812-1883) *De Leeuw van Vlaanderen* (1838). The book, which recounted the events of the Battle of the Golden Spurs in 1302, in which the French nobility was defeated by the Flemish troops, is considered the romantic and mythical basis of Flemish **nationalism**. The project was supported by several Flemish nationalist groups<sup>[20]</sup> and individuals, but although many practical and financial arrangements had been made, it never materialized.<sup>[21]</sup> Next to the aforementioned projects, a few other smaller initiatives were taken during the war, none of which had lasting effects on the Belgian film industry though.

## Post-War Cinema: Keeping up Appearances throughout the interwar period

After the war, the film industry was slowly rebuilt. The first post-war feature film was *La Belgique Martyre*, a patriotic drama directed by Charles Tutelier (1897-?) and produced by Hippolyte De Kempeneer who had recently founded the film production company *Compagnie Belge des Films Cinématographique*. *La Belgique Martyre* is the first in a series of eleven patriotic dramas produced in Belgium between 1919 and 1924.<sup>[22]</sup> The films, many of which were quite successful, were characterized by resolute patriotism, fierce idolatry of king and country, a notion of sacrifice, as well as strong anti-German sentiments. They ran under titles full of pathos, for example *Âme Belge* [Armand du Plessy (1883-1924), 1921], *La Revanche Belge* [Théo Bergerat (1876-1937), 1922], *La Jeune Belgique* (Armand du Plessy, 1922) or *Cœurs Belges* [Aimée Navarra, 1923]. With the exception of the films made by De Kempeneer's *Compagnie Belge* (six patriotic dramas out of a total of twenty-five films), the films were independent productions made by enthusiasts attracted by the novelty of the emerging motion picture industry, De Kempeneer's success and a deeply felt patriotism. Their tone was largely in tune with current official and popular discourses on the war, in which recognition and commemoration played a central role: the government organized well-attended state funerals for civilian martyrs; communes and cities erected monuments that were often financed by public inscription to commemorate the fallen; and numerous war diaries, tributes and hagiographies were published.<sup>[23]</sup> Filmmakers contributed to this discourse by producing patriotic work that was in line with honoring king and country. National symbols (for example the Belgian flag, the king, the national anthem) and supposed national virtues (like courage, heroism, duty and patriotism) were omnipresent and set in stark contrast with the image of the enemy, who was characterized as a traitor and barbarian.<sup>[24]</sup> According to many Belgians, the German perjury and **atrocities** which followed justified their demand for a German confession of guilt and reparations to be paid to them. In *La Belgique Martyre* for example – the only film to be produced after the armistice and before the Treaty of Versailles - the image of “poor little Belgium”, which had been

created by foreign propaganda during the war, was shamelessly recuperated. The film stressed “how Belgium suffered for the victory of justice” and how the country was now awaiting “a place in the vanguard of nations.” Although the Treaty of Versailles did not entirely accommodate Belgium’s demands for reparations, the longing for international recognition and financial as well as moral satisfaction permeated the films of the early 1920s. Instead of making clear political demands, the filmmakers chose to settle things symbolically, and so while numerous German characters died accidental or even “deserved” deaths, their Belgian counterparts were cast as the injured party who, nonetheless, reveled in justice having been restored.

Aversion for the former enemy and the glorification of the own nation remained dominant in all narrative films dealing with the war until 1924. The result was a continuation of war culture(s) - albeit with different objectives - that outlasted the actual end of the conflict.<sup>[25]</sup> The films made in the early post-war period were a monolithic cycle of patriotic dramas, displaying many similarities with the patriotic films produced in France and Great Britain in 1914-1915, and throughout the war in the United States. Films like the French director and actor Léonce Perret’s (1880-1935) shorts *Les Héros de l’Yser* (1915), *Léonce Aime les Belges* (1915), or the so-called American “Hate-the-Hun-movies” (like *The Prussian Cur*, 1918; *To Hell with Kaiser!*, 1918; and *The Kaiser, the Beast of Berlin*, 1918) openly defamed the enemy, often personified by the *Kaiser*. Though European allies stopped using and spreading this imagery and replaced it with more subtle alternatives as of mid-1915, it did not keep the Belgian filmmakers from reviving these images after the war. The German retreat, which brought back memories of the invasion of 1914 during the final months of the war, partially accounted for this. More generally, the popularity of these images in post-war Belgium can be explained a type of postponed catharsis: while filmmakers outside the occupied territories were able to express (within the restraints put by censorship but nonetheless) their patriotic fervor and frustrations over German conduct immediately, Belgian filmmakers and audiences had to wait till the end of the occupation before they could do so openly. Because Belgian films were produced after the war had ended, they were made with a different set of ambitions and goals than the earlier American, French and British war dramas. Images first used in a war propaganda context by the allies were now being used in a post-war entertainment context. By creating a canonical version of the war experience, filmmakers tried to come to terms with the war that had just happened. The consistently virulent character of the imagery of war that was present in Belgian narrative films in the early 1920s was clearly an exception in the European and American context, where the entertainment industry commonly opted for noticeably less explosive themes.

After the German reparations failed to materialize and the 1924 occupation of the Ruhr-area came to nothing, the Belgian government directed the country onto a path of international reconciliation and integration. The Locarno Pact (1925) and the Briand-Kellogg Treaty (1928) were going to grant Belgium a place in a new European constellation permeated by the spirit of the League of Nations. The masses, however, had difficulties leaving the logic of the *cultures de guerre* behind. The cultural demobilization – in the scope of which the war experience and the sacrifices made had to basically be redefined – took great effort.<sup>[26]</sup> The gap between the political demobilization on the (inter)national

level and the shared popular memories of the war proved difficult to bridge. As of 1924-1925, the government moved away from the image of Germany as the prime enemy and subsequently also relativized its take on Belgium's heroic status, a shift that resulted in a sense of collective confusion among the Belgian people. In terms of the production of war dramas, it translated into a period of disinterest: From 1924 to 1927, no films that dealt with the war thematically were produced in Belgium. However, this silence was contrasted with a revived interest in war films in the United States, e.g. *The Big Parade* (King Vidor (1894-1982), 1925), *What Price Glory?* (Raoul Walsh (1887-1980), 1926), *Wings* (William A. Wellman (1896-1975), 1927). Inspired by the success of foreign productions, Belgian directors began making war dramas with renewed interest in the topic in the late 1920s. On occasion of the tenth anniversary of the armistice (1928) and the Belgian centenary (1930), several films (a number of which had received official support from the authorities, mostly of a logistical nature) were made to commemorate these events, positioning the First World War as a formative event in Belgian history. Around 1930, a pacifist ideal took hold that manifested, for example, in Lewis Milestone's (1895-1980) adaptation of Erich Maria Remarque's (1887-1970) *All Quiet on the Western Front* but it failed to produce any noticeable intervention in mainstream Belgian cinema. The film *Yser* [Rigo Arnould, 1928] focused on the Belgian army on the Yser-front. Like *Les Croix de l'Yser* Gaston Schoukens (1901-1961), 1928], *Ruines* [Edouard Ehling, 1929] and the sound film *La Flamme du Souvenir* Paul Flon (1898-1981), 1930] it did not it did not eschew the the reality of life and violence on the front. While in the early 1920s, war dramas were mainly set in occupied territory, removed from the front and the actual bloodshed, the late 1920s saw a broadening of the discourse. Authenticity and realism began being hailed as valuable assets and filmmakers introduced reenacted scenes from the front into their productions, ideally accompanied by the sound of bomb fire and patriotic songs.<sup>[27]</sup> Violence and death on the battlefield claimed their place on the big screen. At the same time, the commemoration of civilian sacrifice was revived in mainstream war films like *Femme Belge* Francis Martin (1905-1960?), 1928], a biopic about the life of the Belgian war heroine Gabrielle Petit, and *La Petite Martyre* (Francis Martin, 1928), a romanticized account of the life of Yvonne Vieslet (1909-1918), a nine-year-old girl executed by a German soldier in 1918 because she had handed her *brioche* to a French prisoner of war. Anniversary films like *Ceux de 1830* (Francis Martin, 1930), *Le Carillon de la Liberté* Gaston Roudès (1878-1958), 1931] and Emile-George De Meyst's *La Brabançonne* (1932) interpret the Great War as a formative event of Belgian history, while simultaneously praising the country's glorious past and celebrating its unity.

In reality, this "unity" was being strongly contested. A turbulent debate on amnesty for Flemish collaborators and the implementation of language laws caused great tension between the regions Flanders and Wallonia. In popular narrative films, such frictions were deliberately marginalized. For the first time, however, a limited number of pacifist and Flemish nationalist productions were questioning the patriotic discourse of mainstream war dramas. The Flemish nationalist propaganda film *Met Onze Jongens aan den IJzer* [*With Our Troops on the Yser*] Clemens De Landtsheer (1894-1984), 1928] and Henri Storck's (1907-1999) leftist pamphlet *Histoire du Soldat Inconnu* (1932) were both politically subversive films to a certain extent. By renouncing the now wavering ideological consensus, they compromised their chances of box office success and popularity. Their dissident

character and ideological conviction was also reflected in the films' form: no catching melodramas or exciting espionage plots, but experimental compilation films made out of old newsreel footage. Critical discourse on the war was seemingly only tolerated in politicized and artistic-intellectual circles.<sup>[28]</sup> As far as Flemish nationalism was concerned, one could even speak of an alternate narrative if not memory of the war, with its own milestones,<sup>[29]</sup> its own goals<sup>[30]</sup> and its own martyrs<sup>[31]</sup> Real exchanges between the Flemish nationalist and the mainstream patriotic discourse were rare in Belgian cinema. While the dominant filmic discourse seemed to largely ignore the Flemish nationalist one, the latter tried to undermine the hegemony of the patriotic discourse by openly attacking it.

After patriotic festivities surrounding the Belgian centenary in 1930, filmmakers' interest in the Great War slowly faded. While **fascism** was on the rise in Europe, folk comedies and well-intended dramas reigned in Belgian studios, offering a distraction from the political situation. Only in the second half of the 1930s, filmmakers revisited the Great War. With the impending outbreak of the Second World War, a remobilization of war culture was also unmistakably taking place. The new batch of war films propagated patriotism and celebrated once again the unity of the country. The younger generations – having no first-hand memories of the war – were especially targeted as an audience. Productions like *La Tragédie de Marchienne* (1937), a new Francis Martin adaptation of the story of Yvonne Vieslet and *Gardons Notre Sourire* (1937) were clearly targeted at family audiences. At this point, cultural remobilization could not be taken for granted. First of all, twenty years of peace, the distance and remoteness of militant conflicts bring with them a certain hesitation towards war culture. *Gardons Notre Sourire*, at first sight an ordinary and even somewhat dull folk comedy, employed humor and **caricature** to express a skepticism towards the excesses of past war culture and might be read as a parody on the war dramas produced 1919-1924. Second, the government clearly monitored Belgium's recently declared "**neutrality**." Third, Nazi Germany reacted with extreme suspicion to Belgium's project of cultural remobilization. While the celebratory patriotic stance of certain films was still somewhat acceptable (or out of reach for German diplomats), every attempt to revive stereotypical or critical images of Germany as the (former) enemy was immediately retaliated by German diplomacy.<sup>[32]</sup> The war films of the late 1930s were paradoxical in nature: on the surface, they seemed to point to cultural demobilization, but on a deeper level they testified to intensify political tension and remobilization of war culture. The filmmakers' contribution to a cultural and mental preparation for the next war was rather limited and short-lived, however. The last film about the Great War was made in 1938, namely *Passeurs d'Hommes* by French director René Jayet (1906-1953), and as of the second German occupation, Belgian and allied films on the First World War were banned from the Belgian screens altogether.

## Conclusion

Throughout World War I, the belligerent parties in Belgium only began to understand the potential and importance of cinema for propaganda purposes. This is reflected in a series of rather moderate

initiatives on both sides. Especially when compared to the totality of control exercised over the film industry in Second World War, the idea of the first German occupation of Belgium as a training ground for the second seems to hold true, while more research will have to go into the exact role of cinema in the German occupation policy for Belgium. What stands out is the realization that cinema functioned as a battlefield on which opportunism, patriotism, propaganda and entertainment clashed, and where the local authorities and the German occupying force went head to head, fighting over control and tax revenues.

To some extent, the fight went on in post-war Belgian cinema, in which the fierce images of the former enemy as well as those of the always idealized Belgian nation were a much debated issue. From incorrigible barbarians and dauntless patriots in the immediate post-war era, to more sanitized and moderate images of foes and friends in the years leading up to the Second World War, the dichotomy between the enemy and the nation was always a crux in Belgian war film. This manifests itself in its clearest and most hyperbolic form in the war dramas made in the immediate post-war period. Although filmic representations of the Great War are heterogeneous and subject to important changes over time, I would argue these early war dramas do constitute a canonical filmic representation of the First World War characteristic of Belgian film. Yet, the representation of the war in post-war cinema is also characterized by disproportions and omissions. Experiences that jeopardized the idealized image of the nation (e.g. the massive carnage at the front, the uncivilized behavior of certain Belgians, King Albert's hope for a peace compromise with Germany, the refugees, deported persons and those in hiding) were clearly avoided, as were favorable images of Germany.

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## **Filmography: List of Belgian Great War films cited in the text**

*Âme Belge* (1921), Compagnie Belge des Films Cinématographiques (prod.), Armand du Plessy (dir.), fiction. 2000 m., silent. This film is kept by the Royal Belgian Film Archive.

*Ceux de 1830* (1930). Francis Martin (prod. and dir.), fiction/no-fiction. Sound. This film is kept by the Royal Belgian Film Archive.

*Cœurs Belges* (1923). Compagnie Belge des Films Cinématographiques (prod.), Aimée Navarra (dir.), fiction. 1689 m., silent. This film is kept by the Royal Belgian Film Archive.

*Fabrication de Couques Scolaires à la Maison du Peuple* (1918). Hippolyte De Kempeneer (prod. and dir.), non-fiction. Silent. This film is considered lost.

*Femme Belge* (1928). Les Production Cinématographiques Belges (prod.), Francis Martin (dir.),

fiction. 1764 m., silent. This film is kept by the Royal Belgian Film Archive.

*Gardons Notre Sourire* (1937). Lux-Film (prod.), Gaston Schoukens (dir.), fiction. 90 m., sound. This film is kept by the Royal Belgian Film Archive.

*Histoire du Soldat Inconnu* (1932). Henri Storck (prod. and dir.), compilation non-fiction film. 316 m., silent (sound was added to this film in 1959). This film was released as part of a collection on the DVD *Avant Garde, 1927-1937. Surrealism and experiment in Belgian Cinema* (disc 1) by the Royal Belgian Film Archive.

*La Belgique Martyre* (1919), Compagnie Belge des Films Cinématographiques (prod.), Charles Tutelier (dir.), fiction. 1650 m., silent. This film is made available on EFG1914 by the Royal Belgian Film Archive.

*La Brabançonne* (1931). Emile-Georges De Meyst and Georges Moussiaux (prod.), Emile-Georges De Meyst (dir.), fiction. 77', sound. This film is kept by the Royal Belgian Film Archive.

*La Flamme du Souvenir* (1930). Paul Flon (prod. and dir.), fiction. silent/sound. One reel of this film is kept by the Royal Belgian Film Archive.

*La Jeune Belgique* (1921). Compagnie Belge des Films Cinématographiques (prod.), Armand du Plessy (dir.), fiction. 2000 m., silent. This film is made available on EFG1914 by the Royal Belgian Film Archive.

*La Petite Martyre Belge* (1928). D.R.D. (prod.), Francis Martin (dir.), fiction. 998 m., silent. This film is made available on EFG1914 by the Royal Belgian Film Archive.

*La Revanche Belge* (1923). Compagnie Belge des Films Cinématographiques (prod.), Théo Bergerat (dir.), fiction. 1700 m., silent. This film is made available on EFG1914 by the Royal Belgian Film Archive.

*La Tragédie de Marchienne* (1937-1938). Maurice Lootens (prod.), Francis Martin (dir.), 60', sound. This film is kept by the Royal Belgian Film Archive.

*Laiteries du Comité National* (1918). Hippolyte De Kempeneer (prod. and dir.), non-fiction. Silent. This film is considered lost.

*Le Carillon de la Liberté* (1931). Sybil Film (prod.), Gaston Roudès (dir.), fiction. 66', sound. This film was released on VHS by Les Editions L.C.J. in 1999.

*Maudite Soit la Guerre* (1913). Belge-Cinéma Film (prod.), Alfred Machin (dir.), fiction. 1050 m., silent. This film is made available on EFG1914 by Eye Film Instituut Nederland.

*Met Onze Jongens aan den IJzer* (1928). Werk der Jaarlijksche Bedevaart naar de graven van den IJzer (prod.), Clemens de Landtsheer (dir.), compilation non-fiction film, 1870 m., silent. This film is released on DVD by the Royal Belgian Film Archive and the ADVN.

*Passeurs d'Hommes* (1937). Sobelfilm (prod.), René Jayet (dir.), fiction. 92', sound. This film was released on VHS by Les Editions L.C.J. in 1998.

*Ruines* (1929). A A. Bouchez & E. Breuning (prod.), Edouard Ehling (dir.), fiction, silent. This film is currently considered lost.

*Yser* (1928). Syndicat du Film National de Propagande Belge (prod.), Rigo Arnould (dir.), compilation non-fiction film, 3000m., silent. This film is currently considered lost.

*Yser Journal (nr. 3, 7, 8 and 9)* (1919). Service cinématographique de l'armée belge (SCAB) (prod.), director unknown, non-fiction. Silent. These newsreels are made available on EFG1914 by the Royal Belgian Film Archive.

Section Editor: [Benoît Majerus](#)

## Notes

1. ↑ De Schaepdrijver, Sophie: Occupation, Propaganda and the Idea of Belgium, in Roshwald, Aviel/Stites, Richard (eds.): *European Culture in the Great War*, Cambridge 1999, pp. 276-77. De Schaepdrijver bases this conclusion on the study of Emile Beco. See Beco, Emile: *La Croisade Entreprise Contre les Mauvais Cinémas Pendant la Guerre*, Turnhout 1919. She is referenced in Zuckerman, Larry: *The Rape of Belgium. The Untold Story of World War I*, London 2004, p. 143.

2. † Secondary sources for the study of wartime film culture in Belgium include Convents, Guido: Cinema and German Politics in Occupied Belgium, in: Dibbets, Karl, Hogenkamp, Bert (eds.): Film and the First World War, Amsterdam 1995; Ontstaan en Vroege Ontwikkeling van het Vlaamse Bioscoopwezen 1905/1908-1914 [The Origins and early Development of the Flemish Cinema Sector 1905/1908-1914], in: Biltereyst, Daniel, Meers, Philippe (eds.): De Verlichte Stad. Een Geschiedenis van Bioscopen, Filmvertoningen en Filmcultuur in Vlaanderen [The Enlightened City. A History of Movie Theatres, Film Exhibition and Film Culture in Flanders], Leuven 2007; De Eerste Wereldoorlog en het Bioscoopwezen in Leuven 1914-1918 [The First World War and the Film Exhibition Sector in Louvain 1914-1918], in: Van Buyten, Leo (ed.): Film en Fiets Rond 1900. Moderne Uitvindingen in de Leuvense Samenleving [Film and Bicycle around 1900. Modern Inventions in the area of Louvain] (Arca Lovaniensis Artes Atque Historiae Reserans Documenta), Leuven 1981; Capiteyn, André: Niet Alleen Ellende. Het Cultuur- En Ontspanningsleven [Not Only Misery. Culture and Entertainment], in: Gent En De Eerste Wereldoorlog. Het stadsleven in de Jaren 1914-1918 [Ghent and the First World War. City Life in 1914-1918], Ghent 1991. Sources for the study of representations of the war in post-war cinema are: Engelen, Leen: De Verbeelding van de Eerste Wereldoorlog in de Belgische Fictiefilm 1913-1939 [The Representation of the Great War in Belgian Fiction Film 1913-1939], Leuven: unpublished doctoral thesis KU Leuven, 2005; Maudite Soit la Guerre / War is Hell, in: Mathijs, Ernest (ed.): The Cinema of the Low Countries, London 2004; Cinematic Representations of the Enemy in Belgian Silent Fiction Films, in: Purseigle, Pierre: Warfare and Belligerence. Perspectives in First World War Studies, Leiden-Boston 2005; Die Kontrolle des Gedächtnisses. NS-Interventionen gegen Belgische Filme über den Ersten Weltkrieg zwischen 1937 und 1939, in: Herbst-Messlinger, Karin, Rother, Rainer (eds.): Der Erste Weltkrieg Im Film, Munich 2009.
3. † Blom, Ivo: Business as Usual? Filmhandel, Bioscoopwezen en Filmpropaganda in Nederland Tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog [Film Commerce, the Cinema Sector and Film Propaganda in the Netherlands during the First World War], in Binneveld, Hans et al. (eds.): Leven Naast de Catastrofe. Nederland Tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog [Living next to the catastrophe. The Netherlands during the First World War], Hilversum 2001, p. 130.
4. † Hammond, Michael: The Big Show. British Cinema Culture and the Great War 1914-1918, Exeter 2006, pp. 49, 163.
5. † There are no official statistics regarding the number of cinemas and the number of tickets sold before the Second World War. Relevant publications on the topic include Beco, Emile: La Croisade Entreprise Contre les Mauvais Cinémas Pendant la Guerre. Turnhout 1919; Filmvertoningen Tijdens Het Interbellum [Film Exhibition in the Interwar Years], in Biltereyst, Daniel, Meers, Philippe: De Verlichte Stad. Een Geschiedenis van Bioscopen, Filmvertoningen en Filmcultuur in Vlaanderen [The Enlightened City. A History of Movie Theatres, Film Exhibition and Film culture in Flanders], Leuven 2007, p. 47.
6. † Decree of 13 October 1914 and Decree of 4 November 1914, in: Pirenne, Jacques/Vauthier, Maurice: La Législation et l'Administration Allemandes en Belgique, Paris 1925, pp. 138-140.
7. † During the invasion, a number of cinemas were destroyed, as was the case in the Flemish university town of Leuven for example, where four cinemas were burned down in the summer of 1914. During the war years, some new cinemas also opened, notably Anvers Palace, a beautiful picture palace with 1,500 seats.
8. † Translated by the author. The original reads “[...] les spectacles attirent surtout un public dont les ressources s’alimentent presque exclusivement à la charité publique et privée; la bourgeoisie s’abstient de fréquenter ces salles de spectacles, mais c’est le peuple assisté et secouru”. Letter from 9 December 1915. S.A.L., Représentations Cinématographiques – Palace, n° 11251.

9. † Numbers cited in De Schaepdrijver, *Occupation, Propaganda* 1999, pp. 276-277.
10. † In some cities, cinema owners organized themselves in syndicates to be able to stand up against pressure from German and Belgian authorities, as well as pressure from moralists trying to protect children and youngsters from the supposed bad influence of cinema. A noteworthy example of such organization was the Syndikale Kamer van Antwerpen der Kinema's en Bijvakken, which was founded in Antwerp in May 1916. See Wildiers, Clement: *De Kinema Veroverd de Scheldestad* [The Cinema conquers the city of Antwerp], Antwerp 1926.
11. † The fact that a lot of cinema proprietors actually owned certain pre-war short films also explains why they were kept on the program throughout the war.
12. † The activities of the Bufa are well documented. The Bufa archive is preserved by the German Bundesarchiv in Lichterfelde (R 901 Auswärtiges Amt, Teil: Zentralstelle für Auslandsdienst [1912-1923], 9.2 Bild- und Film).
13. † If available, it is useful to look at the film programs in the local press. In the Flemish town of Leuven, all programs were published in French only until May 1916. After that date, most movie theaters announced their programs in both French and Dutch, although it varied from week to week. Interestingly, as of their reopening in December 1918 after the armistice) all movie theaters switch back to French announcements only.
14. † Fowler, Catherine: Sites of Contestation. The Place of Alfred Machin in Early Belgian Cinema, in: *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 21.4 (2001); Convents, *Ontstaan en Vroege Ontwikkeling* [Origins and early Development] 2007, pp. 32-36.
15. † Engelen, *Maudite Soit la Guerre* 2004.
16. † Convents, Guido: Film En De Duitse Inval En Bezetting in België 1914-1918. Op Welke Wijze De Overheid Film Als Machtsinstrument Ontwikkelde [Film and the German Invasion and Occupation of Belgium: How The Authorities Developed Film As A Means Of Power], in: Jaumain, Serge et al. (eds.): *Une Guerre Totale? La Belgique Dans la Première Guerre Mondiale. Nouvelles Tendances De La Recherche Historique*, Brussels 2005, pp. 315-324.
17. † After the war, the SCAB occasionally produced compilation films for the general audience, like *À la Gloire du Troupier Belge / Ter Eere van den Belgischen Soldaat* [To the Glory of the Belgian Soldier] (1922), a five-part documentary (with a fictionalized narrative) which gave an overview of the Belgian military war effort from the mobilization to the armistice. Several SCAB films (including the *Yser Journal*) are kept by the Royal Belgian Film Archive in Brussels (Cinematek); A number of films related to the First World War - including the titles mentioned above - can be accessed through the European Film Gateway 1914 ([www.europeanfilmgateway.eu](http://www.europeanfilmgateway.eu)).
18. † See also: Rochet, Bénédict: Plongée au coeur des prises de vues du service cinématographique de l'armée belge: un matériel visuel de la Grande Guerre à multiples usages. In: Rochet, Bénédict & Tixhon, Alex (eds.): *La petite Belgique dans la Grande Guerre. Une icône, des images*. Namur 2012, pp. 111-128; Amara, Michael: Les grands défis de la propagande belge durant la Première Guerre Mondiale. In: Rochet, Bénédict & Tixhon, Alex (eds.): *La petite Belgique dans la Grande Guerre. Une icône, des images*. Namur 2012, pp. 21-35.
19. † Convents, *Film en de Duitse Inval* [Film and the German Invasion] 2005, p. 327.

20. † As the following quote from Storky, the secretary-general of the Deutsch-Flämischen Gesellschaft, demonstrates: *“Ein wohlgelungener Film ‘Der Löwe von Flandern’ würde die Begeisterung der Flamen für diese Heldentaten ihrer Vorfahren gewaltig steigern. Dabei bedarf es gar keiner Frage, dass dieser Film ausschließlich anti-französisch und darum in deutschen Sinner wirken würde.”* Cited and translated in Convents, Cinema and German Politics in Occupied Belgium, p. 176. (“A successful film, The Lion of Flanders would considerably increase the enthusiasm of the Flemish for the heroic deeds of their ancestors. There is no doubt whatsoever that this film would have an exclusively anti-French effect and therefore further the German cause”).
21. † Convents, Cinema and German Politics 1995, p. 174-176.
22. † A total of twenty-five feature films that deal with the Great War thematically are produced in Belgium in the interwar period. This is approximately one sixth of the total feature film production. See Thys, Marianne (ed.): *Belgian Cinema - Le Cinéma Belge - De Belgische Film*, Ghent 1999. The still-existing films have been preserved by the Royal Belgian Film Archive (Cinematek) in Brussels. Several are also accessible through European Film Gateway 1914 (see filmography).
23. † See for example Claisse, Stéphanie: *Pouvoir(s) et Mémoire(s). L'Etat Belge et les Monuments aux Morts de la Grande Guerre*, in: Jaumain, Serge et al. (eds.): *Une Guerre Totale? La Belgique Dans La Première Guerre Mondiale*, Brussels 2005.
24. † Engelen, *Cinematic Representations of the Enemy* 2005.
25. † When referring to "war culture", I use the definition proposed by [Annette Becker](#) and [Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau](#): "...le champ de toutes les représentations de la guerre forgées par les contemporains: de toutes les représentations qu'ils se sont données de l'immense épreuve, pendant celle-ci d'abord, après celle-ci ensuite." Audoin-Rouzeau, Stéphane, Becker, Annette: *Violence et Consentement. La "Culture de Guerre" du Premier Conflit Mondial*, in: Rioux, F.P., Sirinelli, J.F. (eds.): *Pour une Histoire Culturelle*, Paris: 1997, p. 252.
26. † Horne, John: *Locarno Et la Politique de Démobilisation Culturelle 1925-1930*, in: *14/18 Aujourd'hui, Today, Heute*, 5 (2002), pp. 72-87; De Schaepdrijver, Sophie: *Les Dangers de l'Idéalisme. Souvenirs Contestés de l'Occupation Allemande en Belgique*, "14/18 Aujourd'hui, Today, Heute", 5 (2002), pp. 114-127.
27. † The introduction of sound film production in 1929 (with Gaston Schoukens's *La Famille Klepkens*) created a *de facto* split screen in Belgian cinema: Flemish and French language cinema went separate ways. After 1929, war films were mainly a French language genre.
28. † Screenings of "Met Onze Jongens..." were organised by the Flemish nationalist Yser Pilgrimage Committee; "Histoire du Soldat Inconnu" was mainly screened in ciné-clubs.
29. † Like the banishment of ten Flemish militant front soldiers to serve in Peloton *spécial forestier* in the French *Département Orne* in January 1918.
30. † Belgian recognition of the Flemish sacrifice and suffering during the war in the form of more cultural and political autonomy for Flanders, and for some even the founding of a separate Flemish state.
31. † War casualties such as the Flemish brothers [Edward Van Raemdonck \(1895-1917\)](#) and [Frans Van Raemdonck \(1897-1917\)](#), who supposedly died in each other's arms in the Steenstrate Sector in March 1917 became symbols of the Flemish struggle. Their bodies are buried at the foot of the Yser Tower in Diksmuide.
32. † Engelen, *Die Kontrolle des Gedächtnisses* 2009.

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