GERTJAN WILLEMS
University of Antwerp/Ghent University

Radio drama as art and industry: A case study on the textual and institutional entanglements of the radio play *The Slow Motion Film*

**ABSTRACT**

This article argues that in order to obtain a deeper comprehension of the radio play as a work of art, one should complement the dominant method of textual analysis with industry analysis. This argument is illustrated by means of a case study on the 1967 Belgian radio play *The Slow Motion Film*. This radio play is an adaptation (in fact, a re-adaptation as there had been radio adaptations in 1940 and 1950) of the innovative theatre play *The Slow Motion Film* (1922) by Herman Teirlinck. In order to explain the creative choices of the radio play, which are largely based on the pursuit of fidelity to the source work, the institutional aspect is of great importance. The goal of honouring Teirlinck and highlighting the cultural-historical importance of his work fitted within the broader cultural-educational mandate of the public broadcaster, which prevented a more inventive adaptation. This article argues that in order to gain a better understanding of the radio play as a text, the industrial context also needs to be studied. Furthermore, this article contributes to the largely unwritten history of the radio play in the Low Countries.

**KEYWORDS**

radio drama
adaptation
Belgian radio history
public broadcasting
textual analysis
industry analysis
Radio drama studies have put a lot of effort in positioning radio drama as an art form in its own right. As Tim Crook points out, these efforts stem from the observation that ‘Academics, media theorists and writers in most cultures have not fully appreciated that the medium of sound has provided an environment in which a new storytelling genre has been born’ (1999: 3). As a result, most studies apply a ‘textual’ (close reading) approach to radio drama, aiming to demonstrate that radio plays employ, as Elke Huwiler (2010: 139) convincingly argues, ‘much more varied medial features than only language and [create] a story world with the own intrinsic features of the auditive medium’. The value and the necessity of these research efforts is beyond dispute. The downside of this focus on the artistic qualities of radio drama, however, is that many studies seem to neglect the existence of what could be called the radio drama industry, i.e. the material conditions of the production, distribution and reception of radio plays. Yet, as this article will show, radio drama as art and radio drama as industry are intrinsically intertwined. In other words, in order to obtain a deeper comprehension of the radio play as a work of art, one should complement the dominant method of textual analysis (in its many varieties) with production, distribution and reception analysis. In this context, the institution of the radio broadcaster is particularly relevant.

In order to illustrate the analytical benefits of combining textual and contextual approaches, this article focuses on the textual and institutional entanglements of a specific radio play: *De Vertraagde Film* (*The Slow Motion Film*) (1967), directed by Frans Roggen and produced by the Flemish public broadcaster, the Belgian Radio and Television broadcaster (BRT, Belgische Radio- en Televisieomroep). It is an adaptation of the eponymous theatre play from 1922 by the Belgian writer Herman Teirlinck, which had already been adapted into the film *Het Kwade Oog* (*The Evil Eye*) (1937) and into radio adaptations in 1940 and 1950. This adaptation history is important when examining the textual characteristics of the radio play from 1967. Through the analysis, it becomes clear that in order to explain the creative choices of the radio play, which are largely based on the pursuit of fidelity to the source work, the institutional context is of great importance. The textual analysis is then complemented by an industrial analysis paying special attention to the production and broadcasting circumstances of the radio play, as well as the more general public broadcaster’s policies of which it was part. This is done by consulting a variety of archival documents, such as radio play scripts, policy documents of the public broadcaster, broadcasting announcements and programming information. The case of *The Slow Motion Film* thus shows that in order to gain a better understanding of the radio play as a text, the institutional context also needs to be studied. Furthermore, by means of a case study from 1967 but with connections to the 1940s and 1950s, this article joins the recent and very timely research efforts to explore the understudied history of the radio play in the Low Countries (see Bernaerts and Bluijs 2019).

## INNOVATION IN FLEMISH INTER-WAR THEATRE

The versatile Herman Teirlinck (1879–1967) was active as a novelist, poet, essayist, correspondent, illustrator, actor, puppeteer, pedagogue, cultural organizer and royal advisor. Internationally, the ‘Prince of Dutch Literature’ is recognized as the most important dramatist of the inter-war period in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking northern part of Belgium (Rubin 1994: 110). A key work in Teirlinck’s dramatic oeuvre is *The Slow Motion Film* (1922), which introduced expressionist elements to Flemish theatre. Dutchman Arie van den
Heuvel was the director of the play, but Teirlinck was the general leader. He was also the most important contributor in terms of *mise en scène*, costumes and decors (Van Schoor 1996: 602). The theatre script soon appeared as an independent publication (Teirlinck 1922), which was translated into French, German and Russian (Van den Bossche 2017: 382).

*The Slow Motion Film* is situated on and around a bridge in the Marolles, a Brussels working-class district, during the Christmas period. The play consists of three acts. The first act opens with a folkloristic atmosphere, including a chapel in the decor, dance organ music and folkloristic characters, such as the Epiphany singers, the lantern man, Jean and his lover ‘the blonde’, two policemen, a whelks saleswoman and ‘Crazy Lowie’, based on a popular figure in Brussels at the time. Then the focus shifts to a nameless man and a woman who, out of desperation, decide to drown themselves, together with their baby. Tied together with a rope, they jump from the bridge, but Crazy Lowie sees and calls for help. The saleswoman, the agents, the blonde and Jean approach, after which the middle act starts.

The third act begins again at the end of the first. Jean and the policemen save the couple from the water, but their child is lost. The husband and wife jump into the water as lovers, but they emerge as strangers. The man and woman each go their own way, whereas the policemen take a pint, the lantern man turns out the light, and the Epiphany singers continue their song. This first and the third act form, as the theatre script indicates, a foreplay and aftermath ‘in normal tempo’ (Teirlinck 1922: 5).

Another tempo is used for the longer second act, which deals with the underwater death throes of the man and woman. In this transition between life and death, the realism from the first and the third act is exchanged for another dimension, where the laws of empirical reality no longer apply. The couple is introduced to allegorical figures, such as Death (around which the dragons of plague, war, hunger and sin dance), Memory (which allows the man and woman to see various moments of their lives again), Oblivion and Truth. The underwater feeling is created by the music, the lighting and a mesh, which separates the actors from the audience.

The middle act forms the core of the expressionist character of Teirlinck’s play. Typical of expressionism, this part focuses on the inner world of tormented characters, which is externalized onstage. The spectator does not get to see the empirical reality but the reality as the characters experience it. Their memories, thoughts and feelings are depicted. Expressionist theatre often uses distorted, non-realistic decors, props and costumes (Furness 2018). By the use of, among other things, a mesh and masks, this is also the case in the second act of *The Slow Motion Film*.

The most inventive expressionist element of the play is that the subjective experience of time is also externalized by stretching a few ‘empirical’ minutes considerably. The second act is no longer ‘in normal tempo’; instead, it is conceptualized as a slow motion film. The slow motion aspect, which is also indicated by slower-acting movements, refers to the fact that the few minutes of the death throes are spun out over a much longer dramatic time in the play, just as is possible in films via the slow motion technique. Within this slowing down, however, there is also an acceleration: through the encounter with Memory, the protagonists see important moments of their lives flash by as in an accelerated film. As such, by making use of an innovative intermedial intervention (see Kattenbelt 2008), the second act bears both a slow motion and a fast motion dimension.
The cinematic inspiration for the play is also present in the directing instructions for the actors to move more slowly at the end of the first act and finally to stand still. As such, the second act is introduced by a gradually growing slow-motion effect that results in the theatre equivalent of a freeze frame. Furthermore, the underwater world resembles a movie theatre that the man and woman have entered. In a very cinematic playing with time and space, they encounter not only all kinds of allegorical figures but also various scenes from their lives, depicted as if in a movie. The cinematic influence is made explicit not only in the title of the play, but also in the promotional poster (see Figure 1). Designed by avant-garde artist Karel Maes, this poster was soon exhibited as an independent work of art and has gained international recognition through its inclusion in the Museum of Modern Art collection (Wrede 1988: 20). In a geometric abstract style close to cubism, the poster suggests a film strip and film equipment.

While cinematic influences are central, the intermedial character of Teirlinck’s play is more varied, as is suggested by the play’s subtitle: Een Gedanst, Gezongen en Gesproken Drama in Drie Bedrijven (A Danced, Sung, and Spoken Drama in Three Acts). In addition to the singing and dancing, which were indeed prominently featured, the lighting and the stylized decors also played an important role in Teirlinck’s staging of the piece. The art of painting was present not only in the masks and the decors of the bridge and the underwater scenes but also in the structure of the play: the core part is supported by a prologue and an epilogue, a structure derived from the triptychs of Early Netherlandish painting (Van Schoor 1996: 604).

By incorporating intermedial and expressionist elements, Teirlinck wanted to renew Flemish theatre, which he felt was lagging behind other literary genres and too focused on realism. This was in line with international tendencies. The depiction of subjective psychology and world perception, as well as specific expressionistic decor elements, is reminiscent of German expressionist films, such as Robert Wiene’s Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari (The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari) (1920). Theatre influences included French and francophone Belgian authors, such as the expressionist Fernand Crommelynck and the symbolists Maurice Maeterlinck and Henri-René Lenormand, as well as the Italian modernist author Luigi Pirandello (Goedegebuure 2009: 550; Van Schoor 1996: 605–07).

The Slow Motion Film is often labelled as the first expressionist play in Flemish theatre history. However, the symbolist influences already indicate that the play is not expressionist in every respect. In addition, Teirlinck wanted to reach a wider audience. For this reason, the first and last acts are more traditional in design, more fitting within familiar Flemish theatre traditions. Despite modern elements — such as the metropolitan setting and the background sounds of a dance hall, trams and cars — the setting of The Slow Motion Film has a lasting rural character, with folkloristic characters. This toning down of the modern and experimental character of the play did not appeal to everyone. Critic and author Victor Brunclair, for example, found that Teirlinck renounced expressionism because he only took over a few formalistic elements, while the play remained rather traditional in other areas (Vandenbroucke 2014: 261–62). It seems more correct to speak of a moderate expressionism, which does not alter the fact that The Slow Motion Film, together with subsequent plays by Teirlinck, did indeed introduce formalist renewal in Flemish theatre. Because of this, the historical importance of Teirlinck’s play is beyond dispute.
The Evil Eye

As we have seen, an important strategy in Teirlinck’s renewal project was to connect to other media and art forms. After the performances of the play in the 1920s, the relationship of *The Slow Motion Film* with various media got a new dimension through adaptations of the play into other media. It was adapted
as a radio play no less than three times. Very appropriately, however, the first adaptation was a film: *The Evil Eye* (1937). In order to better understand and contextualize the adaptation strategies of the radio plays, it is necessary to first take a closer look at the creative choices of this film adaptation.

The director of *The Evil Eye* was Charles Dekeukeleire (1905–71), one of Belgium’s most important experimental and documentary filmmakers. For this film, he worked closely with Teirlinck, who wrote the screenplay. Teirlinck was not afraid to deviate much more radically from his own play than the radio plays would do. The film takes place seventeen years after the story from *The Slow Motion Film*, which means that *The Evil Eye* can be seen as a kind of sequel to the play. The setting has also been relocated, from Brussels to a rural area in Flanders, and the modern elements from the play are exchanged for documentary images about rural folklore. The film story deals with a man who is labelled ‘the evil eye’ by the villagers: he is accused of letting the harvest fail and making the cattle ill. In reality, the man is an innocent vagabond who seventeen years earlier suffered through a romantic relationship that was rejected by society and ended in a double suicide attempt. Just like in the theatre play, the couple survived, but their child died in the water. The man has since been restlessly searching for his former lover.

Towards the end of the film, the man recounts the suicide attempt. The six minutes that the film spends on the man’s account of the happenings are directly based on *The Slow Motion Film*. These six minutes also form the most experimental sequence of the film. The man talks in voice-over about his ill-fated love, the suicide attempt and how he experienced underwater death throes for a few minutes. Meanwhile, the film shows nature and rural images, idyllic children’s scenes, close-ups of body parts and graphic abstract forms. For these images, Dekeukeleire and Teirlinck also employed the expertise of Dutchman Jan Cornelis Mol, a specialist in flower and crystal films, and Frenchman Jean Painlevé, a marine biologist who filmed underwater life. Dekeukeleire made a fairly fast, expressive montage of the images, for which he made frequent use of slow motion, dissolves and superimpositions, in a style reminiscent of French impressionist cinema (see Figures 2 and 3). In this way, the film attempts to lend expression to what the man in voice-over describes as ‘[w]e hovered in the quiet conjuring of forms, of lights and sounds’.

This experimental scene explores the expressive possibilities of the film medium. With the short films by Dekeukeleire, Henri Storck, Henri d’Ursel and Ernst Moerman, Belgian cinema had seen avant-garde film experiments for almost ten years. However, such an experimental sequence in a long fiction film aimed at a broader audience was unprecedented in the history of Belgian feature films. Although the contemporary press largely regarded the film as a failure (the critical appreciation for the film has since increased considerably; see, e.g. Thys 1999: 262; Mosley 2001: 52; Vantorre 2009), *The Evil Eye* is an innovative film providing a highly creative treatment of Teirlinck’s play *The Slow Motion Film*.

**THE SLOW MOTION FILM AS RADIO PLAY**

After the film adaptation in 1937, three radio play adaptations of *The Slow Motion Film* followed in 1940, 1950 and 1967. All three were productions of the public broadcaster. In 1940 and 1950, this was still the National Institute for Radio Broadcasting (Nationale Instituut voor de Radio-Omroep, NIR), which
Radio drama as art and industry

Figure 2: A frame from the ‘underwater scene’ in The Evil Eye.

Figure 3: A frame from the ‘underwater scene’ in The Evil Eye.

The first radio play adaptation of The Slow Motion Film was broadcast on 3 May 1940, one week before the outbreak of the Second World War in Belgium. It was a radio adaptation by puppeteer Jozef (Jef) Contryn, who had been working at the NIR since 1933 as a foley artist for radio plays and then as a director. The music was provided by Jef van Hoof, who had already composed music for the second act of the play The Slow Motion Film in 1926, to the great satisfaction of Teirlinck (1950). In contrast to the script, a recording of this radio play has not survived. The same goes for the second radio play adaptation from 1950, directed by Frans Roggen. Roggen was also the director of the radio play from 1967, which is preserved in the archives of the public broadcaster.

Only the 1967 version of the radio play has been preserved, so it is this version that we will discuss in what follows. Indeed, the scarcity of older radio play recordings forms a major problem for radio drama studies (Huwiler 2005). Besides Roggen as a director, Louis De Meester was also an important figure for the realization of this radio play. De Meester, a pioneer in Belgian electronic music, provided the musical sounds for the radio play. In 1945, De Meester had started working for the public broadcaster. Through his soundtracks for radio and television, he was able to introduce the Belgian audience to electronic music. With his radio and television operas, he also won international praise in the 1950s and 1960s (Knckaert 2001). De Meester’s importance for the creation of the radio play The Slow Motion Film was highlighted because the BRT broadcast began and ended with the words ‘The Slow Motion Film by Herman Teirlinck with musical sound images by Louis De Meester’. In addition, in the script of the radio play, De Meester is mentioned first in the credits, before director Roggen.

FIDELITY TO THE SOURCE WORK

For the radio play adaptation of The Slow Motion Film, the greatest possible fidelity to the source work was sought. Also, the medium-specific adjustments are inspired by this quest for fidelity. The radio play adopts the narration of Teirlinck’s play, with the three acts and the story development described above. Only a few fragments of minor narrative importance are removed to limit the duration of the radio play (67 minutes). The dialogues are largely retained in their original form, with just a few small adjustments that stem from the actors’ performance. Occasionally, a piece of dialogue is added to make the radio play easier to understand when certain things are less clear due to the lack of visual elements. For example, the first dialogue of the lantern man in Teirlinck’s theatre script reads as follows: If I do not light the bridge lanterns now […] (Teirlinck 1922: 7).

In the radio play, there is an addition that immediately clarifies the profession of the character: ‘If I, the lantern man, do not light the bridge lanterns now’.

The script of the radio play preserves the majority of Teirlinck’s auditory direction instructions, which become all the more important, both in the provision of extra narrative elements and in the creation of atmosphere. Thus, the time of the year (around Christmas), the time of day (evening) and the setting (the street) are immediately made clear at the beginning of the radio
play by the mix of sounds: the dance music of the organ in the distance intertwined with children’s songs and an Epiphany song. During the full first act, the organ music is heard and functions as an indicator for the real world. The organ music only stops when the second act starts, which takes place under water. During the transition to the third act, the organ music resounds again, making it clear that we are back in the normal world. When at the end of the radio play only the Epiphany song can be heard and the other sounds are replaced by the howling of the wind, it is clear that the night is coming to its end. These sound elements create a cold, wintery Christmas atmosphere, just like the visual staging of the play.

Sporadically, a sound instruction from the theatre script cannot be heard in the radio play. For example, the script of the radio play does take over an auditory direction like ‘[i]n between the ringing of a tram clings or the horn of a car shouts’ (Teirlinck 1922: 7), but in the final radio play, no tram or car can be heard. Perhaps the makers of the radio play found this was only a detail and chose not to burden the already quite full soundtrack (with the organ music and children’s and Epiphany songs) further. But for Teirlinck’s play, these sounds were important markers of the modern, urban character of the setting.

Apart from a number of relatively minor omissions or additions, the radio play seems to be a sort of a posteriori audio capture of the 1922 play, in which the obvious elimination of the visual dimension is the most important difference. As a result, the radio play adaptation seems to suggest an implicit hierarchy of art forms, in which the radio play remains in the shadow of the theatre play. This is especially true for the first and last acts of the radio play. The adaptation of the second act, which forms the innovative core of Teirlinck’s piece, bears a somewhat more inventive character because of Louis De Meester’s use of electronic music.

The transition to the underwater world at the end of the first act is indicated by the voices of the blonde, Jean and the Epiphany singers, which sound slower, deeper and further away, corresponding to the slowed-down acting in the play. Remarkably, the organ music in the radio play keeps on playing at the same rhythm. Since the organ is an indicator of the ‘real’ world, the radio play offers two narrative spaces at the same time. Here the radio play fully exploits the creative possibilities of the medium: through the use of sound, two narrative spaces are displayed in superposition. It is in these and other instances of the second act that it becomes most clear that, notwithstanding its closeness to literary works, radio drama should indeed be considered, as an art form in its own right, with its own intrinsic features (Huwiler 2010: 139).

After the sounds that introduce the second act fade away, a loud gong heralds the second act, exactly as the theatre script prescribes: ‘[w]hen the curtain rises a great bronze sound is heard, the reverberation of which spreads out and merges with the woe sounds of the choir’ (Teirlinck 1922: 33). While the radio play accurately follows this directional instruction, there is no such indication in the radio play script. This means that the radio play artists also consulted Teirlinck’s theatre script. The woe sounds are complemented by other slow, strong echoing electronic tones that create an underwater effect. During the 29.5 minutes of the second act, these reverberating electronic sounds often return, effectively taking over the function of the mesh, the lighting and the music that suggest the underwater feeling in Teirlinck’s theatre play from 1922.
After the radio play adaptation of *The Slow Motion Film* in 1967, the BRT continued to put Teirlinck’s literary legacy in the spotlight, now through television adaptations. The mini-series *Mijnheer Serjanszoon* (Mister Serjanszoon) (dir. Johan De Meester and Bert Struys), based on Teirlinck’s eponymous novel from 1908, appeared on the small screen in the autumn of 1967. On the 100th anniversary of Teirlinck’s birthday in 1979, the BRT, in co-production with the Dutch public broadcaster General Association of Radio Broadcasting (AVRO, Algemene Vereniging Radio Omroep), produced the prestigious six-part costume drama *Maria Speermálie* (dir. Antonin Moskalyk), based on Teirlinck’s 1940 novel of the same name.

Electronic sound effects are also used in the second act as an auditory alternative for visual instructions from the theatre script. When Death delivers his speech and presents the dragons of plague, war, hunger and sin, these dragons appear each with their own distinctive sounds. Furthermore, the arrivals of allegorical figures Memory and Oblivion also receive an auditory announcement through appropriate sounds. At several occasions, the use of sound in the second act ensures that the expressionist characteristics of the play are preserved in spite of the omission of the visual elements.

**THE PUBLIC BROADCASTER’S POLICY OF HONOURING LITERARY FIGURES**

While the above textual analysis provides insight into the creative choices of the radio play, these choices can only be fully understood when taking into consideration the institutional context out of which the radio play originated. The radio adaptations of *The Slow Motion Film* were part of the public broadcaster’s strong tradition of honouring important Flemish literary figures by means of television or radio adaptations, and sometimes even film adaptations. For radio drama, this tradition was part of a broader policy by the public broadcaster that stimulated radio drama’s closeness to literary drama. Such a closeness can also be found in the English-speaking world of radio drama (Crook 1999), while it is less present in German-speaking radio drama history, notwithstanding the strong presence of literary radio adaptations (Huwiler 2010: 130).

The tradition of celebrating literary works and authors was fully in line with the cultural-educational policy that characterized Flemish public broadcasting until the 1980s. The public broadcaster consciously used radio and television as instruments for the development and emancipation of the Flemish community (Dhoest 2004; Van den Bulck 2001). In this context, the dissemination of Flemish (mainly high) culture was high on the agenda. Audio-visual adaptations of literary works were a frequently applied strategy for achieving these goals.

Radio plays offered a quite fast and cheap adaptation option for the public broadcaster. Teirlinck himself had already used this medium in 1930 to pay tribute to his friend and fellow author, Karel van de Woestijne, who had died in 1929. Teirlinck’s radio play adaptation of Van de Woestijne’s novel *De Boer die Sterft* (*The Dying Peasant*) (1918), made for the just established public broadcaster, is one of the very first radio plays in Flanders. Teirlinck was already honoured with radio plays before his death. After the first radio play adaptation of *The Slow Motion Film* in 1940, the public broadcaster produced a second radio play adaptation after Teirlinck received the five-yearly State Prize for Flemish Literature in 1950. In 1959, on the occasion of Teirlinck’s 80th birthday, Bert Brauns directed *Ik Dien* (*I Serve*), a radio play adaptation of Teirlinck’s eponymous theatre version (1923) of the Beatrice legend.

In the days, weeks and months after Teirlinck’s death in 1967, various memoriam articles appeared in the Flemish and Dutch press. The BRT also wanted to honour Teirlinck, not only with a news or memoriam report but also with a new radio play adaptation of *The Slow Motion Film*. The radio play was made ‘in memory of the recently deceased author’, as can be read in the public broadcaster’s annual report (BRT 1968: 31). The radio play was thus fully in line with the cultural-educational policy context of the public broadcaster, in which adaptations were used to bring the literary legacy of important Flemish writers to the attention.
In this regard, it is interesting to note that the public broadcaster was not afraid to attribute more authorship to Teirlinck than he actually deserved. In the script of the 1967 radio play, it is immediately noticeable that this is the same script as in 1940, the only adjustment being the modernization of language. The name of the scriptwriter, Jozef Contryn, however, is nowhere mentioned in the script or in announcements of the radio play. While in an American context, it was quite common to leave the radio drama writer uncredited (Ellett 2017), this was less the case in a Belgian context. Moreover, the authorship of the radio play was even unjustly attributed to Teirlinck, as the 1950 version was announced as 'a theatre play by Herman Teirlinck – adapted by the author into a radio play' (Anon. 1950: 3).

Remarkably, the public broadcaster’s archives hold a radio play script from 1940 in which Contryn’s name is ostentatiously crossed out with red pencil. It is not clear when this crossing out happened, but it shows that the absence of Contryn’s name in the radio plays from 1950 and 1967 was a deliberate intervention. This can probably be linked to Contryn’s past: during the Second World War, he actively collaborated with the German occupier. After the Second World War, he was punished for this and he could no longer work at the public broadcaster, which could be an explanation for why Contryn’s name has disappeared from the radio play versions of 1950 and 1967. But in May 1956, Contryn was rehabilitated, and from the beginning of the 1960s, Contryn worked again for the public broadcaster, where he mainly produced radio programmes for children. In this context, it is unclear why his name was not included again in the 1967 radio play version. Maybe they started from the 1950 version, where his name was deleted, and they simply forgot to include his name again? Maybe they didn’t see the added value of mentioning his name, and Contryn agreed?

Whatever the case may be, the result of the removal of Contryn’s name meant a bigger degree of authorship for Teirlinck, which was in accordance with the tributary goals of the radio plays. While authorship is an important concept within the textual tradition of radio drama analysis, this instance, bumped into accidentally while studying the archival material, shows that institutional and contextual research can provide important new insights into questions of authorship.

INSTITUTIONAL IMPACT ON THE RADIO PLAY

The cultural-educational approach of the BRT’s policy to pay tribute to important literary figures was shared by Dutch Catholic Radio Broadcasting (Katholieke Radio Omroep, KRO), which broadcasted the radio play in the Netherlands on 12 December 1967. The transmission was preceded by the following introduction:

In our programme, *Tuesday Evening Theatre*, you can now listen to *The Slow Motion Film*, a Flemish radio performance of this play by Herman Teirlinck […] His most successful plays date back to the 1920s, when he helped to renew Dutch-speaking theatre in the style of expressionism. He wrote his best piece, *The Slow Motion Film*, in 1922. It is a triptych. On the first panel, Teirlinck paints the atmosphere of a Flemish town in the cold, dark days around Christmas […] A young man and a young woman carrying a child in her arms approach the water. Before anyone can prevent it, they jump into it. The middle act plays under water. As
in a slow motion film, the suicidal couple experiences the whole life of man in the few moments that remain before suffocation […] In the third part, the suicides, still alive, are taken out of the water. Their child has remained in the water. The suggestive performance of the Belgian radio does justice to the baroque-pathetic tone that characterized the expressionist theatre of the 1920s.

The educational approach of this introduction is clear, first presenting the importance of Teirlinck and then giving information about the content and context of *The Slow Motion Film*. Strikingly, it is already revealed that the child dies and the couple is saved. This way, an important part of the narrative tension, and thus also of the joy of listening, is taken away. The explanation is part of the introduction and not of a discussion after the radio play has finished (so the listener can first discover the radio play and the story her/himself). This underlines the paternalistic attitude of KRO, and it shows how the institutional context has been important for the historical reception of the radio play.

The cultural-educational institutional context of the public broadcaster was not only instrumental for the production and reception of *The Slow Motion Film*. It also had implications for the textual characteristics of the radio play. BRT was primarily interested in highlighting the cultural-historical importance of Teirlinck and his work. That explains why a more inventive creative adaptation was not possible. BRT aimed less for the creation of an innovative radio play than for the presentation of a piece of theatre history. In this context, the greatest possible fidelity to Teirlinck’s play from 1922 was the first concern in order to get as close as possible to the historical experience. Again, this emphasis on fidelity to the literary source work was fully in line with the broader adaptation policy of the BRT during the second half of the twentieth century (see, e.g. Willems 2014).

Seen within BRT’s pursuit of a historical evocation, the question remains: why did the music get an update, whereas this was not at all the case for the other elements, such as the dialogues that, after 45 years, sounded outdated? Why did the radio play artists not choose the musical composition of Jef van Hoof, which was used in the radio play adaptation of 1950 and of which Teirlinck was so fond? A possible explanation is that the radio play artists mainly departed from the radio play script (which remained very close to the theatre script) and the theatre script, rather than from the performances of the play. They wanted to pay tribute to Teirlinck, which was done by following his dialogues and instructions as closely as possible. Because there is no musical indication in the theatre script, and the composition of Jef van Hoof dates from a few years after the first performance of Teirlinck’s play, the radio play artists might have seen the opportunity to exercise greater freedom. This greater freedom was translated into the use of electronic music. However, as the music always supports the dramatic development, the radio play did not deviate from the principle of loyalty to Teirlinck’s script. The choice for Louis De Meester, who shared Teirlinck’s ambition to be a pioneer who integrated experimentation into his artistic work in an accessible manner, also fitted within the idea of paying tribute to Teirlinck.

The use of electronic music can be interpreted as an attempt to boost the inventive character of the radio play. However, De Meester had already used his electronic music in various radio and television works since the 1950s, making the innovative nature of his contribution to this radio play rather limited.
CONCLUSION

The radio play from 1967 departed from an already existing script for a radio play from 1940, by Contryn. This script attempted to emulate Teirlinck’s theatre script for *The Slow Motion Film* as closely as possible. Consequently, this is also largely the case for the radio play from 1967. The story structure, dialogues and sounds were adopted without notable modifications. Only the use of electronic music represented a contemporary adjustment of the play from 1922. The radio play may be true to the letter of Teirlinck’s play, but whether it is true to the innovative spirit of Teirlinck’s piece is a different question. The film adaptation from 1937, *The Evil Eye*, shows that Teirlinck himself was inclined to a more dramatically deviant and formally experimental treatment of his work. To understand why 30 years later the radio play went in a completely different direction by remaining very close to Teirlinck’s theatre play, the institutional context of the public broadcaster is crucial. The radio play’s fidelity to the theatre play served the goal of honouring Teirlinck, which fitted within the broader cultural-educational mandate of the public broadcaster. This prevented a more inventive adaptation. Next to explaining creative choices, the contextual research also illustrates how the question of authorship can be much more nuanced than the radio play and its official credits often seem to suggest.

At the heart of this article lies the argument that the study of radio drama as art should be complemented by the study of radio drama as industry. As with theatre, film and television productions, a whole cast and crew is involved in the creative process of producing radio drama. All these people are working on a radio play within a certain production and (mostly) institutional context. In this respect, from a historical perspective, public broadcasters are the most important players in Belgium, the Netherlands and many other parts of Europe. The textual and institutional entanglements of *The Slow Motion Film* show how elucidating this institutional context can be when asking the question why certain radio plays are made and why they sound as they sound.

REFERENCES

Anon. (1950), ‘De Vertraagde Film’ (*The Slow Motion Film*), *De Radioweek*, 11 June, p. 3.
Brauns, Bert (1959), *Ik Dien* (*I serve*), Belgium: NIR.
Contryn, Jozef (1940), *De Vertraagde Film* (*The Slow Motion Film*), Belgium: NIR.
Dekeukeleire, Charles (1937), *Het Kwade Oog* (*The Evil Eye*), Belgium: PDK.


Roggen, Frans (1950), *De Vertraagde Film (The Slow Motion Film)*, Belgium: NIR.

Roggen, Frans (1967), *De Vertraagde Film (The Slow Motion Film)*, Belgium: BRT.


Teirlinck, Herman (1922), *De Vertraagde Film (The Slow Motion Film)*, Amsterdam: Maatschappij voor goede en goedkoope lectuur.


Wiene, Robert (1920), *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari (The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari)*, Germany: Decla-Bioscop.


SUGGESTED CITATION


CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Gertjan Willems is an assistant professor at the University of Antwerp. He is also a postdoctoral fellow of the Research Foundation – Flanders at Ghent University. He has been a visiting scholar at the Erasmus University Rotterdam, the University of Amsterdam, the Université Paris 2 Panthéon-Assas and the University of York. Since 2016, he is chair of the film studies section of European Communication Research and Education Association. He has particular research expertise in Belgian film history, film adaptations and the relation between media and nation-building.

Contact: University of Antwerp, Gertjan Willems, S.D.124, Grote Kauwenberg 18, 2000 Antwerpen, Belgium. E-mail: Gertjan.willems@uantwerpen.be

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7125-4161

Gertjan Willems has asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.