It is a well-known fact from modern theatre history that, when Leon Trotsky attended *Earth Rampant* at the Meyerhold Theatre in 1923, he suddenly appeared on the stage to deliver a speech on the fifth anniversary of the Red Army. Since the play by Sergei Tretyakov was explicitly concerned with the events of the Civil War, his address fit in perfectly. ‘After thunderous applause the action on stage continued as if without interruption and Trotsky again returned to his seat’ (Yuri Annenkov quoted in Leach 1993: 19).

Trotsky’s interruption marks a key event in the history of the theatrical avant-garde. According to Peter Bürger’s influential *Theorie der Avantgarde* (1974) – and numerous similar texts - its main project was to reunite art and the everyday praxis of life. In Bürger’s concise words, the utopian aim of avant-garde artists could be phrased as ‘the attempt to organize a new life praxis from a basis in art’ (Bürger 1984: 49). Consequently, the fame of Trotsky’s intervention is even outshone by Soviet mass spectacles such as *The Storming of the Winter Palace* (Petrograd, 1920). The enormous production commemorated a decisive event from the Revolution. Here the aesthetic happening coincided almost seamlessly with the social. Many of the eight thousand ‘actors’ and the hundred thousand spectators had been involved, a few years before, in the actual historical events. Moreover, the Civil War was still raging in the vicinity of Petrograd at the very time of the show. Present-day evaluations, by Susan Buck-Morss and Slavoj Žižek, continue to stress the event’s avant-garde character, for example by quoting a contemporary report: ‘The future historian will record how, throughout one of the bloodiest and most brutal revolutions, all of Russia was acting’ (Žižek 2003; Buck-Morss 2001: 144).

Revolutionary mass theatre has become a well-known and even paradigmatic example of avant-garde art. In this essay, I would like to explore other types of mass theatre or, to use a more general expression, ‘socio-theatrical events’. My case-study will concern the mass spectacles and choral plays organized by Catholic reformers during the interbellum period in the region of Flanders (Belgium). Although we do not commonly associate such events with the revolutionary fervour of the avant-garde, they do fit Bürger’s description of the avant-garde project surprisingly well.

My guiding question will be that of liturgy. I would like to investigate the properly ‘religious’ dimension of these events. Were they modelled on traditional Catholic liturgy (Mass, the sacraments), or did they rather fit in with a modernist aesthetic? As these events were organized by the Catholic Church but directed by modern theatre artists who were keenly aware of artistic currents such as Constructivism and Expressionism, I believe that the Flemish mass spectacles of the 1930s form a highly interesting case of ‘arrière-garde’ (Marx 2004).

1. Mass Theatre in Europe
Mass theatre was a popular expression of ‘community art’ in most European countries...
during the interbellum period. From Max Reinhardt’s lavish open-air spectacles (such as *Everyman* in Salzburg, 1920) to Socialist workers’ *Laienspiel* (lay theatre), theatre visionaries focused on ever larger groups for entertainment as well as political agitation. Among Western European countries, Belgium was one of the last to follow the new trend of socio-theatrical events. It was imported via the Socialist movement from Germany and Russia, passing through the Netherlands, where workers’ choirs (both singing and reciting choirs had quickly risen in favour.

In the case of Belgium, and Flanders in particular, it is especially interesting to observe that the mass theatre phenomenon displayed an ideological heterogeneity not seen elsewhere. Catholicism soon appropriated the Socialist idea of lay theatre and choral training. Their spokesmen defended a modernization of Catholicism that was at the same time traditionalist and radically contemporary. How did they come to conceive the renaissance of the ancient liturgical tradition in the form of mass spectacle?

I will first study the emergence of liturgy in general in modern drama theories of the early twentieth century. This will serve to highlight the peculiarities of Catholic Flemish theories by directors and critics such as Jozef Boon, Lode Geyser, Aloïs de Maeyer and Herman de Vleeschauwer. The concluding movement of this essay will be devoted to verifying whether the liturgical component was not simply an important theoretical presence. Was liturgy equally strongly articulated in the actual stagings of Catholic mass theatre? Was it possible to successfully merge Catholic liturgy with a modernist theatre aesthetic?

2. LITURGY AND MODERN DRAMA

Although the Soviet director Meyerhold was an ardent promoter of revolutionary mass spectacle, he sharply realized that the conservative forces in society had long since employed the means of theatrical street actions. Far from blind to the new impulses which emanated from the proselytizing ‘Catholic Action’ movement (stimulated by Pope Pius XI), he wrote in 1929:

> The Vatican has become a laboratory for research into the art of production. Of all theatre-directors, the Pope is the most inventive, the most ingenious. Even now, as I sit checking this summary of my lecture, the newspaper contains a report of widespread anti-Semitic disturbances which have turned into an organized Jewish pogrom. But take note: ‘On the eve of the disturbances in Lvov there were organized Catholic processions’ … Now the Catholic Church has offered its hand to Fascism. With their religious processions and their Fascist rallies, these two organizations are unrivalled in their restoration of the traditional devices of the street theatre. (Meyerhold 1969: 260)

It was not only political parties and religious organizations that flirted with the social and dramatic potential of liturgy, but also many diverse contributors to modern drama. The most caustic among them was T. S. Eliot, who, in ‘A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry’ (1928), wrote: ‘The only dramatic satisfaction that I find now is in a High Mass well performed’ (Eliot 1972: 47). His
experiments in liturgical drama would first lead to the pageant play *The Rock* (1934) and subsequently to *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935). In the same vein, the French dramatist Paul Claudel came to reproach his modernist idol Arthur Rimbaud for attempting to approach Eternity through the means of the senses, i.e., secular poetry. Being merely a ‘poet without the power of the priest’, Rimbaud failed to realize that only the unleavened bread of the Eucharist could be a material pointer to the eternal realm (Claudel 1957 [1919]: 500-1). Claudel’s artistic conclusion was to introduce liturgical elements in the texture of his plays. He composed the final redemptive scene of *Partage de midi* (1906), for instance, by means of a liturgical and confessional language (aptly entitled ‘Mesa’s Canticle’).

In *Le Masque et l’encombreur* (1921), Gaston Baty developed a similar intuition into a historical essay on the origins of theatre. Religious ceremony, and most importantly medieval Catholic liturgy, was the true dramatic phenomenon, because it had integrated all dramatic components – the spoken text and the non-verbal elements of spectacle – into a harmonious whole. Classicist drama had corrupted the dramatic harmony by privileging the spiritual and individualist dimension, i.e., the text. Baty undertook to rewrite Western theatre history as a fluctuation between these two poles of the theatrical event: the spiritual dimension of drama, which had dominated literary theatre since the Renaissance, and the material dimension of spectacle, which had resurfaced in such genres as commedia dell’arte, classical ballet, melodrama and pantomime. Only the distinctly Catholic and medieval creation of Mass – the ineffable divine mystery attired in the material splendour of liturgy – had succeeded in harmonizing both poles.

For Baty, though, a contemporary Catholic theatre did not mean an art-form explicitly intended to edify or apostolize. ‘The dramatic system of the Middle Ages does not at all require a religious topic. The same living and elastic form may serve a romantic intrigue or a historical action’ (Baty 1949: 87). Here we touch on the true problem that liturgy posed to modernist theatre practitioners. Convinced that theatre should break out of the autonomy of art and approach the efficacy of ritual, it was unclear how this efficacy was to be understood or realized. Eliot and Claudel attempted each in their distinct way to integrate a certain liturgical style in drama. For Baty, Catholic liturgy stood for a superb harmony between word and image. Others still modernized and restaged the medieval liturgical drama itself, such as Gustave Cohen and Henri Ghéon in France, or Herman Teirlinck and Herman van Overbeke in Flanders. But however great their admiration for its sacred efficacy, few modernists went so far as to strive for a genre truly in-between religious practice and modern drama. They tried to imbue the existing Western theatre with the powers of liturgy but were reluctant to demand the creation of a new dramatic genre that would truly reinvent liturgy for the modern age. Others, however, unhesitatingly stated that such a form could be made. Its creators should be the ideologically organized masses of the twentieth century.

3. MODERNIST CATHOLIC THEATRE IN FLANDERS

Before I contrast the views of Eliot, Claudel and the others with those of the Flemish mass theatre practitioners, it is necessary to frame their activities within the context of interwar Catholicism. The origins of Catholic reciting choirs, which quickly grew into the large-scale spectacles of the 1930s, may be found in two distinct developments of the early twentieth century: Catholic Action and the rise of modernist Catholic theatre.

From the other side of the political spectrum, Socialism had succeeded in organizing the working class by means of trade unions and youth movements. These comprised an important cultural component. Prominent artists such as Bertolt Brecht helped to compose an extensive repertoire of militant songs, *Lehrstücke*, and poems and choral dramas
intended for the workers’ choirs (amongst which the Arbeitersprechchöre or reciting choirs). In Germany and Flanders, young professionals from the budding modern dance scene made use of the Laban system to train Socialist lay movement choirs (notably Laban’s disciples Martin Gleisner, Albrecht Knust and Lea Daan).

The Church had responded to the growing popularity of Socialist organizations by stimulating the creation of similar Catholic groups. Especially the 1922 encyclical letter Ubi Arcano Dei Consilio consolidated the concept of a society-wide Catholic Action that would ‘restore all things in Christ’ (following the motto of Pius X) through engaged lay groups. Youth movements, assisted by chaplains, were widely deployed to counter the popularity of Socialism among young workers. Catholic Action found one of its most outspoken and active promoters in the person of Belgian priest Jozef Cardijn. From his ‘unionized youth’ movement Jeunesse Syndicale, founded in 1919, quickly grew the successful Young Christian Workers. Their members were labelled ‘jocistes’ in French-speaking Belgium (JOC - Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne) and ‘Kajotters’ in Flanders (KAJ - Kristene Arbeiders Jeugd). As my main subject in this essay will be the developments in the Flemish movement, I will subsequently use the acronym ‘KAJ’.

The KAJ’s foremost task was to incite Catholic unionization of young factory workers. To that end, it provided a Catholic version of Scouting-type activities, but additionally demanded that its members closely monitor the local work force. It was an evident evolution to copy the Socialist youth movements’ cultural projects, too. The programme of Catholic Action had already implied a strong revaluation of such theatrical expressions of popular piety as processions and passion plays.

We refer to the various organizations of young people which have helped to develop such ardent and true love for the Holy Eucharist and such tender devotion for the Blessed Virgin, virtues which have made certain their faith, their purity, and their union one with another: to the solemn celebrations in honor of the Blessed Sacrament, at which the Divine Prince of Peace is honored by truly royal triumphal processions.  (Pius XI 1922: 53)

These traditional forms of popular piety would not only be intensified but also supplemented by new and modernist devotional events. Reciting choirs and movement choirs, composed of amateurs, were trained by theatre and dance professionals in order to participate in the mass happenings that celebrated the Catholic renouveau of the 1930s. The largest and most notable events include the mass play at the Heysel Stadium in Brussels by the KAJ, directed by Lode Gysen in 1935, the Rerum Novarum play Bevrijding (Liberation, Antwerp, 1936) and Jozef
Boon’s Sanguis Christi: The Play of the Holy Blood (Bruges, 1938).

If Catholic Action may account for the religious and socio-political origins of these events, it says little to nothing about their artistic sources of inspiration. During the first decades of the twentieth century, a torrent of innovations in stage design, dramaturgy and acting had been introduced by the predominantly left-wing theatrical avant-garde. Constructivist, Expressionist and Futurist artists had demanded that art conquer the public space and let itself be conquered by it. To that end they employed innovative drama texts that were composed by montage or featured actual events. Popular theatre forms inspired new acting styles, such as Meyerhold’s biomechanics or the Futurists’ provocative delivery. Large groups of performers were deployed in novel ways, e.g., the chorus equipped with megaphones for Ilya Selvinsky’s Commander of the Second Army (directed by Meyerhold in 1929). The stage itself was invaded by banners with revolutionary slogans, giant constructions, everyday objects and projection screens.

In Flanders, the Vlaamsche Volkstooneel (Flemish Popular Theatre) was one of the few European ensembles that strove to integrate modernist techniques in a traditionalist, Catholic framework. Constructivist scenography and stylized acting helped to stage plays based on figures of Flemish folklore, such as Tijl (Anton Van de Velde, 1925). From the early 1920s, its directors also started to experiment with bigger groups of performers, beyond the customary crowd scenes. The search for an original way to stage the choral songs in tragedies by Sophocles and Vondel eventually led Renaat Verheyen and Lode Geysen to autonomous choral plays. Geysen, along with teacher priests such as Jozef Boon and Gery Helderenberg, soon started to form small reciting choirs with members of the KAJ and other Catholic youth movements. Next, a series of Catholic Action workshops helped to diffuse the newly developed method among Catholic teachers. The end result was a surge of lay-theatrical enthusiasm, animated by techniques from modernist theatre praxis, that produced the gargantuan events from the late 1930s.

4. Flemish Theories of Liturgical Drama

The practitioners of Catholic lay theatre obviously had good reasons to develop a coherent theory of choral drama. The phenomenon was brand new, and it ought to be introduced quickly and convincingly among Catholic groups and theatre professionals alike, if the movement was to gather any momentum. At the same time when the first choral play-texts appeared in print, a series of theoretical manifestos was published by the same small but prolific body of writers (director Lode Geysen, writer-director Jozef Boon, and critics Aloïs de Maeyer and Herman de Vleeschauwer). As was to be expected, liturgy fulfilled an important role in their reflections.

It is conspicuous that the Flemish theorists did propose a much more radical view of liturgical drama than the other modernists treated above, such as Eliot and Claudel. If we apply Bürger’s definition of the avant-garde strictly, Catholic lay theatre ought to be called avant-gardist. It literally strove to found a new, impassioned praxis of (Christian) life from a basis in ‘art’, i.e., choral drama and mass spectacle. Boon surmised that the recent evolution of modern drama, and he was indeed thinking of choral drama, had led it to fuse with ‘the chief drama – life – Catholic life with its Catholic tragedy’ (Boon 1937: 57). Geysen strongly echoed the Futurist definition of theatre when he asserted that, during choral plays, the action takes place in the auditorium.

The spectator is a crucial element of choral drama, who has to be incessantly taken aim at ... It is a confession of faith that petitions the audience. All doubt, all hesitation has to be overcome.

(Geysen 1934: 41)

Similarly, when Geysen concluded that the lay player is no actor but only plays himself, this is a verbatim prefiguration of Žižek’s typically
avant-gardist appraisal of The Storming of the Winter Palace as an aestheticization in which the people plays itself. ‘[O]ne should perceive, in this minimal, purely formal, difference of the people from itself, the unique case of “real life” differentiated from art by nothing more than an invisible, formal gap’ (Žižek 2003). The Flemish nationalist critic De Vleeschauwer saw choral drama as a symptom of the contemporary era’s inner need for liturgy. He insisted that ‘from the art of choral drama must grow the liturgy of labour, freedom and humanity’ (De Vleeschauwer 1931b: 172). ‘Socialism’ - although he was probably thinking of National Socialism - should be instrumental in this process. It should 

consciously cultivate the workers’ need for ‘irrational mythical and mystical forces’. De Vleeschauwer is clearly echoing such doctrines as Nietzsche’s philosophy of ‘vital lies’, or the French sociologist Georges Sorel’s on the re-emergence of myth as a guiding force for modern social movements. In Germany, a similar train of thought would lead to the National-Socialist Thingspiel. This, indeed, is one of the possible outcomes of socio-theatricality, and also of the avant-garde: the use of mass theatrical art to refashion the structure of society.

Next to its avant-gardist radicality, the history of choral drama was a second important component of the Flemish theories. Since the invention of modern choral drama was usually claimed by its Socialist and mostly German promoters, this was a crucial point indeed. Catholic theorists needed to prove, first, that choral drama had ‘always been there’ in the history of Western theatre and, secondly, just as much that its modern revival was due to their independent efforts. For the first appearance of choral drama, all pointed to Greek tragedy and its reworkings in the early modern period. But they did not really stress this aspect of the genealogical chain, since the choral songs from ancient tragedy obviously had little in common with their decidedly modernist efforts. Boon, Geysen and De Maeyer would instead underline that the versicles and responses from Mass were the true ancestors of modern choral drama, which was identically structured. The main German theorist of choral drama, Friedrich Roedemeyer, had himself acknowledged this in his book Vom Wesen des Sprechchors (1926).

A third remarkable point concerns the question of spontaneity. Although Boon and Geysen, both prolific producers of choral dramas, repeatedly complained that there were not enough suitable play-texts available, they also vividly asserted that a true choral drama could only originate from the group’s solidarity and its sense of community. ‘Choral plays... can only be staged when the text contains the thinking and willing of the performers’ (Geysen quoted in De Maeyer 1933: 115). This is especially striking when the subject of gesture is brought under discussion. Boon and De Maeyer warned that the accompanying gestures, instead of being truly animated, could easily turn into gymnastics when all performers were mechanically instructed to carry out the same movements. Producers therefore had to be attentive for gestures that arose spontaneously out of the group itself, in response to its sense of community or to the choral play that was brought to their attention.

The importance of spontaneity, taken together with the first point - that of the avant-gardist construction of a new praxis of life and hence new communities - indicates a central problem of socio-theatrical events. How orchestrated or spontaneous was the collective life of the groups that actually constituted the ubiquitous ‘community’ that was worshipped through the interbellum period? A final quotation from Vleeschauwer acutely shows how this tension was alive just under the surface of the discourse of choral drama.

Modern choral drama is the art of the masses. It is the art that humanity will use to combat that of yesterday and of today. It is an orchestra of human voices, graded and differentiated as organ pipes. It is a living organ, the tones of which are not united by a mechanism and the will of a single human, but by the collective will of all performers.

(De Vleeschauwer 1931a: 91)
5. The Practice of Liturgical Drama

If the spontaneity of choral drama was inherently problematic, the question arises whether the promoters of lay theatre rightfully professed that it was closely related to liturgy. Was 'liturgical drama' a convincing claim? To answer that question, I would like to take a look at a selection of events from the late 1930s.

In his book *Spreekkoor en Massatooneel* (1937), Jozef Boon reported on an interesting and untitled choral drama he directed in the town of Diest with a group of 100 students, on the occasion of the feast of Saint Jan Berchmans, a seventeenth-century Jesuit priest who was the students' patron saint. The action took place on the local marketplace, and Boon had intentionally placed his chorus on a raised podium so that it could 'dominate the market', i.e., the audience of 2000 students that would respond to the reciting choir (Boon 1937: 79). The happening was adequately framed against the imposing backdrop of Diest's Gothic church. The relics of Saint Jan Berchmans were displayed in front of the church portal, and the carillon played specially composed music by Arthur Meulemans, a frequent collaborator of Boon's mass plays.

What is particularly striking about the Diest mass spectacle, is that Boon strove to integrate his choral drama with the official church festivities devoted to Saint Jan Berchmans.

The bishop and the clerics who participated were explicitly designated as 'being part of the choral drama' (Boon 1937: 79). Indeed, the event ended with a huge open-air celebration of Mass. If one is to believe Boon himself, the event truly 'conquered' its attendance.

Immediately the masses were overwhelmed: they were dominated by the fact that carillon, music, church, city hall, flags, podium, and flags and crowd were united into a single body. No small role was played by the wide-circling music that made everything into one wave ... It had grown into a mass happening, especially because it was a part of reality, namely, because of the integration of the Holy Relics and because, lastly, while the choir was still plastically deployed and the musical finale burst open, the priest came with the Blessed Sacrament. All of that was really part of the choral drama, including the blessing by the bishop with the Blessed Sacrament being administered amidst the kneeling choral reciters. (Boon 1937: 79)

One year later, Boon directed what was probably the largest Catholic mass play of the 1930s. *Credo!* ('I believe') was staged in the Heyssel Stadium (Brussels) at the occasion of the Sixth Catholic Congress of Mechelen in 1936. The spectacle numbered hundreds of participants grouped in singing, reciting and movement choirs. A gargantuan audience of 150,000 filled the stadium, usually reserved for sporting events.
In Boon’s eyes, the huge crowd saying the Confiteor prayer, at the beginning of confession, grew into ‘the most beautiful and ardent drama ... that we could ever dream of’ (1937: 86). The effect must have been that of an immense and industrial-scale celebration of the Eucharist. Moreover, the whole event was broadcasted over the radio. At the exact same time when the spectators in the stadium said the Apostles’ Creed (the ‘I believe’), all church bells of Belgium tolled. This typically modernist event did, however, also feature many recognizable elements from traditional popular piety. Local Flemish devotional customs were incorporated in the show: the Halle cult of the Holy Virgin Mary and the penitential procession of Veurne.

These two events clearly show that it was possible, up to a certain degree, to create new devotional performances that somehow succeeded in the attempt of a radical modernization – and a substantial increase in scale – of liturgy’s traditional means. However, these large-scale successes were quite rare. Catholic choral drama proved to be short-lived. It did not really survive the end of the 1930s and did not reappear after the Second World War.

Let me conclude with an anecdote. From the French critic Robert Brasillach’s book *Animateurs de théâtre* (1936) comes an
interesting report about a French theatre group performing in Leuven (Belgium). The ‘Théophiliens’, led by Sorbonne professor Gustave Cohen, were an amateur ensemble who had acquired a solid reputation producing ancient and medieval plays in modern garb. At the end of a performance in Louvain, somewhere between 1933 and 1936, the bishop of Le Miracle de Théophile addressed the audience with the customary invitation to chant ‘Te Deum laudamus’. To his surprise, the call was answered. The audience rose and was led in prayer by the actual bishop who attended the show (Brasillach 1936: 205-6).

The Leuven anecdote provides the Catholic counterpart, as it were, to the Soviet event that introduced this essay. In this event, too, a true community came into being through inherently artificial and modernist means. Such successes, however, were not easily repeatable. Provisionally – since the subject is far from exhausted by my summary overview – I would venture to conclude that the modernist reinvention of liturgy through theatrical means was an actual possibility during the interbellum period. Its impassioned creators applied an avant-garde artistic strategy to a most traditionalist problem: how to revive the efficacy of religious ritual. But the actual happening of a successful religious ‘performance’ remained subject to the chance of the moment.

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* The choir of 500 angels from Credal