



Community as Gesamtkunstwerk: Dick Ket's Self-Portraiture and the Debt of Epic Film

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What sort of influence did modernist painting have on the production designs of early cinema? Largely overlooked in the field of art history—which does not often explore the aftereffects of modernist movements on broader visual culture—this aesthetic lineage has largely been relegated to the domain of media studies. Siegfried Kracauer—a foundational figure in twentieth-century film criticism loosely affiliated with the Frankfurt School of critical theory—acknowledged the import of Expressionist painting on the *mise-en-scène* of *Das Kabinett des Doktor Caligari* (The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari; Robert Wiene, 1920) in his 1947 book *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*. In that landmark text, Kracauer cited the direct involvement of *De Sturm* artists Hermann Warm, Walter Röhrig and Walter Reimann whose concept drawings for the film visualised the disorienting, heavily painted set, effectively capturing the psychological interiority of its lead characters through the bewildering depiction of space.¹

When it comes to the set design of Fritz Lang's two-part epic *Die Nibelungen* (The Nibelungs), film studies scholars such as Patrick McGilligan have noted Jugendstil influences Gustav Klimt and Carl Otto Czeschka, as well as the director's own background as a painter.² What if, as I propose in this essay, this order of influence also ran in the opposite direction? Did modern artists also look to the spatial particularities of these very same set designs to evince the politics of control and restraint that evolved during the interwar period (see *plate 1*, *plate 2* and *plate 3*)? Moreover, if we are to accept this premise, what can these works contribute to resistance studies discourses on interwar- and Occupation-era painting?

One theory proposed in this essay is that under the rubric of modernist figuration, certain artists drew inspiration from the Gesamtkunstwerk—or total work of art—as an *idea*, rather than an achievable aesthetic model, one that led them to orchestrate compositions on the basis of an implied, sublime subtext. According to this premise, two-dimensional canvases did not have to be subordinate to the overriding suprastructure of an artwork, but could instead exist in dialogue with multimedia, multisensory art forms. First coined by Karl Friedrich Eusebius Trahndorff in his 1827 book *Ästhetik oder Lehre von Weltanschauung und Kunst*, and then popularised by composer Richard Wagner by mid-century, the Gesamtkunstwerk was a concept that many cultural producers attempted to create over the following decades, from Art Nouveau designers to avant-gardes such as Kurt Schwitters and his Hanover Merzbau and Oskar Schlemmer and his Triadic Ballet. Its origins in the eighteenth century sought to conceptualise the ethos of Romanticism in the shape

**Detail from Dick Ket,
Zelfportret met bolskruik [Self-
Portrait with Bols Jugs], 1932
(plate 5).**

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of a consummate art form, one that engaged all the senses through a combination of multimedia components and installations. In reality, such a project was only possible as an ideal.

Using the interior as an extended metaphor for the post First World War experience, I argue that there exist painted examples of a phenomenon that Kracauer observed among Weimar-era directors—figures who withdrew into the safety and control of the studio to regain total command over their created environment.³ While Kracauer was really describing a trauma response, could it not also be possible that modern painters—including those outside Germany—looked to these very modalities to express the experience of restriction, one that, among other things, accompanied the rise of totalitarian regimes in Europe?

The term *innere Emigration*, or inner emigration, borrowed from a literary dispute between Frank Thieß and Thomas Mann, may be a useful concept in this regard. The expression has also given art historians the language to describe the predicament of German artists who clandestinely opposed the Nazi regime through subtle—and sometimes undetectable—acts of resistance. A more recent spate of words loaned from exile studies that translate to camouflaged (*getarnt-Tarnung*), immunity (*Resistenz*) or refusal (*Verweigerung*) have added nuance to the discussion, but it remains challenging to accurately or appropriately discern degrees of nonconformity since the parameters for making such a determination are poorly established. Willi Baumeister's refusal to abandon his modernist style, even following his persecution at the exhibition of *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art), may provide one example that is difficult to dispute.⁴ For Otto Dix and Jeanne Mammen, however, the case is not as clear. Made while he was living in the small village of Randegg in Lower Austria, Dix's body of work during the wartime included references to a past Jewish presence in the form of cemeteries or townspeople named Joseph and Ephraim—details that went unnoticed by his harshest critics.⁵ Mammen's work was equally understated following her registration at the Reichskulturkammer in Berlin—an affiliation necessary to ensure her ability to make a living. She returned to motifs from the carnival—the fool and the clown—as a Trojan horse for her critique. Operating at a pitch just faint enough to avoid detection, the work of Dix and Mammen from after 1933 necessarily retained a level of plausible deniability.⁶

While inner emigration might be useful for assessing artists living within Germany and under the very real threat of professional censure—what about those from neighbouring countries soon to be absorbed into the Greater Germanic Reich? To respond appropriately, perhaps a slightly different question is in order: to what degree does the importation of 'Germanic aesthetics' into the oeuvres of foreign artists signal anxieties about cultural imperialism? One artist toiling in relative isolation from 1930 until his premature death ten years later may help to unpack some of these questions: the figurative painter Dick Ket (1902–1940) who was working in the Netherlands between the World Wars. As an exemplar of Neorealism—the Dutch answer to German *Neue Sachlichkeit*—Ket had up until that point in his youth, painted in relative obscurity. It took a serious health diagnosis to instigate the most fertile period in his career—1930 to 1940—commencing with a body of work that would finally receive critical recognition. Whilst restricted to his parents' home in the small village of Bennekom located in the Centre-East Netherlands, due to a serious physical heart defect called Tetralogy of Fallot, Ket dramatised his personal experience of solitude in ways that, I argue, drew upon recollections of attending the cinema in years past. Adopting highly schematic compositional arrangements in his paintings from 1930 onwards, Ket flattened the

I Dick Ket, *Zelfportret met zwarte hoed* [*Self-Portrait with Black Hat*], 1931. Oil on canvas, 72 × 51 cm. Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum.



distinction between the human form and the surrounding décor to a degree that questioned the agency of the sitter, with nearly exclusive attention to the subject of himself. When read against the artist's duelling experiences of both physical and psychological restriction during this period, Ket's imagery also resonates with broader psycho-social needs. Chief among those concerns was the desire for belonging—or more specifically, community—which found a novel manifestation in the form of film-going audiences in the early twentieth century. This relatively new and ubiquitous form of entertainment was forging new frontiers for shared human experiences that would understandably appeal to an individual confined to his home.

2 Still from *Gone with the Wind*, MGM, 1939, reproduced in *Life*, 25 December 1939.



Before succumbing to the congenital condition that took his life at the age of 38, Ket's bodily and emotional autonomy were, beginning in the early 1930s, enclosed by the boundaries of his parents' domicile. From that point until his death, I note an aesthetic evolution in his work, one that responded to the conformist credos proliferating throughout Western Europe, and which resonated with the visual culture and spoken rhetoric of Italy, Spain and especially Germany. To this end, I use the example of Leni Riefenstahl's documentaries, less as a point of comparison or a source for Ket than to demonstrate an alternative trajectory for creators working under the influence of Lang's *The Nibelungs*. The theoretical writings of Kracauer, when applied to the work of Riefenstahl and to that of Ket, further elucidate a formal relationship between pattern and control shared in the work of these two creators.

The path leading to this conclusion is not, however, a direct one. Ket's painted oeuvre opens a line of inquiry that is not at all obvious, one that places a two-dimensional self-portrait into conversation with the sensory concerns of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as a notably German, and in many ways totalitarian aesthetic concept. As a term that has become identified with the musical dramas of Richard Wagner, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*—or total work of art—sought to finally reunite music, gesture and narrative into a synthesis that could penetrate the viewer both corporeally and intellectually. Naturally, it would be a fool's errand to simply translate such a totalising concept into painted form.⁷ The two-dimensional and material restrictions of an easel painting can only captivate the visual—and not the aural—faculty within Wagner's equation. Even silent film, while elaborating upon the sensorial engagement of the former, does not strictly satisfy Wagner's definition, due to the sensorial limitations of pre-sound technology—primarily the absence of audible speech.

More specifically, I read Ket's paintings as a memory index of the artist's receptive experience when watching Fritz Lang's two-part 1924 epic film *Die Nibelungen* (*The Nibelungs*). For his epic adaptation, the director looked to the very same classic German legend that Wagner had made synonymous with the total work of art in the nineteenth century. In what follows, I argue that Ket's long-held fascination with

Lang's film—which in many ways both borrowed and departed from the Wagnerian tradition—made it an important aesthetic source for his painted compositions during the 1930s. My reading of the documentary evidence thus far overlooked in the artist's correspondence has led me to the conclusion that the painter viewed *The Nibelungs* as an all-encompassing experience that lived up to—or at the very least approximated—the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in its deeply affective, and even totalitarian aesthetic procedures. This was something that I believe Ket retained even years after watching the picture, his recollection of which allowed him to visualise the reality of living in a narrowly circumscribed world with little agency in its orchestration. I see Ket's paintings from 1930 as demonstrating a novel preoccupation with sensations of control or constraint. He conveyed this experience in his treatment of the human form—or more specifically his own self-portrait—as subordinate to its surrounding environment and the objects contained within. His paintings, in their similarity to Fritz Lang's *mise-en-scènes* for *The Nibelungs*, reproduce an easy-to-read visual shorthand for the idea of hemming in the human figure as a metaphor for an externally-constructed realm. This description matched the parameters of Ket's physical limitations, while also speaking more broadly to the aestheticisation of politics, and the realisation of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a larger fascist project. Such an evocation would have certainly resonated with an artist confined to his parent's home with few opportunities to socialise. What is more, the print and radio news media that Ket was consuming during those years, casually mentioned in his letters, may evince his own experience of lost agency against the major geo-political upheavals taking place across Europe.

From Wagner to Lang to Ket: The Leitmotif

A close examination of Ket's 1931 canvas *Zelfportret met zwarte hoed* (Self-Portrait with Black Hat; plate 1) might begin to respond to the above question. Completed the year after the artist retreated into isolation and embarked upon his mature style, Ket began to use pattern in demonstrable ways to bring his own image into closer proximity with the surrounding room. The composition of this painting captures Ket in reflection, likely seated before a framed mirror with shoulders hunched; the ledge on which a white bowl, a wine bottle and a journal sit before him appears at a severe, tilted angle. It becomes clear that Ket sought to elicit the same kind of visual tension seen in the steeply angled and stylised design of the Droste Cocoa poster depicted behind him. The dark bottle at the centre of the composition forms a visual parallel with the elongated face and neck of the artist himself. At the same time, Ket's arrangement hints at the shared categorical identification between this wine bottle and the translucent vessel in his hand (likely a medicine beaker), while also establishing the differences between the two objects in terms of shape, colour and hierarchical placement. This pairing produces a rhythmic cadence that repeats in the uneven, unbuttoned collar of Ket's white shirt. By doubling these motifs and fusing the figure within his environment, Ket relegates the human body to an aspect of the scenery, visually reproducing the effect of physical—and by extension psychological—submission to the greater aesthetic totality. Examples such as *Self-Portrait with Black Hat* hint at the expansiveness of the cinema-going experience, confined to the darkness of the movie theatre, but there is also a political implication at stake.

Ket has until now been understood by biographers as a highly skilled, academically-trained artist, who combined his expertise in the Northern Renaissance Old Masters with his interest in modernist idioms, such as Cubism, Art Deco, and

the posters of French-Ukrainian designer Cassandre (née Adolphe Jean-Marie Mouron).⁸ Often noted in these accounts is the fact that as a reclusive artist, Ket used his aesthetic forebears to give form to his own dualistic philosophy that described states of being and non-being, outlined below. It is my contention that the specific cinematic influences motivating Ket's work provide an underappreciated window onto the painter's claustrophobic compositional arrangements since the turn of the decade. In fact, the route connecting Ket's self-portraiture and Richard Wagner's aesthetic concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is an indirect one. It can be traced through the artist's fascination with Fritz Lang's aforementioned two-part epic, a film that Ket briefly but emphatically addressed in his prolific personal correspondence on more than one occasion.

Lang's film is itself an adaptation of a c. 1200 Germanic epic poem titled the *Nibelungenlied*. Consisting of two parts, the first film, *Siegfrieds Tod* (Siegfried's Death) focuses on the odyssey of the warrior-prince Siegfried of Xanten and his assassination, while the second, titled *Kriemhilds Rache* (Kriemhild's Revenge), details the retaliation of Siegfried's wife, Queen Kriemhild of Burgundy. Targeted for having treacherously removed the arm band of Queen Brunhild of Iceland, an act that led her to consummate her marriage with King Gunther, the otherwise invulnerable Siegfried took a spear to his back. Reeling from the dishonour brought upon her family, Kriemhild then married King Etzel of the Huns to form an alliance that eventually brought those responsible—Gunther and his advisor Hagen—to justice. Much like the *Nibelungslied* on which the film was based, Lang trained his focus on the action and reaction to the characters' deceptions through conspirational plot points that revolved around death, war and marriage. Narrativising this age-old story through innovative aural-visual devices, Lang used every means at his disposal, primarily the motif-laden *mises-en-scènes*, which he played against the orchestral arrangement.

For his part, Wagner drew from a slightly different variant of the original two-part poem, while nonetheless distilling some of the same recurrent themes of honour, vengeance and fate that Lang would later explore in his four-hour epic. The composer adapted an expanded Old Norse version for his four-part operatic cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, 1876, often described as his most complete realisation of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. As the ultimate Nordic ur-saga, the story that Wagner explored was suited to his vision for an all-encompassing artistic experience that embodied the German spirit.⁹ His fifteen-hour, four-day cycle told the tale of a magical ring with the capacity to grant world-dominating powers. While Siegfried and Brunhild play a role in this version, their stories are secondary to the overarching theme of vengeance in Wagner's opera.

Most importantly, when Fritz Lang brought *Nibelungs* to the screen in 1924, the director also employed Wagner's use of the leitmotif, which he conceptualised as rhythmic progressions or harmonies within the musical composition. Gottfried Huppertz, who produced the score for the film—to be played live in the cinema by an in-house orchestra—requested in the published notes that each proprietor consider the tempo when organising onscreen events.¹⁰ Following the lead of the musical accompaniment, Lang carried through complementary leitmotifs in a series of patterns within the set, communicated as harmonies in the designs of the costumes, décor, hair and makeup. As a way to clarify points of emphasis and establish mood, this device allowed for the audience to take notice of important select parts of the story and let the 'unmarked' and therefore less pertinent details fall to the wayside.¹¹

Ket's personal correspondence—as well as his self-portraiture—reveals that he was deeply moved by a screening of *The Nibelungs* in his younger days, the experience of which I believe impacted his aesthetic during the 1930s in ways not yet remarked upon in the literature. While it was not until the end of the decade that he began to sincerely write about his memory of Lang's film, I would argue that *The Nibelungs* had by that point long sustained him as an aesthetic source at a time when he was undergoing a major change in his lifestyle. Ket did not specify in his letters the precise moment at which he attended the two-part feature, but theatres in the Netherlands regularly screened both parts of the epic film from the year of their debut in 1924 until 1935. The artist thus had many opportunities to view *Siegfried's Death and Kriemhild's Revenge* up to 1930, when he retreated to his parents' home in Bennekom.¹² There are a variety of reasons why Ket began producing such Nibelungs-inspired compositions at this time. He very possibly watched the films relatively soon before going into isolation, but it may also be true that his interest was piqued by the continued press coverage, especially since Fritz Lang's first 'talkie' picture, *M*, was widely covered in mainstream newspapers in the Netherlands, whose articles frequently looked to *The Nibelungs* as a point of comparison.¹³ Lang received effusive praise for his creative use of sound in *M*, such as the whistle of the child-murderer villain played by Peter Lorre as yet another leitmotif. Years after the release of *M* and well into the 1930s, *The Nibelungs* was repeatedly cited in the Dutch press in reference to the Third Reich's takeover of the German film industry, when the double feature was cited as the very high point in the history of UFA (Universum-Film Aktiengesellschaft).¹⁴

Because Ket was bedridden for the last decade of his life, he was in the unusual position, as a popular film enthusiast in the late 1930s, of never having seen a talkie, although he had viewed silent pictures in years past. Only familiar with second-hand accounts of sound film, he still formed an opinion on what he imagined this innovation could contribute to the experience. In December 1939 he recounted his memory of watching *The Nibelungs* in a letter to his good friend Agnes de Maas van de Moer. Lang's film may have come to the forefront of his mind at that time due to



3 Still showing Kriemhild and Siegfried from *The Nibelungs: Siegfried's Death*, UFA, 1924.

the extensive press coverage of the cinematic adaptation of the almost-equally-epic production *Gone With the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), which Ket also mentions in the same letter. Ket wondered what it would be like to attend a film with sound, knowing little other than what was discussed on the radio. He posited that the theatre play-like quality of this new vocal component would lose something of the essence of the silent picture.¹⁵ Assuming that he would in fact dislike the 'conversational and barren sound quality' of the talkie, Ket recounted his memory of watching *The Nibelungs*, focusing entirely on the film's appeal to a visual—as opposed to an auditory—mode of perception, claiming, 'you cannot hold it against me if I assume that the powers of absorption lie more in the eyes'.¹⁶ He described the way in which the musical accompaniment had produced a kind of 'speech impediment' by replacing dialogue with sound effects—intentionally directing the limitations of non-verbal expression in such a way that resulted in 'something special'. This prioritisation of the optical was also a result of the medium-specific constraints on the silent picture, which had fewer sensory avenues to exploit. Ket recognised the way in which the orchestral music allowed the mind to wander into different emotional registers; it did not demand the same focus of the film-goer's attention as the coordination of audio and moving image playing simultaneously.¹⁷ Etched into his memory, Ket described the lengthy two-part film as the ultimate example of film-going as a modern spectacle—which in his experience was purely based in the visual.

To proclaim Fritz Lang's version of *The Nibelungs* an example of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* may be a stretch, given that as a silent film the picture lacked an important component in Wagner's concept: the spoken word. Some prominent figures who were well-versed in Wagner's ideas, such as composer Gottfried Müller, argued that only the sound film with its synchronisation of image and sound—including music, sound effects and dialogue—could achieve the coordinated sensorial engagement of Wagner's operas.¹⁸ In any case, whether strictly adhering to Wagner's concept or not, the description that Ket provided in his letters elicited the idea of total sensorial immersion into the film-watching experience. By his own account, Ket found that he could easily lose himself to the totalising effects of the cinema in a way that echoes the core principles of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The overwhelming dominance of the repeating patterns, bringing together the performers with the set as a united visual leitmotif, must certainly have been a vivid component of his viewership. Ket's patterning in his painting, however, is not overtly based in rigid, abstract forms and decorative designs. Rather, the internal structure of his compositions derived naturalistically from his surroundings instead of imposing geometric motifs onto it.

The fact that he could still recall the experience of watching *The Nibelungs* in his letter so many years later speaks to the important ways in which I believe that his impression of the film impacted the visual content of his paintings over the course of that decade. While it may seem counterintuitive that Ket drew from a visual source at such a far remove from his everyday experience in the mid to late 1930s, the archival evidence suggests that the *mise-en-scènes* in Lang's *Nibelungs* retained a certain mnemonic potency for him and that this was not the only time that he brought up the film in his correspondence. By his own account, Ket found pleasure in the 'decorative schema' of Lang's *Nibelungs* and in a different letter to van der Moer once again made reference to the film, this time comparing the Wiener Werkstatt-inspired set design by Erich Kettelhut to the more naturalistic *mise-en-scène* of *Gone With the Wind* that had been reproduced in a still for *Life Magazine* (plate 2), one that he mentioned in a different letter to van der Moer from early 1940. In that image, Vivien Leigh as Scarlett O'Hara lifts her hoop skirt to run off of the Tara Plantation. Ket made note of

the white peacocks in the picture, which he described as ‘annoying but decoratively necessary’ to the sense of balance of the composition, and which stabilised the figures’ placement within the scene.¹⁹ By contrast, because *The Nibelungs* did not use spoken dialogue for its storytelling, Lang relied upon the tempo provided by the patterns evoked throughout the film, which played against the instrumental music in the cinema that had been tailored to the story.²⁰ These important details, when taken together, in addition to performing the work of the leitmotif in Wagner’s famous opera, also had the effect of forging an intense visual relationship between the figures in the scene and the set in which they performed. What Ket appears to have done in his paintings is combine these two different kinds of aesthetic modalities that he appreciated in *The Nibelungs* and in films featuring less-stylised sets such as *Gone with the Wind*: the ornamental and the naturalistic. It is my contention that rhythm, as experienced optically in the geometric motifs repeated in both the set and costumes, as well as aurally through the film’s music, became a guiding principle in Ket’s affective reception of *The Nibelungs*. Ket discarded the graphic motifs of the former in favour of a realism informed by geometry, and in so doing reproduced the corporeal effect of constraint that Lang had maintained across his film. While Ket’s use of the painted medium might call to mind the experimentations of Le Corbusier and Amedée Ozenfant, unlike the Dutch painter, the highly-ordered, nearly architectural schemas of the Purists visualise a formal unity that is not similarly concerned with the question of subordination.²¹ Ket’s compositions assume an ambivalent dialectic, upending any symmetry in the power relations between the subject—usually the artist himself—and his environment.

Confinement through Mise-en-scène

The affective experience of the viewer’s immersion into film-watching that Ket described above was—especially in the case of a film like *Nibelungs*—magnified by the actor’s immersion within the film itself. Lang captivated his audience while also holding captive his performers by subsuming each individual cast member within the mise-en-scène. The total composition of the character placement, lighting, set design, costumes, hair and makeup, effectively reduced the actors to props. Collaborating with the set designer Erich Kettelhut, Lang often established strong visual correspondences between the patterns on the costumes and those of the set, or between the performers’ bodies and the decorative motifs based on the Jugendstil designs of Czeschka. This effect most often manifested itself in prominent geometric forms that appear on the roofbeams, for example, and which form a visual continuity with the performers’ garments, an effect further entrenched by the identical vertical orientation of these decorated strips. However, it also appears on a much smaller scale, such as the attempt to match the zigzag design of Kriemhild’s braids to the outer edge of her cloak, and again in the enlarged motif that appears in horizontal format on Siegfried’s tunic (plate 3). Even the physical features of the performers were brought into this concept of total integration, where the elaborate, repeated bullseye design matches the intensity of the actress’s heavily made-up eyes. The same motif extends to the furnishings, since it can be seen repeated in the arms of the throne that Kriemhild shares with her second husband Etzel (plate 4).

This emphasis on pattern and sameness subordinates the figure to the mise-en-scène as the driving story-telling device. Ket often carried out a similar visual feat in his paintings by doubling two- and three-dimensional objects in such a way that brought together analogous forms. When expanded to an analysis of Ket’s prolific range of self-portraits, it becomes clear that the artist sought to place the human

figure—himself—in an array of different tightly-arranged constructions. Like Lang's interest in formal parallels among costumes, props, scenery, actors, hair and makeup, Ket consistently played up the visual similarities between the human figures and the objects in his compositions, and in the process demonstrated a penchant for self-objectification. Returning to his *Self-Portrait with Black Hat* from 1931, for example, Ket's use of pattern and synthesis not only repeats the aesthetic established in the Droste Cocoa poster, but might also be compared to the mises-en-scènes of Fritz Lang. Indeed, Ket's compositions translate the heavily patterned sets and costumes of Lang's film into naturalistic-looking scenes that locate formal similarities (and differences) in objects and human figures from the real world, while also comparing them to the fictive 'two-dimensional' realm, such as the cup and saucer in the Droste poster in the top-right portion of the canvas, which play against the 'three-dimensional' vessels in the foreground. Such a visual effect reproduces the type of pairings that can be seen between figure and motif described above, but also reflects the way that Fritz Lang redefined human presence as a part of the scenery. We can see another example of this tendency in his 1932 painting *Zelfportret met bolskruik* (Self-Portrait with Bols Jugs; plate 5). In this work Ket played with the visual distortion created by the angle of the earthenware container of Bols Genever placed in front of him and its reflection in the mirror.²² The image of Ket with one shoulder covered by a jacket gives the illusion that one side of his body is skewed; his awkward torsion effectively copies the form of the jug handle in front of him. The cylindrical bottle-like shape of the cruise-ship smokestack in the poster behind Ket forms another layer to the established motif: the artist and two-dimensional chimney, which when conceived as a unit, form a parallel to the visual cadence of the twinned bottles in the foreground. While the term 'containment' is one way to describe the mood of Ket's arrangement, this painting could also be said to evoke the visual thematics of order and harmony. These two interpretations—separated by a distinction without a difference—epitomise



4 Still showing Kriemhild and Etzel from *The Nibelungs: Kriemhild's Revenge*, UFA, 1924.

5 Dick Ket, *Zelfportret met bolskruik* [Self-Portrait with Bols Jugs], 1932. Oil on canvas, 81 × 54. Rotterdam: Caldic Collection.



the profoundly nuanced, and even ambivalent space in which Ket operated, whether figuratively or illusionistically.

It should be noted that the effect that Ket achieves in this still life and in his self-portraits more generally does not conform precisely to the totalising modalities of Lang's *The Nibelungs*, or what Sabine Hake has described as 'making the protagonists prisoners of ornament'.²³ Ket did not use such impositions of scale to dominate the human figure like the director had done with the *mise-en-scène*. In an early scene from *Part 1: Siegfried's Death*, for example, Kriemhild appears alone in her room pressed against the wall with a painted quasi-floral design made up of white crisscrossing lines (plate 6).

6 Still showing Kriemhild from *The Nibelungs: Siegfried's Death*, UFA, 1924.



The similarity between this motif and the thigh-length braids in Kriemhild's hair cause the female protagonist to look as if she blends into the décor. Lang repeats this effect throughout the film as in the example of Queen Brunhilde standing before a curtain decorated with chevrons similar to her costume (plate 7) as well as the moment when King Gunther wears jewellery in the same lozenge shape that is duplicated in the motif behind him. In each of these scenes the character's body merges with the set design, signifying their place within the narrative and their particular affiliation with—and even subordination to—a given house or kingdom. To the degree that Ket sought a similar aesthetic of constraint, he did so through comparatively subtle means. There was, surely, also a personal stake for Ket in this emphasis on subjection. Due to Ket's oxygen-deprived status, any breathing difficulties, heart palpitations and fatigue caused by his condition, necessarily limited his mobility. Spending much of his time at rest, and never veering far from home, the sensation of a body bound to its environment likely resonated for him. For this reason, I contend that Ket's likeness in his self-portraits endures at an indefinite location between two categories: as a subject with a limited amount of personal agency or an object being acted upon by his surroundings.

Ket's treatment of the human figure as but one component within a larger design scheme is consistent with how he incorporated the applied arts in his paintings, especially the work of the graphic artist Cassandre, whose posters Ket frequently quoted, and who expressed space and motion through meticulously patterned arrangements.²⁴ Even the illustrated advertisements used to promote Lang's films in Germany and the Netherlands demonstrate how cultural workers forged visual—and by extension experiential—continuities between the cinematic space of the film set and the real-world movie poster.²⁵ The moments dedicated to consuming publicity surrounding *The Nibelungs* also constituted the entirety of the movie-watching experience as it existed beyond the hours spent in a cinema, and which in the 1930s largely defined Ket's relationship to film. His sedentary lifestyle restricted his participation in movie culture to magazines, newspapers and the radio.

It was one that allowed the artist to draw a connecting line between his personal affective experience of the cinema with the shared cultural bond of film-going as a phenomenon, supported by attendant publicity and promotional material.

Leni Riefenstahl, the Third Reich and the Gesamtkunstwerk

It is now well established that during the 1930s and '40s, the Third Reich appropriated Wagner's musical compositions to form an aesthetic basis for the developing national Hitler cult. Post-war interpretations of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* by thinkers such as Theodor Adorno, for example, made the link between the opera and national myth so explicit that the work has since been marked by the taint of its National Socialist appreciators.²⁶ Under Hitler's leadership the concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk faced a similarly problematic fate that tied together national identity and sentiments of solidarity. Part of this evolution had to do with the humiliating defeat of the First World War. In its aftermath the composer's work came to be seen as the epitome of Germanness; at a time when the country needed to heal, Wagner's famous Ring Cycle offered a sense of unity to the nation's masses by embracing the German people within the *Volksgemeinschaft*.²⁷ Wagner's theories on the social purpose of art most interested Hitler, particularly the idea of opening up a new locus for physical and mental control. Used as a metaphor, the Gesamtkunstwerk came to express the idea of an extended national community that would ultimately encompass the Netherlands and the other occupied northern territories.²⁸ Adorno derived his above-mentioned retrospective analyses from commentary on Wagner's Total Work of Art that were disseminated in the 1930s press in Germany and beyond—including the Netherlands. In one well-publicised example from October 1937 responding to the Degenerate Art Show ongoing in Munich at the time, literary stalwart and leader of the national cinema club De Nederlandsche Filmliga Menno ter Braak made a speech at the Amsterdam Schouwberg condemning the curtailment of freedoms for artists living in Germany, Italy and Russia. He traced



7 Still showing Brunhilde and King Gunther from *The Nibelungs: Siegfried's Death*, UFA, 1924.

this totalitarian tendency back to the new 'surrogate religion' that began under the 'priest of Bayreuth' Richard Wagner, whose 'ludicrous ritual' in the form of the Gesamtkunstwerk deluded artists into thinking that they could create something supratemporal, and or eternal.²⁹

Likewise, Fritz Lang's adaptation of *The Nibelungs* experienced a swift cooption by the Nazi Party beginning with Goebbels's public praise of the film in 1933 and the rerelease of *Siegfried's Death* by the now-government-controlled UFA. These historical facts, combined with the inherent subordinating relationship between figure and mise-en-scène, provoked retrospective analyses of the film—beginning most famously with Siegfried Kracauer—that predominantly framed this two-part film as a prototype for National Socialist monumental aesthetics.³⁰ In fact, Kracauer's critique of the ornamentality in *The Nibelungs* evolved from his more focused meditations on the beauty and danger of body culture from the 1920s and '30s, particularly his famous 1927 essay 'Mass Ornament', which took as its primary focus the geometric, patterned 'girl cluster' formations of the Tiller Girls, an early twentieth-century high-kicking dance troupe. In this famous text Kracauer put into words the reality of alienation under capitalism, in which the individual becomes absorbed into a large, coordinated mass. He described a double-edged experience: at the same time as exposing the rationale of this larger societal structure, each participant can also indulge in the aestheticised pleasure of being part of such a harmonious arrangement.³¹ In 1947 and with the war behind him, Kracauer returned to this subject in his book *From Caligari to Hitler*, wherein he specifically addressed *The Nibelungs*, arguing that 'the spell' of the film's decorative compositions symbolised fate in the way that it asserts itself by forcing everything to fit into a tightly-controlled structure.³² He drew a direct connection between Lang's heavy-handed use of the human body as ornament and Nazi pageantry in the documentaries of Leni Riefenstahl.³³ Looking specifically at her 1935 propaganda film *Triumph des Willens* (Triumph of the Will), Kracauer claimed that she had borrowed Lang's tendency to use vantage points that expanded the field of vision in such a way that rendered the individual figures 'human accessories'.

Sabine Hake has described the above reading of Lang's *The Nibelungs* as reductive, and one too often repeated in post-war analyses.³⁴ In an essay from 1990, she argued that the denial of ambiguity and insistence on a 'monolithic' reading of the film presented in these critiques reproduced the same totalitarian structures that they criticised.³⁵ While Hake did not deny the oppressive nature of the set designs, she viewed the aesthetic orientation towards monumentality in the films as rooted in something else—not fascist politics necessarily, but rather a desire to be part of something greater than oneself—as the 'longing for submission to a higher power'.³⁶ She noted that these post-war critiques importantly ignore the fact that *The Nibelungs* received tepid reviews in its native Germany at the time of its release, and was hardly seen as the paragon of nationalism that these later critical analyses had claimed.³⁷ In fact, some critics compared the flat stylisation in the film to an illustration or 'cardboard' artificiality that denigrated the legacy of this great epic.³⁸ Fritz Lang himself intended *The Nibelungs* to occupy a space between Hollywood film (which he felt appealed to base interests) and the elitist erudition of a mediaeval epic. He and his screenwriter wife Thea von Harbou had hoped to offer a gift to the overworked masses exhausted by the post-World War I conditions of Germany, something that would belong to 'the Volk'.³⁹ When the National Socialists came to power, Goebbels took the couple's ambitions one step further. Upon re-releasing a heavily edited version of *Siegfried's Death* in 1933, Goebbels promoted the film as a potent form of

propaganda, stating: ‘Here is a film story not taken from our time, but crafted in a manner so modern, so close to the times, so topical that even the militants of the National Socialist movement were deeply moved within’.⁴⁰

The reception of *The Nibelungs* in the Netherlands was, naturally, free from these concerns. Rather than focusing on the way in which the film undermined grand national narratives, Dutch reviewers broadly praised Lang’s epic duology as intrinsically German or an intimidating force to behold, one whose affective response resembled many of the key hallmarks of the Gesamtkunstwerk. An anonymous critic for *De Courant* called *The Nibelungs* a nationalistic triumph in the campaign to defeat Hollywood, which despite its minor flaws could still stand as a strong advertisement for German cinema.⁴¹ Another writer for *Algemeen Handelsblad* applauded the ‘austere lines’ that contribute to the atmosphere of the set, while a critic for *Twentsche Dagblad* described the second instalment of the film as a ‘masterpiece of cinematographic art’ in the way that it integrated every gesture and stylistic detail into a homogeneous whole.⁴² In 1929 Menno ter Braak even spoke in fearful terms of the rhythmic aesthetic in *The Nibelungs*, warning of its unifying effects as a danger due to the intoxicating tempo produced by the relationship between the figure and the mise-en-scène. He claimed that Lang’s use of pattern successfully masked the way that the film reduced the human form to a dehumanised object.⁴³ While the German critical reception largely emphasised Lang’s denigration of an important Teutonic myth, the Dutch reviews evinced the freedom bestowed upon the viewing audience in the Netherlands, who—unburdened by the cultural weight of this famous epic—could enjoy immersing themselves in its combination of striking visuals and orchestral sound. As Ket’s own written words attest, the nature of the Dutch criticism of *The Nibelungs* can help to reconstruct the milieu in which he first received the films, and may suggest the cultural takeaways that he gleaned from reading reviews or watching the film himself.

In the last decade of his life Dick Ket repeatedly juxtaposed personal and collective anxieties as a complementary but unresolvable set of crises relating to individual agency or lack thereof. His new explorations into figural objectification evolved alongside an important geo-political shift rightward among those European neighbours who would eventually compose the Western part of the Axis powers. While the Führer’s political machinations had long been tracked by the Dutch press, his ascent to Chancellor elicited a notable change in tone among cultural commentators in the Netherlands. One article, from an Arnhem newspaper dated to Hitler’s forty-fourth birthday of that fateful year 1933, posed the question of whether or not the bluster of this egomaniacal, failed artist should be taken as a serious threat. Following with an answer to this rhetorical question, the unnamed contributor stated that Hitler was an artist of a different kind—a humanist and psychologist skilled in moulding the masses like wax. Evoking the methods of Richard Wagner and the realisation of the Gesamtkunstwerk, the writer asserted that Hitler’s medium was the organisation of all things, especially: ‘expressions of patriotism, that is of feeling’, but wielded an overwhelming psychic discipline that could only work on the Germans. For—the author claimed—his decline in prestige abroad, resulting from his anti-Jewish, anti-foreign and anti-dissent actions suggested his unstable grip on the immoral foreigner, who was not so convinced.⁴⁴ These last sentiments particularly resonated with words that Ket expressed in his own writing on the Führer, as I will discuss below.

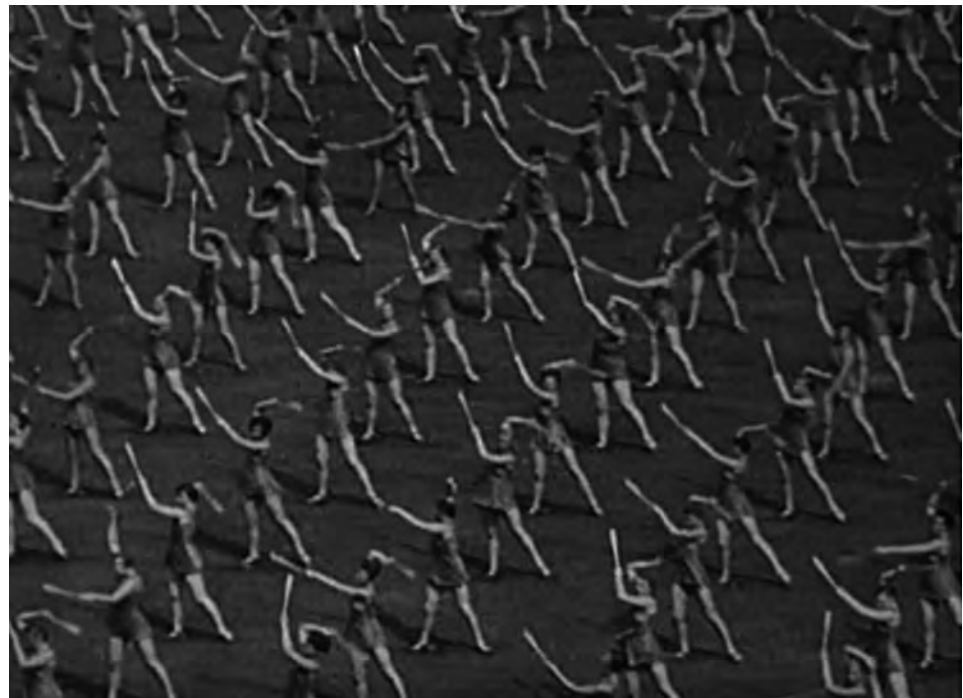
Three years preceding Hitler’s rise, Bertolt Brecht warned about the ability of the Wagnerian Opera to condition society to accept a set of values that serve an

important social function. He compared this phenomenon to the subordinating tendencies of the total work of art, in the way that the resulting synthesis relegated each artform to its proper place.⁴⁵ Indeed, as an artist-politician, Hitler's orchestration of a centralised network of state apparatuses—or *Gleichschaltung*—would later be compared to a Gesamtkunstwerk that expanded the Wagnerian metaphor from the aesthetic to the administrative realm. In reality, the Nazi regime was much more polycratic and incoherent than such a metaphor would suggest. Where the state apparatus did succeed was in signalling its similarity to the Wagnerian concept through its public-facing image, achieving a similar smoke-and-mirrors effect as that of the 'Führer myth'. Behind his highly-curated personality cult, the German Chancellor was actually sowing chaos with the implementation of his four-year plan for rearmament and economic self-sufficiency.⁴⁶ In maintaining relentless momentum in his roll out of foreign and domestic policies, however, Hitler was able to camouflage any failures of its total coordination by focusing on long-range goals such as the *Lebensraum* (expansionism).⁴⁷ One example of this can be seen in the actions of the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, or NSDAP following the Führer's 1935 Nuremberg rally speech lambasting modernism. Beginning that year even those artists on the 'right wing' of Gustav Hartlaub's definition of *Neue Sachlichkeit*—painters such as Georg Schrimpf, Alexander Kanoldt and Franz Radziwill—were redesignated as too modernist and thus 'degenerate' to properly represent the German ethos.⁴⁸ By all accounts, the *Gleichschaltung* appeared to orchestrate a harmonious organisation through the submission of each individual—or moral unit—to the synthetic whole. In practice, however, the implementation of Nazi art policy often contradicted its own stated principles, allowing leeway for modernist impulses depending on the preferences of the party leaders in power at that time who more or less disagreed on how to view the Expressionism of *Die Brücke*, or the style that Joseph Goebbels proclaimed 'the German art of the next decade': *Neue Sachlichkeit*.⁴⁹ When properly organised, the optics of such a machine could deploy a willing public primed for destruction in the form of war, or its opposite—the construction of a utopian totalitarian community.⁵⁰

Forming just one part of this larger Gestalt of a communications plan were the visionary documentaries of Leni Riefenstahl, whose work in this genre might be described as the optical counterpart to the Führer's rhetorical flourish.⁵¹ As a prominent Nazi documentarian and propagandist, Riefenstahl was reaching the peak of her career, bringing with her different kind of indebtedness to the work of Fritz Lang, and *The Nibelungs* in particular. One of the more prominent examples of Riefenstahl's adaptation of Langian aesthetics for Hitlerian purposes was her 1938 documentary *Olympia*, which immortalised the 1936 Summer Olympic Games. In a segment covering the opening ceremony, the stadium is filled with dancers performing choreographed and synchronous exercises, while maintaining the integrity of a massive, geometric pattern (plate 8 and plate 9). Limbs of hundreds of performers move simultaneously, first with arms and legs alone, and then with the addition of white clubs in either hand, lengthening the reach of each rhythmic pass. The aesthetic value of this mass—when seen from a bird's eye view followed by a short sequence that reveals the faces of the individual participants—lies in its relentless synchrony. Like the soldiers in the above-mentioned scene from *Wurms* in *Siegfried's Death* from *The Nibelungs*, the athletes' bodies in Riefenstahl's documentary become 'moral units' who are symbolically subsumed into the weave of a larger social fabric. On the surface, this conquest of the rational over the organic suggests the unification of the community through the obedience of each component citizen.

8 Still from Leni Riefenstahl, *Olympia*, Tobis Filmkunst, 1938, showing close view of group exercise.

9 Still from Leni Riefenstahl, *Olympia*, Tobis Filmkunst, 1938, showing bird's eye view of group exercise.



Also at play, however, is a visual metaphor that instills the imperative for self-sacrifice on behalf of the greater good.

In 1935—the same year that Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* made its debut—Walter Benjamin coined the phrase 'aestheticization of politics', referring to a kind of political spectacle that offered to the masses an outlet to quell their appetite for belonging. When this desire was articulated as fascism—which Benjamin was addressing specifically—the government could maintain the status quo in regard to property ownership, by satiating the need of the people for kinship, community and

cultural relevance.⁵² To this end, film was a fitting but imperfect Gesamtkunstwerk—the ideal mechanism for collective storytelling. It introduced a novel power differential between director and consumer that was inherently imbalanced, but not necessarily totalitarian.

I would go so far as to say that Lang's use of heavily constructed mise-en-scènes had the potential to sacralise power, particularly in their secondary application to totalitarian artistic products. Perfectly suited to capturing the sublimation of the individual within the mass or the power and majesty of nature, Riefenstahl's films propose a visual theory of *Gleichschaltung*, the National Socialist policy of forced participation and synchronisation. In her deep focus pans of the crowd—forming an endless sea of identically-dressed automata—Riefenstahl put into visual terms the power of optical domination as viewed through the high vantage point of the panopticon lens. Her bird's eye view of the coordinated performers in *Olympia* or the German soldiers at the 1934 Nüremberg Rally in *Triumph of the Will*, for example, played a part within the greater body of the Gesamtkunstwerk in its visualisation of a power-based sublime, much like Wagner's attempts to harness the majesty of the eucharist in his liturgical dramas of the nineteenth century.⁵³ To that end, Riefenstahl's fascist aestheticisation in these two celebrated documentaries could be considered a sacred art of a new political religion.

By the time that Riefenstahl's aforementioned documentaries were released in 1935 and '36, Ket no longer had the option to view the films in the cinema. He did, however, have ample opportunity to learn about them in Dutch newspapers, including among others *De Telegraaf*, which the artist was known to read.⁵⁴ I do not mean to suggest that Riefenstahl's documentaries were a source for Ket, which they certainly were not. Rather, I view her work—produced at the same time that Ket was making these self-portraits—as a counterpoint against which to assess the painter's deployment of totalising aesthetic strategies. Moreover, because the totalitarian resonances of the Gesamtkunstwerk had been firmly established by the 1930s and embodied most paradigmatically by *The Nibelungs*—in the versions of both Wagner and Lang—a proper appraisal of Ket's politics should theoretically shed light on his personal view of authoritarian regimes and their aestheticisation. Unfortunately, such a diagnosis remains elusive. Despite the many boxes of correspondence that the artist left behind after his death, Ket never revealed or outrightly declared alliances to any political party. Nor do his canvases from that era provide much of an answer. What can be determined with relative certainty was the fact that Ket was averse to nationalist rhetoric, and often defined his ideology according to what he did not believe, rather aligning with a partisan organisation of any kind.

Likewise, in contrast to the work of Riefenstahl—whose films Kracauer and others viewed as indebted to *The Nibelungs*—Ket's paintings did not emulate the monumentality of Lang's heavily-decorated sets. As an important matter of distinction, the air of physical embeddedness in Dick Ket's paintings put his work at odds with the aestheticised politics of virtuosic filmmakers like Riefenstahl. One point to consider when addressing the artistic gulf separating the former and latter is Ket's chosen medium. His paintings in oil on canvas still enjoyed an auratic quality that could immerse or absorb the beholder during the viewing experience. For Benjamin, film was, by contrast, 'distracting' in its flowing narration, one that turned beholders into spectators who could not be engaged in the same manner as non-time-based artforms.⁵⁵ In my estimation, Ket's paintings operated in the space between, where he could reconcile the primacy of the individual art viewer with his own distant memories of Lang's towering sets that reduced the individual to a feature of the décor.

Ket's canvases neither fully embraced, nor fully opposed the epics of Lang and Riefenstahl. Rather, the discrete, totalising effects embodied in the work of these two filmmakers exist in conversation with his paintings. Uninterested in the visual thematics of monumentality, Ket instead accentuated his singular experience of solitude via the palpable intimacy that he constructed in his compositions, stressing his personal connection to the domestic space that circumscribed his everyday world. For that reason, he did not draw from Lang's insistence on wide shots to express hierarchies of scale, nor did he treat the figure as something insignificant in comparison to their surroundings. In fact, it was often the human subject in Ket's canvases that centred spatial fluctuations by pinning them down.

While Riefenstahl coopted the visceral power of Lang's centralised command over the masses, Ket was reflecting upon the paralysis of the individual subordinate to a greater design. Ket's renderings of his own image—as well as objects—confined within the 'set' of their surroundings, expressed both his longing to push back against external limitations and the beauty that he still managed to find within them, and should be understood in the context of the artist's restricted lifestyle during that decade. Early in the 1930s he trained his focus on personal expressions of confinement, using formal rhymes to blend figure and environment. By 1933, he began new experiments in objectification and dehumanisation, perhaps inspired by Fritz Lang's flattened and anonymised treatment of the human figure. In one such example Lang arranged the guards of the court in *Siegfried's Death* so as to create a repousoir of statuesque, enigmatic forms, whose combined ornamentality and attitude have been described as a signifier of the Burgundian kingdom's power (plate 10).⁵⁶ Ket similarly played with this relationship between two- and three-dimensionality in his *Zelfportret met zwarte baret* (Self-Portrait with Black Beret), 1933 (plate 11) by placing his own likeness before a darkened and ambiguous two-dimensional silhouette, taking a position in which the red curtain behind his right shoulder lines up with the fold of his white smock. His addition of a pair of



10 Still showing court scene from *The Nibelungs: Siegfried's Death*, UFA, 1924.

11 Dick Ket, *Zelfportret met zwarte baret* [Self-Portrait with Black Beret], 1933. Oil on canvas, 38.5 × 26.5 cm. Arnhem: Museum Arnhem.



seemingly-disembodied hands in front of his torso exacerbated his dual roles as artist in the act of painting, or as the passive sitter with arms lowered at his sides in the course of being painted by an artist—Ket himself. Once again, he declared both potentialities—his identity as a captured subject and that of a wilful artist with total power to edit or even dispose of any select elements within the composition that he so chooses.

The antinomy between the sensations of immobility and imperious control is what distinguished Ket's reluctance from Riefenstahl's open embrace of these aesthetic modalities. Indeed, the grandiosity of her films corresponded well with

the painter's distinct interpretation of the German leader's particular persuasive abilities. When reading Ket's letters one can even get a sense of his specific reaction to listening to the Führer's oratorical skills; the artist's words reveal a mixture of fear and stupefaction. In a letter from February 1939 Ket described to his friend Agnes his experience of listening to one of Hitler's more famous addresses aired on Dutch radio. Likely referring to the 30 January Reichstag speech that announced the imminent 'annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe', Ket wrote, 'I always thought that Hitler had projected his power well in the form of a long speech and radiated just enough force from it. What a demagogue!'⁵⁷ It should be noted that the artist himself did not in any form celebrate the Third Reich, nor was there evidence of his affiliation with any specific party despite being a regular listener of the socialist radio station Vereeniging van Arbeiders Radio Amateurs (Association of Worker Radio Amateurs).⁵⁸ With increasing frequency—especially in the last two years of his life—Ket expressed fear over Hitler's ascendance to power as well as the rising tide of antisemitism. In that very same letter to Agnes, he voiced his concern that he had come to believe in a 'fairy tale', referring to Joseph Goebbels's promise that the 'anti-Jewish campaign' would be short-lived.⁵⁹

Counterpoint: Ket's Dualistic Philosophy

The certainty of Ket's opposition to Hitler thus beyond reproach, the issue of audience engagement in the work of Lang and Ket should also be considered for its contributions to this dialogue—pushing both into and against the thematics of immersion. As Susan Sontag has argued, fascist aesthetics—especially those evident in the work of Riefenstahl—channelled the erotics of body culture by transforming sexual energy into something spiritual, while nourishing the entire community in the process.⁶⁰ Just because Ket bypassed the spiritualising methods of the famous documentarian did not mean that his deeply personal paintings lacked a sacral tenor. In fact, his visual strategies often drew from the devotional arts. Ket's oeuvre has long been recognised for its debt to Early Netherlandish masters Dieric Bouts, Rogier van der Weyden and Quentin Matsys on the level of technique and subject matter.⁶¹ The question then becomes how to reconcile the weight of these influences against his unusual, modernist compositional arrangements, particularly his unnaturalistic, inconsonant treatment of planes. In my view, the marked distinction between scales of monumentality and intimacy in Ket's compositions roughly correspond with the divide separating the visual articulation of a Riefenstahl-esque political religion from the very personal gnosis that he described in his correspondence. In his own words, Ket theorised a self-made dualistic philosophy, which his biographer Alied Ottevanger argued is key to understanding his work. Over the years, Ket wrote frequently about his interests in psychic phenomena, elaborating on his theories of duality informed by theosophy, freemasonry and his high school physics teacher H. A. Naber. Ket saw himself as living in a world in which being and non-being co-existed in dynamic balance. He rationalised his artistic talent as a form of compensation for having a congenital (and terminal) illness, or having been born with a 'negative charge', a term which he borrowed from the field of physics.⁶²

This kind of pseudo-religion mentioned in his correspondence bears a resemblance to gnosticism, a belief system that had informed theosophy, the esoteric movement recently popularised among modern artists by the writer-mystic Helena Blavatsky. Although it was interpreted within early-twentieth-century theosophic societies as a set of nebulous heretical systems, gnosticism was largely defined by the belief that God, the Supreme Being was separate from and superior

to the demiurge (or creator) and made of the same substance as the human spirit, which transcends the material world.⁶³ Furthermore, as the domain of gnosis—or spiritual knowledge—gnostic practice was only accessible to those few individuals conditioned to receive the divine spark or *pneuma* made of the same substance as the Supreme Being. The illumination or transcendence resulting from such an experience can reveal God's true nature.⁶⁴ Resonant in Dick Ket's writings and canvases is the inherent ambivalence embodied in this belief system, and the forced contradiction of the material world and metaphysical existence. Thus, the apparent dualism in Ket's compositions—manifest in the planar incongruence of the tabletop and its reflection in his *Self-Portrait with Black Hat*, for example—might also suggest a polarised relationship between spirit and matter. At the same time, his compositions both push and pull against many of the operations at play in Riefenstahl's documentaries, which sought to dominate and will the public to form, sculpting the masses like a wax as Hitler had done. Riefenstahl also used visual devices that often displaced the spectator's understanding of their viewing position—such as the frequently shifting points of view in *Triumph of the Will*. In this film the director consistently returned to the figure of Hitler as the 'fixed pole' now guiding the German people, all of whom are represented as subordinate to the Führer via the editing process.⁶⁵ Rather than embodying the centre around which all things revolve, Ket's self-representation, by contrast, subtly negotiated against an external imposition. In some instances—such as his self-reflexive treatment of the human subject—he resists the centripetal forces demanding total integration of the figure and environment.

There is also the unpleasant question of Ket's illness and its place within the conceptual framework of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Identification and removal of the degenerate Other has long been seen as yet another way that the total work of art can sustain itself. David Levin has written on the not-so-subtle antisemitic caricatures in *The Nibelungs*, embodied in the distorted, dwarflike figures of Wagner's Mime and Lang's Alberich. The overt stereotyping of these characters through ethnic and personality traits, Levin argues, marks them as abject beings whose disavowal can only help to ensure the integrity of the totality—meaning, reification of the Volk in terms of cultural identity.⁶⁶ Afflicted from birth, Ket's congenital condition was also the very kind of matter that was coming under the jurisdiction of the totalitarian state, such as the Germanic Reich, whose oversight of public hygiene often meant identifying those abject individuals in need of removal from the gene pool. His body was one of many that did not belong within this aesthetic conceptualisation, a fact that I would argue may have contributed to the spatial ambivalence of Ket's self-portraiture and the reluctance with which his figures occupy a place within their surroundings.

Of course, such a narrow focus on Ket's adaptation of Lang's schematic devices does not paint a comprehensive picture of what this two-film epic may have meant to him. The fact that he had so thoroughly enjoyed Lang's *The Nibelungs* was a symptom of the fact that he—like so many other people of his generation—was a typical consumer of popular culture and was susceptible to the seductive mechanics of film and its methods of promotion. Cinema provided for Ket the idea of escape, and the prospect of being a part of something larger than himself at a time when he was isolated and dying. Of course, *The Nibelungs* was not the only film that Ket wrote about in his many letters. He also expressed his longing to watch Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, 1936, and asked his friends if they had seen it.⁶⁷ In late 1939 he yearned for the opportunity to see Victor Fleming's adaptation of *Gone With the Wind*. Having read Margaret Mitchell's novel in the year of its publication (1936),

Ket began to incorporate the title into his correspondence with regularity following the film's release, sometimes using the popular acronym GWTW. It began as a post script message to his friend Agnes de Maas van de Moer, where he jokingly stated that the film will be preserved for posterity until the year 8000—likely referring to the overwhelming media attention dedicated to the picture.⁶⁸ He made a similar statement in a letter to American collector Mary Taylor in 1940, suggesting that the far-off day in the future when the world can resolve conflict without warfare, the great cultural artefact *Gone With the Wind* will be unearthed by archaeologists.⁶⁹ These motion pictures—or more importantly the very idea of watching them—provided for Ket a sense of community in the way that they offered the opportunity to participate in an international cultural phenomenon, an experience that the cinema could more adequately deliver than any other mass medium at that time. Ket took part in movie culture in the only way that he could, and at a time when film remained inaccessible to him—through coverage in magazines—a fact which accelerated in 1939, the year preceding his death.

Unable to attend the cinema, I would argue that Ket's canvases from this period stand as a testament to his memory of—and longing for—the experience of film-going as a shared social activity. Whether as a member of an audience in the Netherlands, or as part of an international public sharing in the collective experience of this widely-distributed film, the cinema offered to Ket the sense of belonging that had eluded him since yielding to the enervating force of his illness. In his case, film contributed to what Alison Landsberg has termed a 'prosthetic memory', wielding the unparalleled capacity to produce shared narratives that transcend geographical boundaries. Not unlike what Benedict Anderson had argued in regard to the printing press, Landsberg's concept suggests the kind of community-formation that relied heavily upon affective experience.⁷⁰ Indeed, the 'prosthetic memory' that manifested through Ket's participation in this phenomenon provided him with a suitable visual vocabulary for empathising with the experience of confinement or restriction.

It surely cannot be happenstance that in the last years of his life, Ket's longing for the experience of filmgoing coincided with a surge in his observations on the frightening news playing out in real time. Restricted to sedentary activities, Ket had ample time to read about world events in the newspapers, like the general confluence of the Axis Powers as well as more specific moments, such as the Germans taking up positions in Finland.⁷¹ Anyone living in western Europe during that time with even the slightest awareness of Hitler's accelerating occupation plan may have had a similar sensation of encroachment. Indeed, the events of 1939 made clear what had only been theoretical in the early days of the Führer's reign. Ket followed the unfolding political situation closely and took the threats seriously, despite bouts of spirited optimism that the Fins were going to fight back, or instances of playful irreverence mocking Hitler's cult of personality. By February of that year the stakes were clear. The artist wrote that none of the imminent conflicts certain to take place in Italy, Germany, Japan or Spain 'may be called a masquerade'.⁷²

It was also at this same time that Ket's self-portraits did away with the confounding planar combinations that he preferred in the first half of the 1930s. If the rhythmic pairings of his earlier work remained, then I would argue that the leitmotifs became much more subtle, and even muddled at the end of his life, while his palette grew significantly darker, and many canvases were left unfinished. The very crisp way that he used motifs at the beginning of the decade to delineate the different elements within the painting, gave way to layered, often-conflicting textures. His self-portraits in particular exhibited a frontal posturing

that sometimes featured playful grimaces or pulled faces. Considering his interest in Charlie Chaplin's high-budget film *Modern Times*, which continued a long cinema run in the Netherlands well past its release in 1936, it would not be surprising if Ket styled himself after the Tramp. Ket encountered *Modern Times* through Dutch newspapers that continued to reference the film quite regularly, and well into the late 1930s when Chaplin had begun filming the anti-Hitler spoof *The Dictator*. While Ket's caricature-like facial exaggerations can be seen in a number of canvases from this period including his *Triptiek Zelfportretten* (Three Small Self-Portraits), 1937–40, his very last work in this genre, titled *Dubbelportret van Dick Ket en zijn vader* (Double Portrait of Dick Ket and His Father), 1938–1940 (plate 12) is perhaps the most Chaplin-like of them all. In this unprimed, unfinished work, Ket depicted himself with paintbrush in hand, standing before a wood-panelled wall. In the background hangs a marionette horse (a reference to a translation of his last name in the local dialect of West Frisian). Although Ket otherwise wore simple clothing covered by a smock with one shoulder left unbuttoned, he also introduced a pair of accessories that had become by that point a metonym for the characteristically dapper Chaplin: a bowtie and brimmed hat. When paired with Ket's toothbrush moustache, these details could be read as an ode to the famous actor. The artist's 'drumstick' or clubbed fingers—an effect of his heart condition which restricted

12 Dick Ket, *Double Portrait of Dick Ket and His Father*, 1938–1940. Oil on canvas, 80 × 100 cm. Arnhem: Museum Arnhem.



blood flow—are here used for dramatic effect. With his right hand on his hip, Ket used his left to hold his paintbrush in such a way that almost renders it a cane-like prop. At the same time, Ket's interest in seeking out optical pairings through the relations between the figure and the surroundings became so tempered by that point in time, that they appear almost negligible. What he does emphasise in this painting appears to a greater degree than before, in my opinion, is his practice as an artist. By 1939, he appeared to have liberated himself from the schematic framing orchestrated by his surroundings, granting agency to himself, as an artist and as an individual.

The late 1930s also happened to be a time when *Neue Sachlichkeit*—a style that Ket had followed since the original Mannheim show travelled to Amsterdam in 1929—had been adapted to the strictures of an increasingly anti-modernist position in Germany. National Socialist art policy was guided by a worldview of negation rather than a coherent set of aesthetic goals, where German artists like Rudolf Schlichter who hoped to work after 1933 had to find ways to justify the hygienic value of their artistic product.⁷³ Despite the many disagreements among Nazi art policy-makers in Germany, the existence of a national essence—whether it be heroic, Nordic or rooted in Blood and Soil tropes—remained the single point of compromise. Any cultural worker wanting to continue their professional activities in Germany at that time had to subscribe to this aesthetic, or face the penalty of dismissal from their position.⁷⁴ By the time of the infamous Degenerate Art exhibition in 1937—an event well covered in the Dutch press—the notion of being German had taken on a biological dimension; illness and foreignness were the primary pathologies of an enemy Jewish-Bolshevik identity. In light of this context, Ket's self-stylisation in a bowtie and brimmed hat might read on the surface as bourgeois. His identity as a painter, while still present, is subordinate to his various significations of class respectability. Given Ket's own apprehensions about the Nazi regime, however, I would think that he, like Chaplin's character Charlot, was using parodic performance as a form of camouflaged resistance, further silenced by the painted medium. If we take this speculation to be true, then Ket's status as a terminally ill artist who is mimicking the look and behaviours of the famous Jewish actor Charlie Chaplin, this painting can also be said to perform a kind of hidden anti-German identity.

Conclusion

This last self-portrait exhibits a constant that held across Ket's oeuvre. Fitting with his rejection of any political affiliation, Ket prioritised the individual and his or her place within a cultural context that aimed towards total absorption on all fronts: cultural, political and aesthetic. Interrogating his personal experiences in ways that were equivocating or otherwise critical, Ket blurred the distinction between reality and edited fiction in his self-portraits just as Riefenstahl had done in her documentaries. While the famous documentarian aimed to incorporate the masses into an aesthetic machinery in service to the State, Ket encouraged introspection by way of self-reflexive analysis. Neither an ode to monumental aesthetics nor evidence of a political position, Ket's adoption of these filmic devices complicates the reconciliation of his desire for belonging with the explicit imposition of community found in National Socialist policies.

To be clear, Ket's paintings do not come close to embodying the kind of intermedial synthesis that constitutes the total work of art, and in fact, to make such a claim would be beside the point. In my view, Ket's self-portraits from this period

were an index of the total synaesthetic experience that can only be had in cinema. Through his self-portraits, Ket negotiated the aesthetics of domination that were emerging in German popular culture in the decade after World War I. His paintings dissolved the boundaries that separated the contemplative mode of beholding from the distracted experience of the filmgoer. By disallowing the Gesamtkunstwerk to supersede consciousness while acknowledging the persistence of individual alienation, Ket's imagery performed a muted form of rebellion. He visualised his own resistance to subsumption within a totalising aesthetic experience and interrupted the Gleichschaltung in the process.

Notes

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- 1 See Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, Princeton, 2015, republished 2019, 68–75 and Patrick McGilligan, '1923–1924,' *Fritz Lang: The Nature of the Beast*, Minneapolis, 2013, 95–96. Thomas Elsaesser is hesitant to categorise *Dr. Caligari* as an Expressionist film, in the sense of belonging to the same movement as *Die Brücke*, considering the distinct post World War I socio-political conditions in which it and other UFA films came into being. See Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After. Germany's Historical Imaginary*, London and New York, 2000, 3–7.
- 2 The designs were borrowed from Carl Otto Czeschka's book Franz Keim's *Die Nibelungen: Dem Deutschen Volk*, Vienna Gerlach und Wiedling, 1909. Comparisons have also been made to the heroic paintings of Wilhelm von Kaulbach, the allegorical work of Franz von Stuck, the figures of Gustav Klimt, the folk personalities of Hans Thoma, the Jugendstil influence of Heinrich Vogler and the landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich and Arnold Böcklin. See McGilligan, *Fritz Lang: The Nature of the Beast*, 95.
- 3 Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 74.
- 4 See Peter Chametzky, 'The Post History of Willi Baumeister's Anti-Nazi Postcards', *Visual Resources*, 17: 4, 2001, 459–480.
- 5 See James van Dyke, 'On the Possibility of Resistance in Two Silverpoints by Otto Dix', in *Art and Resistance in Germany*, ed. Deborah Ascher Barnstone and Elizabeth Otto, New York and London, 2019, 165–167.
- 6 See Camilla Smith, *Jeanne Mammen: Art Between Resistance and Conformity in Modern Germany, 1916–1950*, New York and London, 2023, 72–73.
- 7 Wagner began to develop his concept of the total work of art in 1849.
- 8 Allied Ottevanger has assessed these sources in her biography on Dick Ket titled, *Dick Ket: Over zijn leven, ideeën en kunst*, Zwolle: Waanders uitgeverij, 1994.
- 9 See Krisztina Lajosi, 'Wagner and the (Re)mediation of Art: Gesamtkunstwerk and Nineteenth-Century Theories of Media', *Frame*, 23: 2, 2010, 58.
- 10 Adeline Mueller, 'Listening for Wagner in Fritz Lang's *Die Nibelungen*', in *Wagner and Cinema*, ed. Jeongwon Joe and Sander L. Gilman, Bloomington, 2010, 85.
- 11 See James Buhler, 'Wagnerian Motives: Narrative Integration and the Development of Silent Film Accompaniment, 1908–1913', in *Wagner & Cinema*, ed. Jeongwon Joe and Sander L. Gilman, Bloomington, 2010, 32, 37.
- 12 Ket likely would have either seen the film(s) in Amsterdam or Utrecht, which were closest to Arnhem where he was studying; he also frequently exhibited in Amsterdam. *Siegfried's Death* played eleven times before 1930 in Amsterdam at the Rembrandt, Ceintuur, Union, Asta, National and Luxor Theatres and six times in Utrecht at Scala Theatre. *Kriemhild's Revenge* played five times before 1930 in Amsterdam at Rembrandt, Ceintuur and National Theatres and three times in Utrecht at Scala. See cinemacontext.nl.
- 13 'Filmnieuws. "M," Een Geniale Film', *Arnhemsche Courant*, 5 November 1931, 17.
- 14 'Talenten van de Ufa', *De Tijd*, 21 December 1935.
- 15 Letter from Dick Ket to Agnes de Maas van de Moer dated 3 December 1939, RKD, Dick Ket Collectie, box 1, inv. Nr. 4, letter 165.
- 16 'Ik ken geen sprekende film behalve het sprekende ervan zo nu en dan per radio. Dit lokt mij niet aan. Ik geloof dat de gebrekkige, met toelichtige, geluidskwaliteit me verhinderen zou er meer van te genieten. Ik herinner me vaag de stomme film heel sterk "De Nibelungen" en dat was een film waarbij alle praten uit den boze zou zijn geweest (of men moest middeleeuws gepraat hebben), waarbij geluidseffecten niet meer dan effecten konden zijn. Als kijkspel eist dan dit spraakgebrek "geconcentreerd" iets geweldigs! Het heeft veel indruk op me gemaakt. De muziek om een goed orkest daar gegeven vermeld op het andere terrein der emotie de indruk d. w. z. had nergens een eigen, de aandacht eisende, betekenis. Je kunt het mij niet kwalijk nemen, dat het meeste absorptie vermogen in mijn ogen ligt.'
- 17 Letter from Dick Ket to Agnes de Maas van de Moer dated 3 December 1939.
- 18 See Carolyn Birdsall, *Nazi Soundscapes*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012, 141–145. Birdsall cites German composer Gottfried Müller's 1940 text *Dramaturgie des Theatres und des Films*, which argues that the sound film was the first true Gesamtkunstwerk.
- 19 Ket describes the *Life Magazine* issue in a letter to Agnes de Maas van de Moer dated 3 March 1940, Dick Ket Collectie, box 1, inv. Nr.5, letter 181.
- 20 Dutch essayist Constant van Wessem, who when writing for the *Filmliga* journal in 1927 detailed a similar experience of watching film with 'musical accompaniment'. He described film as containing a rhythm and cadence of its own that could be enhanced by music and was capable of communicating on a purely visual level. Constant van Wessem, 'De Film met of zonder muziek?' *Filmliga*, 1: 2, 1927, 7.
- 21 Ket knew of Corbusier's work and cited the artist-architect in his letters. See letter to Agnes de Maas van de Moer, Dick Ket Collectie, box 1, inv. Nr. 2, letter 37.
- 22 Genever is a traditional Dutch juniper-based liquor; it is a predecessor to gin.
- 23 Sabine Hake, 'Architectural Hi/stories: Fritz Lang and *The Nibelungen*', *Wide Angle*, 12: 3, July 1990, 46.
- 24 See Allied Ottevanger, 'De Indringenheid der Primitieven. Over de betekenis van de laat-middeleeuwse en vroeg-renaissance schilderkunst voor het werk van Dick Ket', *Jong Holland*, 9: 4, 1993, 20, 31 and Ottevanger, *Dick Ket: Vier Studies*, The Hague: Albani Drukkers, 1995, 91–98.

- 25 Tim Bergfelder, Sue Harris, and Sarah Street, 'European Set Designs in the 1920s and 1930s: Cultural Contexts and Professional Practices', in *Film Architecture and the Transnational Imagination*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007, 36; Johannes Kamps, 'Reimann, Walter—Kunstmaler. Freie Kunst und Gebrauchsgrafik eines Filmarchitekten', in *Walter Reimann. Maler und Filmarchitekt*, ed. Hans-Peter Reichmann, exh. cat., Frankfurt-am-Main, 1997, 27.
- 26 See Theodor W. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, Berlin: u. a. Suhrkamp, 1952.
- 27 David Ian Hall, 'Wagner, Hitler, and Germany's Rebirth After the First War', *War in History*, 24: 2, April 2017, 159–160.
- 28 See Wolfram Pyta, 'Adolf Hitler's (Self-) Fashioning as a Genius', in *Pictorial Cultures and Political Iconographies: Approaches, Perspectives, Case Studies from Europe and America*, ed. Udo J. Hebel and Christoph Wanger, Berlin, 2011, 171.
- 29 'Kunstenaarscongres voor geestelijke weerbaarheid. Kunstenaar en samenleving', *Het Vaderland*, 16 October 1937, 2.
- 30 Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 92.
- 31 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Mass Ornament' (1927) in *The Mass Ornament Weimar Essays*, ed. Thomas Y. Levin, Cambridge, 1995, 75–86.
- 32 Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 93.
- 33 Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 85.
- 34 Klaus Kreimeier, 'Der Schlafwandler: Fritz Lang und seine deutschen Filme', in *Film-Stadt-Kino-Berlin*, ed. Uta Berg-Ganschow and Wolfgang Jacobsen, Berlin: Argon, 1987, 104–105; Helmut Welshmann, *Gebaute Illusionen: Architektur im Film*, Vienna: Promedia, 1988, 123; Dieter Bartetzko, *Illusionen in Stein. Stimmungarchitektur im deutschen Faschismus. Ihre Vorgeschichte in Theater-und-Filmbauten*, Reinbeck, 1985, 269. See Hake, 'Architectural Hi/stories: Fritz Lang and The Nibelungs', 40–41.
- 35 Hake, 'Architectural Hi/stories: Fritz Lang and The Nibelungs', 41.
- 36 Hake, 'Architectural Hi/stories: Fritz Lang and The Nibelungs', 48.
- 37 Hake, 'Architectural Hi/stories: Fritz Lang and The Nibelungs', 40–41.
- 38 See W. B., 'Ein Nibelungenfilm', *Der Kunstwart*, 37: 8, May 1924, 85–86; Herbert Ihering, 'Der erste Nibelungen-Film,' (1924) and 'Der zweite Nibelungen -Film' (1924) in *Von Reinhardt bis Brecht* Volume I, ed. Herbert Ihering, Berlin/GDR: Henschel, 1959, 477; Béla Balázs, 'Der Nibelungenfilm' and 'Nibelungen II', in *Schriften zum Film* Volume I, ed. Helmut H. Diedrichs, Wolfgang Gersch and Magda Naga, Munich, 1982, 320.
- 39 See David Levin, *Richard Wagner, Fritz Lang, and the Nibelungen: The Dramaturgy of Disavowal*, Princeton, 1999, 131.
- 40 'Dr. Goebbels' Speech at the Kaiserhof on March 28 m 1933', trans. Lance W. Garner, in *German Essays on Film*, ed. Richard W. McCormick and Alison Guenther-Pl, The German Library 81, New York, 2004, 154–155. See also Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity*, London, 2011, 38.
- 41 'De Duitse Film-Industrie. Siegfried en Hagen op het doek. Een Film Zonder Natuur', *De Courant*, 22 February 1924, 6.
- 42 'De Nibelungen', *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 12 October 1924, 9 and 'Twentsche Nieuws', *Twentsche Dagblad Tubantia*, 10 February 1926, 2. A writer for *Algemeen Handelsblad* wrote about the awe that he experienced when watching *The Nibelungs*, but also quoted a critic from the *Berliner Tageblatt*, who wrote about how difficult it was to characterise it as representative of German film, which 'demands the strictest criteria of criticism'. He claimed that due to the cost and ambition of the film, it would have to be considered a 'world film', meaning that it would have to be financially successful in foreign markets, a fact which could also take away from its specifically German identity. See 'De Rolprent: Rondom een "Grossfilm"', *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 3 March 1924, 9. A critic from the *Bredasche Courant* remarked upon the beautiful atmosphere created by the emphasis on straight line as well as how the 'superb' orchestral music 'heightened the mood'. See 'Bioscoop: Grand Theatre', *Bredasche Courant*, 13 December 1924, 2.
- 43 Menno Ter Braak, 'Cinema Militans (1929)', in *Menno ter Braak: Verzameld Werk*, ed. M. van Crevel, Amsterdam, 1950, 442.
- 44 'Aan het wereldvenster', *Arnhemsche Courant*, 20 April 1933, 5.
- 45 Bertolt Brecht, 'The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre' (1930) in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, edited and translated by John Willett, New Delhi: Radha Krishna, 1957 and 1978, 33–35. See also Amy Lynn Wlodarski, "Exposing the Political Gesamtkunstwerk" Hanns Eisler's *Nuit et Brouillard*," in *The Total Work of Art: Foundations, Articulations, Inspirations*, ed. David Imhoof, Margaret Eleanor Menninger and Anthony J. Steinhoff, New York, 2016, 120.
- 46 Ian Kershaw, *The 'Hitler Myth': Image and Reality in the Third Reich*, New York and London, 2000, 122.
- 47 Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspective of Interpretation*, fourth edition, New York and London, 2000, 139, 152.
- 48 See David Crockett, *German Post-Expressionism: The Art of the Great Disorder 1918–1924*, University Park, PA, 1999, 186, note 211, Steve Plumb, *Neue Sachlichkeit 1918–33: Unity and Diversity of an Art Movement*, Amsterdam and New York: Brill, 2006, 146, and James van Dyke, *Franz Radziwill and the Contradictions of German Art History, 1919–1945*, Ann: University of Michigan Press, 2011, 72–73, 122.
- 49 Hildegard Brenner, 'Art in the Political Power Struggle of 1933 and 1934', in *Republic to Reich: the Making of the Nazi Revolution, Ten Essays*, ed. Hajo Holborn, New York, 1972, 399, 404, and 419.
- 50 David Roberts, 'The Will to Power as Art: The Third Reich', in *The Total Work of Art in European Modernism*, Ithaca, 2011, 248.
- 51 Roberts, 'The Will to Power as Art', 249.
- 52 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, 1935', in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, Cambridge, MA, 2008, 41.
- 53 See Matthew Wilson Smith, *The Total Work of Art: From Bayreuth to Cyberspace*, New York: Routledge, 2007, 42.
- 54 Some examples include 'Sportfilms van Leni Riefenstahl', *De Telegraaf*, 17 July 1936, 7 and 'Meeningsverschillen tusschen Göbbels en Leni Riefenstahl', *De Telegraaf*, 16 June 1937, 5. One widely distributed story taken from the wire with the byline 'Meer dan 400.000-meter Olympische film', appeared in newspapers throughout the Netherlands in August of 1936, such as *Het Vaderland*, *Haagsche Courant*, *Leeuwarder Nieuwsblad*, for example.
- 55 Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, 1935', 40.
- 56 Klaus Kanzog, 'Der Weg der Nibelungen ins Kino. Fritz Langs Film-Alternative zu Hebbel und Wagner', *Wege des Mythos in der Moderne: Richard Wagner, 'Der Ring des Nibelungen': eine Müncher Ringvorlesung*, ed. Dieter Borchmeyer, Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1987, 208–210.
- 57 See letter from Dick Ket to Agnes de Maas van de Moer dated 4 February 1939, RKD, box 1, inv. Nr. 4, letter 127, 2.
- 58 In a letter from Ket claimed that he had been a listener of VARA for fourteen years. VARA was associated with the Social Democratic Workers Party, SDAP in the Netherlands, however, Ket was critical of the Party, describing it as being too beholden to the interests of the rich. See letter from Ket to Agnes de Maas van de Moer dated 11 February 1940, RKD, box 1, inv. Nr. 4, letter 177, 5.
- 59 See letter from Dick Ket to Agnes de Maas van de Moer dated 4 February 1939, RKD, box 1, inv. Nr. 4, letter 127, pg. 2. Also included in Dick Ket's letters of correspondence is an undated handwritten transcription of a poem by Jacobus Revius (1586–1658): 'Hy droegh onse smarten', which translates to: 'He carried our sorrows'. This poem begins with the phrase: 'No, it was not the Jews who crucified'. See RKD, box 1, inv. Nr. 4.
- 60 Susan Sontag, 'Fascinating Fascism', (1974), republished in *A Susan Sontag Reader*, New York, 1983, 317.
- 61 Alied Ottevanger, *Dick Ket: Over zijn leven*, 26–31.
- 62 Ottevanger, *Dick Ket: Vier Studies*, 36–39.
- 63 Philip Francis Esler, *The Early Christian World*, New York, 2000, 74
- 64 John Glyndwr Harris, *Gnosticism Beliefs and Practices*, Brighton, 1999, 10. Conditioning refers to the reception of knowledge through visions and dialogue.
- 65 Smith, *The Total Work of Art*, 98.
- 66 Levin, *Richard Wagner, Fritz Lang, and the Nibelungen*, 10.
- 67 See letter from Dick Ket to Gerry van der Zee dated 1936, RKD, Dick Ket Collectie, box 3, Inv. Nr. 48.
- 68 Letter from Dick Ket to Agnes de Maas van de Moer dated 3 December 1939, RKD, Dick Ket Collectie, box 1, inv. Nr. 4, letter 165.
- 69 Letter from Dick Ket to Mary Taylor dated 5 January 1940, RKD, Dick Ket Collectie, box 3, Inv. Nr. 53.

Dick Ket's Self-Portraiture and the Debt of Epic Film

- 70 Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, New York, 2004, 28, 159.
- 71 Letter from Dick Ket to Agnes de Maas van de Moer dated 1940, RKD, Dick Ket Collectie, box 1, inv. Nr. 5, letter 173.
- 72 Letter from Dick Ket to Agnes de Maas van de Moer dated 4 February 1939, RKD, Dick Ket Collectie, box 1, inv. Nr. 4, letter 127.
- 73 Olaf Peters gives the example of Rudolf Schlichter who attempted to reframe Neue Sachlichkeit as a 'religious-national' concept of realism. Later in his life he lamented the 'boring' and 'bourgeois' pictures that he had made at this time to appease the regime. See Olaf Peters, *Neue Sachlichkeit und Nationalsozialismus. Affirmation und Kritik 1931–1947*, Berlin, 1998, 46–47.
- 74 Kirsten Baumann, *Wortgefechte: Völkische und nationalsozialistische Kunstkritik 1927–1939*, Weimar, 2002, 16, 20, 108.

Community as Gesamtkunstwerk: Dick Ket's Self-Portraiture and the Debt of Epic Film

Stephanie Lebas Huber

This essay posits that Weimar-era film sets – in their evocation of Richard Wagner's concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk – served as a previously unseen visual source for painters that in some cases pushed back against interwar aesthetics of power. Focusing on the Dutch figurative painter Dick Ket, it investigates the ways in which this artist's self-portraits from 1930–1940 acted as a memory index of his experience of the mises-en-scènes in Fritz Lang's 1924 epic two-part film *Die Nibelungen* through Langian devices such as heavy geometric patterning, leitmotifs, and subjugation of the human figure to the set. Ket's work evinces the artist's own sensation of confinement in his parents' home as a result of a terminal heart condition while also reckoning with Adolf Hitler's extremist rhetoric and expansionist policies in the years that preceded the German Occupation of the Netherlands.

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