



Sound, otherness & the disabled self: listening to the voices of the Belgian 'blind', 1900-1940

3d International Disability Studies Conference//‘The art of belonging’//Amsterdam//30 November – 2 December 2017//**Pieter Verstraete**//Education, Culture & Society Research Unit//KU Leuven

Historiographical background

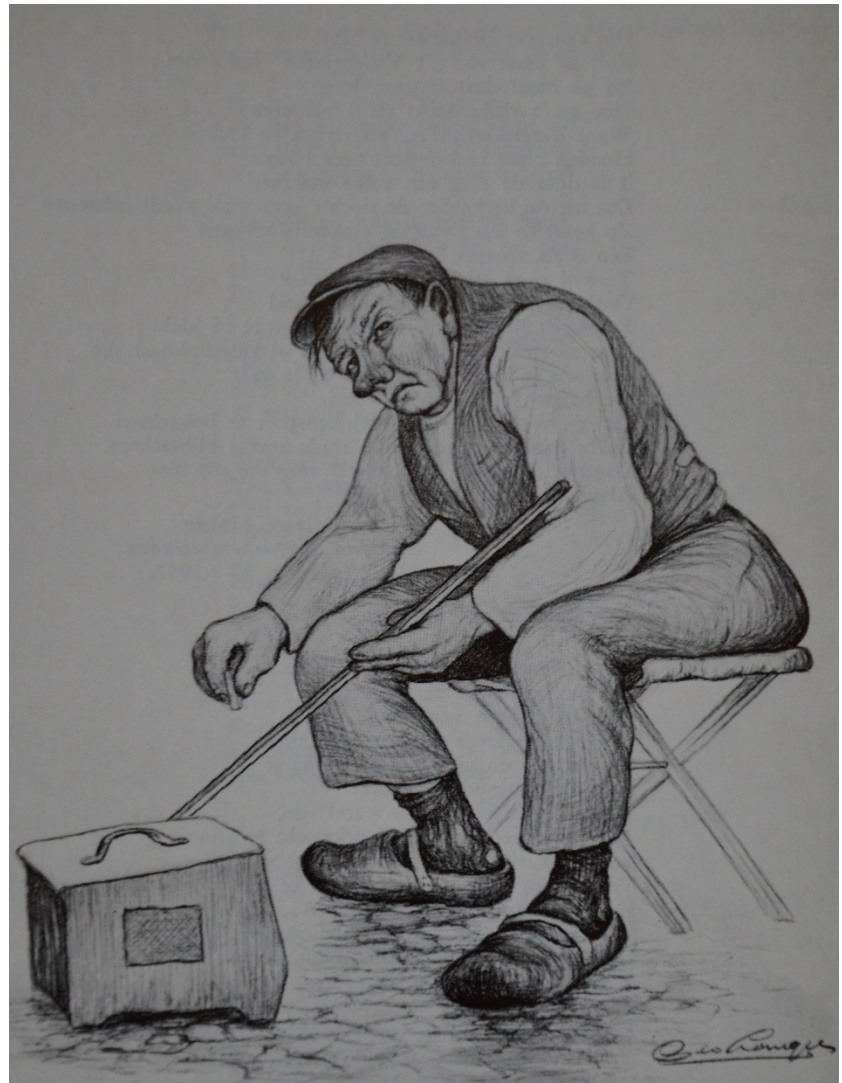
- Sykes, I. (2011). Sounding the ‘Citizen–Patient’: The Politics of Voice at the Hospice des Quinze-Vingts in Post-Revolutionary Paris. *Medical history*, 55(4), 479-502.
- Scales, R. (2008). Radio Broadcasting, Disabled Veterans, and the Politics of National Recovery in Interwar France. *French Historical Studies*, 31(4), 643-678.
- Ongoing book project: Silence – a cultural history of silence in the classroom

Research question

- **What is there to see** when we look at emancipatory processes of the Belgian 'blind' **through an acoustic lens**?
- Although in theory it would have been possible to make use of acoustic source material (from the 20's onwards/like for instance recordings), our **data consisted of written texts**
- Written texts often contain traces of auditory events, mirror historical soundscapes or feature written guidelines for musical performances for instance
- **Focus was on the 'voice' of Belgian 'blind'**
 - Literal voices – for instance radio-programs where a blind individual was interviewed
 - Metaphorical voices – will be the subject of this presentation

Blind voices at the turn of 20th century

- **Important remark:** voices of the Belgian ‘blind’ already can be found throughout the 19th century!
 - For instance: blind senator Alexander Rodenbach
- Our starting point will consist of a **parliamentary petition** send by the blind pupils of the Royal Institute for the deaf and the blind in Brussels (Woluwé): **1901**
 - Not written in Braille
 - Particular and in a way problematic source – for who is speaking here?
 - Still in a way reflects political activity of the ‘blind’



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That it perverts the character and heart of children;
That it takes its toll on the most useful birds to agriculture;
That there is no plausible reason which can legitimize or excuse [it];
That its abolition, even by legal means, is desired by all right-thinking men;
That we, the blind, have particular reasons for desiring this abolition

That our nature for us, are the thousands of voices, which from the sky, show to our attentive soul the splendor of the creation, the greatness, goodness and the love of the Creator; these thousands of voices that have so much charm to our ears, which make the night less dark and life more joyful; these thousands of lovely voices that cruel and sacrilegious hands want to transform into plaintive groans, which cause our sensitive heart to bleed;

War blindness & rehabilitation

- Number of Belgian war blinded soldiers: 88
- Special institute between 1919-1921
- Iconography, funding campaigns and discourse of rehabilitation
- When confronted with reality this definitely not always could be realized
 - For instance the case of private Julien Dhondt:

Blind voices in the Interwar years

- The increased visibility of the 'blind' lead to the foundation of several organizations in the immediate After-war period;
- Five in total: Oeuvre National des Aveugles, Ligue Braille, Licht en Liefde, Algemeen Blindenverbond Vlaanderen & La lumière
- ONA, Ligue Braille & Algemeen Blindenverbond Vlaanderen were founded by one or more blind persons.
- Each of these organisations published a journal
 - Reference to experiences with war blindness during the war
 - Importance of work for emancipation of the 'blind'
 - The other seems to have been disappeared

Radical voices ... and how these were forgotten

Lecture by Bert De Visscher on 12 May 1929 – radical attack against pity and charity:

Because in most cases charity is just a shameful gift of the advantaged in society who feel, who know that something is wrong, but actually do prefer not to try to seek out what precisely the problem is in our society [...] The war blinded rightly ask himself: “do those of the higher classes who act out of charity and look down on us with pity, do they then don’t know, are they not aware of the fact that precisely their class is the cause of the existence of war blinded (ABV, 1929, p. 82-83).

Conclusions

- **The Belgian ‘blind’ undoubtedly have raised their voices** between 1900 and 1940; they send their voices to the parliament and made them public through the journals they founded
- When listening to these voices it appears that **around 1900 the sound of the other still could be heard** (cf. plea for protection of other creature, namely the finch)
- **Towards the end of the Interbellum** the ‘sound of the other’ has been **covered up by the ‘sound of the self’** – which becomes most clear in the flamingant approach of Algemeen Blindenbond Vlaanderen
- **Provocative question:** Is the other still present in contemporary disability activism?

Thanks for your
attention! Any
questions or
suggestions?

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