



**Te leven op duizend plaatsen. Jo Otten 1901-1940**

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## To live in a thousand places. Jo Otten (1901-1940)

The obscurity of Rotterdam author Jo Otten cannot have been due to his extensive body of work. In the period between the world wars he revealed a view of the world in his writings that can be called fairly unique in Dutch literature.

The first fruits of Otten's pen were born during his education, when he studied Trade Economics, and appeared in the *Rotterdamsche studentenalmanak* (Rotterdam Student Almanac). These are texts steeped in a melancholic atmosphere and betray the thinking of the French poet Charles Baudelaire.

Otten's official début was in 1925, in the modernist literary magazine for young people *De Vrije Bladen* (The Free Pages). Three years later his collection *Verloren vaderland* (Lost Fatherland) was published, a cross-section of the development in his writing. Otten wrote down his stories of a seemingly romantic nature in modernist prose; they are veiled stories of the ego, in which the concepts of doubt, insecurity and fear predominate.

Over the years Otten became convinced that everything in life was dependant on a position of satisfaction. In his critical work he reacted to stagnation by pleading for a 'mobile' way of life, where everything was constantly on the move. It describes the hyper-awareness of the modernist: a person subject to doubt, who resists stagnation and reflects this in his work.

In 1927 the Filmliga Rotterdam (Rotterdam Film League) was founded. This was a department of the Nederlandsche Filmliga (Dutch Film League), to which Otten would commit himself. In the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* (New Rotterdam Gazette) he wrote a series of film portraits. Besides Chaplin, he used these to promote positive awareness for other actors such as Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd and the Danish film diva Asta Nielsen. Later Otten would go on to tell the story of American film, which was seen in a bad light by the Dutch intelligentsia. Otten was not undividedly negative, but in *Amerikaanse filmkunst* (The American Art of Film) (1931) he made it clear in just a few lines what he and his followers saw as their main objection to American film.

During the first half of the thirties Otten would, as a board member of the Nederlandsche Filmliga (Dutch Film League), the Rotterdamsche Kring (Rotterdam Circle) and the Rotterdamsch Leeskabinet (Rotterdam Reading Cabinet), put his mark on the cultural life of the city of his birth; a city in which a handful of modernist authors of Rotterdam origins were never able to reach full maturity.

In his thesis *Het fascisme* (Fascism) (1928) Otten described the birth of Italian fascism, which he believed to be the only form of government that was capable to repair national unity and consolidate order and authority. However, he paid little to no attention to the repression and application of violence that went along with it. Mussolini's greatest merit, according to Otten, was that under his rule Italy had grown to become unified, where the interests of the individual were subordinate to the interests of the community. In his view the individual should function at its best when it is part of a collective. Otten saw fascism as a typical Italian product and as a solution for Italy's problems. He would not become a practicing fascist. Nevertheless, he would continue to defend some of Mussolini's political views. With regards to communism he was, however, more sceptical. And he rejected national socialism emphatically and completely.

In 1929 Otten met the essayist Menno ter Braak (1902 - 1940), who was, like him, in search of a way out of stagnation. Ter Braak came to the conclusion that this was impossible, which eventually led to a parting of ways

between him and Otten. Ter Braak approached the reality mainly with reason; Otten also made use of emotion, intuition, dreams and imagination in order to maintain a balance in a regulated and egoistical world. He could not accept that everything in life was subject to laws and conventions that had to collectively take care of keeping everything together. In this way life would be destroyed by predictability, and in such a rigid world, a world of similarity, Otten refused to live. He also protested against a world in which everyone shared each other's opinions and views, because from his point of view a world of consensus was terribly boring. In Otten's universe a strong fresh wind invariably blew. Old ideas fell away after a period of time, like leaves from a tree, and new ideas grew. In his mind, borders had a very relative meaning.

Otten introduced his critical view of the world in the essay *Mobiliteit en revolutie* (Mobility and Revolution) (1932). In this essay he applauded the 'mobile person', an autonomous, chameleon-like figure who tries to escape social stagnation in various ways, some of them even surrealistic. This non-conformist remained true to himself in every circumstance and saw reality through compound eyes. Otten put into words the fundamental unrest that is the consequence of such a way of life in his kaleidoscopic novella *Bed en wereld* (Bed and World) (1932). In this work he made use of a modernist narrative method that borrowed from the so-called *stream of consciousness* and the movement *simultaneism*. Despite the strongly pessimistic character of Otten's novella, it was received with relative praise by the press. Nevertheless, with regards to the frankly erotic passages in the book, a storm of criticism rose up.

Due to the fact that Otten had as his goal the discussion of norms and values, or even the overthrowing of them - he had also sworn off the Catholic faith - he slowly but surely lost his grip on life. In this way the fear made itself more emphatically known. He glorified his anxiety neuroses in the collections of short stories *Angst, dierbare vijandin* (Fear, a Beloved Enemy) (1935) and *Muizen en demonen* (Mice and Demons) (1936). Here he created an image of himself and let the characters speak his words. Fear hangs like a perpetual veil of mist over the existence of Otten's fictional characters. Other faces of fear, such as insecurity, power and impotence, doubt, jealousy and loss all form the basic theme of these stories, which at their core form the unrest of Otten himself.

Otten's defeatism would culminate in his theory of the 'inner fate'. Contrary to popular opinion that an unknown, external power causes all human suffering (fate), Otten believed in an inner fatality, determined by a complex mix of 'properties and potential of a person'. In this he meant that the person created the individual circumstances in which his characteristics were shown in the best light. Every act committed by a person was, according to him, a result of his unique capability. Otten did not believe free will existed, which shows him here as a representative of an absolute determinism.

For Otten, literature only had value when it elicited emotion from the reader and connected the reader with the hard reality. He therefore had no preference for intellectually manufactured books. For this reason he sought refuge in the socio-humanist magazine *De Stem* (The Voice), which was constantly warring with the intellectual review *Forum*.

After the publication of the apocalyptic novel *Drijvend casino* (Floating Casino) (1939), in which he once again brought together his world view, Otten put himself to the task of a translation of *Il Principe* (The Prince) from the Italian philosopher and politician Niccolò Machiavelli (1469 - 1529). In the introduction to this book, which appeared in the Netherlands under the revealing title *Machiavelli. Sleutel van onzen tijd* (Machiavelli, the Key to our Time) (1940), Otten tried once again to make it clear, between the lines, that he considered the individual

autonomy to be a high priority.

After the war Otten fell into oblivion. During the second half of the sixties an attempt was made to reanimate attention for his work by reprinting his works. Success was immediate. Some even saw him as an author who had been ahead of his time. Yet, the renewed attention could not prevent Otten disappearing back to the position he had had to accept in life: the literary periphery.