

THE TEMPLE OF DREAMS AND THE INFORMATION MACHINE THE ANTITHETICAL MOVIE THEATRES OF H.L. DE JONG AND JAN DUIKER

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ABSTRACT

The Tuschinski and Cineac movie theatres in Amsterdam look at each other across the middle of the tiny Regulierbreestraat. Both venues are modern, both are characteristic of their respective eras, and both propose through the metaphor of cinema a radical and committed vision of what the modern world should be. Individually, they express respectively the rapture and vision of imagination and the cold calculation of the machine era. Together, as they can be seen from the street, they manage to figure an oxymoron which itself is a paradigmatic representation of Modernity. This paper examines the language, context and configuration of both buildings and explores the consequences of their programmatic opposition for the tenets of architectural historiography.

Keywords: Expressionist Architecture, Suggestion, Empathy, Machine Age, Modernism.

"Hollywood is the origin of all the shadows of the world," wrote Joseph Roth in *The Antichrist*, "a Hades that not only casts its shadows on the outside world, but also makes the living from the outside world who do not sell their shadows, doubles for the shadows of Hades" (Roth 2013: 128). For the great Austrian writer, who at this point in his life was exiled, drunk and desperate about the advance of Nazism, the seventh art was part of the devil's arsenal of tricks. Thanks to it, the Antichrist had managed to completely confuse humans by creating a theatre of fascinating, moving shadows capable of supplanting the real world and depriving people of their souls.

The history of culture is often intertwined with strange coincidences and paradoxes, and it is at very least worth noting that Roth's book was published in Amsterdam in 1934, precisely the same year that an innovative Cineac movie theatre was inaugurated there - a mechanised projection room that seemed to embody the writer's nightmare about a "shadow factory". But even more remarkable is the fact that the Cineac cinema was built right opposite the famous Tuschinski Theatre (1918-1920), one of the most extraordinary examples of "magic construction" for cinema, and a true recreation of the hell of fantasy.

A few years before, the appearance of the strange Tuschinski cinema was greeted by the architectural critics with the same scandalised fuss with which blasphemy would have been received. "This building ruins the quiet urban atmosphere of Amsterdam for a square kilometre in all directions" (Fraenkel 1973: 323), claimed an article in the magazine *Bouwkundig Weekblad* (Construction Weekly) in 1921. The expression "Tuschinski style" soon became synonymous with excess, stridency, idle fantasy or bad taste. The new Tuschinski cinema was, in fact, a bizarre and striking building, motley and flamboyant, that neither has ever left passers-by indifferent. Its creation was the most beloved project of the Jewish businessman Abraham Tuschinski, who had opened his first cinema in 1909 in an abandoned church in Rotterdam. Tuschinski's dream was to create an authentic cinema palace, and for this he secured the collaboration of the architect Hyman Louis de Jong, a figure totally ignored by scholars and of which practically nothing is known apart from that he is the author of the project for the Tuschinski cinema and one of the first housing blocks for the Berlage Amsterdam Zuid plan. If the style of this latter work is remarkably similar to that of Michel de Klerk, which was usual at that time, the type of inventiveness used in the cinema belongs to a different class, and in this the client's personality is an inevitable reference. In Amsterdam architecture guides (see for example Groenendijk / Vollaard 2000: 147 and Kemme / Bekkers 2010: 418), as well as in the article published by Francis Fraenkel in the *Architectural Review* in 1973 (see bibliography), it is resolutely qualified as "Art Deco", but this label does not easily fit the aesthetics of the Tuschinski cinema and is, moreover, slightly anachronistic.



Fig. 1. The facade of the Tuschinski cinema

The creature from the imagination of H.L. de Jong possesses elements evolved from the repertoire of the Amsterdam School, especially from the *Scheepvaarthus*, and is branded with the most organic elements of Expressionism (for these references, see Rivera 2017: 41-43, 65-75 and also 250); but the whole maintains its strong individuality and presents a mythical universe crafted to the last detail. De Jong was not alone in carrying out this exhaustive task. The design of the cinema was the product of the collaboration of a series of outstanding artists who were constantly stimulated by Tuschinski to let their fantasies fly, so that the aesthetic paroxysm of the facade extended into the main foyer, along the communicating corridors, up the stairs and the accesses to the toilets and around the main auditorium, ceilings and boxes included.

With the collaboration of the painters and designers recruited by Tuschinski, de Jong created a rapturously dreamlike atmosphere, oddly biased towards the dark and the unusual, not only limited to the projection room, but embracing the entire building both inside and out. The facade, designed by de Jong with the collaboration of the architect Christiaan Bartels, appears lumpy with luminous larvae, spiky shells, gills, antennae and tendons, and the ceramic cladding produces a disturbing impression of dampness and perspiration. The towers and the central bow window, on the other hand, like the stained-glass windows, allude to ecclesiastical architecture in a kind of conscious perversion of the prototype of the western facade of churches. On each tower, a lantern with the significant shape of a diamond dangles in the air, hanging from a cage formed by the twisted extension of the nerves that run through the domes. A feminine visage, seductive and mysterious, contemplates the neophyte peeking from the top of the façade, and a structure composed of teeth and scales seems to emerge from its mind.

The finish provides a tough, armoured look to the outside, and the fractures and tendons that line it suggest an articulated body that may be able to move. The nocturnal effect is equally well studied, as the light that comes from inside illuminates the brightly coloured stained-glass windows with geometric patterns similar to insects, while the eyes and bulbous projections of the facade come to life, and the light is reflected, slipping off the brownish ceramic cladding.

The sensation of the interior is consistent with the diabolic presentation of the exterior, but it is based on an obvious tone of uterine and cavernous warmth; the dominant colours are infernal red and fleshy brown, but we also find yellows, oranges, blues, greens and blacks in the form of bands and filaments that curl over each other. The lobby is treated as a truly social space. One way to describe its general appearance would be to say that it is partly a nest of caverns through which rivers of lava flow, and partly a forest of dark brambles and luminous flowers. Electric eyes seem to open and gaze at us from various points on the walls.



Fig. 2. Detail of the exterior ornamentalations.



Fig. 3. A view of the foyer.

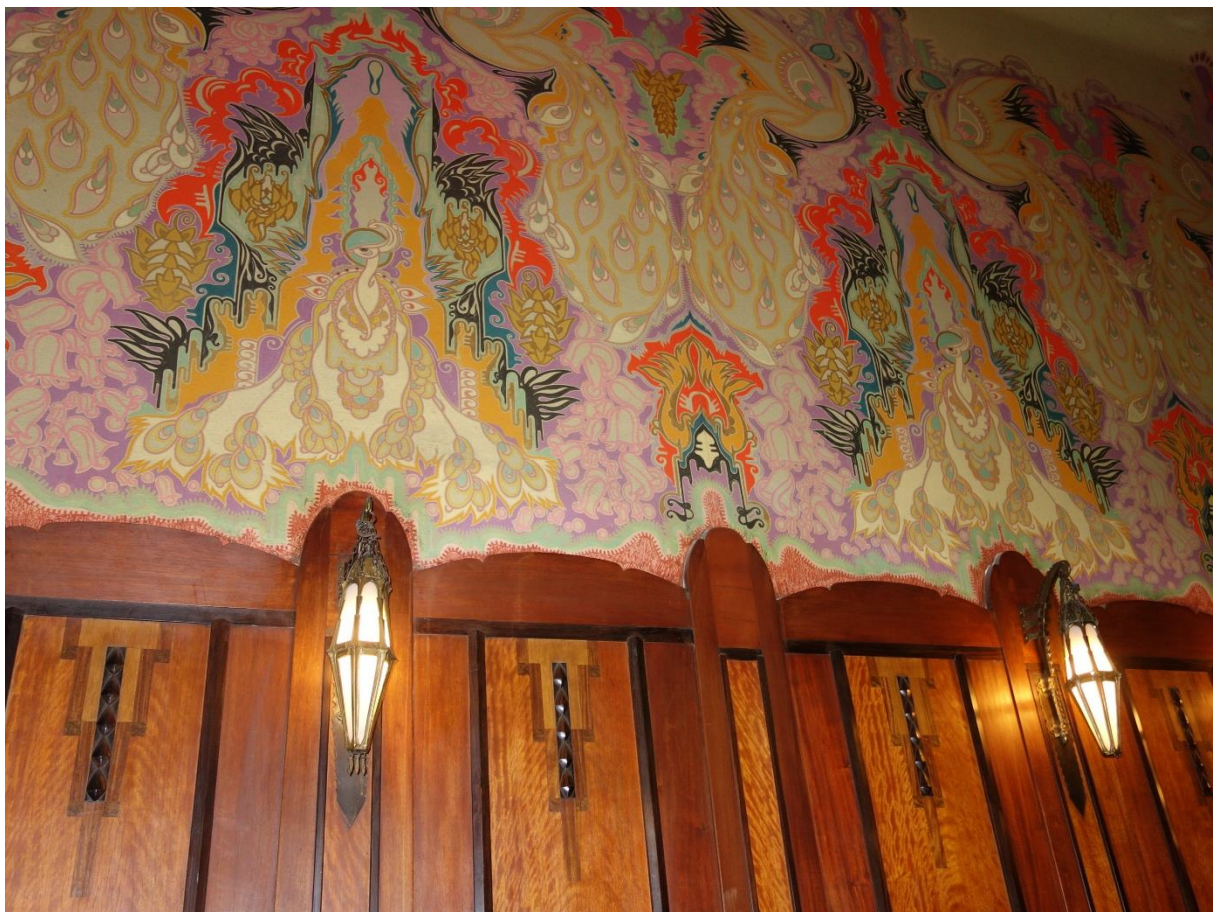


Fig. 4. Decorations by Jaap Gidding for the foyer.

The flights of stairs invade the space in a zigzag. Galleries perforate the walls opening the space upwards and the most dream-like and disturbing lanterns hang menacingly from the ceiling and expand trying to touch us from the pylons in the corners. The decorative patterns of the walls and the thick and unsettling carpet (all the work of the decorator Jaap Gidding, who Tuschinski knew from Rotterdam) are angled, fractured and dissolved and perfectly complement the space and the refined wall fittings. If the dominant motive in them is the peacock, as beloved as the dragonfly by the sensibility of Art Nouveau, the bird is virtually indistinguishable in the accumulation of reddish and broken abstractions that seem to be consumed in flames. While the space extends to the bottom in the openings of the corridors, stairs and galleries, the ceiling contains a large circular vortex that retreats into the ceiling and is illuminated by a neon tube adjusted to its perimeter. The neon's constant changes of colour modify the atmosphere of the vestibule, flooding it alternately with an insane green and an alarming red, and reinforces the sensation that the surrounding hell is composed of restless shadows.

As one could imagine, the main auditorium of the Tuschinski cinema was conceived as the inner sanctum of the cinematographic rite, of the ghostly images and dreams. Its ceiling is dominated by a giant lantern in the form of a tense crosspiece, with cutting, polygonal lamps pointed towards the public from each corner, while a central eye seems to watch from the skies the meeting of disciples of the cult. Between the powerful and luminous arms of this floating creature, continuous curved lines have been painted, so that the jagged and pointed crosspiece seems to rotate rapidly and to spin the spirit of all those who, under it, have their eyes fixed on the screen.

The strange, functionless boxes on both sides of the screen in the proscenium arch, from where it is only possible to see the audience and not the film, as well as the luminous electric organ Wurlitzer that was added later in the orchestra pit, complete the cathedralesque impression of transcendence and the sense of communion that Tuschinski wanted to breathe into the new worship of the moving image.

Let's return now to the story where we left off at the beginning. Luckily for the architecture historian, a few years after the opening of the Tuschinski cinema, a second movie venue was built and opened to the public, in the same narrow, central street – indeed, just in front – that was equally extraordinary, but opposite in all imaginable aspects from its famous and controversial neighbour. The meeting of these two distinguished works (and we say meeting, because there is no dialogue whatsoever) is a fortunate event in many ways and allows us to observe, in an exemplary way, the fiery and messianic architectural debate that runs through the 1920s and that drives the emergence of the Modern Movement with volcanic force.

Indeed, between the Cineac movie theatre built by Jan Duiker in 1933 and the Tuschinski cinema on the opposite side of the street, such a radical contradiction is created that we could almost consider it a conscious irony of destiny. In contrast with the chromatic and atmospheric darkness of de Jong's work, Duiker's creation shines with clarity to the point of clashing stridently within its context of brick houses. While the Tuschinski cinema, compressed between fairly close party walls (about 13 meters of facade), seems to ascend violently towards the sky until it dissolves in the metallic superstructure that holds the diamonds, the Cineac presents itself as an almost perfect cube (in appearance, at least), closed in on itself and autistic. Even the brilliant dynamic gesture of the curved windows and canopy, which serve as a transition towards the side alley, seems to have the purpose of disconnecting the cube from the rest of the urban layout. In fact, in 1935, Duiker's Cineac served as a pretext for the magazine *Het Bouwdrijf* to discuss the increasingly pressing issue of planning permissions that were being granted to works that clearly clashed with the context of Dutch cities.

The exterior of the Cineac stands as a single volume, a simple box, but has been decomposed by Duiker through horizontal and vertical lines carefully counterbalanced to achieve an image of equilibrium. The Tuschinski cinema is full of decoration; the Cineac is stripped and abstract, and its very refined aesthetic forms derive from the position of the openings and the deliberately slender window frames. The only symbolic, romantic, disproportionate element that we find on the outside of the Cineac cinema is a huge advertisement in clear letters whose metallic support has been left exposed and is, in fact, part of the design. The curvature of the sign frame echoes the curvature of the mezzanine corner windows, thus drawing a volumetric set of intersections very much in the taste of formalist Constructivism. The sign doubles the height of the building and projects the advertisement obliquely upwards and, in reality, is another coherent element of the romanticism of the machine, which was even more evident when the sign was illuminated at night. As described by A. J. van der Steur in issue number 10 of the *Bouwkundig Weekblad* in 1935 in an obituary on Duiker, the sign "is like a little man who wants to draw attention among the crowd: he has to raise a banner on a stick to be seen by those around him, who are almost a head higher than him. It is as insolent as it is daring (Good God! What if the whole world did the same?) and only justified by being such a completely naïve, disarming gesture. In this, it is the very essence of Duiker: as he was, how he spoke and how he acted" (Molema, dir 1985: 38-39).

If we analyse how the venue projected by Duiker works, the contrasts with the Tuschinski cinema seem even more profound. The Cineac system (Cine-Actualités) was founded in Paris in 1931 by the ingenious entrepreneur Reginald Ford, who had lived in Hollywood and knew the world of cinema well. His business project consisted of offering the viewer a continuous news summary interspersed with some comic shorts. People entered Cineac venues at any time and remained in them very little time, and what was seen on the screens was part of political and social news. The entrance ticket was issued by a machine, people entered and left continuously following a pre-established circuit, and, for practical reasons, there was never complete darkness inside.

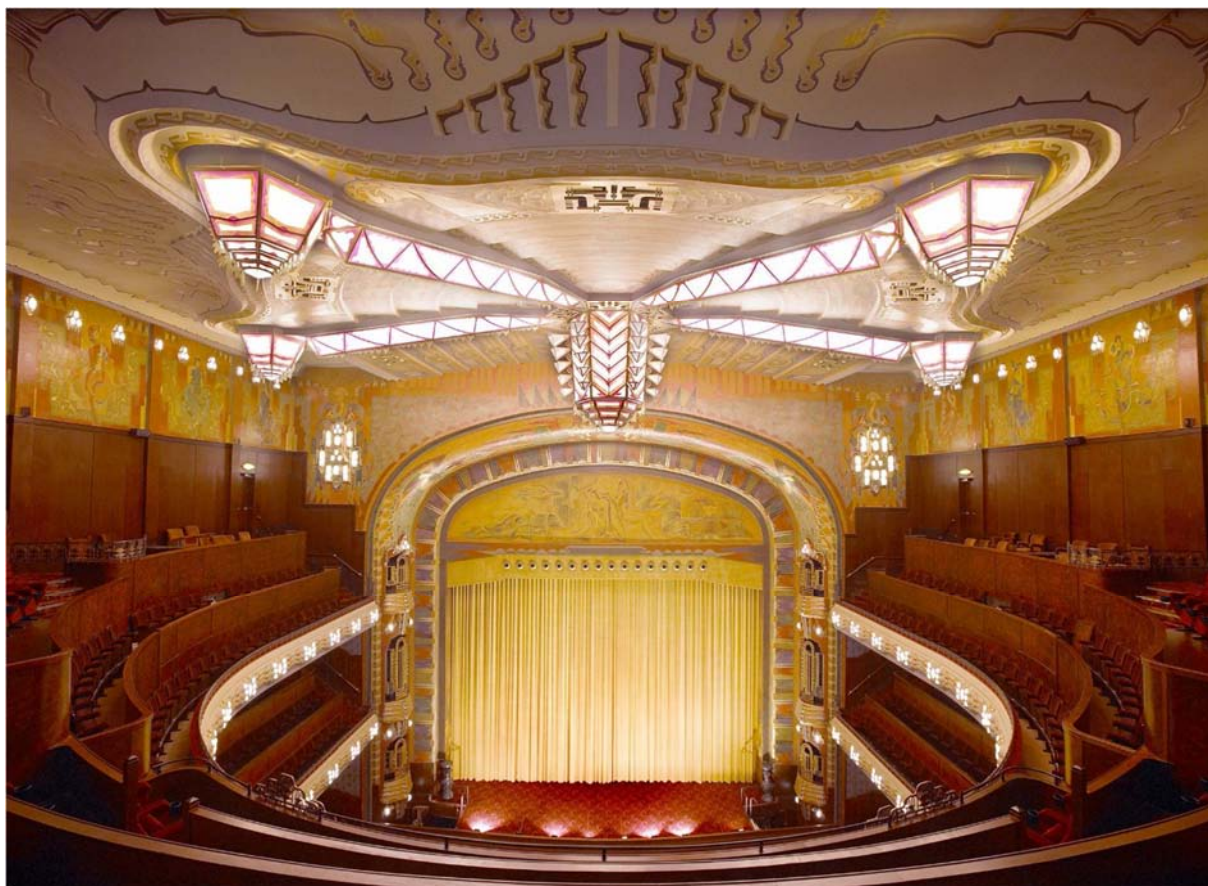


Fig. 5. La sala proiecciones del cine Tuschinski.

The striking neon advertisement was also a standard feature, as was the partnering of each cinema with a representative of the local press who wanted to be associated with the project (in the case of the Cineac in Amsterdam, it was the *Hanselblad* daily newspaper; particularities of the Cineac circuit can be found in Lacroche 1981: 178-179).

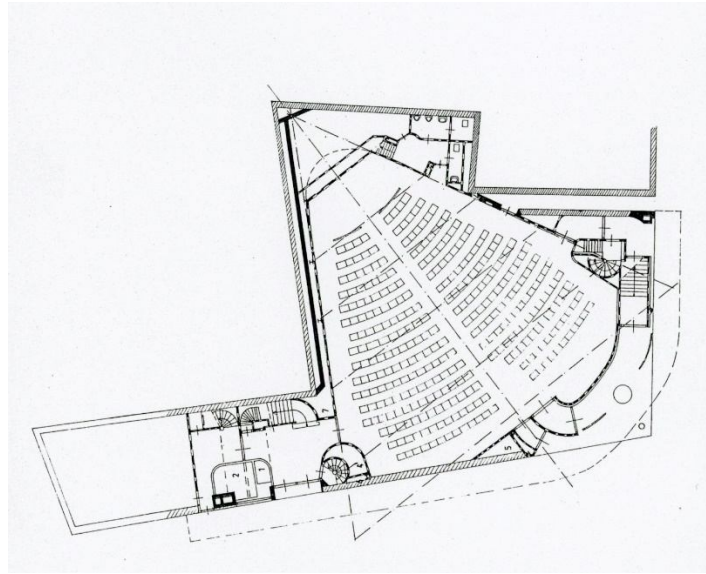
Duiker found in this forced hand the perfect excuse to develop to the extreme his minimal approach to architecture, making the street space under the curved canopy take the place of a non-existent foyer, painting arrows on the ground that indicated the way into the movie theatre and out of it as a mechanical route, and creating a smooth and clear interior, with a sloping floor in the auditorium allowing circulation without disturbing others while the projections continued. Duiker developed Ford's idea by allowing the projection booth to be seen from the outside, through the curved glass that forms the mezzanine. In addition, he organised the irregular site so that the auditorium was placed diagonally (like the neon sign) in a paraboloid shape, to allow for more seats and because of its supposed acoustic advantages. De Jong had encountered a similar problem on his site, which in his case was elongated, and had used the foyer and corridors with tooth-like counters to disguise the changes of axis. Duiker did not try to disguise but to highlight, to clarify, to reduce every form and resource to its own elemental husk. The isolated, exposed metal pillar that ideally extend the edge of the cube in the left-hand corner of the cinema, at the point where the mass is excavated and recedes to become a curved plane, is a rhetorical indication of this principle, as demonstrated by the fact that the canopy does not actually touch it. The formal and constructive process of the building is evidenced throughout, although this is only possible thanks to a certain degree of poetry and elegant refinement - qualities that are usual in Duiker's work and that refute again and again his professed faith in functionalism.

In short, people went to the Tuschinski Theatre to dream, to immerse themselves in fantasy and the unconscious, to get in touch with the spirit; while people entered the Cineac to be informed and, once inside, remained in a state of alert consciousness. Consequently, the decor and the spaces of the Tuschinski invited the relaxation of rational controls and drowsiness, and its decoration aimed to appeal to desires and subconscious anxieties. The aesthetic of the Cineac cinema, on the other hand (and let's not be naive, it has aesthetics too and they have been very carefully calculated), is based on the suggestion of speed, mechanical processes, activity and continuous progress, in the same way as the continuously repeated projections of 45-minute programmes had a particular emphasis on travel, inventions, transportation and changes in the modern world.

The main auditorium offered in each case a final indication of the conflicting intentions of the worlds of Tuschinski and Ford.



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7

Fig. 6. Duiker's Cineac at night, in an old photograph.
Fig. 7. The plan of the Cineac.



Fig. 8. The Cineac's original screen and auditorium.

The Tuschinski cinema, as we have seen, was about creating the reverential atmosphere of a theatre, private boxes included, and therefore a transcendent event, a fundamental communion, while in the Cineac everything is transient, epidermic and machine-like. In the Cineac, the auditorium was polished and clear and it looked more like a school classroom; its immediate and mystery-less beauty came from its expressly sought allusions to the naked functionality of engine rooms or airship pods, and most significantly of all, instead of being placed on the broad side, the screen was located at the apex of the cone (with the speaker just behind), and was as small as the mini "art cinemas" that would later become fashionable. In similar conditions it seems impossible to participate emotionally or imaginatively in any procession of images that could parade through the slightly protruding box with rounded corners towards which the eyes were directed, a small window that seems to prefigure, formally at least, the Orwellian screens omnipresent in *1984* (the interior of Duiker's cinema theatre, predictably, would have a very short life).

When we consider the Tuschinski and the Cineac cinemas together, looking at each other across the middle of the Regulierbreestraat, we become conscious of being in front of an authentic crossroads, faced with the best possible expression of the split that has turned Modernity, with capital letters, in a tormented tragedy. Both venues are modern, both are characteristic of their respective eras, however original they may seem, and both propose through the metaphor of cinema a radical and committed vision of what the modern world would be if the ideal of total control that the architects dreamt of when designing their refined venues were achievable.

From the point of view of the historiography of modern architecture, the Tuschinski cinema is a simple anomaly, a fantasy aberration completely opposite the concept of "functionality". Consequently, it has been completely ignored in text books and monographs. However, the work of de Jong continues to function as a cinema a century after its conception, so we may ask if it has not always been more modern than the Cineac opposite, at least from the point of view of adapting the building to the purpose for which it was built - an issue that was certainly not insignificant for Duiker. But the issue about functionality has other secondary derivations on which we should reflect. In the mid-1980s, a team from the University of Delft systematically analysed the structure and construction of the Cineac movie theatre (among other works by Duiker) and concluded that Duiker's functionalist pretensions, included in an article he published in November 1932, were very doubtful. The "lightness" sought by Duiker, and illustrated by his references to aeronautical construction, was more apparent than real, because behind the metal panels of the facade was a thick brick wall (perhaps required by fire regulations). In addition, Duiker was limited by the existence of basements and foundations that he had to respect and by a plot whose limits were somewhat capricious. Furthermore, the innovative mechanical system devised by Duiker was spoilt by the lack of insulation of the building and the ducts he used (Molema, dir 1985: 37-41). Conversely, and curiously, one of the notable peculiarities of the Tuschinski cinema is it being at the technological vanguard of its time, both in the field of electrical services and in that of air conditioning, with a system of air diffusion, both warm and cold, that anticipated Duiker's. Tuschinski had no intention of being sparing, either aesthetically or technically, and obtained a remarkable building in each of its constituent elements. Finally, it should be noted that the relationships that Duiker established between the creation of a neutral and naked environment and the improvement of acoustics and circulation are pure machine-like fantasy without real effect as the acoustics and circulation were better in venues where the decoration absorbs the reverberation and there are interior corridors.

Hindsight allows us to appreciate a reality that went hidden in Duiker's time and that historians, blinded by the orthodox approach, have also overlooked: what most interested Duiker, in reality, was to create an "image of functionality" and dynamism, a monument to the hopes that "machinism" placed in modern technology. The Cineac cinema is also a poem, an exercise in style, an act of faith, an outburst. His vision, however, is that of the ascetic, that of one who seeks exactness and purity.

These days, the Tuschinski Theatre is one of the most visited architectural attractions in Amsterdam and has become a truly living museum. Tourist tours are offered at fixed times when there are no film screenings, and guides inform visitors about the history of the building. Both de Jong and Tuschinski were killed by the Nazis in concentration camps, but thanks to their most significant creation they are continually remembered and are part of the memory of Amsterdam. The Cineac theatre has not been so lucky; too arid and cold for the general public, it goes completely unnoticed by most visitors. Only those interested in modern architecture are aware of the irreplaceable value that it possesses. Since the end of the twentieth century, both buildings have been placed under architectural heritage protection organisations. The Tuschinski cinema was reasonably well preserved, although the foyer, the main auditorium and the extraterrestrial-looking Wurlitzer organ underwent careful restoration between 2000 and 2002 (the Chinese halls and the successful La Gaité cabaret, designed by the painter Pieter den Besten, were definitively lost when the owners added more auditoriums; they appear illustrated in Fraenkel 1973 and in Lacroche 1981: 82). The interior of the Cineac cinema, on the other hand, was destroyed many years ago, and the building has housed all kinds of activities over recent decades. Fortunately, the neon sign, which had been dismantled, has been completely reconstructed, and nowadays, walking along the Reguliersbreestraat, people can once again enjoy the disagreement between Duiker and Tuschinski, in all its nuances: a delightful architectural oxymoron that makes us think and surprises us, that illustrates the telling paradoxes created by modern life.



Fig. 9. The Cineac's billboard and Tuschinski's towers as seen from the Amstel river.

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