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Cinematic Rotterdam: the times and tides of a modern city

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RECAPITULATION OF PART I – THE EMERGENCE OF A CINEMATIC CITY

The first film images that featured Rotterdam were made in 1898. Many recordings would follow in the next years, and most important in this respect was the Austrian operator Stefan Hofbauer, who worked for Casino Variété of Samuel Soesman. Film production and exhibition were initially closely related in Rotterdam. There were, moreover, connections to the realms of theatre, music and the visual arts – for publicity, set design and decoration of the cinema halls, and finally also architecture when, since the late 1910s, various cinemas were built. Following the theory of Allen J. Scott, I have recognised issues of ‘clustering’. A pivotal role in this was played by East-European Jewish immigrants between 1915 and 1935. They were involved with exhibition, and also the production of newsreels and documentary shorts that often dealt with Rotterdam. I have explained that they competed and collaborated with each other, which gradually resulted in a division of tasks regarding exhibition, distribution and production.

At the same time, locally produced newsreels, like those by Tuschinski, found themselves in competition with national productions. This turned finally into a collaboration too, with Tuschinski showing the newsreels of Polygoon from Haarlem. Although several film production companies appeared in Rotterdam over the years, a substantial part of the films about the city were produced by companies from elsewhere. Using a concept of Elsaesser, Rotterdam became mostly *Tatort*, while cities like Haarlem, The Hague and Amsterdam functioned in this case as *Standort*. As such, Rotterdam developed as a ‘porous’ system with various connections to other systems.

All kinds of films were made featuring Rotterdam, but non-fiction filmmaking became paradigmatic. This was propelled by the port and the related industry that I have identified as the ‘culture core’ in terms of Steward’s theory of cultural ecology. Common became films to advertise services in the port, to show and promote production processes – with an important share of films on ‘food and fuel’, hence energy flows – next to films on the construction of major buildings, as well as union films, among other. I have studied such films through Elsaesser’s triple ‘A’ model that asks for attention to *Auftraggeber*, *Anlass* and *Anwendung*. This is a way to find the reasons of a production, to understand the roles of different agents involved, and to draw networks between them.

Following this approach, I have shown, in the case of the ‘construction films’, that rather different motivations existed for each production, notwithstanding formal similarities. It has been exemplified by films for, among others, department store De Bijenkorf (made for reasons of publicity), the Dutch union of construction workers (for recruitment), the Van Nelle factory (documentation), and, for example, the municipal department of “Public Works” (as explanation). Alternatively, I have also found films that were rather different in style that served nevertheless the same purpose, as part of strategies to reach different audiences. By tracing network transmissions, I have thus come across connections between entities that were previously seen as being part of distinct realms, like art and industry, or social engagement and commerce. Similarly, links between cinema and architecture have come to the fore. The Van Nelle factory is a case in point. Its attempts to achieve modernisation allowed me to draw cross-connections to other media, including photography, graphic and industrial design, and architecture. Here I have applied Elsaesser’s concept of *Medienverbund*, to indicate the use of different media that serve a common purpose.

I have further elaborated on this concept in the case of the industry exhibition Neniĳto. Films, next to other media, helped to inform the visitors about the latest industrial developments. By doing so they presented Rotterdam as a modern city. This has also been observed regarding various other events, including sports games and aviation shows. I have referred here to Tschumi, for space does not determine events to take place, but creates possibilities that can be further explored and empowered, in which media play a role too.

Thinking about the concept of *Medienverbund*, as an alliance of different cultural productions, I have made an attempt to stretch it to the extent of cultural ecology. I have therefore amplified the shared agenda of different media to a shared attractor of systemic development that involves different cultural phenomena – particularly the attractor of rationalisation (the third ‘R’ of Hediger & Vonderau, 2007). This applies to the large collection of industrial films, and the social-economic institutions to which they were related. Here I have invoked Steward’s concept of ‘levels of sociocultural integration’, as a degree of coherence between cultural phenomena.

I have addressed such an integration at the level of the city as a whole by regarding both housing (*Gemeentelijke Dienst Volkshuisvesting*) and educational cinema (*Gemeentelijke Schoolbioscoop*). There was no direct interaction between the director of the housing department, August Plate, or the architect J.J.P. Oud, and the director of the Schoolbioscoop, A.M. van der Wel, neither were there any films made about housing projects. The films were not *about* modernity, but *for* modernity (cf. Lebas, 2000), according to what Heynen (2000) has called programmatic modernity, in contradistinction to transitory modernity. Regarding the way the housing department and the Schoolbioscoop developed has pointed to a connection at a higher level: that of the municipality and its progressive policy. Housing was organised to improve the living conditions of the workers, while films raised the knowledge of the environment. Architecture and educational films had a programmatic connection.

Films on local issues, like those by the Schoolbioscoop, which were shown to local audiences, immediately linked back to the city. I have explained it in terms of stigmergy, as a matter of local communication, in connection to the environment. Although this applies to industrial and promotional films as well, many of them were also shown outside the city, which fuelled national and international interest in Rotterdam. This was often paid back indirectly, since it involved various other stages. The interaction between Rotterdam and the rest of the world is, in the way Steward has put it, an interplay between environmental and historical factors. Here I have used Ulf Hannerz’s concept of the city as a ‘switchboard’, through which ideas are simultaneously locally appropriated and sent into the world.

In this way I have looked at the international networks of the avant-garde, and how Rotterdam developed its own path within it. The Filmliga has been considered as an ‘historical factor’. Following an international trend, it was initiated in Amsterdam, from where it got diffused across the Netherlands, including Rotterdam. It became embedded in the city’s own structures, with a strong involvement of architects, the business elite, as well as the press (in particular the NRC). Along with the establishment of the Filmliga, films were made like Ivens’s *THE BRIDGE* (1928) and Von Bary’s *HOOGSTRAAT* (1929), which appropriated the ideas of the genre of the ‘city symphony’, in order to send them into the world again. Similar observations have been made regarding architecture, for example in the case of Oud’s housing projects and the Van Nelle factory, which received substantial attention from abroad. I have related the idea of the city as a ‘switchboard’ to the logic of relationality (cf. Urry, 2003), which I have imagined as networks that exist within networks (cf. Hannerz, 1996).

By drawing networks, I have made an attempt to explain the emergence of particular productions such as *THE BRIDGE* (1928, Joris Ivens) as well as *NUL UUR NUL* (1927-1928, Simon Koster). I have done so by considering how they mediated relations and provided personal references. It has been another way to address how these productions fulfilled, using the words of Luhmann (1997), the functions of memory and oscillation, by considering both content and conditions and the connections between them. Along with this, various individual names have appeared, as members of a ‘scene’ and as nodes of a particular network. Its connections lead to other agents, events, and productions, such as – in the case of *NUL UUR NUL* – the fiction films *DOOD WATER* (1934, Gerard Rutten) and *LENTELIED* (1936, Simon Koster). Regarding the latter I have similarly pointed to the way the film propelled a modern image of Rotterdam.

A network within a network corresponds to a particular group or ‘scene’, which is largely responsible for the achievements of its individual members. It has been exemplified by the case of

the union film *EN GIJ, KAMERAAD?* (1928, Joannes Ratté). It was the result of a collective effort, not of an *auteur*, but of a ‘scenius’ (cf. De Jong & Schuilenburg, 2006, after Brian Eno). It provides another take on authorship, which comes in addition to the case that I have presented regarding the cinematographer Andor von Barys. It is no coincidence that Von Barys’s *HOOGSTRAAT* (1929) became his most famous film, since it matched the paradigms of the *auteur* and the art film. But a different perspective is created when drawing the networks that Von Barys was part of. They show his numerous involvements as a cameraman, especially regarding commissioned films, in which respect his name is sometimes not even mentioned at all. I have addressed his work in terms of ‘functional cinematography’, which applies also to his port films, including *THE CITY THAT NEVER RESTS*. Since Von Barys also worked on fiction films and commercials, next to photographic projects, cross-connections have appeared between different categories and genres. These cross-connections are largely the result of all kinds of reactions upon things popping up in one’s environment. As the production history of *THE CITY THAT NEVER RESTS* (1928) has also illustrated, something may bump into something else that can have decisive consequences on the course of an individual career. In respect of a larger system, like a city, a multitude of such contingent acts constitute nevertheless a common movement, and common directions.