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Cinematic Rotterdam: the times and tides of a modern city

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Citation for published version (APA):

Paalman, F. J. J. W. (2010). Cinematic Rotterdam: the times and tides of a modern city. Eigen Beheer.

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Download date: 20 Oct 2019

PART II.

THE CINEMATIC RECONSTRUCTION OF A CITY ROTTERDAM IN THE 1940s & 1950s

PROLOGUE TO PART II

the disappearance and reappearance of a city

On the 14th of May 1940, the German Luftwaffe bombed Rotterdam in order to force the Dutch capitulation. Neither the exact motivations nor the precise course of things have become entirely clear⁶⁶⁷. It might even have been a matter of contingency. The negotiations between the German and Dutch military forces preceding the attack resulted in misunderstandings; at the last moment the German general Schmidt decided to cancel the attack, but it was too late. The Heinkel aircrafts were already on their way. Light signals were fired, but they were not seen by most pilots – or they were ignored. The question remains if the attack was a matter of tactics or terror.

In any case, the Germans were well prepared to document the event on film, and the filmmakers knew what would happen. The recordings were not only used for the *Wochenschau* newsreel, but also for a propaganda film: ANGRIFF AUF ROTTERDAM (1940, UFA)⁶⁶⁸. It was made to convince the German nation of the need to occupy the Netherlands. The film explains that the attack had to prevent the allied forces to attack Germany via the Netherlands. In a staged discussion, which is the first part of the film, a man explains this to a bohemian who loves the good life and does not see any problem with Holland. This rhetorical discussion is interchanged with maps of Europe. The second part shows the German march into the Netherlands that leads to the ‘necessary destruction’ of Rotterdam. Like no other record, the film shows the air raid and the occupation of the city, with soldiers posted on strategic positions, and trucks entering the streets of Rotterdam. It has therefore been used in many films on the war afterwards, with one of the first being, THE DUTCH TRADITION (1943, John Fernhout), a propaganda film of the Netherlands Information Bureau in New York, to promote the reliability of the Netherlands as an allied partner⁶⁶⁹.

The bombardment put large parts of Rotterdam on fire. As a result, about 900 people died and 78.700 people became homeless⁶⁷⁰. About 11,000 premises were destroyed with 25,000 apartments, 2400 shops, 3500 offices, factories, workshops and warehouses, 500 cafes, restaurants and hotels, and 120 public buildings, including schools, churches, hospitals and cinemas⁶⁷¹. These numbers are not mentioned by the German film. Neither are there images of victims or people seeking refuge. There is no image of struggle, pain or fear whatsoever. Instead, the destruction of the city is shown as a clinical operation, merely an act of planning. The city is simply erased, which is shown by images from the air taken a few days later. In addition to this film, the propaganda campaign also included an illustrated story, made in a similar vein, to explain the attack to German children⁶⁷².

In general there are hardly any film recordings that show victims of the bombardment of Rotterdam. The newsreel producers Polygoon and Profilti still operated, but the country was in total confusion. The young cameraman Taede van Maanen of Profilti, working for the Dutch *LegerfilmDienst* (‘Army Film Service’), went to Rotterdam by car on the 14th of May, together with his chief, but due to the chaos they had to stop near Schiedam⁶⁷³. Van Maanen made some recordings in the city centre afterwards, but it seems that they were not used for newsreels⁶⁷⁴. Such images appear, however, in the American propaganda film WHY WE FIGHT (1942, Frank

⁶⁶⁷ Van de Laar, 2000: 404-407; Van der Pauw, 2006: ch 4. See also:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bombing_of_Rotterdam_during_the_Second_World_War (visited: 2008-01-14)

⁶⁶⁸ The film is also known as ANGRIFF AUF ROTTERDAM and AANVAL OP ROTTERDAM.

⁶⁶⁹ Fernhout also used these images in HOLLAND CARRIES ON (1945), a film on WWII and the prospects afterwards.

⁶⁷⁰ Van de Laar, 2000: 400; Van der Pauw, 2006: 848 and 854.

⁶⁷¹ ASRO, 1946 (inside cover); Besselaar, 1960: 8; Van der Pauw, 2006: 854.

⁶⁷² Cf. Van de Laar, 2000: 406.

⁶⁷³ De Haan, 1995: 158.

⁶⁷⁴ There is no record, either related to Profilti, the LegerfilmDienst or Polygoon that mentions a newsreel about the bombardment of Rotterdam.

Capra), which was made to motivate the American soldiers⁶⁷⁵. Yet, this film was made of recycled images from a large number of sources, including confiscated German material, and even fiction films. It is therefore not sure if the images shown are those shot by Van Maanen, or if they are shot in Rotterdam at all.

While Rotterdam was in ruins, it depended on others. Other cities had to perform its tasks and to help its citizens. This was reported by various newsreels. Citizens of Roermond, for example, collected furniture and the like, which was transported by ship to Rotterdam (Polygoon, 1940-wk33); in The Hague, toys were collected for evacuated children from Rotterdam (ibid, 1940-wk42). This dependency counted on a general, political level too. As a result a complex development was set in motion, through strategic alliances, in order to actualise visionary ideas of the modern city.

Only once World War II was over could Rotterdam think of managing itself again, which is exemplified by a report in which its citizens are asked to help their peers⁶⁷⁶. Citizens showed indeed a strong commitment to the city, which is probably best illustrated by amateur films⁶⁷⁷. Among them are recordings of the winter famine (1944-1945), which took about 4,300 victims in Rotterdam⁶⁷⁸. Next to various professional reports, many amateur recordings were made of the liberation, as a historic moment⁶⁷⁹. These records were individual attempts to serve a collective memory emphasizing the urge for self-determination and to improve one's conditions.

While architecture and planning played key roles within the reconstruction, this was not isolated from other cultural practices. However, cinema in Rotterdam lacked the possibilities to retain the conditions from before the war. Its film culture had simply been erased. Out of the eleven cinemas that existed in the city centre, only the German Luxor Palast, survived the bombardment of 1940⁶⁸⁰. Three cinemas built by Van Gelderen were destroyed (Ooster Theater, Grand Théâtre, City), and all Tuschinski's. Most tragically, Van Gelderen, Tuschinski, Chermoeck, Weisbard and others died in concentration camps.

The disappearance of film theatres, as well as distribution companies, broke down a general film infrastructure which also affected film production⁶⁸¹. Monopole, the main film production company, moved to Amsterdam⁶⁸². Andor von Barsy moved to Munich. New talents, among them Ytzen Brusse, Joop Burcksen, and Hans Koekoek, left the city as well. Certain other filmmakers were not allowed to work anymore for a period of time, among them Jan Koelinga and above all Jan Teunissen, since they had collaborated with the Germans. Yet, new films about Rotterdam were requested, which had to be made by companies from elsewhere.

⁶⁷⁵ Something similar counts for the film 5 JAREN (1946, Polygoon), showing the devastations that took place in WWII, made for the Red Cross to collect money to help the Dutch.

⁶⁷⁶ EN NU... ROTTERDAM VOOR DE ROTTERDAMMERS (1945, Profilti).

⁶⁷⁷ Which have been brought to the fore by Joop de Jong (= De Jong, 2005).

⁶⁷⁸ See: Van der Pauw, 2006: 901. HONGERWINTER 1944-1945 (Valk)* shows people gathering things to be used as fuel. VOEDSELDROPPINGS 29 APRIL 1945 (M.I. de Jong)*, a well-made report, shows the dropping of American canned food and its distribution through the Van Nelle factory. During the war, many people relied on the *gaarkeuken* ('soup kitchen') that had been established in 1940 (Polygoon, 1940-wk46), which was, however, not sufficient during the winter famine. The films marked by an * are included on the DVD that accompanies De Jong, 2005; see also next note.

⁶⁷⁹ e.g. ROTTERDAM NA HET BOMBARDEMENT EN NA DE BEVRIJDING (1945, H. Philipsen)*, BEVRIJDING ROTTERDAM (1945, anon.), EINDELIJK VRIJ (1945, A. Rijken), NOORDEREILAND 8 MEI (H. Heil)*, STRAATFEESTEN MEI 1945 (1945, Van Zuylen)*, BEVRIJDINGSFEESTEN (1945, H. de Klerk; see: filmography J. De Klerk)*. Next to these recordings, Polygoon-Profilti made also reports on the liberation (DIVERSE OPNAMEN KORT NA DE BEVRIJDING, 1945), and on following events, such as a funeral of resistance fighters (Polygoon, 1945-wk48). See also images shot by the US Army Film Service (WORLD WAR II, 1945, US Army Film Service / National Archives).

⁶⁸⁰ Cf. Van de Laar, 2000: 411.

⁶⁸¹ Something similar occurred in other disciplines, like literature. For writers in post-WWII Rotterdam, see: Van de Laar, 2000: 568.

⁶⁸² Monopole moved to Amsterdam, see: www.cinemacontext.nl > bedrijven > Monopole (2008-07-09)

Reconstruction films had clear objectives, and a parallel development can be found abroad, like in Glasgow. 'Like other films of national reconstruction, these promote consent to large-scale urban re-building and planning as part of a comprehensive redefinition of civil society after the war' (Lebas, 2007: 42). This new civil society became the welfare state, and Rotterdam was its urban template within the Netherlands (Wagenaar, 1992). This directed architecture and planning, and cinema alike, at least in terms of *Tatort*.

Once film production gradually established itself again in Rotterdam, in terms of *Standort*, it did so through the same attractors of economic and social development that directed the reconstruction. Over the course of the 1950s small companies came to the fore, which were largely based on industrial and municipal sponsorship⁶⁸³. Towards the end of the 1950s they were followed by bigger companies, especially the *Nederlandse Filmproductie Maatschappij*. To an important degree, this development was intertwined with that of the port, as an overall conditional force. Also in terms of *Tatort*, it was not the reconstruction of the city that got most attention in the first place, but the port, which had been destroyed too. The port was the motor for social development and the emergence of the welfare state, which can be recognised through film practices too.

The fact that both the city and the port were ruined and needed to be rebuilt offers an insight into Rotterdam's 'subsistence activities'. In terms of an ecosystem, both 'biotic' and 'abiotic' parameters had changed. The city had to 'remake' its historical development of almost seven centuries in about two decades, which makes it possible today to analyse patterns of emergence. In the years after the war, the reconstruction of the port got the highest priority. Industry and economic development were needed to generate the required flows of goods and finances for the reconstruction of Rotterdam and the country.

The reconstruction of the port, before the reconstruction of the city, provides an opportunity to think of the 'interrelationship of exploitative or productive technology and environment' (Steward, 1976 [1955], 40). In this case, it concerns a technological complex related to shipping and transshipment, processing industries, and engineering works. If this constitutes Rotterdam's 'culture core', we may have a closer look at this business and how it relates to 'the behavior patterns involved in the exploitation of a particular area by means of a particular technology' (ibid). The question is how films link up to the technological complex and how the activities in the port inform and enable film productions, 'to ascertain the extent to which the behavior patterns entailed in exploiting the environment affect other aspects of culture'⁶⁸⁴.

⁶⁸³ E.g. *Synchroonfilm*; Jan Schaper's *Skan Film*; the animation studio *Maschilsto* (see: Hogenkamp, 2003: 274n91); Carel Borgers' *NV Filmproductie Rotterdam*; *Studio Freddy Lievense*.

⁶⁸⁴ Steward, 1976 [1955]: 40.