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Cinematic Rotterdam: the times and tides of a modern city

Paalman, F.J.J.W.

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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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RECAPITULATION OF PART II – THE CINEMATIC RECONSTRUCTION OF A CITY

After the bombardment of May 1940, Rotterdam had to reinvent itself. It strengthened the commitment of its citizens with their city, as reflected by amateur recordings, which I have addressed in terms of stigmergy. The subsequent reconstruction of the city took place over about two decades, which had to go beyond the achievements of seven centuries. Therefore it has been possible to observe, in accordance with the theory of cultural ecology, the culture core and its radiation. The reconstruction of the port got priority, which was shown by the short film *ROTTERDAM AAN DEN SLAG* (1946, Penning & Van der Horst). Under the heading of ‘stretching the liquid’, I have traced links between the port, planning and film practices.

The growth of the port required appropriate infrastructure, industrial facilities, and housing for its workers. Commissioned films supported this development, by channelling visions and directions. In a broader view there has been a double move: while shipping and industry fed the local culture and the city’s development, they became also engaged with a world system of trade, emigration, and defence. These issues were subject to the rise of higher levels of sociocultural integration. This rise has similarly been mediated and recorded by films, which in turn were also affected by it.

The development of the port enabled the reconstruction of the city, which was mainly carried out in the 1950s, but largely prepared in the preceding decade. Because of the destruction of the city, and the void that was the result of it, I have raised the question, following Crimson (2002), what a city is like when it has no longer a material form. I have articulated here the issue of urban identity and the collective cognitive domain (cf. Conti, 2005). In this perspective media became important. They were applied, as a part of development strategies, to communicate values and views that motivated and promoted modern urbanism and the reconstruction plans in particular. The void became a screen on which memories and possible futures were projected. Plans and films were both spatial *and* temporal indicators. In accordance with the ideas of Luhmann (1997), I have addressed this as a matter of ‘memory’ and ‘oscillation’ that draw a difference between past and future and, along with it, a temporal horizon. Through building, one could simply read progress, while achievements were communicated by way of film, which offered (positive) feedback. Moreover, films presented a concentrated image of what was happening, which emphasised the new. They were ‘oscillators’ that provided a model, according to a general attractor of social-economic welfare (cf. Wagenaar, 1992).

This attractor rose through an interplay between developments in the world and the city’s own urge for development. While the bombardment had been an external intervention, which has been underscored by the UFA film *ANGRIFF AUF ROTTERDAM*, the question of how to recover had been answered by state planner Ringers, and subsequently by Van der Leeuw as well as city planner Van Traa, and the ‘scenius’ of the Club Rotterdam. In this perspective I have discussed the film *EN TOCH... ROTTERDAM* (1950, Polygoon-Profilti). Being the first major reconstruction film on Rotterdam after *ROTTERDAM AAN DEN SLAG*, it drew a history that rhetorically presented the new plan as self-evident.

Various other reconstruction films provided feedback to the city, in different ways. In some cases film was a monitoring device at the end of a process, to document the results, and to provide input to new projects; sometimes it was a matter of promotion, of achievements like the ‘Lijnbaan’ and the ‘Groothandelsgebouw’, which provided positive feedback, while film was also used (e.g. by Gemeentewerken) as a research tool, as a model to communicate or channel urban plans, or for reasons of analysis and evaluation, education and information. To address, alternatively, the creative and directive forces of film, I have occasionally spoken of ‘projective reflexivity’. It is a kind of monitoring according to a certain assumption or idea of what will or should happen.

The imaginative aspect of film also appeared in the trend to present information through fiction, which added entertainment to the functionality of the city. Imaginative power was, furthermore, part of films like *STEADY!* (1952, Herman van der Horst), which explored cinematographic possibilities that appealed to the senses, although the objective was still to promote the reconstruction plans. Whereas Rotterdam was already a city of labour for its dockworkers, as shown by the film, this was reinforced by the construction workers. The port had given Rotterdam the image of industry and modernity; construction strengthened it through the idea of progress and building the future. This image would be cultivated through cinema.

Many films about Rotterdam (i.e. *Tatort*) were produced elsewhere (i.e. *Standort*). The clustering of film production companies in Haarlem, and Hilversum later on, points to a higher level of socio-cultural integration. By drawing networks, it has nevertheless become clear that most films about Rotterdam were still related to the city's institutions, its reflexivity and identity. This counts also for newsreels and documentaries that monitored Rotterdam as an index for national economic growth and the Dutch spirit to reconstruct the country. The production company Polygoon has been a case in point, since it made, next to newsreels, various films for the municipality and companies in Rotterdam. It has shown that the three As of Elsaesser even apply when there is no direct commissioner. Agents move into common directions due to larger structures and their attractors.

The institutions of Rotterdam were linked to national and international ones. Institutions that integrated developments at higher levels of social organisation were, among others, the Ministry of Reconstruction and the Mutual Security Agency (i.e. Marshall Plan), which became manifest in the films by Van der Horst (*ROTTERDAM AAN DEN SLAG*, 1946; *STEADY!*, 1952). Something similar applies to foreign reports that showed Rotterdam as a model of reconstruction, within a general European history. With socio-cultural integration taking place at an international level, differentiation and even opposition occurred at lower levels. Certain films and buildings that were enabled through the Mutual Security Agency (i.e. against the Eastern bloc), were actually produced by people engaged with the political left.

Different agents were directed by the attractor of social welfare, to be achieved through modernisation and rationalisation. Rotterdam linked it to its image of a 'city of labour', which empowered its development up until the 1960s. It preceded, according to Paul van de Laar (2000), the emergence of 'a city of culture'. However, 'culture' is seen here in a narrow way, which is common to the humanities (cf. the paradigms of *auteur* and art cinema) and that resonates in the social sciences, for example when economic geographers speak of 'cultural industries'. Most fundamentally, culture implies all human expressions; 'cultural industries' is a tautology. Similarly, the culture of Rotterdam is not 'additional' to its economy (cf. Van Ulzen, 2007: 149). At last, Van de Laar acknowledges this too when he refers to a lecture by the writer Wim Wagener at Museum Boymans in 1948. 'The culture of the city ought not to be, in his eyes, "her Sunday coat, which one can take off her, and hang on a nail to look at it"; one had to realise "that culture makes its way till the plate you eat from, and till the chair on which you sit"¹¹³¹. In a similar way, architecture and cinema, among other forms of modern culture, actively framed Rotterdam as a city of labour. The *Bouwcentrum* is a case in point, which I have addressed, with a reference to Hediger and Vonderau, in terms of record, rhetorics and rationalisation.

As mentioned in the introduction, Van de Laar has finally said that Rotterdam is hardly able to do away with its image of a city of labour. Its culture is simply rooted in this 'culture core'. It is, in terms of Luhmann (2000 [1995]: 158), 'a self-generated nucleus of autopoietic autonomy, which is recognised and utilised only in retrospect.' The city's appearance does not

¹¹³¹ Van de Laar, 2000: 589, quoting W.A. Wagener (from *Rotterdams Jaarboekje*, 1949). Original quote (from Van de Laar): 'De cultuur van de stad mocht in zijn ogen niet zijn "haar Zondagse jasje, hetwelk men haar uit kan trekken en aan een spijker te kijk kan hangen"; men moest zich realiseren "dat cultuur dóórwerkt tot op het bord waarvan u eet, tot aan de stoel waarop u zit."

necessarily stay the same, which is maybe the actual concern of Van de Laar¹¹³². As Luhmann has it (ibid): ‘If evolution suggests a gradual process that occasionally makes a leap forward, the question is always how much complexity may still be compatible with the autopoietic autonomy of a system whose irritability by the environment increases accordingly.’

The development of the port has thus been preconditional for urban development that has subsequently been channelled by plans and media as ‘multiple extensions’ of the culture core. This has been recognised, quite literally, in the extension of the city by building new suburbs and enlarging neighbouring towns such as Schiedam and Vlaardingen. Cinema, in its turn, extended planning, which has been exemplified by the film *VLAARDINGEN KOERST OP MORGEN* (1955/1958, Jan Schaper).

Partly inspired by Mumford, one advocated the *wijkgedachte*. It was combined with industrial production methods to fight housing shortage and to explore possibilities of spatial design. Since industrial production needed a critical mass, various films were made to explain the urgency. At the same time they stressed the need for international exchange, since construction materials had to be imported. It was paralleled by the appropriation of foreign construction methods, like that of Coignet, which was promoted by the film *ALLE VOGELS HEBBEN NESTEN* (1961, Louis van Gasteren); sponsored by Dura, with additional support of the ministry of planning, it embodies the joined forces of avant-garde and industry, of social engagement and business, and, eventually, it exemplifies the convergence between culture and economy.

Beyond the rhetorics of labour, the *act* of building became an experience in itself, a ‘reality film’ (which I have illustrated by the *Rondrit Wederopbouw*). Various other events have exemplified the convergence between economy and culture, among them exhibitions that took place during WWII and a series of large manifestations that were organised afterwards, with the Ahoy’ being the first one (1950). This event, to celebrate the reconstruction and the port, was characterised by a collaboration between the arts (i.e. *Medienverbund*). It was a factor in the animation of the new city. Regarding the Ahoy’ I have distinguished three kinds of media practices: films shown here did not necessarily refer to the event, nor to Rotterdam, but promoted its values or ‘intensions’; reports about the event were its ‘extensions’; and amateur films, which became increasingly important, were its ‘retentions’, since they remained hidden serving private memories. Such practices were intensified by the E55. With the help of Philips, commercial television was introduced, which showed productions like *EEN WANDELING DOOR ROTTERDAM* (1955, Joop Burcksen), next to various advertisements. Within the overall theme of ‘energy’ the products and the modes of presentation reinforced one another.

Whereas *Medienverbund* applies to *different media* propelling a common agenda, I have also observed that *different events* propelled a common agenda, which implies a *Medienverbund* at yet another level. I have illustrated it through links between the E55, Interbau (Berlin, 1957), and EXPO ’58 (Brussels), with the architect Bakema and the filmmaker Schaper as the connecting agents. I have also pointed to Constant’s work at the E55, and his project New Babylon that would visualise such a ‘union of events’. Due to different alliances and cross-connections, I have hopefully provided an idea of a self-reflexive cultural ecology that applies to the city and beyond.

¹¹³² Cf. Van de Laar, 2000: 8 (i.e. mission statement).