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Cinematic Rotterdam: the times and tides of a modern city

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RECAPITULATION OF PART III – THE CINEMATIC PROLIFERATION OF A CITY

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed a bifurcation from cinema to television, to cable television, to video, which came to exist next to one another. It allowed for new media applications regarding urban development, which ran parallel to an increasing complexity and diversity of architectural projects. I have related these changes to the five main ‘elements’ that Allen J. Scott has marked as factors within creative processes (i.e. human input, skills, production networks, multiple stimuli at points of interaction, and institutional infrastructures). I have additionally invoked a sense of self-reflexivity of the urban system (cf. Conti, 2005, a.o.). This is, however, complicated by divisions between *Standort* and *Tatort*. I have articulated it through foreign productions, such as the Austrian television documentary ROTTERDAM (1964, Walter Klapper); besides institutions like Eurovision, I touched upon an international network within the field of architecture and planning.

Along with the proliferation of cinema and increasing spatial complexity, higher levels of socio-cultural integration developed. This implied internationally standardised media formats, and an ‘international style’ regarding architecture. At the same time, however, there have been practices of local monitoring, experimentation, and appropriation. It has been exemplified by the RKS and De Lantaren, and productions related to them, next to the establishment of local studios. Among them was the Open Studio of Jan Schaper, who made (television) recordings abroad and at home, in Rotterdam. By doing so he played an active role in the debate on urban development.

The changing media landscape gave, furthermore, rise to what I have called ‘developing compositions’. Cinema newsreels (i.e. Polygoon) used to be little stories, with pronounced aesthetic qualities and witty comments. Television news, instead, became an ongoing narrative, through many voices; news items linked up to earlier ones and other programmes. Narrative structures emerged that shared features with fiction stories. Polygoon, in turn, became just one of the media players, providing background information rather than ‘breaking news’.

Reports started to be made that presented the news without the aesthetic ambitions or wittiness of Polygoon. Many reports were made for just that day, rather than for weeks. As a consequence this also reduced the chance of material being reused or evaluated. Whereas critics initially paid attention to the television news, writing about it in the papers, this hardly occurred anymore in the 1970s. Such an ephemeral turn created another sense of time. Television news became a matter of fast feedback loops. Input-output cycles could be so quick that monitoring itself became an active force within events. This has been enabled by new technologies as well as institutional support that created a faster work flow. Especially important here was the practice of the NOS JOURNAAL to work with local correspondents, namely Pim Korver and J. van Rhijn in Rotterdam.

Within the developing multitude of connections between media and urbanism, there was still one clear path: that of the commissioned film. As a matter of ‘visual engineering’ rooted in the city’s culture core, large numbers of industrial films continued to be made. Filmmakers operated like technicians, while they were also narrators that streamlined processes in order to make them comprehensible to the public. In this way I have also followed the way cinema and television, in relation to one another, treated infrastructural projects, especially the construction of the metro, the ring road, the airport, and larger infrastructures that made Rotterdam part of the Randstad, as a network of strongly connected cities (also in terms of *Standort – Tatort*). However, the Randstad worked merely in a practical way, but it was hardly articulated discursively or reflexively and provided with feedback by way of film. Instead, various films framed the position of Rotterdam within larger natural and built environments, mostly showing its port within a system of waterways and its role within the Dutch economy.

Infrastructure enables mobility, which links up with motion pictures in terms of perception. The ‘modernity thesis’, as debated in film studies, says that the cinematic mode of perception is inherent in modernity, which is characterised by mobility and fragmentation.

Criticising this view, David Bordwell has argued that there are different ‘ways of seeing’ among different groups. Yet while the debate concerns mainly stylistic conventions (of feature films), Bordwell’s critique actually points to the social role of film, which I have addressed in the form of ‘scenes’ of commissioners, filmmakers, and audiences. Rather than aesthetic developments, media strategies have been important here. In this way, I have illuminated a particular dynamic between film and television; commissioned films were made as records of progress, which articulated itself across the rhetoric of rationalisation. Television in its turn enabled monitoring practices, offered a stage for alternative visions and debate, and affected the public opinion. Filmmakers, however, became used to working in both realms, which allowed for cross-connections. Competition and collaboration went together, through an oscillation between media, in an ongoing process of modernisation. It stimulated innovative approaches and styles, and new arguments and visions, which resulted in a web of audiovisual productions.

I have elaborated on these observations through the case of the Europoort development. Critical documentaries were broadcast by television, and promotional films made by companies and the municipality. Opposition can result in co-evolution, towards a common attractor, since radically opposed forces sharpen and strengthen themselves through interaction. This seems to have been the case with environmentalists and industrialists (i.e. the port), in the 1960s and 1970s, with media appearing as part of ‘emergent interfaces’ (Nowotny, 2005). Exemplary are, respectively, the television documentary *POLDERS VOOR INDUSTRIE* (1961, Wim van der Velde) and the municipal promotion film *ROTTERDAM – EUROPOORT* (1966, Joris Ivens). Ivens’s critical view became part of the promotion campaign. The film was framed in terms of personal and social motivations, to strengthen the port’s cultural basis in order to ensure its economic output in the end. Ivens and the commissioners consciously effected an ‘oscillation’ that went beyond the rationalisation that was so typical for the previous period. Alternatively, asking Ivens was also a matter of path-dependency, while invoking the memory function of culture, since the commission relied upon the international fame of *THE BRIDGE* (1928).

Other filmmakers became also involved with the port, especially Korver, both as a correspondent of the *JOURNAAL* and as a director of commissioned films. Entrepreneurs like Veder and Verolme invested in media practices. Various enterprises, next to the municipality, asked for films, for reasons of publicity and internal feedback (e.g. annual reports by Wilton-Fijenoord and RDM). While such ‘corporate images’ were made, television directors continued to express their criticism and journalists monitored social unrest.

Such dynamics were reinforced by the appearance of the container. Television monitored its development (‘the container contained’), which provided positive feedback. Rotterdam soon established the Europe Container Terminus, which was aware of the value of publicity. Additionally to television reports, it commissioned several films itself, away from the public discourse that, over the course of the 1970s, encompassed many reports on strikes that provided negative feedback. Different from the dynamic between industrialists and environmentalists, however, employees and employers still worked for the same enterprise; workers were not opposed to industrial values as such. The struggle in the port resulted finally in a ‘striking development’; the port was forced to innovate and to adapt itself to the new regime of the container. Media were part of this process, underscoring the double dialectic of modernisation.

Media ‘augmented’ the space of the city as an industrial complex, and that of the city as a public realm. Regarding the latter, reports ‘amplified’ the mediating role of public space. Quays, squares, streets, the Maastunnel, halls, and company lots, among other kinds of spaces, offered possibilities for events to take place, to empower the workers to express themselves, and for interactions to crystallise. This was also a matter of learning through space, extended by media, with places bearing meanings because of previous (recorded) events.

Whereas strikes were ‘spontaneous’ events of a socio-economic nature, accompanied by instantaneous benefit concerts, meetings, papers and the like, various planned manifestations took place as well, whose numbers rapidly increased over the course of the 1960s and 1970s. I have

considered the Floriade, and its conscious use of media by making up stories that could be reported. In a similar way, the Euromast was built on the occasion of this event, as an act of city branding. The Floriade took place at the Ahoy' hall, which subsequently accommodated all kinds of other fairs, games and concerts. This resulted eventually in a brand new Ahoy' complex. Since the activities were frequently reported, this helped to build a media infrastructure in Rotterdam. It was reinforced by other events, particularly football matches by Sparta and especially Feyenoord.

In the series of five-yearly events the exhibition *Stad in Beweging* (1965) was successively organised. It marked a change in the way the reconstruction was communicated – from explaining reasons to highlighting achievements, which was also reflected by the accompanying remake of *EN TOCH... ROTTERDAM* (1965, Polygoon). The next big event, the C'70, followed an entirely different concept. It took place in the city centre, in order to animate it immediately. It propelled a small-scale approach, and applied all kinds of media. Parallel to it, various other festivals were organised, such as the Holland Festival, with the legendary pop festival in the Kralingse Bos, and finally the film festival. Under the direction of Huub Bals, it put the city on the map of the film world. It gave an impulse to the cultural climate of the city, and as such it served as an alternative planning instrument.

Media practices were reinforced when Van der Louw became Mayor, in 1974, after he had worked for radio and television himself. The municipality supported a range of media productions. It sponsored videos to facilitate citizen participation, informational films on municipal services, recordings to discuss municipal plans, advertisements to attract tourists and investors, while the municipality also collaborated on (foreign) television reports and features. Additionally, the municipality supported artistic productions that as 'oscillators' imagined or predicted social-cultural developments, to anticipate them or to explore urban life.

Especially video became important, for experimentation and urban renewal. It has exemplified the issue of stigmergy, of collective learning and appropriating the environment as a communication process. Using the ideas of Nowotny (2005), I have considered this, next to socially motivated television reports, and (provocative) feature films, in terms of an 'emergent interface' regulating 'interface turbulence'. This turbulence concerned the struggle between different groups of people, and between citizens and institutions. Collective expressions (e.g. by Mediafront) and an explicit political engagement have, furthermore, recalled activities from the 1920s and 1930s, whose issues and ideas became actual again.

There are feedback loops of varying duration, from days to many years, through buildings that last for decades and through films that are preserved by archives (and, in some cases, used by contemporary media productions that recall past events). To account for future effects is part of a professional concern. Planning and designing *is* premediation (to use Grusin's term), while films have documentary value for future generations, which acquired an institutional base through the *Gemeentearchief*. Its film collection has enabled citizens, among them historians and filmmakers, to compare present and past conditions, to draw historical parallels and perspectives. This enabled at the same time as it reinforced a relationality between different moments in time.