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Cinematic Rotterdam: the times and tides of a modern city

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SUMMARY

introduction

Media have become ubiquitous in modern life, especially in urban society, which has fuelled an interest in the 'cinematic city'. This orientation offers new perspectives to film studies away from the paradigms of the *auteur*, national cinema and the art film, and beyond textual analysis. Little known predecessors of current media practices are being rediscovered and their historical potentialities reassessed. Along with this the idea of linear history and its notion of time are being challenged. At the same time, a 'spatial turn' within the humanities has foregrounded ontological questions. The debate on the cinematic city, however, has remained loose. There have been attempts to connect different disciplinary approaches, but there is also a question of the relevant corpus, which should not be restricted to fiction or to the major metropolises of the world.

I opted for Rotterdam to carry out a case-study, in addition to existing studies about Frankfurt (Elsaesser, 2005b) and Glasgow (Lebas, 2005 & 2007). The challenge of this research has been to extend the scope and to develop a more comprehensive view of the cinematic city that concerns not only avant-garde city symphonies and features, but also newsreels, educational and commissioned films, among others. Thousands of audiovisual productions dealing with Rotterdam were made during the heydays of modernity and modernism, from the 1920s to the 1970s. Why were they made, what functions did they fulfill, and how did they participate and intervene in social and spatial processes? The purpose of this research has been twofold: to write the film history of Rotterdam, in order to show how films have participated in its development as a modern city, and to provide theoretical insights regarding the relationship between film and the built environment. To this end I have made use of network approaches from the social sciences, and more specifically, the theory of cultural ecology (Steward, 1955).

the emergence of a cinematic city

The first film recordings of Rotterdam were made in 1898 by Stefan Hofbauer for Casino Variété, which were early 'newsreels'. Due to a clustering of film activities in the following decades, the cinema entrepreneurs Tuschinski and Weisbard also produced local newsreels. It caused a competition and then, through specialisation, collaboration with the nationally operating film companies Polygoon and Profilti (1920s, 1930s). As a result, the city was no longer the focus of attention, but enterprises could commission films, of which parts were used for newsreels.

Although several film companies appeared in Rotterdam, many films about the city were produced elsewhere. Using a concept of Elsaesser, Rotterdam became mostly *Tatort*, while other cities became *Standort*. Rotterdam developed as a 'porous' system linked to others. Common became films to advertise the port and to show industrial production processes, which provide an audiovisual map of the city's then existing subsistence arrangements. 'Construction films' became also important, as did films for social organisations and labour unions.

Regarding these films I have applied Elsaesser's concept of the triple 'A', of mapping the *Auftraggeber*, *Anlass* and *Anwendung* of a film, and to relate them to one another. By tracing the commissioners, reasons and uses of the films, it turned out that certain films resembled each other, but were made for different reasons, while rather different films could share the same purposes, as part of strategies to reach different audiences, which became clear from their screening at factories, conferences, schools or exhibitions. Many films were not *about* modernity, but *for* modernity (cf. Lebas, 2000). In this way, unexpected connections have appeared between distinct realms, like art and industry, or social engagement and commerce, and similarly between cinema and photography as well as design and architecture. In this perspective the Van Nelle factory and its director Van der Leeuw played a pivotal role. The connections between different media correspond to Elsaesser's concept of *Medienverbund*, which says that different media are applied to serve the same purpose. This has also been observed in the case of events, especially

the industry exhibition *Nenijto* (1928). I have subsequently extended this concept to cultural ecology by amplifying the shared purpose of media to a shared attractor of systemic development, particularly that of rationalisation and modernisation.

The networks and institutions that enabled film productions have been related to Steward's (1955) 'levels of socio-cultural integration', which indicate the degree of cultural ecological interdependence. At one end are home movies, with common values and 'institutions' to be found within single families, which embody the most elementary level of integration. At the other end are feature films like *LENTELIED* (1936, Simon Koster), which praised the modern city, and *BOEFJE* (1939, Detlef Sierck), which addressed the problems of the slums; these films revealed extensive networks with socio-cultural integration at an international level. The coherence between different cultural phenomena has been elaborated regarding social housing and educational cinema (*Schoolbioscoop*). Integration between the two realms took place at the level of the municipality and its progressive policy.

Films on local issues shown to local audiences immediately linked back to the city. I have explained this dynamic as a matter of 'stigmergy', of collective learning and communication through the environment, which is then also affected. This applies to industrial and promotional films as well, but many of them were also shown elsewhere, and the interest they generated was often paid back indirectly through the interplay between environmental and 'historical factors'. The city became a 'switchboard' (cf. Hannerz) through which ideas were locally appropriated and sent into the world again. This applies, for example, to the avant-garde and its international networks, especially that of the cineclub *Filmliga* with its branches in different cities. It became embedded in Rotterdam due to strong involvement from architects, the business elite, and the press. Along with it, various 'city symphonies' were made, among them *THE BRIDGE* (1928, Joris Ivens) and *NUL UUR NUL* (1927-1928, Simon Koster). They mediated relations and provided personal references while fulfilling the functions of memory and oscillation (cf. Luhmann). This came to the fore through my research by considering both content and conditions and the connections between them as part of personal and extensive networks.

Following the logic of relationality (cf. Urry, 2003), a network within a network (cf. Hannerz, 1996) corresponds to a particular group or 'scene', which is largely responsible for the achievements of its individual members. The successful union film *EN GIJ, KAMERAAD?* (1928, Joannes Ratté), exemplifies such a collective effort, not of an *auteur*, but of a 'scenius' (cf. Eno). This comes in addition to the case of the cinematographer Andor von Barsy. His avant-garde film *HOOGSTRAAT* (1929) is well-known. By drawing the networks that he was part of, one observes his numerous involvements with fiction films, commercials, and especially with commissioned films, in which respect his name is sometimes not even mentioned. I have addressed his work in terms of 'functional cinematography', which applies also to his port films, including *THE CITY THAT NEVER RESTS* (1928). As its production history has illustrated, contingent events may have decisive consequences. However, within an environment such as the city a multitude of contingent acts constitute a common movement and direction.

the cinematic reconstruction of a city

The bombardment of May 1940 strengthened the commitment of the citizens with their city, as reflected by amateur recordings, which I have addressed in terms of stigmergy. The subsequent reconstruction took place over two decades and had to recreate the achievements of seven centuries. The port and its industry appeared to be the city's 'culture core', in accordance with the theory of cultural ecology. While the reconstruction of the port received priority, its further growth required appropriate infrastructure, industrial facilities, and housing for workers. Commissioned films supported this by channelling visions and directions. There has actually 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. Higher levels of

sociocultural integration emerged, which was mediated and reported by films, while film production was also affected by it.

The destruction of the city and the eventual void raised the question (cf. Crimson, 2002): what is a city when it has no longer a material form? The answer has to do with urban identity and the collective cognitive domain, and hence media became important. They were applied to communicate values and views that promoted modern urbanism and particularly the reconstruction plans. The void became a screen on which memories and possible futures were projected. Plans and films were both spatial *and* temporal indicators, drawing a difference between past and future. Through building one could 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.

While the bombardment had been an external intervention, underscored by the UFA film ANGRIFF AUF ROTTERDAM, the question of how to recover was answered by state planner Ringers, and, as an internal intervention, and almost as a 'conspiracy', by Van der Leeuw as well as city planner Van Traa and the 'scenius' of the business association Club Rotterdam. It is expressed by the first major reconstruction film on Rotterdam EN TOCH... ROTTERDAM (1950, Polygoon-Profiliti), which drew a history that rhetorically presented the new plan as self-evident. Other reconstruction films documented the results in order to provide input to new projects. Film was used to provide positive feedback, 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 spoken of 'projective reflexivity'. This is a kind of monitoring according to an assumption of what will or should happen, as in STEADY! (1952, Herman van der Horst).

Although many films about Rotterdam were produced elsewhere, most films were still related to the city's institutions, its reflexivity and identity. Polygoon has been important here too, for its commissioned films as well as its newsreels, which show that Elsaesser's 3A model even applies when there is no direct commissioner. Agents move in common directions due to larger structures and their attractors, especially the attractor of social welfare that is to be achieved through modernisation. Rotterdam linked this to its image of a 'city of labour'. Architecture and cinema, among other forms of modern culture, actively contributed to it. As such, a key role was played by the *Bouwcentrum*, in terms of record, rhetorics and rationalisation (cf. Hediger & Vonderau).

While the construction worker joined the dockworker in the city of labour, as in STEADY!, the development of the port was preconditional for urban development. Both were channelled by plans and media as 'multiple extensions' of the culture core. This also applies, quite literally, to the extension of the city through new suburbs and neighbouring towns (e.g. Vlaardingen). Partly inspired by Mumford, the socially engaged elite advocated the *wijkgedachte*, to achieve a new social order, which was combined with industrialised production to fight the housing shortage. Since it needed a critical mass, films were made to explain its urgency, such as ALLE VOGELS HEBBEN NESTEN (1961, Louis van Gasteren). This embodies the joined forces of avant-garde and industry, social engagement and business, and the convergence between economy and culture.

Beyond the rhetorics of labour, the *act* of building became an experience in itself, a 'reality film'. A series of events concretised the convergence between economy and culture with the Ahoy' being a true milestone (1950). This event, to celebrate the reconstruction of the port, was characterised by a collaboration between the arts (i.e. *Medienverbund*). Here I have distinguished three kinds of media practices: films shown at the events promoted its 'intensions'; reports about the event were its 'extensions'; and amateur films shot there were its 'retentions'. Such practices were intensified by the E55 and its experiment of commercial television. Different events, including events abroad, propelled a common agenda, which implies a *Medienverbund* at yet another level.

the cinematic proliferation of a city

Along with the process of modernisation, the 1960s and 1970s witnessed a bifurcation from cinema to television, to cable television, to video. It allowed for new media applications regarding urban development, while the image of the city diversified, both socially and spatially. I have related these changes to the five main 'elements' that Scott (2005) 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 complicated by divisions between *Standort* and *Tatort*, but can even be recognised in foreign productions that emerged through international networks.

At the same time, however, there have been practices of local monitoring, experimentation, and appropriation. 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, which shared features with fiction stories. Many television reports were made for just that day, rather than for weeks. Feedback loops could be so quick that monitoring itself became an active force within events. Important became the fact that the NOS JOURNAAL started to work with local correspondents, Pim Korver in the case of Rotterdam. He combined this with the production of promotion films, especially for companies in the port, and interrelations existed as a result. City news was eventually produced through local television in which the city itself became of primary interest again.

As a matter of 'visual engineering' rooted in the city's culture core, commissioned films continued to be made. Such 'corporate images' (e.g. for Shell, Volker, Verolme, Wilton-Fijenoord) served publicity purposes and internal feedback. Certain filmmakers, among them Burcksen, who made films about the Europoort development, and Alsemgeest, who made many 'episode films' for Gemeentewerken, operated like technicians, while they were also narrators presenting production processes as comprehensive accounts. Many films heralded infrastructural projects as hallmarks of modernisation, especially the construction of the metro, the ring road, the airport, and the port. Some films showed Rotterdam's position within the Randstad or within larger systems of waterways and the city's role within the Dutch economy.

While many (commissioned) films were records of progress, resistance grew. Television, in its turn, 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. Important as such has been Jan Schaper and his Open Studio. Next to that, a key production was Ivens's ROTTERDAM-EUROPOORT (1966). His critical view became part of a marketing strategy conducted by the authorities. Asking Ivens was a matter of path-dependency. It invoked the memory function of culture, due to the international fame of THE BRIDGE (1928), in order to effect an 'oscillation' that went beyond rationalisation. Competition and collaboration went hand-in-hand in an ongoing process of modernisation.

Such dynamics were reinforced after 1967, when the Europe Container Terminus (ECT) was established in Rotterdam. The ECT commissioned several films, away from the public discourse, as various media reported on strikes with the reports providing negative feedback. In the end 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. Especially television 'amplified' the mediating role of public space, which offered possibilities for events to take place, including the Floriade and other events that were organized at the Ahoy' hall. Eventually a new Ahoy' complex was built, which stimulated the development of a media infrastructure. Gradually a change took place in the way the reconstruction was communicated – from explaining reasons to highlighting achievements. The C'70, dedicated to the theme of

communication, turned the entire city into a medium. A proliferation of events took place, including the international film festival, as a planning strategy to animate the city.

Media practices were reinforced when Van der Louw became Mayor in 1974, after he had worked for radio and television. The government sponsored video productions by the Lijnbaancentrum and the Videocentrum in order to support the arts and to facilitate citizen participation and urban renewal, and informational films on municipal services, while the municipality also collaborated on television reports and features. Additionally it supported artistic films that worked as 'oscillators' to imagine or to predict developments. These practices exemplify the theory 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'. Collective expressions (e.g. by Mediafront) and a political engagement have, furthermore, recalled activities from the 1920s and 1930s, which implied a revision of the modern city.

conclusion

The film history of Rotterdam is characterised by a number of strands. Besides avant-garde experiments and features there have been amateur films and especially news reports and commissioned films, sometimes closely connected, which recorded as well as participated and intervened in the development of the port, the industry, construction works, social engagement (and housing), and various events. While the productions by Von Barsy, Schaper and Korver, among others, were interwoven with the city, many other films were not produced in Rotterdam itself, but were still part of webs that were anchored in the city in which various people acted like spiders, among them Van Nelle director van der Leeuw.

As a 'porous' system within a networked landscape, due to its port and social-economic infrastructure, Rotterdam encompasses a multitude of 'paths'. While following paths, agents leave traces and markers providing information to others. This information is used to adapt to the environment or to appropriate it, which in turn provides new information, and so on. In modern urban society, such traces and markers have become complex systems of spatial design, information and communication. Within this form of stigmergy, the study of audiovisual media implies a historiography based on complex network dynamics, drawn as spatial configurations framing time.

The role of film in the development of Rotterdam cannot be explained in terms of an immediate cause-and-effect relationship. Not every social or spatial project needs a film, but film has been an indispensable factor within the city as a cultural ecology. Audiovisual media appeal to and are part of the cognitive dimension of the modern city. According to Urry (2003), contemporary society is characterised by 'reflexive modernisation' and monitoring through aesthetic-expressive systems. Beyond monitoring, however, are the ways in which the information links back to the environment. This is a matter of feedback that is enabled through culture, which fulfils a collective memory function. Besides memory, to refer to Luhmann, there is oscillation: to cross boundaries in order to propose new states to move to, as Rotterdam has shown, in support of, but also beyond the attractors of rationalisation and industrialisation. In this way culture is what marks the difference between past and future.

To say that feedback is a matter of culture does not mean that Rotterdam should be understood as a 'city of culture', neither as a 'city of labour'. It is a city whose culture is typified by artefacts such as industrial architecture and social housing as well as by films that articulate the system's reflexivity, with a 'culture core' that is informed by the port. Both commercial and municipal companies were somehow involved with media practices. Many media practices, however, have remained invisible. Film has been a hidden dimension within the history of 20th century Rotterdam. Although the media industry in Rotterdam has become an economic sector in

its own right today, the times and tides of the modern city may eventually cause them to become part again of more regular business practices.

I have made an attempt to contribute to a film theory and methodology that relates *content* to *conditions*, while paying special attention to *connections* between people and artefacts across different social-cultural fields. By taking the three Cs into account I have added to Steward's theory of cultural ecology the intrinsic values, ideas and visions of cultural forms, films in particular, and with it the self-reflexivity of the urban system. As my study has shown, this approach provides an alternative to the paradigms of the art film, the *auteur*, and national cinema. Rather than reflections or representations of an experienced or imagined reality, films are part of urban networks and concrete environments. It implies another ontology of cinema, which offers a new prospect to media studies as well as the spatial disciplines.