A Plea for the Magic Lantern

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The fact that public broadcasting is regarded as belonging to the creative industry cannot conceal the sad state of creativity in this sector. Radio, television and internet display a striking lack of imaginative power, a situation that becomes even more embarrassing when set against the vigour of other creative sectors.

Why, for example, is no one in Hilversum [1] making programmes with a cachet to match that of our architecture and our design?

Stefan Themerson, writer, filmmaker, publisher and poet, distinguishes two ways of making images: the camera obscura and the magic lantern. The camera obscura represents reality. The magic lantern by contrast elevates representation to the status of reality. Each of these principles results in a different approach to public broadcasting as a creative medium: do programme makers accept existing reality for what it is? Or do they manipulate reality by allowing their imagination free play?

Jaap Drupsteen (b. 1942) belongs to the second category. Drupsteen trained as a graphic designer. In 1975, following a sensational series of vpro network promo spots, he produced his first major feature: *Het grote gebeuren* (The Great Happening). The action, based on a short story by Belcampo, takes place on the Day of Judgement in the Overijssel village of Rijssen. Hordes of devils and angels descend on the village to read the inhabitants their final lesson. After all the villagers have been carried off to heaven or to hell, only Belcampo, disguised as a devil, remains behind. Eventually, after a group of angels discovers him, he is conveyed heavenwards, 'with steady wingbeats'.

I still recall the New Year's Eve when *Het grote begeuren* was broadcast. The sense of witnessing something completely new was overwhelming.

Jaap Drupsteen says of this work: 'The viewer is repeatedly fucked about', thereby revealing himself to be no devotee of today's phone-in quizzes. Rather, he champions the programme maker as illusionist. He takes issue with television's alleged social benefit: 'Everything that's added is nonsense, personal hobbies, artistic claptrap, fake magic, pomposity, technical tours de force, trendy hype and showing off, which usually undermines the functionality and for that reason is infinitely more interesting.'

No one looking at the way things have developed since the 1980s can avoid the conclusion that Jaap Drupsteen's views are out of date. Television, radio and internet have become reality machines: the 'Big Brother' living room and the 'Golden Cage' villa turn television quite literally into a camera obscura.

So where did things go wrong with the magic lantern? This was a question Jaap Drupsteen asked himself in 1985, when the NOS [2] refused to enter his music theatre production *The Flood* in the Prix Italia. He vented his frustration in several interviews: 'If the nos enters something it's more likely to be a recording of a good performance. But that's more to the credit of the theatre makers than the tv makers. . .. That's typical of the views on creativity and innovation. It's completely normal for television to appropriate the creativity of other media. . .. I've always found that a bit parasitical. But when a production in which television itself is used as creative medium is brushed aside as an incident, I'm

rather dismayed.'

Drupsteen regards television as a creative medium, especially public television and the public broadcasting system as a whole. Public broadcasting is public space. Public space is free space. Free space is a space for imagination. Or should be, at any rate.

The international success of Dutch architecture and design is due not just to training, talent and a little money, but above all to good clients. Not to managers, who hide behind public approval and taste, but to people of character with the courage to take responsibility for complete and partial failures. Open-minded and open-hearted. Convinced of the need to stimulate public curiosity.

If public broadcasters are serious about rediscovering their creativity, they must start by being good clients. Who will give the old and new Drupsteens the opportunity to conquer public space? As long as no one feels the need to do so, even the illusionists can have no illusions.

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Footnotes

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2.

Tags

Media Society

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