General

The Lost Voyeur

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René Boomkens, *De nieuwe wanorde. Globalisering en het einde van de maakbare samenleving*, Amsterdam, Van Gennep, 2006, ISBN 9055156507, 328 pages

In the introduction to his book *The New Disorder. Globalization and the End of the Makeable Society,* René Boomkens announces that he will be defending two propositions. First of all he contends that 'globalization is accompanied by a radical change in our social world and our way of life, a change that until now is mainly evident in vehement cultural conflicts and considerable panic in political and intellectual circles, not only in the Netherlands but elsewhere as well'. Boomkens' second proposition immediately puts the weight of the first proposition into perspective: 'The actual problem lies elsewhere: what we're experiencing under the banner of "globalization" is a silent and gradual, but for that reason no less revolutionary departure from modernity as the age of *makeability*.' Politics and science are no longer the exclusive sources of information and inspiration for organizing society, argues Boomkens.

The title of the book refers to 'disorder', which moreover is 'new' and whereby, in connection with 'globalization', the 'end' of something is also announced, namely the 'makeable society', an archetypal Dutch theme. Throughout the entire book, however, Boomkens leaves his options fairly open as to whether the so-called end of the makeable society is a good thing or not. For the most part one has the feeling that, all in all, that 'end' has had positive effects. In particular, Boomkens sees a lot of freedom, more and more of it in fact. 'The qualitative decline of public life has, however, not so far led to a loss of freedom – certainly not in many people's daily experience.' With these sorts of remarks Boomkens' arguments at times take on a more than left of centre tinge.

At the same time, towards the end of the book, it is politics after all that is meant to shape society, preferably at a global level. You can't get much more leftist than that. As it happens, I and many others think the same, but Boomkens continually gives the impression that society is (self-evidently) no longer shapeable on a national level. He fails to sufficiently explain the connection between the impossibility of shaping society on a national level and the necessity to (therefore) fashion society on a global level. What's more, he remains ambiguous about the political ambitions that one can cherish on the global level. 'A serious European public domain' should be created, for example. By this he presumably means, after a suggestion by Jürgen Habermas to which he refers elsewhere in his book, that a public culture of debate should be created at the European level – and to this end, according to Boomkens, 'our national governments' should be coerced. While one could also wish for something of this sort from the European Union, he prefers, as a writer in a country where a referendum about the European Constitution produced a devastating No, to back 'our national governments'. These three words immediately reveal how much courage this Dutch intellectual is willing to display in the local debate about globalization and politics. In other words, none. The centre-left intellectual with a sporadic leftist reflex remains on good terms, after all, with the proponents of national sovereignty.

In the book's three central essays Boomkens deals with 'issues and areas that are either well-nigh invisible and remain ignored in current research and dominant political discussions, or are grossly underestimated and misunderstood'. His intention with these essays is mainly to outline a picture of the globalization of the everyday, and he makes a case for deploying non-academic forms of knowledge in each of the essays. The first essay about dwelling 'leans on philosophers who thought that poetry and narrative are the most important sources if we want to acquire an adequate insight into what dwelling, the consciousness of "being at home", entails'. The second essay is about the city and primarily comments on 'images by city photographers who have documented everyday urban experience in all its inexorable momentariness and evanescence'. A third essay on popular culture 'interprets pop songs as the soundtrack of a worldwide, everyday popular culture that is at once local and global'.

The dwelling, the city, popular culture – Boomkens has been writing about each one of these themes for much longer, of course, even before there was the need to avail oneself of the word 'globalization' in such writings. Most probably because it was too stylistically uncomfortable to insert the fashionable new word everywhere between the text of previously published essays, an introductory and a concluding chapter have been added, which, together with an actual introduction and conclusion, go a little bit deeper into the theme of globalization than, in the final analysis, the three central chapters themselves do. In reading this book one gets the feeling that not only has Boomkens re-framed, as it were, older work, but also that the frame does not quite suit the work.

More problematic is the fact that Boomkens does not by any means fulfil his epistomological promises. While he raises the expectation that his observations about dwelling will draw from poetry, stories and daydreams, the essay all too soon gets bogged down in an utterly academic discussion among Heidegger exegetes about the *Bauen Wohnen Denken* lecture. Hilde Heynen's interpretation (which plays off the utopian-nostalgic conception of Christian Norberg-Schultz against the radical-critical one of Massimo Cacciari) is confronted with the interpretation by Eric Bolle – not forgetting the interpretations by Kenneth Frampton, Christopher Alexander, Peter Eisenman and other Dal Cos. Following an introduction in which he seriously criticizes academic philosophy, Boomkens gets involved in the most academic way in an academic dispute among academics, which makes one wonder whether what is at stake here is not so much everyday dwelling as professional positioning. The second essay, about the city, in which Boomkens mainly addresses the photographic work of Aglaia Konrad, Beat Streuli, Gabriele Basilico and Piet-Hein Stulemeijer, appears unable to talk about the city without extensively citing academic studies or criticizing government plans like the 1991 *Fourth Memorandum on Physical Planning Extra* (better known as VINEX). Here, too, the otherwise apposite reflections accompanying the small section of photographs in the book ultimately get bogged down in a polemic against an outdated government policy document. Finally, the third essay on popular culture deals much less with pop music than with the diatribes of the notorious conservative intellectuals George Steiner and Roger Scruton, with whom a former professor of pop music can of course engage in a nice controversy. But what's happened to pop music as an alternative source of knowledge is a question that remains unanswered.

Even more of a problem than Boomkens' epistemological showing-off, which is unable to substantiate what it proclaims, however, is his conceptual plebeianism. In his observations about dwelling he puts, sparingly at best, Bachelard's notion of 'housewifely care' in inverted commas. His comments on the city are all about 'seeing and being seen' – whereby one has difficulty suppressing a yawn – while his history of popular culture begins with Elvis Presley and culminates, in self-evidently qualitative terms, in the post-revolutionary work of Bob Dylan and The Band. The unreflected, subjective perspective on which the writing is based and which irrevocably comes to the fore is that of the 'white

Anglo-Saxon male chauvinist gaze'. Of course that perspective also has a right to its own triviality and this may also underlie the writing. But when that writing continually puts its own subjective perspective between quotation marks, the impression is raised that it is saying something about everyone's commonplace experiences. In itself, there's nothing wrong with making the history of pop music begin in the year you were born – which coincidentally is what Boomkens does – and then to make it culminate in the year that you presumably bought your first record, but I wish he would deal a little more reflexively with his own perspective and hence his myopia. If you begin the history of pop music on the day that shrewd marketing men realized that you could only get a white public to buy black music if you worked with a white star, then you also cover up the all but explicit racism of this marketing strategy. Others have written alternative histories of pop music, in which different information surfaces than the so-called knowledge about the history of pop music supplied to us completely free of charge by the music industry and consumed somewhat too eagerly and unthinkingly by Boomkens.

When he does manage to reflect just for once about his own point of view, this reflexivity is merely intended to immediately sweep the reader along in the moral decay. '[We] hardly complain about villagers or city dwellers behaving exactly like typical suburbanites – after all. We don't like to complain about ourselves, since we, that is we writers, artists, essayists, photographers, scholars, journalists, we "metropolitans", we don't live in the suburbs. But we're of the same species: network citizens, radical individualists with no really meaningful relationship with our immediate environment. In general we too scarcely know our nearest neighbours, we hardly ever walk through our own district nor do we maintain much contact with important organizations in our neighbourhood, party because we're just as often somewhere else.' 'Speak for yourself', is the first thought that comes to mind when reading a tirade like this. But assuming that this is all true for the one who is hiding here behind the plural form, what does the everyday life of a professor indeed look like?

Boomkens may well situate all experience as an irreplaceable source of knowledge in a class of its own next to and compared with academia, but he seldom or never writes on the basis of that experience. Boomkens is continually playing hide-and-seek behind the high backs of the great writers and their commentators, the great photographers and their critics or the great singers and their criticasters. And thus it happens that, in this book about our everyday life in the age of globalization, the quotidian life of professor Boomkens is discretely suppressed, but at the same time it keeps cropping up, like a symptom. The most important motif that refers back to this quotidian life is the writing subject's struggle with 'the university'. He keeps harping on the legitimacy of a knowledge that is different from scholarly knowledge, yet at the same time he continually cites scholarly knowledge in order to legitimize himself, all in all a very recognizable conflict for many academics. One can't get rid of the impression that Boomkens is one of those who are under pressure every day within the academy to justify why they should be given research funding, why they should be entrusted with teaching assignments, and who are expected to provide this justification according to criteria that are becoming more and more bureaucratic, which all too soon robs many of any desire (to teach, or to do research). Against his better judgment, however, Boomkens completely omits any reference to work and its conditions in his comments on 'the everyday', so that the everyday can be conceptually 'rescued' as 'the age of fun'.

In the everyday life of a professor, however, whether one is a professor of pop music or a Shakespeare specialist, there is little fun to be had. If you happen to go out for a drink, the pub is almost empty, apart from a local prole, Ali, Mohammed, Marie and the student who lives upstairs. 'Are you still busy with that book about, what was it now, sadomasochism or something?' And then you remember that tomorrow you should really ask the faculty's webmaster to finally correct the announcement of the book on the site, which still says

'The lost voyeur. Globalization and identity (forthcoming).'

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