

Culture as Dynamic

Prologue

A brief autobiographical introduction: I make my living in the cultural sector, where I busy myself with the dual – and sometimes competing – tasks of analysis and reproduction. The former task covers any number of historically and culturally specific explorations of how people deploy, negotiate, and use a wide range of media and it includes, most recently, a five-year investigation into media and identity in Europe.¹ The latter task entails teaching, and I work in university programs on both sides of the Atlantic, brokering the insights of the past and interrogating the experiences of the present in order to shape the creators and critics of tomorrow, hoping to spark in them a sense of curiosity, of implication, and perspective. These tasks collide when the analytic project risks consuming the project of reproduction, dissecting it with critical gusto. Thinking about how and why cultural practices have emerged and witnessing the fabric of assumptions from radically divergent viewpoints, tends to destabilize (if not dissolve) the object of reproduction. And so it is with this essay. There are good reasons to think carefully about concepts that seem almost naturally to bind our experience and define our institutional practices; but if we press too hard, we risk dissolving the very categories that we seek to understand. I am aware of this danger, and proceed with the hope that should this occur, at least we might see other ways to formulate our questions.

If Delft blue windmills, wooden shoes, and kissing figurines in national costume still fill the shelves of Dutch souvenir shops, they do so in a very different identity context than even ten years ago. Leaving aside the problem of competing claims on these icons (Copenhagen's souvenir shops are full of the identical Chinese-made objects), long held assumptions about Dutchness and the identity of the nation are currently subject to dispute. Creating pressure from the inside, major populations in cities such as Amsterdam and Rotterdam are no longer white or Christian or speak Dutch as a first language. Dutch cuisine has been relegated to a tourist speciality in a culinary landscape dominated by Italian, Chinese, French, and American fast food restaurants. From the outside, Europe – itself in the throes of an identity crisis as it assimilates new nations and struggles to establish a constitution and sensible work regime – poses challenges in areas until recently held to be the domain of the Dutch state. Deprived of its culturally distinctive paper currency, facing regulatory incursions into long established agricultural practices, and witnessing the 'Europeanization' of its education system thanks to the Treaty of Bologna (in which 29 European nations agreed to reform their systems of higher education), it seems that the state can no longer take anything for granted. Against this background, the recent debates provoked by the very un-Dutch political assassinations of politician Pim Fortuyn and film director and columnist Theo van Gogh have triggered attempts to formulate and define the nation and its values for all of those who would be a part of it. One way of thinking about efforts to reconsider, renew and possibly re-brand Dutch Culture (with a capital 'C') is to

siege. Yet, at a moment when even Dutch concerns such as Philips and increasingly the flower business are shifting their operations out of the Netherlands, and as incursions from inside and out seem to redouble their intensity, the success of such initiatives seems questionable.

Culture & culture

While these changes have certainly provoked a sense of uncertainty as well as valiant attempts to fight back and assert national tradition, both changes and reactions need to be seen against the much larger backdrop of history and language, against a texture of everyday life that has marked and defined the culture over the long term. From this perspective, the latest transformations seem no more than a blip in a long and illustrious tradition. But that tradition is itself dynamic, with the Netherlands as a physical territory and Dutch as a language, demonstrating remarkable fluidity over the course of time. Fluid or not, and this is Hobsbawm and Ranger's point,² there is a core of accepted traditions and fictions that help to stabilize and centre the dynamic edges of a nation, and the Netherlands is no exception. It is no accident that the time when the Dutch were active in exploring and colonizing the world, transforming the identities of the many cultures they encountered, was also the time that we can most easily point to as a golden age, when brand-Nederland was easy to recognize in painting, for example. And today, when the nation is on the receiving as well as the giving end of the many dynamics wrapped up in the term 'globalization', it is also no wonder that its identity is increasingly blurred.

If by culture we mean those collective behaviours and products of a people studied by anthropologists, two things are certain. First, Dutch culture is alive and well, linked by history and genealogy through generations of evolving and accreting practices, and stabilized by whatever national framework we decide to impose upon it. Second, it is an emphatically plural culture – or perhaps better, a multitude of intertwined cultures, organized along the fault lines of taste, region, ethnicity, age and gender. Each of these has a schizophrenic relationship to the project of nationhood, at once helping to constitute it and reaching outwards across national boundaries, enacting the terms of cultural (as opposed to national) specificity by aligning with trans-national cohorts. Dutch lovers of early Renaissance music may have more in common with their French or Belgian counterparts than with fellow countrymen who are Britney Spears fans. Cultural citizenship does not necessarily coincide with national borders. But if by culture we mean Culture, that is, a limited domain of expressive practices and institutions – music, painting, architecture, literature, theatre, television, film, etc. – we enter a rarefied world of critics, taste-makers, investors, policy makers, and often (depending on the cultural form) state subsidized museums, publishers, concert halls, etc. This kind of culture is far less organic than the anthropological sort, and far more subject to the interests, pressures, and discourses of various elites – both national and international. Culture, in this sense, and as described to us by sociologists from Becker to Bourdieu,³ is closely related to notions of taste, to structures of cultural power and strategies for social distinction. Although garbed in concepts of truth and beauty, its mechanisms, strict hierarchies, and patterns of social deployment suggest that something far more mundane is at work. A sub-category of culture, Culture can be

on distinction – a context-dependent term that could refer to social position, or to nation, or to trans-national taste-cohorts, but always turns on identity.

Identities

Because *in situ* identity is always pluralform, I prefer to use the term identities. Identities tend to be dynamic and relative. They are dynamic in the sense that they change in response to different situations and appeals (in certain settings, our gender identity may supersede our national or occupational identities). And they are relative in the sense of being context-bound (a Dutch subject visiting the US is likely to be European; but in Europe, Dutch; and in the Netherlands, an Amsterdammer). Dutchness may also be triggered at home by transnational contexts: the Eurovision Song Contest, or world cup football, or even by the occasional war, national disaster or national holiday. Plural, dynamic, and relative, identities map onto the various collectivities that we participate in, and thus enjoy different levels of recognition and respect. One's identity as the subject of a nation is manifest in a documentary trail and regulated by the force of the state; one's identity as a participant in illegal music exchange systems is wholly voluntary, enacted through music file sharing, and till recently technically at odds with the rules of the nation. Most of us can negotiate the complicated demands of our various identities, and sometimes we even use one identity to camouflage another. These attributes of 'identity' when sited in humans also seem to hold when sited in non-human entities – cars, institutions, and even nations. With the key difference that they are discursively imposed rather than felt, the identities associated with nation can range from the declared (constitutions) to the hoped for (an immigrant's dreams), from the overtly iconic (wooden shoes and tolerance) to that which is actively repressed (nationalism).

The combination of identity and Culture may be as straightforward as the process of distinction just alluded to, or may emerge as something iconic and aspirational. If we pull the term nation (as a necessary fiction) into the mix, we may even have the makings of a branding strategy. Like the Nike swoosh trademark, iconic national Culture carries associations that are immediately evident; they link the familiar (the reified high points of Culture past) with the desired (our aspirations as a national culture), using a kind of shorthand that thrives on the specificity of reference and the ambiguity of meaning.

Media

Do some expressive forms, some modalities of Culture, relate to the project of nation and national identity more than others? This is a tricky question to answer, but there are grounds for suggesting that they do. Historically, and through the processes described by Hobsbawm and Ranger, some forms, 18th century Dutch painting is one example, have been closely associated with a richly developed national culture, with the project of national expansionism, and with the period's hierarchization of nations. If we think more in terms of the present, it seems that other forms, particularly those involving language (literature, theatre, film, broadcasting media, song), may be particularly apt carriers of national and popular memory and experience. The visual, spatial, and musical arts are obviously capable of this task as well, but the overlap of language and

complicated by the social organization of Culture, and within living memory, that organization has changed profoundly. Before the widespread democratization of political voice and means of public expression associated with the 20th century (when women could finally vote and media such as film, low cost printing, and broadcasting opened up new communication channels), the Netherlands saw a relatively close correlation between Cultural elites and economic and political elites, and thus a close fit between Culture and nation. But the unfolding of the 20th century introduced new patterns, uncoupling the links between these three realms. Particularly after the Second World War, Culture continued to be guided and stimulated by the nation (subsidy), but its relevance was increasingly determined by the marketplace.

The explicit repositioning of Culture as market meant that artists in search of an international career had to depend more on individual marketing – and thus appeals to a trans-national taste cohort – than on association with a particular nation and its taste elites. Here, the non-language-based arts, unencumbered by the complications of translation, enjoy ease of access to trans-national markets. The shift to Culture as marketplace also meant that the public could vote with its feet, choosing trans-national Culture or Dutch Culture, increasing the divide between nation and Culture. In this context, medium specificity emerges as more important than ever. The film medium, for example, has been so long dominated by Hollywood that even in the Netherlands, Hollywood stands as a vernacular against which Dutch film appears as something exotic or exceptional. So, too, popular song. So how have language-based media been able to fight back? Perhaps the answer isn't to be found in the text, in the work itself, so much as in the format. Here, the principal of pluriformity behind the *Nederlands Omroepbestel* might be seen as a resonant example. Not only is the policy unique, it reflects a unique sense of nation as a composite of distinct voices rather than a top-down imposition of homogenized imagery. That domestic television production, like the other language-based arts, helps to construct the nation's experience, serves as a repository of aspects of the national memory, and speaks in the national tongue, only reinforces its embrace of nation.

What next?

Subsidies remain the most effective way for a collective to ensure control over its representation. But as the logic of the neo-liberal state facilitates the project of global flows, we must attend carefully to the question of whose Culture is being sustained. We remain in the shadow of a Cultural system dominated by an aristocracy of taste; it is embedded in our history and our institutions, and it enjoys the advantage of being taken for granted. But as our cultural mix changes thanks to shifting populations, a changing European environment, and a re-definition of Culture as commodity, how should our subsidy system respond? Should we re-define the margins, shifting from the support of those with 'good taste' to those newcomers with distinctive cultural needs? Should we embrace the popular, hoping to engage larger publics? Should we support the work of language and memory – and the project of 'national identity' – developing new criteria for collective support? Should we focus on the structure of the Cultural, underscoring the centrality of concepts such as pluriformity in defining Dutch national identity, and supporting the channels necessary to make it flourish? Or should

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The answer will not be easy. As we enter the 21st Century, and the old links between nation and taste continue to weaken, the implications of how we ask the question will continue to grow.

William Uricchio is professor and head of Comparative Media Studies at MIT and professor of Comparative Media History at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. A Guggenheim, Humboldt and Fulbright Fellow, his research considers the transformation of media technologies into media practices, in particular their role in (re-)constructing representation, knowledge and publics.

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First impression
of Dutch

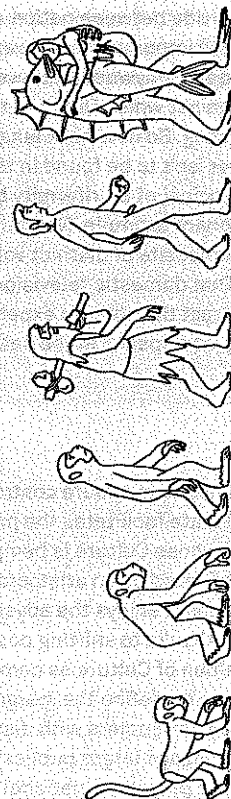
Dutch Diary by *Masuhiko Sato*

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Essay by William Uricchio

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- Essay by William Uricchio
- 1 - The European Science Foundation program was entitled *Changing Media, Changing Europe*, and the project I led within it was 'Media and Identity: Homogenization and Diversity.'
 - 2 - Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983)
 - 3 - Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley, 1982) and Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA, 1984)
 - 4 - This sidesteps the problem of translation, whether of words or program formats, in which the foreign is localized. Still, the trace of national language invariably reinforces one dimension of nation.
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