

Critique = Propaganda

The role of critics in the Netherlands

Roemer van Toorn

To know what one is speaking about, (...) requires that one knows who is speaking and from where: it is necessary to know that one always speaks from within a world from which comes the structure of consciousness of the one who is speaking and who, in order to know what he is saying, must know this world and this structuration at risk of otherwise remaining within an ideology.¹

Lucien Goldman

Practice experiments

A lot of critics in the field of architecture speak from above and outside lived experiences. They lose sight of their conditional nature, take no risk in speculation, and circulate as members of an administrative inquisition over the world paralyzing all practitioners what should be done tomorrow. When Lucien Goldman spoke his words in Paris during the turbulent days of 1968 he referred to what Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels once said in “The German ideology”² that when someone speaks, one should always ask oneself “Who is speaking and from where?” Goldman targeted people such as the philosopher Jacques Derrida and others who were stepping in the footsteps of Martin Heidegger, dealing with the world from an ivory-tower; as if life can be determined far from a consciousness determined by life itself. It is remarkable says Terry Eagleton “...that intellectual life for centuries was conducted on the tacit assumption that human beings had no genitals. Intellectuals also behaved as though men and women lacked stomachs.”³ Heidegger’s rather abstract concept of “Dasein” is indeed – as Emmanuel Levinas once said a “Dasein that does not eat”. In the many mediations of Dutch critics many different influences are dealt with: sociology, economy, anthropology, history, philosophy, technology, art, film, music, literature, design, the city, the everyday, photography, fashion, the experience of the thing, and other fields all inform their role as mediator. And it is of no coincidence that several mediators have started as an architect, because – as Antonio Gramsci once noted – architects and other practitioners are “organic intellectuals”⁴, they feel the obligation to organize life, they cannot permit themselves the luxury to observe the world from a quasi-neutral distance as traditional intellectuals prefer to do. Architects cannot avoid to experiment with the contemporary. Through projects they commit themselves to the present. Cannot but make their hands dirty when they transform a given reality to the better (at least that is what many hope to establish). It is these practices of experiment which mediators – from several different angles propagate. But we face a problem as well.

In 2003 the Amsterdam Architecture Centre (ARCAM) organized a discussion on the role of critics in the contemporary field of Dutch Architecture⁵. My introduction notes, to provoke debate was entitled: “ Critique = Propaganda”. Not only did the critics help to create the Superdutch condition, enjoyed and celebrated its success, they were also part of the whole propaganda machinery in advocating, promoting and installing the idea of the Superdutch through government policies, publications, exhibitions, congresses, research, polemics and alike. The once critical intelligencia in the Netherlands – looking at distance at the practice in the past – understood that her role had to change in

the face of the many changes our Supermodern society was undergoing. Architecture became a spectacle, became part of our experience economy, and critics as members of a symbolic class saw their new role coming. Reflexive Modernisation with its creative class demanded another approach from the critics. Help us, take part in the information economy, become just as pragmatic as architect, communicate with the public, embrace the market, criticizing the free market economy will not help you in developing alternatives, help the architect to communicate, change your role as architecture historian and help the architect, write operative history.

Instead of discussing the different practices of critique, mentioning them by name, which position they have taken so far, how they maneuver around in advocating certain characters and issues (for instance in America and Europe, after all they do fabricate certain imperial and orientalism too) or how this symbolic class manufactures certain points of view and historical realities), I will in the form of bullet points characterize the different types of critics we find in the Netherlands and also abroad today. So lets begin.

I believe there is no debate on architecture or the city in the Netherlands. There is a lot of talk, there are a lot of secret -- even provincial -- opinions around (you here them whisper in the corridors), there are lot of meetings and congresses doing yet another inventory on a theme or hot issue, there is disagreement on who has the facts right or wrong, but almost nobody dares to discuss the inherent ideological positions. Taking a stand and willing to enter into a fight is all to easily understood as a personal attack and not understood as something very fruitful. Not to mention the fact that you know that in a small country as the Netherlands your "enemy of yesterday" is your ally in the next project you have to pull off. Many results in the Dutch landscape -- we see being built -- are the results of endless meetings celebrating consensus, within the constraints of the last 30 years of neoliberal logics. We invite all the different voices to speak, but we never dare to classify, or categorize them. The result is an ocean of publications, an encyclopedia of endless facts, a catalogue of everything without being aware of its blind spots or hidden ideological direction. How thick can a book become? When does the backbone of a book become thicker than the width of its pages? Critique has died silently in the Netherlands.

Intelligence and creativity is not to blame. The many forms of mediations we practice in the Netherlands are proof of invention, commitment, reflection and daring pioneering spirit. And we have to be proud. But how come architecture critique is no longer with us? Is the new complexity so addictive, so much in need of explanation and mapping that there is simply no time left to critically reflect? Have we become data-addicts, reality addicts? Can reality do it better than any idea can? Has the demand for explanations overwhelmed the critic and academia, or worse: is any idea outdated in the face of the mutating real before it even has a chance to land? Many questions we have to answer and discuss some other time. The fact is that not only architects have become pragmatic also the critics have become pragmatic, or in other words: Critique = propaganda. And don't get me wrong, this propaganda has put Dutch architecture international and national high on the agenda, and the public is now very much aware of it too, that is no small achievement. More than ever we speak about architecture, and not only about its Style, but also its

economic and planologic perspective. What does this propaganda of critics consist of? Or differently put by which is the word critique replaced, and what do we do as propagandists, what is our propaganda about?

- 1) The Ghostwriter. The Ghostwriter writes for the architect and/or client. S/he writes understandable, lovely and intelligent about the work of the architect. Situates the work, clarifies it, selects the best photos, edits the wrongs out, the controversies, etc. perhaps even gives it a personal and autobiographical touch. Never before we have seen so many architects organizing and producing their own monographs on their (recent) work. When the ghostwriter fulfills its task well, s/he does research and makes connections the architect himself could never have envisioned. Suddenly the architect has a place in history, exemplifies a contemporary philosophy, etc.
- 2) The Launcher. The critic can also choose to become what I call a launcher. S/he launches new phenomena or genius newcomers who preferable others (the competition) haven't found and situated yet. S/he makes diagrams, opens avenues for trends and positions to come, techniques to develop, theories or techniques to bring to architecture, etc. Important is to be first, to know the trend before the others even thought of it. Timing is of utmost importance, because you should never launch a trend too early or too late. It has to be in the air, without anybody else knowing it, but as soon as you tell and explain it everybody feels it is actual and urgent, something of the now. An excellent launcher becomes famous by always again and again being ahead of its time on time. You inform the community and direct the actual debate, hopefully for a wider audience too. You could say that the architect launcher does what a stylist does in design and fashion both being a headhunter as trend hunter. And because you are the one who found it all you both intellectually, historically as well as financially can benefit from it if you play the launching game right.
- 3) The Ambassador. When you are abroad you should tell only the good news. Never tell the bad stories once your country is being celebrated. People want to hear success stories and why they are so. When I was lecturing about the Netherlands abroad, - people didn't expect that critique can be part of informing them on the Dutch situation from also a critical perspective, the good, the bad and the beyond. To be critical is not expected when you are an ambassador. Optimistic and joyful diplomacy is the keyword here. And perhaps you have noticed that Dutch still always excuse themselves for their success, but that you can hardly call critique.
- 4) The Informer. A critic can also act as an informer, almost acting like a secret agent. S/he puts the architectural production in a larger context, looks from different interdisciplinary angles. S/he unfolds and digs up new sources beneficial for the profession. Informs the different parties involved who you should meet, how you have to write that letter for a commission or subsidy to. It's all about the right people and correct data to use at the right place and how to capitalize on them. As informer you also play an important role in education.

- 5) The Researcher. The informer and researcher don't need to be far apart. Here we speak of the critic as academic researcher. In contrast to the other more positive (or projective) forms of propaganda the academic researcher locks him/herself up in pure theoretical/historical/stylistic/technical, non-engaged observations where the subjective point of view stays hidden in their scientific method. The observations of this research are not made to be operative for the practice. You can find all kinds of stuff depending on your own individual desire in the research, but don't ask the researcher to take a stance. The academic washes his/her hands in innocence, as if s/he can find and locate facts free of value. It is the propaganda of facts consciously excluding any form of engagement or commitment. By that it neutralizes and disqualifies every form of acting and negotiating the real.
- 6) The Journalist. The critic can also be a journalist. S/he translates difficult and often non-understandable languages and forms of the architect into common sense. The in-crowd language of the architect is translated for a wider audience overcoming the often lost in translation effects of architecture discourse. The journalist researcher would have. Today in our media world the architect as journalist has perhaps the best chances of success. Of course the journalist runs the risk of becoming an advertising agent, or even worse a spectacle hunter (just as the news broadcasts violence and other disasters) without the time to do a much-needed kind of independent research.
- 7) The Collaborateur (English I don't know, s/he collaborates with the wrong people, like collaborating secretly with the Nazi's (enemy) while doing as if you belong to others, what is English word?). The collaborateur is no longer a ghostwriter or ambassador, but plays as if s/he is critical to what s/he describes, but if s/he has to call the shots she enjoys the part of success. We deal here with a quasi-critical position, but the reality of it all is that this "avant-garde" or subversive role gives him/her the perfect alibi to be a member of the status quo. Slightly different from the collaborator – another form of the same character - is the agitator, that is the one who always takes the opposite position of what is current. If you say X s/he will polemically promote Y. Success guaranteed when the opposition to the enemy (preferably the status quo) is chosen well. But if this dialectic of simple opposition (or negation) is indeed of essential importance is a whole other issue.

The above-mentioned characters of mediation are no longer critical, but do witness a very intelligent and creative kind of mediation explaining, describing, contextualizing, populising and mobilizing certain agenda's and issues in architecture. But what ever has happened to a kind of critique that breaks open slogans fights the war against cliché? Shouldn't the contemporary critic as launcher or otherwise (as described here) stop hiding behind the work of the architect or the society in which s/he situates the work? Why can't a critic not also do proposals how it also can be different, collect information, develop concepts for architect who have no time to do research, reflect upon their work or ask questions? Aren't we in need for new forms of collaboration to address

the many issues we are facing today in our corporate global world? I believe a real mediator, a real critic develops alternative spaces too, and a counter public space away from the much surveillanced public sphere we find in the street of our theme park world today. So what should a mediator do too?

- 1) Critique has to become productive, it should go beyond analyses. The retroactive manifesto, the localization of difference, the localization of the manifest of our extreme reality is not enough. We need a new paradigm, a program that resists the vulgarity and commercialization of our everyday.
- 2) One-liners (Single) visions have to be dismantled.
- 3) We have to investigate the relation between ethics and aesthetics, how social needs and space-time sensorium's (performances of formation) can be seen as interdepend. We have to search for, both in history and the present, how dialogues between cultures in space can develop a news sense of public- and cityness.
- 4) We have to – as the mediators do – intervene in the public sphere, not by being popular, but by becoming popular. It is not about ratings, like in box-office terms, but about creating the popular.
- 5) Instead of staying silent about the different manipulations we are confronted with we have to make them visible, expose them, and make them explicit. Not to fight each other, but because of the consciousness that a free culture exists only by *gratuite* that differences do matter. Propaganda normalizes, neutralizes and creates wrong contradictions (when you are for them you are against us), it makes power invisible, while we should but the power forces on the table, make them part of the discussion.
- 6) As critics, or as I have claimed, propagandists we give the status quo its argumentation, authority, and legalize the power which is present in our physical space. This authority of explanation (description) has to travel together with critical observations, which steer other possibilities.
- 7) Critique should not ignore the past; let it disappear from the radar of the present. We should not explain or memorize (monumentalize) history, but through re-interpretation, from an actual and urgent perspective on the future rewrite history and make her operative again. No restoration or gentrification please.
- 8) The critic has to mobilize a counter-perspective breaking our hypnosés, our continuous sleepwalk (a critique without qualities). We have to develop a new vision and new ideals to counter the neoliberal hegemony of individualism in search for a new notion of the collective.
- 9) We shouldn't create fields of battle and/or competition – fight against each other; who puts what first on the agenda, who has the first publication out, etc, instead we should organize fields of co-existence. In our current society of privatization it is of utmost importance to create

new forms of collaboration, teams working together, in search of a kind of collective inventiveness against the design spectacle, against a being lost in paradise, a society of fear.

I am not against propaganda, but I regret that the hegemony of Neoliberalism – that society no longer exists, but only man, woman and the family as Margaret Thatcher used to say – doesn't allow any alternative form of mediation as I just have tried to explain.

Thank you for your patience.

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Talk for Arcam (Architecture Centre Amsterdam) at The Balie, Political Theatre, Leideseplein, Amsterdam, 15 January 2003. Republished in Hunch 2004.

1 Lucien Goldman, Lukács and Heidegger: Towards a New Philosophy, 1977.

2 Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels, Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy, 1959.

3 Terry Eagleton, After Theory, 2003.

4 Antonio Gramsci, as explained by Edward W. Said, in "Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993. Reith lectures", 1996.

5 "Critici aan het woord", 15 Januari 2003, ARCAM, in theatre De balie, Amsterdam.