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Dutch television studies and the reinvention of television as a medium in practice

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Dutch research communities were introduced to anglophone Media and Cultural Studies via internationally renowned, pioneering studies in television theory and research on television series. *Het Geval Dallas* [*Watching Dallas*] (1982) by cultural scholar Ien Ang was notably ground-breaking because of its use of an active audiences research approach which sought out participant viewers by placing an advertisement in the Dutch women's magazine *Viva*. Ang analysed viewers' experiences of watching the U.S. TV serial *Dallas* (1978–1991) and offered key understandings of how television operated as a popular culture medium, and of its social, political and cultural roles. Ang's work was a foundational text in the move towards understanding television in a particular way that is still influencing Television Studies today.

This review article offers a provisional mapping of Television Studies as conducted in the Netherlands with a main focus on the Dutch media industry, on the 'reinvention' of the medium in practice – across media, cultures and industries – and on how this has been reflected in Television Studies research conducted in the Netherlands. It brings together what I have observed as three strands of doing media research in the Netherlands over the last decade. It will look, first, at how television is seen to operate as a platform for cultural identity, ranging from historical perspectives on what is called the 'pillarisation' of Dutch public service broadcasting (PSB) to comparative and cross-cultural research on media, diversity and representation. It will secondly turn to the question of how television and streaming media are discussed in contemporary Television Studies in terms of cross-media culture and storytelling. Third, and finally, it will discuss how television is situated as audio-visual heritage, focusing on (digital) preservation practices

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of television content – including new and online forms – in audio-visual archives, such as online search tools for doing media research.

Media, diversity and cultural identity

Many inaugural lectures at Dutch universities have offered a reflection on the field of television history and theory, addressing in particular the impact of the medium on media, culture and society (De Leeuw, 2003; Müller, 2014; Van Dijck, 2002; Van Zoonen, 2003; Wijffjes, 2010). The Dutch television industry itself is characterised by its history of ‘pillarisation’, referring to a division of society into groups (‘pillars’) with their own institutions and organisations, separated on an ideological, religious or socio-economic basis. While in the rest of Dutch society this system has practically been closed down, the pillarised system of competition between different public service broadcasters has constantly been a defining characteristic of the Dutch media industry. In short, when Dutch broadcasting organisations were permitted to start experimenting with television broadcasts from 1951 onwards, each of the public service broadcasters produced their programmes individually but broadcasted together on the main PBS channel(s), resulting in a ‘pillarised’ television broadcasting system corresponding to the radio broadcasting system of the time (De Leeuw, 2012a; Fickers, 2012a; see also Beeld en Geluid Wiki, n.d.; Hagedoorn, 2016). This particular organisation of the public broadcasting system was maintained by amendments to legislation in 1980: broadcasting organisations needed to prove that they were representing a certain societal, cultural or religious movement in Dutch society. Because of this, in the words of Sonja de Leeuw, the experience of watching television in the Netherlands has been ‘an anchor point in the experience of cultural identity, in the search for and identification of standards and values of groups of varying composition and size’ (2003: 6 (my translation)).

When commercial broadcasting was legalised in the Netherlands in 1992, the main public broadcasters were encouraged by the Dutch government to compete with commercial broadcasters by collaborating more regularly and by categorising their schedules on the three public channels along themes that were ideology/human-oriented, popular entertainment, and social-oriented/progressive in a way that continued to draw on pillarisation. However, from the end of the 1990s and onwards into the new millennium, the public broadcasting system became more centralised (De Leeuw, 2012b). Jo Bardoel and Leen d’Haenens (2008) have evaluated the new public service broadcasting policy directions and questioned whether a European concept of public service broadcasting was still realistic. Nevertheless, throughout its different stages of convergence, the medium of television has provided people in the Netherlands with a shared experience of cultural identity and representation. Today, in Dutch society and government, the tasks and purposes of television broadcasters (both public and commercial) and their websites, digital channels and mobile services, are still heavily discussed in terms of their contribution to national identity and culture.

The history of Dutch television has been a topic of cultural-historical and socio-cultural research. An excellent example is the special thematic issue of the *TMG Journal for Media History* on 50 years of TV news in the Netherlands (Aerts and De

Vries, 2015). Furthermore, the volume of cultural-historical research *Een Eeuw van Beeld en Geluid: Cultuurgeschiedenis van Radio en Televisie in Nederland* [A Century of Sound and Vision: Cultural History of Radio and Television in the Netherlands] (Hogenkamp et al., 2012) provides an historical overview of traditions and trends in the Dutch television industry between 1900 and 2010 and Van Vree (2014) provides a further historical reflection on research into the history of mass media in the Netherlands. Such cultural-historical and socio-cultural analysis includes research on culture and migration in the Netherlands which has provided insights into representation on television and the impact of 20th-century migration flows on television culture (Kuipers, 2003).

Interest in Dutch television as a cultural platform for expressions of identity and diversity is also reflected in ethnographic audience and production research conducted in the Netherlands. A notable early study in this context is Joke Hermes's work on popular culture and cultural citizenship entitled *Re-reading Popular Culture: Rethinking Gender, Television, and Popular Media Audiences* (2005). In this research, Hermes combined textual analysis and media reception theory to analyse forms of popular culture including (children's) television. Costera Meijer (2010), moreover, investigated the local broadcaster in Amsterdam (AT5) and 17 local broadcasters in Rotterdam as institutions which helped to create social cohesion and public connection. Along similar lines, Boross and Reijnders (2019) studied participants' experiences of taking part in the British and the Dutch versions of the disability dating show *The Undateables* (2012–) (the Dutch version in 2018 changed its name to *The Dateables* (2013–)). Media audience research on television also plays a key role in Hermes's reflections in 2020 on participatory platform media and on how cultural citizenship is being practised and contested in the Netherlands. She argues for a combination of 'offline' and digital media audience research since '[t]he search for hidden common ground in digital and non-digital encounters might well be the goal for cultural scholarship today' (p. 11). Current research continues to emphasise television's continuing importance as a medium for information and storytelling and as a platform for cultural citizenship – including during lockdown (Hermes and Hill, 2020).

Research into multi-ethnic audiences and citizenship includes conceptualisations of multicultural programming by commissioning editors and programme makers working for public broadcasters (Leurdijk, 2006) as well as research into young Turkish migrants' perceptions of cultural difference via Turkish satellite television viewed in the context of the Netherlands (Milikowski, 2000). Most recently, research on screen cultures and migration can be situated within 'new directions in digital media and migration studies from a gendered, postcolonial, and multidisciplinary perspective' (Ponzanese, 2019: 1). Van der Waal and Böhling's (2019) analysis of 'refugee reality TV' as a technology of citizenship accommodating a plurality of voices would be an example of such work.

Finally, cross-cultural comparative studies investigate and compare Dutch television texts, production and consumption practices with those across borders. Van Keulen and Krijnen (2014) have studied the limits of localisation in cross-cultural, comparative research of the popular television programme *Boer Zoekt Vrouw* [Farmer Wants a Wife] (2004–), while Kuipers's 2011 article compared the export of the demographic gender

categories of American television series, such as *Sex and the City* (HBO, U.S. 1998–2004) and *South Park* (Comedy Central, U.S. 1997–), to the Netherlands, France, Italy and Poland. Importantly, Dutch television history and culture is also researched within larger studies in transnational television history in, for instance, the edited volume, *A European Television History* (Bignell and Fickers, 2008), and the special issue of the journal *Media History* titled ‘Transnational Television History. A Comparative Approach’ (Fickers and Johnson, 2010). *A European Television History* includes the Netherlands in a research project which brings together television historians and media scholars to map out the development of television across Europe by means of the comparative analysis of representative moments in television history. The *Media History* special issue uses a comparative, transnational, historiographic approach to reach more complex understandings of the historical development of television as medium and cultural agent and includes discussions on Dutch national and transnational contexts.

Television as cross-media culture and storytelling

Dutch broadcasters and media producers have played a pioneering role in the development of new forms of television in contemporary media landscapes. Recently, Media Studies scholars in the Netherlands have particularly zoomed in on researching Dutch television practices as examples of cross-media culture and storytelling, covering a constellation of dynamic screen practices that provide access to television content (Hagedoorn, 2016). Such research seeks to analyse forms of linear and non-linear television broadcasting, on-demand streaming services, (online) audio-visual archives, and digital initiatives including web television and video highlights from TV programmes on platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. Reflecting this academic research on television, universities and colleges in the Netherlands usually teach Television Studies as part of a larger degree programme in Media Studies (including theoretical, historical and practical approaches, in the Dutch and/or English language) with an emphasis on applied and intermedial research trajectories. Topics covered are likely to include cross-media culture and storytelling; media, culture and society; media and global politics; media and journalism; media and entrepreneurship; and creative media industries and cultural production. Contemporary degree programmes that include Television Studies teach theories, models and methods inspired by scholars from Media and Cultural Studies and Hermeneutic traditions, but also from Communication Science. Students are expected to acquire skills in qualitative and/or quantitative research which would include (among other approaches) textual or content analysis of TV programmes, documents and websites; media industries research; (online) audience research; market research; (social) media statistics; and oral history and archival research. In the broader context of the social development in which knowledge and science must always have a practical goal, television practitioners and researchers today speak the language of multiple, convergent media industries.

Researching television is now framed in an intermedial and convergent manner, including analysing storytelling techniques – like ‘transmedia world-building’ (Hassler-Forest, 2016) – and researching the production and consumption of content on different

'screens'. While the extent to which the medium has been stable throughout its history can be questioned (Keilbach and Stauff, 2013; Uricchio, 2013) these developments in research point to the question of whether television is still a recognisable medium for audiences and users in all its current forms. In this context, the University of Groningen in the Netherlands hosted the Biennial Conference of the Television Studies Section of ECREA (European Communication Research and Education Association) on 24–25 October 2019, centred around the theme of the 'youthification' of television in the age of screen culture (Hagedoorn et al., 2021). This conference offered a platform for new European research on how television is constantly testing its definitional boundaries and how established structures are reacting and adapting to new viewing and screen cultures, demonstrating, as Elke Weissmann (2019) also argues, how vibrant the research field has become.

In contemporary media societies, television has continued its characteristic role as a platform for entertainment, information and participation in both private and public spheres. However, these functions of the medium have been expanded in cross-media contexts with content created by television producers travelling across multiple platforms and screens. Television content has been, as William Uricchio has called it, 'loosened' (2004: 175) from a specific distribution format. For example, my students at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands now engage in studying more contemporary screen practices which they no longer refer to as 'watching television'. These screen practices might include viewing an episode of their favourite TV series on a popular streaming service, or watching and commenting on a YouTube video or Instagram Stories made by television creators (think for instance of the viral video 'America First, the Netherlands Second' from the Dutch satirical late-night programme *Zondag met Lubach* [*Sunday with Lubach*] (2014–2021)). The work of these students is supported by reading television research being developed in a Dutch context.

Despite this shift to intermedial approaches, there are still Dutch-language Television Studies handbooks which focus on television as a medium on its own terms. Notable is *Inleiding televisiestudies* [*Introduction Television Studies*] (2003) – later titled *Televisiestudies* [*Television Studies*] (2011) – by Joke Hermes and Maarten Reesink, which was the first Dutch-language introduction to analysing television. Important too is Sonja de Leeuw's *De man achter het scherm: De televisie van Erik de Vries* [*The Man Behind the Screen: The Television of Erik de Vries*] (2008; see also De Leeuw, 2010), which is a television historiography of the rise of the medium in the Netherlands as it intertwines with the life and works of television pioneer and director, Erik de Vries.

Dutch television research also regularly contributes to introductions to the practices of cross-media culture, such as *Basisboek crossmedia concepting* [freely translated as *Handbook of Conceptualising Crossmedia*] (Reynaert et al., 2009). Researching television culture in Dutch Media Studies also involves broader media-wide theoretical explorations of screens like *Mobile Screens: The Visual Regime of Navigation* (Verhoeff, 2012) which focuses on new screen practices, media theory and visual culture, including (ambient) television screens, game consoles, mobile phones, car interfaces and GPS devices. The collection *Mind the Screen* (Kooijman et al., 2008) explores concepts central to the work of European film scholar Thomas Elsaesser and examines the context

of varying screens: the television set, the cinema screen, video installations, digital interfaces and mobile phone displays. A European comparative study, published by Amsterdam University Press in their MediaMatters series, is presented in *Screen Space Reconfigured* (Sæther and Bull, 2020), a collection edited by scholars from the University of Oslo with contributions from international colleagues including those from the Netherlands (De Rosa and Strauven, 2020; Verhoeff, 2020). This collection explores the many new ways in which space in the 21st century is reconfigured by screens, including mainstream cinema, experimental film, video art, mobile screens and stadium entertainment; the television set, its aspect ratio and screen dimensions are specifically reflected upon as part of a larger discussion on the reconfiguration of screen borders (Ross, 2020). While television is not the sole central medium in any of these works, the reflections on the medium and its industry offer understanding of the topic at hand.

Media audiences using so-called ‘second screens’ in connection to television viewing have been of particular interest for researchers of Dutch media and viewing cultures, with studies, for instance, on how institutional decisions impact on the development of interactive television in the Netherlands and Flanders (Baaren, 2015); how television genres in the Netherlands use additional interactive communication channels (Van Selm and Peeters, 2007); how Twitter use may offer insights into viewing patterns of television audiences (Van Es et al., 2016); how Dutch fans interpret popular international TV series (Lamerichs, 2018) like *Sherlock* (2010–2017); and how the rise of social media affects European public service broadcasting – in this case specifically in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom – at the level of institutions, professional practices and content (Van Dijck and Poell, 2015).

While this mapping of the debate about television culture has the Dutch media industry as its starting point, it is relevant to emphasise that Television Studies research conducted in the Netherlands analyses television, streaming media and screen cultures across borders. As part of the audience research discussed here, discursive analyses of social media commentary examine responses to international television programmes; examples include Sophie Eeken and Joke Hermes’s (2019) work on YouTube viewing responses and critiques of gender representation in the British science fiction TV series *Doctor Who* (1963–1989/2005–) and Jan Teurlings’s analysis of the new ‘commons’ of TV criticism which argues that social media have prompted ‘a renewed impetus to TV criticism’ (2018: 208). U.S. focused research like that conducted by Ang (1982) has been more or less a constant since the early days of Television Studies in the Netherlands.

In response to such contemporary transformations of the medium, the English-language volume *After the Break: Television Theory Today* (2013a) edited by Marijke de Valck and Jan Teurlings seeks to rethink earlier television theory by means of a ‘decidedly heterodox collection of positions, arguments and emphasis’ (p. 15). The authors question the extent to which key Television Studies concepts and theoretical paradigms are (still) adequate to understand television in its current contexts of uncertainty. Here, they take the perspective that debates on the death of the medium have actually been of advantage to Television Studies, describing such deliberations as ‘a blessing for a discipline that – some excellent exceptions excluded – had become rather

set and repetitive in its output' (De Valek and Teurlings, 2013b: 15). The volume opens a new academic series on television culture (in English) published by Amsterdam University Press; rather than accepting the narrative of the end of television as we know it, the mission of the series is to analyse 'the televisual' today in its contemporary specificity as well as to address challenges of new developments and blurred boundaries in technology and theory (AUP Television Culture website, n.d.).

Television as audio-visual heritage (digitised and born-digital)

Materials for doing Television Studies are growing online with the increasing availability of audio-visual materials and their metadata in digital form (think of broadcasts, images, new media, documents, transcriptions of TV and radio broadcasts, newspapers, TV magazines, books and articles, among others). Many hours of audio-visual material have been digitised in the Netherlands since 2007 due to a government-funded programme called *Images for the Future*. While earlier research generations, as Fickers (2012b) argues, were trained to grapple with access issues and a relative scarcity of sources, at present researchers examining television face a phase of abundance with an overflow of audio-visual sources. The digital availability of television content and the preservation of audio-visual heritage in the Netherlands has also brought new opportunities for analysing television materials and connected paratexts in (online) audio-visual archives, and via digital search tools. Materials for researching Dutch television and screen culture are thus increasingly available online and infrastructures often support applications for media research and analysis. The Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision (Beeld en Geluid, the Dutch knowledge institute for media culture and audio-visual archiving in Hilversum) offers researchers (digital) accessibility to audio-visual archives, especially television programmes – including those of public services broadcasters – but also written press, gifs, games, websites and media-related objects. CLARIAH (*Common Lab Infrastructure for the Arts and Humanities*) is the digital research infrastructure for humanities researchers in the Netherlands, which provides support for doing Media Studies teaching and research using audio-visual sources and connected (meta)data. Notably, it aims to provide researchers with access to digitised audio-visual data in the Netherlands as well as improved tools for research and analysis. Digital tools – and digital humanities or data science techniques – allow for items to be explored and compared more easily, across larger or multiple diverse datasets; enable the visualising of trends and patterns in, for example, representations on television; and encourage the triggering of new research questions or the reformulation of ongoing ones. Andrea Meuzelaar (2015), for instance, has analysed European immigration history in the three-part Dutch television documentary *Land van Aankomst [Land of Promise]* (2014), and her research significantly draws on this improved availability of broadcast archives and digitised television materials. In my own work (Hagedoorn, 2016, 2020), I explored how Dutch television's reuse of archival materials and convergence with new media technologies has affected its role as a mediator of the past, examining in particular how the medium's contemporary representations of history contribute to the construction of cultural memory. Archival research by television scholars can also include analyses of

content that has never been broadcast – such as Chris Vos’s (2018) reconstruction of how a controversial current affairs programme made by the progressive VARA broadcasting group never made it to air in 1965 and 1966.

Media researchers in the Netherlands have begun to evaluate the practices of doing Television Studies and television history online and to offer critical reflections on the state of this growing field. Julia Noordegraaf (2016) discusses the methodological implications of including computational research in Media Studies, as well as the implications of online access to television archival material. She looks at how digitalisation affects the archivist whose role as gatekeeper of knowledge is becoming more like that of an ‘*editor* of knowledge and information generated by a variety of agents’ (Noordegraaf, 2010: 9; see also Noordegraaf, 2011). Digital tool criticism research by Aasman et al. (2018) further explores the creation of tools in the CLARIAH Media Suite for audio-visual annotation and for doing media history. This study in particular analyses autobiographical and confessional modes of documentary filmmaking on Dutch public service television across the last five decades. Furthermore, in-depth qualitative analysis by Hagedoorn and Sauer (2018) of media researchers studying audio-visual materials in the Media Suite in a co-creative design process has offered critical insights on how contemporary digital tools and platforms of cultural heritage institutions in the Netherlands inform curatorial approaches and user perspectives. This analysis shows how such approaches inform the researcher’s processes of search and storytelling and suggests that online access requires media and television researchers to adopt a more self-reflexive research stance.

Online availability also offers opportunities for the creative re-use of televisual archival materials, including in media archives and research reports. For example, Jasmijn Van Gorp and Rosita Kiewik (2018) reflect on what is *not* found in the audio-visual archive from the perspective of teaching television history online, inviting their students at Utrecht University to build a canon of a genre of Dutch television and create a video poster on the *EUscreen* portal (discussed further below) consisting of clips that represent part of their canon. This offers researchers a creative opportunity to reflect on a canon of things that have not been on Dutch TV but do exist, or never existed but should have existed. By contrast, television historian and director Gerda Jansen Hendriks (2015) offer an in-depth analysis of newsreels and documentaries about the colonial war between the Netherlands and Indonesia (1945–1949) and also looks at their re-use in later television programmes. Jansen Hendriks demonstrates how the programmes often look back at the colonial war in ways that go beyond the purpose of the original films and the methods used by television creators to do so.

Finally, increased digitisation supports comparative analyses of television broadcasts and televisual production practices across borders. Such current research on audio-visual data in digital humanities research and audio-visual heritage online (see for example Badenoch et al., 2018; Fickers et al., 2018) has paid attention to Dutch television cultures and practices but also transcends these. *Europeana* which is funded by the European Union enables people to explore the digital resources and metadata of Europe’s museums, libraries, archives and audio-visual collections while cross-domain portals like *EUscreen* (also as part of *Europeana*) transcend national connotations and make a

significant contribution to television's history becoming more widely available. *EUscreen* offers free online access to videos, stills, texts and audio from European broadcasters and audio-visual archives. Television Studies scholar Sonja de Leeuw (2012c) states that the *usability* of television materials online is dependent on contextualisation. Pointing to issues such as scattered metadata, technical interoperability, rights issues and lack of educational value, De Leeuw argues that 'the real challenge is in establishing connectivity at different levels' (2012c: 7; see also De Leeuw, 2015; Fickers and De Leeuw, 2012).

In summary, doing Television Studies and researching television culture, with a focus on the Dutch media industry, over the last decade is characterised by an emphasis on multidisciplinary. This review article shows how different observed research strands often combine investigations of television as examples of cross-media culture and storytelling with an analysis of television as a platform for cultural identity, diversity and representation. Similarly, explorations of television as audio-visual heritage material in both digitised and born-digital (i.e., material originally produced digitally) forms also work to develop new online screen cultures and digital tools for analysing media. Practices of creating television content and doing television research today both necessitate speaking the language of multiple and convergent media, as well as working with digital tools. Television is now being considered less in a media-centric manner and rather more as part of cross-media storytelling and 'screen culture'. Television Studies in the Netherlands has become part of Digital Humanities, which increasingly requires knowledge of archival practices and archival theories (De Leeuw, 2018). To meet the challenge of connectivity at different levels, Dutch audio-visual archives are encouraged to archive more contextual materials alongside broadcast content; written documents, the websites of Dutch public broadcasters and electronic materials help to contextualise Dutch television production cultures, conditions and craftsmanship (Hagedoorn and Agterberg, 2016), even though archiving such dynamic texts is extremely challenging (Baltussen et al., 2014). This does not mean that it is not still worthwhile to consider what constitutes the medium of 'television' in these current research strands and to ask oneself what 'Dutch' television and Dutch Television Studies is. Television researchers should feel encouraged to include Dutch perspectives on doing web archaeology (see Aasman et al., 2019) in their research. It has been profoundly significant that the research strand of television as audio-visual culture and heritage, alongside newer developments in digital humanities research, has required practitioners, researchers and audio-visual archives to rethink research questions and approaches for doing Television Studies online and to connect with the paratexts of the medium on sites where television content for diverse audiences (re)circulates online.

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