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Art, ideology and Americanization in post-war Dutch Mandril. Journalistic innovation of a conservative kind

In his study Discovering the News Michael Schudson came to the conclusion that journalists try to objectify their standards and values by stressing the importance of ‘facts’. Gaye Tuchman says it perhaps more concisely: ‘the word “objectivity” is fraught with meaning’.¹ To talk of journalism is to talk of ideology. Let us interpret ideology in the sense given to it by the French philosopher Jean-François Revel in his book La Connaissance Inutile (1988): a mixture of strong emotions and simple ideas which is expressed in a form of behaviour.² It is a rather negative definition of ideology, which stems from Revel’s principle that ideological thought comes prior to the examination and argumentation of facts.

You can examine ideology by looking for the hidden and unconscious motives behind openly expressed convictions. In press history studies the emphasis is almost always on the political culture of the medium under examination. Such studies rarely devote much attention to art, even though that constitutes a substantial part of a newspaper or magazine.³ Though we happily leave the art section and the art information on news pages as a historical source for art historians and literary experts, they often show little interest in journalism in return. They look to reviews of books or exhibitions in order to discover more about the reception of an artist or movement. And yet from a journalistic point of view there is much that is worthy of mention about art in the newspaper.

While it would be absurd to question how far political coverage is about politics, you may well wonder to what extent art coverage is about art. Elaborating further on this theme, this article will proceed to discuss hidden ideologies in art coverage as part of a particular journalistic culture in the Netherlands shortly after the Second World War. Because such a subject is too wide to be treated in a general way, I shall focus on the news magazine Mandril from several angles; what follows should be seen as a case study of the relationship between art and politics in the context of journalistic innovation. To what extent was the attention given to art in Mandril fuelled by hidden ideologies, not only in factual reporting but also in the way in which art was written about?


2 Jean-François Revel, La Connaissance Inutile (Paris 1988), p. 164. The passage reads as follows: ‘l'idéologie est un mélange d’émotions fortes et d’idées simples accordées à un comportement.’

3 In Lás die krant! Geschiedenis van het nieuwsblad Parool 1945-1970 (Amsterdam 1996) Gerard Mulder and Paul Koedijk occasionally make exceptions to this rule, as on pp. 379-82 where they write about the relationship between Het Parool and Tiende. By contrast they say nothing whatever about the interrelationship between Het Parool and Mandril.
Mandril did not stand alone as a renascent medium. In the wake of the Dutch newspaper *Het Parool*, which had its origins in the resistance, the late nineteen-forties saw the appearance of several journalistic weeklies and monthlies which gave paramount importance to breaking the still rigid patterns within the pillarized society of the immediate post-war years. Since the middle of the nineteenth-century Dutch society had been divided into ideological pillars. This meant that Catholics, Protestants and socialists (as well as the ‘residual pillar’ of the liberals) had their own schools, societies and even their own press. Needless to say, this rigidly enforced segmentation and segregation entailed a close relationship with political and artistic institutions. The result of this socially and ideologically fragmented system was that people from the same pillar did not criticize each other, and events seen as the domain of another pillar were rarely the subject of serious attention.4

*Mandril* is an example of the post-war endeavour to found a non-pillarized press by avoiding party politics and by abolishing the taboo on humour and independent thought which was still prevalent in both Catholic and Protestant newspapers. *Mandril* also shows that there was a need to cover art with the same topicality as politics. *Mandril* gave a lot of attention to new art forms from America: not just film and jazz but American journalistic trends too were given more space than previously: commentaries, columns and cartoons for example. It was an American novelty to let the honest man in the street have his say now and then.

Although rationality was regarded as a prerequisite for liberalism, the name of the magazine referred to a West African species of ape also known as the ‘devil of the forest’. (Rationalism can also be depicted mockingly, as in the mandrill presenting its buttocks to spectators.) The *Mandril* editors made no secret of the fact that they were aiming at a Dutch equivalent of the American weekly *The New Yorker*. Feature formats were simply borrowed.5 For example the introductory feature ‘On dit . . . on dat’, generally written by Eduard Elias, was a blatant copy of the *New Yorker’s* ‘Talk of the Town’. A first glance at the cartoons in *Mandril* leaves little doubt that Dutch cartoonists were sometimes extremely directly inspired by their American counterparts.6 (Illus. 1, 2 & 3.)

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