

CONVERGENT CULTURES

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF COMMISSIONED AUDIOVISUAL PRODUCTIONS IN THE NETHERLANDS

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Abstract: The article analyses the changes in production and consumption in the audiovisual industry and the way the so-called 'ephemeral' commissioned productions are scarcely preserved. New technologies and the liberal economic policies and internationalisation changed the media landscape in the 1980s. Audiovisual companies created a broad range of products within the audiovisual industry. This also resulted in a democratisation of the use of media as well as new formats of programmes and distribution for commissioned productions. By looking at a specific company that recently handed over a collection to the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, challenges and issues of preserving video and digital and interactive audiovisual productions are discussed.

Keywords: ephemeral media, interactive content, commissioned audiovisual productions, video, Sound and Vision, audiovisual archive

At first sight a video of a Garden centre (Video 1), in which a comic scene is supposed to educate the staff about hospitality, is probably not what one would consider to be audiovisual heritage. This production is part of a recently acquired collection by the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision.

Sound and Vision collects audiovisual productions of national interest. It functions as the archive of the Dutch public broadcasters, but its collection also consists of documentaries, company collections, scientific and educational films, radio, music as well as internet videos. Its aim is to have a representative collection of audiovisual material and to offer context information about the programmes produced in or about the Netherlands. This article looks at the development of commissioned audiovisual productions in the Netherlands since the 1980s. It discusses opportunities as well as challenges for an audiovisual archive like Sound and Vision to preserve video and digital born commissioned productions.

Sound and Vision was formed in 1997 by a merger of three archives and a broadcast museum. Its new building opened in 2006, giving access to over 750.000 hours of material for professionals, researchers and a museum, called 'The Experience,' for a general audience. Over the past 20 years the preservation has been professionalised and content is made accessible in many forms.

The diversity of collections at Sound and Vision is not only in content, but also in types of carriers. The changes in production and consumption of the audiovisual industry are only partly represented in the collections of national



Video 1. *Intratuin Momentje AUB*. Click [here](#) to watch it

audiovisual archives such as Sound and Vision. To study changes in the production and distribution of audiovisual media, documents as well as the productions themselves are essential.

1 Ephemeral Productions

Commissioned productions can be considered ephemeral media forms. Paul Grainge describes the ephemeral as signifying a relation to time (duration, shortness, speed) and regimes of transmission (circulation, storage, value).¹

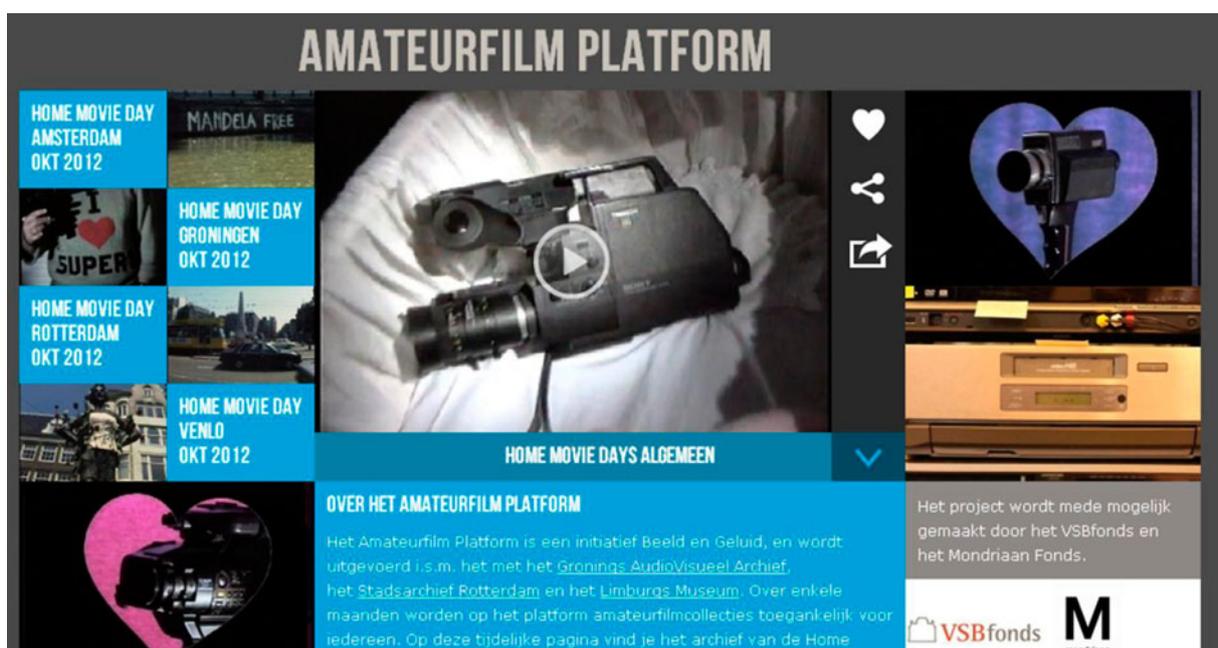


Fig. 1 Screenshot Amateurfilmplatform

Compared to film and television, types of media like amateur film, commercials or company videos are considered ephemeral. Their smaller visibility, lower cultural status and historical/archival marginalisation have resulted in little scholarly attention.²

Among ephemeral media, the amateur film has slowly but surely gained cultural status. It has been collected and found its way to local and national archives. Amateur video from the 80s and 90s is however absent from the vaults. Therefore Sound and Vision and the Council Archive of Rotterdam, and Groningen Audiovisual Archive started [www.amateurfilmplatform](http://www.amateurfilmplatform.nl) in 2013. This platform does not only present material, people can also upload videos to add to the collection of archives involved. The case of the amateur film is similar to commissioned productions. Sound and Vision also campaigned to collect clips people shot with or about the Dutch Royal Family in *Mijn band met oranje* ('My Bond with The Royal Family'). These projects combine acquiring material with immediate presentation.

2 Developments of Commissioned Film to Video

Within the audiovisual industry the commissioned productions have always been important. In the film era, until the 1980s there was only a small audiovisual industry in the Netherlands. However these films were screened in cinemas and discussed by newspapers. Internationally awarded documentaries like *Glas* ('Glass'), by Bert Haanstra, or *'t schot is te boord* ('Shoot the Nets'), by Herman van der Horst were commissioned films.³ In the Netherlands local archives, the **EYE Film Institute** and Sound and Vision have collections of commissioned films, or company collections from Philips, Unilever and DSM, for instance.

Between 1980 and 1990 the audiovisual industry in the Netherlands transformed from a film dominated medium into video. The lower cost of video production and distribution increased the demand of commissioned productions. The number of companies and audiovisual productions grew enormously.⁴ This process continued with the digitisation of production and distribution in the 90s and the new millennium.

With video production, screenings were no longer in cinemas and newspapers did not write about these videos. The target audience was reached in offices, schools, at home and, in the new millennium, increasingly online. Public screenings took place at specialised festivals or trade shows and audiovisual projects were discussed in trade magazines. Figures about the amount of money involved in the industry are only partly available, for instance for advertising.⁵

*Films that Work*⁶ is one of the few studies of the commissioned film, looking at the audiovisual sector in the celluloid era before the 80s. The change from celluloid to video in the Netherlands was studied by Bert Hogenkamp.⁷ He describes the ambivalence of the film industry, about the professional quality of video and the initiatives for community and educational and promotional use of the medium.⁸ These developments were also determined by the introduction of cable, satellite and digital media, which offered new ways for production and distribution.⁹

1 Paul Grainge in: Paul Grainge, eds, *Ephemeral Media*, BFI, 2011, p. 9

2 Idem, p. 10

3 Bert Hogenkamp, *Documentaire 1945–1965, bloei van een genre*, 2003, p. 97–101

4 Based on a survey by *AV Magazine*, June 1981.

5 For amounts spent in television and in commercials, see for instance the yearly publication *Mediafeitenboekje*, Carat.

6 Vinzenz Hediger, Patrick Vonderau, eds, *Films that Work*, Amsterdam University Press, 2009

7 HERA project Technology, Exchange and Flow <http://trans-techresearch.net/tef/>

8 Bert Hogenkamp, *Video Ergo Sum*, unpublished paper, European Social Science History Conference, Glasgow 2011

9 See for instance Bert Hogenkamp, Sonja de Leeuw, Huub Wijffes, eds, *Een eeuw van beeld en geluid*, Beeld en Geluid, 2012, chapters 6 and 7 and Sonja de Leeuw in: 'TV Nations or Global Medium?' in: Jonathan Bignell and Andreas Fickers, eds, *A European Television History*, Wiley Blackwell, 2008, p. 129–134



Fig. 2 Video and laser disc on the cover of AV Magazine June 1981

3 Converging Culture in Commissioned Videos

Most production companies were able to combine multimedia forms like film, video or slide shows. The introduction of video can be considered as an important step in converged media in the way that Henry Jenkins describes it: convergence understood not only as a technological shift, but also as a change in the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres, and audiences.¹⁰ Thus the logic by which media industries operate as well as by which media consumers process news and entertainment were altered. The democratisation of the medium, available for all communities and not only professionals, results in new forms of interaction with its audiences.

¹⁰ Henry Jenkins, *Media Convergence Culture*, New York University Press, 2006, p. 15

The new technologies, the liberal economic policies and internationalisation changed the media landscape in the 1980s. Broadcasters increasingly worked with independent companies.¹¹ These companies did not only produce television programmes, but covered a broader range of products within the audiovisual industry. Many companies, (local) government, schools and universities used audiovisual media for their own purposes. The new formats that video offered were for instance, a weekly company journal. Several banks created their own production unit that delivered a video to employees to watch together on Monday morning before the banks would open.¹²

4 Preservation Needs Institutionalization

The acquisition in the archive is based on standard procedures. The most dynamic collection for Sound and Vision is the broadcast material. Based on a government mandate and agreement, all content, about 8000 hours of television by public broadcasters is ingested automatically at Sound and Vision in a digital workflow since 2006. Other collections, analogue or digital, are offered by individuals (for instance producers or directors) or stakeholders (institutes or companies) and selected in procedures according to international standards by **UNESCO** and **FIAT-IFTA**.

It would be too simple to conclude that the lack of commissioned videos is due to the fact that archives like Sound and Vision do not acquire actively and that producers or companies involved do not offer the material to be preserved. In contrast to broadcasting, there is no institutional partnership with the industry. It does not mean that none of the commissioned productions are preserved. Larger companies do have a company archive in which audiovisual material is stored, like the (inter)national bank Rabobank that even digitised some material. All documents and products by the national government are archived via **The National Archive**, audiovisual material is stored at Sound and Vision.

Partnership between archives and producers is a step to institutionalisation, for instance with companies that are part of the trade organisation **Directors of Media**, originally founded in the 80s as the Vereniging Audiovisuele Producenten (Organisation of Audiovisual Producers). Another partnership to acquire material is with specialised festivals. A platform for commissioned film was established in 1972, the Foundation for Audiovisual Manifestations (SAM). In around 2000 the festival was renamed into **Keying into the Brain**. This festival focuses on all forms of audiovisual communication. Keying into the Brain awards 'Golden Herons' in eleven categories such as Film and video, Internet, Multimedia and location based Media. Sound and Vision hosted the last two festivals in 2011 and 2012. Acquiring the prize winning or nominated productions would be an opportunity for selecting a part of the annual production. A festival organised by volunteers has a risk of maintaining continuity, and that is why Keying into the Brain has not been organised since 2012. Furthermore an archive could just crawl the web for online productions. This offers opportunities to collect material, but often lacks the context information that is needed.

Restrictions in selecting and preserving are often the result of pragmatics. One problem is that commissioned productions are commercial, which is in contrast to the public funding of archives. Secondly there is no urgency due to the lack of demand by professionals, academics or the industry for reuse, research or presentation of these productions. The urgency for preserving video is primarily the risk of loss, due to the decay of the material. Thirdly the material itself makes preservation, cataloguing and digitisation time-consuming and expensive. Other issues involved are the variety of obsolete video formats, which can be the case within a small collection of one producer. This requires specific skills for archiving these productions. One of the reasons that there has been no cooperation with Keying into the Brain for collecting materials is the lack of resources.

11 Bert Hogenkamp, Sonja de Leeuw, Huub Wijffes, eds, *Eeuw van beeld en geluid, Beeld en Geluid*, 2012, p. 250.

12 Bert Hogenkamp, *video ergo sum*, unpublished paper, European Social Science History Conference, Glasgow 2011



Fig. 3 A variety of video formats in the vaults of Sound and Vision

5 The Talmon Case

The Garden centre (Intratuin) video, which was mentioned and presented in the beginning of the article, is part of the collection of Talmon Online Storytelling. The company is an interesting case for discussing the problems and opportunities in collecting and preserving commissioned productions. The company director, Ab Talmon, felt the urgency to preserve some of the productions in 2011, when director and scriptwriter Henk Goossens retired after working at Talmon for 25 years. It happened after Talmon participated in a seminar on commissioned productions for the HERA project at the VU University in Amsterdam.

The company's history is representative of developments in the Dutch audiovisual industry. Ab Talmon started a production company, Total Video, in 1983. Like many video production companies at the time, it grew quickly. By 1990 it



Video 2. *Keying into the Brain*. Click [here](#) to watch the festival leader

produced about 80 video's a year for large companies such as a national bank (Nederlandse Middenstands Bank, NMB) and Toyota Netherlands. At the time it offered production services as well as facilities like a studio, duplication and (post)production. The facilities and production were separated in two companies, and Talmon chose to run the production company. In the 90s the focus changed from video to digital, as Total Video was renamed into 'Talmon AV producties' in 1997 and later into 'Talmon Online Storytelling.'

The growth of the company with its online activities was similar to rapid video developments in the 80s. Having 40 employees, Talmon sold the company. Only a few months later it went bankrupt and Talmon bought back the company to continue as a small organization with just four employees.

The collection of Talmon consists of 31 productions on videotapes, CD ROMs and digital files. Information about these productions is gathered from brochures, scenarios and articles in trade magazines. Some of the productions were already acquired, for instance *Say Cheese* (2000), a promotion for the Netherlands aimed at young people. It reached millions of audiences worldwide, according to the commissioner, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹³ In comparison to the company journal for Intratuin, a project like *Say cheese* has production value, using animation and live action to address the youngsters.

For its variety of clients the company looked for many ways to attract audiences. Some evidence of new production or distribution methods is no longer in existence, for instance, videos for the 'Point of sale' network that was launched in 1984 for a large retailer, Blokker. Another example is a sponsored programme for the European television network Super Channel. This was made in 1988 for the fashion company Van Gils, before commercial television was introduced in the Netherlands. The programme was not only shown on television, but also in shops across 35 countries.¹⁴

¹³ Interview by Linda Roos, intern at Sound and Vision, with Willem van der Linden, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 12 december 2012

¹⁴ Jos Waltmans, Interview Ab Talmon in *Viewfinder*, februari 1990, p. 16–17.



Video 3. *Say Cheese! A Journey through Holland by Talmon TV*. Click [here](#) to watch it

6 The Real Challenge for Preservation: Interactivity

Although archiving the linear videos poses practical or organisational problems, the real challenge for preservation is posed by the interactive video. Already in 1981 the *AV Magazine*, a periodical for the audiovisual industry in the Netherlands, headed ‘the year of the laserdisc.’¹⁵ In the documentation on Talmon the first production mentioned is an interactive laser disc at the end of the 80’s, commissioned by a pharmaceutical company Eli Lilly, in cooperation with a software company and Sony. Unfortunately the laser disc is not in the Talmon collection. More recent productions include a CD ROM called *Contact. One thousand calls a day* (2002). It was made for the national police and is about the variety of calls that the police calling centre receives.

Just like the video player was a condition for the distribution of video, interactivity depended on the availability of computers. In 1990 about 30% of people in the Netherlands had access to a computer, this percentage increased to 50% in 1995 and to 70% in 2000.¹⁶ Gradually the CD ROM was replaced by the distribution through the Internet, which grew from 63% in 2002 to a 90% reach in 2009 in the Netherlands.¹⁷ Video carriers can be played if the machines are available, and scanned if the videotape still offers sound and vision. If CD ROMS are made playable, how can we preserve the content?

For archiving interactive content “the challenge is to think through the entire archiving procedure, from early acquisition all the way to a possible end-user experience several decades from now,” says Jesse de Vos, who argues that cooperation between different heritage institutes, involving the user communities and developing new skills for archivists, is essential for preserving this type of material.¹⁸ These skills and workflows for preserving interactive content is a rapidly evolving area of research.¹⁹ Issues include the preservation of technological hardware and software like the

15 Chriet Titulaer, Het jaar van de beeldplaat, in *AV Magazine* 5, juni 1981 p. 16–19.

16 Frank Huysmans, eds, *Achter de schermen*, Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2004, p. 104

17 Frank Huysmans, Jos de Haan, *Alle kanalen staan open*, Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2010, p. 47

18 Jesse de Vos, *Preserving interactives*, research project Vrije Universiteit and Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, p.28. <http://www.centrefordigitalhumanities.nl/files/2013/07/final-report-archiving-interactives-2013-1.pdf>

19 Idem, p. 23

operating system and web browser. It deals with processes like migration of digital file formats into newer ones, the emulation in which software mimics the original operating system and experience. Finally, it needs new forms of documentation about production, reception and use.²⁰ Preservation of this material is more than ever related to accessibility.

For heritage institutions, the categorization of media is mostly based on linear formats. The interactive formats need a new categorization, which is difficult, partly because of the variety of categories ranging from e-books, audio files, games or software. Moreover in the convergence of media the productions are increasingly a combination of these categories.²¹ As John MacKenzie Owen claimed in 2007, “it is no longer possible to classify heritage materials in a limited number of distinct media, types and genres: in the digital world these exist in multiple and changing combinations.”²²

In terms of heritage one could argue there is no ‘natural’ partner for this interactive material. Audiovisual archives need to develop policies on the selection, preservation and presentation of interactive productions. These productions include new categories such as (online) games. Alternatively it’s not audiovisual archives, but a new heritage institute that preserves interactive communication. Practising new policies depends on public funding.

Preserving ephemeral products calls for a rethinking of partners, processes and presentation. Archives need to work together in developing new skills and workflows. Academics could study the creative audiovisual industry as part of an integral media history.²³ This will help to value the industry and develop methods for selecting, preserving and presenting these commissioned productions.

Biography

Bas Agterberg studied Film and Television at Utrecht University and Glasgow University. He was Assistant Professor at Utrecht University and film producer. Currently he is curator at the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, where he participates in research projects with universities, archives and academic networks. Results of these research projects are presented at (film) festivals, manifestations, seminars and exhibitions.

20 Idem, p. 23–28.

21 Idem, p. 10.

22 Cited in Jesse de Vos, p. 10.

23 See, for instance: Siegfried Zielinski, *Audiovisions*, Amsterdam University Press, 1999