



## Review

### **Protocols of radio and television criticism. On Jeroen Dera's *Sprekend kritiek: Literatuurprogramma's in de vroege jaren van de Nederlandse radio en televisie* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2017)**

*Sander Bax, Tilburg University*

In May 2017, Jeroen Dera defended his PhD-thesis *Sprekend kritiek. Literatuurprogramma's in de vroege jaren van de Nederlandse radio en televisie* at Radboud University Nijmegen. In the thesis, which has been published by Uitgeverij Verloren, he investigates literary criticism in Dutch radio shows of the 1920s and 1930s and in Dutch television shows of the 1950s and the 1960s. Dera points at the fact that much research into literary criticism has focused on what he calls 'het papieren brandpunt' (the paper focal point): literary criticism as performed in dailies and weeklies. In this dissertation, he is the first to offer a systematic perspective on literary value judgments as they were formulated on radio and television.

With this object of inquiry, Dera participates in an important development in literary studies. More and more attention is given to how literature participates in the public sphere and in media culture. The battle over the legitimacy of literature is no longer (or maybe never was) a battle fought in the so-called literary field (in which printed literary magazines and newspapers have been the central object of critical attention for years). Since the rise of public media, new battlefields have emanated: radio, television and digital media have altered the processes by which both the image and the reputation of literary writers are constructed. This mediatization of processes of canonization and sacralization might become key features in future literary histories.

In his book, Dera starts out with the question why literature became a point of attention in these new media so soon. What were the conceptions of literature of the first literary critics that used these new media as a platform? And why were these new media important to them? Dera is equally interested in the literary texts these critics chose to discuss on radio and television. Which literary or societal conventions influenced their choices? Finally, he focuses on the reception of literary criticism on radio and television in the literary field itself. How did the traditional institutions react to these new phenomena?

This research project resulted in a dissertation that is a highly enjoyable read, not only because of the new material it presents, but also because of the fact that it is well written. Dera lays bare a completely new field of study and confronts us with plenty of different case studies that illustrate that the influence of radio and television on how we deal (and have dealt) with literature

should not be underestimated. Yet it is important to notice that Dera does more than just deliver an outline of a new field and an assessment of what is available. The aim of his thesis is to provide us with a critical perspective on the cultural historical position of literary criticism on radio and television.

Dera's analyses of the case studies are informed by the theoretical concepts of 'protocol' (Lisa Gitelman) and 'institutional identity' (Gwenyth Jackaway). Gitelman regards media as 'socially realized structures of communication' and she focuses on the socio-cultural practices that surround the institutionalized channels of communication. The term 'protocol' refers to the both explicit and implicit rules and conventions that surround a medium and that the users of that medium have internalized. Dera uses the ideas of Jackaway to reflect on the ways in which 'old' media consider 'new' media to be a threat. New media tend to disrupt the existing media infrastructure. In doing so, they change the institutional positions of all other media. These changes affect the institutional identities of all media: they all have to alter the image they have of themselves.

In his book, Dera dives into the first years of both media. With regard to radio, he focuses on the years between 1923 and 1940, with television he is concerned with the period between 1951 and 1975. To provide an overview of the early criticism on radio and television, Dera sets off onto an impressive and very subtle search into a great array of different sources. He uses the archives of the radio and television broadcastings, the personal archives of authors that were involved in these shows, literary magazines (that sometimes printed radio lectures), and he uses [www.dbnl.nl](http://www.dbnl.nl) and [www.delpher.nl](http://www.delpher.nl) in his search for public reflections on radio and television criticism. He also spent many hours in the Dutch Institute for Image and Sound (Nederlands Instituut voor Beeld en Geluid) to study footage of early television.

Dera uses the information he gathered from these archives to make quantitative lists of which critics performed on which show about which author and text. These lists help him to pin down key figures of radio and television criticism, whom he then examines in more detail in his qualitative case studies. In the chapters about radio, this results in the description of four key radio critics that function as cultural mediators: P.H. Ritter jr. (AVRO), Anton van Duinkerken (KRO), Cornelis Rijnsdorp (NCRV) and A.M. de Jong (VARA). Dera shows how these critics acted in a field of tension between idealism (they used radio to find a public for their literary and their ideological beliefs) and pragmatism (they often worked for the radio because it paid well) and in a field of tension between negotiating (learning the public about literature) and criticizing (separating good literature from bad literature).

In the domain of radio, protocols of 'neutrality' and 'optimism' were important. Critics were supposed to inform neutrally and to be positive about the books they talked about. But this does not mean they always abode to these rules: time and again critics used the radio for serious literary criticism. Overall though, the dominance of these protocols strengthened the impression, within the literary field, that serious criticism remained the domain of literary magazines, whereas the radio was just a superficial mass medium that had an eclectic and a leveling effect on literature. In their reactions to radio criticism, literary magazines confirmed their own institutional identity as platforms for genuine intellectuals with such negative responses to radio criticism.

In the chapters about early television criticism, Dera provides plenty of relevant information as well. He starts with showing that the number of television programs about literature declined heavily in the early seventies – a time often considered to be the moment where the medialization

and commercialization of literature gained dominance. Television programs about literature, by contrast, were a difficult genre from the start, as is proven by the fact that these programs had a rather short life span. In contrast to the positive reception by television critics, broadcast corporations had a hard time dealing with the low viewer ratings. This led them to stimulate editorial boards to make the programs more attractive to the broad public and to suspend them when they did not manage to do so. Only two programs were given a longer life: the shows *Litteraire ontmoetingen* (34 broadcasts) and *Literair kijkschrift* (25 broadcasts).

Another list shows that the literary critic Hans Gomperts was the most important media critic of the 1950s and 1960s. He took part in a lot of broadcasts (36), which was quite a bit more than Ernst van Altena (18), Rudolf Geel (13), Wim Hazeu (10), Ed Hoornik (10), J. Bernlef (8), Harry Mulisch (8) and Gerard Reve (8). Dera makes clear that these authors took part in these television programs to earn money, to enlarge their 'brand awareness', and to position themselves within the literary field with their conception of literature. The same holds for the authors that appeared as guests in these shows – a list topped by Harry Mulisch, but on which also Remco Campert, Willem Frederik Hermans, Hella S. Haasse, Gerrit Kouwenaar, Marga Minco, J. Bernlef and Cees Buddingh' appear.

In one of the case studies Dera shows the complex negotiations that took place in television interviews between the posture of the author interviewed on the one hand and the image that the interviewer had of the author on the other. With this informative analysis, Dera contributes to our knowledge of the media images of literary writers and about the theoretical notion of 'posture' that is developing as an important concept in Dutch Studies. I particularly appreciate this part of Dera's dissertation and it is a pity that this important theoretical contribution to the discussion about authorial posture is somewhat hidden in the middle of a chapter as one of the many small case studies.

In this part of the thesis, Dera also shows that Gomperts explicitly attacked the protocol of neutrality that was important for television too. While he was a public figure who knew how to speak to a general public and who was very keen on popularizing his ideas, he also wanted to use his public stage to perform as a serious literary critic, just like when he wrote in the papers and the magazines. For Gomperts, it was important to make his value judgements known to as many people as possible. In doing so, he reacted against the criticism from the literary field of people who said that by its superficiality television made the viewers lazy. In Gomperts' eyes, television was the ideal medium to emancipate and educate people.

In the 'metacritical discussions', Dera analyzes three protocols that were discussed time and again. Critics contested the dominance of the idea that radio and television criticism should be accessible to a large audience, the idea that interviewers and critics should speak about authors and books in a positive way, and the idea that the contributors had to follow a moral protocol. They had to stick to the ideological norms of the broadcast companies and to general norms of decency. In order to perform on radio and television, critics had to accept these protocols and had to learn to live with them. Yet, meanwhile, they constantly tried to disrupt them.

In *Sprekend kritiek* researcher Dera presents himself as a happy pioneer, laying bare unknown land for us and clearly enjoying that. But his dissertation is more than just an inventory: its main importance is that it provides a challenge to literary history. What would happen when future literary histories would focus on the media presence of literary writers more often? The development of 20th and 21st century literature runs parallel to the development of the 20th and 21st century mass media. Literary writers presented their conceptions of literature and they

formed their image as writers in dailies, weeklies, radio shows, television performances, and on social media. More than once they both functioned as a literary writer and worked in the media system. Incorporating the literary writers' public presence is one of the great challenges for literary history.

*Sprekend kritiek* provides us with a first, very informative step in the right direction. That is the reason why possible weak points in this book – it touches upon a wide variety of different issues, presents us with a lot of disparate case studies, and tackles many different problems – eventually turns out to be its great strength. We know so little about the media presence of our most important writers that *Sprekend kritiek* proves to be a much-needed exploration that should stimulate us to do further research.