

THE PUBLIC LIBRARY : A MIRROR OF SOCIETY

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I am aware that this is a paper that has been written in Rotterdam, in the Netherlands.

I am aware that Portugal is a different country, with a different culture. All the same I feel that it will be good to let you know

what I think about these things, in my country. It will be a pleasure to hear from you then where our two worlds meet and where they don't. That, after all, is the most interesting aspect of our meeting.

The importance of knowledge for the development of man is highly praised. Knowledge opens doors that lead man to power and riches. It enables him to explore his environment and to control it. Additionally, acquiring and applying knowledge is often a source of pleasure. Especially when this happens as a result of one's own interest and curiosity.

From time immemorial, wisdom has had a place by the side of knowledge. Not in the sense of a system of learning, as a philosophy, but as a form of knowledge which surpasses personal interest and which man cannot so much possess as live up to, so that

he is wisdom. The basis of this wisdom is selfknowledge. As it is written in the Greek temple in Delphi: 'gnothi seauton', 'man, know thyself'.

But in what way does man get selfknowledge? Are there any suitable schools, universities of perhaps libraries? The answer is quite simply this: man is his own way to selfknowledge. He alone among all living beings can be: a selfunderstanding creature. But how does man know who or what he is? He mostly learns that in an indirect way, by means of an image. The simplest way is to look into the mirror. Our outward appearance is relentlessly reflected by the mirror. We attach much weight to this image, for when it is not to our liking, we camouflage a few wrinkles with cream or pull our tie straight. Obviously another image, in addition to that in the mirror, plays a part. A more idealised image, indicating how we wish to be seen by others. This leads us to a second possibility for acquiring selfknowledge: relationship, the mirror others hold up to us. From that mirror we get to know the psychological aspects of ourselves. A well-known saying is that you see in others what also lives in yourself. So there are two mirrors: one for the outward appearance and one for the inner self. The remarkable thing is that you yourself are the only person who can never physically look into your own eyes, while on the other hand you are the only one who can see what is happening inside of you. Mirrors are just an aid, but in the absence of other means they are often quite important as such. As everyone knows, they cannot do anything but reflect: they present an image of reality.

This lecture is called: 'The public library: a mirror of society'. A title which in itself is just as confusing as a mirror image sometimes can be, but it gives me the opportunity to approach the theme in at least three different ways.

1. The mirror of ideas

The collections of the library mirror human potential in thoughts, ideas, feelings, knowledge through the ages.

2. The mirror of people

The visitors of the library mirror present society with their pleasures, problems and idiosyncracies

3. The mirror of library profession

The library workers mirror also present society in their work, their fears and prides, in the way in which the profession is realised

1. First there is the view that is also expressed in the Unesco

Manifesto on the public library. Recently the Dutch public libraries have published a modern version, adapted to their situation. This

charter for the Public Library states in its preamble: 'In the

definition of their ideal objectives the public libraries give the

individual human being central place and let themselves be guided by

the ideals of equality, freedom and universal education. By making

the fruits of knowledge and culture available to everyone, they

contribute to the democratic functioning of society and assist man

in all phases of his life. In this way public libraries are a mirror

of human potential'.

It is the responsibility of the public library to build up collections, to preserve them and to make them accessible. No matter what they consist of, books, brochures, leaflets, newspapers, periodicals, volumes of poetry, plays, sheet music, video's, compact discs, audiocassettes or series of slides, these are all materials which can be found in the library. They are an expression of what men, sometimes in days long past, have thought, felt, known or experienced. They have given a voice to this by putting it down in writing or recording it in other ways. All in all the same subjects crop up again and again: man is trying to define his attitude towards surrounding nature, towards illness, love, death, his fellow men, conflicts. What solutions have been offered throughout the years?

Strolling through the central library of Rotterdam or letting the escalators carry you from one floor to the next, one can't help being impressed by the amount of knowledge and culture which man has developed throughout the ages. I emphasize the words 'throughout the ages', as our library dates from 1604 and holds many rare and precious works, a.o. the Erasmus collection, which is still being added to. We have hundreds of thousands of books older than this century. For that matter, keeping and preserving the collections will be a key subject for discussion in the years to come; it will confront us with some difficult questions. The selection we now make, on the basis of our present values and standards, will then reflect in the collections, also for future generations. The collections we have are of essential importance to our existence as

libraries, now as well as in the future. For that reason I take to heart the admonition: he who neglects his collections, digs his own library's grave.

If we, library people, with splendid ideal objectives, really want to make the most of our work, we shall have to start looking for materials and information which are not so easily available through the usual channels. The surplus value of what the library has to offer is precisely to be found in the fact that not only the main stream of human thought and action is given a chance, but also the numerous undercurrents. Otherwise the result will be not a reflection, but a caricature. The important thing is that the many products of knowledge and culture have through the ages presented such a differentiated and varied picture and it is exactly this variedness that contributes to people forming their own opinions and to universal education. In the city library of Rotterdam we really try to be a centre of information, for the 570.000 inhabitants of the city itself, but also for people outside its boundaries. We have a great deal to offer: the complete collection numbers 1,8 million items. 3 % of these are audiovisual means. Out of a budget of 17 million dollars we spend 2,5 million dollars on media. And we prefer to keep it that way.

Can we say then that these 1,8 million media really constitute a mirror of human potential? I think we can, but nevertheless I have some additional remarks. In the first place a library cannot, not even in a city like Rotterdam, contain everything that has ever been issued or published. So one always applies a selection. The ways in

which librarians select are even nowadays still shrouded in mystery. I think it would do our social legitimacy a world of good if we could be more open about this. Ours is, after all, a respectable profession that is sufficiently mature to make demands of ourselves and be honest about them. Much-discusses affairs like the Rushdie case momentarily make our principles flare up once more, but afterwards everything seems to be back to routine. I can't help feeling now and then that a publisher's well-known name is already sufficient to order a book. If libraries wish to be the champions of pluriformity, they will have to have an eye for the less known, the still undiscovered. The concentration of newspapers, media and publishers holds the threat of a monopolization of information the libraries should not be blind to. Every year numerous authors make their debut, partly as a result of the publishers' passion for new publications. We find the same abundance in the succession of articles filling up the pages of periodicals. It sometimes seems as if in this century printed matters get to look better all the time, while their contents get emptier and emptier. In what way can one separate the wheat from such a quantity of chaff? In my view making the enormous offer of knowledge and culture accessible implies allowing people to peep behind the screens of the information industry, so that they can be critical enough to make their own judgements and selections and know the basis for their own 'free' opinion. This is what I call 'media-education'.

For our (alternative) research work we in Rotterdam make frequent use of contacts and questions from the information desks and we cooperate with the city's booksellers. As a great deal of knowledge is nowadays also stored in data files, the Rotterdam library has, at an early stage already, linked up with interesting on line files, Dutch as well as foreign ones, and has experimented with data files on WORM and CD-ROM. Both from discussions and from practical experience it has become clear that there is still much to be improved in equipment, ease of operation and contents, if a massive use is to be made of it. So far the use is only too often remains limited to the intermediaries and a few persistent clients. One of the means to make information accessible is the catalogue, which we have automated. In this connection some projects have given us the possibility to use our terminals for direct input of titles into the Dutch Union Catalogue. Beside this we can consult the catalogues of the Erasmus University, which is also situated in Rotterdam. Moreover we have several permanent data line connections with some other libraries and museums, linking a total of 200 terminals. People are nowadays not only interested in the knowledge and culture of past ages, but more especially in what is happening here and now, close to their homes. That is why the library of Rotterdam has recently given access to a local information file called INFRA, which holds all kinds of information on what's happening in town, what training possibilities there are, how to set up a business,

etc. The library also provides accommodation for the municipal Aid and Information Centre, which gives not only information, but also advice in answer to social questions citizens ask. It is one way of meeting social needs. It has always been the philosophy of the library to cooperate with other institutions, sometimes under the same roof. In this way we also accommodate a study centre of the Open University, which can receive an annual number of up to 4.000 students for advice, consultation and studying. And then there is the information offered by our department of Business Information, which - in close cooperation with other information and advice services for trade and industry - is being further developed. Making the products of culture and knowledge available through filling shelves with books and other materials, entering data files into the computer and putting up information desks, is only one way of bringing people into contact with everything that human beings have ever said, thought, felt and experienced. What we in Rotterdam have always had in mind for the library is offering a total package. Libraries must be jacks-of-all-trades. There is no other place where one can walk round as an individual with such freedom and make one's choice. Our aim has been to have an open and inviting library, leading on to search, to adventure, to new things and meeting the needs in the field of information, education, recreation and culture. Such a library has many functions. Of course one can borrow materials from it, but there are so many more things possible (our aim in the central library, for that matter, is not so much to add to the number of loans as to raise the number of borrowers). We seek

to stock many possibilities. This demands cooperation with other organisations - to my mind a 'must' for libraries - so as to get higher achievements and better quality.

We consider ourselves lucky to have a building which offers sufficient space for on-the-spot reading, studying, browsing, trying out music scores or, for instance, looking at expositions. All in all we have an annual number of about fifty larger or smaller exhibitions in the central library. For the twenty branch libraries some two dozen exhibitions to choose from circulate yearly. These exhibitions can in their own different ways illuminate special aspects of the collection, respond to a topical theme or offer an interesting subject. We also have a separate exhibition room, where in the last years numerous manifestations have taken place. Moreover we want to make literature and culture subjects for discussion. In the Library Theatre, which can seat over 200 visitors, we organize a literary café, a lunch break theatre, and theatrical performances by amateurs and semi-professional actors. The latter in some 75 productions a year. Furthermore there are musical and dancing performances. These theatrical performances attract an annual number of 20.000 visitors from every section and corner of the town.

2. This brings me to the second interpretation of my theme of the library as a mirror of society.

When you stroll through the library in Rotterdam, it is not only the collections that strike you, but also the people.

Every year more than two million people visit the library. That means about 8.000 every day. Where do they come from and what are they doing in the library? Of the total population of 570.000 inhabitants in Rotterdam 105.000 people belong to ethnic minorities and this number is still growing. Part of them originate from Surinam (35.000), the rest come from Turkey, Morocco and other southern countries. For many more years already we have a large Chinese minority in The Netherlands and also in Rotterdam. There are also concentrations of people from the Cape Verdian Islands. Rotterdam as a city is in constant development. Not only have many new buildings been erected after the war, but in the course of this process mistakes have been made. This has led to decline and delinquency.

Architects endeavour to make it livable once again and they also have a philosophy for this: 'It is not pursuit of style and elegance that must be of the first importance in the public space, but that it should be inviting as a meeting place. It should be a place which brings together people of different backgrounds. Apart from heightening the city's liveliness, such a democratic space could contribute to a better functioning of the town. Knowledge - even though it is only superficial knowledge - of each other's culture (or subculture) prevents alienation.'

After this quotation it is not difficult to see the public library as a kind of covered public space.

Every day we witness the multi-coloured meeting taking place in the library of Rotterdam, precisely because of the enormous diversity of culture and backgrounds which people carry with them. In an open

space there is room for everyone, irrespective of the kind of question they come with, irrespective of the nature of their requirement, be it for reading, studying, knowledge, phantasy or whatever.

Observing quietly, one can see the following: people of various skin colours enter the building, sometimes alone, sometimes with a child, sometimes as a group of children and sometimes with their girl or boyfriend. Some have just been to the market and deposit their purchases in a storage box. Others are carrying a briefcase, a rucksack or a countercultural linen bag. Some people are holding a slip of paper in their hand and know exactly where they are going. Others are looking round for a while, sometimes with seeming casualness, but then, suddenly interested, they take something off the shelf. A visit to the library is a bit like a voyage of discovery. Some walk hesitantly towards the catalogue terminals, where others have for some time already been producing one title after another without any problem.

At the information desk you see the go-getters taking up position in front of it, whereas other, after hastily putting their question, want to leave again. On one of the tables you see a pile of books a man is calmly looking through; at another table a girl is examining a documentation portfolio for her essay. People are browsing, reading, making notes or just dreaming away. They can be seen browsing in the newspaper room or enjoying their coffee in the restaurant. They nudge each other, point at something, or continue on their way past the exhibition.

The practice studio is bustling with activity. Several scores are on the piano. In the juvenile department a group of children are being read to, there are posters that appeal to the imagination. It makes you think of the time, years ago perhaps, when you yourself could be completely under the spell of a story. Or are we always under the spell of a story, the story of our own life? That is what you see in the library, all those strolling, questioning, searching, kind and grumpy, phantastic and peculiar life stories.

Could one find a better mirror of society than in the library? It is not for nothing that the library considers the idea of freedom of paramount importance. But if it wants to live up to that, it is not enough to declare that it is open to everyone. People must be able to recognise themselves in the library. They must find a mirror there which helps them in their daily life, which inspires them to find answers, to discover something extra in their life story. That is why I think the lending function must be put in perspective. It makes a good impression on politicians if we can point to a subscriber percentage of 35% of the population and to 5 million loans. But taking books home does not mean all that much, are they really being read? Do people actually find them useful? Should we perhaps be a little more interested professionally in this aspect? How does it function, this whole process of picking out a book, leafing through it, putting it back or taking it home, skimming through it at home or reading it, talking about it or silently enjoying it? What are the effects of a book? If we would know more about this, we would have a better idea of the social relevance of

our work. We could better meet social needs. Our library would gladly be open on Sundays. That is not common practice in The Netherlands. We are going to set aside money for this purpose. An experiment in another town in our country has shown that being open on Sundays fills a need. A visit to the library, finding a good book, may compensate somewhat for loneliness, psychological isolation, fossilization, obtusion, culture blindness or deafness.

Rotterdam has always given attention to the major target groups: young people, senior citizens, participants in adult education projects and ethnic minorities. The significance of reading as a social skill seems to have got through once more to a wider political circle. The promotion of reading has become a good item with a clear role for the library. Social acceptance and militancy, chances on the labour market are closely related to linguistic skills, being able to speak, read and write.

Rotterdam has been the city that was always insisting on an innovation policy in order to tackle these unacceptable social conditions and to put its shoulder to the wheel. Under the term 'social innovation' this has now even become national policy, with a view to abolish disadvantages in the fields of labour, education and incomes, to augment the accessibility of general (social) provisions and to improve the climate of life and the housing conditions. At the moment numerous coordinated projects are in progress, brushing aside bureaucracy as much as possible. In a number of cases the libraries participate in the project, for

instance by offering members of ethnic minorities training and jobs, by offering materials for adult education and by special services for senior citizens. The concept of 'community information' too is in keeping with this innovation policy. It helps people to get more independent and to assert their rights. As a result of the combination of the library with the Aid and Information Centre of the City of Rotterdam, a concentrated information and aid centre of many of the city's municipal services, we in Rotterdam have gone a long way already. Up till now we as library have always argued that for every new target group we need a higher budget. I think the library must always safeguard its general function. A target group approach is a good marketing technique, but we must not commit ourselves to ever new target groups. We can do many things if we are given the money to do them. As an example the library lends hundreds of collections to schools and special educational institutes and gives them advice. With the help of special programs for ethnic minorities teaching in their own language is stimulated, while disadvantages in other domains are removed. The library cooperates in projects within the framework of adult education and the elimination of illiteracy. In districts and neighbourhoods too activities for minorities are being developed. Sadly no extra financial means have been provided for all these tasks. Within the framework of the policy towards minorities library staff members have received extra training. The staff's knowledge of other cultures and their attitudes is after all essential for good services.

3. This brings me to the third interpretation of the library as a mirror of society. We as professionals regard the library as our field of action. Frequently we also think of the library as the centre of the world, in the way we often see ourselves as the centre of everything and act in a selfcentred manner. With a little more sense of the relativity of things we can be a better partner. Together we form the library world and would it not be so that this world just as much mirrors society? In Rotterdam, in any case, it does. In the central library and its branch libraries 400 people are employed, the greater part of them trained and schooled for library work; 65 % are women, 35 % are men. Having an eye for social problems is not difficult, for they present themselves through one's own staff. The library organisation is a world in miniature. It mirrors the way people relate to each other. It is precisely selfknowledge that we have to win from ourselves, a process which is stimulated more by being open and communicative than by playing up to each other. Clarity always comes first and that demands honesty, which includes the honesty to be willing to learn from someone else. To acknowledge that others too may have interesting ideas and perhaps even a better view of the matter. Flowers of wisdom do not bloom on the tree of arrogance. Our work is intensive, it demands much effort, many contacts. There is always the question which attitude to adopt: introvert or extravert? How do we react to persons with a different cultural or an in any other way special background among our staff? Do we work together or without real contact? If the library wants to be an open space, how much

open space do we have in ourselves? How much space do we give others?

Order is an important principle in the library. But it looks to me as though everyone invents his own little rules and regulations and wants to hold on to them at all costs. Here too more loyalty and cooperation is possible, which will always benefit our clients, the library users. They have no use for complicated systems and incomprehensible rules: they want information, books, sheet music.

They also want to get sound information on their authors, composers, or on a certain subject. So let us occupy ourselves a little less

with minor points in connection with the catalogue. It is an instrument, it is not the media themselves. The time and energy that become available in this way we can then spend on the contents of

the media. What do we read ourselves? How much, how often? That is where our enthusiasm and our expertise are to come from, after all!

Would it not be a good thing if more people with a different kind of professional training were appointed in the library? A training, for instance, in public relations, technology, marketing, personnel management, etc.

How enormously cooperation would improve if all of us did not always know everything better! Then it would really be possible to

economize, by harmonization in the build up of collections, by combined services, union catalogues, network automation, better logistics, good planning and correct handling. In short, we would be able to offer people quality and value for money. It is possible for us to work professionally and forcefully. Together we are capable of greater things.

The library could mirror a world which elsewhere is only dreamt of.

Why should we wait for paradise that long?

Let it begin in the library, with ourselves.