Looking Past the Rural Idyll: History, TV Fiction and the Representation of the Flemish Countryside

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Over the course of the twentieth century, the boundaries between the urban and rural realm have become increasingly blurred. Among other developments, the modernization of agriculture and the democratization of personal mobility have changed the face of the countryside, and undoubtedly so in the densely populated and heavily industrialized region of Flanders. Gradually, from an almost entirely agricultural focus, a ‘post-productivist’ or ‘consumption’ countryside has emerged; a multi-purpose countryside in which housing, industry, tourism and recreation have also claimed a significant stake. Not surprisingly, these spatial and social evolutions have affected contemporary rural historiography, which could until recently be considered ‘agricultural history writ large’.¹

The most prominent strand of non-agricultural rural research has concerned itself with the ‘rural idyll’, chiefly through the lens of so-called ‘high’ culture.² Although the preoccupation with this concept has occasionally been ridiculed³, I believe Jeremy Burchardt has argued convincingly that a social history of the rural idyll may serve as a proxy for a better understanding of the twentieth-century countryside. Simultaneously, Burchardt has pointed out the danger of a mere description of shifting cultural meanings, shying away from explanation, providing only a ‘sterile recycling of high-cultural quotations’. To avoid this outcome, he has suggested historians take refuge in the promising concepts recently developed by sociologists and geographers.⁴

Rurality and popular discourse

Very influential among these concepts is the work of British geographer Keith Halfacree, who has successfully introduced Serge Moscovici’s theory of ‘social representations’ into the debate on contemporary rurality. Researching representations of the rural is now generally

³ Jo Little, among others, has denounced the rural idyll as a ‘shorthand [...] catchall and highly evocative notion’ which is ‘dangerously credited with causal powers and too often carelessly employed as an explanation for rural social change’. J. Little, ‘Otherness, representation and the cultural construction of rurality’, Progress in Human Geography, 1999, 3, pp. 439-440.
considered crucial because of the social effects these cultural constructions may generate, even if they are ‘fetishized and misplaced, distorted, idealized and generalized’ – attributes which certainly apply to the rural idyll. In the context of a consumption countryside, a hegemonic struggle can be perceived in which several societal actors – i.e. political parties, farmers’ unions, housing organizations, environmental groups – compete for the use of rural space, primarily by aiming to institutionalize their own view of rurality. Therefore, the historiography of the post-productivist countryside will necessarily be a history of representations.

It does not come as a surprise that the depiction of the countryside in the modern mass media – addressing large groups of people beyond personal networks – has gradually slipped into the centre of the debate on rurality. Through processes of complex interaction, through anticipation and feedback, these mass-produced, mediated or ‘popular’ discourses are able to influence professional and political actors as well as the broader public. Unquestionably, the rise of television represents ‘a quantum leap in the number of images available to ordinary people’. However, it is striking that popular discourses, especially television, are singled out by many scholars as the primary source of ‘unrealistic’, ‘distorted’ or ‘idealized images’ of the countryside. Televised rurality is, for instance, often denounced as the mere representation of a commodified countryside within the framework of a hegemonic middle-class ideology, completely cut off from social reality. In this paper, I will argue that the representations of the countryside provided by Flemish TV fiction, if approached correctly, may yet be of great significance for historical research on the contemporary countryside.

History and TV fiction

Historians have traditionally been wary of images as historical evidence. That certainly holds true for the use of television images – fictional drama in particular – within research on

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7 Burke, Eyewitnessing, p. 17.
9 On the other hand, Peter Burke cites several authors who have advocated the historical use of images as early as the nineteenth century, such as Jacob Burckhardt and Johan Huizinga. Burke, Eyewitnessing, pp. 9-11.
This observation strikes an odd note with the near-total consensus on the importance of television as a source of imagery and its powerful influence on twentieth-century popular culture. The most enthusiastic scholars consider television ‘a mirror to hold up to society’ as a result of its ‘obvious’ ability to reflect the sensibilities of the general audience. TV fiction specifically has often been praised as ‘a rich fund for the study of social and cultural values’; shrouding ‘the prevailing social mores of a given period in time’, even fulfilling a ‘bardic function’ in modern societies.

Robert Sklar has attempted to re-historicize moving image studies by discarding the methodological paradigms of the past and reviving the ‘common sense notion’ that television interacts with culture and society. As a dominant force within the mass media, TV images can be considered suitable documents for the history of mentalities, because ‘[s]uch documents [...] could not achieve their mass appeal without in some way expressing or reflecting values and attitudes shared by their mass audiences’. As a result, the major challenge lies in distinguishing which methodologies of social and cultural historians can be appropriately applied to the study of moving images. John Burke has delivered a compelling argument for a so-called ‘third way’ between the conflicting views of positivism and structuralism. The former looks upon television as an accurate ‘reflection of social reality’, the latter considers it merely a system of signs and conventions. Burke quite rightly states that images are in the first place ‘testimonies’ about the past. Albeit that they do not grant historians immediate access to the past from which they stem, they still reveal contemporary views on social issues. Close reading of specific images is therefore more fitting than attempts at generalization, especially if the latter are based solely upon an ‘analysis of correspondence’ between TV fiction and the values of a certain moment in time.

Images should evidently be studied in their political, cultural and artistic context. Nevertheless, this paper will not address the entire ‘cultural circuit’ of which television is a

17 Burke, Eyewitnessing, pp. 183-184.
19 Burke, Eyewitnessing, p. 188.
part. I believe Sklar and several others in some cases exaggerate the importance of the production and reception aspects of television for the historical use of images. This approach primarily grants historians a retreat towards the familiar vein of studying the archives of broadcasters and the printing press, sometimes combined with a bout of oral history. Unravelling the intricacies of the production process of a television series does, however, rarely teach us anything about the history of mentalities. In fact, it often reveals a rather meaningless and haphazard succession of events. For example, when researching the production process of a hugely popular British children’s series generally acknowledged as a quintessential exponent of the rural idyll, John Horton found it ‘nitty gritty, and generally quite banal and happenstance’, limiting him to merely point out the ‘temporality’ of the resulting representations of the countryside.20

Specifically, I will assess the historical use of television images through the case study of De Kat, a popular Flemish children’s television series that ran for thirteen episodes from January to April 1973 on the Flemish public broadcaster BRT.21 The story of De Kat revolves around an environmentalist masked vigilante who confronts an evil industrialist and property developer. The eponymous hero of the series is David De Kat, a freshly graduated ecologist who is frustrated by the authorities’ unwillingness to protect the environment. Disguised in a cat costume, he singlehandedly starts an environmental crusade against AfVal, a polluting plastics company owned by the series’ villain Oskar Dias. Through several practical jokes and acts of sabotage, De Kat demands the installation of purification facilities to filter the factory’s emissions and effluents. Although initially reluctant and even belligerent as a result

21 De Kat was written by Louis De Groof, who provided the BRT with eleven scripts for children’s television between 1956 and 1974. In fact, almost ten years beforehand, he had already successfully introduced an environmental theme in the series Kapitein Zeppos: Belderbos (1964). De Kat’s popularity spurred reruns in 1979, 1981 and 1991. It should be noted that I by no means imply that the series is exemplary of the BRT’s youth series or TV drama in general: I simply employ De Kat as an extreme case study. Granted, research by Alexander Dhoest has revealed that Flemish TV drama, especially the most popular series, was set overwhelmingly in the glorified past of small-town Flanders and the countryside, mired in rural nostalgia. On the other hand, however, Dhoest has also pointed out that the circumstances behind this trend – it usually concerns revisions of popular Flemish regional novels – are a mix of the distinctly educational Flemish broadcasting policy, aimed at pursuing Flemish cultural emancipation; the personal literary preferences of the BRT’s powerful Heads of Drama; the perceived viewer’s taste for more ‘popular’ fiction; and, on top of these, ‘quite banal pragmatic considerations’ that were nevertheless ‘decisive’, such as the shortage of competent screenwriters and the limited budgets that allowed only ‘small-scale realism’. A. Dhoest, ‘Negotiating Images of the Nation: The Production of Flemish TV Drama, 1953-1989’, Media, Culture & Society, 2004, 3, pp. 393-408.
22 The name is a rather not-so-subtle pun, as ‘afval’ is Dutch for ‘trash’.
of De Kat’s actions, Dias finally caves in when he loses the supports of several of his closest relatives and employees – although not without putting up a fight.

Most remarkable about the mise-en-scène of the story is that, although clearly meant to be set in contemporary rural Flanders, the bulk of De Kat’s episodes were filmed against the backdrop of the wild and unspoiled landscapes of the French Provence. Outdoor fights and chases between De Kat and a group of thugs in Dias’ employ23 – featured in almost every episode – provide an excellent opportunity to flaunt the scenic beauty of the region, quite rightfully labeled by Michael Bunce as ‘the archetypal rural utopia’, because it comprises ‘the essence of the classical pastoral idyll’.24 Logically speaking, this choice of setting does not make sense. As a rule, producers of TV fiction are exceptionally concerned with the believability and recognizability of the imagery they provide, therefore anticipating ‘what lay discourses will expect and accept as images’.25 I will argue that we should not simply mistake De Kat’s idyllic imagery for a distorted representation of the countryside being prepped for commodification, bluntly imposed upon the viewer by a hegemonic bourgeoisie. On the contrary, after a closer look, De Kat’s deceitfully unrealistic imagery reveals much more than just pretty pictures, or, in the words of John O’Connor: ‘[M]ore concern should be given to the values represented and the style assumed in establishing the composition and mise-en-scène than to the accuracy or authenticity of the images.’26 In between the excitement of numerous action scenes and the comic relief providing by several slapstick segments, De Kat offers a consistent narrative on contemporary Flemish rural history. Through a content analysis of De Kat’s thirteen episodes27, I will address several aspects in which the series’ narrative closely mirrors historical evolutions in the post-productivist Flemish countryside – as likely as we are to be distracted by the views of lavender fields on the slopes of the Mont Ventoux.

23 The thugs are invariably dressed in orange overalls and orange caps with the company logo, and incurably lazy, clumsy or cowardly, providing the necessary comic relief.
25 Jones, ‘Lay Discourses of the Rural’, p. 39. It should be noted that, apart from the obvious added aesthetic value, part of the decision to shoot in southern France was due to the need for a permanently sunny location for outdoor scenes. Moreover, two years beforehand, the BRT’s children’s series Het Zwaard van Ardoewaan had been filmed in the same region.
27 Because of the occasionally erratic editing, and because director Bert Struys claims to have amended the original script as he deemed its ‘doomsday rhetoric’ unfit for a young audience, I have also consulted the novelization of the series to grasp the writer’s original intentions: L. De Groof, De Kat, Antwerp 1973, 2 vol. Almost all the BRT youth series were subsequently published as novels; see K. Lindemans, De Novelisatie in Vlaanderen, Leuven, 2004 (unpublished master’s thesis).
Country life

First of all, I will deal with *De Kat*’s representation of the countryside as a social environment. The character of Karin Oste, introduced in the first episode when she is mistaken for *De Kat* by Oskar Dias’ cronies, is temporarily living with her children at the *Rupsentros*, a small rural hamlet consisting of a handful of abandoned working-class country cottages.\(^\text{28}\) The terrain has recently been sold to a construction company and will eventually make way for a newly built residential neighbourhood, but the previous owner has allowed them to occupy one of the houses until the demolition. Karin describes moving to the country with her children as a deliberate choice to leave the city, because of the urban ‘stench’ and ‘noise’. They are joined at the *Rupsentros* by Bruno Pinter, a middle-aged upbeat world traveller who moves into a neighbouring cottage. After some minor renovations, the foursome settles in as a happy community. However, it is quickly revealed that Oskar Dias also owns the construction company that bought the *Rupsentros* and he orders its evacuation. Karin is saddened at leaving her rural refuge, especially for the sake of the children who were ‘so comfortable’ in their new environment. She remarks that she ‘can’t afford to rent a house with a garden’.

The unfortunate residents of the *Rupsentros* are eventually saved by befriending Andrea Belmont, whose aunt Nellie is married to Oskar Dias and who works at *AfVal* as his secretary. Her parents have died in a car crash several years ago and have left her the splendid Belmont manor and its surrounding estate, ‘a large domain with forests’. Although noticeably susceptible to the environmental cause, Andrea initially helps Dias in his struggles with *De Kat* in exchange for her uncle’s promise to act as guarantor in her efforts to save the heavily mortgaged Belmont. Once she finds out that Dias has no intention of honouring their agreement, she quits her job and defects to the cause of *De Kat*. As ‘partners in misfortune’, Andrea invites Bruno Pinter, Karin Oste and the children to move in at Belmont. Karin is immediately infatuated by the estate and even Bruno, until now always on the move, is seen quietly remarking to himself that Belmont is worthy of ‘sticking around for a while’. But once again, Oskar Dias cuts across this plan. As a malicious speculative property developer, Dias is scheming to obtain custody over Belmont and divide the estate into residential lots. After succeeding in buying the mortgage, he constantly urges Andrea to sell and settle her debt. In one episode, *De Kat* is obligated to chase some of Dias’ thugs off the Belmont premises, where they were already taking measurements with land surveyor equipment.

\(^{28}\) De Groof, *De Kat. Deel 1*, p. 12.
Without a doubt, through various audiovisual techniques, *De Kat* makes the case for the countryside as a rural utopia, especially as a social milieu. Both the *Rupsentros* and *Belmont* are pictured as green, quiet and healthy environments, in particular for young families. The characters are often to be overheard making off-the-cuff remarks concerning the ‘fresh air’ and delightful green surroundings. This is reflected in their activities, such as gardening or relaxing on the patio at the end of the day. The children in particular are time and again pictured during fun outdoor activities, such as flying kites, riding bikes, playing soccer, picking flowers or riding horses dressed up as Indians.

Because we are dealing with television imagery, the rural idyll is intensified through sound effects and editing. Similar to Phillips, Fish and Agg’s analysis of British rural drama, *De Kat* is abundant with all kinds of audiovisual ‘rural signifiers’. The geography of the Provence lends itself perfectly to typical panoramic shots of natural open spaces that contribute to idyllic imagery. To obtain the desired effect, visions of ‘small-scale, nucleated, focused and embedded settlements’ often act ‘as important linkage, backcloth and introductory shots’.\(^{29}\) For instance, Bruno’s decision to stay at the *Rupsentros* is followed by a slow panning shot of the hamlet, accompanied by soppy music. Undeniably, the musical soundtrack is important to amplify the meaning of the images. This is demonstrated by the first episode’s opening scene. As a voice-over announces that ‘The Hollebeek used to look like this…’, we are presented a sunny shot of a crystal-clear creek, accompanied by soothing piano music. However, at the line ‘... then came the factory’, the soundtrack switches to an ensemble of agitated percussion and brass players over flashing images of a huge industrial plant spewing smoke and refuse. The sequence is concluded by a shot of sewage dripping from a waste pipe and its effect on the Hollebeek, which has transformed into a brown, muddy brook. In addition to music, the director of *De Kat* was obviously also very partial to ‘rural soundscapes’\(^{30}\): the wind rustling through the trees, the chirping of crickets and the merry sound of birdsong set the appropriate mood.

*De Kat*’s idyllic portrayal of country life closely matches the fondness within Flemish society for suburban or rural privately-owned homes. Karin Oste’s flight from the city to the countryside mimics the actual demographic evolutions in post-war Flanders, when almost all

\(^{29}\) Phillips et al., ‘Putting together ruralities’, p. 7.

\(^{30}\) Phillips et al., ‘Putting together ruralities’, p. 11.
major cities saw a decrease in population in favour of neighbouring suburbs and rural municipalities. As a matter of fact, following the Second World War, governmental spatial policy was aimed at driving urbanization processes towards the periphery of towns and the existing chains of rural settlements. Especially the Flemish Christian-democratic party – almost continually in government – favoured housing in the countryside, which they regarded as a superior social environment for families. Through several subsidy acts, of which the *Wet De Taeye* (1948) is the most notorious, private ownership of single-family homes was intensely advocated.\(^\text{31}\)

However, *De Kat* primarily exposes the paradox inherent to the Flemish rural idyll, i.e. by recounting how the construction of new dwellings may threaten the existing amenities of the countryside. Only the renovation of old farms or country houses is pictured in a positive light, as an appropriate or responsible way of rural living. It is no coincidence that, in post-war Flanders, the same practice was universally celebrated by both commercial women’s magazines and pillarized intermediary organizations.\(^\text{32}\) Moreover, two of the most famous and influential essays concerning the commodification of the countryside – the cultural critique *Het land van de dwazen* (‘The country of fools’, 1976) by catholic historian Karel Van Isacker and *Het lelijkste land ter wereld* (‘The ugliest country in the world’, 1968) by communist architect Renaat Braem – are equally respectfully of the ‘naturalness’ and ‘simplicity’ of the traditional Flemish rural architecture, while denouncing its modern imitations, the Flemish *faux* country houses commonly called ‘fermettes’.\(^\text{33}\)

Likewise, the subplot concerning the estate of Belmont is not accidental. The sale and parcelling out of historical estates in the possession of large landowners (often nobility) was very common in Flanders during the twentieth century and pushed a great deal by real estate speculators.\(^\text{34}\) The practice was one of the earliest subjects of controversy within the classic

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34 See, for instance, the account of Jef Van den Broeck, ‘In de ban van ruimte en beleid. Relaas van een zoektocht’, Ruimte en Planning, 2005, 2, pp. 12-34, or the unpublished master’s thesis by Peter Triest, who conducted a historical analysis of the land registry: Woonverkavelingen in Halle Kempen: het belang van het grondbezit in de vorming van het lokale woonlandschap (1834-1968). Met een verkenning van het integreren
nature conservation movement, as some privately owned large estates, surrounded by vast areas of park or forest, were among the largest green spaces in the vicinity of Flemish cities. Already during the ‘40s, the conservationist Koninklijke Vereniging voor Natuur- en Stedenschoon (‘Royal Association for Natural and Urban Beauty’) advocated tax breaks for large landowners to alleviate their financial burden and prevent them from selling (parts of) their grounds to speculators.35

Several other aspects of country life are also represented throughout De Kat’s episodes. Gardening seems to play an important part in the portrayed housing practices. In many scenes, Karin or Bruno are pictured gardening or carrying horticultural equipment. One of De Kat’s practical jokes consists of impersonating a representative of a gardening firm and uninvitedly laying out a flowerbed on the premises of AfVal. As a matter of fact, in post-war Flanders, growing vegetables was generally encouraged as an appropriate hobby for men, women and children alike, and growing flowers as a way to beautify the housing environment. These scenes are both reminiscent of the popular Flemish allotment gardens36 and of the Nationale Maatschappij voor de Kleine Landeigendom (‘National Agency for Small Landownershhip’), a quasi-governmental rural housing institution founded in 1936 that passionately advocated kitchen-gardens. At the time of its establishment, the NMKL wanted to guide the often unemployed urban workforces back to the countryside, back to agriculture and back to a rural way of life. To that end, the dwellings of the NMKL came with an obligatory small agricultural or horticultural exploitation until well after the Second World War.37

Another important detail is that the cottages at the Rupsentros have nameplates attached to their façades. Karin’s house bears the name ‘GOED LEVEN’ (meaning either ‘Living well’ or ‘Good life’) accompanied by a colourful illustration of a horn of plenty. The front of another cottage is adorned with a picture of a honey-filled beehive and the name ‘ZOETE INVAL’ (a Dutch expression meaning ‘Open House’38). In the novelization of De Kat, scriptwriter Louis De Groof clarifies that the little dwellings were named in this way by the day labourers who once occupied them and left for the city as a result of the industrialization of agriculture.

38 The connection with honey is that ‘zoet’ is Dutch for ‘sweet’.
Although this particular background story is not featured in the series, the audience would still be able to relate to it: until this day, many Flemish homeowners name their house, a custom usually viewed as an attempt at beautification or appropriation of the home. Ever since the fifties, naming one’s home was even occasionally promoted by several housing organizations. The NMKL, for instance, argued in its member magazine that naming houses was a potentially ‘significant custom’ if the name was chosen wisely. It recommended that house names should reflect either ‘the location, the inhabitant’s ideals, the vegetation or the aspect of the home’ and cited several ‘fitting’ examples of existing house names. The cultural services of the Boerenbond (‘Farmer’s Union’), Flanders’ primary agricultural organization, also promoted the practice as a means of maintaining a local rural identity, grounding the countryside in its agricultural heritage. Local chapters of the Farmer’s Union even organized campaigns and competitions to promote the naming of both farms and rural residences.

Consumption countryside

Often, the narrative of De Kat concerns itself directly with the hegemonic struggle over rural land-use. Especially the tension between ecological concerns and economic interests is distinctly featured in the series. The novelization reveals that the original establishment of the polluting factory close to the Hollebeek was the outcome of a governmental incentive meant to create job opportunities by developing industrial activities ‘in remote areas with a low employment rate’. This is an obvious allusion to the ‘regional expansion policy’ of the Belgian government starting from 1959, which was aimed at integrating underdeveloped, often rural districts into the national economy.

In the conversations between Dias and his daughter, numerous references are made to the legendary leniency of local planning administrations, the flexibility of zoning legislation and the vagueness of the public nuisance act in Flanders. The diabolical duo often hints at exploiting the existing loopholes and employing political alliances to amend the zoning plans in their favour. For instance, when looking for a way to develop the Rupsentros industrially, Dias is confident that once the planned residential neighbourhood is established, he will be

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39 Landeigendom, augustus 1959, p. 286.
41 De Boer, 25 oktober 1969, nr. 42, p. 22.
42 L. De Groof, De Kat. Deel 1, 1973, p. 8
able to convince the municipal authorities to reconsider building factories at the site. He even quotes one of the perennial talking points of Flemish employers as well as trades unions – ‘Work, close to home’ – and is manifestly banking on the ambition of many municipalities willing to go a long way for their own ‘business area’. While discussing Belmont, Helena finds it a suitable location for a dangerous chemical factory because of its remoteness. And although Belmont is ‘destined to be a nature reserve’, she implies that nothing is seldom final in that matter. As a matter of fact, Belgium’s first actual zoning law was only passed in 1962. Detailed development plans even came over a decade later, and with an almost endless list of exceptions and loopholes. Moreover, many authors have claimed that zoning plans were often abused by local politicians to service the pleas of their constituency.

*De Kat* also points out the drawbacks and disruptive effects of many other activities in the post-productivist countryside, such as legal and illegal dumping. Some scenes were shot at a car graveyard and a landfill, but two in particular are exemplary of the series’ message. In the first, *De Kat* catches a man called Jef Sluik red-handed at dumping wrecked cars by the side of the road. Our hero reacts by picking up the lot, following the offender and dropping it off in Sluik’s front yard, leaving a sign chiding him for his behaviour. A similar episode occurs when *De Kat* encounters a young couple that leaves some litter behind after a picnic in the country, whereupon he collects the trash, chases their car and chucks it through the side window. It is remarkable that neither scene has any dialogue or, for that matter, a clear connection to the concrete plot. They are centred entirely on their imagery and in some way resemble interludes or even infomercials on the environmental effects of irresponsible behaviour in the countryside.

**Environmental perspective**

*De Kat* still echoes some of the tenets of classic nature conservation groups in Flanders, such as the concern for historical estates. In episode 4, Andrea explicitly clarifies her efforts to protect the ‘unspoiled nature’ of Belmont as a part of a broader attempt to save ‘anything that’s not past saving’. However, the preoccupations of *De Kat* show more remarkable similarities to the emergence of the Flemish ecology movement during the 1960s. Just like the environmental movement as a whole,45 *De Kat*’s actions started off as a grassroots initiative

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44 The name is once again a pun, as illegal dumping translates as ‘sluikstorten’ in Dutch.
against a local case of environmental pollution. Gradually, throughout the series, the discourse evolves and ultimately encompasses many aspects of environmentalism.

What distinguishes the existing conservationist movement from the ‘new social movements’, is the plea for radical social change that accompanies the ecological discourse on nature.\(^{46}\) Throughout De Kat’s episodes, remarks about the decline of the rural milieu are often accompanied by pessimistic comments on the greed and consumerism that characterize modern society. In several scenes, De Kat or his disciples reproach Dias of only being interested in profit. In fact, Dias himself indeed often brushes off the environmental issue by referring to the need for economic prosperity. For instance, when reflecting on the evacuation of the Rupsentros, De Kat delivers the following speech: ‘Another patch of nature vanishing. Just because Oskar Dias wants even more money than he already has. [...] They only think about their self-interest. They are gradually making this planet uninhabitable. Huh! Through their advertisements, they try to dupe us into thinking that we cannot live without a bunch of stuff we can very well do without. Them and us... we must all learn that things could be different. And must be!’ This talk closely resembles the ecological motivation of Marc Dubrulle, co-founder of the Bond Beter Leefmilieu (BBL, ‘League for a Better Environment’) – an organization established in 1971 in response to the need for a single voice communicating the environmental movement’s political actions, and soon covering most of the Flemish environmental organizations.\(^{47}\) Dubrulle also questioned the heavy toll of material progress on the well-being and denounced the ‘artificial needs’ brought on by ‘all-pervading advertising’.\(^{48}\) In response to these sentiments, the little community consisting of Andrea, David, Dalkin, Bruno, Karin and the children is, in some respect, even reminiscent of the kind of anti-urbanist countercultural hippie communes that were briefly popular during the sixties and seventies, in the Low Countries as well as elsewhere.\(^{49}\)

The ‘different way of life’ advocated by De Kat is distinctly ecological. Several aspects play upon this theme. In the first episode, Karin tells Andrea that she grows her vegetables ‘without chemical fertilizers or spray treatment’ and that they ‘might not look as nice as those available in the shops, but they are healthy, authentic and delicious food’. On a similar note, at the beginning of episode 8, we see Bruno returning from the Belmont garden carrying a

\(^{46}\) Walgrave, Nieuwe sociale bewegingen, p. 46.

\(^{47}\) Walgrave, Nieuwe sociale bewegingen, p. 58.


pitchfork and a hoe, and singing a song about not using insecticide to grow carrots. These remarks tie in with the message of the Vereniging voor Ecologisch Leven en Tuinieren (VELT, ‘Association for Ecological Living and Gardening’), a prominent member of the BBL.

Another aspect is the series’ stance towards air pollution from transportation. The thugs from AfVal invariably get around by car, but De Kat and his sympathizers are mostly seen on horse-back or riding bikes. Even shopping in the village or dropping the children off at school is done by horse-cart. Only when in danger or pursued by Dias’ thugs does De Kat resort to ‘lending’ one of the factory’s motorcycles, cars or trucks. Only on two occasions is this preference for clean means of transportation explicitly mentioned by the characters. In one scene, Andrea owes her partiality to horses to the fact that they do not produce any exhaust fumes. In another scene, to prevent the factory thugs from pursuing him, De Kat sabotages one of their trucks and leaves a sign with the message: ‘An engine that doesn’t function, is a clean engine’.

Sociologist Stefan Walgrave has described the shift from the conservationist to the ecologist perspective as both a change in focus towards protecting the own social environment, and a change in behaviour through the use of rather symbolic and expressive modes of action. As a matter of fact, De Kat makes extensive use of slogans and signs which bear a striking resemblance to the imagery employed by actual environmental protest groups during the 1960s and 1970s. However, De Kat’s trademark style is sabotage. Among other feats, he closes off AfVal’s effluent pipeline that causes the pollution of the Hollebeek and even diverts poisonous ‘sulphur and chlorine fumes’ from the factory’s chimney to Dias’ office through the factory’s ventilation system, to give the industrialist a taste of his own medicine. The actual protests of environmental groups during the 1970s were occasionally also rather rough. Probably the most notorious case is an overpass that was set ablaze by environmental activists during a protest against the construction of an expressway in the Flemish residential municipality of Overpelt (1977).

Another key characteristic of the ecological movement consists of a combined plea for individual responsibility and proposals for structural solutions. De Kat’s narrative also

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50 Walgrave, Nieuwe sociale bewegingen, p. 48.
presents answers to many of the environmental issues that it raises. This is done through the character of Vincent Dalkin, a friend of David De Kat who once worked for Oskar Dias as a chemist. Dalkin solves the problem of domestic refuse by inventing a bio-degradable kind of plastic. Dias has been able to steal the formula and refuses to put it into production, as it would affect his margin of profit. About halfway through the series, Dalkin joins the gang at Belmont to work in a laboratory, analyzing samples and trying to create an environmentally friendly fuel. In the final episode, all ends well as this fuel is perfected and Dalkin’s plastics formula is traded for the estate of Belmont, with Dias’ promise to start its production.

As a final point, education was also considered crucial by new social movements. The fact that De Kat is meant for a pre-teenage audience, has an effect on the way this is narrated throughout the series. Many of the reprimands on environmental policies are delivered by Clovis, a ‘talking’ garden gnome who is actually voiced by Bruno – who reveals himself an amateur ventriloquist. Clovis teaches the children about the ‘Zoedels’53, a collective term for people and machines that pollute the environment.

Halfway through the series, Karin Oste accepts a job as a teacher at the local elementary school and is praised by David De Kat because he considers the school system crucial to the teaching of environmental values. Through several field trips, Patrick, Katja and their classmates are taught about recycling and, among other things, the harmfulness of phosphates in detergents. As a matter of fact, many of the BBL’s member organizations focused heavily on education and information, such as the Centrum voor Natuurbeschermingseducatie (‘Centre for the Education on Nature Preservation’) and the Jeugdbond voor Natuurstudie en Milieu (‘Youth Club for the Study of Nature and Environment’). Importantly, the ecology lessons prompt the children into forming their own youth club, named after De Kat, with a club house at Belmont. They start to organize their own environmental actions, such as bringing glass bottles back to the factory54 and collecting garbage left behind in natural environments. The message is clear: through the children’s industriousness, the continuity of De Kat’s environmental battle is made certain. That is also why the final shot of the final episode pictures young Patrick in a miniature cat costume.

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53 Another example of wordplay: ‘bezoedelen’ means ‘to soil’ in Dutch.
54 In the novelization, their actions garner attention from the press and are even brought up by a member of parliament. De Groof, De Kat. Deel 2, p. 61.
Conclusions

Without a doubt, the imagery of De Kat subscribes to the rural idyll. The unspoiled natural environment of the Provence summons the promise of ‘sensational outdoor experiences, spectacular landscapes and idyllic settings’, creating the familiar image of an idyllic countryside. And although the rural world is still distinctly portrayed as a pastoral retreat for urbanites, the narrative of De Kat heavily criticizes the unrestrained consumption of the countryside’s amenities by industry, housing and tourism. If we consider noticing of small but significant details central to a thorough reading of images, including the absence of certain issues, perhaps the complete lack of any allusion to agriculture – except for the ubiquitous Provence vineyards – is the most striking way in which De Kat emulates a distinctly post-productivist countryside. The series’ narrative is overflowing with references to evolutions in the Flemish countryside after the Second World War, such as industrial pollution, planning difficulties and the parceling of historical estates. De Kat is particularly evocative of the type of rural idyll commonly held by the budding environmental movement in Flanders. Numerous references to issues such as biological agriculture, domestic refuse and transportation embed the threatened Flemish countryside within a global ecological crisis.

By relying on the well-known imagery of the rural idyll, the producers wish to express their admiration for healthy rural environments as well as concern for their continued existence. We should look past the fact that the unspoiled Provence countryside pictured in De Kat in no way resembles Flemish rurality. As Halfacree has contended, we should not necessarily look upon the viewing public as the ‘cultural dupes’ of popular discourses and a hegemonic rural idyll. We can only assume people recognized and accepted the imagery as a hyperreal idealization and, as David Crouch has stated, have made ‘their own sense of the rural, reinterpreting dominant images through their own cultural practice’. In essence, De Kat provides us with an overstated representation of a countryside endangered by industrialization, waste dumping, invasive tourism and urban sprawl, as well as a fictionalized cross-section of the environmental movement in Flanders during the 1970s.

56 Burke, Eyewitnessing, p. 188.
Abstract

The emergence of a post-productivist countryside has thoroughly affected contemporary rural historiography. Against the backdrop of a hegemonic struggle in which several societal actors contest the countryside’s amenities, historians have turned to the analysis of the circulating social representations of the rural. The mass media – especially television – are often singled out by scholars as the primary source of unrealistic, distorted and idealized images of the countryside. Then again, most scholars agree that TV nevertheless provides ‘testimonies’ about contemporary issues. In this paper, I argue that representations of the countryside provided by TV fiction, if approached correctly, may yet be of great significance for research on contemporary rural history.

This paper focuses on De Kat, a Flemish children’s television series (1973) in which a masked environmental vigilante fights an evil industrialist and property developer. Although clearly meant to be set in contemporary Flanders, much of the episodes were filmed against the backdrop of the wild and unspoiled landscapes of the French Provence. But this ‘unrealistic’ imagery shrouds a narrative that is overflowing with references to the ongoing hegemonic struggle and historical evolutions within the Flemish countryside, such as industrial pollution, planning difficulties and the parcelling of historical estates. By relying on the well-known imagery of the rural idyll, the producers merely wish to express their admiration for healthy rural environments and simultaneously provide a deliberately overstated representation of a countryside endangered by waste dumping, invasive tourism and urban sprawl. As such, De Kat presents a fictionalized cross-section of the environmental movement in Flanders during the 1970s.
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