

2003

MAPPING LEUVEN

Intertwined with today's global culture, I also find myself connected to the city of Leuven. Each month I produce several ragga/dancehall compilation cd's for a Pakistan friend who runs a small fashion business and a restaurant in this beautiful city. As I am not a regular visitor, my thoughts about Leuven are not dominated by its well known medieval and post-medieval architecture or by its rich history of priesthood, Catholicism and science. Although I am a big fan of Catholic cities (I will get back to that later), however, my knowledge of Leuven is mainly composed of stories from friends, letters, email contacts, websites, music and nightlife.

It will probably not come as a surprise, but my first visit to Leuven in 1979 concerned a visit to the famous brewery of Stella Artois. In those years I was hosting a small club in a Catholic town in the south of the Netherlands that totally relied on Stella's investments. Stella paid for the furniture, the bar, the dj-set and other necessary infra-structural supplies. The Leuven based brewery had recently taken over the famous Trappist Abbey at Tilburg from which we purchased our booze and soda. Our weekly trips to this ultra-Catholic abbey with its beer loving monks were as exciting as visits to punk rock clubs or soccer matches as it not only provided historical glamour and deep insight in our shared Catholic culture, but adventure and long exciting conversations with bearded outsiders dressed up in brown robes as well. The monastery helped in shaping our world views and thus played its role in our becoming of age in an increasingly secular world that still bore witness to its Catholic foundations. From the perspective of the Tilburg Abbey, our encounter with Leuven and the Stella Artois Brewery was not an alienating event, but a more or less organic next step in our global cultural development. For us youngsters, Stella symbolized nightlife, music, psychedelics and sexual experience, in other words, global secular culture. On the other hand, Leuven with its Catholic decorum of old fashioned grandeur, symbolized a culture of habituation, familiarity, ease and beauty, in other words, local religious culture. In Stella Artois they have become one: the brewery, once dubbed 'Den Horen', dates back to 1366 and was conferred to Sebastian Artois in 1708. The brewery even outdates the famous university of Leuven.

(Although not in a religious and ecclesiastical sense, I have always felt myself an avowed Catholic, as this thoroughly cultural environment provided me the freedom to construct a personal philosophy of life in which I was allowed to combine singular and universal elements into a more or less coherent and comforting approach to life and death. Not hindered by rational protestant fundamentalism, as a Catholic pagan I never had any reason to denounce or detest my cultural foundations.)

These thoughts came to my mind after I had read Leuven's Cultural Policy 2002-2007, entitled 'Ancient and Alive & Kicking'. The Plan is focused on two principles: history and contemporary cultural developments. The city aims to revitalize architectural monuments and to redefine contemporary art and culture. "Leuven", the report says, "wants to develop itself as a dynamic city within a rich past". The city wants to do justice to local contexts and global contexts as well. In other words, Leuven is aiming at a 'glocal' identity. This identity is held together by 'transversal

lines', a complicated phrase borrowed from French philosophers Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, however hardly defined and taken to its merits here. Perhaps Herman de Dijn, like Deleuze & Guattari an expert of Spinozism, can elaborate on this theme later. Within this transversal urban texture, or in other words, within this matrix of criss-cross scattered cultural characteristics, relationships, lines, knots and centres, the city points out four priorities: youth culture (25% of the Leuven population is aged between 17 and 24); cultural integration (equal admission for all to all cultural institutes and means); cultural diversity (making sure that Leuven's cultural identity is based on the cultural pluralism as lived and expressed by its citizens) and, finally, senior culture (as contemporary cultural life is often hostile to elderly people).

To be honest, 'Ancient and Alive & Kicking' is a disappointing effort to re-brand Leuven's identity. The piece thrives on clichés and fashionable themes like popular culture and cultural diversity, without mentioning examples or showing how these aspects are intertwined with 'Ancient' Leuven or with contemporary global culture that is supposed to be 'Alive & Kicking'. How global is Leuven? I think of this guy from Pakistan, married to a Dutch wife, importing clothes from India, running a multi-ethnic catering business and who happens to like Jamaican music imported from Rotterdam. I think of Stella Artois, once my local/global window to the world, however denounced by Dutch beer lovers and called 'vin du koppin' (headache booze) and now upgraded in England and sold expensively in pubs as an exotic beer for drum & bass lovers, black immigrants and women.

A short and provisional inquiry about local and global aspects of intercultural life in Leuven, set up amongst friends and email contacts, provided more interesting details for an outsider like me. To mention only a few local/global lines and knots, closely related to popular culture:

Techno and drum & bass, global expressions of digital culture, nightlife and urban self-assurance, seem to do very well in Leuven. Club Food is supposed to be famous for its Fluffy Clouds and Fataal Parties. There is mentioning of other dance events like Underground Oase and Oase the Pleasure. Record shops like Wood-Nymph, JJ Records and Doctor Vinyl keep up with contemporary global pop culture. There is more digital culture. I also came across a high-tech Leuven organization, called Mad Belgian Aliens. They form a local Linux development team within a global network and have been doing a lot of research in this field.

Less digital, however equally interesting, is comic culture. As in other Belgian cities, Gent for instance, Leuven has several good comic shops - I think of Gobelijn, Houtekiet and Het Besloten Land –selling and promoting a wide and global range of comics derived from Japan to the United States and producing excellent interviews in magazines and on the internet. Students of the Leuven University, being part of the Institute for Cultural Studies, organized a big symposium last year, dedicated to the worldwide distribution of underground comics and their role in contemporary youth culture. Within the Management School of Leuven, a lot of research has been done on the impact of informal and underground economies on global culture.

Activists and squatters, another significant local/global phenomena, also perform their duties in Leuven. The international organization Food Not Bombs – consisting of people who collect left over food in order to feed the homeless and the poor – have found a local expression at Leuven as the Pumpkin Liberation Front, which, so I am

told, is well known for its creative activities, gatherings and art works. There was also mentioning of LUPA, the Leuven Underground Press Agency and a small squatters movement, circling around Villa Skwattus Dei, a very ironic but characteristic local/global name for a squat in a Catholic city.

I am aware the above listed examples are presented in a random fashion and that they are not based on comprehensive research or to culture in general, however, they do show us that Leuven is totally intertwined in the matrix of global culture. I am convinced that you, as Leuven insiders and experts on local culture, are much more capable of producing an extensive list.

If our aim consists of getting a glimpse of the transversal ordinates and co-ordinates that define Leuven's cultural life, we need to construct a map. Not a ground-plan as provided by the local tourist board, but a map, shaped in the good-old tradition of the Surrealists. City branding without a map, without a visualized database, is nothing more than a cheap marketing instrument. Perhaps suited for a supermarket, however, not for a respectable city like Leuven. And let us face it, Surrealism once found a solid base in Belgium, so why should we not reinvent tradition?

Besides, contemporary digital media provides us with countless possibilities to produce an exciting cultural map of Leuven. Perhaps then we can start to think more carefully about city branding. Or better: in the ongoing process of mapping, city branding is revealed.

Following the Surrealists, we will discover that 'Ancient' Catholic Leuven was also 'Alive & Kicking'. There is no need to draw a distinct line between the past and the present. Popular culture and cultural diversity have always been part of Catholic tradition. We should not, in prejudiced Protestant fashion, mirror Catholicism exclusively in the context of the Church of Rome. My grandmother and mother for instance, grew up in a Tilburg parish, run by friendly Capucijner monks and priests, who, like my family, had never any ties with and sympathy for the bishop of 's Hertogenbosch or the pope in Rome. Leuven, with its famous university and respectable scientific tradition of history of religion, could guide us in rethinking the merits and tragedies of Catholic culture. Guido Marnef's exciting book on Underground Protestantism in 16th century Belgium (1996), a thesis recently defended at Leuven, in only one example of ancient, but alive & kicking stories.

The infamous Belgian Surrealist philosopher and freethinker Raoul Vaneigem has published exciting books about the history of Catholic sects, cults and practices. He and other Surrealists show us that we should not only look at the past in terms of architecture, monuments and congealed religious life, but in terms of stories, plots, drama, adventure and excitement as well. Yes, in terms of popular culture and cultural diversity. To quote philosopher Paul Virilio: "The city, let's keep talking about it. But architecture, it's finished, over. Curtain".

The famous Surrealist Map Of The World, published in 1929, was a lucid attempt to deconstruct the existing Europe centred map of the world. Some countries were left out, others blown up in size, some regions were taken very serious, others were made ridiculous. The map was originally published in the Belgian art magazine 'Varietes'. At a 1978 exhibition in London, a British writer overheard the following conversation:

Woman: "Look at this. A Surrealist map – what does it all mean?"

Man: "Well, I suppose that is trying to portray the world, er...-it's like a child would draw a map-you know, a childlike drawing. See-the United States and England are missing...I don't understand that either".

We understand it all too well now. Reconnecting mapmaking with imagination, a typical Surrealist approach, and posing cartography as a matter of shared cultural choice, this kind of mapping leaves elements out and brings new elements into play. Only these kinds of maps, philosopher Gerard Legrand wrote in 1982, reflect "the spirit as well as the artistic and political tendencies" of a generation at a given moment. To produce such a cultural map, or more philosophical, to produce an imaginary but possible planisphere, is not only a playful enterprise, however, it helps us to rediscover the city we live in and enables us to re-appreciate aspects of culture we had already thrown on the rubbish-dump of history.

Earlier today, urban hacker Wilfried Hou Je Bek organized a walk through Leuven in which he paid tribute to an old tradition of mapping, re-mapping and counter-mapping, dating back till 1821 when Thomas de Quincey wrote 'Confession of an English Opium Eater'. Last week my friend and I explored the city of Edinburgh. Strolling without a map the city guided us through its streets and stories. By pure coincidence we crossed a cemetery and were stopped at Thomas de Quincey's grave. I did not even know he was buried at Edinburgh. How would your map look like?

To cut a long story short, to me Leuven seems a grateful city to be looked upon again. If we want to do justice to the transversality of contemporary culture, as Leuven's Cultural Policy 2002-2007 has stated, we should use all our research, creativity and imagination to construct a cultural map. If I understood Deleuze & Guattari correctly, transversality refers to mapping movements, currents and flows that are typical of Leuven, but always intertwined in a matrix of global culture. Sometimes we will congeal, sometimes we will feel the need to liquefy. Sometimes we will stress 'ancient' aspects, knowing they are 'alive & kicking'. Sometimes we will focus on 'alive & kicking' developments, knowing they have their 'ancient' counterparts within the same city or within the same developments.

The biggest challenge is to build a network, or better, to become a network, destined to redesign the city and culture of Leuven. Cultural policy, as Dutch historian Johan Huizinga once proclaimed, should not be based on the preservation of culture, however, cultural policy should create conditions under which cultural practises are able to flourish. Mapping or visualizing those conditions and practises seems a good start to me. Good luck!

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