

# Translator's Introduction: Menno ter Braak's two articles on Norbert Elias, 'The age of kitsch' (1935) and 'The word civilization' (1939)

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Norbert Elias and the Dutch modernist writer Menno ter Braak (1902–1940) never met, but the relationship between the two intellectuals is significant in a number of ways. Joop Goudsblom (2011) has often referred to the impact ter Braak's review had on him, and Léon Hanssen, ter Braak's biographer, also observes that ter Braak constituted an important part of the 'bridge' between Elias and Dutch intellectual debate, scholarship and literary criticism (2003: 367; 2015: 41). He was the first Dutch writer to recognise, understand and appreciate Elias's book, and these two articles (ter Braak 1935; 1939) have played a crucial strategic role in the reception of Elias's work in the Netherlands and beyond. It was ter Braak's review of the first volume of *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* (Elias 1939) which attracted the attention of Goudsblom in the 1950s [precisely?] and persuaded him, (together with the recommendation of his sociology teacher, A.N.J. den Hollander, and the 1940 review by W.A. Bongers), to borrow the book from the library. Readers of this journal will probably be familiar with the pivotal role that Goudsblom then played in the gradual spread of attention paid to Elias's approach to sociology and, after his Professorship in Ghana, Elias made Amsterdam his permanent home.

Menno ter Braak was born in Eibergen (1902), on the German border, and went to school in Tiel, where he was an exemplary student. His grandfather was a doctor, as was his father, and there were also a number of lawyers in the family. His mother was related to Johan Huizinga, with whom he later engaged in correspondence and public debate. He studied Dutch and history at the University of Amsterdam, where he became an editor of and regular contributor to the student magazine *Propria Cures*. He became interested in the new field of film studies, co-founding the *Filmliga* (Film League), which aimed to promote avant-garde and Soviet films. He completed his Ph.D. dissertation in 1928 on the Holy Roman Emperor Otto III (980–1002) at the University of Amsterdam, and later worked in a secondary school teaching Dutch and history.

He entered the literary world in 1925 when he co-established the periodical *De Vrije Bladen*, later moving on to the literary magazine *Forum*, together with Edgar du Perron and Maurice Roelants, and becoming literary affairs editor of the Dutch liberal daily *Het Vaderland* ('the Fatherland') in 1933. In addition to a large number of essays on a wide variety of topics, including film, art, culture, politics and religion, his twenty books, many of which are regarded as classics of Dutch literature, included *Het carnaval der burgers* The Burgers' Carnival (1930), *Afscheid van domineesland* Farewell to the Land of Pastors (1931), *Demasqué der schoonheid* Unmasking Beauty (1932), *Politicus zonder partij* Politician without a Party (1934), *Van oude en nieuwe christenen* On Old and New Christians (1937), *Het Nationaal Socialisme als rancuneleer* National Socialism as a doctrine of rancour (1937), and *De nieuwe elite* The New Elite (1939). The Netherlands government capitulated to the German forces four days after invasion, on 14 May 1940, as the Luftwaffe carpet-bombed Rotterdam. On that day, having just failed to secure a boat crossing to England, he committed suicide, using a sedative and an injection of poison prepared by his brother, Wim ter Braak, a doctor. He felt that he did not have much of a future under German occupation.

Hanssen surmises that ter Braak must have received his review copy in August 1939 (2015: 48), since the review was published on 27 August 1939, and war was declared four days later, on 1 September 1939 – ter Braak begins the review referring to 'these days of crisis'. He received the second volume a few months later, in February 1940, and he did read it, since his copy has his margin notes (Hanssen 2015: 49), but he did not write a review, presumably because he had more pressing concerns on his mind. The book review also needs to be seen against the background of Elias's 1935 article on kitsch (Elias 1935; 2006), published in *Die Sammlung*, the German emigre periodical managed by Klaus Mann, and ter Braak's laudatory discussion of it in *Het Vaderland* on 8 January 1935. It seems to have been this lively engagement with his kitsch article by ter Braak which prompted Elias to arrange for a copy of the two volumes of *Über den Prozess* to be sent to ter Braak for review, even though we don't know if Elias actually read ter Braak's essay; he was in Paris at the time, so it seems unlikely (Hanssen 2015: 42–3).

Joop Goudsblom has said that Elias wrote to Klaus Mann (letter in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach) asking for confirmation of the authorship of the kitsch piece in *Het Vaderland*, [1],[#N1] and Joop is also certain that Elias was very much in control of the distribution of review copies, to Karl Mannheim, Johan Huizinga, Raymond Aron, Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud, Franz Borkeneau and S.H. Foulkes. This addresses a controversy around how ter Braak came to review the book: Herman Korte (2013) thought a copy must have come from Thomas Mann, but Leon Hanssen correctly points out that a close look at the times they were together, and the fact that Thomas Mann appears to have read the book properly only after his meeting with ter Braak, makes this unlikely (2015: 46–48). ter Braak's review copy more probably came, then, directly from the publisher, at Elias's instigation.

ter Braak grasped its nuances immediately and was able to identify its intellectual significance eloquently. Contrary to the widespread misreading of Elias's work in terms of an association of 'civilization' with naïve progressive evolutionism, ter Braak appreciated it immediately as precisely a critical account of the European self-perception of having achieved an advanced state of civilization, at the expense of understanding it as a continuous and long-term process. He was trained as a historian himself and his uncle was Johan Huizinga, so it is likely that his general intellectual disposition facilitated his receptivity to Elias's arguments.

Apart from being the earliest discussion in Dutch of Elias's thought, and being the immediate linkage to the review of *Über den Prozess* and its subsequent reception by Goudsblom, the kitsch piece is also especially interesting because of ter Braak's explanation of its significance. For ter Braak, one of its important features was its sociological, materialist approach to art, and this is in contrast with Walter Benjamin's reading of the first volume of *Über den Prozess*, that he found paid too little attention to class conflict, which was Benjamin's reason for declining to review it (Schöttker 1998). It also stands firmly on its own as a robust discussion of the sociology of art and the 'problem of modernity'. His reading of Elias marks an important moment not just in his personal intellectual development, but also in 20th century Dutch literary criticism (Hanssen 2015: 49). Elias's essay reinforced the idea that Western civilization has double-sided, often disastrous effect, and it marks a sociological turn in his understanding of art and literature, which was in turn to have a significant impact on Dutch literary criticism well beyond his lifetime.

ter Braak's reading of Elias is also interesting in that what resonated for him was a degree of cultural pessimism about the current state and possible future trajectory of human civilization which remained far more muted in Elias himself (Hanssen 2015: 51). As Hanssen points out, Elias's conclusion to *Über den Prozess* – where he deals with the negative aspects of the process of civilization simply by declaring that it still has a long way to go (somewhat like Ghandi's Western civilization 'would be a good idea') – is a little pious compared to the more critical edge of the kitsch article and much of the rest of the book. Overall, the impact of Elias's thinking was significantly facilitated and amplified by ter Braak, stimulating a sociological turn in Dutch literary criticism as well as the powerful influence Elias subsequently had on Dutch social science. As

Hanssen remarks, 'Partly thanks to ter Braak's sharp analysis, an intensive and fruitful debate emerged about the development, current state and future of Western culture, in which direct and indirect connections can also be made beyond the borders of Dutch culture (2015: 52). ter Braak's reading of Elias had important effects, then, in a variety of ways, and these two essays shed significant light on the history of Elias's intellectual trajectory.

## Note

1. Personal communication, Joop Goudsblom, 9 November 2017. [♣.\[#N1-ptri\]](#)

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