

The Romance of Technology in an Age of Extremes

Leonard de Vries' Hobby Clubs, 1945–1965

Dick van Lente

This article discusses the work of the most successful populariser of science and technology during the 1950s and 1960 in the Netherlands, Leonard de Vries. De Vries not only wrote books in which modern technologies were explained, but also started a movement of Hobby Clubs for secondary-school-age boys and girls (very similar to the American Science Clubs). His very optimistic view of technological and industrial progress contrasted sharply with the intense pessimism of most intellectuals at the time. The largely implicit dialogue between these extreme positions is analysed in this article. It is argued that De Vries' popularity was based not so much on his arguments, as on his articulation of the emotional appeal of cooperative technological creativity. Without entering into the contemporary intellectual debate about technology, he offered a romantic alternative to the 'cog-in-the-machine' view of the cultural critics, a view that attracted many young people at the time.



INTRODUCTION

In 1994, the English historian E. J. Hobsbawm characterized the century that was coming to an end as an 'age of extremes' – a time of wars of unprecedented scale and destructiveness, of spectacular economic growth and of mind-boggling scientific discoveries that were the basis for a range of technologies and gadgets on which everyday life had come to depend. He also noted a widespread suspicion and fear of science, rooted in an awareness of its extreme complexity and its dangerous, or possibly dangerous, applications, such as nuclear weapons and genetic engineering.¹ At the same time, however, modern technology was presented in corporate advertising, as well as by some politicians and intellectuals, as bringing boundless wealth and comfort

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and even as the only hope to overcome the great global problems of poverty and hunger.² This coexistence of utopian and dystopian expectations illustrates Hobsbawm's idea of an age of extremes, but it also raises the question if and how these attitudes were related. Were they in some kind of conversation with one another? This is the question that this article explores.

The life and work of the Dutch writer Leonard de Vries, author of a series of very popular books aimed at high-school-age boys and girls about technology and technological adventures, can help us understand this dialectic of the utopian and the dystopian, and especially the emotional quality and psychological roots of technological enthusiasm. While most Dutch intellectuals and literary writers at the time were very pessimistic about the prospects of western technological society, De Vries was almost ecstatically optimistic, both about technology in general and about the industrial future of the Netherlands. His popularity during the first two post-war decades suggests that his romantic utopianism struck a responsive chord among Dutch youth. It was also warmly greeted by industrialists, for whom he wrote promotional books and gave popular talks. De Vries was especially important because he was a prominent educator, who introduced his young readers into the exciting and threatening world in which they were growing up – a world about which their parents and teachers held highly contradictory views.³

LEONARD DE VRIES (1919–2002) AND THE HOBBY CLUBS

Leonard de Vries was the only child of a journalist who wrote for the national newspaper *Algemeen Handelsblad*, as well as for a magazine for young people, to which he contributed a column on radio technology.⁴ At age ten Leonard visited, with his parents, a large radio transmitter that was used for broadcasts to the Dutch East Indies, on the other side of the globe. He was deeply impressed and, like many of his generation, started to build his own receiver. At seventeen, he took over his father's radio column – the start of his professional writing career. After finishing secondary school he enrolled in a training course at the Bataafsche Petroleum Maatschappij (part of what is now Royal Dutch Shell) to become a chemical assistant. When the Germans occupied the Netherlands in May 1940, Shell discontinued this course. De Vries then turned his radio columns into his first book, *Het jongensradioboek*, or 'the radio book for boys', which appeared a few months later. Then he wrote two similar books, one on electricity and one on photography, which appeared in 1941. These works were very successful during and after the war; the radio book was in its fourth printing in 1946 and its eighth in 1955, and the electricity book had its fourth printing in 1955. By that time, De Vries had become an acclaimed popular writer on science and technology. When the city of Amsterdam organized a large exhibition on nuclear

energy in 1957, De Vries was asked to give lectures and to write a popular book about nuclear physics and technology (this book also had a large second-print run⁵). In the late sixties, he wrote an anniversary volume about the national airline company KLM,⁶ and he wrote many other books, which aimed at, and reached, a large public on a variety of subjects, from children's literature and the history of nineteenth-century technology and medicine to the history of pornography. Before one analyses his ideas and impact, however, one has to look at the formative period in his life, the dark years of the German occupation.

From the fall of 1940, the Germans started to register and isolate Dutch Jews, and in the summer of 1942 massive arrests and deportations started. The De Vries family, which was Jewish, went into hiding. For Leonard a place was found in the southern province of Brabant. He survived the war, while his parents, like the majority of Dutch Jews, were arrested and killed in a German camp. De Vries spent his years in hiding writing his fourth book, this time a novel for adolescents, *De jongens van de hobbyclub* (The Boys of the Hobby Club).⁷ It was the story of a group of high school boys and girls getting together to pursue their technical hobbies. They shared their tools and materials, their knowledge and their enthusiasm; theirs was a happy place De Vries dreamed up for himself during those terrible years. He wrote later that the boys and girls of the Hobby Club kept him company during those difficult months – even literally: when he and his foster parents had to leave the house during the last weeks of fighting, he carried the manuscript under his clothes.⁸

De Vries has hardly written directly about this terrible period, but the book he considered his best,⁹ *Chaweriem* (1955) describes the experiences of a Jewish boy, Jaap, during and after the war: the arrests and deportations from his native Amsterdam, death notices about deported family members coming from Germany, other family members who commit suicide, then the isolation and anxiety in his hide-out and the news of the deportation of his parents and little sister. Sleepless at night, Jaap asks himself how he can endure it all. Then, after twenty months in hiding, American troops liberate the area. Jaap's ecstatic happiness about freedom regained soon turns to depression however, as he realises he will never see his parents and little sister again. He then decides to immigrate to Palestine to help build the new Jewish state. He describes the kibbutz where he ends up in utopian terms: it is 'the most complete realisation of socialism on earth'; class differences have been abolished and each person works for the community.¹⁰ The book ends with the assertion that construction of a new community is the only answer to repression, concentration camps and destruction.

Chaweriem illustrates one psychological effect of 'the age of extremes': displacing traumatic memories with utopian plans. Jaap attempted (not always

successfully*) to see the kibbutzim as a paradise that eradicated the nightmare of the German occupation and the Shoah. When he describes himself as 'one of those in whom great joy and deep melancholy always alternate', he even defines his own personality as one of extremes.¹¹ In the absence of good biographical material, one can only speculate how close De Vries' mindset was to that of his hero Jaap, but very likely his immense productivity, his unremitting *Wanderlust*, and the rather overblown, exalted atmosphere in his books were his way of keeping the melancholy caused by his war experiences at bay.[†] The hobby club books have an atmosphere of idealism and cooperation that is very similar to *Chaweriem*, and they clearly fulfil a similar wish: to replace the isolation and fear of the occupation period with a creative community.

De Vries' depiction of the Dutch people during and after the occupation was remarkably positive. While this is understandable, since a Dutch family had saved his life while risking its own, it was well known that many Dutch people had cooperated with the Germans. The few Jews returning after the war were commonly met with indifference or worse, and their houses and goods were often not returned to them. Jaap also feels lost; his foster parents can no longer support him, and his family and former home are gone. If he had not gone to Palestine, he would have needed a community like De Vries' Hobby Club to keep depression at bay.

But the Hobby Club story was more than a private fantasy. The novel was also, like De Vries' other 'how to-books', an instruction manual. It was a dream meant to come true – and it did. The book appeared in 1947, and De Vries tells us he soon received 'piles of letters' from youngsters who wanted to start such a club.[‡] Taking inspiration from the American Science Clubs, which had existed since the 1920s, he next launched a magazine called *Hobby Club*, first appearing in August 1949, with the aim of guiding and encouraging his readers.¹² Two months later, 17 clubs had been started, and within a year there were 70. De Vries also wrote a number of sequels to the first Hobby Club novel, wrote letters to industrial firms asking for support and published an article in *De Industrie*, a journal published by an organization for managers in industry. The response was lukewarm. Industrial firms encouraged him, promised to advertise his books among their employees, sometimes provided materials and instruction and invited Hobby Clubs for

* At one point Jaap shamefully admits his boredom with the unremitting toil in the Mediterranean heat.

† For the period under scrutiny, however, I have found no indications of severe psychological problems in the De Vries archive: no interruptions of his work because of mental collapse, and no mention of therapeutic treatment. However, the archive is not ordered, I have not seen all of it, and material may be missing.

‡ So far, I have not found these 'piles of letters' among De Vries' papers.

excursions; but they did not offer much financial support. The clubs had difficulty finding suitable workshop rooms for their meetings and most clubs dissolved after a few years; in the sixties only a handful remained.¹³ The decline of the Hobby Clubs was, however, part of a more general trend, for from the mid-fifties on, most Dutch youth organisations, such as those connected with churches, lost members.

De Vries thought this should be blamed on the spread of television and the decline of idealism as the country became more prosperous,¹⁴ and historians have confirmed this analysis. By the late fifties, the Dutch economy was growing fast – after 1963, incomes, which had been growing gradually since the war, shot up, Cold War détente created a mood of optimism and a new generation of politicians and journalists emphasised new values. Collective effort receded behind personal development. Young people usually attained a higher education than their parents, and they became sceptical of the older generation's values. The moralistic, nationalistic, cooperative, boy-scout-ish tone of the youth organisations of the fifties suddenly seemed terribly out of date, and hypocritical as well; the young started asking painful questions about the less than heroic behaviour of their parents during the occupation period.¹⁵ Besides, modern technology came under fire, especially nuclear weapons. In the course of the sixties it became increasingly difficult to believe that so recently so many young people had been enthralled by the technological utopianism of the Hobby Clubs.¹⁶

ROMANTIC TECHNOCRACY

Indeed, De Vries' views of technology had a romantic as well as a pragmatic or political aspect. The romantic part refers to the inner drive to technological activity. In the first chapter of *De jongens*, De Vries describes the creation of the Hobby Club as a dream coming true. A particularly effective physics teacher inspires this dream by showing the boys 'the incredible possibilities of the Empire of Science', where 'white-coated men amid mysterious apparatus penetrate the secrets of nature and thereby serve humanity'. This teacher's educational philosophy is that school tends to turn students into 'encyclopaedias and calculating machines, beings without a soul'. He wants to stimulate his students to use their hands as well as their brains; he wants to foster 'their feeling for the beautiful and the practical'; he wants to teach them that all great achievements in science and technology come from cooperation.¹⁷ Some of his students experience his lessons as glimpses of a technological paradise, and they want to find a place where they can build that paradise. One night after such a lesson, says De Vries, as the boys are falling asleep, 'darkness loosens the brakes on their imaginations, and their minds wander way beyond the everyday, into the wonderful Realm

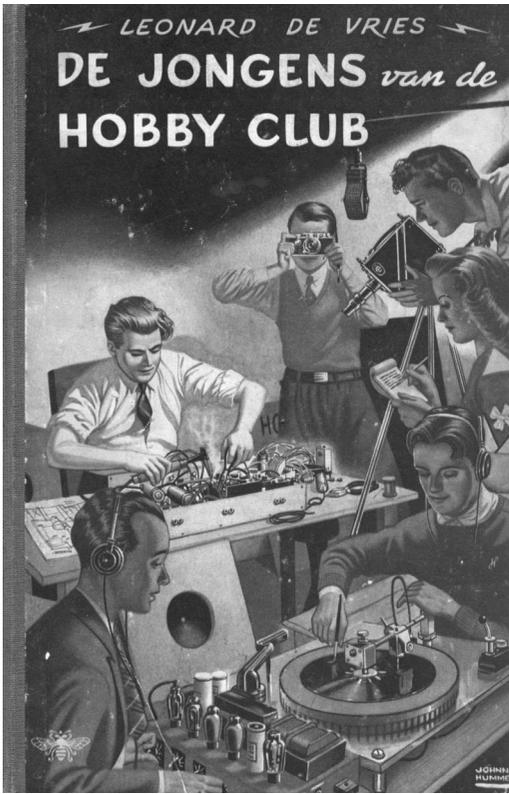


Figure 1. Cover of Leonard de Vries' *The Boys of the Hobby Club*, first edition, 1947. By courtesy of De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam.

of the Imagination'. They dream of brightly lit rooms lined with mighty technical installations and pervaded by a mysterious 'electrically charged atmosphere'. Motors hum, switches and Morse keys click. Hands are busy, eyes are shining. There is deep enjoyment.¹⁸

Later in the book, when the Hobby Club is in full swing, De Vries describes the final stage of making a film:

Vibrations of the air, electrical pulses, sounds and oscillations, each time of a different character, followed one another. Drops of sweat on the foreheads of the recording staff, quick fingers, following even quicker thoughts, controlled the dials, eyes

followed the images of the film, then looked at the scenario, electrons travelled with dizzying speed through hundreds of conductors, [...] motors hummed, vocal chords vibrated [...]: a maze of sounds and images, air particles and electrons, frequencies and flickering of light, musical notes, words and sounds, a matchless technical adventure.¹⁹

This view of technology can be called romantic on several counts. First, it is an affair of the heart as much as of the brain; second, it creates a community of soul mates – genius grows out of inspired cooperation; and third, technological activity fuses mind and matter. Boundaries between individuals, as well as between humans, nature and devices, disappear. This longing for an intimate communion with fellow people and with nature was very important to De Vries. A poem which was printed on a card of thanks to friends after his death in 2002 expressed this longing as follows:

When I have died
Scatter my ashes

To all winds
So that what was my body
Can find its way
To everything it once loved
To mountain and sea
And become one with them.²⁰

However, the language in the Hobby Club books was certainly not only in the lyrical, impressionistic mode of the quotations above. On the contrary, one of the striking aspects of these books is the frequent detailed, technical descriptions. After all, readers were encouraged to make real radio sets and model airplanes and print their own photographs. While this technical kind of writing may have scared some readers away, it was clearly assumed to be, to the more technically minded, an irresistible invitation to enter this mysterious Empire of Science.

But for De Vries the meaning of the Hobby Clubs went far beyond creating a space for teenagers to pursue their hobbies. He saw them as places where the engineers, managers and skilled workers of the future were shaped. The Clubs were his answer to two urgent problems that were widely discussed by intellectuals and politicians at the time: the need to create a modern economy that could compete on the international market and the problem of modern youth.

De Vries shared the conviction of the political elites that the Dutch economy could only thrive if, besides trade, there was an innovative industrial sector.²¹ This required many more skilled operators, engineers and managers than were available at the time.²² De Vries argued that schools should be much more attuned to the needs of industry, but as long as they were not, the Hobby Clubs would serve to attract young people to industry and help recruit workers for every level of work, from engineers and managers to manual workers.²³ They would not only foster technological skills and interests, but other abilities as well: speaking in public, 'team work', taking responsibility. The clubs were to bypass the ideological and religious divisions that were so prominent in Dutch society at the time. In De Vries' view, good leadership was not a matter of political conviction but of a cooperative attitude and technical and managerial expertise – a technocratic point of view shared by many engineers and civil servants at the time.²⁴ As already indicated, during the first few years some firms supported De Vries. They advertised in his magazine, some provided materials and tools, their employees sometimes gave courses to the boys, there were excursions, and Philips electronics factory and the Bataafsche Petroleum Maatschappij invited the National Association of Hobby Clubs to have its annual meeting in their company buildings. Until the early sixties there even was an

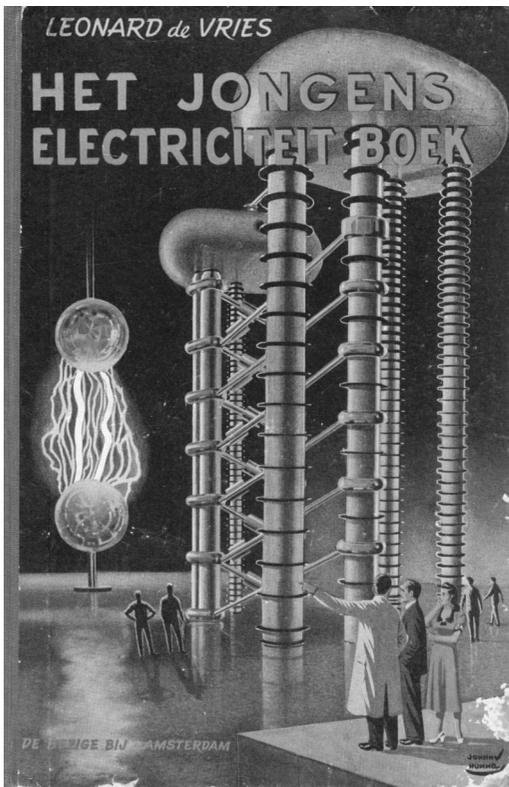


Figure 2. Cover of Leonard de Vries' *The Electricity Book for Boys*, 1948 edition (first edition: 1941). The picture illustrates a visit of the Hobby Club to a high voltage installation at the Philips labs in Eidnhoven. By courtesy of De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam.

a group of boys in the Eindhoven factories.²⁷ In December 1950, De Vries wrote to one of the directors of the company, Frits Philips, that he would finish the manuscript in March, so that the book could appear in time for the celebrations. 'What you will get for your subsidy', he informed Philips, 'is a lively book about your firm, a book that can be sold for years, that has good possibilities for the English market [...] and that definitely fills a gap in the field of company novels' (as if the 'company novel' was an established literary genre!). In an outline of the book, De Vries explained that the subtitle would be 'a book of inventions, discoveries, and entrepreneurial spirit'. When writing about inventions, he often used the word 'romantic'. The book would start in a Dutch city at night, with electric lights everywhere, and a passenger plane taking off, its crew communicating with the airport by radio – examples of the wide range of electrical and electronic devices on which a modern society depends. In a separate letter, De Vries'

organisation of industrial firms to support such activities.²⁵ In his books, De Vries had the boys visit these companies and admire the wonders that were created there. Philips, one of the boys says on such an excursion, is a kind of very large Hobby Club.²⁶

The Philips Company Archives contain a nice example of De Vries' close cooperation with a prominent high tech firm. In 1950, De Vries was preparing a book on electronics, *Het electron omspande de wereld* ('the electron encircled the world'), which was to appear a year later, on the occasion of the firm's sixtieth anniversary. It was a lyrical history of electronics, interweaving the history of the Philips firm with the lives of great inventors, and concluding with an excursion of

publisher added that he wanted to have at least 10,000 copies printed, and that the book would cost 3.90 guilders – a low price for an illustrated book at the time. This was only feasible, however, if Philips subsidised each book with 1 guilder and bought 1000 copies, which it could distribute in schools as a present; otherwise, the price would be 6.90 guilders and the print run considerably lower. The finished book turned out exactly as De Vries had described it in his letter.²⁸ He thus contributed to the Dutch government's intensive efforts to stimulate industrialisation, as well as to Philips' corporate advertising.

The second widely-discussed issue to which De Vries responded was the concern about 'modern youth'. After the war many observers agreed that the German occupation had led to widespread moral degradation and that especially the young were at risk. The causes were easy to identify: for five years, the Dutch had lived under a criminal regime, and they had learned to mislead the authorities and sometimes use illegal practices to maintain themselves. Repressed feelings of guilt about cooperation with the occupiers and the murder of the large majority of Dutch Jews must have played a role as well. When young novelists such as W.F. Hermans and G.K. van het Reve openly portrayed a demoralised, cynical young generation, critics and the public were shocked, although everyone recognised the description.²⁹ 'Moral reconstruction' was therefore considered even more urgent than the rebuilding of destroyed houses, roads and bridges. Around 1950, when this moral panic (which turned out to be quite exaggerated) had faded, concern shifted towards the social effects of industrialisation. A large apparatus of socio-psychological helping institutions was created to help families educate their children and to give moral guidance to the growing number of young people who left the countryside to join the industrial work force.³⁰ The pedagogic literature of this period was strikingly pessimistic. A typical complaint in 1947 was that young people were growing up in a world that had lost its norms and sense of direction, that they lacked idealism and were seeking escape in superficial entertainment. Another spoke, in 1956, of the social and moral disintegration of society.³¹ In the *De jongens van de hobbyclub*, De Vries portrayed some of these aimless, bored youngsters and showed how the Hobby Club turned them around, giving them joy and a sense of purpose.³² His books were on the extreme opposite side of the books of Van het Reve and Hermans.

Yet, to offer technological activity as an answer to the moral decay of western society was not as obvious as it may seem. Most intellectuals who wrote about this cultural crisis saw technological development not as a solution, but as a major cause. In order to understand De Vries' position, one therefore needs to take a closer look at the debate about technology between the late forties and the early sixties.

THE CLIMATE OF OPINION ABOUT MODERN TECHNOLOGY

Attitudes about technology were extremely ambivalent during these years. On the one hand, many people, including the young, were proud of the great land-reclamation works, the national airport Schiphol, and high-tech firms such as Philips (electronics) and Hoogovens (steel).³³ There was wide support in parliament for the industrialisation policy, including heavy investments in pure and applied research and in technical education at all levels.³⁴

At the same time, many politicians and academics were deeply troubled by the impact of technological modernisation. They often expressed these worries in very general terms: technological systems would gradually come to dominate all of society, which would increasingly resemble a huge machine – an idea that had already been expressed by early romantic writers such as Novalis, but had been strongly developed during the nineteen twenties and thirties in the Netherlands, for example, by the widely read historian Johan Huizinga.³⁵ Some depicted this machine as working more or less autonomously,³⁶ while others believed it would come to be managed by an uncontrollable technical elite.³⁷ Either way, the effect would be that most people would feel helpless ‘cogs in a machine’, and this feeling would foster cynicism, irresponsibility, escapism, consumerism and a general loss of idealism and a sense of direction. Such fears could easily be linked to worries about more specific technologies, especially computers, automation and nuclear power. Computers were expected to enable extensive control of all kinds of social processes. A well-known Dutch sociologist spoke in 1949 of an ‘unequal struggle between robots and people who are still partly authentic’.³⁸ Nuclear weapons were an example of technology either controlled by an uncontrollable elite comprised of experts and generals, or worse, out of anybody’s control. This gloomy perspective was very common in the late forties and through most of the fifties.

None of these bad feelings kept politicians from pursuing the goal of a high-tech economy, but there was a constant sense of danger and even bad conscience in many of their pronouncements. A practical response to the dangers of industrialisation was the network of social workers who were to guide young people migrating from the countryside into industrial cities towards sober and responsible lives. A more general response, coming from pulpits and in advice columns in the popular press, was moralistic – preaching the importance of individual responsibility and discipline, and of not giving in to cynicism and hedonism.

DE VRIES’ POSITION IN THIS DEBATE

De Vries, as has become obvious, joined in the chorus of moralists and

industrialists. But the subjects he avoided are as interesting as his explicit message.

First, De Vries largely avoided the more troubling aspects of technology, such as nuclear weapons, radiation illness and automation. In reading his books, one does not get a sense at all that one is in the midst of the Cold War. The technological paradise he described was related to the real world of industry, but far removed from the troubles of international politics and threats. Of course De Vries was fully aware of these problems. In *Het Atoom* (The Atom), 1957, he wrote honestly about the terrible suffering in Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the debate about the justification of the attacks. In his book on electronics (1951), he repeated the well-known instrumentalist mantra: technology is just a means; make sure it is used not against humanity but rather to serve it.³⁹ Overall, he emphasised that technology, including nuclear power, could improve the lot of mankind, and he strongly recommended a career in nuclear physics to his young readers. The implicit message was that there was no reason to feel bad about technological innovation in general.⁴⁰

But the main implicit message in his work, as I read it, was to deny the rise of an anonymous technological system, a 'megamachine', as Lewis Mumford called it, in which individual people were no more than cogs, leaving them cynical and unhappy. The main point of the Hobby Clubs was to show young people that technology was a product of human cooperation, a field of creativity and personal fulfilment in which they could choose to participate. The fragment quoted above about the ecstasy of working together on a film reverses the well-known image of people as cogs in a machine – machinery joins with human hands and brains and voices in a magnificent new creation. Perhaps it is also significant that De Vries often used film and radio as examples; these were the media of mass consumption, which were defiled by the cultural critics. In De Vries' stories, they do not provide passive entertainment, because the boys make films and broadcasts themselves.

Finally, there is an implicit message about the personality of the technological enthusiast, which is often that of the cold, calculating male, focused on efficiency.⁴¹ De Vries, however, emphasises the social *savoir faire* that the boys and girls learn in the Hobby Clubs, which include dancing, going to movies and love affairs.

CONCLUSION

Leonard de Vries' Hobby Club started as a fantasy, a cure he devised for himself to heal the wounds of the war. As a Jew, he had suffered much more than most Dutchmen. The success of his first books must have convinced him that his idea of a community of young inventors and technicians appealed to

many young people for somewhat similar reasons – it provided a sense of purpose and counteracted the mood of depression that hung over the country after the first wave of relief over the end of the occupation had passed.⁴² Moreover, the constructive cooperation and technological creativity described and praised by De Vries fitted seamlessly into the government policy of industrialisation, part of which was creating a positive attitude towards large-scale manufacturing, modern technology and industrial labour. On the other hand, it contradicted the dominant view of intellectuals that modern technology was among the main causes of the crisis of western civilization that had culminated in the war. Bureaucratic and technological rationalisation, these intellectuals constantly reminded their countrymen, undermined fundamental liberal-protestant ideals of personal autonomy and responsibility. Technocracy was an imminent danger.

There is no evidence in Vries' books and letters that he made an explicit contribution to this debate: he did not write articles in newspapers or intellectual journals about the impact and meaning of modern technology, did not correspond with intellectuals and, in his books, there is hardly any polemic about these issues.⁴³ His work must be read as a more implicit response to the prevailing pessimism, an alternative view, which may be summarised as a technocracy of the heart. It was based on an aspect of modern technology that the cultural critics tended to ignore completely: the strong feelings of awe, and even of transcendence and connection to a greater purpose, which new technologies could evoke, feelings akin to religious experience.⁴⁴ In their simplest form, such feelings were exploited in corporate advertising, which cultivated the glamour of gadgets and the lifestyle associated with them. A more elaborate form is exemplified in the exhibition building, 'Evoluon', that the electronics company Philips opened in 1966 to celebrate its 75th birthday. It was a flying saucer-shaped building, in which visitors could enjoy displays which explained electronic technologies and their uses in everyday life. The exhibition carefully avoided military uses, in which Philips was also involved. It soon became one of the most popular destinations for a daytrip in the Netherlands, and many people, including the present author, remember their visit for the rest of their lives.⁴⁵ The interior designer, the Englishman James Gardener, explained the magic of the exhibition as follows: 'everyone has a little of what I call the fairy-tale world in him. He feels something wonderful will happen tomorrow [...] and this feeling is what we want to stimulate and build up through this exhibition'.⁴⁶

De Vries described the technical paradise his youngsters created together in openly magical terms, but in his stories, the magic was not so much in the technological gadgets themselves – wonderful though they were – but in the act of creating them together. He connected this activity to the greater purpose of building a buoyant economy with work and comfort for all. The

computer scientist and anthropologist Morgan Ames has pointed out that technological charisma is fundamentally conservative: ‘Just as charismatic leaders amplify their audiences’ existing worldviews to cultivate their appeal, a charismatic technology is built on existing systems of meaning-making and largely confirms the value of existing stereotypes, institutions, and power relations [...] even as a charismatic technology promises certain benefits, it simultaneously confirms that the worldview of its audience is already “right” and that, moreover, they are even savvier to have this technology bolster it.’⁴⁷ This is true for De Vries’ Hobby Clubs too. His basic conservatism is obvious from his intimate relations with big industry, but also in the way he depicted the relations between boys and girls in the Hobby Clubs. Although primarily a boys’ world, some girls did participate, but the gender norms prevailing in the Netherlands at the time precluded their participation in real technical work: they were expected to become good homemakers, not engineers and managers. In the clubs, therefore, they mainly pursued stereotypically female hobbies and chores (making photographs, decorating lamp shades, serving coffee, acting in films), as well as adding a dose of erotic tension. It is a kind of half (or quarter) way emancipation: boys and girls enjoyed technical adventures together, without ever breaking gender codes. In that sense, the books were strictly unadventurous.

Just like the *Evolution* omitted the huge contribution of electronics to the war machine that could destroy all life on the planet, so De Vries remained mostly silent on the threatening aspects of modern technologies, emphasizing their life-enhancing qualities. Reading his books, one senses that one is in an atmosphere of extremes, but one only hears the somewhat

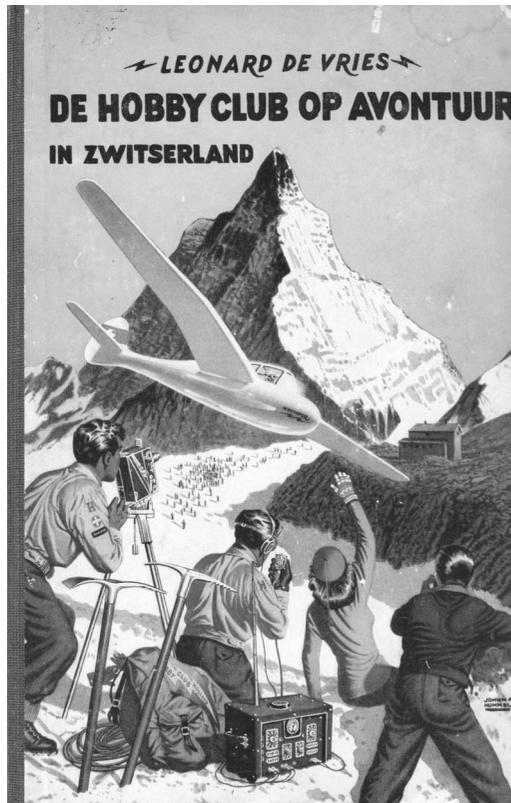


Figure 3. Cover of Leonard de Vries’ *The Hobby Club’s Adventures in Switzerland*, 1949 edition (first edition: 1948). By courtesy of De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam.

over-excited optimistic half of the cultural conversation going on at the time.⁴⁸ His work reveals that the economic reconstruction and modernisation of the Netherlands was supported by much more than rational, economic calculation. It had a strong emotional underpinning in admiration and delight of modern technology, a delight that was cultivated, at least in part, in order to erase the dark memories of the World War and the current fears of the Cold War.

NOTES

- 1 E. J. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: the Short Twentieth Century* (London, 1994), 527–532 and see also the introduction; I. F. Clarke, *The Pattern of Expectation 1644–2001* (New York, 1979), ch. 10.
- 2 This was C. P. Snow's point of view, in his famous lecture *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge, 1998) [originally in *Encounter*, 13:1 (1959): 22–27].
- 3 I have explored this theme in 'Teaching children confidence in a high tech world: the Netherlands 1950–1962', *The Journal for the History of Childhood and Youth*, 5 (2012): 181–191.
- 4 There is no biography of De Vries. I have used the interviews and correspondence in De Vries' personal papers, which are at the Letterkundig Museum in the Hague, and which I was allowed to use by permission of his son. At the time of writing, this material, contained in 23 boxes, has not been selected, ordered and made accessible by an inventory. The material includes numerous articles about, and reviews of his work, as well as correspondence with publishers, broadcasting organisations, magazines, as well as letters to companies and other organisations which he tried to persuade to commission work from him. He had the habit of writing long typewritten letters of which he kept a copy, and which reveal much about his work as a freelance writer. Although he was very successful, the letters (esp. in the box marked 'corr doos I') show that he had to work very hard to get his work published and to make ends meet. The letters he wrote to his wife, undated, but probably written in September 1967, when they were separating, document his sources of income. I will refer to this archive in the following as 'De Vries papers'. All kinds of material on De Vries can be found at a website devoted to his life and work, which is maintained by an old fan, Leo Heistek (<http://www.therenfrews.com/leonard-de-vries/> [accessed 1 June 2015]). De Vries' has given a short account of the Hobby Clubs at the end of his *De Hobby Club* (Amsterdam, 1966). See also the interview in *NRC-Handelsblad*, 2 June 1973.
- 5 See the annual report of the publisher of this book, Elsevier, *Annual report 1958*, p. 23.
- 6 *Vlucht KL-50: 1919–1969: logboek van vijftig jaar vliegen. Koninklijke Luchtvaart Maatschappij* (Amsterdam, 1969). The book was written on his own initiative. Although KLM allowed him use of the company archives and promised to sell the book to clients and its own employees, the company did not provide any subsidy to De Vries. See De Vries papers, corr doos I, letters to Vogels of the public relations department of KLM, 4 April 1967, 19 September 1967, and to the publisher Wouter van Zeytveld, 17 April 1967.
- 7 L. de Vries, *De jongens van de Hobby Club* (Amsterdam, 1947).
- 8 L. de Vries, *De Hobby Club*, 207.
- 9 F. J. Huiskamp, 'Leonard de Vries: boekenmaker', *Boekenpost*, 44 (1999).
- 10 L. De Vries, *Chaweriem* (Amsterdam, 1955), 172, 175.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 180.
- 12 Sevan Terzian, *Science Education and Citizenship: Fairs, Clubs, and Talent Searches for American Youth, 1918–1958* (New York, 2013). In De Vries' papers, corr doos 1, there is a mimeographed

- booklet published by the Science Clubs of America, *Science Talent Search Light*, 6:1 (February 1948), with information on winners of the annual prize and their further careers; and letters exchanged between members of Dutch Hobby Clubs and American pen pals of the Science Clubs. De Vries toured the US in 1951 in order to study these groups and contributed to a booklet by UNESCO about it: see the letter to Miss Hélène van Gelder, Natural Science Department, Unesco, 4 1952, in which he submitted part of the manuscript. I have not been able to find a published report, which may never have been written.
- 13 Leonard de Vries, 'Jeugd en industrie vormen samen de toekomst' in *De Industrie. Orgaan van de hoofdgroep industrie*, 5:7 (1 April 1950): 141–144; De Vries papers, corr doos 1, letters of 18 December 1952 to W. H. van Leeuwen and Paul Spijkerman.
 - 14 De Vries, *De Hobby Club* (n. 4 above), 208.
 - 15 J. Kennedy, *Nieuw Babylon in aanbouw. Nederland in de jaren zestig* (Amsterdam, 1995), 67–68.
 - 16 De Vries' popularity is well documented at the website mentioned in note 4, which contains newspaper clippings with reminiscences, interviews with de Vries and much other material. See also the documentary about the Hobby Clubs on Dutch public television: VPRO, 'Andere tijden', 2000. On the way to the conference in Tampere where I presented the first version of this paper, I met an old man on the airport, with whom I struck up a conversation. When my subject came up, he told me how he built a radio set as a youngster, using De Vries' book as a manual, and the excitement of meeting others in the ether. It sounded much like the cyberspace experience of 1990s. I was struck by his description, in accurate detail, of the cover illustration of De Vries' radio book, which he must have read at least half a century earlier.
 - 17 De Vries, *De jongens* (n. 7 above), 5.
 - 18 *Ibid.*, 24–25.
 - 19 *Ibid.*, 128.
 - 20 'Na mijn dood / Strooi uit mijn as / voor alle winden / dat wat mijn lichaam was / de weg kan vinden / voor alles wat het eens beminde / naar berg en zee / om zich daarmee te verbinden'. From <http://www.therenfrews.com/leonard-de-vries/>. The text is by Martha Muusses, from 'Het witte schip', and is used more often on such occasions. On the history of the idea of genius and the part of romantic thought in that story, see Tamsin Shaw, 'Wonder boys?', *New York Review of Books* 61:15 (9 October 2014): 3–10.
 - 21 This part of De Vries' program is explained in *De jongens* (n. 7 above), 236, 359–361, and more extensively in 'Jeugd en industrie vormen samen de toekomst' in *De Industrie. Orgaan van de hoofdgroep industrie*, 5:7 (1 April 1950): 141–144, where he also refers to English and American science clubs, which have helped recruit scientific and technical talent for the war effort. For mainstream political thinking about economic policy, see Kennedy, *Nieuw Babylon* (n. 15 above, 37–49).
 - 22 W. J. Dercksen, *Industrialisatiepolitiek rondom de jaren vijftig. Een sociologisch-economische verkenning* (Assen, 1986), 222–224; J. A. A. Ketelaar, 'De behoefte aan wetenschappelijke onderzoekers en hun verdeling over de vakgebieden', *Wetenschap en samenleving*, 11 (June 1957): 55–56.
 - 23 For example, see *De jongens*, 35, Municipal Archive Dordrecht, archief Hobby Club, nr 56, L. de Vries, *De jeugdgemeenschap – werkplaats Hobbyclub. Een handleiding voor het oprichten van een Hobbyclub* (s.l. 1954 printed), 1.
 - 24 Dick van Lente and Johan Schot, 'Technology as politics: engineers and the design of Dutch society' in Johan Schot, Arie Rip and Harry Lintsen, eds., *Technology and the Making of the Netherlands* (Cambridge, MA, 2009), 365–431.
 - 25 For example, see De Vries, *De jongens* (n. 7 above), 35. See also De Vries' letters to industrial firms, asking for financial and technical support for his Hobby Clubs, and trying to persuade them to advertise in his *Hobby Club* magazine, in De Vries papers, corr doos 1; and De Vries papers, box 'pers doc', Mededelingen betreffende het Paascongres van Nederlandse Bond van Hobbyclubs, 1953.

- 26 De Vries, *De jongens* (n. 7 above), 175.
- 27 The following is based on Philips Company Archives, Eindhoven, 185.75 redactieraad (Philips' publishing council), letters from: De Vries (21 December 1950), publisher De Bezige Bij (no date), and report of the publishing committee (24 January 1951).
- 28 L. de Vries, *Het electron omspande de wereld* (Amsterdam, 1951). Philips Company Archives, PCA 185.75 redactieraad, invitation for and report of meeting 24 January 1951. The publishing council decided to 'support' the book, at the request of director Frits Philips, but whether this included financial support is not clear, and I have not found a contract in De Vries' archive nor in that of Philips. In a letter written 11 October 1983 to Philips' press department, De Vries complained that in return for the many publications and lectures he had done for Philips, he had hardly been paid.
- 29 T. Anbeek, *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur tussen 1885 en 1985* (Amsterdam, 1990), 183–191. Van het Reve also wrote a masterful novella, *Werther Nieland*, about a boy fantasising about creating a club, in order to carry out all kinds of (often somewhat morbid) experiments – a more convincing though more disturbing portrait of the fantasy world of a sensitive young boy than De Vries' brightly lit Hobby Clubs.
- 30 H. De Liagre Böhl e.a., *Nederland industrialiseert! Politieke en ideologische strijd rondom het naoorlogse industrialisatiebeleid 1945–1955* (Nijmegen, 1981), esp part III.
- 31 Examples: H. Fortmann, et al., 'Verantwoording', *Dux* (1947/48): 1; H. Fortmann, 'Moderne jeugd op haar weg naar volwassenheid', *Dux* (1955): 441; J. J. A. Vollebergh, 'Moderne jeugd en maatschappelijke vorming', *Tijdschrift voor opvoedkunde* (1957/58): 163.
- 32 De Vries, *De jongens* (n. 7 above), 66, 95
- 33 J. Goudsblom, *De nieuwe volwassenen. Een enquête onder jongeren van 18 tot 30 jaar* (Amsterdam, 1959), 180–181. The popular illustrated magazine *Panorama* often carried reports on technological wonders, such as new polders, Philips and the national airport Schiphol.
- 34 Dercksen, *Industrialisatiepolitiek* (n. 22 above), 34–38, 197.
- 35 For the continuity with the interwar period, see T. de Vries, *Complexe consensus. Amerikaanse en Nederlandse intellectuelen in debat over politiek en cultuur 1945–1960* (Hilversum, 1996), 137, 149, 187v. On Huizinga's views on technology and society, see my 'Huizinga's Children: Play and Technology in Twentieth Century Dutch Cultural Criticism (From the 1930s to the 1960s)', *ICON: Journal of the International Committee for the History of Technology*, 19 (2013), 52–74.
- 36 E.g., by the very popular protestant church minister Buskes in the introduction to a play about a nuclear disaster, Maurits Dekker's *De wereld heeft geen wachtkamer* (novella-version: Amsterdam, 1950), 9.
- 37 E.g., in a widely read book by a writer as well known as Buskes, P. J. Bouman, *Revolutie der eenzamen. Spiegel van een tijdperk* (Assen, 1953), 424–431.
- 38 F. L. Polak, *De wentelgang der wetenschap en de maatschappij van morgen* (Leiden, 1950), 28–30.
- 39 De Vries, *Het electron* (n. 29 above), 184–5.
- 40 Cf. De Vries, *De Jongens* (n. 7 above), 230, where he writes about the American nuclear airplane project and nuclear energy without mentioning any criticism. See also his *Het atoom*, 141–144, and *Het jongens electriciteit-boek* (Amsterdam, 1948, 3d printing), chapter XI.
- 41 E.g., the Swiss psychologist A. Carrard, *Praktische Einführung in Probleme der Arbeitspsychologie* (1949), cited in A. F. Kamp, *De Technische Hogeschool te Delft, 1905–1955* (s-Gravenhage, 1955), 144.
- 42 See for a similar analysis of the Brussels Expo 1958: J. Kint, *Expo 58 als belichaming van het humanistisch modernisme* (Rotterdam, 2001), 13, 27–28.
- 43 In a few places he mentions the danger of nuclear war and the use of airplanes and radio for destructive purposes (see L. De Vries, *Het atoom* (Amsterdam, 1957), 112–113; and De Vries, *Het electron* (n. 29 above), 184–5, 202–205), but his overall message is always positive.

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- 44 D. E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, MA, 1994); D. F. Noble, *The Religion of Technology: the Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention* (New York, 1997); M. Ames, 'Charismatic technology', <https://webfiles.uci.edu/mgames/research/Ames-charisma-aarhus.pdf> (accessed 1 September 2015).
- 45 Steef Hendriks, *Evoluon. 40 jaar boegbeeld van een ambitieuze regio* (Den Bosch, 2006). The popularity of the Evoluon is discussed in newspaper clippings in Philips Company Archives, Knipsels Evoluon I, 1969 t/m 1972. During each of the first few years, about half a million people came to visit.
- 46 See interview in *Announcer* Nr. 2 (March 66), in Philips Company Archives, Evoluon, knipsels.
- 47 Ames, 'Charismatic technology', paragraph 'theorizing charismatic technologies' (no page numbers).
- 48 Culture as dialogue: D. E. Nye, *Narratives and spaces. Technology and the construction of American culture* (Exeter, 1997), 3; J. W. Carey, *Communication as culture* (Boston, MA, 1989), 28, 32.