
From Oeroeg to De Oost

Critical discourse analysis of character representations in Dutch films taking place in Indonesia

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Master Thesis

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Wordcount: 9560

25-06-2023

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Abstract

In this thesis, four films taking place in Indonesia during the Dutch colonisation have been analysed using Critical Discourse Analysis. The primary objective is to explain the representations of the characters and their relationships while aiming to uncover the underlying meaning. All of the films revolve around white male protagonists, who are characterised by naivety and trying to do something ‘good’ for Indonesia. When taking a deeper look, the white characters represent Dutch whiteness: the notion of innocence while at the same time both othering people of colour and othering within whiteness. This innocence and naivety seem to shield both the characters, as well as Dutch society from acknowledging both racism and the violence in their colonial past.

Keywords: Colonialism, Critical discourse analysis, Dutch film, Representations

1. Introduction

In 2021, the Dutch-Moluccan filmmaker Jim Taihuttu was sued by the Federation of the Dutch East Indies (FIN) (NU.nl, 2021; NOS, 2021). His film about the so-called ‘police actions’ during the decolonisation period in the Dutch East Indies (1945-1949) was not only seen as controversial but was also called both untrue and anti-Dutch propaganda. The FIN demanded Taihuttu add a disclaimer at the beginning of the film that the events in the film are purely fictional (Keyser, 2021). Eventually, the FIN lost the case against Taihuttu and *De Oost* was available both in theatres and on the streaming service Amazon Prime. The son of the Dutch soldier on which this film is based supported Taihuttu in his decisions: *“I researched my dad[‘s past in the Dutch East Indies] for years, I have talked to nine veterans of the DST¹. Jim has held back on the violence that is shown in the film, the reality was way worse.”* (NOS, 2021).

¹ Depot Speciale Troepen: the Dutch special forces responsible for various executions in South-Celebes as part of the ‘police actions’ (Meuwese, 2020; Ministry of Defense, n.d.). As the Dutch did not want to speak of a war because a war takes place between two countries and Indonesia was not recognized as an independent state. So, instead, they used the term ‘police actions’ (NPO Kennis, n.d.).

The Dutch cinematic landscape is filled with historical films about war times the Netherlands has known. However, most of the historical films take place during the German occupation of the Netherlands in the Second World War. Not many films concern the country's 400-year-long colonial history with 'the East'.² This phenomenon itself already reveals the relationship the Dutch have with their colonial past: people who have roots in the Dutch East Indies refer to this as 'Indisch zwijgen', a term that describes the refusal of talking about the family history in the former colony (Jelyta, 2020). However, the few films that were made against the backdrop of colonisation create an artefact or a social document, which reflects attitudes, values and assumptions about the society in which the films were consumed and produced (Chapman, 2020). Chapman (2020) states that films can be seen as reflections of the dominant cultural views and ideologies of society, and thus are influenced by a range of historical processes. So, even though it does not reflect the actual historical events, a film does reflect how those historical events are perceived.

This leads us to the following question: *What do the characters and their relationships depicted in Dutch films taking place in Indonesia during the Dutch colonisation represent, and what explanations can be provided for these representations?* Through a critical discourse analysis of Dutch cinema, this study aims to explore what the characters represent and how this can be explained through different points in time: the period during the colonisation, right before the decolonisation and during the decolonisation. This study is relevant in terms of both scientific and societal relevance. First of all, as mentioned before, film can be seen as an artefact of how we look back on (in this case) postcolonial power structures. Not much research has been done in the specific case of the Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies, which means it will contribute to the academic field both in terms of research on Dutch postcolonialism and films as artefacts and social documents.

Lastly, the societal relevance is already seen in the opening of this introduction: the controversies that arise when something related to the Dutch East Indies reaches the dominant discourse. There is often a lack of knowledge about the Dutch colonial past due to the erasure in, for example,

² The Dutch East Indies is often referred to as 'The East' to distinguish it from the colonies in 'The West', which refers to the colonies of the West Indies (for example what is now known as the Antilles) (Niermeyer, 1909/1920).

Dutch history classes. In the recent report requested by the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, which resulted in advice from the commission led by former minister of Education Bussemaker to give the history of the Dutch East Indies a more prominent place within the Dutch educational system, as well as in heritage, museums and public spaces (Commissie Versterking kennis geschiedenis voormalig Nederlands-Indië, 2023), and thus create more awareness for the Dutch colonial past. This way, 73 years after the decolonisation of the Dutch East Indies, the colonial history of the Netherlands is being addressed within the country's institutions. As this is however still not the case as this has only recently been addressed, this study will focus on the postcolonial power structures we know today. These power structures are likely to influence how the Dutch colonial past will find a more prominent place within Dutch institutions.

2. Theoretical framework

To conduct this study, various literature has been analysed to build this theoretical framework. First, postcolonial discourse in general will be elaborated on. Secondly, collective memory specifically in the Netherlands will be further analysed. After that, the performance through film will be discussed. Lastly, tropes in historical war films will be addressed.

2.1 Performing the past: postcolonial discourse

As well as military and economic force, culture is at the base of the construction of imperialism and colonialism (Said, 1994). The term *representation* can be used to describe a depiction of a phenomenon with a meaning behind it (Van Vree, 1998). It refers to the production and exchange of meanings through everything produced by human beings: pictures, texts, conversations, music, stories, film and so on. It is a form of communication through which we assign meanings to events. Those who produce such depictions '*operate, often unwittingly, within a cultural system, a reservoir of cultural meanings and patterns of discourse*' (Van Vree, 1998). In terms of the depiction of history, it is also referred to as *performing the past*, where the performance of memory is used as a tool to reminisce, resuscitate and refashion individual memories (Tilmans, van Vree & Winter, 2011).

When looking at how the European narrative and thus discourse is constructed and presented, Said (1978) introduced the term *Orientalism*, which he uses to describe the way how Western Europeans place ‘the Orient’³ within their own experience. ‘The Orient’ is the place where a big part of European history has taken place: its colonial history and thus how Europe constructed their civilisation and language, as the Orient is where the image of the Other was created (Said, 1978). Said (1978) argues that European culture formed its identity and gained its strength by setting itself against the Orient. As Sanz Sabido (2015) describes Said’s Orientalism: it is a system in which the West represents itself and thus is used for purposes of imperial consumption. Within this system, the Other is not ever truly known since it is based on the imagination of postcolonial power structures (Sanz Sabido, 2015).

Discourse is built upon various representations influenced by colonial power structures. This representation in turn replaces the historical reality. It not only replaces the historical reality; it also influences the way we look at this historical reality. The postcolonial discourse then forms and confirms existing ideologies about power structures inherited from the colonial past (Van ‘t Veer, 2020). This postcolonial discourse is also seen in visual forms, which is criticised by stating that the latest form of representation is part of a long tradition of false portraits created by the West about the East (Pattynama, 2007).

2.2 Dutch collective memory: *tempo dulu*?

Often the claim arises that the Dutch have ‘forgotten’ about their colonial past (Bijl, 2012). This phenomenon can be explained by Dutch cultural memory, which finds itself between public history with its underlying national identities and unrestricted spheres of personal memories (Pattynama, 2013). Dutch collective memory about the Dutch East Indies often is characterised by nostalgia, as seen in terms such as *Ons Indië* (Our Indies) and *Tempo Dulu* (Good Old Days) (Houben, 2000; Bijl, 2012; Pattynama, 2012; Dragojlovic & McGregor, 2022). Pattynama (2007) describes how in the cultural domain of both cinema and literature, the memory of the Dutch East Indies is a source for many

³ Nowadays, the term ‘Orient’ is seen as an outdated term, as it generalises the Middle East and Asia as something distant and exotic ‘far away’ destination from an European, imperialistic point of view (Hill, n.d.). However, I chose to include this term in the theoretical framework as Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) is an important, foundational work in theory and literature on the construction of the views and representation of said regions.

fictionalised recollections. This is often what is referred to as *imperialist nostalgia*: proud narratives with fond, ‘tropical’ memories of pleasurable interracial contacts (Pattynama, 2007) and which leads to *aestheticised forgetting*. This creates the still-existing notion that the Dutch are members of a small, honest and tolerant nation (Houben, 2000; Doolan, 2021).

Some of the films made about the decolonisation period of the Dutch East Indies also provoked the collective memory the Dutch have that was filled with romanticised imagery (Doolan, 2021). Starting from the 1980s, also the violence by the Dutch soldiers was incorporated within the narrative. Filmmakers, television makers and novelists started problematising the ‘forgetting’ and thus influenced the main discourse around *imperialist nostalgia*. However, this is often met with a polarised debate led by those who want to remain innocent and rather would unremember again (Doolan, 2021). Doolan (2021) argues that this is due to the fact that the Dutch rather see themselves not only as innocent but also as victims of both German occupation in the Netherlands and the Japanese presence in the Dutch East Indies. However, the forgetting still exists in a way: apart from some debates, the main narrative is only briefly influenced and often simply periodic reminders (Bijl, 2020; Dragojlovic & McGregor, 2022). The ‘unmaskers’ of colonial violence are often surprised by how fast the Dutch narrative moves on (Bijl, 2012). Bijl (2012) explains this by stating that ‘*people not only have to see things in order to believe them, but also people need to believe things in order to see them*’ (p.447). The dominant idea that over four hundred years of Dutch colonisation is simply a ‘black page in the history books’ persists (Bijl, 2012).

2.3 Performing through film

Performance can be done through various forms of modern media, such as film. Media is therefore used to exchange views, feelings, ideas and knowledge on numerous phenomena (Van Vree, 1988). The process of performing the past, and thus representation of the past is seen as a barometer of both cultural and social life. In the past, novels were used for the process of representing history. However, nowadays cinema with its influencing and engaging images has greater influence than print when it comes to collective memory (Pattynama, 2005). Film specifically has two purposes: modifying national identity and provoking public memory. In the case of the Netherlands, it played specifically part in provoking

public memory and thus being more open to discussing the Dutch military actions during the decolonisation of the Dutch East Indies (Doolan, 2021).

Even though the war during the decolonisation is being ‘remembered’ again through such performances, it is seen as an artificial memory that reshapes the narrative through film that leads to the aforementioned *aestheticised forgetting*: film does not show us the memory of such an event, but an aestheticised experience that replaces the event. Discourse shaped by the Dutch narrative could lead to the colonisation of public memory, which is as well seen in American films about the Vietnam War (Doolan, 2021). This is in line with how Fanon (1968) states how the settler makes history, with their life portrayed as an epoch against tropic creatures. This is seen ever since the beginning of European cinema, which happened at the same time as the height of European imperialism: often, the colonised were portrayed in a negative light (Stam & Spence, 1982). Cinema, specifically from the historical genre such as Westerns and war films play a role in the perception of historical events for later generations (Lahti, Weaver-Hightower, 2021)

2.4 Tropes and narratives in postcolonial cinema

Ever since the late 1970s, various novels, tv shows and films have been performing the colonial past. Pattynama (2007) describes how the films produced since that time often embrace a western perspective, as they are based on Dutch literary canon. At that time, the three films that have been made about the Dutch East Indies (*Max Havelaar*, *Oeroeg* and *Gordel van Smaragd*) all start with the colonial convention of a white male arriving in an exotic region. This narrative embraces the idea of “our men” going to a strange, exotic place, carrying out their mission while dealing with “the white man’s burden” (Pattynama, 2007). Even though these men are portrayed as the settlers taking part in the “police actions”, they are always portrayed in a vulnerable state (Pattynama, 2007). Furthermore, the men are mostly framed as honest and innocent participants who seem to be naive, yet always put in the hero trope, which is closely interlinked with how the Dutch see themselves (Pattynama, 2005). All three films represent and memorise interracial contacts and represent the ongoing postcolonial relationship between current day the Netherlands and its former colony (Pattynama, 2007).

Nevertheless, not much research has been done on specifically the representations in Dutch cinema in films related to the Dutch East Indies. Even though the mentioned studies seem to have a more critical approach, it has not been specifically mentioned. To add to that, these studies have been done in 2005 and 2007. In the meantime, more research has been done about the Dutch context in general. To add to that, *De Oost* came out in 2021 which, as seen in the introduction, further dove into the violence that took place in the Dutch colony.

3. Methodology

For this thesis, a qualitative approach was used, specifically a Critical Discourse Analysis (hereafter: CDA). In total five films were analysed. However, due to the big amount of data derived from these five films, only four of the five films were used for the report of this thesis. Only the films predominantly taking place in Indonesia were used, as they are all in some way set up similarly (e.g. a white male as the main character, same location, similar themes). In the table below, the films that were used for the analysis and the ones left out of the report are shown:

| # | Title | About what period in time? | Release date |
|---|---------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------|
| 1 | <i>Max Havelaar</i> | Around 1855 | 1976 |
| 2 | <i>Oeroeg</i> | Before and during the decolonisation | 1993 |
| 3 | <i>Gordel van Smaragd</i> | Before and during the decolonisation | 1997 |
| 4 | <i>De Oost</i> | During the decolonisation | 2021 |
| 5 | <i>De Punt</i> | Train hijacking in 1977 | 2009 |

As for the analysis, first the films have been watched while making extensive notes. After making these extensive notes, the films have been watched again to see if anything of importance was missed. After that, the notes have been uploaded to Atlas.TI to code specifically anything related to the characters and the relationship they have with one another. At first, the plan was to analyse ‘key scenes’ as well, but due to the big amount of data two of the key scenes are now used as supporting evidence of the findings. The notes have been analysed through the lens of the *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA) developed by

Fairclough (1995), in which the first step is to describe, the second is to interpret and lastly to explain. The approach is visualised in the following scheme:

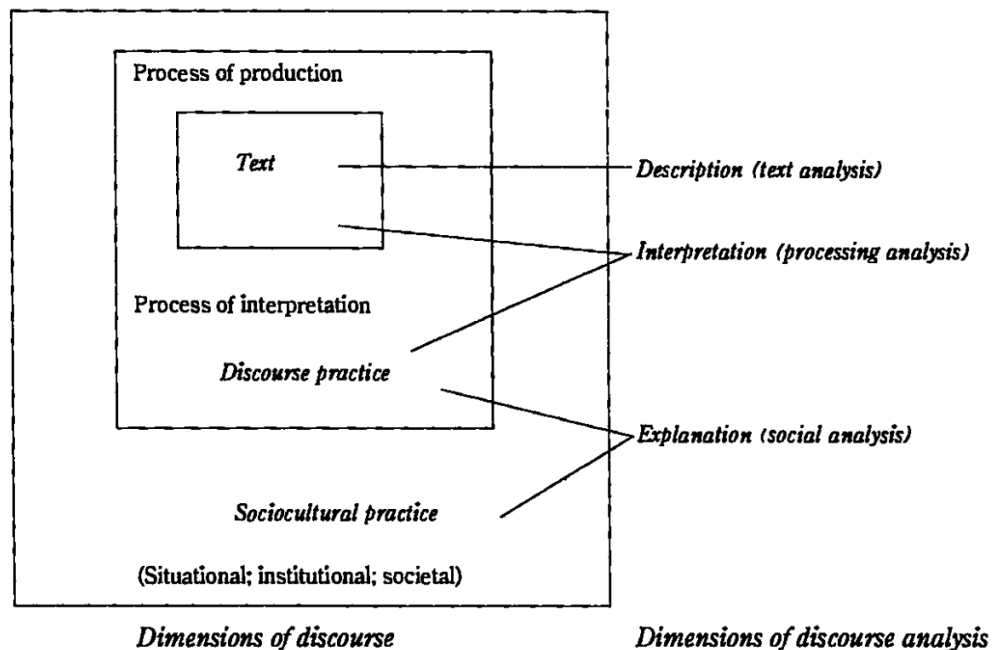


Figure 1. Steps in Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995)

After the coding of the description, the data has been interpreted through the theory as set up in the theoretical framework. After that, both the theory and the sociocultural context have been used to explain (chapter 5, the analysis) the findings (the description and interpretation in chapter 4). To ensure and increase the validity and reliability of this study, various measures have been taken. Firstly, positionality that influences how I interpret the data (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018) is discussed later on in this chapter. Second of all, both the validity and reliability increase through the use of an established method within social sciences developed by Fairclough (1995). Lastly, all the films from the sample have been analysed through a standardised form that functions as a support to be consistent through the description, interpretation and explanation of the data.

Lastly, as for the ethical considerations of this research, an unobtrusive method has been used. This means that not any social processes of both individuals and/or sites have been disrupted or influenced by this research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Before the start of the data collection, an ethics and privacy form has been filled in and approved by my thesis supervisor, and thus this research follows the guidelines and rules as set up by the Erasmus University Rotterdam. Part of these ethical

considerations is my positionality. As for my positionality, it is important to have evaluated my own biases, values and personal background (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Just like these films I have studied, I myself am a product of the history the Netherlands has with their former colony. My grandmother was 15 when she arrived in Rotterdam in 1951, after spending a month on the *Kota Inten*. As a person in exile she expected to go back, however, Dutch policy choices lead to her and my other family members becoming migrants. As I grew up solely with my Moluccan family, this will be of great influence on how I interpret the data. This, for example, explains my choice of a more critical approach when analysing the data.

4. Findings: Description and interpretation

In this chapter, the findings will be presented according to the recurring themes in the four analysed films. The first theme focuses on the portrayal of the Dutch characters and their overall representation within the films. The second theme centres on the depiction of ‘the other’, which refers to characters who are marginalized within the narrative. Lastly, the relationships between these characters will be elaborated on, such as their interactions and dynamics.

4.1 The characters: saviours, villains and victims

“Me? Dead? No. I have a lot to do in the Indies. Something huge. I have a task.” - Max in Max

Havelaar (1976)

4.1.1 The main characters

The four films taking place in Indonesia centre around four white, Dutchmen, who are all in their own ways troubled and thus differ from the people around them. In Max Havelaar (1976), we meet Max on a boat on his way to Celebes. Three things become clear in this scene: he is heroic while at the same time naive, cares deeply about native Indonesians and he has a worrisome amount of money issues due to his generosity. In Oeroeg (1993) we meet Johan first in the Netherlands, being trained to join the KNIL. He is not like the other soldiers, as he corrects his superior on his pronunciation of *merdeka*. Later we see him filled with nostalgia longing for ‘Indië’. He reminisces about the food of a country

that was once his home, or as he sees it, his real home. This same romanticised imagery is the motive of Theo in *Gordel van Smaragd* (1997) to move to the Indies. Lastly, in *De Oost* (2021) we meet their protagonist Johan in a different way: he is on his way back to the Netherlands on a boat and is met with posters with the word 'Nazis' on them and gets red paint thrown at them. In a later scene, we meet him the 'conventional' way: a young man arriving in an exotic region, ready to start his adventure here.

All of the protagonists have a motive linked to their naivety: either longing for an exotic destination or the feeling of a moral obligation to make the Indies a better place. This motive is carried throughout the film, almost as a rationale of why it is okay that these people function as the spokesman of the settler, where only the naivety of Johan in *De Oost* (2021) in the end gets notably punished. This differs from the other films, the naivety simply 'is'. For example, in *Max Havelaar* (1976) his naivety is used to frame him as a hero trying to fight a system you cannot win from; but at least he tried. Apart from *De Oost*, the naivety of the main characters is mainly used to shield them from directly being seen as a colonial settler.

Another strategy used to show both the naivety and the goodness of the main character is to use the portrayal of their peers to differ them from. For example, all of the protagonists 'bother' to learn the native language (Bahasa Indonesia) whereas others often do not. This particular use of the Dutch supporting characters will be further elaborated on in the following paragraph.

4.1.2 Dutch supporting characters

Apart from small cues such as learning the language to set the protagonist apart, the films often show the good of the main characters with exaggerated (violent) racism from other Dutch characters. Here, the main characters either stand up against or remain 'neutral' by being portrayed as an innocent bystander of sometimes even hate crimes against the local people. Max from *Max Havelaar* (1976) is an example of how early on the role of other characters is mainly to show how good and heroic he is. Key scene #1 is the most notable example of the role the Dutch supporting characters have, as the whole first act of *Max Havelaar* revolves around how he differs from his peers:

KEY SCENE #1: Max and the overseers in Max Havelaar (1976)

Two Dutchmen are making fun of two Indonesian women while overseeing Indonesian workers. When a worker drops a sack of coffee beans, one of the Dutchmen gets angry. He calls them 'monkeys' and 'dicks'. He yells at the Indonesian overseer and pushes the worker off the stairs as he swings a whip. The Dutch man tells them they have to pay the difference. Now the Indonesian overseers slap the workers with the whip. The Dutch man says the Indies are useless without the Dutch.

As Max Havelaar arrives by boat, Indonesian workers come running to him with a throne to carry him on shore. He thanks them and exchanges looks with one of the Indonesian women. The other Dutchman does not like that, so he tries to kiss the woman and grabs her breasts. She uncomfortably declines his 'advances'. Max looks shocked. The Dutchman calls her a bitch and the other laughs. He throws a bottle at her and hits the mud pool, so her sarong is covered in mud. The men laugh right before Max confronts them and starts beating him up. The Dutchman tells them that the whites have to stick together against the black monkeys. Max then says that he does not want to fight in front of the workers, as fighting with their fists is not European. The Dutchman calls Max a monkey lover as Max walks off. The workers watching the scene, smile.

In all of the films, side characters that are 'worse' in their behaviour are used to show us, as viewers, that the protagonists' intentions are not *that* bad and again, mostly fuelled by naivety. They are not like the others who come there to kill, they do not call the natives monkeys. They have a genuine, friendly connection with the locals and want to save them from what their country has become.

4.1.3 Portrayal of "The Other"

The portrayal of "The Other" is often done in three ways. First, friends and allies of the Dutch. They are often on 'their' side, speak the Dutch language well and in two of the movies even dress in a more 'European' manner, and thus are portrayed as more 'civilised'. Secondly, there is the violent, radicalised 'other'. They are often portrayed in a rather stereotypical manner: males with long hair, often shirtless

and fighting with sticks and spears. The third portrayal sometimes overlaps both but is also seen as a portrayal on its own: the helpless victim that needs to be saved by the Dutch. They are often portrayed as poor and as either women or children.

All of these tropes are again seen in *Max Havelaar* (1976), which in particular carefully builds the story around the Dutch as victims along with the Indigenous workers that are heavily exploited. Again, remarkable in this case is that the workers are not exploited by the Dutch, but by the Indonesian regent and the people that work directly for them. This gets established in various ways early on in the first act of the film that sets the tone. One way it gets established is also the reason Max is sent to Lebak: his predecessor is killed by the Indonesian regent for wanting to speak up against how the Indigenous workers get exploited. Lastly, this same violence is also used against the exploited workers. Apart from key scene #1, not once is this physical violence used by the Dutch against the workers. This implies that it is not in fact the Dutch who are violent, but the Indonesians that are higher in rank.

As the majority of *Gordel van Smaragd* (1997) takes place around the occupation of the Indies by Japan and the decolonisation, the main character Theo and other Dutch men are often a victim of violence used by both the Japanese and the Indonesians. The violence the Dutch partake in is portrayed as simply self-defence against the Japanese and Indonesians who are trying to destroy a ‘successful, wealthy country’. Before the arrival of the Japanese, the Dutch and ‘the Asians’ lived together in harmony. After the Japanese occupation, all “Others” are portrayed as villains, except for the Indo-Europeans⁴ in the film, as they remain allies of the Dutch. The different kinds of interracial relationships portrayed in all films will be further elaborated on in the following paragraph.

4.2 The portrayal of the relationship

“Near or far, we will always be brothers.” - Oeroeg to Johan in *Oeroeg* (1993)

4.2.1 The violent villain

Portraying colonial violence is unavoidable when making a film about the country’s colonial past. However, this violence is primarily in two different lights: it is a sideshow for the main plot and is seen

⁴ Indo-Europeans refers to people who are mixed race (Boudewijn, 2010), often the children of an Indonesian mother and Dutch father (as also seen with Ems in *Gordel van Smaragd* (1997))

‘just’ as part of the context of that point in time. Apart from *De Oost* (2021), where the Dutch colonial violence is part of the main plot, Dutch violence is often portrayed more as a ‘necessary evil’ to fight the faceless, violent villains who fight the Dutch shirtless with spears who are often referred to as ‘perlopors’⁵. The tone the Dutch soldiers use to describe the *perlopors* seems often derogatory. The Indonesian nationalists often are portrayed as faceless villains who simply add to the Dutch kill count in the films. However, there are some exceptions. And the exceptions highly differ.

The villain does get a face in *Max Havelaar* (1976): greedy rich Indonesian regents who profit from the poor locals and terrorise the Dutch overseers. They get portrayed as the ultimate colonial enemy the Dutch protect the poor locals from. It was not the Dutch who were wrong, they were just there trying to do their best to make the Dutch East Indies a better place with a prosperous economy. This same prosperous economy gets mentioned in *Gordel van Smaragd* (1997), as something the Japanese settlers want to take away from the Dutch. Here, a different enemy resurfaces that wants to take away all the good the Dutch have built in their colonial empire. And those are the villains that do get a face, and not a good one. Specifically in *Gordel van Smaragd* (1997) the majority of Asians get highly villainized apart from the Indo-Europeans. As for *Max Havelaar* (1976) the Indonesian regent and those who work for him are ‘the’ enemies of the Dutch. The plot of these two films relies mostly on villainizing “The Other” and making them murderous, evil antagonists the Dutch need to fight.

De Oost (2021) does this differently, they give those who are exploited a face. For example, we see up close how one of the captured nationalists gets tortured by one of the supporting characters Westerling. Later we see the main character Johan joining in on the torturing, and we see him dehumanising the captured nationalist as he starts to do the torturing without holding back. Later, he gets ordered to let him go but Johan decides to kill him. It is an important plot point for the film to show how even the naive soldier who goes to the Dutch East Indies is in fact capable of dehumanising people of colour. Another example is the character Gita, who is at first the love interest of Johan and seems to reciprocate his love. It seems like they are having a good time, but this illusion that is usually held up

⁵ Perlopors comes from the Dutch word ‘voorloper’, someone who walks in the front to explore the area before attacking. During the decolonization period, it was used to describe Indonesian anticolonial nationalists

in other films gets shattered. This will be further elaborated on in the following paragraph with key scene #2 as an example.

4.2.2 'Pleasurable' interracial contacts

The vast majority of the film includes pleasurable interracial contacts. Gordel van Smaragd (1997) adds an extra layer to adding contacts with Indo-Europeans, who are often portrayed in a very European manner (or as they call it in the films: 'civilised') and 'on the side' of the Dutch. However, other films also include pleasurable interracial contacts, in particular Oeroeg (1993), where it is a huge part of the main plot of the film. The pleasurable interracial contacts are often portrayed in two ways: either the locals are getting saved by the Dutch, or they are either close friends or romantically involved.

As mentioned, Oeroeg (1993) is a striking example of those pleasurable interracial contacts. To add to that, it is also a striking example of the naivety of the Dutch interacting with people of colour with matters related to race. Oeroeg deals with both institutional racism, such as racial segregation, as seen when Johan and Oeroeg go to the theatre together and have to take different entrances and Oeroeg has to watch the film with the other natives mirrored on the back of the screen, as well with as Essed (1984) calls it *everyday racism*, from both Johan and his peers. Even though Johan has no clue about the power structures in the Dutch East Indies and he gets it explained time after time by his best friend Oeroeg, he does not understand. However, even when Oeroeg joins the nationalists fighting the anti-colonial fight that Johan seems to be against, they remain friends. They do face hardships in their friendship due to their 'political differences' (or in the case of Johan, rather indifference, again trying to seem 'neutral'), but they do overcome it. Oeroeg explains to him one last time the racial power difference between them in the Dutch East Indies in the final scene and they hug it out.

Apart from examples of friendship, there are also examples of interracial romance seen in Gordel van Smaragd (1997) and De Oost (2021). The focus of Gordel van Smaragd is on the romantic relationship between the Dutchman Theo and the Indo-European woman Ems. From the beginning on, Ems is highly sexualised and is described as someone who is 'dangerous' for men. She throws herself at Theo, the man in whom she is 'truly' interested. With the other men, she only flirts or sleeps with. One of her most notable quotes is when she calls all the Dutchmen at the party her daddies, along with

calling other Asians she sleeps with during the Japanese occupation to bring herself to safety ‘strange meat’. She again is saved by Theo in the end from all the men she sleeps with, just like in the beginning when she cheats on her husband who is an old man with Theo. The relationship gets portrayed as turbulent, but also very romantic and as if the two are meant to be together. De Oost (2021) starts on a similar note when Johan meets Gita in a brothel. He wants to sleep with her as she is one of the only girls there who is not underaged (which also shows again how he is not like the other soldiers, who do have sex with underaged girls). Later they start to hang out and they seem to fall in love. However, their relationship takes a different turn as seen in the example below:

KEY SCENE #2: Johan his illusion shattered in De Oost (2021)

Johan is just made aware that the special troops are leaving Java and they do not know when and if they are coming back. He goes to see Gita one last time before leaving. He knocks on her door and there is no answer. He keeps on knocking the door, then calls for Gita, and then continues knocking impatiently. Eventually, she opens the door hesitantly and tells him that she did not expect him. Then she tells him that she wants to get dressed so they can leave someplace else together. In response, Johan pushes the door open and says he is thirsty. She offers him tea as Johan is walking around the house, looking around. Then he kneels down and sees a man hiding under the bed. Gita gets visibly nervous. Then Johan points a gun at her and tells her to stay quiet with a hand gesture. Suddenly he pushes the bed and starts beating the man up. He keeps pointing the gun at Gita while we see her child crying in his bed. Johan asks the man who he is, and then continues to beat him up. We see the child crying and distressed again. Then, Gita protects the man. Johan asks who he is, and she answers that he is her fiance. Johan looks shocked, as Gita begs him not to shoot them. He leaves in shock and drives away quickly.

As seen in the example, after building up the romance similarly as in the other films, here De Oost (2021) chooses to shatter this illusion of romance. The power difference between the two becomes clear, whereas in other films these power differences are barely shed any light on by the characters, simply

ignoring the differences and thus almost overcoming it by just giving minimal attention to it. In Gordel van Smaragd (1997) we too see Theo and Ems talking about their positions, mostly by Ems calling him out. However, as said before, their relationship is still portrayed as romantic mostly due to its turbulent nature.

5. Analysis: Explanation of the findings

For this chapter, the themes and patterns seen in the previous chapter will be linked to both the context it takes place in and the theory from the theoretical framework, as well as similar theories. The first paragraph looks at the way the findings relate to the theory and the second paragraph focuses predominantly on the (Dutch) sociocultural context.

5.1 The theory performed

As described in the theoretical framework, Said (1978) introduced the term *Orientalism* as a way to describe how, in this case the Dutch, place *The Orient* in their own experience. The films in this thesis literally take place in *The Orient* and the discourse built upon the imagery portrayed in these films is heavily influenced by how the West looks back upon its colonial history. As seen in the findings, the characters are heavily influenced by false portraits of how the Dutch view themselves: innocent. The naivety that protects the Dutch innocence from being seen as active participants in a colonial regime and war is the same naivety that protects those who have created this particular postcolonial discourse. The discourse portrayed in particular in Max Havelaar, Oeroeg and Gordel van Smaragd are based on racist stereotypes of both Indonesia and its indigenous inhabitants.

The main characters in the films are used as a tool for the Dutch to process and almost soften the colonial history and the war crimes the Dutch have committed in Indonesia. Even though the side characters are used to show that there were indeed active participants in the colonial regime, as it would not have existed without people partaking in it, it makes the viewer believe that you do not have to be 'guilty'. It almost seems like the goal of most of the films is for Dutch people to still have a good night's

sleep after watching these films: ‘yes, some people were bad, but I would not have done that.’. How this notion relates to a bigger, Dutch context will be further elaborated on in the following paragraph.

This is very much in line with both trying to unremember and the phenomenon of aestheticised forgetting (Doolan, 2021). *Oeroeg* seems like an example of trying to unremember the period of decolonisation. In the very first scene, Johan gets trained to kill ‘rice eaters’. However, those ‘skills’ are never put to use as his friendship with Oeroeg is his reason to go back to Indonesia. The fact that he signed up for the Dutch colonial army even seems to be ‘unremembered’ throughout the course of the film.

When it comes to aestheticised forgetting, Max Havelaar and in some way *Gordel van Smaragd* are examples of this. They both play into the tropes that the Dutch protagonists are heroes and ‘The Other’ antagonist is the villain of the story. The films create a false, romanticised memory with the story they chose to focus on. Or as Van Vree (1998) stated: ‘*[they] operate, often unwittingly, within a cultural system, a reservoir of cultural meanings and patterns of discourse*’. The way this discourse is presented, we as viewers are also able to (unwittingly) assign innocence to the depicted events.

Again, the way the main characters are portrayed makes it so that we as viewers are able to assign such meanings. Both ‘The Other’ and ‘unacceptable Whiteness’ are used as a tool to strengthen this effect. For example, a film such as *Gordel van Smaragd* has great potential to portray the trauma and (sexual) exploitation Indo-European women faced in colonial times, an experience that is barely shed any light on within Dutch discourse. Indo-Europeans are often products of Dutch men and Indonesian women (Boudewijn, 2010), which in itself already reveals power relations. However, these hardships are only emphasised in a negative manner within the discourse and are thus further negatively stereotyped. Meanwhile, the film chooses to focus on Theo, a Dutch man who is almost portrayed as the ‘true’ victim of Dutch colonial times. In his case not only innocence is used to shield him from the consequences of being a settler, but also victimhood.

Again, *De Oost* seems to be a slight exception from the theory. It offers a nuanced view of how an individual with ‘good intentions’ can be influenced by a colonial, racist system and how an individual can become the spokesman of the settler (Fanon, 1968). With taking a critical approach when watching these films, it is easy to forget that there were in fact a lot of young men lured to the Dutch East Indies

with Dutch propaganda. It shows how these men were proud to have defeated the German Nazis in the Netherlands in the Second World War and were influenced by Dutch propaganda to ‘defeat some more Nazis’, referring to Indonesian nationalists. However, the main character does have to pay the price for his actions, something that is not seen in other films. It shows us that there is no such thing as *Tempo Dulu* and thus tries to take a more anticolonial approach. We see the main character being an active participant in both torturing Indonesian nationalists and killing innocent Indonesian civilians. However, as seen in the introduction it confirms how Doolan (2021) states that such depictions are often met with a heated, polarised debate started by those who would rather unremember again.

5.2 The Dutch context

When looking at the context these films take place in, it is very much in line with how matters surrounding both colonial history and race (which are closely interlinked) are handled in the Netherlands. The films often come from a standpoint of Whiteness and how this is constructed in the Netherlands. The sentiment of innocence seen in the main character is highly similar to how the Dutch see themselves as a colour-blind, ethical country with simply some ‘black pages’ in their history books. Furthermore, Hondius (2014) states that with Dutch Whiteness specifically, race is something that is simply not talked about. This, too, is a way to remain innocent (Barkenhol, 2016). This sentiment is seen specifically in *Oeroeg*, where Oeroeg tries to explain to his friend Johan how much their lives differ because of their skin colour, but Johan almost seems to ignore it in an attempt to remain neutral.

However, the films also accept that we cannot ignore racial differences in colonial times. To add to that, the Dutch also cannot ignore that racism is something that is still happening to this day. Nonetheless, Dutch Whiteness is carefully constructed around this notion. This is something which is nowadays specifically seen within the white, Dutch middle-class: racism *does* exist, but it is exclusively assigned to lower-class people (Çankaya & Mephsen, 2019). This is something also seen in the films with the Dutch side characters who are the only ones who are capable of racism in the films, often portrayed in very extreme ways. This shows that even within these films, where the social class of these characters do not necessarily play a role, being racist is compartmentalised and assigned to others in order to remain innocent. Even though the characters do not necessarily differ in class, or this is not

made explicit, the racist characters are often portrayed as kind of goofy, silly and dumb. Additionally, this way of “othering” within Whiteness does not only help the main characters to remain innocent, but also to put them in the hero trope. As an example, the part Whiteness plays in the films could possibly be explained by an interview with Gordel van Smaragd director Orlow Seunke who gets called out by an interviewer for hiding his political views by trying to remain ‘neutral’, as if sharing this story in particular is something that could not possibly be political:

“I consider this period a forgotten chapter, and I wanted to tell you that. I think the suffering in the camps in Asia is greatly underestimated. Jeroen Brouwers wrote it down according to his own experience and then got everyone attacking him. I only got it from books and stories, I didn't get anything from it myself. I also find it too easy to say afterwards that what we did in the Indies was all wrong. I have respect for people who have built up plantations there and I can imagine that if you have been there for 25 years, you don't want to give that up just like that.”

I sense a certain urge to correct the collective guilt about the colonial past.

“No not at all. You see it way too consciously, too politically. I try to think only from my characters. Often such a plantation had been family property for two hundred years, so it is not so strange that people, often born there, wanted to rebuild that property after the war? I wanted to convey that feeling.” (Duursma, 1997).

The choices filmmakers make are in fact political, even though they seem like personal choices. The statement ‘The personal is political’ is also the case for these filmmakers: it is the reason Orlow Seunke wanted to add the perspective of Dutch people losing ‘their’ land in the Dutch East Indies; it is the reason Jim Taihuttu added a Moluccan character explaining why he fought against the Indonesian nationalists. And, it could possibly be the reason why the imperialist nostalgia that is often portrayed in these films gets shattered in De Oost along with that the discourse is slightly changing as seen in the introduction.

However, the films still show that the ‘biology’ based on pseudoscience that was used in colonial times did not fully disappear after the decolonisation of Indonesia and racist and colonial ideas

are expressed less 'in-your-face', such as being conveyed through various forms of media of which one is film. This 'cultural racism' that was a term introduced by Essed (1984) as part of 'everyday racism' is used as a way to further normalise and institutionalise such ideas. The makers behind these fictional depictions of historical events cannot ever remain neutral: they can either reproduce or challenge cultural racism and colonial ideas within the dominant discourse, even though the idea remains that the Dutch can be 'neutral'.

Throughout the years change is seen, specifically in *De Oost*. However, these films all centre the story of white men and their struggles in colonised Indonesia where they function most times as the spokesmen of the settler. To stay in Fanon (1968) his words, this shows that the settler still makes history as these are the stories that are chosen to be centred. The fact that these stories are chosen could also be closely interlinked with what the Dutch public wants, it is possibly the stories the Dutch want to see as they very much represent how the Dutch look back on their colonial history and how they navigate issues around oppression, specifically in terms of race.

6. Conclusion and discussion

This thesis aimed to explore the representations of characters and their relationships depicted in Dutch films taking place in Indonesia and aimed to explain said representations. Through the analysis of four films, it became clear that the portrayal of the Dutch main character is very closely interlinked with how the Dutch view themselves, which is focusing on honesty and innocence. The colonial history of the country has often been reduced to merely 'black pages' in a history book, which the films mirrored. The innocence of these men being part of the black pages is often shielded by how they are portrayed: naive, honest, part of 'pleasurable' interracial relationships and consistently differ from their white peers in a 'good' way. This representation of the Dutch main character can be explained through how whiteness in the Netherlands is constructed: predominantly trying to remain innocent and often 'neutral'. The films achieve this notion by using other characters to 'other' within whiteness and 'othering the Orient'.

This way, both the main character and the film itself partake in ‘unremembering’ or ‘aestheticized forgetting’ the colonial past while at the same time portraying colonial, racist ideas to its audience by the way ‘the other’ is portrayed such as a helpless victim being saved by the white protagonist carrying the white man's burden, women of colour that are highly sexualised and as faceless, violent villains. Apart from *De Oost*, the use of violence is restricted to a minimum and when used, it is portrayed as necessary (such as a ‘direct threat’ that provokes said violence) which again villainizes ‘the other’. Such representations in the films contribute to the aestheticized forgetting and prove that the Dutch and the way they construct their whiteness are still very much in charge of shaping our perceptions of Dutch colonial history. Lastly, it shows that the same racist ideas that colonialism was built upon are still very much present in the media we consume, and thus in our society.

To answer the research question ‘*What do the characters and their relationships depicted in Dutch films taking place in Indonesia during the Dutch colonisation represent, and what explanations can be provided for these representations?*’: the protagonists are portrayed as colonial agents whom you cannot blame for their choices due to their naivety. Even though they often are ‘the spokesman of the settler’ due to their position within the colonial system, such as administrators or soldiers. To add to that, all of the characters enforce stereotypes. The Dutch are often, sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally portrayed as superior and civilized. Whereas the Indigenous characters are depicted as exotic, submissive and uncivilized. These representations in turn can serve to justify or reinforce colonial ideologies, which in turn can be explained with the Dutch socio-cultural context and specifically how Dutch whiteness is constructed.

Overall, it demonstrates how the films construct a narrative around the Dutch characters as saviours, victims or individuals fighting against colonial violence. The portrayal of the Dutch characters, their interactions and the prominent Orientalist tropes contribute to shaping the way we look back on both the Dutch colonial past and the views on the racism and oppression that comes with it. As Chapman (2020) states, it reflects how these events are perceived as they are reflections of the dominant cultural views and ideologies of society, in this case, influenced by historical processes the films aim to portray. Lastly, it shows that colonial and racist values are still very much present in our current-day society.

The process of this thesis felt at some points as trial-and-error as this was my first time using the method of Critical Discourse Analysis. When going through the data and the rough results of my analysis I figured that I had way too much data to process and report for the time available and the size of this thesis. For this reason, the reported results remain on the surface of the discourse represented in these five films, which also led to dropping one film and analysing the key scenes in the reporting as it was simply too much. This is also the limitation of this research. For this reason, the focus was shifted to the discourse the portrayed characters in the film represent. If I could have done things differently, I would either take a deep dive into the discourse represented in one of these films such as *De Oost* or save this research for a bigger project. Another limitation is that the filmmakers' perspectives and intentions also play a role in the representations. This was only paid attention to in a limited amount to show that some filmmakers aimed to challenge or critique the Dutch colonial past, while others may have reinforced colonial narratives. It would have been of great value to analyse all of the filmmakers' backgrounds and motivations, as they could offer more insights into the representations in the films.

As for future research, it would be of great value to either fully take a deep dive into all these films or, what I noticed when watching these films, focus on the portrayal of violence (physical as well as emotional) as it represents power dynamics and could provide insights into how we perceive and reflect on them. Ultimately, there is way more to uncover in the Dutch postcolonial discourse that has yet to be researched that could also be of great value in both the educational system as well as uncovering institutionalised colonial, racist ideas. This thesis has only scratched the surface.

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Appendix I: Ethics and privacy form



CHECKLIST ETHICAL AND PRIVACY ASPECTS OF RESEARCH

INSTRUCTION

This checklist should be completed for every research study that is conducted at the Department of Public Administration and Sociology (DPAS). This checklist should be completed before commencing with data collection or approaching participants. Students can complete this checklist with help of their supervisor.

This checklist is a mandatory part of the empirical master's thesis and has to be uploaded along with the research proposal.

The guideline for ethical aspects of research of the Dutch Sociological Association (NSV) can be found on their website (http://www.nsv-sociologie.nl/?page_id=17). If you have doubts about ethical or privacy aspects of your research study, discuss and resolve the matter with your EUR supervisor. If needed and if advised to do so by your supervisor, you can also consult Dr. Bonnie French, coordinator of the Sociology Master's Thesis program.

PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION

Project title: Postcolonial discourse in Dutch films related to the former Dutch East Indies

Name, email of student: Denise Jonker, 610463dj@eur.nl

Name, email of supervisor: Bonnie French, french@essb.eur.nl

Start date and duration: April 2023 - June 2023

Is the research study conducted within DPAS YES - NO |

If 'NO': at or for what institute or organization will the study be conducted?
(e.g. internship organization)

PART II: HUMAN SUBJECTS

1. Does your research involve human participants. YES NO

If 'NO': skip to part V.

If 'YES': does the study involve medical or physical research?

YES - NO

Research that falls under the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act (WMO) must first be submitted to an accredited medical research ethics committee, or the Central Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (CCMO).

2. Does your research involve field observations without manipulations that will not involve identification of participants.

YES - NO

If 'YES': skip to part IV.

3. Research involving completely anonymous data files (secondary data that has been anonymized by someone else). YES - NO

If 'YES': skip to part IV.

PART III: PARTICIPANTS

1. Will information about the nature of the study and about what participants can expect during the study be withheld from them? YES - NO

2. Will any of the participants not be asked for verbal or written 'informed consent,' whereby they agree to participate in the study? YES - NO

3. Will information about the possibility to discontinue the participation at any time be withheld from participants? YES - NO
4. Will the study involve actively deceiving the participants? YES
- NO
Note: almost all research studies involve some kind of deception of participants. Try to think about what types of deception are ethical or non-ethical, (e.g. purpose of the study is not told, coercion is exerted on participants, giving participants the feeling that they harm other people by making certain decisions, etc.).
5. Does the study involve the risk of causing psychological stress or negative emotions beyond those normally encountered by participants?
YES - NO
6. Will information be collected about special categories of data, as defined by the GDPR (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a person, data concerning mental or physical health, data concerning a person's sex life or sexual orientation)? YES - NO
7. Will the study involve the participation of minors (< 18 years old) or other groups that cannot give consent? YES - NO
8. Is the health and/or safety of participants at risk during the study? YES - NO
9. Can participants be identified by the study results or can the confidentiality of the participants' identity not be ensured? YES - NO
10. Are there any other possible ethical issues with regard to this study? YES - NO

If you have answered 'YES' to any of the previous questions, please indicate below why this issue is unavoidable in this study.

What safeguards are taken to relieve possible adverse consequences of these issues (e.g., informing participants about the study afterwards, extra safety regulations, etc.).

Are there any unintended circumstances in the study that can cause harm or have negative (emotional) consequences to the participants? Indicate what possible circumstances this could be.

Please attach your informed consent form in Appendix I, if applicable.

Continue to part IV.

PART IV: SAMPLE

Where will you collect or obtain your data?

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

What is the (anticipated) size of your sample?

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

What is the size of the population from which you will sample?

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

Continue to part V.

Part V: Data storage and backup

Where and when will you store your data in the short term, after acquisition?

The digital data will be stored in Google Drive

Note: indicate for separate data sources, for instance for paper-and-pencil test data, and for digital data files.

Who is responsible for the immediate day-to-day management, storage and backup of the data arising from your research?

I, myself will be responsible

How (frequently) will you back-up your research data for short-term data security?

Everytime a change is made or new data is collected, the data will be backed up

In case of collecting personal data how will you anonymize the data?

Not applicable

Note: It is advisable to keep directly identifying personal details separated from the rest of the data. Personal details are then replaced by a key/ code. Only the code is part of the database with data and the list of respondents/research subjects is kept separate.

PART VI: SIGNATURE

Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the ethical guidelines in the conduct of your study. This includes providing information to participants about the study and ensuring confidentiality in storage and use of personal data. Treat participants respectfully, be on time at appointments, call participants when they have signed up for your study and fulfil promises made to participants.

Furthermore, it is your responsibility that data are authentic, of high quality and properly stored. The principle is always that the supervisor (or strictly speaking the Erasmus University Rotterdam) remains owner of the data, and that the student should therefore hand over all data to the supervisor.

Hereby I declare that the study will be conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Department of Public Administration and Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. I have answered the questions truthfully.

Name student: Denise Jonker

Name (EUR) supervisor: Bonnie French

Date: 25/03/2023

Date: 26/03/23

APPENDIX I: Informed Consent Form (if applicable)

v. 1.2 (March 2023)