

# La construcció de l'actualitat en el cinema dels orígens

*The construction of news  
in early cinema*

*La construcción de la actualidad  
en el cine de los orígenes*

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# Creating an event out of nothing happening. An exploration of the category *event* through tourist imagery of the Zuiderzee region (The Netherlands), 1874-1914

Sarah Dellmann

In the summer of 1906, six Amsterdam boys were hired by the agency *Besteldienst Premier Stores* and dressed in traditional Volendam outfits to advertise for the steamboat company *Batavierlijn* in the streets of London and in Brighton. The *Batavierlijn* connected England (London) with the Netherlands (Rotterdam). This ferry route was not only used to transport goods, mail or business people, but also, from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards, an increasing number of British tourists.



De 'Volendammers' op het Trafalgar Square te London",  
newspaper photo. In Anonymous 1906, 512

The Dutch weekly magazine *Eigen Haard* and the daily newspaper *Algemeen Handelsblad* enthusiastically reported on this event: In order to attract tourists and make them spend their money in the Netherlands, catchy advertising strategies were needed. This one was judged potentially successful, good for the company and the entire country.<sup>1</sup>

The fact that whoever had planned the advertising-event used Volendam costumes to promote a trip to the Netherlands indicates that this image was expected to be widely known. Indeed, we find images of people in traditional clothing of the Zuiderzee region – mostly from the villages Volendam and Marken – across all visual media of that time, including early cinema, when it comes to signify “Dutchness”.

In this paper, I will argue that tourism changed the way the Zuiderzee-villages Volendam and Marken were described. Before institutionalized tourism, to go and see the Zuiderzee region was not considered to be in any way a remarkable thing to do; it did not, in other words, constitute anything like an “event”. So in order to address and understand this shift, I will examine the notion of *event* and evaluate its use for my analysis of function, use and meaning of tourist imagery in early popular visual culture.

### **“Event” in media studies**

All definitions of the concept “event” I examined share the criterion of newsworthiness. An event is worth being commented on. This advertising campaign thus can be considered an event, because it has been commented on in newspapers.

In media studies two definitions of the “event” predominate: The first one defines events as unexpected or extraordinary incidents such as natural disasters, accidents, war, terror or crime. This touches on journalistic questions on possibilities, style and ethics of news coverage and its perception.

The second defines events as planned and extraordinary “ceremonial occasions” (Dayan and Katz 1992) or “ritual” (Couldry 2003). Examples are sports matches, royal weddings, and constitutive parliamentary sessions. Dayan and Katz characterize this type of event as live and remote, interrupting the daily routine and preplanned (Dayan and Katz 1992, 7). They focus on the role media play in turning occasions into events. Events bring together a diverse group by stopping the everyday. Dayan and Katz, and Couldry inquire about the social integration achieved through and by events and the role media take in “ordering our lives, and organizing social space” (Couldry 2003, 1).

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1. “Hollandsche Reclame in Engeland,” *Eigen Haard* 11.08.1906. “Nederland En Vreemdelingenverkeer. Berichten En Beschouwingen in Verband Met Het Reisseizoen.” *Algemeen Handelsblad* 31.07.1906.

Advertising and tourism address the extraordinary, too. In tourist discourse and tourist advertising in general, the newsworthiness/event goes beyond descriptive documentation. In my case, the advertising is set up as an event *and* refers to another event. The article comments on the advertising-event (the performing boys) and not on the advertised experience (of “Dutchness”). This distinction between advertising-event and advertised experience – thereby turning experience into an event – is not made in the traditional use of news events. In those cases, the newsworthiness is well known *before* there are images documenting the action. Moreover, the images are clearly attributed to the very place and moment where and when they were recorded. The imagery I explore, here, is neither linked to the duration in which an event unfolds, nor to a specific action. Having these different logics in mind: how does the category of event need to be conceptualized?

Before I explore this question, I wish to stress the prominence of this motif in visual media at the time of early cinema. Images of the Zuiderzee region were circulating at high rate: The Database of *EYE Film Institute Netherlands* shows that at least 35 out of 684 films until 1914 contain images of the Zuiderzee, which is 5% of the entire known film production,<sup>2</sup> Donaldson’s *Filmography of Dutch Silent Fiction* shows that the Volendam outfit was prominent in fiction films until ca. 1918 (Donaldson 1997). Likewise, in an exemplary discussion of two early fiction films, Ivo Blom shows how early cinema drew on this archetypal, pre-modern imagery to signify “Dutchness” (Blom 1996, 246-255).

Visual media in the domain of tourism and travel are not restricted to the documentation of actual travel, but also, and maybe in the first place, communicate “what is to be seen” at a given destination. How, then, was the event character attributed to this motif?

### **When nothing happened at the Zuiderzee**

The villages of the Zuiderzee – important Dutch trade cities throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth century – were hardly known to anyone anymore, even among the Dutch, until the late nineteenth century. In contrast to other areas of the Netherlands where industrialization had changed the cityscape in the second half of the nineteenth century, this region remained largely underdeveloped. Around 1900 its inhabitants still lived from (non-industrial) fishing and trade of dairy products – and increasingly from tourists and artists.

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2. The database contains films of Dutch and foreign production. Often the titles are all that remains. The 35 films mention either a place in the Zuiderzee region in its titles, or I have been able to consult copies. It is likely that more films on the Netherlands use this motif.

The Zuiderzee region got famous through the publishing success of Henry Havard's travel account "*Voyage Pittoresque aux villes mortes de Zuiderzée*" (Havard 1874). It was among others translated into Dutch (1876), German (1882) and English (1885) (cf. Blom 1996, 246-255). The French edition was reissued four times by 1883 and is cited in travelogues and guide books ever since throughout the 1910s. Havard's descriptions of villages resemble each other: He describes the deathlike silence in the streets and the monotonous landscape, leading to the impression of time standing still. Havard gives information about architecture and art collections in the town houses, describes in an ethnographic manner outward appearances and clothing (especially of women) and interprets them as untouched by modernity. This seems paradox: Why would an image referring to a region that was known for its monotonous landscape, the deathlike atmosphere in the streets and the absence of any action turn into an attraction? How could experiencing a never changing way of life become an event?

Turning back to the 1906 advertising-event, it surely caused puzzlement to see people in an unfamiliar clothing style in the streets. Using this attention for a certain aim – selling a ticket for a steam ship line – requires an operation of sense-making that would not work without reference to general knowledge and previously mediated imagery. This singular appearance, then, has to be understood as part of a serially disseminated motif. The question this raises is: how could Amsterdam boys performing Volendamers communicate "Dutchness"?

### **Making Volendam "typically Dutch"**

In the 1870s and 1880s, the Zuiderzee Island of Marken was better known than Volendam (was it because Havard described it in more detail than any other village?). It was possible to go there on a one-day return trip from Amsterdam. In 1877, a trip to Marken was described under the rubric of day trips around Amsterdam.<sup>3</sup> A Dutch traveler who went to Marken in winter 1883 refers to it as "often mentioned but really not well known place" (Anonymous 1884, 2). By 1898 this had changed, for according to a daily newspaper *Het Nieuws Van Den Dag* it was not necessary to write about Marken "because it was already so well known" (Anonymous 1898).

Visitors going from Amsterdam to Marken would not travel through Volendam. One important reason Volendam became a place of interest and eventually outclassed Marken with regard to popularity lies in the activities

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3. The author mentions having shown the Island to Viennese artists who participated in the contemporary art exhibition in 1877. P. H. Witkamp, "Uitstapjes Op Één Dag Uit En Thuis," *Het Nieuws Van Den Dag: Kleine Courant* 15.06.1878.



[Rondreizen Marken-Volendam],  
Advertising poster, 1910

of businessman Leendert Spaander. In 1881 he bought a house near the harbor and turned it into a hotel. To promote it as an artists' residence he sent postcards to art schools, advertised in tourism brochures and used other original marketing strategies.<sup>4</sup> His efforts were fruitful: artists who felt that the artist's colonies of Scheveningen and Katwijk were already too modern and effete came to paint the unexploited village of Volendam. Shortly after that, tourists came to see the much depicted village.

State officials also contributed to the circulation of quaint images of Holland: In 1898, the "Committee to welcome the foreign press" invited 140 foreign journalists – who probably were already in the country to report on the coronation of Queen Wilhelmina – on a day trip from Amsterdam to Edam, Volendam and Marken. The trip included a visit of a cheese factory and a reception at the city hall of Edam with (female) service personnel in traditional clothing, worn especially for this occasion (Anonymous 1898).

One more step is required to relate the Amsterdam boys in Volendam outfits to a ticket for a steamboat to Rotterdam. Although clearly staged,

4. "In 1895, Spaander took his daughters "to the opening of an exhibition of Dutch artist Nico Jungmann at an art gallery in London. For this occasion he dressed the two girls in the typical costumes of Volendam." Cf Ivo Blom, "Of Artist and Tourists: 'Locating' Holland in Two Early German Films," in *A Second Life: German Cinema's First Decades*, eds. Thomas Elsaesser and Michael Wedel (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996), 246-255, 247).

these boys served within the tourist discourse – that is inherently intertwined with a quest for the authentic, as numerous scholars have pointed out (Culler 1988, 153-167; Fiske 1989; Berghoff and others 2002; Urry 2009) – as reliable markers for “Dutchness”. If the Volendam outfit was both a sign for “Dutchness” and a promise to experience it, we have to do with two layers: This advertising-event allowed to mediate both the promise of *and* the reference to a specific experience. Seen in this light, “event” serves as a means to communicate two seemingly contradictory temporalities: the promise to make a not-yet-realized authentic experience within the frame of repetition – that is the already-realized and reproducible.

### Creating an Event: Positioning the Spectator

The Netherlands has not always been regarded as place of aesthetic interest: The absence of monuments, the non-prestigious architecture, the Gothic churches scarred by iconoclasm did not meet the interest of travelers interested in experiencing beauty. This did not change before the late eighteenth century when Romanticists promoted the picturesque. Art historian Hans Kraan juxtaposes these aesthetic concepts: Whereas the classical age’s concept of beauty is attributed with perfection, symmetry, the stable and eternity, the picturesque is characterized by raw and sudden variation,

**Images in travel writing, 1874-1885**

Havard 1874                      Anonymus 1884                      Boughton 1885

“Habitants de l’île de Marken”, drawing in travelguide. In Havard 1874; “Binnenhuis op Marken”, drawing in magazine In Anonymus 1884, 7. “A Drawer of Water”. Drawing in travel writing. In Boughton and Abbey 1885, 69



non-symmetrical lines, an understanding of phenomena as ephemeral and emphasis on subjective experience (Kraan 2002, 31-33). Contrary to Italy and Greece, the Netherlands could qualify as a travel destination only after the criteria for “place of (aesthetic) interest” had shifted. The picturesque places the spectator differently to the things seen. The viewer is not overwhelmed by an experience of the sublime (caused by the beauty of classical art); it positions the viewer in a safe distance to the things seen, allowing him/her to appropriate them. In a similar way, Nanna Verhoeff characterizes the picturesque as “the aesthetic equivalent of armchair travel” (Verhoeff 2006, 251).

The first images of the Zuiderzee in illustrated magazines are rather ethnographical, and although they give evidence that the editors found this topic worth writing on, the depicted places and people are presented as “simply there”: The images show people in traditional clothing in their surrounding. For the reader of the magazines, the images turn the depicted into objects of study in a principally never-ending series of places and people, following an “encyclopedic logic” (Gunning 2008, 11-16; Amad 2010).

This mode of presentation differs from depictions in Magic Lantern series from ca. 1895 and 1906. Here, we find images like these:



Slide 10 “Marken Children” [Lantern Slide], from Lantern Slide Series *Projektion für alle, Nr. VII: Quer durch Holland*. Producer: Hoffmann und Unger, Dresden 1906 (24 Slides).

Collection Gwen Sebus, Netherlands.

Probably Slide 32 “Marken men and Girls in Holiday Attire” or Slide 33 “Marken Girls & Boys in their best Clothes” [lantern slide], from Lantern Slide Series *A Visit to Holland* (also distributed as *Picturesque Holland*). Producer: unknown, probably England, ca. 1895 (50 Slides). Collection Gwen Sebus, Netherlands.

Tourists appear, either visually in the image of the slides, or textually in the lecture material (Hoffmann & Unger 1906).<sup>5</sup> The lecture to the first slide even explicitly addresses the viewer as a consumer of something that is picturesque: You may have a look at this scene, but you have to pay these people for taking a picture of them (cf. *ibid.*). In the second slide, the tourists are part of staging: Children in traditional clothing pose for the photograph. The tourists<sup>6</sup> pose as well; they do not look at the children but also address the camera and thereby the viewer. The audience of a magic lantern projection gets to see the spectacle and is offered a position in that scene as well. These images position the viewer within the scene, at the very location.<sup>7</sup>

This composition, which also implies a positioning, underlines the event character of such a visit to the Zuiderzee region. The fact that these children are of touristic interest is confirmed by the presence of the tourists. These children are not just “simply there” anymore, but perform for the camera as they do for the tourists. It is obvious that this scene would not take place if no one looked. This differs from the mode used in the more ethnographical descriptions in illustrated magazines, mentioned above.

The advertising-event of the Volendammers in London bears evidence to the availability of predefined, controlled experiences made available by the purchase of tickets to touristic destinations and turns the latter into a commodity. It functions as a teaser because it does not (aim to) substitute for the “real” experience of actual travel. In this regard, the lantern slide show and the advertising-event are essentially different: the screening of images is sold as and provides an experience; it *is* the event, whereas the advertising-event is (and aims to be) a *reference to* the experience-as-event. What lantern slide shows and tourist advertising have in common (and what distinguishes them from the news events) is that they do not show something new, but repeat a predefined experience in a predefined setting and spectator position.

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5. It is not possible to trace if lecturers read out the readings issued with the series or wrote their own comment. The popularity of the readings gives some ground to the speculation that at least some people used them.

6. To name these two persons in the background tourists is, of course, an interpretation. However, all travelogues and ethnographic accounts state that the entire population of Marken wore traditional clothing. Because there was no business to do at Marken and the prominence of Marken among tourists, the probability is high that these people are tourists. At least, they stand out and are no Markeners.

7. Verhoeff discusses a similar case of people in landscape painting, seeing them as mediators “between the armchair traveler and his more adventurous counterpart.” Nanna Verhoeff, *The West in Early Cinema. After the Beginning* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 257. For the discussion of “event” I want to point out the difference between people looking at landscape and people looking at people, who are conscious of being looked at.

## **The end of the event: broad dissemination**

Then something happened: Highbrow tourists were turned off by the organized and obviously staged attractions. In 1913, two British tourists lament the loss of authenticity of this place:

“Here [in Monnikendam] we met the Dutch child at its worst. It is particularly hard on Monnikendam, which is otherwise an engaging little place, because these strident-voiced, brazen-faced, pushing girls, and hulking, baggy-trousered, pipe-smoking boys don’t belong there at all, but come over from Marken, to spend, let us hope, a generally unprofitable day in pestering visitors to buy postcards and other rubbish.” (Grew and Grew 1913)

Due to income from tourism, the inhabitants of the Zuiderzee villages could afford to build their houses in bricks, so that there were no more wooden houses in need for colorful furnish, “authentic decoration” and “typical furniture” were sold to collectors and the replica of “typical” Marken or Volendam interiors shown on location no longer fulfilled the promise of authenticity these places once got famous for. It seems that the event character is lost when the promise – here: an experience of authenticity – is not kept.

But something else happened, too: Volendam and Marken motifs were widely disseminated because it benefited various interests. By performing “the Volendammer” or “the Markener” to the visitors, the mostly poor inhabitants – not to mention the tourist agencies – generated income. Artists saw what they came looking for, lantern slide and cinema audiences as well as (at least some) tourists were happy to see what everyone was talking about. Seen in this light, authenticity does not seem to be a necessary condition for the event character, when made available in visual mass media. In this mode of presentation, the promise of an experience is not bound to authenticity or, at least, the concept of authenticity underwent change, too. It seems that there was a shift from “auratic” authenticity of the here and now to a reproducible spectacular.

## **Conclusion**

On first sight, traveling – be it armchair travel or “real” travel – seemed to be a domain to which the concept of event can be applied, at least insofar as the extraordinary experience and thereby the experience-as-event is highlighted. When looking deeper into the *use* that is made of the “eventness” and the *function* the extraordinary qualities have, it becomes apparent that “event” needs to be conceptualized other than when used to describe extraordinary news incidents or ceremonies. If applied to the analysis of tourism but also travelogues in early cinema, it has, I argue, the following characteristics:

Event is a *mode and a means to communicate, present or promote* a certain experience. If an event only is one if it matches an expectation, i.e. if it provides the expected experience, event is a *qualitative* category. Moreover, an event does not show something entirely new but *confirms* a predefined experience. It is a category of repetition. In addition, event is a means to make a (promised) experience consumable. Just like tourism and advertising, it comes in the form of a commodity. Lastly, the way mass media provide experiences raised by tourist discourse indicates the possibility to create (touristic and picturesque) experiences not simply in the realm of authenticity but also in the realm of the spectacular.

In none of these cases does event relate to a determinable time span of news events like a coronation ceremony or a football match that are non-repeatable and finish at a precise moment. Rather, the “tourist type”-event is a means to an end: It can only be applied within consumer culture as the so-defined event *only* realizes its promise in consumption. Following the logic of tourism and advertising in consumer culture, tourist discourse creates both the longing for a specific experience (in this case: of “Dutchness”) and fulfillment through its advertised commodities. The fleeting experience of “Dutchness” can be consumed and realized by attending a film, a magic lantern show or going on holidays. Conceptualizing event this way enables us to explore the *relation* between promise and experience, the new and the repeated, the spectacular, the audience, the setting and the involved media. These relations, however, have mostly been addressed through the concept of performativity. If the category “event” is used in research on tourism, tourist imagery, and tourist events in early popular visual culture, a careful conceptualization of the term is required - especially with regards to its repetitive quality.

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## Abstracts

### **La creación de un acontecimiento a partir de la nada. Un análisis de la categoría de acontecimiento vista desde el imaginario del turista de la región de Zuiderzee (Países Bajos), 1874/1914**

Tomando como punto de partida un anuncio de 1906 para viajar a los Países Bajos, la autora estudia el posible uso del término acontecimiento en las discusiones sobre el imaginario de viajes del cine de los primeros tiempos. Con la finalidad de transmitir la esencia de lo que es «holandés», el cine de los primeros tiempos se inspira en una imaginería y una estética que el turismo hizo cambiar. A pesar de compartir el criterio «digno de convertirse en noticia», dentro de la lógica del turista, la categoría «acontecimiento» se asocia a experiencias prometidas y no a actos que ocurren en un lapso de tiempo. Si se utiliza para tratar la imaginería del turista, la conclusión es que un «acontecimiento» ha de conceptualizar como una categoría cualitativa. El autor plantea la cuestión de si «acontecimiento» sería un término idóneo a la hora de analizar la imaginería del turista en el cine de los primeros tiempos o si habría otros conceptos más adecuados para tratar cuestiones relativas al turismo.

### **La creació d'un esdeveniment a partir del no-res. Una anàlisi de la categoria d'esdeveniment vista des de l'imaginari del turista de la regió de Zuiderzee (Països Baixos), 1874-1914**

Prenent com a punt de partida un anunci del 1906 per viatjar als Països Baixos, l'autora estudia el possible ús del terme *esdeveniment* en les discussions sobre l'imaginari de viatges del cinema dels primers temps. Amb la finalitat de transmetre l'essència d'allò que és «holandès», el cinema dels primers temps s'inspira en una imatgeria i una estètica que el turisme va fer canviar. Tot i compartir el criteri «digne de convertir-se en notícia», dins la lògica del turista, la categoria «esdeveniment» s'associa a experiències promeses i no pas a actes que s'esdevenen en un lapse de temps. Si s'utilitza per tractar la imatgeria del turista, la conclusió és que un «esdeveniment» s'ha de conceptualitzar com una categoria qualitativa. L'autora posa damunt la taula la qüestió de si «esdeveniment» seria un terme idoni a l'hora d'analitzar la imatgeria del turista en el cinema dels primers temps o si hi hauria altres conceptes més adequats per tractar qüestions relatives al turisme.