

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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“Views from the Japanese-Russian War”: Re-titling Russo-Japanese War Film Programmes in the Netherlands and Netherlands Indies

Dafna Ruppin

On December 2nd 1904, almost a year into the Russo-Japanese War, an Amsterdam-based journalist who had attended a cinema screening at the Circus Carré theatre wrote: “We should [...] mention the cinema-number from the Japanese-Russian War; this is truly one of the best pictures we have seen here.”¹ The use of this disambiguation – the Japanese-Russian War – rather than the generally accepted name for the Russo-Japanese War in international parlance and, indeed, in other Dutch newspaper reports on the on-going fighting, is encountered in several other reports on film programmes from the period.² Moreover, the name-reversal appears again in screenings in the Netherlands Indies (present-day Indonesia), when a traveling Japanese cinema arrives in Sumatra in August of 1905 offering “Views from the Japanese-Russian War” (see figure 1).³ The recurrence of this naming practice throughout the war years leads one to ask: What effect were film exhibitors trying to achieve? Did the alternative naming of the war change the nature of the event as it was experienced by cinema audiences? And what does this reveal of the specific interests and spectatorial positions from which audiences engaged these events and their cinematic representations?

1. *Algemeen Handelsblad*, Tweede Blad, 2.12.1904, column titled “Stadnieuws,” emphasis added. All translations from Dutch are mine.

2. According to the Cinema Context website (www.cinemacontext.nl), which provides information on early cinema screenings in the Netherlands.

3. *De Sumatra Post*, 22.8.1905, column titled “Advertentiën.” All images courtesy of the Koninklijke Bibliotheek (KB), taken from its online database of digitized newspapers (kranten.kb.nl).



Fig. 1. An advertisement for the Japanese Cinematograph in Medan (*De Sumatra Post*, 22.8.1905). Image courtesy of the Koninklijke Bibliotheek (KB), taken from its online database of digitized newspapers (kranten.kb.nl).

This paper focuses on the production, dissemination and reception of images of the Russo-Japanese War from an intermedial perspective, examining early cinema as embedded within and engaged in exchanges with other contemporary popular media, in terms of both content and form.⁴ Focusing on the case of the Netherlands – by that point in time, a minor imperial power in Asia, relatively neutral in regards to the conflict and, moreover, not a producer of such images but rather a recipient and distributor of ones produced outside its borders – will enable us to examine how images of war were adapted and reframed in order to construct an international news story for Dutch audiences. Furthermore, an overview of the popular visual media circulating at the time in the Netherlands and in the Netherlands Indies will help outline features of the political and cultural exchanges between the colonies and the home country.

4. For more on the concept of intermediality in the study of early cinema, see the special issue of *Early Popular Visual Culture*, particularly the introduction: Shail, Andrew (2010). "Intermediality: Disciplinary flux or formalist retrenchment?" in *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 8: 1, p. 5.

The first part of this paper presents some historical background on the Russo-Japanese War and its media representations in the West, followed by a contextualization of Dutch-Japanese relations as well as of the Dutch media environment in the early twentieth century. The second part moves into mapping out the representations of the Russo-Japanese War in illustrated newspapers and book titles published in the Netherlands and in the Netherlands Indies at the time. This will allow observing where widespread sentiments lie with regards to the conflict. Finally, we will come back to the films circulating in the Dutch homeland and colonies.

The Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5 saw the Japanese succeed in vanquishing the Russian Imperial Army in the Far East, an Asian power on the rise thus defeating a European one in a conflict conducted with modern arms, dramatically reshuffling the cards in world power relations for the rest of the twentieth century.⁵ Major European powers and the US, though not involved in the fighting directly, were implicated in the conflict through treaty obligations with either Russia or Japan. Moreover, France, Britain and the US were financially invested in the war efforts, with the Russians being supported by the French and the Japanese drawing on British and American loans. The repercussions of the war therefore went beyond the decline of Russia and the rise of Japan, touching “upon the economies and military organizations of every power in the early twentieth century.”⁶

Worldwide interest in the developing struggle led to extensive coverage, producing visual representations which circulated worldwide: from the illustrated press, through photography and postcards, to theatre performances and films. Filmmakers in the West quickly responded to film audiences’ desire for moving images of the war, resulting in film programmes that combined actualities with war re-enactments, alongside travel and exotic films not directly connected to the fighting. The Charles Urban Trading Company in Britain, for instance, filmed war re-enactments yet also dispatched its cameraman Joseph Rosenthal behind the lines of the Japanese, and another cameraman, George Rogers, behind the Russian side in order to produce actualities from the scene.⁷ Meanwhile, the Edison Company and the Biograph Company in the US, wanting to satisfy the craving for images of the war while keeping production costs low, resorted to filming war re-enactments in New York and New Jersey based on news

5. See Kowner, Rotem (2007). “Between a colonial clash and World War Zero: The impact of the Russo-Japanese War in a global perspective,” in *The Impact of the Russo-Japanese War*. Kowner, Rotem (ed.). London and New York: Routledge, pp. 1-25.

6. Ibid., pp. 4-5.

7. McKernan, Luke (ed.) (1999). *A Yank in Britain: The Lost Memoirs of Charles Urban, Film Pioneer*. Hastings: The Projection Box, p. 75

from the front.⁸ In France, Pathé Frères similarly invested in a series of war re-enactments generally known as *Évènements russo-japonais* which, according to its set designer, were also filmed in accordance with reports on the war in major French newspapers of the day.⁹ Remarkably business-minded, Pathé offered exhibitors two options for the films' final intertitle – “Vive le Japon!” or “Vive la Russie!” – in six different languages, opening up the possibility for these films to be used in film programmes expressing directly opposite sentiments.¹⁰

As opposed to other contemporary wars which were often colonial conflicts, readily offering themselves up to be depicted as a battle between civilised and uncivilised peoples, the question of how to represent the conflict was slightly different for the case of the Russo-Japanese War. As *The Times* claimed upon the outbreak of war: “It is really the contest of two civilisations, and in this lies, perhaps, its profoundest interest to the observer. For the first time an Asiatic Power confronts a European Power on equal terms and with equal weapons.”¹¹ At the same time, the Russians and Japanese were both almost equally “Other” to the West¹²: the Russians – as the most Eastern of European nations, geographically and culturally; the Japanese – as “the most Western of the nations” of Asia.¹³ Filmmakers and exhibitors would have thus had to resort to other techniques for invoking audience sympathies with one side or the other, and it is likely that they would have drawn on their knowledge of the preferences and orientation of the audiences they were serving.

While no film footage from the Russo-Japanese War survives in archives in the Netherlands, my research has discovered records of screenings in advertisements and newspaper accounts by journalists who attended such screenings in the Netherlands and in the Netherlands Indies, as well as information on film programmes from the period. These new findings reveal that cinematic representations of the war came onto the scene early on, with the first recorded screening of a Pathé film taking place in Amsterdam in mid-March 1904, just a month after the outbreak of war, followed by more screenings across the Netherlands up to 1906. These Pathé films

8. Musser, Charles (1991). *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp-273-274.

9. Bousquet, Henri (ed.) (1993–1996) *Catalogue Pathé des années 1896 a 1914*, Bassac: Henri Bousquet, p. 889.

10. Sadoul, Georges (1973). *Histoire générale du cinéma. Tome 2: Les Pionniers du cinéma, 1897-1909*. Paris: Denoël, p. 302.

11. *The Times*, 6.2.1904. Quoted in Lehmann, Jean-Pierre (1978). *The Image of Japan: From Feudal Isolation to World Power, 1850-1905*. London, Boston and Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, p. 149.

12. Kowner, p. 3.

13. Sladen, Douglas (1904). *Queer Things About Japan*. London: Anthony Treherne & Co., p. vii.

also travelled to the Dutch colonies in Indonesia, in addition to Charles Urban productions, Biograph films, and Japanese Cinematograph shows, among others, which were available across various locations in the archipelago from the second half of 1904.

In order to speculate as to which final intertitle (if any) would have been shown on cinema screens, and as a way of situating early cinema within the contemporary array of war representations circulating in the Netherlands and in the Netherlands Indies, we should at this point examine the visual media environment of the period. Providing an overview of Dutch illustrated newspapers and book publications can assist us in fleshing out where Dutch sentiments lie at the time of the Russo-Japanese War. This requires us to postulate a certain link between news reporting, the commercial nature of the popular media and local audience preferences, assuming that the media as a market-driven enterprise were not only influencing public opinion but simultaneously reflecting it and appealing to prevailing public taste in order to sell more newspapers and draw more viewers to cinema screens.

In the days immediately following the eruption of the conflict between Russia and Japan in early February 1904, the Dutch government, in consultation with the government in the Netherlands Indies, declared that the mother country and its colonies were to remain neutral with regards to the escalating situation in the Far East.¹⁴ At the same time, while Dutch newspapers often claimed that their reports on the war were also neutral, a clear pattern developed early on. Already in the weeks leading up to the war, Dutch illustrated newspapers displayed images of Japan and the Japanese, as well as of Korea and Manchuria, yet significantly less of Russia. Current events were presented alongside portraits of the people, their land and customs, turning anything and everything to do with Japan into hot news items.

In addition, books and albums about Japan were advertised for sale in daily and weekly newspapers. Some of these were republished second editions of earlier titles especially focused on Japan's rapid modernization during the Meiji Restoration, such as Wickevoort Crommelin's (1904 [1895]) *Een Herlevend Volk: Schets van de Japanners en hun Land* [A Resurgent Nation: Sketch of the Japanese and their Country] and Wijnaendts Francken's (1904) *Het Japansche Volk* [The Japanese People], on Japanese-Dutch relations, as in Nijpels' (1904) *Japan-Nederland* [Japan-Netherlands] and on the on-going war, as for example in de Voogt's (ca. 1905)

14. Laffan, Michael (2007). "Tokyo as a shared Mecca of modernity: War echoes in the colonial Malay world," in *The Impact of the Russo-Japanese War*. Kowner, Rotem (ed.). London and New York: Routledge, pp. 225.

rather explicit title *De Oorlog in Oost-Azië. Een nauwkeurig overzicht van den geweldigen strijd tusschen Rusland en Japan, verzameld uit de meest betrouwbare bronnen met beschouwingen en illustraties van ooggetuigen* [The War in East Asia. An accurate view of the violent struggle between Russia and Japan, gathered from reliable sources with observations and illustrations by eyewitnesses]. In short, the Netherlands was swept with a form of “yellow fever,” leaving the Russians very much in the background of the war coverage.

This pro-Japan tendency is perhaps not surprising in light of the historical contacts maintained between Japan and the Netherlands, which for hundreds of years was the only Western nation permitted to trade with Japan and hold a port on the artificial island of Dejima during the period of Japan’s self-imposed isolation from the West.¹⁵ The history of their relations therefore ran longer than with other Western powers, and natives of the Netherlands Indies would have been familiar with them for centuries before.¹⁶ It was only in the mid-nineteenth century that Japan was forced open by the US and underwent a rapid modernization: from a feudal state to a modern country within 50 years.¹⁷ This quick modernization commanded respect in the West, but also caused fear of the possible threat a modernized Japan could pose. The Dutch were on the side of the admirers, at least at the end of the nineteenth century, judging by the decision in 1899 to upgrade the Japanese’s status within the colonial census system, from “Vreemde Oosterlingen” (“Foreign Orientals”) to equal to European – with all the perks and privileges that this entailed, and much to the discontent of the Chinese minority in the colonies.¹⁸

Images circulating in the Netherlands and in the Netherlands Indies were sourced from contemporary European periodicals, mostly photos and illustrations of English and French origin. In the early days of the war, newspapers eager to provide their curious readers with stories and images published portraits of Japanese and Russian military figures, the Mikado, the Russian Tsar, Japanese and Russian battleships, and maps of the region showing Russian and Japanese military positions. Yet the depiction of actual battle scenes required a few more months of fighting. As was the case in other conflicts from that period, the “working consensus” that Ste-

15. Cullen, L. M. (2006). *A History of Japan, 1582-1941: Internal and External Worlds*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 3.

16. Laffan, pp.221-222.

17. Cullen, p. 1.

18. Fasseur, C. (1994). “Cornerstone and Stumbling Block: Racial Classification and the Late Colonial State in Indonesia,” in Cribb, Robert (ed.). *The Late Colonial State in Indonesia: Political and Economic Foundations of the Netherlands Indies 1880-1942*. Leiden: KITLV Press, p. 37.

phen Bottomore has identified for presenting photographs and/or painted impressions of war continued in Dutch illustrated newspapers from this period: “photography to show the background events of the conflict, and artists’ impressions to show the heat of battle.”¹⁹ Thus, we typically find photos of troops preparing to set out to or returning from battle as well as of general landscapes, and hand-drawn sketches or paintings of actual battle from close up.

On top of these, throughout the war years Dutch newspapers chose to highlight Japanese people, their customs and culture, often in serial form, for instance, in the series “Uit het land der Chrysanten” [From the land of Chrysanthemums] in *Nederlandsche Illustratie*, or “Japan in Woord en Beeld. – Van Menschen en Zaken” [Japan in Word and Image. – of People and Professions] in *Wereldkroniek*.²⁰ No counterpart of the Russian side was provided at the time. Many images in these series displayed dainty and exotic Japanese women, which was typical of Western representations of a “feminized Japan” since the late nineteenth century.²¹ Interestingly, this image of a feminine Japan would have indeed been in line with what residents of the Netherlands Indies were accustomed to encountering in their daily lives. According to the census of 1905, there were only about a thousand Japanese living in the Indies, eighty percent of them were women who were working as prostitutes or hairdressers.²²

Nevertheless, even though the general mood seemed to be favourable towards Japan, negative representations of the Japanese occasionally emerged. Some of these were reminiscent of earlier “Yellow Peril” threats, to the extent of re-employing images of brutalities that were previously used in connection with the Sino-Japanese War (1894-5) or the Boxer Uprising (1900-1). On the whole, the image of Japan was positive, even if sometimes mixed or ambivalent, spawning a certain circularity of images from past and present military and cultural encounters. These continually resurfaced and were recycled as editors deemed necessary to fill up the pages of their newspapers.

Turning our attention back to cinematic representations of the war in the Netherlands, the choice of titling Pathé film programmes “Japanese-Russian war” seems to further reinforce the prominence of Japan over the

19. Bottomore, Stephen (2007). *Filming, Faking and Propaganda: The Origins of the War Film, 1897-1902*. PhD, Utrecht University, Chapter 1, p. 1.

20. *Nederlandsche Illustratie*, 31.1.1904, 28.2.1904, 13.11.1904 and 14.5.1905; *Wereldkroniek*, 12.3.1904, respectively.

21. Mizuta, Miya Elise (2006). “Fair Japan’: On Art and War at the Saint Louis World’s Fair, 1904,” in *Discourse*, 28.1, Winter 2006, p. 35.

22. Laffan, p. 223.

marginalization of Russia in the Dutch war imaginary. Furthermore, the instalment on the scenes from Port Arthur, titled in the Pathé catalogue “La vigie de Port-Arthur,”²³ specifically stated in the Dutch screenings that the siege was imposed by the Japanese (“Belegering van Port Arthur door Japan” [Siege of Port Arthur by Japan]), a specification which I have yet to find in any other country that screened the film. This unusual choice of titling enabled exhibitors to construct a news story to fit the national mood, working in the process against the images themselves, which were presumably more sympathetic to the Russians, based on the fact that the films were also screened in Russia at the time and were produced by a French company. The strategy for constructing meaning for spectators did not settle for a possible final intertitle, but tried to make sure from the outset that viewers knew what perspective the film programme was supposed to represent.

These Pathé films were also screened in the Netherlands Indies, alongside films by other cinema companies from various nationalities. The Urban Bioscope Company, for example, advertised itself in the Dutch colonial newspapers in Java, the main island of Indonesia, as the cinema of NY, London, Paris and all the other big cities of Europe and America, while the Royal Bioscope boasted of a programme “of the same genre as the shows currently drawing so much attention at the Alhambra Theatre in LONDON.”²⁴ Audiences in the colonies even got to watch the Joseph Rosenthal footage (see figure 2).²⁵ And if we wonder with whom sympathies in the Indies rested, the following description of an unnamed screening in Sukabumi from December 1904 gives a good sense of the atmosphere:

The Royal Bioscope with its shows always draws large crowds. Chinese and natives especially love such amusements and of course the favourite topic of such spectacles: the Russo-Japanese War. On war evenings, as we shall call them, it was packed and with every new Japanese victory came a loud applause.²⁶

The Japanese film screenings in Sumatra in August 1905 were met with equal excitement, according to a journalist who noted the audience’s “ecstasy,” “rejoicing” and “spontaneous joy.”²⁷

23. Bousquet, p. 889.

24. *Het Nieuws van den dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 20.12.1904, column titled “Advertentiën,” emphasis in original.

25. *Het Nieuws van den dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 8.9.1905, column titled “Advertentiën.”

26. *Het Nieuws van den dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 14.12.1904, column titled “Nederlandsch-Indië.”

27. *De Sumatra Post*, 24.8.1905, Tweede Blad, column titled “Ons Dagelijksch Nieuws.”

HEDEN AVOND! HEDEN AVOND!
in de Manège op TANAH-ABANG,

KONINKLIJKE  **BIOSCOPE,**

Zooeven ontvangen van EUROPA
De Jacht op het Roode Hert in 40 tooneelen.
Groot Succes in het Alhambra Théâtre te Londen op 16 Juni 1905.
DOROTHYS DROOM; KINDERLIEDJES.
Zie onze programma's.

MORGEN AVOND! MORGEN AVOND!
Robinson Crusoe in 25 tableaux.
De belegering en verovering van Port-Arthur.
De Heer JOSEPH ROSENTHAL, Photograaf van de Bioscope Mij., kreeg speciaal verlot van den General Baron NOGI, om de oorlogstooneelen op te nemen, en vertoonde ze in Engeland en Amerika met zeer veel succes.
Incidenten gedurende den aanval van het 8de Keizerlijke legercorps onder bevel van Generaal Baron NOGI, in de loopgraven en op het slagveld rond Port-Arthur.
Geheel naar de werkelijkheid genomen.
N.B. Iederen Woensdag en Zaterdag geheele verandering van programma.

IEDEREN AVOND! IEDEREN AVOND!
TWEE VOORSTELLINGEN
van 7 — 8^{1/2} uur en van 9^{1/2} — 11 uur.

PRIJZEN DER PLAATSEN:
Loze f 2.— | 1e Rang f 1.50 | 2e Rang f 1.— | 3e Rang f 0.50 | 4e Rang (Inlanders) f 0.25.
Kinderen beneden 10 jaar en militairen beneden den rang van officier betalen op den 1en, 2en en 3en Rang **half geld.** 8143

Fig. 2. An advertisement for the Royal Bioscope screenings of Joseph Rosenthal's footage in Batavia (*Het Nieuws van den dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 8.9.1905).

Image courtesy of the Koninklijke Bibliotheek (KB), taken from its online database of digitized newspapers (kranten.kb.nl).

This paper started out by asking if the alternative naming of the Russo-Japanese War in film programmes in the Netherlands and Netherlands Indies changed the nature of the event as it was experienced by cinema audiences. The examples of film programmes, alongside other popular media, suggest that Dutch spectators, who were supposed to remain neutral in respect of this conflict, nevertheless had a side they chose or were invited to sympathise with. Yet, studying the material, and especially encountering the audience responses in the Netherlands Indies, has led me to think about the problems involved in theorising spectatorial positions from a localized perspective. For instance, I would propose that the reports in the Dutch-language colonial newspapers on the rejoicing of Indonesian and Chinese spectators may have been too quick to read these reactions as simply pro-Japanese. It is also quite possible that these films provided the Indonesians and Chinese a specific, perhaps anti-colonial, spectatorial position, their delight then deriving rather from watching an Asian power defeating a European one, drawing strength and possibly inspiration from it.

Shifting the focus away from exhibition strategies to local cinema spectatorship, with the “local being, par excellence, the level where films and spectators meet,” I would suggest that we need to think carefully about the constructions of national and ethnic identities of audience members in a colonial society, especially in the case of a war with repercussions on the perceived balance of power between Western and non-Western nations and peoples.²⁸ While this paper is based on Dutch-language texts, it remains vigilant of the biased insights offered into the viewing experience of other ethnicities. The next stage of this research will have to look into available sources from the vernacular press, in order to be able to contrast the findings here and bring the local Indonesian perspectives to the forefront.

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Abstracts

Visiones de la guerra niporusa: La retitulación de los programas de películas sobre la guerra ruso-japonesa en los Países Bajos y las Indias Neerlandesas

Esta comunicación estudia la producción, la distribución y la recepción de imágenes de la guerra ruso-japonesa (1904-1905) en los Países Bajos y las Indias Neerlandesas (actual Indonesia). Tomando como punto de partida bien inusual la titulación de los programas de algunas películas con la denominación «Guerra Niporusa», se pregunta si la denominación alternativa de la guerra cambia la naturaleza del evento a medida que la audiencia cinematográfica lo experimenta. La comunicación sitúa el cine de los primeros tiempos en el contexto de otros populares medios visuales contemporáneos de los Países Bajos, como diarios ilustrados y libros, y muestra que a menudo salen destacados los japoneses, sus costumbres y su cultura, y se deja a los rusos en un segundo plano de la cobertura. Analiza como las imágenes de guerra se adaptan y se reubican para construir una noticia internacional desde un punto de vista holandés. Finalmente, la comunicación pasa a tratar cuestiones de teorización de las posiciones del espectador desde una perspectiva local.

Visions de la guerra niporussa: La retitulació dels programes de pel·lícules sobre la guerra russojaponesa als Països Baixos i les Índies Neerlandeses

Aquesta comunicació estudia la producció, la distribució i la recepció d'imatges de la guerra russojaponesa (1904-1905) als Països Baixos i les Índies Neerlandeses (actual Indonèsia). Prenent com a punt de partida ben inusual la titulació dels programes d'algunes pel·lícules amb la denominació «Guerra Niporussa», es pregunta si la denominació alternativa de la guerra canvia la naturalesa de l'esdeveniment a mesura que l'audiència cinematogràfica l'experimenta. La comunicació situa el cinema dels primers temps en el context d'altres populars mitjans visuals contemporanis dels Països Baixos, com ara diaris il·lustrats i llibres, i mostra que sovint hi surten destacats els japonesos, els seus costums i la seva cultura, i es deixa els russos en un segon pla de la cobertura. Analitza com les imatges de guerra s'adapten i es resituen per tal de construir una notícia internacional des d'un punt de vista holandès. Finalment, la comunicació passa a tractar qüestions de teorització de les posicions de l'espectador des d'una perspectiva local.