

# Dutch Films in the Mid-1930s Dutch Market: A Characteristics Approach to Film Popularity



Clara Pafort Overduin

**Abstract** This chapter analyses the relationship between 17 Dutch films produced in 1934 and 1935 and their popularity with Dutch filmgoers. Starting from the concept of cultural nearness and appropriation, I have examined recurring character types, themes, and plot developments, arguing that those can reveal preferences for certain morals and values and thus shed light on aspects of Dutch culture. Audiences better appreciate films in which working-class characters take control over their future. This is especially the case in the movies starring Fientje de la Mar, in which a positive image of a successful, independent, and nonconformist woman is presented. In contrast, a popular male character was clumsy, not too bright, and not very handsome: a goodhearted working-class boy, like those characters played by Johan Kaart. Most plotlines revolve around newly formed romantic couples or married couples. Jealousy is the main obstacle they must overcome. Invariably, the emotional state is resolved by showing that partners were unjustly jealous. Coming from the wrong social class is a recurring obstacle as well. Crossing the borders between social classes to marry is acceptable when the transgressor is open, honest, and not pursuing financial gain. In most films, multiple plot lines show different couples. Movies that depict traditional relations are juxtaposed by highly popular films in which the main female protagonist refuses to commit herself to one man. A considerable amount of humour is created at the expense of bossy women and superior men from upper-class backgrounds. Such characters always come off badly, making it clear that their behaviour is not appreciated.

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C. P. Overduin (✉)

Department of Media and Culture Studies & Institute for Cultural Inquiry (ICON), Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

e-mail: [c.pafort-overduin@uu.nl](mailto:c.pafort-overduin@uu.nl)

How can the same piece be shown many hundreds, even thousands of times in a row? Mystery. [...] A comparison of those plays gives even less insight into the essence of success. It only shows that the national psyche is clearly exerting its influence [...].<sup>1</sup>

Where films were made in Europe during the 1930s, they proved highly popular with home audiences, co-existing in the charts with more well-known Hollywood productions—particularly those films with a high International Orientation Index.<sup>2</sup> Undoubtedly, part of the reason for this is the spoken language, as well as the cultural proximity of those films to the lives led by the audiences. In two chapters in this book set during the 1930s, Swedish and British movies found favour with home audiences, but not with audiences in the other. This asymmetry was commonplace throughout Europe, with Hollywood proving the exception in all cases, where its products were not forbidden or heavily restricted.

Although with a comparable population to Sweden, the Netherlands did not have a history of film production on the same scale. Nevertheless, during the 1930s, Dutch films experienced a brief period of popularity.<sup>3</sup> Indeed between 1934 and 1936, they dominated the popularity charts (see Table 1): the first successes in 1934, led to a wave of 37 new Dutch films that ended with the German occupation in 1940. Having new Dutch-language movies on their screens was unusual for Dutch audiences. Yet, no matter how these films were praised for their accessibility, this did not guarantee a good reception. In other words, while having films spoken in the home language helped their popularity, it was not sufficient. The variation in the audience response to Dutch cinema is the subject of this chapter. How should we explain differences in their popularity?

I turn to the films themselves to find an answer. Not to evaluate and review them as it is usually done in critical approaches, but to understand the roles played by their characters and the response of Dutch audiences to them. As little as we know about movies and their relationship to their audiences and the societies in which they are shown, we cannot simply ignore some films are more popular than others and that this changes over time and space.<sup>4</sup> Based on the concept of cultural nearness, I contend that although we cannot establish a direct relationship, a correlation can be observed between film popularity and how dramatic conflict is handled and resolved. To do this, I analyse the characteristics of on-screen conflicts; what are they about, between whom, and how are they resolved.

To keep the investigation manageable, I focus on those Dutch films released in their home market between 1934 and 1936. This experiment in interpretation is intended as

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<sup>1</sup> Hoe is het mogelijk eenzelfde stuk vele honderden, zelfs duizenden malen achtereen te vertoonen? Mystery. [...] Een vergelijking van die stukken geeft nog minder Inzicht in het wezen van het succes. Slechts blijkt, dat de nationale psyche duidelijk haar invloed doet gelden [...] Van Gigch Jr. Mr. L. (1921). Van Gigch wrote this in response to the phenomenal success of the theatre play *De Jantjes*. (Bouber 1920).

<sup>2</sup> Miskell (2016). See Chaps. 1 and 12 for an explanation of the concept.

<sup>3</sup> See Sedgwick et al. (2012) for an account of the complexities of Dutch society in the mid-1930s and how this affected filmgoing.

<sup>4</sup> See for example a discussion of this fact in Jurca and Sedgwick (2014).

a starting point for a deeper investigation into differences in film characteristics and popularity in the Netherlands. Before turning to the film analysis, I briefly introduce the dataset and explain the method used to calculate popularity. This is followed by a discussion of the literature concerning the importance of cultural nearness in understanding film popularity, finally leading to an analysis of the films themselves.

## 1 The Dataset and Measuring the Popularity of Films

The dataset used to establish which films were popular in the Netherlands between 1934 and 1936 consists of programming information drawn from 144 cinemas in 22 cities and towns, varying in population from 781,645 (Amsterdam) to 6,944 (Zierikzee). Details of the sample can be found in Appendix 1 at the end of the chapter. The sample is comprehensive, covering a little over 40% of Dutch cinemas in that period. It comprises 26,059 programs (13,134 single bills and 6,462 double bills), involving 2,411 feature films.

Films are followed for 12 months after first appearing in the dataset for equity purposes, meaning that films that premiered after the first week of January 1936 were not included in the comparison, leaving 752 premiere movies to be included in the investigation. Of these, 17 were Dutch.

The calculation of the popularity (POPSTAT) and relative popularity (RelPOP) of films is based upon the methods developed by John Sedgwick but adjusted to reflect the inconsistent availability of price information.<sup>5</sup> POPSTAT for each film in each city is the product of the number of screenings, the weights of the cinemas where they are screened, and their billing status—1.0 if a single billing, 0.5 if a double billing.<sup>6</sup> The POPSTAT values of films screened in each city or town form an index. By expressing the POPSTAT value of each movie as a proportion of the median value of each, a standardised measure of popularity is established, which can be used for comparative purposes. Hence, if Film X in Utrecht has a RelPOP value of 3 while generating a value of 2 in Amsterdam, it is possible to say it is more popular in Utrecht even though it may have sold many more tickets in the larger city. Some films are more varied in their reception than others. While aggregating RelPOP values of films across the 22 cities and towns allows a ranking order of movies to be formed—see Table 1—, it will disguise the variance inherent in circulation. This is overcome by calculating the coefficient of variation.

The table shows the relatively high presence of eleven Dutch films in the top 30; nine films were of European origin (other than the Netherlands), and eight were

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<sup>5</sup> See Chap. 1. Also see Sedgwick (2000, 2020a, b).

<sup>6</sup> Screenings provide a more accurate measure of supply than half-weeks or weeks, capturing better the intensity of circulation. Cinema weights are established by dividing the number of seats in a cinema by the average seating capacity of all cinemas in a locality. Thus, the mean weight for each of the 22 cities is 1.0.

**Table 1** The 30 most popular films in 22 Dutch towns and cities, measured by ReIPOP

Rank	Film	Country	Year	Director	Total ReIPOP	Mean ReIPOP	Standard Deviation	Coefficient of variation	Towns and cities	Localities in which ranked first	Highest ranking	Lowest ranking
1	Jantjes, De	NL	1934	Jaap Speyer	170.34	8.13	4.25	0.52	22	12	1	13
2	Bleeke Bet	NL	1934	Alex Benno & Richard Oswald	104.05	5.29	3.29	0.62	21	2	1	61
3	Bright eyes	US	1934	David Butler	93.82	5.27	3.55	0.67	19	2	1	125
4	Meisje met den blauwen hoed, Het	NL	1934	Rudolf Meinert	92.30	4.62	2.46	0.53	21	1	1	182
5	Big van het regiment, De	NL	1935	Max Nosseck	88.90	4.11	1.97	0.48	22	1	1	126
6	Op hoop van zegen	NL	1934	Alex Benno	85.05	4.43	2.06	0.46	20	0	2	42
7	Malle gevallen	NL	1934	Jaap Speyer	82.13	4.60	2.33	0.51	19	0	2	155
8	Kribbebijter, De	NL	1935	Henry Koster & Ernst Winar	69.26	3.69	2.34	0.63	20	0	2	168
9	Little colonel, The	US	1935	David Butler	66.95	3.94	2.77	0.70	19	1	1	167
10	Maternelle, La	FR	1933	Jean Benoît-Lévy & Marie Epstein	62.14	3.50	2.49	0.71	20	0	2	192
11	Familie van mijn vrouw, De	NL	1935	Jaap Speyer	58.11	3.03	1.28	0.42	20	1	1	166

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Rank	Film	Country	Year	Director	Total ReLPOP	Mean ReIPOP	Standard Deviation	Coefficient of variation	Towns and cities	Localities in which ranked first	Highest ranking	Lowest ranking
12	Lives of a Bengal Lancer, The	US	1935	Henry Hathaway	57.02	2.72	1.61	0.59	22	0	4	152
13	Suikerfreule	NL	1935	Haro van Peski	56.52	2.85	1.51	0.53	20	0	2	192
14	Episode	AT	1935	Walter Reisch	54.40	3.00	1.97	0.66	19	0	2	212
15	Mein Herz ruft nach dir	DE	1934	Carmine Gallone	53.76	3.28	1.93	0.59	18	0	8	209
16	Merry widow, The	US	1934	Ernst Lubitsch	52.41	2.75	1.51	0.55	20	0	2	209
17	Gold (1934)	DE	1934	Karl Hartl	51.98	2.94	1.84	0.62	19	0	5	210
18	Czardasfürstin, Die	DE	1934	Georg Jacoby	50.30	3.08	1.88	0.61	17	0	5	369
19	Stern fällt vom Himmel, Ein	AT	1934	Max Neufeld	50.11	3.11	2.37	0.76	18	0	6	210
20	Wenn du jung bist, gehört dir die Welt	DE	1934	Richard Oswald	48.23	3.21	3.72	1.16	19	1	1	511
21	One night of love	US	1934	Victor Schertzinger	47.61	2.80	1.72	0.61	17	0	7	164
22	Viktor und Viktoria	DE	1933	Reinhold Schünzel	47.39	2.63	1.21	0.46	18	0	2	130
23	Witte, De	BE	1934	Jan Vanderheyden	47.23	2.36	1.16	0.49	20	1	1	135

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Rank	Film	Country	Year	Director	Total ReLPOP	Mean ReIPOP	Standard Deviation	Coefficient of variation	Towns and cities	Localities in which ranked first	Highest ranking	Lowest ranking
24	Queen Christina	US	1933	Rouben Mamoulian	46.53	2.59	1.50	0.58	18	0	8	77
25	Zigeunerbaron, Der	DE	1935	Karl Hartl	44.45	2.61	1.32	0.51	17	0	5	194
26	Vier Mullers, De	NL	1935	Rudolf Meinert	44.02	2.32	1.31	0.57	19	0	3	220
27	Op stap	NL	1935	Ernst Winar	44.01	2.10	1.23	0.59	21	0	3	337
28	Painted veil, The	US	1934	Richard Boleslawski	43.87	2.31	1.15	0.50	19	0	15	156
29	Maskerade	DE	1934	Willi Forst	43.75	2.19	1.23	0.56	20	0	9	362
30	Viva Villa	US	1934	Jack Conway & Howard Hawks & William A. Wellman	42.49	2.12	1.02	0.48	20	0	16	157

Source Dataset

produced in the USA. It can be observed that the Dutch films in the top 30 still show the least variation, ranging from 0.42 to 0.63. The only Belgium film in the list falls into the same range, while films from the USA showed a little more variation ranging from 0.48 to 0.70. Films from Germany and Austria showed the most variation with the coefficient of variation ranging from 0.46 to 1.16, although without the outlier *Wenn du jung bist, gehört dir die Welt*, the range would have been less—0.46–0.76. The explanation for differences in coefficient of variation values will be examined later in the chapter.

Here it is more important to ask about the reach of the films. We can expect that the most popular movies would reach most places, and indeed as Table 1 shows, they did. Each Top 30 film was shown in at least 17 of the 22 cities, rising to 18 where films arrived after the 12 months cut-off period. This occurred mainly in two small towns with only one cinema that commonly were at the bottom of the distribution network: Culemborg (a small town just east of the centre of the Netherlands) and Zierikzee (a small town in Zeeland, near the coast, in the south-west of the country). Furthermore, it is telling that Dutch films were less appreciated in two mining towns in the south-east of the Netherlands, close to the German border. In Geleen, four of the eleven Dutch films were not shown and in Heerlen, five. With an influx of German coalminers, the populations of both towns were more oriented towards their German neighbour, suggesting the fluidity of culture and the idea of cultural nearness.<sup>7</sup>

## 2 Cultural Nearness

Several earlier studies have explored the relationship between popularity and cultural nearness. The assumption is that films depicting cultural aspects of a society related to the audiences watching those films are more appreciated than films made in a non-related culture. For instance, Larry May accounts for the popularity of the Hollywood star Bud Rogers among working-class white Americans.<sup>8</sup> Evidence from the annual British Top 100 charts (1932–1937) suggests that his movies did not travel well, even in English-speaking countries, with films such as *County Chairman* attracting near to median POPSTAT values in 1935.<sup>9</sup> Garncarz included genres and their basic structures in his work on the popularity of Hollywood in Germany.<sup>10</sup> He shows that changing attitudes in German cinemagoing audiences coincides with changing popularity of particular genres. For example, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, young Germans appreciated the Hero/Spectacle movies, films that expressed values like purposefully taking control of things by oneself as personified by a hero who consistently achieved his goal. Garncarz contents that ‘the cultural affinity between the country of production and the country of export is a prerequisite for the exported

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<sup>7</sup> Pafort-Overduin (2018).

<sup>8</sup> May (2000).

<sup>9</sup> Sedgwick (2000, Appendix).

<sup>10</sup> Garncarz (2015).

films to become popular in the other country.<sup>11</sup> In his next book, Garncarz explores this hypothesis and shows that cultural affinity can account for differences in films popular in different European countries and within regions of one country.<sup>12</sup> He refers to Norbert Elias' concept of interdependency, in which community members create culture and language in an exchange process. Garncarz points out that this relationship exists between film audiences and film supply.<sup>13</sup> In other words, films are cultural constructs in their production and consumption.

Peter Miskell has shown that Hollywood films do better in foreign markets when they resonate culturally with their audiences. The variables he selects in his investigation are the nationality of the artistic talent (director, scriptwriter, and the two main actors), the geographical setting of the scenario, and the author of the source text.<sup>14</sup> Like Garncarz, he explains that cultural norms and values are reflected in cultural products and that these are most appreciated by audiences who belong to or associate with the cultural group being depicted. Reasoning from a European perspective, this would mean that Hollywood films with a solid European association are likely to be more attractive. A very preliminary test by Van Wissen et al. seems to confirm this. Hollywood films that were more foreign oriented were slightly more popular in the Netherlands than those that were not.<sup>15</sup> As discussed earlier; Table 1 supports this. Other than two Shirley Temple films, the remaining six Top 30 Hollywood films have a European or Imperial focus. However, more significantly, Dutch audiences preferred European films, particularly those made by Dutch filmmakers—the majority (22) of the films are European in origin, and half of these are Dutch. Most of the other European films are from neighbouring country Germany (7) or German spoken but produced in Austria (2).

More generally, the cultural proximity argument is supported by the demand and supply percentages in Dutch cinemas during 1934–1936. In the dataset described earlier, 55% of films marketed in the Netherlands emanate from Hollywood, garnering 46% of market demand measured by POPSTAT. In contrast, these proportions are reversed for German and Austrian films, which supply 25% but capture 30% of the market. For Dutch movies, this difference is even more striking, with the 2% of films supplied capturing an 11% share.<sup>16</sup>

These examples point to the importance of culture as one of the factors explaining popularity. Related to that is the way people learn to understand their environment. Psychological research has shown in a general sense that when a person processes

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<sup>11</sup> Garncarz (2013, pp. 174–175). Translated by author. 'Die kulturelle Affinität zwischen dem Produktions- und dem Exportland ist die Voraussetzung dafür, dass die exportierten Filme im anderen Land Populär werden können.

<sup>12</sup> Garncarz (2015).

<sup>13</sup> Garncarz (2015, pp. 193–194).

<sup>14</sup> Miskell (2016).

<sup>15</sup> Wissen et al. (2021) The authors note that they did not collect information about all the categories Miskell discerns. Also the calculation of the popularity was solely based on the number of screening weeks of a film. The size of the cinema was not included.

<sup>16</sup> Pafort-Overduin (2012).



information, they try to relate it to earlier acquired knowledge through schemata—patterns developed to understand the world.<sup>17</sup> A similar approach is at work when someone watches a film. Gained from personal histories of filmgoing, spectators will ‘consult’ their schemata to understand the story in narratological terms (the narrative form and the style) and substantive terms such as the themes and the actions of the characters. When filmmakers work in the same production environment—like, for example, Hollywood—they will develop shared schemata about creating a film, reflected in the movie they make.<sup>18</sup> The same applies to the stories told and the morals and values reflected in them.

The process of creating a representation about a particular group—recognised and then repeated, is referred to by Willem Frijhoff as ‘appropriation.’<sup>19</sup> Appropriation revolves around the adaptation of cultural assets and, consequently, is dynamic and constantly changing. Typically, there is always an interaction between the suppliers of a cultural product, such as a film, and an audience expressing positive or negative opinions about it. Positive reactions lead to higher product consumption (in the case of cinema, a higher box-office). Where film producers aim to reach as large an audience as possible, they will be tempted to repeat their success by telling a story in a similar form, using the same star or choosing a similar theme.

Recognisability is thus seen as an essential condition for a film’s appreciation. Yet, the relationship between recognisability and popularity is neither simple nor straightforward. Too many movies with the same structure will be recognisable. They may also become tedious for audiences because they are predictable. This danger also applies to themes and their elaboration—too many films with the same theme will make them commonplace and less entertaining.<sup>20</sup> The challenge for filmmakers is to combine recognisability with surprise, catering to various audiences with different attitudes to cinematic risk.

In the absence of subsidies, film producers aim to generate positive returns for their investors. Consequently, they need to make films attractive for the largest possible audience. One way of doing this is by identifying trending currents in society. In the early days of Hollywood film, Paramount, for example, had teams at work looking for appealing stories and subjects in theatre plays, literature and newspapers and magazines.<sup>21</sup> A similar strategy was followed in the Netherlands, where producers also used successful plays and books as sources (Table 2). How the original pieces were adapted—what was added and removed—indicates the producer’s expectation of the audience for whom the film was made. In turn, a movie’s popularity is an indicator of audience taste, not just in terms of the narrative form and the style but

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<sup>17</sup> Emmott and Alexander (2014).

<sup>18</sup> Bordwell (1989, 2007) Of the latter, see chapter 4 (pp. 135–150) for an example of how schemata can be used in an analysis.

<sup>19</sup> Frijhoff (2003).

<sup>20</sup> Thompson (1988).

<sup>21</sup> *Motion Picture Herald* (1933, June 3, p. 28).

Table 2. Sources of the 17 Dutch films released between 1934–1936

Rank	RePOP	Title	Source	Title source	Author source	Year source	Earlier success
1		<i>De Janities</i>	Play & silent film	<i>De Janities</i>	Herman Bouber	1920/1922	26 October 1921, 500 performances; 4 April 1922 600 performances; <sup>a</sup> no information about number of screenings of the silent film
2		<i>Bleeke Bet</i>	Play & silent film	<i>Bleeke Bet</i>	Herman Bouber	1917/1923	27 May 1918, 200 performances; <sup>b</sup> no information about number of screenings of the silent film
4		<i>Het meisje met den blauwen hoed</i>	Novel	<i>Het meisje met den blauwen hoed</i>	Johan Fabricius	1927	novel was his breakthrough as writer for adults <sup>c</sup>
5		<i>De big van het regiment</i>	Novel	<i>Spionnage in het veldleger</i>	A. Roothaert	1933	thriller genre became popular in the 1930s <sup>d</sup>
6		<i>Op hoop van zegen</i>	Play & silent film	<i>Op Hoop van Zegen</i>	Herman Heijermans	1900/1918/1924	play 650 performances on 26 February 1918; 27 September 1919 700 performances; <sup>e</sup> the 1924 silent version was a German coproduction; <sup>f</sup> no information about number of screenings of the silent films

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Rank	RePOP	Title	Source	Title source	Author source	Year source	Earlier success
7		<i>Malle gevallen</i>	Novel & Play	<i>Malle gevallen</i>	Hans Martin	1913/1920	in 1920 adapted to a theaterplay by Hans Martin <sup>g</sup>
8		<i>De Kribbebijter</i>	Play	<i>Willis Frau</i>	Max Reimann & Otto Schwartz	1917	14 Februari 1920, 150 performances in the Netherlands; 10 August 1932 500 performances <sup>h</sup>
11		<i>De familie van mijn vrouw</i>	Play	<i>My Wife's Family</i> ; also referred to as " <i>Een huis vol herrie</i> "	Hal Stephens & Harry B. Linton; also reworked by Alfred Duprez & A. Milo Bennet;	1905	premiere 4 December 1931, run until last week of April 1932 <sup>i</sup>
13		<i>Suikerfreule</i>	Play	<i>Suikerfreule</i>	Henri van Wermeskerken	1917	5 March 1927 500 performances <sup>j</sup>
26		<i>De vier Mullers</i>	Play	<i>Schottenring</i>	Armin Friedman & Ludwig Nerz	1933	9 August 1934 200 performances <sup>k</sup>
27		<i>Op stap</i>	Original script			1935	
36		<i>Het Leven is niet zoo kwaad</i>	Original script			1935	
62		<i>Fientje Peters - Poste restante</i>	Novel	<i>Fientje Peters - Poste restante</i>	K.R. Neubert	unknown	
64		<i>Het mysterie van de Mondscheinsonate</i>	Novel	<i>Het mysterie van de Mondscheinsonate</i>	Willy Corsari	1934	successful writer; thriller genre became popular in the 1930s <sup>l</sup>

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Rank	RelPOP	Title	Source	Title source	Author source	Year source	Earlier success
101		<i>Dood water</i>	Original script			1934	
175		<i>Willem van Oranje</i>	Original script			1934	
688		<i>Blokkade</i>	Original script			1934	

<sup>a</sup>(1921, October 20). *Algemeen Handelsblad*, p. 8. <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010655087:mpeg21:p008>; (1922, April 4). *Algemeen Handelsblad*, p. 8. <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010655215:mpeg21:p008>

<sup>b</sup>(1918, May 27). *Het nieuws van den dag*, p. 8. <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=MMKB15:000638048:mpeg21:p000008>

<sup>c</sup>Vos, J. (2011) Johan Fabricius. In J. Van Coillie, W. Van der Penne, J. Staal, H. Tromp (Eds.) *Lexicon van de jeugdliteratuur*. Groningen: Martinus Nijhoff. [https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/coi1001lexi01\\_01/lvjdj00307.php](https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/coi1001lexi01_01/lvjdj00307.php)

<sup>d</sup>Walch, F. (1996). *Roothaert: een biografie*. Baam: De Prom

<sup>e</sup>(1918, February 25). *De Telegraaf*, p. 3. <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:110549771:mpeg21:p003>; (1919, September 27). *De Telegraaf*, p. 7. <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:110550798:mpeg21:p007>

<sup>f</sup>Donaldson, G. (1997). *Of joy and sorrow. A filmography of Dutch silent fiction*. Amsterdam: Stichting Nederlands Filmmuseum

<sup>g</sup>Jong, A.M. (1920, December 4). Centraal Theater. Malle gevallen. *Het volk*, p. 4. <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:011081819:mpeg21:p004>

<sup>h</sup>(1921, February 5). *Algemeen Handelsblad*, p. 8. <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010654606:mpeg21:p010>; (1932, August 10). *Haagsche courant*, p. 8. <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=MMKB04:000146839:mpeg21:p007>

<sup>i</sup>(1931, December 2). *De Telegraaf*, p. 11. <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:110571094:mpeg21:p011>; (1932, April 25). *Algemeen Handelsblad*, p. 12. <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010662530:mpeg21:p012>

<sup>j</sup>(1927, March 02). *Algemeen Handelsblad*, p. 7. <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010657990:mpeg21:p007>

<sup>k</sup>(1934, August 10). *Het Vaderland*, p. 4. <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010015504:mpeg21:p012>

<sup>l</sup>Nieuwe uitgaven. (1934, July 12). *Het Vaderland*. Avondblad, c.p. 1. <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010015454:mpeg21:p009>; Koning, J. (1934, April 18). Een nieuw boek van mevrouw Sezeley-Lulofs. *Haagsche Courant*, b.5.p. 3. <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=MMKB04:000148166:mpeg21:p019>

also in dramatic content. As more films adopt similar themes, ‘appropriation’ occurs. This idea is at the core of the film analysis conducted in the remainder of the chapter. The goal of the analysis is not to point out ‘unique’ Dutch characteristics so much as to establish what representations recur, seemingly appreciated by the film-going audiences of the time and thus give us a glimpse into Dutch culture.

### 3 Method of Film Analysis

The analysis of the films is inspired by Keiko McDonald and her book on Japanese cinema. In the introduction, she calls her approach a combination of New Criticism, neo-formalism, and a cultural/historical analysis and explains that she discerns an internal and external perspective. The internal view is focused on the structure of the film and the function of its essential parts like the characters, symbols, setting, and events (hence the neo-formalist influence). The analysis is built on the protagonist’s choices when confronted with a central problem and how the film prompts the protagonist to make such choices. Endings receive particular attention as it is here that the outcome of the main situation is presented.

In contrast, the external analysis focuses on the film’s structure and its relation to its audience.<sup>22</sup> McDonald is concerned with the audience’s point of view and whether it (dis)agrees with, (dis)likes, the choices made by the characters. She points to knowledge of cultural specificities needed to interpret a Japanese film ‘in a meaningful way.’<sup>23</sup> In other words, she tries to bring films from a different culture closer by explaining its cultural norms and values.

Her work inspired me to concentrate on the developments of the plotlines and the outcome of the central conflicts and regard them as reflecting cultural norms and values. The underlying assumption is that Dutch filmmakers used the same schemata as their audiences: the choices created for individual storylines and character types resonate with what they believe will be appreciated by the target public. If specific themes are repeated in similar ways and attract a large audience, we may assume that they appeal to and say something about that audience’s cultural values and norms.

I start by describing analysing the different plot lines and their outcome. The questions for research were: What is at stake? What are the character’s senses and goals? And finally, which characters and goals prevail? Based on this, recurring characters and repeated themes and outcomes are identified.

17 Dutch films are included in the dataset that could be followed for the 12 months following their premiere. Since only a couple of fragments remain for the film *Blokkade*, 16 Dutch films are included in the content analysis. *Blokkade* is included in the sections that do not rely upon content analysis.

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<sup>22</sup> McDonald (2006, p. 15).

<sup>23</sup> McDonald (2006, p. 14).

## 4 Appropriating Earlier Successes

Earlier successes are as significant to film producers as they are to audiences. As argued in the introduction, Dutch film producers, like their foreign counterparts, were looking for subjects and stars that would appeal to a large audience. There was no state support at the time, so every Dutch Guilder invested had to be earned back in the cinemas in which films were circulated.

Audiences also attempted to manage the risk they took when purchasing tickets since they had no sure way of knowing beforehand whether their decisions would pay off.<sup>24</sup> Choices were made using information from personal experiences, such as earlier acquired knowledge about a story or an actor, the opinions of friends and family with a similar taste, and the information provided by the marketing machines of the producers.

To investigate the choices made by producers, the source material of the 17 films is identified—whether each was based on a previously published source or an original script. I have investigated how celebrated and popular the original sources are to establish possible positive or negative influences on the popularity of the films (Table 2). Next to that, an overview of the actors and their earlier careers was created as one would expect that well-known actors had a greater appeal (Appendix 2).

Table 2 shows that of the eleven Dutch films that made up the 30 most popular films, eight were based on a popular theatrical predecessor. In the column ‘earlier success,’ an indication of the scale of popularity is given by the number of theatrical performances. The numbers are based on advertisements found in newspapers and articles in journals. When a play was very successful, it gained press coverage, including announcements when new milestones were reached. These repetitions of the same representations can be considered part of the process of ‘appropriation’ referred to earlier, suggesting that audiences recognised them as meaningful, leading to more visits. Such success encourages producers to re-use the representation, and a new cycle begins. In economic terms, it shows that film producers tried to manage their investment risk by relying on successful performances of past theatrical plays to forecast similar success at the cinema. Their choices were vindicated if judged by their cinematic popularity Table 2 illustrates the difference between films based on a popular play and those with an original script, with the latter located in the lower part of the table, starting with position 27 for *Op Stap*.

A similar pattern appears with the five films based on novels—two of which had already been on the market for some time and were widely known. The novel *Het meisje met de blauwe hoed* was published in 1927 and marked the breakthrough of author Johan Fabricius.<sup>25</sup> *Malle gevallen* by Hans Martin was first published in 1913 and was adapted to a theatre play in 1920. In contrast, the film *Fientje Peters—Poste Restante* was the Dutch version of the German UFA film *Hilde Petersen-Postlagernd*, based on the German novel of the same title by K.R. Neubert that had not been

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<sup>24</sup> See Chap. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Vos (2011).

translated into Dutch. This factor probably partly explains the relatively limited popularity of this comedy.

Both *De Big van het regiment* and *Het mysterie van de Mondscheinsonate* can be associated with the popularity of the detective/thriller genre in the 1930s in the Netherlands.<sup>26</sup> Both were recent novels published one year before the film. Both authors were celebrated, even though the first of these was Anton Roothaert's debut novel (His second novel was published almost at the same time). Roothaert was praised for his new approach to the detective genre and his witty style and humour.<sup>27</sup> Willy Corsari, on the other hand, had already 13 titles to her name when *Het mysterie van de Mondscheinsonate* was published. Her books were widely read.<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, when it comes to the familiarity of the sources, the films do not seem to be far apart. Yet, they rank very differently: *De big* is in 5th place and '*Het mysterie*' in 64th. Here other factors were at play, which I will come back to in the analysis of plotlines. Before this, the role of the actors in the popularity of the films is discussed.

## 5 Famous Names and the Popularity of the Films

When the Dutch film wave took off in 1934, no feature film had been produced for four years. Indeed, after the bankruptcy of Filmfabriek Hollandia in 1923, the production side of the industry had been largely moribund.<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, film producers had no reservoir of film actors from which to draw. Appendix 2 lists the 85 actors that played leading parts or supporting roles in the 17 Dutch films and the number of films they appeared. Other columns provide details about the actors, including the actor's year of birth, their first appearance in theatre or film, and the number of years between the start of a career and the release of the first Dutch talking picture. Also added is the field or genre the actor was most known for in the theatre—operetta, revue, dance, film. The overview comprises well-established names, rising stars, and short-lived personalities.

Appendix 2 shows that producers and directors chose their actors from the theatre in general. Almost 57% (48) of the listed actors worked for theatre companies, with another six working for theatre companies but sometimes appearing in revues or operettas. Only three actors had an earlier career in film through working abroad. Most of the actors (49) had a career of over ten years before their first appearance in a Dutch sound movie. For as many as 30, this stretched for more than 20 years. The table also lists 13 new actors with no previous career.

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<sup>26</sup> Ross (1986).

<sup>27</sup> Walch (1996).

<sup>28</sup> Koning (1934, April 18), *Het Vaderland* (1934, July 12).

<sup>29</sup> Bishoff (1986).

In most films, the cast was a mix of (very) experienced and less experienced actors. In general, actors with longer careers were more widely known than actors with shorter careers. However, this could differ, making it hard to conclude the effect of experience on film performance and reception. Combining an original script with unknown actors was not very beneficial, as can be told from the ranked position of *Dood Water* (101) and *Blokkade* (688). In *Dood Water*, only one of the main characters was played by a well-known actor—Jan Musch, whose stage career started in 1899 but took off in 1910. The other four main characters were new to the field or were hardly known in the Netherlands. Two of them had left for Germany around 1920 and appeared only once in the Netherlands in a theatre play—Theo de Maal in 1932 and Arnold Marlé in one year later. In *Blokkade*, a similar strategy was followed: Louis de Vries was by then a household name in the theatre, having been in the public eye continuously from 1903, two years after the start of his career. Jacques Reule had a lower profile, although he had also been around for a long time in the theatre, beginning in 1907. For the other two main actors, this was their first part.

Two other films with original scripts were *Op Stap* and *Het leven is niet zoo kwaad* were more popular, ranked, respectively, at 27 and 36. Both films used actors that had become popular since the beginning of the revival of Dutch cinema. *Het leven is niet zo kwaad* featured eight actors who, between them, appeared in eleven previous Dutch films. The cast of *Op Stap* boasted five actors who had featured in four Dutch films. Moreover, two of the leading actors, brother and sister Henriette and Louis Davids, were highly popular revue stars. Both films starred Fientje de La Mar who had been in the highly popular film *De Jantjes*. *Op Stap* was her third film and *Het leven is niet zoo kwaad* her fifth.

Undoubtedly, the degree of fame played a role, but that did not mean that well-known actors guaranteed success, as the example of *Willem van Oranje* illustrates. Although the cast boasted many big names from the theatre, the film did not resonate with Dutch audiences. The distributor and exhibitors will have been disappointed, having four copies of the film in circulation. Indeed, the take-up by exhibitors was so poor that after the first week following release was the only period during which this number of copies was in circulation. The film, about the life and death of the ‘father’ of the Dutch nation, was withdrawn from circulation 18 weeks after its premiere. Obviously, although big names can attract audiences during the first weeks after release, it is difficult to maintain high attendances when the film itself is unappealing. At the time, Dutch audiences preferred a melodramatic story about ordinary folks found in *De jantjes* over a political-historical drama about the birth of a nation depicted in *Willem van Oranje*.



## 6 The Role of Genre

Ten of the 17 Dutch films were comedies. Eight of these were ranked among the Top 30 most popular films. As is evident in Table 2, this did not mean that dramas per se ended up at the very bottom of the popularity scale—*Op Hoop van Zegen* was a big success, whereas *Dood Water* was not. The first was based on the phenomenal successful play by Herman Heyermans starring the famous Esther de Boer-van Rijk, who played the well-known central character Kniertje in an extended theatrical run and two film versions (1918 and 1934). Having lost her husband and two sons to the sea, Kniertje forces her youngest son to sign on as a fisherman. He then dies in a storm, and she speaks the famous words ‘the fish has taken its toll’ (‘de vis wordt duur betaald’). Over the years, Esther de Boer-van Rijk had become the personification of Kniertje.

Based on an original script, *Dood Water* features actors who were not well-known. Nevertheless, it was presented as a prestigious art film at the 19th Venice Biennale in 1934. The famous Dutch Concertgebouw Orchestra conducted by Willem Mengelberg pompously underscored the very long animated introduction on how the land was won from the water. The film’s tone was propagandistic and created a peculiar paradox by opposing two symbols showing the Dutch reign over the sea: the Volendammer fishermen, a famous national icon over the centuries, and the polders and dykes safeguarding the low countries from the North Sea. In a patronising way, the film shows that the fishermen had to accept the loss of their livelihood and life at sea, convert to farmers and embrace the newly reclaimed land as the new source of living. This combination did not resonate well with Dutch audiences as *Dood Water*, ranked at 101, was one of the least popular Dutch films at the time. *Willem van Oranje* ranked 175th, and the experimental thriller *Blokkade* (688th) was even less popular.

## 7 Transcending Genre: Song and Dance

The narrative structure of most Dutch films in the dataset, irrespective of genre, is enriched with characters that burst out in song and dance, commonly interrupting the plot but sometimes as part of the plot. Films in which this occurs are identified in Table 3. Even in dramatical stories like *Dood Water* and *Op Hoop van Zegen*, dance is shown as part of a way of living of the fishermen who spend spare time in the café where they dance. Dancing and singing, either doing it or watching it, is an integral part of the lives of Dutch film characters. Where this is done depends on the social class of the characters being portrayed—poor street singers entertain passers-by in the street; fishermen and sailors enjoy themselves in the café, soldiers and their commanders in their respective messes, the cabaret and revue are open to all, while the theatre is frequented mainly by middle or higher classes. The rich and famous are entertained by hired musicians at private parties in exclusive abodes.

**Table 3** The genre of Dutch films and incidence of song and dance, 1934–1936

Rank RelPOP	Title	Genre
1	De Jantjes	Melodrama with song and dance
2	Bleeke Bet	Melodrama with song and dance
4	Het Meisje met den blauwen hoed	Comedy with song and dance
5	De big van het regiment	Comedy—espionage with song and dance
6	Op hoop van zegen	Drama
7	Malle gevallen	Comedy with song and dance
8	De Kribbebijter	Comedy
11	De familie van mijn vrouw	Comedy—burlesque -songs
13	Suikerfreule	Comedy—songs
26	De Vier Mullers	Comedy—songs
27	Op stap	Comedy—songs and dance
36	Het leven is niet zoo kwaad	Comedy—song and dance
62	Fientje Peters - Poste restante	Comedy—one song dance intermezzo
64	Het mysterie van de Mondscheinsonate	Detective, drama—song and dance but not much
101	Dood water	Drama
175	Willem van Oranje	Historical drama, biography
688	Blokkade	Experimental thriller

Source Dataset

Characters with lesser means bring their instruments and sing themselves. Singing together is part of the fun. In the private (music) rooms, the song is typically used to express the first declarations of love. The piano in the room facilitates advances between couples or, in contrast, causes greater distance between characters from different social statuses. In the songs, characters express love (either for a person or a place), kind-heartedness, a sense of humour and often an optimistic view on life. Other more negative feelings like sadness, lovesickness, or anger are seldom part of the songs in a Dutch film from that period.

## 8 Recurring Actors and Recurring Types of Characters

During the Dutch film boom, producers recast actors from the films that proved initially popular, a practice that led to several film stars emerging. *De Jantjes* was the start of many film careers. Almost all the actors who played significant roles reappeared in later films. This was especially the case with Fientje de la Mar and Johan Kaart, each cast for leading roles in five of the movies in the dataset. Aaf Bouber-ten Hoope also appeared in five films but, except for *Suikerfreule*, played

smaller parts. It was not only the actors who became famous through their roles in *De Jantjes*; the characters they played also proved popular and would return in subsequent films, sometimes slightly adapted. This happened most clearly with Fientje de la Mar, Johan Kaart, Silvain Poons, and Henriette Davids, who all played similar characters in their subsequent films. These recurring characters are a clear example of the process of appropriation, providing insight into which cultural values and norms were recognisable by the Dutch audience.

By way of example, I will focus on Fientje de la Mar and Johan Kaart and the types of characters they played. From her first appearance in *De Jantjes*, Fientje de la Mar became associated with a female character in some way related to showbusiness, either as a glamorous revue star or as a local singer in the soldiers' canteen. The character has difficulties committing to one man but never really suffers as a consequence. Her first character, Jans (*De Jantjes*), openly cheats her boyfriend and explains to her friends that for as long as he cannot provide a good income, she will not commit to him but rather stay with her wealthy boyfriend, who she met at the cabaret. There is no punishment for her behaviour; on the contrary, she flourishes. This positive image of the nightclub is repeated in the storyline of her friend Greet. She is in a relationship with short-tempered sailor Dries. Their relationship is threatened by Aunt Piet, the owner of the neighbourhood café. Aunt Piet wants to help her son Leendert, who has a crush on Greet, by manipulating Dries into believing Greet has cheated on him. Following a knife attack on Dries, Leendert accidentally stabs himself. His mother declares that Dries stabbed her son, and Dries is imprisoned. Again, the nightclub turns out to be a place where a working-class girl like Greet can find help; in this case, from a lawyer to release her boyfriend from prison. However, instead of being grateful, her boyfriend then leaves her because he believes the false accusations about Greet being unfaithful while she was in the cabaret. Viewers know that this is not true; not only have they seen that Greet only searched for help in the cabaret, but they also saw that before her visit, Leendert tried to force himself upon her and that she was saved by her girlfriend, Jans. The truth comes out, and Dries must admit that he was wrong, after which the couple reunites. We are thus invited to have a favourable opinion of the cabaret as a safe place for working-class girls. In contrast, the traditional neighbourhood café is presented as a place of lies and manipulation.

As the character Ka in *Bleeke Bet*, Fientje again plays a working-class girl, this time a maid, who finds a way to a better future in the cabaret, where she is discovered as a singer. Drama is added to her character by giving her a secret and unfulfilled love for the boyfriend of her boss's daughter. She accepts the marriage proposal of her well-to-do boyfriend even though she does not love him, and he agrees to her career as a singer.

Fientje plays two different character types in her following two films: a lower-class girl (*De big van het regiment*) and a star persona (*Op Stap*). The two films premiered on the same date, so the audiences could literally choose between these two versions of Fientje. In *De big van het regiment*, she plays Fietje (note that her character's name only differs one letter from her real name), a singer in the soldiers' canteen. She is introduced as an independent woman whose heart beats for the whole company. She sings:

'Who has the right to say  
 she belongs to me?  
 My heart beats for the whole company!  
 I wouldn't know who to choose.  
 Whether I see Jan or Piet or any other sweetheart  
 I will never lose my heart to one of them.<sup>30</sup>

As expressed in the song, her opinion corresponds with her attitude towards her two suitors asking for her hand; she meets with both but does not commit herself to either.

In *Op Stap*, Fientje plays the megastar Bella Ramona. Like in *De Big van het regiment*, she is not impressed by any man begging for her hand, but her background has changed. There is no hint at a working-class background; she is a settled, respected, and powerful woman. As a cabaret star, she acts the same way as the men we saw earlier in *De Jantjes*: she helps others build a career and prevents a man from being imprisoned after being accused of fraud. Her selfless help is contrasted with the suspicion of a young woman who thinks Ramona has a crush on her boyfriend. The young woman has to admit that she was wrong, which again invites us to regard the cabaret as respectable.

The star personality is taken further in her next film *Het leven is niet zoo kwaad*, but some changes altered her image as an independent woman. Revue star Anita discovers a new male talent and bets with her producer that she can turn this hawker into a star. She wins and states that from now on, she will do things her way and not be tyrannised by him any longer. The producer then leaves. Her protégé does not appreciate her part in making him successful. He feels caged by her, and when he finds out about the bet, he feels deeply humiliated and decides to return to his job as a hawker. Anita is in pieces and concedes that her producer should take charge once again. In this case, the film reinforces negative connotations about the cabaret. The plot development shows that fame comes at the price of being forced into a role one does not want. The hawker is dominated by the star Anita and she, in turn, is dominated by her producer. While the hawker decides to break free, Anita conforms to the rules of her producer. This plot enlarges the dramatic aspect of her character at the expense of the image of strength and independence; she wants to free herself but must ultimately accept that she cannot if she wants to stay at the top.

*Het leven is niet zoo kwaad* was the lowest scoring of all her films. It seems that the recurring figure of the cabaret star had lost some of its appeal by altering her character from a strong and independent working-class girl to a wealthy star persona trapped in the clutches of fame, with a man in charge of her career.

The plotlines suggest that audiences preferred a working-class girl becoming a star instead of a story in which the negative aspects of being a star are foregrounded. Also, the plotline in which a woman can climb the social ladder is more appreciated than those in which they are punished for it. This is confirmed by the even lower scoring film *Het mysterie van de Mondscheinsonate*, a film in which Fientje does not appear, but the same negative plot development concerning cabaret and the female

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<sup>30</sup> Translation by the author.

star is central. The plot revolves around solving the murder of Enrica, a former dancer who is now married to a rich husband. Longing to return to her life in the theatre, she plans to relaunch her career and meets secretly with her former dance partner. When her sister, who has been staying with her from before her marriage and does not want to return to a former life she regards as miserable, learns of her plans, she shoots her in a rage. Here there is not just a negative association with life as a performer but also with life as an ex-performer who has married a rich husband. Although this likely was one of the reasons for the low interest in this film, other factors played a role. There was a lack of established names in the cast, fitting the trend established earlier concerning the marketability of established stars. Furthermore, the story is at times difficult to follow.

In his autobiography, Johan Kaart remembers becoming famous overnight due to his role as Manus—nicknamed ‘The Squinter’ (De Schele)—in *De Jantjes*. Manus is a sailor who does not know how to handle his unfaithful girlfriend. Director Jaap Speyer had instructed him to squint in close-ups when De Schele was ridiculed by friends and crying when leaving for the Indonesian army.<sup>31</sup> This kind, naive and somewhat sheepish character that one could laugh at and feel sorry for became a recurring role for Kaart in his subsequent films. He explains that he was looking for a ‘generally acceptable character,’ (...) ‘The average type of working-class boy, (...) who doesn’t worry about anything, goes straight to his goal, the simple rough-diamond-type accepted everywhere.’<sup>32</sup> Speyer cast Kaart similarly again in his following two films, followed by other directors.

In *Malle Gevallen*, he is the odd man out when he and his friends go out courting. His two companions fall in love with a girl, but he is not part of the romantic plot-line. Instead, his character functions as comic relief, interrupting the narrative flow. In *De Big van het regiment*, in which his character is involved in a minor romantic subplot, he is depicted as a blockhead, unable to win the girl’s heart with whom he has fallen in love. Kaart has a bigger part in *De familie van mijn vrouw*. He plays Dr Nix, a junk-dealer—philosopher—veterinarian—English and French teacher—manicurist—podiatrist, obsessed with food. Throughout the film, his failed attempts to get a decent meal are the running gag. Dr Nix creates misunderstandings everywhere he goes preventing the real problem from being solved. The same structure is followed in *De vier Mullers*, where again, he appears as a sheepish and naive man who stubbornly is in pursuit of the discarded clothes of his rich distant relative. The scenes in which he tries to lay hands on the desired blue suit and fur coat function as a comic interlude in the narrative.

The fact that this character reappears several times suggests that the directors of those films expected Kaart in this specific role to enhance their appeal. His appearance likely contributed to their success as films Top-30 films. Considering appropriation, the way the plots develop invites sympathy with precisely this type of unpretentious, straightforward, not always very bright, working-class boy. The exaggeration of his stupidity, sometimes combined with stubbornness, creates humour, never malicious,

<sup>31</sup> Hielkema (1969, pp. 27, 82).

<sup>32</sup> Hielkema (1969, pp. 82–83).

rather compassionate. In other words, the film presents these traits as being positive, the character as a figure we can like.

Further support for this argument can be found in the way unsuccessful male figures from a higher class were represented. These were given negative traits such as vanity, smugness, and conceit to create a less friendly source of humour. The films do not invite us to like them. In *Malle Gevallen*, Kaart's character is contrasted with that of an admirer of one of the young women—a young man nicknamed 'The Leech' (De Klit), who is so full of himself that he ignores all her very outspoken rejections (she is already taken), asking her parents for her hand. His behaviour is punished when the three friends mercilessly fool him. We are invited to the same negative evaluation of the very big-headed, wealthy factory manager from *De Suikerfreule*, who is trying in vain to woo a young lady. He believes that he can do whatever he likes since his sister has the majority interest in the company and will protect him. He lacks responsibility, misbehaves, has gambling debts and drinks. His character is ridiculed in every possible way: he is vain, acts exaggeratedly, gets the wrong ideas, resulting in multiple misunderstandings. All these situations are humorous, but there is no sympathy for him. In the end, it feels as though he is getting what he deserves when his sister fires him.

A similar characterisation is created for the bosses who try to court female subordinates in the films *Het Leven, who is niet zoo kwaad* and *Fientje Peters*. In the first of these, the chief has a reputation among his secretaries: he invites every new secretary into his office, closes the curtains, and tries to persuade her to go out with him. Through exaggerated acting, the boss is meant to come across as funny. Still, at the same time, his acts are negatively commented upon by the other secretaries, thus creating a negative undertone. Like 'The Leech,' this boss is blind to the real feelings of the woman he pursues. At first, the secretary politely declines the honour, but when she suspects her boyfriend of cheating on her, she accepts the invitation hoping to make her boyfriend jealous. However, she regrets her decision, running away from the theatre and her manager during the date.

In *Fientje Peeters*, humour is created by contrasting an obsessive hotel manager who writes love poems to the beautiful new assistant of one of his guests and the manager's assistant who is madly in love with him, trying everything to get his attention. Only when he is rejected does he feel that he 'has no other choice' than to accept the intentions of his not particularly elegant assistant. His utterly negative attitude towards her when he takes her as his girlfriend is obnoxious and prevents sympathising with him. Instead, the film invites us to pity the assistant who gets the man she wanted but one who abhors her.

In Dutch films, characters who behave pompously are usually ridiculed and suffer defeat unless they repent and adopt a friendlier attitude towards their subordinates. This dramaturgical device is used repeatedly, pointing to an underlying conception of these types. It is not desirable to set oneself above others and be complacent. When confronted with this behaviour, one may resist and make clear that no one is more than another. Interpersonal relationships are always more important than money and

financial gain. Fame receives a similar dramaturgical treatment. Time and again, it is made clear that fame is not worth pursuing because the price is an unhappy personal life. These representations and the emphasis on wealth and gender equality implicit in these plot developments may not have been exclusive to the Netherlands. Still, they are recognised as meaningful and repeated time and again in the Dutch films of that period. They are part of Dutch cultural identity.

## 9 Recurring Themes: Marriage

The formation of a new heterosexual couple or the sustenance of a married relationship are dominant themes of the Dutch films found in the analysis: the troubles and perils associated with both constitute either the main plot or a subplot of most of these movies. Overcoming them is the end goal of plotlines, constituting the denouement of the narrative. Only two films deviate from this, both featuring Fientje de la Mar. In *De Jantjes* and *De big van het regiment*, the subplot ends with a woman who explicitly decides not to commit to one man and instead has relationships with two. In both films, this subplot is contrasted with a traditional romantic couple, thus creating more versions of men-women relationships. In *De big van het regiment*, a third subplot is added that ridicules marriage and introduces the bossy wife dominating her meek husband as a source of humour. This exaggerated character reappears in *De Familie van mijn vrouw*; *De Suikerfreule*; and *Op Stap*. In these three films, the wife, in the end, relents, reinstalling the husband as head of the family, but probably only temporarily. In *Malle Gevallen* the character of the bossy woman is also ridiculed. Here she is not put in a relationship but tries in vain to prevent her female students from flirting with the male students. The inclusion of several marriage/relationship versions in the narrative structure of these films provides an opportunity for audiences to consider alternatives to the singular dominant male-submissive female relationship.

In many films, jealousy creates a delay in the plot's denouement and forms the obstacle couples need to overcome before being formed or reunited. The implicit meaning that can be read into this is that jealousy is the biggest threat for partners, whether married, engaged, or newly formed. In most cases of suspected infidelity, it turns out that it had not happened. The cause for suspicion can be manifold, but the common outcome is that trust is undermined. It can arise from false accusations by a third party, the meddling of a parent in a relationship, the misunderstanding of a situation, and even a premeditated imitation of cheating to evoke jealousy and make them realise whom they love. All these plot lines end with the revelation of the truth, at which point the quarrelling couples forgive each other, laugh about it and reunite. When a third party deliberately spreads lies, this person is in some way punished and must show remorse. In other words, jealousy is the driving force of many actions and plays a big part in the development of the plot, but the resolution always shows that it is not a very constructive emotion.

The ending invariably shows that partners can and should trust each other. This is even confirmed in the plot lines concerning women involved in two relationships, as these are conducted openly. Her boyfriends or admirers know that she will not commit to any one of them. In other words, even the polyamorous woman can be trusted as she does not hide her actions. The ranking of the films suggests that the deliberate deception by one of the partners to make the other partner jealous is less appreciated by audiences than in those movies where this happens because of an external factor: *De Jantjes* and *Bleeke Bet* are ranked 1 and 3, whereas *Op Stap* is ranked 27th, and *Het Leven is niet zoo kwaad*, 36th. The film where the making-the-other-partner-jealous theme forms the main plot, *Fientje Peters*, ranks the lowest of the three—62nd. This was not the only possible reason for the low ranking, but the comparison with the other films suggests that it was at least part of the explanation.

Another important theme is the role of class in relationships. Especially in the comedies, this takes the shape of a conflict between parents and children, in which a parent tries to prevent a son or daughter from marrying into a lower-class family (*De Kribbebijter*). But the conflict can also be shaped the other way round, where a parent wants a son or daughter to marry up the social ladder instead of someone from their class (*Bleeke Bet*). In both situations, the obstacle to overcome is the parents' attitude towards other classes, and in all cases, the parents admit that they were wrong.

At first glance, the plot developments can affirm class differences or a crossing of the boundaries between classes. However, a closer analysis of what is accepted shows that ultimately, each social class acknowledges the same values: an acceptance of unpretentiousness as a virtue and, following from this, a choice of love over economic gain or social prestige. When this is not the message, like in *Het mysterie van de Mondscheinsonate* (ranked 64th), in which the main character is killed by her jealous sister to maintain her standard of living, or in *Dood Water* (rank 101st), where traditional fishermen's lives are sacrificed for the more lucrative trade of farming, the films are less popular. Invariably wealth is a corrupting influence. In comedies and melodramas, its influence is restrained in the resolution of conflict, following which a bright future and a happy life become possible. In a drama like *Op Hoop van Zegen*, the death of fishermen shows what can happen when the power of money has free rein. However, the shipowner is not punished in the end. Kniertje does not speak up against him, but instead, she accepts his charity. Although the film's message is implicitly highly political, the focus is on human suffering, which likely helped its widespread popularity.

Films in which characters from the upper class are ridiculed seemed to have been appreciated better than films with severe upper-class characters. In *Malle Gevallen* (ranked 7th), *De kribbebijter* (8th), and *De familie van mijn vrouw* (rank 11th), those characters act exaggeratedly; they have an affected speech, react outrageously in all kinds of situations, and are full of themselves. Again, *Het mysterie van de Mondscheinsonate* (rank 64) shows the opposite: the upper classes are not ridiculed, and all characters are treated seriously.



## 10 Conclusion

In most cases, we can conclude that Dutch film producers looked for proof of earlier successes in the theatre or literature. In particular, previous success in the theatre provided a good forecast for success in the cinema. Although an actor's reputation in the theatre did not automatically translate to film, Dutch films could bring fame. During the short period of two years, Dutch film stars emerged. The examples of Fientje de la Mar and Johan Kaart are discussed in the chapter, but there are more.

From the analysis of the films, it can be concluded that the great majority of plotlines revolve around newly formed romantic and married couples. This points to an almost obsessive interest in gender relations. In films other than dramas, there are at least two plotlines, each presenting the struggles of a different couple. The main problem new couples must overcome is jealousy, often related to a lack of trust. The resolution introduced in the plot development is that one should trust the other party. Going out or talking to another man/woman does not necessarily mean that a partner cannot be trusted. By creating such an outcome, the plotlines 'allow' men and women more freedom in their contacts and interactions with the opposite sex.

Another recurring theme is the initial rejection of a partner because of their social position. Here the borders between social classes can be crossed when true love is at play, but not when financial gain is the objective. Honest, open characters not pursuing any financial gain are the ones that triumph and can achieve marriage.

The case study of Fientje de la Mar pointed to an interest in a positive image of an independent, nonconformist female character. This character is shown in plot developments deviating from the conventional path to love. Still, this plot is always countered with one or more other plotlines in which a more traditional romantic couple is formed. Both storylines end well. This favourable treatment of modern and more traditional women's roles is essential in explaining the popularity of the actor's films.

The same thing happens in Johan Kaart's first three films. The characters he plays are part of a general plotline in which the traditional development of a young man pursuing love is not followed because he cannot gain the love of a woman. However, it seems that it is not the love interest but the comical effect of his character which is the main reason for his popularity.

This is further developed in his other two films. His character is not very handsome, not very bright, but goodhearted, one with whom viewers laugh and sympathise. Interestingly, during the period under investigation, no male Dutch star played strong male heroes like, for example, Clark Gable. None of the actors playing romantic leads of the period became stars like Johan Kaart, with Dutch audiences, seemingly, preferring the comical type of the guy-next-door. This is confirmed by analysing other male characters who fail to attract the woman they are after. Unpretentious, down-to-earth characters are treated more favourably in the plot developments, suggesting that film producers responded to a known preference among Dutch audiences.

The concepts of appropriation and cultural nearness turn out to be fruitful, facilitating a textual analysis of a batch of Dutch films released in 1934–1935, from which recurring types and plot developments are identified which producers believed would appeal to Dutch audiences. The first results suggest a relation between the kind of conflict encountered, the means of its resolution, and the popularity of a film—between content that depicts societal concerns and popularity. Analysis of this nature can thus shed a different light on how we should understand the appreciation of the films. Further research could address how these new findings relate to other discourses and other themes that circulated in Dutch society at the time.

This chapter analysis has focused on Dutch films. However, to better understand the preferences of Dutch audiences, foreign films should be included as well. What themes are presented, and what values and norms are propagated through the plot developments? How do popular foreign movies relate to popular Dutch films? The function of song and dance is a case in point. That song and dance has a presence in most Dutch films is an indicator of its importance to Dutch audiences. However, this phenomenon extends to foreign cinema, especially German movies. According to the critic I quoted at the opening of this chapter, the popularity of music in a play was an international phenomenon. In this respect, audiences were similar everywhere. But, as he added, each country did it differently.<sup>33</sup>

One final note I want to add is about the role of humour. Again, I only refer to this incidentally, but that most of the films are comedies deserves closer attention. In Dutch comedies, the main targets are bossy women, higher social classes, especially men who are full of themselves. Humour is created by exaggerated acting and the failure of the characters to exert power over other characters. The implication is that they should not think of themselves as better than other persons. Whether true or not, as a Dutch person, I can affirm that this is considered a typical Dutch characteristic. This example illustrates that in comedy, humour is created by a contradiction between what is expected and what happens, often taking the form of a transgression of certain norms and values.<sup>34</sup> To understand and appreciate the joke, it is necessary to know what these are, making this type of comedy challenging to translate to another culture. The implication is that comedy serves as a gateway to understanding cultural values and norms. In terms of our criticism, it can help to understand the ‘national psyche.’

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<sup>33</sup> Van Gigch Jr. Mr. L. (1921).

<sup>34</sup> Palmer (1987).

## Appendix 1: Towns and Cities Appearing in the Dataset

Place	Inhabitants	Number of cinemas in place	Number of cinemas included in dataset*	Seating capacity
Alkmaar	30,467	6	6	2,566
Amsterdam	7,81,645	36	33	19,559
Apeldoorn	68,590	2	2	771
Culemborg	9,359	1	1	500
Den Haag	4,82,397	26	23	17,740
Dordrecht	60,131	2	2	1,002
Eindhoven	1,03,030	5	5	3,808
Geleen	14,289	1	1	900
Groningen	1,15,185	4	4	2,543
Haarlem	1,31,257	5	5	3,203
Heerlen	49,724	3	2	1,407
Leiden	73,612	5	5	2,199
Maastricht	65,929	3	3	2,450
Nijmegen	90,739	6	5	4,365
Rotterdam	5,95,448	23	22	17,100
's Hertogenbosch	46,212	4	4	3,098
Schiedam	61,845	3	3	1,614
Tiel	12,730	2	2	1,138
Tilburg	88,890	6	6	2,990
Utrecht	1,61,093	7	7	4,589
Zeist	29,691	2	2	1,050
Zierikzee	6,944	1	1	450

Source Dataset

## Appendix 2

Actor	Film title 1	Film title 2	Film title 3	Film title 4	Film title 5	Films 1934-1935	Year of birth	Start career	Career before first Dutch sound film (years)	First silent film	Number of silent Dutch films	Career before film
Aaf Bouber-ten Hoop	De Janjies	Bleeke Bet	Op hoop van zegen	De Suikerfreule	Het leven is niet zoo kwaad	5	1885	1902	32	1915	6	Theatre
Adolf Bouwmeester	De vier Mullers					1	1889	1907	28	no films	0	Theatre
Adolph Engers	Op Stap	De Big van het Regiment				2	1884	1912	23	1918	5	Theatre
Adolphe Hamburger	De familie van mijn vrouw					1	1898	1920	15	no films	0	Theatre
Adriaan van Hees	Malle Gevallen	Het leven is niet zoo kwaad				2	1910	1931	4	no films	0	Theatre
Adrienne Solser	Het Meisje met de Blauwe Hoed	De Suikerfreule	Het leven is niet zoo kwaad			3	1873	1883	51	1921	10	Variete
Ank van der Moer	Het mysterie van de Mondscheinsonate					1	1912	1932	3	no films	0	Theatre
Annie van Duyn	Malle Gevallen	De Suikerfreule				2	1915	1930	4	no films	0	Theatre
Annie Verhulst	Op hoop van Zegen	Het mysterie van de Mondscheinsonate				2	1895	1919	15	1931	1	Theatre & Operette

(continued)

Actor	Film title 1	Film title 2	Film title 3	Film title 4	Film title 5	Films 1934-1935	Year of birth	Start career	Career before first Dutch sound film (years)	First silent film	Number of silent Dutch films	Career before film
Arnold Marié	Dood Water					1	1887	1919	15	1919	0	Film (abroad) - German film actor - started his career in 1919 ( 9 films) in Netherlands September 1933 tour Kabale und Liebe (Schiller) Leopolds Jessner (group)
Betsy Rautucci-Beckman	Dood Water					1	1877	1897	37	no films	0	Theatre
Bill Benders	Het mysterie van de Moonscheinsonate					1	not known	1935	0	no films	0	No earlier career
Cees Laseur	Het leven is niet zoo kwaad					1	1899	1916	19	no films	0	Theatre
Chris Baay	De Kribbebijter					1	1904	1930	5	no films	0	Theatre
Cissy van Bennekom	De Janitjes	Op hoop van zegen	De familie van mijn vrouw	De vier Mullers		4	1911	1928	6	no films	0	Theatre

(continued)

(continued)												
Actor	Film title 1	Film title 2	Film title 3	Film title 4	Film title 5	Films 1934-1935	Year of birth	Start career	Career before first Dutch sound film (years)	First silent film	Number of silent Dutch films	Career before film
Claire Clairry	Het mysterie van de Mondscheinsonate					1	1901	1932	3	no films	0	Operette - German actres - started her career in the Netherlands in 1932 (operette) fled in 1933 from Germany
Cor Hermus	Willem van Oranje	De Jantjes	Bleeke Bet	Fientje Peters, Poste restante		4	1889	1912	22	no films	0	Theatre - (acted in reprise of De Jantjes in 1924)
Cor Ruys	De Kribbelbijter					1	1889	1905	30	1919	2	Theatre
Cor van der Lugt Melsert	Willem van Oranje					1	1882	1897	37	no films	0	Theatre - directed one silent film in 1927
Cor van der Lugt Melsert jr	Willem van Oranje					1	1907	1934	0	no films	0	No earlier career
Cruys Voorbergh	Willem van Oranje	De familie van mijn vrouw	De Big van het Regiment			3	1898	1918	16	no films	0	Theatre
Darja Collin	Het mysterie van de Mondscheinsonate					1	1902	1928	7	no films	0	Dance

(continued)

Actor	Film title 1	Film title 2	Film title 3	Film title 4	Film title 5	Films 1934-1935	Year of birth	Start career	Career before first Dutch sound film (years)	First silent film	Number of silent Dutch films	Career before film
Dolly Bouwmeester	Fientje Peters, Poste restante					1	1913	1926	9	1931	2	Theatre & Operette
Dolly Mollinger	De Kribbebijter	Het leven is niet zoo kwaad				2	1911	1935	0	no films	0	No earlier career
Egon Karter	Het mysterie van de Mondscheinsonate					1	1911	1934	1	no films	0	Operette - Czech actor and singer - was part of the Fritz Hirschberg operette in 1934
Enny Meunier	Malle Gevallen	Het mysterie van de Mondscheinsonate				2	1912	1929	5		0	Theatre - 1933 advertisement film for Persil
Esther de Boer-Van Rijk	Op hoop van Zegen					1	1853	1873	61	1913	13	Theatre
Fie Carelsen	Malle Gevallen					1	1890	1907	27	1916	1	Theatre
Fientje Berghhegge	Fientje Peters, Poste restante					1	1913	1918	17	no films	0	Theatre
Fientje de la Mar	De Jantjes	Bleeke Bet	Op Stap	De Big van het Regiment	Het leven is niet zoo kwaad	5	1898	1915	19	no films	0	Operette & Theatre
Frits van Dongen	Op hoop van Zegen	Op Stap	De Big van het Regiment	De kribbebijter		4	1901	1926	8	no films	0	Theatre

(continued)

Actor	Film title 1	Film title 2	Film title 3	Film title 4	Film title 5	Films 1934-1935	Year of birth	Start career	Career before first Dutch sound film (years)	First silent film	Number of silent Dutch films	Career before film
Gusta Chrispijn-Mulder	Malle Gevallen	Het Meisje met de Blauwe Hoed	De familie van mijn vrouw	De vier Mullers		4	1876	1893	41	no films	0	Theatre
Hans van Meerten	De Suikerfreule					1	1895	1921	14	no films	0	Theatre
Hansje Andriessen	De Big van het Regiment					1	1929	1935	0	no films	0	Child actor - No earlier career
Hein Harms	Het Meisje met de Blauwe Hoed					1	1863	1886	48	1933	0	Theatre - 1933 advertisement film for Persil
Helga Gogh	Dood Water					1	1912	1934	0	no films	0	No earlier career
Henriette Davids	De Janijtes	Op Stap	De Big van het Regiment			3	1888	1907	27	1906	7	Revue & Operette
Herman Tholen	Fientje Peters, Poste restante					1	1897	1916	19	no films	0	Cabaret & Singer
Hilde Alexander	Fientje Peters, Poste restante					1	1909	1935	0	no films	0	German actress - No earlier career
Jacques Reule	Blokkade					1	1879	1907	27	1918	2	Theatre
Jacques van Bijlevelt	De vier Mullers	De Big van het Regiment				2	1885	1911	24	1925	1	Opera & Operette
Jan Musch	Dood Water					1	1875	1899	35	1922	1	Theatre

(continued)



Actor	Film title 1	Film title 2	Film title 3	Film title 4	Film title 5	Films 1934-1935	Year of birth	Start career	Career before first Dutch sound film (years)	First silent film	Number of silent Dutch films	Career before film
Jan van Ees	De Jantjes	Bleeke Bet	Op hoop van zegen	De Big van het Regiment		4	1896	1914	20	1920	2	Theatre
Jean Lemaire jr	Bleeke Bet					1	1906	1924	10	1921	2	Theatre
Jean Stapelveld	Fientje Peters, Poste restante					1	1887	1906	29	1921	1	Theatre
Johan Elsensohn	Bleeke Bet	De Suikerfreule				2	1884	1916	18	1922	6	Theatre
Johan Heesters	Bleeke Bet	De vier Mullers				2	1903	1920	14	1924	2	Operette & Revue
Johan Kaart jr	De Jantjes	Malle Gevallen	De familie van mijn vrouw	De vier Mullers	De Big van het Regiment	5	1897	1914	20	no films	0	Theatre
Jopie Koopman	Bleeke Bet	Malle Gevallen	Op Stap	De Big van het Regiment		4	1910	1933	1	no films	0	Revue
Lau Ezerman	Willem van Oranje	Bleeke Bet	Het Meisje met de Blauwe Hoed	Het leven is niet zoo kwaad		4	1892	1911	23	1913	7	Theatre - 1933 advertisement film for Persil

(continued)

(continued)	Actor	Film title 1	Film title 2	Film title 3	Film title 4	Film title 5	Films 1934-1935	Year of birth	Start career	Career before first Dutch sound film (years)	First silent film	Number of silent Dutch films	Career before film
	Lies van Santen	Blokkade					1	not known	1934	0	no films	0	No earlier career - was discovered through a competition organised by the Journal Cinema & Theater
	Loesje Bouwmeester	De familie van mijn vrouw					1	1910	1932	3	no films	0	Theatre - Bouwmeester is a famous actors family
	Lou Bandy	Het Meisje met de Blauwe Hoed	Het leven is niet zoo kwaad				2	1890	1926	8	no films	0	Revue
	Lou den Hartogh	Blokkade					1	not known	1934	0	no films	0	No earlier career
	Louis Borel	Malle Gevallen	De kribbebijter	De Suikerfreule	Fientje Peters, Poste restante		4	1905	1924	10	no films	0	Theatre
	Louis Davids	De Janijtes	Op Stap				2	1883	1906	28	1906	11	Revue & Operette
	Louis de Bree	Malle Gevallen	De kribbebijter	Het mysterie van de Mondscheinsonate	De Suikerfreule		4	1884	1907	27	no films	0	Theatre, Operette & Revue

(continued)

(continued)												
Actor	Film title 1	Film title 2	Film title 3	Film title 4	Film title 5	Films 1934-1935	Year of birth	Start career	Career before first Dutch sound film (years)	First silent film	Number of silent Dutch films	Career before film
Louis de Vries	Blokkade					1	1871	1901	33	1909	0	Theatre - directed 1 silent film in 1909
Louis Gimberg	Malle Gevallen	De Suikerfreule				2	1880	1907	27	1913	2	Theatre
Louis Saalborn	Het mysterie van de Mondscheinsonate					1	1891	1908	27	no films	0	Theatre
Louise Kooiman	Willem van Oranje					1	1898	1919	15	no films	0	Theatre
Mary Dresselhuys	De Kribbebijter					1	1907	1929	6	no films	0	Theatre
Mary Smithuysen	De familie van mijn vrouw					1	1906	1926	9	no films	0	Theatre
Matthieu van Eysden	Het Meisje met de Blauwe Hoed	Op hoop van zegen	De Big van het Regiment			3	1896	1919	16	1922	3	Theatre & Operette
Max Croiset	Dood Water					1	1912	1933	1	no films	0	Theatre
Miep van den Berg	Op hoop van Zegen					1	1906	1919	15	no films	0	Theatre
Minnie Erfman	De vier Mullers					1	1900	1917	18	1916	2	Theatre
Raoul de Bock	Het mysterie van de Mondscheinsonate					1	1926	1935	0	no films	0	No earlier career

(continued)

Actor	Film title 1	Film title 2	Film title 3	Film title 4	Film title 5	Films 1934-1935	Year of birth	Start career	Career before first Dutch sound film (years)	First silent film	Number of silent Dutch films	Career before film
Rini van Ni	Het Meisje met de Blauwe Hoed	Het leven is niet zoo kwaad				2	not known	1934	0		0	No earlier career
Roland Varno	Malle Gevallen	Het Meisje met de Blauwe Hoed				2	1908	1928	6	1928	1	Film (abroad) - first Germany then US; 9 small roles (6 German films; 3 US films; 1 Dutch
Sien de la Mar-Klopper	De Big van het Regiment	De Kribbebijter				2	1881	1897	38	1914	1	Theatre & Operette
Silvain Poons	De Jantjes	Bleeke Bet	De familie van mijn vrouw	De Big van het Regiment		4	1896	1912	22	1914	4	Theatre, Operette & Revue
Sophie de Vries-de Boer	Op hoop van Zegen					1	1882	1894	40	no films	0	Theatre
Susie Klein	De Jantjes					1	1911	1928	6	no films	0	No earlier career - one small part in theatre in 1928
Theo de Maał	Dood Water					1	1902	1934	0	from 1920s	0	Film (abroad)

(continued)

Actor	Film title 1	Film title 2	Film title 3	Film title 4	Film title 5	Films 1934-1935	Year of birth	Start career	Career before first Dutch sound film (years)	First silent film	Number of silent Dutch films	Career before film
Tilly Perin-Bouwmeester	De familie van mijn vrouw	De vier Mullers				2	1893	1916	19	1918	1	Theatre (gap between 1918-1932)
Tonny vd Berg	Het Meisje met de Blauwe Hoed	De Suikerfreule				2	not known	1934	0	no films	0	No earlier career
Truus van Aalten	Het Meisje met de Blauwe Hoed					1	1910	1927	7	1927	0	Film (abroad) - 1927 in Germany (27 films)
Wiesje van Tuinen	Het mysterie van de Mondscheinsonate					1	not known	1935	0	no films	0	No earlier career
Willem Hunsche	Op hoop van Zegen					1	1880	1903	31	1912	13	Theatre & silent film - was also in silent version of N18
Willem van der Veer	Het Meisje met de Blauwe Hoed	Op hoop van Zegen				2	1887	1903	31	1913	37	Theatre & silent film
Willy Castello	De Janijes					1	1910	1927	7	1927	0	Film (abroad) - 5 small roles (3 US films; 2 French films)
Willy Haak	Willem van Oranje	Het Meisje met de Blauwe Hoed				2	1897	1919	15	1921	1	Theatre

(continued)

(continued)

Actor	Film title 1	Film title 2	Film title 3	Film title 4	Film title 5	Films 1934–1935	Year of birth	Start career	Career before first Dutch sound film (years)	First silent film	Number of silent Dutch films	Career before film
Wim Paauw	Het mysterie van de Moondscheinsonate					1	1909	1932	3	no films	0	Theatre

*Source* Honig, P.H. (1984). Acteurs- en kleinkunstenaars lexicon: 3200 namen uit honderd jaar Nederlands toneel. Diepenveen: Honig

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**Clara Pafort Overduin** is a lecturer and researcher in the Department of Media and Culture Studies & Institute for Cultural Inquiry (ICON), Utrecht University. She works on popular cinema in the Netherlands and has published several book chapters and articles on the popularity of national films in the 1930s—the subject of her Ph.D. With economic historian John Sedgwick and marketing economist Jaap Boter she published on the peculiarities of the structure and development of the Dutch film market in the 1930s. With Douglas Gomery she wrote the student handbook *Movie History: A Survey*. (Routledge, 2012). She strongly believes in sharing knowledge and expertise and tries to bring that into practice through the History of Moviegoing, Exhibition and Reception (HoMER) Network.