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# ‘GOODWILL AMBASSADOR’ THE LEGACY OF DUTCH COLONIAL FILMS

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**Abstract:** This article looks back at the films commissioned and produced by the Dutch government about their colony in the East Indies between 1912 and 1962. The main focus is on newsreels and documentaries about the colonial war between the Netherlands and Indonesia (1945 to 1949). The article discusses these films and their re-use in later television programmes. The programmes often look back at the colonial war in ways that go beyond the purpose of the original films and the article aims to show the methods that are used to do this.

**Keywords:** Netherlands East-Indies; Indonesia; colonialism; government film; propaganda; re-use of footage.

## Introduction

Contemporary colonial films have long been a neglected part of European film studies. In the last decade, extensive research on these colonial films in the UK has resulted in two books and an [elaborate website](#).<sup>1</sup> In France, another country with an extensive colonial history, a fully comprehensive scholarly study has yet to be published. In the Netherlands, colonial films have been a suppositious child generally ignored in Dutch film and documentary histories, and studies about colonialism itself seldom take films into account.<sup>2</sup> The PhD dissertation, *An imagined colony. The Dutch East-Indies in fifty years of government films 1912–1962*, published in 2014, has been a first step in filling this gap.<sup>3</sup> This paper provides a summary and a follow-up of this study, looking specifically at how films that were produced during the years of the decolonization war (1945–1949) have been re-used in television programmes.<sup>4</sup> More specifically, it investigates how these films are re-used as archival footage and how at times their original message is altered in the process. In the past, this type of research was hindered, since both the original films and later documentaries and productions re-using this footage were on film, some still on nitrate. Due to an extensive digitalization programme in the Netherlands, called *Beelden voor de Toekomst* (‘Images for the Future’) a large majority of the original colonial films and television programmes re-using this footage have now been made available for study.

1 See Lee Grieveson and Colin McCabe eds., *Empire and Film*, British Film Institute, 2011 and Lee Grieveson and Colin McCabe eds., *Film and the End of Empire*, British Film Institute, 2011.

2 See Rommy Albers, Jan Baeke en Rob Zeemand eds. *Film in Nederland*, Ludion, 2004, p. 418, on the absence of colonial films in general film histories. See also Gert Oostindie *Postkoloniaal Nederland. Vijfenzestig jaar vergeten, herdenken, verdringen* Bert Bakker, 2010, a study on memories of colonialism in the metropole.

3 Gerda Jansen Hendriks, *Een voorbeeldige kolonie. Nederlands-Indië in 50 jaar overheidsfilms 1912–1962*, PhD Dissertation, University of Amsterdam, 2014. The dissertation is only available in Dutch, but an English summary is included [here](#).

4 Gerda Jansen Hendriks, “‘Not a colonial war’: Dutch film propaganda in the fight against Indonesia 1945–49,” *Journal of Genocide Research*, 14, 3–4, 2012, pp. 403–418.

## Historical Background of the Films

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Dutch possessions in the East Indies, which turned from a string of trading posts into an empire, included a well-organized Dutch administration imposed on the indigenous authorities. The need to map the whole archipelago and gain knowledge about the empire in all its vastness resulted in a surge of surveys being carried out by the end of the century. The first films, produced by the Dutch government in 1912, were part of this desire and need to control the empire. The fact that the government produced these films remained unknown until recently, due to these films never having been catalogued as such. Most of these films have been kept in the vaults of the **EYE Film Institute**, and, after further contextual information and metadata has been provided from written documents from the **Dutch National Archive**, the place of these films in film history can now be properly studied.<sup>5</sup> As Peter Burke also acknowledged in *Eyewitnessing*: "Paraphrasing E.H. Carr it might be argued that before studying film, you should study the director."<sup>6</sup> In films produced by the government, the voice of the producer usually prevails.

In the 1920s, there were few governmental colonial films produced. During World War I, the Netherlands adhered to strict neutrality and the government did not feel the need to use propaganda as other countries did. From the Dutch government's point of view, the existence of their empire was so 'natural' that there was no need to defend, explain or promote it.<sup>7</sup> By the end of the 1930's, this complacent attitude began to change, at least in some circles. Once the Dutch metropole was invaded by Germany in May 1940, propaganda, including propaganda films, was treated as a useful tool for fighting the enemy. This remained unchanged in the immediate postwar years.

Between 1945 and 1949, the Netherlands and the Republic of Indonesia were at war. The Republic came into being on August 17, 1945, with a proclamation of independence by the Nationalist movement. This was not immediately accepted by the former colonial power, but the Netherlands officially acknowledged Indonesia as an independent state on the 27<sup>th</sup> of December, 1949, when sovereignty was transferred. Thousands of short reportages and some longer documentaries were made during these four years and most of them were produced by the Dutch East Indies government. Most of the footage survived and has been preserved by the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision.<sup>8</sup> The Dutch films of this period have one feature in common: they hardly depict fighting, instead they promote a positive representation of the events in the archipelago, despite the fact that more than 6,000 Dutch soldiers died in the decolonization war, while the number of Indonesian casualties is usually estimated at least 100,000.<sup>9</sup> The focus on representing a reconstructed image of the colony instead of the guerrilla war that was going on, was in line with the general policy of the Dutch government, which had a hard time accepting the nationalist aspirations of their Indonesian 'subjects.' This was also confirmed by the findings of the abovementioned research study in Britain, which concluded that colonial films tended to offer a positive representation of colonial history.<sup>10</sup>

## 1 THE PRODUCTION OF COLONIAL FILMS

### 1.1 A forgotten history

In 1912 a Dutch civil servant, Louis van Vuuren, suggested the highest authority in the Dutch East Indies set up a 'government film service' that would produce films about the colony to be shown to Dutch audiences in order to make

5 Most films commissioned by the government in the early twentieth century are incorrectly catalogued in EYE as being produced by a private company called Nationale Filmfabriek. Jansen Hendriks, *Een voorbeeldige kolonie*, pp. 38–52.

6 Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing. The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, Cornell University Press, 2001, p. 160. E.H. Carr advised one to study the historian before studying the facts that he presents. See *What's History* Macmillan, 1961, p. 23.

7 Jansen Hendriks, *Een voorbeeldige kolonie*, pp. 36–37 and 69–75. See also Bob de Graaff, *'Kalm temidden van woedende golven': het ministerie van Koloniën en zijn taakomgeving 1912–1940*, SDU, 1997.

8 *Een voorbeeldige kolonie* has an appendix in which all the films that are kept in the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Visions are listed. Based on this appendix, many of these colonial films are made available for a general audience in three 'chapters' of the website: [in.beeldengeluid.nl](http://in.beeldengeluid.nl).

9 René Kok, Erik Somers and Louis Zweers, *Koloniale Oorlog. Van Indië naar Indonesië 1945–1949*, Uitgeverij Carrera, 2015, p. 6.

10 Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe eds., *Empire and Film and Film and the End of Empire*, British Film Institute, 2011 and [colonialfilm.org.uk](http://colonialfilm.org.uk).



Photo 1. Title sequence from *The arrival of governor-general Van Limburg Stirum in the Moluccas*, 1919. Go to [the online version of this article](#) to see the full video.

the East Indies more known and loved by people in the metropole. Without waiting for approval, Van Vuuren, who happened to be the head of the new documentation department, the Encyclopaedisch Bureau, ordered several films to be made. Eventually his proposal to make these films was rejected and his films later on ended up being catalogued in the archives under the name of a different producer.<sup>11</sup> The early start of Dutch colonial government films became a forgotten history.<sup>12</sup>

## 1.2 Film as the 'Vital Gear for a Government'

In 1938, the minister of Economic Affairs of the Dutch East Indies, Huib van Mook, proposed to make a series of film,<sup>13</sup> in color and with sound, to promote the colony abroad and especially in the United States. Van Mook saw clearly that the East Indies needed the United States as an ally against belligerent Japan and according to him, film was pre-eminently suited for gaining the sympathy of the American people. In his proposal he called film "the vital gear for a government."<sup>14</sup> Van Mook was also aware that being a colony, the East Indies could not count on unquestioned support from the Americans. His strategy was therefore to present the colony as already part of a commonwealth, as a more or less autonomous region that happily cooperated with the Dutch. This vision—or better said, this 'dream'—was not in line with the official governmental policy, which created conflicts between Van Mook and his colleagues. Nevertheless, Van Mook did become the most influential person in the East Indies, rising to the post of governor-general, and it was only in 1948 that he was forced to leave his position as the highest civil servant in the colony. The films Van Mook proposed were realized when the threat of war was already felt in the East Indies. Cameraman Jaap Zindler started working around the archipelago in 1941 and the final editing was done in Canada in the spring of 1942, after the Dutch had surrendered to the invading Japanese forces. Two films were made on the occasion: *High Stakes in the East*—which

11 The films that were commissioned by the 'gouvernementsfilmbedrijf', i.e., Louis van Vuuren, are kept in EYE and are mostly catalogued as being produced by a company called Nationale Filmfabriek, owned by Mr. H.B. Robbers. This gentleman managed to get the films from the government for free when Louis van Vuuren was on leave in the Netherlands. Jansen Hendriks, *Een voorbeeldige kolonie*, pp. 38–52. The embedded film is kept in EYE, under the title of *Molukkenreis Landvoogd*, ID 43494.

12 An exception must be made for a study about the films that were commissioned by the Koloniaal Instituut in 1912. Janneke van Dijk, Jaap de Jonge and Nico de Klerk, *J.C. Lamster, een vroege filmer in Nederlands-Indië*, KIT Publishers, 2010.

13 Statement by Huib van Mook, minister of Economic Affairs of the Dutch East-Indies.

14 NL-HaNa, Koloniën/Openbaar Verbaal, 2.10.36.04, inv. nr. 3865.



Photo 2. Title sequence from *High Stakes in the East*, 1942. Go to [the online version of this article](#) to see the full video.

got an Oscar nomination, and *Peoples of the Indies*. These were so-called short films, each lasting ten minutes, with a voice-over that was clearly aimed at American audiences.<sup>15</sup>

### 1.3 Propaganda at Work

The producer of *High Stakes in the East* and *Peoples of the Indies* was the Netherlands Information Bureau, based in New York. This bureau was set up at the end of 1940 by the Dutch government-in-exile. The German invasion of the Netherlands in May 1940 caused a complete turnaround in the Dutch attitude towards propaganda. As soon as a government-in-exile was installed in London, an information department was established, including a film department that had a rather unskilled staff in its first years. This was different in New York, where John Fernhout was in charge. He was responsible for the editing of *High Stakes in the East* and other Dutch documentary films for the American market. Fernhout had worked as a cameraman with the well-known filmmaker Joris Ivens before the war and both men were involved in the Allied war effort. Besides London and New York, there was a third Dutch government film department, based in Melbourne, Australia. This was headed by a flamboyant and conservative marine officer, H.V. Quispel, who wanted to produce 'independent' films. His department therefore cooperated with a commercial Australian company, Southern Seas Production, and film credits often only showed this last name. References to the Dutch government were avoided. This procedure was continued after the war, with another company.<sup>16</sup>

### 1.4 The Future of the Dutch East Indies

When lieutenant governor-general Huib van Mook returned to Java in October 1945, he discovered a changed Indonesia. The Japanese had surrendered on August 15, but there were no Allied forces on the main Indonesian island to enforce order. Moreover, on August 17<sup>th</sup>, the Indonesian nationalist movement declared the independence of the

<sup>15</sup> The story of how these two films were made can be found in Jansen Hendriks, *Een voorbeeldige kolonie*, pp. 128–130 and 155–162. The films are archived in the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, *High Stakes in the East*, Taak ID 4544388.

<sup>16</sup> Quispel was rebuked shortly after the end of the war by the East Indies Audit Office for making a mess of the way films were financed, including cooperation with a commercial company. This was without consequences, since the construction was continued in the years after the war. But it did lead to another, more severe judgment in an Audit Report of 1949. Telling is that some of the films produced by Quispel's Film Service are kept in the archives of the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision without the acknowledgement that they were produced by a governmental department, like the rather spectacular story of *Rescue from Shangri-la*, Taak ID 49216.

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Photo 3. Title sequence from *Rescue from Shangri-La*, a film by the Dutch Government Film Service in Australia about a spectacular rescue of Americans in the interior of Dutch New Guinea. Go to [the online version of this article](#) to see the full video.

archipelago. Van Mook was at first willing to cooperate with the nationalists, but the Dutch government blew the whistle on him. It took the Dutch authorities four years to realize that the Dutch East Indies had essentially ceased to exist, four years in which a huge amount of films were produced to defend the Dutch position, that the colony could

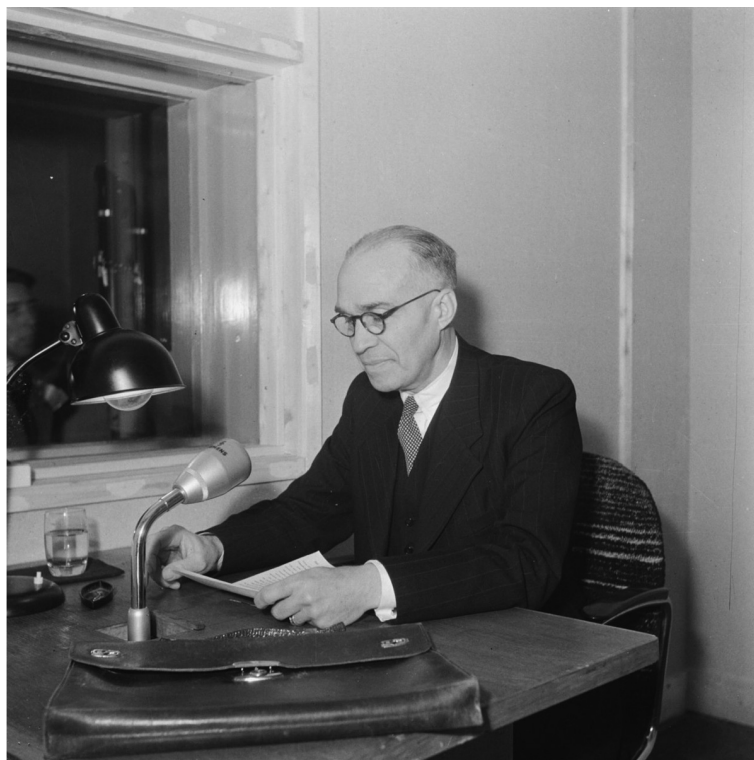


Photo 4. Minister of Overseas Territories Logemann giving a speech on the radio, in which he explains the government's position on the Dutch East Indies in 1945. ©Anefo. Go to [the online version of this article](#) to listen to his radio speech.



become independent in the long term, but for the time being Dutch assistance and governance was necessary to rebuild the country.

### 1.5 A Victory for Conservative Voices

Rebuilding the film studios was the first task for H.V. Quispel when he returned from Australia to Java at the end of 1945. There had been a struggle for power over who would be responsible for government films after the war, with the conservative Quispel as one contender and left-leaning Joris Ivens as his opponent. Ivens was formally appointed Film Commissioner for the Netherlands East Indies in the autumn of 1944, with the assignment to make films for a 'new' Indonesia once the war was over. As such, he worked independently from the film service that Quispel was heading. But Quispel never accepted Ivens and hindered his work as much as he could. In the end Quispel won, being much more skilful in handling all the bureaucratic procedures within the Dutch East Indies government. Ivens concluded that the progressive forces that had appointed him, did not or could not offer sufficient support and in November 1945 he resigned. In the months following, he produced a documentary about the independence movement in Indonesia, *Indonesia Calling*. It was shot with the help of Australian dockworkers and it led to a decade-long conflict between Ivens and the Dutch government. From the beginning of 1946, a new government film department came into existence under the guidance of Quispel and carried the name of Gouvernements Film Bedrijf Multifilm Batavia. In film credits, only the last part was used, creating the illusion that these films were produced by an independent company. In fact, everyone working for Multifilm Batavia was a civil servant, working for the Government Information Service. It was the practice Quispel had used before and it led to very complicated financial structures. But Quispel was not a man to be bothered by this; he wanted to spread the word that the Dutch were perfectly suited to guide Indonesia into a new era.<sup>17</sup>

### 1.6 Newsreels from the Gouvernements Filmbedrijf Multifilm Batavia

The films produced during the years 1946–1949 come in a variety of forms, but for this paper the main focus is on the longer documentaries and newsreels. To start with the latter: in the Netherlands, *Polygoon* was the main and in fact only Dutch newsreel after the war, distributed in 110 copies every week around the country. News from Indonesia was a regular feature in *Polygoon*, but they did not have their own office in the colony. All their footage came from the Gouvernements Filmbedrijf. *Polygoon* took pride in being an independent company that used different news sources to make a story, but when it came to Indonesia, the sources were limited to one: the government. More film



Photo 5. Studio Multifilm Batavia, ©Dutch Government Information Service.

<sup>17</sup> For the power struggle between Quispel and Joris Ivens, see Jansen Hendriks, *Een voorbeeldige kolonie*, pp. 195–203 and 207–211.

news about Indonesia could be seen in the so-called Cineacs, movie theatres that specialized in a continuous programming of news and documentary films and could be found in bigger cities. They showed *Wordende Wereld*, a weekly movie newsreel produced, according to the credits, by Multifilm Batavia, i.e., the Gouvernements Filmbedrijf. Here the focus was mainly on reports about social and cultural life, but visits from ministers to Batavia were also part of the fare.<sup>18</sup>

## 1.7 News in Other Media

If all the filmed news that the Dutch people could see about Indonesia was produced by the government, one can ask if the same were true for the other media. The simple answer is yes. In the colony itself, there was only one newspaper in the Dutch language and that was government owned, just like the film studio and the radio station for that matter. Dutch newspapers did send their own correspondents to Indonesia, although coverage was scant because of financial reasons. Some of these correspondents looked back in shame thirty years afterwards, their only excuse being that criticism of government policy was non-existent in these days.<sup>19</sup> It should also be kept in mind that in the years preceding the conflict with Indonesia, all journalists were embedded with either the Allied or the Axis forces and censorship was **normal practice**.<sup>20</sup>

## 1.8 The government as Owner of the Media

After the war, the government of the Dutch East Indies was the owner of all Dutch language media in Indonesia and people were well aware that this did not suit a democracy. In a policy document from 1946, this situation was described and condemned as inappropriate, but it also provided an explanation: because the war had destroyed all Dutch language media, the help of the government was needed to restore a proper media environment. And since rebuilding needed a 'new spirit,' it was deemed necessary that there would be, for the time being, a certain amount of government control over the media.<sup>21</sup> This 'for the time being' lasted until the moment of the transfer of sovereignty at the end of 1949. The minister of Finance regularly pushed for selling the film studio, as the cost of film production was very high and films never made any profit, but this was never realized. Lieutenant governor-general Van Mook prevented it,



Photo 6. The arrival of Dutch PM Louis Beel at the airport Kemajoran in Batavia, where he is welcomed with the question: "Did you have a good trip, your excellency?" Go to [the online version of this article](#) to see the full video.

18 For an extensive overview of *Wordende Wereld*, see Jansen Hendriks, *Een voorbeeldige kolonie*, pp. 271–278. The linked report from *Wordende Wereld* can be found at the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, Taak ID 47646.

19 See Hans Verstraaten, *De Oorlogsverslaggevers van 1947*, *Vrij Nederland*, 5 July 1980, pp. 2–26.

20 The linked [AP press release](#) of May 2012 provides an example of how the press worked in 1945 and how that differed from today's practices.

21 ANRI, Alg. Secretarie Ned.-Ind. Regering, 1942–1950, 2.10.14, inv.nr. 1642.



because he remained convinced that films were an important means to circulate the view of the government to a wide audience, "a vital gear for the government," as he had stated in 1938.

### 1.9 Documentaries from the Gouvernements Filmbedrijf Multifilm Batavia

The long documentaries produced by the Gouvernements Filmbedrijf Multifilm Batavia form a special case. They were the pride of the company and at the same time most of them never got a movie theatre release in the Netherlands. Formal censorship did not exist in the East Indies, but there were of course 'sensitive issues' and in those cases the authorities wanted to judge a film beforehand. *Linggadjati in de branding*, a documentary about the first large military action the Dutch started in the summer of 1947, especially caused friction between the film studio and the authorities. Even after some changes, lieutenant governor-general Van Mook vehemently opposed showing the film in the Netherlands (the film was shown in movie theatres in Indonesia). Van Mook was convinced that the film would give the wrong image of the colony and that it showed too much war and destruction.<sup>22</sup> *Linggadjati in de branding* depicts advancing tanks that are often greeted by friendly Indonesians standing alongside the road. Dutch soldiers are busy clearing roads from the debris left by 'terrorists,' they sometime lie in cover for expected snipers, but never is there any actual fighting to be seen (or heard).<sup>23</sup> Probably Van Mook was so obsessed by his dream of a peaceful Indonesia that every image that could counter this dream was unwelcome.

### 1.10 Conservation in the Metropole

With the transfer of sovereignty in 1949, the future of the films produced by the Gouvernements Filmbedrijf Multifilm Batavia was uncertain. Several fires in the film studios in Jakarta in the beginning of the fifties destroyed much of the original footage, but copies of the edited films and newsreels were kept by Multifilm Haarlem, the parent company of Multifilm Batavia. In 1953, the Indonesian government asked Multifilm Haarlem for these copies, which they considered to be part of the cultural heritage of Indonesia. Multifilm was willing to ship the films but also asked for the support of the Dutch ministry of Foreign Affairs to finance copying and preserving these films as part of the Dutch cultural heritage. After some haggling, about 40% of the films were copied and stored in the vaults of the Dutch Government Information Service (RVD) near The Hague. The collection became once more complete when, at the beginning of the eighties, the Indonesian government asked for help with the conservation of the films in their possession. They were shipped back to



Photo 7. *Linggadjati in de branding*, a documentary explaining the military actions of the Dutch in Indonesia, 1947. Go to [the online version of this article](#) to watch part 1 of the documentary.

<sup>22</sup> Idem, inv.nr. 1682.

<sup>23</sup> *Linggadjati in de branding* (6 episodes), Netherlands Institute for Sound And Vision, Taak ID 51425 and 51428–51432.

the Netherlands. As caretaker of all the films of the RVD, The Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision now has the largest colonial film collection in the Netherlands.<sup>24</sup>

## 2 THE DECOLONIZATION WAR REMEMBERED

### 2.1 Looking Back on a Lost War in 1969

Documentaries like *Linggadjati in the branding*, *Van duisternis tot licht*, and *Het vreemde leger*, to name the three most important political documentaries produced by the Gouvernements Filmbedrijf Multifilm Batavia, may not have reached Dutch audiences at the time they were made, but they attracted millions of viewers once they were re-used in television programmes from the 1970s on. At first, the public lost interest in what was happening in Indonesia after the transfer of sovereignty at the end of 1949. The hundred thousand Dutch conscripts that were sent overseas to fight a sometimes very dirty guerrilla war returned home to a country that only wanted to think about rebuilding itself. Reminiscences about a lost war were not welcome. This changed almost overnight in January 1969, with the broadcast of a popular current-affairs program, *Achter het Nieuws*, in which a former conscript, Joop Hueting, told the interviewer he had seen war crimes during his time in Indonesia, some of which he had committed himself, and that it was high time for a thorough research into the behaviour of the Dutch army during the 'police actions,' as the military campaigns were formally called by the authorities.<sup>25</sup>

### 2.2 The Lack of Guerrilla Warfare on Film

The interview with Hueting was preceded by a short historical introduction of events in Indonesia, consisting of archival footage and a voice-over. Interestingly, the anchorman of the news show then told the audience that what they were about to hear next would not correspond to the footage they had just seen about these 'police actions.'<sup>26</sup> By 1969,



Photo 8. Former conscript Joop Hueting talks about war crimes in *Achter het Nieuws* (VARA, 17-1-1969). Go to [the online version of this article](#) to see the full video.

24 Jansen Hendriks, pp. 306–309

25 *Achter het Nieuws*, 17/1/1969, Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, Taak ID 52832. This broadcast also ranks as an example of the growing impact of television in the 1960's. See Mirjam Prenger, *Televisiejournalistiek in de jaren vijftig en zestig. Achter het Nieuws en de geboorte van de actualiteitenrubriek*, AMB, 2014, pp. 232–252.

26 Contrary to the filmed archive and interview, the presentation was done live in the studio and was not recorded. It can be found in the transcript that has been made of this broadcast, which is archived by Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision. For the second broadcast of *Achter het Nieuws* on the issue on January 25, containing more interviews with veterans, so-called tele-recording was used, i.e., a film camera was put in front of the television screen and in this way the whole broadcast was preserved.

images of the Vietnam War had become familiar for television viewers all over the world and constituted a new perception of what war looked like. The war fought in the East Indies was partly comparable to Vietnam: guerrilla warfare in a tropical climate, against an enemy that was undistinguishable from civilians. But in the case of the East Indies, visual resources were lacking. The government-produced films did not show war as was expected. No scenes of destruction, no marine with a Zippo lighting thatched roofs.<sup>27</sup> In the years to come, this was a problem for all documentary filmmakers who wanted to tell a story about Indonesia in the years 1946–1949.

### 3 THE RE-USE OF COLONIAL FILMS

#### 3.1 Researching the Re-use of Footage from the Colonial War

What solutions have filmmakers found to mask the lack of 'telling' footage from the colonial war? Were there specific shots that became popular for re-use? In a completely digitized archive, it might be possible to retrace every shot that has been re-used after its first broadcast, but even though most of the films from the Gouvernements Filmbedrijf Multifilm Batavia are now available in digital form, the system of retracing footage is not yet fully implemented and will probably be too costly to input retroactive data. For this paper, I went through roughly fifty documentaries, reports and programs about the colonial war that are known to have had a high profile and have attracted sizeable audiences. The topics they cover range from state visits to Indonesia to protests of war veterans against accusations of war crimes. This gives some insight into the different ways archival footage is used (or not used) in stories about the colonial war.

#### 3.2 Bypassing War-Atrocities

The accusations broadcast in *Achter het Nieuws* in January 1969 had some follow-up, but it took several years for television to pay attention again to what had happened in post-war Indonesia. The much-publicized and filmed state visit of Queen Juliana to the former colony (the first time ever the Dutch crown paid a visit) in 1971 was apparently not seen as an occasion to open old wounds. Neither television broadcasts nor movie newsreels mentioned war atrocities that had taken place in the past. But at the end of 1976, a three-hour long documentary was broadcast under the title



Photo 9. Still from an episode of *Soldier Overseas* (1948), in which a medical orderly helps local people. Go to [the online version of this article](#) to see the full video.

<sup>27</sup> For reporting about Vietnam, see Daniel C. Hallin, *The 'uncensored war': the media and Vietnam*, University of California Press, 1986. The typical example of reporting by the Gouvernements Filmbedrijf is from the series *Soldiers Overseas*, the episode about the medical orderly, kept by the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, Taak ID 119106.

*Indonesia Merdeka of hoe Nederland de erfenis van Jan Pieterszoon Coen verloor* ('Free Indonesia or how the Dutch lost the heritage of Jan Pieterszoon Coen').<sup>28</sup> The filmmaker, Roelof Kiers, gave several interviews beforehand in which he stated that he had gone through all the government films of the time, expecting to find at least some images of war, but never found one.<sup>29</sup> His documentary did not focus on war atrocities and crimes (as did *Achter het Nieuws*) but looked at the political and social aspects of the relationship between the Netherlands and Indonesia. Kiers did not have to tackle the problem of 'illustrating' gruesome stories. He did show the archive footage in an innovative way, by using the original editing and voice-over. Kiers hoped that it would be apparent for his audience, thirty years after the events, that these films constituted pure propaganda by the Dutch government.

To see *Indonesia Merdeka* (in two parts), click [here](#) and [here](#).

### 3.3 Re-editing Footage

After *Indonesia Merdeka*, there was again another decade of silence about post-war Indonesia on Dutch public television. The colony was not completely forgotten, but programmes focussed on the war period and the experiences of Dutch people under the Japanese rule. From the mid-1980s on however, a steady flow of documentaries and current-affair reports were produced that continued for over ten years and is still trickling until the present day. The atrocities of the colonial war formed a regular feature in these programs, mostly evoked by the stories of eyewitnesses. Missing the accompanying archival footage, filmmakers relied on music to give 'neutral' shots a more threatening and sinister feel and re-edited the government films, keeping only the more 'aggressive' looking shots. In doing so, they in fact reversed the original intention. One of the cameramen who worked for the Gouvernements Filmbedrijf, Charles Breijer, said in a later interview that the studio was told to stick to 'pacifist editing'.<sup>30</sup> This meant that after a Dutch tank drove by, the shot should not be cut away from immediately but left for a couple of seconds more, so that the viewer might see citizens on their way to the market, creating the impression of normal life going on. To get a more war-like feeling, these seconds were now cut away. Photographs were also used, as there exist some that show Indonesian rebels being arrested or threatened. Zooming in on a picture like this, on a young Indonesian whose face is terror-stricken, is an effective way to evoke war atrocities. This type of photograph is not very common, as the Dutch photographers in Indonesia between 1946 and 1949 were, just like the cameramen, working for government services. Several of their pictures were censored.<sup>31</sup>



Photo 10. Indonesians arrested, photographer: H. Wilmar. ©Nederlands Instituut voor Militaire Historie (NIMH)

<sup>28</sup> *Indonesia Merdeka*, Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, Taak ID 31281.

<sup>29</sup> Jansen Hendriks, *Journal of Genocide Studies*, p. 413.

<sup>30</sup> Conversation with Charles Breijer, see Jansen Hendriks, *Een voorbeeldige kolonie*, p. 254.

<sup>31</sup> For photography, see Louis Zweers, *De gecensureerde oorlog. Militairen versus media in Nederlands-Indië 1945–1949*, Walburg pers, 2013.



### 3.4 Using Eyewitnesses

The most straightforward way to document historical events on film is by interviewing eyewitnesses. In *Achter het Nieuws* veterans talked openly about the war atrocities and crimes that were committed but their reactions were furious, denying any wrongdoings by the Dutch military.<sup>32</sup> Since 1969, there has been a sometimes emotional public debate in the Netherlands about whether or not the Dutch had committed war crimes in Indonesia and if atrocities were standard policy or an exception to the general rule, which claimed that Dutch soldiers were supposed to protect and help Indonesian civilians and only attack 'terrorists,' something that was featured prominently in the government films.

In August 1995, the documentary *De excessen van Rawagedeh* ('The Excesses in Rawagedeh') was broadcast. It was the first time Indonesian eyewitnesses talked about their war experiences on Dutch television. The documentary reconstructed events in Rawagedeh, a small Indonesian village on Java, which in December 1947 was raided by Dutch troops leaving many of the male inhabitants dead.<sup>33</sup> This 'notorious massacre' was documented and condemned by an UN investigation at the time, but none of the perpetrators were ever prosecuted. The reconstruction of what happened in Rawagedeh was done through interviews with surviving Indonesian eyewitnesses and no archival footage was used (none was available of course). The programme caused shock, led to questions that were raised in the Parliament, and after a long legal procedure, the Dutch state took responsibility in 2011 for what had happened, offered apologies and paid a compensation to surviving widows of the murdered men.

### 3.5 The Sequence Most Often Re-Used

It is telling that *De excessen van Rawagedeh*, the documentary that had far-reaching consequences for the policy of the Netherlands regarding war crimes in Indonesia, did not use archival footage. Even with re-editing the original government films, it is hard to convince today's audiences that this colonial war was one of guerrilla warfare and atrocities. The message that the films once were meant to give, lingers on. This becomes clear as one reflects on one of the more 'popular' sequences from these days: the landing of the marines at Pasir Putih, a stronghold on the coast of East Java, at the start of the military push in the summer of 1947.<sup>34</sup> The sequence originates from a long *Polygoon* report on this offensive and is often used in television programmes, as the start of a historical overview of what happened (*Achter het Nieuws* also started with these shots).



Photo 11. The landing of the marines at Pasir Putih, part of a longer movie newsreel about the Dutch military operation in the summer of 1947. Go to [the online version of this article](#) to see the full video.

32 The Dutch government ordered a research into war crimes that lead to an official report, the so-called *Excessennota* in June 1969. The official conclusion at the time was that atrocities had taken place, but that the Dutch army in general had behaved properly.

33 *De excessen van Rawagedeh* was broadcasted on 15 August 1995 by RTL5, a commercial Dutch station that has never had a tradition in investigative documentaries. This is the one exception to the normal fare they broadcast.

34 The sequence is part of a *Polygoon* report kept by the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, Taak ID 34629.



The sequence shows the coast from the point of view of the marines, the marines wading through the water, in full gear, with weapons raised above their head. These shots may vaguely remind the viewer of other iconic images, made only three years earlier: the landings on D-Day, when the liberation of Europe began. The shots of the Dutch marines have the same connotations: these men took on this action to liberate Indonesia, to bring 'justice and safety.'

## 4 CONCLUSION

### 4.1 The Legacy of the Films of the Gouvernements Filmbedrijf Multifilm Batavia

Colonial films have been carefully preserved in the archives. In Britain, an extensive research project about colonial films concluded that these films constituted an important part of what is called 'imperial mythography'.<sup>35</sup> In their day, most of the films made by the Gouvernements Filmbedrijf Multifilm Batavia failed to reach a large audience and therefore could be considered as failures. They were after all intended to convince the Dutch public of the good intentions of the authorities, making it believe that the war that was fought overseas was a good cause. Public opinion polls never showed an outright majority in favour of sending troops to Indonesia, although subsequent coalition governments (including the Social-Democratic party) agreed to the colonial war. It seems safe to conclude that government films did not affect public opinion between 1946 and 1949. But they did have an effect when they were re-used in the television programmes from the mid-1980s on. Veterans then often pointed to the archival footage, where soldiers could be seen helping the Indonesian people. For them this was 'proof' that they had been sent overseas for honourable reasons. Forty years after the events, the propaganda of the government had finally struck a note. Now, almost sixty-five years later, the word 'war' is replacing the old term 'police actions' that was once invented by the government.<sup>36</sup> It may be the start of a new approach to a war that is still sensitive in Dutch society. By the time the last veterans are no longer among us, it will be interesting to see if the 'imperial mythography' of the films is still effective; to see if the divide can be bridged between the two images that dominate Dutch collective memory: that of a nation whose military participated in a gruesome war in Indonesia or that of a nation whose military were 'goodwill ambassadors' in a far-away country that had to be assisted on its way to independence.



Photo 12. *Brigadeflitsen*, footage shot in 1946 by the Marine Information Service. Go to [the online version of this article](#) to see the full video.

35 Lee Grieveson, "Introduction: Film and the End of Empire," in Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe eds., *Film and the End of Empire*, British Film Institute, 2011, pp. 4–5.

36 See Ad van Liempt, *Een mooi woord voor oorlog. Ruzie, roddel en achterdocht op weg naar de Indonesië oorlog*, Sdu Uitgeverij Koninkinnegracht, 1994).

## 4.2 A postscript

As always, there are exceptions to the rule, in this case the rule being that Dutch films did not show atrocities from the colonial war. At the end of 2009, two 16mm film rolls in colour about the war in Indonesia emerged from the vaults of the Nederlands Instituut voor Militaire Historie. **Research by the institute** showed that these films were produced by the Marine Voorlichtingsdienst in the Dutch East Indies.<sup>37</sup> It is raw footage, not edited, it has no sound, but some sequences show a marine brigade in action in the east of Java, in the late spring of 1946. We see villages burning, dead bodies of Indonesians, marines herding the population away and interrogating locals. Due to being in colour, the footage of the guerrilla war in Indonesia starts to resemble the later war in Vietnam, to which the presenter of *Achter het Nieuws* referred in 1969. It is unknown why this footage was preserved by the military authorities; what it shows is contrary to all the instructions of the governmental information services. One can only speculate. One reason might have been that both film rolls start out with more familiar and 'innocent' footage: the arrival of a high-ranking officer and aerial pictures of the Indonesian landscape. The later sequences on guerrilla warfare may have escaped the attention of the person who decided what films had to be kept for preservation. In a few cases after it was unearthed, the footage has found its way to television reports about the war with Indonesia.<sup>38</sup> In time, it may help to counteract the influence of the one-sided black-and-white films that proliferated their message about the 'goodwill ambassadors.'

## Biography

Dr. Gerda Jansen Hendriks finished her MA studies in modern and theoretical history at the University of Amsterdam in 1984 and has since worked for Dutch Public Television. She was a foreign-affairs reporter for features such as *Panoramiek*, *Diogenes*, *NOS Laat* and *NOVA* and directed episodes for several historical series, among which was the *The Iron Century* (2014). She devised the format of the weekly history magazine *Andere Tijden* that started in 2000 and has since been working as a director for this programme. In 2014, she completed her PhD with a dissertation about government-produced films in the Dutch East Indies from 1912 until 1962.

37 A.A. Lemmers, "Brigadeflitsen, een klein filmmysterie," in *Marineblad*, No. 8, December 2010. The filmreels are kept at the NIMH, nr. IMH0095.

38 The footage was first shown in *Nova*, NPS/VARA, 2-12-2009, Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, Taak ID 3911144 and *Andere Tijden: Door Soldatenogen*, NPS/VPRO, 27-12-2009, Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, Taak ID 3918650. Most recently it was used in a current-affair report on a newly released book about memoirs of Dutch soldiers in Indonesia, see *Brandpunt*, KRO/NRCV, 27/10/2015.