

Contrived Nature. Reflections of the Netherlands in Bert Haanstra's *Spiegel van Holland* and Wim van der Linden's *Summer in the Fields*

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Critics have often described Bert Haanstra's nine-minute film, *Spiegel van Holland*, as "extraordinarily beautiful images [...], emanating infinite poetry."¹ What viewers see: in the title sequence, overlaid with the sound of partially tonal, partially atonal orchestral music, the camera glides across a water surface teeming with plants, filming it in black-and-white close-up. Towards the end of the first minute, this first shot dissolves into an image of trees and clouds reflected in the water, then cuts to a reflection of a young man walking along the riverbed and coming to a stop, followed by two reverse angle shots of a windmill reflected in the water.

In the second of these shots, the camera moves at a slight rotation (a "Dutch angle"), following the motion of the windmill's sails. We see two shots of the young man's reflection – first a medium long shot, then a medium close-up – as he bends sideways, towards the water. Cut back to the mill's reflection, now seen as a medium long shot, which also rotates in a subtle, synchronized manner. Cut to a shot of a horse, which, unlike the preceding images, is suddenly oriented right-side up. Through the wave-like movement of the image, it becomes clear that it, too, is a reflection in the water. Same for the next image: a long shot of the windmill, no longer seen upside down. In the foreground, a farm-worker pours milk into a milk churn and climbs into a boat.

In sequence that follows, the water's reflections all remain right-side up and its mirrored motifs are framed and rhythmically edited in the manner of conventional documentary and narrative film: a cow; a shot of the worker setting down milk churns; a reverse angle shot of three cows; the milk churns; the original cow; a close-up of a swan; children hoisting sails on a sailboat; the sailboat setting off; a reverse-angle shot of the swan swimming, slightly cropped from the bottom; a shot of the sailboat moving against the water's directional flow, with the camera following in pursuit.

¹ "bijzonder mooie beelden [...] waaruit een oneindige poëzie straalt," [VPRO Cinema.nl](http://vprocinema.nl), last accessed 1/2014.

So much for the opening section, which prefaces the remaining seven minutes of the film. Although the camera continues to remain focused on the water and exclusively films reflections, its perspective now shifts into the subjective, depicting what the sailors see on their journey: houses drifting past, oncoming boats, people sitting at the water's edge, windmills, water surfaces with shore grass, rows of trees along the river bank, rows of historic and modern country houses; a family fishing from a boat; two shots edited back-to-back of men raising river bridges to allow the boat to pass; a historic barrel organ; people strolling on a bridge. A camera-tilt from the bridge to a church tower initiates a more rapidly edited sequence of historic townhouses, lanterns, a parked car, and, finally, storefronts and a shot of people leaning against a railing. Reflected in the intensified movement of the water, this image pulsates like a fish-eye view.

As the montage accelerates, images become increasingly distorted and virtually abstract: advertising pillars, the facades of houses and medium close-ups of streets are almost unrecognizable as such. All the while, the camera remains in constant motion, representing the boat's voyage from a subjective point of view. In the final shot of this city sequence, at six minutes and twenty seconds, the image of a townhouse dissolves into a reflection of the sailboat in the water. Here, the boat once again becomes visible as object. The perspective of the filmic narrative thus shifts from the subjective back to the objective while remaining continually fixated on the water's reflections. Cut to a medium shot of the rotating sail seen from two different angles, cut to a shot of the water's surface, cut back to the sailboat. A thirty-second sequence begins, in which parts of the boat are broken down into abstract forms through close-ups and distortions brought about by the water's movement. Following this, we return once again to identifiable, representational images of water and water-plants; a reverse angle shot of a man walking along the shore; a shot of the boys on the sailboat; accelerated shots traveling across the water; skewed sailors montaged against passing shore plants; long shots of the sailboat, gradually disintegrating in the water's ripples; reflections of sunlight on surface; three shots of the landscape drifting by at sunset; closing credits.

1 Incorporated Avant-garde

On the one hand, *The Bridge* (NL 1928) and – especially – *Rain* (NL 1929) left off. In all these films, identifiable protagonists and overtly narrated stories are absent. The narrative arises through the montage of images recorded by a roving silent-film camera. Urban and industrial landscapes are often abstracted and defamiliarized through intense rhythm, camera perspective, camera movement and editing. The Modernism of these works is counteracted, however, through a hidden

conventionality in both composition and narrative. All city symphony films – which tend to depict a single place on a single day, from morning until night – subscribe to the classic narrative formula extending from Aristotle's *Poetics* all the way to Hollywood: that a story must contain a beginning, a middle and an end, and respect the unity of both time and place. No sign, then, of the modern, essentially filmic narrative montage methods of Gertrude Stein, James Joyce and others. The use of the word "symphony" already implies a connection to the tradition of classical and romantic music, a legacy seamlessly continued in these conventionally composed films (structured as they are into movements). No sign, then, of futuristic bruitism or radical twelve-tone polyphony.

If *Spiegel van Holland* was not such a flat film, one might be tempted to mistake its concluding sunset as a parody of the city-symphony genre's conventionality. The film's narrative conforms to these conventions. Though it is edited in a purely visual manner, its structure is conventionally linear, with three main acts or movements that are identified through sequences of motifs (the opening section, in which the narrative perspective shifts to the subjective camera, a return to the objective camera and the conclusion). Through the structure of the boat/camera voyage, the film forms an organic, closed unity of space and time. This can ultimately be read as a remake or shortened version of what Russian literary scholar Vladimir Propp and American mythologist Joseph Campbell described as the fundamental structure of fairy tales, myths and epics: the hero's journey. Haanstra's hero, however, is democratized: a blank space, filled only by the eye of the traveling camera, which is transplanted into the eye of the film's viewer, seeing through its lens. In terms of this visual and narrative trick, *Spiegel van Holland* can be read as a predecessor to the genre of "first person shooter" computer games, established with *Doom* in 1993, and "POV [=point of view]" porn videos filmed by participating actors using handheld cameras.

Haanstra's film engages all of the formal attributes of its 1920s and 30s *avant-garde* precursors (such as the use, for example, of the compact, "unbound" Parvo Debie 35mm camera employed by Vertov, Eisenstein, Ivens and Riefenstahl). With just one exception: namely that of subject. In this arena, we clearly see Haanstra's break with the Constructivism of Vertov, Ruttmann and Ivens, whose films focused on the modern, built Metropolis. Haanstra, however, takes the flat, rural countryside (or "platteland," as it is called in Dutch) as a point of departure.

If nothing else, this difference may have been the basis for *The Bridge* in such words, despite the similarly regional nature of its subject.

Haanstra's images appear "beautiful" mainly due to their motifs: water, fields, windmills, cows, idyllic bridges (as opposed to the technological monstrosity of Rotterdam's railway bridge in Ivens' film), country houses and picturesque towns dating back to Holland's "gouden eeuw" (Golden Era) in the 17th century, a time when early financial capitalism and colonialism led to growing affluence for the country. Indeed, Holland's history of merchant ship expeditions remains an underlying presence in these images. Yet in the form of the sailing trip, this content is minimized and turned inward.

Besides being picturesque, the film's cityscapes are viewed only from the perspective of the country and the water. The opposite can be said of Ivens' *De Brug* and *Regen*, which depict water as part of the urban landscape.

By connecting with the past, Haanstra points to the future. His film quotes the iconography of Dutch landscape painting since the 16th century (which in 2008 inspired Amsterdam's *Rijksmuseum* to name a catalog it published of 19th century landscape painting *Spiegel van Holland*).² Contemporary advertising for tourism in the Netherlands also draws upon the same motifs found in the film.

In the postwar era – after the German carpet-bombings of 1940, which destroyed Rotterdam's industrial center – the mirror that Haanstra's film holds up to the Netherlands and the rest of the world is a restorative one. It functions as a conservative reassurance of geographical and cultural heritage, constructing an untainted, wholesome world and producing an image that can, to this day, reach consensus in the Netherlands. The image it presents is likely even acceptable within the circle of Geert Wilders' right-wing populists, whose cultural policies otherwise pit national folklore against the "leftist hobby" of avant-garde and contemporary art.

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Reflection

²Suijver: *Spiegel van Holland: het mooiste van de Haagse School in het Rijksmuseum*. Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 2008.

³Excerpt from Geert Wilders' PVV party program: "Kunstsubsidies, daar stoppen we mee. [...] Er wordt niet getornd aan mooie lokale tradities: het kievitseieren zoeken in Friesland, carnaval in Limburg etc." (<http://www.pvv.nl/images/stories/verkiezingen2012/VerkiezingsProgramma-PVV-2012-final-web.pdf>, p. 45), last accessed 1/2014.

Haanstra's subjective camera democratizes – and anonymizes – a “heroic quest” that both represents the water and refracts it. Despite the initial impression the film leaves as a Dutch modernist counterpart to the Austrian and German Heimat films of the 1950s, its iconography is more complex. The camera travels through nature that is actually not nature at all; the landscapes we see are no less technologically constructed than Ivens' harbor bridge. All water (the motif linking Ivens and Haanstra) is channeled, and all land is artificially reclaimed. The film functions, then, on two levels. It is an idyll for an audience of foreign tourists and Cannes viewers, and an interior description of the Netherlands as cyberspace and the history of the country ever since the moment water was first redirected using automated windmills in the 13th century.

This double meaning is already present in the title, which is coded for both internal and external recognition. For outsiders, “Holland” refers to the entire country of the Netherlands. For the Dutch, however, it is only used to designate the lower coastal provinces between Den Helder and Dordrecht (including Amsterdam, Den Haag and Rotterdam). From the romanticizing perspective of the outsider, water carries the film. From the Dutch perspective, however, this is much more ambivalent: as an element, water governs the film and is also governed by it. As is typical for the Netherlands, the entire landscape is defined by the duality of water and not-water. On the one hand, water shapes the land. Yet on the other hand, its amorphous mass must also be canalized and controlled. The film translates this physical geography into a psychogeography. Water becomes a medium, reflecting the landscape into the viewer's eye and taking the viewer on a trip. The historical struggle against water remains a sublimated presence and intensifies our viewing pleasure.

Two technical constructions are doubled in the water simultaneously: the landscape and the lens of the camera. The water also serves as the prism – the projection screen – in which both of these constructions refract and collapse into one another. Haanstra's camera uses the reflective surface of the water as an auxiliary lens that mutates uncontrollably between wide-angle/teleconverter lens, anamorphic lens and effect filter.⁴ The contest between the formation of land through water and the formation of water through land is doubled in the battle between camera and water to form image. In this, the film perpetuates the visual language established by the likes of Monet, van Gogh and Feininger, producing impressionistic images of nature and expressionistic images of architecture and cities.

⁴It is interesting to note that at this same time, Dutch optics manufacturer *Old Delft* introduced an anamorphic lens called *Delrama* to the market. In the USA, this was sold under the name *Vistascope*.

Inevitably, *Spiegel van Holland* simply does away with the dichotomy of man and environment, nature and culture. The Holland we see reflected in the film is all things at once. Romantic transcendental philosophy is presented as reconciled: reflection is refraction (breaking), but not fracture (brokenness). Quite on the contrary, the film establishes an unbroken historical continuity between the “gouden eeuw” and modernity. Modernist dissonance, both in the filmic image and the film’s music, is only present as a sort of flavor-enhancer, continually dissolving back into harmony.

In this way, the film delivers the overall aesthetic package of a watered-down modernity: appropriations from Impressionism and Dutch landscape painting are counterbalanced against the visual language of constructivist film montage and expressionist image distortion. With its tense dramaturgy indebted to the late Romantic period, the film’s soundtrack by Max Vredenburg (a composer and music critic who studied with Paul Dukas) harmonizes with this moderate modernism as well. If anything extreme can be found in *Spiegel van Holland*, it is the latent oversaturation of its idyll: an oversaturation that is technically filtered out (or, in Dutch, “omzeilt”, sailed around) through the film’s constructivist use of black-and-white.

Parody

A later film for which Haanstra provided both special effects and editing, Wim van der Linden’s *Summer in the Fields* (1967), shows us that he was familiar with these extremes. This film likewise displays all the idylls of Dutch country life, albeit in wide, 2.35:2 Cinemascope with oversaturated colors that exaggerate these motifs to the point of camp-parody. The film begins with a close-up on a field of flowers, cuts to a rabbit hopping along a riverbank, a farmhouse behind a river bridge, grazing cows: a sequence that repeats the imagery of *Spiegel van Holland*’s opening with slight variation. The next shot, however, is not a nature motif; instead, we see a close-up of a farmer sitting on a tractor and plowing a field. Both the filmic and musical language are clearly inspired by Hollywood. The score – written by composer Mischa Mengelberg, whose work combines New Music, Free Jazz and improvisation – consists of orchestral music punctuated by sparkling harp glissandi. The film’s opening serves as a pre-credit sequence appearing prior to the film’s titles, which, in the style of mainstream cinema, are harmoniously arranged within the image of the moving plow.

The title sequence ends with the title, “A Genuine SAD MOVIE.” *Tulips* (NL 1966). These films were produced in collaboration with two Dutch *Fluxus* artists and icons

of 1960s counterculture: Willem de Ridder and Wim T. Schippers. Schippers, who achieved notoriety in the 1970s due to a series of anarchic television programs directed by Van der Linden, wrote all of the screenplays for the *Sad Movies* series. These films combine exaggerations of the Heimat-film and Popart, uniting these in a conceptualism that operates via subversive over-affirmation. Retrospectively, this can be read as the Western European counterpart to the sort of subversive over-affirmation employed by underground Eastern European conceptual art as a subversive tactic against the communist aesthetic regime.

The title sequence is followed by postcard-like pictures of the tractor and its driver. Already exaggerated with irony, these details are shot in totally saturated technicolor, producing an almost Mondrian-like palette of stereotypically Dutch colors: the farmer's white shirt, deep blue suit and deep red handkerchief combine to form the Netherlands' national flag, while the orange of his tractor echoes the color of the Dutch Royal House. The farmer glances at his watch. A coffee cup on a checkered tablecloth is suddenly superimposed next to his head, like a thought-bubble representing a stereotypical element of Dutch "gezelligheid": the "kopje koffie." Next, a hard cut takes us into the interior of a farmhouse, where we see the farmer's young wife standing in the kitchen, dressed in traditional Dutch clothing and lecturing her daughter. This is the film's first dialogue. Surprisingly, it is in English with Dutch subtitles. As this is the typical way Hollywood films are presented in the Netherlands, it functions as an additional American-style alienation element, counteracting the pretense of the Heimat-film.

The woman, too, wears the Dutch national colors: white stockings, a blue and white house-dress and a red headscarf. In clogs, she exits the house and walks by milk churns (recalling *Spiegel van Holland*), bringing a picnic basket adorned with flowers to her husband in the field. The film illustrates her walk through a rapidly edited sequence of animal and nature scenes: a close-up of a sheepdog, a galloping flock of sheep, a billy-goat, a cow, a horse grazing on the dike, swans in a pond, ducks, a butterfly in flight. This is followed by a medium long shot of a river ferry, and the woman's ferry ride with the ferryman, who, wearing a blue suit and taking a cigarette from a red-and-white Lucky Strike package, embodies an Americanized version of the Dutch national flag. Their conversation consists of exaggeratedly banal small talk about the weather.

The encounter between wife and husband in the field initially begins as a picture-postcard idyll of wholesome country life. But this topples at the moment when they actually meet, and the husband scolds his wife for not being punctual. In the following shots of the man picnicing and the woman holding the picnic basket, the

intensified sweetness of the film's soundtrack compensates for the lack of dramatic action. At this point, the film turns into a musical, neutralizing the previous scene. In the style of a Gene Kelly film and accompanied by the yearning strains of an orchestra, the farmer and his wife sing: "In the warmth of summertime, our glowing love blooms strong / both our hearts are so intertwined, it's just like in a song," followed by the refrain, "summer, summer in the fields."

Whereas *Summer in the Fields* cynically account for all forms of cultural conservatism. The fiction of the rural as the (allegedly) intact society is both grotesquely exaggerated and counteracted through Brechtian moments of alienation – such as the husband's sudden outbreak of aggression towards his wife.

With the introduction of song, the dramaturgy of the eleven-minute-long film changes. The song begins six minutes into the film and doesn't stop until one minute before the film's ending. Cut between shots of the singing couple, we see images of rabbits and ducks. A strange noise can be heard, initially mixed with the music. As we see in the following shot, this noise stems from two fighter planes flying above the field. Once again we see close-ups of pigs, geese and horses. A shot of a defecating cow accompanied by farting sounds pushes the film definitively into slapstick comedy.

Whether intentionally or not, the film contributes to a pop cultural renewal of precisely the regional *Heimat* and *Schlager* aesthetic it sets out to satirize. In the Netherlands, "Schlager" is a genre of popular music sung in the native tongue. In terms of its distribution and the socio-cultural background of its audience, it can be likened to a similar German and Austrian musical genre, also called "Schlager." What was still new in *Summer in the Fields* – campy exaggeration and fecally grotesque humor – has not only been integrated into contemporary forms of music such as Ballermann-Techno Schlager (a genre which is just as widespread in the Netherlands as it is in Germany and Austria): it has become a crucial component.

Summer in the Fields ends with a long shot of the farmer on the tractor, plowing his field towards the sunset. This image is accompanied by bombastic closing chords and a lofty voiceover performed in the style of a propaganda film, praising the farmer's sacrificial service to family, fatherland and all humankind. Even if the sunset forms an additional parallel to *Spiegel van Holland*, this section of the film no longer caricatures the Netherlands. Instead, it imitates the classic closing shot of the cowboy riding into the sunset in the American Western.

Van der Linden's appropriations of American film aesthetics are crafted to perfection. In this sense, Pop Art forms a parallel to the 1920s and 30s avant-garde city symphony aesthetic employed in *Spiegel van Holland*, on the other hand, the history of World War II is nothing but an implicit presence.

When the parodic *Sad Movie*-style was later incorporated (Dutch: "poldering," which refers to the reclamation of land from water) into the stuffy, folkloric "Schlager" genre, Van der Linden himself was an active participant in the process. In the 1970s, he worked in Germany as a television director for ARD's *Plattenküche*, a show moderated by Frank Zander and Helga Feddersen, which served as a precursor to the infamous 1980s pop show, *Bananas*.

The female character in *Summer in the Fields* might have already been familiar to German audiences: her appearance, manner and rural setting bears striking similarity to the commercial character *Frau Antje*, who, wearing a traditional costume from the fishing town of Volendam, has advertised Dutch cheese to German television audiences since 1961⁵. Whether *Frau Antje* – who in Germany is believed to be a national icon in the same vein as *Uncle Sam* or *Der Deutscher Michel*, yet remains virtually unknown in the Netherlands – actually served as a model for the film, however, is unclear.

Romanticism

Spiegel van Holland and *Summer in the Fields* pull out all the stops of European Romanticism and mash them together: romantic irony and parody (in the sense of which *Summer in the Fields* is structurally no different than Ludwig Tieck's *Puss in Boots*); the transcendental poetics of infinite self-reflection (which, in); the romanticism of natural beauty (first established by Kant); folkloric and national romanticism; the music of the late Romantic period and a penchant (found in Haanstra as well as his forerunners, Ruttman, Vertov and Ivens) for the symphonic *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Maybe this sort of thing is inevitable when national culture and national iconography undergo the sort of systematic declension found in both of these films.

Yet this is not the grammar of an allegorical language; nor is it a poetics shaped by religion or feudalism. Instead, it unfolds the romantic symbols of a liberal, democratic aesthetics in an experiential, inductive way. At those points where

⁵Here, too, the parody quickly caught up with its paradigm: as early as 1978, *Frau Antje* could be seen interviewing a cow in an advertisement (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=700Q_5VdPLA), last accessed 1/2014.

Summer in the Fields shows the blind spots of this democratism – for example, in the super white ethnic coding of Dutch rural culture – this occurs with an elitist wrinkle of the nose. Here, the “autonomy” of art in the Netherlands, which since the work of the 19th century liberal politician Johan Rudolph Thorbecke extends beyond aesthetic theory into the law, acts as a classic social regulator. Thanks to the state of exception granted to artists, the paradox arises that a (theoretically) egalitarian society can no longer regard itself critically from an external perspective. In *Spiegel van Holland*, it is the camera’s refusal to take on this outside perspective – its rigid fixation on the water – that ultimately makes the film unanimously agreeable, democratic and thus also: an excellently mediocre artwork.

Bibliography

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Excerpt from Geert Wilders’ PVV party program: “Kunstsubsidies, daar stoppen we mee. [...] Er wordt niet getornd aan mooie lokale tradities: het kievitseieren zoeken in Friesland, carnaval in Limburg etc.”,

<http://www.pvv.nl/images/stories/verkiezingen2012/VerkiezingsProgramma-PVV-2012-final-web.pdf>, p. 45, last accessed 1/2014.