CHAPTER 1

Analysing Images of Dutchness: From Stereotype to National Cliché

DOI: 10.5117/9789462983007_CH01

ABSTRACT

This chapter explains methods and approaches for the study of popular visual culture before 1914. The objective of the following study is to shed light on a semiotic process: the attribution of meaning to cultural artefacts, which result in supposed common knowledge and, as part of it, national clichés. The concepts “performative” and “performance” as well as “intermediality” are introduced as suitable approaches for investigating visual material in conjunction with its textual comments. The outlined research frame is designed to historicize the categories (Dutch, Dutchness, and the Netherlands), the visual content (the image-objects, motifs, and clichés), and the attributed meaning (textual comment performed at specific venues).

KEYWORDS
visual culture – methods; media history – methods; stereotypes; intermediality; performativity
1.1 INTRODUCTION

This study investigates the role of visual media in the creation of supposed common knowledge about the Netherlands between c. 1800 and 1914. Two expressions will recur throughout the chapters: “supposed common knowledge” and “images of Dutchness”. As stated in the Introduction, the research question concerns itself with knowledge production, while the data to answer it are “images of Dutchness”. It is crucial to be aware of this distinction, as the analysis of the aesthetics and meanings of the images is not at the centre of the research question itself, but a means to answer it. In addition to these two expressions, a number of highly polysemic terms will be used as conceptual tools. This chapter defines the terminology, outlines the approach to the historical material, and situates this research in the field of history of Western popular visual culture.

I use the term “popular”, not qualitatively to distinguish between lowbrow and highbrow culture, but quantitatively as a synonym to “widely disseminated”; “media” to signify a technology and form of transmitting information; “text” and “word” exclusively for written and spoken words; “image” in reference to a material object (an artefact) whose visual information goes beyond the material of the carrier and what is perceived as an image; and “motif” to describe the visual content of these images. The term “image” therefore does not refer to mental representations (which I will refer to as “ideas”). I have chosen the formula “supposed common knowledge” over the more widely used term “stereotype” to better account for the implicit normative ideas regarding what people of a given community are expected to know. Furthermore, supposed common knowledge is not primarily linked to cognitive questions of representation. Supposed common knowledge is defined as a conceptual tool to describe a specific form of knowledge against the backdrop of the stereotype.

Images of the Netherlands and the Dutch appeared in various visual media (see Chapter 2). My corpus consists of images that were disseminated widely. All of these popular images came with textual comment and were shown to, performed for, and seen by audiences at various venues and in different countries. For the investigated period, I observed a relative stability and persistence of media and media formats, a relative stability and persistence of recurring motifs, and a relative instability of meaning attribution and tex-
tual comment. Neither motif nor aesthetics, neither attributed meaning nor appreciation, nor critique of the images differ significantly along the lines of place of production or nationality of the commenting person. A comparison of self-images with outsider’s images therefore appeared too simple. To describe the complexity of the “nationality” of images, the concept of Dutchness proved useful. In addition, I will use the concept of “Otherness” to analyse the descriptions of people and places. In order to better account for the various functions that word and image combinations can have, I will introduce the distinction “national-as-bracket” and “national-as-descriptor” in Chapter 4.

Despite technological differences between media and therefore differences in production methods and the material of carriers, the motifs resemble one another across different media and appear very stable and persistent during the investigated period, especially from c. 1870 onwards. Consequently, it seemed inadequate to present the research purely chronologically or to compare e.g. images of the Netherlands in film to images of the Netherlands in illustrated magazines. To describe the recurrence of motifs across media, I make use of the concept of transmediality (see below).

The most significant differences are found in the textual comments to the images. Textual comment is crucial in the process of attributing meaning to images. By understanding this process as performative (thus not fully determined by image or comment alone), I can account for the observation that the same motif – at times even the same image – can be commented on in several ways. Recurring patterns in meaning attribution can be distinguished from one another by assigning them to specific discourses. This gave reason to organize the analysis of the material according to discourses (anthropology, geography, and tourism) and not along the more commonly applied lines of chronology, origin, or medium. I provided motivation for this choice in the Introduction.

1.2 SUPPOSED COMMON KNOWLEDGE AND THE STEREOTYPE

The Stereotype across the Disciplines

Generally, within the humanities, the phenomenon of recurring formulas or patterns in media is described in terms of the stereotype. In the key publication on the topic in the field of cinema studies, *Film and Stereotype*, Jörg Schweinitz (2011) traces the various uses of the term “stereotype” across the disciplines. In social psychology, the term “stereotype” refers to “standardized conceptions of people, primarily based on an individual’s belonging to a category” (Schweinitz 2011, 4). In this discipline, the formation of stereotypes
refers to mental and cognitive processes in order to analyse belief patterns and how these patterns influence attitudes on and perception of other groups of people (Cf. Schweinitz 2011, 5). The verbal articulation of stereotypes are also studied in (comparative) literature studies (Cf. Beller and Leerssen 2007). In linguistics, fixed lexeme connections are defined as verbal stereotypes. Patterns used in specific situations that are “conventionally used to say certain things” (Coulmas 1981, 3) are also named stereotypes.

Visual Expressions of the Stereotype

As these examples have shown, not all phenomena that are commonly designated by the term “stereotype” have a visual or textual component. For the study of visual expressions of stereotypes, I turn to its conceptualization in art history. In art history, the stereotype is used to “describe conventionally fixed and recurrent structural patterns of representation” (Schweinitz 2011, 21). According to art historian Arnold Hauser, artists need to deal creatively with this fact as long as they want to share and communicate: artistic representations need to make use of the already known and transform it, because something completely unrelated necessarily remains incomprehensible to the audience (cf. Hauser 1982, 21). Art historian Ernst H. Gombrich uses the terms “pattern” and “formula” to mark that he “understands stereotypes as particularly stable schemata of visual or artistic representation, which can be considered conventional within a given art-historical formation” (Schweinitz 2011, 23; referring to Gombrich 1983, 148). In his study *Art and Illusion*, Gombrich shows the strong impact of conventions in Western art that influence pictorial representations in visual representations of the external world. To Gombrich, the distinction between the stereotype as specific schema or convention either in the mind of the artist or in pattern books on the one side and the realizations in the individual works of art on the other is highly important to analyse various ways in which artists adapt stereotypes into clichés. In Gombrich’s conceptualization, the stereotype is very explicitly an idea, the abstract pattern behind the image but never the concrete, material image. The adaptation of a stereotype in e.g. a painting or a photograph results in a cliché, not a “stereotypical image”.

For my analysis, I will follow Gombrich’s distinction of “cliché” and “stereotype”: in this definition, the stereotype designates the mental concept, the cliché is the realization of this mental concept in an image (Cf. Gombrich 1983, 61) or, better, in images. Only through comparative analysis, so is my conviction, can one identify the recurrence of a motif and discern conventions in depiction.
Before recurring motifs can be understood as clichés, the stereotype that is expressed in the cliché needs to be reconstructed. The cliché is not equal to a single image or a recurring motif; it is only by relating the observed recurrence of motifs to a mental concept – the stereotype – that the recurring motifs can be understood as cliché to visualize the stereotype. In other words: it is only possible to understand the motif of an image as a cliché against the interpretative backdrop of the stereotype. Whereas “image” and “recurring motifs” describe material, visible phenomena, “cliché” and “stereotype” are cognitive concepts. These levels are, of course, only distinguishable in theory; in practice, both are related in a dynamic process: mental constructions are both manifested in and are based on material objects such as images.

Two types of studies that investigate visual expressions of the stereotype are dominant. They take either a deductive or an inductive approach. A deductive study of stereotypes investigates how mental concepts are visualized. Starting from a mental concept, these studies investigate which instances – in visual matter, motifs – figure as corresponding clichés. Once the cliché is identified, expressions of the stereotype can be traced via the appearance of the cliché in a body of images and texts. An example for such a research question is: “How are the mental concepts ‘the Dutch’ and ‘the Netherlands’ visualized? Which motifs are used to express the concepts ‘the Dutch’ and ‘the Netherlands’”? Here, the mental concept appears as the defining criterion for the classification. Such research can result in an inventory of motifs that illustrate a concept. In the case of continually recurring motifs, a cliché can be identified. A conclusion would state, e.g. that the concept “the Netherlands” is usually visualized by the motifs “windmill” and “clogs” and not by fast cars and evening gowns and that these motifs are found in the images A, B, and C. The motifs “windmill” and “clogs” can now be understood as clichés for the expression of the concept “the Netherlands”.

An inductive study of stereotypes starts at the other end. Departing from the observed phenomenon of a recurrence of motifs, it searches for corresponding mental concepts to subsequently identify the recurring motifs as clichés. A research question of the inductive approach is: “To what do these hundreds of images with the recurring motif of windmills next to a canal relate?” Then, different suggestions for the interpretation of the recurring motif are made. Is the motif a cliché to illustrate the mental concept of a windmill, waterways, or Dutch landscapes? In this approach, the recurring motif (not the cliché) is the criterion of classification. As a result, various semantic fields associated with the motif and the variety of mental concepts, that the motif of a windmill next to a canal can stand for, can be traced.

Both approaches presuppose one element at their point of departure: either clichés are searched to represent the already-defined stereotype, or a
concept is searched to explain the phenomenon of recurring patterns of an already-defined motif. Both approaches elucidate different cognitive aspects in the coupling of concept and expression, generalized abstraction and concrete instances, stereotype and cliché. Although it is possible to use the concept of the stereotype in historical research, e.g. for diachronic studies on how visualizations of a concept change over time, it is neither possible to investigate the social, cultural, and historical dimensions in the process of coupling a concept to a limited number of expressions, nor to explain what the images mean or meant. Even when used to investigate aesthetics, the stereotype is defined as a cognitive entity and is not used to describe the (material) images. If scholars judge an image as stereotypical, this is most often the conclusion of an analysis of images that made use of other tools to analyse the meaning of a certain motif, e.g. Barthes’ concept of anchorage as outlined in his famous essay “Rhetoric of the Image” (Barthes 1977); criteria from art history for the description of images, iconography, cultural traditions of symbols and allegories etc.

Research into stereotypes would possibly find that windmills and clogs often are present in images referring to the Netherlands – but, through these stereotypes, the question of what people got to know through these images, which attitudes about the Netherlands and the Dutch were broadly shared, cannot be fully answered. The conceptualization of the stereotype is not designed for investigating semiotic processes. Precisely this, the attribution of meaning to images of the Netherlands and the Dutch, is central to this thesis (see Introduction). I thus opted to approach my material through the concept “supposed common knowledge”. Rather than alternatives, I see that supposed common knowledge is a broader category that contains, but is not limited to, stereotypical thinking and its expression in clichés. As I will argue below, both forms of knowledge are reductive and incomplete, but, in contrast to the stereotype, supposed common knowledge does not exclusively rely on standardized forms and therefore accounts better for my research question.

Rediscovering historical, visual material and investigating the processes in which an image of the Netherlands eventually becomes an image of Dutchness requires another route for the research. I started by trying to consider (at least conceptually) all images that claim to inform about the Netherlands and the Dutch in a realist way and that circulated widely in the long nineteenth century. I then clustered recurring motifs and comments to subsequently derive patterns in the ways in which visual material functions in the knowledge production about the Netherlands and the Dutch. Although my corpus of about 3000 images is not suitable for absolute quantitative statements, I am convinced that it indicates a relative prominence of used motifs and ascribed meaning, which is telling about patterns.
I believe that there are two advantages in looking into a big corpus of images without limiting oneself to images that display clichés of (today’s) stereotypes of the Netherlands and the Dutch. For one reason, this approach is less likely to presuppose what one is about to find out: had I limited myself to images of windmills and people wearing clogs, I could have verified that this was a popular motif indeed. However, the gained knowledge would have been quite poor. Another reason for this conceptual openness was the possibility to include the “non-cliché images” in the generation of supposed common knowledge as well. I could trace which meanings were attributed to images of the Netherlands and the Dutch without the necessity to define beforehand if the image in question used a cliché. Furthermore, the openness led to my observation that, over the course of time, the motifs used for expressing the concepts “the Netherlands” and “the Dutch” became limited to a relatively small number that functioned as clichés. I could not have observed this if I had not considered the “non-cliché images” in my research.

From the above follows that the cliché in my research plays a different role than it does in stereotype theory. The cliché is neither the starting point nor the result nor the central object of the research question. Clichés are visual expressions of the stereotype and, as such, they are part of supposed common knowledge about the Netherlands and the Dutch. Clichés can also be valuable evidence of assumptions of “what one supposedly knows”; however, there is something more to supposed common knowledge than stereotypes and clichés. To account for this “something more”, I will now outline differences between these two kinds of knowledge.

From Stereotype to Supposed Common Knowledge

Supposed common knowledge and the stereotype have in common that they are reductive and simplifying. This notwithstanding, there is a difference in the way the reduction of complexity is achieved. The stereotype is a systematic, highly organized form of knowledge, as the attributions “formulaic”, “schematic”, and “composite” imply. This stands in sharp contrast to the cumulative and fuzzy character of what people at a given time in a given community believe or (are supposed to) know. The reduction of complexity into supposed common knowledge is not organized formulaically i.e. not systematically. Although supposed common knowledge is the result of a non-organized selection process, this kind of knowledge does not invite readers/viewers to evaluate its content critically. Everyone can contribute to supposed common knowledge: the scholar of ethnography as much as the neighbour who returns from her holidays or even someone who hears something on the radio. Person-
al experiences and scholarly research; anecdotes and historical facts; eclectic information on villages, cities, and buildings; on weather, landscape, and customs all feed into “what everyone knows”. No graspable authority assembled this corpus of statements and bits of information. These statements are not necessarily coherent, nor are they exclusive. If “everyone knows” that the Dutch are a nation of fishermen, it is nonetheless possible to admire their diplomatic tradition. Supposed common knowledge about people and places is implicitly or explicitly tied to claims of truth, and thus visual representations of realism and authenticity – stereotypes do not necessarily make this claim. In addition, supposed common knowledge offers the individual an easy way to make statements without questioning or taking responsibility for the things said. An individual can answer the question “how do you know that the Dutch wear wooden shoes?” with “because everyone knows it” or with reference to “common sense”. Thereby, a statement is confirmed by repeating a presupposed content by reference to a norm (reiterating both the body of knowledge and its attribution) – without further justification or arguments. The normative implication of supposed common knowledge opens the statements made in its name to interrogation from an ethical perspective; this dimension is absent in the concept of the stereotype.  

By definition, supposed common knowledge belongs to the realm of the popular. The fact that something is supposed to be known commonly requires relatively invariant and fixed forms – if not, one’s own knowledge would not be convergent with everyone else’s. Supposed common knowledge and the stereotype thus share that both draw on “fixed forms”, which are “repeatedly reproduced” and as a result “very persistent” (Cf. Schweinitz 2011, 26). However, the degree of both fixity and persistency of supposed common knowledge cannot be as high as in the stereotype. The absence of systematization in supposed common knowledge allows the inclusion or exclusion of details as one sees fit (which ensures its functionality to divergent discourses and for a wide range of communicative aims) without being marked or perceived as an adaptation. The concepts of stereotype and supposed common knowledge differ strongly in their relation to truth. As Schweinitz rightly points out, criticizing the stereotype for not representing the world in its complex variety misses the point as the stereotype by definition is a kind of schema, thus reductive and formulaic (Cf. Schweinitz 2011, 36–39). As outlined above, supposed common knowledge is not systematically reductive or schematic; the question whether its statements are true or false therefore becomes more intricate. In the course of my research, I rarely came across a statement about the Netherlands and the Dutch that is explicitly false – there are people who wear wooden shoes, there are windmills, some people do paint their houses in colourful varnish, and cheese actually is produced in the Netherlands. The problem here
is not so much one of true versus distorted or false representation, but one of synecdoche / *pars pro toto*. The focus of attention then lies on the question of which bits of information and which statements are supposed to be “commonly known”. Consequently, this research inquires the status of the (always) partial knowledge in relation to claims of comprehensiveness. Supposed common knowledge and the stereotype share the aspect of being established by convention, but the established conventions are situated on different levels. Supposed common knowledge is not the result of conventionalized *cognitive processes* but of conventionalized *social and cultural practices* that result in statements about a certain topic that members among a given community are supposed to know.

Having conceptualized supposed common knowledge this way enables me to pose questions about the process of linking objects with cultural and historical meanings as well as questions about how “everyone” is addressed to make sense of and relate to the images and statements.

1.3 NATIONALITY, NATIONALISM, NATIONNESS: THE NETHERLANDS, DUTCH, DUTCHNESS

Alongside concepts to investigate the meaning of images, as discussed above, analytical concepts for the discussion of the “nationality of images” are required.

What is Dutch or what makes something or someone Dutch is not a question first asked in the age of postmodernity; it has been asked (and answered) in various ways and with different intentions ever since the national became an important category of difference in the early nineteenth century (see Chapters 3 and 4). Debates about possible meanings of Dutchness have a history, too. What is Dutch concerning *cultural heritage* was of great importance to the intellectual elite in the Netherlands as early as the first half of the nineteenth century. Joep Leerssen shows in *De bronnen van het vaderland. Taal, literatuur en de afbakening van Nederland 1806-1890* (2006) how many efforts were taken in attempts to firmly root the Netherlands and the Dutch in a cultural tradition that is older than these national categories themselves. Leerssen particularly investigates the role of literature critiques in the creation of a cultural national tradition. With the tale of Reynard the fox, Leerssen illustrates how cultural heritage retrospectively has become nationalized by historiographers and confronts the conflicting claims of German, Belgium, Dutch, and French intellectuals who interpret this tale as part of “their” national cultural heritage (Cf. Leerssen 2006).

In addition to the question of “national identity” of cultural heritage,
many Dutch intellectuals of the nineteenth century pondered which qualities are or should be related to “Dutch identity”. Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) defined the Dutch as a spiritual unity of (orthodox) Protestants; consequently, he saw the Dutch nation as a Protestant nation with Calvinism as its core (Cf. Kuiper 1993). In the second half of the nineteenth century, liberals claimed to embody the “typically’ Dutch spirit of the Golden Age” and thereby the “essence of national tradition” (te Velde 1993, 62), too. Decades later, Johan Huizinga (1872-1945) drew on this tradition to define the Dutch first and foremost as burgerlijk (Cf. te Velde 1993). The affiliation of the province of Limburg is another case in point: in 1866, Limburg was fully separated from Prussia and joined the United Provinces of the Netherlands. At that time, the local political elite defined themselves not as essentially Dutch; their anti-Prussian feelings were at least as important as Dutch national sentiments (Cf. op den Camp 1993, 86). Only when the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1871 threatened the sovereignty of Limburg did the Limburg elite emphasize their belonging to the United Provinces of the Netherlands. Despite differences in landscape, language, religion, and history, the Limburgers felt that they were best off within the Dutch state and its tradition of “toleration of cultural differences” (op den Camp 1993, 103).

This selection of definitions of Dutchness already shows that the question “what is Dutch” can be posed with various intentions. The multiple answers prove that so-called Dutch attitudes and qualities never have been defined in a univocal or consensual way. The search for a generally accepted and encompassing definition of Dutchness is as old as it has proved to be unachievable. However, it is not possible to abandon the categories “Dutchness” and “Dutch (national) identity” altogether in a study on “images of Dutchness”; not least because parts of the various answers to the question of “what Dutch is” fed into the fuzzy, eclectic, and cumulative body of supposed common knowledge. I thus suggest rephrasing the question to inquire about Dutchness. Instead of trying to define Dutchness and then discuss whether an image represents Dutchness correctly, desirably, adequately or not, I will ask which definitions of Dutchness are offered and which function a particular construction of Dutchness fulfils.

In order to account for various functionalities of questions concerning the “nationality” of cultural products, a more elaborate understanding of the national is indispensable. This need increases when products are disseminated and produced for an international market. Popular images of the Netherlands and the Dutch are produced by manufactures based in various countries. What is, then, the nationality of a film showing a coastal town in the Netherlands, taken by a Belgian cameraman for a French production company, distributed all over the world? What is the nationality of an image taken
in a British studio, showing a woman with props and clothes that are associated with the Netherlands, reprinted in a German illustrated magazine? Confronted with similar questions in her study of early films on America’s West, Nanna Verhoeff designed three layers of the national: nationality, nationalism, and nationness. According to her definition, the national refers to the origin of the product in question – e.g. the site of the headquarters of the production company. The second layer, the nationalist, refers to questions of cultural ownership and/or belonging – e.g. the place of the filmed sites. With cultural products becoming available on an increasingly international market, the demand for recognizable distinctions between national products has increased, too. The third layer, nationness, is linked to this demand. Verhoeff defines nationness as a “bundle of features that cater to a recognizable taste that becomes fashionable” (Verhoeff 2006, 160). Nationness implies both recognizable images and a recognizable style of these images that, in the case of early film, is often associated with the nationality of the production company. Despite all efforts, the content of the category of nationness itself is never fully defined and remains in constant transition. Verhoeff observes that early Pathé films about America’s West “foreground an unstable ‘nationness’ that draws attention to the impossibility of pinning them [the films] down in terms of nationality” (Verhoeff 2006, 172).

This impossibility of pinning down internationally distributed images in terms of nationality also applies to popular images of the Netherlands and the Dutch before the invention of cinema and in nonfiction genres. In the Netherlands as well as in its neighbouring countries and in North America, the nationality (i.e. the origin) of images that circulated massively was foremost British, French, and German (see Chapter 2). Nationalism and nationness of images are not determined as easily as nationality. A certain motif may be claimed or discarded to express cultural belonging, and fashions change over time as well. Looking into textual comments on the image gives insight into the meanings that an image came to stand in for; the meaning is, to a large extent, external to the images themselves.

Nations and Their Others

In the course of the nineteenth century, aspects that were seen as characteristic of a nation were often defined against their (assumed) difference to others. The terms “The Other” and “Otherness” (with capital O), contrasted to the “self”, are employed in different disciplines of the humanities. For my research, I will follow the application of these terms as outlined in postcolonial studies, as, in that field of study, these terms are used to investigate the
production of knowledge about people and places. In postcolonial studies, Otherness is the result of the ways in which the colonizers explain, imagine, and allocate the people in the colonies as radically different from themselves. One key publication in this field of study is Homi Bhabha’s essay collection *The Location of Culture* (Bhabha 1994a). In his famous essay “The Other Question. Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism” (Bhabha 1994b), Bhabha proposes a shift in the (functionality of) analysis of colonial discourse. Instead of discussing whether texts use aesthetics that are ethically acceptable or not, he asks which positions of collective identities are (re-)constructed.

My reading of colonial discourse suggests that the point of intervention should shift from the ready recognition of images as positive or negative, to an understanding of *processes of subjectification* made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse. To judge the stereotypical image on the basis of a prior political normativity is to dismiss it, not to displace it, which is only possible by engaging with its *effectivity*, with the repertoire of positions of power and resistance, domination and dependence that constructs colonial identification subject (both colonizer and colonized). [...] In order to understand the productivity of colonial power it is crucial to construct its regime to truth, not to subject its representations to a normalizing judgment. (Bhabha 1994b, 67 original emphasis)

In the following section of the essay, Bhabha emphasizes the function of knowledge production in colonial discourse (Cf. Bhabha 1994b, 70). This knowledge “employs a system of representation, a regime of truth, that is structurally similar to realism” (Bhabha 1994b, 71). This allusion to realism makes the content of knowledge appear true, which, in turn, facilitates the acceptance of the meaning that is ascribed to the perceived differences, not as an interpretation, but as reality. Bhabha quotes a passage of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*:

[A]nyone employing orientalism, which is the habit for dealing with questions, objects, qualities, and regions deemed to be Oriental, will designate, name, point to, fix what he is talking or thinking about with a word or phrase, which then is considered either to have acquired, or more simply, to be, reality. (Said 2003, 72; quoted in Bhabha 1994b, 71)

Orientalist discourse, just as colonial discourse in general, produces knowledge in the rhetoric of realism resulting in ideas of reality and truth about the colonies for the Western or European reader. As Bhabha, Said, and other
postcolonial scholars have argued, the people and places described in colonial discourse are constructed as opposed, i.e. as Other, to the European white male. Differences, not similarities, are emphasized. The perceived differences of “the Other” are neither meaningless nor neutral. While the European colonizers conceive of themselves as the norm (and get away with it because the drastic asymmetry in power is in their favour) they define the peoples in the colonies as “Others”, as deviants from the norm. Colonial discourse thereby positions the white man on top of a social hierarchy (i.e. as “normal”) with the peoples in the colonies on the bottom, as Others. The ascribed Otherness then served the European conqueror as proof of their superiority and as justification for colonialization.

Both the knowledge of colonial discourse and supposed common knowledge about the Netherlands and the Dutch claim (implicitly or explicitly) to inform objectively, truthfully, and in a realist way about people and places. In both postcolonial studies and this book, research questions inquire how readers/viewers are addressed to make sense of people and places. But the Dutch are not a minority group; on the contrary, the Netherlands was a colonial power itself. Are the same structures at play when people of colonial powers depict those of another one? This possibility is mentioned by postcolonial studies scholar Marie Louise Pratt in her analysis of nineteenth-century travel writings on colonies. *En passant*, she mentions that

> readers of European travel books about Europe have pointed out that many of the conventions and writing strategies I associate here with imperial expansionism characterize travel writing about Europe as well (Pratt 1992, 10)

but does not elaborate this thought further. Similarly, Anne McClintock shows how, within colonies and colonial states men excluded women from equal participation by using rhetorical strategies that are similar to colonial discourse. Socialists and working class members, too, were constructed as Other to the bourgeois nation state (McClintock 1997, 103). She adapts the concept of the Other exclusively for politically subjected positions.

The adaption of concepts designed to investigate representation and positioning of minoritized groups to the study of the Dutch needs some clarification. There are certain points that cannot be parallelized. First and foremost, the Netherlands and the Dutch were never marginalized or seen as abject. Even when seen as Other in the eyes of the commenting person (see Chapter 6.9), the consequences of this “Othering” are by no means comparable to the situation in the colonies: the Dutch were not conquered, shot, imprisoned, colonized, enslaved, or raped in the name of “civilization”; they were not forced to
organize their social life in foreign languages and according to alien institutions. Dutch people could speak and some did talk back against images they felt uncomfortable with, and no one risked their personal or physical integrity when doing so. In the case of the knowledge production on the Netherlands and the Dutch, being seen as Other does something with the Dutch (and not to them) – and some Dutch even contributed to the construction of their image.

Despite these differences, in the cases when the Netherlands and the Dutch are seen as Others, there are functions at play that I find relevant to analyse. I will take up Bhabha’s suggestion to study “the process by which forms of racial/cultural/historical otherness have been marginalized” (Bhabha 1994b, 67 original emphasis) because this process is, at least implicitly, related to the question of ascribing meaning to people and places that are perceived as different (unlike Bhabha, my main interest does not lie in the effects of these descriptions).

Marginalization is one possible result of making Otherness work. While marginalization is intrinsic to every colonial project, I believe that processes by which forms of Otherness are created can result in other positions and relations. When I borrow the concept of “the Other” from postcolonial studies, I draw on the expertise of postcolonial scholars to investigate various layers in the functions and mechanisms that are at play when depicting and describing people and places. If – what postcolonial theorists emphasize – colonialism was constitutive to the identity formation of Western states, then we can suspect the structures of colonial thinking to be at work within Western colonial nations as well. With respect to the depiction of people and places, we can thus expect to find forms of “Othering” even within and among Western societies.

To analyse the historical and cultural meanings of images of people and places (see Introduction), a careful analysis of ways in which difference is constructed and which judgments are connected to this difference is needed. I suggest to study the textual comment to visual material by means of discursive analysis with regards to the question: how and what are spectators addressed to see in the image put before them? Next to the investigation of the textual comment, the images need to be considered in order to account for the visual aspects in the relation between viewer/reader/audience and the presented combination of word and image. This requires a different approach than postcolonial studies, stemming from literary studies, usually takes.
After the definition of the relevant analytical concepts “supposed common knowledge” and “Dutchness”, I will explain the methodologies and approaches that I will apply to my analysis of image-text combinations.

Motifs Across Media

Within media studies, the circulation of similar motifs through various media is referred to as transmedia phenomenon or transmediality. Irina Rajewsky defines transmediality as medium unspecific phenomena in which matter, aesthetics, genres, and types of discourse appear in different media, and in which “the assumption of a contact-giving medium of origin is not important or possible, and would not be relevant for the constitution of meaning in the current medial product” (Rajewsky 2002, 12–13; translated in Englund 2010, 75).

This definition matches my observation of popular images of the Netherlands and the Dutch between 1800 and 1914. Matter, aesthetics, genres, and types of discourse do not change as such when used in different media or embedded in another discourse. Neither new media nor upcoming discourses produced new or specific motifs or employ new aesthetics per se (see Chapter 7). To account for the observation that the same motif – sometimes even the same image – was used to communicate various meanings, I propose a historical-pragmatic perspective, arguing that content changes when it is experienced or perceived differently (Cf. Elsaesser 1996; Kessler 2002). Experiencing content differently does not necessarily imply the use of new images or new media. On the contrary, “old” images can be experienced and perceived in a new way when the comment or the way of presentation is changed. To find out about the attribution of meaning to nonfiction visual material, the investigation of the combination of word and image and the ways in which these combinations are presented and performed proved highly relevant (see Introduction for the explanation of the lines of inquiry).

Analysing the Meaning of an Image (I):
The Image and its Textual Comments

Images of people and places with a claim to realism do not make sense out of themselves. Unlike e.g. Christian religious iconography, there is no explicit, symbolic coding in what the composition and gestures of people against a certain backdrop means. Nonfiction images of the Netherlands and the Dutch
only prove that this particular instance, place, building, or person existed (in reality or in fantasy) and appeared worthwhile painting, filming, or photographing – and that is about what can be derived from a single image when analysed in isolation from any other.

If we compare different images, we will find that some motifs appear more often than others. Although the prominence of a motif does not have a meaning in and of itself, it does have an impact on what can possibly be known. The availability of certain motifs (and the absence of others) produces and limits what “everyone” could have seen, what visually could have been experienced about the Netherlands and the Dutch. The images and the visual aspects (recurrent motifs and aesthetics) are relevant to describe the content of supposed common knowledge about the Netherlands even when no specific meaning follows directly from the material.

Almost all images in my corpus come with textual comments. Captions, titles, and intertitles suggest a direction of the spectator’s view towards what there is to be seen. Film-, stereo card- and lantern slide titles, readings, lectures, and catalogue descriptions indicate to the lecturer, projectionist, or audience the subject at hand. In order to be accepted as meaningful, the relation of image and text needs to be perceived other than as randomly or arbitrarily connected elements. Theoretically, any comment can be made on an image. In practice, this does not happen. Recurring combinations of patterns in image-text combinations can only be explained against an interpretative backdrop. Just as stereotypes figure as interpretative backdrops to attribute recurring patterns of motifs in images (see Chapter 1.2), discourses function as interpretative backdrops to the textual comments against which technology, statements, and images are perceived as specific image-text entities that “make sense”.

Attributing a statement or a combination of word and image to a discourse is, obviously, the result of inductive interpretation. These interpretations as well as the classification of discourses are mine. Yet, I claim my interpretations to be neither arbitrary nor subjective. The sections in illustrated magazines (e.g. “news from abroad”, “arts”, or travel descriptions), the publisher of a brochure (e.g. a tourist agency or a teacher’s committee), the title (e.g. Picturesque Travel through Holland or Ons Vaderland in Lichtbeeld), or the genre itself (e.g. tourist guidebook or geographical magazine) indicate a larger framework within which this material was situated.

I wish to emphasize the term “situated” here as it adds the dimension of venue to the analysis of meaning-making. A film shown in a vaudeville evening program, an ethnographic compendium available at a university library, a lantern show by the local society for geography, or advertising trade cards mounted in albums all situate word and image combinations literally. The making of meaning can thus be located.10
Having said this, I will not investigate concrete exhibition places, individual entertainers, and their specific strategies to draw and address local audiences. My analysis is restricted to examine possible ways in which images and textual comments were combined to convey information on the Netherlands and the Dutch. My study does not claim to inform about what really happened in actual viewing situations and what people got to know in a specific show, but it sketches the larger framework of circulating information on the Netherlands and the Dutch in word and image from which local lecturers could draw for their shows.

**Analysing the Meaning of an Image (II): Performative and Performance**

The discussion in the previous paragraphs showed that neither images nor the technological medium format make sense out of themselves. Images of the Netherlands and the Dutch are perceived as meaningful when combined with textual comment, displayed at specific venues. With the concepts of the performative and performance, I believe, we can tie together the different elements in the process of meaning-making and explain the observation that standardized, internationally distributed images can take various meanings.

The concepts “performative” and “performance” are used in various disciplines of the humanities. The concept “performative” goes back to John L. Austin’s theory of speech acts (1976). Austin observed that language does not always make statements about what is the case, but that it can also produce what it refers to. The statement “I cycle to Amsterdam” is an example of a constative utterance, i.e. a statement; it can be true or false. Austin’s examples for performative utterances are “I do take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife” or “I name this ship the Queen Elisabeth” (Cf. Austin 1976, 5). Obviously, these utterances can be neither false nor true; they can go wrong, be unhappy, or become infelicitous (Cf. Austin 1976, 14). Jonathan Culler summarizes:

> The essential thing about performative utterances is that they do not describe but perform – successfully or unsuccessfully – the action they designate. It is in pronouncing these words that I promise, order, or marry. (Culler 2000, 504–505)

The “success” of a performative utterance does not depend on the intention of the speaker or an inherent meaning of the statement, but on linguistic and social conventions. In adapting the performative to gender studies, Judith Butler has argued that it is not the authority of the speaker that is decisive for
the success or failure of the utterance, but the repeated citation (and recogni-
tion) of norms. Seen like that, everyone takes part in the repetition of norms
that create their own position (Cf. Butler 1993, 225–226; cited in Culler 2000,
514).

The textual comments to the images in my corpus are never phrased in
the form “I hereby declare the people in the images as (representative of the)
Dutch”. Still, the textual comments do exactly what performative utterances
do. For example, the caption “Dutch peasants” of an image displaying the
motif of people in traditional costume attributes meaning by proposing con-
text. In fact, this caption points to a polysemic image and turns the content of
the image into what the caption refers to.

From this observation follows that word and image combinations of non-
fiction images are inherently performative – not in the sense that the state-
ments literally produce what they refer to (the figures in traditional costume
would still exist if nobody had photographed and commented on them), but
in the sense that such combinations of word and image produce what there is
to be known (i.e., through the specific combination of word and image, these
people are performed as and become known as “Dutch peasants”).

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, this study investigates
which images and statements are supposed to be commonly known, how the
process of linking visual objects with cultural and historical meanings works
in the case of images of the Netherlands and the Dutch, and which differ-
ences result from this process. In this sense, I explore the broader effects of
the performative in shaping our perception and encounter with the “things in
the world”. From my study of archival material, I infer that every display of a
nonfiction image performs the motif as part of something else, e.g. a concept,
an idea, or a proof for a statement. Any motif only becomes meaningful and
communicates meaning in performance, and this meaning can change even
when the motif does not. Here, I shift my approaches to the combinations of
word and image from the performative (a theoretical concept with emphasis
on the relevance of convention and repetition in the acceptance of expres-
sions and actions) to the performance of these images, i.e. the diverse practices
of presenting and exhibiting these images to an audience such as the projec-
tion of film and lantern slides in a show. Both the performative and the per-
formance will need to be considered in the analysis of the combinations of
word and image. In addition to designating presentations and shows in which
these images are projected or looked at, I expand the term “performance” in
a metaphorical way to images in print. I believe that newspapers, brochures,
journals, tourist guidebooks, and the like also perform the motif in form of
a printed image. After all, the function that lecturers and commenters in film
and lantern slide shows fulfil – attributing meaning to a polysemic image,
creating a relation between image and audience – is present in the captions, comments, and titles of print products as well.

Across different media, the motif of a Zuiderzee inhabitant appeared, among others, in the promotion for a package tour to “Holland”, to advertise a steamship company, document regional peculiarities, illustrate customs in geography lessons, mourn the levelling effects of modernity, or praise the simplicity of life “back then”. The performance of motifs-as – whether in a travel report, in an anthropological compendium, in lantern shows, in advertising trade card collection albums, in a catalogue for educational material, or in cinema programmes – takes place at specific venues. New layers of meaning are negotiated and eventually attributed to the image every time it is performed for a specific audience at a concrete venue. This constant repetition in performances may change the experience, presentation, and understanding of a motif over time. While the motif might not change, the meaning it conveys does. In this view, the images are elements of performed meaning and not stable, disclosed entities. The question to that historical material can no longer be what a motif meant or represented “in and of itself”. Approached through performance, the various meanings attributed to a motif can be understood as situated meanings of specific combinations of audiences, venues, images, and comments.

1.5 OUTLOOK

As stated in the Introduction, the object of this research is to shed light on a semiotic process – the attribution of meaning to cultural artefacts, resulting in supposed common knowledge. Intermedial and transmedial approaches are relevant to assess the popularity and longevity of an image or a motif. Through the approach via the performative and performance, the visual material is investigated together with its textual comment and with regards to its role in the production of supposed common knowledge.

What and how are readers/viewers addressed to see in images of the Netherlands and the Dutch? What are people supposed to believe and know? How is meaning created and performed in the discourses? And what is the role of visual material and its textual comment in the knowledge production on the Netherlands and the Dutch? These are the sub-questions which I will answer in the Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

In the following chapter, I will first present the popular visual media of my corpus and develop criteria for the discussion of the material (Chapter 2). Neither visual strategies, descriptive categories, nor media technologies emerged out of the blue, nor is the ambition to document people and places realisti-
cally a transhistorical phenomenon. In order to better situate the nineteenth-century images and their surrounding discourses, these “preconditions” for the emergence of supposed common knowledge and, as part of it, national clichés, will be reconstructed in Chapter 3. This research frame enables me to historicize the categories (Dutch, Dutchness, the Netherlands), the visual content (the image-objects, motifs, and clichés), and the attributed meaning (textual comment performed at specific venues).

NOTES

1 The perception of image-content as a motif is the result of inductive interpretation; interpreting image content as a motif is not too intricate in this study because I do not deal with figurative images.

2 Changes in the availability of media that display images of the Dutch and the Netherlands did not affect the use of motifs in the investigated period. Of course, the respective media have specific aesthetics: lantern slides were often hand-coloured, whereas illustrations in journals are generally not; films show images in movement and images of postcards are still etc. However, I did not find differences in used motifs or in attributions of meaning along the dividing line of media. Medium-specific aesthetics seem to be of subordinate importance to convey a statement on the Netherlands and the Dutch; motifs and captions seem to have been of higher relevance.

3 Oester’s study (1996) on various semantic fields associated with the cow in Switzerland is a good example for such a research design.

4 Images that are based on stereotypes have been subject to ethical critique, especially from film and media studies, which concerned themselves with aesthetics and representation of minoritized groups. However, in these analyses, the stereotype is not used as a conceptual tool to describe a phenomenon, but is the object of these investigations. Analytical tools in these studies are e.g. the concepts “representation” (Cf. Hall 1997 esp. 223-290; Dyer 1993), “visuality” (Cf. Foster and Dia Art Foundation 1988), or “visibility” (Cf. Schaffer 2008).

5 Again, this is not to say that images cannot be criticized for being offensive in their way of reduction, but then we argue on ethical grounds, not on questions about truth. See also note 4.


7 What Bhabha means with the expression “stereotypical image” remains unclear to me; he does not come back to this expression in the rest of his essay and, in one
passage, he even distinguishes the stereotype from the image (Cf. Bhabha 1994b, 68). Given the fact the he defines the stereotype as a “discursive strategy” (Bhabha 1994b, 66) and that he does not analyse visual material, it is likely that “stereotypical image” refers to fixed lexeme connections (“stereotypes”) that result in idioms (“images”). In any case, the term “image” does not refer to a material, visual object in Bhabha’s essay.

8 One example is the imposition of a system of citizenship. By granting citizenship to some people and denying this status to others, only citizens acquire certain rights, e.g. access to education, health care, suffrage, and more. The exclusion of people from the political and public sphere is justified by a system that does not treat people equally and that marginalizes those who have been “Othered”.

9 Indeed, scholars in comparative literature studies also observed such patterns within Europe (Cf. e.g. Beller and Leerseen 1997a), but have investigated mostly fictional literature, and the field of panoramic literature (Cf. Preiss and Stienon 2012), which, by definition, includes illustrated journals and books but does not consider other media forms.

10 These venues are not “simply there”; they exist through and in greater narratives of a society – expressed in genre conventions, general beliefs, and pictorial traditions. Locations are not purely discursive; they are also defined by the prestige of places and venues, by technological limits, existing and available media, social conventions, and living conditions of the audience.

11 Cf. Kember and Plunkett (forthcoming) for the relevance of site, showperson, and performance in the making of meaning for local and regional audiences; for case studies into the implementation of visual media as part of (British) local culture, cf. e.g. Kember et al. (2012); with an emphasis on showmanship, cf. Kember (2009).
