Dutch Children's film -
*Mirrored Power Structures or Subjective Representation?*

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Abstract

This essay goes through the structures of discourse within Dutch children’s film with the aim of finding a pattern of progressions between the 1980s and the 2010s in the representation of youngsters. The theoretical framework is set by Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Discourse.*

Key words: Dutch film, Foucault, discourse analysis, children’s film
Introduction

Scandinavian countries such as Sweden and Denmark are known for their groundbreaking children's films that started appearing after the protests of 1968. In the aspect of individual freedom and youth liberation, emphasized in the children’s films of the 70s and the subsequent productions onward, serious issues such as discrimination, divorce, tragedy, death and other grave topics, were introduced to child audiences. Young characters needed no longer to be role models but would rather function as individuals that children could relate to. A country that took on this new trend was The Netherlands, with a set of moviemakers that highlighted the presence of children within the public sphere. In contrast, adventurous, fantasy filled motion pictures, common for their providing of an escapist alternative to children, existed alongside the realistic feature films. Tropes that marginalize youngsters can be found both among realistic and non-realistic films, creating young characters that lack in individuality and relatability or characters that live in a non-existing world which does not give room for depiction of diverse individuals. On the other hand, there are films that succeed in representing youngsters. This essay explores these notions by analyzing how children have been represented in Dutch film productions throughout the 1980s, 90s and the 21st century.
1.1 Purpose
There are two types of Dutch children's film in focus for this study; the first one being diverse in its depiction of youngsters by portraying them as individuals capable of their own critical thinking. The second one shows the child as other while defining them from an adult point-of-view - meaning that the depiction of them unconsciously highlights the power structures between child and adult without offering self-criticism to these power relations. Here the identity of the child could, for example, be formed by the desire of shaping a morally taught character, serving as good example for the young audience – a consequence that creates characters lacking in diversity. My aim is to find out which functions these motion pictures share that create power structures, or (alternatively) what they do to counteract them and whether or not this has progressed throughout the years.

1.2 Problem Statements
- How does Dutch children's film manage to depict young characters subjectively?
- What are the recurring themes which are used in the process of children's misrepresentation in the Dutch feature film and how does these highlight the power structures between adult and child?
- What can the results tell us about the developments in the portrayal of children in Dutch movie productions between the 80s and the 00s?

1.3 Method
I wish to emphasize the tropes in Dutch children's films, which produce a certain representation of young individuals, by either forming a complex, realistic personality or a simple, unrelatable character. These so-called kinderfilms shall – with the help of a formalist and Foucauldian approach – demonstrate the disparaging discourse adults use to define children. The discourse in focus for this essay will either be the spoken word against/ by children or something told about them through visual imagery. This so-called visual discourse will be decoded through a formalist analysis of the films’ content with emphasis on how moving
images portray the youngster. This will be fulfilled by taking a close look at how different film shots and angles depict the child. Here, Foucault’s *The Order of Discourse* works as a tool for perceiving a pattern within discourse that will help put focus on child portrayal throughout the years.

1.4 Limitation

This essay will analyze films which represent children (either in animated form, as human beings, or as participants in family films). The limitation is that these motion pictures need to be aimed at children under thirteen. Coming-of-age-films tend to include young adults to the world of the grown-ups. The same world of adulthood tends to be secluded for youngsters and they are often portrayed as outsiders who feel misunderstood by older characters. Selection of the films are chosen, regarding to the Dutch movies parental advisory site Kijkwijzer.nl, which has age restriction suggestions for all Dutch film productions based on a film’s violent, sexual, discriminative, coarse language, agitative and drug abusive content. Despite Kijkwijzer’s age restrictions, the site states that:

“The Kijkwijzer age recommendation does not simply mean that a television program or film is suitable for children of that age and above. Kijkwijzer makes no pronouncements on this. For example: a serious documentary bears the recommendation All Ages, because it contains no images that could be harmful to children. The film may nevertheless be unsuitable for young children, for example, because the content is too complex.”

With this statement in consideration, this essay will focus on feature films that are clearly aimed at youngsters, by its providing of a predominant children's cast or a child protagonist. The choice of films consists of popular motion pictures (the majority has been celebrated for selling more than 100,000 tickets at the box office by being awarded a Gouden Film by the Nederlands Film Festival) made for the

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1 Kijkwijzer.nl, reviewed 2-15-2018, [https://www.kijkwijzer.nl/about-kijkwijzer](https://www.kijkwijzer.nl/about-kijkwijzer)
broad audience, shown nationwide in the cinemas and modern classics that are recurring on Dutch television. These films - which are set as examples for each decade in modern, Dutch film history, ranging from the eighties up till current writing time - are mainly selected with regard to their historically, chronological function within this essay, in order for changes in the representation of children to be observed.

Choice of films:

*Abeltje* (*The Flying Lift Boy*, Ben Sombogaart, 1998)
*Achtstegroepers huilen niet* (*Cool Kids Don’t Cry*, Dennis Bots, 2012)
*Ciske de Rat* (*Ciske the Rat*, Guido Pieters, 1984)
*Finn* (Frank Weisz, 2013)
*Het verhaal van Kees* (1989)
*Het Zakmes* (*The Penknife*, Ben Sombogaart, 1992)
*Lepel* (*Spoon*, Willem van de Sande Bakhuyzen, 2005)
*Nijntje de film* (*Miffy the Movie*, Hans Perk, 2013)
*Oorlogsgeheimen* (*Secrets of War*, Dennis Bots, 2014)

1.5 Theory

By stating that children's identities are something that is being defined by adults, we also recognize Michel Foucault's theories which will yield us insight on the relation between film production and its aims towards youngsters as a target group. This is not a reception study, and neither an essay on children's consumer behaviors, but rather a cultural study focused on the discourse between adult and child, that can be seen through several films.

The readers get to familiarize themselves with the hegemonic nature that lies behind all discourse through a historical overview, using the madman in its second section as an example for suppressed individuals. How taboos of, e.g. sexuality, function and are spoken differently about in psychiatric, medical or literary
discourses, can tell us something about how discourses are managed in various ways in cinema, depending on the context of the objectified character of a film.²

Mapping out why and how the repression of minorities has been conducted by dominant parts of society, is the purpose behind Michel Foucault's *The Order of Discourse*. There are norms and taboos that dictate what should and should not be said in certain circumstances. At the same time, we have rules in our society that validate a group of people's opinions, while others lack the authority, opportunity, profession or age to get their viewpoint recognized as truth. He writes about the opposition between reason and madness³ which, I must stress, can be applied between the opposing aspects of reason and naivety, the latter often being associated with the child's innocence.

Foucault speaks of a power which people strive to seize within discourse. In order to identify the procedures of power seizing in discursive contexts, we need to distinguish the systems of exclusion.⁴ When it comes to the portrayal of young characters, there are a number of recurring tropes that indicate suppression of power. Malena Jansson's reading of Foucault suggests that one of these systems of children's exclusion is equal to the madman's regulated seclusion within several health institutions. Jansson means that the youngest also suffer from isolation based on the older, dominant, counterpart's understanding of them as innocent beings, hence the intention of protecting their safe sphere. This can “prohibit children from becoming speaking subjects”.⁵ The appearance of a safe sphere can be witnessed in films that avoid bringing up grave topics, such as divorce, death, war, poverty, imprisonment etc., that are present in many children's actual lives. An idyllic environment may instead surround young characters for the sake of the observance of their innocence, eventually producing a range of narratives set in an unrealistic world. In this essay, we will be able to distinguish the different takes on childhood and see how otherness is either being repelled or facilitated, conforming with Foucault's theory behind the hegemonic essentiality of discourse.

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³ Foucault, 53.
⁴ Foucault, 56.
⁵ Malena Jansson, ”Fostran” in *Film och andra rörliga bilder* ed. Anu Koivunen, (Stockholm: Raster förlag, 2008), 133.
1.6 Previous Research

A look at several academic search engines show a few specific studies made on children's film consumption, which explores their role as a target group for children's movies. Most studies focus broadly on children's consumerism, by including various media platforms in their research, such as television, games and social media. A few studies have primarily regarded the ethical values that are being cemented onto youngster's movies. The works of research that raise awareness about otherness, morals and children's perspectives will be examined in this section.

Professor Benita Blessing's research primarily involves children´s education. Her article “Happily Socialist Ever After? East German Children's Films and the Education of a Fairytale Land” is an overview of feature films produced for youngsters during the Cold War era. Here, Blessing has taken pedagogical aspects, and gender stereotypes in account of her overview of East German fairytale films and their mirroring of GDR's self-image during the postwar era.

In focus for this article is GDR's institutionalized film company Deutsche Film AG (DEFA) set by the Soviet military administration, while encouraging East Germany to elaborate their own national cinema. The DEFA's emphasis on fostering anti-fascism in children's feature films is brought up in Blessing’s article together with the fact that their employees had the creative freedom of sending any message they wanted to their young audiences. This text also offers some insight in DEFA's filmmaking process involving children viewing the screening of several productions. The aim of these screenings was to consider whether or not a motion picture was suitable for youngsters or not, which could be the case, for instance, if the meaning of a certain feature film could not be understood by the targeted age.

Concerning the instructive nature of DEFA productions, Blessing points out that we can learn about East Germany's pedagogical history through its children's films.

The similarities between “Happily Socialist Ever After” and this essay is the focus put on national cinema. The difference is that this essay does not try to make
any cultural or political annotations to the Netherlands through its film analysis, in the same manner, that Blessing does with her comparative historical research of East Germany. Each film in her article is explained through a political action taken in the historical context of the GDR. What’s missing is a thorough evaluation of the movies' pedagogical agendas alongside the film analysis. Although the author states the creative freedom of DEFA filmmakers, she does not consider the influence they’ve had on their own movies, and only indicates political milestones as the driving force behind different themes in East German motion pictures.

Much like this essay, professor of cultural geography Owain Jones' article “‘I Was Born But…’ Children as Other/Non-representational Subjects in Emotional and Affective Registers as Depicted in Film” explores the portrayal of the youngster with emphasis on their appearance in adult-dominated environments, which put the child in the curb of otherness. In his analysis, Jones uses a cultural geography perspective to explore the term in the means of its context in various international film titles.

Jones defines the term other in premise to its philosophical meaning, specified by philosopher Emmanuel Levinas as a word opposed to the self. Levinas means that the other has no individuality but represents an entire entity instead. The same is its dominant counterpart which is represented diversely. This transition from self to other and same is explained as a result of uneven power relations.

Professor of literature Edward Said, is mentioned in the article, known for his book Orientalism, which is a take on the Western perspectives cemented on to the rest of the world, by cause of the ethnic other. This form of otherness differs from the young individual's otherness, considering that every individual has been a child and should be able to see things from their point of view. However, Jones questions the adult's ability to relate to youngsters, while pointing out how the reminiscence of childhood might be coloured by a grown-up's state of mind. Several facts, such as how the young past lives of authors are being “tamed” in their autobiographies

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7 Blessing, 236.
8 Owain Jones, “I was born but…” in *Emotion Space and Society* No.9, (2013), 8.
9 Jones, 5.
10 Ibid., 6.
by remembering and “forgetting” certain incidents from their childhood, suggest that this way of memory revisit and reversal cannot correctly represent the youngster's point of view.11

One central aspect, mentioned in previous studies in this field, is the question of how motion pictures can foster children into good citizens. According to Jones, adults “colonize the childhood space” in a totalitarian fashion, by excluding or taming “misbehaving” youngsters that show signs of “selfishness, sexuality, guilt or anger”12 (e.g. in educational institutions, religious foundations, in their homes or juvenile prison or by sport coaches) and only representing well behaved, innocent children that e.g. feel guilt over mischief. The films that counteract against this sentiment are the ones that “[...]reveal the otherness of children, [and] the challenges that [the] notion presents [...]” by “[...] offering careful, imaginative, empathic, witnessing of child in space and in narrative.”13 Here, scenes with unchaperoned childhood territories, such as school busses, or walks to and from school, are being set as an example in the film analysis for moments where youngsters solely navigate through the adult world (according to Jones, in places that are regimented by grown-ups, e.g. family homes, schools, stores, airports etc.).14 Jones demonstrates the subtilty between adult and children's territories. Urban areas may, for instance, be disrupted by a thing such as snow, which interrupts adult routines, leaving the city like “a playground”.15 Being aware of the child's interference with adult-dominated spaces is a central aspect of the film analysis in this essay. Jones' article surely doesn't approach children's otherness, considering the oral discourse of the films in focus for his study, but nevertheless, uses visual discourse to unravel the elaborate reciprocity between adult and child.

Film scholar Margareta Rönnberg's academic work involves children's culture and media consumption. Nya medier - men samma gamla barnkultur? (“New Media - But Same Old Children's Culture?”) and Rönnberg's other scholarly works

11 Ibid., 6.
12 Ibid., 7.
13 Ibid., 9.
14 Ibid., 9.
15 Ibid., 10.
analyze how research in children's culture is conducted in order to analyze children's consumerism from a wide range of medialities and how adults' observations of youngsters are coloured by their own views. Her method is interactive, e.g. children get to explain and formulate the meaning of games, consequently distinguishing between the ones, that in their opinion, impersonate real-life or those that are real.\textsuperscript{16,17}

Rönnberg has applied the psychoanalyst Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's term \textit{childism} with the use of its Swedish translation \textit{barnism}, which she uses in accordance with the term \textit{feminism}, on the basis that children, in the same degree as women, are inferior in society.\textsuperscript{18} The analogy with feminism is \textit{barnism}'s aim to reach impartiality within their paternalist world, adapting the same methodology that feminists use to reach equal rights within the patriarchy. Rönnberg stands behind what, above mentioned scholar, Jones considers the adult state of mind that interferes with the grown-up's ability to see things from a child's point of view.\textsuperscript{19} She suggests that \textit{barnism} is an ideological term, sustained by people defending and representing children while being aware and clear about which perspective they are retelling. Here, the emphasis lies in the difference between being a \textit{barnist} and representing a child's perspective. The latter is a methodological approach which usually involves the participation, opinion, and information provided by youngsters.\textsuperscript{20} Research done with children's perspective will, however, always be interpreted through an adult vision, a notion that implies the complexity of representing people of young age, especially those lacking verbal skills.

In her book \textit{Nya medier}, Rönnberg approaches the meaning of children's perspectives through cultural studies, such as anthropology, when questioning the methodology of the discourse analysis done in the field. There's contradiction in observing children in an anthropological and ethnographic fashion, primarily by its risk of marginalization and seeing children as a “special case” - paradoxically enough it's necessary, argues Rönnberg in reference to scholar Pam Alldred.\textsuperscript{21}

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\textsuperscript{17} Rönnberg 162.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 53.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 53.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 54.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 98.
Power relations between researcher and youngster is discussed, in the way by how the other (children) adjust their communication to an authoritative, dominant part (interviewer or researcher). Since youngsters might formulate themselves differently in interviews, just to adapt their language to adults, the information provided will thereupon still be affected by the discourse of grown-ups, thus not giving insight from the child's world or point-of-view.22

Objective representation is on behalf of the dominant part who have the power to define the other, meaning that the problem lies in adults as depictors. While Rönnberg's book might suggest that the importance of ethnographic research is the highlighting of its authoritarian, off-age discourse, I have to disagree on the emphasis on children's reception and conveyance of adult discourses, hence the diverging method of this thesis and its way of examining how adults frame their views in Dutch children's film, instead of how they are received by their young audience. This is mainly due to the inescapable, clouded, adult views on youngsters.

The impact movies have on children has been of adult concern ever since the medium's first decades. In her essay *Fostran*, film critic Malena Jansson demonstrates how this concern has been pursued in Sweden throughout history. The educative aspect of the children's film is brought up here as a major factor that examines how films in the 1940s came to involve a pedagogical agenda. The Swedish government chose to research the issue of the effects of children's reception on matinee movies as an answer to several protests coming from concerned parents, medical doctors and even schoolteachers. This research concluded, although stating the difficulties of getting clear answers about the effects, that it's better to be safe than sorry and assume that films can be harmful to the psyche of youngsters. One of the motivations being their potentially "negative effect on their morals, ethics and values".23

Jansson presents Michel Foucault's discourse analysis - which in this context points to the fact that children “lack the ability and chance to define

22 Ibid., 98
23 Jansson, 128.
themselves as subjects.”²⁴ According to Foucault the discourse of some people are excluded, and the victims of this process are mainly children and the mentally ill; people whose opinions might be seen as irrelevant or naïve.²⁵ Fostran figures as an inspiration for this essay’s hypothesis which is described as follows; adults have the power of defining children and that children's movies must be morally “correct”, which points at how the child is seen as a blank paper, ready to be defined by those of higher influence.

Many film theorists have involved themselves into the moral and pedagogical aspect of children's movies. While discussing movie adaptations, literary scholar Linda Hutcheon also writes about the film’s necessity of being of educational value while appearing before a young audience. Here children and their educational institutions are seen as the target group for adaptations. Book-to-film-adaptations are supposed to figure as educational tools for youngsters, suggesting that it might “give them a taste for reading the book on which it is based”.²⁶ Most films in focus for this study happen to be film adaptations, something that might indicate on the educational aspect of motion pictures made for the youngest spectators.

Hutcheon also brings up censorship in The United States such as The Hollywood Production Code of the 1930s which decided that “movies must not lower the audience's moral standards by showing any sympathetic representations of evil, crime, or sin.”²⁷ Here we can see that the early decades of cinema in both Sweden and the US were regulating the morals of their young audiences.

Most films certainly have a moral-of-the-story, but children's films are rarely seen without one. Children's characters might do as they please whilst defying good morale and being of bad example to other youngsters, but not without feeling great guilt afterwards. Their guilt can be used to turn the scenario around which is where the moral-of-the-story unfolds.

²⁴ Jansson, 130.
²⁵ Ibid., 130.
²⁷ Hutcheon, 119.
1.7 Disposition

Given the previously mentioned methodological approaches, the study of the Dutch films will be conducted in different sections based on recurring oral and visual discourse. The part covering the topic of verbal discourse will target the issue by focusing on the dynamics of the exterior of discourse, while the visual discourse will be discussed with the help of camera shots and angles, or simply by distinguishing what type of characters who has the longest running time. Each and every film with similar ways of child portrayal is being assorted under the same category in order to make recurring patterns within Dutch children's cinema clear. The observations of discursive issues will have anecdotes to Foucault's “The Order of Discourse”. The last problem statement will be answered with the use of the results from section one and two from a perspective focusing on progressions throughout Dutch film history between the 1980s and the 21st century.

2 Analysis - Recurring themes

2.1 Children adapting to adult discourse

Michel Foucault clarifies that each procedure of discourse involves a set of exclusions which are responsible for the power relations that are being formed through conversations. In focus for this essay is the exclusion of children in discursive contexts. This section deals with the fact that adults have definite ways of communicating that differs from their younger fellows and how those - while recognizing the adult discourse - have to adapt to it in order to survive their lives as social beings. In connotation to Foucault's division between reason and madness (the first one being applied to dominant individuals of society and the latter applying to the mentally ill people), this essay treats reason as a trait of the adult, and irrationality (an attribute that, in “The Order of Discourse”, is applied to the madmen, whose opinions are turned down for their
appearance of being unreasonable) as a trait that adults apply to children. Here, we will go through scenes which show how youngsters adapt to the discursive norm set by their older, dominant counterparts.

Foucault demonstrates how people who speak the truth by going against the dominant discursive behaviors are seen as false; “[…]one is in ‘the true’ only by obeying the rules of a discursive ‘policing.’” 28 As an example, he uses the discipline of science, and one of its pioneers that discovered the basic principles of genetics, Gregor Mendel, who was “[…] speaking of objects, applying methods and placing himself on a theoretical horizon which [was] alien to the biology of his time […] Mendel spoke the truth, but he was not ‘within the true’ of the biological discourse of his time.” 29 The social situations of children in Dutch movies can illustrate the very same thing as mentioned above. In most cases, the youngsters of these films are telling the truth, or acting righteously (by not letting their actions be of any harm) but are not seen as doing so by their dominant counterparts. Children adapt their discursive ways to match with the adults’ way of speech and behavior. For instance, in the 90s movie, *Het Zakmes* we follow Mees, a young boy who takes an interest in his father's penknife in the opening sequence of the film. His cautious father forbids his young son from playing with it. Nonetheless, Mees encounters another penknife that belongs to his friend Tim. The protagonist accidentally brings his friend's precious belonging to his home after school. In the rear of realizing this mistake, he tries to get ahold of Tim, who's moved to the distant province, Flevoland.

Mees can never finish his sentences while conversing with adults, who always seem to interrupt him. He hides his true agendas from the fear of not being understood or being forbidden to do as he pleases. Thus, he adapts his discursive ways by lying in order to do what he think is right; return the penknife to Tim. The conversations between Mees and his father are eventually held to adult values that our young protagonist recognizes and uses to his own benefit.

The story of *Oorlogsgeheimen* takes place in a German-occupied Dutch village during the second world war. Tension between people in the small village is apparent. Many of

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28 Foucault, 61.
29 Ibid., 61.
them are opposed to their Nazi-sympathizing neighbors and classmates. Secrecy between parent and adult is a theme that can be found in this war drama. The main characters of the film have a favorable far-away place where they like to spend their time together – a grotto. Tuur, the protagonist of this story, is instructed by his parents, to stop playing in the cave. He secretly starts going back to the place when he feels like the warnings are futile. This results in a series of witnessing around the cave that makes Tuur suspect his parents of being part of a resistance group and eventually realizes that the grotto is a hiding place for people who risk getting caught by Nazis.

As previously mentioned *Het Zakmes*, Tuur and Lambert turn to lies and falseness in order to cheat the so-called “privileged or exclusive right of the speaking subject”. In Lambert's case, this means that he at one point in the movie dresses up in a *Nationale jeugdstorm* (the Dutch equivalent of the German *Hitlerjugend*) uniform to get a favor granted from his father. Tuur has been locked up for trying to save Tamar, his Jewish friend, from being caught and evacuated by the Nazis. In order to convince his father of making the phone call that can release Tuur from custody, Lambert tells him that he is going to join his brother on *Jeugdstorm* day, which, out of pride, immediately makes his father grant the son’s wish.

![Figure 1, 2. Achtste groepers huilen niet, 2012.](image)

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30 Foucault, 52.
A movie that contains one character that, contrary to other films in this section, adapts to the children is *Achtste groepers huilen niet*. When Akkie is diagnosed with cancer, she is hospitalized with the hope of catching up with her real-life and friends. The oncologists in the movie tells his young patients to call him Dokter Snor (“Doctor Mustache”) and illustrates disease by having different cells in the body represented by toys that are lying in his office. Dokter Snor is, at one point, seen riding around the hospital halls in a scooter (fig. 1, 2). The miscommunication between adult and youngster in this movie, is compensated by Dokter Snoer who chooses, to consciously adapt to child discourse. Such is the circumstance in this film where Akkie's parents are unable to communicate their worries about their daughter's health (see page 23).

### 2.2 The learning aspect

The learning aspect of a children's film is something that has been stressed by several scholars writing on the topic. As for Swedish film history, Malena Jansson conveys how children in early cinema were depicted as role models. Their function would be to foster the children that would look up to these characters.\(^{31}\)

In order to get a broader look on the pedagogical function of films, we need to understand the social and institutionalized systems that regulate them. To illustrate this, Foucault explains how the dominant discourse is the holder of truth. In that case, subordinate groups, such as children are in possession of inaccuracy and the inputs they contribute with in conversation are seen as untrue. The dominant discourse provides people with true knowledge through their distribution on several platforms such as academical institutions, publishing or television.\(^{32}\) Being that this essay focuses on the matter of discourse within films, our subsequent question is as follows; *how is pedagogy attributed in children's movies?* Margareta Rönning discusses the pedagogical functions of different medialities in her book *Nya medier – Men samma gamla barnkultur?* She states that youngsters are expected to do proactive things. Therefore, even their consumption of e.g. games and movies are supposed to teach and be of use to

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\(^{31}\) Jansson, 127-131.

\(^{32}\) Foucault, 55.
them - something that, in contrast, is not presumed when it comes to the free time-activities of adults.

Six of nine films in this study are adaptations of books written by authors beloved by the Dutch nation. With Linda Hutcheon's statement in mind one can ponder whether this has something to do with the wish that children should familiarize themselves with their cultural heritage, or if adaptations are used as safe shots when it comes to hitting the jackpot at the box office. Either way, producing films adapted by the works of the nation's most beloved authors will - gradually, depending on how and to which extent the work has been adapted - immerse children with the content of their cultural heritage.

**Naivety/innocence in characters and the fostering aspect**

The realistic films of this essay, feature films which are set in the common-day lives of Dutch youngsters, highlight the forbidden things that the protagonists choose to explore against their parents' will, who, in some cases, see the desires of the children as naive. But these fascinations are never entirely of dangerous matter. Media scholar Anita Werner says that learning from one's own experiences is not the main way of gaining knowledge, but also by observation, which is something that most Dutch children’s filmmakers seem to be aware of by portraying youngsters with good intentions – a careful approach to send messages through film.33 The children may seem naïve to their adult counterparts but are still setting a good example for their audience by showing that they mean no harm with their actions. In Weisz's *Finn*, the protagonist is fascinated with music and chooses to master the skill of violin play against his father's will. Finn's curiosity for the instrument is innocent, but his father's agenda to forbid the boy from exploring it turns out to have a darker meaning on behalf of his own secret past life. However, the protagonist is a child that suffers from bullying and, in contrast to his bullies, behaves orderly in school while only wishing well to those amongst him, thus, still figuring as a good role model to the audience, although he acts against his father’s wishes.

The same pattern described above can also be observed in *Het Zakmes*. The main character’s possession and preservation of a forbidden pen knife is a secret he needs to keep away from his protective father – yet, an innocent secret, since his motive only is

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33 Rönberg, 229.
to return the potentially dangerous device to its rightful owner. This innocent intention is revealed to his father in the ending sequences, which gives closure to the issue of misunderstanding that's been appearing throughout the film between the two of them. The misconceptions Mees' father has about him, have been the cause of his feelings of disappointment towards his son. By keeping his possession of the pen knife a secret, Mees spares himself from these misconceptions, but is still a positive figure in the eyes of the audience that, throughout the movie, have been aware of his true intentions.

The animated movie *Nijntje de film* tells about the three youngsters Nijntje, Nina and Knorretje whom are visiting a zoo together with Nijntje's parents. The parents set up a treasure hunt for the children, that needs to be solved by finding animals of a requested quality. The young target group is apparent by the film’s pedagogical aspects, e.g. Knorretje is represented as naïve and uncomprehending, which is why his friends Nina and Nijntje must explain new concepts to him. By using a naïve character, the filmmakers can conduct the fostering of the spectators by making Nina and Nijntje repeat the information they’ve received by adults to Knorretje. The information that the youngsters receive by their older counterparts is repeated several times as Nijntje breaks the fourth wall by giving eye contact with the spectator and interacting with them by asking questions such as the colour of an animal. After a few seconds of staring into the eyes of the viewers, a non-diegetic sound of a young audience can be heard saying the answer in unison.

Formalistically, adults have taken the role to guide children through moving images. Besides for its clear, auditive pedagogy, an unspoken guidance can be seen in *Nijntje de film*, the movie made for the youngest peer group in this essay. There is a cautious,
visual storytelling that puts emphasis on providing with good pedagogy that corresponds with the teaching aspect. For instance, when the children ride on the back of a camel, they wear what appears to be a turban, but actually functions as a helmet with its fastened chin strap (fig. 3). This demonstrates how adult storytelling consciously fosters its young audiences by displaying good values through visual imagery.

*Het verhaal van Kees* is a short, modern classic TV-movie telling the story about a young boy during the second world war. He moves out to the countryside, where it’s supposed to be safer and where there are more resources of food, when the bombings of his city worsen. The visual framing of the movie is not represented through a child’s perspective since the story is told through a subjective voice-over by a grown-up Kees. We get a naïve representation of a child, not aware of what’s going on around him. For instance, when Kees sees his neighbor being escorted to a van by a Nazi troop, the neighbor smiles and waves his hand at Kees, who gladly waves back but stays standing on the same spot with a confused look on his face as the neighbor is being positioned inside the van. Our protagonist shakes the scene off and continues playing.

A naïve child that stand clueless amidst political occurrences in their surrounding society is not just seen in *Het verhaal van Kees* but also in *Oorlogsgeheimen*, which consciously highlights how grown-ups see youngsters as naïve individuals. For one thing, Tuur’s parents do not admit their child’s capability of subjective, independent thinking, and ignores his curious questions about the Nazi occupation taking place in their community. They neglect his involvement in the happenings of the village, by not letting him have a saying in the grave topics that are happening there. When the family's neighbors are taken by Nazi forces, Tuur asks his parents if they could be of any help to them, whereby his brother replies, “do not be stupid”. This short answer of rejection does not invite Tuur for any further conversations on the topic. The same pattern is repeated when he sees that his Nazi emphasizing friend’s dad suddenly has been promoted to major of the village. He asks his parents; “Why is Lambert's father major all of a sudden?” without getting any further explanation on his new privileges as a member of the Nazi party. The young characters are “isolated in a children's sphere” where harmful topics are avoided to protect them and their young spectators. Malena Jansson means that, just like the mad-man, the youngster is isolated, not in clinical institutions, but in this so-called “children’s sphere”. This prohibits them from becoming
“speaking subjects” \textsuperscript{34}. \textit{Oorlogsgeheimen}, in contrast to the other motion pictures in this chapter that are portraying naive, innocent characters and does not reflect on their protective approach to character depiction, is conscious about including children in grave topics, by portraying them as people of subjective thinking that witness and react to serious happenings in their surroundings. By depicting the system of seclusion in action - how children who want to have access to different truths and seek them regardless of how much adults prohibit them from doing so - the film manages to offer a critical perspective on discursive power relations.

Sometimes the wish to protect a child from negative topics can be critically highlighted by the filmmaker, such as in \textit{Achtstegroepers huilen niet}. Akkie is an eighth grader with a passion for soccer and an ambition to achieve higher grades in school in hopes of getting offered a place at a more advanced educational institution. When Akkie is suspected to suffer from cancer her parents take her to the medical oncologist while depriving her of facts behind the reason for the visit, e.g. she asks them about the meaning behind the term oncology, without getting a straight answer from her parents who look nervously at each other and avoid replying. In objection, Akkie stops the elevator and approaches a nurse with the same question. When she comes back from to the elevator she tells her parents: “it means cancer. That was not difficult, now was it?”

\textbf{2.3 Unusual themes}

There are two films that does, however, avoid being of fostering nature. One of them is \textit{Ciske de Rat}, a remake of the movie adaptation from 1955 with the same title. A classic that several times has been made into a musical. Kijkwijzer classifies the film with the age-limit of 12 years for its violent content. Despite its complex character representation (Ciske has different sides that are portrayed, such as kindness, anger, sorrow, sympathy and mischief), it still focuses on one child in relation to the adults in his environment. Here, The other is depicted in relation to The same. Since no other child from Ciske´s age group is represented thoroughly, the separation of The other from The same becomes clear in terms of character portrayal. In other words; we can't call this a groundbreaking film for its innovative character, since Ciske is the only child with an

\textsuperscript{34} Jansson, 133.
in-depth representation. The dominant group pictured in this feature film are still adults and the protagonist gets defined through them.

![Figure 4 & 5. Ciske de rat, 1984.](image)

During the title sequence of the film, the audience are presented to the main character’s unruly nature by seeing the young child smoking a cigarette. Ciske goes through a rough childhood as a consequence of getting beaten up by his mother, feeling lonely (as he sings during the opening sequences), being forced to (illegally) work in a bar, stirring up fights amongst his classmates and teachers, losing his polio affected friend, and witnessing his mother getting sexually involved with strangers (fig. 4). In an act of rage, he ends up killing her (fig. 5) and is thereafter sent to juvenile prison. Although seen as nothing but trouble, Ciske does justice for himself by saving one of his bullies from drowning at the end of the film. The ending may suggest another form of fostering aspect, one with a moral-of-the-story. Instead of showing an ideal child, that young audiences can look up to - Ciske functions as a warning lesson to the spectators.

The film crew behind Abeltje might have focused on creating an adventurous film based on the popular novel by Annie M.G. Schmidt, but have, nonetheless its imaginary escapist qualities, avoided hiding the young characters under a protective children’s sphere. Abeltje is not an idealistic child and gets happy when his mother tells him he never has to go back to school as she decides to let him fake his age and illegally work as a liftboy in a department store. Aside from the movie’s unrealistic traits, such as a flying elevator that takes Abeltje and a few others on a journey around the world, which might imply on a safe, escapist children's sphere - there is a scene that annotates to the usage of drugs. One of Abeltje's companions, Jozias Tump makes a living of selling insect repellent moth balls. When he tries to do this in the streets of New York, the moth balls get mistaken for drugs. Tump approaches a young man in a store with the products, referring to them as: “Pills from Amsterdam”, by which the man reacts: “Whoa, pills
from Amsterdam are the best pills in the world, man.” The film also touches briefly on the subject of child labor, as Abeltje rescues a group of children from a small cider manufactory.

2.4 Invading adult spaces

Is the children's opportunity to express themselves only made possible if the adults in the movies are absent? The absence of the protagonist's parents is specifically evident among some of the films examined in this essay. It is in the narrative without dominant adults that the children can use their own discourse (instead of adapting to the one of grown-ups). Stories with grown-ups dominating the running time amid their younger counterparts create opportunity for the children to escape the adult dominated environments/or make it their own. Owain Jones describes this as; “Children live out their otherness, their 'other geography', by appropriating spaces in a range of ways [...] Intense and intensely ordered/controlled adult spaces (e.g. busy roads shopping malls, some schools) leave little 'play' for children's other geographies to flourish”.  It is in those controlled adult spaces that youngsters are appropriating in Dutch cinema. An absence of grown-ups can be seen in following films:

*Lepel* tells the story of an orphaned boy called Lepel, who lives with whom he’s taught to recognize as his grandmother. He unwillingly does house chores from day to night and assists his false grandmother with stealing various buttons for her sewing store. Lepel has been told that his parents have been away for a long time to discover the world in their hot air balloon and cannot remember their faces at nine years of age. One day he escapes the clutches of the “grandmother” and takes shelter in a department store. This adult dominated place is now seen behind the curtains as the boy explores it after closing hours together with another orphan, Pleun. During his first stay in the store, they celebrate Pleun's birthday by using the whole department store as their playground, thus appropriating adult-dominated objects and geographies. The kitchen tools are turned into instruments, the spatiality is used as a massive bike lane, and day-to-day objects are transformed into toys.

35 Jones, 8.
The distribution of discourse through educational institutions can be witnessed in Het Zakmes, where a strict teacher administers every single thing her students say and do. Tim has told Mees that in the province of Flevoland, they speak “Flevo taal” and as the boys envisage this imaginary speech, they end up making up their own version of it and transferring what their teacher writes on the blackboard to the unreal language. When she witnesses the classmate's incorrect use of the Dutch language, they are mistakenly suspected of writing each other off are seated far away from one another in the classroom. Educational institutions are strictly regulated by doctrine, something that the stern educator manifests e.g. by preventing the students from a drawer where she places forbidden things that have been confiscated from the children. Among these things is, for instance, Tim's penknife. Seen from a Foucauldian perspective, the teacher embodies the distributor of discourses: “What, after all is an education system, other than a ritualization of speech, a qualification and a fixing of the roles for speaking subjects [...]”\textsuperscript{36}

In order to escape the watchful eye of their teacher, the boys can be seen in the ruins of an abandoned car during their school breaks. Here they invade objects associated with adults, as expressed by Jones; “colonizing the neglected, derelict, abandoned spaces”\textsuperscript{37} by playing and being able to hold private conversations away from the observant gaze of their teacher, in an area just a few steps away from the school yard (fig. 6).

\textsuperscript{36} Foucault, 64.
\textsuperscript{37} Jones, 8.
A hospital is a place that’s been made, not only for its diverse patients who come in all shapes and sizes, but mainly for the adults who work there, those who regulate and run it. In *Achtste groepers huilen niet* Akkie has to leave her home and school for her cancer treatment. Although her department specifically treats youngsters of different ages, it is still controlled by adults. Traces of residing children is evident through, not only, their physical presence around the corridors, but also through the objects associated with youth, that are lying around in the area, such as toys and drawings made by the patients.

At one point in the movie, the hospital yard, usually a still place, is appropriated by the children who hold their soccer game for Akkie, who otherwise would not be able to witness it, due to her weak, physical condition.

### 3 Discussion

#### 3.1 Children’s portrayal throughout the decades 1980-2000s

The representation of youngsters has been taking different shapes throughout the decades. We begin with the eighties which, in terms of the two films selected for this study; *Ciske de Rat* and *Het verhaal van Kees*, share the only similarity of being characterized as historical fiction. *Ciske de Rat* displays complex character, and moral-of-the story at the end of the film, while *Het verhaal van Kees* is told by a subjective voice-over that looks back at his young days of war, without including some fostering aspect. Neither of the movies are depicted from the subjective perspective of a child. The impossibility of doing this without children behind the filmmaking process is obvious. There is, however, a clear lack of point-of view shots, that the filmmaker could have used in order to imitate the perspective of a child. Ciske and Kees are, nonetheless included in a narrative surrounding the public sphere and not being isolated in a guarded children's sphere.

Stepping one step further from the eighties takes us to *Het Zakmes* and *Abeltje*. In terms of the formalism in *Het Zakmes*, a couple of low angle shots of adults towering over Mees when he is lost in the train station, enhance his disadvantage in an environment occupied by grown-ups. When he enters the train cabin, a POV-shot shows how the turn of every train passenger’s head examines the young boy which may point to his vulnerable position amongst adults. There are, however, not much that otherwise
hints to subjective portrayal in neither of films. The storytelling jumps from a clear third person, adult narration, to a few POV-shots from the children’s perspective, such as in Ciske de rat, when the main character peeps through a door’s chink, we actually see what he observes from his POV (fig. 4).

Grown-ups are mostly present throughout the running time of Het Zakmes and Abeltje. Most characters in Abeltje, who hold conversations, are adults. Visually, the young characters in the movies mentioned from the 1980s and 1990s take up the majority of running time but are not heard as much as they are seen, since the conversations are mostly held either between adults, or between child and adult. Much less between two or more children. The films made between the 80s and 90s follow this pattern, more or less. However, motion pictures produced in the 21st century films; Nijnjte de film, Finn and Achtste groepers huilen niet avoid the pattern and give space for children to hold conversations between each other.

The earliest film of the decade, Lepel is centered around its protagonist Lepel and his friend Pleun, but the focus lies on the need for adults, with other words; Lepel’s search for new parents. The child is defined by its superior adults, which may point to them being depicted as others. Being an orphan or simply having a preoccupied parent becomes part of illustrating a child that feels secluded in society (this notion can also be applied to the 1980s film about lonesome Ciske and his beloved, but distant father, a sailor who is always away at sea). This may suggest the dependence a youngsters could feel towards adults and the isolation that comes with not having an older figure to rely on. Such is the case in Finn where we have a bullied child who also happen to have lost his mother and is left with an unreachable father hiding a family secret.

These stories may include real-life topics, but they are circulated around the world of adults, which make them part of the normative film where grown-ups are in focus for the audience. Paradoxically enough, if a movie, instead, revolves around young individuals it may be considered depicting a false children’s sphere (see 21). A film that avoids both outcomes is Dennis Bots’ film Achtste groepers huilen niet. The protagonist, Akkie's world revolves around spaces that are controlled by adults, such as her home, school, soccer field and hospital – but these environments are mostly filmed in the presence of children who also take up most of the dialogue. Despite it being dominated by young characters, it succeeds in subjectifying children and not letting them be isolated in a false, idyllic sphere. This may be due to its dealing with the serious day-to-day issues of death and disease and how a child experiences these matters. It is, as said
previously, unavoidable to completely individualize a representation of children, with a film crew consisting of adults. Contrariwise, Achtste groepers huilen niet manages to represent a child as a human being that simply experiences day-to-day situations. Dennis Bots’ second contribution to this essay takes the same turn as last-mentioned film. Oorlogsgeheimen emphasizes the miscommunication between adult and child just as Achtste groepers huilen niet. It depicts children who gradually piece together what’s going on in their German-occupied Dutch village by portraying their individual thoughts and feelings concerning their alarming observations. For instance, after seeing a hand, dropping a stuffed animal through the wooden cracks on a train cabin, Tuur gradually realizes that the trains going through the area where he’s living are transporting people to concentration camps (Fig. 7)

The 21st century does not avoid involving children in realistic topics of society. Not only does Dennis Bots films manifest this, but also Frank Weisz movie Finn, with its topics of death, and separation. Nevertheless, the story of Finn is strongly defined by his older family members who dominate a big part of the narrative – thus making it less of a film based on character individuality.

3.2 Conclusion

There has not been a radical change throughout the years regarding the portrayal of youngsters. Each and every interpretation of children is done slightly differently. What we can see differing between the last decades of the 20th century and the 00s, is a slightly increased predominant children’s cast. The conversations in the 80s and 90s films are
mostly involving at least one adult, mostly in places controlled by them, making youngsters Others. The 21st century brings more individual focus on children and their place in the public sphere. In an examination of films from the earlier decades of cinema and their difference to contemporary film, Malena Jansson concludes that “With a comparison to […] older film […] one can clearly see that focus has been resettled from a wide, social perspective to an individual one.”³⁸ Jansson’s films belong to a more extensive sum of years, beginning earlier in cinema history than this essay, thus making it difficult to compare her study to this (in terms of historical pattern). However, almost the same observation can be made in Dutch children’s film where the eighties are characterized by depicting the worldly issues of war or a dysfunctional family. The 90s are surrounded by an adult dominated cast that dictate the direction of the story, despite of how individualistic and relatable the child may be. More contemporary films criticize the upper-hand an adult has in discursive contexts and the disadvantage of being underage. They running time is mostly taken up by the young characters, which also can be said on behalf of Nijntje de film where the adults only pop into the screen when giving new directions for Nijntje’s scavenger hunt.

The films that are closest in bringing a subjective representation to their audiences are the ones that include a predominant children’s cast, which create an opportunity for discourse between children to flourish. Another thing that helps with the representation of subjective youngsters is the appropriation of adult controlled spaces. A take-over that includes children in public places of society. Some films on this essay critically portray power relations between adult and child by showing how children adapt to what is considered true and valid in a world ruled by grown-ups; the adult way of discourse

³⁸ Jansson, 141.
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