

## **Remembering Dutch-Moluccan radicalism**

Memory politics and historical event television

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## **Remembering Dutch-Moluccan radicalism: memory politics and historical event television.**

**By Randi Marselis, Roskilde University**

**Abstract:** This article examines memory politics in relation to radical actions of young Dutch-Moluccans, more specifically a train hijacking in 1977 at the village of De Punt in the Netherlands. The article examines how these historical events were remembered in the drama-documentary television film, *De Punt* (Smitsman, 2009), as well as in user-generated comments in an online discussion. The television film represented an inclusive memory culture that made room for the difficult memories of all parties involved including the radicalised, young hijackers. Based on a multidimensional model of mass media reception, the analysis of the web debate examines how viewers reacted to this interpretation. The web debate functioned as a participatory forum, where collective and national memories and postcolonial history were intensely discussed, and the debate made room for some degree of reconciliation between viewers of Dutch-Moluccan and of Dutch majority background.

In the 1970s, the Netherlands experienced a series of radicalised actions performed by young Dutch-Moluccans. Some of these actions ended in violence, resulting in painful memories both within the Dutch-Moluccan community and amongst the Dutch majority population. This article examines how a train hijacking in 1977, which ended tragically with the death of two hostages and six hijackers, was remembered in the television film, *De Punt* (Smitsman, 2009), as well as in user-generated comments on the Internet. On the evening of the television premiere, the website of the broadcaster served as a forum

for intense discussions about how to remember these traumatic, historical events. While the debate allowed room for robust disagreement, it also showed some degree of reconciliation between viewers of Dutch-Moluccan background and of Dutch majority background<sup>1</sup>.

By examining user-generated comments on the website, this article contributes to the increased focus on the reception of memory texts within *Memory Studies*. Lorraine Ryan (2011) has proposed, in an article on mnemonic resistance, that Stuart Hall's classic encoding/decoding text could serve as a fruitful basis for studying how groups and individuals receive public memory texts and to what degree they resist dominant memory discourses. This article takes up this challenge but draws on a newer, multidimensional model of mass media reception, which takes Hall's model as its point of departure (Schrøder, 2000, 2003).

This article shows how the film, *De Punt*, represents an inclusive memory culture that acknowledges the difficult memories of all parties involved in the train hijacking and invites viewers to an understanding of the motives behind the radicalised actions. The article then examines how participants in the web debate positioned themselves in relation to this interpretation of the historical events. As a background for the analysis, the following sections will give a historical introduction to the forced postcolonial migration of Moluccans to the Netherlands and to the radicalisation amongst the second generation.

## **Postcolonial, Moluccan migration to the Netherlands**

The Moluccas (Maluku) are situated in the Malay Archipelago, and the islands are today part of Indonesia. The Dutch obtained control over the area during the seventeenth century and subsequently the islands became part of the colony of the Dutch East Indies. From the last decades of the nineteenth century, an increasing number of Moluccan men were enrolled in the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army (KNIL). Both in their own perception and amongst the Dutch population, Moluccans got the reputation of being highly skilled soldiers who were very loyal to the Netherlands. These Moluccan soldiers fought on the Dutch side against the Japanese during the Second World War. Furthermore, a large group of Moluccan soldiers remained part of the colonial army after the war and fought against Indonesian independence. When the Netherlands recognised Indonesian sovereignty in 1949, the colonial army was to be demobilised, and the soldiers and their families wished to settle in the Moluccas. However, new developments in the Moluccas made this impossible. In April 1950 the independent Republic of the South Moluccans (RMS: *Republik Maluku Selatan*) was proclaimed, but by the end of the year, the Indonesian army had reclaimed the islands (Smeets and Steijlen, 2006). Many of the Moluccan soldiers, who were still in the Dutch colonial army, supported the claim for an independent republic, and, subsequently, they were banned from returning to the islands and became pariahs in the new Indonesia (Oostindie, 2010: 27). In 1951, the Dutch government decided to ship the Moluccan families (around 12,500 people) to the Netherlands and, to their indignation, the soldiers were discharged on arrival. This severe disappointment created a sense of helpless anger

towards the Dutch government that would mark the community for the following decennia (Oostindie, 2010: 92).

The Moluccans were placed in camps throughout the country, and a policy of segregation was maintained until the 1960s since both the Moluccans themselves and the Dutch authorities awaited the possibility of repatriation. Furthermore, the Moluccans expected the Dutch government to actively support their political fight for an independent republic, and initially this claim had some support amongst the Dutch population. However, even if the Dutch state would have officially acknowledged the claim for an independent RMS, the precarious relationship with the former colony and international political agendas meant that they were not likely to have had any influence on the matter (Oostindie, 2010; Smeets and Steijlen, 2006).

### **Radicalisation of the second generation<sup>2</sup>**

In the 1960s and 70s, groups amongst the second generation became radicalised in their fight for RMS and their anger towards both the Dutch and the Indonesian governments. Furthermore, the groups were concerned by rumours of severe human rights violations on the Moluccan islands. The groups were inspired by anti-imperialist literature and drew on discourses of liberation struggles abroad, such as from the Black Power movement and the Palestinian struggle (Demant and De Graaf, 2010; Smeets and Steijlen, 2006). A series of political and sometimes violent actions followed between 1966 and 1978.

The radicalised actions of the young Moluccans culminated in three hijackings between 1975 and 1977. While earlier actions had mainly been directed against Indonesian goals in the Netherlands, these later actions were aimed at Dutch civilians. In December 1975 a train was hijacked near the village of Wijster and 54 hostages were taken. One train employee was killed at the beginning of the action, and later two other hostages were shot by the hijackers in an attempt to pressure the Dutch government. After 12 days the hijackers surrendered and were sent to prison.

Less than one and a half years later, in May 1977, another group of young Moluccans planned two coordinated actions and hijacked a primary school and a train. The group's goals were to attract new attention to the human rights situation in the Moluccas, have all Moluccan prisoners in the Netherlands released, and force the Dutch government to withdraw all support from the Indonesian regime. Furthermore, the hijackers wanted safe passage on a plane in order to leave the country. On May 23 a group of four men hijacked a primary school in Bovensmilde with 105 children and five teachers. The children and one teacher were released after three or four days, while the rest of the teachers were held hostage until the military bashed into the building with armoured vehicles on June 11, and the hijackers surrendered themselves.

In the simultaneous train hijacking, which also began on May 23, another group of eight men and one woman stopped a train outside the village, De Punt, taking 51 hostages. The hijacking went on for 20 days, while the hijackers negotiated with the government. The government decided to end the hijacking with a dramatic military attack early in the morning on June 11. The antiterrorist unit fired 15,000 bullets through the train at four

strategic places, where the hijackers were known to stay, and then F-104 Starfighters flew over the train in the hope that all hostages would be terrified by the noise and throw themselves to the floor. Tragically, two hostages and six hijackers were killed, and for many years the public assumed that they were killed by the bullets that penetrated the train. However, in 2000 it became publicly known that the female hijacker was shot by one of the soldiers storming the train, and that she had been wounded and unarmed when it happened (Bootsma, 2000; De Graaf and Van Riel, 2008).

The violent ending of this hijacking is still highly controversial. It has for many years been discussed whether the government should have continued negotiations with the hijackers, since the train had been bugged and the government knew that the hijackers did not intend to kill any hostages (De Graaf and Van Riel, 2008). Also the level of violence used by the military has been controversial and these discussions have been fuelled by new information made public in 2013. The official position of the Dutch government has since 1977 been that it was not the intention to kill the hijackers and that they were not hit by a hail of bullets. However, this has been challenged by the autopsy reports, which showed that the six dead hijackers were in total hit by 144 bullets. Furthermore, accusations that wounded hijackers were executed by the soldiers, who stormed the train, have been raised by the hijackers' relatives. At the time of writing an official archival investigation initiated by the Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice is taking place, and more exact facts about the events may become known when the result is made public by December 2014 (van Es, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2013d;

Wollerich, 2014). However, the television film examined in this article premiered in 2009 and presented a fictionalised account of the events based on the knowledge available at that time.

While the violent ending has thus been controversial, it has also been described as an important turning point that led to a process of de-radicalisation. The Moluccan activist groups realised that they could not win by military means. Furthermore, the support of such actions dwindled amongst the wider Moluccan community, which was especially critical towards the means of taking children hostage (Demant and De Graaf, 2010: 416).

Obviously, the Moluccan actions had severe consequences for relationships between Dutch-Moluccans and the Dutch majority population. The public were terrified of being in any train on which Moluccan youngsters were present, and Moluccans experienced discrimination in everyday encounters and were held accountable for the actions (Demant and De Graaf, 2010: 412; Smeets and Steijlen, 2006: 240). However, the Moluccans as a group were not collectively demonised in the official rhetoric of the government (Demant and De Graaf, 2010: 414), and the historical context meant that the Dutch population had some degree of understanding of the Moluccan cause:

‘To the conservative majority of the Netherlands, the Moluccans were “our” loyal, royalist, and mainly Protestant allies, while to the left and liberal segments of the Dutch population they were “our” colonial burden and the Netherlands owed them something’ (Demant and De Graaf, 2010: 414).



The Dutch-Moluccan community were thus, along with other groups from the former colonies, ascribed a ‘postcolonial bonus’ granting them a different position in Dutch society than other groups of migrants (Oostindie, 2010). In spite of the tense relationship with the majority population following the actions, the Moluccans did have some amount of goodwill amongst the majority population, meaning that they were not simply stigmatised as a potential threat. In her historical research on the radicalisation of Moluccans, Beatrice de Graaf found a frequently recurring ‘injustice frame’ in her interviews with former radicalised Moluccans made in 2008–9. This injustice frame could be summed up as ‘the Dutch government left the Moluccan minority in the cold, ignored their struggle for independence, and gave them false promises’ (Demant and De Graaf, 2010: 414). Based on Geert Oostindie’s concept of a postcolonial bonus, it could be expected that this framing would still have some support amongst the Dutch population. The following sections will examine how the hijacking in 1977 was memorised in the television film *De Punt* (2009) and in the following debate on the broadcaster’s website.

### ***De Punt*, a drama-documentary**

*De Punt* (Smitsman, 2009) was produced as part of a Dutch series of so-called *telefilms*, which are films that are specially produced for the public broadcasters and dramatise socially relevant events. It had its premiere on Dutch television on May 3, 2009 and was broadcasted in prime time by the Dutch public service institution, Evangelische Omroep (Evangelical Broadcasting Corporation). It became the most seen telefilm in the ten years this concept had been running, which indicated that the theme of the film was not

only important to the Dutch-Moluccan community but had broader national interest (Het Parool, 2009). In the previous years, the Dutch public had had ample opportunity to get (re-)acquainted with Dutch-Moluccan history. Historians had published broad accounts of the history of the Dutch-Moluccan community (Smeets and Steijlen, 2006) as well as studies that focused specifically on the actions of the radicalised youth (e.g. De Graaf and Van Riel, 2008). Furthermore, these dramatic, historical events had been taken up by a number of media texts and cultural productions (Roelofs, 2000; Bootsma, 2000; Van Der Oost, 2008; Vernout and Susannah, 2008). When *De Punt* had its premiere on Dutch television, it had thus been preceded by a number of journalistic texts and dramatised productions, which could have prepared the viewers to engage with its theme.<sup>3</sup>

*De Punt* gave a fictionalised account of the train hijacking in 1977 as well as of present-day memories of these events. Drawing on Derek Paget's discussion of genres that combine fictional and documentary modes, this film could be categorised as a *drama-documentary* that 'uses the sequence of events from a real historical occurrence or situation and the identities of protagonists to underpin a film script intended to provoke debate about the significance of the events' (2004: 206). It adhered to the cinematic conventions of realist drama, and documentary material was not included. The main characters had, with the exception of known politicians, been given fictive names, but they were still based on historical characters. The tragic love story between two of the hijackers was foregrounded, and this seemed to be inspired by recent historical research about the female hijacker (De Graaf and Van Riel, 2008). In order to shape the

narrative, the number of characters and complexity of events were reduced. Paget describes this unavoidable process as *editing out*: ‘To rationalise and shape in dramatic terms mean to edit out in documentary terms’ (2004: 204). The aim of this article is not to scrutinise in detail how the film edited historical events. Yet, a few significant choices should be given attention because they were discussed in the web debate. One significant choice was that the coordinated hijacking of the school in Bovensmilde was at no point mentioned in the film. Another important aspect concerned the death of the female hijacker. The film showed a growing friendship between her and a female hostage, and after being shot by the soldier, the hijacker died in the arms of this hostage. This touching scene romanticised the relationship between hijackers and hostages. The hijacker was actually lying wounded and unarmed in another part of the train, when she was killed by one of the soldiers, who searched the train.<sup>4</sup> These examples are only a few of the changes made in order to shape the narrative and they are mentioned here because they were taken up in the web debate analysed later in this article.

The film began with the caption ‘Based on the second Moluccan train hijacking in 1977 at De Punt’,<sup>5</sup> but the complicated narrative structure also included a fictionalised account of present-day memories of these events. The plot of the film was built around a fictive television talk show that in 2007, 30 years after the hijacking, brought together five persons who were involved in the events. These persons were: one of the surviving male hijackers; a female hostage; the father of the deceased female hijacker; the soldier who shot the female hijacker during the military attack; *and* the politician Dries van Agt, who was in 1977 Minister of Justice. In the beginning of the film each of these

persons received a letter from a television station, and this fictive letter served as a framing disclaimer for the whole film. The letter to the father of the female hijacker was read out by a voiceover introducing the intention of the television debate as not aiming to reconstruct the events but to make clear the motives of the train hijackers and portray the female hijacker. The letter ended with the statement, ‘We sincerely hope that we, by telling this story, do justice to the Moluccans in the Netherlands as community and to Noor P. [fictive name] in particular.’ The filmmakers were here clearly inspired by *historical event television*, where television premieres of mixed formats as docudramas are often followed by an *extra-textual event* in the form of a discussion programme that examines the social importance of the represented historical topics (Paget, 2004; Ebbrecht, 2007). In the case of *De Punt*, including a fictive television talk show in the diegesis gave an opportunity to describe the long-term consequences for the involved individuals as well as to articulate present-day memory discourses. The five persons’ memories about the 1977 events were shown through a series of flashbacks. Thus, the film was structured as a multi-protagonist narrative, which continually invited viewers to shift identification and understand the events from a new point of view. The discussion in the present-day television studio allowed arguments and reflections to be verbally articulated, while the continuous flashbacks ensured dramatic tension in the film. The characters’ lines in the television debate were to some extent built on interview statements from the documentary journalistic book by Bootsma (2000). Different views on the hijacking and the controversial military action were thus verbalised in a realistic way. Furthermore, the studio talk gave an opportunity for letting

the Moluccan characters articulate their views on the broader question of Dutch postcolonial politics. This ensured that the dramatic actions in the 1970s were to some extent historically contextualised. However, this theme was not fully developed but mainly referred to in general terms through mentioning the loyalty of the KNIL soldiers and the treatment that these soldiers and their families received from the Dutch authorities after arriving in the Netherlands.

The film ended with the father thinking back on his last conversation with his daughter. As she turned away, without having managed to tell him that she would participate in the hijacking, text on the screen invited viewers to place a reaction on the website of the broadcaster.

### **Methodological considerations**

The invitation to comment on the website was taken up by many viewers, and such a debate could be seen as a form of participatory, extratextual event, where the discussion of the drama documentary was moved from an expert-driven debate in a television studio to a discussion amongst viewers on a website. The following analysis will focus on comments posted on the premiere evening until midnight, a sample of 363 comments.<sup>6</sup> Obviously, the viewers who took up the invitation to respond and debate were not representative of all viewers. Rather, the comments were posted by viewers who had been especially moved by the telefilm, were especially positive towards or angry about it or already had a special interest in this part of Dutch, postcolonial history. The debate was intense for the first hours after the broadcast as participants were voicing their personal reactions to the film as well as entering into dialogue with each

other. Relying solely on user-generated comments gives some limitations compared to reception studies based on interviews, where especially the use of mixed methods has larger potential for capturing the richness of viewers' experiences (McElroy and Williams, 2011: 92). However, examining an online debate created immediately after the premiere gives insight into what the participants spontaneously wish to communicate and share with each other, without being prompted by questions posed by a researcher. I would thus argue, that user-generated comments have strengths in terms of spontaneity even though they may be lacking in terms of complexity.<sup>7</sup>

Another difficulty in analysing web debates instead of basing reception studies on qualitative interviews is that it is usually impossible to know the exact social demographic background of the participants. However, the format of the reaction form had one slight peculiarity. Participants were not only asked to give their name and email address (not made public) but also mention their *Afkomst* (origin), and this meant that many participants categorised themselves in terms of ethnic or national belongings. Furthermore, participants often mentioned ethnic background in their comments, and ethnic background could also be deduced from the way they used the pronominal 'we'. While it was still not possible to know the ethnic background of all participants, it was possible to conclude that the web debate on this television premiere evening served as the forum for a cultural encounter between people of Dutch-Moluccan and of Dutch majority background.<sup>8</sup>

The debate showed that many participants had read each other's comments, and they often addressed each other directly. Although they disagreed considerably both in their

evaluation of the film and in more general political ways, the debate was remarkably sober in tone (compare to, e.g. Drinot, 2011; Knudsen and Stage, 2012). There were some instances of aggressive comments from Dutch-Moluccans, but these were generally ignored by other participants or reprimanded by other Dutch-Moluccan participants. In total, 26 comments in the sample were found to use an aggressive or coarse language *or* to comment on such behaviour, thus it was not a general feature of the debate.

The ethical aspects of including the web debate in this article were carefully considered. The debate took place on a public website, and participants were likely to have intended the asynchronous comments to be postings in a public communication (Kozinets, 2010: 145). The names or pseudonyms of participants have not been mentioned in the analysis, and since the web debate was no longer publicly available, the quotes used were not retraceable through a search engine.<sup>9</sup> The identities of participants were thus medium cloaked (Kozinets, 2010: 154), and personally identifiable items of information were not included (AoIR Ethics Working Committee, 2012: 7).

For the analysis the debate was coded twice. The first part of the coding-process inductively identified recurring themes in the debate. Such themes were: the perceived degree of realism of the film, personal memories of the situation in the 1970s, whether the military ending of the action was justifiable or not, wider references to postcolonial politics etc. Based on this thematic coding, the comments were re-coded with a more specific focus on how the participants positioned themselves in relation to the filmmakers' interpretation of the historical events in 1977. This approach was inspired

by Lorraine Ryan's (2011) call for an increased focus on the reception of official memory discourses and how they may be resisted by individuals or groups.

### **A multidimensional model of reception**

Lorraine Ryan's (2011) discussion of *mnemonic resistance* draws on Hall's classic encoding/decoding theory from 1973, which became important for the development of reception research within media studies (Hall, 1992). Hall's interest was in proposing a theoretical model of how the ideological content of a text was received by its readers. Using the example of televisual text, Hall stated that the text was polysemic, but nevertheless the text was *encoded* with a *preferred meaning* that was based on a *dominant code*. Hall categorised a reading in accordance with these understandings as a *preferred reading* in which the readers 'operate inside the dominant code' (1992: 136). In addition, he proposed two other reading positions. In a negotiated reading, the viewer accepts the dominant or preferred definitions but adapts it to his/her own specific situation and understandings, and Hall stated that a negotiated reading combines the dominant code with oppositional views (1992: 137). The third *oppositional* position implied a reception that identified the dominant code but rejected it 'in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference' (Hall, 1992: 138). In order to avoid a too-simplistic understanding of reception, it is, however, crucial to notice that Hall stressed these reading positions as hypothetical and in need of empirical testing. This was indeed done within empirically based reception research, which led to an increased focus on media texts' contradictory discourses, as well as a more nuanced understanding of the reception processes (e.g. Brunsdon and Morley,



1978; Morley, 1980). When drawing on the classic encoding/decoding theory, which Ryan proposed ‘perfectly complements memory studies’ (2010: 159), it is thus important to not understate the complexity of receivers’ readings of memory texts.

Based on many years of empirical experience with reception research, the Danish professor of communication, Kim Christian Schrøder (2000, 2003), developed a multidimensional model for mass media reception that aimed at acknowledging the complexity of readings, without throwing away all of Hall’s important points. Schrøder’s main argument was that Hall’s model was one-dimensional since it only focused on how viewers positioned themselves in relation to an ideological message. Moreover, Schrøder pointed out how Hall assumed that a text would always be in favour of the status quo and work against oppressed groups (2000: 240). As a consequence, Schrøder insisted on the need to untangle viewers’ attitudes to the text from the researcher’s mapping of readings in relation to the political-ideological landscape. Whether an oppositional reading of a memory text (e.g. a monument or a television documentary) should be considered an open-minded or a more chauvinistic contribution to the climate of memory is an *evaluation*, which the researcher *might* want to apply after the analysis. Such a political agenda of the researcher was not, however, an inherent part of the multidimensional model of the recipients’ reception.<sup>10</sup>

Schrøder’s model proposed five dimensions of reception that ‘should not be seen as happening in some kind of sequential order’ but rather ‘simultaneously or near - simultaneously’ (Schrøder, 2000: 242). Only in the analysis could these dimensions be clearly separated from each other:

‘Position’: While Schrøder was highly sceptical about Hall’s idea of a preferred meaning (ideological message) as inherent in the text, he acknowledged the value of examining how viewers position themselves in relation to a text. The dimension Position then ‘includes a continuum of attitudinal responses, from acceptance to rejection of the perceived textual position and the various textual elements perceived to make up that position’ (2000: 249).

‘Comprehension’: This dimension implies ‘a decoding continuum from complete *divergence from* to complete *correspondence to* either the encoder’s intended meanings or the readings produced by other recipients’ (Schrøder, 2000: 246).

‘Motivation’: This dimension is about ‘the “link of relevance” between readers’ personal universe and the universe perceived to be presented in the text’ (Schrøder, 2000: 245).

‘Discrimination’: The extent to which a reading of a text is often informed by an awareness of how the text is constructed; for example, in terms of framing or editing (Schrøder, 2000: 247).

‘Implementation’: This dimension concerns to what extent and in what way media are used as a political resource. Schrøder argued that not only political mobilisation but also everyday discussions based on media content should be included here (2000: 252).

The following analysis of the web debate about *De Punt* was based on Schrøder’s model, but the dimensions were not given equal weight. My interest was primarily to

examine how viewers positioned themselves in relation to what they perceived to be the film's message, and expressing their views on this matter also seemed to be the main concern of the viewers. Since my analysis was not based on interviews, I did not have the option of posing probing questions about specific dimensions, as for instance how aesthetical choices influenced viewers' reception (Discrimination). Nevertheless, the analysis will show how the participants sometimes expressed other dimensions of their reception and how participating in a deliberative web debate about a memory text could in itself be seen as an example of the dimension of Implementation, whereby the participants engaged in memory politics.

### **Inclusive memory culture as proposed position**

The multi-protagonist narrative of the film invited the viewer to shift identification between the main characters and acknowledged their difficult choices and memories. The focus on the tragic love story, the death of the female hijacker, and the generally sympathetic portrayals of the hijackers asked the viewer to understand the motives behind their actions. In the fictive television show, the soldier, who shot the female hijacker, told about the reprisals he had experienced. And, the viewer was also given some insight into the difficult political discussions that led to the military action. Thus, the film stressed the complexity of these historical events and the difficult consequences for all those involved. Generally, the participants in the web debate seemed to perceive this as the main message of the film, and so they may in broad terms be said to have agreed on their general understanding of the film (Comprehension). However, they positioned themselves very differently in relation to this 'preferred reading'.<sup>11</sup> Viewers

who posted comments in line with this interpretation typically mentioned how touched they had been by the film and their appreciation for seeing the event from different perspectives:

‘Beautiful film. For me it shows that reality is more complex than a simple distinction between good and bad or perpetrator and victim. That it meant a succession of pain and sorrow for all the involved is indisputable. Hopefully, at some point we will as humanity learn to solve things peacefully.’

A young Dutch-Moluccan participant also appreciated the shifting point of view:

‘I have myself as third generation here and there heard about the train hijacking. Of course only from the Moluccan point of view. Found it anyhow very interesting to see it from the other side. I am very glad that this film has been broadcasted; again, I am a bit more knowledgeable about our history.’

Taking up a reading strategy that accepted the filmmakers’ main message thus implied acknowledging the complexity of the events, and this may be in line with general trends towards more inclusive memory cultures, where national collective memories make room for individualised and minoritarian voices, and where opposing interpretations may coexist (Ryan, 2010: 161). As seen in the following section, an oppositional reading would then imply a rejection of this plurality of memories and stress antagonisms between the involved groups.

### **Oppositional reading: do not empathise with perpetrators**

Far from all participants in the debate appreciated the film, and it was criticised for a number of different reasons. In line with Schröder's definition of oppositional readings, these participants were aware of what they perceived to be the filmmakers' intentions but rejected this interpretation of the events. Typical of such comments were the intertwinement of the dimensions Position and Discrimination, as participants commented explicitly on choices made in the production process. Quite a lot of criticism was raised against the film's representation of historical facts and the way some events and persons had been edited out. Some participants found that the simultaneous hijacking of the primary school in Bovensmilde should have been included in the film, but this would have complicated the narrative severely and possibly made the film fall apart. On the other hand, omitting the controversial act of taking small children hostage downplayed the radicalism of the young Moluccans. One of these former child-hostages saw the filmmakers' editing out of these events as part of a broader tendency in Dutch society to neglect the traumas of the children and make the Moluccans the victims of the events. In this case, her reading was thus motivated by her own personal history and experiences of national, memory politics.

The film's depiction of the train hijacking at De Punt was also criticised and was for instance found to be one-sided because it did not focus enough on the consequences for the hostages and the death of two of them during the military action. Furthermore, an individual, who presented himself as an insider of the military units that attacked the train, although not himself participating in the attack, commented on the death of the female hijacker. He claimed to know for a fact that she was very fanatic, ran through the

whole train with her wounded leg and got into a gunfight with the soldiers. This retelling of events seemed to combine the available knowledge about her death with her lover's actions, as he was the one who got into a gunfight in the train (Bootsma, 2000: 317–329). This participant's story may have been a military version that had helped to explain her severe injuries. The many bullets in her body have led to a range of speculations, since the details about her death did not become known until 2000 and new information may still be made public (Bootsma, 2000; De Graaf and Van Riel, 2008; Van Es 2013c, 2013d). The participant might have been reluctant to give up the preferred understanding of his peers and stayed loyal to his mnemonic socialisation within the military. His reluctance to accept another version might have been strengthened because of the drama-documentary genre, since *De Punt* did not reconstruct the military attack but showed a fictionalised version that mixed historical facts with made-up scenes. This dramaturgic choice could actually have caused new confusion and created additional myths amongst viewers since information about the military attack was still concealed by the authorities.

As seen above, some participants criticised the depiction of specific historical details, but the most direct oppositional readings explicitly dismissed the multi-perspectival representation of the events. Some users got rather upset about the invitation to empathise with the hijackers and saw this as reversing moral positions: 'What a terrible shame that we the Dutch always seem to be masters at making perpetrators into victims.' However, such a position did not exclude recognition of the postcolonial

bonus of the Dutch-Moluccan community, which had traditionally been widely acknowledged in Dutch society:

‘I find it quite biased. The Moluccans are represented far too humanely. They were no less than criminals, who have scarred many people for the rest of their lives. If you begin an action like that, it is logical that you will end up being shot by the Dutch army. The film creates a question of guilt. Did Van Agt react in the right way? What was the government supposed to do? To keep trying is not possible in such a dangerous situation. That a couple of criminals lost their lives is too bad but not to be avoided. The history of the Moluccans is known, and I understand their pain. But train hijackers are criminals, and you should not portray them as super humane.’

### **Contextualisation: postcolonial history and personal memories**

Schrøder proposed that the dimension Position should be seen as a continuum between total acceptance and total rejection, which meant that positions in the middle of the continuum would be concordant with Hall’s negotiated positions. However, in this empirical case, participants that were in opposition to the inclusive memory culture, seemed to resist this quite fiercely. In the analytical coding of the debate, all comments that explicitly rejected the pluralistic agenda of the filmmakers were systematically categorised as oppositional readings. The majority of participants seemed to accept the perceived main message, although many did so only implicitly (Schrøder, 2000: 249). However, another prevalent way of negotiating how these events should be remembered

was to broaden the discussion by including themes not developed upon in the film. Two main, and often intersecting, ways of contextualising the events were found.

The first strategy was to discuss the film in relation to broader historical and political contexts. The earlier-mentioned injustice frame stating that ‘the Dutch government left the Moluccan minority in the cold, ignored their struggle for independence, and gave them false promises’ (Demant and De Graaf, 2010: 414), found by Beatrice de Graaf in her interviews with the radicalised Moluccans, was drawn upon both by Dutch-Moluccans and by participants of Dutch majority background. Numerous postings called for an official apology from the Dutch government, which could be seen as an example of how the film was used as political resource (Implementation; Schröder 2000: 252), but this claim was phrased in very different and often unclear ways. In some comments the apology seemed to concern the role of the Dutch during colonialism, others the Dutch postcolonial politics in regard to the Moluccan soldier families and a free Moluccan republic, and some participants asked specifically for an official apology for the military attack on the hijacked train. Furthermore, participants of majority background often expressed a sense of guilt about Dutch postcolonial history as in this comment, where the loyalty of the Moluccan soldiers was stressed:

‘Deeply affected, I have watched this film. Distressingly, it shows how we have given the Moluccan people many promises that have never been fulfilled. It is a stain that can’t be wiped away. But it’s not too late to ask for forgiveness and where possible to make up for it. A people, who have been so loyal to us in difficult times, should not be left alone with this pain and these wounds.’



While some brought up the need for official apologies, others expressed their own personal apology and their respect for the Dutch-Moluccan community. By raising this apology-theme, participants drew on memory discourses of the obligation to apologise and make recompense for historical injustices. However, this position did not challenge but rather strengthened the national identity of the participants, as ‘patriotism and acknowledgement of guilt are no longer mutually exclusive, but indeed sustain each other, as a nation’s integrity is now evaluated on its ability to confront and resolve past wrongdoings’ (Ryan, 2010: 161).

Participants with a Dutch-Moluccan background sometimes combined the injustice frame, with references to the present-day situation of Moluccans in Indonesia, which testified to the transnational engagement still vital within the community.<sup>12</sup> As pointed out by Erin Bell, viewers’ reactions to history programming ‘reflect their and their broader family, cultural and other histories and identities’ (2011: 57). Televisual memory texts about colonial and postcolonial history may thus serve as resources when descendants of colonised groups seek to articulate their views on the current effects of history in the former colonies (see also Gray and Bell, 2010).

The other main strategy for contextualising the film was to draw explicitly on personal relations and memories. These postings articulated a link between the film’s subject and the personal universe of the participants, and such personal engagement might have made these viewers particularly motivated to comment upon the movie (Schrøder, 2000: 245). Persons of Dutch majority background who had taken up the invitation to comment, often had some special relationship to Moluccan people. A few drew on

family memories from the colonies, as in this example, which again brought up the theme of loyalty: ‘(. . .) Moluccans saved the lives of my mother, brother and sister in ‘45. And years later this people is deceived in my name [as a Dutchman] . . . .’

However, more typically participants mentioned personal encounters in the Netherlands as having friends and colleagues of Moluccan background.

Another reason for commenting seemed to be vivid memories of the events, and these comments often took the form of flashbulb memories, which allowed the tellers to include themselves in the narrative and create a shared recollection (Misztal, 2003: 81).

A number of such comments retold memories of the military attack:

‘It has made a big impression on me. I still remember that I at the age of 16 turned on the radio in the morning exactly at the moment that the planes flew over the train. At that frightening sound, my thoughts went out to the hostages and the hijackers. The angst they must both have felt. You cannot defend a hijacking but I am ashamed of the way the Netherlands have treated our Moluccan fellow creatures. I can understand their anger; these people have been treated like old trash.’

As shown above, the negotiated readings of viewers of Dutch majority background showed a great deal of respect for the Dutch-Moluccan community and repeatedly insisted on seeing the radicalised actions in a broad context. This did not go unnoticed by participants of Dutch-Moluccan background:

‘Nice to see that there still are some Dutchmen who know their history.’

‘Really good film! I have read some comments and it strikes me how there is amongst some Moluccans still so much hatred (which is understandable). But maybe we should see this film as a history lesson to the Dutch, who have never learned about this in school. What you see is that almost all Dutchmen react verrry well.’

To these Dutch-Moluccan participants, reading the comments of viewers of majority background might have been a positive surprise. The last comment urged other Dutch-Moluccans to notice how viewers of majority background attempted reconciliation and acknowledged the complex history of the Dutch-Moluccan minority.

## **Conclusion**

This article has examined the reception of a televisual memory text about historical events that still evoke many painful memories. The drama-documentary, *De Punt*, gave a fictionalised interpretation of the hijacking in 1977 in De Punt, the Netherlands, which ended tragically as military forces stormed the train. I have argued that the web debate functioned as a participatory, extratextual event, whereby collective memories and postcolonial history were intensely discussed. If historical event television is to reach its potential in a participatory culture of digital media, the typical expert-driven discussions in a television studio need to be supplemented with digital forums, where viewers can voice opposing interpretations and express their own memory work. In this case study the user-generated reactions turned into a fruitful debate that showed some degree of reconciliation. The tone of the debate was remarkably sober compared to other recent studies of user-generated comments discussing collective memory on YouTube, which has been described as having a harsh debate culture (Drinot, 2011; Knudsen and Stage,

2012). Commenting on the website of a public service broadcaster might have framed the debate about *De Punt*, so that users showed each other respect. But I would argue that the tone of the debate was more likely influenced by the inclusive memory culture proposed by the film makers. The article has shown how *De Punt* proposed a pluralistic understanding of these events and acknowledged the painful memories of everyone involved, even the young Moluccan hijackers. Some viewers explicitly rejected the film's portrayal of the hijackers and saw this as an attempt to turn the moral positions of perpetrators and victims upside down. However, the large majority of comments accepted the film's framing in terms of an inclusive memory culture, and many used their historical knowledge and personal memories to widen the perspective of the film. Both viewers of majority background and Dutch-Moluccans repeatedly drew on an injustice frame that implied criticism of Dutch, postcolonial politics in relation to the Moluccan minority. In this sense, the postcolonial bonus traditionally ascribed to the Moluccan minority was still a vital part of the participants' interpretative frameworks.

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<sup>1</sup> Drawing on Richard Jenkins' (1997) *Rethinking Ethnicity* I refer to "the Dutch majority" as the national majority (the Dutch) understood as an ethnic group believed to have a common origin, culture and history.

<sup>2</sup> My categorisation of these young Moluccans as radicalised is based on some of the actions chosen in their political fight. Their actions included taking civilian hostages and some of these were killed. My use of the term *radicalised* is however not meant as a value judgement regarding the legitimacy of their political goals. It is beyond the scope of this article – and the expertise of the author – to go further into the questions of International Law related to the claim for Moluccan self-determination and an independent Moluccan republic.

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<sup>3</sup> In 2000 the television documentary series *Dutch approach* (Roelofs, 2000) described all Moluccan actions between 1970 and 1978 and showed detailed reconstructions of both train hijackings. The series was based on extensive research and was accompanied by a book which presented additional information found during the journalistic research (Bootsma, 2000). Following the 30 years anniversary the Dutch news media again paid attention to these events, and they were also adapted in dramatized productions. A musical theatre play about the hijacking of the school in Bovensmilde in 1977 (Vernout and Susanna, 2008)) toured the Netherlands in 2008/09, thus at the time when the telefilm *De Punt* had television premiere. And finally, the first train hijacking had the previously year been dramatized in another *telefilm*, named *Wijster* after the nearby village (Van Der Oost, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> This description is based on the reconstruction presented in the documentary journalistic book by Bootsma (2000).

<sup>5</sup> All Dutch citations have been translated into English by the author.

<sup>6</sup> The debate was after some time moved to and hosted on the website of the (now closed) Museum Maluku. The information manager at the museum, Nanneke Wigaard, has given me permission to use the debate for the purpose of this article (personal interview, 29.1. 2010).

<sup>7</sup> For other examples of research that include user-generated comments in examinations of televisual representations of colonial history, see Bell (2011) and Gray and Bell (2010).

<sup>8</sup> Some participants identify themselves as having another minority background, typically from another postcolonial group such as the Dutch-Surinamese community. However, the main focus of this analysis is on the debate as an encounter between Dutch-Moluccans and the Dutch majority population.

<sup>9</sup> This was tested by doing a Google Search on each quoted comment. This did not preclude the possibility of the debate being available in web archives. However, the possibility that individuals could be traced through these means was seen as a minimal risk, and furthermore the contents of the comments were of a nature that was not likely to harm the participants.

<sup>10</sup> In Schrøder's first presentation of his multimodal model, the dimension of the researcher's political *evaluation* of readings was still included (2000), but in a later version published in Danish, he argued that

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it should be placed outside the reception model as an option that the researcher could choose to add to the analysis if this was found appropriate due to the research agenda (Schrøder 2003: 69).

<sup>11</sup> Schrøder is critical of the idea of a 'preferred meaning' inherent in the text, which the researcher can locate through analysis and contrast with actual readings. He finds that actual readings could pragmatically be compared to either the encoder's intentional meaning or other users' readings of the same text (2000: 246). In the case of a drama-documentary or other documentary genres, I do however believe that it is possible to at least locate a main premise or message through textual analysis, as I have done here. And in this particular empirical case study, my analysis seems to be in line with what most of the participants in the web debate perceived to be the intention of the movie.

<sup>12</sup> The human rights situation on the Moluccan islands and especially the imprisoning of political activists has been criticized by both Amnesty International (2009) and Human Rights Watch (2010).