

William Uricchio

Nation, taste and identity:

Hollywood remakes of European originals

American film and television are often seen as strong forces in the Americanization of European culture. William Uricchio investigates an interesting aspect of the American film industry: the remaking of European film.

From its start, America's mere existence has provoked debate over cultural identity, exchange and effects on both sides of the Atlantic. America's dependence upon Europe for its languages, its political ideologies, and its cultural references has been so fundamental as to be taken for granted. Yet the last century has witnessed a shift in the balance of cultural power. Thanks in particular to American culture's embrace of the mass media of recorded music, film, and television, it has managed to make significant inroads into the populations newly empowered by universal voting rights and labor rights – developments which swept over most Western nations soon after the First World War. But although the democratization implicit in these last two developments has been celebrated as emblematic of Western civilisation's progress, democratization on the cultural front has been faced with indifference if not outright hostility.

Although there are countless manifestations of the cultural tensions between America and Europe, some of the more revealing concern the mass media and their status and effects as cultural carriers. One of the debates this has provoked speaks directly to the theme of this issue of *Groniek*, and thus I would like to address aspects of the long-standing tension between Hollywood and the European film industries. This debate has appeared in many different forms over cinema's centenary thanks to a series of fundamental ambiguities in the terms of the discussion. I have elsewhere addressed some of these ambiguities as they relate to such basic terms as 'America', 'motion pictures', and 'national identity'.¹ These terms

1 W. Uricchio, 'Displacing Culture: trans-national culture, regional elites, and the challenge to national cinema.' in: A. Van Hemel, H. Mommas, C. Smithuizen

permeate the Hollywood-Europe debate and all of its different elements – identity politics, economics, national prestige, etc. But the ambiguities of these terms also offer a clue to an often overlooked issue in the transatlantic debate over media, namely the role of hierarchies of taste. The struggle over popular culture generally, and over film more particularly, played itself out in judgements about the “decline” of values and taste associated with commercial popular culture, judgements with a direct link to issues of social power. And it is this debate, with all of its contradictions, which plays itself out in the latest round of debates between Hollywood and the European Film industries.

This paper takes as its target a particular aspect of the discursive positioning of Hollywood and European film: remakes. I would like to take a brief look at how Dutch critics and theorists have responded to Hollywood and European films and in particular to Hollywood remakes of European originals. Remakes offer unique insights into issues of cultural translation – insights that are of particular relevance to the debate over the characteristics of the two industries. While in this paper I will be able to do little more than sketch out an argument and point to its implications, I hope to at least challenge the familiar terms of the Hollywood stand-off.

A number of media historians and policy specialists have argued about the various manifestations of the cultural debate over cinema.² In my own work together with that of for example Richard Abel, this has meant a close look at how the US industry struggled for independence from the early dominance of the French (and more generally European) film industries in the years before World War One. This particular battle was complicated since it both played out over issues of national cultural identity (in a patriotic sense as well as in a modern sense) and over the cultural status of motion picture as a medium (its role as a carrier of culture and a binder of publics). It provides an extremely useful set of insights into the complications that have kept this debate so vital both within the US and Europe, and between them. However, before getting to the topic of taste

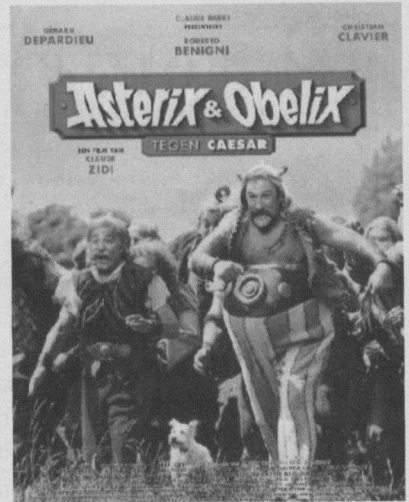
ed., *Trading Culture: GATT, European cultural policies and the transatlantic market* (Amsterdam, 1996) 67–82.

- 2 See for example: Uricchio, ‘Displacing culture’, Uricchio and Pearson, *Reframing Culture: The Case of the Vitagraph Quality Films* (Princeton 1993). And among others: J. Wasko, *Hollywood in the Information Age* (Austin, 1994). G. Nowell-Smith and S. Ricci ed., *Hollywood and Europe: Economics, Culture, National Identity 1945–1995* (London 1998). R. Abel, *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900–1910* (Berkeley 1999).

and social power *via* remakes, a brief review of the undulations of Hollywood and Europe's filmic relations is in order as a way to position the dominant elements in the debate.

In the period between 1908 and 1913, the US industry sought to invoke cultural protectionism as a way to drive out the then-dominant French film industry. Thanks to these efforts – together with changes in industrial organization, film signifying practices, a vast domestic market, and a Europe scattered by war – the American industry triumphed. In the years following the First World War, Europe, for its part, sought to restore the balance of power which Hollywood had upset, using an array of protectionist measures. The battle pulled in players ranging from the US State Department (using political power to keep Europe's doors open to US film) to a European intellectual aristocracy committed to defending the cultural *status quo*. From the First World War through the Second (with obvious exceptions like periods of Axis control), the happenstance of war and economic dependency gave US-based economic and policy interests the upper hand in a traumatized Europe, shifting the terrain of battle from policy to cultural discourse. By the 1960s, European recovery resulted in a positive cash flow, encouraging investment in the motion picture medium: the European film industry enjoyed subsidies, cultural critics were abated, and the various new European cinemas

prospered: Britain's Angry Young Men, the French New Wave, the New German Cinema, etc. Fortunately for Europe, the US studio system was itself in a state of chaos thanks to a well-timed reorganization, but the ultimate success of the reorganization – as film companies became parts of larger multi-media conglomerates – would bring renewed pressure on the European film industry. These multi-media and often multi-national efforts which characterize the present moment have changed the rules of the game considerably, in the process complicating the idea of national cinema. But they also triggered another round of policy offensives (the GATT debates), and ongoing cultural offensives (the MEDIA project), and subsidies (*Asterix and Obelix*). Yet somehow, despite it all, consumption of Hollywood products continues to grow.

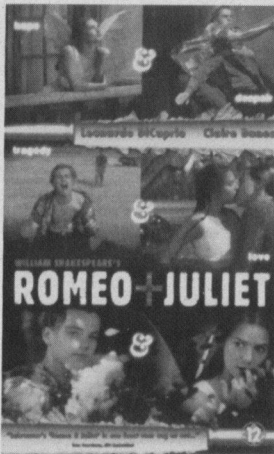


Asterix en Obelix tegen Caesar (1999).

This (sad) narrative should be familiar. True, reduced to a paragraph, it misses nuance (the shifting multi-media market), paradox (European film production workshops where American scriptwriters are the featured teachers), and perversity (European subsidy systems helping to pay for Hollywood films). But, in the broad strokes of caricature, it is consistent with the notion that the US industry is about commerce at any price and the European industry is about defending Culture. But let us shift away from the the economic and policy imperatives (themselves superb sources of discourse) and look at the terms that have greeted the films themselves.

The challenge posed by remakes

Remakes – which for the purpose of this essay mean films produced in one nation (usually European) and subsequently remade in another (usually America, which in this case is to say Hollywood) – share common starting points in terms of narrative and vision. But obviously the perceived need for remake (instead of the much cheaper alternative of recycling of the



Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in een modern jasje. *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) met Leonardo DiCaprio en Claire Danes.

original) and the nature of the transformation allow differences in the two production conceptions to stand out in sharp relief. Remakes can be seen as sites of cultural exchange, falling into the long literary traditions of translation, adaption and *hommage*. Or they can be seen as evidence of cultural exploitation, of failed imagination, or simply of cultural imperialism. Having said this, it is important to rememeber that remakes are as old as the medium itself, with filmmakers such as the Lumiere brothers re-shooting some of their earliest efforts; with early film entrepreneurs (or better, 'pirates') such as Paramount re-shooting multi-language versions of early sound features in its Joinville studios. Remakes are further complicated by the tendency to re-work particular narratives (in this case, more often considered 'properties') often deriving from literary sources – one thinks here of Shakespeare's *Romeo*

and *Juliet* (with vast number of versions) or James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. In this sense (and perhaps more generally), theories of adaptation are appropriate to their analysis.

Our interest, however, is the Hollywood remake of European originals. There is certainly evidence of certain patterns that bear further investigation. For example, the work of certain directors is frequently remade (Molinaro,

Veber, Robert³), while some Hollywood directors seem to prefer making remakes (Donnen, Mazursky⁴). *Auteur* status is no protection against remakes, as the Hollywood versions of Truffaut and Goddard films attest. And some filmmakers manage to make both the European original and the Hollywood remake (Vadim, Veber, Sluizer⁵). These latter instances are among the most interesting, both because they offer pointed insights into the new expectations and context provided by Hollywood (and thus

the differences from the European context). Judging from the perspective of industry, the logic of producing remakes is straightforward: legal rights to an already-produced film can be cheaper than to a script with potential; moreover, an already-produced film is pre-



The Postman Always Rings Twice (1946).



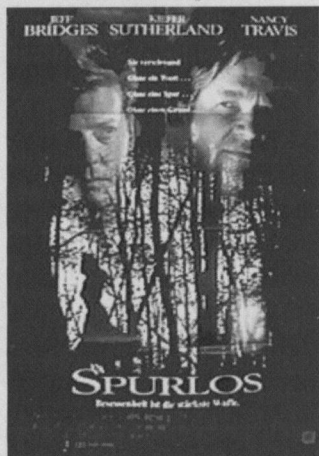
Remake van *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981).

3 Several examples of these 'remade' directors' films follow, with the Hollywood remake listed first, and its European source second: *Buddy, Buddy* (Wilder 1981) and *L'Emmerdeur* (Molinaro, 1973); *Oscar* (Landis, 1991) and *Oscar* (Molinaro, 1967); *The Birdcage* (Nichols, 1996) and *La cage aux folles* (Molinaro 1978); *Pure Luck* (Tass, 1991) and *La chevre* (Veber, 1981); *The Toy* (Donnen, 1982) and *Le jouet* (Veber, 1976); *Two Much* (Trueba, 1996) and *Les jameaux* (Robert, 1984); *The Woman in Red* (Wilder, 1984) and *Un elephant ca trompee enormement* (Robert, 1976); *The Man With One Red Shoe* (Dragoti, 1986) and *Le grande blonde avec un chaussure noir* (Robert, 1972).

4 For example: *Willie and Phil* (Mzursky, 1980) and *Jules et Jim* (Truffaut, 1961); *Down and out in Beverly Hills* (Mazursky, 1986) and *Bodu sauve des eaux* (Renoir, 1932); *Blame it on Rio* (Donnen, 1984) and *Un moment d'egarement* (Berri, 1977); *The Toy* (Donnen, 1982) and *Le jouet* (Veber, 1976).

5 Sluizer's *The Vanishing* (1993) and *Spoorloos* (1988); Vadim's *And God Created Woman* (1987) and *Et dieu créé la femme* (1956); and Veber's *Three Fugitives* (1989) and *Les fugitives* (1986).

tested, offering a free production run-through; and of course, a Hollywood remake offers the advantages of the English language and international stars and thus access to both the US domestic market and the world. But few remakes stop with this level of translation alone – the narrative is frequently modified to conform with the conventions of the Hollywood film. George Sluizer's Dutch original *Spoorloos* (1988), which he remade as

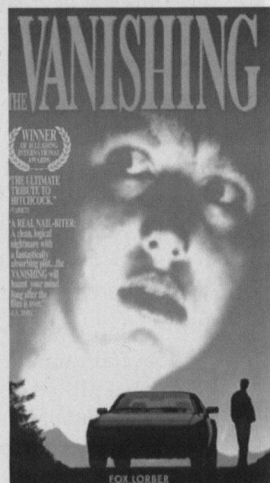


Duitse Filmposter van de remake van *Spoorloos*, *The Vanishing* (1993) met onder andere Kiefer Sutherland.

The Vanishing (1993), offers a case in point. The remake has stars, it has expensive production values, it has adventure, action, and romance. Perhaps most strikingly, the ambiguity and fatalism of the original closing scenes are reworked into a Hollywood resolution in which crime is punished, the quest is resolved, and the hero gets the girl.

These last reasons – language, stars, narrative and stylistic transformation – combined with the marketing prowess of the US studios, all helped a film like *The Vanishing* reach not only an American but a global audience – something *Spoorloos* was unable to achieve. It seems as though Hollywood took a 'local' Dutch product and reworked it into a 'global'

vernacular, a version easily acceptable to transnational audiences. The point is crucial: despite claims of 'Americanization', somehow the Hollywood remake often seems endowed with a kind of cultural transparency, allowing it to feel at home in many cultures where the European original would be perceived as foreign. How might this process function, and how is it perceived by critics? Can they tell us something about the differences between the two systems? Based upon a number of English-language European failures, some even cast with international stars and well marketed, evidently more is involved than these factors alone. One way to locate the differences is by looking at the audience reception process, in this case, press reception, for clues to the difference in expectation and meaning between the two realms of production.



Engelse Filmposter van *Spoorloos* (1988).

Terms of the debate

A recent study at Utrecht University by Romy van Krieken charted over a decade of film reviews in both the Dutch popular press and film trade press as they related to descriptions of Hollywood and European film⁶. Could one speak of a discursive pattern despite the tendency of reviewers to approach each film as a unique text and despite the wide variety of reviewers, both popular and professional? If so, what characteristics did reviewers associate with these national identities? Two sorts of patterns emerged. On one hand, the expectations regarding the 'typical' Hollywood film appeared to be quite coherent and succinct, centering around such markers as big budgets, stars, special effects, happy endings, and predictability. The European film, by contrast, seemed more difficult to characterize: if anything, it was *not* Hollywood. On the other hand, certain descriptors appeared with regularity over the period studied for both Hollywood and European products, a number of which follow in alphabetical order:

<i>Hollywood film</i>	<i>European film</i>
action/speed	artistic
big budgets	authenticity
cliches/stereotypes	cultural and national identity
commercial	deep staging
fantasy	depressing
happy end	elite
infantile	innovative
marketing	intellectual
predictable	metaphysical
production values	original
patriotic	open ended
quality/craftsmanship	psychological
sentimental	realistic
special effects	reflexive
stars	subjective
superficial	subtle
sensational	slow

6 Romy van Krieken, 'De Keizer is Bloot!' Een onderzoek naar de kenmerken van de Europese film (doctoraalscriptie, film and television studies, Utrecht University, 1998).

With the proviso that the descriptors for the European film were far less concentrated than those for the Hollywood film, Van Krieken's work on the reviews offers a useful insight into the cultural positioning of the two groups. The Hollywood descriptors seem very close to the terms used to describe popular and low culture generally (predictable, sensational, superficial). Descriptors for the European films, by contrast, resonate more closely with the markers of high-modernist culture (intellectual, metaphysical, reflexive). These characterizations, in turn, correspond rather closely with the visions of Hollywood and European film offered by such theorists such as David Bordwell, Peter Lev, Pierre Sorlin and others. Bordwell offers a particularly clear case, distinguishing as he does between the (classic) Hollywood film and the art film (although he by no means uses Hollywood in a pejorative sense).⁷

The press comments on *Spoorloos* and *The Vanishing* adhere to this pattern, suggesting that the former was somehow situated within the realm of 'art' and the 'serious' and the latter within the realm of 'popular culture' and 'the entertainment business' (and that in the process of the remake, Sluizer somehow 'sold his soul'). This case suggests the multiple levels through which the issue of remakes can be approached: we can consider national cultural practice and context (language, representational continuity, and the local traditions of filmmaking and exhibiting); we can consider filmic signifying practices (technique, casting, narrative); and we can consider national industrial practices (marketing, press coverage). And although judgements can be made on all of these levels, it is interesting to see how critics in fact use these parameters to assert a meta-discourse of taste in the sense of cultural status.

American versus European film

The 'Hollywood' film's success, certainly *vis a vis* the 'European' film's, might be usefully approached by considering its cultural position and the realities of its production rather than focussing on issues of national identity. One reason resides in the trans-national status of Hollywood products: the industry enjoys multi-national financing and marketing, some of the world's most successful writers, directors, and actors, and most importantly, a domestic cultural base (the multi-ethnic US population) that requires products oriented towards a multi-cultural audience.

7 David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London 1985).

Hollywood is difficult to defend as a 'national' industry (despite the history of US government interventions on its behalf).

But there is another more important reason. Hollywood has been centrally concerned with *popular* culture, not with traditional or elite aesthetic values (the domain instead of some American independent productions as well as some European 'art' films). It has embraced the most damning caricatures of its efforts as populist, in the process winning large audiences and a healthy profit. By contrast, the 'art' film (whether American or European) faces an uphill battle cursed both as an 'elite' anomaly for 'mass' audiences, and as still-tainted by its low-status medium for other members of the elite. What appears at first glance as a diffused, nebulous film form marked more by its expensive production values and formulaic narratives than by artistic integrity or vision, in fact is a form that manages to relate to a wide range of audience backgrounds. Unfortunately for some of its critics, the negative caricature of the motion picture elides more than it reveals; but for audiences not so concerned with elite value systems or taste judgements, the medium seems to provide its share of pleasures.⁸ The wide range of present (and historical) meanings inherent in such recurrent terms in the debate over American culture might suggest that the Atlantic shapes the terms of the debate, but the far more complicated patterns of meaning for 'American culture' and 'film' suggest that, on the contrary, divisions exist *within* rather than *between* the United States and Europe. By looking more carefully at the deployment patterns of these and related terms, a somewhat clearer sense of the strategies or intentions behind them might be gained.

The problem of the popular

Translation theory may indeed be an appropriate framework to understand remakes. The subsidized product of a cultural aristocracy, the European art film speaks to elites on both sides of the Atlantic just as its translation into the Hollywood vernacular speaks to mass audiences on both sides. Yet

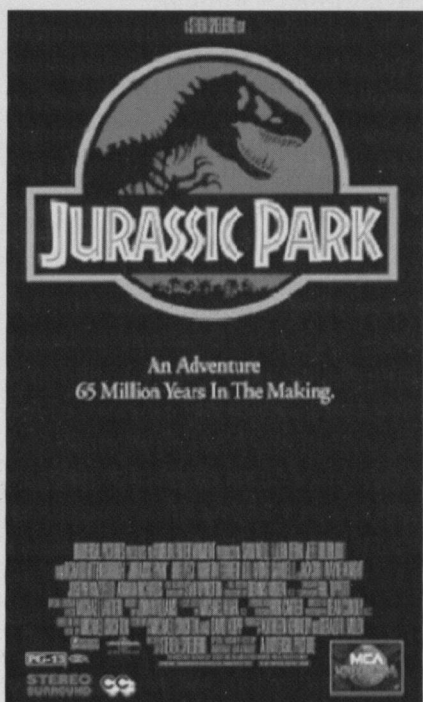
- 8 The issue of an active audience creating its own meanings from mass produced texts has occupied an important place in critical approaches to popular culture thanks to the efforts of Anglo-American theorists associated with cultural studies, and French theorists such as Michel de Certeau. Such considerations often approach popular texts both as processes of ideological positioning and sites for individual meaning and pleasures.

the array of judgements that have been invoked in this contrast – national cultural identity primary among them – have tended to block analysis of a more interesting (and potentially meaningful) set of distinctions. The point is simple: although national sentiments are mobilized to defend regional interests against an ‘American’ take-over, in fact the issue is one of multi-national corporations *versus* cottage industries, of mass produced, mass

consumed products versus artisan production, or popular culture vs high art. The implications for existing taste hierarchies – the threats to the *status quo*, the potentials for egalitarian access, and the shift of authority from a traditional social elite to a corporate elite – are obvious. The discourse of nationalism does little more than limit an effective analysis of the situation by directing our attention away from the most pressing issues.

The post-war period has been one of convergence. We have witnessed economic convergence in the automotive, fashion, and food sectors. We have witnessed linguistic convergence, with English, the new Latin, as the common ground for members of the most far-flung language groups. And, as already noted, we have witnessed a process of trans-national cultural convergence, whether ‘high’ (Mozart’s late string quartets), ‘middle’ (Weber’s *Phantom of the Opera*), or ‘low/mass’ (Spielberg’s *Jurassic Park*). The point is perhaps self-evident, but it has been effectively lost in discussions which pit ‘American’ film against ‘European’ film.

Few in the west would challenge acquaintance with the work of Bach or Shakespeare as an imperative for those making any claim to ‘culture’. Indeed, the high culture canon has been remarkably trans-national for at least the last century. But when popular culture crosses borders, it seems to generate suspicion and hostility. The historical record shows that the inconsistency is recurrent: the cultured elite know what is best for their less fortunate brethren, and more important still, they know a cultural menace when they see one. Beyond evident self-interest in preserving cultural authority, at least one source of this double standard relates to the



Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993).

fact that popular culture tended to stay regional until the turn-of-the-century, whereas elite culture found trans-national institutional form earlier. This developmental disjunction, where the new mass culture appeared bound up in the technologies of modernism, urbanization, industrialization etc., and threatened to displace the older, more 'genteel' elite culture, has somehow been reconstructed as 'Americanization', at least *vis a vis* the 'old world' values of Europe. This linguistic slippage points to the quandary facing European filmmakers. If, as members of elite-identified and tradition-bound communities, filmmakers explore the 'high' culture side of their medium, by definition their cultural status will be regarded as (relatively) high and their box-office return will be (relatively) low. If they shift attention to the 'low/mass' culture side of the spectrum, economic success is a good possibility whereas charges of 'selling out' or 'Americanization' are certainty. But if they pursue the concerns of the cultural elite and attribute their modest audiences to competition from Hollywood, they have simply made a mistaken analysis which no amount of marketing strategies or market regulations will reverse.

Although politically democratized, most European nations continue to have cultural aristocracies which dominate the subsidy sector and institutions of cultural reproduction. These aristocracies thrive by conflating national culture with (local) elite culture, and such a conflation is not without merit: we will be able to see selected aspects of our cultures, lives and tastes take material form. But the question of reaching beyond an elite audience for these elements remain a vital one. The issue is not so much 'good' culture against 'bad', but a question of whose culture will be supported and whose will be regulated on the marketplace. As an expressive medium, film has the capacity for critical contestation, for national and regional variation, for creative tension as a source for cultural renewal. As a mass medium, it has the potential to share this process, reaching across islands of parochial interest by constructing new publics. By joining these two attributes and shaking loose from the self-defeating logics which have thus far limited it, the medium as artform and as cultural force may have a new lease on life. Whether European filmmakers choose to embrace mass culture, competing with Hollywood, or whether they choose to develop the niche market already associated with them, the 'high' culture, art film sector, or whether they can find a third way, using the medium to reach outside the elite/mass dichotomy and define dichotomy and define a new public – remains to be seen.



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Nico Lettinck, *Praten als Brugman. De wereld van een Nederlandse volksprediker aan het einde van de Middeleeuwen* vv 5, 80 blz., ingenaaid, geïllustreerd, isbn 90-6550-445-1, f 19,90

De uitdrukking praten als Brugman is ontleend aan het optreden van de Nederlandse volksprediker Jan Brugman (circa 1400-1473). Deze franciscaner monnik reisde in de vijftiende eeuw stad en land af om de mensen op te roepen een eenvoudig christelijk leven te leiden. In zijn gloedvolle preken sloot hij aan bij de belevingswereld van gewone mensen. Juist daarom was hij in zijn eigen tijd een gevierd man, maar werd hij in de geschiedschrijving al spoedig als een dweper of volksmenner afgeschilderd. Nico Lettinck, docent geschiedenis aan de Christelijke Hogeschool Windesheim te Zwolle, plaatst de persoon Brugman in de context van zijn tijd. Hij beschrijft zowel de inhoud van Brugmans preken als zijn wereldbeeld, waarin het lijden een belangrijke plaats innam. Dit thema werd door Brugman voorbeeldig uitgewerkt in zijn levensschets van de heilige Lidwina van Schiedam. Een schets van de vaderlandse beeldvorming over Jan Brugman besluit dit boek.

David Barnouw, *De hongervinter*

vv 6, 88 blz., ingenaaid, geïllustreerd, isbn 90-6550-446-x, f 19,90

De hongervinter is decennia lang de metafoor geweest voor al het kwaad dat de Duitsers de Nederlanders gedurende de Tweede Wereldoorlog hebben berokkend. De nadruk op die winter van 1944-1945 doet echter geen recht aan de complexe omstandigheden waarin Nederland zich gedurende de oorlogsjaren bevond. Zo hebben de zuidelijke, oostelijke en noordelijke provincies geen echte hongervinter gekend. Maar ook in andere opzichten kunnen vraagtekens worden geplaatst bij de hongervinter als beeldbepaler van vijf jaar oorlog en bezetting. Moest de ellende van de randstedelijke honger de schaamte over de deportatie van en moord op de Nederlandse joden wegnemen? In dit boek beschrijft David Barnouw, werkzaam bij het Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogs-documentatie, de levensomstandigheden van Nederlanders gedurende het laatste oorlogsjaar.

De hongervinter

David Barnouw



De reeks Verloren Verleden. Gedenkwaaardige momenten en figuren uit de vaderlandse geschiedenis biedt algemene, geactualiseerde informatie over de unieke geschiedenis van Nederland aan een breed, in het verleden geïnteresseerd publiek. In ieder deel staat een spraakmakende gebeurtenis of persoon uit de Nederlandse geschiedenis centraal. Het onderwerp wordt pakkend beschreven en in een bredere context geplaatst, waarbij onder meer aandacht besteed wordt aan het algemeen historische kader, de historische canon en beeldtraditie en de huidige stand van het historisch onderzoek. Jaarlijks verschijnen vier delen, ze kosten per stuk f 19,90. In 1998 verschenen:

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