

WENDY BURKE

# IMAGES OF OCCUPATION IN DUTCH FILM

Memory, Myth, and the Cultural  
Legacy of War



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## IMAGES OF OCCUPATION IN DUTCH FILM



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AMSTERDAM UNIVERSITY PRESS



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## NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS

The translation of quotations from Dutch publications and Dutch film dialogue are my own, as the majority of the written and filmic material exists only in its original language. Two of the films analysed (*Als Twee Druppels Water* and *Soldaat van Oranje*) include English subtitles in their commercial DVD releases; however, I have used my own translations of the dialogue as there are occasional inaccuracies in the commercial subtitling. I would like to thank Rob Riemsma for helping with the translation of some of the German dialogue spoken in the films. The glossary lists Dutch and German terms commonly used throughout the text.

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My theme is memory, that winged host that soared about me one grey morning of war-time. These memories, which are my life—for we possess nothing certain except the past—were always with me.

Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited* (1945)

# Introduction

A Dutch middle-aged couple enter the headquarters of the *Sicherheitsdienst (SD)* in a district of Amsterdam. They walk across a marble floor to a soldier behind the reception desk. Several swastika flags hang in the foyer. The middle-aged woman tells the *SD* soldier that their neighbours' belongings and furniture have been picked up. These neighbours were Jews. The couple's own bicycles were in their neighbours' shed and these have also been taken. There is a moment's pause before she asks: 'We happen to know where two Jews are hiding out... Can we get our bicycles back if we give up the two Jews?' The soldier says that will not be possible, but the going rate for giving up a Jew is seven and a half guilders per Jew. She nods slightly and he hands her a form. She and her husband look at the form, look at each other, and nod their assent to each other.

Scene from *In de Schaduw van de Overwinning* (1986)

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This book examines shifting images of occupation in Dutch feature films about World War Two, with an emphasis on films made between the 1960s and the 1980s. It explores the complex, evolving role played by film within Dutch post-war cultural memory and asks to what extent film can represent and assimilate the experiences and collective legacies of war. The book views film as a cultural text—a representation of the past that reveals the concerns of society from the time it was made, whether this happens consciously or not. In this way, the Dutch films examined in this volume form part of collective social memory, bringing to light how Dutch society sees itself—or saw itself—during the decades after the war. Though its apparent subject is Dutch films with war as their theme, *Images of Occupation in Dutch Film* is at the same time an exploration of how the films of a nation re-tell the stories of its past.

The book argues for a progression from ‘black-and-white’ responses to Germany’s 1940-1945 occupation of the Netherlands—reflected in the tendency in films of the early post-war decades to portray ‘good’ Dutch citizens against ‘evil’ occupiers—towards a much more nuanced, intricate image in later films of the moral choices faced by ordinary Dutch people during occupation. This alteration in images of occupation portrayed in Dutch films is reflected in an increasing ‘greyness’ and ambiguity in depictions of ‘the enemy’, Dutch identity, life under occupation, and the resistance and collaboration. This exploration of what Dutch society chose to remember, and to forget, revealed across the decades in films about war and occupation, offers compelling evidence of the connections between filmic representation, memory, trauma, national identity, and a nation’s cultural legacy of war.

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What we can call the ‘sociology of representation’ helps us understand what films from the Netherlands might tell us about the times in which they were produced—the societies behind their production. The sociology of representation is not about seeking documentary truths about what is or is not being represented—in Dutch war films in this case—but rather about *how* and *why* these events are thus depicted and how visual representation can be used as a reflection of society’s latent concerns from that particular film’s era. Interestingly, films themselves often become sources of history and historical facts to viewers, either at the time of a film’s release or retrospectively, yet what interests me are the deeper layers of contemporary society’s concerns that film can and, I suggest, does reveal, often unconsciously. This is echoed in Siegfried Kracauer’s contention that ‘The films of a nation reflect its mentality’ (2004: 5),<sup>1</sup> which resonates with one of the underlying assertions in *Images of Occupation in Dutch Film*: that we are not examining factual evidence or historical truths about the German occupation of the Netherlands in World War Two, nor judging historical authenticity in portrayals of real events within these Dutch films. I do not attempt to recount ‘what really happened’ in wartime Holland. Instead, I seek to understand and explore, through close analysis of cultural texts—the films themselves—shifting attitudes of Dutch society towards aspects of the war. As Dutch public opinion about the war altered over the post-war decades—including attitudes to the 1940 to 1945 occupation, Jewish persecution, the enemy, deprivations, resistance, and collaborators—so too did the presence, or indeed absence, of these elements in subsequent films. The historical trajectory of Dutch recovery and reconstruction—politically, economically, and, most difficult of all, psychologically—came to be revealed, often unconsciously, in the films from that time.

Representation is a term with many interpretations, but its meaning in the context of this book is a *re-presenting* of facts, historical eras, people, and situations within cultural forms: in this case, Dutch feature films about the war. A

cultural representation of a historical event or time (for example, a painting, film, music piece, novel) can never actually *be* what it is meant to represent or imitate, just as the films I examine in this book can never fully recapture ‘reality’ nor accurately copy real-life events, as those moments in time have passed. Instead, I am interested in the reasons *why* films as a form of cultural representation are created in particular ways. My analyses recognize that images of many aspects of wartime occupation in Dutch film are social constructs. They are versions of that historical period and of those events and characters, mediated through certain learned cultural, societal, and ideological codes from the time they were produced. This corresponds to the social constructionist approach to cultural studies and representation in which Stuart Hall argues that culture is a set of meanings constructed according to systems of representation (1997: 25). Partly we give meaning to things ‘by how we *represent* them—the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce’ (1997: 3; emphasis in original). Hall suggests that meaning and representation depend on the practice of interpretation (62) and that the study of culture (in this case, Dutch war films) ‘underlines the crucial role of the *symbolic* domain at the heart of social life’ (3; emphasis in original). It is this suggestion from Hall of the symbolic and societal nature of representation, together with its interpretive quality, that resonates with my interpretive, thematic analyses of Dutch films about the occupation.

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An understanding of the notion of *myth* is key to understanding the evolving role played by film within Dutch post-war cultural memory. Myth has intricate associations with themes such as resistance and collaboration, images of the enemy, and Dutch identity. I do not mean myth in the sense of a simple falsehood or invention; instead, I suggest a far deeper societal construction. The ways in which the legacy of war and occupation for the Dutch is articulated through filmic representation is intrinsically significant. In this book I look at the occurrence and creation of myth, meaning, and social memory concerning that period in Dutch history and how this is disseminated and reimagined over time through the medium of film. Myths about the occupation in the Netherlands are examined: the *myth of the resistance* (and its apparent opposite: collaboration), of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, of ‘heroes’ and ‘villains’, and the powerful human potential for mythologizing through film the events, characters, and circumstances of war.<sup>2</sup> Society’s tendency selectively to remember, or indeed to forget—whether consciously or not—certain aspects of its collective, arbitrary experiences is relevant when thinking about post-war Dutch films about the occupation. I examine the construction of myth in post-war Dutch societies and ask how and why mythogenetical representations evolve and are maintained.<sup>3</sup> Remembering the past and mythologizing the war take place firmly within a cultural and socio-political landscape, with the media as

one of society's main means of transmitting such myths. We discover that it is via the cultural form of film and its re-presentations and revisions of events that myth finds one of its strongest modes of expression.

David Morgan sees popular culture (to which these Dutch films belong) as a vibrant, significant aspect of daily life, shaping part of society's collective memory. The cultural artefacts surrounding us in everyday life tell us about who we are 'by shaping our memories of the people, places, institutions, and events that have formed our lives—often in utterly forgettable yet tenacious ways' (1998: xi). This collective consciousness and memory, especially Morgan's emphasis on 'tenaciousness', is interesting in the context of Dutch collective mentality and how this is influenced by, and influences, the nation's works of filmic representation. It also acknowledges the potential power of popular cultural forms in people's real-world experiences. Mieke Bal describes cultural memory as consensual and collective rather than individual, with cultural memory called upon in order to 'mediate and modify difficult or tabooed moments of the past—moments that nonetheless impinge, sometimes fatally, on the present' (1999: vii). Bal's understanding of cultural memory is closely connected to an underlying theme in this book of *cultural coping*, whereby Dutch society's inherited traumatic memories and experiences (of long-term occupation) are re-mediated in cultural forms such as novels or films. Cultural coping also relates to the *re-writing of history* in which preferred versions of events are shaped and myths about war and occupation are created, particularly when some of the harrowing realities of what happened may be too difficult fully to acknowledge.

As brief background to the German occupation that informs the analyses of Dutch films in this book, war began for the Netherlands on 10 May 1940 when German forces invaded, on the same day that they invaded France, Belgium, and Luxembourg. Within a very short time all Dutch borders were infiltrated, and by 15 May 1940 the country capitulated under the threat of further bombing, having suffered the severe aerial bombing of Rotterdam on 14 May. The Dutch army had attempted to defend its country but was unable to resist the invading forces and had been overwhelmed. Thus began the five-year occupation of the Netherlands—a territory highly prized by the Nazi regime both for its innate wealth and also for the anticipated spreading of the Nazis' racist ideology throughout the Dutch population once they were occupied (Lagrou 2000: 7).<sup>4</sup> For the next five years, the Netherlands was subject to German rule under the administration of the Austrian *Reichskommissar* ('Reich Commissioner') Arthur Seyss-Inquart. The Dutch queen, Wilhelmina, fled with her cabinet to the relative safety of England to escape the threat of German bombing, where she remained in a safe house in London for most of the rest of the war. The Dutch government continued to operate in exile as best it could for

the duration of the war. The Netherlands remained under occupation until Germany capitulated on 5 May 1945. The economic, social, and psychological consequences of five years of occupation—culminating in one of the worst winters on record, the *hongerwinter* ('Hunger Winter') of 1944–1945—were to make the post-war recovery and reconstruction of the Netherlands especially difficult.

*Images of Occupation in Dutch Film* identifies and explores compelling links between Dutch post-war society—especially during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s—and the films made in this period about the German occupation of the Netherlands. It seeks to unravel the interconnections between the two as a way of understanding the one (Dutch society) by engaging in critical analysis and interpretation of the other (its films about the war). This provides a basis for investigating the sociological, political, and cultural trajectories of Dutch post-war society from the 1960s to the 1980s, which was a period of significant cultural and societal change in Europe and beyond. Through detailed analyses of seven Dutch feature films made between 1962 and 1986, and taking into account other films produced up to 2014, all dealing with the German occupation, this book probes contemporary social and cultural developments in post-war Holland. In dealing with any cultural form—in this case, film—and its representation of war, the tension existing between cultural works and socio-political concerns cannot be ignored. In this regard I also look at ideological issues behind the construction of filmic representations.

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A *text-first* approach is used in my analyses of these Dutch war films, for whilst the context of the films' production inevitably is important, it is the film texts themselves that are my particular focus.<sup>5</sup> I seek to draw out what the films might reveal about their historical contexts in order to interpret how people might wish to see themselves reflected on the screen. My focus is on the symbolic relationship between film and collective memory. With its emphasis on films as texts and as expressions of a society's latent or underlying concerns, this book inhabits a multidisciplinary position embracing the spheres of film studies, cultural studies, sociology, psychology, memory, and identity as well as Dutch war and post-war history and the occupation's cinematic legacy for the Netherlands. *Images of Occupation in Dutch Film* draws together these disciplines to seek a better understanding of society's (often *unconscious*) motivations and the cultural and psychological stimuli behind these compelling filmic images of war.

This book deals chiefly with Dutch feature films about the war made in the period 1962 to 1986, each of which depicts the German occupation of the Netherlands in different ways. The seven films analysed in detail represent a significant era of quality in Dutch film production, embracing an evolving image of occupation. 1962 was the year the first Dutch feature film about the occu-

pation—*De Overval* (*The Silent Raid*, Paul Rotha and Kees Brusse)—appeared after a decade-long hiatus during the 1950s. The following 24 years brought significant changes in depictions of the war, changes that are at the core of this book’s interpretive, theme-based film analysis. Paul Verhoeven’s *Soldaat van Oranje* (*Soldier of Orange*) was released in 1977 and came to be highly regarded, advancing the international careers of many of its cast and crew, especially Verhoeven. Fons Rademakers’ 1986 film *De Aanslag* (*The Assault*) won the 1987 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film: thus the end point of this book’s 24-year timeframe corresponds with a film of high quality and critical acclaim. In the world outside of film production, which nonetheless affected the choice and tone of the films’ topics, changes were happening in the Netherlands, especially during the political and social uncertainties of the 1960s and 1970s. The films reflect and encompass an era of significant Dutch cultural and social change. Alongside *De Overval*, *Soldaat van Oranje*, and *De Aanslag*, the other films examined in detail are: *Als Twee Druppels Water* (*The Spitting Image*, Fons Rademakers, 1963), *Pastorale 1943* (Wim Verstappen, 1978), *Het Meisje met het Rode Haar* (*The Girl with the Red Hair*, Ben Verbong, 1981), and *In de Schaduw van de Overwinning* (*In the Shadow of Victory*, Ate de Jong, 1986).<sup>6</sup> I also look at Paul Verhoeven’s 2006 film *Zwartboek* (*Black Book*).

With one exception, the films are set during the period of wartime occupation<sup>7</sup> and were made by directors and producers living in the Netherlands when the films were made and therefore part of Dutch culture and society.<sup>8</sup> I chose these particular films because they represent popular and for the most part critically acclaimed Dutch films.<sup>9</sup> They illustrate notable shifts over time in filmic depictions of the war, evident even after initial viewing, and are intriguing indicators of the shifts in Dutch public consciousness about the occupation.

Although there is an impressive body of academic work on the history of the wartime occupation of the Netherlands and its consequences for Dutch society—including J.C.H. Blom (1998; 2007), Chris van der Heijden (2003), David Barnouw (1986; 2005), Adriaan Hakkert (2003), Pieter Lagrou (2000), Jan van Miert (1994), E.H. Kossman (2005), and Louis de Jong (1969-88)—the majority of which has yet to be translated from the original Dutch, scholarly work in the English language on the subject of occupation within Dutch films remains very scarce. Barnouw’s 1986 article ‘The Image of Occupation’, Johan Swinnen’s chapter on *Soldaat van Oranje* in Ernest Mathijs’ edited volume *The Cinema of the Low Countries* (2004), and Peter Cowie’s brief paragraphs on *Als Twee Druppels Water*, *Soldaat van Oranje*, and *Pastorale 1943* in his 1979 book *Dutch Cinema* are rare exceptions. Considering the impact of World War Two on the Netherlands together with its relatively recent place in history, one might expect a reasonable number of publications examining filmic repre-

sentations of war to exist, but this is not the case. A number of relevant Dutch language articles and book sections touching on films about the war have been published—François Stienen (in Albers, Baeke, and Zeeman eds. 2004), Egbert Barten (1990), Frank van Vree (1995), Mieke Bernink (2003), and Hans Schoots (2004)—but no deeper study deals with representations of occupation in film. For existing Dutch research, English translations are not available. *Images of Occupation in Dutch Film* is the first book in English (or any language) to explore the evolving role played by film within Dutch cultural memory by closely examining changing representations of the German occupation of the Netherlands in Dutch post-war feature films. Its interdisciplinary themes of film, memory, myth, representation, identity, and the cultural legacy of war come together to form a framework for the analysis of Dutch war films, supplemented by references to a range of other films. It aims to bring these fascinating and original film texts from the Netherlands—most of them rarely seen or written about, even in their home country—to a wider, English-language readership. I hope that my readings of the films, particularly in chapters two to five, breathe life into them for readers for whom they are at present unknown and offer insights into these valuable cultural documents and the historical and social contexts of their production.

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I am interested to see if a connection can be traced, over time, between the stages of historical post-war recovery in the Netherlands and images of occupation in Dutch films. We might expect to find links between the phases of Dutch post-war reconstruction—as identified by Chris van der Heijden (2003) and J.C.H. Blom (2007)—and depictions of wartime events and characters in subsequent films. David Barnouw's suggestion that there were already signs of 'war weariness' in the Netherlands as early as 1949 (1986: 21) indicates a connection between public perception and appetite for film subjects on the one hand and the films that are consequently produced on the other. It is worth remembering that the films analysed in this book, like most films, are produced by ordinary people, not by policymakers or historians. Yet films are also made for entertainment and profit, and filmmakers are rarely completely autonomous. Along the chain of production from initial concept to a film's screening, pressures about how to deal with certain subject matters inevitably come into play. These may include concerns about the persecution and murder of Dutch Jews (and non-Jewish collusion in this), the extent of wartime collaboration, or depictions of torture and violence. Through my readings in this book, I attempt to discover whether images of occupation within Dutch war films reveal as much 'through what is *not* shown, as through what is' (Hall 1997: 59; emphasis in original).

## THE LEGACY OF OCCUPATION

The German occupation of the Netherlands left behind an enduring *imprint of occupation* that affected the Dutch socially, culturally, economically, politically, and, perhaps most persistent of all, psychologically. The special circumstances of long-term civil occupation over and above ‘usual’ conditions of combat and warfare, and the fact that it endured for a five-year period, led to an even greater likelihood of long-term effects. Being occupied implies far more than dealing with the immediate consequences of military invasion, for the interventions of an occupying power permeate all aspects of daily life. The war’s *legacy* for the Dutch (in its negative sense) is fundamental to this book’s investigation into filmic images of people’s communal, arbitrary experiences of occupation and the socio-cultural reasons why these experiences are re-created and re-animated in certain ways in film.

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After the end of World War Two in the Netherlands, there was a period of jubilation. However, the euphoria of liberation was soon replaced by the stark reality of post-war reconstruction and of having to come to terms with the occupation and its consequences, some of which were devastating. The war’s aftermath, during which the population went through several stages of reconciling (or failing to do so)<sup>10</sup> with the trauma of long-term occupation, had a considerable impact on the Dutch nation, as Lagrou describes:

Any study of the consequences of the occupation must take into account the tremendous effort to reconstruct the nation’s self-esteem. The social consequences of war and occupation cannot be deduced mechanically, since they are refracted and recast through this prism of ideological and political context. (2000: 2-3)

Lagrou’s statement on the enduring effects of war and occupation resonates with this book’s exploration of how a nation copes—psychologically and culturally—with the legacy of repression, lack of autonomy, deprivation, torture, collaboration, resistance, and reconstruction that such an extended period of occupation entails. My readings probe the subsequent reworking of these traumatic, arbitrary experiences—a *re-writing of the past*, a therapeutic *cultural coping*<sup>11</sup>—in filmic representations. A national tendency to make success out of failure, though not limited to the Netherlands, is nevertheless one that rings true here. I do not suggest that occupation was a failure for the Dutch, but it was unexpected and problematic. It lacked the traditional community dynamics of active warfare and had far-reaching consequences. Long-term occupation creates a wholly different mood to that of active combat, yet there exists a similar tendency for a nation liberated from an occupying power to create

and glorify heroes and martyrs and create positive narratives out of traumatic circumstances. A British example of this tendency is the Gallipoli campaign of 1915: an unmitigated disaster in military terms, with poor decision-making, failed objectives, and high numbers of Allied and Turkish casualties. Yet it was the successful *evacuation* of troops from the Gallipoli peninsula after a pointless nine-month campaign that was emphasized to the British public. This ‘successful’ withdrawal endured within historical consciousness, leading to the ‘myth of Gallipoli’ as legions of returning heroes who had tried their best in difficult terrain on an alien shore.<sup>12</sup> Subsequent feature films about Gallipoli focused on small moments of bravery or cameraderie rather than military successes which had not, of course, happened. Echoes of this same mythologizing tendency can be detected in later, unsuccessful US or British military arenas such as the Falklands, Vietnam, or Gulf Wars, though filmic renderings of these more recent conflicts tend to be more nuanced. A drive to mythologize or extol communal negative experiences can even be recognized in national attitudes to sport—even if only occasional success is achieved, there persists a tendency towards an ‘at least we did our best’ attitude, a self-serving defeatism acting as a balm to a nation’s bruised ego.<sup>13</sup> National responses to defeat, or failure to acknowledge damage inflicted upon other nations during military campaigns, resonates with Dutch society’s conscience and wounded ego after the May 1945 liberation. It is little wonder that a combined effort on the part of the government, the media, and society led to the swift suppression of certain facts and memories about the occupation and to the mostly consensual remembrance of those aspects deemed to be more heroic and steeped in myth—that is, to what could be *coped with* at the time.

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Interpretive analysis within this book takes place according to four core themes that correspond to chapters two to five. The themes are: the image of the enemy, Dutch identity and ‘Dutchness’, life under occupation, and resistance and collaboration. The films are a means to an end; they are not analysed from start to finish in a linear, narrative way. Instead, the book’s thematic framework allows strong ‘snapshots’ to be pinpointed that may illuminate (or even obfuscate) our understanding of the depiction of the occupation within Dutch films. My first chapter, ‘Representation, occupation, and Dutch war films’, acquaints the reader with a solid background to the key areas of representing the past, nationhood and identity, the re-writing of history, and myth and memory in film—including mythologizing war in popular cultural memory. It also sets in context the historical background to the Netherlands during World War Two and discusses the German occupation of the Netherlands between 1940 and 1945 as well as post-war considerations. An overview of Dutch film history follows, after which I take a closer look at Dutch films about the war from both a historical and a cultural perspective.

In chapter two, 'The image of the enemy', I commence the detailed readings of the films according to each chapter's theme. Here I examine portrayals of the German occupiers as the Netherlands' wartime enemy, in contrast with images of the Dutch population. The chapter addresses the filmic representation of 'heroes' and 'villains', where Dutch citizens are the heroes and the German invaders are the villains, and evaluates the shifting image of the enemy over the films' timeframe.

20 | Chapter three, 'Dutch identity and "Dutchness"', looks at national identity, 'being Dutch', and how this is represented in films about the war. My readings look at presumed Dutch core values and images, such as bicycles, canals, dykes, the quiet countryside, big skies, and windmills, and consider the prevalence of water in Dutch history and the nation's psyche. The influence of the landscape's topography (flatness, borders that are difficult to defend, no hiding places for the Dutch army) on the progress and outcome of the occupation is considered, together with representations of the Dutch personality and infrastructure, and what it was about the Netherlands and its people that provoked German interest in invasion.

Chapter four, 'Life under occupation', analyses images of family, relationships, and friendship bonds during the war. I examine filmic depictions of the home and family life and the role of women and men at a time when the domestic arena became empowered, taking on a critical role. Deprivations and losses of liberty of many kinds—the persecution of Dutch Jews, famine and the severe Hunger Winter of 1944-1945, Dutch men deported to German labour camps, punishments, and the loss of continuity in social, economic, educational, and leisure domains—are revealed. I also address the war's impact on families and friendships as families were torn apart, relatives and friends lost, and Jewish families in particular were persecuted or forced into hiding.

In chapter five, 'Resistance and collaboration', I look at images of perhaps the most powerful theme of all concerning the Dutch experience of occupation. Resistance and collaboration are the most prone to re-visioning, re-writing, and transmitting into the realms of myth, and in this chapter I analyse depictions across the spectrum of these contentious elements within Dutch war films. In so doing, I attempt to trace correlations between filmic portrayals of the resistance and collaborators over time and changes in society's attitudes towards them, as public awareness altered over the post-war decades from a black-and-white separation of 'heroic' resistance fighters and 'traitorous' collaborators to more realistic shades of grey in which clear-cut moral distinctions were no longer so certain.

The conclusion takes stock of the images of war and occupation evaluated in Dutch films, especially those made between 1962 and 1986. It contends that

a *shared society of occupation* came to exist for the Dutch during the war years, a scenario that was to shape much of the post-war re-writing and re-imagining of occupation. I ask how formerly occupied countries such as the Netherlands might make sense of their shared communal memories of invasion and occupation and begin to assimilate and recalibrate their histories, over time, through the medium of film. The conclusion argues for the significance of film as a remarkably powerful means through which the psychological implications of war for society are worked out. It recognizes that the imprint of occupation is, indeed, a lasting one.