**REMEMBERING RESISTANCE:
REPRESENTATIONS OF RESISTANCE IN DUTCH CINEMA
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World War II saw the rise of Hitler and the Nazi party as they spread their tendrils across Europe through the occupation of countries in both the west and east. The occupation of European countries was unique to each situation and each peoples, but they all had two things in common: resistance and collaboration with the Germans. Within each occupied country examples of occupied peoples resisting and collaborating can be found, and in every instance resistance and collaboration plays out differently. Since 1945, there has been an abundance of scholarly work done on the appearance and execution of resistance and collaboration in occupied countries. However, the execution of resistance and collaboration is not the focus of this paper; rather it aims to confront the ways in which the resistance is remembered in popular memory through cinema. When resistance is looked at through a historical lens, it is easy to highlight the issues and flaws of its remembrance, as well as the collaboration that it accompanies. People do this in an attempt to create an educated and factual representation of what happened. Often this level of analysis is not represented in cinema as stories and historical events are tweaked or portrayed differently to produce specific images of resistance. These images are more palatable for the mass consumer and tend to drift away from the dark reality of resistance. Despite the over seven decades since the end of World War II, the film industry still upholds the stereotypical image of a heroic and romanticized resistance fighter and their battle against the Nazi system and anti-Semitism. The 2018 Dutch film *The Resistance Banker* provides a key opportunity to analyze this phenomenon. The film tells the story of Walraven van Hall, a Dutch banker who used his skills to start an underground bank to fund the resistance in Amsterdam. It is a prime

example of current cinematic representations of resistance and upholds the stereotypical romanticized image of resistance. *The Resistance Banker* will be analyzed and used as a juxtaposition to what resistance historically looked like in the Netherlands.

The occupation of the Netherlands by Nazi Germany provides a unique case for the examination of resistance representations in cinema due to the treatment of the Jewish population. In the Netherlands, the Nazis were more effective in the deportation and elimination of Jews than they were almost anywhere else in Europe. Of the 140,000 Jews in the Netherlands, 75 per cent were murdered during the war.¹ This is a monumentally high number when compared to the 25 per cent murdered in France or the 40 per cent in Belgium.² Prior to the outbreak of war in 1939, the Dutch Jewish Refugee Committee registered over 12,000 new Jewish refugees while the government estimated a total of 25,000.³ In the prewar years, the Jewish population was rapidly rising in the Netherlands as Jews attempted to escape persecution in other countries. In the Netherlands, the Jewish population was purportedly assimilated into Dutch society, and, theoretically, the Jewish population would be considered one with the Dutch population and be better protected as such. Unfortunately, the Jewish population in the Netherlands was not protected, and Dutch-born Jews fell victim to Nazi rule in proportions larger than that of the Jewish immigrants.⁴ For example, German Jews made up 59 per cent of the immigrants in the Netherlands, and they had significantly higher chances of survival than Dutch-born Jews.⁵ The significance of these numbers is that they are representative of both the treatment of Jews under

¹ Milja van Tielhof, "The Predecessors of ABN AMRO and the Exportation of Jewish Assets in the Netherlands," *Financial History Review* 12, no. 1 (April 2005): 87.

² Tielhof, 87.

³ Peter Tammes, "Jewish Immigrants in the Netherlands during the Nazi Occupation," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 37, no. 4 (Spring 2007): 543.

⁴ Tammes, 561.

⁵ Tammes, 562.

German occupation and the opportunities for help provided by Dutch citizens. They do not reflect a country teeming with resistance and aid for the Jewish population.

The Resistance Banker provides the opportunity to assess the progression of resistance representations and images in a country that lost a staggering portion of its Jewish population during the German occupation. Resistance films really began to emerge in the Netherlands in the 1960s. These films embodied the myth of heroic resistance, the idea that every citizen was unified in the battle against the Nazis and that their plans to halt the Nazi war machine went off without a hitch.⁶ These early films upheld the stereotypical romanticized images of resistance as a courageous act upon which everyone agreed. In reality, collaboration was an issue that plagued the Netherlands in many forms throughout the war. This was better represented in the films of the 1970s. These films held representations of collaboration, although it was depicted within certain guidelines and limitations.⁷ Collaboration was only shown in the form of coercion, passivity, and national or family loyalty and bonds.⁸ From the start of the 1960s to the end of the 1970s Dutch cinema evolved to a point where collaboration, be it in limited forms, could be included in representations of resistance. Whether this was because of a shift in the Dutch popular memory or the distance between the war and these representations, it is evident that the image of heroic resistance still dominated the popular memory. *The Resistance Banker* provides the possibility to examine how much later popular memory of resistance has or has not evolved since the Dutch films of the 1960s and 70s.

The first aspect of the film that will be analysed is its representation of Dutch banks during the German occupation and specifically how they represent resistance and collaboration.

⁶ Wendy Burke, *Images of Occupation in Dutch Film: Memory, Myth, and the Cultural Legacy of War* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 186-189.

⁷ Burke, 190.

⁸ Burke, 191.

Dutch banks played a key role in the extraction of Jewish capital from the Netherlands over the course of the occupation. Unlike other countries such as Switzerland that still had Jewish capital at the end of the war, Dutch banks had liquidated most Jewish capital, and there was almost nothing left by the end of the war.⁹ The banks were involved in everything from selling off Jewish capital assets like stocks and shares to transferring Jewish accounts to the Germans.¹⁰ In some cases, the actions of the banks occurred because they feared what the Germans would do to Jewish capital during their occupation. Banks such as Twentsche Bank began checking the books of Jewish companies and clients in fear that they might flee or commit suicide, leaving masses of debts unpaid.¹¹ They registered all companies that had Jewish ownership, administration, or affiliation with the German Wirtschaftsprüfstelle (economic inspectorate) whose goal, “was to ‘aryanise’ the Dutch business community.”¹² Although the banks did end up collaborating in many ways it would be biased to suggest that they did not resist in some fashion. It is true that eventually banks would have to comply with orders given to them by the Germans. However, there were ways that they would resist while doing so. Some bank officials saw the unjust nature of anti-Semitic regulations and would not implement them blindly, but would carefully select which ones to implement and which ones to challenge.¹³ Unfortunately, as Tielhof puts it, “[i]n some cases this resulted in them allowing the Germans to carry out their plans without any significant hindrance, or even in the banks actively participating in these plans.”¹⁴ When the

⁹ Tielhof, 87-88.

¹⁰ Tielhof, 88.

¹¹ Tielhof, 89.

¹² Tielhof, 89.

¹³ Tielhof, 108.

¹⁴ Tielhof, 108.

banks did choose to resist orders, they did so in secret by negotiating with the Germans or looking for loopholes in the system so they could protect certain Jewish accounts.¹⁵

How does *The Resistance Banker*, a film that positions itself around the workings of Dutch banks, represent the banks in relation to their acts of resistance? Early on in the film, it is revealed that the president of the Dutch State Bank, Rost van Tonningen, is collaborating with the Germans.¹⁶ In the first ten minutes of the film, van Tonningen is seen giving a speech announcing his appointment to the position of president of the State Bank and declares that the bank should collaborate in good faith with those of the same race.¹⁷ It could be interpreted from this that the bank is a mostly collaborative system that will be helping the Germans accomplish their goals without hindrance. A depiction of the bank as such would accurately support the collaboration seen within the Dutch bank system throughout the war. However, this is the only grand representation of collaboration within the bank that is seen in the film. For the rest of the film, the audience is shown person after person who is willing to help Walraven van Hall without major hesitation or questioning. A great example can be found when Walraven and his brother Gisjbert approach a bank member and requests that he regularly order millions worth of treasury bonds from the Ministry of Finance without asking questions. Gisjbert begins to apologize for asking in the expectation that the man will say no when the man says, “No, that’s fine. I’ll do it.”¹⁸ This man’s fast and non-hesitant answer is echoed through most of the banking characters in the film. The idea implied that everyone was willing to help Walraven despite the dangers that it might pose to them. This is a reflection of the stereotypical romanticism of resistance in cinema. Resistance is depicted as an easy and heroic choice.

¹⁵ Tielhof, 108.

¹⁶ *The Resistance Banker*, directed by Joram Lürsen (Netherlands: Dutch Filmworks, 2018).

¹⁷ *The Resistance Banker*.

¹⁸ *The Resistance Banker*.

Next to be considered is the portrayal of people in the film and how it compares to the actions of the Dutch people during the war. In the film the vast majority of people, outside of a small handful of collaborators, are depicted as being on the side of the resistance and in favour of helping the Jewish in need. When Walraven first starts the underground bank he needs to find money to operate with, and he does so by collecting money from the Dutch people. In the following scenes, countless people are shown to be happy to lend money with the promise that it will be paid back at the end of the war. The film never depicts anyone refusing to lend money.¹⁹ What is shown is the 250,000 guilders that Walraven has managed to amass through loans from the Dutch people. For the majority of the film the characters that are introduced and the people that are seen all support the resistance or at the very least are opposed to German rule except for a handful that show signs of collaboration. An example of one of the few characters that collaborate is a young man whose girlfriend has been detained by the Germans for participating in the resistance. In exchange for her release, the man agrees to help the Germans locate van Tuyl (Walraven's alias) by getting them the location of a resistance meeting.²⁰ After the Germans storm into the meeting killing and capturing the resistance members and then dragging the bodies off, the young man is observed to be in distress with a look of shock and disgust on his face as he comes to terms with what he has done. Even in this moment when it is shown that a man has collaborated, it is also shown that he only did so for his loved one, and as a result of his actions he is changed. It is apparent to the audience that this was not something that he wanted. In doing so, the film perpetuates the message that resistance was what the people wanted and that collaboration only occurred if it had to.

¹⁹ *The Resistance Banker.*

²⁰ *The Resistance Banker.*

Unfortunately, this image of resistance within the Dutch population does not accurately represent what occurred during the war. Queen Wilhelmina, from the safety of London, had described, “how the pain inflicted on the Jews was felt by her as pain inflicted on herself and the entire Dutch nation.”²¹ Despite this touching message from the Queen, the Dutch people did not share her sentiment. The Jews were isolated in society as everyone from Dutch police, streetcar personnel, train personnel, and civil servants aided the Germans in the Netherlands chapter of the Final Solution as if they were going about their routine days.²² In many ways, German success in the Netherlands was due to the lack of authorities resisting their plans rather than their repression of resistance movements; as Mason states, they never needed to coerce anyone to get the dirty work done.²³ Even among those who supported the resistance it was not uncommon for them to turn their backs on the cause, especially when it came to harbouring Jews.²⁴ Many who agreed in principle to help hide Jews would refuse to help when Jews arrived and needed sanctuary.²⁵ In turn, resistance organizers would often show up after curfew and dump Jews on ‘hosts’ doorsteps, which left them with the option to either shelter the Jews or evict them.²⁶ In many instances, the eviction of Jews led to their capture by the Germans. Furthermore, for some hosts the sheltering of Jews was simply an opportunity to profit off of their plight. Hosts could take money in return for shelter, threaten and blackmail them for money, or even turn them in for financial rewards from the authorities.²⁷

²¹ Henry L. Mason, “Testing Human Bonds Within Nations: Jews in the Occupied Netherlands,” *Political Science Quarterly (Academy of Political Science)* 99, no. 2 (Summer 1984): 325.

²² Mason, 325.

²³ Mason, 342.

²⁴ Bob Moore, “The Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Belgium, France and the Netherlands,” *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 50, no. 3 (September 2004): 391.

²⁵ Moore, 391.

²⁶ Moore, 391.

²⁷ Moore, 392-393.

The film also neglects to address the type of people who were often involved in the resistance. Although it shows Walraven and Gisjbert as characters that were good men before and during the war, it does not draw attention to the more nefarious people who participated in the resistance. Not all involved in the resistance were good people and led blameless lives, nor did they continue to be good people after the war.²⁸ Criminals were often employed in the resistance as they had particular skill sets needed by the resistance.²⁹ For example, Walraven needs individuals to forge counterfeited treasury bonds for the resistance.³⁰ The film does not draw attention to the fact that these men come from a criminal life. The types of people involved in the resistance and their actions during the war challenge the romanticized image of resistance that the film advances.

Another topic for analysis through the film is the depicted size of the resistance movement in the Netherlands. The resistance movement was quite small in the Netherlands with the official number of members reaching only 25,000 up until 1944.³¹ This meant that less than 0.3 per cent of the population was participating in the resistance up until 1944.³² Collaborator numbers, on the other hand, reached upwards of 20,000, and that only counts those who enlisted in the Waffen SS.³³ When you consider all of the minor acts of collaboration that occurred during the war the number of collaborators outweighed the number of resistance fighters in the Netherlands.³⁴ Despite this, there is a myth in the Dutch popular memory that there was a large resistance movement in the Netherlands that employed a vast number of men and women, when

²⁸ Moore, 389.

²⁹ Moore, 389.

³⁰ *The Resistance Banker*.

³¹ Burke, 183.

³² Burke, 183.

³³ Burke, 183.

³⁴ Burke, 184.

in reality the volume of resistance was small compared to the size of the population.³⁵ One key reason for the myth surrounding the size of resistance is the way it was reported by the Wehrmacht. The Wehrmacht would have been compelled during the war to exaggerate the size, type, and extent of resistance in the Netherlands so High Command would not relocate forces to less “peaceful” areas.³⁶ The Wehrmacht had a strong desire to portray the Dutch population as hostile regardless of the actual situation in the Netherlands.³⁷ This façade showing the Dutch population as hostile would be enough to convince both High Command and the Dutch people that there was significantly more resistance occurring in the Netherlands than there actually was. In *The Resistance Banker*, there is a general sense that the resistance movement is much larger than reality. From the use of Walraven’s code name, van Tuyl, to the endless characters that are shown to support the resistance, the movement is depicted as something rather large.³⁸ Although the film takes place in Amsterdam the audience is made to feel as if Walraven’s operation reaches far and wide. The network of people that Walraven uses to convert the 250,000 guilders they collected into small denominations is presented as massive, and everyone is shown to be supportive and willing to help the cause.³⁹ By doing this, the film continues to support the myth of a large Dutch resistance and in doing so upholds the romanticized nature of resistance in cinema.

One can find this narrative of a romanticized and heroic resistance coming directly out of the war period as well. This romanticism is evident in the wartime poetry originating in the

³⁵ Burke, 183.

³⁶ Jennifer L. Foray, “The ‘Clean Wehrmacht’ in the German-Occupied Netherlands, 1940–5.” *Journal of Contemporary History*, no. 4 (2010): 777-78.

³⁷ Foray, 778.

³⁸ *The Resistance Banker*.

³⁹ *The Resistance Banker*.

Netherlands. Weevers speaks of the senses and feelings surrounding resistance in Dutch poetry in his article *The Poetry of Dutch Resistance*:

We witness here the rebirth of the genuine sense of nationhood under the pressure of a perverted alien nationalism. It is a national consciousness able to rise above its hatred of the destructive forces temporarily in power, because its love of the best qualities of its own people is stronger still.⁴⁰

The idea that the Dutch citizens rose above the hatred and destruction brought on by occupation because their love of their own people was stronger than the hatred enforced on them seems hollow when compared to the reality of Dutch resistance. Yet this idea remained strong in the minds of the Dutch people, and it still does today. As Weevers puts it, “[t]here is a resistance of the heart and one of the mind. The poet of ‘De groene bloemen’ does not reason why he wants to take up arms, his desire to resist is instinctive.”⁴¹ The factors at play in occupied Netherlands allowed for the Dutch people to develop a popular memory surrounding resistance, one that developed into a representation of resistance as a heroic and romanticized act that has been carried on through cinema and the film industry. This romanticized popular memory of resistance is best encapsulated in *The Resistance Banker* through Walraven when he says, “We are not doing this for fun are we? This is our duty.”⁴² Despite the reality of resistance in the Netherlands demonstrated in the way banks collaborated, to the limited size of resistance operations in the Netherlands, a popular memory of a romanticized resistance remains. Perhaps it is due to a social desire to avoid acknowledging the darker chapters of our past or that it simply does not make good movies. Whichever it is, it has been over 70 years since the end of the Second World War, and it appears we have not advanced beyond the romanticized images of resistance from the 1960s and 70s.

⁴⁰ Weevers, “The Poetry of Dutch Resistance,” *The Modern Language Review* 40, no. 3 (1945): 201.

⁴¹ Weevers, 203.

⁴² *The Resistance Banker*.

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