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On Neerlandistiek and investigating sporting culture in the Netherlands.

It is a great privilege and an honour to be invited to deliver a keynote to the 19th Colloquium of the Internationale Vereniging voor Neerlandistiek (IVN). I would sincerely like to thank the committee of the IVN for considering me to give this address and giving me the opportunity to speak to you today.

The subject of this colloquium is hyper-diversity, what joins us together or what could separate us, and I would like to say on a personal level, that one thing I believe joins us all together is a genuine interest in promoting new researchers and students in all aspects of Dutch studies. It is something which, as a relative latecomer to Dutch language and culture, during my Doctoral studies, I have found to be a consistent element of those who promote this area or form of study. It is something which despite our many differences in origination, approaches and ideas that I have found to be refreshing, enlivening and one which provides a welcoming environment for study and innovative research. So I want to say a broad thank you to all of you for this.

[SLIDE]

And I would like to take the opportunity I have been given to provide an address from a personal perspective on two different, but as you will hopefully see, interrelated subjects. First I would like to introduce you to my own research into the history of early Dutch football and what I call its discourses of values. I will also suggest some preliminary thoughts about the role of cultural organisations and their links to power, authority and values in sport. My approach to history is directly related to the personal and present and I will show how my research into Dutch cultural history has allowed me think about sport in more general terms and my relationship to it.

I would also like to address my own personal relationship within Neerlandistiek and the IVN and what this means, and could mean. That I have not opted for the English translation of this term is deliberate and is done for two reasons; the first is a way of saying thank you for including me in this conference and this organisation. That I have been invited to give my address in English is something which I am immensely grateful for – I must admit my own confidence in my Dutch language skills is something which fluctuates frequently. The second is because I am still a little unsure of exactly what the term means and where I fit in with it. That I have been invited here to give this address has challenged some preconceptions I have had about the IVN and Neerlandistiek.

[SLIDE]

One phrase in the colloquium outline particularly caught my attention and linked to my research into early Dutch football: '*in een hyperdivierse constellatie is het begrip 'norm' relatief*'. The idea of cultural relativism, of the possibilities of shifting meanings, values, and language, of how the world can be constructed, particularly through historical representations is something which runs through my research and my own approach to life.

My doctoral research focused upon diverse areas of early Dutch football, on how the spaces of Rotterdam and Amsterdam became contested sites for sport and identity, on how I could imagine different individuals fitting within these spaces and times, on how sporting research could be used to provide an inroad into a wider history and aspects of everyday life. But the area of my research which has become the most interesting to me since my doctoral thesis, is thinking about how linguistic representations of football matches were part of a wider 'discourse of values' – a way in which sporting culture was not just a leisure pursuit, but was part of a wider way of constructing the world and how people could act within it.

By looking at how newspapers reported football matches between 1910 and 1920, I found that they took part in constructing a discourse about what was an acceptable use of the body and what was not. That a language of what was acceptable and not was constructed about football will, perhaps, not come as a surprise to many of you today. For any of you who have watched, listened or read about games you will be aware there is often discussion of what is 'fair' or 'unfair', 'acceptable' or 'unacceptable', of what the rules mean and whether they are a 'good' thing or a 'bad' thing.

[SLIDE]

This was no different in early Dutch football. From analysing match reports one could construct a picture of what appear to be fairly consistent norms and values in football. For example certain words like ‘vuur’, ‘hardwerk’, ‘snelheid’, and samenspel’ were linked to positive values. Teams or individuals who displayed these attributes would be praised. At the same time elements of ‘ruwheid’, ‘forsche spel’, ‘slapheid’, ‘futloosheid’ and the broad ‘weining sportief elementen’ were all viewed negatively and those who indulged in such behaviour were criticised, especially if their tactics were successful.

In the media field between 1910 and 1920 such terms, and others, were used to describe football players and their actions. They seem to construct a commonly accepted, and simple, representation of what was good and bad. It was noted in all the newspapers that to work hard was good, to be listless was bad and would have bad results.

[SLIDE]

It seems that a consistent use of language suggests that there were established norms within the game of football about what was accepted, what was not accepted. This set of words was part of what I consider a 'discourse of values' within football; a set of ideas, practices, concepts, language and sporting rules which was linked to either a positive image or negative one. It was intimately connected to those with authority setting out how they wanted the game to function and how they wanted those who played it to behave; it was linked to wider cultural concepts. Within the discourse an 'ideal' sportsman could be constructed and, it was hoped, copied and reproduced. This discourse of values was part of wider discourses which attempted to emphasise the positive aspects of football – discourses of football – if you like, including representations of good order, administration, charity and education. The two discourses overlapped, permeated and spread beyond the game itself.

But this 'discourse of values' in football was formed by a language which was itself subjective, relative, and interpreted differently. While there may have been consistency in whether a specific term was viewed as acceptable or unacceptable, what actually constituted such terms was a site for disagreement, confusion and subjective perception. This is indicted by reports on the same game between Ajax Amsterdam and Sparta Rotterdam in 1918. I have provided these on the handout in original and translated forms. I will stick to English for time reasons.

[SLIDE]

Although initially praising some of the play of Ajax the Rotterdam based catholic newspaper, de Maasbode, noted in its report:

> Referee Willing was in charge, and this was fortunate because without his firm hand the play of the Amsterdammers would have been less pleasant. People know what we think of the Amsterdammer's system. The "hacking", the pushing and the throwing which these "amateurs" make use of, is so condemnable that even the most neutral spectator said to us yesterday "I am happy that Sparta have won, because of the unpleasant play of the Amsterdammers".

de Maasbode went on to criticise scandalous fouls and dishonest tricks.

[SLIDE]

However, Rotterdam based NRC, although noting a few infractions had a different tone to its report, summing up the game as follows:

> While some complained about play that was too forceful, we would like to impart our opinion, that we do not share in this general view. There happened here and there, and more from Ajax's side, some isolated incidents, that would have been better not taking place, but the game as a whole was certainly not too wild or too rough.

[SLIDE]

In the Amsterdam press no mention was made of any concept of forceful play noting rather in the Algemeen Handelsblad that the:

> 'The match yesterday in Rotterdam was beautiful and exciting. It cannot be said that Ajax deserved to loose: a draw would be a better result in this match of equally completely equivalent teams.'

In the popular Amsterdam daily De Courant they felt Ajax deserved to win. They sympathised with the Sparta defence not for rough play but because their teammates had been listless, although they did note some rough play here and there.

What these excerpts suggest to me is that while the narrative about what was good or bad was seemingly fixed, how this narrative related to action was fluid, subjective and changeable. There was space between language, action and meaning. This space within the 'discourse of values' and its subjective understanding could be a site for conflict and the negotiation of power; a place where what was acceptable was subtly challenged. The space between language, meaning and action meant that the apparently fixed norms of the football constellation were actually fluid, relative and despite appearance diverse.

From these single extracts it is difficult and unwise to try to find a pattern within newspapers as to whether specific newspapers favoured certain clubs or players over others, or whether there was a pattern based on regional, religious, or other forms of identity. This could be a useful avenue for future research.

What I think it does suggest though is that there was a discourse of values which was connected to how people should use their body, a discourse which was intimately connected to the concept of power and of control.

[SLIDE]

Sport can be considered as a site were values, ideas and thoughts about the world can be made physical, can be located within the body – the discourses of values in sport give meanings to actions. Physical actions are not simply done in the abstract but are seen as part of a wider constellation of meanings. It is variable and constructed, not a natural phenomenon. By this I mean that similar physical actions in different sports, situations and locations can be seen entirely differently – each action is relatively constructed within a wider constellation of meanings.

In sport, those who are in positions of authority play a part in how people may use there body, where they may do so and when they may do so; they can impart a view of the world to participants and spectators. Supposed norms of behaviour and action may be implemented through administration, regulation, measurement and training. The fluidity of the links between language, action and meaning, allow participants a degree of manoeuvrability within the discourses; they can create their own space within the confusion of the discourse, to push the boundaries, to experiment – perhaps to create a sense of freedom, to utilise their own power within the game.

But the subjective, relative link, also allows those with authority - the media and the rule makers - to reframe discourses, to constrain the excesses, to cope with changes and challenges. Perhaps, if I am cynical to give the impression of freedom while keeping it in check; if language can be used dexterously to refer to meaning, then discourses, narratives and other concepts are sometimes able to subtly shift to minor changes while appearing to remain stable. They can hide the hyper-diversity within the arena and give a sense of unity, conformity and stability.

That football became important to the discourses of values within society is demonstrable by the different cultural organisations which attempted to exert authority over participation in the game from the end of the 19th century to the early 1920s. The discourses of values which I have described above, were not just about playing sport correctly but about constructing a better future and better society. **[SLIDE]**

This circular report from a committee about school football from 1910 demonstrates how some came to see football.

> The committee considers that football training for school pupils, under the expert leadership of a teacher, a leader or a self chosen instructor, is of immense worth in the physical formation and the character building of the male youth, and the committee is of the view that this game, more than any other, which benefits physical development, should be spread.

Sport was an important cultural practice which could ensure that the so called correct aspects were transmitted to the bodies of the young.

I suggest, that control over who got to decide which discourse of values were to be spread, and how this was to be done, was a fundamental issue in the development of different cultural organisations in football at this time. The response of different groups, individuals and organisations is linked to the period's own diversity in ideas and concepts.

[SLIDE]

Initially there seemed to be little diversity in participation in Dutch football. In the 1880s the game was played mainly by young teenagers from more wealthy backgrounds, and promoted by those like Pim Mulier who had had contact with English sport. The NVB , the forerunner to today's KNVB, was established in 1889. This cultural organisation was established with a purpose – at first it was rather humble; it was intended to promote sport to other young men from a similar background, to convince parents and others from the older generation that football was not a danger or moral degeneration, and it was there help new clubs and old clubs operate.

Over time, the mission of the organisation changed. It was constantly a source of debate between members; should the organisation encourage wider participation from across the social spectrum or make the game merely more acceptable within society while retaining the elite nature of it? How would opening the game to workers change the nature of the sport and organisation? Should the organisation focus on competitive matches or upon the more traditional forms of elite football? How could the organisation promote its ideas and acceptance of football? What would happen to the game if the organisation succeeded or failed? How could they cooperate with other cultural organisations who were sympathetic or opposed to them? By the 1920s debates in the NVB about who the game was for and what it could do, led to some individuals from more wealthy backgrounds moving to participate in other sports.

[SLIDE]

As football became more popular in the Netherlands after 1900, the NVB and other individuals in society became concerned with how football interacted and permeated their lives. Catholic organisations were established with their own values and ideas, primarily to ensure that this increasingly popular leisure activity would remain within the control or oversight of the Catholic Church. Socialist organisations were established which fought against the idea of competitive football and restricted interaction with bourgeois elements. Office associations allowed colleagues to enjoy one another's company outside of the workspace. Later, protestant organisations were founded, which were against playing the game on Sunday. Within each organisation there was a great deal of diversity and debate as to how each organisation should operate. Just which values should be prioritised and promoted? Their formation was not the origination of a set of ideas, but an attempt to unite sometimes disparate ideas – a diversity of opinion which continued.

I suggest that each of these cultural organisations had a distinctly different mission – had a different discourse of values, which was part of the world outside football but permeated into and through it. In each case football was not in opposition to culture, to politics, to religion, to the world of work, but was an intrinsic part of shaping and forming perceptions of the world. The borders between football, sport, politics and other cultures which are so often spoken about, were, as is the case with so many artificially created borders, permeable, fluid and in many cases non-existent. Each cultural organisation did not stand separately to the world outside, but was a part of it, was shaped by it and shaped it.

I would suggest, that a more important point for us to consider is that attached to the values at the heart of each of the organisations, was the idea of control, authority and power. Each organisation was not only concerned with stating their own ideas, but was actively attempting to promote and spread them. That workers, catholic and later protestant organisations emerged when football became more popular is not coincidental – at these times, amongst different groups and individuals, there was concern that the certain values were being challenged and that this needed to be countered. These cultural organisations were about authority, power and their own discourse of values.

There may have been division within organisations as to how they should operate, but what united these organisations was the belief that their own organisation was best placed to offer the 'correct' set of values for a wider population or part of it. While there may have been a different discourse of values for each organisation, one idea which became widely accepted was that football itself could be a positive part of this discourse.

These suggestions about cultural organisations in Dutch football are preliminary and in future I would like to research the birth of Dutch sport and how diverse organisations represented their own discourses of values connected to wider social ideas. I would also like to further consider how sport permeates and is permeated by other aspects of culture.

I am a passionate participant in sport and have been for as long as I can remember. My research has made me consider whether sport is entirely a good thing; of whether playing sport fits with my own beliefs of how the world could be constructed. By participating in sport am I promoting a discourses of values that I disagree with? Football and sport is permeated by regulations, rules, authority, measurements and training. Within it are discourses which, while attempting to encourage inclusion and participation, are riddled with differentiation, ranking, segregation; discourses which make it seem like victory, loss, authority and punishment are a natural part of our everyday lives – does this need to be so? My research makes me wonder whether, my participation in sport, with its different organisations and structures, is part of a way to normalise concepts and institutions, which are based on the idea of promoting certain discourses and tend towards authority and hegemony. In short it makes me question whether the thing I love is something I believe in?

I use Dutch cultural history as the site of my research, but I am not primarily concerned with the past or the Dutch case. My research about the past of the Netherlands is firmly rooted in the present, in the international and, above all, the personal. I have used the Dutch case as a form of thought experiment for concepts, which are much wider. I wonder how many of you also see their research in this way? **[SLIDE]**

And this finally brings me to the IVN. I became a member in 2011. It was a gift from my supervisor for successfully completing my doctorate. As I pay the membership fee each year, I am reminded of this act. From her side a formal welcoming into the world of academia, of Neerlandistiek, and on my side a desire to be part of it and not to let her down. And yet, up until a few weeks ago, I must confess I did not really know what it was, or what the organisation did, or even whether I should really be a member; the symbolic element outweighed any practical concerns – you may be able to tell I have a suspicion of organisations! In my mind Neerlandistiek was more about Dutch language and literature, it was about specifically Dutch or Flemish things. For whatever reason, I did not feel part of this. My language skills while acceptable for reading, always left me insecure in the company of those with more ability. I am certainly no expert in Dutch literature or indeed language. While I had lived in the Netherlands for two years, I have no familial connection to it, I had never presented my ideas in the Netherlands; maybe my research didn't even matter to those within the Netherlands.

For whatever reason I believed that the IVN was an organisation which was not for me, it was for people who spoke fluent Dutch – whatever that meant - , were concerned solely and intimately with affairs of the Low Countries, and wanted to somehow separate these cultures from the rest of the world. I probably didn't do Neerlandistiek either – this was something too narrow, too specialised, too far from me, too much about writers I had never heard or words I didn't understand.

I am happy to say that, as the papers and people of this conference have shown I was wrong. But I wonder how many other students or researchers with an interest, however tangential, in the Low Countries, may also be put of, not by what they know of the concept but by their own misconceptions.

In Europe today cultural organisations are under a degree of pressure. They are constantly asked to justify their existence, the reasons for their funding and just what they provide to wider society. They, like the cultural organisations of early Dutch football, are not isolated but part of the wider cultural constellation with its changing and relative values. Values so often defined by language which means many things and nothing. There are perhaps, some similarities between the NVB and IVN.

I think many academics look to the world outside and hope they can change it, can suggest ways in which we can be better. This is why I conduct my research. In this way perhaps I am similar to the idealists of the NVB. At the heart of the NVB, just as the IVN, was a mission, a set of values which it believed in and a goal to strive towards. Naturally this changed.

However, I believe that the IVN is different to organisations of early Dutch football. These organisations were based around what they saw as a natural, un-relative, fairly fixed set of values, even if they changed and were challenged. The organisations were about how they could make the world more like them, about how society should act, should behave and should be. Success was judged on the number of members they claimed, the number of people they converted to their view and the way in which their values were accepted and disseminated throughout society. I would suggest it was about asserting the superiority of their 'discourse of values' and about limiting the possibility of diversity.

This cannot be the future for the IVN. I believe that one of the things which is special about the atmosphere of conferences on Neerlandistiek is the encouraging and genuine interest which participants show. I believe the future of the IVN lies in promoting this spirit of openness, interest and friendship for new students and existing researchers, not as a by-product of what we do, but as the very foundation of the organisations existence.

The organisation can be united by a belief that it is open, friendly and outward looking, and that we can offer an experimental place for researchers of all parts of the world to think about their own ideas and subjects.

Yes, this will be based geographically or linguistically in a specific region to some extent. But my research has shown that this can be a springboard for wider concepts and ideas, for thinking about the present, the international and personal. For students who have exciting ideas which no one else will support, why should we not support them and show that Neerlandistiek offers an exciting opportunity to think about the world?

What must and should divide us, in my opinion, is everything else; our methods, ideas, beliefs, approaches, schools, outputs, aims, politics, homes and lives. In a world which is hyper-diverse - which is not only diverse but energetically, franticly and frustratingly so - the answer is not increased similarity as was thought by those earlier cultural institutions. But an acceptance and joy in encouraging ever more diversity, in giving the opportunity to be diverse, and giving each of us the chance to rub up against it, to create our own meanings. This is especially true in academic research. I am not naïve. My research demonstrated that cultural organisations operate with political, economic and social constraints; I understand that every cultural organisation which requires funding must demonstrate why they deserve it. But in any cultural organisation there must also be a place and time for idealists and for those who want to do things differently.

To close, I would like to suggest what Internationale Neerlandistiek means to me and what it could be as a field. I come with the advantage of ignorance that I admittedly do not know too much about the history of the term, but from this I can construct my own possibilities for the future. I propose that Internationale Neerlandistiek can be a field based on the following:

[SLIDE]

> **a field of study, rooted in friendship and collaboration, which intends to promote and support diverse research and experimentation, in all areas of life, using the cultures (broadly speaking) of the Low Countries (broadly speaking) as a site to address contemporary international issues.**

In a period where borders between disciplines are increasingly disappearing and morphing, where constructed borders themselves are being challenged, perhaps it makes more sense to try to think of new ways to define what we do which are based on the personal and not the disciplinary. I believe this could give Internationale Neerlandistiek the possibility of finding new audiences, to be seen as truly experimental and radical in the best sense of the word. As members of the IVN I believe we have the opportunity to shape the future of this field. In the spirit of friendship and hyper-diversity, I accept and welcome the possibility that many of you may not agree about the future of the field and organisation – this debate is why we are here. But irrespective of this, I truly hope that what continues to unite us as a group within the IVN, or outside it, is our support of new scholars from a range of backgrounds.

Especially those like me, who at first don’t quite understand what it is they are joining.

Thank you.