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## Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

# Living history on Dutch TV at last – the making of 'Het verhaal van Nederland'

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The project is called *Het verhaal van Nederland* (The story of the Netherlands), HVVNL for short. Its core is a series of ten TV episodes as well as ten pod-walks at different locations in the Netherlands. This is complemented by an online series for kids called *Het verhaal van Nederland Histories*, a series of podcasts about remarkable characters from Dutch history, a book, and an adaptation of the documentaries for 12–18 year-olds to be used in schools. In

this article, we will tell you about the process of creating the ten tv episodes and the choices made along the way.

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Working with reenactors on set is a blessing but also has its challenges. Normal extras are dressed by the Wardrobe department and get items from the Art department and instructions from Production. This system gives a director “total” control of what he is going to see. Re-enactors, on the other hand, have their own clothes and bring their own gear.

## The beginning

In 2019 the NTR (national public radio and television broadcaster) wanted to make a program based on the Danish format *“Historien om Danmark”*, made and broadcast in Denmark. The NTR wanted a series that would appeal to a broad spectrum of viewers. In their view, which I share, knowledge of history can help to better understand current events. The target audience for the series was people who are already interested in history, but also people who might not be particularly into history but could be enticed to watch because of the show’s attractive format. The NTR hoped the series would lead to an increase in interest in history and archaeology, leading to more museum visits and other searches for knowledge.

In the Netherlands we have something called “the canon of the Netherlands”, a list established by Dutch historians of what they consider the 50 most important people or events from Dutch history. Examples include the megalithic monuments from the north-east provinces, the Roman Limes, William of Orange, Rembrandt, and of course Anne Frank. Such a selection is necessarily arbitrary, but with this canon as a base, telling “The story of the Netherlands” became possible.

## About the series

HVVNL tells the history of the Netherlands (with its current borders) from the start of human habitation until the 1950’s. This history, spanning not just centuries but millennia, needed to be reduced to ten 50-minute episodes. This meant deciding what stories to tell and what to leave out. The editorial staff called on several reputable scientists to help make the difficult choices about the stories they wanted to tell, trying to make use of the most up to date information. In most of the stories the perspective of the common man is presented next to that of a more well-known person. On many occasions, they steered clear of stories that have been told many times before.

Each of the ten episodes covers a detailed account of a small event within a wider historical context. As in the canon, the series takes big leaps through History and zooms in on particular stories. It is not so much a documentary as an informative drama series. The dramatic scenes are the main part, but interviews with historical archaeological specialists are intercut to add clarity and information.

The dramatic scenes were created with a few actors as well as a large number of reenactors. A great deal of research went into the locations, props, clothing, and, last but not least, the people acting in it. All episodes are presented by the same actor, Daan Schuurmans, who acts as omniscient narrator and gives the necessary explanations. Almost none of the actors in the dramas have any spoken lines that we can hear. By choosing to have no dialogue, we eliminated the issue of reinventing long-forgotten languages, which we felt would only be a distraction. The whole project is very cinematographic, combining beautiful shots of natural scenery and historical reconstructions filmed all over the Netherlands. Several crew members contribute their point of view on making this huge project work below.

## 'How living history conquered 2 million Dutch TV-viewers'

**Hasan Evrengün, Chief editor of Het verhaal van Nederland**

The story of the Netherlands – how to make history

"How about doing historical research for a television documentary series that will cover 2500 years of history of the Netherlands?" The question was easy, the answer was not. Of course, I said yes, because as a historian I got really excited by the idea of putting my nose that deep in Dutch history. But as soon as we started the project, the question was where to begin and, also as important, where to end?

Luckily, I was able to rely on the existing historical structures that are used in Dutch educational programs, such as the 'Canon van Nederland', in which 50 prominent historical developments and persons are portrayed. As soon as we had the basis for ten episodes (prehistoric Netherlands, Roman influence, early, middle and late Medieval Netherlands, the Dutch Revolt, the 17th, 18th and 19th century and World War II and decolonization) another question arose: what to tell and how to show it?

The format of the series is based on the Danish 'Story of Denmark' in which the narrator is a time traveller. He goes back and forth from the modern day to the past where he enters dramatized scenes as a spectator, invisible to the people of the past. He addresses the viewers and explains what is going on and why. The viewer is thus a part of the narrative and makes their own time travel to the past. This way of switching from today to the past is an essential element of the series. Through acting and re-enacting the viewer gets an image of how this past world could have looked, how people at that time lived and how they were dressed. Thanks to input from professional historical experts, amateur researchers and reenactors, local historical sites, archives and museum objects, the series tries to visualize the past as accurately as possible.

It is, however, television, in which a dramatic story has to also be prominent. To combine documentary and historical drama on television is a challenge. It is most important to

maintain a credible and accurate historical narrative; this is what happened, how it happened and why. On the other hand, the challenge was not to scare away the viewer by flooding them with information but rather to tempt them by using motion picture elements: love, fear, friendship, death, family. By writing scenarios for the series that used these elements, combined with historical facts and ideas, the ideal mixture was produced: an exciting television program.

The collaboration of tv professionals (directors, editors, researchers), historical professionals (universities, museums and archives) and 'amateur' historians as reenactors (who are experts in clothing, craft, arms, jewellery, furniture and much more) has proved to be very successful. This bottom up/top-down way of working led to many ideas and new inspirations for writing and filming the scenes, and the use of garments and props on the set. It has also made all the contributors to the series enthusiastic and excited to make even more history.

### **Luc Amkreutz - Curator of the Prehistory Collections at the National Museum of Antiquities (RMO) in Leiden and one of the experts on the show**

It was about two years ago that, in my job as curator of the Prehistoric collections, I was approached at the National Museum of Antiquities (RMO) for a contribution to the series 'Het verhaal van Nederland' for the NTR. At that time it was of course not clear how successful the series would be. Talking to the production company I could imagine that the Danish concept could work. The combination of a genuinely interested host with scientific interpreters such as archaeologists and historians from the field could make an important contribution. I was hesitant concerning the reenacted scenes but if they were serious and of high quality I understood that they would be an important element to ensure people would actually watch the series.

In that first talk it was clear that the makers were still deciding what the precise content of each show should be, which was why they came to brainstorm. They indicated they had one show dedicated to prehistory. I spent the next hour or so trying to convince them that one hour for 300.000 years, at least two species of hominids and arguably the most important shift in our history, to a food producing, agricultural way-of-life, would hardly fit in one episode. Perhaps the Romans or the Frisians and Franks warrant one episode, but all of prehistory? Still this was what it was, one episode.

But what to choose then? The story of Doggerland, changing landscapes, Ice Ages and the fact Neanderthals were here earlier and longer than us seemed very important to me. But it would be a stretch to then also include the first farmers some 290.000 years later. The reenactment part would also be tricky for Neanderthals as their appearance and locomotor apparatus leave much open for discussion. In other words, it always looks quite silly when modern human actors try. After much deliberation I suggested to opt for the window 5500-2500 cal BC. That way the last hunter-gatherers could be staged encountering the first

farmers of the *Linearbandkeramik* culture in Limburg and the all important process of neolithisation would be included. The transition to agriculture and the idiosyncratic route that took in the Netherlands with the Swifterbant culture could be highlighted as well. Finally the cut could be made to the Yamnaya migrants that lived about 2000 years later and contributed importantly to our genetic make-up and introduced Indo European languages as well as the *Yersinia pestis* bacteria, the plague. 3000 years is still a bit of a stretch.

A number of colleagues and I were later asked to talk about this time-frame in a studio-setting and some shots were taken at the museum highlighting certain objects. What I found difficult was that the script was written by a script-writer who was not familiar with the period and its specific problems. I received the script and commented upon it and provided nuance (as we as prehistorians do not know many things for sure). And, while I understand that in a production for a wider audience there is not much room for nuance or scientific debate, I never saw a revised version, only the finished production two weeks before it aired at which point mistakes could no longer be altered.

Reception of the series was overwhelmingly good and many people (2 million) also watched the first episode directly. Many colleagues, of course, remarked on the choices made, but most of this critique was a matter of taste, nuance and choice. Mistakes such as the faulty edit of a comment on the Yamnaya plague bacteria after a *Linearbandkeramik* scene (2000 years too early) were not noticed. It is important to note that we as professionals are not the target audience and that the target audience was reached in a way previously unknown for archaeological programs in the Netherlands. I think that the first episode had a very high level of information, discussing hunter gatherers and farmers, landscape change, migration, violence, loess soils and flint as well as skin colour and ancient DNA. Reactions I heard a lot where 'I didn't know this' and 'We are all migrants'.

Of course it is not possible to cater to everyone's needs, but I think 'Het verhaal van Nederland' opened a new window on communicating our deep past and, for prehistory, hopefully creates new avenues and possibilities to engage with a wide audience. I found it telling that one of the local newspapers in the Netherlands 'De Limburger' highlighted that the talk at the coffee corner after the second episode was no longer about soccer or a game show, but about Romans, Batavians and hunter-gatherers. I feel we have an important message about our deep past to communicate which is also relevant for us today as human communities and I am happy with what 'Het verhaal van Nederland' has established in that respect, particularly there, in the coffee corner.

### **Maarten van der Duin – Screenwriter of Het verhaal van Nederland**

"Would you be able to condense seven thousand years of history into 10 episodes of 50 minutes?" As an opportunistic drama writer, only moderately educated in history, I felt no qualms: "Sure". I mean, how much history can a small country like the Netherlands really

have? It turns out a lot. After researching only one of ten roughly defined periods, I knew more than enough about the Roman conquest of the Lower Countries and the Batavian Revolt, to fill an entire television series. The challenge was clear. What guidelines should be used to distill a single episode? Of course, I could adhere to the suggestions of an extensive community of reenactors. Their practical skills and applicable knowledge indeed proved indispensable to creating convincing drama scenes and conveying a feeling of authenticity. Telling history, however, is more than merely reconstructing history. Especially when it comes to prime-time television. Each episode needed an underlying message that was relevant and gripping enough to appeal to a contemporary Dutch audience.

To define a compelling premise like that, I could surely turn to an expert. But which one? I had spoken with various archaeologists and historians, who tended to emphasize their own research and pet theories, while subtly contradicting each other. Besides, the Danish creators of the original format had emphatically warned us to keep all historians at arm's length. Their production of "Historien om Danmark" had come to a grinding halt after one year, when the experts involved could not find common ground. Moreover, understanding the importance of current historical research and the accompanying excitement, presupposes a level of historical knowledge that is not widely shared. In fact, that turned out to be the biggest challenge for the program. Not the ambitious time span, nor the multitude of viewpoints, but the insurmountable gap between the scientific world and the general public. One can only speculate that the near absence of historical drama and docudrama on Dutch television in the last two decades had contributed to that. So, instead of promoting any scientific achievement, I started to research again. Open-minded and unbiased, but this time I paid equal attention to my own emotional response, whether it be amazement about little known facts or straight indignation about unexpected dark sides of our national heroes. Certainly, my feelings as an individual are not important as such, but as an average representative of Dutch society, I can reasonably expect my interests to resonate with a wider audience. It is an approach that fiction writers usually take, and it paid off. Following and sharing my fascination, a clear pattern evolved, that made it possible to narrow down the mountain of information and shape each episode. Instead of solely focusing on the past, the defining question was always: who are we and how did we become like this? Although *The Story of the Netherlands* depicts events and figures from the past, in reality it is a mirror for the present.

### **Floris Eysink-Smeets, Production Designer of *Het verhaal van Nederland***

"If I ask you to visualize the Middle Ages, what do you see?" About 90% of people will have an image in mind inspired by film. But is this a correct visualization? The answer is no, it is Film-realism. Film-realism has influenced our perspective on history.

The Art Department is the department which is responsible for the sets and the composition in the frame. Most of the time we as an Art Department make fictional dramas, where

historical correctness is not that important. It has to look and feel good and it has to support the story. The first question I had to ask myself when I was asked to be the Production Designer, the head of the Art Department, for The Story of The Netherlands (HVVNL) was "what level of realism do we want to achieve in HVVNL?"

In advance I already knew we would never achieve 100% realism, because we don't have the buildings anymore, we don't have the wildlife anymore, or we lack knowledge of specific details of those periods. Sometimes we only have assumptions or indications and interpretations. But still the question remains how close do you want to get?

Because HVVNL is a hybrid series, mixing fictional drama with documentary influences, we are required by the documentary part of the series to get as close as possible. Lourens Blok, the director, set the goal really clearly: when a history teacher thinks this is real, then we have achieved our goal. This meant that Jaap Hogendoorn (Reenactment Advisor) and his network of dedicated re-enactors were of vital importance. With the lack of time for decent research we had to use their knowledge of the periods, their knowledge of (human) behaviour in those periods, their props and their willingness to participate to achieve the level we finally presented.

My major concern was not to fall for the Film-realism-trap. It is so easy to let yourself be lead by the visuals we see everywhere, even for me. To come back to the example of the first sentence, if you visualize the Middle Ages most people will say people in those days looked dirty, clothes had a lack of colour and every castle was lit by torches. This is only because films have given us these visualizations. But what people forget is that films only give an approximate idea of what these periods looked like, you only see what you see because it supports the story or helps the technical aspects of film-making. A good example is the torch, one of the main items you always see in Medieval or earlier storytelling. It is a beautiful way of lighting up hallways of dark castles and pitch-black night exteriors. But when you look at it in a scientific way, the torch is impossible. It burns for about 10-15 minutes before it runs out of fuel. It wasn't a reliable source of light at that time, they would have used oil-lamps, candles and fires or just eyes which were used to the darkness. Film-making is an artistic expression which exists only because of light. That's why my colleagues had to find a way to make it look "authentic". And this was a great one. Over the years everybody begins to believe it is authentic. Even me. As a result we had to talk and discuss every aspect of life and the script of every period we shot.

Thanks to our re-enactors and Jaap we were able to keep as close as possible to realism as the historians and re-enactors know it. Still there were enough scenes and situations where we had to fall back on Film-realism, even on the torch, because, in the end, it is film.

**Nicole van Kilsdonk, Director of episodes 5, 6 and 7 of Het verhaal van Nederland**

I was one of the two directors of *Het verhaal van Nederland*. As a director, it was a unique series to work on, especially because of the interesting mix of fictional scenes, interviews, maps, objects and a narrator in present and past – and the balance between all of this. The fiction scenes especially presented challenges: we wanted the scenes to be credible in the way they look and in the way they are acted.

In the Netherlands it's hard to find places that are really old and authentic, or places where you don't see modern buildings, since it's a such densely populated country. We really had to look very carefully where we could put the camera and have the correct decor. Of course you have to cheat now and then: the audience has to believe that they are 'time travelling', but all the things we see do not really have to BE that old. This is also the case with props, some of them were original and old, some of them were made especially for the series, but it's also "make believe". Many costumes were made especially for the actors, based on research, or re-enactors brought their own costumes. For me as a director it's all about credibility, which means we shouldn't drown in our attempts to have all these kinds of details correct. It's not a museum!

Something that is interesting and challenging regarding the look and feel of historical fiction scenes is the fact that we, as an audience, are all very much influenced by historical feature films, and the way things look in those films. Often you see dirty and gloomy scenes. One has the feeling that colours, costumes, walls should not be too bright or fresh and things aren't clean. This is because that's what we see in movies. Of course, you can rationalize and say: but in those days the paint was fresh and new and colours were bright. But to the audience this can feel fake, so as a director you have to find a balance between the conditionalized view of the audience and the logic of how it really could have looked like in those days.

Another challenge was the casting: we didn't want to have well-known faces in the series so we worked with a mix of trained actors, inexperienced actors and extras, and historical re-enactors. We tried to avoid dialogue since we don't know how people talked in those days. As a result there were lots of dramatic scenes with no dialogue at all. In such scenes it was very important to have authentic performances and avoid the tendency, especially strong in inexperienced actors, to 'pantomime' and overdo gestures. It was important to get natural ways of acting. It was very interesting to find the balance in those performances, to be dramatic but not melodramatic. I was pleasantly surprised by the performances of historical re-enactors and inexperienced actors.

### **Jaap Hogendoorn, Re-enactment Advisor for *Het verhaal van Nederland***

In January 2020, I got a phone call from one of the executive producers from Pupkin / Tuvalu media. Three people from within the re-enactment scene had put my name forward as the person to go to for advice on re-enactment for HVVN. As you can imagine, I was super excited about the show and honoured by the fact that others put me forward. I went to the first

meeting with Remco van de Kant, the production manager for the first three episodes to be made (2, 3 and 4) and Theun Termijtelen, the line producer. They explained the plan: making a high-end drama documentary about the history of the Netherlands. They were looking for someone to fix re-enactment extras for the series.

For me, working on a project of this magnitude was a dream come true. It was like I had been training for this all my life. Being able to assist all the super professional people from the different departments, working together to make this the best depiction of Dutch history we were able to make and I was asked to arrange everything for this, how amazing is that!

The whole team was about 40 professionals from the television world. You have just read the stories of a few of them. They are dedicated people, but they don't necessarily know very much about living history. The same views have been dominating the film and television industry for decades, especially in the Netherlands and like everyone, their views on history are coloured by the medium itself. In this project, I found that the biggest danger is when you assume that certain things are the way you imagine they are. Things that for people with our background are a dead giveaway, but not obvious for "modern" people. Some examples: baled straw, water pumps, the use of fur in clothing and the size and colour of candles. Many important details were researched, for example how would a nobleman approach Margaret of Parma, regent of the Netherlands in the 1560's?

Working with reenactors on set is a blessing but also has its challenges. Normal extras are dressed by the Wardrobe department and get items from the Art department and instructions from Production. This system gives a director "total" control of what he is going to see. Re-enactors, on the other hand, have their own clothes and bring their own gear. These are often better than any production could ever make. For starters, the clothes they wear are made for them. Re-enactors dress themselves and don't need instructions on how to handle tools and weapons. But a director and other departments have to be confident enough to deal with the fact they have less control over the overall aesthetic, and with all the unsolicited advice that re-enactors can't resist giving.

In this production several Dutch members of EXARC contributed. Eva Ijsveld made a grass cloak for episode 1 and gave advice on the general clothing for that episode. Frank Wiersema, Lucia Ros and Leo Wolterbeek played a small part in episode 1. Lucia Ros, Dorothee Olthof and Diederik Pomstra supplied several items for that same episode. Vera Bos arranged a full 13th century banquet and played a small part in episode 5. Wiel van der Mark played a big role in episode 7. All this contributed to making this series even better!

A production is divided into departments that work alongside each other under the director. In the end, reenactors always bring more than any department can think of. By doing so, they make a production look so much better. In general, they are super dedicated and are able to spot small mistakes and adjust them on set. To have someone working in between all the

departments, the way I did, was something the professionals had to get used to. But slowly I gained their confidence. In the end, the wardrobe department was starting to correct me instead of the other way around. From other productions they've done since, I've heard wardrobe is sometimes too strict on authenticity now. Totally infected with the re-enactment virus!

#### Link(s)

<https://hetverhaalvannederland.ntr.nl/>

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#### Gallery Image



FIG 1. BEHIND THE SCENES OF "HET VERHAAL VAN NEDERLAND". COPYRIGHTS BY NTR (NEDERLANDSE PUBLIEKE OMROEP)



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FIG 5. JAAP HOGENDOORN PLAYING A ROLE AS WELL, IN PART 6: "GEUZEN EN PAPEN". COPYRIGHTS BY NTR (NEDERLANDSE PUBLIEKE OMROEP)



FIG 6. PART 7 OF THE SERIES: "KAPERS EN KOOPLUI". COPYRIGHTS BY NTR (NEDERLANDSE PUBLIEKE OMROEP)