



Defeat of the Spanish Armada, 8 August 1588; by Philip James de Loutherbourg (1796 – oil on canvas).

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Encountering Histories in English and Dutch Textbooks, 1920-2000

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In 1949, an English history textbook described the retreating German troops after the Battle of Britain – the German Air Force air campaign against the United Kingdom in 1940 – as follows:

“They were the retreating remnants of a shattered and disordered armada whose rout meant even more to Britain than had the defeat of the Spanish Armada nearly four hundred years earlier.”

The authors made a historical analogy between 1940 and the English defeat of the Spanish Armada in the sixteenth century in order to compare the impact of these routs on Britain. In turn their narration of sixteenth century events employs a flash-forward effect to emphasize the danger of invasion in 1588:

“Our country has been threatened with invasion several times since 1588, but until the German threat in 1940 the danger has never been as great as that from the Spanish Armada.”

This history textbook exposes narrative encounters between past events and contemporary war experiences. The year 1588 functions as an important anchor in the narration of the past; it offers a background perspective for observing and understanding the present. The event of 1588 is one of the most famous stories in English history and has gained universal meaning in its narrative form: it has become a heroic apologue of the defence of freedom against tyranny, an eternal myth of the victory of the weak over the strong. Hence, throughout their textbook series, the authors employed more flashbacks to this naval battle in 1588, for example, in their narration about Napoleon.

History textbooks contain canonised texts about the past. National narratives in this genre have provided many people with

meaning, memory and identity. Members of a particular culture often remember and narrate the past as well as the present according to the same mental schemata and plot structures as these cultural codes are relevant to its members. Since these cultural codes are shared by a mnemonic community, several studies have examined what these communities collectively remember and highlight the complexities of collective remembrance within a certain community that is often not as homogenous as it seems. In addition to the content, I am particularly interested in the mnemonic form in which national communities remember, narrate and transmit the past as detectable in the schemata and plot structures of national narratives in history textbooks.

This mnemonic form is not necessarily bound to national contexts: it can be transnational as well. The quoted English textbook series is entitled *The Four Freedoms or the People We Are*, referring to the 'freedom speech' by United States President Franklin Roosevelt in 1941. Roosevelt proposed four fundamental freedoms for everyone: freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want and freedom from fear. The English textbook authors used Roosevelt's speech as a trans-historical frame to narrate their nation's past, present and future. They started their textbook with an image in which the journey towards the four freedoms is represented as four rivers flowing towards the future. The future is located in the year 2000, a glorious horizon where the four freedoms appear to arrive at their ultimate destination. On these rivers, there are several ships travelling towards the horizon, some of which threaten the four freedoms and are sinking while others remain afloat. The ships *Armada* and *Hitler*, representing the danger of invasion, are both sinking in the river 'Freedom from fear'. The authors showed the significance of history, including the horrible period of World War II, by narrating history as an attempt to obtain the four freedoms.

The question of how and why textbook authors combine different histories, places and times is a key focus of my research. The study of these combinations can contribute to a deeper understanding of how history is transmitted, interpreted and perpetuated in textbooks. Resonance patterns in history textbooks can reveal widespread frames of references and possible schemata in the narration of national history. I study national narratives in English and Dutch history textbooks for 11-14 year-old students published in the period 1920-2000. This comparative study embraces a multidisciplinary approach which fits well into History@Erasmus and uses insights from different fields - such as history, memory studies, literature and sociology - to scrutinize how and why different periods intermingle in narrated and remembered history. This process can transform the meaning of an event by associating it with the interpretative framework of another event. Moreover, instead of comparisons between two moments in

time (historical analogies), the chain of signification is derived from a *combination* of cross-references between histories. Distinct moments in time and space are recomposed into a different configuration. Hence, by examining how textbook authors combine histories, places and periods in their narrative, this study can bring to light how history is made sense of, and to what extent this has changed after large-scale events, such as war.

Verder lezen

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