

Exception or Rule?

The International Rise of Dutch Children's Films

Since its world premiere at the International Film Festival in Berlin in February 2012, *Kauwboy*, the film debut of Boudewijn Koole, has swept all before it. After being awarded the top prize for best children's film by the international jury in the Generation programme and taking the prize for best film debut in the entire festival, *Kauwboy* went on to scoop awards at an array of other national and international festivals. *Kauwboy* was chosen as the Dutch entry for the Oscars, and in 2012 was voted the best European debut during the European Film Awards, the 'European Oscars'.

The film (about a ten year-old boy who is trying to come to terms with the loss of his mother and strikes up a friendship with a jackdaw which he keeps hidden from his volatile father), marks a high point in a trend that has been under way for some time, namely the international rise of Dutch children's films. The Dutch Film Festival celebrated the importance of the genre in 2012 by opening with *Nono, the Zigzag Kid* (*Nono, het zigzagkind*). This film portrayal of David Grossman's novel is a Dutch-Belgian co-production, directed by the Fleming, Vincent Bal, and featuring Isabella Rossellini in a major supporting role. The film tells the story of a 13 year-old boy trying to find out who his dead mother was because his father refuses to tell him anything about her. The film premiered at the International Film Festival in Toronto, and has also been selected for the children's section of the 2013 Berlinale.

The first prize awarded to a Dutch film at the Berlin Children's Film Festival dates from 1989, when *Mijn vader woont in Rio* (*My father lives in Rio*) was awarded a prize by the children's film jury. The film (about a girl who does not know that her father is in prison) was produced by Burny Bos. With his company BosBros, he was in at the birth of the genre of Dutch family films that has now become immensely popular. The genre is typified by an often adventurous quest told from the per-



spective of a child which, with its nostalgic undertone, serious themes and humour, also appeals to adults. Bos broke with the tradition of somewhat moralising and rather artificial children's films that had been the norm until then and replaced them with realistic dramas with scope for fantasy and imagination. More attention was paid to acting skills, thematic development and hefty budgets. Bos also formulated ambitions which looked beyond the national borders, towards Berlin and towards Disney, which he was aiming to trounce at the box office. He succeeded in 1998, when the American distributor Warner financed the large-scale distribution of the BosBros production *The Flying Liftboy* (*Abeltje*) in Dutch cinemas.

Since then, Dutch children's films have become a regular fixture in Berlin. *De Tasjesdief* (*The Bag-snatcher*, 1995), *Mariken* (2000) and *Bluebird* (2004) all won Crystal Bears there. Maryanne Redpath, director of the Generation children's section of the Berlinale, says the following: "What makes *Kauwboy* special – and this applies to lots of Dutch children's films that we select – is that it deals with very human issues. These films are shot from the perspective of the child, and describe in detail



Stills from *Nono, the Zigzag Kid*
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how that child deals with the fact that his mother is absent, for example.”

Redpath finds it difficult to list the general characteristics of Dutch children’s films, because the output is so diverse. “It’s a mixed industry that covers an enormous range, as regards topics, with something for everyone from age 4 to 16, and as regards form; from big-budget fairytales and adventure films to raw, documentary-style films such as *Snackbar* [a story about kids hanging around on the streets: KW]; from classical works to art house productions.”

Dutch children’s film has grown since 2002, with at least four titles being released every year. In fact, in the last five years this has risen to an average of eight films a year, roughly a quarter of the total annual Dutch film output. Half the 16 Dutch films which attracted more than 100,000 visitors between September 2011 and September 2012 were children’s films: *Bennie Stout* (Bennie Brat), *Razend* (Furious), *Sinterklaas en het raadsel van 5 december* (Sinterklaas and the Mystery of 5 December), *Dolfje Weerwolfje* (Dolfje the Werewolf), *Achtste-groepers huilen niet* (Big Kids Don’t Cry), *Tony 10, Sprookjesboom de film* (Fairy Tale Tree: the Movie) and *Brammetje Baas* (Fidgety Bram). These are not necessarily the films that go abroad, though that happens regularly, too. *Kauwboy* drew only 20,000 visitors in the Netherlands, because this idiosyncratic film was out of step with most Dutch people’s expectations of children’s film and therefore proved more difficult to market.

Looking across the annual crop and premieres at the recent Dutch Film Festival, with films such as *Dolfje Weerwolfje*, *Patatje Oorlog* (Potato War), *Tony 10*, *Brammetje Baas* and *Mees Kees*, it is obvious that the pioneering work of BosBros has be-

come commonplace. Dutch children’s films often share recurrent characteristics: they are based on a familiar book or TV series; there is a voice-over (in which the main character introduces him/herself and invites the viewer into his/her thoughts); there are animation sequences (which are usually used to express fantasies); they are politically correct (there is always at least one black or coloured child in the class, and children who are ‘different’ are presented in a gentle, sympathetic way); the plot is dialogue-driven (the characters recount what is happening to them); the ending is happy (every problem can ultimately be resolved); and there is a grand finale (a contest or match, birthday or school show towards which the characters work). And of course there are the over-stylised sets with retro props and vehicles designed to appeal to parents’ sense of nostalgia.

Nono the Zigzag Kid is an international co-production from the BosBros stable, and is a representative example of the broad array of children’s films currently being made in the Netherlands. *Kauwboy*, with its sensory imagery and raw sense of reality, is the new odd one out.

“Trying to pinpoint what makes a good children’s film is a rather frustrating exercise”, says Redpath, “because the best films are often exceptions to any rule you might find. And we tend to select the exception rather than the rule.”

KARIN WOLFS

Translated by Julian Ross

ESTHER SCHMIDT and SABINE VEENENDAAL, *The Dutch Touch. Vision and passion for children’s films in the Netherlands*, Eye Film Institute, Amsterdam, 2012, 128 pp.
Online: <http://issuu.com/jannemieke/docs/thedutchtouch>.