'An evocation of our colonies for the western eye' Louis Couperus' aestheticising gaze from the car

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‘An Evocation of Our Colonies for the Western Eye’

Louis Couperus’ Aestheticising Gaze from the Car

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He had a busy time of it on board the *Prins der Nederlanden*: writing letters, going to the hairdresser, accepting all the attentions from the steamship company: ‘some broth’, ‘a cup of chocolate’, ‘a cherry-brandy’.[1] And then there were all sorts of things he had to look at:

> In the morning you must watch the sun rise, and in the evening watch it set. And then you must have a look around the ship. Our amusing purser takes us on a tour. We see the cook’s galley and pantry, so beautifully neat […]. The provision master shows us the cold storage rooms where the snow is heaped up along the pipes. The refrigerating chambers remind one of an Alpine landscape. A prospect of slaughtered oxen, pigs, pink and red, hanging on hooks, confronts my spying gaze; have we got to eat all that?? […] When shall we ever return to the simple life? The wine cellars slope away with rows of bottles before my astonished gaze; no, we shall not return to the simple life just yet![2]

The Dutch writer Louis Couperus (1863-1923) would not have minded that the simple life was a long time coming. He usually travelled with tens of kilos of luggage, including his familiar rugs, peacock feathers, and bronze statuettes of Atlas with which to transform into a comfortable home the strange rooms in which he stayed.[3] According to the editor-in-chief of the bourgeois weekly *Haagsche Post*, Couperus, who left for the Dutch East Indies on Saturday 1 October 1921 together with his wife Elisabeth Couperus-Baud (1867-1960), considered himself ‘a spoilt person’.[4] Prior to what would be his third and final voyage to the Indies, he had already told friends and acquaintances how delighted he was to go there in great luxury; how much he was looking forward to the public accolades that he, a famous and infamous figure from Dutch literature, was to receive in Batavia.[5] He had made a name for himself with such realistic novels as *Eline Vere* (1899) and *De stille kracht* (1900, The Hidden Force), and passionately enjoyed the appreciation he received for his work, relishing abundance and ostentation.

Couperus loved travelling in and of itself, not least for the opportunity it gave him to escape the stifling Netherlands with its lack of splendour and its ‘unbearable climate – damp, fog, cold and rain, even in summer’.[6]

Louis Couperus and Elisabeth Couperus-Baud aboard the ship heading for the Indies, October 1921. Literatuurmuseum, The Hague, C 00383 II 008, NLMD02 C 00383 II 008.

Yet, this love of travel also stemmed from his inability to 'grow rooted in one spot'.[7] Additionally, he firmly believed that travelling furthered a writer's progress in an artistic, as well as geographical sense. In 1919, a critical piece by the author Herman Robbers had a significant effect on Couperus. Robbers felt that Couperus' oeuvre had in part been written 'in cold excitement', Couperus, however, hit back in an open letter, stating: 'I wish to tell you that I have read your St Elmo's fire [after the title of Robbers' 1919 novel *Sint-Elmsvuur*] and that I was absolutely amazed how a writer was so little able, over so many years, to step out of his little circle that has so closely formed around him.'[8] Couperus then continued:

> I would give you this cordial advice, without any spite because I have no spiteful feelings for you, as you do not for me. I would advise you: by all means go travelling. Step out of your little circle [...]. Attempt to look for the divine vistas of eternal Beauty, wherever they may be for you, in a different place than for someone else or me.[9]

For his part, from 1920 onwards, at the behest of the founder and editor-in-chief of the *Haagsche Post*, S.F. van Oss, Couperus had wrenched himself away from *his* familiar 'little circle' on several occasions. In October of that year, he left The Hague for Algiers, travelling via Marseille, to report on his journey through North Africa (November 1920 to May 1921). Whilst still recovering from his journey, and intending to spend his old age in Italy, his employer announced that he would need to put any such plans on hold for

a while as he was to prepare for another major trip. Couperus accepted the assignment to portray the Indies, China, and Japan 'in causerie after causerie'.[10] As before, he hoped that the journey would put him as a writer on a new artistic path towards great literary heights.[11] After all, his very best novel, or so he suggested, was yet to come.[12]

Van Oss's proposal that he move away from the Netherlands as a special correspondent was undoubtably most welcome to Couperus in the years following World War I for several reasons. In addition to his artistic motivations to embrace the chance to travel, there was also a financial motive. Couperus was frequently plagued by money troubles and his journalistic endeavours brought in considerable sums.[13] In his memoirs, Van Oss mentions that Couperus received twenty thousand guilders for his Asian feuilletons to cover the expenses for the journey itself, plus a fee of ten thousand guilders.[14] It is not known what financial reward Couperus stipulated for his journalistic work in North Africa, but it undoubtably amounted to another generous sum. Indeed, in his reminiscences, Van Oss refers to Couperus as a 'highly remunerated employee'.[15]

In addition to the obvious financial benefits, travelling provided an opportunity to escape an environment he found oppressive. After four years of war – a time in which Couperus found himself compelled to give up his beloved Italy and his romantic wanderings in return for a more stable and bourgeois life in the Netherlands – he also had to cope with the loss, within a short time of each other, of several loved ones.[16] In addition, rumours had been circulating in the spring of 1920 that he was involved in a sex scandal in The Hague.[17] Whilst evidence that Couperus had anything to do with the scandal has never been provided and the magnitude of the case seems to have been blown out of proportion, the mere rumour that, together with the prince consort, he had been found in a 'boys' brothel' by police officers would prove ineradicable until well into the twentieth century.[18] Thus, after five hard years in the Netherlands, a depressed, exhausted, and sickly Couperus wrote to a friend and colleague that he would much rather remove himself quietly from 'the creaky world', 'but it is not to be as yet …'[19] Such gloominess would, time and again, come over the writer in later years as soon as he felt the court-capital loom up.[20] Yet whenever life and mood changed course through Van Oss's intervention, Couperus' spirits rallied. A self-declared tourist, he set off once more and, with renewed energy, started to write down his travel impressions for the benefit of future tourists – both the 'man-of-business' and the 'traveller-for-pleasure'.[21] Even before he had taken his first steps in the Maghreb, he was able to report that he was 'no longer cowardly and despondent'.[22]

Couperus' Indies feuilletons, to which I will restrict myself in this article, paint a unique picture of the Western tourist's experience of 'the East' in the early 1920s. The Indies world that he found as a correspondent and that he recorded in his travel sketches was, even to him, almost exclusive-

Louis Couperus, dressed for a children's ball in Batavia, circa 1875. Photograph Woodbury & Page. Leiden University Libraries, KITLV 15332.

Louis Couperus (second from the right) with his family-in-law in Batavia, 1899. Leiden University Libraries, KITLV 4520.

ly strange. He may have spent part of his youth in Batavia (1872-1878), and he and his wife may have stayed with relatives on Java for almost a year between 1899 and 1900,[23] but it was not until his third journey that Couperus saw the islands of Sumatra, Bali, Borneo, and Celebes for the first time.[24] Moreover, the Java to which he returned, had changed.

During his twenty-year absence, thanks to government and private investments, the colony had become an international destination for the modern tourist. The Dutch authorities, who had long been fearful that foreign visitors might divulge painful truths about the Indies, adopted a more welcoming stance towards travellers-for-pleasure from the beginning of the twentieth century. This rather sudden turnaround seems to have been prompted by two factors. First, 1901 saw the beginning of the so-called 'ethical policy' in which the Dutch policy in the Indies shifted its focus towards 'elevating' the Indonesian peoples, with the Dutch now invested in education, healthcare, and infrastructure.[25] This also removed much of the necessity to hide colonial conditions. In fact, tourism offered the government the opportunity to heap positive images of the Indies on outsiders.[26] Second, any contribution that tourism could make to the colonial economy was more than welcome, especially given the significant financial cost of the ethical policy.[27]

Since Couperus' last visit to the Indies, travellers out to have a good time, who joined group tours and armed themselves with travel guides, had started their advance through the archipelago, at least until it was understandably cut short by the outbreak of World War I. Of all the Indonesian islands, it was Java in particular that developed as a tourist destination. Nonetheless, other regions such as West Sumatra and Bali were similarly promoted in brochures and advertisements that targeted this new wave of travellers.[28]

Couperus' depictions of the experiences of Western tourists in his Indies feuilletons make them a valuable source for postcolonial research and, just like other Western travellers in the Orient, Couperus reports on his intercultural encounters. A critical reading of these colonial exchanges may reveal how a Western tourist's travel account of 'the East' could help to maintain the inequality between the West and the rest of the world.[29]

Moreover, Couperus' feuilletons occupy a unique place within the much more comprehensive corpus of Dutch travel texts representing the European tourist gaze on the Dutch Indies. They are, first and foremost, the work of a writer considered to be one of the greatest authors in Dutch-Indies literature. More importantly, in his own time, Couperus was one of the most famous Dutch travellers to report on the Indonesian archipelago. His contributions to magazines and public lectures earned him fame at home and his name was similarly 'far from unknown' elsewhere.[30] Thus, his travel accounts reached a large, international audience. The magazine in which they appeared on a bi-weekly basis had a circulation of fifteen thousand. In addition, when, in October 1923, the feuilletons were posthumously published

and marketed in a collection entitled *Oostwaarts*, this similarly proved a 'great success'.[31] In 1924, English and American editions appeared under the title *Eastward*.[32] The German translation *Unter Javas Tropensonne* was published in 1926.[33] Critics discussed his travelogue at length in such renowned magazines as *The New York Times*.

Given the large and international reach of the texts and Couperus' star status, it is likely that his Indies feuilletons influenced and reinforced then prevalent ideas and views of the Indies, both in the Netherlands and beyond. Undoubtedly, the perspective from which the colony was viewed in the West was, at least in part, defined by these accounts. In his travel sketches about the Indonesian archipelago itself, we see how Couperus – the 'tourist-and-pressman' – is actively engaged on constructing and developing the gaze of homestayers and future recreational travellers alike. Sometimes he does so by giving 'must-sees', such as, for instance, a Javanese court dance.[34] At other times, he gives very precise watching instructions. When driving in the area of Fort-de-Kock (now: Bukittinggi) on Sumatra, one definitely must not forget to look carefully at the 'little bamboo-houses [...] standing in the midst of the sawah-fields', from which children chase away the little rice birds.[35] As in many other travel accounts, the writer not only offers his readers the information necessary to be able to follow the journey he has made – be that in reality or in the mind's eye, from one's armchair – but also, the facts via which to faithfully copy his experiences.[36]

In this article, I draw on insights from postcolonial theory for my analysis of how Couperus' tourist sketches, with their construction of a specific gaze on 'the East', may, as an instrument of colonial power, have contributed to the (re)production and maintenance of colonial practices. In my analysis, I will be focusing on two specific Western gazes: the aestheticising gaze on 'the East' in art and literature, and that from early automobiles. Both feature prominently in Couperus' feuilletons and are inextricably bound up with the 1920s tourist experience of the Indies. Previous research has shown that both aestheticising landscape descriptions/portrayals and descriptions from Western travellers' motorised vehicles constitute the main components of various visual colonisation regimes.[37] Both gazes subject the indigenous person to a form of suppression and in this sense may have made a significant contribution to the maintenance of the colonial status quo. Finally, in Couperus' travel texts they are also best understood in conjunction with each other due to their intersectional relationship. My analysis rests on the assumption that we cannot properly identify the unique power of the Western aestheticising gaze by simply adding aestheticising landscape descriptions/portrayals and descriptions from Western travellers' motorised vehicles together. Ultimately, any meaningful analysis of the two gazes requires an intersectional approach.

The Gaze as a Theoretical Concept

Before I embark on my postcolonial analysis itself, I will briefly elaborate on my use of the gaze as a theoretical concept. The 1970s saw a blossoming of scholarly research into the 'gaze'. However, this term does not refer to a well-defined school or movement. There is wide variety in the research methods that have been developed to study the interaction between different forms of looking (literally and/or metaphorically) in such cultural expressions as novels and advertisements. Academics from various disciplines, including art history, post-colonial literature, and feminist film studies have, over recent decades, defined and used the notion in very different ways in their analyses.[38] Even so, it is still possible to identify a number of characteristics as to the manner in which the theoretical concept is interpreted.

First of all, the gaze comprises more than the physiological and natural aspects of the eye alone. Rather, emphasis is on the cultural-historical, social, and ideological dimensions of observation. The starting point for a great deal of the study into the gaze is the assumption that our socio-cultural existence impacts how we look.[39] In his classic study *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (1972), which has influenced much of subsequent art history research into the gaze, Michael Baxandall argues that people view images, including paintings, in different ways because their experiences, and the knowledge and skills based on these, vary. However, due to significant similarities in the experiences of people belonging to the same social group in a certain period – a given society within a particular time frame – they also share a distinctive cognitive style: the visual skills that are brought to bear on complex visual stimulations, such as paintings.[40]

The finding that the gaze should be viewed as a cultural-historical construction also implies that there is no such thing as a 'pure eye' that absorbs an already existing reality or collects information in a neutral manner. Rather, the gaze is akin to the concept of 'discourse'. The French philosopher Michel Foucault used this term to refer to a group of texts that both determine and constrain what, at a specific historical moment, can be said about a particular subject. Foucault demonstrated that the changing way in which 'madness' has been viewed over time was determined by prevailing discourses on such fields as medicine, law, and education. The representation of a certain gaze may be a major instrument of power in the construction and reinforcement of discourses as, for example, it lays down what is considered 'normal' and 'abnormal'. In medicine too, to give another example, photographs can be used to visually distinguish between 'diseased' and 'healthy' according to the prevailing discourses.[41]

The relationship between the gaze and discourse described here also serves as a useful framework for a postcolonial approach to the gaze in colonial travel texts. With the adoption of this perspective, the texts by European authors about 'the East' are not considered merely neutral collections

Men carrying coal in Port Said, June 1920. National Museum of World Cultures, TM-60035099.

of accurate travel observations on local customs or architecture. Rather, the Western gaze is shaped, culturally and ideologically, by a colonial discourse. It is particularly in the wake of Edward Said's influential study *Orientalism* (1978) – in which he demonstrated that the European gaze on the Orient is a means of subordinating the latter to the former – that the use of the gaze as an imperial power instrument has been actively theorised.[42] The colonial processing of 'the East' is expressed, for instance, in the binary oppositions that Western observers set up as they gaze.[43] As it places 'the East' / nature / emotionality / the primitive on one side of the equation, and the West / culture / rationality / civilisation on the other, it succeeds in creating a sanctifying Western identity at the expense of the antithetical East. At the same time, it may also express the colonial hierarchy in the representation of interpersonal gazing patterns. 'Rulers look', as Jeremy Hawthorne articulates, exposing another binary opposition, 'and those ruled – including the "subject races" of oppressed people – avert their eyes'.[44]

In summary, this article views the gaze as a construction that is determined and constrained by prevailing discourses. In colonial travel texts the gaze may contribute actively to the creation of imperial practices and the maintenance of the colonial status quo.

The Aestheticising Gaze

In his Indies travel letters, Couperus makes frequent use of the metaphor of the painting to depict what he sees in the Orient. One notable example is his description of some Arabic men who he sees on his outward voyage in Port Said – the town that represents the boundary between East and West in colonial literature, and therefore in the colonial discourse embedded in it.[45] The men carrying coal to the hold of the ship via gangplanks are rendered thus by Couperus: 'The dusky, singing toilers were indeed *a picture in black against the blue of sky and sea*.'[46] Eastern architecture, nature, and population take centre stage in representations that will, in his subsequent feuilletons, inspire him to the use of the qualification 'picturesque' or other painting-related vocabulary, as in this description: 'The little trees […] *sharply outlined* against a golden rosy haze, as the sun sets'.[47]

The imagery itself and the instances where it occurs in Couperus are hardly original in colonial literature. Much like Couperus' (ostensibly) non-fictional story, W.F. Margadant's novel *Voor drie jaren naar de Oost* (1890, For Three Years to the East Indies) opens with a steamship voyage from the Netherlands to the Indies. Having arrived at Port Said, where most passengers decide to go and explore the city, the omniscient narrator describes some 'dark-skinned individuals', who are 'carrying, waiting, or looking to secure some job or other', upon which he concludes that 'painter's models' [are] 'literally there for the taking in the Egyptian seaport city'.[48]

These past decades, various post-colonial literary scholars have theorised about the power that radiates from the Western aestheticising gaze towards non-Western people and places.[49] In this context, they have also studied the presumed imperial effects of 'the picturesque East' as a topos in colonial travel texts. For example, Mary Louise Pratt deals with imagery in her influential, ideology-critical study *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* from 1992.[50] She discusses the cliché in her post-colonial analysis of a number of texts about Central Africa by nineteenth-century British explorers, including Richard Burton's *The Lake Regions of Central Africa* (1860). As does Couperus, they use qualifications such as 'picturesque' in their writings to characterise what they observe in the Orient.[51] Similarly, they use vocabulary borrowed from drawing, such as 'sharply pencilled', in their descriptions of Eastern landscapes.[52]

As Pratt demonstrates, the painterly cliché of these Victorian explorers is part of a characteristic and more comprehensive imperial rhetoric of verbal painting. Via this linguistic strategy, British explorers were able to accomplish a specific meaning-conferring task: they turned their travel texts into highlights of the geographical 'discoveries' made in England's name for their European readers. Since Pratt's typology of the picturesque Victorian exploration rhetoric also serves as a useful framework for a critical analysis of the aestheticising gaze on the Indies in Couperus' travel text and for an

assessment of its imperial effects, I briefly set out here the three rhetorical devices she distinguishes.

First, the landscape is aestheticised. In the travel texts, the view is treated as if it were a painting, with the 'spectacle' described accordingly, as having, for example, a foreground and a background. Second, the explorers aspired to lexical density in their texts. They larded their descriptions with numerous adjectives that refer to objects and materials, thus depicting the landscape as extremely rich. Noun-derived adjectives referring to a colour are repeatedly used to connect 'the East' to the culture of the home country. Burton for instance speaks of 'steel-coloured mountains' as he describes Lake Tanganyika (Central Africa).[53] Besides these strategies of aestheticisation and lexical density, Pratt distinguishes a third and final strategy in the imperial rhetoric of verbal painting: the conferment upon the viewer of power over what they gaze at.

Whilst it almost goes without saying that we encounter the above features in more travel texts than just those of Western colonial travellers, it is also the case that the rhetoric in imperialistic contexts produces its own unique effect. For instance, both the aestheticisation and the creation of lexical density helped the explorers increase the value that the West placed on their feats. After all, this value lay in the aesthetic pleasure of the 'discovered' areas. According to Pratt, without this added value of the explorers' own making, the explorations would remain the meaningless events they in reality were. In practice, the 'discovery' often came down to finding (i.e., looking at) a place that was well-known to the indigenous population – and with their help, to boot. The rhetoric of verbal painting in general, and the metaphor of the painting in particular, ultimately create a power relation between gazer and gazed upon, allowing the former to wield power over the latter. The Western explorer is the one to depict 'the East' as a painting; 'the East' itself has no influence whatsoever on the viewpoint from which it is being shown, nor on what is, and is not, portrayed. The gazing author is, moreover, the one who assumes the authoritarian position to evaluate his own verbal painting, which is presented in the text itself as truthful. As the Orient is repeatedly said to be occasionally lacking aesthetically, 'the East' is defined as an area in need of the 'innocent' beautifying intervention from the West.

Couperus' Aestheticising Gaze

Even though Couperus is a tourist rather than an explorer, his *Oostwaarts* abounds with passages in which all the three elements distinguished by Pratt come together. How Couperus captures in words his gaze on Lake Toba (Sumatra) and the mountains surrounding it – the type of location that would frequently lead the Victorian traveller to a descriptive tour de force as well – is a good example:

> As we speed across the lake, we are constantly surprised by the almost square basins, surrounded by steep white mountains [...]. Promontories covered with tall green feather grass jut out; it is the idyllic stalks that convey something pastoral to nature here, as they jut out against the blue sky. [...] Slender proas, with a carved and coloured fish or dragon-design on bow and stern, and square, pale-hued sails are sharply outlined against light and water. There is scarcely a ripple on the water – these tints are astonishingly vague. We had never pictured such opal softness, which is Oriental still, because it cannot be compared to anything else. [...] In the lake lie fishermen's nets, beneath the surface and on bamboo scaffoldings under a little shed in the water, the slim poles looking like streaks of sepia. Vaguely outlined against the pearly light, the small, dark, shadowy forms of fishermen as they sit and watch their nets can sometimes be seen.[54]

That Couperus aestheticises the Indies in this passage is evidenced by his description of the view as if it were a painting with phrases like 'streaks of sepia'. His penchant for lexical density is apparent from the use of such adjectives as 'opal' and 'pearly'. Further, Indonesian nature is incorporated into a European discourse through the word 'idyllic': the word goes back to the peaceful, pastoral descriptions of classical poets such as Theocritus and Virgil. Lastly, it is Couperus who decides what is and is not depicted and, if so, from what perspective – although, incidentally, he did not feel completely free to do so. He took the brief he had received very seriously and ever bore in mind the expectations and wishes of his audience and commissioner.[55] This partially explains why any elements that might detract from 'the charming picture' are absent from his text.[56] Further, the writer is the one who evaluates the scene of his own creation, as he states, for example, that the tints 'almost astonish' him. All in all, we see how the old, imperial rhetoric of verbal painting lives on unabated in his travel letters.

The aestheticising commonplace of the picture and the rhetoric of verbal painting are part of a far greater effort on Couperus' part to aestheticise the Indies in its entirety in *Oostwaarts*. Numerous other forms of art – ranging from sculpture and ceramics to literature and music – form part of his strategy to make the Dutch Indies into a beautiful object of art. To this end, he likes to adopt an aestheticising manner of wording. A shed becomes a 'jewel-shrine'.[57] 'In spite of our modern vehicle the view [on Sumatra's landscape] is full of poetry.'[58] Wajang Tjina players look, to Couperus, 'like tiny figures escaped from the finest egg-shell teacup'.[59] Even the colonial hierarchical tradition cannot escape Couperus' aestheticising gaze. The manner in which the Indies was governed (particularly in the past) is full of splendour, Couperus finds: 'I have always found something beautiful in this upward grade, this hierarchic tradition. Possibly because as an artist I have an eye for harmony and rhythm, and that in this mode of Government, this simultaneous service and rule, I saw signs of such rhythm and harmony.'[60]

Its large scale apart, another striking feature of Couperus' aestheticising enterprise concerns the distinction he makes between the indigenous and

European population. Focusing on the figurative canvases he makes during his journey, we notice how the indigenous population is not given any individual role to play in them. In the description of Lake Toba quoted above, for instance, we get 'the small, dark, shadowy forms of fishermen', whilst the Sundanese women who contribute to the many-coloured pageant of the market in Garut (Java), into which the Western pleasure traveller can immerse himself, remain types.[61] In stark contrast to these are the almost ubiquitous individualised representations of Europeans, and then, almost exclusively, of 'the big men' among them, portrayed in the manner of the silhouette.[62]

Finally, we see in Couperus' aestheticising techniques how the transformative power of his gaze – which, amongst others, recasts indigenous people as beautiful objects – is repeatedly masked in the text. Put differently, the beauty of 'the East' is represented in his Indies feuilletons as reality, and not, therefore, as something that has been constructed consciously or unconsciously by the author's Western gaze (and socio-culturally determined mindset). How the writer makes it appear as if the picturesque quality of what he sees is something that has simply come about of its own accord and without his interference is illustrated by his description of 'the antique houses in the Chinese and Cingalese native quarters' in Ceylon: 'With their pillars and their low sloping roofs, they lie tucked away in a wealth of green. Such a house is indeed picturesque, especially when the little door is ajar, giving a glimpse into a dark interior alive with bits of vivid colour.'[63] Whilst this quote also serves to demonstrate that Couperus likes to mask his own share in the creation of picturesque scenes, this comes to the fore even more in *Met Louis Couperus in Afrika* (With Louis Couperus in Africa). The 'band of small, little Arabs, pushing and shoving' who are peeping from behind a railing during an Arab wedding in the Algiers casbah are rendered thus: 'a painting, as it is ever a painting here, unsought, and *come into being by itself*'.[64]

Couperus' aestheticisation has the effect, first and foremost, of increasing the value of his own journey and of the Dutch East Indies as a whole. In his travel letters the colony emerges as one large, splendid, and valuable possession of which 'the small mother country' can be justly proud. Heightening the value of the Indies with his aestheticising gaze, the author simultaneously increases the power of the Netherlands as coloniser, with 'the mysticism and the immensity of this world of the East [...] dominated by a small Western country'.[65] Moreover, any detrimental effects of the colonial presence are erased. Couperus' gaze makes Sumatra, Java, and Bali into 'lands of almost idyllic charm' and, at the same time, into alluring tourist destinations for his Western audience.[66] By the same token, his gaze marginalises the Indonesian population. Persons from this group are frequently dehumanised and deprived of their individuality by the aestheticisation ploy. They are reduced to art objects and/or general types – a treatment, however, that is never extended to Europeans. In this way, the text produces the racial

Louis Couperus, Elisabeth Couperus-Baud, and Adriana Westenenk-Nering Bögel (l.) posing with indigenous children at Lake Toba, 1921. Leiden University Libraries, KITLV 32297.

inequality that is inextricably bound up with colonial ideology. As Couperus masks his own beautifying contribution and presents the aestheticising gaze as 'neutral', the artistic scenes that are constructed of the Indies in *Oostwaarts* are represented as reality.

Couperus' Aesthetic Gaze

In addition to Couperus' aestheticising gaze on the Indies, there is his aesthetic view of 'the East'. A critical spectator, he constantly appreciates and evaluates the beauty of everything he beholds on his travels (or, rather, his own construction of it). If he, as an 'art critic', is to arrive at the verdict that a certain view has earned the qualification 'picturesque', then the entire composition needs to be exactly right: organisation, colour, and line are absolutely crucial here. Locations may even lose their 'picturesqueness' at a

second viewing, and no Eastern building is given the qualification unreservedly. In his role as art critic, he considers an array of Eastern artefacts: the statues of a man and woman that he sees in Ambon and that he feels to be 'clumsy and primitive, dating from a period entirely devoid of art', whether the legend that has given the Minangkabau (an ethnic group originally from West-Sumatra) and their region their name 'lacks poetry', or if the performance of a Javanese tragedy is indeed a 'wonderfully beautiful spectacle'.[67] Mediterranean high culture drives the process whereby he reaches his verdict: products that originate from these Western civilisations represent true art, in his eyes. Hereupon, he draws the conclusion that the areas he has visited are largely lacking in 'art'.

Yet not all of his pronouncements conform to this same pattern. According to Couperus, it would be an oversimplification to conclude that there is no indigenous art to be found at all in 'the East'. The houses of the Minangkabau, their woven baskets, and hampers, for instance, should definitely be called art, he argues, even if it takes a Western eye to see this:

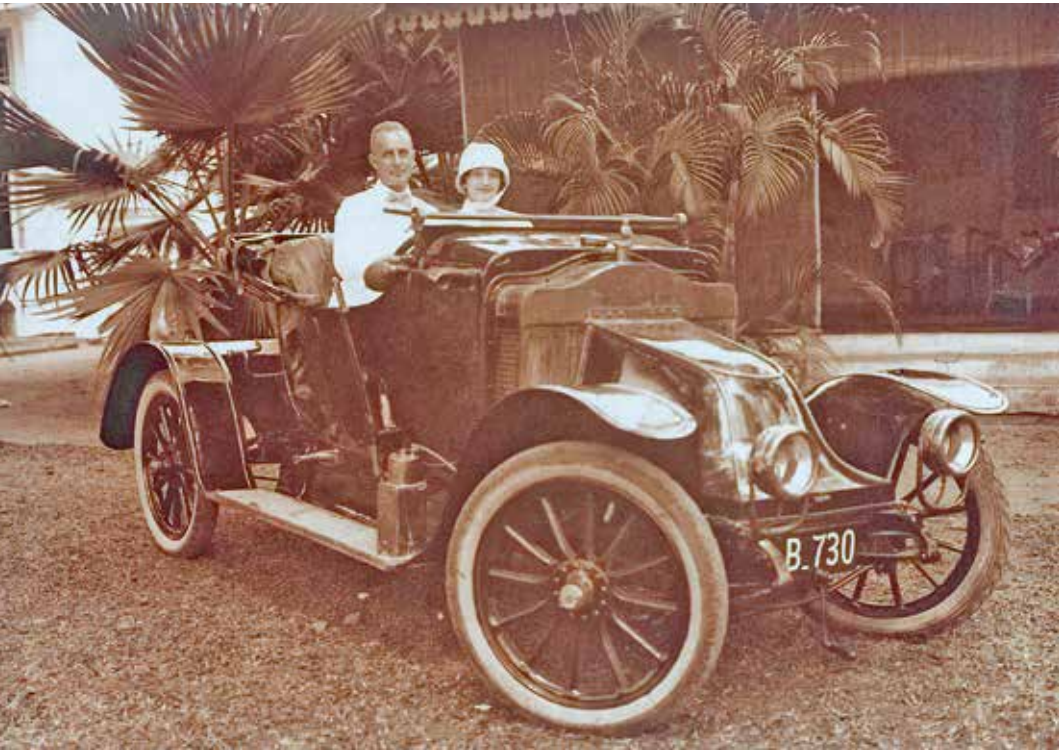
> For, of course, these people know nothing about 'art': they have never thought about it. Everything which they have built, woven and worked for centuries was graceful and amazingly beautiful; they have never pondered over this wondrous beauty, which is an advantage and at the same time a disadvantage.[68]

By repeatedly pointing out how the Orient sometimes falls short aesthetically despite all of the beauty with which it is endowed, Couperus adopts the kind of imperial power strategy that we encountered earlier in the texts of British explorers. The East is represented as an area that is occasionally lacking aesthetically and is therefore in need of the West's 'benign and beautifying intervention'.[69] In the process, this also serves to legitimise the colonial presence. Couperus adds that it is only the Westerner who can discern the art of Indonesian artefacts, thus intensifying 'the East's' dependency on the West even more. Couperus' message is that, without any help from the West, it would be simply inconceivable that indigenous people could ever overcome their aesthetic shortcomings. The Westerner needs to be present since he alone knows how to distinguish art from non-art.

The Gaze from the Car

With both his aestheticising and aesthetic Western gaze upon 'the East', Couperus follows a trusted power strategy. However, unlike the nineteenth-century 'explorers' with their penchant for verbal painting, Couperus frequently used the car as his chosen platform from which to gaze.

It need not come as a surprise that Couperus on his travels gazed at (and aestheticised) many a foreign land as a rear-seat passenger in a motor vehicle. Several unpleasant experiences with other means of transport and a



European couple in a car, probably in Batavia, circa 1920. Leiden University Libraries, KITLV 30187.

loathing for walking in the tropical heat, since it compromised his pristine suits, drew him towards motorised modes of transport.[70] In Africa he had neither the 'knees' nor the 'patience' [to] lift up his 'legs and [to] climb and descend stairs and terraces'.[71] Similarly, 'in this sedan-chair I am shaken like a will-less bag of sawdust', so much so that he could feel his stomach turn.[72] To counter such discomfort, he had frequently used the car during earlier holidays.[73] Further, the taxi ride that took him to the ferry to Harwich shortly before his departure for the Indies had pleased him so much that he decided to henceforth take the car to the Hook of Holland.[74]

Couperus had already taken part in organised car tours on the Isle of Wight off the south coast of England, and in Liguria in Italy, well before his arrival in the Indonesian archipelago.[75] The planned day trip from Port Said to Cairo, however, was something he chose to decline. A sixteen-hour journey – ten hours by train, and six by car – 'in order to see Cairo and the Sphinx between lunch and tea' was too much of a good thing, he thought.[76] Once he had arrived, though, he remained loyal to the car, albeit always as a passen-

ger. In order to take in a crater lake, a kampong, a leper house, trading companies, theatrical performances, the port facilities in Belawan, the Sultan of Deli's official reception palace, the Great Mosque, a Hindu temple in Medan, the landscape of Brastagi, and the petroleum refinery during his three-week sojourn on Sumatra, he turned time and again to the car. Indeed, he continued to favour the car on the subsequent islands that he visited. 'We have even motored across Celebes', he remarked with some pride at the end of his Indies travels.[77]

Cars and Infrastructure in the Dutch East Indies

Some fifty years after the first steamship departed from the Netherlands for the Indies, two decades after the first steam train operated in the Indies, and one year after the first motorcycle appeared there, the Western car began its advance across 'the East'.[78] In 1894, the Sunan of Solo became the very first automobile owner in the entire Dutch realm – incidentally, the 'mother country' did not welcome its first car until 1896. Pakubuwono X of Surakarta was in all likelihood the very first reigning prince to own one. He had a Benz Phaeton – a car with canopy and summer roof that seated eight, and that had a five-hp engine and wooden wheels. The vehicle was brought over from Europe at a cost of ten thousand guilders.

Whereas he was the only person in 1894 to be driven around Java in his *krèta sètan* ('devil's carriage'), more and more wealthy European men would over the following years import a Benz, Peugeot, Daimler, or Decauville to the Indies. The number of cars on Java had already risen to nine thousand towards the end of World War I. Within that same time frame, the vehicle had also started its advance throughout the plantations in Deli. The arrival of motorised transport also set in motion infrastructural developments and changes in laws and regulations. For example, roads were paved over, maximum speed limits were introduced, and it became mandatory to have a driving licence as of 28 November 1899. Besides, more and more people began to work as tradesmen, business reps, or taxi drivers – a line of work mostly chosen by indigenous men – thus earning a living from the automobile. However, any automotive triumph was rather short-lived. Curtailed by the Great Depression only three years after reaching a maximum number of 12,500 imported private cars in the Dutch East Indies in 1929, the number dropped to below 2,000.

At the time of Couperus' explorations of the archipelago, motorised vehicles were used for all manner of purposes in the Indies. They transported goods, featured in military actions, and took plantations doctors to their patients, they were also a status symbol. Those who had risen to great heights, were able to show off their number plate, its format partly determined by the owner's civil rank. Thus, there is an abundance of photographs that have survived, showing proud Europeans who had themselves photographed sit-

An ambulance, presumably of the army on Java, circa 1910. Leiden University Libraries, KITLV 114861.

ting before their house with a car and an Indonesian chauffeur.[79]

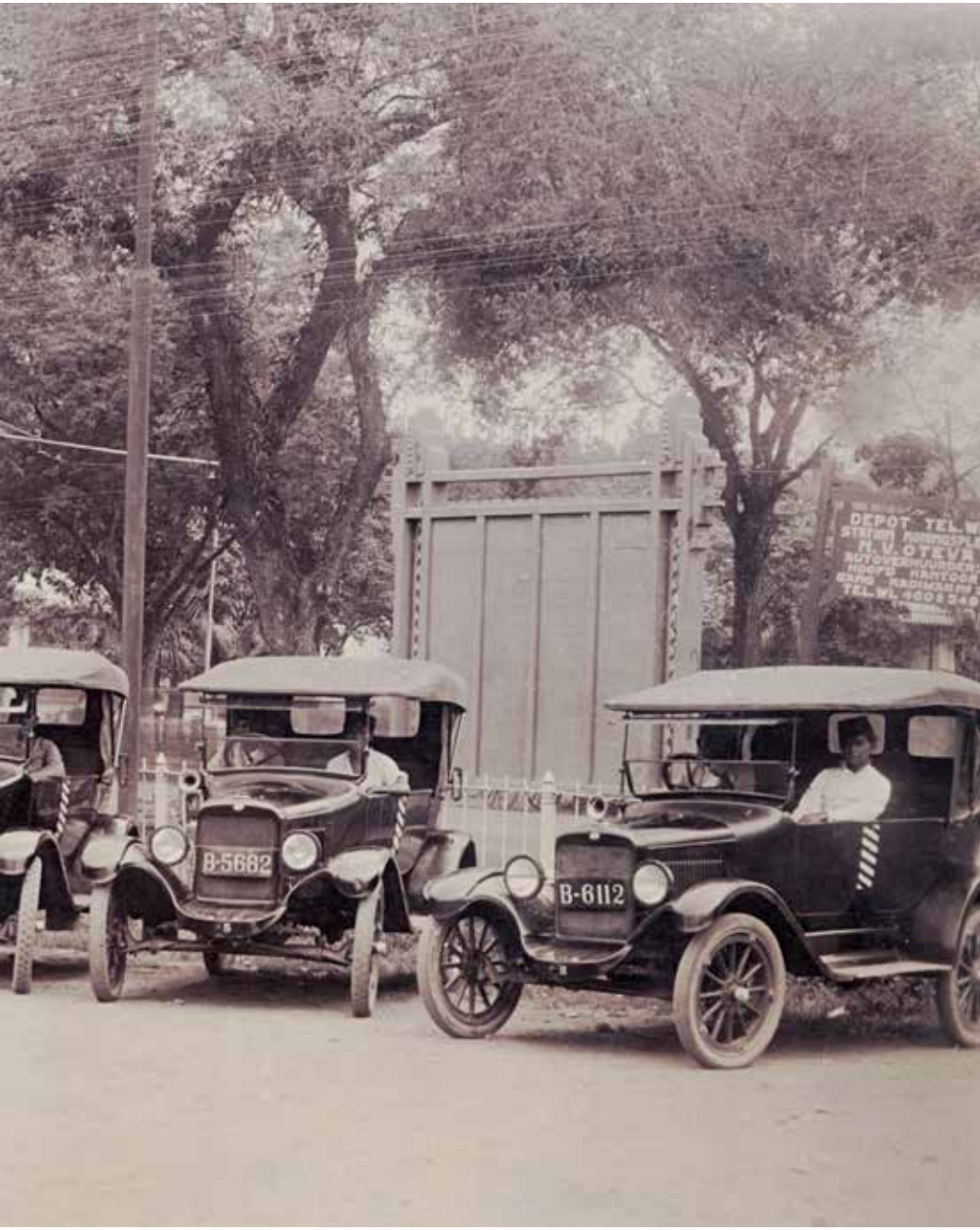
On the basis of travel guides to the Indies dating from the period of Couperus' visit we can safely say that motor vehicles had also entered the Indies world of tourism by the early 1920s. *Come to Java* (1922) – published by the 'Official Tourist Bureau' in Weltevreden (Batavia) – admittedly gives more space to the comfortable and faster train journey to and from all the important tourist centres in 'one of the most successful colonial systems existing', but it also points out, on numerous occasions, the possibility of travelling by car, with information on rates and how to order one.[80] Couperus, for his part, records how they 'decided to go by motor from Brastagi, along the Lake of Toba to the Padang Uplands', calling his trip 'a great feat of tourism'.[81]

Changes in the field of transportation and infrastructure are inextricably bound up in a colonial context, with the maintenance and reinforcement of the imperial status quo. The German anthropologist Erdmute Alber points out that transport systems are always embedded in social structures

that reflect and create relations of power.[82] Transport systems are more than just a technical means of moving people and things from A to B. Alber shows that the history of the introduction of the car in the then French colony of Dahomey – present-day Benin (West Africa) – lays bare the hierarchy of the contemporary colonial system and how it served to perpetuate this system. At the beginning of the twentieth century, ownership (or indeed, non-ownership) of a car became an effective instrument with which to create and consolidate both economic and social, as well as symbolic boundaries between white rulers and black subordinates. These boundaries in their turn structured everyday life in the colonies.[83]

Alber's description of how the car was introduced in Dahomey includes some distressing episodes, in which European rulers underhandedly bought cars with money that had been earmarked for the indigenous chiefs and local population during World War I.[84] The situation sketched here bears some striking resemblances with that in the Dutch East Indies. For instance, in both colonies, any profit made by the indigenous population was small compared to that which the European population reaped from the new means of transport and infrastructure. The automotive industry itself was mainly a European and American affair. The indigenous population in the Dutch East Indies and the African in Dahomey alike were forced to construct motorways and/or improve and maintain existing roads.[85] Further, the enormous amounts spent on infrastructure in Dahomey and the Indies were grossly disproportionate to the then small number of cars in the two countries. Alber consequently views these large-scale investments in infrastructure as an expression of the colonial regime's need to control and regulate.[86] In the Indies too, infrastructural projects were emphatically bound up with the power of the colonial administration. Even where their practical use was, to say the least, doubtful, their construction was still pursued, simply because they enhanced the rulers' prestige.[87] In addition, the traffic laws imposed in the Dutch Indies consolidated the hierarchical difference between Europeans and Indonesians – as did legislation in other fields.[88] The *Handboek voor automobilisten en motorwielrijders* (circa 1920, Handbook for Motorists and Riders of Motorcycles), a publication by the Java Motor Club (founded in 1906), illustrates the point perfectly. Apparently, different penalties applied to European and indigenous violators of the 'regulation on the use of motor vehicles on the road from Pasrepan to Tosari' – a regulation that mainly governs the times when one can and cannot drive on the road:

> Violation of this regulation, which is deemed to have been committed by the driver of the vehicle, is punishable, if the violation is committed:
> a by a European or an individual of equal status by a fine of up to f 100,- (one hundred guilders) or by a prison sentence not exceeding eight days;
> b by a Native or an individual of equal status by a fine of up to f 100,- (one hundred guilders) or by labour at the public works for subsistence without pay for a period of time not exceeding thirty days.[89]



Drivers in their cars on Kings Square (Koningsplein) in Batavia, circa 1915. Leiden University Libraries, KITLV 153781.

Couperus' Gaze from the Car

The link between car (use), infrastructure, and the perpetuation of the colonial system is on occasion established in *Oostwaarts,* as Couperus makes an explicit and direct connection between the arrival of the car in the Indies and an improvement of the colonial system. Upon the remark that an inspector could now visit as many as eight or nine enterprises a week, he exclaims: 'Hail to the motor, which has made this possible.'[90]

Much more often, however, the verdict is less pronounced, with representations of automobility and infrastructure underpinning the colonial ideology more subtly. The moment that car problems arise on an unpaved road, for instance, gives the writer a chance to establish a hierarchy in the text by reproducing the binary opposition of the 'subordinate', 'indolent' East as opposed to the 'superior', 'energetic' West. Thus, a reality is created in which the colonised population could not possibly do without the coloniser. This occurs, for example, in Couperus' account of how the car in which he is sitting gets stuck in the mud:

> There we are stuck, we get out and in, are pushed a bit by Chinese coolies, once more out and in again. Will a rail wagon be fetched to take us home? We emerge, thanks to the energy of a young driller, who himself takes the steering wheel – this is only an old motor and the chauffeur can't get much music out of it – to a better bit of road.[91]

The car thus offers a new opportunity for modelling the dependence of 'the East' on the West, and for legitimising Western domination – only an 'energetic' European driller can come to one's rescue and redress the situation.

It is not only the travel experiences in which car/infrastructure problems are emphasised that consolidate colonial power structures through a return to binary thought patterns. Much the same happens with the gaze from the car. In Couperus' case, the vehicle frequently 'chugs', but it also 'hastens' and 'rushes on'.[92] Seen from its interior, the roads 'shoot out from under the car'.[93] The very speed of the Western car also forms part of that same binary imperial perception in Couperus' text. Couperus continually sets off this speed – seen from a car in motion – against 'Eastern slowness', in particular the 'slowness' of the means of transport that the indigenous person supposedly prefers to use. As Couperus gazes from the car over a road in northern Sumatra, 'we see [...] a cart drawn by a pensive buffalo, rolling *slowly* along'.[94] On Bali he sees, on a daily basis, 'men and women walk *slowly* and *calmly*, *without hurrying*, for many kilometres' along the roads that glide by from under the car.[95] These pairs of opposing concepts show how the European man succeeded in creating a glorious image of himself in colonial texts. In the colonial perception contained in these texts, one's own 'superior' Western identity could always be the antithesis of the 'inferior' Eastern person that he himself had shaped.[96]

Additionally, the arrival of the car helped Couperus aestheticise the colony a lot faster than the European travellers preceding him. Gazing from the car, he frequently focuses first and foremost on the beauty of the Indies. In one instance he spots a 'lantana [...], a thick shrub, with orange-red flowers', growing 'luxuriantly along the roads', whilst in another, he notices 'a pretty road between coconut and banana trees, always green and gold in these rainy seasons'.[97] It would, however, be a mistake to think that everyone in *Oostwaarts* who travelled together with Couperus in the car had the time and the opportunity to aestheticise with his own gaze. 'Both Javanese chauffeurs – there are two, who will help and relieve each other on the long stretches of the upcoming journey – invariably stare fixedly ahead.'[98] They may be sitting in the same vehicle, but – because of their job – they do not have the same space to gaze as do Europeans in *Oostwaarts*.

Apart from the fact that Couperus was able to aestheticise a larger part of the Indies because he was using a car, this means of transport also affected his aestheticising gaze in other ways. Earlier, the Dutch literary scholar Siegfried Huigen has similarly argued that Couperus' view on the Orient was influenced by his use of this motorised conveyance.[99] That the author looked at large parts of the Indies sitting in the car's rear seat next to European travel guides, according to Huigen, led to a reinforcement of the distant and primarily visual manner of observing, with a concomitant transformation, described by Derek Gregory, from 'sites' into 'sights'.[100] Further, Huigen points out that it is precisely because of Couperus' use of the car that his observations were less intensive and more transient than those of tour-

Louis Couperus (left), accompanied by H.W. Hoogland (centre) and C.W. Wormser (right), motoring in the Preanger (West Java). Reproduced from Hoogland 1963, 10.

ists without motorised vehicles at their disposal. The 'gaze' was replaced, in Couperus' case, with what Jonas Larsen has termed the 'glance' – an effect that is also revealed by Couperus' shorter landscape descriptions.[101]

The gaze from the car thus intensified the aestheticisation of 'the East' in various ways. First, Couperus was able to aestheticise a much larger area than his predecessors within the same time frame. Second, the shift from 'gaze' to 'glance' enhanced the efficiency of his aestheticisation in another field as well. Besides traces of the Victorian rhetoric of verbal painting, in the travel text itself we frequently encounter a much less protracted aestheticising manner of phrasing – two features we dealt with in the previous section. A much larger area was aestheticised using the same number of words. Finally, automobility reinforced the distant and primarily visual observation of the Eastern world; it became a spectacle, and that in itself entailed aestheticisation.[102]

Conclusion

A postcolonial analysis of Louis Couperus' *Oostwaarts* (1923) lays bare how the Western gaze on 'the East' was both determined and constrained by dominant colonial discourse, and how this discourse was in turn reproduced through the construction of a kindred gaze in the colonial travel text. Two specific, Western perspectives, which feature prominently in Couperus' collected travel observations on the Indies, were central to the analysis: the aestheticising gaze upon 'the East' and the gaze upon the colony from the car.

With both Western perspectives, Couperus exercised power over 'the East'. As he recurrently returned to painting-related imagery, repeatedly portrayed the Orient as picturesque, and made frequent use of an aestheticising manner of phrasing, he was not only able to increase the value of the Dutch East Indies, but also the power of 'the mother country'. In addition, we notice that his gaze from the (moving) car is structured by binary forms of thinking that create a distinction between East and West. It is thus that the 'fast Western car' comes to find itself in opposition to the 'slow Indies buffalo cart'.

On the basis of the representations that Couperus gives of the Indies in his travel letters, it can also be argued, moreover, that there is an intersectional relationship between his aestheticising gaze and his gaze from the car. The combination of these two Western perspectives brought about a unique visual exercising of power. The two gazes interact in such a way that the imperial effect is intensified. The fact that the gaze upon the Orient – its population, nature, and architecture – from the car is more transient and more distant than the gaze of the traveller on foot, thus contributed to an aestheticising divide between East and West, as well as a marginalisation of the indigenous population.

Let me finally point out that for this article I have focused on only two Western perspectives on 'the East' and on the way in which they are closely interwoven. Converging in all the images – whether photographs, paintings, or travel texts – are many more gazes. For example, in the present case study both the 'queer gaze' and the 'tourist gaze' would also have yielded productive perspectives. Therefore, the idea that we could ever discern some all-encompassing gaze from all the different threads that comprise the smaller gazes is, to my mind, rather utopian. I would maintain, nonetheless, that in postcolonial research into colonial texts, any power factors that are addressed in an analysis should be examined in conjunction with each other wherever possible. It is only then that it becomes clear how unique forms of power have come about in specific cultural-historical situations. The colonial discourse that determined and constrained Couperus' gaze on the Indies not only encompassed the aestheticising imperial strategies that already featured in works by nineteenth-century explorers about the Orient; changes in mobility – specifically the new gaze from the moving car on the Indies – were similarly incorporated effortlessly into colonial discourse.

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Notes

1 Couperus 1924, 19. Any inaccuracies and omissions as to content and/or form in the English translation of *Oostwaarts* (Eastward) have been tacitly corrected. For this article, the text of *Oostwaarts* as it appeared in Louis Couperus, *Volledige Werken 45* (1992) has been used throughout. This article was written in the context of the NWO Vidi research project *Voicing the Colony: Travelers in the Dutch East Indies, 1800-1945*, led by Rick Honings, which is being carried out at the Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society (LUCAS). I would like to thank Eli ten Lohuis for the translation of this chapter. I also extend thanks to Rick Honings, Olf Praamstra, and Doris Jedamski for their valuable counsel on an earlier version of this article.
2 Couperus 1924, 19-20.
3 Van den Berg 1997, 128-129.
4 Van Oss 1946, 128.
5 Gosse 1925, 266.
6 Couperus 2013a, 858; 2013b, 401.
7 Couperus 2013a, 423.
8 Robbers 1919, 359-360; Couperus 1919, 702.
9 Couperus 1919, 702.
10 Couperus 1996, 488.
11 Bastet 1987, 606-607.
12 Gosse 1925, 267.
13 Bastet 1987, 225, 588, 600; Couperus-Baud 2016, 22-23.
14 Van Oss 1946, 128-129. If we convert the 1921 fee of 30,000 guilders to its value in present-day times, we arrive at an amount of well over two hundred thousand euros (Statistics Netherlands 2021).
15 Van Oss 1946, 128.
16 Bastet 1987, 569-574.
17 Bastet 1987, 581-586; Buschman 2009, 17-19.
18 Snijders 2003.
19 Couperus 2013a, 905.
20 Cf. Bastet 1987, 600.
21 Couperus 1995, 24.
22 Couperus 1995, 12.
23 Bastet 1987, 65-82, 217-227.
24 Huigen 2013, 310; Couperus 1992, 265.
25 Van den Doel 1996, 153-174.
26 Vickers 1989, 92.
27 Cribb 1995.
28 Cribb 1995; Van den Doel 1996, 197; Vickers 1989, 91-92.
29 Thompson 2011.
30 'If You've 'eard the East a-Callin' 1925, 14; Bastet 1987, 604-605; Kemperink 2017.
31 Bastet 1987, 589, 601.
32 Breugelmans 2008, 24-25, 99.
33 Breugelmans 2008, 38.
34 Couperus 1924, 208.
35 Couperus 1924, 129.
36 Thompson 2011, 63; Burke 2008, 65.
37 Cf. Pratt 2008; Smith 2000; Huigen 2013.
38 Hawthorne 2006; Elkins 2010; Bertolini 2019.
39 Bertolini 2019.
40 Baxandall 1988, 38, 40.
41 Sturken & Cartwright 2001, 93-96.

42 Cf. Kaplan 1997.

43 Incidentally, anti-Western thought is similarly found to harbour a binary rhetoric. The warm, organic, profound, and superior East/the Orient is then set against the cold, mechanical, superficial, and inferior West/the Occident. Buruma & Margalit 2008.

44 Hawthorne 2006, 514.

45 Boehmer 2015, 34; Van 't Veer 2020, 94-101, 149.

46 Couperus 1924, 28. Unless otherwise stated, emphasis has been added by the author.

47 Couperus 1924, 155. For other instances of descriptions where Couperus opts for words to do with painting, see Couperus 1924, 66-67, 115-116. See Huigen 2013 on similar aestheticizing descriptions in *Met Louis Couperus in Afrika*.

48 Margadant 1890, 37.

49 Spurr 1993, 43-60; Smith 2019.

50 Pratt 2008, 197-204.

51 Cf. Burton 1860, as cited in Pratt 2008, 197.

52 Burton 1860, as cited in Pratt 2008, 198.

53 Burton 1860, as cited in Pratt 2008, 198, 200.

54 Couperus 1924, 115-116.

55 Bastet 1987, 642.

56 Couperus 1924, 115.

57 Couperus 1924, 134.

58 Couperus 1924, 86.

59 Couperus 1924, 70.

60 Couperus 1924, 267.

61 Couperus 1924, 116, 174.

62 Couperus 1924, 48.

63 Couperus 1924, 35.

64 Couperus 1995, 33.

65 Couperus 1924, 264.

66 Couperus 1924, 165.

67 Couperus 1924, 107, 124, 196.

68 Couperus 1924, 126.

69 Pratt 1992, 205.

70 Bastet 1987, 222.

71 Couperus 1995, 27.

72 Couperus 1924, 178.

73 Cf. Couperus 2013a, 658.

74 Couperus 1996, 492.

75 Couperus 1924, 18, 24-25.

76 Couperus 1924, 27.

77 Couperus 1924, 275.

78 The history of the arrival of the car in the Dutch East Indies and the attendant infrastructural changes described here are based on: Bossenbroek 1995; Van den Doel 1996, 176-199; Habnit 1977, 37-49; Ten Horn-Van Nispen & Ravensteijn 2009, 47-50.

79 When, in *Oostwaarts* Couperus chooses to praise the house of the governor of Sumatra's East Coast, he uses the same tactic. He calls the house 'a palace', says that it 'has a spacious dignity, magnificent and always ready for official receptions' (Couperus 1924, 47). In order to dramatise its greatness a bit more, he brings up 'its portico, through which our car drives, with its two parallel front verandahs supported by pillars' (Couperus 1924, 47).

80 Official Tourist Bureau 1926, 27, 29, 43, 45.

81 Couperus 1924, 100.

82 Alber 2002.

83 Alber 2002, 81.

84 Alber 2002, 79-81.

85 Alber 2002, 83; Bossenbroek 1995, 714.

86 Alber 2002, 79.

87 Bossenbroek 1995.

88 Van den Doel 1996, 193-194.

89 Java Motor Club n.d., 92.

90 Couperus 1924, 53.

91 Couperus 1924, 89-90.

92 Couperus 1924, 78, 80, 266.

93 Couperus 1924, 253.

94 Couperus 1924, 85.

95 Couperus 1924, 252.

96 Meijer 1996, 129.

97 Couperus 1924, 57, 65.

98 Couperus 1924, 101-102.

99 Huigen 2013.

100 Huigen 2013, 302-303.

101 Larsen 2001, as cited in Huigen 2013, 303.

102 Larsen 2001 demonstrates that the manner in which tourists perceive the environment from a moving train shows

clear parallels with how tourists look from a moving car. In both means of transport, seeing occupies a place that dominates the passengers' other sensory experiences. Both the moving car and the travelling train impose upon them a manner of looking that could be termed 'cinematographic' – moving images shoot past the spectators seated in their chair – and that differs from the pedestrian's static photographic 'gaze'. Whether the textualised aestheticising 'glance' of Western tourists at 'the East' from a moving train reproduces the prevailing colonial discourse in the same manner, however, remains an as yet unanswered question.