The Spectacle of an Intercultural Love Affair

Exoticism in Van Deyssel's Blank en geel

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Abstract

This article focuses on Lodewijk van Deyssel's fascinating novel *Blank en geel* (White and Yellow) (1894) that tells the story of the encounter between the young Dutch bourgeois woman May and a Chinese merchant Tsengki-Harr in Amsterdam at the end of the nineteenth century. It analyses the representation of exotic otherness in this story about an intercultural love affair that was considered highly improper at that time. In a careful analysis of the novel's mode of narration the article demonstrates how *Blank en geel* testifies to both a fascination with, and a fear of, the exotic other, thus reflecting, as well as catering for the ambivalent mind-set of the fin-de-siècle reader. It argues that the novel, while securing the stability of bourgeois 'normality', simultaneously offers this fin-de-siècle reader the pleasure of scandalous reading.

Key-words: Exoticism, Interculturality, Fin-de-Siècle Literature, Race, Gender, Otherness

Introduction

'The exotic' has become an undeniable presence in Dutch society and has irrevocably transformed the country's ethnoscape. Dutch multiculturality, however, remains a topic of vehement controversy. The polarized debates of the last decade on this topic testify to a nervous anxiety about the social and cultural effects of globalization in general, and about the conflation of the imperialist categories of centre and periphery in particular.[1] This article directs the attention to a time in which 'the exotic' was still perceived as something exceptional, even 'spectacular', despite the long Dutch history of colonialism and other forms of intercultural contact. It discusses a nineteenth-century literary work in which a member of the so-called margin arrives in the centre and brings about a spectacle of exotic otherness.

This article focuses on Lodewijk van Deyssel's fascinating novel *Blank en geel* (White and Yellow), a novel that takes the International Colonial Trade Exhibition of 1883 in Amsterdam – the 'Internationale Koloniale en Uitvoerhandel Tentoonstelling' – as the setting for a tale about an intercultural love-affair. *Blank en geel* was first published in 1892, serialized in five installments in the popular weekly *Eigen haard*, and then printed in 1894 as a book.[2] It tells the story of the encounter between the young Dutch bourgeois woman, May, and the Chinese merchant Tsengki-Harr in Amsterdam at the end of the nineteenth century. The writing of this novel was inspired by a real-life scandal, caused by the marriage of Mia Cuypers, daughter of the famous architect P.J.H. Cuypers and cousin of the writer, to F.G. Taen-Err-Toung, a representative of the Chinese Ministry of Trade whom she had met at this Colonial Exhibition.

Whereas (rather rare) academic writing on this novel generally directs its attention to the historical truth-value of the story,[3] this article will analyze the representation of exotic otherness in the work. It aims to demonstrate how *Blank en geel*, written in a time of modern transformation and social and political insecurity, intervenes in a western-European, colonial discourse that is strongly concerned with keeping the other out and securing the stability of bourgeois 'normality'.[4] It discusses how Van Deyssel's novel tells the story of a dissident, improper desire for an exotic other and reflects on exotic presence within the Dutch centre. Whereas in the novel this presence is initially restricted to the Colonial Exhibition, a fascinating phenomenon that I will discuss later in the article, a problem arises when the exotic other threatens to cross the predetermined boundaries and actually leaves the regulated space of the Exhibition grounds in order to marry a Dutch woman. This (gendered) instance of boundary-crossing causes a public scandal as well as a fearful moment of losing control. It is the novel's particular mode of narration that testifies to both a fascination with and a fear of the exotic other, thus reflecting as well as catering for the ambivalent mind-set of the fin-de-siècle reader. In this article I will demonstrate how *Blank en geel's* representation of a 'spectacular' exotic otherness on the one hand yields to the (shared) fascination for this other and to a longing for proximity, and on the other hand enables the reader to keep the other at a safe distance, thus leaving the idea of the other's *absolute* difference intact.

Exoticism in literature

In his study *The Postcolonial Exotic. Marketing the Margins*[5], Graham Huggan defines exoticism as 'a particular mode of aesthetic *perception* - one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery'[6]. According to Huggan, exoticism refers to a particular way of making people and things other, of producing otherness. It concerns the *discursive* formation of the

exotic rather than the description of any presumed essential or natural identities. In one sense exoticism can be considered as a form of epistemological imperialism. It produces knowledge that works to support and justify the imperialist project and that helps to legitimate the accompanying power relations. This is the kind of exoticism that Edward Said famously discussed in his seminal study *Orientalism*.[7] In another sense, exoticism refers to a particular practice of cultural translation. It describes the attempt to translate exotic otherness into the terms of the home culture, while at the same time maintaining a safe distance between western self and exotic other. The resulting tension between familiarity and strangeness, proximity and distance, sameness and difference is typical of exoticism. Exoticism generally oscillates between these poles, just as it oscillates between feelings of both fear and desire.

In *From Cannibals to Radicals. Figures and Limits of Exoticism*, Roger Célestin investigates exoticist formations in western literature from the Renaissance onwards. In his study he describes exoticism as 'the means for certain writers to negotiate (discursive) position and (subjective) space vis-à-vis this [Home] culture and vis-à-vis the exotic simultaneously'.[8] This definition sees exoticism in literature as a practice of subject-positioning. Exoticism is not restricted to the negotiation of the other culture, the exotic outside, but it also concerns the home culture, the familiar and dominant centre. Célestin argues that exoticism often produces texts that belong to a problematic, paradoxical category. He explains this paradox by pointing out that the relation between western self and exotic other is always a relation of desire. Exoticism requires a subject as well as an object of desire, and in his opinion these are often congruent with the subject and object of narration. The paradox lies in the fact that the western self, as the subject of desire, is caught in a process of both attraction and repulsion. The narrating subject experiences both fascination and fear for the strangeness of the exotic other, and often passes these feelings on to the reader.

This tension between fascination and fear directly links to the nineteenth-century interest in race theories in the west that, as Robert Young convincingly argues in his study *Colonial Desire. Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* are simultaneously 'covert theories of desire'.[9] He describes how hybridity and racial mixing were key issues in the (colonial) public debate of that time. An array of semi-scientific theories – each with its own ideological agenda – tried to explain and prove the (non-) existence of (fundamental) racial differences among mankind. These theories focused explicitly on questions of sexuality and reproduction and were preoccupied with the biological and moral (im)possibility of racial mixing. As Young aptly phrases this, the discourse on racial mixing circulated around 'an ambivalent axis of desire and aversion'.[10]

In the following analysis of *Blank en geel* I will draw on these theories to demonstrate how the novel provides a representation of the other that on the one hand

plays into the end-of-the-century readers' desire for exotic otherness, and on the other seeks to reassure their anxiety about this otherness.

Van Deyssel's *Blank en geel*: an extraordinary novel

Blank en geel is an extraordinary novel in the oeuvre of the Dutch writer and critic Lodewijk van Deyssel (1864-1952). Van Deyssel is well-known as a member of the so-called *Tachtiger*-movement (1880s) that set out to modernize Dutch literature. He started his literary career as a naturalist writer who considered naturalism as an innovative mode of writing against rules and institutions, but then moved on to an aesthetical and even mystical style of writing.[11] *Blank en geel* is a 'minor work' in Van Deyssel's varied oeuvre which has received relatively little (academic) attention, especially when compared to his famous and controversial novel *Een liefde* of 1887. Despite the fact that these two novels display several parallels, both in theme and in style, *Een liefde* generally counts as an exemplary naturalist work, whereas *Blank en geel* remains rather marginal, if not unmentioned, in scholarly discussions of Van Deyssel's work.[12] This lack of serious engagement with the novel might have to do with *Blank en geel's* rather unusual subject matter: the novel tells the story of a hypersensitive young woman who against all odds loses her heart to a Chinese merchant and thus breaks the nineteenth-century taboo on racial mixing. As this Dutch-Chinese love-story was inspired by actual events in Dutch society of that time, scholars tend to focus on the novel's presumed historical character rather than on its aesthetic form and its literary figurations.[13]

In what follows, I will take a closer look at the *literary* representation of the inter-racial love affair and, in particular, at the representation of May as the subject of desire and of the Chinese merchant as the object of her desire. As I explained above, the desire for the exotic other is a dissident desire that violates the standards of accepted, 'normal' behaviour. The actualization of this desire as represented in the novel turns a private 'weakness' into a public spectacle. The novel enables readers to share in this desire as well as to observe its scandalous actualization – on stage. While the spectacular representation draws one to, or even into, the scenes, the rather sceptical comments of the extra-diegetic narrator encourage readers to dissociate themselves from the spectacle performed. The narrator takes position as a secondary subject of desire, hidden – or maybe better: hiding – behind the protagonist May.[14] This particular mode of narration, which presents many scenes as seen through May's eyes, allows readers to give in to their own fascination for the exotic other, while at the same time maintaining a safe distance from its threatening otherness. The literary spectacle of otherness provides the reader with an armchair experience of an intercultural encounter without, however, the risk of a loss of self (or of blurring the clear-cut boundaries of difference between self and other). In the following, I will show how the representation of May as extraordinary and the specific spatial setting of her falling in

love help to excuse May's dissident desire and the presumed *faux-pas* – an inter-racial union – that results from it. I will argue that the novel emphatically points out the exceptional aspect of the compromising situation in order to appease the scandalous impact of the inter-racial marriage.

The strange desires of an exceptional girl

The main protagonist of the novel is the eighteen-year-old girl Maria, or May as she prefers to call herself after a stay in England. May is the daughter of well-to-do, bourgeois parents, who are well aware that their daughter is reaching an eligible age. But there is no need to hurry. As the narrator comments: '(...) there still was time... oh yes... all the time. And there would certainly not be a lack of suitable parties'.[15] This trustful attitude, apparently shared by the parents and the narrator, appears mistaken, the prediction turns out wrong. Although there are indeed plenty of suitable candidates, May gives her heart to the most unsuitable of all, at least in the eyes of her parents. She falls in love with the Chinese merchant Mr Tsengki-Harr and she is determined to marry him, against her parents' will. May persists and eventually succeeds in marrying the man of her dreams. The novel concludes with a short section on the dénouement of the bourgeois 'drama' and ends with the revelation that: '[s]he had three sweet, healthy and beautiful children'.[16]

The novel tells the story of how this could happen; it sets out to explain the unheard-of. This explanatory mode of narration addresses a particular kind of reader, a reader who assumes that something unprecedented is going to happen. Whether readers are already familiar with the story's outcome (or with the scandal that inspired its writing), or whether their curiosity is triggered by the novel's title, in both cases readers expect a story that explains how and which boundaries of bourgeois behaviour come to be crossed.[17] On the one hand the novel satisfies this expectation by offering the reader May's view on things so that we can share in her feelings and contemplations and can gain an insight into her motivations. On the other hand it is the external narrator who directs our attention in this third-person narrative and who determines what we come to know. Despite the novel's naturalist air of objectivity, the narrator's role in the representation of events is determinant, as is his role in the judgment of the whole.[18] At crucial moments he comments on the happenings, often in a warning and morally disapproving tone. His casual interventions thus colour the representation of May's mental world and work to emphasize her hypersensitive state of mind.

From the beginning, the novel represents May as a girl who is not completely of this world, who does not wholly fit in with the world of the Amsterdam bourgeoisie. She is described as a dreamy 'damsel', delicate and of pale complexion, who resembles an ivory statue with carefully carved hands and who seems to belong to bygone times. On her return – to her regret – from England, May strug-

gles to resettle in Amsterdam. Dutch society appears dull and grey to her eyes, as do her Dutch peers with whom she is supposed to socialize. May feels different, (an impression that is confirmed by the narrator who represents May as a languishing heroine), ill at ease in her Dutch surroundings. This becomes particularly clear during a soiree her parents organize in her honour. The festive happening cannot satisfy her craving for 'worldly' excitement. She despises the ordinariness of her 'provincial' Dutch guests and she does not attempt to hide her feelings of boredom and contempt. No wonder that her guests find her arrogant and unfriendly: 'They didn't think her sweet at all'.[19] The mutual aversion adds to the impression that May does not fit in the world that she is expected to inhabit. The novel describes how she despairs at the prospect of remaining 'alone, like a stranger, understood by no one, confidential with no one!... Oh God, the thought of it was horrible!...'.[20] The prospect makes her deeply melancholic.

The descriptions of May and her extraordinary, dreamy character work to prepare the reader for the deviant turn ahead. The narrator emphasizes that May has always known that 'something *very* extraordinary' would happen to her.[21] She is sure to detect predictions of her 'strange fate'[22] in fairytales, songs and novels. Recurring romantic (day-)dreams confirm her in her expectations: one day a prince of exceptional beauty will come to whisk her away. In these moments 'a sense of the highest pleasure penetrated her sleeping bosom'.[23] While dreaming away, May's appearance seems to match the content of her dreams. According to the external narrator she looks like an 'ethereal apparition' (*etherische verschijning*): 'white May, irradiated silver pale by the light of the moon'.[24] He describes how in these moments an irresistible force takes possession of her, and a strong, erotic desire for the extraordinary overwhelms her soul. She enters into 'Sensation' and this sensational experience fills her with a deep happiness.[25] At the same time it awakens a strong determination in her to strive for this wonderful fate, and to not settle for less than the extraordinary.

The recurrent entrance of fear into the dream-like scenes, however, undoes the feelings of sensational triumph. The narrator relates how an inexplicable fright tones down May's ecstasy, how she all of a sudden realizes that her poetic desire is *dangerously* transgressive. This sudden awareness changes the narrative's high-tuned mode of expectancy into one of anxiety and threat:

> But, good heavens, what was it that she longed for?... what impossibility was she intent on?... Did clothes or other externals make the man?... Or did she wish for an angel to come and that she could love him?[26]

The use of the term 'impossibility' in this reflective intervention can hardly be ascribed to May. It is the external narrator who critically questions her fascination

for the exotic and who seems to suggest that May is naively blinded by the beauty of appearances.

A spectacle of otherness

Whereas the prince is initially a product of May's 'nervous' imagination, this changes when she visits the festive opening event of the Colonial Exhibition. In 1883, this first and unique 'World Exhibition' in the Netherlands (after London, Paris and Vienna) was a spectacle of unprecedented dimensions.[27] For a period of six months the large grounds behind the Royal Museum in Amsterdam, now the 'Museum Square', were turned into a global bazaar of encounter, education and entertainment. Representatives from all over the world, including both the colonial territories and the colonial powers, participated in a political performance of colonialist diplomacy and expansive nationalism. The opening event took place in the new Park Theatre that was erected especially for this occasion. In the novel this theatre is the venue where the dream prince turns real. It does not come as a surprise that the Colonial Exhibition becomes the locus of the highly anticipated intercultural encounter. Both the theatre and the Colonial Exhibition can be considered liminal spaces; they function as thresholds to alternative worlds, the artificial world of performance and that of foreign cultures. Up until this point it was in the private sphere of her bedroom that May succumbed to her dreams and fantasies. From now on the theatre and the exhibition represent two public transitional spaces that allow May to free herself from the social and moral strictures of 'reality'.[28]

The narrator describes how the hypersensitive May tries to resist being carried away by 'mad passion' (*dwaze geestdrift*)[29] and how she attempts to remain 'cold-blooded and indifferent' (*koelbloedig en onverschillig*)[30], but the tantalizing lustre of the theatre is stronger. 'It was no use'[31]: May is blinded by the aesthetic excess of visual and auditive impressions.[32] The 'multifaceted magnificence of colour' (*duizendvoudige kleurenpracht*)[33] of all ornaments captures her and the glimmer of lights and mirrors further augments her exaltation. Stimulated by the melody of the music, her mind drifts away from the ordinary Amsterdam that she despises into a dizzying world of enchantment and bliss.[34] Then, all of a sudden, the moment the music stops, she recognizes 'sickeningly sharp' (*ziekelijk fel*)[35] the prince of her dreams. According to the narrator it is in the same moment that she realizes that this man will turn into an 'irresistible obsession' (*onwederstaanbare obsessie*).[36]

The theatre gives May's ecstatic encounter the character of a spectacle that is performed in front of an audience – literally, for the visitors and spectators present, but also figuratively, for the novel's readership. The instance of border-crossing is performed on a public stage that is at the same time an artificial, unreal world of dreams and appearances. The narrator explicitly contributes to this (dis)qualification of the space of the encounter as unreal. He exclaims:

'What? Didn't she know that this splendid hall was nothing more than a copy of an exotic model, a temple of cardboard and papier-mâché with a coat of multi-coloured paint!'.[37] It is as if he suggests to the reader that May does not fathom the artificial character of the spectacle.

The fact that the object of May's look and aroused desire is not her initial love-object, the Englishman Arthur Clarkestone, whom she met during her stay in England, but a person of the Asian 'race', clothed in exotic folklore, does not matter at that moment. The two 'exots' appear easily interchangeable and May immediately convinces herself of the fact that the British Arthur was in fact not exotic enough to match her longing for the extraordinary. It is this 'Oriental prince',[38] dressed in gold-embroidered silk and satin, who fully responds to her (erotic) desire for the exotic: 'Now he *was* the mysterious, almost supernatural being that she had so often beheld in her dreams'.[39] The typographic emphasis on 'was' seems to indicate the productivity of May's imagination: she *makes* him resemble her dream prince. Whereas May knows no doubt, it is the narrator again who dims the ecstasy. He repeatedly describes May's state of mind in pathological terms, as 'feverish' (*koortsachtig*) and 'fanatic' (*dweepziek*): 'No, she had not yet been relieved of that troublesome fanaticism in her mind'.[40]

The exotisation of the Chinese object of desire

That night May does not succeed in matching her ecstatic vision with an actual encounter. The next day, however, she goes out to look for him; the Colonial Exhibition, the artificial world where people from all over the world have (been) assembled, seems an obvious place to search for the exotic object of her desire. Initially she is convinced, inspired by prejudices about the other's connectedness to nature, that she is most likely to find him outside, in the fresh air. But her rambles over the exhibition grounds remain fruitless. She continues her search inside the exhibition buildings where a painting of a funeral catches her eye. Again a work of art touches upon her particular sensibility: the melancholia of the painted scene corresponds to her growing despair in such a way that tears well up in her eyes.

Then, suddenly a passionate desire takes hold of her and directs her straight to the colonial section of the exhibition where strange music, an abundance of exotic trinkets and 'dark-eyed-barbarians' (*donkerogige barbaren*)[41] in traditional costumes (passively and silently) determine the scene. At the moment that she enters this exotic world 'a force beyond her control' (*een kracht buiten haar*)[42] makes her look in a certain direction:

> Then – it was only a moment – it was as if her heart stood still and the ground would open up and swallow her. Everything around her receded in a colourful

> fog and she saw nothing more than, at the end of gallery, strongly lit by the glass ceiling, the head and face of the person she was looking for.[43]

It is clear that this is a magical, ecstatic moment: May finally finds the object of her desire. Simultaneously, however, the text makes sure to emphasize that this is a situation out of May's control.

In the scene that follows, the narrator describes May's object of desire in strongly aesthetic terms. Downright exoticist rhetoric is used to capture the Chinese merchant in a narrative image of ornamental excess. It is the 'lure of difference' that determines the description: this is a spectacle of otherness as well as a spectacle of artificiality.[44] The reader is invited into a dream-like world of foreignness, the exotic world of the Oriental other:

> It was certainly one of the most picturesque spots of the Exhibition, and the man with his slant eyes, with his delicate, stiff, shiny, little black moustache, in his wide-hanging garment of satin and silk, adorned with gold, was at home in these surroundings of delicate tapestries in blues like a woman's eyes and pale creamy yellows, embroidered with extraordinary figures, ornaments and flowers.[45]

This passage continues to describe a colourful world of exotic plentitude in the terms showing the narrator's appreciation. The Chinese merchant is clearly at home in this realm of elegance, he truly belongs to the artificial world of the exhibition. The aesthetic surplus of the description matches the excess of the exotic world that the Chinese merchant naturally inhabits. As Célestin states about exoticist writing, it is 'as if the extreme foreignness [of what is being represented] required a rhetorical style and stylistic *surplus*, a *straining* that simultaneously emphasized the workings of this particular mode of representation'.[46]

Despite the serenity of the depicted scene there seems to be something uncomfortable about it as well. It is haunted by the prospect that the Chinese merchant will leave this artificial space and cross the boundary to the 'real world'. It is the idea of him participating in Dutch society – as the husband of an ethnic Dutch woman – that seems to disturb the narrator. It appears that the narrator wants to prevent this prospect from materializing. A crack in the beauty of the scene occurs when the Chinese merchant smiles and 'his uneven teeth' (*zijn brokkelige tanden*)[47] become visible. It is as if the text wants to make clear that the Exhibition is just a world of appearances and that its beauty is only on the outside – unreal as well as skin-deep. As soon as the Chinese merchant opens his mouth, the truth comes out: then the real and unattractive face of this mystical world becomes visible.

When the focus finally shifts to Mr Tsengki-Harr who is completely unaware of the effects of his appearance on the young girl, the narration sobers up again. It is

his rationality that brings 'reality' back into the scene.[48] It appears that he, the Oriental object of May's desire but also a merchant 'of a very normal European merchant nature',[49] doubts the psychological stability of the strange girl as well.[50] He wonders who she is and what she wants from him. Is she simply mistaken, is she a woman of indecent behaviour, or is she a lunatic? In a moment of self-exotisation he assumes that he has become the stake of a bet among friends: in a mood of 'worldly recklessness' (*wereldse overmoed*)[51] the girl has probably agreed to dare something outrageous by addressing this Chinese 'weirdo' (*rare snuiter*).[52] However, as soon as he realizes that the girl is serious in her offensive courting, he decides that she must be insane and tries to keep her at a distance. Aware of the rules of bourgeois respectability, he classifies her behaviour as unsuitable and tactfully sends her away to protect her (family's) good name.

When May returns home after her exciting rendezvous she hurries to her room, which, as the narrator comments, is completely secluded from the outside world. Here, by herself and safe from the judgments of others, she reflects on the successful afternoon. She feels rescued from the fate of living a 'normal' life that she associates with suffering and despair. Full of joyful satisfaction she imagines how she will embark on a wonderful journey into the unfamiliar, to faraway regions and places, until again a casual intervention by the narrator tones down her happy excitement. The narrator asserts that the image of the Chinese merchant in May's 'feverishly excited imaginations'[53] actually contrasts in a 'terrifying' (*schrikwekkend*) way to the longed-for ideals of her former musings. Passing the focalization to May again, the text describes how the comparison of the Chinese merchant with the blond prince and the passionate Mediterranean male now startles May. In accordance with the discourse of racial hierarchy of that time, the comparison makes her realize how ugly and ignoble her new love object actually is. She grows aware of the absurdity of her deed and of its frightfully pathological character, and realizes that it was performed in a situation that she had no control over. However, as this dawns on her, an 'irresistible voice inside her'[54] intervenes yet again.[55] Once more May is overcome by a 'pathological daze' (*ziekelijke bedwelming*)[56] with a blinding effect.

The novel offers no opportunity to get closer to the Chinese character. In this respect *Blank en geel* confirms the idea that 'exoticist discourses are more likely to mystify than to account for cultural difference' as Huggan states.[57] The text mainly emphasizes Chinese otherness and makes no attempt at familiarization. The narrative representation of Mr Tsengki-Harr restricts itself to the surface of his dazzling garment; his character acquires no depth. The numerous references to fabrics, jewels and other externals – which Célestin calls 'emblems of desire'[58] – endorse the impression that he is merely the object of a desiring look, an *exemplar* of exotic otherness.[59] Despite the eventual marriage he does not become subject of desire himself. The reader gains no insight in his inner life and longings: he is the exotic chattel in the (dis)agreement between May and her parents.

The novel ends with a short section announcing that May has actually married the Chinese merchant.[60] It tells that although she soon finds out that her husband is not 'the hero of her dreams'[61] and that he does not offer her the longed for 'ecstatic happiness',[62] she is happy and satisfied anyway. According to the narrator, the inevitable disenchantment is acceptable to May, because her wish for enchantment has disappeared: '[s]he had calmed down and resigned herself without resentment to her fate'.[63] The terms 'resigned' and 'fate' point at the inevitability of this disappointment.[64] It is hard not to overhear the complacent triumphalism in the narrator's voice.

Catering for the reader: reassuring bourgeois normality

The novel seems to conclude that the incredible and highly improper 'mixing of races' (*kruising der rassen*) that follows from the intercultural encounter between May and Mr. Tsengki-Harr is an exception, that this scandal is just a one-off incident. The novel explains the extraordinary nature of the incidental union with reference to the strange exceptionality of the girl. It is May's fundamental strangeness, already perceptible in childhood that explains the improper match. Her strange and deviant self simply requires a strange and deviant counterpart: both partners in crime are in their own way 'exotic', both belong to 'other' worlds. Other factors further explain the infelicitous occurrence. The text repeatedly refers to the pernicious influence of reading on the imagination of young women. The romances vehicled in literature are supposed to stir their fantasies more than their physical constitutions can cope with. The narrator mentions fate as another important, if not inevitable factor of influence. This match was simply meant to be. The girl, weak by definition, had no chance whatsoever to counter or escape her destiny.

The result of this representation is that the instance of scandalous behaviour does not affect the 'normal' status quo. The boundary-crossing springs from the exalted mind of an awkward, hypersensitive female. The emphasis on May's extraordinariness and on the abnormality of her behaviour very much works to confirm the 'normality' of most other characters in the novel: the shocked parents, the dull peers, the astonished bourgeois society. This applies to the narrator and his readers as well: through narrative dissociation they are able to secure their difference from May. Only one character in the novel matches May in her extraordinariness, despite his rational behaviour: exoticism renders the Chinese merchant 'other' by definition.

It is this narrative effect that adds to the pleasure of (scandalous) reading. The novel caters for a reader who is keen to enjoy the spectacle of exotic otherness, without, however, participating in it. This happens on several levels. First, the novel rakes up a real-life public scandal by retelling the story of an intercultural love affair that took place about ten years before the novel's publication. The fact

that *Blank en geel* was published under a pseudonym reinforces this atmosphere of scandal and secrecy.[65] Second, by mainly narrating the story from the perspective of May, the novel answers to a voyeuristic desire on the part of the bourgeois reader. By offering insight in May's motivations the novel feeds the readers' curiosity for the private story *behind* the public scandal. Third, *Blank en geel* intervenes in the controversial debate on race theories of that time, albeit in a less provocative manner than initially planned. The original title of the novel, 'Kruising van rassen' (Mixing of races), appeals much more directly to the cultural fear for miscegenation. The title *Blank en geel* is more moderate in the sense that it suggests keeping the boundaries between the races clear and intact. This title contains no reference to 'dangerous' racial mixing. By distinguishing two *separate* races, it holds on to the idea of clear racial difference.

I would like to conclude this article by stating that Van Deyssel's *Blank en geel* in fact performs an ideologically coloured act of cultural translation. The novel translates a scandalous event of exotic otherness into 'the understandable and the usable, into language, into "knowledge"'[66], into an easily digestible cultural commodity – a serialized novel – for a Dutch audience. The 'spectacular' representation of the exotic other at the Exhibition equals an appropriation of this other for an audience fascinated by the foreign and the strange. The novel's aesthetic mode of representation works both to capture and control this exotic other. Together they determine the other as a passive and artificial object of desire. The fact that the destabilizing moment of racial transgression that results from May's dissident desire is turned into a spectacle works both to conceal and to appease the nineteenth-century horror of racial transgression. The 'spectacular' narrative representation helps to undo its disruptive impact.

Notes

1. See my discussion of these multiculturality debates in Liesbeth Minnaard, *New Germans, New Dutch. Literary Interventions.* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), pp. 15-50.
2. The weekly magazine *Eigen haard* (1875-1941) published contributions in the field of culture, science and literature for a broad readership. It was the first illustrated magazine in the Netherlands and counted as popular family reading.
3. For example see Harry G.M. Prick, 'Nawoord', in Lodewijk van Deyssel, *Blank en* geel, (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 1979), pp. 135-148 and Ileen Montijn, *Pierre Cuypers, 1827-1921: Schoonheid als hartstocht*, (Wormer: Inmerc., 2007). Montijn actually criticizes the novel's focus on May's emotions instead of on the scandalous happenings of that time.
4. See Mary Kemperink, *Het verloren paradijs. De literatuur en cultuur van het fin-de-siècle*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2001), pp. 77-108 on the concern for (threatening) otherness and the discussion of race theories in the Dutch fin-de-siècle.

5. Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic. Marketing the Margins*. (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 13.
6. Huggan, *Postcolonial Exotic*, p. 13.
7. The fact that Said's *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995) has been subject to vehement, and partly justified, critique does not diminish the fact that his study and his application of Foucault's theories on the relation between knowledge, discourse and power was nonetheless significantly influential in the field of cultural analysis.
8. Roger Célestin, *From Cannibals to Radicals. Figures and Limits of Exoticism*, (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 3.
9. Robert Young, *Colonial Desire. Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, (London; New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 9.
10. Young, *Colonial Desire*, p. 19.
11. Van Deyssel also wrote several poetical texts and was active as a literary critic. The ultimate aim of art, according to Van Deyssel, is to move the reader into a particular mind-set, into what he called Sensation – with capital S. See also footnote 25.
12. Ton Anbeek maintains that '*Een liefde* is a heterogeneous book, three quarters naturalist, one quarter impressionist (or sensitivist)'. '*Een liefde* is een heterogeen boek, driekwart naturalistisch, één kwart impressionistisch (of sensitivistisch)' in Ton Anbeek, *De naturalistische roman in Nederland*, (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij De Arbeiderspers, 1982), p. 48. The same can be said of *Blank en geel*.
13. Scholars themselves seem insecure about how to handle the precarious representations of inter-raciality. As the analysis of race (rather than ethnicity or culture) remains a taboo in the Dutch academic discourse of the early twenty-first century they are cautious not to burn their fingers on a 'hot' topic. See *Dutch Racism*, ed. by Philomena Essed and Isabel Hoving, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, forthcoming 2011).
14. Compare Anbeek's discussion of the role of the narrator in *Een liefde* in Ton Anbeek, *De schrijver tussen de coulissen*, (Amsterdam: Atheneum - Polak & Van Gennep, 1978), pp. 67-96.
15. Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel*, p. 9: 'men had nog al de tijd... o ja... al de tijd. En aan goede partijen zou het zeker niet ontbreken'.
16. Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel*, p. 9: '[z]ij kreeg drie lieve, gezonde en mooie kinderen'.
17. In his epilogue to the 1979 reprint of Van Deyssel's novel, Harry Prick assumes that the novel was aimed at a readership of what he calls the 'Amsterdam *crème de la crème* of that time', the upper echelons of Dutch society. He suggests a primarily biographical interest on the side of the readers and supposes that only members of the Amsterdam bourgeois elite would have been able to recognize the architect Cuypers in the literary character of Mr Reeve, May's father, p.136.
18. I have chosen to refer to the narrator in the male form.
19. Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel*, p. 9: 'Men vond haar niets lief'.
20. Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel*, p. 42: 'alleen, als een vreemdelinge, door niemand begrepen, met niemand vertrouwelijk!... O God, de gedachte was verschrikkelijk!...'
21. Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel*, p. 27: 'iets héél buitengewoons'.
22. Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel*, p. 27: 'vreemde lot'.

23. Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel*, p. 60: 'een gevoel van het allergrootste genot drong in de boezem der slaapster'.
24. Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel*, p. 45: 'witte May, door het maanlicht zilver bleek beschenen'.
25. Van Deyssel uses the capitalized term Sensation to refer to a state of intensified sensory perception, of rapture, through which the subject enters into higher, metaphysical spheres. It is striking though, how the representation of May's moments of sensation resonate (erotic) neurosis rather than enlightenment. For a discussion of Van Deyssel's conceptualisation of Sensation, see Kemperink, *Van observatie tot extase*, Kemperink, *Het verloren paradijs* and Prick, 'Inleiding'.
26. Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel*, p. 56: 'Maar, mijn Hemel, wat verlangde zij dan toch?... op welke onmogelijkheid stond zij daar dan toch te zinnen?... Maakten de kleren of andere uiterlijkheden dan de man?... Of wenste zij, dat er een engel bij haar zou komen en dat zij die zou kunnen beminnen?'
27. Marieke Bloembergen describes the world exhibitions as 'international competitions in progress' ['*internationale wedstrijden in vooruitgang*'] that were very much part of the imperialist project. As public manifestations these exhibitions not only aimed to expand imperial power and interests, but they also functioned to propagate and legitimate imperialism as a civilizing enterprise for a home audience. Marieke Bloembergen, *De koloniale vertoning. Nederland en Indië op de wereldtentoonstellingen (1880-1931)*, (*Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek*, 2002) p. 20. On the Amsterdam Colonial Exhibition of 1883, see also Ileen Montijn, *Kermis van Koophandel. De Amsterdamse Wereldtentoonstelling van 1883*, (Bussum: Van Holkema & Warendorf, 1983).
28. Compare Foucault's concept of heterotopia as discussed in his 1984 lecture 'Of other spaces'. In a way the theatre and the exhibition function as heterotopias or counterspaces: *real* spaces that are simultaneously outside of 'the real world' and have the characteristic 'to suspect, neutralize or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror or reflect' (24).
29. Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel*, p. 70.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.: '*Het mocht niet baten*'.
33. Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel*, p. 71.
34. The capacity to be moved by works of art illustrates a particular sensibility of (mostly female) characters. See Kemperink, *Het verloren paradijs*, p. 296. An experience of Sensation is unleashed when the frame of mind of these characters corresponds with the emotional force that the artist has conveyed to the work of art. In *Blank en geel* music functions as an important medium that triggers May's sensibility for experiences of Sensation. These experiences have strong erotic connotations. At a later occasion it is a painting that brings about a moment of Sensation.
35. Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel*, p. 76.
36. Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel*, p. 77.
37. Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel*, p. 70: 'Hoe! wist zij dan niet, dat deze luisterrijke hal niets was dan een kopie naar een uitheems model, een tempel van carton-pierre en papiermaché met veelkleurige verven bestreken!'

38. Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel*, p. 80.
39. Ibid.: 'Nu wás hij het geheimzinnige, het bijna bovennatuurlijke wezen, dat zij in de droom zo vaak had aanschouwd'.
40. Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel*, p. 74: 'Neen, zij was nog niet bevrijd van dat lastige dweepzieke in haar gemoed'. It is May's sense of proper bourgeois decorum that keeps her from running towards him and throwing herself in his arms. She reflects on the restrictive social norms that hamper her in realizing her dream in very negative terms, controlled as she feels by 'the eye of the elite of the whole of Dutch society' ['*het oog van de elite der gehele Hollandse maatschappij*']. Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel p.* 80.
41. Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel*, p. 104.
42. Ibid.
43. Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel*, p. 105: 'Toen – het was maar één ogenblik – was 't haar of haar hart stilstond en zij door de grond zou zinken. De gehele omgeving deinsde weg in een bonte nevel en zij zag niets meer dan, aan het eind van de galerijhal, het door het glazen dak sterk verlicht hoofd en het gelaat van hem die zij zocht.'
44. Huggan paraphrases Todorov when he states that: 'Exoticism posits the lure of difference while protecting its practitioners from close involvement'. The aesthetic excess functions as a mechanism of 'othering' that simultaneously conceals the underlying power relations. Huggan, *Postcolonial Exotic*, p. 22
45. Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel*, p. 105: 'Het was daar werkelijk een der meest schilderachtige plekjes der Tentoonstelling, en de man met zijn schuin liggende ogen, met zijn fijn, stijf, glimmend zwart snorretje, in zijn breed hangend gewaad van satijn en zijde met vergulde versierselen, behoorde geheel en al thuis in die omgeving van dunne vrouwenoog-blauwe en bleek roomgele, met zonderlinge figuren, ornamenten en bloemen bestikte behangselen'.
46. Célestin, *Cannibals*, p. 4.
47. Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel*, p. 108.
48. His rational behaviour strongly contrasts with stereotypical assumptions about the exotic other of that time, as the (unjustified) anger of May's father about the encounter indicates. He automatically assumes that Mr Tsengki-Harr has courted his daughter instead of the other way around.
49. Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel*, p. 107
50. Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel*, p. 107: 'zeer gewone Europese koopmansaard'.
51. Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel*, p. 108.
52. Ibid.
53. Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel*, p. 116: '*koortsig opgewonden verbeeldingsvoorstellingen*', '*schrikverwekkende*'.
54. Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel*, p. 117.
55. Ibid., '*onweerstaanbare stem in haar binnenste*'.
56. Ibid.
57. Huggan, *Postcolonial Exotic*, p. 17.
58. Célestin, *Cannibals*, p. 25.
59. Despite the merchant's actual, rational behaviour towards May and her parents, he features as the exotic embodiment of a fundamental irrationality. The fact that he is a

tradesman and not a member of May's bourgeois class is another factor of supposed inferiority.

60. It is striking that the positive dénouement of the story (at least in terms of the fulfillment of the protagonist's desire) is only briefly and casually mentioned. It seems as if the narrator is reluctant to elaborate on the final and apparently happy actualization of May's desire.
61. Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel*, p. 133.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid., '[z]ij was tot bedaren gekomen en schikte zich zonder tegenzin in haar lot'.
64. The term 'inevitable' recurs several times in the text, e.g. in the combinations 'inevitable misfortune' (Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel*, p. 123) and 'inevitable future' (Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel*, p. 125). The Dutch text uses the relatively neutral term 'lot' [fate] except for one instance (Van Deyssel, *Blank en geel*, p. 118) where it uses the more dramatic term 'noodlot' [destiny].
65. Van Deyssel (this name is itself also a pseudonym) used the pseudonym 'Max C.' for the serial publication in *Eigen haard*. For the book form published by Veen Publishers he chose the pseudonym 'A.J'. which he used for many of his critical texts. His choice for yet another pseudonym in this case may well have something to do with the scandalous subject matter of the novel and the fact that he re-stages a precarious happening in a bourgeois family that they would have preferred to forget.
66. Célestin, *Cannibals*, p. 6.

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