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The ubiquity of Royal Dutch Shell in the Netherlands as a case of banal petroculture

Résumé

In 1995 Michael Billig introduced the term 'banal nationalism' to refer to those representations and reproductions of the nation which are as ubiquitous as they tend to go unnoticed. I try to link this concept to 'petroculture' since that notion too refers to practices that are so pervasive in modern societies that we tend to overlook them. Case in point is Royal Dutch Shell, in the Netherlands often and tellingly abbreviated to 'de Koninklijke' (the Royal one). By making explicit what most readers and citizens overlook because Shell seems as 'natural' in Dutch culture as tulips, bicycles and windmills, this contribution tries to make clear how the everyday aspects of Dutch petroculture in tourism, literature, and advertising are linked with the elite practices of managers and politicians.

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INTRODUCTION: EARTHQUAKES AND GAS

- 1 When presenting its conclusions and recommendations on February 24 2023, the Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry into natural gas extraction in the Dutch province of Groningen did not mince its words: this whole affair had been “an unprecedented system failure by public as well as private parties”.¹ After seven weeks of hearings in the Summer and early Fall of 2022 about the damage caused by 1,615 gas extraction induced earthquakes in Groningen this much was already clear: the ties between Big Oil and Dutch officials had made things considerably worse. But for the committee to label the situation “disastrous”, to call a specific government decision “a gross infringement of the interests of the people of Groningen” and to emphasize that the private company extracting the gas had lost “its moral license to operate” was something else.²
- 2 The earthquakes that have resulted in more than 267,000 claims for damage in the Groningen region are a direct result of the extraction of gas in what was once the largest natural gas field in the world, exploited by NAM (Nederlandse Aardolie Maatschappij), jointly owned by Shell and Exxon. That subsidence might be a problem in Groningen was suggested by NAM itself as early as 1972, but even after the 3.6 Huizinge earthquake in August 2012 the extraction *increased*. How could this happen? Economic and budgetary concerns and financial incentives and ambitions obviously played a major role. All too trusting scientists who for years could not imagine this to be a problem and consequently failed to research the issue bear some of the responsibility. That TU Delft’s Earth Sciences

department received generous corporate funding probably did not help either.³

A key explanation, however, is formulated as Conclusion 5 in the Parliamentary Committee’s report when it states that “Oil companies benefit from the confusion of roles at the ministry of Economic Affairs”.⁴ Dutch top officials apparently did a better job informing corporate executives than their ministers. These ministers, for their part, tended to put more trust in the executives of Big Oil than in their own official regulator Staatstoezicht op de mijnen (State Supervision of Mines). And to top it all, during his job interview for inspector general of Staatstoezicht a former official noticed a representative of Big Oil (which he would supervising) to be part of the selection committee.⁵ Collusion, in other words. Not deceit let alone a conspiracy, but a situation in which public duties are neglected because officials and politicians are so close with private partners that they lose sight of what is really at stake.⁶

That Shell is one of these partners should perhaps not come as a surprise. For more than a century this multinational firm has managed to be seen in the country as a major Dutch force

¹ Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry into Natural Gas Extraction in Groningen, *Groningers before Gas*, vol. 1. *Conclusions and recommendations* (The Hague: Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2023), 26. The five volume report counts 1956 pages in Dutch. The first part, *Conclusions and recommendations*, is also published in English, both on paper and as a pdf download.

² *Ibid.*, 16, 51, 30.

³ Jurre van den Berg, “Hoe Nederlandse wetenschappers zich decennialang verkeken op de gevaren van gaswinning in Groningen”, *de Volkskrant*, 7 October 2022.

⁴ Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry, *Groningers before gas*, 49-53 (cf. note 1).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁶ Cf. “Shell and ExxonMobil, the shareholders of NAM, have short lines of communication with the ministry and the Cabinet as well. This is true for Shell in particular. The Shell chief executive has discussions with the prime minister every year and indicates viewing him as a friend. These short lines are also visible when NAM has to answer questions by the regulator State Supervision of Mines. An example is when, in 2018 after the quake in Zeerijp and according to protocol, within 48 hours NAM has to put forward measures to contain the risks of earthquakes as well as possible. Despite the fact that the regulator asks for measures, the ministry of Economic Affairs lets NAM know that concrete measures are not necessary. The regulator still observes that the distance between NAM and the ministry is extremely small. “I got a sense of ‘them all being hand in glove’, which I found most disconcerting, because that makes the performance of my duties a lot more complicated,” Inspector General of Mines Theodor Kockelkoren says during his public hearing.” *Ibid.*, 56.

of good and, thus, national pride. From day one in the Spring of 1890 Shell received the royal seal of approval and even international scandals concerning the firm's involvement in Apartheid in the 1970s and 1980s, the Brent Spar and Ken Saro-Wiwa affairs in the 1990s or its controversial climate policies did until very recently not substantially alter its image or, more importantly, power.⁷

5 Its sheer economic size can account for Shell's political clout, but in this article I want to make the case that the company's power is even more pervasive. As the quintessential harbinger of progress, Shell also represents a remarkable cultural force. In my contribution to this special issue on Petrocultures, I want to explore and investigate how Shell's cultural work actually functions in the Netherlands, both in a strict sense (focusing on specific literary and artistic oil and gas related artefacts) and on a broader level, where culture and politics meet in what could be named a Shell habitus, which for over a century propelled petrofriendly ideas in such a way that Shell became a symbol of modernity as well as a trusted house friend. I build on earlier research by Hein (2018) who emphasized

⁷ Royal seal of approval for Shell's predecessor Nederlandsche Maatschappij tot Exploitatie van Petroleumbronnen in Nederlandsch-Indië: C. Gerretson, *Geschiedenis der 'Koninklijke'*, vol. 1 (Baarn: Bosch & Keuning, 1971), 97–99. For some of the scandals in recent Shell history: Ike Okonta, Oronto Douglas, *Where Vultures Feast: Shell, Human Rights, and Oil in the Niger Delta* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2001); Jack Doyle (ed.), *Riding the Dragon: Royal Dutch Shell & the Fossil Fire* (Boston, Mass.: Environmental Health Fund, 2002); Ian Cummins, John Beasant, *Shell Shock: The Secrets and Spin of an Oil Giant* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Pub, 2005); Daniel A. Omoweh, *Shell Petroleum Development Company, the State and Underdevelopment of Nigeria's Niger Delta: A Study in Environmental Degradation* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2005); Keetie Sluyterman, *Geschiedenis van Koninklijke Shell*, vol. 3, *Concurreren in turbulente markten, 1973-2007* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2007), 314–329 (Apartheid), 335–341 (Brent Spar), 342–355 (Nigeria); Keetie Sluyterman, "Royal Dutch Shell: Company Strategies for Dealing with Environmental Issues", *Business History Review*, vol. 84, n°2, 2010, 203–226 and Marcel Metze, *Hoog spel. De politieke biografie van Shell* (Amsterdam: Balans, 2023), 389–440, 454–504, 522–528. A very critical Dutch book about Shell in the 1980s: René Didde et. al. (red.), *Als het tij keert: Shell en Nederland, macht & verbeelding* (Amsterdam: Ravijn, 1989).

how Dutch petromodernity has transformed Dutch landscapes and everyday practices, and by Plets and Kuijt (2022) who demonstrated how prominent hydrocarbon players like Shell and NAM have bought their way (and ideology) into major Dutch museums, presenting themselves as homegrown models of innovation.⁸

6 Linking Michael Billig's concept 'banal nationalism' to Shell's position in the Netherlands I try to enrich our understanding of how fossil fuel companies, very much like their commodities, are at their most powerful when they can hide in plain sight.⁹ I focus on three distinct yet inter-related aspects: the résumés and memoirs of prominent politicians who have worked for Shell, the way Shell seems to sponsor Dutch culture and nature as elements of national heritage, and the position and image of Shell as it is conveyed in elite art works, the books of highly respected artists like one of its most famous employees, multi-award winning experimental writer Gerrit Krol in particular.

BANAL NATIONALISM AND BANAL PETROCULTURE

7 For far too long, social scientist Michael Billig suggested in 1995, academics and media tended to see nationalists as 'the other' – rebel rousers in former Soviet states or weird separatists tearing up Yugoslavia or, for that matter, Belgium or Canada. A misleading frame, Billig claimed, because it overlooks the deeply rooted nationalism in established nation states like France and the United States. In his eponymous book he labeled their type "banal nationalism" – not

⁸ Carola Hein, "Oil Spaces: The Global Petroleumscape in the Rotterdam/The Hague Area", *Journal of Urban History*, vol. 44, n° 5, 2018, 887–929; Gertjan Plets, Marin Kuijt, "Gas, Oil and Heritage: Well-Oiled Histories and Corporate Sponsorship in Dutch Museums (1990-2021)", *BMGN-Low Countries Historical Review*, vol. 137, n°1, 2022, 50–77. For a general discussion of the concept 'petroculture', see the Introduction to this special issue.

⁹ Fossil fuels hiding in plain sight, see: Sheena Wilson et. al., "On Petrocultures: Or, Why We Need to Understand Oil to Understand Everything Else", Sheena Wilson et. al. (eds.), *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture* (Montreal/Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 4.

because it tends to be peaceful or benign (the Falklands and Gulf Wars were very much on his mind) but because it manifests itself in daily, indeed mundane practices. Singing the national anthem before a local sports game, pledging allegiance to the flag, sports pages mainly devoted to national competitions, celebrating national holidays or teaching what is considered to be the national language – these practices are “so familiar, so continual” that we barely register them. “The metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building.”¹⁰ Billig’s intention in reframing and broadening the term nationalism was unapologetically political. With *Banal Nationalism* he wanted to “draw attention to the powers of an ideology which is so familiar that it hardly seems noticeable.”¹¹

- 8 That is where petroculture comes in. The grip fossil fuels hold on our lives is also based on deeply ingrained daily practices (heating our homes, driving to work, powering our tooth brushes and tablets) we don’t tend to notice. (Or only start noticing during an energy crisis, not unlike how many Americans expected their neighbors to be visibly and audibly more patriotic after 9/11.) In this article I try to adapt Billig’s line of thinking to the power of fossil fuel companies, not by looking at their actual extraction and production or their lobbying practices but on how they have managed to become a piece of furniture so ubiquitous we stopped noticing it, even if their power should be a source of concern.
- 9 The impact of banal nationalism, Billig stressed time and again, should not be underestimated. Real wars are being fought by nation states which do not consider themselves to be nationalist at all. I want to argue that petroculture functions not that differently. The power of petrostates is well established. Banal petroculture, on the other hand, like banal nationalism, operates more subtly. Not necessarily under the radar: gas stations and oil tanker trucks are

there, for everybody to see. It is in the realm of culture, however, in books, films, museums, tourist attractions and the general discourse that banal petroculture really manifests itself. Like product placement in games and tv shows the sheer presence in our daily lives of fossil fuel companies’ logos naturalizes petroculture, and even more so if they appear in places where you wouldn’t expect them. If a substantial number of its politicians have a stint at a fossil fuel company on their resumé it becomes normal for a country to have a political class full of petropoliticians. If a fossil fuel company’s products are also part of the entertainment industry or art world, they become associated with leisure or having fun. Together these petrosigns come to symbolize a world in which fossil fuels are assumed to be crucial ingredients of a modern and developed society. And, to be clear, those societies can be found outside of fully-fledged petrostates as well.

Petrostates like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Venezuela, Nigeria, and Russia are nation states where a small elite wields enormous power, both politically and economically, based on the presence of oil or natural gas in their country’s soil. Those nations, one could say, are examples of non-banal petroculture. In these countries it is impossible to ignore the impact and power of fossil fuels. They are the petroculture counterpart of what nationalism is in places like Serbia or Catalonia. I want to suggest, however, that there are also banal petrostates. My case in point is the Netherlands, a liberal democracy and founding member of the European Union with supposedly very strong institutions.¹²

Plets and Kuijt have argued convincingly that in the 1970s the Netherlands became an actual “petrostate” when “production at Slochteren,

¹⁰ Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995), 8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹² An important caveat: this article only deals with the European part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Its colonial history and presence when it comes to petroculture is a whole different story which deserves a separate article. See Sinaya Wolfert, *Curaçao: Life with an oil refinery* (Amsterdam: Sinaya Wolfert Fotografie, 2019) for a multi-faceted presentation of how Shell and the Lesser Antilles island almost became synonymous.

then Europe's largest gas reservoir, was significantly increased", making the country "highly reliant on royalties paid by the gas companies for filling the treasury and balancing the budgets".¹³ These shared financial interests obviously played a major role in the Groningen earthquake debacle. That it took so long for this tragedy to become a national scandal, however, might have had other reasons as well. The peripheral position of the Groningen province probably was a factor. But I want to suggest the position Shell/NAM had in the hearts and minds of so many people – the population at large, but members of the elites in particular – is also part of the explanation.¹⁴ There seems to have been a form of cognitive dissonance at play: it proved very difficult to be critical or even skeptical when it came to Shell. Shell, for most Dutch people, were the *good guys*, creating jobs and revenue on an enormous scale, and, more importantly, symbolizing some of the central values of the nation.

- 12 Together with former electronics company Philips, Royal Dutch Shell came to epitomize innovation and modernity in the Netherlands.¹⁵ Unlike Philips, however, the fossil fuel giant also featured "Dutch" in its name, making it the perfect standard bearer, both home and abroad, of a nation eager to embrace and espouse progress. When banal nationalism and banal petroculture are mixed the results can be explosive. As Carola Hein noted, "Royal Dutch Shell has become a national icon in the Netherlands [...] and this status has further increased its power to transform physical and cultural landscapes through interventions at

the government level."¹⁶ A closer look at how Shell is part and parcel of so many aspects of Dutch culture might help us understand how banal petroculture functions.

THE ROYAL ONE

Both its first official history and the title of one of Gerrit Krol's novels refer to Royal Dutch Shell colloquially, or maybe a more apt word would be fondly, as the 'Koninklijke', literally: the royal one. By no means is Shell the only Dutch firm to boast its royal approval in its name. The K in KLM, after all, stands for 'Koninklijke' as well. Yet amongst these companies Shell is the *primus inter pares*. Hence, only Shell is being referred to with the abbreviation 'de Koninklijke'. 13

Shell's early history was a harbinger of things to come. Instrumental in establishing this new company and in the Spring of 1890 obtaining the royal epithet to this yet-to-be-founded corporation, usually only granted after decades of successful functioning, was N.P van den Berg, former president of the Bank of Java and from 1889 onwards president of the central bank of the Netherlands, De Nederlandsche Bank. H.D. Levyssohn Norman, the first chairman of the board of what would initially be called the Koninklijke Nederlandsche Maatschappij tot Exploitatie van Petroleumbronnen in Nederlandsch Indië (Royal Dutch Company for the Exploitation of Petroleum in the Dutch East Indies) was a member of Parliament, as was another board member D. de Ruiter Zijlker. Besides being a chemist specialized in analyzing petroleum W.J.E. Hekmeijer, co-founder, shareholder and also member of the first board, was a former lieutenant colonel of the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army, better known as KNIL.¹⁷ In other words, from its very first days this colonial petroleum company was run by men hailing from the top of the Dutch political, financial, military and colonial establishment. 14

¹³ In Plets & Kuijt, "Gas, Oil and Heritage", 57 (cf. note 8).

¹⁴ During the parliamentary debate on 6 June 2023 Prime Minister Mark Rutte labelled the relations between his officials and the gas and oil industry as "too intimate", but in an exchange with MP Pieter Omtzigt he explicitly refused to use that same label for Dutch cabinet members' relationships with Shell, despite the fact that former Shell CEO Van Beurden called Rutte a "friend" during the hearings (See note 6).

¹⁵ A point made earlier in Plets & Kuijt, "Gas, Oil and Heritage", 61 (cf. note 8) when they note how Shell is seen and presented "as a national institution driving Dutch science and innovation".

¹⁶ Hein, "Oil Spaces", 918-919 (cf. note 8).

¹⁷ Gerretson, *Geschiedenis der 'Koninklijke*, 91-99 (cf. note 7).

15 A separate history could and perhaps should be written about the interconnectedness of these Dutch elite institutions and prominent Shell employees.¹⁸ These are just a few examples. Hendrik Colijn, one of the country's most legendary Prime Ministers (1925–1926/1933–1939), served as lieutenant in the Aceh War under the infamous KNIL-general J.B. van Heutsz, before becoming managing director of the Bataafsche Petroleum Maatschappij in 1914 and, in 1921, general manager of Royal Dutch Shell. In recent history as well, the distance from the Hague's political center to the Shell headquarters in that same city seems even less than the 1.9 kilometer it actually is. The influence works both ways, from Dutch politics to Shell and from Shell to the upper regions of Dutch politics. From 2003 onwards social-democrat Dick Benschop, former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs (1998–2002), worked for Shell in The Hague and Kuala Lumpur, before becoming CEO of Shell Netherlands in May 2011 (making him a key witness in the Groningen hearings). After serving as Prime Minister from 1994 until 2002 the social-democrat Wim Kok became a member of the board. The conservative-liberal Gerrit Zalm, the longest serving Finance Minister in Dutch history and chairman of the board of ABN Amro bank from 2009 until 2017, became a Shell board member in 2013. By hiring these top politicians the company acquires both their policy insights and their international networks.¹⁹ Shell's very successful recruitment

¹⁸ The links are often so blatant even right wing and corporate minded media took notice. See: Jean Dohmen, "Oliegigant Shell is staat in de staat", *EWmagazine.nl*, 26/06/2018. Url: <https://www.ewmagazine.nl/economie/achtergrond/2018/06/oliegigant-shell-is-staat-in-een-staat-136892w/> (accessed 12/06/2023) also Niels Markus, "Het aantal Haagse politici met Shell op hun cv is overweldigend", *Trouw*, 16 November 2021.

¹⁹ Paul Schnabel's case is a bit different, but significant in its own right: he wrote columns for Shell's Dutch quarterly *Venster* while he was serving on the Social and Economic Council and while he was a Senator for the social liberal party D (2015–2019). He was general director of SCP, the official Netherlands Institute for Social Research (1998–2013), and is generally considered to be one of the country's leading public intellectuals (university professor at Utrecht with scientific integrity as his area of expertise) and one of the most influential people of the Netherlands (on the board of countless museums and special councils, including Shell's). His father and brother worked for Shell and he

practices also produce high potentials who might later on seek office. Two of the three Deputy Prime Ministers in the current Dutch government, christian-democrat Wopke Hoekstra and social liberal Sigrid Kaag, worked for Shell before becoming politicians. A similar trajectory was followed by the conservative-liberal leader and European Commissioner Frits Bolkestein and by Wouter Bos, Labour party leader and Deputy Prime Minister from 2007 until 2010. Both wrote a memoir in which they reflected on their Shell years. A close reading of these memoirs enables us to get a closer look at the values and practices they cherished from these years.

Just a Case of Successful Management: Shell Politicians

Working in East Africa, Honduras, El Salvador, 16 Indonesia and the London and Paris offices Bolkestein was with Shell from 1960 until 1976. In his 2013 memoir *Cassandra tegen wil en dank* (Reluctant Cassandra), he presents Shell as the ideal workplace for a person with his ambitions and temperament. "What is the essence of Shell? Is it oil, gas or chemistry? Is it technology? No, it's management. Without my Shell experience I wouldn't have been able to be a successful leader of my party in the House of Representatives."²⁰ An impressive global network is obviously something Bolkestein built in these years, but the main management lesson he learned would prove influential for his politics: "My Shell experience had taught me that it is better not to avoid tough choices."²¹ It was a management style that fitted perfectly in the neoliberal age Bolkestein helped to shape politically. Its core message – there is no alternative to sound management policies – was echoed in his memoir's title.

was able to go to college on a Shell scholarship; he is a close friend of Jeroen van der Veer's, former Royal Dutch Shell's CEO (2004–2009). On one occasion Van der Veer took Schnabel (and former Prime Minister Wim Kok) on a Shell company plane to see an opera in London. ("Paul Schnabel", *Brandpunt Profiel*, 19/02/2012. Url: https://www.npostart.nl/profiel/19-02-2012/POW_00445545 (accessed 12/06/2023))

²⁰ Frits Bolkestein, *Cassandra tegen wil en dank. Memoires* (Amsterdam: Prometheus/Bert Bakker, 2013), 76 (all translations from Dutch sources are mine, gb).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

- 17 When he himself made the apparently tough choice of leaving Shell to become a politician, however, he asked the company to make a telling exception. “In the meantime I had a financial problem. I was 43 years old. When I would turn 47 I was entitled to early retirement [sic] [...] The thing was that every Shell employee who, for whatever reason, had to leave the company, could avail oneself of redundancy pay. I did not fit into that category – my next position was already clear – but nevertheless I asked if a similar arrangement was possible because of my uncertain political future. It was.”²² For the reader it was not entirely clear whether this passage should have been read as cynical or patently naïve. Apart from the fact that Bolkestein and his party were not on the record as proponents of enlarging the welfare system it seems unlikely he did not appreciate why Shell would grant this exception to him, a high achieving, ambitious, by all accounts brilliant manager hoping to become a central player in one of the country’s top political parties. But it never was a tough choice let alone a gamble: Bolkestein’s career switch was part of a deliberate attempt by Shell, Unilever, Philips and Akzo to influence Dutch politics by parachuting some of their own top managers in a position of power.²³
- 18 A similar faux naivety can be found in Wouter Bos’s *Dit land kan zoveel beter* (This country can do so much better, 2006) when he writes about how he ended up at Shell. “‘Dear Mr. Bos. We kindly invite you for the next step in your job application, etc, yours sincerely, Shell the Netherlands.’ I was flabbergasted when I received this letter in my mailbox. Sure, a few days earlier I had been at Shell’s for a conversation but that was nothing more than a job interview training for almost-graduates, was it? Later I would learn that Shell uses these types of informal trainings for talent scouting.” Bos was about to lose his innocence, he quickly adapted: “When I became a recruiter myself at Shell Hong Kong this was exactly how I would do it.”²⁴ Upper middleclass Bolkestein, one could say, was born to become a Shell manager. Bos wasn’t. In his family of Calvinist social-democrats who hosted Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak at their home Shell was not exactly a popular career choice. At the heights of the anti-Apartheid struggle in the 1980s Shell was generally seen as the enemy, in their circles.²⁵ Wouter Bos sympathized with that struggle and he was active himself in the Labour Party PvdA (Partij van de Arbeid) and yet: “I chose Shell. Out of rebelliousness, vanity, ambition and a desire to work at a place where I could learn a lot.”²⁶ He asked (and was granted) the right not to work in or with South Africa. And he liked what came his way instead: “To be fair, I did enjoy the spoils. A young expat working in these surroundings with this salary tended to have a great time indeed. At Shell’s they call it the golden chains, there to tie you to the company for years on end.”²⁷ Still Bos left. The reason he gives is intriguing: “I could not get worked up about it, it could not make me happy, in the end it did not do me anything at all.”²⁸ A few pages earlier Bos mentioned Shell’s troubles with Brent Spar and Ken Saro-Wiwa yet this socialist could not get worked up about his company. And he desperately wanted to care. And to lead, because his ambitions remained intact.
- In just a few years’ time he became one of the leading voices of his party. He was ready to become the top dog and felt he deserved it: “meritocratic Shell had left its traces.”²⁹ That much was clear, because in the part of the book where he writes about his political beliefs and the platform he is trying to sell – the book was part of the 2006 general election campaign

²⁴ Wouter Bos, *Dit land kan zoveel beter* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2005), 27.

²⁵ For a representative take, see this article on Shell and South Africa by a Dutch union leader: Hans Hoffman, “Je bent een brave hond als je niet blaft”, in René Didde et. al. (red.), *Als het tij keert: Shell en Nederland, macht & verbeelding* (Amsterdam: Ravijn, 1989), 24-33.

²⁶ Bos, *Dit land*, 27 (cf. note 24).

²⁷ Ibid., 35.

²⁸ Ibid., 38.

²⁹ Ibid., 43.

²² Ibid., 98.

²³ Metze, *Hoog spel*, 436 (cf. note 8).

– his ideas do not seem that different from what major corporations like Shell would want: “if an ever enlarging welfare state with higher taxes and premiums comes at the expense of growth and jobs, you’re bound to run into problems.”³⁰

20 That Shell is a well-oiled recruiting machine for the world’s elite should be clear from these accounts. In the Netherlands it has been training and forming the brightest and most ambitious of every generation for over a century because quality makes for a successful business but also because the many talented employees who might leave the company at some point in their lives are bound to end up in other important jobs. And when they do, they inevitably will bring some of Shell’s values and practices to their new working environments. In Bolkestein’s and Bos’s case these were the corridors of power, both in the Netherlands and the European Union. On some level Shell’s golden chains keep working, even if the company no longer has to pay for them. As human resources go the gold is Shell’s. Of course, this does not mean that these Shell trained politicians invariably do Shell’s bidding. It does, however, produce an *old boys network* culture in which the risk of collusion increases.

FACTS WE HAVE TO ACCEPT: SHELL AS A GUARDIAN OF DUTCH HERITAGE AND NATURE

21 In the Spring of 2022 Dutch Climate and Energy Policy Minister Rob Jetten and his colleagues of Housing and Spatial Planning, and of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy – a distribution of powers worth noting – convened with some two hundred stakeholders to discuss the government’s climate agenda. The place where they met was highly symbolic, two journalists of *De Groene Amsterdammer* noted: Madurodam. In this miniature park filled with scale models of famous Dutch landmarks and cities “the windmills are tiny, the airport disproportionately large. You could say the park really visualizes a Netherlands of interests. Drilling rigs are higher than houses, and trucks with Shell logos are all over the place. [...] Shell and KLM are amongst

[the park’s] founding fathers.”³¹ When the park was built, in the early fifties, Madurodam not only got its own hymn, praising the industrious and freedom loving Dutch, but also a founding myth and a short history, which ended on a telling high note: “Very close to the city successful drillings for oil were undertaken. Large tankers regularly enter the harbor to load and ship the oil.”³² Shell’s ubiquity at Madurodam is indeed a striking case of mimesis. As to be expected, the Shell service station at the park is a perfect copy of a station you could find on a real Dutch highway; the Madurodam NAM oil and gas production platform on the other hand has a few small NAM logo’s but to any Dutch person its yellow-and-red color scheme simply screams: Shell. Madurodam illustrates perfectly how Shell is quite literally part of the national make-up.³³

22 As Dutch tourism and national heritage go Shell has a very rich and telling history. Promotional maps and brochures about the Dutch landscape have been a staple of their pr efforts for decades; showing “icons of gas stations in a landscape dotted with oversized windmills and traditional Dutch houses with tulips, enticing the user to explore neighboring cities and regions” they have been, as Carola Hein noted, “promoting the car as a vehicle of freedom and discovery.”³⁴ A remarkable but little noted example are the booklets Shell sent out from 1961 to 1993 during the holiday season to tens of thousands of

³¹ Jaap Tielbeke, Coen van de Ven, “De minister van groene verleiding. Profiel: Rob Jetten”, *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 6 July 2022. When Madurodam opened in 1952 Shell’s president was one of its trustees (*Shell Venster*, n° 1, 2014, 7).

³² Peter Hofstede, “Hymne van Madurodam”, *Langs de rails*, Url: https://www.nicospilt.com/index_Madurodam.htm (last access 16/08/2023); myth: “Graaf van Laagland stichtte Madurodam”, in *Madurodam*, 1954, 5.

³³ Plets and Kuijt demonstrate how Shell’s involvement in Dutch museum extends far beyond Madurodam. Shell/NAM supported important historical museums (Netherlands Open Air Museum, National Museum Boerhave and the Drents Museum), making possible specific exhibitions about energy history and policy. The Boerhave case in particular seems to have mixed banal nationalism and banal petroculture: “the exhibition discursively connected fossil fuels to Dutch citizenship or ‘Nederlandschap’. Plets, Kuijt, “Gas, Oil and Heritage”, 60 (cf. note 8).

³⁴ Hein, “Oil Spaces”, 918 (cf. note 8).

³⁰ Ibid., 124.

its business relations. Mixing banal nationalism with banal petroculture these *Shell Journals* mainly dealt with either Dutch nature (trees, rivers, ponds) or Dutch culture (folklore, brass bands, monuments, bridges). In the mid-1960s these promotional gifts were tour guides (to old villages, castles and country houses), making them in effect also gifts to Shell itself, because these automobile tours would obviously require petrol.

23 Shell commissioned these books from a limited set of authors, the most famous of them probably being Leonhard Huizinga, son of historian Johan Huizinga. The introductions to these highly informative books, signed by subsidiaries of Shell itself, tried to impress upon the reader the importance of the topic at hand. When these topics dealt with nature, they invariably smell of pr while also being good for business.

24 Take the introduction to volume 1, Huizinga's 1961 *Natuurwijzer* (nature primer): "The population of this good small country increases with frightening speed. The cities, most of all Randstad Holland, grow accordingly. Industry advances towards the country side. Nature is being pushed back by a streamlining world. These are facts which we have to accept. Yet we should never forget that if he loses contact with living nature man is doomed to unhappiness."³⁵ Progress and modernity are a given and, inevitably, nature has got to give. The five-day working week and the fact that more people are using motorized vehicles make it possible for people to find leisure far away from home, the introduction states, stressing how important it is for nature to be preserved. In words they tellingly do not use: our cars, roads, factories and installations take away nature, yet our cars will also bring us to whatever is left of nature.³⁶

³⁵ Shell Nederland Verkoopmaatschappij, "Wereld in stroomlijn", in Leonhard Huizinga, *Shell natuurwijzer: een twaalf-provinciën rhapsodie* (Den Haag: Shell Nederland Verkoopmaatschappij, 1961), 4.

³⁶ This illustrates another point of Hein's: "Company publications geared at the general public continued to construct a spatial meaning that is different from the one that they actually build: their focus remains on accessibility of

Another fascinating example was published 25 during and on the occasion of the European Conservation Year 1970. Topic of that year's special publication: Dutch water. "We at Shell believe that at the end of the European Conservation Year N 70 more special attention should be devoted to water. We should never forget the universal meaning of water." This issue was signed by Shell's Sales Department and, more remarkably, by its Chemistry division. As if Shell's many products did not impact Dutch waterways. (And even more startling: this issue was dedicated to the Dutch bird protection organization who provided an extra preface; as if Shell's pesticides had nothing to do with the many birds who saw their habitats destroyed.) That same year Shell also published a thirty page brochure called *Shell en het leefmilieu. Het leefmilieu en Shell* (Shell and the environment. The environment and Shell) about N 70 in which it called for more intergovernmental power and boundary setting: "It would be advisable to see this communal approach transformed into an intergovernmental organization which, amongst other things, would set uniform boundaries and lists environmental protection measures."³⁷ It might seem strange to see Shell advocate strong regulations but these were clearly in the interest of any multinational company – without international limits there would no longer be a level playing field. And a specific worry for Dutch Shell: what if Dutch rules proved stricter than those in neighboring countries? The rest of this techno-optimistic booklet was *defensive* in nature (look at what we're already doing!), but Shell's detractors were not convinced. In a brochure with the exact same title as Shell's the anonymous authors who called themselves 'werkgroep olie-nood' (working group oil-alarm) annotated the original text, zooming in specifically on parts

natural, historical, and cultural spaces. The representational petroleumscape constructs space and identity as well as culture in and for spaces far beyond the ones that they actually occupy. For the general public, these publicities constructed a feedback loop that clearly tied the petroleum actors to freedom of driving and the joy of leisure." Hein, "Oil Spaces", 920 (cf. note 8).

³⁷ *Shell en het leefmilieu, het leefmilieu en Shell* (Rotterdam: Shell, 1970), 5.

where the company tried to shift the responsibility for environmental issues from the industry to individual citizens.

26 The 1970 Shell brochure was not always subtle in that respect (“Educating Dutch citizens to become environmentally conscious sometimes seems to be the most pressing environmental problem in this country”³⁸) but the *Shell Journals* took a more cautious approach. Yet, introducing the 1979 issue on Dutch trees, the collective assignment Shell put in its preface (“It is up to this generation to care for trees in such a way later generations will be able to say that we, in the 20th Century, gave them the care they deserve”³⁹) conveniently left out any mentioning of industrial products or activities that have proven very harmful to trees. It is a telling difference: whereas the 1970 brochure was a PR ploy aimed at both recuperating the environmental consciousness of the era and pushing back at criticism Shell had had to endure in this respect, the issues of *Shell Journaal* linked the company to those aspects of Dutch (or for that matter: any) life – trees, water, birds – no person in their right mind would criticize. And by systematically focusing on the Dutchness of those trees and wetlands Shell presented itself not only as a promotor but even as a *guardian* of all good things local, nature very much included.

27 Shell’s guardianship is not only rhetorical. Especially when it comes to Dutch Masters, a key component of Dutch heritage and tourism, the company has a decades old tradition of financial aid and research. In 1990 they sponsored the Mauritshuis’ exhibition *Dutch Masters from America*; twenty years later they financed an extension to the museum, tellingly called the Royal Dutch Shell Wing. As part of Shell’s ‘Partners in Science’ project the museum’s restoration team worked closely with the renowned Shell Technology Centre Amsterdam (STCA), as did from 2000 to 2018 the Van Gogh Museum and the Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel

Erfgoed (RCE, Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands) in a systematic effort to analyze the Van Gogh paintings in their collection made in Paris, Arles, Saint-Rémy and Auvers-sur-Oise. In a press release about the joint Van Gogh research project Shell Netherlands CEO Marjan van Loon emphasized how proud she was to have contributed to preserving “an important part of Dutch cultural heritage”.⁴⁰

“THESE ARE GREAT PEOPLE.” ARTISTS AND INTELLECTUALS & SHELL

A Picture of Shell

If there is such a thing as *high* petroculture, Shell 28 is certainly part of that too in the Netherlands. Filmmakers, poets, prose writers... some of the Netherlands’ most famous artists have worked for or on Shell. Joris Ivens (1898-1989) and Bert Haanstra (1916-1997), arguably the country’s most renowned documentary filmmakers, made what was called *Shell Films*. Iven’s *Oil for Aladdin’s Lamp* (1941) only survives in a 1949 re-edit, a techno optimist display of products and gadgets which are oil-based; a World War II-propaganda effort which Ivens did not really care about, apparently.⁴¹

Haanstra, on the other hand, worked over a 29 decade for Shell and he considered these years and the many films he worked on for the company as a crucial phase in his career. No wonder, the London based Shell Film Unit seemed to have unlimited resources, was explicitly not supposed to make promotional films, and guaranteed an audience of millions for these documentaries, as they were shown on ships, in prisons, canteens, and schools. In the Netherlands every year about

⁴⁰ Carolien Terlien, “Meesterlijk partnerschap”, *Shell Venster*, n° 3, 2014, 22-26; “‘Partner in Science’ Van Gogh Museum; alle late schilderijen van Van Gogh zijn onderzocht”, *Shell*, 10/08/2018. Url: <https://www.shell.nl/media/persberichten/2018-media-releases/partner-in-science.html> (accessed 12/06/ 2023).

⁴¹ “Shell’s Wildest Dreams”, *European Foundation Joris Ivens*. Url: <https://ivens.nl/en/home/177-shell-s-wild-est-dreams> (accessed 12/06/2023); Joris Ivens, *Oil for Aladdin’s Lamp* (1949 Ca.), YouTube, 07/01/2022. Url: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SouSnXwgsto> (accessed 12/06/2023).

³⁸ Ibid., 30.

³⁹ Shell Nederland B.V., “Ten geleide”, in Jaap Hage, *Shell-journaal van Nederlandse bomen* (Rotterdam: Shell, 1979), 5.

a million people watched a Shell film. Brilliant displays of petroculture they were, not aimed at selling products directly, yet obviously showing the Shell logo and informing the audience, as in science films, about the history and wonders of petroleum or other Shell products these films project an image of progress, heroism and service. *The Rival World*, a 1955 full color film presenting insects in close-up as never before, is actually about how dangerous a pest they are and, thus, about the urgent need for insecticides. *The Changing Earth* (1953), *The Search for Oil* (1953), *The Wildcat* (1953) and *The Oilfield* (1954), a series about all stages of oil production, filmed in Indonesia, presents this enterprise as a mix of exploration, scientific rigor and determination. *Dike Builders* (1952) shows age-old techniques and hard manual labor, but is also about a new method of dike building with asphalt. Considering the eternal, nation-defining battle against water in the Netherlands it is also a clear example of banal nationalism – here as well reinforcing the idea that Shell is looking out for the Dutch.⁴²

31 Shell knew who to hire to document its activities. When their Amsterdam Laboratory celebrated its fiftieth year Sybren Polet and Carel Blazer were asked to produce a coffee table book about the working methods of the lab. Photographer Blazer (1911-1980) had documented the labor struggles of the thirties and, as a resistance man, the misery of the war years. Sybren Polet (1924-2015) stands to this day as one of the foremost experimental writers in the Dutch language – a major literary award for that type of literature is named after him. In *Verkenning in het onbekende* (Exploration into the unknown, 1964) Polet would explicitly link his working methods with those of the scientists in the lab. Working at Shell's is also about *creativity*, he emphasizes, often “the result of intuition; science comes later, when a phenomenon needs to be explained. Everybody in the business of creation, whether an artist or

scientist, will admit frankly to the share of intuition.”⁴³ Thanks to Polet Shell could add a certain *je ne sais quoi* avant-garde vibe to its image of service, progress and success. It should be clear to all: this firm was cutting edge.

Histories of Shell

Ever conscious of its outside image and proud of its heritage, Shell has instigated two of the most impressive non-governmental Dutch historiographical projects of the last hundred years: twice they asked prominent Dutch historians to write its history. The first one was written by Frederik Carel Gerretson (1884-1958), who also published poetry as Geerten Gossaert. In 1917 Gerretson became Colijn's secretary at the Bataafsche Petroleum Maatschappij (BPM) and it was that same future prime minister who in 1922 asked him to write a *Geschiedenis der Koninklijke* (History of the royal one) which he ended up publishing in three volumes (1932, 1936, 1941).⁴⁴ Gerretson did most of the research and writing for these volumes while he was extraordinary professor of ‘Old and Younger History of the Dutch East-Indies and Comparative Colonial History’ at Utrecht University, a special chair endowed by colonial businesses in the Dutch East Indies, Shell subsidiary BPM in particular.⁴⁵

In 2007, a century after BPM was established, a new multivolume *History of Royal Dutch Shell* was published, again produced at the behest of the company at Utrecht University. Both projects exist in a Dutch and English version, all of them published by prominent houses.⁴⁶

Gerrit Krol and Shell

When in 1950 Gerretson was awarded the very prestigious Constantijn Huygens award for literature the jury explicitly mentioned his

⁴² Paragraph based on the films mentioned in the text and Hans Schoots, *Bert Haanstra. Filmer van Nederland* (Amsterdam: Mets & Schilt, 2009), 81-89. For the Dutch nation defining relationship to water, see Tracy Metz and Maartje van den Heuvel, *Sweet & Salt: Water and the Dutch* (Rotterdam: New York: NAI Publishers, 2012).

⁴³ Sybren Polet, Carel Blazer, *Verkenning in het onbekende. Vijftig jaar Koninklijke Shell Laboratorium* (Koninklijke Shell Laboratorium, 1964), 15.

⁴⁴ Volumes four and five were published posthumously in 1973, based on Gerretson's extensive notes. The first volumes went through several editions in the 1930s and early 1940s.

⁴⁵ Information obtained via Parlement.com.

⁴⁶ Joost Jonker et al., *A History of Royal Dutch Shell*, 4 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

“monumental” Shell history. Thirty six years later his colleague Gerrit Krol (1934–2013) was awarded the same award, but maybe he wouldn’t be able to come collect it, a newspaper wrote, because his employer Shell had just sent him to Nigeria. Not a trivial addition to the article, because Shell features heavily in Krol’s deconstructed autobiographies. His Nigeria stint would end up inspiring his 1994 novel *Okoka’s Wonderpark*, though despite its oil theme Shell was not mentioned there. That hadn’t always been the case. In 2001 Krol was awarded the even more prestigious P.C. Hooftprijs and to celebrate, his publishing house Querido collected his Shell-themed works – three stories and three novels – in a volume tellingly entitled *Krol & de Koninklijke* (Krol and the royal one).



Figure 1: The cover of a Krol novel, designed by Boudewijn Ietswaart.

Despite featuring Shell’s logo on its cover (see figure 1) the title of the oldest of these – 1973’s *De chauffeur verveelt zich* (The driver is bored) – presents itself as potentially petrocritical. The driver’s boredom however is never mentioned nor explained.⁴⁷ Quite early on the author describes his book as being about “an excess. Luxury. Uselessness of a person producing that luxury” but many more parts of the book seem to revel in that luxury, more specifically the luxury of automobiles, machinery, and technology.⁴⁸ The narrator wants his book to be about “the goal I set for myself in life”, but it remains up to the reader to figure out what that goal could be.⁴⁹ It might have to do with beauty or, judging from the next passage, the technological sublime: “I wanted to write poems so badly and I was of the opinion I needed a suitable environment to do so. / Three, four fuel trucks in a row on the road.”⁵⁰ Interpreted as a poem which omits crucial information, this passage might also be read as ‘How I Ended Up Working For Shell’, Shell apparently being the place or producer of environments suitable to writing poetry. The sheer beauty of their machinery sometimes seemed to cast a spell.

At some point the narrator is sent to Sicily as part of a crew building a chemical plant. “When the job was done and the scaffolding was taken down and the thing stood there naked and glowing on the plane I almost vomited from happiness.”⁵¹ This was modernity for you: the promise of progress and economic growth through the sheer elegance of modern shiny objects and technology. The narrator, as Krol a scientist very much into logic, math and automation, tends to pose big questions and rarely shies away from answering them. “What is the function of a human being? A link in the automation

⁴⁷ See also Ad Zuiderent, *Een dartele geest: aspecten van De chauffeur verveelt zich en ander werk van Gerrit Krol* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1989), 212. Chapter 4 of this close reading of the novel tries to explain the title.

⁴⁸ Gerrit Krol, *De chauffeur verveelt zich* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1973), 11.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁵⁰ *Id.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

lying on its back and floating on the blue, tepid waves, hands to the side as fins, almost immobile, and *unable to stop enjoying*.⁵² A philosophical riddle also related to petroculture for sure, as this very modern type of *dolce far niente* was only made possible through fossil fuels (and the exploitation of countries and people to extract them). Not to say that there isn't any ambivalence in him, but it is very hard if not impossible to determine where the irony starts or ends. "My desire to be a productive member of society or, sometimes, unnecessarily, to destroy this society. I can do both."⁵³ Maybe he can, but he does not change jobs.

36 Krol's next book, *In dienst van de 'koninklijke'* (lit: in the service of the 'royal one'; or: employee of the 'royal one', 1974), is even more Shell-centric. The back cover shows the author on what appears to be an oil rig, in front of a KLM helicopter. The caption reads: "The function of this book? Shell has no use for it. Despite it being one of her employees' purest thoughts c.q. motivations". On the first page of the book its publisher (or the author himself?) adds that it should be read as "a 'success-story', without it being clear whether the main character really accomplishes anything. It is the story of a dreamer molding the world to his will. It is an authentic description of what we tend to call a 'poet'" – again a description which might turn the whole book into an exercise in irony. How could you see yourself as someone molding the world to your will if you are a Shell employee? Krol seems to want to suggest he uses Shell – because the company turns out to be a great source of inspiration – but, of course, he very well knows it's a two-way street. "[M]y profession – optimizing the daily operations of a subsidiary."⁵⁴ And in *La Concepción* (Bolivia) he is part of an endeavor which – seen in the light of the Groningen debacle – has a very peculiar ring to it: "These numbers had to prove this subsidence and these floodings were not the result

of oil production, but of something else..."⁵⁵ Of course, one should never equate narrator and biographical author, but are readers supposed to experience this book as the total opposite of a success-story, as the apologetic musings of a failure? "Autonomy, that was what I wanted; to develop the capacity to build something, something also to be categorized in terms like freedom, glory and right."⁵⁶ To which he adds: "Lots has been said about these words, I should use them more often."⁵⁷ Which, of course, he never again does.

Krol's third book about Shell is actually 37 more about NAM (as was mentioned before: Nederlandse Aardolie Maatschappij, jointly owned by Shell and Exxon). *60.000 hours* (1998) is explicitly presented as *An Autobiography* of the years he worked in the local gas extraction business. Again his assignment is to automate crucial work processes and, judging from this book, he does so with great results. A success story, after all. Socially as well. He is well liked by most of his colleagues and he likes them. Even more than that: "I love these people. They know what they are doing. The Groningen gas field is safe with them [is in good hands, gb]".⁵⁸ Considering the fact that five years before *60.000 hours* was published a NAM-cosponsored investigation had officially acknowledged that there was a correlation between earthquakes and gas extraction, this sounded more than a bit apologetic.⁵⁹

The most revealing part of Krol's quite extensive 38 critical and academic reception is that it never really deals with the nature of the companies he's working for and discussing in his books. He has been interpreted as a modernist or postmodernist, a neo-symbolist or neo-cubist, a writer obsessed with the tension between

52 Ibid., 47.

53 Ibid., 97.

54 Gerrit Krol, *In dienst van de 'Koninklijke'* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1974), 65.

55 Ibid., 71.

56 Ibid., 95.

57 Id.

58 Gerrit Krol, *60 000 uur. Een autobiografie* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1998), 44.

59 For the 1993 findings by the Supervisory Committee of Research into Earthquakes, see Parliamentary Committee, 34-35 (cf. note 1).

truth, reality and deception or structure, bureaucracy and organizations, but even this century the fact that Krol was working for Big Oil did not seem relevant.⁶⁰ Apparently high culture made it even easier to hide in plain sight.

TABLES ARE TURNING, HOUSES COLLAPSING

39 In October of 2018 Marcel Möring, ex-NAM-employee, an admirer of Krol's, and a prominent Dutch author in his own right, published an essay called 'De bel en ik' (lit: the [gas]field and me') in Shell quarterly *Venster*, deploring the end of an era. Yes, NAM should be criticized for its handling of the Groningen earthquake damage, but people should also realize what they were about to lose, now that the government had decided to discontinue the extraction of gas: jobs and everything NAM's 'gas culture' had represented. Möring also mentioned how generous a sponsor of local culture the company has been – "I myself received money a few times for exhibitions and art projects".⁶¹

40 By the late 2010s this type of nostalgia for the era of untroubled progress had become rare in Dutch high culture, however. Piet Hein van der Hoek's acclaimed and award-winning documentary *De Stille Beving* (lit: the silent quake, 2017) presents NAM in general and Shell's legal department in particular as a highly effective destroyer of houses, families, and people's health, prospects and faith in democratic institutions. In Groningen's Fieke Gosselaar's 2018 novel *Het land houdt van stilte* (lit: the land loves silence) NAM only pops up as a company

⁶⁰ Exception to this rule is the Marxist critic J.F. Vogelaar who wrote, after reading *In dienst van de 'Koninklijke'*: "It's typical that a man, writing a book about little games because he likes to think up rules of these games hoping they might make the world a bit more transparent [surveyable, gb], that when he writes about a game which is a bit larger in which he himself is a pawn (the worldwide web of oil groups) he applies the same scaling-down technique. This simplification might make everything more transparent [surveyable, gb], but not more clear." (J.F. Vogelaar, *Konfrontaties: Kritieken en commentaren* (Nijmegen: Socialistiese Uitgeverij Nijmegen, 1974), 59.

⁶¹ Marcel Möring, "De bel en ik", *Shell Venster*, n°4, 2018, 29.

trying to shirk its responsibilities.⁶² That same year Saskia Goldschmidt's Groningen earthquake novel *Schokland* (lit: shock land, or quake land) contained a remarkable number of scenes about local taciturn farmers in tears, devastated by what was done to their age old farms and by the crippling uncertainty as to when, how or even if they would be compensated for the damages.⁶³ When NAM experts assess the house of the farmer protagonists one of them boldly states: "De grond onder uw bestaan is prut" ["The ground beneath your existence is mud [trash]"] – a claim aimed at deflecting the firm's responsibility but also an insensitive appraisal of what was left of these people's lives.⁶⁴ As part of NAM Shell seems to have become the country's bogeyman, signaling a dramatic shift of its public image.

CONCLUSION: A TROUBLED LOVE AFFAIR

Indirectly, Royal Dutch Shell made Time Magazine's 2021 100 Most Influential People list through Dutch lawyer Roger Cox, who tries to use judicial means to protect the planet and who made world headlines with the May 26 2021 Dutch verdict against Shell. Years of greenwashing and soft power seemed to have no impact on the Dutch judge who forced this fossil fuel giant to reduce its emissions with 45% by 2030. A telling detail in *Duty of Care*, Nic Balthazar's 2022 documentary on Cox, is that the lawyer is married to the daughter of a Royal Dutch Shell engineer. Her family's holiday videos are packed with Shell people they met during their stays in Venezuela, Nigeria, Turkey, Bonaire and Malaysia. When environmentalists start pointing their arrows against the company the family is in shock: this is not the Shell they know! The Shell they know "doet hartstikke goeie dingen" (does terrific things)! These people had always been proud to be part of this global conglomerate, bringing energy and other vital products

⁶² Fieke Gosselaar, *Het land houdt van stilte* (Amsterdam: Ambo|Anthos, 2018), 7, 33, 100-101.

⁶³ Devastated Groningen farmers in Saskia Goldschmidt, *Schokland* (Amsterdam: Cossee, 2018), 73, 74, 77, 80, 153, 241, 254 and 273.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

to people all over the world. The cognitive dissonance they have struggled with can be seen as a *pars pro toto* of the troubled love affair the Dutch have grown to have with this company.

42 The sheer number of Dutch families that have relied on Shell salaries over the years but, more importantly, have felt part of this global adventure make for a substantial part of the Dutch population.⁶⁵ Add that to way the company has been sponsoring research into innovative technologies and its presence on highways, in tourism, and in popular and elite culture and one can begin to understand how ‘the royal one’ has felt like ‘our royal one’ to many people in the country. Yet, today Cox’s mother-in-law supports his struggle against Shell, as did at least 17.000 Dutch citizens on whose behalf the case was filed; it was a Dutch judge who convicted the company. And it was in the Netherlands that Chihiro Geuzebroek started #shellmustfall. A brainwashing instrument banal petroculture is not. The era of hiding in plain sight might be over.

Of course, whether this also implies that Shell’s grip on the Dutch elite is over remains to be seen. Yet, an interview early in 2023 in *NRC*, the Dutch paper of record, with former CEO Jeroen van der Veer might be a sign of the times. In the 1990s, Van der Veer recalled, every cabinet minister, leading public servant or journalist would jump when they received a Shell invitation. Today these types of people try very much *not* to be seen with the current CEO of the company. Leading companies apparently have become wary of hiring retired Shell people as members of the board. “As if it is something really bad to work for Shell,” Van der Veer remarked in utter disbelief.⁶⁶

Another writing on the wall might be the 43 Parliamentary Committee’s labelling of the oil companies’ request to be “compensated for loss of income due to the expedited scaling down of gas extraction” as “unjustified”.⁶⁷ Yet, while Shell seems to have fallen from grace, its financial power has only increased over the last years.⁶⁸ What they lost in soft power, they probably manage to compensate with hard cash.

⁶⁵ Shell Netherlands employed 8.500 people in 1948, around 20.000 in the 1970s and about 10.000 in the early 2000s. See Jan Luiten van Zanden, *Geschiedenis van Koninklijke Shell*, vol. 4, *Bijlagen, cijfers, toelichting, volledige bibliografie en index* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2007), 88-89.

⁶⁶ Chris Hensen, Erik van der Walle, “Oud-topman van Shell Jeroen van der Veer: ‘Het is alsof het iets ergs is als je voor Shell werkt’”, *NRC*, 21 January 2023.

⁶⁷ Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry, 76 (cf. note 1).

⁶⁸ Ron Bousso, Shadia Nasralla, “Shell 2022 Profit More than Doubles to Record \$40 Bln”, *Reuters (section Energy)*, 02/02/2023. Url: <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/shell-makes-record-40-billion-annual-profit-2023-02-02/> (accessed 15/03/ 2023).

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