



ne-Third

Land and Two-Thirds Sky

As a child Holland sailed into my consciousness on the back of a disaster. I went to school in London and they scrupulously taught us London's history. I was intrigued by the three great disasters of the reign of Charles II; in 1665, the Great Plague of London, in 1666, The Great Fire of London and in 1667 the Dutch sailed up the Medway to fire cannon-shots at the Tower of London. The first two events were in the nature of Acts of God, the third was certainly an act of the Dutch. Who were these Dutch? And how come that Charles' brother was thrown out by a Dutchman? And how come we ended up having a King who spoke English badly with a Dutch accent? And who was the little man in black velvet who fatally tumbled this Dutch King onto the back of his head when his horse tripped over a molehill on Hampstead Heath?¹ This Dutch country was called both Holland and the Netherlands – to have two names was greedy – and they spoke Dutch which sounded suspiciously like Deutsch, and they had an alarming reputation for being excessively clean. And then what about double Dutch, my old Dutch, Dutch courage, Dutch trouble, Dutch caps, to go Dutch, my Dutch uncle and even Dutch Elm Disease?

All this made for a suspicious approach to Holland. These suspicions were further assisted by my father. He was a bird-watcher in love with East Anglia, which is the closest you can get to Dutch low watery horizons without crossing the English Channel. The birds flew out to sea, eastwards from where the Dark Age invaders had come. My father dragged us, my brother and I, across those low horizons in gumboots and clutching binoculars, warning us it was even flatter and wetter in Holland.

But I am certain that the most persistent introduction to this mysterious place came later through an admiration for Dutch landscape painting. I discovered it first through English East Anglian painters like Crome and John Sell Cotman who are scarcely known outside England. I was enthusiastic for their landscapes, tried to copy them and then learnt they were copying too, copying the Dutch painters of a century before, when the strategy seemed to be to make every landscape two-thirds sky and one-third land.

I eventually came to Holland to see these two-thirds sky and one-third land paintings. I was not disappointed. Most filled the necessary criteria.

Jan van Goyen, *View of Rhenen*, 1646. Canvas, 101.5 x 136 cm.
Corcoran Gallery of Art,
Washington, DC.



This was a land where nothing fell downhill, hill-starts in a car were unknown, and mountains were a fiction. I was seventeen and stayed in a hostel near the Railway Station in Amsterdam, sleeping in a wire-frame bed four metres from the floor. Gravity ought to have been a stranger in Holland. Yet the Dutch do not fear gravity – look at Amsterdam staircases. I saw paintings of children in the Rijksmuseum whose heads were wrapped around with bandages, a feeble protection from staircase accidents. If children did not fall downstairs, they drowned in a canal. I was intrigued by the Dutch story of a woman decapitated by the sails of a windmill. A third way to die in Holland. Gravity, drowning and windmills. The first two have given me considerable subject-matter for film-making. I await an opportunity to use the third.

Cows

Perhaps there is a fourth – bicycle-riding. I have now assiduously taken to it myself. Sitting high on a sit-up-and-beg bike along Prinsengracht, still intrigued, like so many pop-eyed tourists, about the Amsterdam bicycle cult – load it with children in front and behind, dogs in baskets, dogs dragged on



Paulus Potter, *The Bull*.
1627. Canvas,
235.5 x 339 cm.
Mauritshuis, The Hague.

leads, holding two umbrellas and a portable-phone, skipping the red traffic-lights, and singing loudly, unafraid of ridicule – no brakes and certainly no lights at night, and a most nonchalant stoicism when the damn thing is stolen yet again though you loaded it with chains and padlocks and tied it to both a tree and a lamp-post.

I enjoy the scale of the Dutch cities. Even the centre of Amsterdam is still a village, pedestrian-friendly, domestically inclined, still building good vernacular architecture in brick as it has almost continuously done since the early 1600s. And outside the cities I still enjoy those long flat horizons. I now know them better. And I have developed a particular enthusiasm for those Dutch stands and rows of trees – poplars, birches – that clump together so elegantly and stretch for metres so strictly. Planted carefully in parallel rows, their lower branches stripped away to make straight vertical trunks that play tricks on the eye as you swiftly ride past them in a car along a highway.

Being Dutch and tidy, perhaps the trees do their own de-stripping. I am now prepared to swap Dutch parkland for English parkland, it comes somewhere between the ruled edges of French Le Notre, and the accidental-on-purpose of English Capability Brown. It is friendlier, less romantically deranged and less aristocratically haughty. What else do I like? Picnics on the Amstel, the gaunt new armies of windmills, my walk-in-walk-out-pass to look at Frans Hals any time I wish, the new Amsterdam Museumplein that looks like the Tuileries Gardens, the confidence of tall Dutch women, the

wind in Zeeland, the smell of cows when you leave Schiphol airport.

Practically the very first film I ever shot, back in the sixties, with an 8mm camera loaded with black and white film, was from a train window travelling from Rotterdam to Amsterdam at dawn, looking at cows. We have cows in England – exactly the same animals, but Holland has made a cult of the cow. It has exclusive cow-painters – Potter and Cuyp. On this train trip I was intrigued by the long black shadows of cows standing against the sun which gave them the appearance of standing on stilts. The drainage canals of a hundred small fields were set at right-angles to the train-track and catching the low winter sun, their surfaces reflected back quick, sharp, blinding reflections into the lens at regular intervals, making a mesmerising rhythmic pattern. The footage was used in a film called *Postcards from Eight Capital Cities*; one city was Amsterdam, the other Rotterdam. The film is now lost. My films were first shown to an international audience in Rotterdam, where I subsequently made a movie about Vermeer set in Rotterdam Zoo which curiously possessed a rarity – a Dutch mountain – some thirty metres high, the home for goats and monkeys. And I now live in Amsterdam. In a house close to the Rijksmuseum. I can see its south tower when I paint in the attic and I know there are four Vermeers under that roof, and a considerable number of those one-third land and two-third-sky paintings, and also quite a few painted cows.

Casual and confident

The enthusiasm for Dutch painting remains. How could they produce so many, and not just in the Golden Age – Rembrandt, Vermeer, van Gogh and Mondrian? The Van Gogh Museum is close. And so is the Stedelijk. Way back in 1963, way before Rudi Fuchs, I accidentally listened there for the first time to the music of Stockhausen, and saw paintings by his companion, Mary Baumeister. I tried to paint like her for several years. And he was my introduction to modern music. I later traded Stockhausen for Cage and Baumeister for RB Kitaj, but the train of influences in and via Holland is strong and they continue. I am now a collaborator at the Amsterdam Muziek Theater with the music of Louis Andriessen, and I was given licence, not at the Amsterdam Stedelijk, but at the Rotterdam Boymans van Beuningen, to make a first curatorial exhibition – it was called *The Physical Self* and we displayed human nudes in glass-cases to demonstrate where painters from Memling to De Kooning had taken their inspiration. I doubt if you would be allowed to do such a thing anywhere else. I have since tried to exhibit a dead swan in the Louvre and a live pig in the Vienna Hofburg Palace but met with rejection on both counts. A live human nude was not even to be dreamt of.

This freedom, this nonchalance, this toleration and these opportunities are often praised as being very Dutch characteristics. The necessity to trade, the smallness of the country and the impossibility of hiding in it, have no doubt contributed to these characteristics. The need to get along with foreigners has generally made the Dutch tolerant and more open, and curiously more honest – sometimes brutally honest. Holland is an old democracy – everyone can be part of a decision-making process, and curiously success is not



Johannes Vermeer, *Girl Writing a Letter*. c.1666.
Canvas, 45 x 39.9 cm.
National Gallery of Art,
Washington, DC.

The opera *Writing to Vermeer* at the Amsterdam Muziektheater, 1999.
Photo by Hans van den Bogaard (courtesy of De Nederlandse Opera, Amsterdam).

feted. Stick your head above the parapet and, watch out, you might get it lopped off. This attitude is strangely present in a Dutch aptitude to invent and instigate, but not to follow through. There is a reluctance to self-promote, which makes the embarrassment of riches an endearing characteristic, but also a fearful one, because it implies so much confidence. Self-promotion, the Dutch seem to be saying, is a characteristic of the unconfident. Which might be why the Dutch in their relaxed way are probably the best Europeans – they have been Europeans for so long. It is of course to do with trade and communications. The English are also supposed to be a trading nation. But one of the differences between Dutch and English attitudes which is touching – and I sympathise – is that although both nations were curious to travel the world, the English always regarded themselves as superior to their trading partners, yet they were not always so happy to return home – look at America, Australia, India – whereas the Dutch, though they had colonies, always came back. They knew home was best – to sit in their own convivial company comfortably – you can see it in Dutch seventeenth-century painting as you can see it now in cafés, restaurants, Amsterdam parks, domestic togetherness, families, and a liking for the very word that the English feel uncomfortable about – coziness. The Dutch kiss is threefold. The English find this excessive. I like it.



1. 'The little man in black velvet' being the mole who built the molehill that caused William III's horse to stumble and throw him, with fatal results. Political correctness not having been invented yet, supporters of the exiled Stuarts gleefully devised a new and now famous toast 'To the little gentleman in black velvet'.
2. The libretto of *Writing to Vermeer* was written by

Peter Greenaway and Louis Andriessen put it to music. The director was Saskia Bodeke. The opera opened in Amsterdam in December 1999.

Rags and flags

It is said that Dutch William who became the English King William III – Sweet William to the Protestants, Stinking Billie to the Catholics – didn't want to leave his children in England far from home, so he didn't have any. We have an English nursery rhyme for him. '*Hark hark the dogs do bark, the beggars are coming to town, some in rags and some in flags and one in a silver gown.*' The beggars were the Dutch sea-beggars, the flags were orange, and the one in the silver gown was William. We have learnt many of our four-letter swear-words from Dutch sailors, orange flags still haunt Anglo-Irish politics, and with William, modern Protestant Britain really begins. The little man in black velvet on Hampstead Heath could not halt the changing times.

In an opera at the Amsterdam Muziek Theater², there was a modest attempt to return some of these Dutch enthusiasms back to the Dutch. The very title was an homage – *Writing to Vermeer* –, and on stage there were tall and confident Dutch women, a cow, bridges, excessive cleanliness, a certain amount of coziness and much – very much – water.

PETER GREENAWAY