EPILOGUE

DUTCHNESS IN FACT AND FICTION

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There are two ways of looking at ‘Dutchness’. The easiest one is to see it as a purely American matter. The other way, more difficult but in the end much more rewarding, is to treat Dutchness as a general epistemological issue of which the Dutch and the American modalities are two different forms of contextualisation. In the end, the question inevitably arises whether Dutch and American Dutchness have something in common, and until what point. I shall take this second position and speak first about Dutch Dutchness, then continue with American Dutchness, and summarize at the end.

The Dutch after 2000: A Crisis of Identity

Seen from within, and perhaps also from outside, the kingdom of the Netherlands is unmistakably involved in a crisis of identity. Two political murders, the first since the lynching of grand pensionary Johan de Witt and his brother Cornelis at The Hague in 1672, have shocked and confused the country and profoundly affected its own intimate conviction of being the most pacific, consensual and tolerant society of the West. Since the murder of the popular politician Pim Fortuyn by a Dutch opponent on May 6, 2002, and on November 2, 2004, the execution by the young Muslim Mohammed B., on a busy street of Amsterdam, of the controversial film maker Theo van Gogh, a relative of the famous painter Vincent van Gogh, public discourse is mainly about crisis, danger and terrorism, about the fear of disintegration and the impossibility of shaping a peaceful multicultural, multiethnic or multi-religious society.1 All of a sudden, the Netherlands has discovered

1 The dramatic effect of the murder of Van Gogh was enhanced by the fact that at the time of his death he had finished a movie on the death of Fortuyn. The title of the movie 06/05 referred obviously to 09/11. On the meaning of Fortuyn’s spectacular
that its public image of toleration, integration, consensus policy (the so-called *poldermodel*), social participation, and multiculturalism does not correspond any more to the reality of relations within the global society, between the social, cultural and religious groups, and even on the individual level. Its self-proclaimed position as *gidsland*—the moral guiding nation of Western Europe—is shattered.

The political response has been immediate and clear: Dutch society has to strengthen its inner cohesion and to revitalize its norms and values, as a truly ‘Dutch’ nation. The ‘Dutch’ character of the nation, understood as more genuine than immigrant cultures, has to warrant its authenticity and strength. The measure of this new challenge is the past performance of the country, which had resulted in the successful creation of a national community with a truly national spirit and strong social cohesion. In other words, back to the moral values and the customary traditions of the Dutch themselves, back to the culture shaped and transmitted by the national community itself as the core of the citizenship of the Netherlands, back to ‘Dutchness’. Dutchness is, of course, not a Dutch word in itself, but it is largely understood in the Netherlands and it distils well the way Dutch people interpret their way of life and their cultural horizon. I use it here as a general concept encompassing all those aspects of Dutch life and culture that were considered, at a particular moment and in a specific context, as characteristic and distinctive of the Dutch. In fact, Dutch social histo-

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4 For a couple of decades, the concept of Dutchness has served as an analytical tool in the history of art and architecture. It has recently been used in a rather matter-of-fact way by Christopher Brown, *The Dutchness of Dutch Art* [First Golden Age Lecture, 26 September 2002] (Amsterdam: Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2002).