

Introduction

Apart from the art-house cinema Het Ketelhuis, the self-declared ‘canteen of Dutch film’ founded in 1999, Dutch film is only consistently celebrated during the ten days of the annual Netherlands Film Festival (NFF), which started as the Netherlands Film Days in 1981. In the 2007 festival, a jury chaired by Jeltje van Nieuwenhoven presented the Canon of Dutch Cinema (Canon van de Nederlandse Film) in order to stimulate an interest in national productions. The jury decided to restrict the list to only 16 titles, covering a huge diversity of types and genres: shorts, documentaries, black & white, silent films, box-office hits, comedy, animation, experimental films, film festival successes and youth cinema. On the one hand, the canon bows to popular entertainment – the ‘low-class’ humour of *FLODDER* (Dick Maas, 1986) and the ‘parochial’ comedy *FANFARE* (Bert Haanstra, 1958) being the most obvious examples. On the other hand, the canon includes (‘serious’) artistic cinema – with the experimental shorts *IK KOM WAT LATER NAAR MADRA* [THAT WAY TO MADRA] (Adriaan Ditvoorst, 1965) and *LIVING* (Frans Zwartjes, 1971) at the other end of the spectrum of commercial endeavours. Except for some critical remarks about a few missing titles – such as Paul Verhoeven’s *SOLDAAT VAN ORANJE* [SOLDIER OF ORANGE] (1977), George Sluizer’s *SPOORLOOS* [THE VANISHING] (1988) or Mike van Diem’s *KARAKTER* [CHARACTER] (1997) – the Canon of Dutch Cinema has met remarkably little controversy.¹

In addition to congratulating the jury on its balanced selection, the absence of a heated debate about the canon can be taken as a sign that both critics and the general public are no longer as adverse to Dutch cinema as in previous decades. There has always been ample admiration for a strong documentary tradition in the Netherlands (by, among others, Joris Ivens, Herman van der Horst, Johan van der Keuken, Heddy Honigmann).² There has also always been sympathy for the so-called ‘family films,’ aimed at a young audi-

ence and their parents. This genre of the family films, pioneered at first by Henk van der Linden and then by Karst van der Meulen,³ has gradually grown into full-blown maturity since Ben Sombogaart's *MIJN VADER WOONT IN RIO* [MY FATHER LIVES IN RIO] (1989) and *HET ZAKMES* [THE POCKET-KNIFE] (1992), with *MINOES* [MISS MINOES] (Vincent Bal, 2001), *HET PAARD VAN SINTERKLAAS* [WINKY'S HORSE] (Mischa Kamp, 2005), *KAUWBOY* (Boudewijn Koole, 2012), and the adaptations of Carry Slee novels, produced by Shooting Star Filmcompany.⁴ The Dutch (narrative) fiction feature, however, has in general met less enthusiasm, and if a canonical list had been presented in the mid-1990s, the overall reaction would probably have been one of considerable derision. In that period, Dutch cinema was so strikingly unpopular that the idea of a canon alone would have been greeted with jeers and might have provoked a contemptuous remark like: Is the idea of publishing a selected number of titles a means to cover up for the lack of quality of the non-selected films?

14 |

Even though the attitude towards Dutch cinema has become much more positive over the years, in critical reception as well as at the box office, the persistent prejudices have not died out, as websites with a film forum, like *moviemeter.nl*, testify to. Among the responses to Dutch narrative fiction films, which not always exceed the level of a gut feeling, there are two recurring ones. The first one can be paraphrased like this: 'Dutch cinema consists of a too frank display of nudity and sex, which it tries to legitimize as a functional display.' The portrayal of sex in the notable box-office successes of *BLUE MOVIE* (Wim Verstappen, 1971) and *TURKS FRUIT* [TURKISH DELIGHT] (Paul Verhoeven, 1973), deeply ingrained in collective memory, led to a series of subsequent pictures over the years which also played this card, betting on it that the pair of 'nudity and sex' offers a road to fame. Every attempt to make a film that even remotely resembles *TURKS FRUIT* – from *KORT AMERIKAANS* (Guido Pieters, 1979) to *BRANDEnde LIEFDE* [BURNING LOVE] (Ate de Jong, 1983), and from *DE GULLE MINNAAR* [THE GENEROUS LOVER] (Mady Saks, 1990) to *ZOMERHITTE* [SUMMER HEAT] (Monique van de Ven, 2008) – only worsened the reputation of Dutch cinema and reinforced the prejudice that nudity and sex are part and parcel of it, regardless of the many films which do without this combination.⁵ The second one goes like this: 'In principle, I am not a fan of Dutch films, but I would like to make an exception for this one.' Apparently, a good or decent Dutch picture is considered to be a deviation from the general rule that the quality is below average.

This study is not meant to correct the eventual unjustness of these prejudices, for that would be Sisyphean labour. For every great Dutch picture, critics can easily respond with a number of failures. For every international success – like Academy Awards for 'Best Foreign Language Film' for *DE AANSLAG* [THE

ASSAULT] (Fons Rademakers, 1986), ANTONIA [ANTONIA'S LINE] (Marleen Gorris, 1995), and KARAKTER – sceptics might cite the embarrassing statistics that BORGMAN (Alex van Warmerdam, 2013) was the first Dutch film to be selected for the main competition in Cannes in 38 years. Instead of combating prejudices, I intend to address the fact that there is no proper educational forum to debate Dutch cinema. Hence, *Humour and Irony in Dutch Post-war Fiction Film* has to be considered as only a 'modest proposal' to address the almost total neglect of Dutch cinema in the academy.

OVERVIEW OF STUDIES ON DUTCH CINEMA

In order to illustrate that Dutch cinema lacks a proper institutionalization, let me sketch the programmes of the various departments of Language and Culture at Leiden University. In Japanese studies some attention is devoted to Japanese cinema; in Chinese studies the same for Chinese cinema, and this list can easily be extended: Korean cinema, Turkish cinema, Iranian cinema, Brazilian cinema are all covered in Leiden – not very comprehensively, but nonetheless. Even though the films are not much valued for their specific cinematic potential, but as a means to deepen students' understanding of the culture in which they have been produced, the attention to cinema in foreign language departments is more consistent than in Dutch studies, although there are signs that this might change for the better in the near future.

It is perhaps a matter of looking at tea leaves, but a (Western) scholar with an interest in Japanese, Chinese or Iranian culture is like an 'omnivore': fascinated by any peculiarity of that faraway country – not only literature and films but also popular songs, sports, food, up to the Japanese obsession with manga comics and Hello Kitty.⁶ These preferences are not strictly hierarchically marked in advance. By contrast, a Dutch scholar studying his own culture behaves like someone with refined taste, steeped in a tradition in which one is educated to distinguish high from low culture. Due to a conventional bias favouring literature over film – let alone, comic strips or popular (dance) music – scholars in Dutch studies have, at least until recently, a blind spot for (the national) cinema.

If Dutch cinema is addressed at universities, it usually takes place in an incidental course under the umbrella of literature, like 'Novel and Film.' The policy which underlies such a course seems obvious: Dutch film can only be made to fit the curriculum on the condition that it is associated with the more venerable belles-lettres. And even if such a course were to give film (adaptations) pride of place over novels, it risks affording film the role of sidekick to literature, the more since the status of the written-source texts predominantly

determines the selection of films. This aside, however, is not meant to strike a sour tone, because a course like ‘Novel and Film’ at least offers a way for Dutch film to position itself in the academy.

Given the fact that there is no substantial interest in Dutch cinema at universities, it is no wonder that the output of studies on Dutch cinema has been quite meagre over the years. The most profound academic publications are not dedicated to the post-war feature films, but to film culture preceding 1940, like the introduction of sound in Dutch cinema (Karel Dibbets); a study called *Hollywood in Holland* on ‘Filmfactory’ Hollandia which produced 60 films in between 1912 and 1923, the year of its bankruptcy (Ruud Bishoff); a study on the Nederlandsche Filmliga (Céline Linssen, Hans Schoots, Tom Gunning); a dissertation inspired by the collection of Jean Desmet (Ivo Blom), which was also the basis for an exhibition in EYE and an accompanying volume (Rommy Albers and Soeluh van den Berg); reactions to film as a new medium in the Netherlands in the period 1895–1940 (Ansje van Beusekom), and a study on the role of German emigrants on the Dutch film industry in the 1930s (Kathinka Dittrich). And of course, the internationally oriented Joris Ivens – whose work spans several decades, from the short *DE WIGWAM* [THE WIGWAM] (1911) to *UNE HISTOIRE DE VENT* [A TALE OF THE WIND] (1988) – has attracted some bookish attention (Kees Bakker on the documentary context, André Stufkens on Ivens’ connection to art, Hans Schoots’ biography, *Living Dangerously*). Dorothee Verdaasdonk wrote a dissertation on Dutch cinema, covering the years from 1960 to 1983, but her approach was sociological rather than textual-analytic. In *BEROEP: FILMMAKER* [PROFESSION: FILMMAKER] (1990), she examined under what socio-economic conditions Dutch filmmakers could practice their profession: what financial resources were available; what was the role of the Dutch Vocational School for Film and Television; does the family background of the director have an influence? Another sociological perspective was adopted by Bart Hofstede who examined the influence of the government and of film organizations like the Bioscoopbond as well as the growing impact of critics upon Dutch film production in the post-war period. Notwithstanding these studies, when the narrative fiction film in the last five decades has been addressed, it was much more common to adopt a journalistic perspective than an academic one: Rob van Scheers on Paul Verhoeven, Mieke Bernink on Fons Rademakers, Joost Ramaer on Alex van Warmerdam, Hans Heesen on George Sluizer, Ruud den Drijver on Wim Verstappen, Hans Schoots on Bert Haanstra, although the latter was a biography, published in the form of a dissertation.⁷ Moreover, a number of websites focuses on Dutch cinema, of which *Neerlands Filmdoek* (<http://www.nlfilmdoek.nl/>) and the *Nederlandse Film Database* by René van Dam (http://www.filmtotaal.nl/nederlandse_film) are the most noteworthy.

Further, in his *Hollands Hollywood* (1995), freelance journalist of *NRC Handelsblad* Henk van Gelder gave a solid overview of 60 years of Dutch feature films, starting with *WILLEM VAN ORANJE* (G.J. Teunissen, 1934) and ending with *06* (Theo van Gogh, 1994). It catalogued 337 films with brief descriptions, (amusing) anecdotes and an impression of their reception; only 27 of the films were considered so relevant that they got more than one page. Van Gelder does not resist the temptation to cite the lines from particularly damning reviews, which, it must be said, can offer amusing reading. In defence of the slightly sarcastic perspective of Van Gelder, who originally had in mind to use for a motto Wim T. Schippers' hilarious phrase, 'A Dutch film is no guarantee of an empty auditorium,' I would like to point at the year he wrote his book: 1994 is about the worst year for Dutch cinema in the post-war era. As the last line of Van Gelder's study mentions: That very year, no more than 126,000 tickets, which is less than 1 per cent of the total number of tickets, were sold for films made in the Netherlands (372). This statistic turns the title *Hollands Hollywood* into an ironic pun: while Hollywood is known for its commercial policy, the adjective 'Hollands' is rather associated with box-office poison.

In 1995, Robert Jan Westdijk's low-budget *ZUSJE* [LITTLE SISTER] was hailed as an innovative debut feature, which marked the beginning of a recovery from the *annus horribilis* 1994. This film is the starting point for a survey of Dutch cinema between 1995 and 2005 in the book *De broertjes van Zusje* [The Little Brothers of Little Sister], edited by film critics Mariska Graveland, Fritz de Jong and Paul Kempers. The tone is one of moderate optimism, justified by some critical successes – *DE POOLSE BRUID* [THE POLISH BRIDE] (Karim Traïdia, 1998), *WILDE MOSELLEN* [WILD MUSSELS] (Erik de Bruyn, 2000), *VAN GOD LOS* [GODFORSAKEN!] (Pieter Kuijpers, 2003) and *SIMON* (Eddy Terstall, 2004) – which outweigh the failures and for the fact that the numbers of viewers for Dutch cinema have risen, from the 1 per cent in 1994 to 13.6 per cent in 2005. Since then, the situation has further signs of improvement. In the year 2013, for instance, the share was 20.5 per cent, and 21 Dutch films attracted more than 100,000 moviegoers.

In addition to the books mentioned above, three studies, all from the year 2004, deserve special mention as particularly penetrating contributions. The first one is Schoots' enjoyable study *Van FANFARE tot SPETTERS*, which took a cultural-historical approach. Sketching the cinema between the years 1958 and 1980 Schoots relates the predominantly provocative themes in a number of movies to the revolutionary atmosphere in this period. Hence, he considers national cinema as an expression of contemporary issues within society. Do the films under analysis succeed in capturing the so-called *zeitgeist* and can the white screen function as a 'mirror of Holland'?⁸ This cultural-historical perspective offers an insight into a possible relation between art and society,

but the drawback of this approach is the tendency to analyze the films insofar as they can illuminate their (social) context. Hence, the films are not primarily debated for their intrinsic value, but they are rather used as a kind of reflection of the context as its original model. *The Cinema of the Low Countries*, edited by Ernest Mathijs, presents itself as a volume that seeks a balance between contextual readings and textual analysis. The 24 articles of about ten pages each put a particular film central stage. Half of the contributions are devoted to Dutch films, and in addition to the ‘usual suspects’ like TURKS FRUIT and SOLDAAAT VAN ORANJE, films like KOMEDIE OM GELD [THE TROUBLE WITH MONEY] (Max Ophüls, 1936) and TWEE VROUWEN [TWICE A WOMAN] (George Sluizer, 1979) were included in the selection. The volume is significant, since it attempts to fill such a yawning gap that one is willing to accept the ‘glaring omissions’ of which Mathijs himself is so well aware (2).

A study which is at the same time very ambitious in its effort at completion and strikingly unpretentious in its deliberate choice for a totally random structure, is *Film in Nederland*, compiled by a number of researchers affiliated with the former Filmmuseum, now called EYE. It contains in alphabetical order brief descriptions, anecdotes and some thematic similarities regarding 200 Dutch films. The sheer breadth of subjects covered is necessarily at the cost of in-depth analyses. Due to its wide range, *Film in Nederland* reads like a database, but one of the advantages of this book is to see how flexible the term ‘Dutch cinema’ is interpreted by the editors. They endorse elastic criteria for the obvious problem of deciding when a film is to be considered as ‘Dutch.’ CISKE DE RAT (1955) was directed by the German Wolfgang Staudte and some of the crew members were German as well, but the film counts as Dutch, if only for the Dutch actors, the Dutch producer, the Dutch locations, and the Dutch novel it was based upon. Another entry is more or less the opposite, since MASSACRE AT CENTRAL HIGH (1976) is shot in California with an American cast and crew, except for camera man Bert van Munster and director René Daalder. PROSPERO’S BOOKS (Peter Greenaway, 1991) is included as a Dutch film because this international co-production had set designers Jan Roelfs and Ben van Os on board, was produced by Kees Kasander and Denis Wigman, and had some Dutch actors in minor parts. Hence, the editors of *Film in Nederland* used flexible guidance for selection as entries, which is comparable to the criteria the Netherlands Film Festival has set for its competition. In 1989 the Golden Calf for Best Film at the festival was awarded to the Spanish-language film BODA SECRETA [SECRET WEDDING] by the Argentinian-born Alejandro Agresti, because of the nationality of its producers, Kasander and Wigman. The Dutch-Palestinian Hany Abu-Assad won the same main prize in 2005 for PARADISE NOW, but it could not be the Dutch submission to the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, because in that case the rules

are stricter. Since the film is in Arabic, it could only be submitted on behalf of Palestine. And what about the career of the cosmopolitan director George Sluizer, who made his stunning debut feature *JOÃO EN HET MES* [*JOÃO AND THE KNIFE*] (1972) in Brazil and *LA BALSA DE PIEDRA* [*THE STONE RAFT*] (2002) in Portugal and Spain; *UTZ* (1992) was shot in the Czech Republic with Armin Mueller-Stahl, *THE VANISHING* (1993) was the American remake of his aforementioned *SPOORLOOS*, *THE COMMISSIONER* (1998) was set in Brussels, and just before his death he finally finished *DARK BLOOD* (2012), starring the late River Phoenix who had passed away in 1993 during shooting. These are just a few examples of many borderline cases, which illustrate how problematic it is to think in terms of absolute and strict national demarcations. Since the practice of international co-productions is becoming more customary than ever, this is all the more reason to see Dutch film along a continuum.⁹

| 19

LIKE SHARING A SECRET CODE

A main rationale behind this study is to countervail the underrepresentation of Dutch narrative cinema in the academic world, but one has to prevent oneself from 'drowning by numbers.' It would be overambitious to cover the whole domain from (action) comedy to avant-garde cinema. Writing a study on national cinema always risks being an arbitrary endeavour. The concept of national cinema erroneously suggests that the country of origin of the filmmaker, cast and/or crew is a more predominant factor for a useful taxonomy than economic, industrial, artistic and/or generic ones. It is easier to mention the differences in subject matter, film style, target audience and so on, of the films of Paul Verhoeven, Nouchka van Brakel, Dick Maas, Nanouk Leopold, Mijke de Jong and Alex van Warmerdam than to sum up what unites them. Maas has perhaps more in common with the Farrelly brothers who made *THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY* (1998) than with any of the other mentioned here; Leopold with French director Bruno Dumont; De Jong with the Belgian Dardenne brothers; Van Warmerdam with the Finnish Aki Kaurismäki.

Even though 'national cinema' may not be the best criterion for analysis, in common parlance it is still a vibrant concept. Each and every national cinema is haunted by the question: Which films are characteristic of the country at hand?¹⁰ From an academic perspective, it is a daring, almost impertinent, question, because any hint at a clear-cut answer always already sounds too definitive. By contrast, from a journalistic perspective, it seems the most obvious of questions to ask whether there is such a thing as a typically Dutch film. Three global positions to this question can be derived from the first epi-

sode of the documentary series consisting of nine parts, *ALLEMAAL FILM: DE NEDERLANDSE FILM VAN 1945 TOT NU TOE* [IT'S ALL FILM: DUTCH FILM SINCE 1945].¹¹ First, Frans Weisz replies with a rhetorical question: Does the label of Dutch cinema not denote limitations as if a filmmaker has to be caught in a straitjacket? It is not surprising that the label is not productive for Weisz, since he has always adored Italian cinema, which is most evident from his grandiose film *HET GANGSTERMEISJE* [A GANGSTERGIRL] (1966). Second, as Paul Verhoeven states, the fact that he himself is rooted in Dutch culture shows unmistakably in his pictures, but at the same time he also has a preference for American cinema, to which he adds that *SOLDAAT VAN ORANJE* is very American in its framing and in its editing. This is implicitly proven by the rumour that Steven Spielberg was very enthusiastic about this picture.

So, if the concept of Dutch cinema is restrictive according to Weisz and if, as Verhoeven claims, Dutch influences are only one among many others, then only the third position, hesitantly mentioned by Alex van Warmerdam, presumes that there indeed may reside something 'typically Dutch' in films. In order to articulate a 'Dutch' accent, Van Warmerdam tentatively points at a distinction with his own canonical film *DE NOORDERLINGEN* [THE NORTHERNERS] (1992) and the work of Federico Fellini. Whereas Fellini's cinema is marked by a certain Catholicism in an exuberant and baroque way, the Christianity of *DE NOORDERLINGEN* is rather Calvinist, meaning very sober and puritan. This does not only show itself in the plot of the film about a woman who is worshipped as a saint, but also in the *mise-en-scène* of the film: the square windows look straight on to the pavement and the scenery is framed and delineated, as if to emphasize a suffocating atmosphere. As a consequence, Van Warmerdam says, his film is miserly, the opposite of baroque, and 'may be that is what is so Dutch about it.'

Although Van Warmerdam describes his film as steeped in a puritan Christian tradition, *DE NOORDERLINGEN* is at the same time in polar opposite to Calvinism. It is a characteristic of Calvinism to distrust visual culture, because in the eyes of Calvinists images can never be reduced to only a single meaning. Whereas the deadly serious Calvinists adhere to a strong textual unilaterality ('X means this and nothing else'), the wilfully visual minimalism of Van Warmerdam's cinema lends itself to ambiguity.¹² This deadpan kind of cinema excels in consistently portraying introvert and often even taciturn male loners whom we never can truly fathom. Journalist Hans Beerekamp coined the term 'Hollandse School' [Dutch School] to characterize the many enigmatic outsiders in films from the 1980s, made by not only Van Warmerdam, but also Jos Stelling, Orlow Seunke, Dannie Dannie, and Joost Ranzijn. The work of the first three will be discussed at length in later chapters, so let me at this stage just refer to Ranzijn's 45-minute *MAN IN DE WAR* [MAN IN

TROUBLE] (1984) for a thumbnail sketch of its chief characteristics. Though it is a little known and underrated film, it can function as an exemplary case.

Its main protagonist is a guy who has difficulty expressing his emotions: the shy Henk works as a gardener in a public park and has to make sure the visitors leave in time. Its plot is fairly absurd: One day Henk is on the tram when a woman hands him a bag to hold for her while she buys a ticket. She does not return, and before long the sound of a crying baby can be heard coming from the bag. He goes to visit his parents, but while his mother wants to take care of the baby, his father is fiercely against it. In subsequent scenes, we see how Henk tries to get rid of his unexpected asset, but to no avail.¹³ Father tells child protection about his son's situation and the baby is taken away from him by a policeman. Then, there is the twist: he starts stealing babies, not just one, but very many, often aided by his friend who is a boxer. We can only guess that he does so for the joy of raising them, together with his mother who by now has divorced her husband.¹⁴ The humour is basically deadpan and slightly morbid. In the beginning of *MAN IN DE WAR*, preceding the tram scene, Henk is getting married. During the taking of the wedding picture, the photographer busily arranges the guests for the photograph. At the very moment when the chaos has been transformed into calm and the photo can be taken, the bride collapses and eventually dies. Moreover, the film works with ironic parallels. One of Henk's attempts to get rid of the baby is to put the boy next to another kid in an unguarded pram on the pavement, but a bunch of women starts chasing him as an irresponsible 'father' – an irresponsibility which seems further proven when he takes the baby to a boxing match. In a later scene Henk takes a baby from another unguarded pram, and once again people start chasing him, this time as a vile kidnapper.

Some of the chases recall the tradition of early slapstick movies from the silent era, when a sparse use of editing was common. At one point, a very high-angle shot of a crossroad shows that Henk is indecisive about which direction to go: first to the left, oh no to the right, oh no to the left. A bit later we see the crowd chasing him as indecisive as he was, leading to a chaotic bumping into each other. Then we get an extreme long shot of the front of a gallery apartments: Henk is running to the right on the gallery at the second floor, while the crowd is running to the right on the ground floor, and via jump-cuts, this pattern repeats itself a few times. At one point, we see Henk hiding behind a pillar, while everyone of his chasers is frenetically passing behind him, suggesting that a crowd often functions like a blind horde. If spoken text is used in films of the 'Hollandse School,' it usually accentuates the insignificance of language. To track down the kidnapper, the local police force is called upon, when all of a sudden the policeman who had taken the baby from Henk at the time remembers that his last name was related to something with a tree. He

starts mentioning a huge variety of tree types until he finally arrives at ‘birch’ and reminiscences correctly ‘Berkhout,’ literally meaning ‘birch-wood.’ The importance of language in Ranzijn’s film is further trivialized via a montage sequence of frontally staged shots of mothers who behave like the scream queens from horror films upon discovering their baby is gone. And at the end of the film, when the police have recovered only some of the children, all the talk at the station becomes a chaotic buzz because parents whose kid has not been returned just grab a baby girl as if it is their own. This noise contrasts greatly with the final shot of the movie: Henk has been able to take a great number of children to a boat, which peacefully sails on the water, against a beautiful, but artificially created, sunrise, suggesting that the introvert abductor proves himself a better father after all than all those biological parents who mainly produce a cacophony.

In seeking to understand what identifies Dutch cinema or a ‘Hollandse School,’ how these films use humour and irony might be the key. Oh yes, humour is ‘universal,’ in the sense that, as Simon Critchley observes, there is ‘no society thus far discovered that did not have humour’ (28). And yes, there are jokes or comic scenes which are appreciated by practically everyone. Who does not like the short film comedy *THE MUSIC-BOX* (James Parrott, 1932), in which Laurel and Hardy have to deliver a piano? The scene in which Charlie Chaplin as a factory worker is being fed by the eating machine in *MODERN TIMES* (Charles Chaplin, 1936) is still considered incredibly funny, by young and old. Despite these wonderful examples, it is fairly common to believe that humour, much more so than adventure stories or drama, is culture-bound. This assumption is confirmed in the idea that ‘British humour,’ rooted in hearty insults and self-depreciation (Bloxham), is of an entirely different nature than, let us say, ‘German humour.’ In making a claim for the locality of humour, Critchley argues that having a common sense of humour is ‘like sharing a secret code’ (68). Laughing at the same types of comedy creates a bond among people, strengthening the impression that one is culturally distinct from, not to say superior to those who remain silent, or worse, who do not get ‘it.’ And to make matters slightly more complicated: some variants of national humour are widely appreciated, like ‘British humour’ or ‘Jewish humour,’¹⁵ but some variants fall absolutely flat when ‘exported’ to another country. To the question ‘What is the smallest book in the world?’ the answer, according to a Dutch joke is: ‘*One Hundred Years of German Humour*,’ which expresses how huge a gap the Dutch believe there is between the German and the Dutch sense of humour.

The nomination of KARAKTER as the Dutch candidate for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film may count as a fine example of the hypothesis that humour is culture-bound, and therefore difficult to ‘export’

to other countries. Six members of a jury voted in October 1997 for Jean van de Velde's *ALL STARS* and only five for *KARAKTER*. Rolf Koot, producer of *ALL STARS*, turned down the honour, because he claimed that his comic film about the male camaraderie in a football team was well-attended in the Netherlands, but lacked any international appeal. By contrast, the serious coming-of-age drama *KARAKTER* would probably cater to both a Dutch and an American audience, as was confirmed by Laurens Geels, producer of Van Diem's film (and Koot's father-in-law): American actor William Hurt had already seen the film twice, Geels said, 'leaving the theatre in tears.'¹⁶ The rest is history, for *KARAKTER* won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film.

The suggestion underlying Koot's position is that the humour of *ALL STARS* was too local to be appreciated by an American public. Despite this emphasis on the cultural dimension of humour, one should not commit the fallacy of identifying humour too closely with nationalities. The thesis that humour is culture-bound may as such meet little resistance, but any attempt to delineate the contours of Dutch, British, Italian, etc., comedy is impractical. If the films by Van Warmerdam are perhaps 'typically Dutch' because of their humour/irony, then one should not forget that his *DE NOORDERLINGEN* turned out to be remarkably successful in France in the 1990s and was even re-released in French theatres in 2012. Moreover, his cinema seems to have affinities with Scandinavian films, like the ones by the Swedish Roy Andersson, the Norwegian Bent Hamer and, as already mentioned above, the Finnish Kaurismäki. Even more striking is the fact that the dryly comic *DE WISSELWACHTER* [THE POINTSMAN] (Jos Stelling, 1986) turned out to be much more successful in Rome than in Amsterdam.¹⁷

Humour is marked by a cultural dimension, but simultaneously always in excess of it. The same goes for the historicity of comedy. People may still laugh at the comedies of Preston Sturges or Billy Wilder (at least I do), or at the Dutch cabaret performer Toon Hermans, but much humour does not stand the test of time and people today will shrug at many comic sketches which made people laugh their brains out in earlier decades. Humour can become 'curiously outdated' for one and the same person: what one considered funny in the 1980s, might come across as stale these days.

So, when this study ventures in the subject of humour and irony in Dutch feature cinema, it is with the proviso that its local flavour, its Dutchness, cannot be described and pinpointed in exact terms, but only circumscribed at most. What in the end proved decisive for examining the humorous potential of Dutch post-war feature films, was the quite banal factor of box-office appeal. Take a cursory glance at the list of box-office hits in Dutch cinema and be amazed at the relatively high number of downright comic films. Of the 25 titles that have attracted more than a million viewers, one can men-

tion FANFARE (Bert Haanstra, 1958), WAT ZIEN IK!? [BUSINESS IS BUSINESS] (Paul Verhoeven, 1971), HELP! DE DOKTER VERZUIPT [HELP! THE DOCTOR IS DROWNING] (Nikolai van der Heyde, 1974), FLODDER (Dick Maas, 1986) and its sequel FLODDER IN AMERIKA! [FLODDER DOES MANHATTAN!] (1992), FILMPJE! [VERY SHORT FILM] (Paul Ruven, 1995), ALLES IS LIEFDE [ALL IS LOVE] (Joram Lürsen, 2007), NEW KIDS TURBO (Steffen Haars and Flip van der Kuil, 2010), and GOOISCHE VROUWEN [VIPER'S NEST] (Will Koopman, 2011) as well as its sequel GOOISCHE VROUWEN 2 (Will Koopman, 2014), and this list is not yet exhaustive. One might say of several other titles that they either have humorous tones – like TURKS FRUIT and the two versions of CISKE DE RAT [CISKE THE RAT] (Wolfgang Staudte, 1955/Guido Pieters, 1984) – or they can be retrospectively read from an ironic perspective, like BLUE MOVIE (Wim Verstappen, 1971) and SPETTERS (Paul Verhoeven, 1980). Apparently, Dutch films strike a chord among the general public in case they contain some dose of humour and irony. Moreover, several films with comic elements which did not sell that many tickets as the titles mentioned above, have received a favourable reception, like the work by Alex van Warmerdam, some titles by Eddy Terstall, Pieter Kramer or Paula van der Oest.¹⁸ It is highly significant that DENNIS P. (Pieter Kuijpers, 2007), based upon a true crime, does not take the form of a gangster picture or an art-house drama. Instead, this film about a big diamond heist by an employee of a trading company, is made as a comedy with cartoonish effects. Hence, an emphasis is put upon the representation of the thief as a merry simpleton, who naively thinks that he can buy the striptease girl's affection with money. The gaudy colours of his clothes further accentuate that he is a pathetic and bulky oddball. Moreover, it is perhaps no coincidence that a film like HET DINER [THE DINNER] (Menno Meyjes, 2013), which in essence is a serious drama about high-class parents whose children have committed a horrible crime, is littered with many funny one-liners, often uttered by protagonist Paul. 'Only Roger Federer rakes his fingers through his hair more than Serge,' he comments upon his brother's vanity. Or he remarks about a man standing next to him in the lavatory: 'It's the kind of stream that is full of its own importance. A stream that wants to testify to its own indestructible health. The stream of a man with a young wife.' His comically sarcastic reflections in voice-over arrest the progress of the actual story, and thus edgy humour is the film's special attraction, outbalancing its serious theme.

The sheer fact that so many Dutch films contain a fair amount of humour is perhaps culturally ingrained. This fact might be taken as a cheeky homage to one of the best-known Dutch achievements in the academic world, the publication of Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938), a study which garnered international fame. The implication of his study that the fun of playing can function as a welcome antidote to a predominance of seriousness seems to

be taken to heart by a relatively great number of Dutch filmmakers.¹⁹ Against this background it makes sense to read Dutch cinema through the conceptual lens of humour and irony. Whereas the reference to Huizinga bears historical weight, the publication of this study also has an initially unforeseen actual value: the killing of the cartoonists of the Paris-based satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015, has particularly highlighted the issue of freedom of speech, which has been – due to the tragic occasion – converted into proclaiming the freedom to make transgressive humour.

THREE THEORIES OF HUMOUR: *FLODDER IN AMERIKA!*

In *FLODDER IN AMERIKA!* (Dick Maas, 1992), the successful sequel to Maas' immensely popular *FLODDER* (1986), two representatives of America discuss with the mayor of the 'blossoming city' Zonnedael the conditions for a programme of cultural exchange between America and the Netherlands – one 'average family' from the US for an 'average family' from Holland. Thereupon, two American delegates proudly present that they have selected a 'well-educated, cultured and attractive' family that will come to visit Holland in order to explore the Dutch lifestyle. The Johnsons have been voted '*family of the year*': the father is a prominent lawyer, the mother sells real estate and the oldest son is a stockbroker on Wall Street. It is rumoured that the family is already preparing for the trip by clumping around in wooden shoes. The two representatives are anxious to hear which Dutch family, in turn, will be travelling to America, for they have high expectations of the initiative. As the American male says, after it has been explained that this is supposed to be the beginning of a long-lasting series: '*If the programme is successful, one day we might be living in a world of peace*,' to which the American female adds '*and love*,' whereupon the man completes the reference to the Nick Lowe/Elvis Costello song: '*... and understanding*'.²⁰

When the mayor asks about whether the stay abroad is 'only for one year,' the response is that if things go well, the families may possibly remain longer. Medium close-up of the mayor who says, with a sparkle of hope in his voice: '*May be forever*.' When the mayor then hears from his guests that America is a big, beautiful country one might easily get lost in, we are given a medium close-up again of the mayor, repeating the words: '*Get lost*.' He folds his hands and as the camera then shows the Americans in two-shot, he says: '*Well, I think we have the perfect family for you*'.

At this point there is a cut from the mayor's office to a wealthy bungalow with conifers and a green lawn, but from below the frame the head of a woman with unkempt hair suddenly pops up. This woman will be plainly called 'Ma'

Flodder. This Ma, which is shorthand for Mama or Mother, a first name is never given, yells at her children – ‘bunch of assholes’ [‘stelletje klerelijers’] – and puts a big cigar between her lips. While she starts to walk to the left of the frame, the camera tracks to a high-angle establishing shot, revealing that the bungalow does not belong to her, but that her own residence has become a total ruin. In one of the subsequent shots we see the neighbours spying on the Flodder family through the curtains of the expensive bungalow. The woman is glad they will be delivered from that ‘riff-raff’ [‘schorriemorrie’] who has been a ‘disgrace’ to the neighbourhood, for, as she says, the Flidders terrorized them, were walking around naked, and the mother even ate dog food. The camera goes back outside again, and one of the Flodder children carries a heavy suitcase which bursts open. As a result, a great number of whisky bottles break, prompting the anger of Ma, who tries to smack the kid, but in vain. She then also attempts to kick the dog, because of its single bark, but when the animal bites her in the leg, she hits it on the head with a bottle.

26 |

Immediately thereafter there is a cut back to the mayor’s office, who recommends the family Flodder. The Americans consider it a peculiar name, because it sounds like ‘*fodder*,’ but the mayor reassures them that it is a ‘*typically Dutch name*.’ When he later takes a photograph of the Flidders from their file, the Americans react by saying that they ‘*sure are ... different*,’ and their clothes look so ‘*ragged and dirty*.’ The mayor tells them that the photo shows the Flidders dressed for a costume party and that they were the highlight of the evening. When the American woman notes that the Flidders lack a father, the mayor closes the case by stating: ‘*Well, nobody’s perfect*.’

Anyone who has seen (or only read my account of) the scene above, which is derived from the first 6 minutes and 20 seconds of **FLODDER IN AMERIKA!**, will acknowledge that this film is a comedy (in terms of genre) in that it attempts to produce humour (as an effect). In plain terms, humour is, as the Oxford English Dictionary defines it, the ‘quality of being amusing or comic.’ Comedy can be defined as the dramatic genre characterized by a humorous tone. At the heart of much comedy, as critics like Mikhail Bakhtin, in his study on carnival laughter, and French philosopher Henri Bergson have taught us, is a (visual) awkwardness with one’s body, in its many possible manifestations: from the scatological ‘humour’ of farting to slipping over a banana peel or to the performance of ‘silly walks’ (to recall a famous sketch from the British television series **MONTY PYTHON’S FLYING CIRCUS**). In the scene from the **FLODDER** film, bodily humour shows itself on the one hand in the absolutely plump dress code of Ma Flodder, best signified by both her cigar and the shabby rubber boots she is wearing at all times and at all places. On the other hand, her rude physical manners become silly, because she lacks the athletic ability to justify her threats. She gets mad at both her daughter and the dog but she fails

to actually hit anything because she is so physically unfit. To make matters worse for Ma Flodder, the counterattack by the dog makes her tumble onto the ground with the animal's teeth in her leg. She can only liberate herself from her uncomfortable position by breaking one more bottle of whisky, whereas the fact that some bottles had been broken happened to have been the cause for her bad temper in the first place.

In his seminal study *Le rire [Laughter]*, Bergson has famously argued that a comic effect is produced when a human being, visibly at unease with his/her body, acts so clumsy or stiff that he/she begins to appear machine-like. The 'mechanical rigidity' of the tramp played by Charlie Chaplin, as cited by Simon Critchley in his insightful study *On Humour* (57), comes to mind as a perfect example, but it is noteworthy to distinguish the tramp's inflexibility from Ma Flodder's stiffness. The machine-like appearance of Chaplin is a combination of an apparently gawky nature and the art of (slapstick) timing. In many scenes from *THE GOLD RUSH* (1925), to name one of his masterpieces, it seems like the tramp is bound to take a nasty fall, but time and again he is able to save himself miraculously. Performers like Chaplin (or Harold Lloyd or Buster Keaton) act in the tradition of the circus clown walking a tightrope – and one has to be very good at walking the tightrope in order to pretend to be about to fall down, but never do.²¹ If Chaplin, Lloyd and Keaton are counted among the great artists in cinema, it is on account of their quality of being inflexible but surprisingly agile as well, whereas the stiff gestures by Ma Flodder are, by contrast, a mere consequence of her lack of control over her overweight body.

Except for noting that humour often involves a bodily aspect, I have selected the first scene of *FLODDER IN AMERIKA!* in this introductory chapter of this study since it addresses, in a nutshell, the three basic theories of humour. The scene is compatible with the so-called superiority thesis, which of the three theories comes first in historical order. The Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle made some observations on the nature of comedy which are too scattered to be truly called a theory, but their remarks can be taken as a stepping stone to the insights of the 17th-century British philosopher Thomas Hobbes (Billig, 38). According to Aristotle, in comedies people are normally depicted as worse than the average and, as he famously postulated in *The Poetics*, the ridiculous is a species of the ugly (qtd. in Billig, 43). A character may commit a kind of silly 'error,' but since he himself is not aware of his own improper behaviour, he is not injured by his mistake or deformity. For Aristotle, comedy lacks pathos since the errors do not bear severe consequences for the ridiculous characters. It takes little imagination to see that the Flodder family from Maas' comedy conforms to this Aristotelian pattern. Even though their neighbours cast disapproving glances at them and consider them both maladjusted and utterly silly, they are so unconcerned about everything that they are

immune to derision and insults. So, the fact that they are called 'riff-raff' does not bother them at all, as anyone who has seen the first film will already know. In the case of the Flodders, the spectators are perfectly aware of the ridiculous nature of, to paraphrase Aristotle, the 'inferior action,' practised by the family. Obviously, the viewers laugh at the dysfunctional family Flodder, who do not care about any rule of decorum, best illustrated by the total absence of decency on the part of Ma Flodder.

The grounding principle of the superiority theory is best summed up by Hobbes' famous quote from chapter 9 in his *Elements of Law, Natural and Politic* (1640) that the 'passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly' (qtd. in Billig, 52). This 'sudden glory' presumes that a group (or a person) laughs because a joke is made at the expense of someone else, which potentially can also include one's former self.

28 | Laughing at another person's stupidity or misfortune is both a pretext and an affirmation to feel oneself elevated over the scapegoated other. In the case of the FLODDER films, the family's stubborn naivety only contributes to the audience's pleasure, for it implicitly emphasizes the smartness as well as the good manners of the viewers. In Maas' comedy, every single family member is so stereotypically rude and vulgar that practically all spectators can feel themselves 'more civilized' than the Flodders. In short, the family has set a yardstick for inappropriate behaviour to which anyone else will be a favourable contrast.

According to the superiority theory, the function of humour is predominantly reactionary, for the effect of the scene is that we, as viewers, can feel 'better' than any of the characters. We might consider ourselves to be not as careless as Ma Flodder, more upright than the mayor and not as credulous as the Americans. The confrontation with the presumed stupidity, arrogance, disarray, laziness, or whatever negative character trait of someone we can safely count as 'other,' can yield pleasure, because it works to emphasize our own elevated status. In such a case, humour is used as 'an insulation layer against the surrounding alien environment' (Critchley, 68), or as Noël Carroll put it, humour is primarily 'involved in the construction (or, more aptly, the permanent reconstruction) and maintenance of what we might call an Us – the *us* that abides by the pertinent norms' (77). Against that backdrop we can comprehend the final words of Giselinde Kuipers' study on the sociology of the joke that humour, even when it is good, 'always implies some bad taste' (248). For, as she asserts, humour is not only to be associated with uplifting feelings – like (the majority of) art and beauty – but also, if not primarily, with the vile and lower things of life. In case that art (cinema) is wilfully provocative in addressing gut feelings, as in *LA GRANDE BOUFFE [THE BIG FEAST]* (Marco Ferreri, 1973) or *FUNNY GAMES* (Michael Haneke, 1997), the predominant and

preferred response might at least be contemplation, but the primary reaction to humour is, Kuipers observes, ‘always visible, physical and to a certain extent, unrestrained’ (248), from a (faint) smile to a guffaw.

Notwithstanding the fact that Hobbes’ ideas on humour have been quite influential, they will only figure at the margins of this study, for the simple reason that he is distrustful of comedy: humour is for him no laughing matter at all. He argued that humans are basically driven by selfish motives, which are expressed by emotions and passions, including joyful laughter. A person had better guard his balance and not burst into a laugh, which in his eyes is always already (too) undisciplined. One had better repress one’s ‘sudden glory,’ for, Hobbes postulates, laughter is an anti-social force. It is, as Billig notes, potentially rebellious, but for Hobbes it is without any benefit. In his hands, ‘all humour stands ostensibly condemned’ (Billig, 56) and can only serve narcissistic demands. Had Hobbes seen *FLODDER IN AMERIKA!*, he would have confirmed that this comedy worked to provide its viewers with superior feelings, which is seldom, if ever, a condition to improve social inequality.

The main objective for mentioning Hobbes is that many subsequent reflections on humour have struggled with the ‘Hobbesian daemon’ (Billig, 58). His critics made an effort to circumvent his general suspicion at laughter, among others by trying to distinguish a witty remark from a vulgar one, as was a pre-occupation of a number of 18th-century British philosophers of humour like James Beattie, Sydney Smith or the Earl of Shaftesbury. For these philosophers laughter became first of all a practical problem. To begin with, they made a distinction between ‘wit’ and ‘humour.’ The first term referred to clever verbal sayings and wordplay – and ‘clever’ here means that downright puns and jokes are excluded.²² Humour, which was then used in a more restricted sense, denoted a laughable person, turned into an object of ridicule (Billig, 61-62). These philosophers aimed to walk the middle ground between indecorous humour for the uncouth masses and the overaestheticism of the idle aristocracy (62). The kind of wit they pursued was to create something incongruous by bringing dissimilarities together, or, in a definition of wit by Henry Home, who acquired the title Lord Kames: ‘A junction of things by distant and fanciful relations, which surprise because they are unexpected’ (173). According to the incongruity theory, laughter is provoked when something great or serious is juxtaposed with something small or frivolous. In an attempt to keep any association with Hobbes at bay, some 18th-century philosophers emphasized that an analysis of such juxtapositions was basically a cognitive process. The social and psychological dimensions of laughter were not to be ignored, however, and the third Earl of Shaftesbury – real name: Anthony Ashley Cooper – highlighted the connection between incongruity and ridicule. Since ridicule is always aimed at something or someone, it is inherently social.²³

In the case of the scene from *FLODDER IN AMERIKA!*, two different kinds of ridicule have to be kept apart: one which potentially may have some sanitizing effect on a person's moral sense, and another one whose effect will probably be nil. As regards the latter, the Flodder family is represented as utterly coarse. Conventionally, a (single) mother, as head of a household, is responsible for nurturing her children and teaching them decent manners, but Ma Flodder acts contrary to this image of a mother. The point is: she does not care at all about what others think of her unorthodox lifestyle, and disregarding outside opinion would imply that she is quite immune to ridicule. The 18th-century adherents of the incongruity theory were more interested in the option that ridicule might remedy some social wrong, or in the beautiful phrasing of Sydney Smith that ridicule was 'the great cure of extravagance, folly, and impertinence; it curbs the sallies of eccentricity ...' (qtd. in Billig, 79). In case some self-conceited character – which Ma Flodder is obviously not – is made to look ludicrous, then ridicule can become effective. On account of his profession, a mayor has to be an upright representative of his city, hospitable to his guests. The mayor of Zonnedael, however, behaves in an opportunistic way for he misuses the exchange programme to get rid of the troublesome family. One might argue that he does his own community a great service – as a mayor is supposed to do – but it is also a foul trick at the expense of the American guests. Because of the cross-cutting between the mayor's office and the ruined residence of the Flidders, we understand the mayor's vicious strategy in selling his guests a pup. We know what the Americans do not know (yet), namely that the mayor has told them a lie: the pictures of the Flidders were not of them at a costume party, but of them in their habitual clothing. In his modern reinterpretation of the incongruity theory, Critchley remarks that 'insofar as the joke plays with the symbolic forms of society' – in *FLODDER*: the mother turns family life into a total mess, the mayor deceives his foreign guests – 'jokes are anti-rites' (5). This type of humour, mocking symbolic practices, reveals 'the sheer contingency or arbitrariness of the social rites in which we engage' (10). In the case of Maas' comedy, this contingency is exposed because the mayor, who is an official dignitary, violates social customs by selecting the vulgar family for the trip abroad.

Though the mayor formally exceeds his duty, his action can nonetheless be legitimized. If the mean gesture of the mayor is to be pardoned, then it is because the American leaders of the exchange programme are represented as self-righteous. If the original idea was to opt for an average family, they pride themselves on having selected the '*family of the year*.' Further, they make fun of the Flidders' name and they criticize fatherless families in passing. Since the American visitors are so overtly complacent – and it is to be expected that the Johnsons are flowers from the same garden – it is somehow excused

that the mayor turns the tables on the Americans by sending the Flodders in return. Thus, persons with pretensions of superiority, like Americans whose pomposity is symbolized by the Johnsons, will get their comeuppance (Billig, 72). Formulated this way, it is clear how this variant of the incongruity thesis is to be distinguished from Hobbes' theory. The latter was cautious about laughter, since it usually testifies to one's superiority towards 'silly' people: the well-behaved poke fun at the non-adjusted (the Flodders). Thinkers like Shaftesbury and Smith rather celebrate the kind of (true) raillery, aimed at highfalutin' people – at those who display an arrogant stance.

It deserves emphasis that a 'banal' example, such as the scene from FLODDER IN AMERIKA!, would have been too blunt for the critics of both the superiority and the incongruity theory. By contrast, the pioneers of the so-called relief theory, the third one on the list, were less strict on the requirements of 'refined taste' but took laughter as a bodily response quite seriously. For the philosopher Alexander Bain, laughter indicates, as a surge of pent-up energy, a momentary release from habitual constraint (Billig, 97). According to Bain in his *The Emotions and the Will*, the comic, in fact, starts from the serious. On many (official) occasions, the general setting of dignity coerces people into a 'certain posture of rigid constraint': one has to be quiet in a church, a classroom, a court of justice. People who tend to take themselves very seriously will often be deeply offended if the solemn atmosphere is disrupted, but those who take the sentiment of self-importance lightly, Bain says, will respond with 'uproarious delight' to any 'contact with triviality or vulgarity' (283). When the required attitude of reverence does not correspond to one's inward feelings, any sudden disturbance of protocol can be experienced as a 'blessed relief' from tension, for, as Bain asserts, it is 'always a gratifying deliverance to pass from the serious to the easy side of affairs' (284).

According to that other pioneering thinker of the relief theory, Herbert Spencer, laughter serves no other purpose than 'expending an accumulation of nervous energy' (Billig, 99). When an official ceremony is all of a sudden interrupted by the presence of a young kid or a dog, then some elevated event is briefly displayed as petty. In the eyes of Bain, however, laughter is not harmless but represents a rebellion – albeit only a temporary one – against authority and establishment. His ideas presume that humour is pervaded with streaks of malice and that one takes glee in mocking that which should not be mocked (Billig, 98). One's laughter at a person or an institution is genial on the surface, but, in fact, it covers up one's feelings of disgust for the person or institution at hand. According to this logic, a joke about a minister or a member of parliament is considered the better, the less popular the politician is. One's pleasure is increased the more the object of humour deserves degradation and humiliation in one's eyes. It is but a small step from Bain's relief theory to the

comedy FLODDER IN AMERIKA! On the one hand, it is reassuring to laugh at the family for they can be used as a yardstick of inappropriate behaviour that any viewer will meet. On the other hand, as the first chapter will clarify, Maas' films position the carefree family as the perfect tool for a mild mockery of anything that connotes an air of (solemn) conventions. On their way to America, they start to occupy the business class, which makes perfect sense to them for the seats are available and much more comfortable than in economy class. The argument that this is not permitted does not impress them, for they have an inbred resistance to anything which is justified by a mere reference to rules and conventions. Insofar as we laugh at the Flodders in a sympathizing way rather than a condescending manner, this is owing to the fact that they never take conventions very seriously – a ‘positive’ side to their rudeness. Thus, they perform a relief from conventions, and our laughter is to be taken as a consent to this performance. In a similar vein, the scene I described above from FLODDER IN AMERIKA! is the prelude to ridiculing the whole idea of a ‘family of the year’ contest, which, as one can read between the lines, can only originate from a country that wants to show itself off as the most wonderful nation in the world. And thus the Americans do not send their ‘average family,’ as was the original plan, but they nominate a family which is far above the average according to their standards, ‘the family of the year,’ as if to suggest that all ‘normal’ American families are this fabulous.

Attempts to rethink the pitfalls of the relief theory have resulted into two thought-provoking studies on humour at the beginning of the 20th century. Though he himself did not consider laughter a very important subject, the aforementioned Bergson wrote the remarkable *Le rire* in 1900. At this stage I restrict myself to his observation that Bain’s ideas actually work the other way around, because Bergson focuses upon the object of the joke rather than upon the laugher. Yes, people tend to laugh at a person’s rigid behaviour or at a hilarious deviation from strict conventions, but Bergson stresses the point that anyone will avoid the risk of being laughed at. Hence, laughter is not a ‘release from social authority,’ as Bain asserted, but laughter is experienced as humiliating, as ‘the punishment in the classroom of life’ (Billig, 128). There is, Billig mentions, a ‘cold cruelty’ at the heart of Bergson’s theory: because people dread being made fun of, they try to avoid peculiar behaviour. In order to prevent coming across as ridiculous – neither too rigid nor too frivolous – they choose the middle ground, i.e., sticking to conventions. Hence, for Bergson, laughter has a corrective and disciplinary function. At first sight, his ideas do not seem to tie in with the case of the Flodder family. Oblivious to everything, Ma Flodder and her children are immune to humiliation, but at the same time, this feature turns them into extraordinary characters. Hence, they are the comic exception that somehow ‘proves’ Bergson’s rule.

Unlike Bergson, Sigmund Freud did not emphasize the disciplinary function, but he attributed a rebellious nature to humour, or to *Der Witz* ('the joke,' both good and 'bad'), as found in the full title of his 1905 study, *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten (Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious)*. Psychoanalysis presumes that a subject's repressed desires and unconscious motives manifest themselves in distorted form, particularly in seemingly minor expressions, like dreams, slips of the tongue, and jokes. Even though Freud spoke of 'innocent jokes,' which do no more than yield pleasure, the category of 'tendentious jokes' is of greater interest. Whereas the innocent joke is merely appreciated for the joke-technique, people derive enjoyment from the tendentious joke on the basis of its underlying content rather than the joke-form.²⁴ Thus, Freud would suspect the usual excuse of a joker when he claims that absolutely no harm was intended and that it was a mere prank. In cases where a taboo topic is addressed as the object of a witty remark, it depends upon the listener's attitude towards the target of the joke whether one appreciates the joke or not – the technique of telling is irrelevant. If a man experiences the fact that he is married as a confinement, he might laugh at jokes about the frigidity of a wife or about a too meddlesome mother-in-law. Elaborating upon this Freudian idea that the content presides over form, Critchley mentions that there is a radical feminist joke about men, which runs like this: 'How many men does it take to tile a bathroom?' Answer: 'It depends how thinly you slice them.' However, as soon as one replaces the men in this riddle by blacks or Jews, the technical wit is the same, but its content becomes quite disconcerting all of a sudden.²⁵

If we laugh at the tendentious thought behind the joke, as was one of Freud's seminal insights, then one can only consider *FLODDER* truly funny on condition that one adheres to the film's tendentious politics. According to a psychoanalytic logic, this politics goes beyond the fact that the film ridicules conventions like violating the separation between business and economy class. Jokes always backfire at the teller/laugher and implicitly reveal their (social, gender, class, cultural, etc.) positions. There is a scene in *FLODDER IN AMERIKA!* when each and every family member is subjected to a full body search at the airport after the ringing of an alarm. Only in the case of Kees, the big-breasted blonde daughter, the alarm remains mute. Since most members carried a weapon, the guard asks her whether she has none. No, Kees replies in a seductive tone, but 'you are permitted to search me anyway,' which clearly hints at her sexual availability for men. In this scene as well as in several others, Kees uses her body as a sexual commodity in such an obvious manner that it might offend anyone with only the slightest feminist sensibilities. Those who regard sexism as a serious and problematic issue will be inclined to reject the comic value of such a scene, but as the suggestion runs, those who laugh heartily are apparently more indifferent to sexism.

Freud's take on jokes teaches us that humour potentially functions as a metaphoric barometer, exposing one's (unacknowledged) instincts. Whether one enjoys FLODDER as amusing then depends upon one's sentiments on 'uncivilized' behaviour: if one takes heavy drinking, insulting dignitaries, foul language or using sexuality for opportunistic ends as pardonable acts, then one is more likely to enjoy FLODDER than those viewers who are attached to general rules of proper conduct. My main reason for selecting FLODDER IN AMERIKA! as an introductory example is not because of its sordid jokes, but because its comic scenario of a cultural clash between the Netherlands and America exposes some characteristics that might be considered 'typically Dutch.'

When Ma and her five children arrive in New York, they are mistaken for the members of a Russian delegation of medical doctors invited by the Roosevelt Foundation. Since their proficiency of English is too poor to understand why they are driven by limousine to the expensive Plaza hotel, they simply presume that this first-rate treatment is part of the exchange programme. The Americans do regard the Flidders as weird, as can be gathered from a comment by one of the hotel clerks: '*I knew it was bad over there [in Russia], but this is ridiculous.*' The Americans remain hospitable throughout, however, which can on the one hand be seen as a positive signal: they are courteous even when faced with rude people. On the other hand, the opening scene suggests, as the spectator may remember, that Americans tend to see themselves as naturally and 'simply the best.' Their hospitality can then be built upon the prejudice that for them, everyone outside America is entitled to a certain dose of outlandishness. In overdoing this eccentricity, the Flidders are for Americans just an extreme case of their self-conception that not everyone can be as 'perfectly normal' as they are. That a great doctor from Russia might be dressed as a hoodlum, well yes, nothing is too weird for the inhabitants of the (former) 'Evil Empire.' Hence, the error can continue for a while, partly thanks to American hospitality, which is an inverse version of their arrogance: well, if one is the best, the consequence is that one has to deal with wackos all the time, and the best way to prove one's superiority is by acting polite and controlled.

In turn, the Flidders themselves accept the wonderful welcome matter-of-factly since for them it merely illustrates their idea that America is, as Johnnie mentions, the country of unprecedented possibilities, although his brother Kees inadvertently botches the term 'ongekend' (unprecedented) to 'ongewenst' (undesirable'). After the error comes out, they are dismissed from the hotel and have no other option than to spend the upcoming night outside. However, they enjoy the lack of a roof over their heads at least as much as their stay in the Plaza. They are frankly happy to eat sauerkraut with smoked sausage, better than any other meal, and they also appreciate the cosiness of a

campfire. In short, no fancy stuff for the Flidders, and despite their excessive rudeness, they breathe oxygen into proverbs like 'he who cannot keep a penny shall never have many' and 'if you just behave normally, you are already weird enough.' In this film, this latter saying, which is often said to characterize a Dutch mentality, works to distinguish the Flidders from the Americans. The Flidders may look outrageous and uncivilized, but do not let that fool you, they are content with the simple things in life. Americans, by contrast, are hospitable and civilized in manners, but do not let that fool you, their attitude is a cover-up for their self-absorption, for they like to show off everything as big and beautiful. It is highly significant that the 'family of the year' contest is not won by common American citizens, but by the financially successful Johnson family, an embodiment of true capitalism.

FROM 'JOKES' TO 'HUMOUR'

| 35

The first chapter will offer a more in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of juvenile and low-class comedies like *FLODDER*, but suffice it to say right now that its overall effect is to advocate a certain amount of authentic roughness as benevolent. This effect ties in with an influential tendency within Dutch mentality, namely the one which presumes that anything is permitted to say because the freedom of expression is an inalienable right. Blunt jokes are an integral part of this right. In her comparative study on American versus Dutch jokes, Kuipers claims that Dutch people with a lowbrow humour style use humour with a 'social, spontaneous intention' in order to create a 'good atmosphere' (231). On these grounds, it is legitimate to make derogatory jokes about anyone, regardless of culture, religion, ethnicity, sex. Kuipers refers to the work of sociologist Johan Goudsblom who claimed in his *Dutch Society* (1967) that a long-standing tradition of tolerance has caused Dutch humour to be 'decidedly amoral at times' (Kuipers, 241). As a consequence of this typical mixture of individualism and egalitarianism, Kuipers asserts, Dutch people presume that by 'being direct, honest, straightforward you show yourself "as you are", that is: not elevating yourself above others' (241). The popularity of the Flidders among Dutch who adhere to what Kuipers calls a lowbrow humour style is proof of this principle of egalitarianism.

This (Dutch) mentality of refusing to condemn coarse remarks comes explicitly to the fore in the replies to the severe criticisms of the controversial figure of Zwarde Piet [Black Pete]. Those uncomfortable with this black faced servant of Sinterklaas [Saint Nicholas] see this figure as too awkward a reference to the history of slavery and/or to a regrettable tradition of inequality favouring whites over blacks. Due to Zwarde Piet's unfortunate racist connota-

tions, the critics argue, it would be better if he was replaced. To the supporters of this figure, the critics are simply too sensitive, for he is part of an already ancient celebratory tradition in the Netherlands, aimed at young children, and therefore 'innocent.' To anyone who questions the folkloristic appearance of Zwarte Piet, they say: 'Don't be a squeamish.' From there it is but a small step to those (Dutch) people who lack the antennae to grasp that jokes about foreigners can be a delicate matter. In November 2013, a jury member of the television programme HOLLAND'S GOT TALENT, Gordon, made fun of a Chinese contestant, not because of his singing qualities, for they were excellent, but merely because of his descent. Another jury member, Dan Karaty of American origin, called Gordon's comment awful and said to him that 'you are not supposed to say things like that to people.' When the clip was posted on the social news website Reddit, a general reaction from Americans was that there would be wide hysteria in the country if this had been aired in the US, sometimes followed by the questions whether Dutch people are racist or intolerant. A considerable number of reactions by Dutch people to the accusatory tone ran like this: Gordon makes jokes about everyone, so it is only proof of the acceptance of Chinese that they are turned into the butt of jokes as well. Or to paraphrase Gordon's own reply: We are hospitable to all foreigners and everyone is entitled to express his opinions, but one should not encroach upon 'our tradition' by deciding what I am permitted to say or not (qtd. in Heijmans, 5). My point is that the way Gordon's remarks are defended as not amiss is analogous to the careless *modus operandi* of the Flidders. The inclination to cover up callousness with the mantle of love is deeply ingrained in some parts of Dutch culture: people should not be too easily offended by jokes. Those who are fond of the humour of FLODDER, I will claim, are more likely to side with the supporters of Zwarte Piet and with Gordon's stance – 'What is all this fuss about?' – than with their critics. For in the end, as chapter 1 will further elaborate, the Flidders can be taken as a backlash against an atmosphere of political correctness which gained momentum in the Netherlands in the 1980s. In this decade, as the tripartite television documentary WONDERLAND (Robert Oey, 2004) suggests, people got caught up in a 'straitjacket of prescribed left-wing opinions.'²⁶ This backlash manifested itself in a desire, albeit often repressed since one could risk being labelled a 'fascist,' to escape this straitjacket by expressing oneself in terms of political incorrectness. FLODDER offered the advantage that by enjoying this comedy with its outrageous jokes, one could give vent to this desire in a most innocuous form.

Maas' comedy illustrates the double impact of humour. On the one hand, FLODDER can be qualified as critical insofar as it lays bare the hypocrisy of those who take an *a priori* condescending attitude towards the lower classes. On the other hand, it is reactionary insofar as it is averse to the logic of political

correctness, advocating a 'live and let live' mantra. This double impact, oscillating between subversive and conservative, will be a red thread throughout the chapters of *Humour and Irony in Dutch Post-war Fiction Film*. Since the value of humour can only be determined in context, there is no golden rule to decide whether the scales tip in favour of the reactionary or the critical. In many a case, the reactionary pole will speak louder than the critical pole in the end, which will make the exceptions a real treat. In clarifying how a comedy might increase its critical potential, I follow Freud's short essay on humour, which he wrote in 1927, after an interval of more than twenty years, as a concise reconsideration of his study *Jokes*.

In the essay Freud makes a clear-cut distinction between jokes and the comic on the one hand, and humour on the other hand. He had defined the joke in his 1905 book as the 'contribution made to the comic by the unconscious' (*Jokes*, 208; 'Humour,' 165). Jokes are often performed to affirm, in passing, the 'invincibility of the ego' by suggesting one's superiority at the expense of others. The comic assumes the role of a grown-up and reduces others to being children (163). Whereas jokes often function to elevate oneself over others – and therefore betray some unconscious aggression – Freud's characterization of humour can be taken as the inverse of the superiority theory. In humour, one treats oneself as a child from an adult perspective, or in Freud's formula: humour '*would be the contribution made to the comic by the agency of the superego*' ('Humour,' 165, emphasis in original), in which the superego refers to an imaginary instance 'speaking' with a voice of authority, either as a severe master or, in this case, as a consoling parent. In contrast to jokes, in humour, one laughs at oneself rather than at others, so that one's ego is not aggrandized, but deflated. According to this criterion, FLODDER obviously belongs to the category of jokes, aimed at instant pleasure with low risk for the comic Flidders themselves. Significantly, a character like Johnnie Flodder is always cheerful, just like the teller of a joke often is amused by his own punchline. This study will aim to explore a gradual shift from the Freudian joke to the Freudian kind of humour, perhaps best represented by the films discussed from chapter 7 onwards, such as the ones by Van Warmerdam. In some of his films, servile characters like a waiter, a train conductor or a postman who rebel against their submissive roles in quite pathetic manners become the object of ridicule. They are never the smiley faces themselves, but viewers might consider their sorry fate funny, though not every viewer is sensitive to this type of humour as I will explain in later chapters. To underscore the idea of a deflated ego, it can be noted that Van Warmerdam himself performs these roles of servile characters – and in another film, he even plays a man who has accepted performing as the dog.

My suggestion to consider the pranks pulled by the cheerful Flidders

as 'jokes' in the Freudian sense, and the deadpan performances in the cinema of Van Warmerdam as 'Freudian humour' is not meant to imply that diegetic laughter necessarily belongs to the category of 'jokes' rather than 'humour.' Let me as a counterexample refer to a film which can be regarded as the polar opposite of *FLODDER IN AMERIKA! DE STILTE ROND CHRISTINE M. [A QUESTION OF SILENCE]* (Marleen Gorris, 1982) was marketed as a kind of 'psychological thriller with particular appeal to female audiences' (Udris, 157).²⁷ Housewife Christine, bar worker An and secretary Andrea are arrested in the beginning of the film. Unbeknownst to each other, the three of them are charged with murdering a male boutique owner in his shop, in the presence of, as will turn out later, four female witnesses who remain silent throughout. In a fine contribution to the volume *The Cinema of the Low Countries*, Jan Udris discusses the formal devices of Gorris' debut feature, like the unstylized 'realist' camerawork in the majority of scenes, the green-blue tint of the prison corridors, the use of sometimes disorienting electronic music, and the brusque insertion of flashbacks which gradually reveal the killing and the ordinary things the three women do in the aftermath: visiting a funfair, cooking a meal, eating an ice cream. Though Christine is mentioned in the (original Dutch) title, the criminal psychiatrist Janine can be taken as the 'prime identification figure' for viewers (Udris, 159), the more since she undergoes a radical shift in perception. As Udris argues convincingly, the successful career woman regards herself as an emancipated spouse who enjoys an 'egalitarian relationship' with her husband-lawyer (159). Thus, she has reason to think of herself as different from the three suspects who have typical feminine occupations (housewife, secretary) or who, like An, has been divorced from a domineering husband ('so glad the bloke has gone'). In the dream, however, which has no synchronized speech and has many interposed shots of the women of less than one second, Janine becomes aware of her close bond with the three female suspects. She herself has been 'co-opted as a surrogate man' (Udris, 164), intent on producing 'wonderful phrases' about the mental state of mind of the women for the benefit of male authorities. Hence, she starts seeing herself as no more than a pawn in a patriarchal society, just like her 'clients' – whom her husband tends to address as 'patients.' The dream sequence makes her realize that the women did not suffer from a temporary mental disturbance, but were perfectly sane at the moment of their 'bestial manslaughter,' to coin the words of the male prosecutor at the trial. Janine's husband is deeply annoyed by her argument in front of the judge, and since she refuses to step into his car at the end of the film, their different positions seem to foretell a separation.

On two separate occasions in the film, two of the women laugh exuberantly in response to a question posed by Janine, before she has her 'revelatory' dream. When Janine suggests to Andrea that there must have been a motive,

the latter starts laughing. An is very talkative, driving Janine crazy with her verbiage, but to the question whether An had never wanted to re-marry, she gets a burst of cackling laughter for an answer. It is suggested that when Janine rewinds her tape recording of An's laughter twice, the awareness slowly begins to dawn on the psychiatrist that these women suffer from oppression in a male-chauvinistic environment. The laughter, then, is to be understood as a dismissive reply, as an indication that both Andrea and An consider the psychiatrist too naive – and her 'dream' will reveal this insight to her. Hence, their laughter was a defiant riposte to Janine, who initially failed to grasp the severity of the inherent inequality of men and women.

Near the end when Janine and the male prosecutor are having a discussion in court on the presumed accountability of the women, the latter argues that he sees absolutely no difference between this case and the hypothetical case of three men murdering a female shop owner. Upon hearing this claim, An cannot suppress a laugh. One of the female witnesses joins her, and soon eight women are choking with laughter: the three suspects, the four silent witnesses and Janine. All the men present are flabbergasted, judging from the puzzled looks on their faces. At first glance, the mirth provoked on the part of the women may seem to chime in with the superiority thesis: their laughter has the effect of disqualifying the male professionals as ignorant. Something seems to be hilarious, but the men apparently do not get it. Their silence is only cause for greater hilarity among the women, for it helps to turn the men themselves into the 'butt of the joke.' So far for the logic of the superiority thesis, since the point here is that there is neither a proper joke (or punch-line), nor a funny situation like someone acting clumsy or machine-like, nor an (unintended) pun or slip of the tongue. On top of that, the situation is solemn and the prosecutor's tone is deadly earnest, devoid of any irony. Thus, the laughter seems inappropriate for the occasion, which has to do with the fact that the women are not laughing at someone or at some situation, but at a general institutional flaw, deeply rooted in patriarchal society. Because the men in court are blind to this flaw, their response is one of amazement at this convulsive laughter and since the feminine pleasure abides, surprise becomes visible discomfort. The judge demands the dismissal from court of the three suspects and their smiling faces are the last we will see of them in the film. Upon their forced departure, Janine decides to leave as well.

On reflection, the laughter both is and is not an expression of the women's superiority. First, why it is not. If a rational conversation falls on deaf ears, then one can either decide to remain silent (as is Christine's tactic for so long) or one suddenly finds oneself bursting into a hearty laughter at one's own misery. This kind of laughter is far beyond the idea of a prank or a joke in the vein of the *Flodders*, but it has a provocative and subversive effect, much more

in the spirit of Freud's idea of 'humour' in his 1927 essay: the spontaneous laughter gives vent to the women's frustration at their structural subordinate position. It is not a reaction to someone stupid or something concrete, but to an abstract structure. The laughter at the end of Gorris' film functions as a gesture of contempt for those who refuse to acknowledge gender inequality. Their laughter puzzles and piques those in power (and that is hilarious), but those in power choose the poorest of options: by getting rid of the 'rebellious' elements, the men hope to 'save' themselves from their laughter, which gives them the creeps. By dismissing them, they in fact return them to 'silence.'

But now let me explain why this laughter can also be termed subversive, and here I refer to one of the most thought-provoking books written on comedy, Alenka Zupancic's *The Odd One In* (2008), in which she tries to reconsider common notions about humour and laughter from a predominantly Lacanian angle. The point of a comedy, she claims, is not to convince us that we are 'only human,' endowed with regrettably weak and fallible characteristics. As Lacan has claimed, the laughing stock is not the simpleton who erroneously believes he is a king, but the king who really believes he is a king (Zupancic, 32), which she translates, in different wording, into: The biggest fool is the one who will do anything not to be fooled (84). The men in court do not try to understand the laughter, but they are only concerned to keep up appearances: they pride themselves on their position of authority on account of their togas. The laughter by the women can be taken as a derision technique, as if they are declaring: 'Stop this charade. You are only concerned about the deadly serious letter of the law. You act as representatives of justice, but underneath your togas you are human, too, men who snore, who fart. Thus you are subject to the same physical laws as other mortals.' According to Zupancic, we tend to laugh at a dignity that strives to control any disturbance of order (112), and since the situation in court is becoming uncontrollable for the male high officials, they have to send the female subjects off. In fact, their "embarrassing" pretension to seriousness' makes the dignitaries all the more laughable (Zupancic, 101).

This study oscillates between the cheerfulness of FLODDER IN AMERIKA! and the subversive laughter from DE STILTE ROND CHRISTINE M. It addresses the manifold variants of humour as they manifest themselves in Dutch narrative fiction features, ranging from juvenile jokes and carnivalesque in the first chapters to deadpan comedy and black humour in the later chapters. It also discusses the trope of irony and its related forms, like camp, persiflage and satire, as well as its rhetorical devices, such as hyperbole and understatement. This goal has to be accompanied with one caveat and three disclaimers. To start with the caveat, if this were only a theoretical book on humour, I would have selected fewer examples and focused upon the very best, usually from international sources (scenes from films by Preston Sturges, Billy Wilder,

Alexander Payne). It is a book in which humour is addressed via analyses of a considerable number of films made in Holland, without any pretence to be complete, for then this study would have been at least four times as voluminous. Ideally, this works as a double-edged sword – a thorough overview of Dutch films to get an understanding of ‘typically Dutch’ humour – but that is aiming too high. This book is much more provisional than that: an overview to get some understanding of what more or less could be termed ‘Dutch’ humour and irony.

My first disclaimer is that there are criteria I have set for the selection of titles, but they do not rule out a certain randomness. To start with the obvious ones: a comedy that has proven successful at the box office is likely to be included here. Moreover, favourable reviews and/or much publicity work greatly to a film’s advantage. Occasionally, and here I may seem to enter a grey area, a film will be discussed even when it does not fall under either one of these criteria, but because it, like *MAN IN DE WAR* in this Introduction, happens to serve my argument so excellently. Further, some films address serious subject matter in a not particularly funny manner, and thus would not qualify as ‘comedy,’ but nevertheless offer some, or at least sufficient, comic relief. Cases in point are *DORP AAN DE RIVIER* (Fons Rademakers, 1958) in chapter 3, or *BORGMAN* (Alex van Warmerdam, 2013) in chapter 8, that is to say, insofar one can speak of comic ‘relief’ in a movie that dark. The status of these titles in the history of Dutch cinema and/or the place these films take in the directors’ oeuvre were decisive in incorporating them. A film like *WOLF* (Jim Taihuttu, 2013) contains some humorous passages as well, particularly thanks to the representation of Adil as a wannabe tough guy, but overall Taihuttu’s movie – inspired by among others *MEAN STREETS* (Martin Scorsese, 1973) and *UN PROPHÈTE [A PROPHET]* (Jacques Audiard, 2009) – depicts such heavy-laden topics, like criminal behaviour, violence, and cancer, that its tone actually is too ‘serious’ and pessimistic for consideration in this study. By contrast, Taihuttu’s preceding film, *RABAT* (2011), which he co-directed with Victor Ponten, is examined in chapter 2, especially because the ending is not as gloomy as *WOLF*’s finale but rather parallels the principles of a joke’s punchline. Another point of contention could be my inclusion of a film like *SPETTERS* (Paul Verhoeven, 1980), in chapter 6, for it is neither (meant as) a comedy nor was it received as humorous at its time of release. In the course of time, however, the status of Verhoeven’s picture has changed so drastically, that its case has become a cause for humour.

Even though my criteria are fairly flexible, the selection had the unfortunate consequence that some quite good, quite humorous and/or quite well-known films fell in-between categories and therefore remain undiscussed – like *VAN GELUK GESPROKEN [COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS]* (Pieter Verhoeff, 1987), *EEN MAAND LATER [A MONTH LATER]* (Nouchka van Brakel, 1987),

VREEMD BLOED [THE ODD ONE OUT] (Johan Timmers, 2010), to name some – or are relegated to a note – like DE AVONDEN [THE EVENINGS] (Rudolf van den Berg, 1989), SUZY Q (Martin Koolhoven, 1999), DUSKA (Jos Stelling, 2007), MATTERHORN (Diederik Ebbinge, 2013).

Keep in mind that, as my second disclaimer runs, this study is a first-attempt array to explore the uncharted territory of post-war Dutch narrative fiction film: there is no consistent academic tradition yet to relate to. In order to take humorous and ironic tendencies in Dutch feature films seriously, I will have to preserve discussions of films which offer only (too) little, or even no humorous interludes for another book. Among this list of excluded pictures, there are some of my personal favourites: alas, no DE DANS VAN DE REIGER [THE DANCE OF THE HERON] (Fons Rademakers, 1966);²⁸ no EEN OCHTEND VAN ZES WEKEN [A MORNING OF SIX WEEKS] (Nikolai van der Heyde, 1966); no PASTORALE 1943 [PASTORAL 1943] (Wim Verstappen, 1978), despite the clumsy actions by the resistance during the war; no CHARLOTTE (Frans Weisz, 1980); no HET TEKEN VAN HET BEEST [THE MARK OF THE BEAST] (Pieter Verhoeff, 1980); no DE SCHORPIOEN [THE SCORPION] (Ben Verbong, 1984); no SPOORLOOS, no GUERNSEY (Nanouk Leopold, 2005); no LANGER LICHT [NORTHERN LIGHT] (David Lammers, 2006); no HET ZWIJGEN [THE SILENCE] (André van der Hout and Adri Schrover, 2006); no OORLOGSWINTER [WINTER IN WARTIME] (Martin Koolhoven, 2008); no NOTHING PERSONAL (Urzsula Antoniak, 2009); no GLUCKAUF [SON OF MINE] (Remy van Heugten, 2015); no THE PARADISE SUITE (Joost van Ginkel, 2015), and, as said, no WOLF. In addition to that, a ‘quality’ film like WILDE MOSSELS [WILD MUSSELS] (Erik de Bruyn, 2000) is examined, in chapter 6, but since humour is no more than an undercurrent of this predominantly melancholic film, the interpretation is relatively brief for a film that good.

And finally, my third disclaimer, as Simon Critchley remarks in the beginning of his study *On Humour*: a theory of humour is itself not humorous. Nevertheless, enjoy reading.

