

Low-Class Comedies

In the Dutch language, the word *boodschappen* can mean both ‘messages’ and ‘groceries.’ When film director Dick Maas was criticized that his film *FLODDER* (1986) was sheer amusement and consecutively void of (social/political) messages, he retorted: ‘Boodschappen doe je maar in de Albert Heijn.’ A literal translation of this sentence might run: ‘Get your groceries at Albert Heijn [the largest Dutch supermarket chain],’ which, of course, slips into the pun: ‘Get your messages at the supermarket.’ This pun is a variation upon the quote, attributed to, among others, American film directors Frank Capra and John Ford that ‘if you want to send a message, go to Western Union’ (or ‘try Western Union’).¹

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Apart from the fact that it is a witty remark, behind Maas’ response is a specific rhetorical question: ‘Is there anything wrong with trivial entertainment?’ If you disagree with this view, Maas would probably reply along the lines of: ‘Laugh and grow fat. Does comic laughter not purge humans from negative emotions and relieve them from their daily sorrows, at least for the duration of the film?’ Such a position presumes that a comedy like *FLODDER* does not offer its viewers food for thought – due to a lack of substance, that is ‘messages’ – but that it can be mildly beneficial to the mood of the spectators: laughter might help them to forget their troubles for a while. In this chapter I want to argue the superficiality of such a claim by addressing, in addition to *FLODDER*, films which can be considered to be companion pieces to Maas’ successful feature. Maas’ shrugging attitude unjustly underestimates (the effect of) such bawdy comedies; they are more meaningful – in both negative and positive terms – than his retort suggests.

If one were to focus on the representation of both the sexy daughter Kees and the womanizing son Johnnie, *FLODDER* and its sequels bow to the tradition of what can be called ‘blue comedy,’ and for which the Dutch

have reserved the term ‘onderbroekenlol,’ translated as ‘underpants-fun.’ ‘Blue humour’ involves material that is typically considered more ‘adult’; it can include swearing or foul language, sexual or scatological (bathroom) humour.² This tradition is quite modest in terms of numbers, but its box-office successes have been considerable. Its main representative in Dutch cinema is *WAT ZIEN IK?! [BUSINESS IS BUSINESS]* (Paul Verhoeven, 1971), which stands uncontested as the prototypical sex farce. Some ‘light’ versions of this subgenre would be *HELP! DE DOKTER VERZUIPT [HELP! THE DOCTOR IS DROWNING]* (1974), *SHERLOCK JONES* (1975), both directed by Nikolai van der Heyde, as well as the two André van Duin vehicles: *IK BEN JOEP MELOEN [I AM JOEP MELOEN]* (Guus Verstraete, Jr., 1981) and *DE BOEZEMVRIEND [THE BOSOM BUDDY]* (Dimitri Frenkel Frank, 1982). All these films are, to a lesser or greater extent, marked by a corny kind of fun. In a scene from *HELP! DE DOKTER VERZUIPT*, there is an enormous rescue operation, after the doctor has accidentally driven his car into shallow waters. The nearby gypsies take pity on him and in the kitchen he is about to change his wet clothes. As he stands there naked, he sees the beautiful Katja, who hardly looks at him. Nonetheless, the doctor takes pain to cover his nakedness, first with a feather brush, which he substitutes for a slightly bigger object, a vase. Then he lays eyes on an even more appropriate object, a book which he unfolds to hide his genitals from her sight. We get a close-up of Katja looking in the doctor’s direction and she starts to smile. The doctor glances downward, and then we see in close-up the title of the book: *What Girls Need to Know*. Because of the embarrassing pose of the naked doctor, the content of the book is reduced to sexual knowledge, as if girls only need to know about (male) genitals.

Sexual innuendo is grist for the mill of a popular comedian like Van Duin.³ In *IK BEN JOEP MELOEN*, a nurse has to take the temperature of the protagonist, and while he opens his mouth, she asks him to turn over. He does so reluctantly, and then asks him to help her find the right spot for the thermometer. He says: ‘Cold, warm, warmer ... HOT!’ Similarly, the title of Van Duin’s second (and, due to its lack of success, final) feature also plays on a possibly sexual interpretation of a principally conventional uttering. The term ‘boezemvriend’ is a Dutch expression meaning ‘very best friend.’ Set in 1811, Van Duin plays a dentist who is mistakenly identified as a baron and then boasts that he is Napoleon’s closest comrade. Since he delivers the emperor from a terrible toothache, Napoleon will at the end of the film confirm, to everyone’s surprise, that the dentist is his very best friend, indeed. At the same time, ‘boezemvriend’ can literally be translated as ‘bosom buddy.’ The term is then a pun on the physical appearance of the big-breasted woman who crosses the dentist’s path on several occasions. Well-educated

people usually turn up their nose at such 'vulgar' humour and 'risqué' word-play, at least, in their public statements, but Van Duin's films have particularly catered to the taste of the lower class.

Part of the fun may reside in the tendency of well-educated people to sneer at them, which enables the lovers of these comedies to whole-heartedly articulate their identity as 'anti-intellectual.' Such a reading is too short-sighted, however, for at the same time, several 'intellectuals' have exploited so-called *onderbroekenlol*, sometimes to a superlative degree, because then this type of amusement could easily transform into a sly provocation at the address of the (petit bourgeois) viewer. This worked well on Dutch public television, e.g., when an 'anarchistic' programme like *DE FRED HACHÉ SHOW* (1972) featured an act with a nude belly dancer, which raised many angry responses from viewers. Deliberate grossness was also at stake in films by, among others, Wim Verstappen, whose work will be discussed at length in chapters 5 and 8. Together with his close companion Pim de la Parra, Verstappen had presented himself as an outsider to the establishment, even though his success had also made them part of the establishment. In *GRIPSTRA & DE GIER [FATAL ERROR]* (1979), which he made after his split from De la Parra, a detective couple has to visit the place of two men whom they suspect of being drug dealers. No, one of them says, we do not make money with hash, but with the 'nice ass' of my partner. In the presence of both Grijpstra and De Gier, they then start dancing together and when one of them bends over, the other holds a lighter to his buddy's ass, which results into a large flame. 'You were expecting some filth, but no ...,' they say to the flabbergasted guests. 'How did you do that?' De Gier asks, whereupon the gays repeat their act, the large flame in close-up this time. In the next shot, Grijpstra enters his very own bedroom and wants to perform the trick for his wife, but she immediately turns away from him, saying: 'Aaargh, a fart in my face ...,' thus missing the flame. Moreover, in another scene De Gier is in the company of a naked woman in a scene in slow motion with soft focus. As soon as he kisses her nipple, there is a cut to a close-up of De Gier's mouth, sipping on the tail of his cat, Olivier.⁴

On the one hand, *onderbroekenlol* derives its humour from the discomfiting attitude of dignitaries towards any sexual insinuation. People who have to keep up appearances – or think they have to do that – become the laughing stock in the subgenre of the farce, like the doctor in *HELP! DE DOKTER VERZUIPT* who starts to behave nervously when an attractive blonde woman enters his consulting room.⁵ On the other hand, when one pushes this kind of 'underpants humour' a bit further, one can have the effect of annoying those (bourgeois) viewers who presume there are standards of decency which had better not be crossed. These types of viewers are the ideal

audience for directors who delight in poking fun at everything that reeks of decorum and the establishment. As a popular comedy which adapts to the proverbial ‘underbelly of society,’ the most important predecessors to Maas’ box-office hit would be Verhoeven’s *WAT ZIEN IK?!*, *HOGHE HAKKEN*, *ECHTE LIEFDE* [HIGH HEELS, TRUE LOVE] (Dimitri Frenkel Frank, 1981), *SCHATJES!* [ARMY BRATS] (Ruud van Hemert, 1984) and *MAMA IS BOOS!* [MAMA IS MAD AS HELL] (Ruud van Hemert, 1986), and its most eye-catching successor is probably *NEW KIDS TURBO* (Steffen Haars and Flip van der Kuijl, 2010). Contradicting the position that these ‘banal’ comedies are devoid of messages, I will set up a ‘dialogue’ between these films and some theoretical notion of laughter taken from the French philosopher Henri Bergson as well as the tradition of the culture of folk carnival humour, voiced by the Russian literary scholar and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin.

A PROSTITUTE AND A CHAMBERMAID: *WAT ZIEN IK?!*

When offered the chance to shoot a feature-length film in 35mm and in colour, Paul Verhoeven was delighted with the opportunity until the moment he heard that producer Rob Houwer wanted to make a ‘popular sex comedy’ based on the confessions of a prostitute, recorded by Albert Mol. Verhoeven felt he had to make a forced choice as in a hold-up (your money or your life). Naturally, he chose the ‘bad’ – going along with Houwer’s plan and to make the best of it – over the ‘worse’ option of declining the offer. He feared that he either had to give up directing at all or would be condemned to shoot ‘boring, navel-gazing, low-budget art films’ like his colleagues did (qtd. in Van Scheers, 126). Together with scriptwriter Gerard Soeteman, Verhoeven decided to balance the sensual story material with the tone of the people’s theatre, which had characterized the pre-war successes of *DE JANTJES* [THE TARS] (Jaap Speyer, 1934) and *BLEEKE BET* [PALE BET] (Alex Benno and Richard Oswald, 1934). Soeteman gambled that film spectators might then recognize the picture as part of a typically Dutch tradition: ‘The more Dutch, the better’ (qtd. in Van Scheers, 127).

Even though Verhoeven considers his *WAT ZIEN IK?!* as a negligible picture in artistic terms, it happened to become a tremendous success financially. The film set the trend for what Hans Schoots termed the ‘sex wave’ in Dutch cinema in the first half of the 1970s. In most films of this wave (see chapter 5) the dramatic parts (are meant to) preside over the comic parts, but in *WAT ZIEN IK?!* it is the other way around. Some groups of people in the Netherlands, mainly in Amsterdam, had participated actively in the so-called ‘sexual revolution,’ facilitated among others by the invention of the

birth-control pill. 'Free love' became a popular catchphrase and sex was not restricted to only one partner. Many people had no first-hand knowledge of the practices of the sexual revolution, but were acquainted with the rumours. A volume of short stories, compiled by Mol in 1965 under the title *Wat zien ik ...?!*, had captured the zeitgeist successfully. The fact that it became a best-seller over the years was an indication that a mass public was willing to read about (and watch) naughty sex adventures, when told in a frolicsome manner. Mol himself admitted that he had heard some gross anecdotes, which he decided not to include in order to keep the tone light-hearted (Van Scheers, 125). Even though tone and approach were not much to Verhoeven's own taste, he understood that the film could only attract an audience if the performances by the actors were relatively down-to-earth, for the material itself was already slightly exaggerated. Hence, he selected actors who had worked in television rather than in theatre, for television actors are more used to keeping emotions in check.

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The dramatic plot of Verhoeven's adaptation is very thin: Greet is a red-haired prostitute and her colleague Nel – also known as 'Haar van boven' [Her from upstairs] – is her dearest friend. Greet gets involved in a relationship with Piet, but he will eventually return to his pregnant wife. Nel, on the contrary, is under the spell of her no-good, pimp annex boyfriend, Sjaak, but Greet encourages her to leave him. After a miserable blind date Nel bumps into a balding but decent merchant by accident, for whom she decides to leave the Red Light District. The pace of the film was deliberately fast to prevent the spectator from noting the absence of a coherent narrative (see Van Scheers, 128), for the plot is little more than a coat hanger for a series of weird encounters between prostitutes and their customers.

In the opening scene, a man returns to Holland after doing three years of development work in Africa. Giving vent to the idea that first things come first, he rushes to Greet by cab, and complains that he has not seen a single gorgeous woman in Africa, except for a nun. Sensing that he is very eager, she charges a high price for her services. In his excitement, the sex is quickly over, to his own deep dissatisfaction. Greet moves over to her cash register and dryly calculates the bill: '285 guilders, tax included.' In another scene we see Greet enter a toy shop from a high-angle master shot in order to buy a mask for a 'children's party.' Then we see Greet from behind and we face the salesman. Because the shot is from a slightly low angle, we see the many masks above his head, while he says: 'A children's party, so something cheerful.' He tries on two funny masks himself, but the camera pans to the right as Greet makes a quarter turn and points at a mask off-screen. The camera shows the salesman in close-up who after a few seconds mutters with a puzzled look on his face: 'That one? For a children's party?'

In the next shot we see a neatly dressed gentleman arrive in an expensive car and enter a building. He walks slowly, while the musical score creates a sinister atmosphere. 'Can I proceed?' the man asks Greet, and a bit later: 'Nothing scary is gonna happen, right?' Greet leaves the room and orders him to get into the bed. Cut to a shot in which we see her from behind while she puts on a wig, lilac in colour. She bangs on the door and yells with an eerie voice: 'Ha ha ha ... I'm coming to get you.' First, we see the man in bed, frightened facial expression, and then the camera tracks behind Greet who enters the room, still yelling and laughing hysterically. In the meantime Nel has come down the stairs to Greet's room, and looks into the open door. Greet turns around in medium close-up, but half-way through the movement, the camera jump-cuts to a close-up and we see the scary witch mask she is wearing. Nel's scream is deafening. In fact, the close-up of the witch mask is the reverse shot of the scene in the toy shop, when Greet made her choice by pointing at a mask off-screen, one and a half minutes before. The unorthodox jump-cut during Greet's turn can be seen as accentuating the shock that provokes the bloodcurdling scream. The man in bed falls back in the cushions, with a satisfactory smile on his lips. He visibly enjoys the thrill. After Greet has reassured Nel by pulling off her mask, we see the customer leave the place, and he congratulates her on the superb act. He gives her an extra tip because of the fabulous scream.

It will be a red thread in the subsequent scenes between Greet and her customers that she puts on an act, dressed in character, and in retrospect it will turn out to be that the performance is in the service of the erotic satisfaction of a male client. At one point there is a cut to a close-up of Greet who blows a whistle against a white background. She is so close that we can only see that she is wearing something with a high collar. She mentions a variety of children's names, and then singles out 'Jantje' to whom she speaks sternly. Jantje is an adult man, wearing a sailor suit and, as we see a bit later, when he walks to his bench, shorts. In a long shot it becomes clear that Greet is dressed like a schoolmarm with a skirt to her ankles. As soon as she drops her piece of chalk, she bends over and remains in position so that Jantje can come over to put his hand under her skirt. Of course, Jantje has to be 'punished' for this behaviour. With both Greet and Nel, who plays the headmaster, in shallow focus in the background, we see Jantje in sharp focus on the left side of the frame, enjoying the spanking. Each and every time in *WAT ZIEN IK?!*, a specific setting is created – a horror scene, a school class with a naughty boy, Greet made up as a corpse who is asked for forgiveness by a male client and then comes alive – which is a play-act for sexual pleasure. Sometimes, as in the scene with the man whom they pick up in the park, the act is accompanied by a joyful melody, composed by Julius Steffaro (real

name: Jan Stoeckart). The tune continues until we see them in three-shot on a bench, from a low angle that centralizes the man's suitcase. As he opens it, white feathers pop up, and in the next shot, Greet and Nel walk and cluck like chickens, whereas the man climbs upon a small table, imitating a rooster. The joyful melody that prepared us for this scene – which takes a twist by the way, when Greet gets angry at the customer – can be taken as a general guideline for all the episodes with the male clients. All the sexual desires in the film are not presented as deviant only, but as comic aberrations. The music is one clue, but Greet's cool attitude is another. Her lack of affection for them clearly shows after they leave. She only tolerates their idiosyncratic wishes because her axiom is, as the English title of the film runs, 'business is business.' Each and every customer is therefore no more than a weird passer-by, of whom we never get to know anything but his eccentric preferences.

Perhaps the strangest bird of them all is the man who chooses the disguise of a chambermaid, dusting Greet's place at her command. His arrival at her place is also announced by a happy tune. Dressed in a white miniskirt, a pair of pumps, and a silly head-cap, he likes the threat of being slapped by Greet's carpet-beater. Greet can play the role of dominatrix. When she checks the cabinet, she says in a loud voice: 'Wat zien ik?! Stof.' [What are I seeing? Dust. The grammatically incorrect language is deliberate, a sign of her lower-class background.] She then starts to hit this 'dirty and filthy girl.' While she continues to hit him, it becomes increasingly unclear whether Greet is merely playing the role of stern mistress or is actually disgusted by the act. When she stops the beating, she apologizes: 'Sorry. Was it too hard?' After some moments of recovery, the 'chambermaid' turns around and says: 'Ah, Madame, it has never been this great before.' While Greet fears that she really has transgressed some boundaries, it turns out that the customer experienced the punishment as the epitome of enjoyment. This illustrates the peculiarity of the male desires in Verhoeven's movie: The most terrible punishment can equal the greatest sexual satisfaction. This conclusion might have been cause for deep reflection, as in a Luis Buñuel film,⁶ but the way the 'chambermaid' behaves and ultimately delivers the line with a happy expression on his face makes the scene fit for comic laughter. The overall impression of the film is that all the male customers seem weird misfits, but though their yearning for role-playing games is a bit bizarre, they treat Greet with respect, minus perhaps the man who has taken on the guise of the rooster. But when she makes clear 'enough is enough,' he runs away as fast as he can, even leaving his clothes behind.⁷

(NO) ORDINARY PEOPLE: *HOGHE HAKKEN, ECHTE LIEFDE AND SCHATJES!*

In fact, the way Greet seems to be in control in almost every scene is part of the vulgar charm of *WAT ZIEN IK?!* One indication that working as a prostitute is not that bad, is given when Greet visits the newlywed Nel. Her new home in Eindhoven is absolutely spotless. Her husband, Bob, returns home from shopping and announces he has a gift for her: two bottles of Vim, a cleaning product, which he bought on discount. The pettiness of Nel's life in the spick-and-span residence (along with Bob) contrasts sharply with the careless conviviality of the lower-class environment to which Greet happily returns after the visit in Eindhoven.

52 | Being direct is a quality that works to a prostitute's advantage in her own world, but such an approach to life leads her into an embarrassing situation when she enters into new, more sophisticated surroundings, as it is shown in the 'classic concert scene.' This episode deserves to be singled out, because it heralds, in a nutshell, the turn that the bawdy comedy will take in the 1980s. In this scene, Piet takes Greet out for the evening, but where they are going is a surprise for her. When she enters the music hall and sees the pianoforte, she exclaims: 'A concert?' so loudly that people in the audience turn their heads. Piet reminds her that she likes to listen to Schubert and Beethoven, but she counters that she only ever does so when that is what her customers request. For them, she asserts, it is a way to enliven the atmosphere. In every sense, Greet does not fit in with the audience at the concert: she applauds too late and continues clapping after one is supposed to be silent. While everyone is immersed in the aria, contemplating the high-pitched notes, she sits staring at the stage with wide open eyes, flabbergasted. She wants to put her arm over Piet's shoulder, but notices that he is uncomfortable with the gesture and so she starts eating a bar of chocolate instead, doing it noisily, and comments: 'This is certainly not *Arbeidsvitaminen*,' a radio programme that plays popular music. When Piet tells her this is not a cinema, but a concert, and that he wants her to behave herself, she gets so frustrated that she leaves her seat, causing quite a clamour.

In the concert scene, it becomes clear that Greet is only familiar with an ordinary background and has never been exposed to 'high culture.' She despises that everyone behaves according to some silently agreed upon sense of decorum that she herself is not aware of. She, however, does not just leave the music hall, but she makes a huge spectacle of her departure, which leads to shocked reactions among both the audience and the performers. Her going away is supposed to attract everyone's attention, for it is meant to express her disdain for this sense of decorum. Moreover, the best way to give vent to her anger at Piet is to make him embarrassed of her behaviour in front of all the viewers.

This scene from *WAT ZIEN IK?!* can be seen in tandem with the film *HOGHE HAKKEN, ECHTE LIEFDE*, which reverses the pattern, but to a similar effect of privileging the low class. Semijns Roggeveen, managing director of a firm, is bored by his upper-class existence, with a wife talking about yoga and meditation all the time. One day he visits the canteen of his workers, and sees how his employees address each other in a direct manner, like ‘Watch out, loaf.’ While we see him drinking a mineral water at a table, a subsequent shot shows him amidst the workers, dressed casually and laughing at corny jokes. In another shot, he imagines himself flirting with the assertive and high-heeled sales girl Jenny. While his wife thinks that he is withdrawing into a Buddhist convent, he starts to lead a double life, thanks to a wig and a fake moustache: in his new guise he becomes a truck driver, called Arie Snoek, at his very own company. ‘Need a blow?’ (*‘Moet je een knal?’*) becomes one of his favourite expressions, but when he receives one himself, he enjoys it tremendously. At the same time, he starts setting his new colleagues against the direction, complaining about the poor working conditions. Moreover, Arie starts an affair with Jenny, who one day happens to meet Arie’s double, Semijns, in the office. Afterwards she tells Arie that the director told her that her breasts are very shapely, which drives the truck driver mad with anger.⁸ He even challenges the director via a letter to a duel, but this impossible situation of Arie meeting Semijns makes him realize that he has to make up his mind who he wants to be/become. This moment is visualized when he stands in front of a mirror – wearing Arie’s clothes, but without the wig and moustache – and with a gun he cracks his own image. While the end credits start running, we see him say farewell to his upper-class friends as an orange-clad Buddhist at the airport, but in a next shot he secretly dons his clothes in a dustbin and continues the relationship with Jenny.

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The children of the family Gisberts in the film *SCHATJES!* can be seen as relatives of both Greet and Remijns in terms of mentality. While the protagonist from *WAT ZIEN IK?!* displays her contempt for social status predominantly in the concert scene, the disdainful behaviour of Remijns is turned into a structuring principle. The way Remijns expresses his disdain for the upper class, however, is only ‘child’s play’ in comparison to the rude way the four kids in *SCHATJES!* will behave. The timing of this film by Van Hemert can be considered as striking, for it is released in the wake of successes like *ANNIE* (John Huston, 1982), *E.T.* (Steven Spielberg, 1982) and the Dutch *CISKE DE RAT* (Guido Pieters, 1984). In all three films children suffer from the absence of father figures, but feel-good alternatives are at hand for them. *SCHATJES!* offers the bleak inverse of such narrative developments and its ‘message’ can be paraphrased as: ‘Well, children, eat your heart out! Parents suck and fathers are even worse than mothers.’ On a personal level, this film can be regarded as

Van Hemert's 'revenge fantasy' upon his own authoritarian father Willy van Hemert, a director himself who became a household name thanks to a few hugely popular television drama series.⁹

From the affluent villa including an enormous lawn as well as from the fancy names they have given their children – the young adolescent Thijs, his slightly younger sister Madelon, and the two young boys, Jan-Julius and Valentijn – we can gather that the parents regard themselves as members of the better social circles. It becomes clear from the start, however, that there is an icy-cold relationship between the parents and the children. The oldest son is driving around on a motorbike on the green lawn, seen via a point-of-view of the father who observes this from his helicopter during office hours, for he happens to work as a pilot at a nearby air base. Father John yells at his son, but to no avail.

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This opening scene is merely the overture for a series of violent attacks and demolitions: on the request of Madelon, Thijs executes a bombing via the alarm clock in their parents' bedroom; Thijs floods the house; the two young kids attach a chain to their father's car so that the automobile breaks in half, and Madelon mows the word 'lul' [prick] with huge letters in the lawn as the father flies over the villa once again. One may wonder whether some of these scenes are funny at all, for a bombing is a most serious assault, but the presentation of it is definitely cartoonish. Due to the bombing, a door flies through the air, there is a lot of smoke, one young kid yells 'The Russians!' and the pissed-off father walks outside with one very dark eye and a bandage on his cheek. In another brutal scene, which is nonetheless played for laughs, the mother is thrown off a ladder, off-screen. We hear her scream, and we only see the outcome of the fall: she has landed head-down in a bush. As in animated cartoons, characters have only minor bruises or injuries, ready for other painful incidents in subsequent scenes.

SCHATJES! is a physical comedy which may come across as rude and sarcastic, for it pivots around the total disrespect of a bunch of rogues towards their parents. Since the battle can only harden, and even some soldiers in a jeep (to the dismay of Van Hemert, the budget did not allow for a huge army) eventually arrive to call the young riff-raff to order, the comedy comes to border on horror without ever losing its connection to humour.¹⁰ The manner in which John starts to chase his children with an axe, while singing 'Who's afraid of the big, bad wolf?', recalls Jack Nicholson's behaviour from *THE SHINING* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), but the overall atmosphere is obviously too humorous to ever become truly as haunting and sinister as Kubrick's classic. The best scene to argue that the horror should not take the upper hand over laughter is the one and only musical interlude. In a scene which is colour-tinted red and pink, Dennis – the handsome blonde tennis coach, both fancied by mother and

daughter – starts to sing all of a sudden about how much he loves Madelon, if only to prevent the film spectator from getting (too) immersed in the family drama.

Despite the film's insistent emphasis upon comedy over drama and horror, it is worth looking at the nature of the parental crisis in *SCHATJES!* At the air base, John is senior in age, but he is still lowest in rank, as we gather from his superior, Pete Stewart (played by Rijk de Gooyer, who was Arie and Remijns in *HOGHE HAKKEN, ECHTE LIEFDE*). John had been nominated twice for a promotion, but the behaviour of his children impaired his general esteem among his peers to such an extent that the nomination was withdrawn. Now, he will get a third, and last, chance. From the few scenes at his work, John is shown as a docile pilot who wants to please his superior. He takes his job very seriously, and he works hard to support his family. Actually, he is so preoccupied with the possibility of a promotion that he fails to notice that his house is flooded upon his return, until he lays eyes upon the broken toy helicopter he once received as a trophy.

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The basic error John makes is that he projects the hierarchical thinking that works best in a military setting onto the situation at home. In the military a higher-ranked person automatically derives prestige from his symbolic position. In his own family, however, he expects that his children pay him due respect because a father happens to be the head of the family. Symptomatic is the verbal expression he uses when he starts to interrogate the eldest of his offspring after the bombing: 'Your mother has asked me to enquire after the root causes of your behaviour of the last days, last months, yes, you might even say the last few years.' This 'your mother has asked me ...' presumes that a father is supposed to call the kids to account for their deeds: in the opinion of the parents, it is up to a father to speak with a voice of authority. In the eyes of John, his children have been troublesome ever since they could talk. According to him, they are intractable, as if it is in their nature to be nasty brats. To him, his symbolic position is so self-evident that if his command is ineffective, the children are to blame for they probably lack the right mentality and discipline. When they do not listen, he can only impose a penalty, such as withholding their pocket money or (what piques Thijs, as he says later when things go bad at home) threatening to send them to boarding school.

Underlying the apparent sarcasm is the children's attempt to reveal to the father that his power is an empty shell. He always takes a stance of authority, but that does not make him authoritative yet. Since he does not see this discrepancy, John fails to acknowledge that his authority is built on quicksand. Moreover, as the mother makes clear, he overshoots the mark by using rude expressions like '*kut met peren*' [literally, 'cunt with pears'] or grandiose words, as when he calls the deeds by the children 'pure genocide.' Such

efforts are so pathetic that they will ruin any chance of having an impact on the children.

The father not only has a blinkered view of the needs of his children, he is also blind to the licentious behaviour of his wife. She tries to seduce the much younger Dennis and performs some cunning tricks to prevent any encounter between her daughter Madelon and the guy she is infatuated with herself. Mother Danny has told the tennis coach that Madelon is still ill and Dennis asks her whether he can pay her a visit. The mother answers that her daughter is perhaps only pretending to be ill because she does not like playing tennis. While she caresses his neck, we hear the whirring sound of a helicopter. As Dennis walks away from the mother in bad temper, the sound increases in volume. A low-angle shot shows both Danny and the helicopter in one shot. She gets mad at the helicopter, for she realizes that it is probably her husband, who might discover that she fancies Dennis – even when John is actually too trustful to recognize her behaviour as improper. Her crush on the tennis coach is so extreme that she flies into a fit of rage when the youngest child tells her by phone that Madelon is sleeping with Dennis – actually, he uses the word *‘rampetampen.’* She even unleashes her anger at a totally innocent child.

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SCHATJES! can be qualified as an anti-establishment comedy with children who, while living in relative luxury, rebel against their parents in a manner as if they have never had any form of decent upbringing. The father exclusively relies upon his symbolic position and the mother merely pursues solipsistic desires. She is hardly interested in giving her children a proper upbringing, bribing the two young kids with candy if she wants them to do something. Although SCHATJES! owes its success to the laughter provoked by the bold acts the kids commit, it warrants attention that the children are not just spoiled brats nor are they ‘inherently’ bad. A great part of their bullying results from frustration with their parents’ incompetence and neglect of them. In the absence of their parents, the children turn out to be quite caring among each other most of the time and both Thijs and Madelon take up the parental role, almost matter-of-factly. This implies that their rebellious behaviour is basically aimed at exposing the false pretence of their father. As such, the film can be taken as a critique of the thin veneer of social varnish in a well-to-do family.

Perhaps this (implicit) social critique is the main reason why SCHATJES! was generally more appreciated than its less successful MAMA IS BOOS! [MUMMY IS MAD AS HELL]. (Ruud van Hemert, 1986), which is more like an average drama of adultery. Thijs and Madelon are no longer around and the focus is upon the animosity between the father and the mother, because he has had an affair with a woman, which Danny considers unbearable. She plays the role of the cheated wife to ridiculous effect and he becomes the object of her aggressive fits. In fact, MAMA IS BOOS! offers little more than her irrational anger.

This already shows in the very first, outrageous scene of the film. At the end of *SCHATJES!* the parents were in pursuit of their children by car, late at night. They deliberately ignore a roadblock and drive their car into a huge gap that is about to be filled with cement. The very final shot of the film shows a little flag, stuck in the highway, apparently locating the spot where the parents are buried. In the opening of *MAMA IS BOOS!*, preceding the starting credits, we get a shot of this particular road. Red, purple and blue filters are used respectively, while the camera zooms in on the little flag still stuck in concrete. The flag flaps vigorously because of the wind caused by busy traffic. The camera moves underneath the road and we hear a radio report about a missing couple. The father, still alive, gets angry when he hears the journalist say that he is 42 years of age: '41, asshole.' The camera tracks back, and then we see the mother lying on the back seat of the car, staring with glazed eyes, as if she is a zombie. Even when a few litres of sewerage floods over her face, she does not move. Initially, the scene seems to be a follow-up to the finale of *SCHATJES!*, but then father John wakes up, gasping, and it only turns out to be a bad dream.

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Nevertheless, there is one elemental feature that distinguishes the bad dream from 'real life': in the dream John's wife was motionless, but in 'real life,' she will burst in a fury, totally unreasoning, time and again. During the party of the 20th anniversary of their marriage, the mere hint of the youngest son, Valentijn, that the tears in his father's eyes are caused by the absence of his mistress, Jane, enrages the mother, Danny. At no point in the film is she open to reason and she grasps every opportunity to wreak physical havoc upon him. When in a later scene John tells his mistress that perhaps some sense will have come into Danny, there is an immediate cut to the mother with a chainsaw.

The difference between *SCHATJES!* and *MAMA IS BOOS!* can be illustrated by distinguishing the psychoanalytic notion of demand from drive. A demand has some symbolic value. A person can demand something, but, as Slavoj Žižek explains, what he is 'really aiming at through this demand is something else' (*Looking*, 21). The children demand to terrorize their parents, but what they actually seem to aim at is their affection. Drive, on the contrary, 'persists in a certain demand, it is a "mechanical" insistence that cannot be caught up in a dialectic of desire: I demand something and I persist in it to the end' (*Looking*, 21). This seems applicable to the mother in *MAMA IS BOOS!*, for she seems only bent after the destruction of her husband: terror is her goal.

Of the many subvarieties within the genre of horror, one might say that they are all 'caught up in a dialectic of desire.' Struggling with immature or 'unfinished' masculinity, (young) men in slasher films might give full vent to their frustration by targeting female victims whose behaviour is frivolous, as is hypothesized by Carol Clover; or the sleazy horror can be a reaction to the

monstrosity of the female body as Barbara Creed suggests, while the vampire, Richard Dyer claims, can be related to a context of (closeted gay) sexuality.¹¹ As psychoanalysis teaches us that repressed desires always return, but in a necessarily different form, then the various categories of horror are possibly some of these forms. In such cases, horror can tap into people's unconscious and this can explain the elevation of some well-executed films to the status of classic, from *NOSFERATU* to *PSYCHO* and from *DR. JEKYLL AND MR. HYDE* to *THE SHINING*.

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The one subgenre exempted from this logic is the zombie film which may be one of the reasons why the status of its best-known title – *NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD* (George A. Romero, 1968) – is definitely cult, with relatively little appeal to middle-class audiences. The zombie only demands to be fed by someone's flesh and has no further quibbles with (structures of) society. Of course, the zombie can be, and actually has been, read as a metaphor for critical tendencies in society (shopaholics are like zombies), but as a character this monster is basically an 'it,' merely programmed to bring death and destruction. The mother in *MAMA IS BOOS!* is, of course, not a real zombie, for she has a clear motive. She is stunned with jealousy and therefore she demands the annihilation of John. But through this demand, she is not really aiming at something else, like the children were in *SCHATJES!* This may explain why the quite straightforward *MAMA IS BOOS!* was less successful than its slightly more double-edged predecessor. The superiority of *SCHATJES!* over its sequel also shows in its intertexts. Whereas *SCHATJES!* clearly alludes to the classic horror film *THE SHINING*, *MAMA IS BOOS!* is to be associated with the subgenre of the zombie film, accentuated by the scene in which the characters who are still beholden to the mother move towards the caravan of John's mistress. Shot from within the caravan, they appear as huge threatening shadows outside. This scene is almost like a replay from similar scenes in *NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD* when zombies are trying to invade the house in which the main protagonists of the film are hiding. Whereas the official sequel *MAMA IS BOOS!* could not rival the original *SCHATJES!*, one might say that *FLODDER* is its unofficial successor, which brought the anti-establishment comedy to a new level of success.

BE THYSELF (OR ACT LIKE A PERSON): *FLODDER*

Since the lower-class family *Flodder* has been living unwittingly on a dump for toxic waste, the social worker Sjakie van Kooten pleads the case that the council has a responsibility to offer these 'well-meaning people' a proper home. There is no better option than to settle them in a long-vacant house in the well-

to-do neighbourhood Zonnedaal.¹² According to Sjakie, such a completely new environment has the advantage of forcing the family to adjust themselves to the structured lifestyles of their upper-class neighbours. The basic humour of the film *FLODDER* consists of laying bare the discrepancy between the gaudily rude behaviour of the new inhabitants and the social conventions of the upper class. This discrepancy is announced in the beginning in two ways – via striking edits as well as via a specific conversation. First, while Sjakie is emphasizing the benevolence as well as the utter sensitivity of the Flodders, we get shot transitions to Mother ('Ma') Flodder which belie his statements. The first time we see her, she is surprised that her oldest son, the 27-year-old Johnnie, digs up a photograph of a man, probably from the attic: 'I have not seen that face for more than ten years,' she says. 'Is that my father?' daughter Kees asks. 'No, his father, not yours.' After the photograph has fallen on the ground, its glass broken, the dog pees over the portrait. This very first scene with the Flodders is meant to suggest the family's laconic un-sentimentality and the matriarch's apparently unforgiving nature, according to the commonplace: 'Out of sight, out of the heart.'

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Second, the discrepancy between the family's straightforward stance and the social cohesion among the rich is ambiguously expressed in a dialogue between Johnnie and his half-sister Kees, when they drive with his very old car, exploring the new neighbourhood. Overlooking the villas with their well-kept lawns, Johnnie says: 'Well, don't fancy anything.' Kees: 'Oh, no, I will just remain my very own self.' Johnnie: 'That is exactly what I am afraid of.' In fact, this conversation goes to the heart of the film's 'message,' if this term can be used at all. The Flodders cannot be but their very own selves, because they live according to their 'instincts.' And in just following their impulses, they wreak havoc in the streets.

A binary opposition is clear from the start: in contrast to the proper and 'good' citizens in Zonnedaal, the Flodders are primitive, and hence, (mildly) 'evil,' because it is not in their 'nature' to conform to social conventions. The opening scenes function as illustrations to point out their nastiness and/or their laconic attitude bordering on moral indifference. When a journalist mentions the nasty odour of their old home, Ma Flodder says: 'What bad smell?' Their obliviousness to dirt is affirmed when the male Kees throws a banana peel out on the impeccably clean streets of Zonnedaal. Further, the Flodders address people in either too colloquial a way – 'Hey, Sjakie, old wanker' (Johnnie) – or in sexist terms – 'look, some horny dames' (the male Kees). Their disinterest in a working ethic is illustrated when Ma Flodder tells Sjakie that 11 o'clock is too early to pay them a visit, since everybody will still be sound asleep. Their refusal to recognize authority shows itself in the scene when Johnnie drives away in his car at high speed, almost overrunning two

policemen. Their utter lack of an intellectual standard is proven in their naming: the mother is simply called by the shorthand 'Ma,' and the old man in a wheelchair is just 'grandpa,' even though as is revealed after his unfortunate death, he probably was not their grandfather at all, but some drifter whom they adopted as their grandfather, another token of a topsy-turvy world. Moreover, this 'grandpa' is not a wise, old man, but seems like a cranky fool, all the time dressed in the attire of a railway guard, and every word he utters is simply inarticulate. The names Johnnie (not spelled as the more common Johnny) and Henkie (not even Henk, but the belittling variant) typically connote a lower-class background; the name Toet for one of the daughters is down-right silly and sounds more like a nickname, whereas the fact that both a boy and a girl are named 'Kees' is the ultimate sign of how little they care about fanciful names.

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When Toet meets a neatly clothed girl, called 'Stephanie,' much more fanciful (like Madelon or Jan-Julius from *SCHATJES!*), the latter's mother is quick to remind her to attend her violin lessons. Stephanie then asks Toet: 'Do you love Paganini as well?' but Toet replies: 'I prefer Chinese,' misunderstanding the fondness for the compositions of a famous musician for a question about types of cuisine. This particular conversation is striking in that it highlights the gap between the typical bourgeois with their cultural taste and the lower-class family. If the latter hear the name of an unknown artist, they think of food. In the vein of Bakhtin's concept of 'grotesque realism,' the family has the tendency to bring anything abstract, intellectual or cultural to the level of the body. Since they display neither a spiritual nor a sophisticated dimension, they can permit themselves to be frank about basic needs like food, drink, sex and death.

Ma Flodder is brewing her own beverage, while attaching fake labels to the bottles. The point whether she has the capacity to make her own alcohol, is sidestepped by her remark that it is only a 'matter of fermenting.' Quality is not the issue here, but quantity.¹³ The family consumes drink and food in large amounts: they eat fried potatoes with their hands and at an amazing speed. As regards sex, the big-breasted daughter Kees has no problems in showing herself off as an erotic object, on the condition that it offers the family financial profit. She seduces the neighbour in his garage, while her brother Kees takes a photograph of the scene. The seduction is a well-planned act to blackmail the neighbour who works as a car dealer. If the neighbour asks them how they want to pay the expensive sports car they have in mind, Johnnie replies: 'Polaroid.' The scene is exemplary for the overall context of the film: the needs of food, drink, sex and death are absolutely basic in anyone's life – and hence, one might expect a serious treatment – but these are constantly hinted at in a humorous way. For the family, sex is not related to love, affection or excite-

ment, but it is a commodity value instead. And insofar love and sentimental feelings are at stake, the impression is at hand that it is play-acted or embedded within another aim.

Johnnie has an affair with Yolanda, one of the neighbour ladies who is bored to death with her husband. She is a handsome woman, but part of her attraction may reside for Johnnie in the fact that she is married to a colonel in the army. Such a man tends to believe that he can derive some status from his profession, and moreover, he will definitely think himself superior to an unemployed 'bum.' Cheating with his wife is then a special delight for a guy like Johnnie, the more since the colonel is in fact still only a boy, as can be gathered from the huge toy army he has in the cellar for a hobby. This toy army is used for comic relief in the representation of the sex scene between Johnnie and Yolanda. When they make love for the very first time, their act is off screen, but we see some of the toy soldiers tumble down and, suggestively, we see the 'loop' of several cannons rise.

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To summarize, the majority of the comic scenes are rooted in some bodily aspect – be it sex, food, drink – or in an utter disinterest in decorum, and this is the common denominator of all the films in this chapter. For that reason, one might say that their behaviour is not that far removed from the way animals behave themselves. According to a specific theory of humour, the human is to be separated from the animal because of man's capacity for laughter. Humour confirms man's eccentric position in the kingdom of animals. But, as Critchley wagers, the capacity for humour also, 'curiously, marks the limit of the human,' for all too often 'what makes us laugh is the reduction of the human to the animal' (29). If this is the case – and I think it is fairly applicable in the case of *FLODDER* – the lower-class background is the object of humour. And hence, one might say, in general, that characters who act peculiar, because of bestial instincts, are to be taken as butts of the jokes, that is, we laugh at them, to paraphrase Critchley, because they constantly overstep the limit between the human and the animal (36). The prostitute Greet in *WAT ZIEN IK?!* is prepared to do anything to satisfy the whimsical demands of her clients, even wear a scary mask or dress and walk like a chicken.¹⁴

Their ludicrous actions, however, are superseded in silliness by the behaviour of the people who surround them: the male clients of Greet in Verhoeven's film or the decadent neighbours in *FLODDER*. The Flodders are unconventional, indeed, but in 'being themselves,' their indecent appearance at least corresponds with their indecent 'identity,' not to say, nature. Unlike the Flodders who do not make any attempt to adjust to the well-to-do environment, their neighbours apparently fit in with their surroundings. The presence of the Flodders will actually reveal, however, how their whole lives are exclusively structured according to tight social conventions. All the time, one

is supposed to act like this, or like that, but this socially accepted behaviour is only the result of the repression of one's impulses. The direct neighbour of the Flodders, Mr. Neuteboom, pretends to be watering the plants and trees, the perfect excuse to his wife for hanging out in the garden, while he is playing peeping Tom at daughter Kees, dressed in a sexy bathing suit. When his wife tells him that his task already takes quite a while, Neuteboom is reminded of the job he is actually supposed to fulfil. Neuteboom's distraction will turn out to be exemplary for the other neighbours as well. They come across as perfectly civilized beings, but as soon as they are sexually aroused or provoked, they give free rein to their desires or aggressive impulses. Hence, it seems no more than logical that at the party at the Flodders' home, near the end of the film, practically everyone starts to indulge in vulgar behaviour.

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One might say that *FLODDER* shows that finally there is hardly any wall separating the lower-class family from their 'civilized' neighbours, and that as soon as one strips the veneer of social conventions, the 'animal within' is released after all. In that sense, *SCHATJES!* can be seen as a relevant predecessor to *FLODDER*, for the parents respond to the provocations by their children in a hysterical manner, making the father a match to the father in *THE SHINING*. Even though this would already come down to a kind of message – which, remember, director Dick Maas would deny his film contains – I guess there is a more intriguing purport to be gathered from *FLODDER*. If the neighbours, like the parents in *SCHATJES!*, start to display their particularly uncivilized demeanour, this means, in retrospect, that they have all the time only been pretending to be civilized. Here we can address a specific twist that Critchley mentioned in his study *On Humour*. A person behaving like an animal (or like a thing) can be a source of pleasure, but at the root of the comic is 'rather – surprise, surprise – *a person acting like a person*' (59, italics in original). As such, we can point at a displacement taking place. On a superficial level, the lower-class family is the object of humour, because their conduct deviates from conventional norms in a rather rude way. By contrast, the neighbours conformed to the norms upheld in the villa area, but ultimately it is revealed that they only play-acted this conformity. Whereas the Flodders are 'authentically' rude, the neighbours are in the end 'worse': their polished appearances do not correspond to their identity, deep-down. The best example of this gap between appearance and correspondence is the scene in which Mr. Neuteboom tries out some cocaine and asks the dealer whether it will have a quick effect. 'Oh, yes, it will,' the dealer replies. And at that very moment, Mr. Neuteboom is hit by his wife on his head, for she has discovered in the meantime some compromising pictures of her husband, harassing girl-next-door Kees.

The more the hypocrisy of the rich is being revealed, the more the Flodders are to deserve our sympathy, because it is their attitude of 'just being

themselves' which is responsible for the revelation of the 'false' appearance of their neighbours. The frequent references to bodily aspects of the Flodder family – food, drink, sex – are ultimately embedded in a satirical portrayal of the so-called civilized environment. We laugh at the all too direct manners of the lower class, but this laugh is relatively benevolent. Despite their unorthodox practices, we at the same time sympathize with the Flodders for their refusal to compromise their desires. They do not undertake any attempt to bend themselves to the norms of their new area. In contrast to this benevolent laugh, the neighbours are ultimately turned into the true objects of derision, if not of scorn, because of their sly ways to respond to the direct manners of the Flodders.

CARNIVALESQUE

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The humour of *FLODDER* is to be categorized under the section of what Bakhtin qualified as the carnivalesque. The film plays with existing notions of social hierarchies between the upper class and the lower class, and seems to suggest that, on a closer look, these hierarchies are represented topsy-turvy. As in carnival when all hierarchies are temporarily suspended (Bakhtin, 10), the world is portrayed upside-down: the apparently decent people are revealed to be more indecent than the primitives. Moreover, another reversal concerns the fact that the seemingly wild Flodders are ultimately good-natured. Not only are they so hospitable as to invite their hostile neighbours, but if they commit an evil deed, it is because they know no other way how to achieve their goal. The Flodders may have obtained a fancy car with foul means, but they unexpectedly pay Mr. Neuteboom the full sum after all, as soon as they totally unexpectedly inherit a large amount of money. Hence, impressions that they may be sly or greedy are contradicted in the end.

A logical question would now be: Is the effect of this carnivalesque subversive or not? To some extent it always is, as Bakhtin claimed. Carnival laughter is of a complex nature, for it is always ambivalent. On the one hand, one laughs at a specific carnivalesque situation, because one recognizes that it is a reversal of the convention. Hence, the laughter works to affirm the 'original' hierarchy as the norm. On the other hand, however, the 'entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity,' and as such, the mockery is 'also directed at those who laugh' (Bakhtin, 11-12). People who are laughing at the scenery also belong to the crazy world that is being represented. In *FLODDER*, all social hierarchies are mixed up and hence, undermined, which would underscore Bakhtin's idea of the ambivalence of folk humour.

Nonetheless, several aspects considerably lessen the possible impact of

the subversion. First, the Flodders at no point effectively resist the existing status quo. They accept the situation as a given, just as they have agreed to be moved to the new area. Their only goal is to continue living as they used to do, regardless of the fact whether their habitat is a dump or a beautiful villa. Being poor themselves, it is no issue for them that the neighbours are wealthy. They are out of step with their environment, but they do not bother and make no attempt to adjust. Their neighbours, however, and that is the basic source of pleasure in this film consider their presence as a nuisance. Even though the Flodders are neither deliberately vicious nor troublesome, their arrival is interpreted by them as an invasion of 'alien elements' and as a violation of their way of life. The careless behaviour of the Flodders has a comic effect, because the neighbours get irritated by any slight disturbance from their regularly coded existence. Being shabbily dressed, as the Flodders are, or ordering the cheapest kind of meat leads to expressions of dismay among their neighbours.

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If the social elite is being poked fun at in *FLODDER*, then there is nonetheless a character who supersedes them in ridicule. Sjakie is a well-meaning social worker with good connections in local politics. His mission is to abolish the borders between different classes. According to him, the differences between people are neither natural nor inherent, but only a result of reigning conventions and habits. People are like chameleons who will automatically adapt themselves to the environment they inhabit. Sjakie aims to mediate between all the parties involved, but in the end he is the true fool of the film because, time and again, something happens which proves the reverse side of his good intentions. His belief that neighbours will behave in a socially cohesive manner and act according to the principle of mutual forbearance is exposed as utterly naive. Hence, his social experiment results into a total failure, illustrated in the particular image of Sjakie waving a flag amidst the ruins after the house has been blown to pieces. Most of the characters have only minor bruises, but Sjakie, as the proverbial unlucky bird, ends up in a hospital with several broken bones and his head bandaged. The Flodders send

him a postcard thanking him that he has made his holiday resort in the south of France available to them. In the final shot, Sjakie crumbles the card with his one remaining arm.

Three insights can be drawn from *FLODDER*. First, the Flodders wreak havoc in a well-to-do environment. Their behaviour is a source of vicarious discomfort to the neighbourhood, but becomes a source of humour for the spectators, because the social veneer of the elite gets stripped away. Their intolerant attitude towards the newcomers emphasizes that they only play-act their status as aristocrats. The film is turned into a clash of social classes, with the lower-class family in the role of sympathetic underdog, thanks to the great contrast to the stereotypical bourgeois – or to use that alliterate expression that any Dutch person will know, ‘kouwe kak.’ Impossible to translate properly, but it would run something like ‘cold upper class’ or ‘fancy airs,’ but the expression works so well, because ‘kak’ is also a lower-class term for poop.

Second, as a necessary mediator and scapegoat, the too truthful Sjakie is time and again put in a position to make a fool of himself. He is mildly, but never severely, punished for his naive belief that there should be tolerance between the classes. He wants to abolish the borders between classes, but its effect is paradoxical. He believes that the Flodders can become ‘decent people’ when well-bred in a ‘solid’ environment, but in fact it is the other way around. The two groups can only come together on the condition that the neighbours become a bit like the Flodders.

Third, if there is a depiction of the lower class in a serious manner, it usually has the outlook of a heartfelt art-house drama, shot with a handheld and/or close camera, as in *JOY* (Mijke de Jong, 2010) or in *LENA* (Christoph van Rompaey, 2011). The deplorable living conditions should not be taken too lightly, these films imply, with the inevitable consequence that an optimistic tone is only minimal. Maas, however, did not opt for a gloomy, cultural-pessimistic template, but presented his *FLODDER* as a film about the lower class, in the form of a hilarious comedy, including bright and gay colours instead of a damp atmosphere. Its tremendous success at the box office, proof of its ‘entertainment’ value, may almost gloss over its ideological message – almost, but not quite. *FLODDER* may have been produced as sheer amusement without an explicit ‘boodschap,’ but that does not alter the fact that there is a message underneath: swanky neighbours and the naive social worker are disadvantaged in favour of impulsive simpletons.

FORREST GONE BERSERK: *NEW KIDS TURBO*

Leaving aside its two sequels – *FLODDER IN AMERIKA!* (Dick Maas, 1992) and *FLODDER 3* (Dick Maas, 1993) – and the television series, the best candidate for inheritor of *FLODDER* in terms of its humour and its popular appeal, might be *NEW KIDS TURBO* (Steffen Haars and Flip van der Kuil, 2010). This may seem a peculiar claim, since the differences are many and obvious: the New Kids do not constitute a family, but consist of a group of five buddies; unlike the *Flodders*, they derive their social identity from their home ground (Maaskantje in the region of Brabant) to such a degree that any relocation to another place would be unpopular; they are not being used in a social experiment like the *Flodders* were, but they initiate a social experiment themselves: What if we do not pay for anything anymore due to the low unemployment benefits? Apart from these obvious differences, there are quite a number of gradual dissimilarities: The language is more coarse, the manners are more rude, the exhibit of sexual desires is more direct, and the homophobic tone is more aggressive. This does not surprise us in a film which post-dates the TV shows of Paul de Leeuw or the late Bart de Graaff, the gross sexual jokes in the films of the Farrelly brothers, the juvenile pranks in the *AMERICAN PIE* franchise, and the popularity of the violent cinema of Quentin Tarantino. The best token of a general ruthlessness in *NEW KIDS TURBO* can be illustrated by pointing at the cameo appearances of the popular comedians Hans Teeuwen and Theo Maassen. Teeuwen and Maassen are forerunners in a generation of cabaret performers who are not afraid of provocative jokes, which may anger those who think they violate the conventions of dignity.

Notwithstanding these differences, *NEW KIDS TURBO* can be regarded as close to *FLODDER* in terms of its kind of humour as well as its popular appeal. As a common denominator, the five buddies do not compromise and all the time act according to their primitive instincts. So, if one feels like eating fast food, one goes to the snack bar, even during the working day. If one wants to smoke marijuana, one does so from self-grown cannabis. If one wants to drive around very fast, one neither cares about speed limits nor about the safety of pedestrians or cyclists. If one hits a person, one is concerned about a scratch on the car and not about the victim. As a typical feature of their indifferent attitude, they at one point wonder what day of the week it is. Since two of them wrongly assumed it is Sunday instead of Tuesday, they are far too late for work – and both get fired thereupon. Another typical feature concerns their appearance. They are sloppily dressed in clothes which might be qualified by the oxymoron ‘camping tuxedo.’ All five are wearing a moustache and they have long unkempt hair, covering their neck, except for Rikkert who has a short haircut which is known as the flowerpot style. Because of his haircut, Rikkert recalls

Forrest Gump, the title character of the successful film, played by Tom Hanks. My point will be that this resemblance is far from accidental, and that the film can be seen as a brutal updating of FORREST GUMP (Robert Zemeckis, 1994). The very first scene, before it is interrupted by a loud and brief title sequence, clearly captures the film's spirit. In the vein of FORREST GUMP which famously starts with a digitally manipulated feather floating in the air until it arrives at the main character's feet, the camera in the opening of NEW KIDS TURBO follows an artificial butterfly, accompanied by the melodic intro of a happy hardcore house song, Paul Elstak's *Rainbow in the Sky*. As soon as the butterfly comes in the reach of Robbie, he crushes it with a single blow: 'That fucking butterfly.' The song stops abruptly.

The feather in FORREST GUMP was only meant to muse about the idea, effectively articulated at the end of the film, whether each and every person already has a set destiny or that people are 'just floating accidental-like on a breeze.' Although Forrest thinks it may be both, Slavoj Žižek has indicated that the film thereby overlooks a more significant effect: we create our fate but not in conditions of our own choosing (Taylor, 45). It is a tale about an innocent bystander, who just does what he does, without any further ado. All his actions are based upon intuition, not intention, but he happens to set in motion great historical events, like the U.S. rapprochement with China. Forrest's purely accidental deeds, however, serve time and again a conservative mentality. According to Žižek, Forrest 'gives body to the impossible *pure subject of Ideology*, to the ideal of a subject in whom Ideology would function flawlessly' (1996, 200, emphasis in original). He never ever gives the slightest impression of a political orientation, but all of his actions have serious ideological consequences which are constantly in support of the American Dream and are averse to any leftist-liberal tendency of 'free love,' 'allowance of drug use' or 'war protest.' Better be a simpleton like Forrest whose naivety situates him on the right side of history than the idealist and (pseudo-)intellectual stance of the other important character, Jenny. To underscore the conservative tone of Zemeckis' film, Jenny dies of AIDS, which is related to her excessive pursuit of (amoral) freedom. It is excessive in the sense that leftists like Jenny deliberately adopt a political attitude of resistance and presumed commitment: she spends her life involved in the lefty protest movements of the moment, unlike Forrest, who just strolls through the decades, unaffected by the zeitgeist. Jenny is positioned as a rebel for silly causes, time and again opting for the latest fashion or political hype, whereas Forrest remains the very same, stable figure from beginning to end. FORREST GUMP thus suggests that if people follow their natural 'self' or destiny, they are always automatically – and safely – within the domain of a liberal-capitalist society, the secure basis of the American Dream. In order to follow one's natural destiny, and this is the

basic ideological purport of *FORREST GUMP*, one should not be hampered by an overabundance of rational thinking, which is the best guarantee to prevent one from siding with political fads. Ultimately, *FORREST GUMP* seems critical of those who think they are smart, like Jenny who considers herself to be more clued in than a simpleton like Forrest. Unlike his blissful ignorance, her restless intellect is expressed as – literally and figuratively – a fatal variant of political engagement.

68 | *FORREST GUMP* is a heart-rending film about a sentimental guy who pursues his genuine love for a politically engaged girl whose life is elsewhere and whose wisdom of life can be summed up in the simple tagline: ‘Mama always said life was like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re gonna get.’ *NEW KIDS TURBO* can be seen as the conversion of the sentimental *FORREST GUMP* into a rude comedy. Its hypothesis can be summarized as: what if Forrest had gone wild under the influence of four buddies, with Rikkert – who has a young mother as a girlfriend, but has never had sex with her – in the role of Forrest. If *Forrest Gump* seems critical of intellectual smartness and political engagement, then *NEW KIDS TURBO*, as a version of ‘Forrest gone berserk,’ adds to this a vehement attack on the obstacles created by social rules. So any figure who upholds such rules becomes the butt of a joke. This can be executed in a relatively friendly atmosphere, when Gerrie pokes fun at the local policeman, Adrie, by making him run for his cap. The New Kids, however, get seriously angry when after what they consider a minor offence against a civil servant at the social security office, their unemployment benefits are reduced to zero. First, we see how a bill collector, in a rapidly cross-cut sequence, is persistently ringing the doorbell. Not only is he hit on the nose when Richard finally opens the door, but Adrie also receives a punch in the face when he comes to the assistance of the bill collector. From this moment onwards, it is time for hard and gun-blazing action, for the law enforcement officers have decided that their practice of looting are totally unacceptable.

The trick of the film is similar to *FLODDER*: how to legitimize the totally unorthodox practices as sufficiently valid so that the New Kids – despite their anti-social stance – can maintain their role as the sympathetic underdog? *NEW KIDS TURBO* hinges upon a twofold rhetorical strategy. First, Richard who more or less acts as their leader succeeds in sentimentalizing their position, when they are interviewed for the local television station TV Brabant. We hear sentimental music, when Richard tells the story that he was a normal, hard-working guy who got fired because he had brought his bulldog Gradje to his job at the sanitation department. In times of economic crisis, he laments, it is hard to find another job. While we see a shot from the journalist who nods in an understanding way, Richard explains that he could not leave his dog alone at home, because the animal is sick. Due to sensitive intestines, the

dog needs special food. While he wipes off tears from his eyes, Richard is also shown peeping from under his hands to see whether his story has the wished-for effect upon the journalist, which emphasizes that he only play-acts his sorrow. Moreover, the television item is intercut with shots from viewers, and the most important of these viewers are two men in a café. One has apparently drunk so much that he has dozed off on the bar, but the other one is still drinking beer and talking, to no one in particular, after we get a close-up of Gradje: 'That is such a sweet dog,' and then again, almost in tears: 'My God, that is a sweet dog.' While the journalist ends his item by stating that the viewers have to decide for themselves whether the five buddies are dangerous swindlers or victims of the economic crisis, the viewers within the diegesis have already decided in their favour. The moment that definitely affirms their status as pitiful victims, is when the beer-drinking man in the café yells to the bartender: 'Hey homo! We won't pay for anything anymore, either. Hand me four more beers, dude,' which is followed by a shot of men sitting on a couch, tearing up letters from the taxman. The media coverage of the New Kids works to encourage sympathy for them and will result into a chain reaction, for many inhabitants of the region of Brabant will imitate their example.

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Second, insofar as the New Kids might be 'bad boys,' any civilian alternative is worse. The very worst is probably the Minister of Defence who is called upon by two officials to intervene because of all the uproar in Brabant. Since the five buddies are identified as the root of the problem, the minister decides to bomb Maaskantje, which he constantly mispronounces as Maaskant. (Since he has never heard of the place before, why would anyone else?, he argues.) This cynical attitude is topped by the fact that the army accidentally bombs Schijndel, the neighbouring place, of which the minister has probably never heard either, as one of his assistants asks him after the mistake. As the television reports that the bomb – that 'big ass ball of fire,' as the New Kids call it – which has destroyed Schijndel was meant to eliminate Maaskantje, the five buddies become totally determined: 'Nobody touches Maaskantje!' This slogan or battle cry functions as a counterpoint to the cynicism of the minister. Despite all their apparently narcissistic pursuit of pleasure – drinking, smoking, joyriding, insulting people, breaking things – there is something elementary they care about: they have a deep-felt concern for the small community they are part of. Their birthplace is an undeniable core which constitutes their identity, just like the blood running through their veins. Politicians utterly lack such a core. They only cling to symbolic, and therefore shallow, accoutrements signalling power, authority or wealth.

The violence that evolves from the battle with the army and the New Kids will be shown in a humorous context, full of wisecracks and unlikely incidents. Thanks to the sympathy that has befallen them, the Kids get support

from a variety of inhabitants of Maaskantje, like the pregnant woman Rikkert used to date and the man who delivers Chinese food. The owner of the snack bar, with whom they had many a quarrel, even comes to their aide, although he in turn has to be saved by Gerrie. Thereupon he confesses that Gerrie actually is his son of whom he always was so very ashamed, but only now he has reason to be proud of this 'ugly ass.' Officer Adrie, no longer under the command of a superior, also takes their side, but they nonetheless are still facing a majority. However, when need is highest, the boot is highest. As a true *deus ex machina*, a truck runs over a group of soldiers, deciding the fight in favour of the inhabitants of Maaskantje. The driver turns out to be a boy with a Down syndrome. Here, at the end, the boy saves the Kids' skins by citing the stock phrase he uses on each and every occasion: 'Truck driver ... honk ... honk.' By this turn of events, the film ultimately concludes with a ludicrous take on FORREST GUMP, for the kid with the Down syndrome is a hyperbolic version of the title character from Zemeckis' film. Even though the Kids used the term 'mongoloid' as an insult for practically anyone, even their friends, they more than tolerated the guy's presence throughout the film. Ultimately, the boy pays them back for their benevolence, and his intervention ultimately is evidence that the New Kids, despite their brutality, also have a heart of gold.

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There is one yet unmentioned difference between FLODDER and NEW KIDS TURBO, and though this distinction is crucial, it is also the main reason why I read the films in tandem. Social worker Sjakie was the butt of many a joke in FLODDER, but was a likeable character. In NEW KIDS TURBO, this role is performed by the local policeman Adrie. He is a lot like them, except that he is in the ('unfortunate') position of maintaining the law. The true culprit in the film, the one who sets the events in motion, is the official of the social work agency. His inflexible attitude enrages them to such an extent that they behave aggressively and lose their unemployment benefits. The historical gap separating FLODDER from NEW KIDS TURBO is that types like 'Sjakie' have become very strict. The original Sjakie was an optimist, a do-gooder par excellence, though a bit gullible, but NEW KIDS TURBO can be taken to exert a nostalgia for 'Sjakie.' That the New Kids feel themselves left to their own devices is because a mediating figure like Sjakie is missing and has been replaced by a hair-splitting civil servant. FLODDER was a comedy that could be enjoyed by the whole family for Sjakie seemed willing to take all the blows. NEW KIDS TURBO is a nihilistic comedy, because the boys feel as if they are taking all the blows themselves, which makes them raving mad. In fact, the attack by the army is a blessing in disguise, for it enables them to project their aggression onto a specific target.

Films like *FLODDER* and *NEW KIDS TURBO* obviously display stereotypes in a superlative fashion. The blond bombshell, the train-loving grandpa, the disorderly mother in *FLODDER* are hyperbolic figures, whereas the New Kids are offspring of the utterly indifferent daredevil Johnnie. Stereotypes are an 'arrested, fixated form of representation' (Bhabha, 321), which are always in excess of the norm. They can have severely damaging effects in case people do not recognize the image as a deviation from the norm and take them as 'realistic.' The problem then is that they probably will not grasp the humour either, for the basis of this type of comedy is incongruity: one has to acknowledge how obviously the stereotypical representations transgress the norm. One might surmise that this kind of humour can have sanitizing effects: understanding that the image of the sexually promiscuous bombshell, to take Kees from *FLODDER* as an example, is obviously a fiction can help to understand that women are not like that. A counterargument has it that one might react: well, they are not exactly like that, but only to a certain degree. In that case, one presumes that stereotypes may be exaggerated, but they are apparently not totally unfounded, and hence, they are supposed to contain some grain of truth. If it works like that, the stereotypes will leave some residue after all, albeit as a diluted reproduction of the images. From an ideological perspective, the problem with the type of off-colour humour in films like *FLODDER* and *NEW KIDS TURBO* is that they lack explicit signs for reflection. If one just laughs at the ridiculous portrayals of the characters, one obviously acknowledges that they transgress the norm/convention, but this also implies that the norm/convention is implicitly affirmed. Ma Flodder is comical, because she does not do what a mother is supposed to do. She is not disciplined and she does not give her children a decent upbringing. In understanding her shortcomings, one at the same time positions her representation against a conventional idea of motherhood. In the process of seeing divergence, this idea is then turned into an idealized principle – which is the great pitfall of humour based upon stereotypes. In general, one might say that this kind of humour is ambivalent: it offers as much potential relief from conventional imagery as that it affirms stock representations.

Nonetheless, comedies – even such bawdy ones – always have the potential to address issues which can either be too complicated or too controversial. One can act as if the jokes are only innocent and make no sense, as Maas' remark that opened this chapter suggested, but in the meantime they have a social significance, as Bergson stresses in his landmark study, *Le rire*. Via Bergson I will discuss the two 'vulgar' comedies in order to identify them as two historical stages in the domain of humour, separated from each other by the popular success of 'amoral' humour.

SOCIAL 'RAGGING'

In *Le rire* Bergson is searching for a deeper-rooted meaning of laughter than the obvious claim that we are just smirking at stupid mistakes and trifling matters. For him, earnestness is laughable in particular. In his eyes, man can become comic when he is deadly serious, or rather, when he is overdoing his serious attitude. Any good quality can be regarded as ludicrous as soon as one performs it in a rigid fashion. When a man prides himself on a virtue he possesses – thorough honesty or extreme cleverness, for example – he withdraws from society into himself. And precisely at this point he becomes liable to ridicule (Bergson, 138). Such a man may think he is an utter emblem of a social ideal – of morality, of wisdom, or whatever – but in the eyes of others, his self-righteous attitude is a token of his unsociability. Such a person becomes comic when he falls into a ready-made category. For Bergson, laughter implies what he called an ‘anaesthesia of the heart.’ It is essential that we temporarily suspend feelings of sympathy, fear or pity for that person, since such feelings might prevent us from epicurism. Hence, laughter, and *schadenfreude* in particular, is incompatible with emotion and requires the indifference of a totally detached observer (138).

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Although Bergson associates this working of laughter with ‘high-class comedy’ such as the plays of Molière or novels like Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, it seems applicable to *FLODDER* as well (or would that prove that *FLODDER* is ‘high class’ after all?). The well-to-do neighbours all seem to fall in a ‘ready-made category’ of those trying to keep up appearances at all costs. Hence, they only play-act at being sophisticated citizens, and their unrestrained behaviour at the party at the Flodders’ residence only serves to prove that in fact there is a discrepancy between their ‘inner nature’ and their decorum in daily life. The presence of the Flodders has a corrective function insofar as their arrival in the neighbourhood lays bare to what great extent the upper class is not civilized in itself, but only pretends to be civilized. The supreme example of this is the colonel, a well-respected citizen and a member of the fancy tennis club. As the film progresses, he is increasingly estranged from the community up to becoming a ‘mad dog,’ who defies the authority of the policemen and bombs the Flodders’ residence. Thanks to the presence of the presumably anti-social family, his ‘true face’ as an utterly intolerable man is revealed. All the laughter that is directed at the neighbours is, to adopt a quote from Bergson ‘really and truly, a kind of social “ragging”’ (135). On the one hand, the Flodders behave in an apparently rude and anti-social way, but on the other hand, in annoying their neighbours their pretence is exposed, which, within the theory of Bergson, can be taken as a service to social conventions.

While the neighbours are shown to lack social cohesion and to be somewhat narcissistic, Sjakie represents the other side of the spectrum. He can be regarded as overtly tolerant, upholding the social ideal that if people are giving the same opportunities they will adapt their behaviour for the benefit of building a happy community. In order to show the naivety of such an ideal, Sjakie also has to become the butt of the joke, despite his good intentions. By contrast, the Flodders owe their role as instigators of comic scenes to their indifferent attitude towards those conventions. A comic character, Bergson claims, no longer 'tries to be ceaselessly adapting and readapting himself to the society of which he is a member' (196), a description which perfectly fits the behaviour of the Flodders. In not adapting to the rules and regulations of society, however, the family members are ultimately accepted as to who they are: big-mouthed, but not so bad after all.

If FLODDER is to be seen as a comedy of 'social ragging,' then NEW KIDS TURBO adds an element to it because of its particularly coarse tone. Maas' film was released in 1986, but the relatively recent film by Haars and Van der Kuil post-dates, as I already mentioned, the cinema of the Farrelly brothers, of Tarantino. If in the 1980s, PORKY'S (Bob Clark, 1981) and its two sequels were eye-catching sex-comedy box-office hits, then AMERICAN PIE (Paul and Chris Weitz, 1999) and its three sequels, can be called its more extreme match for the new millennium.¹⁵ Whereas FLODDER was still a family film, considered fit for the age of 6 onwards, NEW KIDS TURBO has been rated for 16 years, especially due to its violence, its foul language and Rikkert's obsession with getting laid. The havoc wreaked upon citizens, often innocent bystanders, is presented so hyperbolically that its cruel violence recalls the effect of cartoons. The cat can be crushed by a rock or blown to pieces, but in the next scene he is chasing the mouse once again. If one is seriously hit in NEW KIDS TURBO, one either simply disappears from the film, without anyone shedding a tear about the loss, or one continues in the next scene, with only relatively minor injuries. Such cartoonish violence has a repetitive effect, as is commented upon in the film's sequel NEW KIDS NITRO (2011), once again directed by Haars and Van der Kuil. A teenager has an encounter with the five, and tells them that their stuff is entertaining but that they keep doing the same thing over and over again. And when the police officer Adrie is hit by a car, the boy starts applauding cynically: 'Of course, there it is: the car accident. Original.' He continues his condescending tone by saying that if they consider making a sequel, they should not think he will 'spend a dime on another boring movie with a bad storyline and the usual shitty New Kids jokes.' While he adds to this that he will look for a cam version on the Internet, he happens to be shot in the head due to a clumsy act by Adrie. Hence, the kid is criticizing the option of a sequel while he himself happens to be

an extra in the sequel, until the moment he is killed, to which he definitely would have said: 'Of course, there it is: another innocent bystander dead. Original.'

The crudity of the humour can be seen as an attempt to transgress the norms of what Noël Carroll calls, 'right moral thinking' (80). These norms have been stretched since Tarantino, since the adult animation sitcom *SOUTH PARK* (which started in 1997), since Sacha Baron Cohen introduced characters like Ali G., Borat, and Brüno. The makers of *NEW KIDS TURBO* have jumped onto the bandwagon of these comic shock successes. This type of humour is clearly targeted at those who hold the opinion that humour can act as the 'guardian of relevant norms' (Carroll, 85). Once these norms have been stretched and a new implicit 'limit' has been imposed, another film or series will be introduced to abandon this role of humour as 'guardian.' What was an 'amoral' variant of humour in the 1980s will look quite tame from a present-day perspective. 'Amoral' humour is never stable, for it thrives at the grace of exceeding boundaries. For the amoralist, as Carroll postulates, 'it is a category mistake to suppose that indulging in humour is ever immoral. Humour is categorically beyond good and evil.' Humour is to be regarded as a 'verbal carnival': 'What is said in jest stays in jest' (87). Any offensive remark can be justified by saying that one was only joking.¹⁶

In fact, the object of the humour of *NEW KIDS TURBO* is someone who believes that humour can be, or perhaps even has to be, morally serious. For such a viewer, the hyperbolic display of violence will be 'too gross' and the banality of the jokes will be 'too coarse.' The possibility of this 'too' enhances the comic effect for those viewers who have no problems with the rudeness of *NEW KIDS TURBO*. At the same time, and here I follow Carroll once more, this aggressive and vulgar type of humour has a 'double edge' (101). In laughing at the New Kids, the 'amoral' viewer who has no qualms about transgressive and politically incorrect jokes, already acknowledges his distance from the characters who are 'revealed to be nearly Neanderthal' (Carroll, 101).¹⁷ The laughter implies that he does not identify with the attitudes displayed in the jokes, 'but it may indicate [his] feelings of superiority to them' (101). Although the humour is aggressive and transgressive, the laughter itself can be regarded as a safety belt, for it signals that the viewer acknowledges that the attitude of the character is too ridiculous to be endorsed. Laughter is then, as Bergson already suggested, a clue that one does not hold an emotional bond with the character.

OVER THE TOP: *VET HARD*, *MOORDWIJVEN*, *FILMPJE!*

Why was *NEW KIDS TURBO*, if it is so banal, a huge box-office success? It attracted more than one million moviegoers in a relatively brief time span. In making a brief comparison to another off-colour comedy a provisional answer might be suggested. *VET HARD* [*TOO FAT TOO FURIOUS*] (Tim Oliehoek, 2005) is an over-the-top action comedy in the spirit of a rude comic strip. Mast, an old gangster, is hospitalized because of his bad liver. As a last wish he wants to see his son Koen on whom he has never laid eyes before, but this son is in a Belgian prison, since he, as Mast claims, had not paid his parking fines. Aided by his two sons, the corpulent gangster Bennie, who is Mast's adopted son, will attempt to liberate Koen. One of Bennie's sons has an absolutely crazy master plan, based upon arithmetic and acrobatic tricks. It is impossible to execute, but it works wonderfully. Mast is very happy to see his son, but he is on the verge of dying unless he has a very expensive operation in South America. From then onwards, they try to raise enough money for the operation by way of a variety of (criminal) activities, such as a bank robbery, betting on a fixed kick-boxing match, stealing a container of money at Schiphol airport. In addition to the fact that all these actions develop in a bizarre manner, just as in a cartoon, all the characters are a total caricature. Bennie gets mad when he is called 'Fatso'; the ambition of his two sons is to acquire a delicious quiche recipe while their father only wants a simple snack bar; Koen turns out to be a dangerous psychopath who had not only killed five women in the past, but also two after his jailbreak, excusing his misdemeanours with the words: 'She fell.'

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The one woman Koen cannot kill – despite the obvious references to the shower scene in Alfred Hitchcock's *PSYCHO* – is Katia, who during several crucial moments needs to pee. There is the prototypical dope Vuk who is said to be quite good with electricity, but actually it is the opposite. And I have not even mentioned the many cameo appearances of well-known Dutch celebrities like TV presenter Chazia Mourali as a bitchy nurse; film critics René Mioch and Jac Goderie in a cinema, one eating popcorn, the other asleep; porn star Kim Holland as a pole dancer; or Estelle Gullit, the then wife of an ex-football player, as a stewardess. They all meet a quick and violent death, except for Holland, who is 'only' used as some sort of punching ball. Hilarious is the scene with the stewardess who bows over a wounded man at the airport, trying to reassure him with her one line: 'The ambulance will be here soon,' not knowing that at that very moment an ambulance has been dropped from an aeroplane and is about to land upon them. All the bizarre incidents and striking cameos do not alter the fact that the plot of *VET HARD* hinges on the deeply felt tenderness of both Bennie and Koen for Mast. They are prepared to do anything for the sick, old man, up to making

a childish drawing. In a film in which everything is so utterly incredible and over the top, the suggestion of such warm feelings for Mast becomes a travesty itself. These feelings are expressed in such an exaggerated way that they are tainted by an overall context of idiocy.

In principle, *NEW KIDS TURBO* is no less idiotic and bizarre than a film like *VET HARD* (close to 200,000 viewers) – or *FILMPJE!* (Paul Ruven, 1995), *MOORDWIJVEN* [*KILLER BABES*] (Dick Maas, 2007) or *BLACK OUT* (Arne Toonen, 2012), the latter discussed in chapter 9 – but the film by Haars and Van der Kuil is explicitly set against the background of the economic crisis. Except for Barry, who did not have a job anyway, four of the five protagonists get fired. Even though their work attitude was far from impeccable, they blame it on the crisis. Since the crisis is, rightly or not, associated with the discussion about countries losing their sovereignty in a bigger Europe, there is a counterweight desire among people to cut up the big world in smaller pieces. It has become increasingly popular to derive one's identity from the local area one inhabits. Similarly, for the New Kids, the outside world begins in Schijndel, the rivalling village next to Maaskantje. If a film like *VET HARD* can be seen as an attempt to make an over-the-top gangster or crime movie in the vein of comic-strip violence, *NEW KIDS TURBO* happens to have the additional advantage that it can be seen as a response to 'genuine' social problems, no matter how rudimentary such a response might be. It is a matter of reading the tea leaves at the bottom of the cup but I would dare to propose that the timing of *NEW KIDS TURBO* was absolutely right. Perhaps this was no more than a coincidence, the inverse of collateral damage so to speak, but then it was a case of mere luck.

Further, *VET HARD* could be seen as a typical product of the so-called 'grachtengordel,' a term often used pejoratively to indicate the elitist Canal District in and around Amsterdam, and the parade of (semi-)celebrities, known from television basically, in the film testifies to this association. The 'grachtengordel' is the prototypical 'non-region' in the Netherlands to which countryside areas position themselves as regional. To emphasize that *VET HARD* lacks a 'regional' aspect and does not respond to local 'problems,' the fact can be mentioned that it is a remake of the Danish film *GAMLE MAEND I NYE BILER* [*OLD MEN IN NEW CARS*] (Lasse Spang Olsen, 2002). By contrast, the New Kids could depict themselves as 'grassroots' filmmakers, who were not part of the media establishment. They simply gained the opportunity to make a film because their YouTube clips had attracted attention due to their use of foul language and the aggressive tenor of the actions. Moreover, most of the cameo appearances are by people who have expressed explicit ties to the province of Brabant – Teeuwen, Maassen, actor Frank Lammers.¹⁸ Perhaps even more than the other films in this chapter, this film is aimed at

a target audience of young adolescents who dislike big city areas and elite tastes. And they sure responded to the release of the picture, for NEW KIDS TURBO was a gigantic box-office hit and broke records during its opening week.

The prize of such popularity as 'regional outsiders' among adolescents is that success cannot endure: one loses one's cherished image of fresh newcomers. The only option left for its sequel, NEW KIDS NITRO, was to make an overblown version: bigger, louder, more spectacular. In offering a truly over-the-top comedy, in which, among others, the New Kids have to battle with zombies in the region of Friesland, the sequel lost track of its social thematic. No matter how loose the connection with a social thematic, as soon as it is practically absent, a comedy seems to be void of any urgency, which, influences its (box-office) appeal negatively.

In order to avoid misunderstanding: this aspect of a social urgency is not an iron law, but it is only one of many conditions that can help to make a comedy really successful – apart from the usual stuff, like funny jokes, well-timed performances, solid camera work and editing. For his MOORDWIJVEN Maas was expecting at least a million moviegoers, but it attracted 'only' 400,000. According to the standards of Maas, this is a modest number, but, this relatively disappointing result is due to the absence of a clear conflict between the lower class and the higher class. The story of MOORDWIJVEN is little more than a portrayal of the lives of three spoilt-rotten wealthy women who are mainly preoccupied with plastic surgery. After the famous doctor Bilderberg is shot, one of them says: 'Well, Kit, you were right on time with your nose.' Their lack of empathy comes to the fore on many occasions; when the black gardener from Togo is found dead in the swimming pool, one of them crudely remarks: 'Oh no, now the pool has to be disinfected again.' As their major form of distraction, the three women conspire to have one of their adulterous husbands killed.

In the case of MOORDWIJVEN, the film spectator is left with a view of a greedy, posh culture, but there is no character who mediates this look for us. One could argue that such mediation is not necessary here, and that exactly is the problem with the film. Seeing the overdone acting of female friends with an affluent lifestyle and hearing their decadent comments, it is (much too) obvious that this comedy is to be interpreted as a parody of the upper class throughout. By contrast, the strength of FLODDER was that the viewer started with a prejudicial view of the lower-class family, but as the comedy progresses, the vulgar Flodders garner increasing sympathy at the expense of the high class. The main protagonists in MOORDWIJVEN are so utterly shallow and outrageously silly from start to finish that there is no other option than to laugh at them or, even worse, to cast a cool glance

at their overblown behaviour. Moreover, unlike *FLODDER* and *NEW KIDS TURBO*, *MOORDWIJVEN* lacks – as does *VET HARD* – any reference to some deep-rooted social problem, and hence, it risks being a film without a particular trigger, lacking a minimal amount of engagement. No wonder that critics considered it a farcical observation in comic-book style rather than a humorous comment upon a social bias.

My criticism of *MOORDWIJVEN* is that this comedy lacked a dialectical tension; there was no ‘versus,’ such as the lower class versus the higher class, for the high-class ladies were already disadvantaged from the start. Such a ‘versus’ can also be too crude, and then it does not work either. That is to say, Ruven’s *FILMPJE!* did not get great reviews, but it fared quite well at the box office, for the film had the obvious advantage of being an extended version of brief sketches in a TV show hosted by the popular comedian Paul de Leeuw. He always announced these sketches by yelling ‘Filmpje!’ to clarify that it is recorded and not live. *FILMPJE!* was the very first film in the Netherlands which was altered based upon the reactions of a test audience. The consistency of the film’s plot was sacrificed to have as many scenes as possible with the two characters from the show, Annie and Bob de Rooij, both played by De Leeuw.¹⁹ Annie is always dressed in the very same chequered ensemble and she is very naive and good-hearted. When asked what she thinks of gambling, she says: ‘I am against gambling, but if you want me to be in favour of it, I am in favour of it. I simply do not have an opinion.’ She simply does not want to offend anyone. *THE WIZARD OF OZ* is her favourite movie, because, against all odds, she believes that happiness will be ‘somewhere over the rainbow.’

Annie is such an exaggerated version of credulousness that she is brusquely exploited all the time by her husband, Bob, who is her polar opposite. In the beginning of *FILMPJE!*, he files for a divorce because Annie refused to give him a blow job. Bob is an extremely rude and nasty character, who has a whinnying laugh each time he does something nasty or uses foul language – and he laughs a lot. They are such an odd couple that their confrontation lacks tension, for she is always too gentle and he is always too vulgar. Since they are stock characters, each and every confrontation is only a slight variation upon the same theme, and therefore the film never becomes more than a series of sketches. In the end, *FILMPJE!* is better at being a spoof of James Bond movies and of *PULP FICTION* than in offering some coherence in plot, let alone a socially urgent plot.²⁰ This incoherence is addressed by Bob himself, when he suddenly looks into the camera, in a big close-up and says:

Yeah *boppers*, it is turning into a really weird movie, don't you think? I have read the script, and therefore I know how it will end, but I am in a funk right now. Of course, it has a happy end, within less than half an hour, with some fun song from THE WIZARD OF OZ, and a tin man and a scarecrow and the smoked sausage from Oss²¹, but how will it end? Suddenly, everyone is lost. Now, I am about to jerk off. Not because I feel like it right now, but it might give me the idea that I have had an enjoyable day anyway.

LONG LIVE 'SJAKIE'

The off-colour and vulgar comedies in this chapter are obsessed with the physical joys of drinking, drugs and sex and/or with aggressive impulses and/or, in the case of MOORDWIJVEN, beautifying one's body. These obsessions are so hyperbolic that any viewer may feel superior to the cartoonish characters. Even though their fixations manifest themselves differently, the common denominator is to discredit social conventions. This can happen by legitimizing violence (as in SCHATJES!), by glorifying 'authentic' rudeness (as in FLODDER and NEW KIDS) or in parodying the effects of plastic surgery (in MOORDWIJVEN). These comedies testify to Critchley's dictum that worse than the 'animal within' is a person acting like a person. The concert scene in WAT ZIEN IK?! illustrates the disregard of the prostitute for the strict codes of the cultural elite. In SCHATJES! the riotous children hold up a mirror to confront their highfalutin' parents with the shallowness of their authority. The guys in NEW KIDS TURBO cling to their regional identity because they feel themselves victims of a globalized and abstract economy, represented by a civil servant who defends himself by saying he is only doing his job. Actually, FLODDER offers the finest example of the relief theory in this regard: it is a good thing to give way to one's impulses, for those well-to-do inhabitants who become a bit like a Flodder are not as derisive as those who still aim to keep up appearances. Neighbour Neuteboom, who is under the spell of the female Kees and tries a joint, is more likeable than his nagging wife. Better to accept some 'animal-like' behaviour than hang on to the restrictive codes of the upper class.

In her study *Good Humor, Bad Taste*, Giseline Kuipers has analyzed Dutch humour as a 'social phenomenon.' The building block of her theory is that each and every social group can and probably will appreciate jokes differently. The vulgar humour discussed in this chapter is often derided by intellectuals, but generally positively valued by the lower classes. Kuipers observes that the 'Dutch tend to think of themselves as a classless society, making references to social class slightly taboo' (16).²² The utopian nature

of this thought is undermined as soon as lower-class characters are turned into main protagonists – like the family Flodder, like the New Kids, like the criminals in *VET HARD*. If these comedies have some merit, it is above all to break the taboo not to refer to class-based distinctions.

It is highly significant that the narrative crisis in *NEW KIDS TURBO* is the result of a conflict with a civil servant from the social security office and that in *FLODDER*, the social worker is the ultimate butt of the joke. Sjakie's belief that one is the product of social circumstances is derided as hopelessly naive, and this is basically shown on the basis of incongruity. Each of his statements is contradicted, often via editing. When he mentions that the Flodders are, deep down, sensitive people, we immediately get a shot transition to Ma getting angry, hitting one of her kids and kicking the dog. This can be regarded as no more than cheerful amusement, but at the same time and despite all the vulgarity of the Flodders, Maas' comedy also functions as a clear thorny signal. The film expresses a certain discontent with the Band-Aid approach of left-wing politics, represented by well-meaning social workers. Though these latter are the object of (mild) humour in *FLODDER*, *NEW KIDS TURBO* owes its brutal tone to precisely the frustration of the increased inflexibility of a new generation of 'Sjakies.' To couch the aggressive and vulgar humour of the New Kids in positive terms: better well-meaning and naive than nitpicking about rules and details – long live 'Sjakie.'

